SAINTS AND SINNERS 3

FILTHY

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FILTHY: Saints and Sinners 3

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Cover: JRA Stevens for Down Write Nuts

Formatting: Down Write Nuts

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Sebastian

"So, how did your day go with Mason?"

I knew before she answered me. The tears were shining in her eyes, and I pushed the box of tissues toward the young woman.

"He and I had a very long conversation about our relationship and…he's only willing to wait so long for me to 'get over' what happened to me," she answered. She pulled out a few tissues. "He's not *mean* about it, but he's frustrated we can't do much more than a simple peck on the lips."

"And you?" I folded my legs under the desk. "How do you feel about all this?"

"I'm more frustrated than I can put into words. I *know* he's not going to hurt me, I know there's nothing inherently bad about having sexual feelings and touching and eventually doing it, but my body is just so goddamn fucking hardwired into freaking out, or resigning that I can't get beyond it."

This sweet child in front of me, one Elutheria Stavros-*soon to be Warner-Skillman*, had been a child prostitute at twelve, and sex traf-

ficked at fourteen. She survived, and not only just survived but was thriving under the care of her adoptive mother and father.

Her sexual growth, however, was severely retarded by all that had happened. Walking through it with her wasn't going to be the only thing she needed. She needed more. Her words showed that she understood the fundamentals of healthy sex and good sexual relationships.

We just had to bust down the walls that were holding her back. Namely, touch.

"Let me ask you this." I twisted the pencil in my fingers. "Do you hesitate when Wren, Fischer, or Lincoln touch you?"

"They don't—"

"No, I mean casually. Touch your hand, wrap you in a hug, drop a kiss on your forehead."

"Do you see what I mean?" she growled. "My brain went *straight* to the perverse. It's like I can't stop thinking about sex no matter what the question or situation. I think someone is going to imply I'm fucking Fischer or Lincoln—or hell, Wren. I just can't seem to drop this paranoia."

"So, that brings up another question and we'll go back to my first in a moment. Are you being hyper vigilant about other people's perceptions because of the impending adoption?"

Her brow knitted a bit. "I…I hadn't really thought about that. Maybe? They're the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'm a mess and I don't want anything to keep them from adopting me."

"Keep *them* from adopting you, or keep the system from disallowing the adoption because of questionable goings on?"

This time, she sat up straight, and I could see the wheels in this highly intelligent young woman's brain whirling. A moment later, she dropped her head. "Them. Definitely them. The system doesn't want to deal with this," she tapped her temple, "and they'll be happy to get rid of me. I'm just terrified that Wren and Fischer—and Lincoln—are going to walk on this deal."

"Have they said anything like that?"

She shook her head in the negative.

"How much longer for the judge to sign off?"

"About three months. And that's because of scheduling conflicts with the two of them. I had no idea there were brain surgeries scheduled six months in advance."

"What makes you think that they would walk away from you?"

"I'm damaged." Her answer was instant. "I'm so, so damaged."

"Why are you here?"

"Here where?"

I gestured to the office, to the desk, to my notepad, and her file. "Here."

"Because I need help."

"Why?"

Ellie looked confused. "I'm damaged."

"And who sent you here to get help?"

"Wren. Fischer."

"Why?"

"Because they know I'm damaged!" In her frustration, she made the connection, and I saw the comprehension slide on to her face. "They already know I'm messed up. They want to help me get better. To be as normal as a former sex worker and sex toy possibly can."

Smiling, I bobbed my head in approval. "You got it."

She steepled her hands over her mouth and nose and let out a breath. "They don't hate me. They aren't taking me on some condition of me getting better. They aren't closing their eyes to the fucked-uppedness of my life. They genuinely want me in their lives."

I tapped my nose and grinned. "You got it, kiddo."

"Shit that feels good." She laughed, slumping back.

"Major breakthrough here, Ellie. Major breakthrough. Glad I could help you." I looked at the note on the notepad. "Now. We need to work on the touch thing. The three of them don't trigger this response in you, correct?"

She nodded.

"Can we start with someone neutral? My thought on this was maybe go for a massage. A light one, not deep tissue or shiatsu. Just a gentle one. Nonsexual, relaxing, simple touch massage. You can go to a parlor, and take Wren with you, and just have a short one."

Ellie swallowed. "Wren can go with me? Or maybe Miriam or Laxmi if she can't?"

"I've noticed you bringing them up frequently," I answered. "Do you trust them?"

"They started as Wren's friends, but I think we've become friends on our own. I know it's weird to think of someone twice my age as

my friend, but they know everything about me and don't judge at all."

"Then yes, I don't see why they wouldn't be a good companion for this." I nodded, and wrote down the two names she'd been mentioning more and more. I was pretty sure that Laxmi was Doctor Laxmi Rana, her future father's business partner, and Miriam Crownin, her wife.

"What would you like to do about Mason?"

"I want to keep seeing him," she said, without any hesitation. "But…I can't ask him to keep holding on for me. I don't know how long this is going to take and I would rather…"

I waited. I knew what she was going to say, because this young woman was a morally fantastic person, who saw right and wrong with no rose tinting anywhere. She had lived in the gray.

After a pause and a deep breath. "I think I would rather keep him as friend than lose him and spoil the connection we share. We're only sixteen. We're only going to be juniors next year. There's no reason for us to be committing to each other like we're the last ones on Earth."

"Elutheria, I wish all of my patients were as insightful and thoughtful as you." Tipping my head I gave her a smile.

We chatted about some more coping mechanisms for the last ten minutes of the session and then we set up another appointment for the next week. Grateful and happy, Ellie took the appointment card and trotted off, on her way. I knew there would be a car waiting for her downstairs.

Wren and Fischer were so careful to give her just enough freedom without risking her safety. She usually took hired cars—not Ubers, not taxis, but actual liveried cars. They didn't get her a personal driver, either. It was merely a standing account they kept. It was brilliant really—she wasn't ever exposed to the people who had taken her and nearly destroyed her, but she wasn't a hundred percent beholden to her parents.

The development of Lincoln in their lives was slightly unexpected, but at the same time, he seemed as invested in Ellie—and now the twins—as the other two.

Mm. A dedicated threesome. I wondered, briefly, if Lincoln and Fischer were into each other, as well as Wren. My brain happily supplied that picture and I had to snap off my brain's view screen.

It was something I'd always wanted to try. *Either way*. The idea had always intrigued me. Everything about sex always intrigued me, which was why I was in the field I was in: sex therapy.

Sometimes, though, my imagination got the better of me and my thoughts went galloping off in very wrong and raunchy directions. I had a lot of fantasies about threesomes and more-somes. I always had. I was distinctly and clearly pansexual.

I also carried the title doctor, and with that, I needed a measure of decorum.

Victoria helped, a lot. The kids helped as well. They grounded me and helped me remember there were people who depended on my keeping my nose—and my cock—clean.

Didn't stop all the fantasies, though.

And just thinking about a threesome dedicated to only each other, not a random hookup or passing fancy? Yeah, that did things to me. And my dick.

"Shit," I mumbled, immediately thinking of the common core math I had tried to help Elliot with the night before to kill whatever trace of a hard-on had tried to rise. It worked, common core was withering to all body parts.

Organizing the notes for the day, I started typing some of them in, so I didn't have to spend the entire admin day next Tuesday just entering notes. And I could even start to send out some of the insurance claims.

I always got very involved in the notes from the session and from the notes I made after the fact. I would print out a sheet of topics I wanted to revisit or introduce in the next session. I would get so deep, Victoria had started texting me daily to remind me to stop and come home for dinner.

A knock on the door startled me, and when I looked up it was dark out. *What*?

I grabbed the phone. It was seven-thirty, there was no six p.m. text from my wife.

The knock came again, this time more demanding. Our shared receptionist had gone home over two hours ago. I stared at the phone again, but walked to the door to pull it open.

Someone I didn't recognize stood on the other side of the door.

She was holding a badge.

"Doctor Sebastian Mederos?"

"That's me."

She put the badge back on her belt. "I'm Detective Lily Haden. You need to come down to the station."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No, sir, we need to speak to you."

I stared at her. There was a sinking feeling in my gut. "Let me get my bag and call my wife."

"I'm going to ask you not to call her right now."

I was halfway across reception, and jerked my head back to stare at her. The woman standing there seemed to be a blank. But her eyes…

"Oh, God, no…"

She leapt forward to keep me from falling.

…Vance pointed at the woman and two young children there. "My sister-in-law. Her children, my niece and nephew. Angelicci. Two of them. Who will never, ever know what they could have been. The Zhadanjir sliced their throats while their mother watched, and then sliced hers and raped her while she died."

The breath escaped the woman's breast slowly. "They murdered angelicci."

"Yes. And they will try to find and turn their Versilange, to grow their ranks." He looked at her, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I tried."

The Devil himself stood behind her and looked down at him.

"They were judged innocent," he said, his voice smoky and rough but not unkind. "They are safe and cared for in Elysium. Once this is over, he will be able to visit them all there without penalty."

"He will not forgive me for this."…

"Oh, God."

I threw up.

Chapter TWO

Lily

Blood.

There was so much blood.

Three people had bled out in this room, their hearts still beating as the precious fluid was pumped out of the veins that had been slashed open.

A mother had watched her children die.

A mother had died.

For no other reason than she was married to Sebastian Mederos. She didn't know about the feud he was born into. She didn't know the secrets his mind harbored. She didn't know anything other than she loved him, and had probably died weeping that she hadn't been able to protect his children.

"Jesus," the assistant medical examiner whispered. "Complete exsanguination?"

"Don't step on anything," I whispered. "Get your damn booties on, you idiot. Your shoes will be soaked through."

The blood on this floor was more than just blood, though. It was angelicci blood, sacred blood. Powerful. Once the newest assistant was out, I could take the stupid booties and burn them properly. I'd have to call in my other crew to handle the cleanup in the house. I didn't want just anyone marching through this place where these children had died.

"Shit, Detective, what happened in here?" He looked around, and saw the room as I had when I first walked in earlier in the day.

There was blood on the walls, spatter on the ceiling, the mattress, the rug, probably even floorboards were soaked. It was not the worst thing I had ever seen, but it was utterly heartbreaking.

Two young children, just three and six, throats cut. The mother was raped and murdered. They weren't entirely sure how it went down, but I knew.

She had watched her children die, then they cut her throat and raped while she bled out. Disgusting *Zhadanjir*.

I knew they were going to start ramping up their campaign of terror. I didn't think they would take it out on an innocent woman and her two angelicci.

Glancing over at the assistant ME, I sighed. "Did you read the report?"

"Detective, it's three a.m. the night after my best friend's wedding. I'm glad I'm able to move at all. I didn't have time or the ability to read anything."

"Okay, that's a fair excuse" I launched into the explanation of what had happened and he was distraught. Not that we showed it much, even to each other. Big city cops were used to a certain level of gore. MEs were trained to not react to things like this.

The guy let out a breath. "Well, fuck."

"That's a good way to put it," I answered. "What's your name again, kid?"

He canted his head and stared at me. "It's *Doctor* Reid Sadowski, thanks."

I shook my head. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-six," he answered.

"Oh, a Doogie Howser."

"A what?"

"Fuck off," I griped, then saw him laughing.

He turned and looked around for the officers that were assigned to the room, and any other personnel hanging around. He stepped up next to me close, and dropped his voice.

"Well, I tell people I'm twenty-six, Lady Hades."

I snapped my head around. "What?"

He grinned, and a spark of white fire danced through his eyes. "I didn't expect you'd recognized an Elysian. You've been gone a long time."

I was quiet. "Why are you here?"

"Angelicci," he said. "*Zhadanjir rek'cherade*. Well, that and I'm actually the assistant medical examiner."

The darkest ones be damned eternally. So this whippersnapper was on our side. I'd give him the benefit of the doubt for now, and speak to my husband when I could see him again.

Turning my attention back to the present, I sighed. "It all has to be burned. And not just in any fire."

He nodded. "You're able to do that?"

"I'll give the CS techs about a week and then have it taken care of." I nodded.

"Did you know they were angelicci?"

Shaking my head, I glanced around the room. "I had no idea. I was told later. They are the niece and nephew of a friend."

"They're…"

"Safe," I answered. "Cared for."

"Who survived?"

I sighed. "Their father."

He parsed the room with the sight that wasn't of this world, and let out a deep breath. "Retribution killing."

Nodding, I headed for the window, to check the locks as was a routine. "This is all so…"

Reid moved next to the bed to begin his work. "Everything is, m'lady. Everything right now is. Are you aware that the Trium is missing?"

I whipped my head around. "What? Since when?"

"About a century ago, as best we can tell," he answered. "Things have carried on, but…it's not clear who is doing that. No one has seen the three of them, together or apart for that long."

"I don't need this to be any more complicated that it already was, Reid. I don't."

“None of us do,” he answered. “Do we have any hope?”

The smile slipped on to my lips and I nodded. “We’re a lot closer to hope than we were a few weeks ago. I don’t want to say we’re close to finding out everything, but things are falling into place.”

He turned back to the bed where the mother was and started his work.

A retribution killing. It seemed it was a normal reason, but…the retribution, I knew, was for letting a man fall in love with the woman who was his destiny.

I was sure they didn’t understand the wrath of Hell.

Fischer

The woman across from me was disgusting.

Not in a *didn't shower* kind of way, but in a *Picture of Dorian Gray* way. Every evil thing she'd done marred her skin, her hair, her eyes.

I rubbed my eyes, quickly, making it seem like an allergy action. Not me trying to scrub out the gross.

"Well, Mrs. Worth," I said. "I'm glad the new medicine is working for you."

"That's not what I said at all," she snapped.

One of the snakes in her hair snapped at me.

Jesus.

"You said you've been able to get about four hours of sleep for the past two weeks."

"Yes, but that's not enough!" she cried. "I need to sleep eight."

"As I explained when you first started with me, we have to take this incrementally. We started with absolutely no sleep, Mrs. Worth. You get four solid hours now. We have to reacclimate your body to

getting to sleep. We should be happy with where we are and give the body a chance to start getting used to that. About a month, and then we can talk about changing up the dosage and timing and—"

"Why can't we just up the dosage now?"

"All sleep medications are very dangerous," I explained again. For the nine thousandth time. "Especially for insomniacs. If we up the dosage too fast, you're going to sleep while shopping, and doing all sorts of dangerous activities. It's a terrible side effect, but if we can keep the dosage low…there's a chance you may gain another two hours on this dose if we let your body get used to sleeping—"

"I thought they said you were the best."

"Ma'am, humbly, I am," I answered.

"Then why aren't you listening?" she snapped. The snake did as well.

I slammed the folder closed. "Fuck this. Lady, if you want to die in a car accident because you've overdosed on Ambien, you're going to have to find another doctor. I'm listening to you just fine, but you're not listening to me. At all. If you just want to pill seek, go somewhere else. I am the best at the intricacies of the human brain, and you're not interested in your own health at all."

"Well." She sniffed, and grabbed her purse. "If that's how you feel about it."

She stood and I walked to the door to hold it open for her. I leaned close to her ear. "And if I might, Mrs. Worth? Stop fucking the pool boy. You'd do a lot better on sleep if you weren't sneaking around with him. Get your STIs checked. You're showing all the classic signs of syphilis."

She smacked me. I had expected it.

"Fuck you, Doctor."

"Not with a full latex suit, ma'am."

Her jaw fell open and she marched out of the office, straight past the front desk—even as the new girl desperately signaled to her to make another appointment—and slammed the door.

The new receptionist, a woman named Vivian, looked at me sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Doctor. She was—"

"Not worth it, Vivian," I said. "She just wanted pills. Not cures and coping mechanisms."

Vivian gasped when she saw the bright red bloom on my cheek. "She smacked you?"

"Hard." I chuckled. "I suppose I deserved it."

"Smooth, Fisch," Laxmi said from her lean in the doorway. "Very smooth."

I held up my finger to hold Laxmi there for a moment. "Vivian, she's probably going to have a pill pusher calling for her records. Request a release of liability form from them when she does. I'm through with her."

"Yes, sir." She nodded.

I closed the door to the offices.

"Slothful?" Laxmi asked.

"No. Not even. I'm not pushing pills, and she's seeking. There's no middle ground. We made a stunning amount of progress, and she's just not happy. If anything, she's being lazy and just wanting the short cut. Fixing the brain is—"

"Is a long, arduous process and there are no short cuts because short cuts equal short circuits." Laxmi finished for me.

"Did I say it that often?" I grinned.

"Yes, enough times that I got it," she answered, patting my arm.

She started to walk by. I grabbed her elbow and stopped her. "Got a sec? In my office?"

"Always," she answered.

She walked into the office behind me and closed the door and we sat on either side of the desk. I leaned forward on the chair and scrubbed my hands over my face. "Things are weird."

Laxmi sat back and laughed, the flicker of her wings dancing behind her before disappearing. "That's an understatement, Fischer."

"Yeah, so it has to do with…all that. God, this is so effing bizarre."

Laxmi nodded. "I'm just getting used to it myself. My situation isn't yours, but that doesn't mean it's any better or worse. I mean, wings? Hell? Swords? What is all this crap going on around us?"

I stopped trying to figure out what to say, and just said it. "I can see sins."

She stared at me. "What?"

"I can see…sins. Transgressions. Like Dorian Grey. Tricia Worth had snakes in her hair, and mold on her skin, and a lesion on her neck. But they weren't really there, they were…otherworldly."

She held up her hand. "What do you see?"

"Your hand. Tipped with claws, but not really. I don't see any sins." I pointed to the door. "With her, every flaw on her skin I *knew* was a sin. The lesion was her affair with the pool boy. It *told* me that was its reason."

Her eyebrows raised ever so slightly. "Really?"

"It's driving me insane."

"Can you shut it off?"

"I've been trying, but it's been coming in so slowly that I only recently realized it was happening all the time."

She tapped her finger on the arm of the chair. "And Lincoln?"

"I haven't asked him."

She chuckled.

"What?"

"Too busy with Wren to have a conversation?"

"Christ," I groaned, sliding a hand over my eyes. "Does everyone know?"

"No one knows—not outside our little group, but how am I supposed to resist teasing you? She's my wife's best friend, and that's what we do."

Shaking my head, I leaned against the desk. "I have to talk to him, don't I?"

"Do you hate him?"

"Nah. He's a good guy. I'm just…not used to this situation yet. I forget he's a part of the…household."

Laxmi winked. "Get used to it. You and Lincoln are a team, and it's important you start learning to be one. Just like Miriam and I are. It's taken a while, a long while, for us to get used to that."

"There's more coming," I said. "I know there is. And you're right, Lincoln and I have to work together. But Laxi, are we supposed to protect her or she us, or…"

"I don't even know," she said, shaking her head. "I have no idea. But Miriam and I… Well, we've been *practicing* with what we can do. I make no pretense of that. I don't know how the ability to see sins can be channeled into a learnable or useful skill, but it might be worth it to see if you can. Or if other things come up, other abilities."

"Christ, I wish we had a clue of what was going on."

Laxmi stood and headed to the door, pulling it open. "Don't we all? I mean, you see sins. That's a pretty big clue. See what Lincoln thinks. Learn to work as a team, like we do here."

She shut the door quietly after stepping out.

Hell.

She was right. I had to start working with Lincoln as a team. We'd done a pretty good job murdering someone together. We could probably do a pretty good job *saving people* together.

Lincoln

"So, as you can see the contracts are all in order and the terms are laid out clearly."

I couldn't concentrate. The guy was crawling with worms and lesions, and he had some snakes in his hair. *Motherfucking snakes in his motherfucking hair*.

The laugh escaped me, and I had to turn it into a cough behind my hand as I reached for the bottle of water. I turned the contract so I could read it over.

That's when I realized that some of the phrases were trying to crawl off the page. Not really, but the illusion was that they didn't belong there and were trying to leave the rest of them behind.

I concentrated on those.

They changed to red and were very easy to read. When the three dozen or so sentences were individual from each other they appeared harmless. Reading them in sequence made them suspect, and when taken in context with the whole of the contract, they were a recipe for disaster.

As soon as I recognized that, the words and letters all settled down and nestled back on the sheets, looking incongruous.

"I have questions," I started. And for the next twenty minutes, ripped the contract these men presented as honest and upright into small paper shreds.

By the time I was done, they were up out of their seats and nearly running for the door. I was sure I'd never see them again, and if I

did, I'd call the Feds on them and let them end up with RICO charges, as well as tax evasion and interstate fraud.

Gil stared at me from his seat next to me. "Are you kidding?"

"What?" I asked. I risked a glance at him.

"You just utterly destroyed that contract, in a few short minutes!" He was laughing. "You saw shit in that I *never* would have thought to put together!"

"It's a gift," I answered.

Gilbert was, thankfully, clear of snakes and worms. There were a few bruises on his arm, but I'd started to realize most people had some bruises. They were merely white lies.

Everything else was a damn distraction. Like the snakes that guy had in his hair. Who had snakes in their hair?

Worse, I knew they weren't really there, but not reacting to a ghost snake when it snapped at me was a trick. One I wasn't sure I had managed to pull off every single time.

They were big imaginary snakes. And I had started out not liking snakes—or the men who came with the contract. When a nightmare anaconda-looking-thing snapped its jaw at me, all bets were off.

"So, what do we do now?" Gil asked. "We have a big hole in the investments side of the equation. We really don't have time to find another group that can fit the project."

"We need to find one more," I insisted. "Find someone, anyone with a good tech idea and drag them in. I want this full, and I want this on the up and up. No more of that fly-by-night we aren't telling you the deal unless you sign our contract crap. I just don't have it in me to deal with it."

"Yes, sir," he said, and marched smartly out of the room.

I hung my head in my hands. Gil was a good guy. A really good guy. He was the best and that's what I always got: the best.

But I fucking *missed* Vance. Those scheisters never would have gotten in here with their convoluted contract bullshit for the startup if he'd been here. Yeah, I was able to suss out the bullshit—with my new *magical lie detecting powers*!—but I wouldn't have had to if he was here.

No one had seen Vance in close to two months. He disappeared after I came out of my comatose state, and…*poof*! gone. I'd been to his place, which was completely empty, like he'd never existed. His

car was gone, the phone was shut off, all of his bills were paid and closed, and I couldn't find a storage bin with his personal stuff.

Even more, day by day, the traces of him that lived in databases, and online searches, public records, in banks and junk mail that doesn't get delivered anymore, he'd disappeared. In a few months, no one would have ever heard of Vance Rikers, except the few people I knew.

All I really wanted, out of all of this, was just the chance to say goodbye if he was really determined to go. I wouldn't have held him back.

A knock on the door knocked me back to the present. Scrubbing my eyes again, I called for them to come in.

Fischer.

"Hey. Busy?"

"No," I answered, sitting up straight. "Come on in."

He closed the door behind himself. "You look like I feel."

"Hell?"

"Mmm, slightly worse."

"What's worse than hell?"

Pulling out the chair, he sat down. "Fucking hell."

I laughed. He was right, and I headed for the wet bar. "I need a drink."

"It's…" Fischer looked at his watch. "Oh. It's three. Right. Let's do this."

Grabbing two lowballs off the back of the bar, I poured each of us a finger of whiskey. Handing one to him as I headed back to my seat, he took it gratefully, and took a hard sip, closing his eyes to enjoy the smoky burn.

"Rough day?" I asked.

He nodded, opening his eyes. "I guess you could say that. Could you hold your hands up for a moment?" I complied and he nodded. "Thanks. Nothing there."

"Fuck," I whispered. "You're seeing them too?"

"Yep." He nodded, and took another sip. "They snuck in. Didn't really even notice them until the past few days. Now, I can't even turn them down or off."

"Snakes?" I stared at the glass of amber liquid, turning it slowly.

"Worms. Bugs. Wounds, bruises, flies… Just everything." He stared at his glass. "Also, they kind of talk to me?"

"Talk? They yell at me. And today, the words on the paper were slithering around to get my attention. Oh, and let's talk about the anaconda living in the guy's hair, snapping at me."

"Ooh, anaconda." Fischer grimaced. "Mine were just asps, at least."

"What the hell is going on?" I asked, after a hard pull on the whiskey. "Why are we able to see this shit?"

"I talked a bit with Laxmi, since she seems to be embroiled in this crap with us."

I stayed quiet. I liked Laxmi and Miriam. They were good people and Fischer was right—fully involved in this mess as much as we were. Maybe more because both of them came with wings and swords now. I also had the feeling the two of them knew more than they were sharing with us.

"She suggested that we're seeing people's sins on their skin."

I rolled my eyes and let out a breath, and then stared at Fischer. "I didn't want to hear that, but that was the conclusion I was coming to myself. We're seeing the evil that people do on their skin. It's unsettling."

He let out a sigh. "Unsettling is probably an understatement. I lost it with a patient this morning. I'm sure she's off fucking Pedro the pool boy right now and trying to find a doctor who will just give her the pills she wants."

"I just kicked an investor out of my start up for the deceitful contract that they wanted me to sign for them to join the company. The words were there in the contract, dancing at me, trying to get my attention."

We both sat quietly at the table, just nursing the whiskey for a few minutes.

"Thoughts?" I asked.

"Our daughter has wings," Fischer stated.

"And a sword," I reminded him.

"We can see…well…sins and transgressions on the skin," he continued a moment later. "Have we asked Wren if anything unusual has happened to her?"

"Aside from handing Mjolnir over to Ellie?" I asked. "No. I haven't. But Laxmi, Miriam, *and* Haden all insisted she and Miriam hand that sword over, so there's something going on here."

"We should probably chat with her about it," Fischer said.

I snorted. “Fisch, there is only one thing we do with our mouths around her.”

Scrubbing a hand through his hair, he smirked. “You’re right. We have got to stop that. We need to build a relationship here.”

“Can’t we do that first and then talk?”

“Because we’re not all fucked out and falling asleep every night?”

I laughed, hard. “Fischer, stop making sense.”

“Believe me, Linc. There is nothing more I want in this world than to make her scream every night. But we have *got* to establish a relationship, clear up our communication. If something is really going on here? We’re going to need to have clear, open conversations. And she can’t do that in most of the positions she likes.”

I grumbled. Just the thought of slipping into bed with Wren was getting me hard. I closed my eyes and thought about that vicious anaconda I couldn’t be sure I didn’t react to.

Erection, defeated.

“You’re right. I know you’re right. We need to talk. About all of this, about wings and swords and weird friends. We’re just going to have to force ourselves to stay at the table after the twins go to bed.”

He cocked his head. “You want to include Ellie?”

“She’s got wings,” I reminded him.

Fischer maked a ‘go on’ motion with his hand. “And a sword, right, right.” He sighed. “You’re right. She needs to be in on the communication. It will also help keep us from constantly pulling Wren into bed.”

“I don’t hear her complaining,” I said, lifting an eyebrow.

“That’s because you keep using her legs as earmuffs.”

Wren

This was not the powerful, confident Sebastian Mederos I had graduated with. This was not the man who was helping my daughter work through her issues.

The man sitting in my office was a broken and wretched version of my colleague. He was unshaven, unkept, disinterested, and distant. He slumped, his hands shoved under his arms, his rich brown eyes glassy with emotions he didn't want to feel, and his salt and pepper hair a mess from running his hand through it.

Lily looked like hell too, though she wasn't here for the session. She was just here to make sure Bastian was. She leaned against the back wall of the small office I kept in Center City, near CHoP.

"Normally," I said, "I specialize in trauma for children." I sat back in my own chair. "But, Bastian, for you, I'll see you as patient-therapist."

"Oh, well, don't go out of your way."

There was a little snap to his words, but not a lot. He was angry, though. I could see that from his posture. I was sure he wished he

had more venom than what he had just tried to spit at me.

I opted for the 'ignore the rancor' path. "It's not out of my way, Bastian. Not at all. Your life has been turned upside down, and you need help."

"I don't actually. This," he gestured to himself, "is all part of the grieving process. But I get that you haven't really ever had to go through this, so…"

I held up my hand. "You want to have a pissing contest? You want to talk about the shriveled painful limb I cart around every day after watching my aunt die in front of me?" I raised an eyebrow and put my hand back down. "Bastian. I'm here to help you. We don't have to talk at all if that's what you want for now. We don't explore anything, we don't have to delve into your psyche or come up with coping mechanisms. Right now, the only purpose of these sessions is to give you a reason to get out of bed, out of the apartment, once a week."

"Fuck you," he grumbled.

"We'll talk about expectations at the end of the session," I said, ignoring his words.

"Why is she in here?" he groused, jerking his thumb at Lily.

"Lily Haden is a friend. She's concerned about you since the moment you found out that your wife and children were murdered."

He flinched at the word.

"Would you like to start there?"

Leaning forward, he stared at me. "I don't want to *start* anywhere. Everything is ended. Do you get that? My wife and children were slaughtered, no one has any idea by who, and the day after I put them in the ground and she—" his finger stabbed out at Lily "—finally released my house, it burned to the fucking ground."

"You didn't lose anything though," Lily sniped. "I had everything moved to storage. The restorers were coming in that day to start the cleaning."

He slammed a hand on the table. "It was my house! It was where I lived, where I measured how tall my children were! It was where I kissed my…k-kissed my wife g-goodbye…w-where…"

He choked on the words, and collapsed into himself. I hated to do it, but this was what I needed to see in him. The vulnerability. The real state of his mind. The sobs, the tears, the gasps at the gaping

holes in his life. I needed a blueprint of what I had to help him patch, repair, and fill.

Victoria, his wife, and the two children, Elliot and Claire, were never going to be fixable. He was going to have to chain them off—so he couldn't fall in but he could still feel and see them.

The house was a house. I had suspicions about that, but I kept my mouth shut. I waited for him to calm down a bit. There was no reason to rush this. It was easy to see this wasn't going to be solved in a day.

I leaned forward. "Sebastian? I want you to think very hard on the question I'm about to ask you. I don't even need an answer before I see you again."

He didn't object. That was encouraging.

"Would you have really been able to sleep under the same roof where such a horrible crime was committed against your family?"

Ellie had told me, time and again, that when Mister Passyunk had her, and had her in the bedroom, she could never sleep. She could barely sleep in the room she was held in. There were too many horrible things flashing against her mind in every corner.

I suspected Bastian would have the same problem—he'd been the only one who could identify his wife and kids—they were both only children with no extended family. The images of his dead wife and two dead children would haunt him forever.

The question clearly took him by surprise. He'd just wanted his normal back and there was no normal now. He hadn't realized getting back into that house wouldn't have been normal.

Bastian was looking for something that didn't exist anymore.

Weren't we all?

Tapping together some papers I stacked on my desk, I decided I'd tortured him enough for the day. "Like I said, I don't need an answer to anything today, Doctor Mederos. This is not going to be an easy or quick journey. I'm here for you, and Lily will be in charge of the investigation as long as it takes." I let out a deep sigh. "Have they installed the stone yet?"

"Yesterday." he barely breathed the word.

"Did you visit?"

"No."

"Then before I see you again, I would like it if you went to see the stone," I said. I put a card on the desk and pushed it toward him. "I

don't want you driving yet, you're not stable enough. Use that car service and I will pay the bill for you."

He growled, "You or your boyfriends?"

"Personal attacks will not be tolerated," I snapped. "It's my account, that I set up for my very seriously traumatized daughter to get around without fear of being attacked again. You know that as she's your patient. I'm offering you the same, because you are also traumatized. Don't be an asshole about it."

He leaned forward and slammed his hand on my desk. "They're dead! They're all *dead*. They were slaughtered in my house, on our bed, in our room! I am going to be as much of an asshole as I please! I am going to find the sons of bitches who did this and I am g-going to r-rip their…"

The sobs took him again, and he collapsed on to the floor, falling from the chair. Lily took a step forward, but I held up my hand and walked around the desk to where the pitiful wailing of a lost soul sliced through the air.

Sebastian was curled on his side, shaking, shivering, trying desperately to breathe. I knelt down next to him, and put a hand on his arm.

"They're dead… They're dead. Everything I had, everything I loved. All gone. I don't even have the home we made…"

I looked up at Lily, who took a deep breath. She looked like she was about to say something, but I held her off with a shake of my head.

"Bastian, where are you staying?"

"A friend's couch." He hiccupped.

"Would it help if you had a place that was yours? An apartment or something like that?" I knew it would, but I couldn't force that decision on him. "You could put up some of the things that Detective Haden put in storage. Some of the pictures…"

Looking up at me, he was able to catch his breath. A bit. I grabbed an elbow and helped him sit up, leaning against the front of my desk. His eyes were so liquid and tired, and I could just feel the emotions running through him.

"I'm…lost," he said, earnestly. "I don't know where to start, or to pick up, or end." His eyes shot to mine, and he held me there. "I have wanted the end. I have tried to figure out how to end. I don't

know how to do anything right now, except be angry, and empty and hateful and sad."

"This isn't an end. Not yet," I said. "There is new normal you have to find. You cannot try to be who you were before. Your heart and mind won't let you. This grief, the righteous anger you feel, is all normal. It's all overwhelming. It's all important in helping you find a new direction."

"I'm not ready…"

"I don't expect you to be. Not yet. You're raw, you're tired. You *need* to mourn. You need a private space to mourn. You can't do that on couches and spare rooms."

He looked at me, and canted his head. "I have nothing…"

"If I had a place for you, will you take it?"

"I…"

"Obligation free. No strings. A place for you to mourn in private, to hide if you need to."

Sniffling, he shook his head. "Do you do this for all your patients?"

I shrugged. "Most of my patients still wipe their nose on their sleeve."

He laughed, and thunked his head back to stare at the ceiling. "I will pay rent. The insurance company from the fire said I have a year of rent on the policy."

"Let me just clear it with the owner."

I stood and walked into the hall, just past Lily. She touched my elbow as I passed by.

"Lincoln's old place?"

"Makes sense. He didn't want to get rid of it, and this is a perfect use for it."

She nodded. "I agree. I hope he does."

A wicked grin crossed my face. "I have my ways."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I'm sure you do."

I STOOD WATCHING the small moving crew as they worked to get Sebastian's stuff into the house. There wasn't a lot. It was mostly personal effects, pictures, clothes, the toys.

Bastian was going through the motions. It wasn't much but it was better than what had been happening earlier in the week. He seemed relieved to have a place of his own to grieve and just be a mess.

Lincoln had easily agreed to the arrangement. He was actually rather pleased someone was going to use the place for a while. He'd even had Vance's old room converted into a gym with a punching bag. That was something I could see Bastian using a lot.

He'd also had the twins' old room quickly repainted beige, and removed all signs that they were ever set up in there. If Bastian wanted to set up the room with his children's things, that was his decision, but we both agreed it was better to not have that blatant reminder there.

Bastian walked over to Lily and me standing and watching the moving crew. He still had sweats on, and his hands were shoved deep in his pockets, the hoodie up and covering his head. But he was fully present, if doing terribly.

"Can't you just make a house call for my appointments?" he asked.

"No, Bastian. We have to get out of the house once in a while," I answered. "This is a *better* place for you, but it can't be the *only* place."

"Shit," he grumbled. "And you're sure this is okay with Lincoln?"

"I told you it was," I answered. "When you're ready to try going back to work, even part time, we'll set up the sunroom downstairs as your temporary office. I expect that you'll eventually want to go back to seeing patients, and while I can push you to visit me in the office, I can't push you to use yours ."

"I'm not ready—"

"I said when, I didn't give a time frame. We're all aware you need time for this."

He nodded and headed back into the townhouse. He wouldn't give us a goodbye or a get lost, yet, but walking away clued us in that he was done talking and we were dismissed.

Lily huffed. "Fuck."

"Yeah, that's a summation of this." I shook my head. "All this guidance I'm giving him…I feel like I'm leading him around by the nose. It all feels like empty platitudes and bullshit."

"Is it?"

"No, it's eight years of school, and six years of practice. It's all proven psychology. It just doesn't *feel* right this time. Not with him." My gaze landed on the window of the master bedroom, and a quick flash of the night that Fischer and I let Lincoln into our lives. I shook it off. I didn't need dirty thoughts at that moment.

I also hoped someone changed the mattress.

"Lily?"

She stared at the moving van. "Yeah?"

I dropped my voice. "Off the record, how the fuck did his house burn down?"

"Preliminary report says short in the wall."

Biting my lip, I shook my head just once. "I said off the record."

It was quiet a moment, and Lily sniffed a bit into the silence.

"Was it those *Versilange* things?"

"No," she snapped. "*Versilange* are protectors. Laxmi, Miriam, and your daughter are protectors, not destroyers. They aren't agents…of…"

"Of Tartarus?"

"Yes."

"Then who did it."

I could see her sucking on her teeth, desperate not to look at me. After a deep breath, she turned to face me.

"I ordered it," she said.

My eyes grew wide and I just stared at her for a very long time. "Why? Ordered who?"

"Because those children were just like Benjamin. They're more than just children. I'm sure you've figured that out by now." Her stare bore into me, and I dropped my own gaze.

I nodded slowly. "I suspected. When Ellie sprouted her…" I fluttered a hand over my shoulders, "I started to think that there was more to her brother than just being a simple sibling."

"Their blood is powerful," she continued, folding her arms. "Very, very powerful. We could not let the *Zhadanjir* have it. Or hell, even touch it. I had to have it burned, and it was soaked into the wood." She glanced down at the ground and then back to me. "It had to be done. I didn't have a choice, I couldn't take a chance."

"Ordered who?" The question was whispered.

"I don't know who did it, just that they received the order and followed it."

Lifting an eyebrow, I considered her a moment. "And who are you that you can command things like that?"

She stared me down. Uncrossing her arms, Lily leaned into me. "A friend. And I need that friend to trust me right now that I can't tell her any more than she already knows."

"Lily—"

"You know how in *Endgame*, Doctor Strange sees all those futures, and when they're finally in the future Tony Stark asks if this is one where they win? Doctor Strange answers, *If I tell you what happens, it won't happen*." She stabbed her finger down at the ground. "That's where we are. Fourteen million, six hundred five. And I can't tell you more than that."

She turned on her heel and marched away from me.

What the actual fuck was going on here?

Wren

"Hey!" Lincoln screamed up the stairs. "Frick and Frack, get your butts in gear!"

Fischer choked on his coffee, and looked at Lincoln shocked. "What did you call them?"

"Frick and Frack?"

"I haven't heard that since I was like four!" He chuckled. "My best friend's mom used to call us that. We were inseparable, and we even dressed alike once in a while."

"Did you pretend you were twins?"

"Nah, we were CEOs and we were bad ass, ruling our boardroom with iron fists!" He shook his.

"Really?" Lincoln quirked an eyebrow. "You were a little nerd?"

"You have no idea." Fischer sighed. "I memorized all the bones in the body when I was seven."

Lincoln chuckled. "Nerd."

Fischer slumped in his chair. "Nerves at eight, muscles at nine, veins and arteries at ten. I could explain the Krebs cycle at twelve."

Staring at him, Lincoln shook his head. "Okay, that's actually pretty impressive since I only have a vague idea that *Krebs cycle* is a biological process and not something you take on a trail ride."

I wiped a hand down my face. "It's like I live with five children." Leaning up the stairs, I called, "Two of whom are making us late for an appointment!"

"And two who love to make you cream your panties," Lincoln whispered.

"Jesus, Linc," I huffed, but his words had the desired effect. He tried to say something else, but I slapped a hand over his mouth. "No. No more. The kids have to go for their therapy. Shut up."

He walked away laughing, grabbing a bowl from the cabinet. A moment later, the twins came down the stairs like they were a herd of wildebeests.

I motioned them out the back door where the Land Cruiser was waiting, and quickly looked back at Linc and Fischer sitting at the table. They both had wicked glints in their eyes, and I slammed the door with a huff.

They had something planned. Dirty bastards. I still couldn't stop my own smirk. I didn't know what on Earth led to me the point where I had two men in my bed, but I was *not* complaining. No way.

Tabitha and Timothy were already buckling themselves into the booster seats, and I did a quick double check.

We were all proud of how well they were doing after being pulled out of a sex trafficking ring. It had cost a lot of money, and they were worth every penny. There were still challenges in getting them physically and mentally healthy, but the four of us—me, Lincoln, Fischer, and Ellie—were all up for it.

"Mom, are we doing physical or occupational today?" Tabitha asked.

I almost crashed pulling out of the driveway, but managed to correct and stop the vehicle. I put it in park and turned around. "What did you say, Tabi?"

She looked chided and I quickly shook my head. "No, baby girl. What did you call me?"

She brightened. "Mom. I called you Mom."

"You did!" The grin just took over. "Did you do that on purpose?"

"It just…happened."

I reached back and grabbed her hand. "That's awesome, Tabi! So amazing. You know what Doctor Hilbraith is going to say?"

"What?"

"You had a breakthrough! You were comfortable enough with me to call me that, and not miss or ma'am."

She grinned, and sat up a little straighter. I turned back and grabbed my phone for just a moment.

***Wren**: Tabi called me Mom! Just now in the car!*

***Fischer**: Holy crap! :D*

***Lincoln**: Awesome!!*

I dropped the phone back in my bag and started driving again, pulling up the twins' favorite station on the radio. For some reason, they love classic rock and could belt out Led Zeppelin with the best of them. And right now, they were all about *Immigrant Song*, including some of the instruments.

These two were the best.

Today was their physical therapy at St. Christopher's and I was happy to take them. They were making great strides, and I was sure the PT was going to be able to be reduced soon. Having been kept in a literal cage for two years while they tried to break them to be sex objects, they lost a lot of fine motor skills. Holding a pencil was harder for Tabi than it was for Tim, but Tim had coordination problems. So the PT and occupational therapy were working together to get them up to speed. I was pretty confident that by January we'd be able to put them in the local school and get them back to normality.

Despite all of our efforts we were never able to find their family. We weren't even sure where they had originally come from, though both of them described wheat fields when they were asked about something in their past before they were taken.

