



Match Made in Hell (Queen of Hell #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Lucifer's defiant daughter. A fallen angel turned vampire. Two enemies bound by secrets, and a forbidden love that could redeem—or ruin—them both.

Do you know what it's like to be Lucifer's daughter? I mean, all I want is a nice apartment with southern exposure. A guy to rub my feet at the end of the night. Oh, and a job that doesn't involve torturing souls for all eternity.

Unfortunately, escaping my infernal heritage isn't as easy as moving to Earth and adopting a cat named Purgatory. Not after someone took a pitchfork to my memories and scrambled them up real good. I can't even remember how I got here.

I was this close to a normal life. Even found the guy who might want to rub my feet. But in the middle of our first date, he barges in. Rathiel, or Captain Bootlicker as I prefer to call him. My father's right-hand man and a fallen angel turned vampire. One moment, I'm enjoying dessert, and the next, he's hauling me out of the restaurant claiming my father wants me dead.

Rathiel calls it protective custody; I call it overbearing and obnoxious. He swears he'll kill anyone who touches me, which is sweet in a terrifying, please-don't-eat-my-date kind of way. I never asked for a guardian demon. But he's determined to play hero, whether I like it or not. And unfortunately, I'm starting to love it.

Surviving my father is the hard part. But falling for the fallen angel might just be my undoing.

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Chapter One

Hell was working as a coffee shop barista during the Monday morning rush. And believe me, I knew Hell. As Lucifer's daughter and a celestial—or what humans called an angel—I was well versed in torture. But this...this was a special kind of torment. Serving overpriced lattes to clueless humans and “working for the man” at minimum wage gave me a whole new perspective on suffering. I used to have a purpose and a future. Now, I was little more than a wingless aberration who pretended to care about milk foam and flavour shots, all while secretly longing for the good ol' days of battling hellspawn and causing mayhem.