I was convinced they were fostered before they were stolen. More than once, Tim had mentioned putting everything in big black bags —most foster kids toted everything they owned from home to home in contractor trash bags. Which meant that there was no way to get anything they owned before.

Paige Domingues had managed to get them birth certificates based on their situation. They had remember their birthdays, and the time they were born. They were listed on them as Tabitha Doe and Timothy Doe, which we were hoping to change soon. Lincoln was going to adopt them, as soon as he could get cleared.

The appointment for them was nearly two hours, but that was because they worked with them together. We'd tried to have them do everything separately, but that had been a giant, rolling clusterfuck. They were not interested in being separated. So, we kept them together.

I had to put in a few hours at the office anyway, so I usually took them to the hospital. I would drop them at home, with the tutors, and then head off to check on Bastian before my afternoon appointments in University City.

Bastian had been in the townhouse nearly a month. I didn't think he was doing well yet, but he was doing things that didn't involve staying in bed all day. I was going to attempt to convince him to start seeing some of his patients next week. Some of the ones who were easier cases, not traumatic ones.

Which excluded Ellie, but she seemed content where she was for the moment. She had broken up with Mason about a month before, but they were still friends. Which was good because she could use all the friends she could find. She was markedly improved from when we found her, but she wasn't quite free of all the panic attacks and backsliding.

With one twin on each hand, I couldn't wave to Andy as I walked in. He laughed, and trotted over to me.

"Hey, Doc, looks good on you." He smiled.

"Thanks." I rolled my eyes. "Six months ago, I had no children. Now I have three."

"Hey, Nurse Andy!" Tabi said, bouncing a bit. "Are you our therapy assistant today?"

His face fell. "Not today, kiddo. Mister Pallino didn't want an assistant."

My heart froze in my chest. "Pallino?"

"Yeah," he said in a huff.

"Kids, run a head a bit and use the bathrooms, please. I'll be right outside." The two of them took off and headed straight in. I turned back to Andy.

He shook his head. "Faukner had to rush out of town for a family meeting and only Pallino was around."

"They've never worked with him before. They like Kim, they work well with her."

"I know, Doc," he said. "I voiced my concerns, but you know no one ever listens to the nurses."

Shit. This was bad. Andy had gotten a bad feeling about Pallino when he'd first gotten here. The kids didn't react to him well and that made everything more difficult in a hospital that was built for children with special needs.

"I was going to work in the office for a while, but that was because you were going to be with Kim while they were in there. Does he have any assistants?"

"He doesn't like to use them," Andy answered.

"Dude, I cannot leave two sex trafficked children with a stranger alone. Christ, that's just asking for trouble. They're going to freak out."

"Go in," he answered. "You haven't had a chance to see how this guy works, and if you can see that he's frightening the kids, the board might actually listen to you and terminate him." He grabbed my elbow. "Wren, no one likes him. No one likes the way he works. No one likes his attitude. He's all wrong for a children's hospital. We have to get him out of here."

I patted his hand. "I'm not leaving them alone. I'll pull rank on him if I have to." I paused a moment. "I think we need to make a policy that says trauma victims cannot be left to the purview of only one staff member. We need to trust everyone, but the kids aren't there yet."

"I agree," he said. "You bring it up."

I shook my head and moved toward the bathrooms. "I'm also going to introduce a policy that says *trust the fucking nurses*!"

He laughed. "If only it were that easy."

Tim popped out and grabbed my hand. I glanced down at him. "Excuse me, young man. Did you wash that paw?"

"No, I washed the other one," he said earnestly. "That's the one that I hold my penis with."

I desperately tried not to laugh. This kid was a master at one handed peeing. "Tim, you need to wash both hands, each time. We've talked about this."

"This is hopsital bathroom, not pubic one."

I choked the laugh back again. "Tim. Anything that isn't at home is a *public* bathroom. People in here are very, very sick, and you want

to help keep them healthy. Washing your hands helps control the germs. So please, bud, wash both paws?"

He nodded and popped back into the bathroom.

Tabitha came out a moment later, holding a damp paper towel. I didn't know where she had picked up the 'open the door with your paper towel if you can' habit, but I appreciated that. She found a garbage can and tossed it in, then grabbed my hand. Tim was back just after that and his still wet hand grabbed my other hand.

"Okay, you two," I said as we headed down the hall. "So, Doctor Kim isn't here today. She's had to go out of town. You're going to be working with Doctor Pallino." I pulled them to stop at the entrance to the therapy room. "Doctor Pallino is nothing like Doctor Kim. I want you to be on your best behavior, but I am also going to stay in the room with you, okay?"

"Why you, Mom?" Tim asked. "Why not Nurse Andy?"

"Because Doctor Pallino doesn't work with associates. He doesn't have other people who come in and help him. So, I'll be there if you two need anything, okay? Just ask, but I'm going to have my laptop and try to get some stuff done."

"Okay," Tabi said, and Tim nodded a moment later.

We walked into the room, and I was hit with a wall of *cold* the likes of which I'd never felt. The air in the room was icy, and it sucked the breath out of my lungs as I stood there.

What the hell was this?

Both of the twins moved from holding my hands to wrapping their arms around my waist and pulling in close.

"…Wren?" Tim's voice was full of terror, and he wasn't using *Mom* like he had been in the past week.

I didn't have a chance to turn and walk out of the room. Doctor Pallino walked out of a side room and smiled at me.

It was the smile of a demon. I could see, but couldn't see, the sharp pointed teeth that were yellowed and thicker than any human's I'd ever seen. His skin flickered from human tones to a gray black hue, and his eyes were bright yellow behind the brown he tried to project.

"Good morning, Doctor Warner." The smile was positively terrifying. "Are these my two little special patients?"

Right at that moment, I desperately wished for one of the swords. Ellie's, Miriam's, Laxmi's…I didn't care. This man wasn't human.

He couldn't be. I wasn't used to the whole not-human world, but there was no question that he was evil.

"…Mommy…" Tabi whimpered.

I looked down at her and realized she was watching the floor. I followed her line of sight, and found the floor around Pallino's feet boiling with what looked like tar.

A hand reached up out of the tar and I could hear the faint scream of pain as it dipped back down.

"What the fuck?!" I gasped. My eyes snapped back to Pallino. "What are you?"

"I'm a physical therapist," he said, spreading his hands wide in a mock of a welcome. "Come, children, it's time for your therapies." His hand reached out.

Do not let him touch them.

It was Laxmi's voice, but what she was doing in my head I had no idea. It was, however, sound advice. I pulled the twins behind me, and backed up a few steps.

"I think we need to cancel," I said.

"Oh, now come. I know I'm not Kim, but I promise that you won't regret my help."

Fuck me if that didn't sound like a demon trying to lay a trap. Textbook, evil demon stuff. This was unreal.

"Mom, I want to leave," Tim managed through tears I could hear in his voice.

I needed to get the twins out, but I didn't want to take my eyes off this thing in front of me. I desperately wanted one of those swords. There was a sneaking suspicion I harbored that those swords were going to be the only thing to dispatch this thing.

Pallino's smile wavered a bit. He was clearly losing his patience with me. "Temperance. Let the children come to me."

"Oh, hell no," I snapped. "No. Tabitha, I want you to back up slowly, and grab your brother's hand. I want you to carefully find that door that we just walked in, and open it. We're leaving and I need you to get that door open."

I heard a faint click as Pallino waved his hand.

He locked the door with his dirty dark magic, I just knew it. A moment later I heard a little whimper from Tabitha that confirmed it.

Shit. How did I get out of this?

"They're ours, Temperance. They belong to us."

I wasn't sure he was speaking, but I could feel the words shivering over my skin.

"Just stay back," I snapped. "These are my children, and you won't take them. Not now, not ever."

His disguise, illusion, whatever, dropped in that moment and we could see him in his pure hideous form. Both Tabitha and Timothy screamed at the top of their lungs and I couldn't say I blamed them. I'd seen what was lurking, but they hadn't.

I pulled both of them back in close to me, encouraging them to wrap their arms around me. "I don't know what you are, Pallino, but these children are not yours. They aren't going anywhere. You aren't claiming them for anyone. They're fucking *children*."

"And what is pathetic little Earth-bound you going to do to stop me, Temperance? You have no way to stop me. You could barely see what I was when you walked in. You couldn't even sense me through the door." He took a step forward and I did my best not to flinch as he did. "You have no way to stop me from taking these two."

The wall to my right shimmered and twitched, and a gout of black and red flame swirled up from the floor in a whirl of heat and speed. It took just a moment to coalesce into a form.

Ellie.

Her wings were wide and high, the sword I had been hoping for, was clenched in her right hand, a flaming thing alive and dangerous. She had black knee boots with red piping, black tights under a red skirt, and black short sleeved blouse with ladder-cut shoulders and a long-sleeved red turtleneck. Every part of her seemed to be touched with the black flames.

She was *magnificent*.

"Step it back, demon," she snapped, her sword humming in the air.

Pallino was clearly shocked she was there, but didn't seem to be willing to step back. He gathered his wits quickly, and flashed her a smile. "Hello, *versilange*. Claimed for Elysium, I see?"

"I am," she answered, her tone firm. "And I am trained."

That caught his attention. "Trained? Who trained you? There are none who could train you here. Don't tell me Temperance in her little guise here would dare try to train a *versilange*." He started laughing.

He choked a moment later when two more flames leapt up from the floor—one white, one black—and revealed both Laxmi and Miriam, without wings, but with their swords.

Pallino dropped his jaw and hissed at my two friends. Their swords came up, and looked between them and Ellie in all her glory.

"These children are not for you," Ellie said.

"They are!"

"They are not ready," Ellie stated. "They are too young, and when they are old enough, they will be claimed by the White. Leave here and never come back or I will remove you myself."

Laxmi and Miriam were grinning. They were happy with what she was doing. I was too—these were her brother and sister and she was defending them.

Still wasn't used to the magical shit, though.

Or my daughter having wings.

Holding out his hand one more time, he motioned to the twins. "Come with me."

They looked at each other and then turned back to him and chorused, "No!"

"Go, or I'll make you go." Ellie's sword cut the air again as she swept it up and held it at the ready.

Pallino lunged at me and the twins. I gasped and stepped back, pressing them against me and pulling them along .

Ellie took one step forward and swung the sword, slicing through the demon's neck.

He exploded in a shower of black and blazing red embers, landing in a pile where he had been standing just seconds before.

I slumped as my breath escaped. "Shit."

"Sit," Miriam said, running over to us, and guiding my butt to a bench.

While I did, and pulled the twins up on my lap, I watched as Laxmi and Ellie walked around the room. They were doing something, speaking in very low tones about their task. Laxmi was teaching her something.

"Mom?" Tim asked. "Is that really Ellie?"

Miriam and I exchanged glances, and I nodded. "Yes. That's Ellie."

"She's an angel?" Tabi asked.

I was glad when Miriam answered for me, "Mmm, kind of. She's a *versilange*. A guardian. So am I, and so is Laxmi. Your sister and Laxmi are dark *versilange*. That just means that they are from a different part of the After. I'm a white *versilange*. And all of us work in pairs."

"Who is Ellie's pair?" Tim asked.

Miriam glanced at me quickly. "We don't know yet. Ellie is a very young guardian. Laxi and I are teaching her how to be a good one, and it may be a long time before her pair shows up."

"Those swords are cool," Tabi said.

"The flameblades?" Miriam smiled.

"I could have used one just now," I grumbled.

Miriam patted my shoulder. "You, Wren, did an amazing job with the two of them and kept them away from him."

Tim looked across to where Laxmi and Ellie were chatting. "You were bad ass, Sis!"

Turning to find us on the bench, she smiled and gave him a thumbs up. Her sword and wings were gone, but she was still dressed to the nines.

"How did you all get here?" I asked.

"It's part and parcel of the whole *versilange* thing. We can *go* places with a few words and sweep of power. We'd been working on it with Ellie, but she had been struggling. I guess she got over that real fast when…you were in trouble."

"Can she tell when I'm in trouble?" I asked.

She nodded. "Vaguely, yes. But your panic was coming through strong and clear and there was no missing it. Neither Laxi or I were in a position to get here to help you sooner. Ellie apparently was."

"Ooh," I grumbled. "We'll have to make sure that no one knows she's gone AWOL from the school." Thinking for a moment. I sighed. "You don't happen to have one of those Men in Black flashy things?"

Sebastian

I straightened the stapler on the desk again. I was starting to piss myself off with all the little quirks and habits I was picking up.

The first was the fact that I was now a lump of a human with no definition. But the idea of exercising sent me right back to high school and being the puny, frightened child that hid below the bleachers. I'd tried to use the weight room in those four years of hell, but I just kept getting picked off the benches and pushed the side.

It was only when I finally got to college and met Victoria that I…

I had to stop there. My throat was closing on the very idea of her.

I fucking missed her so much. I missed the kids. I missed the stupid common core math Elliot was doing. I missed my whole fucking life.

On a professional level, Wren Warner had done one of the best things that anyone could have done for me: given me a space. Not mentally, but physically. It wasn't my old space and it wasn't going

to be my new one. It was a healing space. A space that allowed me to find out who I was without my family.

But I was still a mess. I knew there was no limit to grief. We had to ride the waves where they took us. Some people compartmentalized and never thought on the dead. Some people spoke of them all the time, reveling in the joy they had brought the world. Some people were brought down and walked in sadness after that. Every one different, no one wrong.

I would never be the same man I had been, but I had to figure out who I was going to be. That meant trying to get back into the world of psychology that I loved. Trying to integrate the loss of my wife and children into my every day. Trying to normalize the interaction with the police while they tried to find their killers.

My first patient, one of my long-time patients, had the very first appointment at my tiny little office in the condo Wren and Lincoln had rented to me.

My second, this afternoon, was Ellie Warner-Skillman.

Exactly on time, the doorbell rang.

I had to admit I liked this set up. The garage was in the front, but it was walled off from the hallway. The stairs were on the left, ahead of the elevator, and the hall lead to this sunroom-den area that was perfect for a office.

Wren had put a boot bench just along the wall by the door, so the patients could leave their coats and bigger bags if they wanted. With it being a private residence, it held a lot of security.

"Barry, good to see you," I said, opening the door and motioning him in.

"I was so sorry to hear about your family, Doc," he said, offering a hand.

I shook it, and hit him with the speech I had prepared for this. "Thanks. But remember, this is your therapy session, not mine. We're not here to talk about what I'm going through, but with what you're dealing with. Gotta get back into the swing of things."

He chuckled. "Good speech. Eight out of ten. Need to work on the sincerity a bit."

I laughed. It was exactly what I needed to hear at that moment. Motioning him down the hall, I made a note of the bench and opened the door for him to step into the office.

"Nice little set up," he said.

"Thank you," I answered, motioning him to the chairs. "Let's get started."

He sat on the couch, and I took the chair opposite of him, across the coffee table.

"How have you been doing?"

"It was tough without you walking me through some of the scenarios, but I think I held my own," he said. "Couple of close calls here and there."

"Define close call."

Scratching his nose—not a good sign in Barry Elberman—he took a long moment to answer me. "Touching. All but one time I managed to pull my hand back."

"Where did all of this happen?"

"The mall."

I waited.

"The Lego Store."

"Barry…"

"As soon as I realized what I was doing, I got the fuck out of there. I knew I had to. I left the mall, went straight home, took a Xanax and Lunesta and went to sleep. I'm not that guy, and I don't want to be that guy."

"You really need a backup therapist," I said. "I had no choice but to drop off the radar, but that didn't mean you should have gone without support. Our next session, I'm going to bring in someone who would be willing to lend an ear if or when I can't. Are you agreeable to that?"

"Another therapist?"

The trepidation in his voice was clear. I didn't blame him. I'd been working with Barry for nearly five years and his situation was unique. "Doctor Brett Hanger is another sex therapist. He works down in Wilmington. And Barry, you know that as long as you aren't breaking the law, we can't tell anyone what you say in these sessions. I want to make sure that you can live your life with a reasonable measure of normality."

Normality for a self-professed pedophile was nothing of the sort. He was a mess when I first met him. I wasn't even sure what was going on for nearly six months of weekly visits, and then one day it spilled out of him: he was desperate to stop the flow of desires for *children*. He was disgusted with himself, and it was only that disgust

that made me willing to help him. We worked together to figure out what he had to do to keep everyone around him safe.

Within the first year, we'd had him move into a job that was low exposure to children, if any. He voluntarily got a vasectomy so he wouldn't be a father, because that was the absolute worst-case scenario for him. He'd even managed to have a few girlfriends over the years, and the relationships were healthy.

But I realized very quickly that we would never be able to scale back further than every other week for sessions. He had exactly twenty days in him to stay on the straight and narrow before we had to do some major work again. So, every fourteen days, he was in my office for his two week assessment and encouragement.

This past month had been a test of his mettle. He'd failed. We'd have to do some major rebuilding in the next few sessions, which also meant weekly.

It was also why I wanted him as my first patient. He needed to stay in control. I needed him to stay in control—the other options were terrifying.

BRETT STARED at me as I closed the door behind Barry. He scrubbed a hand over his mouth, and looked deep in thoughts.

"Christ, Bas. A pedophile."

"I didn't know when I first took him on."

"Are you really sure that he hasn't been offending on his down time?"

"Except for the past month, we've been on a bi-weekly schedule to help him. I have to put my faith somewhere, Brett."

"Yeah, but Jesus, Bastian…"

I folded my arms. "Look, if I thought for an instant that he was actually offending, I'd be on the tip line to the police. I have my own…" I stopped and pursed my lips. "…had my own children…"

He put his hands up. "I'll trust you," he answered, ignoring my heartbreaking misstep. I appreciated that. I needed people to just start treating me like a human again. "But I don't know if I can be backup for him. I'll be honest. I trust *you*. I don't know if I can trust

him. If he calls me up one night and confesses that he's wanking off to kiddie porn… I have to report the whole mess. Including you."

"I haven't done—"

"Ethically, no, you're fine. But in the eyes of the law, they're not going to forgive you if he touched even one kid on your watch. Did you really think all of this through?"

"Repeatedly," I answered. "My whole therapeutic goal has been to make sure that he doesn't act on his instinct and he doesn't even leave himself the opportunity to be around children."

"He was at the Lego store."

I ran a hand down my face. "And he removed himself."

"I can't do it, Bastian. I'm sorry. This is too dangerous. You need to think about some of your other patients as well, like the Ellie girl. She was the victim of people like him, and how do you think she'd feel if she found out you were protecting him?"

"And what if by refusing him treatment, I cause him to give into his instincts?"

Brett stared up at the ceiling. "How about this? I cannot be his backup. To me, that's clear cut. But, if anything should ever happen, I will vouch for your ethical behavior, and your lack of criminal intent in all this?"

"I guess that's as good as I can get," I answered.

"That's all I can give." He stuck his hand out to shake on it. I took it, and pumped it a few time.

"Hanging around for Ellie?"

"Can I take you to lunch, man? You looked like you could use some normal interaction. I know it's very soon after their deaths, but…"

I held up my hand, and swallowed the tears again. "I'd be delighted. As long as you don't mind me busting into tears for no apparent reason."

"I'm a psychologist, Bastian. I get it."

"Good. We're going to Shank's."

Wren

"So, Mason turns around, and just kisses me hard on the lips," Ellie said.

"The look on her face was amazing!" Emma laughed. "I think she didn't freak out because she wasn't expecting it and Mason clearly had it *bad* for Natalie."

"What happened to Natalie?" Miriam asked.

"She went white, then she went red," Ellie giggled, "And then? She slapped him. For kissing me!"

"Mason grabbed her hand, and she spun him against the locker and kissed the *shit* out of him," Emma said. "They got ISS."

"Suspended?" Laxmi gasped.

"They did. For kissing in the hall!" Ellie giggle in glee. "But it was worth it because they are so dumb happy together."

"Makes me gag," Emma said.

The two of them broke down laughing like fools at the table. Miriam, Laxmi, Lily, and I all chuckled along with them.

It was such a relief to have Ellie acting like a normal high school kid, even though she was hiding a huge secret. That now involved wings and a sword and translocation of some sort.

"Oh! Shit!" Emma looked at her watch. "I gotta go! I have dance in half an hour."

"Take the car," I said, nodding at the hired car at the curb. "I can take Ellie wherever."

"Thanks, Doc! You're the best!" She grabbed her school and dance bag and slid into the car. She waved as they pulled away from the curb, and Ellie blew ridiculous kisses at her.

Miriam lifted an eyebrow, and Ellie caught her.

"What?" she asked, her cheeks flaming red in the next second.

"Have you an Emma been fooling around?" she asked point blank.

I put a hand to my forehead. "Miri…"

"We kissed a few times."

Canting my head, I stared at my daughter. "Ellie…"

"What? I'm just being honest. We have."

"Are you gay?" Laxmi asked.

"No, I don't think so," Ellie answered. "I think I might be bi or pan. I don't know. I'm all fucked up about sex right now, so I'm not trying to figure it out and label myself. I'm trying to find out what I like and what I can handle. Mason kissing me after we broke up was fine, weirdly. Emma and I making out isn't a trigger for anything either. She's also…"

"Hmm?" I asked, as nonchalantly as possible.

"She's safe. She's…well. She's a known factor There's nothing duplicitous about her, and she's very kind and sweet to me. She's totally bi, by the way."

"Are you going out?"

"Just fooling around."

If those words had come out of anyone else's mouth, I would probably have given them a lecture about being responsible and not screwing with people's emotions. But Ellie was different. She needed to feel comfortable with herself, she needed the chance to explore who she really was. And she would never be irresponsible to the point of risking her own safety and mental health.

Lily leaned forward on the picnic table. "Okay, now that Emma has gone off, we can talk about some other things that have been go-

ing on." She looked directly at me. "What the hell happened in that hospital?"

I shared a look with Ellie, and recounted the whole mess at St. Christopher's. I had been terrified for the twins. I didn't even think about me—I just wanted those two out of there.

Ellie added her side of the story. "I felt terror. Panic. It was so bad I hit the floor in gym class. Why do they still make us play dodgeball? That game is bullshit. As soon as I hit the floor, they all pegged me with that fucking ball. It was the perfect excuse to get out of there, but that still wasn't fair.

"Anyway, I got down to the locker room and the abject terror was making my skin crawl. I knew what it was, I just didn't know what to do about it. And I had been fucking up the translocation left and right when Laxmi was showing me.

"But the more I sat there, the more the terror grew and the more I knew I had to do something. So I risked it. I had to. And it was like the darkness just connected to me—not in a tempting way, but like attracts like. A magnet. Bam, I was in the room with Mom and the twins. Full *versilange* out and ready."

I nodded. "I was glad to see you, believe me."

She bumped against my shoulder. "You just wanted the sword."

I coughed. "Maybe."

Miriam, Laxmi, and Lily laughed. They all knew that I wanted a flameblade, but there was no way I could have one. They were specifically for people who were part of the After, and a mere human would most likely go up in flames for just touching one.

Not for the first time, I found myself wishing they would explain more, tell me more, about what the hell was going on around me. Us.

Miriam leaned forward. "And then, she just took his head off before he could lunge for the twins. It was beautiful. It was everything we'd been trying to teach her. But for all the straw dummies and bamboo thatches we had Ellie hack through, nothing replaces experience."

"The craziest thing was that while you've all been training me, I've been so afraid that I couldn't push a sword through someone. I would forget everything and run away. But I didn't. Not even close. I just did what had to be done."

Ellie looked between the four of us. "Am I supposed to feel guilty?"

"Technically," Lily said, "yes. But in reality, you won't because you didn't kill a human. You dispatched a demon. Which is what you're supposed to do. Specifically, a *zhadanjir* demon, which is exactly what you're supposed to do. So, there's no reason for guilt."

"Good, because I don't feel any. Not about that. Not when he was threatening my mother, brother, and sister."

I patted her arm. "I appreciate your supernatural support." Taking a bite of my cheesesteak, I laughed. "I still want a flameblade."

Laxmi rolled her eyes.

Lily coughed. "Well…"

I jerked my head over to her. "Well what?"

She reached behind her, and pulled out something from the back of her waistband. I knew it wasn't her gun, she kept that in a shoulder holster.

A black-handled, black leather sheathed knife was on the table between all of us.

"What is that?" Miriam whispered, her eyes growing wide.

"An *anjir* blade." Lily smiled. "It's forged in the After of black titanium and obsidian."

"It looks old," Ellie said.

"It is," Miriam answered. "No one makes anjir anymore. It's too dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Laxmi asked. "Flameblades aren't dangerous?"

"Flameblades can't kill angels," Miriam breathed. "Why do you have this Lily? They're contraband."

"I have it for Wren," she said, her words clipped. It was easy to realize that she wasn't going to tell us why she really had it or where it had come from.

She pushed it toward me on the table, catching my hand before I could touch it and capturing my gaze. "It's going to trigger you. It's going to hit you hard with darsana." She cocked her head. "Really, really hard. Like, you might not want to be sitting here outside of Shank's hard."

"Finding out my best friend and her wife are versilange and Hell is real hard?" I asked.

"Probably," she answered, with no mocking in her tone.

Jesus, did I even want to touch this?

"So, where?"

"Your house? Somewhere that's not here, near a known tear."

"Tear?" I asked.

"The voral that was over there," Laxmi said, pointing to the dock on the other side of Shank's, "exploited a weak spot between here and Hell. There are proper gates, but sometimes they can get through the tears. And touching that blade so close to one may pull some *zhadanjir* through."

"That's bad," Ellie said.

"Thanks for that newsflash." I laughed, bumping her shoulder again. "So what do you propose?"

"I can take it and we can meet at your house tonight?" Lily said.

"Okay, that's agreeable," I said. "We should figure out where the __"

"Doctor Warner?"

We all turned and found Sebastian walking up to the table. I stood and marched over, shaking his hand. "Bastian. You're out of the townhouse?"

"I had to leave at some point," he said. "This is my friend and colleague , Doctor Brett Hanger."

I shook the man's hand and grinned. "Nice to meet you."

"You as well," he said. "I heard you're responsible for a lot of Sebastian's progress after the attack."

"I don't know about *a lot*, but we helped where we could. There's more to work on with him, but we'll handle it one day at a time." I smiled at Bastian who nodded.

"You've given me space to figure my shit out. And I have a lot to figure out."

"May we join you?" Hanger held up his wrapped sandwich.

"Of course," I answered and motioned them to the benches. "Doctor Hanger, may I introduce my daughter, Ellie, my best friends Detective Lily Haden, Miriam Crownin and her wife, Doctor Laxmi Rana-Crownin."

Pleasantries were passed around, and I noticed at some point the short sword disappeared. Lily caught my eye to let me know she had it. We weren't done but we now had people who weren't in the know.

"How are you doing, Doctor Mederos?" Lily asked.

He swallowed audibly. “As well as can be expected, really. How is the investigation going?”

“I’ve got some leads I’m exploring. I actually have a few ideas, but I can’t share those because it might make things more difficult. I don’t want to encourage vigilante justice.”

“Believe me, Detective, I want to see justice, not carry it out,” he said. “I don’t have that in me. I’m glad I’ve even found the motivation to get out of bed most days.”

“I’m glad you have that.” Lily nodded. “We will bring them to justice.”

Bastian nodded, looking tired. “Miss Warner-Skillman, You’ll be in this afternoon for your session?”

“Of course, Doctor.” She nodded. “I’m grateful for your help and I really feel like I’m making huge strides to dealing with everything.”

That made him smile and…

Oh what a smile it was.

Fuck.

I shook off the thought and went back to my sandwich. It was kind of cold now, but I was also really hungry and really needed to distract myself.

“This is where Victoria and I had our first date,” Bastian said, quietly.

That factoid worked as well. I let out an internal sigh.

“How long ago?” Laxmi asked quietly.

“Fourteen years.” He grinned. “We dated for four years before we got married. We used to come here all the time when she was pregnant with the kids. She loved the cheesesteaks, and she’d eat two a week with Elliot.” He smiled at the memory.

The smile slowly slid off his face. A moment later, there were tears in his eyes and they slipped out and ran down his cheeks.

Lily grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “Let it out, man. Don’t hold it in.”

Hanger patted him on the back as well. “It’s good. No one here is judging.”

“Does it ever get better? Is there every going to be a day when I don’t break down in public or at all because something as stupid as cheesesteak reminds me of my wife and children? That I won’t wake up wishing they’d find me too and kill me?”

"No," Ellie said. "It doesn't ever."

We all looked at her, and she shrugged. "It's true. It never really gets better. It just gets different. I watched my dad die. I watched my mom kill herself with drugs. I was seriously alone for four years before you all found me. It never got easier. I miss my dad. I was five when he died. I miss my mom. I was twelve. I don't miss the same way I did, but I do still miss them." She looked at me and I could see the tears in her eyes. "And I miss my little brother. I want him back. Desperately."

I grabbed her hand across the table.

Time seemed to freeze.

…the flameblade danced in front of her, held point down. The young man, no older than fourteen, stood just behind her, defiant and terrified. He stared ahead at the cold, cruel icy angel.

"You can't have him, Melchior. He's not yours. He's angelico, and he's ours."

"He'll be mine in a moment. As soon as I dispatch your annoying ass to Hell with your father."

"Hell doesn't frighten me."

I stepped up next to the boy behind her. "He's not yours, Melchior. Leave, now."

"He has only half the protection he needs, belazhjian. He's ours."

There was a tilt and a shift and whirl of white flame, a roar of translocation, and whoosh of two new blades as they lifted into the air. "He has all the protection he needs."

The voices were harmony and melody, from either side of Ellie. The white flame of their swords lit the room against the black flame of Ellie's, casting long, dangerous, and protective shadows around us.

The icy angel took a step back and growled…

We ripped our hands apart and stared at each other.

"What the hell was that?" Sebastian asked.

Time caught up and the birds resumed their flight in the air.

"Are you okay?" Hanger asked from the end of the table. "You kind of jerked apart real fast."

"Fine," I said.

But when I looked at Sebastian I realized he had seen everything. Possibly even the spark that we'd all noticed during the visions, *darsana*.

God, was Sebastian a part of this too? I'd already touched him, and there was no connection at that point. But could it be that it wasn't the right time yet?

I was getting tired of not knowing what was going on. Glancing down the table, Lily's eyes were wide and full of warning.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Hanger asked.

Letting out a breath, I nodded at him. "Sorry. Yes. I'm fine. Just a little static electric shock. El?"

She coughed. "Yeah, sure. I'm fine. Gotta remember to discharge once in a while." She added a pretty convincing laugh.

The ground under us trembled, and I could feel the air around us trying to rip.

Shit. Our darsana had tripped something.

Laxmi snapped her head around to us. "Wren, doesn't Ellie have to go to gymnastics?"

"Oh, my God, yes!" Ellie crowed. "And I left my bag at home!"

Nodding in the direction of my car, we both stood up. "Come on. I hope there's time to go get it. Doctor Hanger, it was a pleasure to meet you. Bastian, take it easy."

He looked like he was going to offer his hand for a handshake, but I grabbed Ellie and we walked at an angle that allowed me to ignore him as if I hadn't seen the hand.

Ellie ran around the car and dove in as I pulled my seat belt on and started it up. I pulled away from the curb and headed for the on-ramp for 95 North.

"Back to the house?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Away from the rip." She stared out the window. "Jesus, Wren. The twins?"

"You saw that."

"Who the fuck is Melchior?"

I shrugged, turning onto the on-ramp. "I don't know, but it's not the first time I've seen him either."

"He's a nasty fucker," she mumbled. "But the twins. We have to keep them out of this as long as we can. They're going to try and awaken them. And they are way, way too young for this."

"I agree," I said, cutting across too many lanes of traffic to get onto the Vine to head for the house. "The air still feels like it's trying to rip. God, I hope we don't have to give up Shank's because of this."

Ellie laughed. “Really? We just found out that the twins—and maybe Doctor Mederos—are part of this, and you’re worried about cheesesteak?”

“It’s good cheesesteak.”

Lincoln

I pulled into the parking space near the hospital, and turned to look at my kids in the back.

They were beyond terrified. Wide eyes, and trembling hands, they were hanging on to each other. I wanted to punch the demon who had put the terror in their eyes. I hadn't seen it since we took them out of that miserable warehouse in Reading.

"You're going to see Doctor Gary today, you two," I said, trying to be a comfort. "I know you're scared about this place, but just like Mom, I swear to you that I won't let anyone hurt you. I will stay right in the room."

"No more dark men?" Tim asked.

"As much as I can promise, no. No more dark men."

"And you'll stay in the room?" Tabi asked.

"Yes."

"All right," she agreed and a moment later, Tim did the same.

They always fell back into this pattern when they were scared or unsure. Tabi was the older of the two, and she took that roll seriously

when it came to Tim. Wren, Fischer, and I had been working to pull that obligation away from her.

We walked through the hospital toward the OT rooms on the first floor. Doctor Gary was their usual doctor, so that was a huge relief, but I was still staying.

Nurse Andy, on duty as always it seemed, came running up and smiling at the twins. "Hey you two!"

They perked right up at seeing him, and he took their hands. "You two ready to have a good session today?"

"Yes, sir." They smiled together.

"And you both heard that the doctor you had last time is gone. He won't be substituting here anymore. He was fired and disciplined for frightening you."

The two of them looked back at me, and I shook my head just a little. Nurse Andy wasn't part of this. He had no idea what had really happened in that room and I was even reluctant to let the twins know more about it.

These two little lives were mine—ours—to protect and I wasn't thrilled about pulling them out of the normal they were just starting to redefine.

Andy backed into the room with them, grinning and shuffled us all over to where Doctor Gary was sitting. The two of them walked toward the desk and he smiled at them.

"Hey, kids," he said.

Alarm bells started screaming in my head. I'd brought them here enough times to know that he always called them by their names. On purpose. He told me he believed it helped them relax with him, and helped them create their separate identities. With twins, that was a priority. And he'd stressed that with all of us at the intake.

He also had no sins on his skin. At all. Not even the little bruises I was now used to with people who weren't necessarily habitual offenders.

I'd never seen anyone who had *no* sins.

"Doctor, are you feeling all right?" I asked.

"Of course, just happy to see the kids here."

The kids. Again.

I cocked my head and considered him. Andy had an eyebrow raised as well, and we exchanged a concerned look. "Doc, I'm going

to get Nurse Irene to help you today. She's on duty and she said she loves working with Tim and Tabi."

Andy remembered to say their names. Which meant that he was probably seeing the same thing I was.

Something wasn't right.

"No, I don't think we need to bother Nurse Irene today," he answered. "I think we can handle this together."

Andy shot a look at me. Together was not Gary's MO. He always had someone in to help him so each twin got his undivided attention.

"I would like Irene in here, Doctor." I left no room to broker argument. "These children need the therapy, and each is unique, as you've stressed before."

He stood from the desk and stared at me. "Mister Foster, these children are under my care right now and I will do what I think is best for them."

"Daddy," Tim whimpered.

"We're leaving," I barked, and motioned both of them back over to me.

"If you leave—"

"They're leaving with my permission," Andy snapped. "Get your shit together, Doctor Kirgan. There will be no OT for Tim or Tabi today."

It was only a heartbeat of time, but in that heartbeat, time seemed to slow down. Doctor Kirgan's eyes lit with a dark burning fire. Not the black fire that Laxmi and Ellie had, or the white that Miriam held. An icy blue navy flame, that burned cold, as if someone had actually managed to set dry ice to flame.

It was Hell. The bad parts of Hell. The part that Miriam and Laxmi kept telling us about, where the *Zhadanjir* came from.

I could see that Gary Kirgan wasn't there anymore—this was a golem.

Gary was dead, and this thing was using his body.

To get to my children.

Time sped up again, and the thing that was once Gary reached for Tim and Tabi. Andy jumped forward and grabbed them by the waist, pulling them back away from the thing in the skin suit.

"No!" he snapped, and turned to run them out of the room.

A blade made of black and gray flew from the golem's hand into the base of Andy's skull, killing him instantly.

The twins screamed as they spilled forward, but I was only a second behind and dove for them, scooping them both against me before they could see the bleeding body of someone they considered a friend. I crashed through the door, slinging Tim on to my back and clutching Tabi to my front.

"Hang on, we're running like hell, kids," I barked. Tim's arms wrapped tighter around my shoulders, and I could feel Tabitha trying not to cry.

Running through the corridors, I slammed sideways through a fire exit I knew was close to the car, not giving a rat's ass about the alarm. We were a hundred steps from the vehicle.

I hit the unlock. "I need you both to jump in the back. I'm going to start driving before you're buckled in, but you need to do that. Can you?"

"Yes, Daddy," Tabi said.

"Good girl." I yanked the back door open, and they both jumped in. I slammed the door behind them and jerked open the driver's door, sliding into the seat.

The car was away from the curb and racing down the street as fast as I could drive. I checked the rearview as both of them fastened their belts in the booster, and Tabi pulled her big sister routine to make sure Tim was in correctly.

"Daddy, I don't even want to go back there again," Tim said, catching my eyes in the mirror.

Yeah, that was a shock. "I don't think you will, kiddo."

There was a flash and a twist of reality in the passenger seat and Ellie was suddenly there. "What the hell is going on?"

"Andy's dead," I snapped. "Go to the hospital, see what the hell is going on. I got the twins, I'll get them home."

She nodded and vanished. The two little faces in the backseat looked horrified and I could see Tabitha's lip trembling.

"Nurse Andy?" she whispered.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. Yeah, I think the doctor killed him."

"Doctor Gary wouldn't ever hurt anyone!" Tim defended his grown up friend.

"I don't think that was Doctor Gary anymore," Tabitha said. "There was something weird in his eyes and he smelled."

"Smelled how?" I asked.

"Like someone was cooking bad eggs."

Sulfur. The smell of brimstone, a purported signature scent from Hell. And if I was right, this guy was from the bad parts of the After. There were probably only three kinds of people who didn't have sins on their skin: Jesus, the angels, and the dead.

I seriously doubted that guy was Jesus.

Pulling the car on to 95 South, I moved through the traffic as fast as I could without being *that guy* on the road. I probably still was.

I sped up the ramp for the Vine and pulled all the way to the right, the image of Andy on the floor dead running through my head.

Wren was going to be crushed.

The traffic was moving well for the middle of the morning. All the people around us moving through their day, completely unaware of the bits of Hell that moved through their day as well.

Tabitha screamed wordlessly as Timothy barely managed words. "Look out!"

Fischer

"WHERE ARE THE TWINS?" I called down the hall to Lily, trying to hold back a completely hysterical Wren.

"Paige has them in the waiting room," Lily said, holding up a hand.

Wren gasped through a sob, "Lincoln—"

"Is in surgery," Lily said. "His leg was pretty fucked up and he was unconscious, but he's alive."

Finally, Wren let out the wrenching sob that she'd been holding in since Ellie had called from St. Christopher's an hour before. I shoved her into the waiting room where Lily had parked the twins and Paige, and led her over to the couch there to force her to sit.

Tabitha and Timothy darted over to her and wrapped their arms around her. They had cuts and bruises on them.

"What happened to the kids?" I asked Lily.

"I'll get the doctor in here."

"Lily—"

"I have a fatal accident to deal with. I have to find out who the lead detective is on Rollins' murder and coordinate. I'm going to send in the doctor." Her words were clipped, angry and dismissive. She was gone out the door a moment later.

Ellie walked in before the door closed, with Miriam on her tail.

"The twins—"

I pointed to where they were wrapped around a relieved and exhausted Wren. "Fine."

"And Linc?"

"In the operating room. That's all we know right now." I leveled my gaze at her. "And you?"

She shook her head. "Andy was laying there, dead. He was...um…exsanguinating. Like even though his heart had stopped the blood was just draining out of him."

I put a hand on her shoulder. "There was nothing any of us could have done. From what Tim and Tabi were able to tell me, it happened really fast. He had grabbed them away from the doctor and gave Lincoln just enough time to get them out."

"Do you think it was an honest accident?" Wren asked.

"No," the twins chorused.

"The man in the car looked just like the doctor did," Tim said. "There was nothing in his eyes."

"He was looking for us," Tabi added. "He aimed the car for us."

"That answers that," Miriam said. She put a hand on my back and gave a little shove. She knew that Wren was a mess, and I needed to be over there. She and Ellie each took one of the twins and sat on the couch opposite as I sat down and Wren collapsed into my shoulder, weeping.

"I don't understand. They killed Andy! He had nothing to do with anything except protecting those children! He was an amazing nurse! He ran that unit like a military base and nothing got lost…" She hiccupped. "He's dead."

"Doctor Warner?"

She and I both looked to the door, and Wren recognized the man right away. "Doctor Juarez."

He closed the door. "You're here with Mister Foster?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"All right, let's start there. He had a compound break of the humerus, as well as fractures in the tibia, and clean break in the fibula. It's from the engine landing in the cabin. We've repair the humerus with some pins, and he's been stitched up. The fibula has been set, and the leg is being casted in a few days. He's going to be in ICU until he wakes up from the anesthesia, which should be about an hour."

The tension drained out of Wren—and shockingly, out of me. Lincoln had become a real friend to me, and I hadn't realized how tense I was with him being hurt.

"And the kids?" Wren asked.

"Bumps and bruises," Juarez said. "Tabi has stitches under that bandage on her hand from a slice from glass. Tim has a few on his elbow for the same reason. But they're going to be sore tomorrow. Did Detective Haden show you the pictures of the wreck?"

Both of us shook our heads.

"The car was upside down, and we were slammed against the wall, three lanes over," Tim said. "It was really, really scary."

"They can have ibuprofen if they're really sore, and if that doesn't work, call me and I'll get them something stronger. I don't think you'll need it though."

"Can we see Lincoln?" I asked.

"Give them half an hour and I'll ask one of the nurses to come up and get you," he said. "That wreck was quite the scene. The other driver didn't make it."

The doctor walked back out quietly, and Paige followed him now that Miriam and Ellie were there. They left us in silence for a minute.

"He was dead before the accident, wasn't he?" Tabitha asked. "The same way that Doctor Gary was dead before he tried to take us."

Miriam nodded. "Yes. You're right. They were dead before they stopped moving. They were taken by the *zhadanjir*, their souls discarded, and their bodies nothing but an empty husk."

"This is the second time they tried to steal us," Timothy said quietly. "First with Mom and now with Dad. Why do they want us?

We're just no ones."

"Even our families don't want us back," Tabitha said.

"Who told you that?" Ellie asked.

"We overheard Paige on the phone the other day at her office while she was doing our paperwork," Tim said. "She was sad about it. Upset. Grandma and Uncle Bill said they didn't want us because we're adopted anyway, so why would they want to spend money on us."

"Did she have the phone on speaker?" I growled.

"Yes, but she didn't know we were there yet," Tabitha answered. "She didn't know how much Grandma didn't like us."

"I don't think they were sad when the men came to take us away for their auctions," Tim added.

Oh, they had *sold* the kids to sex traffickers. That was a bit of news we didn't have before. If I ever met those people, I'd make sure they didn't take another breath.

And with me, that wasn't an idle threat.

"Why are they after us?" Tabitha asked.

Miriam thunked her head back on the wall and fluttered her hand at Ellie. Ellie gave her a dirty look. "Really? You're leaving this to me."

Miriam shrugged.

Ellie let out a long breath and looked at the twins that were on her lap and Miriam's. "So, you two know how I appeared with that sword last week? And how I appeared in the car?"

"And your wings," Tabitha said.

"Yes, and my wings. So you know all that. Well, I'm something called a *versilange*. A guardian from another realm, meant to protect someone very special to me. I'm a dark guardian. That just means that it's dark where my father came from. I'm not evil or anything—everyone has free will and can choose what they will and won't do."

"That's why you have black wings," Tim stated.

"Yes, exactly."

"So, when the voral showed up—that's a demon who's dark *and* evil—to try a wake up my powers, Miriam and Mom had to claim me for the light side as a *versilange*. If the bad guys had gotten to me, I would have been sucked in and become a *zhadanjir.* A Tartarian."

Ellie shot a look at Miriam, who scratched her face with her middle finger. Ellie shook her head, and looked back at the two of them.

"Well, they're after you two because you can be awakened as well, and claimed for the *zhadanjir.*"

Both of them sat up straight at the same time, and so did Wren and I.

"Excuse please?" Wren said.

"You're both unawakened *versilange*. And you're meant to be my partners in protecting that special person."

"Miriam?" Wren's voice was barely a breath.

"She's not lying. You saw the *darsana*. I had to do some digging to find out what was going on when they tried to take them the first time. I was actually on my way to warn you about the whole thing when I got the call that Lincoln had been hurt."

I stared at Ellie. "That's why you heard them the first time. They're your partners."

Ellie nodded, and looked at Miriam. Miriam nodded and sat up with Tabitha on her lap and gave them both an appraising gaze.

"Listen to me, both of you. You are not awakened and if we can keep that from happening until you're well over eighteen, we will. This isn't fun. There's a lot of responsibility to it, and there's a lot of training and danger. You can ask your sister about what's gone on with her since she got her flameblade. I want you both to call for her, or for me, or if you can call your parents do that. This isn't the first time you were attacked and this isn't going to be the last. We'll do everything we can to keep you safe."

They looked at each other and then back at Miriam. "Yes, ma'am, Aunt Miri."

Tim looked down at his shoes and back at her. "But we do get a cool sword some day?"

Miriam ruffled his hair and laughed. "Yes, you will."

Lincoln

Everything still hurt, my leg most of all, but I was starting to feel more human again.

The twins were coming to visit me every day, and sitting on the bed with me. They managed to color the entire cast on my leg.

I never saw myself with children. Ever. But these two were amazing, and I just felt better when they were here and safe.

Certainly, I had never seen myself sporting an entire colored-in cast. While I was amused, I was hoping for something less plastery when they were going to release me in a few days. I was still keeping the cast.

My kids colored it.

Wren also brought their homework and their computers. She made sure they had snacks and drinks and they were just the best company while I was still able to do a lot of my work from the bed.

Fischer was by every day, since he worked down the street, and hung with us. He would take the kids home with him after visiting for a while, and then I was basically on my own.

I was shocked how much I actually enjoyed Fischer's company sometimes. We were definitely friends, and I knew if he allowed it, we'd be more. But he had no interest in that, so instead we focused on Wren. I was pretty confident she enjoyed that.

A week after the accident, Detective Haden finally showed up. I knew she'd have to talk to me. She knocked on the door and walked in, a fresher-faced detective following her.

"Hey, Lincoln." She smiled. "How many more days?"

"They're saying two, but I'll believe that when I'm sitting in the living room," I answered. "Everyone's gone for the night."

"I know, that's why I'm here. This is Detective Stephen Hopper. He's working on the Rollins murder in St. Christopher's."

Sticking out my hand, Hopper shook it. "Mister Foster. I wish we could have met under different circumstances."

"Yeah, preferably one where I didn't have two dead people in my wake," I said.

"So, Hopper has questions about the hospital and I have questions about the accident on the Vine. We've already talked to the kids, so this is just the last piece of the investigation. He's going to go first, because he's gotta get back to the office. Kid's birthday or some crap."

He shoved her shoulder. "First birthday. We're going to have a big party Saturday, but today's the official day."

"Well, congratulations." I smiled.

"So, let's get to business." Hopper pulled out a notepad and leaned against the wall.

I recited the entire story again, with all the adjustments Lily and I had agreed on when she came to visit me the first time. She'd been there at two in the morning and coached me through an official statement that didn't involve words like *dead eyes, demon, skin suit,* and *golem*. Even though that was exactly what had been happening in that room.

Hopper got what he wanted. I knew enough to change minor details each time I told the story, things that didn't affect the over all truth of what went on. Haden stepped out with him for a moment and then walked back in alone.

"I need your official story on the accident," she said, "so let's hear it."

"It's literally, I got on the Vine, drove about 100 yards, the kids screamed, and that was all I remember until I woke up here. I never saw the car, the driver, the situation. Nothing. One second trying to get to the house, next second waking up from anesthesia in UPenn."

"Nothing? At all?"

"Nothing. The kids were the ones screaming. I didn't have time to even react to that."

"You really don't know what happened?"

"Can't remember," I said. "The kids were awake, and they might be able to help you."

"They already gave their statement. The man in the car that hit you looked straight at them, and he had no one behind his eyes. They were dead eyes. Tim even said, *like a doll's eyes*." Haden chuckled. "You're letting them watch Jaws too young."

"Hey, it's a good story, and that's a good description. Doll's eyes. Nothing there. That's what I saw in Gary's."

She plopped down into the chair there. "So, we're dealing with two golems here. Great." Her hand plowed through her hair and the woman looked flustered for the first time since I met her. "I don't know how much you really know about what's going on here, but something a certain kind of Tartarians can do is pull the soul out of a person and spit it out into the After. They can steal the body for their use. It's only good for about a week before it really does look like Edgar from *Men in Black*. A literal skin suit."

I stared at her. "Who the fuck are you that you know all this?"

She shook her head. "I'm Detective Lily Haden—"

My head canted at her of its own accord. "Seriously with that shit right now? We're talking about golems and skin suits and you're going to pull that?"

"I can't tell you. Not yet."

"Yet?"

"Lincoln…"

"None of us understand this, Lily. You tell us something, you tell Miriam and Laxmi something else. You won't tell us who you are, or why all of this—and I mean *all of it*—swirls around Wren." I folded my arms. "My official statement is I remember nothing after the kids screaming. I didn't see the car, I didn't see the driver, I blacked out."

I saw defeat in Lily's shoulders, but she didn't really slump down. She held herself tall and nodded. "Thank you, Mister Foster.

So far, we have no reason to believe this was anything more than an accident."

"Lily—"

She held up her hand. "I get it. You have to protect Wren and the kids." She dropped it lifelessly to her side. "Maybe I'm fucking this all up. Maybe I'll never get things back the way they used to be. Not a one of you knows what it's taken to get here, to this. And perhaps I should just let the chips fall where they may."

Lifting her head, she took a step toward me. There was a flash of white hot flames in her eyes. "But I am selfish. Greedy. And I want back everything that was stolen from me once up on a time. So, I give you hints. Information. Chances. The fucking hope that someday, I'll be able to go home and stay there with the man I love."

She turned and marched for the door. "Don't ever forget that, Lincoln. You're not the only one who has lost something—some*one* you'd die for."

Oh, I'd fucked that up. Big time.

A KNOCK on the door frame brought my head up to see who was there. I was a little surprised.

There was a tall Spanish god standing in the doorway, looking slightly lost, slightly befuddled, and altogether adorable. His black-black hair was not quite a mess but not really tamed, and his eyes were a dark chocolate brown that sparkled with a touch of polished amber in them. He had broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and I was desperate for him to turn around and show me his presumably perfect ass.

I didn't know Spaniards came in extra-large. I would have ordered one long ago.

Bisexuality, activate. *Shit*.

The Spanish conquistador took a step into the room and looked around just briefly, and then settled on me. His eyes went a little wider, a little more curious, and he swallowed hard. "Mister Foster, hello."

"Can I help you?"

"Sorry, I'm Doctor Sebastian Mederos."

"Oh, Ellie's therapist."

He nodded and walked all the way into the room, and sank onto the chair there.

"I wanted to swing by after Ellie and Wren told me what happened. I realized that's your place I'm holed up in, and I wanted to thank you."

"I'm not using it." I shrugged. "Someone should."

"You're…just keeping a million dollar townhouse empty? Without renters?"

I smirked. "I'm a bit of a greedy bastard, you see. I like having things. Sometimes I don't like to share them. Occasionally someone will make me see the error of my ways, and fix that."

"Someone like Wren?"

I glanced down at my hands. "A lot like Wren." I looked back up at him and his eyes were twinkling with curiosity.

"Tell me to fuck off, if you must, but…you and Fischer?"

I smirked. "Yes. Me and Fischer."

"What's that like?"

My head jerked back, and Sebastian cringed at his own question.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "My specialty is human sexual relationships, and I've come across so few threesome groups, my curiosity got the best of me."

Staring at him for a moment, I shrugged. "Fischer and I have a strong friendship, and we rather enjoy our arrangement. Wren enjoys it."

I watched Sebastian for a moment and I could see he had a thousand more questions for me. Nodding, I motioned to him. "Go ahead. We have no shame about this. We just keep it quiet because other people might try to shame us for it."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes."

"Fischer?"

"Yes."

"Do you and Fischer have any interaction?"

"He's straight. He has no interest. But he and I love each other in a way that allows this to work. He's also, definitely, the alpha between the two of us."

"Alpha?"

"He shares a room with her, I simply share the bed."

"You have your own room."

Nodding, I could almost see a giddy excitement in this man as he was given free rein to ask his questions. "You really haven't ever encountered a threesome in all of your time as a sex therapist?"

"Not a good one that seemed to work," he said. "Usually by the time they get to me, everything is shit, and my best advice is to part ways. They don't realize the level of jealousy when a new partner comes into the relationship and screws with the dynamic. Or even better, when the one didn't realize there were bisexual tendencies in their partner. Man, those sessions…"

I chuckled. "I have not hidden my bisexuality, so I'm pretty sure we're okay."

"Ellie is a fantastically well-adjusted young woman," Sebastian said. "Her hang ups about—wait. Can I talk to you about her? Is she only Wren and Fischer's daughter?"

"They're her primary parents, but I step in when they need me to. The same thing with the twins. Wren and I primary, but Fischer steps up."

"I have to check my HIPAA information," he said. "It's been a while."

Holding up a hand, I sliced into his thoughts. "Doctor Mederos, how are *you* doing?"

"Hmm?"

"How are you doing? How are you handling life right now? Has anyone asked you? Have you seen a therapist?"

He slowed right down and glanced at his shoes. "I'm best when I'm working. Like just now, talking to you about your situation. Or when I'm focused on a patient. Wren does half hour sessions with me three times a week over the phone. She won't let me ramp up my practice yet because she's smart and knows I won't actually deal with any of this."

"This what?" I asked.

"The…" He choked. Immediately. His eyes were cloudy with tears and he shook his head. "You really are hanging around her too much."

"She told me why you were staying at my place, Sebastian. And I know how she works. So, how are you doing with this."

He looked me dead in the eyes. "You mean, how am I doing with the death of my wife and children?"

I nodded carefully. I didn't really want to upset him.

"I guess as well as can be expected. I'm thankful for Wren and Detective Haden. It seems I have no one to talk to but them." He drooped in the chair. "My brother's gone missing as well."

I took a deep breath. "I can empathize with that. My personal assistant has disappeared. He was more my brother than anyone else I knew. Fucking hurts that he's not around. He would have spoiled the twins."

"Just gone?"

"Poof," I answered. "He took care of me when I went catatonic, and then when I woke up…gone. As much as I love Wren and Fischer, no one can replace Vance. He was with me through—"

The color had drained out of Sebastian's face. "Who?"

"Vance. Rikers. He was my—Jesus, grab the garbage can and puke in that!"

He managed to get to it and keep all of his vomit in the trash. He wretched for a good two minutes before finally walking into the bathroom and finding a cup and some mouthwash.

Leaning against the frame, he was still pale and shaking. He didn't look good at all, and for a long time he just stared at me.

"Who was your assistant?" he asked again.

"Vance Rikers."

"That's my brother."

I stared at him. "What?"

"Vance Rikers is my younger brother. My parents adopted me, and my dad was killed in a car accident. Mom remarried and they adopted Vance."

"Are you shitting me?"

"No. Why do you think I just puked? I had no idea he worked for you. Why wouldn't he tell me that?"

I shook my head. "I had no idea he had a brother."

"And you haven't seen him?"

"No. I had a catatonia episode. The last time I saw him was when his face faded out as I fell into the stupor." I rubbed a hand over my face. "Christ. What the hell? He went through everything with me and never bothered to mention you. Now I'm worried I didn't know him at all."

"You and me both," Sebastian said. "Where did you last see him?"

"At the townhouse you're living in," I answered. "I passed out in the back bedroom on the third floor."

"You saw him, though?"

"He's been there for me for a long time. He helped me through my rehab, and kept tabs on me. He was brilliant in the office. Wren, Fischer, Laxmi, Miriam…they've all met him."

"I haven't seen him in person in thirteen years," Sebastian whispered. "We only ever talked on the phone. I asked him to come to dinner more than once, but he just never did." He plopped down on the bed, his head heavy.

"It wasn't because of our work, that's for sure," I said. "I would have given him time to visit, no questions asked."

"He got all weird and mysterious about just over fifteen years ago. Disappearing, reappearing, and then he just never appeared again. Just his phone calls."

I patted his arm. "At least he kept in touch."

Sebastian nodded slowly. "I still miss talking to him."

Nodding along with him, I couldn't help but agree. "I miss him, too. How weird that we didn't know about the other half of his life."

"He had a daughter," Sebastian blurted out. "Did you know that?"

That blew me back. "I had no idea."

"She'd be almost seventeen now. I only saw her once, She was a pretty little thing. I don't know what happened to her, but she's probably better off now. If she had gone to live with him, she'd be dead too."

"That's the wrong way to look at it, Sebastian."

"Yeah, well, I got a dead wife and two dead kids," he stated. "I don't really see another way to look at any of this. Do you?"

Grief was a bitch. How did I even answer that?

"Don't have an answer," I whispered.

"I didn't think so. All the money in the world can't repair my heart, because it's dead. It bled out on the carpet of that bedroom."

I grabbed his hand with mine. It was big, warm, and there was a small callus where his wedding ring had rubbed against his palm for the past ten years.

Sebastian stared down at our joined hands and a flurry of emotions flew across his face in succession: confusion, relief, delight, gratitude, horror, fear, betrayal, and disgust.

Without warning, he stood, releasing my hand and headed for the door. “Thanks for the townhouse rental. As soon as I can get half a grip on my dead wife, dead kids and missing brother, I’ll be out.”

And, I fucked it up again.

Life – 2, Lincoln – 0.

Fischer

Lincoln made his way, step by step, up the stairs with the railing and the crutch. For just a moment I thought about installing an elevator to make it easier for him to get to the second floor.

The brace and boot were temporary. He was already ten days into the healing process and had spent two of those days learning to walk with the boot and brace.

Wren nudged me. "He's fine, Doctor."

"He is a fine doctor," Lincoln called back. "Nice ass, thick thighs."

I shook my head as Wren tried not to laugh.

"You two really don't…"

"Baby, I'm all yours. I am not even the least bit interested in men," I answered. "I mean, I know he has a fine ass, objectively, but I don't need or want in."

Lincoln yelled back, "Your loss!"

"It's not!" I teased. "It's yours. I'm fine without it!"

He grumbled something as he finally reached the top of the stairs, and turned back to us. I pretended to wipe a tear from my eyes.

"Look, Wren. Our boy can do it."

Repositioning his crutch, Lincoln shot me the middle finger. Wren laughed and walked up the stairs to him standing there. She dropped a more than suggestive kiss on his lips.

"Are you cleared for that?"

He looked down at me. "The only thing it has to clear is my boxers."

Oh, we were doing this.

"Gross!" Ellie screamed from the kitchen. "I'm going to the library! Text me when you're dressed!"

I trotted up the stairs after I heard the door slam in the back of the house, and wrapped my arm around Wren's waist. I peered over at Lincoln. "You good?"

"How many more weeks do I have with these damn things?" he grumbled as we crutched through the hall.

"Five," Wren said as we managed to maneuver into our bedroom.

Lincoln maneuvered himself to the bed, and dropped the crutch on the floor next to it. "I hate that thing."

I closed the door behind us, and lifted an eyebrow at Wren. She had a thoughtful look on her face, and I had the feeling that was trouble. The smirk that followed confirmed it.

"Well. It looks like it's my turn to tie you down, Mister Foster."

Whipping his head around to us, he looked shocked. "What? What do you mean?"

Wren nudged me and I knew exactly what she was planning. I walked to the closet and pulled out the wristbands that we usually used on her to keep her on the bed.

"What… I… No. I mean…"

Lincoln was adorably flustered. Even I could admit that. I handed the cuffs to Wren and she crawled on to the bed.

Damn that was hot.

She slipped her hand up Lincoln's side, snagging his shirt and dragging it up his body. She pulled one arm out and slipped the cuff on his wrist, wrapping the rope around the column of the headboard. She climbed off and moved to the other side, repeating the

motions, and finishing it off by slipping his shirt over his head, throwing it on the floor.

"You can't move," she whispered in his ear. "You're not allowed by order of the doctors. So, I'm just going to make sure that you listen to doctor's orders."

I pulled the Queen Anne wingback to the edge of the bed and settled in. I did love when I got to watch the two of them.

"You tied me down," he breathed.

"I did." She reached for the Velcro on the side of his brace. She unfastened it and loosened the brace just a little. It was enough to unsnap the athletic pants and slip them up and out of the brace. She refastened the brace. "Doctor's orders."

A moment later, she pulled the fasteners on the other side of the pants and left Lincoln laying in nothing but a jock and his brace and boot.

"Ooh." Wren smirked and ran her hand over the front of his jock. "I like this."

He looked a little lost at the other end of the ropes. He liked to be in control and most assuredly was not at this point. It was kind of fun to watch him sweat.

"Mmm, let's see here," Wren purred as she followed the straps around his body. "Ah, ha. I knew you'd make this easy for me." She twisted her hands a bit in the back and elastic straps popped open. "I do like this."

Peeling the fabric forward, she lifted the cotton off his body and revealed the hard cock she was looking for underneath. Wrapping her hand around him, she pumped his shaft slowly a few times, then let go and shimmied backward.

I would still have argued I had the better view during that shimmy.

Standing up, she shucked her shirt and pants. She gave me a grin and then crawled back on to the bed.

I unzipped my pants and pulled my own cock out. It was way too tight in there.

"Uhm… Wren? What…what are you doing?" Lincoln looked really nervous.

"Pleasuring you," she hissed, wrapping her lips around his nipple, and cradling his balls.

"The doctor was serious about me—"

She covered his mouth with her hand and rose up a bit. "Lincoln. Will you shut up and let me enjoy myself? I'm not going to hurt you, I'm not going to strain your leg. You might rather like this."

"I like it," I said, raising my hand.

She looked back at me over the crest of her ass. "You'd better get naked, Fischer, because you're going to be up at bat in a few minutes."

Oh, *yes*. I knew where this was going.

Lincoln shut up, thankfully, and let himself sink into the covers and pillows. Wren took her time nibbling and sucking and licking her way around his body. A few whimpers and moans of delight escaped him as she worked her way around.

I could not deny that I loved watching her with Linc. I loved the way he worshiped that body of hers, and the sweet sounds she made when she came. Other people might think that I was whipped, cuckolded—but there was no air of that in this bedroom. At any point, I could climb up on that bed and join in. Help him tease and delight her.

I just really liked watching.

Stroking myself slow, because I didn't want to come yet, my eyes were fixed on Wren's pert little ass in the air as she worked her magic on Linc. She lifted his bad leg carefully and moved it just a little to the side. She shoved his other out and away, and crawled in between his legs.

"Do you know how much I have missed your taste in my mouth, Lincoln?" She dragged her tongue from the base of his dick to the tip and flicked it across the top, licking off the drops of precum. She moaned a bit and closed her eyes.

"Shit," Lincoln breathed. "I missed that filthy mouth."

"You make it filthy," she said.

She swallowed him down in one move, all the way to his root. Lincoln groaned and arched his back, and huffed, desperately trying to get himself back under control. I chuckled. I'd been there, under the spell of that hot mouth moving over my erection. I'd had to start naming the nerves in the neck to keep from blowing instantly.

His lips were moving, and I raised an eyebrow.

"Federal reserve regulations," he snapped. "Jesus her mouth is amazing."

"So is her ability to deep throat," I agreed.

"Ngh. Shit." He let out a blast of air. "Christ, don't stop baby. Are you going to fuck her or what, Fischer?"

Wren wiggled her still panty-clad ass at me. I stood and shucked my pants quickly, pulling her little cotton briefs off her butt and nibbling on the firm cheeks. I pulled my shirt off, and reached forward, plucking her bra open as well, slipping my hands up her body, uncovering them, letting her breasts spill into my hands.

I teased her a bit. That was the only disadvantage to this particular position. Neither Linc nor I were in a position to handle her tits, and we both greatly enjoyed that. But it was difficult like this, so I slid my hands down and grasped her thighs, pulling them apart.

She was at the perfect spot at the end of the bed. I lifted her legs just a bit by her thighs, and fitted myself against her welcoming pussy. I grasped her hips and pushed myself inside.

She made a sound that could have been *oh fuck* if her mouth hadn't been full of Lincoln's dick. He jerked because the vibration of her throat tripped down him and landed in his balls.

Wren worked her mouth up and down him as I worked myself in and out of the warm welcoming heat of her depths. I took my time. I enjoyed the silken sensation of her heat over and over on my cock.

"That's it, baby," I cooed, leaning forward. "Make him feel good. Show him how much you missed him."

Lincoln's fingers fisted in the cuffs—which after sharing this woman with him for the past three months, I knew meant he was going to come soon.

I was actually disappointed that I didn't even feel the slightest wiggle of homosexual attraction. Lincoln was hot, and I had no doubt that he would be amazing in that capacity. And while I was just fine admitting I loved him, it was platonic and brotherly.

Shared over our shared woman. Who was a filthy little creature in this room. We both loved that.

Wren was cresting up as well, and I reached for her clit as I started to move more quickly in her. She lifted up and off Lincoln, and gasped, "God, yes, you'd better come inside me, Fischer." She licked the head of Linc's cock like it was a lollipop. "You too, Linc."

"Not a problem," he gasped, tightening his fingers even more.

I watched as her mouth and tongue swirled around his length, teasing him. She dipped her head down to his sac and sucked each of his balls into her mouth alone, swirling them.

She swallowed him down again—and I watched her finger dust over the hole nestled between his cheeks.

"Oh, fuck!" he yelled and Wren hummed as she swallowed his cum, enjoying his climax on her tongue.

The ripples of delight that traveled through her, tightening her channel around me, brought me that much closer. With a few flicks of my finger over her clit, she drew her head back from where she was still laving Linc's dick and let out a shuddering moan.

"Fuck, yes!" she managed, and came hard around me.

The pulse of her pussy around me again did me in and I came, long and hard, pumping myself into her welcome heat.

Wren dropped onto Lincoln's stomach, smiling like the Cheshire Cat. I managed to flop on to the bed and release one of Lincoln's hands from the cuffs.

"Welcome home." I grinned.

"Mngh."

Wren

Fischer and Lincoln both stared at me. They traded looks with each and then once in a while looked over at Ellie, but it always landed back on me.

Finally, Lincoln stood and limped away from the table, running his hand through his hair. "The twins. The two little kids that I thought I randomly picked from a sex auction, are part of this mess?"

I nodded. Ellie nodded as well.

"They're *versilange*?" he asked, again.

"That's what we discovered," Ellie said. "Linc, I don't want those two involved in this anymore than you do. They're *kids*. Even more than I am. They're just getting their lives back."

A knock on the back door startled all of us, and Fischer went to answer it. Lily, Laxmi, and Miriam walked in, sitting down at the table.

"Gang's all here," Fischer said, and slid in to the seat next to me.

"The twins?" Lily asked.

"With their tutor in the library." Lincoln pointed vaguely in the right direction. "I told them to stay there for the day, so that's about two more hours." He seemed oddly contrite.

Lily pulled the leather sheath and black handled sword from behind her. "That thing is uncomfortable to carry around."

"Why…is there a short sword on the table?" Fischer asked. "Are we expecting hobbits?"

Ellie just rolled her eyes, and I shook my head. "It's mine, apparently. I haven't touched it because Lily said it's going to trigger me and she didn't want me in public for that."

"What did you see? At the table?" Miriam asked. "We all saw the spark and I know you had to have seen something. We all felt the time jerk, and then the After trying to crowd through the rip."

"Sebastian felt it too," I said.

Lily let out a sigh at the same time as Miriam. I still didn't know what Lily's part in all this was, but she'd just turned up with a sword that was supposed to be mine. I guessed it was big.

Ellie explained what we saw in the vision, and I just added on a few details here and there. "But who is Melchior?" she asked, looking at Lily and Miriam. "You've told me more than you've told Wren, which is bullshit, by the way, but you never mentioned Melchior."

"He's an angel," Laxmi answered. "Not a very nice one."

"Yeah, got that impression," I mumbled.

"The twins," Lincoln said.

"They're apparently light versilange," Miriam said.

"Oh, apparently," he grumbled.

"They're just *kids*," Ellie repeated.

Lincoln nodded. "And they're just getting back on their feet. There's still more therapy they have to go through and I'm not willing to pull them into any of this shit before—"

Fischer rested a hand on his. "Linc? We're on the same page. They're kids. They're *our* kids. They need to grow, and they don't need to be brought into this right now. We'll keep them safe."

Lincoln slumped back in the chair, and ran a hand through his hair. "You're right. Of course, you're right. Always the fucking voice of reason."

"Not always." I smirked.

They both blushed beet red.

I wasn't even being specific, and both of their heads went to sex. I laughed.

"Okay, now what's going on with the sword here?" Laxmi said, clearing her throat and the air from innuendo. "You pulled that out back at Shank's—"

"Are we still able to go to Shank's after that?" Ellie asked. "My mother was concerned she'd lose access to her favorite chicken cheesesteak."

I lightly punch her shoulder. "You're a shit."

"But she's not wrong," Miriam said, tipping her head. "You're kind of obsessed with the place."

"Screw you both." I laughed, pointing at each of them. "It's Philadelphia. We're supposed to be obsessed with cheesesteak."

"As long as it's not Pat or Gino's," Fischer grumbled.

"How dare you bring up those names!" Lincoln snapped. "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

"Or at least get thee a pork sandwich from John's," Lily mumbled.

Whatever just happened was exactly what we needed. We all collapsed into a fit of laughter, all trying to catch our breath.

Ellie motioned to the sword on the table. "Okay, tell us about this sword thing. I know Wren wished she had a flameblade the other day with the twins, and you're offering this…thing."

"An *anjir* blade," Miriam reminded us.

"Right," Fischer said. "Obvs."

Lily snorted and shook her head. "It's a titanium and obsidian blade. And since were going for the truth here, this was forged in the fires of Hell by Hephaestus."

My eyebrows shot up my forehead. "Excuse me? Not only is Hell real, but a fucking Greek god is also a thing?"

"Yes," Miriam said. "Heph is a nice guy. Demon. God. Whatever. He's an immortal. He likes working with his hands and the *anjir* and flameblades are his. He makes other stuff, too—"

Lincoln held up a hand. "Hold on. I'm still dealing with the Hell is real thing. There are actual hot fires there?"

"Hell is one aspect of the After," Miriam said. "And After is really just a convenient name for us to call it. It's a whole other realm and I can't even begin to explain it. There's an immortal aspect to all creatures, and that part is pulled to the After. There are some of us,"

she pointed to herself, then Laxmi, "who are from there and we can move between here and the After. But if you are born here, you can only pass to the After. With exception."

I knew she was talking about Ellie. And now the twins, once they were awakened.

"So a lot of the historical gods you might have heard of were probably born or created in the After," Miriam finished.

"This sword," Lily said, pushing it into the middle of the table, "was a…" She was stuck on the words. Pursing her lips, I could see the internal battle to say something.

It hit me like a bolt of lightning why she hesitated. Whatever she was about to say was going to change *everything*. Touching the blade would just wedge all of that into position.

Lily finally lifted her eyes and stared right into mine. "This was a gift to you from Hephaestus after the Awakening."

Laxmi gasped, and Ellie whipped her head around to stare hard at Lily. They were both shocked. Miriam looked terrified, and Lincoln and Fischer just looked lost.

Fischer leaned forward. "What Awakening?"

"*Ail's*."

"E-L," Miriam said. "It's pronounced *ail*."

I was listening, but I was transfixed by the sword. It was mine. It was a gift to me from an ancient god I now had to believe in as well. They were all chattering about this Awakening, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the blade.

"Why?" I whispered.

Everyone turned to me. "What?" Miriam asked.

I looked up at her and Lily. "Why? Why is that a gift for me? Why did some crusty old god make me a hellfire forged sword? Who the fuck am I that I rate a gift from a *god*?"

"Heph isn't a god, not really," Miriam said.

"You're calling an ancient Greek god by a fucking nickname, Miriam," I said, my eyes wide. "Are you kidding me right now?"

Lily stood up. "Ellie, you need to go to your appointment with Doctor Mederos. Miriam, Laxmi, leave the sword with them. They'll call with questions."

"You're seriously just going to walk out of here?" I snapped.

She looked at me and was angry for just a tick of a heartbeat. "If I told you what happens, it wouldn't happen. I'm sorry, Wren. I'm

breaking rules to even give you that." Her phone started ringing.

Laxmi and Miriam followed her out of the house, and Ellie moved in to give me a quick hug. "I don't know what's really going on, Mom. But trust they have your best interest at heart. Please."

She glanced at Fischer and Lincoln. "Send the twins to the real library with the tutor. Take care of her."

A moment later, she was out the door leaving the house in silence.

"What's…what's going on?" Lincoln asked.

"I don't fucking know," Fischer said.

I looked at the sword. "Lily said it's going to trigger a vision. A big one. If the damn thing is a gift from a god, I can only imagine this is going to be a fucking disaster."

Lincoln put a hand on my shoulder, and dropped a kiss on the top of my head. "I'll send the tutor and the kids out to the library or the park." He walked out of the room and down to the library we had in the house.

Fischer grabbed my hand. "Wren, we've known there's weird shit going on. We knew that from the get go. Lily is trying to help. You needed a weapon the other day when you were protecting the kids, and this is her answer."

"Whatever that thing is going to show me, Fischer, is going to change our lives forever."

"I know, baby," he said, leaning down and tipping my head back. "You also know it's not going to change everything and it's not going to give us all the answers. There's more than we know going on."

"Way more," Lincoln said, walking back in. "But we need to start getting answers. Your visions, us seeing sins on skin. There's something going on."

"Sins on skin?" I asked.

"It…started not all that long ago," Fischer said. "We've been meaning to say something. Most people don't have a lot of them."

Lincoln pointed to his wrist. "Bruises, mostly. Around the wrists."

"You don't have them," Fischer said, trailing his fingers over my skin. "Linc and I don't have them. Ellie, Laxmi, Miriam, the twins… all have nothing."

"The golem who attacked me at the hospital didn't have them. He didn't carry Gary's sins," Lincoln said. "I could…see something flickering around him, something that said he wasn't Gary."

"I had a patient who was crawling was sins," Fischer said. "Crawling. As in, with bugs that only I could see."

Lincoln raised his hand. "I had snakes."

I glanced between them. "Which of you still believes that rescuing the twins was a coincidence?"

"I don't know what I believe any more," Lincoln said, limping back to the table. "Everything is so insane right now."

"If I touch that sword, nothing is ever going to be the same. Nothing."

"You need that sword," Fischer said. "You were attacked and had no way to defend against a supernatural enemy."

"I agree," Lincoln said. "I think that we all need one, but at the very least, you do."

I stared at the two of them. "Are you sure? Are you really ready for this? Because I'm scared enough to piss myself at this point."

Fischer grabbed my hand. "Wren. We can't keep ourselves in the dark. We've already seen that the kids are in danger, even if they are *versilange*. Even Ellie, despite the wings and sword. If we can give them another level of protection, I think we should. If this will protect you, we should. You are not defenseless, and you're not a risk-taker. But you're still in danger, and we both need you to be safe."

"I agree," Lincoln said. "And seeing what Ellie can do with her sword and magic, or whatever it is, I can't help but think that you'd be formidable if you had a proper weapon." He pointed to the black sword on the table. "Like that one."

I stared at it. Was I really ready for this? Would this give us the information, the advantage, we needed to find Ben and bring him back? Could it also give us a chance to save others from the sex trade?

"It's up to you, Wren," Lincoln said. "I'm greedy, so I want you to —because it will keep someone, I love safe." His hand traced over my cheek, and I could feel the way he spoke the truth in that moment. The same truth was in Fischer's touch on my hand.

"Everything changes," I whispered.

"Nothing changes what we have," Fischer said. "Nothing."

I stared at the sword for a long few heartbeats.

Without preamble and without warning, my hand shot out and snagged the handle.

The world exploded around me.

Sebastian

Barry was fidgety. Far more than his normal nervousness, and I was not sure that I was up for this mess of a session. Not after what Hanger had said to me.

I'd been mulling what he had brought up over the past few sessions. Barry was a pedophile. There was no way about it. I pulled out my notes about him and studied them. I had five years worth of extensive notes on him, all from the session and post session.

I was bothered, deeply disturbed, by what I was realizing with them.

Despite the five years he'd been with me, there hadn't been any marked improvement. Almost every week was another confession about his nearly giving in to the impulses. About touching a shoulder, an arm, ruffling hair. Even during our most intense session stretch—three days a week for nearly four months—he wasn't improving.

It seemed more that he was getting better at lying about what he was doing. Better at telling me only the light details, not the ones he

was really acting on.

The session we were sitting in was going to be the one that determined if I kept helping him or I turned him over to the police.

The idea that I was aiding and abetting a serial pedophile had me puking in the trash at least three times last night.

And that was separate from the twice I had vomited trying to figure out why the hell I was now so fucking attracted to both Lincoln and Wren. That felt like a horrible betrayal of my murdered wife.

Shoving those thoughts aside because I could feel the bile rising again, I refocused on the jittery patient across from me.

"You're fidgeting badly today, Barry," I said.

"I think I need to lay off the caffeine for a while." He laughed.

The laugh was unconvincing. This was bad, bad, bad. I turned on the full force of my education—not just the sex therapist, but the PsychD I had earned, and the twelve plus years of practice, and the time I had spent at an inpatient facility for criminals.

This guy was now tweaking all the meters, and I was mad that I hadn't realized this before.

"So, what has you so wound up aside from coffee?"

"It was bad this week," he said. There was a hint of pride in his voice.

"How so?"

"I had a coworker's daughter in the office. She was so pretty."

"What did you do?" I wanted to throw up again.

"I had her on my lap and I played with her hair."

"And?"

"I realized what I was doing and that it was putting my job and my stability on the line. I don't want to lose my job at all, and my stability is critical to staying there."

Job first, then stability. He wasn't as concerned about what he was doing as opposed to where he was doing it.

"What did you do?"

"I sent her back to her mother with a pat on her butt."

"That was wrong."

"Very." He nodded. There was mirth in his eyes despite his somber tone.

"Was the pat on the butt a reaction or an exertion?"

He froze. He knew what answer I wanted, was just pretending to think about it. "I think it was more reaction than deliberate."

That was the one he thought I wanted to hear, and the one that was wrong and a lie.

"And then what?"

He folded his hands in his lap. "I called my girlfriend. I chatted with her, calmed myself down and tried to refocus on what I was doing at my desk. I forced myself to stay in the chair at my desk and told myself it wasn't worth the job."

The job again.

I nodded once. "Well, you've taken a step back. Did this affect the rest of the week?"

"A bit. My mind kept seeing all the pretty little girls around me __"

"The what?" He'd used that phrase on purpose.

Clearing his throat, he nodded. "All of the children. It was easier for me to notice the children. More than I had in weeks and weeks."

Weeks. Not months, not years. Weeks. "Did you act?"

"A few times. Closer to the incident in the office, but as the week went on, I got better at not reacting, trying to find that stability. I stayed in the house and didn't go to any of my favorite places to take my mind off the situation. I watched a few movies."

He was lying through his fucking teeth. He had ramped up this week. He'd probably gone to the playground, maybe the mall, and probably near the children's store. I wouldn't put it past him to haunt the one very popular big-production movie studio store, on the premise of looking for something for his non-existent niece.

I wanted to throw up again. This man had been playing me all along. It took the death of my wife and children to make me look at him in a clinical light that didn't give him the benefit of the doubt. This man had never had an intention of getting better.

He was looking for a place to brag about his conquests and perversions without being hauled in for his crimes. I was it. I was his confessor, and I was bound by law to not reveal or share any of the information he gave me.

What the fuck was I going to do here?

"So, you mentioned a girlfriend?" I took a chance.

"I did." He smiled.

This time, the smile was deceptive. He was now lying about the girlfriend—I had a feeling that there was nothing about that relationship that was sexual or intimate. I would even have put money

down that there was a caveat to the word "girlfriend," it was merely a friend who was a girl.

"Tell me about her?"

"We met about six months ago and have been going back and forth for a while. But she's very nice, and supportive."

"So, she knows about your latent proclivities."

"Yes, I was tired of getting six months into a relationship and having to explain why I go to therapy so often. So, I was up front. She's a lovely woman. Grew up in Juniata, and moved to Rittenhouse when she got out of school. Lives there now, still."

Something about the Juniata thing tickled my brain. I scratched a note down and nodded for him to continue.

"We see each other about twice a week. It's nice to have her around, and she's not put off by my diagnosis, at all."

Accomplice. My brain was screaming at me. It also went against everything I knew women to be—it was rare to find a woman who was sexually abusive. Not unheard of, but rare. But when two abusers, two psychopaths, got together—sexually or not—they fed off each other.

I was now convinced that in addition to his unrepentant pedophilia, this man also needed to be reclassified as ASPD-S... Anti-Social Personality Disorder, type Sociopath.

"You've had comprehensive discussions about this?"

"Of course, Doctor. I know better than to let this go too long without an in-depth discussion and she really, really isn't put off by it."

"Excellent," I said, giving him the answer he wanted. He puffed up a bit that he'd gotten my approval to be around this Juniata woman.

An idea hit me like a bolt of lightning. "Next time, I'd like you to consider bringing her to our session. I'd like to get a sense of her and what she's like. I want to back track a second. Did you have any discussion with the coworker about her daughter?"

"Oh, yes. I did. Amberlee was wondering where her daughter was. Apparently, she had wandered off without warning, but Amberlee thought Grace was with a different coworker."

I scribbled the names down quickly, and nodded. "You explained she was with you?"

"Yes, that I had been entertaining her at my desk."

"Well, entertaining was a poor choice of words, but I agree with the honesty." I tapped the pen on the notebook. "So, what do you think we need to work on here?"

"Well, impulse control," he said. "That's the obvious one. I shouldn't have been so happy to see the girl in my cube, and I certainly should have sent her away."

"Why didn't you?" I asked. I knew, though. I knew exactly why he hadn't done that. He didn't want to. All the therapeutic options I had given him had fallen on purposefully deaf ears. He didn't want to be cured, he didn't want to be in control of his impulses. He fully intended to act on them again. If he had been sincere in seeking out this therapy, he would have been mortified in his lapse, and he wasn't.

He was gloating.

Why had it taken me so long to realize that this guy was a total sociopath?

"It just all fell out when I saw her standing there."

Wrong. Answer.

As soon as the door shut behind Barry, I was racing back to my office and I had Detective Haden's card out and in my hand.

It took her just one ring to pick up—my name never flashed up on phones, I'd had the option to put 'restricted' in place of the name and number. It usually signaled to people there was a doctor calling.

"This is Haden."

"Detective, this is Doctor Mederos. I have some information for you. The timing is critical on this. Have you had a young girl reported missing by the name of Grace, and her mother's name is Amberlee?"

There was an intake of shocked breath, and a pause. "What do you know about them?"

"I think that the little girl, Grace, has been cased for kidnapping."

"How long have you suspected this?"

"About twenty minutes."

"When was she cased?"

"About five days ago."

"She went missing yesterday morning."

My heart plunged into my stomach. "Fuck."

"What do you know about this?"

"Can you come to my office? I can tell you everything. I can't do it over the phone."

"Doctor…"

"I have everything here on a private, standalone server. I literally cannot bring it down to the police station. I will show you everything." I paused. "Detective, I fucked up big time, and I want to help you find that little girl."

She huffed into the phone. "Fine. Remind me where you are?"

"Lincoln Foster's townhouse." I rattled off the address.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

She was at the door in ten, and I led her into the office, and had her sit down in front of my computer. She didn't look happy at all, and I couldn't blame her.

"Detective, I had no idea. Or choose to put my head in the sand, I'm not sure. But I can't let this go on. I think that he's connected with someone who is feeding his pedophilia and if he ever made any progress, is now back sliding quickly."

She pointed to the note in the notebook. "What the hell is that?"

"What?"

"Juniata." She looked stricken.

"He was telling me about his girlfriend and specifically mentioned she was raised in the Juniata section of the city."

"Motherfucker," she hissed. "Did you get her name?"

"No, just the girl and her mother."

She scrubbed a hand over her forehead. "We need that girlfriend's name. I suspect that she knows a lot about all of this. Your patient is probably just a small part of this."

"Small part of what?"

"There's something called The Pipeline. We've been trying to shut it down but we can't get our hands on some of the players to stop it."

"The Pipeline?" I was horrified by the name alone.

"Yeah. It's a Sex trafficking ring for the super-rich."

My eyes almost popped out of my head. "This is part of what Ellie was in, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Lincoln's twins."

"He bought them at one of the Pipeline auctions."

"Bought?" I gasped.

"What do you think they do? Give them away? They spend days, weeks, sometimes months, breaking and training these children to listen to their owners and do as they are told without question. Lincoln bought those kids to establish himself in the community so we could get some intel. But he fell catatonic and lost his standing. He was gone too long from the auction rooms."

I flopped into the chair next to my desk, staring at her. "So, these people…"

"Steal children, train them to some degree and sell them to the highest bidder," she said. "This is not pretty and we're trying to stop it. You might have a key here. A big key to a big door. All the members in this have code names."

I nodded. "I remember. Ellie said Mr. Passyunk had her in the stable. He ran the whole thing, but I thought that it shut down after he died."

"No." Haden shook her head. "Not at all. They reorganized and made the structure more nebulous so they couldn't lose all the information again. And we're fighting against that. We think that Mister Sansom, Mister Spring, and Ms. Juniata—" she tapped on the notebook "—are the ringleaders. We haven't been able to get a bead on any of them. Until now."

I stared at my notebook. In the space of an hour I had gone from simply trying to decide if I needed to turn this guy in to being a potential key to a major sex trafficking ring.

Haden was scrolling through my notes on the screen, occasionally stopping to read something that caught her attention.

How had I missed that this guy was playing me? I was one of the best therapists in sexual trauma out there, and this guy had played me like a violin for five very long years.

"Don't feel like this is your fault, Bastian," Haden said. "It's not. I see your note here that says reclassify as ASPD. I know what that means. He probably played a lot more people than you over the years."

"I should have—"

She stopped and looked at me. "No. You shouldn't have. Sociopaths are hard to spot. Even by professionals. They are goddamn

good at playing the game. And it's all mind games. The best of us fall for them. I've been in interrogation rooms before I realized who I was with, and how they were in control of us even though they were in cuffs and under arrest."

Taking a deep breath she leaned back. "Now that we know he's connected to the missing girl, we have a better idea of how to recover her. It's been just one day since she went missing and we have time to find her before the next auction and movement of captives. Sometimes they put them up right away, sometimes they move them around to allow them to be broken. The girl wasn't their typical victim, oddly enough. So, she'll probably be sold off quickly."

"Typical?"

"Typical." She nodded. "They go for adopted children, foster kids. Grace is Amberlee's natural daughter. If they took her, it was a request from your patient directly."

"Why adopted?"

"Fosters and abandoned or homeless children."

"Why?"

"They're easier to miss. They slipped through our fingers faster. There aren't full families demanding that we find their children. The twins? We've discovered their family doesn't want them back, at all. They were poor and the grandmother is old and sick and the uncle doesn't give a fuck. So, we're having them sign them over to Lincoln. Or, Paige Domingues is anyway. Ellie was a street kid, taking care of her little brother. They all didn't have someone like you behind them, demanding they be found, the kidnappers brought in. Easy targets."

"Christ," I mumbled.

She leaned back in the chair. "I can handle the search for Grace. But I want to ask you to help us. I want the names of the people who are parading around my city, stealing children. I want the people behind Sansom, Spring, Juniata, Lombard... All those assholes. Barry is our potential connection."

"I asked him to bring his girlfriend next time," I mumbled.

"I could kiss you." Her grin was blinding. "Can you get names?"

"I can try," I said.

"Don't risk your life for this, Bastian, we can't ask you to do that. But if you can get us anything on this Pipeline, we'd be eternally grateful to you."

Nodding, I slumped back into the chair.

I let Barry play me, mislead me. He'd probably been stealing children for the past five years, and putting them into this Pipeline.

God, what had I done?

Wren

"My Lord! There are two!"

The face we could not see looked down at us, and a great laugh went through the fabric of space. So there are, *his voice intoned.*

El was delighted. The other who stood there was not nearly as pleased.

"They are soft and bright, Lord. Why?"

Do not have such anger, my son, *El said.* I meant merely to give you a companion, but my enthusiasm for your happiness went further.

"Lord, do away with the younger of the two," the dark one said.

"No," came a sweet voice that sounded so desperately familiar. "No. Lord, please. The younger is like me. A female. Let her be."

She will not have a name.

"I believe she will, but not yet, Lord. Not yet. Let us care for her as we will care for him, El." A bright figure walked forward, bright white wings and gleeful smile on her face. "You have not made many of us yet."

He laughed again. Very well, sweet one. She is given to your charge. We shall name her later.

The white winged woman took my hand, and smiled at me. "Come on. Your big brother has things to learn from El. I'll teach you other things."

And I learned. To fly, to help, to love, to care. I learned to tend to the souls that came through the gates to Elysium, to protect them from those who had to go to Tartarus. I learned to help my twin brother, to avoid our older brother.

Both my brother and I, the Morning Star and the Little Star, knew to stay clear of our brother the Dark Star.

Then El created again, a perfect mate for my brother the Morning Star. A dark woman full of love, caring, dedicated to him, carved from the hot fire of Hell, rejected by the simple human she had been made for. My brother took her into his arms and into his bed and named her before El did. His Lilith, the bright dark demon.

El was pleased, despite the Morning Star disobeying his wish to give names to things. He was also displeased with our older brother in that same time.

Coekabiel—one of the first to be named. Angry, cold, distant, I didn't understand hateful at first. But he had an air of trouble about him. He was comfortable with disturbing the peace we had in Elysium. He would refuse entry to Tartarus, and that was when El name our brother.

Lucifer—second named of the three of us. He was fair, even handed, able to sit and give judgement to those who were not clearly meant for Tartarus, but weren't clearly meant for the Fields. He was bigger and stronger than Coekabiel, El had made him so. But Coekabiel was strong enough, cruel enough, dark enough to still cause problems for those not of the After. That was when El named me.

Lucifer's voice was hot smoke and cool acid. "You are being given direction."

"Direction?" I stared up at him. I loved my twin brother with all there was to love with.

"El has realized it would be wise to have his sons and daughters help to rule Earth and the After. I am not sure what El wishes you to do, exactly, yet. But he has granted you a name and guardians."

"I don't need guardians," I said.

"Nonetheless." Lucifer my brother stretched his hand forward and pointed to the ground ahead of him. It cracked and shivered, and split wide. Two flames leapt from the fissure and took up existence in front of me. One was pure white fire and familiar, and the other was black fire.

"You are granted two, and a name," Lilith said.

"A name?" I gasped.

The two flames settled and took form before my eyes. "A name," they said together. "And you may name us, mistress."

I looked at my brother's wife, who smiled back at me. "Just as I have a name, and my husband has a name. Our reality is changing, little star."

"You are the balance struck," Lucifer said. "It is your duty to keep the sins in careful portions, to keep Coekabiel in check. You are temperance."

"Temperance," I said, trying the name on my tongue. "So, I am both named and burdened with this."

"You are. The sins are yours," Lily answered. "Name your guardians, but in your own time." She folded Wren into her arms. "So loved, little star, our Temperance."

"This duty is not yours alone," Lucifer said to me, taking me into his arms. "Now named, little sister, your place is here with us." He motioned to the palace behind him, lit with warm fires from Hell.

Welcoming flames.

"Your charges are here, we keep them from Coekabiel. With you, and your guardians, they will be able to emerge again, and be able to balance the Dark Star. You will keep them from falling to their own sins."

A gout of flame rose next to Lilith, and a dark man, who looked like her, who shared her dark traits, stepped out. He walked with a slight limp as Lilith smiled and motioned to me.

"Hephaestus has made you a gift from the darkness," she said. "This will replace that weak steel you carry. It is anjir*, by request of Lucifer and I. My brother was honored to forge it."*

The gentle, limping man held the sword out to me. "For you, Temperance. To guard yourself, and your charges, to help fight alongside your guardians, and to help you fight for what is good in the Before and the After."

I smiled. "Thank you, Brother."

I wrapped my hand around the handle…

I THREW the sword across the room, smashing it into the wall, where it crashed and clattered to the floor.

Fischer caught me before I hit my head on the stove, but I managed to puke all over the floor. Lincoln scrambled as best he could

reach us, and dropped on to the floor away from the vomit.

My whole body was shaking and convulsing and I was sobbing. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't stop the tears.

"What the fuck did I just see?" I screamed. "Oh, *God*, what did I just see?"

Lincoln pulled me into his lap, and Fischer scooted closer and ran a soothing hand up and down my back.

"You've gotta breathe, baby," Linc said. "Please breathe."

I dragged in a breath. Then another and another and between the warmth of the two men, I started to calm a bit. I looked up, my gaze darting back and forth between them.

"You saw? You saw it?"

Fischer and Lincoln looked at each other, and finally Fischer spoke, "Yes. We saw."

"What the fuck…"

"I don't know," he said quickly. "We saw it, but it was…"

"Unbelievable," Lincoln said. "It was overwhelming."

My eyes darted between them. "Lucifer. *Lucifer*."

"I saw it too," Fischer said.

"Your twin," Lincoln whispered, holding my hand.

"How is that possible?! How can I be the Devil's twin sister!?" I was shaking violently, and I couldn't breathe again.

"Fischer, can you take her to the couch?" Linc asked. "I'll get this cleared up. Get her a glass of bourbon and I'll be in in a minute."

Fischer nodded and scooped me right off Lincoln's lap. We both eyeballed the sword laying there and chose to ignore it. He moved us into the den and I was glad he was carrying me—I couldn't trust my legs at all.

I heard Lincoln moving around in the kitchen, cleaning up my mess. "Fischer, can you please help him?"

He handed me the glass of bourbon and nodded, dropping a kiss on my head. "I was planning to, little bird." His voice was soft, and frightened.

I couldn't blame him. I leaned back on the couch after taking as sip of the bourbon and savored the burn of the honey-smoke flavor.

When Lily—*fucking Lilith*?—had said it would trigger me, I hadn't imagined that my entire life would just fall away and become pointless and meaningless in the scope of the universe.

The devil was my twin brother. My older brother.

I wasn't born, I was created. By…El. God? Yahweh? I didn't know. I didn't really understand.

All I had wanted was to protect my daughter, and a hellfire forged sword was the offered weapon. I had thought that I would see maybe more delightful filth with me and my men. Perhaps a little more about them, or others who might have information about this Pipeline.

Not that the fucking devil was my brother.

What the hell did I do with this information? How was this going to help me protect Ellie and the twins?

I was shaking again.

How the fuck was any of this *real*?

I'd spent my life studying the human mind, human reactions, interaction, helping children and adults recover from traumas that were beyond most people's comprehension. I was one of the best, and I couldn't get my own mind to work through this.

"I'm being drugged," I mumbled. "There's no other explanation for this."

Lincoln hobbled in, and sank next to me on the couch. Fischer brought the bourbon bottle and two more glasses and sank down on my other side. He offered Linc one glass and then drained the bottle into the glasses.

Exchanging the bottle for the remote, he flicked on the television.

"I think one of the best things that we can do to help ourselves, is to see if we can show you what we're seeing," he said.

Lincoln grabbed my hand and laced our fingers together. "You saw through the thing at the hospital, so it makes us think that you can see what we do if we share. We've both been able to see the sins on everyone, including on television."

Fischer turned to a news station and set the remote down. "Just watch." He put a hand on my thigh and gestured with the glass, then took a hard drink.

Everyone on the television had bruises on their arms. Every single one of them. Some were darker, some were lighter. Some people had gashes on their arms, a few on their faces.

An image of a man I knew had been recently caught for a mass shooting was covered in horrible wounds, there were worms and bugs on his face, and his hair was a writhing nest of… something. I wasn't sure what and I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"Oh my God…" I breathed.

"We can shut it off, but only after we'd been practicing and trying for nearly a week," Lincoln said. "It's horrible to see who is a liar, a cheat, a philanderer. Some you aren't shocked about at all, and some just destroy you."

"Does each sin have its own wound?"

They glanced over at each other, and then at me. Fischer sighed. "So far, the only ones we can tell one hundred percent are sloth and greed. Everything else is mostly a guess."

I gasped, and whipped my head between them. "You two…"

"After your vision just now," Fischer said, "I'm more than sure about why this is happening." He pointed to himself. "Sloth." He pointed to Lincoln. "Greed."

Pulling my hand from Lincoln's, I leaned forward, bracing my head in my hands. "God, I feel like I'm going to puke again."

"Please don't." Lincoln winced.

"I won't," I said. "So, let me walk through this with the two of you. I'm the devil's twin sister, the Little Star or something like that. I didn't have a name until… *El* decided he needed help with keeping humanity and our older brother in line. I was given the name Temperance, and told to balance the seven deadly sins."

Glancing back, Fischer shrugged. "Sounds about right."

"And balance means sleep with all of you?"

Lincoln chuckled without mirth. "Well, I don't know that's the right interpretation of *balance*, but from all of the other visions you had, I'd say that you did, and someone had a real problem with it."

"Melchior," Fischer said. "Whoever that is."

"But then, why aren't we in the After? Why are we here, clearly not immortal or impervious?" I pointed to his broken leg.

"I have the feeling that's the whole question," Lincoln said. "I think that we were punished by someone for something that isn't wrong in the eyes of most…of the After."

"But what?" Fischer said, cutting into my own thought. "We're not going to find out easily. We've been, once again in the visions, fighting this for a while. But Melchior seems shallow. That doesn't seem like a reason to…"

"Cast us down? Cast us out?" Lincoln offered.

"That."

I ran a hand down my face, and flopped back on the couch. "We're not going to be able to figure this out, not today, not even in the next week. I don't know if we'll ever figure it out. God, I wish I hadn't touched that damn sword."

"I'm glad you did," Fischer said. "Things makes sense now. Like why we see sins, and why Lily has been so damn elusive."

"What about the kids? Elutheria? Timothy? Tabitha?" I asked. "They're part of this too, and we know nothing about them."

Lincoln pursed his lips. "Let's take this one mess at a time, little bird. We've been offered a few pieces of a few puzzles. Why Fischer and I see the sins. Why Lily's been so elusive."

Fischer gasped, "Laxmi and Miriam!"

"*Versilange*—oh!" I gasped. "The guardians."

"They're your guardians." Fischer nodded. "They are supposed to protect you."

Lincoln laughed. "From what we've seen, it's more like they all work together. In the visions and in real life. I don't think that relationship worked out the way it was supposed to."

I took a deep breath. "I'm going to pick up that sword and figure out what to do with it. I could have used it the other day with the thing in the hospital. And I have the feeling I'm going to need it more and more in the future."

Fischer and Lincoln followed me back into the kitchen and we all stared at where I had thrown the *anjir* blade.

"Made by my apparent sister-in-law's brother as a gift to me, by the bequest of my twin," I mumbled. "Lucifer is my brother. Christ." I glanced at the two of them behind me, "Can I swear like that anymore? Am I allowed to use *Christ* and *God* as swears? I hope that's not some unbreakable law."

"Ask Lily," Fischer said. "She never did answer you about the cheesesteaks."

"I'm going to have a laundry list of questions for that woman," I said.

Without any further preamble I bent down and grabbed the handle of the sword, bracing myself. Nothing happened, thankfully, except for the feeling of familiarity in the handle.

I stared at it for a long moment, then slipped it out of the scabbard. The blade was about as long as my arm—so not really a short

sword, but nowhere near the length of the flameblades that Ellie, Miriam, and Laxmi had. Also, no flames.

The titanium and obsidian swirled through the blade, making a gorgeous whirling pattern of gunmetal gray and shimmering black. The handle was covered with supple leather, and the cross guard curled around and down, with two finial jewels of shocking blue that seemed to glow.

"This is a masterpiece," Lincoln said, assessing it with a money changer's eye.

"Uh, he's the god of the forge and fire," Fischer said. "You expect anything less?"

I watched Lincoln shake off the *greed* persona we could now clearly see, and nod. "You're right. God of forge and fire. If it wasn't perfect, it wouldn't exist."

"So, where the hell—ugh!—do I keep it?" I asked. "I can't exactly go around wearing a sheath on my belt and whipping it to the side when I sit. Swords aren't exactly legal in the city."

Lincoln shrugged.

"What about the way Ellie carries hers?" Fischer asked. "It simply doesn't exist until she needs it, and then the wings and blade do exist."

"I'm not exactly practiced at this whole exist-not-exist thing," I said.

Fischer leaned in close and whispered in my ear, "You're the devil's twin sister. You probably need a little practice anyway."

"I'm not going to make this disappear right now," I said. "I'm going to ask for help. This blade is too pretty, too dangerous, and probably too useful to fuck this up. Lily or Ellie will help." I let out a deep sigh. "And now to earthly matters, I'm hungry. I just lost my lunch. Literally."

"Change of subject?" Lincoln asked laughing.

"If I don't, I'm going to freak out completely," I said. "Shit, I want a cheesesteak."

Lincoln and Fischer gasped and chorused, "No!"

Sebastian

"You're doing better with all of this," Wren said, putting her pen down. "But, Bastian, you've started struggling with something else. I can tell."

"That's something that I don't want to talk about," I answered.

"It's all connected, you know that."

"I realize that, but…I'm here about my wife, and my children. I can handle my own shit."

Wren tipped her head down and stared at me. "Crock of shit, Doctor Mederos. Crock of shit. You've been through one of the worst traumas a person can go through and I know you're currently full of it."

Staring down at my shoes, I let out a sigh. "I am not ready to move on from dealing with the murders. I need some kind of closure on this. I need to feel like I have my feet under me before I face… that."

Wren scribbled something in her notebook. "So *that* is what we're going to call this other obstacle you're dealing with right now?"

"I'm not dealing with it."

"Exactly the problem."

"Wren…"

"Doctor Mederos. I know you don't want to move on from your family. Moving on from them signals that you're starting a new phase of your grief. It means you're healing—and even though we don't have their killers in custody, that doesn't mean you can't start to really heal."

"You're right, I'm not ready to move on. Vic and I were a couple. We were each other's everything. And I'm not interested in moving on from that," I said, my words clipped.

"More bullshit, Bastian. More lies."

Staring at her. "Victoria was my rock. She was my everything. She helped guide me to be the man I am. Without her I feel untethered. I feel there's no reason to be who I am right now. And I'm not okay with that, and I'm not ready to move on from her."

"Are you looking for a safety net to fall into?"

"No. I'm looking for a reason to care again. I'm seeking the balance I got with her to be who I am."

Wren shook her head. "That's a lot of responsibility to put on one person, Bastian. Did you really rely on Victoria to keep you on your path?"

I worked my jaw for a moment. "No. I didn't make her do that. She did it on her own, simply by being in my life. The goal of keeping her happy kept me on my goal of being the best version of me."

"So now that she's gone, you see no reason to keep this farce?"

"It's not a farce, she kept me at my best."

"But you don't necessarily feel like that right now."

The words pulled me up short. Victoria had been my reason to be the man I was. Now that she was gone, I was going to stop being the best? I was going to walk away from the career I had built to keep her smiling, and give me reason?

"Fuck."

She nodded. "There you go. You got it."

"I shouldn't stop being who I am because that's going to dishonor her and the kids. If I am anything less than the best person they helped me to be."

Wren gave me a half smile. "Just because she's not here doesn't mean you can't still strive to be that very same man she made you

into."

Damn. Lily had told me Wren was good. I didn't think she'd get me to admit I wasn't doing my best.

"So, whatever else this is that's bothering you, Bastian, I want you to think about what Victoria did that made you want to be who you are. I want you to consider that she'd still want you to be that person, even as you're moving into the next stage of grief. Good?"

I nodded. "Yes. I get it."

"Excellent. Then I'll see you next week, same time." She handed me the appointment card with the date and time already on it. "Take it easy, Bas. We're making great progress, even if you don't completely trust me."

I snorted, but she wasn't wrong.

I also didn't really trust myself either at this point.

An hour later I found myself sitting in the back of Independence Hall, staring at my phone. I had the dark web browser open—and I knew what I was looking for.

A way to slake my feelings. To lose myself in the sexual drive that had been riding my ass for a few days. I needed a fuck, and I hated that I needed one. Since the oddly intimate encounter with Lincoln in the hospital, it felt like my libido was a thing alive.

Victoria and I had had a more than robust sex life. She was perfect for me because she could keep up with me. There were days that were tender and sweet and days that were nothing but debauchery and filth—and we loved every minute of it.

I had hoped it died with my family.

But no. The simple touch Lincoln had given me brought the dragon roaring back. Even my own hand couldn't curb it. I was grateful for cocoa butter at that moment—my dick was a soft as silk. No ashy shaft for me.

Now, after my session with Doctor Warner and all the shit she had pulled out of me—accurately reading everything going on in my head without me saying a fucking word—I was desperate to calm myself down or to lose myself.

Drugs were out. That was stupid. I saw what happened to people who did that, and I saw it all the time at the office.

So, sex was in and I was looking for the closest brothel to where I sat. Whorehouse? I had trouble with that word, but not what it could give me.

The dark web offered me a discrete house just up in Northern Liberties, or a little further in Fishtown.

Gentrified brothels. Yay.

The next thing I remembered, I was walking up the front steps of a neat, unremarkable house in Fishtown. I stopped with my hand over the bell.

How the fuck had I gotten here? I didn't remember standing, or looking up how to get here. Had I walked? Uber'ed? Taxied? Bussed it? Glancing at my watch I had lost nearly an hour of time.

Christ, now I was fuguing out?

My finger pressed the doorbell before I could pull it away and force myself to think.

What the hell was I doing?

A woman in a ridiculous maxi dress with bangles on both arms and scarf on her head in a poor imitation of a Roma woman opened the door. She looked me up and down and sucked her teeth. "Male or female."

I froze.

What the *fuck* was I doing?

"Honey, I can't leave this door open. If you don't know, we have both and more. Step inside."

Step inside.

…the belly dancer swirled her skirt, pulling the pieces off and spinning them with her. Her flat stomach undulated with the music. A hip popped. She turned. Her perfect ass popped. The coins of her belt were lyrical in their tinkling collisions over her skirt.

She grinned at me, moving closer and closer, her dark delicious hair falling free in taunting strands from the pins that held it up.

The prince across from me motioned to her. "She is yours, my friend, if you want her. I have many more who dance and fuck as well as she does." He laughed, and the sound ripped through my chest.

I knew that laugh. I knew it too well.

This was a trap. He was trying to lay a trap for me, to reel me in and trick me into some mad scheme of his. I wouldn't have fallen for it—my libido might have been a beast to manage, but no one away from the Sins held my heart or interest.

But that didn't stop him from trying.

"What are you doing, Prince Ahmed*?"*

"Oh, you've spoiled the game!" he crowed, rising from the reclining position. The visage he maintained flickered, and I could see the Tartarian below. "I was so hoping this would take more time!"

"I am—"

"I know who you are, Min. *Or whatever fucking name you're going by now."*

"Fareed bin Abraham, for the record."

"Well, Fareed, let us talk." He gestured to the curtain to the right of reclining couch."

"I am not a fool."

"But you are. Because if we talk here…" He swept his hand across the room. "Well, you know the rules. They all have to die."

They did. There were too many people in the room.

Ahmed smiled again. "Step inside."

I did.

I felt the knife slide into my back, into my heart.

I gasped, as best as bloodfilled lungs could. I stared at Ahmed as he let me slide down the wall after pulling the knife back out.

He held it up. "Hades steel. I couldn't convince that idiot blacksmith to make me an anjir *blade. But this will do, I realized, since I plan on torturing you, your compatriots and that slut you all adore for all eternity." He wiped the blade on my sleeve. "Goodnight, sweet prince. May hordes of demons drag you through the bowels of Hell."…*

I gasped and stepped back.

"Are you questioning?" the Roma-ish woman asked. "I can't leave this door open while you decide if you want to fuck a man or woman. Or whatever. Go have your sexual crisis somewhere else."

Stumbling backward, I was barely able to catch myself as the stairs went out from under me. The woman huffed, and slammed the door.

It was too much. My brain was going to explode. What the hell had I just seen? Why had I had gone to a brothel? What was wrong with me?

I was losing control of everything.

I dropped onto the curb in front of the house, dropping my head between my legs. I had never wanted a tab of ecstasy as much as I did at that moment. I wanted to feel happy, and light and clear. But I couldn't. I wouldn't—God, if I dropped molly I'd probably end up fucking a palm tree in a reception hall.

I needed help. But Wren wasn't the right kind of help. I needed to figure out my sex drive, my curiosity. I needed to find out the depths I was willing to go—without jeopardizing everything I had built for myself.

Dangerous sex that wasn't dangerous.

I whipped my head up.

Holy shit.

THE ROOM WAS DARK, with flashes of white and blue cutting through that black. It was disorienting on one hand and on the other—this was the disorientation I was craving.

I moved through the sweating bodies on the dance floor, all entranced by the hypnotic music rushing through them. It was only the music and the mood of the room—there were no drugs here. That's why I had picked this place.

It had taken me a week to work my way in that door. I had been stopped at every turn, seeking entrance. I knew the people in the lifestyle were secretive and protective, especially in the right circles.

Getting into Black Wave had been nearly impossible. I had to call in favors that I had never wanted to, and in one case, threaten someone with a bit of HIPAA violation to get the password and permission to see Master Black himself.

Working my way around the edge of the room, and over to the tables that lined the far wall. The man holding court at one of the tables spotted me, as I hoped he would, and stood from his seat, moving to me. He met me near the end of the dance floor and was clearly shocked.

"Doctor—"

"Bastian, sir, please. I'm not here as a professional."

He inclined his head. "Why are you here?"

"Escape."

The man considered me. "Bastian, this is not a place that is meant for the casual participant."

"I understand. I came here because as much as you trust me as your doctor, I hope I can trust you as my...Dom."

The word wasn't foreign on my tongue, but it was foreign in my mind as something I sought out. I hadn't ever, ever been to a dungeon. I knew of them, I knew how they worked.

I was a doctor of psychology, specializing in sexuality. I knew about Doms, and dungeons. I'd helped people leave them and join them, find a Dom and leave a Dom.

But I needed, desperately, to lose myself. Away from everything that had been fucked up in my life. My dead wife. My murdered children. The patient who had destroyed my trust in myself.

I wanted to disappear.

The man in front of me was, according to several of his subs and friends, the best Dom in Philadelphia. He was patient, strict and absolutely pansexual. Which was also something I needed at that point.

I had never let myself act on that part of my psyche, save for the clinical. My own psychology was why I was in the field.

"Bastian, are you sure?"

"Master Reid, I am lost and I need to lose myself."

"Black. Master Black. This is not the way to find yourself," he said.

"This is my safe option, Master. I have already searched out whorehouses and underground clubs that would destroy me and not allow me to find myself again. I am only here because I am desperate to not feel for just a little while."

Master Black chewed on his lip and motioned me to follow him. I bowed my head and did, trailing behind him and into the back of the club through a curtain. He pointed to a room and I walked in, sitting in the chair there. He closed the door and sat on the couch.

"This is not a good idea, Doctor," he said, losing all sense of the Dom that he'd had outside the door. "You are not settled, not focused enough to handle all this. You've never been here before tonight and what you're asking for takes time and training."

"I want to learn. I need this. I fucked up so badly I can barely breathe when I think about it," I said.

"This is not mean to be a substitution for your life and your obligations—"

"Reid, I know, I know all about what this is and isn't. I am on a dangerous path. My wife isn't here anymore. I don't have a direction without her. I loved her with everything I had, and it was enough to

keep me off the path I could have followed…into unrestrained sexual debauchery. But I can't do that, I won't do that to her, to our marriage, to the man she helped me be. I am here, as Bastian, to beg your help. To keep me from going down that same path. To help me learn how to keep all this check without my wife."

He tapped a finger on the couch. "Have you spoken to anyone else about this? Tried to find someone outside this community to help you find your way?"

"Everyone on this planet can offer to help me—and I have asked for help—but no one can get me to the place I need. I want to forget for just a little while. To have a chance to let my brain reset. To enjoy a part of me I don't know yet."

Tapping his finger again, I could see the indecision on his face. He scratched his nose and sighed. "When you are here, you are Bastian. When you are here, I am Master Black, or Sir. Nothing else. Just as you have a non-disclosure with me, I demand the same. What happens here, stays here."

I nodded.

Standing from the couch, he walked over to me, looking down. "And the first rule you need is that no one touches you without my permission. Even your permission is not enough. You're mine and you'll listen to everything I say. You'll be punished if you don't. This is not a game. This is my world you're walking into, and I am the ultimate final word."

That was what I needed. Someone else to take the burden of thinking from me.

He ran his finger down my jaw and leaned in close to me. "I have found you incredibly attractive since the very first of our sessions, and I have wanted to kiss you ever since. This is me, taking what I want from you."

His lips covered mine, and *holy shit I was kissing a man*. Reid was soft and rough at the same time…his tongue was probing carefully but his lips were strong and possessive. I tried to push for more, but he pulled back and smirked at me.

"No. I expect that you know how all this works, even if we need to practice. I give. You accept. The only thing that will make me stop anything is your safe word. I want you to think very hard on why you're using it before you do. No harm will come to you, I promise. I know why you came here, to me, Bastian. I am the best. And you

don't get that label in this community without it being the absolute truth. Choose your safe word, make sure it something you would never accidentally say."

"*Tesoro*," I whispered. "Victoria was my treasure and I will never call anyone that again."

He gave me a long, hard kiss. "Good boy. I am going to have fun breaking you down and rebuilding you, Bastian. So much fun."

Fischer

Laxmi leaned in the door of the office, staring at me. Again.

"What?"

"How are you?"

I answered her with a chipper voice, "Fucked in the head. How are you?"

"Well, my fucked-in-the-head-ness happened a few months ago at this point, so I'm doing pretty good. Made a pork roast in the Instant Pot last night. Pretty good. Had to vanquish a *cerdil* in Cooper River Park last night, but managed to rescue a cat."

I stared at her, wordlessly.

She shrugged and moved to sit in a chair. "You asked."

"Because killing demons is just par for the course right now."

Shaking her head. "I guess it is. There's a leak somewhere, and these bastards are getting in. Ellie's really not old enough to help, so it's me and Miriam. I wish we did have more help, but we can't find any."

I stared at her. "Are you the only versilange?"

"I don't like to think we are," she said. "But I'm so much younger than Miriam and I'm completely new to all this."

"Tell me about it."

Laxmi snorted, then had the good grace to look mortified that she had. "Doctor Skillman, if what you saw in the vision was true, you're a metric fuck ton of millennia older than I am."

"Nope. I'm thirty-four."

"Denial isn't just a river in Egypt."

I ran a hand down my face. We'd all been trying to absorb what had been thrust into our brains that day. It was a lot, and both Lincoln and I had been mulling it over.

And that the very same time, I realized how much goddamn sense it made. Why the three of us felt like there should be more to us, why we could see sins. Why Miriam and Laxmi had felt a pull toward each other, and to Wren.

"It's not denial, Laxi. It's a coping mechanism. There's a difference, and I need to learn to cope with this. So, for now, I'm thirty-four, and in a polyamorous relationship with my thirty-two year old girlfriend and her thirty-five year old boyfriend. Don't you think that's enough to deal with for now?"

She chuckled. "That is quite a handful for three immortals in denial. Toot toot."

"Fuck you, Doctor Rana."

We both broke down in laughter. I needed that. Even though I was good at not thinking about this whole After and immortality thing, it was hard to ignore it completely. Denial, like Laxmi said. We'd tried talking about it, but it just became so bizarre we had to drop it.

And the only thing that we knew was what the sword had told us. None of us *remembered* anything at all about it. It really could have been a mass hallucination for the three of us.

But the twins remembered the dark man, and Lincoln was still in a cast. It had to be real. At least, partly anyway.

The phone on my desk buzzed and I quickly punched the connect button. "Yes?"

"There's a Mrs. Domingues here to see you. She said it's urgent."

"Paige?" I asked. "Never mind, let her in. She knows where my office is."

The door banged open seconds after I disconnected. Paige stood there looking like a wild woman. She was normally prim and neat, so this was…out of character.

"I found him," she breathed. "Ifoundhim Ifoundhim."

Laxmi and I stood.

"What?" she snapped.

"Benjamin Sheehan. I found him. I know who has him. He was bought at the auction before Mister Passyunk was killed. Mister Sansom has him. He bought him from Frankford."

"Sansom. Do we know who Sansom is yet?" Laxmi asked.

I held up my hand. "Wait. Paige, how did you find this out? Do we need to put you in hiding?"

She shook her head. "I've had my suspicions about a few of the approved families that I was being sent from DFS. The kids were having a lot of adjustment issues to them. I went back and looked through a metric ton of notes I had on them, and I realized that four of these families had been hosting children who were *lost* by the DFS. Meaning that they don't appear in the databases after a certain amount of time.

"So, I've been tracing these families, trying to find the kids, and almost uniformly, these families haven't ever even heard of the kids. I worked on getting to other kids who had been placed with the missing ones, and they don't remember them. That's not likely. Most foster kids remember all the kids they stay with in houses because they are either friend or enemy.

"So, I went to the house with the most recent disappeared foster kid—and by the way, this is the shit I'm up against *all the time* with the foster agencies. All the time. They lose kids all the fucking time." Paige shook her head. "Anyway, I went to the last address and the people living there didn't have a foster kid at all. So I had Lily do a general background check and boink! Up pops a complaint to the Postmaster General—someone had been stealing their mail.

"I had a friend come with me and Lily to the house, and lo and behold, there was a splice in the phone wires. Someone was using the physical location of the house to mask their actual location. We followed the wire back and down the street to another house.

"Holy shit, that house…it was pure squalor. There were rats and roaches and it was just disgusting. But there was a pile of fresh clean mail inside the door that had the address up the street on it. Most of

it was crap. Lily had to go, she got called out on something, but Marco and I stayed and picked through it. And there was a fucking catalog."

My jaw unhinged. "One of the auction catalogs!"

She nodded. "I got Detective Haden to send someone to pick it up, but not before I put on my latex gloves to screen shot every page."

She held out her phone, and swiped it open. There, on the screen was a picture of Benjamin Sheehan in the cotton briefs and T-shirt that all of the children had been cataloged in.

And right next to that, in Sharpie, were the words SANSOM and $75K, *transfer to Frnkfd*. Benjamin Sheehan had been sold to Mister Frankford for $75,000.

Paige flicked the image and there were two postal cancelations on there. "One for the day before and one for the day after," she explained. "The whole pile was in descending chronological order."

"This was the auction the week before the twins," I said. "Didn't Lincoln go to that one?"

"He went to an auction," Paige said. "Not this auction. The one he was at was up in Reading. This one was down in Dover."

"They have more than one…" Laxmi breathed. "Holy shit. How big is this Pipeline?"

"They were clearing inventory," I said. "That's what Lincoln mentioned before he went all catatonic. They were having more auctions than normal because after Passyunk died, they lost their way and lost direction. God, how many double auctions did they pull?"

"They could still be pulling them for all we know." Paige sighed. "I was happy to find this, but the implications of what's gone on is shocking. More kids we have to find."

"You realize that you probably found the auction master's copy, right?" Laxmi said.

"I…" Her eyebrows went up. "I didn't. But you're right. If it had names and numbers in it probably was." The full implication of what she found shot through her. "Holy crap. Could we actually think about taking this down?"

"Curtail, maybe," I answered. "I don't think that we can ever take it down fully, but we should be able to kill a lot of it off." I rubbed a hand over my face. "We have to figure out *who* Sansom is

and where he's got the kid. That's going to be the hard part. It's not like they wear badges."

"Lincoln might recognize Sansom," Laxmi said. "He's been to a few auctions."

"But how do we start with that? These guys are usually wealthy and won't have criminal records, and won't have mug shots."

It was quiet a moment. Lincoln was our connection. He'd seen Sansom, but he didn't know him. He knew Race and Arch, and a few of the minor players.

"What if we talked to Doctor Mederos?" Paige asked.

"What would Sebastian have to do with this?"

She pursed her lips. "Fuck."

"Paige!" Laxmi gasped. The woman never cursed to that degree.

"Okay, it violates HIPAA rules, and forget that I brought it up," she said.

"Nope." I shook my head. "Nope. If it means the potential to rescue my daughter's brother, then I don't care." I walked over to the door and locked it, leaning against it. "Talk."

Paige was quiet, pursing her lips and clearly having a hard time with sharing what she knew. Even with the door closed and it being just the three of us. "Haden is the only one who knows this, aside from me, because we rescued the kid from the trafficker on the tip. Mederos has a patient who is a member of the Pipeline."

"Holy shit," I whispered.

"Mederos has lost his freaking mind over this, from what Haden said," Paige continued. "He's been a long-time patient and something made the doctor look at this guy differently after he lost his wife and kids. Mederos realized he's a sociopath and has been playing him for a long time. Haden hasn't arrested him because he's our connection. He knows who Juniata is."

"Oh, hell," Laxmi whispered.

"We have to let Mederos work on this," Paige said. "This patient needs Sebastian to brag to. The more they brag, the more ammunition we have. Especially now that he knows the patient is bragging and lying, and is an actual sociopath. It won't take long. Haden confided a few things in me—" She held up her hand. "Please don't ask. Please. I've said too much already, even to other doctors. But there's a plan in place and we have to trust the two of them. We will be able

to get a lot of these kids out of the Pipeline, as long as we let it be for now."

She looked between us. "I just wanted to give you the news that we found out who has Ben. And I am not going to fail again to get that child back, to you, and to Ellie."

Wren

"You're still holding it wrong." Lily sighed.

"I'm holding it exactly the way you showed me," I grumbled.

"Yes, except you seem to think you're Hercules and you're choking a snake to death in your crib. Relax your hand. There's no way to make the motion smooth if you're gripping it like that."

"I've already dropped the damn thing four times!" I barked, holding up the sword.

"Mom, relax," Ellie said, walking over. She grabbed the crossguard on the handle, and shook the sword hard. It almost slipped out of my hand again. "No, relax your grip. The tighter you hold it, the easier it is to knock out of your hand. Okay, do you remember doing rubber pencil in school?"

"Rubber pencil?"

"Yeah, you'd hold the pencil between your thumb and your index finger and shake it, and it would look like the pencil was made of rubber."

"Crap, kids still do that?" Miriam asked.

"Duh, we're kids?" Ellie answered.

"Okay, so yes, I remember that."

"Same idea," Lily said. "You're still holding it firmly, but loose enough you can make it move."

My hand was reluctant to let a deadly sword that could actually kill my daughter and my two best friends stay loose in my grip, but I could understand what they were saying. I forced my hand to relax just a bit, and realized how cramped my fingers were.

"See?" Ellie said. "Too tight."

"Okay, Master Jedi… You've had a sword for how many weeks now?"

Ellie shook her head and walked back from where I was standing and facing Laxmi again. I shook my head. "Okay, come—*ah!*"

Laxmi didn't wait for me to be ready. She attacked with the flameblade as fast as she could, driving directly at my heart. I smacked the blade to my left with my own sword and spun into the cross of the swords to hold her there. By the time I finished my spin in, she had her sword free from the cross and was bringing it back up. I turned my wrist, brought the sword up across my chest and caught the blade on mine. I pushed her back with the sword, and dropped into a lunge position with my feet as I brought the sword up again for a defensive high parry.

I waited for her there.

Laxmi smiled and held her sword at waist height. She leapt forward and I dropped my blade on hers and drove the point into the dirt, the handle popping out of her hand. The momentum had me spinning away to my right, pulling myself up straight, and the sword loose at my side.

"Yes!" Lily crowed, clapping. "Rubber pencil! Well done!"

I relaxed as Laxmi pulled her sword out of the ground. "I did not expect you to disarm me. That was awesome. Well done."

Miriam gave me a golf clap, then hopped off the picnic table. "Laxmi, we have to go."

"Yup," she agreed, and spun the sword into the non-existence where it stayed most of the time. "Fundraiser for…where this time?"

"Deborah Heart," Miriam said. "Let's go. Showering and such still needs to happen."

"Thank you!" I called as Miri and Laxmi walked away from us into the parking lot. They waved and disappeared behind some trees.

Lily had her head cocked as I spun the sword and shoved it up into the scabbard she'd secured on my back. It snapped in with a faint click, but I pulled the strap over the hilt and snapped that into place. Just to be safe.

Didn't want some demon forged sword falling out as I walked around.

"What?" I asked when I realized she was still staring at me.

"It's just…a relief to see you with that sword again."

I pursed my lips. "Lily, I wish I remembered any of this, but all I know is what I saw."

"We'll get there." She grinned. "I know we will."

Letting the silence that settled be for a few minutes, the three of us started to walk through the park. The area we used for practice was a small open field in Tyler State Park, ringed by tall bushes and off the regular trails. People thought we were cosplay fans just getting in some practice if they saw us at all—not that those were two real swords that could kill them instantly with the wrong blow. Not even necessarily what was normally considered a fatal blow.

This sword was scary as fuck.

But Lily and Lucifer—*holy shit the devil*—had asked someone to make it for me. So, I felt a certain possessiveness toward it. And I did want to learn how to use it, especially since I had the feeling that we were going to be dealing with more and more of these rejects from Hell.

I finally blurted out the words that had been circling my brain for days, "I want to meet him."

Lily tripped and Ellie barely caught her from smashing her face into the ground. She stared at me with wide eyes and swallowed. "What?"

"I want to meet him. I want to meet my brother."

Ellie's eyes were wide and surprised as well. "Dude, you just asked to meet Satan."

"That's not his name," Lily said quietly. "Satan is someone else. Sataniel. Fucking troublemaker. Your uncle's name is Lucifer."

"Uncle," Ellie choked on the word. "Goddamn this is so out of my league."

"I want to meet him." I wasn't going to be deterred.

Lily let out a breath. "I don't know if that's possible yet. There's…complications. Problems. And it's not that he doesn't want to see you, Wren. Believe me—I had to back him down when I found you. But you said it yourself, you don't remember him. You only know him from the visions."

"Couldn't meeting him jog my memory?"

"I don't know what's going to jog your memory yet, *quilikrozh*. I'm trying to figure that out."

Ellie gasped. "Little Star," she whispered.

"Her brother's nickname for her. And since I adored—*adore* her the same, it was easy to pick it up. I also had to literally bite my tongue a few times when I was talking to you. To not tell you any of this."

I kicked a rock. "But why? Why couldn't you tell me? Why is everything so complicated?"

Lily shook her head. "It's complicated and that's not me copping out on explaining. It's actually complicated and it's *dangerous* for you to know now. Hence the sword. I'm keeping you in the dark on purpose. We don't want it known that you've been found, but you can't keep Lucifer's twin sister a secret for long." She smiled. "Especially since I took the sword back. Heph has been holding onto it for me, for you."

"Hephaestus is really your brother?"

"Yes, my older brother. Much older."

"Is he really…"

"Lame? Yes. He refused to make an anjir blade for someone, and they slashed him with a flameblade he'd grabbed from the nearby working table. Cut the back of his knee, severed two major tendons. He's never been able to regain all the strength in that leg."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Ellie mumbled. "Is Zeus a real thing?"

"Zeus, Jupiter, El, they're all the same," Lily said.

Ellie huffed out a breath. "Sweet Georgia Brown."

Lily patted her shoulder. "You're in for it, kiddo. This is all part of your history too."

"Ugh. All I want is to go to the dance and figure out if I like guys or girls more," she said.

"You can like both." I winked. "I know I do, despite the two guys in my bed."

"We are not even going to talk about the shit that goes down in your bed, *Mom*." She laughed. "Noise canceling headphones are a gift from God."

"Buy a pair for the twins." Ellie laughed, and Lily chuckled. I pointed at Lily. "You're not off the hook. I want to see my brother."

She nodded. "I'll see what I can do about it. Soon, but be patient. There's a lot going on, and I really am a detective in the Philadelphia police department."

Ellie clung to me, staring at the picture on the table. A photocopy of the catalog that Paige had uncovered.

Finally, she nodded. "It's Ben. It's my baby brother." She snapped her head up and stared at Lily and Paige. "Where is he? Can we get him?"

"We know who bought him," Paige said, "but we don't know their real name."

"Who?" she asked.

"Sansom. He bought him for Frankford," Lily said.

"Frankford is dead, though," Ellie said.

"Sansom took him back," Paige stated.

Ellie pinched the bridge of her nose. "Sansom was one of the covered ones. He never showed his face, not clearly. I don't think I could identify him if I saw him."

"That's fine," Lily said.

"I know what he looks like," Lincoln said. "I don't know who he is, though. I'd never seen him before or after those auctions."

"So what do we do?" Ellie asked. "How do we get him back?"

"We can't yet," Lily said. "We know who has him, but we don't know his real identity, and we don't know where he's being held. We cannot rush this."

"Sansom is a key player," Lincoln said. "He was always front row. I'm pretty sure there wasn't an auction he didn't buy at."

"We've been looking for my brother for months," Ellie said. I could feel her shaking. "We know who has him. Why can't we do something?"

"We are," Fischer said. "But this is a long process and we can't afford to mess it up."

She slammed her hand on the tabletop. "Every. Single. Fucking. Day. He's in that monster's hands is another day we lose more of him. Do any of you realize what they did to me? I was hard at fourteen when they grabbed me, but I didn't fucking enjoy being broken down and used as a human fleshlight. I knew what I was, I was old enough to reason it out, and I was able to hide in my head. Ben is *six*. They are destroying him, cell by cell. I'm not even sure he'd remember me at this point because that's what they do."

She slapped her hand on her head. "They get in here, they carve you out. They rip away whatever made you *you*. And they replace it with literal nothing. You know what I was like in the hospital! I was clinically insane for four weeks because suddenly my nothing was filling with me again! And you think a six year old can survive this!?" She slammed her hand on her head again. "He can't! He's a baby! He's my Benjamin! We need to get him back here!"

Fischer grabbed her hand and pulled it away from her head where she was hitting herself, hard. "Stop. Ellie, do you think we aren't working on this every day? Of course, we want Ben out of there. His adoption papers are sitting in Paige's desk, just waiting for him. We want him here. But this is huge and you know that. We can't go charging in like Don Quixote at a windmill. We need a precise strike."

Her eyes flared in a way I had never seen before. There seemed to be fire in them, and Lily saw it as well. She glanced at me, worry on her face.

"I have a fucking sword. I'll give them such a precise strike—"

"Ellie!" Lily snapped, her eyes cutting over to Paige.

Slamming both hands on the table, Ellie pushed to her feet. "I don't give a shit right now. I want to know where my brother is."

"Ellie, stop," I barked at her.

She wasn't going to be stopped. "I will get him back since none of you can do anything!"

Her hand slipped over her shoulder and I saw the sword start to shimmer into existence. Lily wanted to leap over the table to stop her. Paige was sitting there, looking terrified of my daughter, and Ellie was about to do something I didn't think we would ever repair.

I needed to stop her.

"Elutheria Persephone!" the name roared out of me, and a sensation like the very air around us was shaking ripped through the room. "Drop it right now!"

The sword shimmered away. Paige was now staring at me, and so were Lily, Fischer, and Lincoln. Ellie looked terrified and sheepish.

I stood slowly and stared at her. "If you think that we aren't trying to get him, *and the other thousands of children* trapped in the Pipeline out, you really don't know who we are, do you? Sit. Down."

She dropped back into her chair. "Yes, ma'am."

"Step out, Wren," Fischer said, quietly.

Nodding tersely, I spun and marched out the back door. I made it halfway across the patio before my legs gave out and I sank to the ground.

What the *fuck* had I done in there.

"Christ, Wren," Lily gasped, dropping to the ground next to me. "Are you all right?"

"Can't walk," I managed, pulling my knees up and dropping my head to them. "I don't know what the hell just happened in there. Ellie was about to pull her flameblade with Paige—"

"I saw," Lily said. It was quiet a minute. "Paige suspects there's something more going on here, but you made the right call stopping Ellie. Paige shouldn't see that."

"But what did I do?" I whispered. "You saw. You saw everything shake and shiver when I yelled."

Lily looked down at the ground and swallowed again, then grabbed my hand. "You've been learning to use the sword for two weeks now. It's from Hades. It has all the properties of Hades. Just like you. It was bound to start connecting you to it at some point. And the more you touch it, the stronger you connect, to both it and the After. And the stronger you connect…" she hauled in a deep breath, "the more power you're going to awaken. That was a small, and I mean *small* sampling of what you're capable of."

"What did I do?"

"You just got a little angry and…uh…shook space a bit."

I turned my head and stared at her. "I did *what*?"

"You grabbed some molecules that exist, like quarks and gluons, and rattled them together to shake the space around you. It happens

when you're angry. It takes time to learn how to do it and how not to do it."

I blinked a few times at her. "You're serious."

"Absolutely."

Dropping my head back to my knees, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "This is unreal."

"This is the most real," Lily said. "There's one other thing I need to tell you. Paige may have some idea that we're not just average people."

"Why?"

"When we first traced Ben into the Pipeline, it was an ugly mess and the mother shot the father in the living room before I could get the information out of him. I…uh…used some of my power to yank his soul back before it got to Tartarus to get him to talk."

My eyes were wide. "You can do that?"

"*You* can do that," Lily said. "You don't understand how powerful you are. Everything Luce can do, you can do. You're his twin. You've been cut off from it and the sword is reconnecting you."

"Is Ellie okay?"

"Just surprised." Lily smirked.

"Paige?"

Lily rolled her eyes. "Confused and oblivious as ever."

"Well, I guess we don't have to erase her memory."

"I try not to do that." Lily coughed.

I glanced at her, and she gave me a one shoulder shrug. Narrowing my eyes, I considered her. "Lil, did you ever flashy-thing me?"

She chuckled. "Honestly, no. I really do try not to do that. I have—especially at the house when I pulled the guy back—but it's not my go to method."

My legs felt better, and while everything was still whirling in my head, I was calm enough to go back into the house. "We should go back—"

Lily let out a little gasp. "Barry,"

"What? Who?"

She shot to her feet and yanked me to mine. "Mederos can help us find Sansom. We need to find Mederos."

Lincoln

The phone alerts on either side of the bed went off. Fischer groped for his and I grabbed Wren's, holding it out for her.

She squinted at it in the low light of dawn.

"CHoP," she grumbled and sat up to try and pay attention to it.

"CHoP," Fischer said, and also sat up. "Shit. All hands, no media."

I finally sat up, and looked at the two of them. "What's that mean?"

"There's a good chance they've found another stable, and busted it," Wren answered. "They'll need both of us for triage and assessment."

She nudged Fischer out of the bed and climbed out after him. The two of them hurried around the room, dressing quickly, and heading for the door.

Wren came over and dropped a quick kiss on my lips. "Don't change the plans for today. Take Laxmi or Miriam, and keep looking

for Bastian. I'm sure that Lily will be trapped with us at the hospital or on scene."

"You got it, little bird," I said.

After another quick kiss, she was out the door after Fischer and I found myself staring up at the ceiling alone in the massive king bed we usually shared.

No one had seen Sebastian in nearly a week, and no one knew where he could be. But oddly enough, Ellie had said he'd been there for her appointment, and when I pulled the logs for the security system, sure enough he'd been there for her and another patient. His arrival coincided with hers, and the lock coincided with her leaving. Same with the second patient.

I was at a loss. I didn't know what the hell to do. Or why the hell I felt a magnetic pull toward him.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I finally climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom. I couldn't stay in bed all day, but I wasn't ready to face this stupid search again.

Ellie was in the kitchen with the twins. She looked up and smiled at me. "Morning, Linc."

Tabitha and Timothy launched themselves at me, and sing-songed their good mornings. There was no stopping the smile that came over me.

"When can we go to regular school, Daddy?" Tabi asked.

I was instantly on alert. "You don't like your tutor?"

"We like Miss Junie fine," Tim said, "but I miss real school with bells and lunch and gym."

"I don't like gym," Tabi said. "But I like school."

"You just want to go to regular school." I looked between the two of them.

"Yes," they chorused.

"Okay, well, let's talk to Mom and Fischer and see what we can do about getting you into the school. But if Mom says you're not ready, we're going to trust her, right?"

"Always, Daddy." Tim smiled.

How the hell had I gone from a selfish, greedy playboy to a man with a good woman, a best friend, and three kids? I would never get tired of hearing these two calling me 'daddy.' And Ellie trusted me too. It was such a strange place to be, and yet comforting.

"Are you going out today?" Ellie asked.

"I am," I answered.

"Can I come?"

"You have school." I knew what she was trying to do. "Please don't argue. I know you want to help, but you need more time training. The display the other day kind of proved that, baby doll. You just need time. Plus, I'll feel better if I know you're just up the road a bit and can bust out to come running back here to Tim and Tabi."

She sighed and stared at him. "That's not fair using the kids."

"All's fair in love and war, my sweet." I grinned.

She huffed then downed her orange juice in two gulps. "Fine, fine. I'll stay." She walked over and smacked a kiss on my cheek. "But you're a jerk for that."

"Just get more practice, baby doll, then you can come along. You're strong and we all know it. Just young."

"Whatever," she mumbled, but I could see the pride in her face.

Minutes after Ellie was out the door, Miss Junie walked into the house with a chirpy happy good morning. I motioned the kids down to the library, and had June wait.

"They're asking about school, full time."

She nodded proudly. "They're just about ready."

"You're not upset?"

"I knew from the get-go the goal was to get them acclimated to normal, and get them back into a regular school, mainstream. They're doing really well, and I'm also glad they asked. It means I'm doing my job right, Mister Foster. There are thousands of other children I can help along the way. So no, I'm not mad at all."

"Thank you, June. You've been amazing."

"Those children are amazing, and they just bring it out of me." She patted my shoulder and headed into the library to start their school day.

I stared at the coffee mug a little longer while I tried to figure out what to do about this missing doctor situation. He had changed the message on his machine to say that he was backing off taking appointments. There was no sign of him at the townhouse, save those appointments. He was just missing.

I was going to be pissed if he missed Ellie's regular appointment. She was doing so much better with herself between Wren and Bastian that it would be unfair of him to just miss it—though Ellie would understand.

Wren and Fischer had planned something today to see if they could find him, but I came up with a different idea as I sat there.

John Doe. I knew there would be a concentration of police personnel at the hospitals if they found and broke another trafficking stable. That meant that I might get in through the dropping of Lily's name to see if I could visit any John Does in the different hospitals.

We had to find this guy. I didn't know who Barry was, but from what Lily was able to tell us, he was our key and one of the most unsavory motherfuckers to roam the streets.

I suspected that the wife of Lucifer didn't use the phrase lightly.

I scrubbed my hands over my face. This really was all slightly incomprehensible to me—but it always hit me again when I saw the bruises on people's wrists from their sins, and when any of the *versilange* pulled their flameblade.

Or when I remembered why my car was slammed into a wall after running away from a damn demon who was trying to eat my children. Or take their soul. Or whatever the fuck he was doing.

Grabbing the keys, I decided to hit Penn Medical first. Everyone would be over at CHoP and St. Chris with the kids. The patient care advocate there was helpful when I dropped Lily's name, and gave me the pictures of the current John Does. There were three and none of them looked like Bastian at all.

I kept it in the back of my mind that he could be beaten up very badly—which did strange things to me. I didn't want to ever see anyone beaten, but something about Bastian being hit and hurt made butterflies slam dance in my gut.

The same kind of slamming they did when I thought about Wren, Fischer, or the kids being hurt.

Goddamn it.

There was no denying that Sebastian Mederos was hot. Achingly so. And really, we'd only had a few interactions, including the one in the hospital. But I'd noticed him—so had my bisexuality, and all kinds of thoughts leapt into my head.

I didn't need this. I was in love with Wren. This didn't need to be any more complicated.

I walked into Thomas Jefferson and repeated my act, playing Lily's credentials. They were also accommodating, but they also only had one John Doe. The other two were Jane Does.

There were a lot of hospitals in the area and this was going to take me a while. I decided that hitting UPenn and the ME's office was going to be the best use of the time. Get the medical examiner out of the way.

Hopefully with no results.

UPenn was more accommodating after I also dropped Wren's and Fischer's names. They had three John Does, none Bastian.

The medical examiner's office was just down the street. I hurried down there so I could have some hope to get to the other hospitals.

Someone who wasn't the ME was sitting at the desk working on paperwork. He turned and smiled at me, and walked forward wearing all of his protective cover ups.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, hi. I'm Lincoln Foster. I'm working with Detective Lily Haden on the sex trafficking case and we're trying to locate someone. He's been missing a week, but we can't put out a missing persons report yet. We're just trying to see if he's shown up as a John Doe, and so far the hospitals are leading nowhere."

"Ooh, man," he said. "It sucks that you're here. We have three Johns and two Janes."

"I'd have to see the Johns," I answered.

"In person?"

"Uh…do you have pictures? I don't think I need to go into the freezer."

He chuckled. "No, no one really ever wants to go in there. Including me, really. Let me grab those pictures." He walked back to the desk. "How do you know Lily?"

She's my lover's sister-in-law, married to the devil. That wasn't going to work at all. "She's a friend. I'm working with her as a…uh…civilian consult."

"Ah, okay," he said. "I'm Reid, by the way. Doctor Reid Sadowski. Assistant ME."

"Good to meet you. Wish it was under better circumstances," I answered.

He walked back over with a file folder and opened it up.

I regretted this immediately.

None of the faces were familiar, but they were beaten and crusted and—*there was a snake in the one man's hair.* I blinked hard and saw the real picture, with no bruises or cuts.

"Shit," I breathed, tracing the form in the picture. I could even see sins in pictures.

"You know him?" Reid asked.

"No, but…" I let out a huge breath. "This one is going to remain a John Doe, isn't he? He had gang tats? Left to rot somewhere? Maybe some fingers broken?"

Reid stared at me. "All of the above."

"Shirtless, shivved in the back between ribs, right into the heart, but it was only nicked so he bled out for hours before he finally died." I traced the gash over his eyebrows, and studied the two black eyes that weren't really there. "He was killed because he raped someone. Probably more than one someone. Left them beaten and for dead, but they were found. His death is justice served because the law failed those women." A bolt shot through my brain. "Three women. A mother and daughter, and a friend. And when the brother came in, shot and raped him as well."

I looked up. "He's better off dead."

Reid was shocked. A moment later, he gathered himself and whispered, "*Zhadanjir rek'cherade*."

My brain translated it. "The darkest ones be damned eternally."

"Who are you?" he asked softly.

"*Ploutos*," I mumbled. I didn't know the word, but it was there, in my mind.

And it absolutely blew Reid's. He gasped and stepped back, clutching his hand to his heart. "Does Lady Hades know?"

I laughed. "You know?"

"Yes, my Lord," he said, holding out his arm.

I expected to see bruises.

Instead, I saw the same tattoo that Vance had on his wrist. I staggered back. "What the fuck…"

"The mark of Elysium."

My legs gave out and I hit the floor. "Vance…"

Reid ran around the counter and helped me into the chair there. "I don't know what's going on, but I didn't mean to shock you like that. You've seen this before?"

"My PA…well, I guess former assistant, had one just like that. In black, not blue."

"Mmm," Reid said, standing up. "Dark Elysian."

I was having trouble breathing. "What is going on?"

"I can't tell you—"

"I've heard that too often…"

"Honestly because I don't know. Lady Hades hasn't seen fit to tell me much. I didn't expect a Lord of Sin to appear."

"A…Lord…oh." I blew out my breath and dropped my head into my hands. "Please, please, don't call me that? Just call me Lincoln?"

"I can do that," Reid said, entirely too chipper. "So, you can see that this guy was a rapist, and what about the other two?"

"Just nasty sons of bitches," I answered. "A murderer, and an abuser."

"Noted, I'll talk to the detective about them." He walked back around the counter. "Need a drink?"

"Only if it's bourbon."

"Sorry, just water."

"Sold," I said, taking in a deep breath. "So, what are you?"

"An ahura." He stopped and looked at me. "You don't recognize me?"

I shook my head. "We only just found out about Lily."

"Ah." He handed me the glass of water. "My John Does aren't who you're looking for, then?"

"You jump topics like a bullfrog on a hot plate," I grumbled.

"Yeah, more than one person has complained about that over the millennia."

I groaned, "Too much."

He laughed. "More than one person…"

Swiping a hand down my face, I took a minute to drain my drink. "All right. I have at least ten more hospitals to hit today."

"Hey, I'm in contact with all the hospitals and the precincts, leave me your name and number and the name of the guy and I'll call you if I hear anything. I know that Detective Haden is always busy."

I took a deep breath. "Yes. That would be very helpful." I pulled out my wallet and pulled out one of my business cards. I grabbed the pen and wrote Sebastian's name on the back.

Reid came back and gathered up the pictures and tapped the back into the folder neatly.

"Thank you, Doctor," I said, and handed him the card. "I hope you don't call."

"Me too," he answered, and I turned and headed for the door.

My hand hit the handle on the door, and Reid's voice snapped through the space.

"Lincoln."

I turned back, and the happy-go-lucky chatty man who had been talking with me was gone. Instead, Reid looked serious and dark. I was shocked, but I waited for him to speak.

"You're looking for Sebastian Mederos."

"We are."

He stared at my card and then back up at me. "I know where he is." He dug into the cargo pants he was wearing, and pulled out one of his own business cards and walked to the counter one more time. I walked back as well. "Come here, tonight. Bring the woman that he's always talking about. But just the two of you. No one else. Tell no one. And destroy this card after you memorize the address. Understood?"

"Yes," I said, with a nod. "Is he safe?"

"He's as safe as he can be, and no one knows it's him."

"Good. Keep it that way until we're there. This involves sex trafficking. It's dangerous."

Reid lifted an eyebrow. "Trafficking?"

"He has a patient who may know something about the Pipeline."

Running a hand down his face, he let out a breath. "Anything to shut that down."

"Anything."

Wren was as confused as I was as to where we were going. Google showed nothing but a simple office building and attached factory at the address. We both decided to dress professionally, since we had no idea what we were going to find.

Fischer, Miriam, and Laxmi weren't pleased about this plan. The three of them were still trying to talk us out of going alone right up until we walked out the door to the car.

"You have got to trust us," she said, slamming the door and lowering the window. "If he knows where Bastian is, we need to know that. We need to find out what's going on, and get Ben back. I want this over."

"Yeah, but wouldn't we be better off if there were more of us going to see this guy?" Fischer asked. He tapped at the name Reid had written on the back of the card. *Master Black*.

"No, for the love," I said. "Let me and Wren handle this. I'm… sure we can trust this Reid guy. And if he asked us to show up alone, then we're going to show up alone."

"You're being unreasonable."

"He's building trust," Wren said. "We'll be fine."

"Did you bring your gun?" Fischer blurted out.

"Yes. I have my gun, under my jacket. Holstered. I'm not planning on pulling it, either. The only reason I have it is because you asked me to bring it. It's for your peace of mind." She grabbed Fischer's collar, and yanked him close. "Relax. We're going to be fine." She kissed him hard. "Go put the twins to bed."

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered.

Laxmi looked like she wanted to say something else to dissuade us from going, but I just stared her down. "You're not changing our minds, so forget it."

She stuck her middle finger up as I put the car in drive and pulled down the driveway. We didn't know what this was all about.

"Do you really have your gun?"

"Of course," she said, grinning. "I wouldn't dream of doing this without my weapon on me. I frankly don't care what kind of magic and powers we have, a gun is a gun and will do the job just as well as a flameblade." Clearing her throat, Wren picked at a fingernail to get the dirt out from under it. "I've been wearing it when I have the twins with me, after that guy tried to get the twins and killed Andy…"

I grabbed her hand. "I know you liked him."

"He was a friend and he gave his life for those kids. If there really is an After, that guy better have the best accommodations ever."

The silence hung in the car, but not uncomfortably. We both had a lot on our minds, and we really didn't know what was going on with this address that Reid had given me.

"So, what haven't you told us about him?" Wren asked, halfway through the trek to the address.

"About Reid?" I glanced over to see her nod. "He's some kind of demon."

I saw her close her eyes and pinch her nose a second later. "Damn it, Linc. Why didn't you say something to us while Laxmi and Miriam were there with us? We could have—"

"For some reason, I don't think he wants me to share too much with you. Or, at least, them. He's on our side, I'm sure of it. He's friends with Lily." I paused. "He realized who I was when I looked at the John Doe photos. Wren, I could see their crimes. Not just their sins, but their crimes."

She let out a breath. "I wish we could remember. I wish we had more information to go on. I wish people would talk to us."

"I'm starting to think this is a giant jigsaw, and we're not allowed to see the picture," I said. "Like, we're not actually allowed to see the picture because if we do, we'll screw up and lose the pieces in our rush to finish."

"Why though?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure. But Reid called me a Lord of Sin, and was shocked that I was standing there. I think this has to do with the fact that we can't remember any of this."

"I asked Lily to take me to see my brother."

"As you should," I stated. "He's your brother."

"You're as freaked out about that as I am," she said.

"Uh, yes?" I chuckled. "And you shaking the air the other day? That scared the shit out of me. The flameblades? The wings? The twins being part of this? Yeah, it all kind of freaks me out. But…I get the feeling that at the end of this—"

"We're going to right a wrong that should have been righted ages ago."

I tapped my nose. "Bingo."

Again, we were quiet a minute.

Wren cleared her throat. "You know I scared the shit out of myself with that space wiggle the other day."

"Damn, I hope so!" I said. "You grabbed life by the Higgs-Boson and shook it like a can of Reddi-Wip."

She choked on her laughter, and I chuckled right along with her.

Her hand dropped onto my thigh. "Thank you, Linc. I needed that laugh. Everything can get so serious when you're dealing with…whatever the fuck this is."

"Demons? Devils? Angels—hey. We haven't really met any of those yet."

"Considering how bad the demons have been, I don't know if I want to meet an angel! They're all *vengeance of God*-ish and I just can't handle that right now." Wren pointed to the right. "The address is coming up."

I cruised the SUV by at a decent, non-suspicious pace, and we saw nothing but a double front door and a ring of high-set windows around the office area. As we passed, though, a side door opened, and two figures were ushered into the building.

"That's where we need to enter," I said.

"Agreed." Wren nodded. "Park in the garage we saw two blocks back. That will at least make sure we still have a vehicle when we get out."

Ten minutes later, we walked up to the side door on the factory and knocked. I had the card Reid gave me the address on, and I planned to hand it back to him to let him destroy it.

The top of the Dutch door swung open, and someone who was… well, not ashamed of their body at all was standing there. In some leather floss and some pasties with tassels.

"Can I help you?"

"We're here to see…" I flipped the card over. "Master Black?"

The woman stared at the card in my hand, but never asked to see it. She blinked a few times, then swung the bottom half of the door open.

After we walked in, she smartly shut the door behind us and pointed us into a little office. She slapped two short contracts on the table in front of us.

"NDA?" Wren whispered.

"What you see here does not leave here," she snapped. "Your kink is not my kink, and there is absolutely no shaming. Everything you see is consensual. If you suspect that something might not be, you will go to one of the activity directors, and tell them. Do *not* attempt to save anyone in here from what you perceive as may be wrong."

What the hell were we getting into?

She put two pens on the table. "You will sign these just like every other person in here. You will not speak about this place in direct terms. You will not reveal its location unless giving explicit permission to do so. You are only permitted in here because I see you hold-

ing one of Master Black's business cards. But if you betray the trust of this place, in anyway, you will regret it."

Oh, yay a threat. I grabbed the pen and wrote my name very clearly on the top of the paper and signed neatly on the bottom. It was far more aggressive to do that than to scribble. Wren did the same.

"Thank you." She grabbed the two pieces of paper and dropped them in a scanner, hitting the scan button immediately. "You can go down the stairs. Master Black is at his usual table."

"Where is that?"

"Just ask the directors—the people with the UV light triskelion patches on their jackets."

Wren nodded and headed out of the room. I followed, with a sinking feeling in my stomach. I leaned over to her as we headed down. "What the hell is a triskelion patch? A drug?"

She chuckled. "Maybe for some people. No, it's a symbol in the lifestyle signifying that you're a dominant." Glancing at me, she must have seen how confused I was. She pulled us to a stop. "A triskelion is worn by a dominant BDSM master or mistress. Not all of them wear one—"

"Wait. Are we in a *dungeon*?"

Nodding slowly, Wren raised her eyebrows. "You didn't realize that? The mostly naked woman wearing a choker with a lock gave it away. She's a submissive and she's in a committed relationship."

"We're seriously in a BDSM dungeon."

"This is more shocking to you than sleeping with Lucifer's twin sister?"

"Yes, actually," I mumbled.

She laughed and patted my cheek. "You're such a precious creature. This is going to be a shock for us, but I'm more curious as to why Bastian would be here."

"My guess? To get his rocks off."

Her laugh was uninhibited. "No, no, Lincoln. That's not what this is about. There are probably private rooms and orgy rooms, but it's not just and only about getting one's rocks off. It's about exploring and playing with things the rest of the world still considers verboten." She leaned in. "*Fifty Shades of Grey* ain't got nothing on the real thing."

I swallowed hard, and followed her down the stairs to where we could see the strobe lights flashing.

As soon as we cleared the doorway, stepping onto the main dance floor, I knew I was not ready for this. Not even remotely.

Wren

Lincoln gasped loudly.

For someone who had been a self-proclaimed playboy, I found it hard to believe he had never messed around in the lifestyle. Even I had when I was younger. I'd had a lot of fun, but I was way too independent to stay. And a bit too vanilla.

Said the woman sleeping with two men.

…and attracted to a third.

This was bullshit. My brain needed to connect to the libido and tell it to shut the fuck up. Though, to be fair, I didn't ever remember *not* being attracted to Sebastian.

I shook off the thoughts and looked over to Lincoln. He was gawping at all that was going on around him. I'd been in places like this before, so I wasn't as shocked.

His eyes were glued to a couple against the wall. He leaned close to me. "Are they *fucking*?"

"Yes, they are." I nodded. "They are probably getting off on the exhibitionism."

"I'd say she's getting off on his dick, personally."

I flicked my hand on his arm. "It's another level of sexuality. They like being watched, and in here the eyes are anonymous. And willing."

"You can say that again," he mumbled.

"Hey. Keep your bisexual penis in your pants. You'll give me a complex," I teased.

He coughed and adjusted himself. "This isn't affecting you?"

"Where did I say that?" I tossed him a look. "I just don't have anything that points it out. This is supposed to be titillating, Linc. That's the idea. The other idea is that you're completely in control of everything at all times. Even if you have a raging hard-on, it doesn't control you."

His side-eye was epic. "You know too much."

"Why do you think we have bindings and toys?"

"Fuck," he whispered.

I leaned in close to him this time. "See if you can avoid coming in your pants, Linc."

"That's actually a challenge."

I chuckled, and would have loved to keep teasing him, but we were here for a reason. I headed over to one of the *activity directors* who were sporting jackets and the triskelion. They'd managed to put the symbol in something that would glow in the UV lights.

"Excuse me, could you tell us where Master Black is?"

The woman turned and looked me up and down, and glanced at Lincoln next to me. "Is there a reason you're looking for him?"

"He invited us," I said.

I watched as her eyes traveled the length of Linc's body and I felt myself getting riled up by her undisguised perusal. She finally looked back at me. "He's unmarked. He yours?"

"Yeah, he is, so get your mind off my man, sister. Master Black. Where? Let's go. We're not here for fun times."

"His usual table," she said, and started to walk away.

"Hey!" I snapped. "Clearly we're guests. And respect is one of the tenets. So, show some and *kindly* direct us to the table where Master Black usually keeps audience."

She narrowed her eyes. This bitch was going to need a real attitude adjustment.

"Far wall, next to the private entrances." She gestured vaguely to the other side of the room and started to walk away.

I grabbed her arms, and looked across the room. I saw the table where this Master Black was ensconced and saw him and several others sitting and chatting. I let her arm go, but leaned in.

"Lose the attitude," I snapped. "You'll get further."

She flipped me the bird and stalked off.

"Damn, little bird, that was hot."

"In your pants, Linc." I tossed a look at him. "And wait until someone makes a pass at me. You'll understand better."

He growled, and I rolled my eyes. Grabbing his elbow, I muscled our way through the packed dance floor, through the people grinding and groping and fucking in the crowd. I was amazed that these people had this much stamina on a Wednesday night.

All I wanted was to go home and sleep. I'd spent the entire day interviewing and processing the kids rescued from the stable they'd busted. It was grueling to be *on* the whole day, and then have to come to a dungeon to continue looking for Bastian.

The booth Master Black was seated in was an optical illusion. It wasn't a booth, not the way the others were. There were actual cushioned seats and spaces between, where there was a recessed secondary wall, making all of the seats accessible easily. And the spaces between the actual seats could be use by flipping out a spare jump seat from the backs of the chairs.

Lincoln and I walked up and waited for the man in the black and purple pinstripe suit to look up from where he was clearly nibbling on the woman tucked against him.

When he did, Lincoln gasped again.

I slapped a hand over his mouth.

"Master Black, I presume?"

He nodded, and the women surrounding him disappeared quickly. He gestured to the seats across from him. I let go of Lincoln's mouth. As we sat, Master Black's eyes wandered up my body and openly ogled me. I heard Lincoln's low growl and chuckled.

Master Black did as well. "You don't have to piss a circle around her, Mister Foster. She's clearly yours. I'm just appreciating what a fine specimen you have on your arm."

"You're very different here, *Master Black*," Lincoln said. He flipped the card on to the table, face up. He tapped the face of it with

Reid Sadowski's name on it, and pointed Master Black. "I brought this, so you'd see it properly destroyed."

Reid Sadowski was Master Black. I got that loud and clear. I picked up the business card and ripped it into tiny little bits and dropped it back on the table. Master Black nodded once in appreciation, and leaned forward.

"You're here for Bastian."

I nodded just once. "Is he here?"

"He is. He is safe. This is possibly the safest place for him. I've welcomed him because he was beyond distressed about the… situation."

"Situation…" Lincoln said.

"I processed the scene where his life changed," he said. "He didn't know that was me. When he showed up here a week ago, he was distressed and on the edge of losing himself. I've offered him a measure of…forgetfulness. A chance to let his brain sleep, forget about everything. To let his subconscious process what has been going on, not only with his children—but with his practice."

"We need him," I said. "He has the key to—"

Master Black leaned forward. "He is a very fucked up man right now He needed to give his mind a rest. I *will* take you to him, but I am not going to make him do anything he's not ready for. Safe, sane, and consensual. Even in this."

I nodded my head. How bad was Bastian if he was here. "May I asked what he's sought out?"

"Shibari," Master Black answered.

"What the—"

I nailed Lincoln in the side to stop him from asking.

Black sat back and laughed. "I can clearly see who the dominant is in this relationship."

Snapping my eyes over to Lincoln, I gave him my best *shut up* look that I could manage. He got the message and let out a breath, sitting back.

"May we see him now?"

"Are you ready for that?"

"I am," I said, then jerked my head at Lincoln. "He's going to be shocked."

A devious grin appeared on Master Black's face. "Would you like a gag for him?"

"Only if it comes with a leash."

Black threw his head back and laughed. "I can certainly see why you have so many in your orbit, Doctor. Very well, follow me. Mister Foster, I'd appreciate it if you could manage to school your reactions while you're here?"

"I'm doing my best," he said. "There's just so much…"

Standing, Master Black motioned to us to follow. He walked behind the table and met us by the door to the rear private areas. He led us into a darkened corridor and the door closed on its own behind us.

"You know the rules?" Black asked.

"I do," I answered. "I'll make sure Lincoln understands them. If I had known where we were going, I would have prepped him for all this."

He tossed a look at me. "Are you in the lifestyle?"

"Played around a bit when I was younger." I smirked. "I think you know exactly why I'm not now."

Chuckling, Black smirked. "I do. Are you…one of Lincoln's, um…peers?"

I felt the weight of that question as if he had filled it with lead. He wasn't asking if I worked with Lincoln, he was asking if I was one of the supposed Sins. I cleared my throat. "I'm not sure how to answer that." I looked at Lincoln, who had cocked his head. "How do I answer this?"

"With your nickname," he said.

"Little bird?"

He shook his head slowly. "The other one."

"*Quilikrohz*."

Master Black gasped, spun, and went down on one knee. "*Quilikrozh*, my lady."

"Get up!" I snapped. "Get up, get up!"

He stood, but I could tell it was reluctantly. He stared at me openly. "It is right and proper—"

"Quit that right now," I said. "I don't know what's going on. I don't want anyone kneeling to me." Stepping close, I stared him down. "No one is to hear that name in conjunction with me, Master Black. Is that understood?"

"Yes, your—Doctor."

Shit, shit, I didn't need that. I didn't need any of this getting out until I was sure I knew what was going on. I mean, the claim was one thing, but the bowing and scraping—nope. Not gonna happen.

"Let's go. We have to get to Bastian. We have a chance to really do damage to this sex trafficking Pipeline and we're running out of time."

"Right," Black said, and marched smartly down the hall, fully back into his roll of Dom and Master of the club.

We walked down the corridor and all sort of haunting sexual noises filtered out, and I could see Lincoln was both curious and horrified at the same time. I slowed to let him walk next to me.

"If you want, when this is over, I can show you what I liked when I was in this lifestyle…"

He groaned, "I am *shocked* I didn't just pop the buttons on my fly with how hard that made me."

I giggled and patted his shoulder.

Master Black stopped at a door, and waited for us. "I had one of our nawashi work with him this week. What you're going to see in here is someone who is desperate to escape his mind. That he got to this point this fast is shocking, and a demonstration of how much he needed to escape."

After tapping sharply three times on the door, Black swung it open and entered. We followed just behind, and once the light from the corridor behind us was shut out, I let out a low, quiet gasp while Lincoln offered a sharp one.

"It's beautiful," I whispered.

There, suspended by ropes connected to a frame, was Bastian. He was wrapped and knotted and suspended at an incline, head up.

The ropes were twined and spun and looped to make the whole display resemble an ancient twisted tree. Bastian was the trunk, with all the branches coming off at odd angles. His arms were tied behind him, and his chest was bound with lattice and bands of unforgiving rope. The knots grew from his shoulders, waist, hips, and knees and bloomed into branches that raced out to the frame, distributing the weight along the bars, and creating a magnificent illusion.

"Wonderful, isn't he?" asked someone from the right. Their voice was soft and low.

A hulking monstrosity of a man stood from a wing back chair and walked toward us.

"You are the nawashi?" I asked.

He nodded once. "Yes."

"This is amazing. I've only seen a few of these and never as intricate as this…"

"This is one week of training. He is in a deep meditative state, completely at peace."

"You…took a picture of this, right?" Lincoln asked.

"Of course," he answered. "All of my subs and subjects sign a release. Some release their whole person, some request that their faces be hidden." Walking around the back, he motioned us to follow him. "Come, look from here as well."

I joined him, and the back was as peaceful and delicate as the front. Bastian's arms were bound behind him in a lattice pattern.

"He's naked," Lincoln whispered.

"Yes," the nawashi said. "I prefer rope on flesh. It stays where it is put and the sub can experience the sensations of being bound and suspended more completely. And in Bastian's case, he needed that."

"Everyone keeps saying he needed it," Lincoln whispered. "The dude is literally tied up and hung out to dry. Why? Why would you need this?"

"He needed to get out of his own head for a while," I said. "He lost his wife, his children, his house, and then found that he was helping a pedophile. In the space of about six weeks."

"Get out of his head?" Lincoln asked. "Look, I'm sorry if I'm sounding like a bit of an ignoramus here, but…I work with numbers, money and economics. I don't know why someone would purposefully get themselves tied up like this."

"It's not for everyone," Master Black said. "Bastian has always been curious about sex. He's *my* therapist. Do you think I would go to someone who wouldn't understand this?"

Lincoln shook his head. "So, he's been like this for a week?"

The nawashi chuckled lightly. "No, not at all. He's only been in this for about three hours. His choice. The ropes' contact on the skin help to redirect the thoughts away from things that are circling. The whole point of getting into subspace is to let go of everything bothering you. Let go of every thought in your mind and just be, just feel. The meditative state is shockingly good for the brain. And some people need a tactile reminder of meditation."

"So, the ropes. But why so intricate? Why make it a work of art?"

"Because it's not just meditative for him," the nawashi answered. "I find peace in the binding and creation of this. I find peace in studying and watching over those I've bound."

It all seemed to come together in Lincoln's mind in that moment. "And this isn't sexual?"

"Oh, no, it's very sexual," the man purred in Lincoln's ear. "Very sensual, orgasmic if done right."

I took a deep breath. "Did you…"

"We both achieved an orgasm, but from the ropes, not from each other," he answered. "I expect that we will do the same when I unbind him in an hour or so."

"Can we stay?"

"Wren…" Lincoln said. "That's not a good idea." His eyes flitted over to Bastian and back.

"I've always been fascinated by ropes."

"I'll tie you up at home," he said, his eyes suddenly darting and nervous.

That wasn't the Lincoln I knew. He was more than comfortable with his sexuality and nudity. I could see he was amazed by the dance floor before, but now he was freaking out over one man in ropes. Who wasn't even really aware of us at the moment.

"I'd like to see him unbound."

Lincoln cringed. "I'd like a really hard drink and blinders."

"Please, you've seen them before," I teased.

"I need a spiked jock," he mumbled.

I realized exactly what was going on. "Master Black, Nawashi, could we have a moment alone, please?"

Black and the nawashi nodded and moved back around the frame toward the door. I waited until they were out of earshot and pulled Lincoln as far away from them as I could. I dropped my voice as low as it would go.

"Lincoln, do you *like* Bastian?"

He blinked a few times, and then looked at the suspended man in the room. "I am not in a position to deny that I've got an attraction to him. It's a bad idea to let me see him naked."

"Fuck," I whispered.

"Wren, I don't want to jeopardize what we have," he said, his words speeding out of him. "But I am attracted to men and women and I'm definitely attracted to him. Just let me go hang out at Reid's

—Master Black's table and you can come get me when he's done. We can talk to him when he's dressed again. I won't risk what we have because my libido won't shut up."

"That's not why I said *fuck*, Lincoln," I whispered. "Bastian has always been on my radar. We went to school together, and I won't lie about how much I wanted to get together with him in college. But he already had Victoria."

"Oh," The sound hissed out of him.. "So, we're both kind of in trouble here."

"I've always wanted to see shibari art performed," I said. "This is my chance. But it's Bastian and…it's sexual. We need him though, as soon as possible. We can't leave here without at least talking to him."

"Can't we just get a drink at the bar or something?"

I laughed. "Yeah, you and me surrounded by continual sexual acts and innuendos while we wait at least two hours before we can talk to him? Why don't we just go find the orgy pit now, Hedonismbot?"

"Okay, I'll make sure it's scraped and buttered."

We stared at each other a long minute and finally Lincoln reached out and grabbed my arm. He dragged me around the frame to where Master Black waited. "We need a room, an office, where we can talk and wait. We also need the option to come back in here if that's what we decide."

Black nodded and opened the door. He led us to the end of the corridor and pushed another door open. This hall was much brighter and more business-oriented. He motioned to the door on the right.

"Empty, save for some old furniture. You can stay there. Just realize that if you walk out this door," he tapped on the frame, "you won't be able to get back in here. So, make sure that when you leave, you mean it. I have to go back to the dance floor. I'm sure there are details I need to attend to."

Lincoln grabbed his forearm. "Reid. Thank you."

"Welcome." He nodded and let the door close after slipping out of Lincoln's grip.

I eyeballed Lincoln as he slipped into the room. "What are we doing?"

"Figuring this out."

"What out? What?" I looked around.

He dropped onto the couch next to me, and pulled out his phone, and hit a speed dial. A second later, the screen lit up with Fischer's face and number.

"Did you take a fucking picture of Fischer's O-face for your caller ID?"

Lincoln laughed. "I have to tease him about something, little bird. The man is everything you need, and sometimes I wonder why I'm there."

"You're there because I love you," I said.

"You're not too shy about how much you like his dick, either." Fischer's voice rose out of the speaker. "But I'm guessing that neither his dick nor mine are the reason you're calling."

"You'd be half correct," Lincoln said.

"Your dick is a problem?"

"It might be."

"You diseased bastard," Fischer grumbled.

"It's not his dick," I said, "as much as a libido issue."

I could almost see Fischer raise an eyebrow. "Wonder Bisexuality Powers activated?"

"It's not just *his* libido either."

"Oh."

"We found Bastian," Lincoln said. "He's safe. So, I'm about to blow the NDA we signed when we walked in here, but this has to come out. The guy I met at the medical examiner was an *ahura*, a good demon, and he's here with Bastian. Reid Sadowski calls himself Master Black and he's had the good doctor here the whole time."

"His mind was exhausted, Fisher," I explained. "He came here, to Reid for reasons we don't know yet. But Reid took him in and led him through some of the basics of being a submissive. He took the ropes and he's currently bound up in a shibari creation. The nawashi wants him there for another hour before he releases him."

"Another demon?" Fischer asked.

"An ahura," Lincoln repeated.

"Which means absolutely nothing to me, Linc. I just know that you found another one."

"Should I also mention that Wren's demonic nickname compels them to bow?"

Fischer snorted.

"All right, I'm going to let my stupidity in this just flood out of me," Lincoln said. "We all know now that this is absolutely nothing like normal. We know, or strongly suspect the following points.

"One, that Wren is Lucifer's twin sister. Two, that she's really old —"

"Thanks!" I interjected.

"—three, that she was given her name by Lilith, Lucifer's wife and Wren's best friend. Four, she was personally put in charge of balancing the sins by God, Zeus, El, whoever, himself. Herself? Themselves. Fine. Five, that we are two of those sins: me, *Ploutos* and Fischer, *Aergian*."

Fischer and I gasped, and I touched Lincoln's arm. "You discovered names?"

"They popped into my head when I was looking at the pictures of the John Doe at the medical examiner's office." He quickly summed up what he had been able to see on those faces for Fischer. "And six—"

"You interrupted yourself and still remember the point you were on," Fischer said.

"I'm a numbers freak, Fischer. Of course, I remember. So, point six was, there are seven cardinal sins, and there's only two of us."

I cringed and dropped my head into my hands. "Holy crap, Lincoln. Are you trying to say there are five more of you sins out there?"

"Well…" He cleared his throat. "Four, if I'm right."

The room was dead silent. I wasn't sure I was breathing, but a whoosh of blood raced through my ears, making it hard to stay upright.

"You think Bastian is number three?" Fischer asked. "But…how does that work? If I'm Sloth and you're Greed, that leaves Gluttony, Wrath, Pride, Lust, and Envy."

Lincoln and I chorused, "Lust."

"What makes you so sure?"

Lincoln laughed. "Uh, he's a sex therapist who is currently tied into some kind of kinky rope thing in the back of a BDSM club?"

"That…would do it." He let out a deep sigh.

"Fischer, if this is all too weird, we'll pull back. We can come back for Bastian tomorrow. Other than our weird suspicions, there's no reason to—"

"Ellie needs her brother back and every minute counts." He sighed again. "Don't leave there without him or the information. Preferably both."

"Fischer—"

"Take me off speaker, Wren."

I grabbed the phone, tapped the button and held it to my ear. "Fischer, if you—"

"Stop and listen to me, little bird. Whatever is going on—and I think Lincoln is pretty close to it—is not in the realm of what we all believe normal is. This is bigger than we know. I know whose bed you sleep in each night, and if I have to share that with a few others to balance the universe, well…I guess that's not so bad. Especially since I see the way Lincoln treats you, and the way he helps me protect and support you. Bastian, as far as I can tell, is a good man. He's been through Hell—figuratively, I think—and if he needs you and Lincoln to keep going, then so be it."

I let out a slow breath. "My first and always."

"Sweet little bird," he answered.

"Nothing happens here. No matter how much it kills me to not touch," I said.

His voice was quiet. "Wren, I'm getting super filthy pictures in my head right now."

Groaning, I put a hand to my head. "Fuck you, Fischer, why did you say that."

He chuckled. "I love you, little bird."

"I love you too, Fischer. We'll be home as soon as we can."

The connection cut and I handed the phone back to Lincoln. He was quiet a moment and then looked at me.

"He was thinking about four of us in bed, wasn't he?"

I grimaced.

"Yeah," Lincoln murmured and shifted his pants uncomfortably. "Me, too."

Lincoln

Watching this nawashi, Bill, unbinding Bastian from the rigging was one of the most erotic things I'd ever witnessed.

Wren and I sat in lotus pose in front of the rig while Bill had been reading something quietly in his chair. He finally set the book down after glancing at the clock.

He moved from his chair to the floor in front of the rig. He knelt in a reverent pose and held it for a good five minutes. He finally reached up and put a hand on Bastian's skin where it was bare on his chest.

Bastian's eyes flickered open, serene and calm.

"Master," he whispered.

"Release time," Bill said.

"Thank you, sir," he whispered, and he closed his eyes again.

Bill stood and chose the right side. His fingers danced over the simple knot there, and unlashed it.

"That is the only real knot in the whole rigging," Wren whispered. "The rest are all twists, twines, and fold overs."

"Just the one?"

"It's rope art. Shibari, the art of binding. There are buildings in Japan that have been held together with ropes like this. Just one knot."

The knot disappeared and Bill's hands traced the ropes back and back again, unbinding, unwinding them. As he did, he carefully spun the rope into coils, straightening it, looping it, and then finally winding the tail end of a length around itself and placing it on a hook on the wall.

Every time the rope directed him to the other side of the rigging, he would pass a hand over a piece of Bastian's skin, teasing him, making him aware of his presence. As more and more rope was untied, Bastian's eyes opened more often, then opened and stayed open longer.

It was as if his consciousness was bound by the rope and by loosening it, he came back to awareness.

"Meditative binding," Wren whispered.

"Are you fucking reading my mind?"

"Your body language, Linc. I'm a doctor of social work. That means I can read people, really well. And since I know you, *intimately*, I barely have to look to know what you're thinking."

"Show off."

Bastian was more awake now, but there was no question that he remained relaxed as Bill's hands slowly passed over him more and more. The ropes were coming closer and closer and Bastian would have to stand soon.

"Master," he breathed.

"You have visitors, pet," he answered.

"Who, sir?"

"Wren and Lincoln," he answered.

He chuckled softly. "I figured Lincoln for a kinkster."

Bill laughed, passing a soft hand over Bastian's face and smiling. "It's Wren who's the kinky one." He smiled at us, and I saw Wren nod. "She was submissive for a while, and then a Domme."

A long, slow breath escaped, with just the tiniest hint of a moan following.

Bill threw us another look, and Wren nodded again.

"Why were you hoping it was Lincoln?"

"Fucking sexy." A ghost of a smile passed over his lips.

"But you were turned on by the idea of Wren domming you," Bill said.

Oh, this was going to be interesting. Wren had given him permission to grill him while he was still just half awake.

"Fucking sexy," Bastian said again.

"So, you like women…"

There was an ascenting *hmm* from him.

"And you like men…"

"I like everything," he whispered.

"So, you're pan…"

Another ascenting *hmm* escaped him. But the smile slipped off his face. "Anything for Vicky, though. Whatever she wanted."

"What did she want?" Wren whispered.

"Just me."

Hell. He'd loved that woman enough to never stray into his pansexuality. No wonder he was having so much trouble recovering. Victoria had been his life, his North Star. Now, he didn't have that.

I looked at Wren and realized I would be as broken and lost as he was if she was gone from my life. Especially if she was taken as violently as Victoria was.

"Kid gloves," I whispered.

She didn't look at me, but grabbed my hand and nodded. We sat quietly watching as Bill got closer and closer to having Bastian completely unbound from the frame. He motioned the two of us over and put one of us on either side of him as the last secure rope was unwound. Wren and I put Bastian on his feet as he let out a hiss of pain.

"He hasn't stood for six hours. Just hold on until he gets his feeling back." Bill walked around the three of us and finished his disassembly of the rig.

At the same time, Wren and I saw that he was bound up separately from the rigging. He was still trussed up, the ropes still not completely off.

But he was aware.

"What…" His eyes shot between the two of us. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, Bastian," Wren said.

"You disappeared, man," I added. "No one knew where you were."

"Reid knew."

"We didn't know Reid. Not until today."

"We don't have time to discuss you disappearing, Doctor," Wren said. "We need your help."

He glanced down and looked back up. "Uh…"

"We'll wait. We've been here all this time, another few minutes is fine."

"Yeah, no. You're going to have to step outside. This is the part where…" He sucked in a breath and steadied himself. "You need to wait outside."

Wren caught my eye as she moved close to him, and whispered in his ear, "This is the part where your cock gets as hard as steel and your nawashi enjoys taking care of you just before you're completely free from the ropes. Because it's that little bit of danger before freedom that gets you hard. And because you know that in here, in this club, nothing is verboten as long as it's safe and consensual."

Jesus, she had my dick hard with those words.

"You've had your compass star ripped away from you, Bastian. You had your heart shattered with the slip of a knife. You've had your trust betrayed. You are lost and flagging and confused, and these ropes…" Wren trailed her finger along the edge of one of the solid bindings, touching his skin. "These ropes have helped you hold you together while you find yourself in a starless night."

Bastian shivered from head to toe.

I was right there with him.

"We need you, Bastian. Not just to help save the kids. We need *you*. Me, Lincoln, Fischer. We all need you with us."

"I'm still broken," he breathed.

"Let us fix you," I whispered.

His eyes grabbed mine and his stare was both delighted and petrified. "Us?"

"Us," Wren said, her word sibilant. "We're going to stay, Bastian. While your master unties you, we are going to watch, and we're going to take you with us. We can save a lot of children with what you have in your head."

"I can't…"

“You can. I know you can. You know he’s dangerous, a liar, and pedophile. Let us take you home. Let us help you. Help us save them.”

Chapter TWENTY

Sebastian

My mind was quiet.

It was the first time in long weeks it had finally shut up. Bill's hands and ropes were everything my brain and body needed to just be quiet, still. It was a relief.

I lost all track of time, all track of me, just floating in the pleasant ether of perfect subspace.

Exploring my sexuality in just the past week had been shocking. I was basically a no-limits soldier with a sex drive that could beat out Dale Earnhardt at Daytona. There was a lot of guilt, at first, that I was doing this so soon after my wife's death, but after my mind settled earlier in the week, I could almost hear Vicky.

Then, last night as Bill rigged me up, I *could* hear her. I was pretty sure it was a hallucination, but it had been shockingly vivid as she had run her fingers through my hair. I had adored when she did that.

…"Did you think that I would be upset at you, Bas?"

Her fingers were calm, soothing. My hair was shaggy.

"I don't know what to think, Vic."

She hummed softly, her fingers on my scalp. "I love that your hair is longer. I know you kept it short to look professional, but the long hair rock star was always your look."

"You never said—"

"There were lots of things I never said, Bas. You had a hard enough time keeping your sexuality in check, and I didn't want to add to it."

"You knew?"

"I've been with you since we were nineteen. I would've been a fool if I hadn't seen you ogling the boys. And the enbies, and the trans, and the queers, and fluids…" She smiled. "You studied sex and sexuality, love. I knew what was what."

I rolled my head in her lap and stared up at her big brown eyes. "I love you."

"I know you do, and I love you. I am sorry that I couldn't be more for you, but…"

"You were everything for me, Victoria."

She leaned down and kissed my forehead. "Sexually, my love. I never needed or wanted more than we were in the bedroom. In some ways, I felt as if I held you back."

"Never." I grabbed her hand. "You grounded me."

She grinned and ran her fingers through my hair again. "God, I'm going to miss you until I can see you again. I was so lucky to have you. But you're not mine to keep, Bastian. You were mine to set my soul on fire, and to teach yours how to bank that fire. Your destiny is so much bigger."

"Victoria—"

"Ssh and listen, love. I love you and I always will. But who you are, what you are meant for, is bigger than my heart could handle. The children and I are safe, cared for. You will see us again someday. But you must be ready for the battle that is coming to you. And to do that, you must be who you are."

"And who am I?" I asked, softly.

"Min. *You are filthy and sweet and caring and loving. You are the embodiment of sex. You* are *sex. You are lust." She leaned in close to my ear. "You have a place in the universe that is not next to me, but under the guidance of another. You are* Lust, *and you need to be tempered. I could only hold you back so long, and now you must uncover the reason you exist."*

I shook my head. "That doesn't make sense, Vicky. I am yours and—"

"It will make sense, my love. Trust me. More, trust yourself. Let go, let your nature guide you, fill you, show you what you can do." She smiled sweetly and twisted her fingers in my hair again. "I love you. I will always love you. And I will always be proud to have been your wife."

"You were my life…"

"And now, life has something new for you to do. Explore, Bastian. Open. Share. Be. Find your place."…

God, I loved her. I always would. But her words freed me in some way I didn't understand. Everything I'd realized about myself since I was thirteen had piled up behind the simple, powerful love that Victoria asked of me.

I'd given it freely, locking desires away. For her. For a life. For children. I would have left here and gone back to who I was once I screwed my head on straight.

But that hallucination, vision, freed me in a way I didn't know I needed. I wasn't sure what she was talking about, but her words had felt real. The permission, the directive, even the name, broke down the walls.

As I came back out of the meditative state the ropes had put me in, and dropped into a hard arousal, I asked for something I had never ever asked for before.

Bill was delighted to accommodate my request for a blow job. Not only was he delighted, he was skilled and eager. It was the first time I'd had a man's lips on my dick and I liked it.

No, I'd loved it.

I'd kissed a few guys in high school and early in college. But I had never gone further. Victoria slid into my life and I was happy to have her.

But now I had her permission to explore this. Explore who I was. Find out what being *Min* meant.

I'd looked up the name after the vision. Being a doctor meant that I was endlessly curious anyway. Min was the Egyptian god of love, fertility, and lust. If you couldn't get it up, you prayed to Min. If you couldn't get pregnant, you prayed to Min. Horny? In love? Looking for a good time, big boy? Pray to Min.

But my mind still needed some down time, and the ropes were almost a short cut to that head space. While my mind seemed okay with this whole thing, my heart was still looking for a reason to shut down. The next night I asked for Bill to rig me into the ropes again.

I'd very easily fallen into the rules of the lifestyle, and I wanted to learn more.

Bill had delightfully taken the initiative and given me another blow job. Everything he did was deliberate, and his lips were slow and purposeful in that. I'd fallen quickly into sub space after and floated, peaceful in that place.

Coming up out of sub space, there were voices. Other people in the room aside from Bill. And they were people I didn't expect at all.

Two faces stared at me—Wren's pretty, delicate nearly angelic face with her big hazel eyes flashing green in the light and long, fluttering lashes and Lincoln's handsome, chocolate eyes with the flecks of amber, and his strong and stubbled jaw.

I could barely make heads or tails of the conversation they were trying to hold with me. I tried to follow, but my mind was still circling the ideas that had been left in my brain before I'd been bound.

"…I'm still broken," I managed. It was going to be a long time before I wasn't.

"Let us fix you." Lincoln's voice was warm, smoky.

My eyes found his and held his gaze, and the very idea of being helped, healed by them both delighted and petrified me. "Us?"

"Us," Wren said. It shot straight to my dick. Goddamn it, she was gorgeous. "We're going to stay, Bastian. While your master unties you, we are going to watch, and we're going to take you with us. We can save a lot of children with what you have in your head."

They were talking about Barry. They wanted me to reveal him. That was against my oath. "I can't…"

Wren held her hand on my cheek. "You can. I know you can. You know he's dangerous, a liar, and pedophile. Let us take you home. Let us help you. Help us save them."

Them. All the children that Barry and his compatriots had kidnapped, stolen, ruined, rented, and sold.

They sold children.

And Barry knew where they took them. He hadn't told me, but I knew he had the information.

They sold children.

And they'd fooled me for too long.

Staring at Wren and Lincoln there, I nodded. "I will help. I'll find the children."

To my shock—and hell, delight—Lincoln crushed his mouth to mine, and kissed me hard. His tongue slid against mine, driving me, pushing, seeking, tasting. He slipped a hand behind my head, and held me so he could plunder what I was quite willing to give him.

He tasted divine, like smoky bourbon, and a bit like a wild east wind off the ocean.

My body was limp, relaxed, save for one part that was now crushed against the ropes. Someone's hand brushed against me and sent waves of desire through my entire body, raising chills everywhere.

There was a snicker next to us. "That was my move," Wren whispered.

Lincoln's hand then? I didn't care, really. It felt good. The two of them backed up a bit and motioned Bill over.

"Would you like me to cut him out?" he offered.

"No," I whispered. "No, don't cut me out. Finish this please. I want to feel all of this."

Lincoln leaned in. "Fine. But your cock is mine."

I groaned.

Wren

I had not expected that kiss.

It was fucking hot. Watching Lincoln drive his tongue into Bastian's mouth did things to my panties that I was going to have to clean up later. The little moans and noises they made while they were lip-locked did more things to my panties.

And when Lincoln claimed Bastian's dick?

Didn't have to worry about the panties anymore. They were gone, either melted or exploded. No idea which.

Bill motioned me to the wing back chair, and I moved so I could watch everything. He moved to where Bastian waited, still trussed and tied up.

He leaned in close to Lincoln's ear. "Would you like to help me?"

"Yes," Lincoln said, never taking his eyes off Bastian.

Sweet Jesus.

Bill took one of Lincoln's hands and ran it over a rope. "These are extension of your psyche. They are part of your soul. Each length of rope is a thought, a word, a deed, and for your sub to truly be yours,

you must be nothing less than reverent and kind with these. To bind someone with hate or anger is to ruin the trust. To unbind without thought is to lose purpose of the ropes. On or off, it must be deliberate on everyone's part."

Lincoln ran his fingers over the rope slowly. "Silk."

"And jute. Just enough to give the rope a little sting. I make it. Every rope here, I've made."

I could see the gears turning in Lincoln's mind. He was going to like this a lot—and he was going to ask Bill for lessons. I knew it.

I was going to have to burn the remains of my pants when this was all done. The idea of having them—*all three of them*—tie me up and do lots of rude things to my lady bits had me on fucking fire.

With the patience of Job, Bill guided Lincoln around the ropes, after he fully released Bastian from the rig earlier. Once all the rope was hung neatly, they were back to him and began slowly unwinding the lengths from Bastian's still relaxed state.

Lincoln carefully coiled the rope as it was unwound, standing in front of Bastian for a moment. Then, as Bill unlaced the lattice work, Lincoln moved behind Bastian.

Staring straight at me, he whispered in Bastian's ear, just loud enough for me to hear, "You see our little bird sitting there, Bastian? She's watching us." Lincoln slipped his hand around Bastian's neck and gripped his throat lightly. "She likes to watch, and likes to be watched. Did you know she's always held a torch for you?"

Bastian could do nothing but whimper.

Stroking his fingers over a pulse point, Lincoln smiled. "She wants to see you. *I* want to see you. This sculpted body. I want to run my tongue over every valley your muscles make, over ever soft piece of flesh I see. She wants to see us kiss, she wants to watch me enjoy stroking my hand over your hard length, watch me bring you to climax. She wants to see me take you, and watch you take me in turn. She wants to see utter fucking bliss on your face as I spill my cum inside you."

"*Fuck*," Bastian whispered.

"Have you ever been with a man?"

"No…"

Oh *shit*.

"Are you hard right now, Bastian?"

"Yes," he barely breathed the word.

"You're not allowed to come," Lincoln said.

Hell. He was already very alpha, but Lincoln was going to be a quick study in this dominant role.

I watched Bastian shudder, and try to control himself. Lincoln smirked and lowered his mouth close enough to nibble on the soft spot behind his ear.

"Are you excited to share our pretty little Wren?"

"Yes, sir," he whispered.

I saw that word go straight through Lincoln, electrifying him. His tongue traced along the shell of Bastian's ear, and nipped at his skin.

"I think I like this Dom position. I'm going to have to learn how to tie you up, and take you down. Mmm. Just imagining you and Wren in a rig together."

"Fuck me," I whispered.

"Later, love." Lincoln grinned, still stroking his fingers over Bastian's pulse point.

Bill was nearly done with removing all the ropes, and left just a basic shibari pattern on his body: some ropes up the legs, up his thighs, twists across his stomach to his arms. His arms were still bound behind him, but the knots at his wrists were far more simple now.

A piece of cloth had been folded into the ropes covering his dick. It was doing a piss poor job of hiding his hard-on, and I was thrilled by that.

Bill took a moment, and ran his hand down Bastian's mostly naked chest. "Mister Foster, if you'd like to take lessons with me, please let Master Black know and we can arrange that. I would be even more thrilled if you could bring Bastian back for some of our more advanced lessons."

"I will most assuredly be here for lessons," Lincoln said. "Thank you."

Bill nodded and headed out the door. I held up a hand. "Are you sure you want to leave?"

Bill dipped his head. "I am. He has both of you. I'm sure there's a pretty little thing on the dance floor who would be just thrilled to take care of me." The door clicked closed behind him.

I looked back at Lincoln, who was staring at Bastian. "The rest of the ropes are yours, Linc"

He looked at me. "We promised Fischer…"

I smirked. “We don’t have to do anything. Or you can trust me to tell you that Fischer will not care if you took your taste of him.” I stood from the chair and walked to the two of them, and cupping Lincoln’s jaw in my hand. “He will only request to watch you while he takes me.”

“Oh, God…” Bastian’s voice was strung out.

Lincoln smirked. “And you, little bird? How do you feel about me sucking his cock?”

“If I can watch? You’ll owe me a fucking.” My eyes darted to Bastian. “While he fucks you.”

The moan from Bastian was unmistakable. We had to do something before the man came, untouched. Releasing Lincoln from my hand, I stood in front of Bastian.

“I’m only a little jealous that Lincoln got to taste your lips before I did,” I whispered. I leaned in and caught his mouth with mine, keeping the kiss liquid and soft.

But he tasted good. Chocolate and male. I realized I was tasting another man on his lips and that made me…growly. Upset. I knew it wasn’t one of my men—not Lincoln or Fischer, and I didn’t like that. “You need to change that flavor,” I whispered. “Next time I kiss you, I want Lincoln on your tongue.”

“Holy fuck, please…”

I turned and kissed Lincoln. “I want to know what he tastes like on you. Find out for me.”

By the time I got back to the chair, Lincoln and Bastian were locked in a kiss that incinerated…my pants, maybe? The chair I was sitting on? It was insane. My whole body was consumed watching them.

It was my turn to be the voyeur.

Goodie.

Bastian didn’t struggle against the ropes, but let Lincoln have possession of him. The cloth that had been a weak excuse for coverage, was on the floor, and it was a pity I had missed that reveal. But Bastian was pleasantly endowed.

Lincoln’s hand roamed over the parts of Bastian’s skin that were exposed by the ropes. Whenever his fingers danced over Bas’s nipples, I saw his eyes crunch tight.

An idea hit me. I walked to the cabinet in the corner and opened it—finding all kinds of fun toys and implements there. There were a

dozen different kinds of clips, but I picked the simple alligator version and closed the cabinet.

I leaned in for a kiss from Lincoln, and took one of Bastian's nipples in my fingers. I pinched it, and he hissed. I slipped the clip onto him and he gasped. Lincoln grinned and helped himself to the other nipple and clamp.

Smiling, I kissed Bastian softly. "Like that?"

"Yes…" he hissed out the word.

Lincoln moved back into take control of his lips and I figured it would be better for me to just stay here, watch this up close. The chair was likely to explode if I went to sit on it.

So, I sat. Right next to them on the floor. I watched as Lincoln's hand cradled Sebastian's balls, rolling them gently. He used his other hand to tug the chain connecting his nipples, and elicit the most amazing sounds of want from Bastian.

Dragging his hands down Bastian's body, Lincoln landed on his knees. He wrapped a careful hand around Bas's hard cock and studied him.

"It's been a long time since I've been with a man," he whispered. "I've missed this."

His tongue darted out and he licked the dewy drops of precum off the head, and let out a breath that was almost a moan. Bastian's gasp was loud. His head tipped forward to watch Lincoln in front of him.

"Please," he whispered.

Lincoln lifted him and licked from the base to the tip, then slipped him over his lips and ever so slowly took him right down to the root.

"Shit," I whispered.

I couldn't be sure what Bastian said. It was barely English, and his whole body heaved at once. Pulling him out and then dipping back down, Lincoln made him cry out this time.

"I can feel you swallowing my dick." Linc hummed a positive answer, and Bastian convulsed. "Holy shit! I can't…please don't…"

He pulled back and looked up. "Don't what, Bastian? Don't make you come? You want me to edge you until you pass out? I can…"

"I want it to last…"

"Do you think this is the only time I'm going to let you fuck my mouth, Bas?" Lincoln asked, rolling his sac softly in one hand. "Be-

cause this is not a one-time relationship."

I reached up and gently put my palm on his ass, stroking the skin with my fingers. "Fuck his mouth, Sebastian. There will be other times to edge, other times he'll fuck yours." My fingers raised gooseflesh on his backside.

Lincoln let go of Bastian's balls and slipped his hand back to the puckered entrance and danced a finger there. The move made his whole body shake and shiver.

"I'll have this too," Lincoln said.

"Fuuuuuuhhh…." Bastian couldn't finish because Lincoln had taken him back in his mouth, and swallowed him down. He also didn't move his finger from where he was stroking his hole.

My hand left his ass, and I stood. I tugged the chain on his nipples again, and he turned to looked at me. He was nearly in tears. I moved to stand behind him, and I nibbled on the junction of his shoulder and neck. Every once in a while, as Lincoln's mouth bobbed up and down on his cock, I pull on the chain. My other hand rested on his hip.

"It feels so good," he whimpered. "So…good…"

"Come in his mouth, Bastian." My words dusted over his ear. I heard Lincoln grunt his agreement. "Give him your cum."

They both groaned. I felt Bastian's hips twitching and I held him still. He still tried to move. I could feel his whole body tensing, and a whimper leave his throat. Waiting just a moment more, I pulled the chain again, then reached up and unclipped them.

The shock of blood rushing back in caused a sharp pain—I knew that—and Bastian yelled out wordlessly. Pressed against him, I could feel his body tense and still under the influence of the orgasm.

Lincoln didn't let him out of his mouth. I saw him swallow, and swallow again. Just a few drops of cum slipped from the side of his mouth, but he took everything Bastian gave him.

Drawing a hard breath, Bastian cried, "Fuck my mouth. Please fuck my mouth!"

Taking no time at all, Lincoln was up and pulling his cock out. I helped the still bound Sebastian to his knees, and helped guide Lincoln into the wet, warm depths of Bastian's mouth. Lincoln ran his fingers through the dark, black, lush locks and gripped Bastian's head.

He leaned into me, taking my mouth while he used Bastian's, driving into him. Not brutally—he knew Bastian wasn't experienced yet. He took control and while he slid his cock in and out of the hot and willing mouth, he kissed me.

I tasted Bastian's cum on his lips. It mingled with the familiar flavor that was Lincoln, and I opened completely to him, welcoming him.

"Pants off," he managed to breathe. While he moved one hand out of Sebastian's hair, I unfastened my own pants and Lincoln yanked them down, his hand finding its way to my pussy.

He thrust two fingers deep inside me, and groaned, "So wet."

I pushed down on the heel of his palm and he pushed back. The hand in Bastian's hair moved in sync with the one inside me, and Lincoln's mouth owned me.

It took just a minute or two for both Lincoln and I to pull apart and shudder through our mutual orgasms. I felt like I was going to collapse onto Bastian, but somehow managed to stay up. I leaned my forehead against Lincoln's and looked down at the man between us.

Bastian hadn't quite been able to swallow of Linc's cum, and it dripped down his chin. He looked debauched.

He looked so damn fuckable.

Lincoln heaved a breath. "Fuck."

I let out a small laugh. "That's what Lust is supposed to do to you."

"Well. He's pretty fucking good at his job."

Sebastian

Barry and his girlfriend, Cora, were putting on quite the show for me. Flirting, touching, little kisses.

I had to school my reaction. I wanted to kick him in the balls. And her in the lady balls. Because they both deserved it. They were sociopathic child molesters, and this display—now that I knew about it—was pissing me off.

The hints of *strange* I had started to see around people were now in full bloom. Ever since Lincoln and I had *connected* in that room four days ago, everything seemed…more. People were sporting bruises and cuts. Some people had even more, like wounds and worms and one had a snake in his hair. The most frightening was the one who's throat was torn out.

Fischer had explained all of this was me. I was seeing this, it was a gift.

What kind of gift put snakes in people's hair?

They were the manifestation of sin, he said. I didn't understand a lot of what was going on at that moment, but he'd gotten through to

me on that one.

Now, sitting here in front of these two… It was worse than two victims on the beaches at Normandy. I could see pieces of their skull through their skin, oozing pustules, boils, snakes, worms, maggots, their throats were gutted, some of their fingers were only bone.

They had a strange black aura around them, like they were standing in front of a light—or something that *removed* light.

I could almost hear Lincoln, Fischer, Wren, and Lily upstairs in the second bedroom swearing and screaming at each other at this ridiculous display. I wondered if they could see the gore on them.

Lily was probably the most pissed. She had a major Pipeline player two floors below her, and she couldn't move on it. Not yet.

"So, Cora, you're aware of Barry's sessions with me?"

"Of course." She reluctantly pulled her eyes away from her wuvvy-dovey. "Our relationship thrives on honesty. And he's been so good about that."

The dark aura pulsed violently around her.

"And you understand this means if you choose to stay with Barry, there can't be any children."

She rolled her eyes. "We can get a dog. Same deal, less diapers."

Barry chuckled. There was a new, second layer in that laugh. One that just oozed dishonesty. A mocking tone, as if I—as if we didn't know he was lying.

"So, let's run through some things here, involved with keeping Barry safe from his own impulses. Number one *hell no* vacation spot?"

"Disney." She chuckled. "Of course."

"Excellent. Best times to go on vacation?"

"During the school year."

"Holiday shopping?"

"Long before the holidays."

She knew all the answers to all my questions. Too easily, too quickly. It was a dead giveaway that they had practiced this together. She had all my questions before the session.

These two were absolutely feeding off each other.

I needed the location of the kid—of Benjamin. I needed to know where Sansom was hiding his cadre of toys and I needed to know soon. I couldn't keep them here and entertained all day.

Glancing at the clock, I had twenty minutes left to get them to talk. Give me something, anything to save these kids from this hell.

"So we have some things we need to make sure we're keeping up with," I said. "The purpose of this has been to make sure that Cora understood the limitations we have self-imposed to make sure that we don't end up on the wrong side of the prison bars."

He nodded solemnly. I wanted to punch him.

"Next time there is a 'Take Your Child to Work' Day, I want you to call out," I said.

"How is it that I have to accommodate them?" he asked.

"Because you're simply taking a mental health day," I answered. "I can give you a doctor's note if they need it. You need to not be around these kids. What about walking to and from work? Any playgrounds?"

"One, by the nursery school," he said.

"Go the long way."

"I just don't see why I have to adapt to them."

I put the pen down and leaned forward. "How would society exactly adapt to you, Barry? Let's explore that idea. Because I think it gets to the root of why you're here. Why you're *still* here."

He looked confused, genuinely confused. I didn't see any deception in his eyes, and I did a short victory lap in my head.

"You say that you don't want to go out of your way to stay away from children, even though you know you should. Even though we've determined that is what's best for you. Do you understand that what's best for you in this case is also what's best for society?"

Another genuinely confused look. "But if this is a mental illness, why should I not be accommodated? Everyone else gets that."

This conversation moved from the personal to the psychosocial commentary of a privilege short-sighted, narcissistic white asshole.

Yay. I loved my job.

At least the blow jobs were good.

Ooh, bad timing, dick. Settle.

"But not everyone else gets that, Barry. There are a lot of people who have to work around society."

Cora piped up. "Societal norms are bullshit

"Societal norms are guidelines for proper moralistic behavior. It is not proper for you go out and shoot someone in the face. They shift and change with the times, yes, but only to support a more eq-

uitable moral view. Anti-miscegenation was a society norm, until Loving V. Virginia, and now it is not acceptable to discriminate against marriages of mixed race."

"Wouldn't it be moving toward a more equitable stance if child-love was normalized?"

"Absolutely not. Not ever. A child doesn't have a full formed sense of self, never mind morals, until the age of majority Even then, I'd argue they weren't really fully formed. And in that you have an unequal dependence."

There was *no way* these two were going to make me use the word 'relationship' for what a pedophile did.

"Even if they child makes it clear that they are there willingly?"

"Impossible. A seven year old will tell you that they love purple and then when you paint their room purple, tell you they hate it and why didn't you paint the room green. They are not self-aware enough to articulate what they are really thinking and feeling, and that gets worse as they approach puberty, though they do become self-aware."

"So, you really think modern society will never shift enough to allow for the existence of a pedophile that isn't considered evil?" Cora asked.

"In the same way there will never be someone who says they don't like black people and isn't racist. But there will always be someone who argues that they are different."

By the look in their eyes—and vibrating pulse of the aura—I had exactly five minutes left in this session to get the information out of them before they walked out and never came back, disappearing completely from my practice. Barry confirmed that a moment later.

"I have to move my next appointment, Doctor Mederos. We're going on a little vacation, get away from everything for a few days."

"Oh? That sounds nice. Are we being smart about our location?"

"Of course." Barry nodded. "It's a friend's estate. Secluded, quiet."

"Somewhere interesting?"

"Just down in Delaware."

Cora smiled and leaned into me. "We're looking at buying a boat. It has such a fun name we couldn't resist looking at it." She giggled, totally overdoing this stupidity. "*The Bigger Boat*."

I had to chuckle. "Does it come with Quinn and the Chief?"

"That's what I said!" She giggled again. "He's going to bring the boat by for us to check out."

Barry smiled. "Being wealthy is awesome that we can get them to bring the boat to us. I've liked everything I've seen about it and I think we'll probably buy it."

I picked up my pen and scribbled a note on the paper. "You two are serious, if you're talking about buying something together."

They exchanged a look and it was not an innocent, sweet flirty one, and the aura flickered again.

It hit me like a brick. They were going to use the boat to transport the kids.

It took every ounce of my education and training and life lessons in sick shit people confessed to doing to not flick my eyes over to the camera that was mounted on the back of my computer screen. Just to make sure the microscopic little thing was there and working.

"We are serious," Barry said.

Cora fluttered her eyes and smiled. "We are. He's sweet. And I like everything about him. I'm more than willing to help him work with his issue, and we're happy."

I nodded, and sat back after dropping my pen on the desk again. "Excellent. Good. So, we're canceling Friday's appointment…would you like to keep next Tuesday's?"

He glanced at Cora, and she gave him a quick nod, appropriate of nothing we had just said. It was her, *let him think you're coming back* nod.

God, these trash humans were so fucking easy to read now that I knew what I was reading. Every single one of my patients now was going to have to pass a test.

"Yes," Barry said. "I think we should be back by then."

The black aura flashed so hard, the only way it would be more obvious he was lying was if a sign appeared above his head that said, "*Liar*."

I scribbled the time and date down on the card and slid it over to them. "Cora, thank you for coming. I'm pleased to meet you and pleased you're such a good influence on Barry. He deserves some happiness."

"Thank you, Doctor." She smiled and took the card and stood. "Let's go?"

"Absolutely." He smiled up at her and stood. I showed them to the office door, and then to the front door.

To add a convincing touch to the charade, they held hands while they walked to the car in the driveway. I clicked the door shut and heard shuffling behind me.

"*I swear to God*," I screamed over my shoulder at the stairs, "if you come down those stairs before I say so, I will break all of your legs!"

Watching out the fully glass paneled storm door, the two of them climbed into the car they brought, and gave each other a quick kiss once they were buckled in. The black aura winked and danced around them, flagging me down that this was also a lie. It took Barry a long minute to back out of the driveway, adjusting the mirrors. He'd never driven that car until today, just based on that alone.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, the cute little silver coupe disappeared down the street and out of sight. Closing the inner door, I counted to ten, and finally yelled up the all-clear.

An entire herd of elephants stomped down the stairs, followed by one very composed and occupied police detective.

"You didn't get it!" Fischer said. "They're never coming back!"

I raised an eyebrow and glanced at Lily who was just getting off the phone. "Got it?"

"Delaware Staties, FBI, and the fucking Coast Guard, baby." Lily grinned. "We'll have the address in about an hour, once the Vice Admiral gets back to me."

"How do you know a Vice Admiral?" Fischer asked.

"Wait, he didn't tell us anything," Lincoln said.

"Oh, boys." Wren sighed. "So silly. They gave us everything. The name of the boat they are going to see in Delaware and that the captain is bringing it in for them. Which gives us exact coordinates on where the dock is at the estate they were talking about."

I grinned. "And I'd put real money on that being Sansom's place."

"The car is going to be abandoned just about a mile down the road," Lily said. "They'll have their own vehicle stashed." She looked at me. "Do you think they'll drive straight there?"

"No," I answered. "They'll probably have…something they need to bring. Equipment, another kid. They're really horrible people."

"Noticed," Lincoln said.

"You saw the black glowing shit?"

Fischer and Lincoln nodded, and Fischer went on, "Oh yeah. Even through the screen. There was no way to miss that. They were hard to look at when they first got here."

"Had to shut off the Sin-O-Vision," Lincoln grumbled.

Lily burst out laughing. "The what?"

"Well what the hell can I call it? Magical Evil Vision? Your Soul Is Naked Vision?"

Chuckling, I pulled Lincoln over to me by his belt loop, and dropped a quick kiss on his lips. "Sin-O-Vision?"

"Fuck off, the lot of you," he stated. "My brilliance lies in numbers and money, not witty repartee. Sin-O-Vision is about as good as I get."

Lily looked at her phone. "So, it's going to take me a bit to get this task force rolling, but I think we can get down there in about twelve hours for a nice nighttime raid. Oh, shit, I didn't see—did you give her the card, Bastian?"

I smiled. "Of course."

Lily fist pumped. "Yes. Excellent. I'll have my IT guy get on that before we even get going. We may well end up busting the Pipeline completely in the next forty-eight."

Wren grabbed Lily's arm. "I'm going with you on this."

Lily hesitated. "Wren, this isn't—"

"We'll bring Miriam. She's a guardian, so she's going to guard. We need to be there. There are going to be dozens of fucked up kids at this compound and we can both help. Hell, I might even suggest bringing Paige. She has all kinds of contacts who can help us."

"Paige stays here," Lily said. "If we're going to bust the Pipeline, we need her here to coordinate the shit in the city, with Fischer and Bastian."

"What about me?" Lincoln was put out.

Lily stared at him. "You have to watch the kids. You have to *guard* the kids. That's your job." She looked between all of us. "With only Laxmi here, and Ellie half trained, there are going to be…*things* that are going to press their advantage and try to take those kids from you."

Her soul-piercing black eyes landed on me. "They've already succeeded once in tearing the heart out of one of you. I was able to… Well. Not important right now—" She held up her hand to stop my

questions. “Not right now, Bastian. I will tell you, but it’s too long to explain. Lincoln you have to stay with Laxmi, Ellie, and the twins.”

“And what am I supposed to fight off a demon with? The cheese grater? A butter knife?”

“No.” She shook her head, and looked at her phone again. “Look, I’ve got a lot to do. I’ll be back with what you’ll need to help Laxmi with the kids. Let’s all meet at the mansion in about six hours. If I need anything or something goes wrong and is about to go down, I’ll call you. But I got about six hours to get all this shit done and it’s a lot of shit.”

Wren nodded. “Yes. Please. I’ll call Miriam and Laxmi and let them know what’s going on.” She glanced at the three of us standing there. “No one say anything to Ellie about this potentially being her brother’s rescue. It’s not that she doesn’t deserve to know. It’s that I don’t want her to be disappointed if we can’t find him.”

Fischer and Lincoln nodded and I grunted my ascent. She was right—Ellie would also want to go with her and that seemed like a really bad idea.

Grabbing the doorknob on the garage and pulling the door open, Lily pointed at me. “He’s only got a crash course in what’s going on. You need to fill him in on the details you have. Let’s all meet at the mansion in six hours.” She looked at her watch, and shook her head. “He might be able to calm down by then.”

She closed the door behind herself as she entered the garage.

“He who?” I asked. “He me?”

Wren pursed her lips. “Come on up to the kitchen. You’re going to need a drink for the rest of this.”

THE ORIGINAL BEER was sitting in front of me, half gone. I blinked a few times, and shook my head, then grabbed the warmish beer and chugged it.

Wren, Fischer, and Lincoln were sitting around the table with me, waiting for me to say something. I cocked my head and stared at Wren.

“I don’t see the family resemblance,” I finally murmured.

Lincoln choked on his beer, and Fischer threw his head back laughing. Wren just shook her head. "You're going to go with that?"

I stuttered, then gestured vaguely into space. What the hell was I supposed to say. Sin-O-Vision was fucking *accurate*. One of the Seven Cardinal sins, in a human incarnation, I was able to see people's sins on their skin.

They had started to explain all this to me the night before, but I was too strung out on endorphins. Somehow Wren knew I'd only gotten part of what they told me, but decided it was enough to keep me working, to get most of the story out of Barry and the bitch whose name wasn't really Cora.

But this…what they had just dished up? Blew my damn mind. Demons? Elysian Fields? Tartarus? Angels? Lilith! Friggin' Lilith, Adam's first wife from Jewish lore, was a police detective in the Philadelphia Police Department.

But Lilith wasn't the Lilith that the stories talked about. She was the wife of… Wren's twin brother.

Couldn't say it yet. Wasn't going to say it.

Everything was tumbling around in my head. I ran my hands up the sides of my face and stopped at my temples, applying a little pressure. "Baby Jeebus, what in the name of farm animals is going on?"

Fischer laughed. "You were definitely a good father, because that's not would I have said there."

I put it more succinctly with my middle finger.

"There you go."

"Maybe he'll rub off on us since we don't actually want to teach the twins how to swear like sailors on shore leave," Wren said.

"You just want him to rub off on you," Fischer whispered.

I jerked my head up and watched Wren go bright red. Fischer smirked and grabbed her hand. He tossed a look at me and somehow, I knew he wanted me to grab their hands as well.

Mine, and Lincoln's, met in the middle and we covered over their joined hands.

…the warmth of the fires were even present this deep into the castle, supplemented by the small fire in the hearth of the room. There was no need for blankets, or clothing of any sort.

The four of them were wrapped around each other in a tangle of limbs, panting with a fine sheen of sweat glowing in the low fire light. There were

other people in the castle, but beyond the doors of the room. The door on the far wall led to everyone else. The door next to the fireplace led to another room, more beds, more people—but those were familiar and welcome, and sound asleep.

Fischer rose from the pile of bodies and kissed Wren's forehead. "You do wear us out, love."

"You love to be worn such, Aergian."

He stretched and moved from the bed. "As such, I have duties, my love. I leave you in excellent, if exhausted, company."

Bastian rolled and grinned at Fischer. "She's safe with us, Lord Aergian. Even if we are half awake."

"No one will touch her," Lincoln grumbled and adjusted himself. "Not while we draw breath."

"And great snores," Wren teased.

"Such brave and alert companions, my lady." Fischer laughed. He bent and kissed her quickly on the lips. "To your keeping, sa imitti*."*

"By your leave, asaredu*." Lincoln nodded, and his attention notched up a hundred fold, even though he was still face down naked in the bed.*

The door closed a moment later and Wren rolled over to find Lincoln and Bastian kissing and fondling each other.

"You know Aergian doesn't care if you tangle your male bits with each other," she said.

"It feels disrespectful to do that," Bastian hissed as Lincoln licked his way down his body. "Especially when the three of us can enjoy you."

Wren shook her head, then leaned on her side and watched the two men as they kissed each other with passion. She smiled, and didn't interrupt. She found her own breast and teased her nipple watching them.

They were all hers, and they would all defend her, but that didn't stop a little, or a lot, of bed play…

Lincoln launched himself out of his chair and grabbed me by my shirt, jerking me to him. He covered my mouth with his, and plundered me with his tongue.

Fuck, it felt amazing to kiss him.

Wren

"Shit, that's hot," I murmured into Fischer's ear. "You sure you don't want a piece of that?"

"Pass," he said. "I'll admit that's hot, and I don't even mind the swords crossing but getting in the middle of a dickwich? Nah. Not my thing." He cocked his head and looked at them. "But that is fucking hot."

I looked at him. "Do you mind if I get in the middle of this dickwich?"

"Wren, baby, we're all yours all the time. But don't think I'm missing out on this." He leaned in close. "And don't think I'm not going to invite myself in."

I raised an eyebrow. "Mm. So Lust?"

He nodded slowly. "Oh, totally Lust. I'm feeling it over here."

Glancing across the table where Lincoln and Bastian were wrestling with each other for dominance in the kiss, I grinned and called to them, "Gentlemen. There are beds upstairs."

Lincoln pulled back. "She's right. There's a king."

"I know," Bastian said.

"Go," I said. "Upstairs. No clothes in the bed."

A moment later, the two of them were gone, racing up the stairs. Fischer chuckled and grabbed my hand. We followed up the stairs at a more leisurely pace, and I could hear the two of them basically wrestling in the bedroom.

"You're collecting quite the harem, little bird."

"I never imagined I'd be this person…three men in my bed? I never imagined." I giggled. "But I hoped."

Fischer laughed, pulled me to a stop, and kissed me hard. He cupped my cheek with his hand. "Seems appropriate that Lust would be here. I don't know what the big picture is, but you've got more sins to find. I don't think that any of us intended this to happen, ever, but I also don't think that any of us object to it. I don't." He leaned in close. "You're mine to protect, and we're yours to keep balanced."

"Sounds like a plan," I said, and kissed him hard. "Last one naked has to do the dishes."

I ran up the stairs with him laughing behind me. I stripped out of my clothes as I went, leaving a trail.

"I don't know why you're running," Fischer called. "Neither of them are naked!"

I burst into the room and he was right. Neither Bastian nor Lincoln were naked. I pulled up short though at the insanely erotic activity that was going on at the end of our bed.

Bastian had shoved Lincoln over the end of the bed, Lincoln's pants and boxers around his ankles, and Bastian's face shoved between the globes of his ass. Linc was swearing and squirming.

"I owe you," Bastian growled, "and I always pay my debts."

Climbing onto the bed in what remained of my own clothes—panties and bra—I spread out across the mattress and leaned in to kiss Lincoln. "Let him, Linc. You've been without a man's mouth on you for years. And I know you like it."

Lincoln breathed out, letting a long *hngggg* out of the center of his chest. "He shouldn't be this good at rimming me. He's never been with a man before."

I kissed him slow and deep. "As if women don't enjoy that? He's only doing what he would like to have done. Enjoy."

He wrapped his hand around mine. "He's too good. I'm going to die."

"What a wonderful way to go. Rimmed to death by Lust. I'll put it on your tombstone."

Bastian lifted his head from behind Lincoln to smirk at me. "I've been hiding all of this away for years. I've got time to make up for, and this ass here is going to help me do that."

"God, yes, please shut up and get back to it," Lincoln growled.

I leaned forward again and kissed Linc as Fischer walked in, his arms full of clothes. He draped them all neatly on the chair and grinned as he sank down on the bed next to me. He was in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs.

"This is also a very hot scene to walk into," he whispered, somehow managing to steal the kiss away from Lincoln. "I can taste him on your lips, little bird."

"Mm, I taste Bastian," I said.

Fischer's finger plucked at the back of my bra, unhooking it slowly. "Does this all make you happy, Wren? That the three of us are here, for you? Because of you?"

"You're here because I love you," I whispered. "Lincoln is here because I love him. And Bastian is here because both Lincoln and I are falling for him. I know this isn't normal, but I don't think any of us were meant to be normal."

"I think you're right," Lincoln said, with a huff and gasp. "Holy shit, this is…"

Bastian stood from behind Lincoln, wiping his mouth. "Jesus, I didn't think I'd enjoy that as much as I am."

"*You* didn't?" Lincoln asked, mostly boneless.

Bastian helped Lincoln on to the bed fully. It wasn't really a lift or a carry, it was more like a pour. Linc lay there, blissed and hard as a rock. Bastian's eyes twinkled and before we knew it, he had Lincoln's cock deep in his throat.

"Fuck," Lincoln yelled, arching. "Warn a gu—ahhh!"

Fischer's hand trailed up and down my back as we watched Bastian take his fill of Lincoln. I reached back and felt his excitement straining against his briefs. Smiling, I stroked him slowly. "I want this, Fischer…but I think that…"

"Bastian needs you first," he said. "No matter how much he wants to drive that dick into Lincoln."

Fischer rolled me over, and plucked the unhooked bra off, neatly folding it on the nightstand. He guided me up the bed, to nestle me into the pillows, pressing open mouthed kisses to my nipples.

"Bastian," Lincoln hissed. "You have to stop. Stop. Wren wants you. Wren always comes first when it comes to what we do in bed."

What? Why would he think that? I did want Bastian but…

Fischer rested his head on my breast. "Always Wren first, Bastian. She's our balance. Our key to sanity. What she wants, she gets. What she needs, we provide. When she demands, we submit. And for that, she is ours, completely and wholly. For that she helps us learn who we are, keeps us in check." He lifted his head and after a quick glance at Lincoln, spoke again, "There is no line between good and evil. Only the balance that Temperance helps us find."

Bastian leaned on Lincoln's hip, staring at Fischer. The quiet was not uncomfortable, but he broke it a moment later. "You killed Woodall. And Green."

Fischer nodded, just once.

Leaning up on his elbows, Lincoln also nodded. "No legal system would have been able to convict them since they had judges and politicians in their pockets. And nothing would have stopped them."

He glanced between the three of us. "I want Barry. His ass is mine."

"I hope you mean that in a murderous way because I was kind of hoping that this ass," Lincoln pointed to his backside, "would be yours."

Bastian wrapped a hand around Lincoln's erection and stroked it slowly. "I plan on making it mine," he said. "But our woman needs me right now. And you heard the alpha. What she wants, she gets."

"Ooh goodie," Lincoln said, rolling over. "I got breast duty." He crawled up to lay on the other side of me, joining Fischer in his feast.

The jolt of sexual desire had me arching off the bed, feet planted, and hips up.

Slowly and deliberately, Bastian crawled onto the bed, and then up toward me, spreading my legs wide to accommodate him. But he didn't just slide himself inside me.

He pushed Lincoln and Fischer to the side, away from me for a moment. He hovered above me, and stared at my lips, studying my eyes, my nose, my cheeks, and finally leaned down. "I don't understand everything going on right now, Wren, but I do know that I'm

meant to be here with you and these two. Part of me will always belong to Victoria and my children, but just a part. The rest of me from now on is yours."

He kissed me. Long and deep and greedy, he *felt* like Lust personified in that kiss. He drew out every iota of want I'd had for him—from the first day I laid eyes on him in class so many years ago. He stoked it and built it. His lips, sweet and demanding, landed on the column of my throat and he kissed, licked, sucked, and nibbled his way down to my stomach.

As soon as he was past the peaks of my breasts, Fischer and Lincoln invited themselves back and latched on like two hungry octopodes—and I swear they had just as many hands, stroking and grabbing every part of me.

One of each of their hands reached under my thighs, and pulled me wide for Bastian. He grabbed his erection and slipped himself up and down my sex, spreading his precum and my silk all over, taking the sensation of skin on skin to new heights.

"Christ, please…" I managed to squeak out. "Please, Bastian."

He dipped down and lined himself up with me, and slowly, the magnificent cock I had seen Lincoln working with enthusiasm slid deep inside.

A shock rolled through me. It was familiar and soothing and something deep inside unfurled, sending threads of a heated, thick power through the four of us. I could feel the three of them, their lives, their hearts, their minds, twisting around mine—and I knew they could feel each other through me.

"Move," I breathed. "Sebastian, *move*. Fuck me."

He did.

…Wren writhed on the bed between them. Naked and sweating. It was Fischer who slowly slid himself in and out of her willing pussy, drawing out sounds of delight that were hard pressed to get out between the other moans she was releasing.

Lincoln's mouth was firmly fixed on one breast while Bastian's was on the other. They both feasted on her, licking and sucking, planting open mouthed kisses on her nipples and skin.

A moment later, Lincoln and Bastian met between her breasts and fused their mouths together, kissing and licking while their fingers found her nipples and her clit. She couldn't tell who's hand was where and moreover—didn't care…

"Holy shit," Bastian and Fischer whispered at the same time, while Lincoln turned and grabbed his own erection in response to the vision.

But it had sent all of us up into the stratosphere, and we were all close to coming. I grabbed Fischer's hip and guided him so his erection was close to my lips. Lincoln did the same, but instead of my mouth, he reached up and threaded his hands through Bastian's hair and pulled him down.

As Bastian sank down on Lincoln again, Lincoln's fingers found my clit and my lips found the crown of Fischer's cock. We were just a giant tangle of limbs, a tornado of genitalia, and we didn't care.

Everything felt good, right.

Fischer was panting, and I knew he was going to come soon. I reached up cupped his balls, rolling them softly.

"Make her scream, Bastian," Lincoln huffed, trying not to explode that very moment.

It didn't work for long. I felt Lincoln thrust up into Bastian's mouth. I could feel Bastian swallowing everything Lincoln offered, and a moment later, thrust himself hard into me. Unrestrained, his libido lit up like a spotlight, his three hard thrusts into my pussy had him spilling his cum deep. And the climax he and Lincoln tore out of me sent Fischer over the edge—his cock spilling into my mouth. Not neatly, because he very much succeeded in making me scream.

I swallowed, and swallowed again, but Bastian leaned down and helped me. "Shit," Fischer breathed, watching Bastian kiss me and lick his climax off my lips.

Lincoln was there again, and he and Bastian kissed. I let out a long, low moan watching them, then flicked my eyes to Fischer.

"Lust?"

"So much fucking Lust."

Bastian laid his head between my breast. "Can we just go with *so much fucking*?"

Lincoln raised his hand. "Second!"

Fischer laughed. "Motion carries."

Sebastian

The compound Lily gave us the address to was down on the coast of Delaware. She told us to head out because she had to deal with the FBI since this was clearly interstate.

We'd spent another two hours on that bed in all kinds of combinations. I did get to own Lincoln's ass after, and I had really enjoyed it. What made it better was Wren and Fischer watching from the chair as she rode him.

The amount of sexual pheromones in that townhouse was overwhelming. I didn't know if I'd ever be able to look at that bed again without springing a hard-on.

Lily's call had brought us all back down to Earth, and had us sprinting to get our asses washed and dried and on the way.

Before we split up, Wren pulled out an amazing black and gray blade that was—literally—otherworldly. *Anjir*. She said that her brother-in-law Hephaestus had forged it in Hades.

My mouth sort of dropped open on that one.

Fischer pushed it closed and pointed to the SUV we were going to be driving in as Lincoln hopped in his own new Audi crossover down the street.

Miriam had decided that with Lily and two of my men going with me, she would stay behind with Laxmi and Lincoln.

And now, we were parked down the street from the compound, trusting that the fuckers who lived on it didn't take good stock of their neighbors.

"This place is ridiculous," Fischer mumbled. "There's a goddamn formal garden over there. See it?"

Wren and I looked over and in the moonlight, could make out the shapes of topiary bushes, fountains, raised beds, and formal walks. There were a few benches and some perfectly trimmed trees.

"Are you kidding me?" Wren grumbled. "These pig-fuckers have a formal garden like they're the kings of France?"

"Think they shit in the halls too?" I asked.

Fischer and Wren looked at me. I shrugged. "What? There were a few of the courtiers in the French court who just kind of did what they wanted where they happened to be standing."

Fischer turned his lip up. "That's disgusting."

"Exactly," I said.

"Dominance and humiliation," Wren murmured.

"Also on the nose." I nodded. "They did it because they had more power, they shirked societal standards and just shit where they wanted. And because they could, they did. And because they did, they had people to clean it up for them."

"No wonder the monarchy collapsed," Fischer said. "People going around just shitting where they pleased."

"No different from the pig-fuckers who kidnap and train children to be sex slaves," I said.

Fischer pointed to the compound a hundred yards down the street. "Our own personal Versailles."

I grinned. "Then we'll just play the part of Madame Guillotine, *mais oui*?"

A vehicle crunched up on the road behind us, lights off. If it hadn't been for the tires on gravel, we never would have heard it. The passenger side opened and Lily climbed out, walking over to us, and climbing in next to me in the SUV, swinging a bag in with her and closed the door quietly.

"I love Teslas. They're so fucking quiet. It's like having a panther in the jungle in the dark

"Come alone?" Wren asked.

"The feds are supposed to be half an hour behind me," she said. "I told them I would be ahead of them. They were coming from DC, and the roads aren't straight out here."

Hoisting the bag onto her lap, she unzipped it. "I also made a few quick stops." She pulled a mid-length sword out. "Your blade, m'lord."

Wren gasped when she held it out to Fischer. He grasped it, but Wren looked worried. "What about Bastian?"

"Do you doubt me?" She reached in and pulled out another blade. A little shorter than hers, and far simpler, Lily hefted one at me. "Compliments of my big brother."

I wrapped my hand around the hilt and a shock rolled through me. The sword had been made for me—ages ago. This was not a new sword.

Glancing over at Lily, I paused. "Wait. Your big brother? You mean…"

"Heph is a good guy," she said. "Very sweet. Loves to work with his hands. And that usually means forging things in the fires of Hell. Including the swords he made for the lot of you."

"How old is this sword?" Fischer asked.

"Mmm. Not allowed to say," she answered.

"Which means, really really old," Wren said. "Mine's probably older and I don't want to know, but I'm going to just be glad we have these."

"I have something else for you," Lily said, opening the bag again. She pulled out a gun in a shoulder holster and offered it to Wren. "That's yours. There's a full mag, and I have two more in here."

"Sweet, it's my Glock!" Wren immediately slipped it over her shoulders.

I stared at her. "You know how to use that?"

"I have concealed carry in New Jersey and PA," she said. "I'm assuming that either the FBI said it was okay or we're not letting them know I'm packing heat."

"We're going to keep it on the down low," Lily said. "Because…" She reached into the bag and pulled out two more guns and shoulder holsters. "You're all carrying tonight."

I pursed my lips, while Fischer took the gun and strapped it on. Lily lifted an eyebrow.

"Something wrong? You a conscientious objector?"

"Well…" I rubbed my neck. "Do you have a rifle and scope perchance? I do better with those."

"Oh really?" she asked. "As a matter of fact, I have my sniper kit in the trunk."

"That's more my speed," I answered.

She stared at me. "You're serious?"

"Four years in the Marines. Special forces." I grinned. "How do you think a poor boy like me was able to afford school? It wasn't through loans."

"Well, I'll be right back with your new best friend," Lily popped the door open and slipped out of the SUV.

"You're really a sniper?" Fischer asked.

"Yup," I nodded. "I put my time in, took out a few baddies along the way, and walked away. They wanted me for longer, but I was done. I wanted out. I wanted to be a doctor, so I split and used the GI Bill."

"Smart," Fischer said.

Wren was looking at something in the rearview on her side, glancing back once in a while. "I don't like that," she stated. "Something's not right here."

"What?" Fischer asked, and looked in his rearview. "Oh, shit." His voice dropped to very quiet. "There's someone coming up on the back door on the driver's side. Dressed in all black."

I dipped down and snagged the other gun that Lily had wanted to give me. I wasn't good with handguns. They were too imprecise for me, but at close range, it didn't matter. I looked at the one in my hand and pulled out the magazine. "Twenty-two? This is whimpy."

Fischer yanked his out and passed it back. "I don't know what I'm doing with the caliber. Is that better?"

"Three-eighty. Yup." I passed him the small caliber in my hand. "You'll do just fine with that. Now tell me when this bastard is lined up with that back door."

"Just about there," Fischer answered, staring at the mirror.

"Cover your ears," I said.

There two more silent seconds passed. "Now," Fischer said.

I pumped three rounds out of the gun, into and through the door of the SUV.

"He's down!" Fischer slammed the door open as Wren and I spun out of the vehicle on the passenger side. She shot the other guy sneaking up right in the knee, felling him with a yelp. He smashed his head on the ground and was out cold.

"Ooh, you got some bad ass in you," I offered quietly with a smile.

"More than a little," she answered, holstering her gun. She pulled out the sword, and held it down and across her body.

All three of us popped around the trunk of the Tesla to find two men desperately trying to wrestle Lily into the trunk. She was kicking and punching and flailing as much as she could—so much so they couldn't even get her wrists in zipties.

"Hands!" I snapped, holding the gun out for them to see. "Up now! Let's go!"

They let go of Lily, but the one nearest to us whipped out his own pistol and started to take aim at me and Wren.

She sliced the sword up and out and a scream echoed down the street.

His gun *and his hand* hit the pavement.

Fischer yanked the man's belt off him and quickly made a rough tourniquet just above his elbow. The man stared at the spot where his hand used to be and after a few whimpers, passed clear out.

The other guy was staring at his buddy, and thrust his hands in the air. "I don't get paid to lose hands. Fuck that."

Fischer motioned Lily off the lip of the trunk and Wren motioned for the other guy to climb in. I leaned on the trunk and looked down at him once he was settled in.

"What were you doing here?"

"I'm just here to make sure the road only has residents on it after midnight. We're supposed to bring anyone else to the guard house and let Ms. Juniata know they're here."

"Is Juniata here?"

"Got here about two hours ago, with cargo."

"*Cargo*?" Wren hissed.

"Vans. Two of them. Blacked out windows. I have no idea what was in them," he said. "I'm a mercenary. I work for money. I don't believe in the causes, just the cash."

"You," Lily said, grabbing the trunk, "need a better system for vetting your clients. Those vans? Hold trafficked children."

She slammed the trunk closed as a disbelieving gasp and scream of "*What*?" filled the air. "I didn't know. I had no idea. Fuck. Let me out and I'll leave. I'll do a lot of dirty shit, but I don't do sex trafficking!"

Lily knocked on the metal. "Then stay put."

"My guess is they already know we're here," I said. "What are we going to do? We have to get in there."

Lily tossed the rifle at me and I caught it. "We're going to walk the fuck in. I'm going to let my agent know we're in a position that it's fight or lose the kids." She pursed her lips, then raised her hand. "I'm not really supposed to show you this, but these are children and I'll be forgiven for protecting innocents."

Her eyes went flame red and seemed almost to burn from within Her hand was slowly engulfed in a low, cool red flame.

"I have more than guns in my arsenal."

Wren gasped, "Is that…hellfire?"

Lily nodded and turned her hand palm up. She nodded once at Wren, who slowly reached for her with her bad hand. Fischer and I watched as her hand dipped into the flames without reaction.

Wren touched her fingers to Lily's palm. The fire crawled up her fingers onto the back of her hand and slowly wrapped around it. Once she pulled her hand away, the hellfire glimmered over her skin.

"Holy shit," Fischer breathed.

"Can you feel it?" Lily asked.

"Yes…" Wren turned her hand in the air, watching the cool flames on her skin. "It's familiar. Comfortable. It would like to stay… Goddamn, it's intelligent."

"Not really," Lily said. "It clings to things it knows won't extinguish it. Like a lichen grows on rocks that won't kill it. Instinct."

"Will it stay?"

Lily shrugged. "I don't know I don't have time to teach you to call it. But you know what it feels like now, and if you feel that, you need to get gone. Get me?"

"You're going to burn the compound," I mumbled, watching the fire.

“This hellfire is small. Friendly. Almost harmless. But you know what it feels like now. When we have the kids out, I’m going pull out the Tartarian. The stuff that can’t be put out with Earthly means. The kind that consumes everything before returning to Hell. Hellfire will burn even the Created. So, when you sense that small friendly fire dancing on your fingers right now, I want you to get the fuck out.”

Wren

The fire danced on my skin, unhappy, displeased with my broken and destroyed hand. It didn't hurt—it was oddly gentle and soothing. It was just not good with me, *especially me*, have a deformed and not completely usable hand.

The three of them turned and looked down the road at the compound. It was strange, but we all seemed to know that Ben was there. With a crap ton of other kids they wanted to put in the Pipeline.

Just as I was about to get Lily's attention to take the fire back, it flickered and flared and suddenly inverted. It was burning down into my skin instead of out.

But there was no pain. There was a tickle, a prick that traveled through my muscles, through my nerves and up into my wrist.

Then, there was a lightning bolt that shot through my arm and up into my brain. I stiffened and gasped—it hadn't hurt, but it had shocked me and caught me off guard.

Lily, Fischer, and Bastian spun back to me.

I held my hand up, and Lily rushed forward. I was pretty sure that she was trying to take the flame back, so I held my other hand out to stop her.

"No, wait," I managed.

The flames licked in my veins as well as my nerves. I could feel them in my muscles and my bones, all sending signals to my brain and back. There were pin pricks all up and down my arms, in my brain, in my fingers.

A warm sensation filled me, and then the fire, pleased, reverted to its original flickering position and merrily extinguished itself.

Staring at my hand, I couldn't think for what I saw there. Fischer grabbed my wrist and lowered my arm, studying the skin.

"Bend it, little bird. Make a fist."

I could feel my lips trembling in fear. I hadn't been able to make a fist with my left hand since I was sixteen. Since I'd felt that voltage fly through me and wreck the nerves. Closing my eyes, I remembered how to make a fist, and curled my fingers closed.

Fischer exhaled. "Oh, my God…"

I snapped my eyes open.

My hand was in a tight fist. My thumb had curled around and held my fingers fast. I pulled the fist even tighter and watch my knuckles go white. I unfurled the fingers and looked at the tiny crescents in my palm where my nails had dug in.

I could feel those. They were a fading pain.

Lily ran her fingers over my palm, then turned my hand over and traced lines on it. "Feel that?"

"Yes…"

"It healed you," she whispered. "Fucking shit, Wren, if I had known, I would have done that…"

Holding a finger to her lips, I shook my head. "No. You wouldn't have. You couldn't have. There's a veil we're lifting and everything has to be done in sequence. This was meant to happen now and you know what? Fucking hell, I have my hand back."

Flexing and stretching my fingers a few more times, it felt a little sore, a little unused, a tad weak—nothing I couldn't deal with after having nothing but pain in the movement for sixteen years.

"You're waking," Lily whispered with a smile.

I didn't know what she meant, but her tone made me smile too.

THE PLACE WAS EMPTY.

There was no furniture, no rugs, no lamps, no art. Even the front door had been conspicuously unlocked.

There were a few curtains on the windows, but those all faced the front. It was a complete contradiction to what the perfectly manicured grounds led us to believe.

"Where are they?" Fischer asked, his voice almost a crack of thunder in the hall even though he'd kept it quiet.

"Don't know," Lily said.

"Are we sure that it was a good idea to leave Bastian out there?" I asked.

"He's a sniper. Anyone who walks out the front gate is dead," Lily said. She looked around the hall and then back at me. "You pick really good companions, little star."

"Why thank you," Fischer preened.

I elbowed him unable to keep the smirk off my face, but we kept walking forward into the house.

"We need some kind of plan here. Some idea of where to go and what to look for," Fisher said.

"If they had cargo, they have to offload the cargo," I said. "My bet is that they don't have an attached garage and have to figure something out so people don't see them."

"Under cover," Fischer said.

Lily lifted an eyebrow. "Under *ground* We need to find out how to get down."

Fischer peered out the window. "Aren't we too close to the water to have a basement on a place like this?" He glanced at me. "If you want another guy in your harem, could you make him an architect?"

Lily burst out laughing and slapped a hand over her mouth when she realized she had.

I shook my head. "Yeah, I'll get right on that."

Chuckling quietly, Lily headed for the stairs we'd passed on the way in. "Come on, it's almost always a center column of stairs."

The entrance to the basement wasn't in the hall, but circling around to the kitchen just behind it, we found a door. Lily motioned

me to stand behind it and open it when she nodded. Taking her position, I yanked the door back, and she cleared the stairwell.

The light was already on.

The stink of filthy human hit all of us like a freight train. I put a hand over my mouth, Fischer gagged, and Lily managed to just clear her throat.

"What is that?" Fischer hissed.

"Unwashed bodies and excrement. And we'll be lucky if that's all it is." Lily started down the stairs.

We followed, pressing against the wall as she was. Neither Fischer nor I were trained for this sort of thing, but we could follow her lead and her body language. She leaned out from behind the wall to look into the room beyond and—

And I could feel a trace of magic.

Fischer turned a worried eye to me when I jerked ever so slightly. I shook my head and went back to watching Lily.

She was using magic to keep herself from being seen as she ducked out from behind the wall to assess the room.

I had never *felt* magic before. I'd felt tingles and danger signs, but I'd had those all my life. This was something completely different and…

I was pretty sure I could manage it as well.

Lily snapped her head back around and shook it. "No!" she whispered furiously. "Not until you have some training. Just…let me handle it."

Nodding, I leaned back. Hellfire, healing, and now magic. This was not what I was expecting.

Lily stepped out of the stairwell and motioned us to follow. We did, walking as softly as possible. The smell was even worse, and we started to hear whimpering, crying, and noises from activity.

Walls fell away just a few feet later and what we had thought was the back wall of the room was nothing but a decoy. There was a cleverly disguised hallway that went exactly nowhere and showed us what was really down here.

Cages. Rows of cages.

Corrugated metal lined all of them, hiding the children from view and from each other. The whimper of frightened children floated in the air. The stench of waste, the smell of unwashed bodies, the stink of terror all curled around us.

“Lily, this isn’t just about Ben anymore,” Fischer whispered.

“I know We need to find one of those vans and get those kids in it.”

There was the stomp of boots and the sound of a metal door being rolled in the space and it sent Lily, Fischer, and I scrambling.

“Where the fuck is the truck?”

The voice was painfully familiar. I’d heard it somewhere before, but I just couldn’t place it. It wasn’t Barry or Cora, so it had to be one of the others. Sansom?

“They’re late.” That was Barry’s voice. “I don’t know why and don’t ask me to call again.”

“Why are we moving all the goods again?” Cora this time. “No one is going to put two and two together. We can keep our little home away from home off the radar.”

“Not when you fucking go around announcing where we live,” Barry snapped. There was a hard *thunk*, and strangled sound. “I told you not to say anything, as little as possible. Now he knows, and I’m pretty sure that he’s going to share that information with the people we don’t want here.”

“So, this is precautionary?” The familiar voice.

“Just like you’d move stocks, we need to move our investments,” Barry said. “No thanks to the mouth over here. We have to move to the secondary storage and we have to clean the house.”

“Clean the house?” said the familiar voice, “or *clean* the house.”

“Insurance money,” he said.

God, these people were horrible.

“Where are the lookouts?” Sansom asked. “They were supposed be back. It was just one car.”

“How long have they been out there?” Cora’s voice was a bit breathless. It sounded like she’d been choked..

“It wasn’t one car,” Barry said. “Another rolled up behind it. That’s why we sent them.”

There was a pause. “A second?”

“Came up on the cameras when they drove down the road,” Barry said.

“Show me!” Sansom snapped “Show me!”

Two sets of shoes walked smartly past where we were hiding and headed to the right. I heard a heavy door open and slam.

"Can we get the other two?" Fischer asked, barely breathing the words.

Lily looked between the two of us, and instead of answering, she pulled out her gun and nodded. I pulled out my own gun and Fischer grabbed the one he was using. She walked us along the wall over to where the voices were coming from. We were all as quiet as we could be, and I was glad I had worn sneakers.

We ducked below the line of the corrugated metal walls and moved slowly. When we peeked up over the walls, we could see Cora and mystery man leaning against a car looking out of the garage door.

Lily was able to sneak up directly behind Cora, and cocked the gun against her head.

"Move, and you're dead," she said quietly.

I had my gun up and pointed at the man, who turned to look at us.

Fischer and I gasped at the same time.

"Gutiérrez?" Fischer hissed, pointing his own gun at the man. "What the fuck?"

Grabbing the cuffs off Lily's belt, I snapped them around Gutiérrez's wrists. As soon as I was done, Lily pulled out a ziptie and wrapped it around Cora's wrists, and held the gun on her again.

I stared at the man I knew as a caring, kind doctor who ran the Neurology Ward at CHoP, standing in the middle of a children's prison, preparing to ship them out as sex slaves.

I punched him right in the nose.

"Whoa!" Fischer pulled me back.

"This *fuck* has the goddamn balls to be a children's advocate!" I raised the gun and held it at his head. "Talk fast, Pablo. Convince me you're not really hear to move children into the Pipeline."

He just stared at me.

"Fuck," Fischer whispered.

"I can't believe this," Lily said. "You of all the damn people on Earth, Gutiérrez. Of all the people on this planet, you are trafficking children. What the hell is wrong with you?"

He still said nothing.

"Nasty motherfucker," Fischer growled. "Talk."

Cora chuckled. "You really think we're going to say anything to you without a lawyer? Or before Miranda? Or before you two are

booked for breaking and entering, and imitating a police officer?"

"Where did I claim I was a police officer?" Fischer asked.

"You come walking in here with a gun—"

I cocked the gun and held it at her head. "Wanna see my concealed carry?"

There was the cock of a gun at my ear and the cold metal of gun on my skull. "I just want to see your brains all over her shirt."

I didn't hesitate. I manifested the sword in my hand and stabbed back and up, sliding into his guts just above his dick and up and out his back somewhere around his kidneys. Or that's what I hoped anyway.

When I turned, Sansom was staring at me, wide eyed and pale. His blood ran out and down onto the blade of the sword, but never dripped off the handle of it, and it never hit the ground.

"What the fuck!" Cora and Barry screamed.

I kind of want to scream that, too.

Barry recovered though and ran. Before any of us could stop him, he was gone out the garage door.

Lily snapped at us, "Hey! Let's go! Get this van open! Get the kids. Get your sword out of his guts and get going!"

Pulling the sword down and out, several bits of innards followed me, and Sansom choked and fell. I dropped next to him, and grabbed his jaw. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Just a man making millions, and living the high life."

I whipped my phone out and took his picture, sending it to Lincoln. I waited as he coughed and sputtered, his blood pumping out through the main renal vein. Just a second later it dinged with Lincoln's answer, and I smirked.

"Renold Polanski, DDM," I grinned. "Please to meet you. Enjoy the fires of Hell." Standing, I started to walk away.

He grabbed my ankle. "You can't let me die. That's against your moral code. You need to save me!"

Cocking my head, I considered him. Something Fischer had said earlier echoed in my mind. *There is no line between good and evil*. I knew that killing him, which was what I had basically done, was wrong. But what he had done—stealing, raping, and selling children—was just as wrong. If not more, because of the stolen innocence.

"I can't save you. Further, I won't save you. I could go through the chain of events that leads to that, but it's not worth it. Just die.

We'll save the kids."

He coughed and tried to say something. I wasn't interested in hearing it. I pulled my leg away from his grip and stared down at the sword.

The blade was clean.

Handy.

I held it at his neck this time. "Where is Ben?"

"Like I'm going to tell you shit. He's going to the grave with me."

"Where is Ben? Tell me."

"Fuck off."

"Polanski, you'd better tell her, or things are going to be really, really bad for you," Lily said.

"Fuck off, both of you," he snapped.

Fischer was starting the van, and Lily had both Cora and Gutierrez standing back to back at the end of her gun.

"Lily?"

"Help me tie them up and not to kill them," she said. "They need to be tied up and left here. I'll get it out of him in a moment."

I nodded and grabbed a length rope from the wall above the two of them. I wrapped the rope around them and their hands and once more around them and made sure the knots were far out of their reach.

Fischer pulled the back door open, and nodded at the cages. "I'll get those. You find out where Ben is and we'll get him."

Lily walked over to the now clearly pale and dying man who was in charge of this mess. She knelt and grabbed his collar. "Where's Ben?"

"I won't tell you shit," he gasped.

"Oh, I think you will," she said.

"Save my life, save me, and I'll tell you."

Lily snickered. "You overestimate my give a damn, Renold. You really do." She reached behind her and pulled out a small blade.

I knew it was anjir, even before I got a good look at it. She held it again his throat, nicking the skin at his collar. "You're dead, Renold. There's nothing I can do to stop that. Whether it was by the blade or the fire later, you were dead."

She leaned in closer and I knelt down next to him avoiding the blood that was pooling.

"Save my life," he breathed, air becoming harder to suck in. "I'll pay you."

"The only thing that remains is how severe your punishment in Hell will be," Lily said. "Tell me where Ben is. Tell me where you keep the children. Tell me everything you know about the Pipeline and I'll convince my husband to judge you a little less harshly."

"Your husband." He snorted.

The small blade suddenly had Hellfire racing around the edge. I could see her eyes go black and shine with a bright flame that was the same as that on the blade. "Tell me what you know. Tell me where Ben is."

"What the fuck are you…" He coughed and spit blood.

"I am Hades. I am damnation, and Hell. And I am the only one who stands between eternal damnation and merely a sentence in the pits, of a few centuries. Tell me what I want to know."

She was *terrifying*, with Hell shining in her eyes. She had a hot feeling about her that made the blood run absolutely cold, and she pressed the flaming blade a little deeper into his skin.

"Nothing. I'll tell you nothing." He stared at the ceiling above us, fixed on nothing. "I'll die then."

Lily drew a line down his chest with the blade, and he shrieked—unlike I had ever heard before. "Do you think I'm kidding? Do you think that I'm making idle threats about your soul and damnation?"

"What the hell are you doing?" he gasped.

"You're going to tell me where the children were being taken. You'll tell me where you hide them, and you'll tell me where Ben Sheehan is. Or I will reach into your corpse and wring it from your dying brain and send your soul to the deepest pit I know." She pressed the tip against his collar again with the same screaming result. "And I know them all."

He was panting, and shook his head again. "No."

"You're just going to anyway."

"No."

The tip scraped up this time, and Renold screamed at the top of his lungs.

"This is only a taste of what you'll feel in Hell," Lily said over the screaming. "Just a tiny little taste."

He let out a hissing breath and didn't pull another in. With a frown, Lily yanked him up and growled, "You're not getting away

from me."

I wasn't sure what she was doing, but she reached down into his soul with some invisible grip that I could feel through this new magical link. She slid her hand down deep into him and grabbed his soul, jerking it back into his body.

"I told you," she hissed. "Talk!"

"Whhhhat hhhhave you ddddonnnne?" His voice echoed like someone had remixed it with reverb.

"I have your soul. I want your knowledge. Tell me where the children are, or so help me, it's the pit for eternity—and this is nothing compared to that."

"Nnno."

I laid my hand over hers and pushed what magic I could feel into her, and the scream from the dead man ripped through the room. "Tell us where they are!"

I could feel him struggling against the pain to keep his secrets. We needed his information—there was no way Lily could keep this up, holding his soul. I closed my eyes so I could help her more.

But instead, I could *see*.

Everything in vivid color. Whatever I wanted to know about something, I could see it there.

Pointing that at Lily, I could see her running blindingly white hot, and the magic, red and black, swirled through her and down into Renold.

He was pure, ultrablack. There was no light in him. None. The magic that Lily was using to hold him there was tainted immediately upon touching him. She had a bright red, nearly white shield on the hilt of the knife, holding it back.

I opened my eyes and the ability to *see* was still there, superimposed over reality. I held up my other hand and stared at it.

Blue. Shocking bright blue white trickled through my fingers. My own magic. My own nature? I glanced down where my hand was on Lily's and I could see her red grabbing and using it to feed her own.

Holding my index finger out, I reached for Renold's temple and touched him there gently. The violence in his black void tried desperately to push me away but it was like a soft breeze against the blue magic.

"Holy shit," Lily whispered. She glanced at me. "Do it, Wren. Do exactly what you're thinking. Hurry. I can't hold him."

She did know me well. I trickled the magic into his skin, into his brain. I could, on some level, hear him screaming against me but I didn't pay it much attention. Instead, I led the magic into him and fed the spaces in his mind with the blue white. His neurons fired, again and again, and the information was all there.

The magic flowed where I wanted it to, and I found the speech center of the brain. Like a lightning bolt, I jolted him—I could feel everything of his physical body dying as I did.

"Tred Avon River. Waterview. Woodland. Three seven five five one. Waterview. Woodland. Tred Avon River. *NO*!!"

His brain seized, but I didn't let go. He needed to tell us where Ben was. He thrashed on the floor, spreading his blood everywhere, and tried to kick me and Lily off. I held fast with just one finger on his temple and let him think that he had some kind of power over us.

Then, I squeezed.

"*Fuck. Ben is upstairs. Upstairsupstairsupstairs.* He's mine! Minemineinemine! He's mine! You can't have him! He's mine. Plaything. So yummy!"

I squeezed as hard as I could at that. His scream turned to a shriek of pure pain and terror. Lily smirked, and waited a moment before she nodded. "That's enough. He'll have more when he gets there. We know where everyone is." She looked down at Renold. "It's going to be a pleasure to pick out your screams from the Pit, you rotten motherfucker."

I pulled my blue white magic back, out of him, and Lily pulled her dagger away. The dull life that had been clinging to her slipped out and away, and kept dropping out of sight below us, until a dark black creature leapt up and snatched it, swallowing it.

The yelp got away from me as I fell back on my ass. "What was that?"

"Leviathan," she said, the red white glow tamping down to the color of a dying ember. "He eats the souls of the dead destined for the Pit and shits them out into the lake of fire there."

I stared down as the magic around me also tamped down and disappeared. The empty well below us folded in on itself, and Renold's limp, dead body flopped to the ground out of Lily's hand.

"You have your magic," she whispered. "All of it. Not just a little I can teach you, but all of it." She took a deep breath and looked up

at the sky. “God, I wish you had your memories.”

“I seem to have my instincts,” I answered. “I don’t know how I knew to do that, but I did.”

“Come on.” Lily stood. “Ben is upstairs. Let’s get him and I’ll contact the FBI for the kids at the other place. They’ll have people there in no time.”

Fischer gasped, and ran to the door, “We have a serious problem.”

Lily and I ran after him.

The roof was on fire.

“Fuck.”

Chapter TWENTY-SIX

Lincoln

I stared at the pictures Wren had sent me. I could believe that Polanski was part of this. It was an obvious choice, really. The man was a pervert.

But the other one, Pablo Gutiérrez...

That blew my mind. The man was highly respected and well known in his field. He had run the CHoP neurology department for ten years. He headed at least two charities and gave generously to a dozen more.

And fucked small children.

I wanted to puke.

Ellie gasped behind me, "Where did you get that picture?"

Spinning around, I pulled the phone out of her view. "I didn't know you were there."

She reached for my hand with the phone in it. "Where did you get this? Who sent it?"

I gave up hiding it. "Wren and Fischer, They're at the compound and they've found a lot of the children and a lot of the Pipeline

controllers."

"Including him…"

"Yes." I watched her face. "You know him?"

"Mister Spring," she whispered. "He's a pervert. He was one of the worst I'd ever been sent to. Depraved. He had two of his own kids, one boy one girl, but he called up for others all the time. He made me…"

My hand landed on her shoulder, softly. "You don't have to, Ellie. You don't have to tell me anything more. He's a dead man at this point."

"I want to carve his dick off."

"Well, then." I smirked.

She stared at the picture. "Let me guess. Upstanding citizen. Rich. Donates a lot. Good man."

"Pillar of the community." I nodded. "Brilliant doctor, brilliant administrator. Nice to animals." I twisted my lip and felt the bile in my throat. "And twenty-four seven access to children."

"Oh, my God. Who was he?"

"Pablo Gutiérrez, Chief of Neurology at CHoP."

Ellie honestly looked like she was going to throw up. "God, he was casing the potentials from there. And who knows what he did when no one was looking!"

"I know, baby dollBut he's not much longer for this world. Not if Lily and Wren have anything to do with it."

She nodded. "I would love to pull a Salome and ask for his head on a platter." Ellie paused. "Either head."

"They'll burn the place to the ground and leave them there to die I guarantee it."

"Good enough." She walked over to the table, sat, and grabbed her soda.

Before it reached her mouth, we both froze and stared at each other. The sensation of heat and lightning raced through both of us, making us shiver.

"What the fuck was that?" she whispered.

"Bad news," I answered. "Miriam? Laxi?"

"On their way. The twins?"

"In the basement," I answered. "We need to get them up here."

Ellie broke into a sprint, yanking the door to the basement open and leaping down the stairs. I wasn't far behind her, imitating her

leaps.

Tabitha and Timothy were huddled in the corner, surrounded by the strangest black light I had ever seen. It was crackling and swirling and closing in on them.

At the same time, Ellie and I pulled out the blades—mine a black and gray anjir and hers a flameblade rimmed in red fire.

"Bottom," I said. "Slide the blade into the energy about two feet from mine. Tim, Tabi, you're going to need to duck and run through the hole."

The two of them nodded, and Tabi pushed Tim forward just a little. Always the older sister protecting him. They were crouched and ready in a moment. I nodded at Ellie and we stabbed the blades into the cracking electricity, slicing it apart.

There was a scream, as if metal was scraping against metal, and the power parted. Tim was through, and pulled Tabi with him. I caught them with my open arm and pulled them against me.

Ellie and I pulled the blades back and she came to stand next to me, shielding the twins. She looked formidable and angry.

The screaming stopped when we pulled the blade back, but the swirling energy closed in on itself and made a column of black and blue power. It felt evil, cruel, with more than a dash of desperation.

"*Versilange.*"

The word was distorted and pulled, but I heard it.

"What do you want?" I screamed over the sounds it was making.

A hand formed in the center and reached for both the twins and Ellie. "*Verssssssilangggggge. Claimed for Tartarus…*"

"Don't try it!" Ellie snapped her sword up.

"Versilange. Two hearts, one guardian…"

This time I put my sword up. "No. They are not yours. They are ours."

"They're too young to claim," Ellie snapped. "They are innocents. You can't touch them, it's not allowed."

"Rules are gone" The entity cackled, and lanced out at the kids.

Ellie swatted it away, and held the sword up again. "We can't hold this off. I don't even know what it is," she said.

"I agree." I pushed Tim and Tabi onto her leg. "Take them and go."

"Go where?" she gasped.

"Can you find Laxi or Miriam?"

She paused. "Yes. They're on the Schuykill, stuck in traffic."

"Go. Their backseat. I'll be fine."

"Linc—"

A lash of power sliced the air and cut down, and I caught it, hacking it off and absorbing the power into the sword. That was a neat trick.

"Go! Go!" I snapped.

The flameblade was gone, and Ellie pulled the twins close. She turned to the right and reality swallowed all three of them.

The entity screeched, lashing out in all different directions. I cut a few away, but a few more caught me on my legs and it *fucking* hurt. I felt the skin slice, and the blood run down my legs. I backed up and kept swinging. I didn't really know what I was doing.

I felt a tear in reality, and Laxmi was suddenly there in the room with me, her flameblade lit white. She yelled something in the demon language that filtered in to my brain as, "You are breaking rules set by El, and you are not allowed to be near those innocents until they are of the age of majority. Back off, back down, and back to Hell with you!"

The whirling energy cackled and cracked. It spun in on itself, and with a tremendous *bang*!, was gone. I let the tip of the sword drop to the ground and sighed.

"Thank you," I managed.

"You did awesome," Laxmi said, patting me on the shoulder. "Just awesome. The kids will be here with Miriam as soon as that traffic breaks up. That was a great idea, sending them to us."

"I just worry about them, and you guys are better at this than I am. I wield this sword as about as threateningly as a butter knife."

Laxmi laughed. "The bread at least should be afraid."

I chuckled and ran a hand down my face. "What was that?"

"Not sure. There were a few things it could have been. A razkor, an elemental, a faundil. Of all those, the elemental is the most likely."

"Lemme guess. An electrical elemental?"

Laxmi smiled, and tapped her nose. "You're getting the hang of this."

I shook my head, and disappeared the sword.

"Just help me make sure that no one is going to come after these kids again?"

She took a deep breath. “I can’t wait for all of you to get your memories back. Then I wouldn’t have to show you.”

Shaking my head again, I walked for the stairs. “For now, you have to show me.”

Fischer

The roof was going up quickly.

"It's regular fire," Lily said.

"Ben is up there," Wren whispered.

"Fucking shit," I snapped and ran for the stairs. "Get the kids in the van! I'll get Ben!"

"Fischer, no! Come back!" Wren screamed. "Let Lily do it!"

"Just get the kids in the van!" I slammed the door at the top of the stairs.

I could smell the fire above. I had to think fast. Where the hell would this disgusting bastard keep a sex slave? The bedroom was almost too obvious, so I headed up there to rule it out.

The master bedroom was on the other side of the house from the fire, and I hoped I could get Ben before that became an issue. I ran down the hall—

—And found myself slammed into the wall opposite one of the other bedrooms.

The pain ran up my arm and shoulder and made my vision hazy just long enough to be slammed to the ground.

"Did you think I left?" Barry asked. His voice sounded far away for the ringing in my ears. "Did you really think I would leave all that property down there? They're worth millions, you ass."

I pushed up to sitting. "You set the house on fire."

"This? It's one of a dozen I own," he said. "You fools should have just stayed away. Now I have to kill all of you and get as many of my goods out of the basement before this place collapses."

Jesus, he didn't even care that there were dozens of children down there—just that he could make money off them.

He pulled out a gun and pointed it at my head.

"You're all just meddling assholes," he stated. "You think you can stop this? You can't. This is bigger than you can possibly comprehend. We'll never be stopped. There are too many people like us in the world. Too many men and women who want little sex slaves. Too many people with proclivities that—"

While this bozo was busy chatting, I manifested my new sword and lobbed his hand off, gun included. He shrieked like a banshee and staggered back against the wall, holding his stump.

"Idiot. Don't monologue. Just shoot." I snatched up the gun and shoved it in the back of the waistband of my pants. Holding onto the sword, I headed for the bedroom again and left Barry standing there, whimpering.

The bedroom was more a mini apartment than a master suite. There was a sitting room, a wet bar, the bedroom, a huge walk-in closet, and massive bathroom. There were no signs of anyone there. I plowed through each room, looking for a secret door and finding nothing. Nothing in the closets or behind other walls.

I heard a bang at the other end of the building, and the whole structure creaked. It was going to start collapsing soon, and the part of the roof that was on fire was the part where the underground garage was.

But above all the noise of the fire, I heard a whimper. I looked around, but didn't see anywhere I could find a kid hiding. There was nowhere. As if they had built the room and furnished it to prove to visitors there was nothing to hide and nowhere to hide it.

I heard the whimper again.

I looked up.

There was a trap door there in the ceiling.

Christ, he was in the attic.

That was currently on fire.

Fuck.

There was no way to grab the handle on the trap door where I was.

Looking around, there were no chairs, no ladders, no step stools. Nothing I could grab and pull over easily. I glanced over to the bed, and realized that I didn't have time to figure anything out. I had to get to that latch before the kid suffocated from the smoke.

Reaching under the frame of the bed—a wealthy asshole like Sansom only had the cheap metal frame?—and heaved it up and started pulling it backward. I moved it as fast as I could, and placed it under that lock.

Hopping up on the bed, I was just still a few inches short.

Three little monkeys, jumping on the bed. One fell off and hit his head.

Bending my knees, I bounced on the mattress a few times, and then trampolined it up, and caught the handle with one hand. With the other, I slapped the latch open and the whole thing fell into the room.

I slammed backward onto the bed, a massive roil of smoke came billowing out and a small body landed on mine a moment later.

Immediately curling in on himself, the boy started shaking. "Sir, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were going to open it. I didn't mean to fall on you."

Wrapping my arms around him, I pulled him close. "No apologies, Ben."

He gasped at his name and looked at me. "You're not Sir…"

"My name is Fischer. We've been looking for you."

He started crying. "Oh, no…"

I sat up, scooped him up and swung him onto my back. "Legs around me, arms around my neck, we're getting the hell out of here. Hold on tight."

Ben listened to me, but he was crying hard. I knew he thought I was taking him from one bad place to another. I didn't have time to disabuse him of that idea as I ran through the house.

I could see the building was burning down now, the smoke rolling along the ceiling. The flames would follow in a few minutes, and I made my way down the stairs.

Barry had disappeared from the hall. That was concerning but expected. Expected because the house was on fire, concerning because I didn't know where.

It took only a minute to find out.

The cast iron pan swung at me from around the corner. It was aimed directed at my neck, and I barely managed to duck back.

"You're not taking him," Barry growled.

He had a belt around his elbow, cutting off the blood to the open wound at the end of his arm. Casually flipping the pan with the other hand he came at me.

"Child, come here," he snapped.

I grabbed Ben's legs and held them fast on my waist. "No. He's not yours. He's ours. Our son. You're never going to touch a child again." I had to get downstairs and make sure that Wren and Lily were able to get out, and this guy was in my way.

He came at me with the pan again, swinging up and trying to catch me in the stomach. Again, in the ribs. Again, across the knees. I kept backing up. He kept trying to use the hand that was laying upstairs on the floor.

Ben's hand slipped off my neck as I ducked away again, and then slipped back. I dodged again, this swinging at my head.

"Give me the kid! He's mine!"

"I'm not!" Ben screamed.

His other hand joined the first and he had the gun I had tucked in the back of my pants aimed in Barry's general direction.

"You are mine, you brat! Sansom is dead, you're mine!"

I closed my eyes and turned my head, whispering to Ben, "Do it."

I hoped that the hearing in my right ear would recover after a few hours. The bang sent the bullet flying at Barry, and the screech from the man was much, much higher than the one he'd let out when I took his hand off.

Turning and looking, Barry had dropped the pan and hand his hand over his junk.

Ben had shot him in the dick.

I liked this kid.

I grabbed the gun out of his hands and kicked Barry out of the way, running for the basement door.

"Wren?" I screamed.

“Here!” She screamed back from the door. “We’ve got most of the kids loaded! Did you—”

She was standing in front of me, staring at the little boy ducked behind my shoulder, and her eyes went wide with tears.

“Ben?”

He nodded without lifting his head.

“He’s a great kid,” I said, swinging him on to my hip. “He shot Barry in the balls.”

“Fantastic!” Lily called. “Get him in the second van! That roof is coming down soon.”

Running to the open door of the second van, I lost my footing when I saw two dozen or more terrified faces looking at me from the filthy floor. Some of the older ones held the younger ones, and packed against each other, as if they hadn’t had human contact in years.

I stood Ben on the running board. “Get on in. We’re getting everyone out of here.”

“Mister?” he said quietly. “You don’t want to—” His lip trembled as his eyes filled with tears.

“No!” I gasped and ran a hand over his head. “Never. You’re all safe now. Let’s get the fuck out of here. Sit. We don’t have to drive far.”

Ben sat and pulled the door shut.

“Drive it out!” Lily screamed. She was screaming because the fire was loud above us. “You and Wren! Get out of here!”

“And you?”

“I’ll meet you outside,” she said.

I saw the hellfire ignite in her palm.

There would be nothing left of this place.

Or of Gutierrez and Cora.

Wren put her van in reverse and backed out of the sunken garage. She sped up the incline and made a fast turnaround at the top, disappearing down the driveway. I put mine in drive to pull out—

As the roof collapsed above and dropped flaming beams across the exit of the garage. I caught Lily’s horrified look, but I wasn’t letting that stop me. I didn’t care about this vehicle. I’d drive it on the rims if I busted the tires. I put it in reverse and looked over my shoulder.

“Hang on, kids. This is gonna be a little rough.”

I hit the gas and backed into the cages behind me. They weren’t secured so they slid back across the cement with a massive ripping and tearing sound. I got myself an extra twenty feet of distance.

Dropping into neutral, I revved the engine lightly. Nothing too extreme. Holding my foot on the gas, and tapping the brake a bit, I dropped it into drive. The wheels spun for a moment, and I released the brakes.

The van charged forward, slamming through the flaming debris, tossing it mostly out of the way except for a piece of wood, on fire, that got tossed up on the wipers.

I kept my foot on the gas and sped up the ramp. Flicking on the wipers, I flung the wood out of my way as I pulled the van hard to the left and curved around the driveway and out to the main gate. I could see the other van idling just beyond where Lily had parked the Tesla.

In the next moment I was eternally grateful for panel vans.

Sebastian

Barry stumbled out the front door, missing one hand and using the other to cover his junk.

I watched as he limped forward toward the fountain, cursing, swearing, covered in blood. Ten points to Gryffindor for the shot to the sack. And twenty more for the removal of the hand.

Once Wren, Fischer, and Lily had disappeared into the house, I climbed a tree down the street. The rifle that Lily had lent me wasn't quite as nice as the one I'd had in the service, but it was still a good piece. It had a scope, but I had no spotter. A disadvantage, but not a big one. I wasn't shooting a half mile out. Just a few hundred yards.

I followed Barry's stumbling steps as he tried to get to the car parked in the lot to the side. Waiting patiently in my tree, I allowed him to get all the way to the door.

Then, I shot the door handle, making it impossible to open.

He stumbled back and looked around. I knew he wouldn't see me in the tree. Taking a second to regroup, he headed for the en-

trance to the estate. One of the cars on the street behind me were probably set up for a clean escape.

These traffickers weren't stupid or sloppy. We'd lucked into most of this information.

I was right—he headed for a black Taurus sitting on the side of the road not far up from the estate. This time, I waited until he was in the car and shot the front tire. When he climbed back out, I shot the back tire. As he looked around for what was going on, in the wrong direction, I put a slug in the engine.

"What the fuck!" he screamed.

I chuckled.

He started down the sidewalk just as a panel van tore around the house, through the gate and down the street, screeching to a halt about twenty feet beyond the Tesla. The door popped open and Wren looked back, worried.

While Barry was staring at the panel van, and stumbling toward it, I shot his left foot. He screamed in pain, but didn't go down.

Excellent.

He limped forward, as fast as he could. I let him pass under me without making a sound.

Another panel van tore up the driveway, and I knew that was Fischer. I kept my eyes on Barry, though. He was limping faster as the panel van sped past him and pulled in behind Wren's.

He staggered into the street and was going for the passenger door on the van, probably to hijack them.

I whistled at him.

He spun and found me in the tree. His face lit with anger.

I grinned at him and called, "Enjoy Hell, motherfucker."

Pulling the trigger, I planted the bullet right between his eyes and watched as his brains exited through the back of his skull.

Thank God for panel vans.

Wren

Ellie just clung to Ben, silent tears tracing down her face.

"God, I missed you," she said.

He put a hand on either side of her face and studied her. "I remember you. You used to feed me and make sure I was dry and warm." He nodded, satisfied with his inspection. "You're my sister."

"I am. Do you remember my name?"

"Elliephant."

Ellie covered her mouth with her hand in shock. "Oh, God, you do remember."

The six year old made trumpeting sound, and my daughter burst out laughing.

Fischer held his hand out to Ben. "Come on, kiddo. We have some doctors who need to see you before you can come home."

"Home?"

"You're going to live with us, Ben," I said. "You'll have your own room next to Ellie and you're going to have another brother and sister."

"I am?" He looked up at Ellie, hopefully.

"You am, kiddo," she said, smiling and giving him a hug. "Let the doctors look at you, make sure that everything is working and in the right order, then Fischer and Wren will take you shopping to decorate your own room."

"No door," he said, suddenly terrified. "No door on my room."

Lincoln nodded. "That's what you want, that's what you'll have. No door. I'll help Bastian take it off when we get back. But you have to respect other doors. Deal?"

Ben nodded, satisfied. "Deal."

"Come on, we'll go in and see the doctors," Fischer prompted. Ellie wanted to stay with her brother, so she followed them, and Lincoln was going to set up the payments and he trailed behind.

Lily was still wrangling with the FBI, which left me and Bastian. Everyone else would meet us back at the house.

"Do you think Ben will be okay?"

"He and I will have a few sessions, or discussions about what happened. I want to make sure that he's going to handle what happened as well as he can. He's got all of us, and he can talk to any of us. But…"

"You're the sex therapist." I smirked.

"I am." He nodded.

"I'm the regular therapist, so…how are you doing?"

He stared straight ahead on the road. "I miss my wife, and my kids. But after everything that's happened, I am beginning to understand that what she and I had wasn't meant to be forever. We were meant to be, but who we are—Fischer, Linc, and I—was always going to be the bigger facet of destiny." He tapped his chest, then his head. "She's still here. I hope you don't mind sharing."

I let out a hardy laugh. "Not if you don't!"

Bastian chuckled. "It's so strange, but I don't. I don't feel a drop of jealousy. Should I? It's very clear that Fischer is the leader of the pack, but we…all get along. I don't know what to think."

"We've only given you the bare bones of what was going on before we went sprinting after the kids," I said. "There's a lot going on here. Seeing the sins? Because you are one. Lust. I'm meant to balance you all, weighing the good of the sin against the bad of it." I swallowed. "I mean, Lucifer is my twin brother."

He turned his head slowly. "We're serious about all this?"

"The swords we were given? Were forged by Hephaestus," I said. "You saw Lily conjure the hellfire. You saw what it did for my hand…"

Holding up my unmangled hand, I flexed it a few times, watching it. There was no pain. There was a full range of motion. I had a strong grip, and the skin was perfect. Not a single scar.

"I'm scared," I whispered.

He tossed a glance at me as we merged into the mess that was the Sckuykill. "Why? About what?"

"Lily swears that we were friends in our lives before this…but I don't remember her. God, that we even had lives before this. That I'm as old as time itself? How is that possible? I'm just me. I've always just been me." I could feel tears in my eyes. "I like my life, Bastian. It's not perfect. It can down right suck sometimes, but to think there was once more? That I didn't have a job but roamed the universe, seeking balance, bringing hope and despair?

"And what happened? How did I end up here? Was I punished? Were *we* punished? I know that I spent my time in the company of all of you. But…what happened?"

He tapped on the wheel as we moved through the surprisingly light traffic. "I don't know. I can't even start to guess. I do have the feeling we're going to find out though."

"I can't disagree with that…"

We were quiet on the ride and I realized he was heading back to the townhouse when he got off at Green Lane.

"The mansion, Bastian," I said.

"What?"

"We live at Fischer's mansion, the townhouse is going to be our offices."

"I live…"

I covered his hand with mine. "At the mansion. With us. All of us. You have your own room."

"Wren…"

"Look, we're all in this together, and since I like having all my men near me, Fischer offered his place. Lincoln was going to sell the townhouse, but it makes sense that we can have offices there. No one needs to know I'm living with three guys and four kids. And with the way we've been attacked lately, I'd prefer to keep people out of our house."

After a moment at the stop light, Bastian made a left instead of a right, and we were on our way to the mansion. It was a slightly uncomfortable drive, but I knew that Bastian was trying to figure things out.

When we finally got to the house, I motioned him in through the back door. I closed the door and pointed to the wall next to the entrance. "There's a set here for you. I know you haven't been told the whole story yet, but we really do all feel better when we're in the same place."

Taking his hand, I led him into the house. I pointed out the kitchen, the pantry, the laundry room, the back staircase. The sitting room, the family room, and farther down the library, and the formal living room. I showed him the formal stairs, and walked up them with his hand in mine.

Once we were on the second floor landing, we wandered down the main corridor. I pointed out Ellie's room, the twins' room, and the room that Ben would have.

"I'd set up a second bed in Ellie's room for now," he said. "He's not going to want to be in his room for a while to sleep. Not until he gets used to everyone."

"Good point." I smiled and moved us down another hall. "This is Lincoln's room. There are seven more bedrooms down here. You can choose any of them. They all share bathrooms."

"Pass throughs?"

"Yes," I said, and chuckled. "Lincoln's has two."

"I'll take that one, whichever one is attached to Lincoln," he said without hesitation. He stopped and pulled me around to him. "What are the rules here? Was the other day a one and done deal? Do we have to schedule time with you? Ask Fischer permission? Can we have you to ourselves, or do we always need someone else there?"

I tugged him along to the door to our room. "This door is, figuratively, always open. We haven't had to come up with rules, because Lincoln usually just shared the bed." I pushed the door open and led him in. "I don't need Fischer's permission for anything, but…this is his bed as well. He always sleeps here."

Bastian nodded. "Do we pick days of the week?"

I laughed. "You think I can't take all of you in one day, Sebastian? Everything you all are, I am too. Fischer is Sloth, Lincoln is Greed. If you are Lust, I am part of that."

"So, no scheduling days?"

Shaking my head, I chuckled. "No, we're not scheduling sex. That's insane. And anyway, it's not like you're not going to slip it to Lincoln."

"Honestly?" he whispered, "I'll fuck anything that wants it. It's insane since meeting you, Linc, and Fischer. All I want to do is…" He shook his head.

I slid my hand around his waist and turned him to look at me. "Just because Fischer and I share that bed doesn't mean I can't use it by myself, too. Or with someone."

"Mm. Show me where I'm sleeping?"

I grinned and held his hand as we walked through the massive linked bathroom that Fischer and Lincoln had insisted we needed. There were no shower curtains. There was a tiled wall, with glass doors on either side and inside were two benches. I tapped the wall. "Shower head is here, and sprays into the room. There are also shower heads in the ceiling and against the back wall if you hit all the buttons correctly."

"I'm sure you need all of them if you hit the buttons correctly." The devilish grin on his lips wasn't helping my sudden bout of lust.

I pushed through the bathroom door and into Lincoln's room. "We keep the doors closed between the rooms. For the kids. Well, for the twins. Ellie's not unaware of what goes on."

Lincoln's room had become more his in the past few weeks, which was a relief, but he also hadn't even pulled the covers up on the bed. I shook my head and clucked. "Like a child."

"Always pull the covers up. For a fresh bed in the evening and to hide any cum stains," Sebastian said.

I choked a bit, but laughed. There were definitely a few stains we couldn't get out.

The door to the other bathroom, the original one for Lincoln's room, was pulled shut. We all just used the new one. But I pushed it open and popped on the light. It was clean and neat and slightly cold.

Walking through the other door, I flipped on the light to the next bedroom. It was done in neutrals, and maple furniture, and I'd always kind of like the pops of navy and yellow in the room. Fischer had put king beds in all the rooms—mostly because they were all enormous.

"I like this," Bastian said. "But I feel like it's missing something."

"What's that?" I looked up at him.

"You, naked on that bed."

He caught my mouth and kissed me thoroughly. I melted into him, and I could taste Lincoln on him. Knowing that they had been kissing did funny things to me, and I leaned into him.

"Naked, huh?" I asked, barely getting the question out between his kisses.

"Very naked." He nodded.

"You first, Doctor." I found the buttons on his shirt and slipped them out of the holes as fast as I could. I'd seen him naked before, but that didn't mean I didn't want to see him again.

He grabbed my hands just as I finished unbuttoning him, and moved them above my head. He held me there, and kissed me again. "On the bed, Wren."

"Naked."

"Yes."

"Strip, or you're not allowed with me." I turned and headed for the bed, dropping my pants off my waist and stepping out of them.

I pulled my blouse off over my head, plucking only the sleeves and first button open. When I reached the bed, I turned and sat, crossing my legs.

"Well, Doctor?" I asked. "Going to join me?"

He'd gotten his shirt off and was working on his pants, but froze when he saw me there.

It wasn't a good freeze. I loosened up immediately, stood and grabbed his shirt from the floor where he'd dropped it. Wrapping it around me, I stepped into him and grabbed his arms. "Bastian?"

He pulled the shirt open, and looked down at my bra. Raising a single finger, he traced it along the lace of the strap. His path continued down the cup to just over my heart.

"Victoria…had this set…"

Oh, shit. I pulled the shirt closed over myself. "I'll…get rid of this. Let me go change—"

"No," he whispered. "You look so sexy in it. It would be wrong to ask you to get rid of it. I just didn't expect to see it on another woman." His finger hooked on the edge of his shirt and pulled it apart. "Another woman that I'm in love with…"

"Bastian…" What the hell did I say to him? Everything about us was weird, out of the norm, and had certainly never been covered in my therapy classes.

A big, fat tear rolled down his cheek. I reached up and wiped it off. Another followed, and I did the same. "Let's not force this, Bas. Let's take some time, and talk. You're still raw."

He shook his head. "Stay with me. Please. Let me hold you for a little while. It might not hurt as much if you're there."

Without a word, he walked me back to the bed and had me sit. I scooted back and waited for him. Just a moment behind me, he climbed on and settled into the pillows there. Pulling me down to his chest and holding me there, his foot kicked up the spare blanket and he drew it over us.

The air between us had changed fast—he was not being sexy or lustful anymore. He was somber and sullen, and I just let him hold me.

It was quiet in the house, and there was only the sound of passing cars outside, very occasionally. The more distant sound of the Schuykill filled in the white noise.

"I loved her so much," he whispered. "The kids were everything to me. It's hard to accept that she's gone and I'm alone."

"But you're not alone, Bastian."

He tightened his grip on me just a little. "It's going to take me a long time to get used to that. You're not her—I don't want you to be. Vicky and I shared our lives in a very different way than I think we will. There's just no way to explain how much this hurts while explaining that I'm in love with you."

I turned a bit in his arms and peered up to his eyes. "We do not recover from grief, Bas. We carry it forward and it becomes something else, it makes us something else. I would never ask you to choose me over her.

"She was then. We are now. There is a terrible divide between the two, one you have crossed, but are only just climbing to safety from. No matter how far forward we walk, you will always see that chasm, and you will always remember that you weathered it for her, and to a great degree, with her."

"I miss our children," he said. "I miss the laughter in the morning, even the whining at night."

"I can't heal that," I whispered. "No one can."

"I don't want anyone to," he answered. "That's the grief I want to carry. Those lives, those little hearts and souls. I want to carry them and let them shape me."

"Let's get their pictures and hang them in the house," I offered. "We can put them with the pictures of Ellie and the twins and I'm sure the ones of Ben we'll have. Let's make them a part of our family."

He nodded slowly and let a smile drift on to his lips. "I would like that."

"Then we'll do it," I said. "And I'll get rid of these stupid panties and bra."

"No," he said. "Keep them. They'll remind me that while they are the same, the two of you are very, very different. Not one of you better than the other." He ran his hand over the cup of the bra again. "Is it okay if we don't…"

"No one is going to make you do anything," I said.

He wiped another tear off his face. "I want to make love to you, Wren. Not mad fucking, but slow, sweet, careful love."

I moved up on his body, slipping the shirt off. "Whatever you need, Bas. Whatever you need."

It was nearly six hours later when Fischer and Lincoln found us, curled around each other, naked, finally sated. Without a word, they stripped and climbed in, and wrapped themselves around us, as well.

We slept better than we had in months.

EPILOGUE

Lily

The thunder crashed a moment after the lightning flashed and I had grabbed the knob. The door only opened with that combination. Even if I was the one who had to make the lightning and thunder.

We stepped into the room, and I pulled the door shut. Over to the curtain, I pulled it back and motioned Wren forward. Once the curtain was back in place, I pushed a hand through the illusion of the wall.

She gasped lightly, then smiled.

This was beyond strange to me. I had my sister-in-law, one of my very best friends back, but I didn't. She didn't remember any of this.

I needed to know what was going on. I needed to talk to Luce and get all the information on what we were dealing with.

Passing through the illusion, I felt the warmth of home on my skin. I hated staying away from him, from home, for the sake of this disaster—but both of us knew this was the way it would end faster.

I didn't mind being a police detective either, really. It was fun to bring people like the Pipeline owners down.

"Lily," Wren said. "What happened after we tore out of the building?"

"You really want to know?"

"I feel like I need to," she answered.

I held out my hand. "I'll show you."

Her palm hovered over mine a moment, hesitant, and then touched the skin to hers.

…The cages behind Fisher were smashed backward and shoved against the wall. I saw him yell at the kids to hang on, and drop the gas pedal. It took another moment for him to drop it into drive and smash the van through the large, fiery beams now blocking the door.

I took a deep breath as I watched him skid into the corner and pick up speed away from the fire.

He, and the kids and Ben, were out.

Turning slowly, I looked at the two people sitting there: Cora and Gutierrez.

I knelt down and looked Pablo Gutierrez right in the eyes. "I never would have guess, you shitbag. Never would have guessed. Do you enjoy fucking all the little children on your ward, too?"

He screwed up his lip and said nothing.

"Let us out," Cora said. "Let us out and we'll make sure that you want for nothing ever."

"Oh, sweetie." I laughed. "I have the riches of Hell at my fingertips, I don't need your filthy lucre. *I really don't. There's nothing you can offer me to make me release you."*

"Houses, clothes, power, money like you've never seen."

"Go ahead and try," I said. "I love when the evil ones really think they can win me over." Flicking my hand, I summoned two gold Roman coins from my treasury in the palace. "Do you know what these are?"

"Gold," Gutierrez said. "Where did you—"

"They're not just gold, Pablo. Not just simple coins. They're not even from this millennium, or even the last. These are gold coins pressed by Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, the last king of Rome."

"There were no kings—" Cora started.

"There were, shut up and let me finish." I held one in my hand and flipped the other between my fingers. "Tarquin was the last of the Etruscan

kings of Rome. It was pressed in 528 BCE. Before Christ. And do you know why I have this?"

"Because it's probably worth hundreds of thousands of dollars," Cora stated.

"You see things as commodity, only the price of them. I should have brought Lincoln here. What fun my sister-in-law's Greedy sin would have with you." I turned the coin in my fingers again. "He would have asked me if I knew it's value. He would have questioned the wisdom of having something so valuable on me, and why wasn't something like this in a museum." I stopped flipping it and pinched it between my fingers. "And do you know what the answer is?"

Gutierrez sneered. "Because they're worth a lot, and you like to keep them near,"

"You're only half wrong. They're worth a lot. To me. No one else knows that these were the first two coins I made in the forum at Thracia, selling my potions. No one else knows that I spent twenty years in Thracia selling those. Saving the lives of women and children. No one knows I was castigated for helping a Jew. No one knows I was cast out for touching the wife of the priest. No one knows they tried to take my hands for that—and no one knows I took her soul for her own safety because her husband beat her and raped her and lent her out as a favor to those he owed."

I grabbed Gutierrez's jaw and pried his mouth open. "Just like you." I shoved the coin against the back of his throat and snapped his jaw shut. "Swallow it, you piece of shit. You can pay the price Chiron demands to ferry your ass to the Pits with my gold, because I'm only too happy to see you go."

He swallowed when I held his nose and he tried to catch his breath. The scream from the pain of swallowing a solid gold coin didn't give me any satisfaction—the knowledge that Chiron was going to pull it back out would.

He'd also give it back to me for the usual exchange of a bottle of Booker's bourbon and some nice bleu cheese.

Cora was staring at me, terrified. "Please, please don't…"

I leaned into her ear. "Ironic, don't you think?"

She trembled and shook her head.

"All those children you've stolen, abused, assaulted, raped…all of them screaming that same phrase, please don't*…and you think that I'm going to listen to you." I squeezed her jaw and shoved the coin all the way in. "Swallow, bitch."*

She choked, and a second later vomited, and started crying.

I called up the hellfire, and let it dance on my hand. This wasn't the soft, sweet healing fire I had shown Wren. This was the hot, terrifying, destructive flame that would consume everything in its path.

"You had your fool Barry start the fire upstairs," I said, standing straight and backing up. "All he did was start what I am going to finish. Hellfire has no mercy. Hellfire will burn steel to carbon." I made it dance on my fingers. "Can you imagine what it will do to human flesh and bone?"

"You're not going to kill us." Gutierrez coughed the words. "You're an officer of the law."

"Sometimes." I tipped my head. "And sometimes I sit in judgment in Hades with my husband and choose those worthy of Elysium, of Valhalla. I can tell you right now, my judgment is for neither. Pay Chiron when you reach the Lethe. He'll make sure you remember, and you go where you belong."

I touched the metal cage behind me, and the hellfire leapt up, taking root, consuming and destroying.

"Convenient that Barry started this…now they'll have conjecture enough to assume you were consumed by your own monumental greed. And I will do nothing to dissuade them."

I stood and watched the fire as it grew, and consumed, and grew and consumed. The room was hot, smoky, and starting to lose its structural integrity. I summoned more of the hellfire to encase me, and walked straight out the garage door—leaving Cora and Pablo to die…

Wren let out a sharp breath and pulled her hand away. "Wow," she whispered.

"They had to die…"

"No, no," Wren said. "I understand. It's just…a lot to try and get my brain to accept that what you did wasn't wrong. It wasn't exactly right, but it wasn't really wrong. The *eye for an eye* thing that everyone misinterprets."

I smiled and nodded. "I didn't relish leaving them, but it was necessary." Jerking my head to the stairs, I motioned to her. "Let's get going. Let's see if a moment in Hades restores what you've forgotten."

She grabbed my hand back. "Lily. No matter whether I remember anything or not, please know that you are, truly, one of my best friends."

My heart did a little dance, and I smiled. Nodding at the stairs, we both started to descend.

The warmth felt so good, again. Even standing in a burning building I didn't feel the same warmth. It felt like home, like perfection. Like my husband.

Turning the knob of the door and pushing it open, we stepped into the wide terrace that overlooked everything.

"Hades," she whispered.

"Straight ahead, and down one flight, is the entrance to Elysium. The Greeks had the best word for it, so we've stuck with it. Hell and Tartarus, which holds the Pit, are down beyond the palace."

"Palace…" Wren breathed and turned to look.

Her face lit up in awe and I saw the palace Lucifer had built us so many millennia ago with renewed eyes.

Looking like something out of the Akkadian empire, it was made of sandstone colored bricks, and rose as a mighty, imposing wall. There were three gates on the front, two smaller ones on either side, and one great gate in the center, with the image of a three headed hellhound—that had never existed. Someone had once seen it there and spread the threat of it, naming it Cerberus, which eventually lead the occupants to call it the Cerberus Gate. The doors were carved of an extinct tree from the Cretaceous era, using a single tree. The inlays were nonsensical and whimsical—it was all carved before the advent of humanity.

Beyond the wall rose the main living area, five stories of sandstone and open windows that looked out into the expanse of Elysium. Staggered and tiered, it was an imposing edifice, but in some way still welcoming.

At least, to me.

Wren looked at me. "You live here?"

"You did too," I whispered. "You, the Sins, several dozen *versilange*, some family, some Elysium demons… It was never empty. Not like it is now."

"What happened?"

I sighed, and we walked toward the massive Cerberus Gate. "We don't know. We woke one day, and the entire palace was empty. Not just of people, but of things. Furniture. Paintings. Food. Weapons. We mourned for a while and then knew we had to find out what happened."

I stopped and looked up at the doors. "Our positions, the titles of the Sins, aren't just ceremonial, Wren. They're real. Lucifer and I

have done what we could to keep the balance, to make sure souls were placed, to keep things safe and secure. But the titles aren't ceremony. They're real. Gluttony, Greed, Wrath, Sloth, Pride, Lust, Envy. They need to work together with you to keep things steady for the humans.

"We need you back. And neither of us know how to do that. Which is exactly why you don't remember any of this. Why none of you do." I glanced at her. "They took your memories when they stole you away that night."

"Temperance," she whispered. "My name is my purpose."

Nodding once, I turned to the doors and pushed them open. They swung into the inner courtyard and Wren followed me, I gave them a magical push to close them.

Leading her across the magnificent mosaic tite work that covered the courtyard, I headed for the entrance that would take me to the private kitchen, where my husband always liked to sit and think.

"I'll show you the whole palace another time, Wren," I said.

She nodded, silent.

We stepped into the half modern, half ancient kitchen. The hearth fire was burning, and it felt amazing on my skin.

"Lucifer?" I called.

"Here, wife," he answered.

A moment later, the massive person that was Lucifer walked into the room. Ruddy skin, black hair, black pants, white shirt, reading glasses, and a book in his hand.

"The devil wear's reading glasses?" Wren whispered.

Lucifer's head snapped up, and he gasped, dropping the book. "Temperance." He snapped his eyes to mine. "You brought her?"

"She asked," I answered. "She knows…"

He walked forward, slowly, and held out his hand after ripping his glasses off. Wren was studying him, hard, and I could see the beginnings of recognition flicker across her face.

"My sweet little sister," he breathed, waiting with his hand stretched out, waiting for her hand.

Wren lifted hers and after a moment, dropped her tiny hand into his massive one.

Her face burst into a grin that would have eclipsed the sun. "Brother."

…Lust has found his Temperance…

The Sins are gathering.
FALL
Saints and Sinners 4
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AFTERWORD

Hey, Readers!

My plan was to release all of **Saints and Sinner** about 5 weeks apart, so you could read along, and not get exceedingly frustrated with me. *Well*, best laid plans and all that.

Due to a release that just went akimbo, the holidays (all of them) and my wicked amazing bucket list trip at the end of January, I'm going to push FALL back six weeks, to February 5, 2020. I want to give you the best story I can, and trying to release #4 that fast with all this mess around me—well, that's just not going to happen. FALL is a pivotal shift in the direction of the series and I won't mess it up.

Meanwhile, if you like my books, I have a HUGE back catalogue and two other pen names! Just turn the page to find all of them.

Keep an eye out in January, though—I have a lonely manuscript that's just begging to be released! How can you find out? Well, there's a newsletter, and you can hang out with me in Rhodes' Rogues.

Wanna follow my real life adventure on our Bucket List 15th Anniversary Trip? I'll be all over Instagram!

Love and whirled peas,
Kay Rhodes

Armed with a pen name, **Katherine Rhodes** has gird her loins and set her mind to writing erotic romances which are kinky, dirty, and fun. As a lackadaisical laundry goddess, and an expert in the profundities of bad music and awful literature-thanks to her husband-Katherine strives to find balance in the universe and time to cook dinner. An East Coast dweller, currently located in the Philadelphia Tristate area, she is the proud servants of three cats and would take a vacation in Prague over a day at the beach any time…

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KATHERINE ALSO WRITES YA/NA UNDER

J. Rose Alexander

Chatter box, compulsive writer, bon vivant, stunt commuter, and a ninja in her dreams, J. Rose enjoys losing herself in the capes and masks of her superheroes, finding new trouble for her witches and werewolves-- and is always on the look out for a new adventure, on the page or in real life. J. Rose write sweet, clean(ish) stories that are suited to readers 13 and up, unless she warns you otherwise...

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Katherine also writes MM Romance
S.A. Sommers

S.A. Sommers has ink in her blood. Sucked into the world of MM Romance by another author, she couldn't resist dipping a toe into the genre and was swept away.
A New Jersey native, she swears like a sailor, has a terrible love for Rutt's Hut, used to sneak into Greenwich Village as a kid and wanted nothing more than to write grand adventures of the human spirit. Living outside of Philadelphia, she swears (profusely) that you can take the girl out of Jersey, but you can't take the Jersey out of the girl.
Married, Mother of Cats, world traveler, and expert destroyer of dinners, she believes strongly that love is love, and if you have a problem with that, [single finger Jersey salute].
(*No, really. You haven't lived until you have had a Rutt's Hut ripper.*)

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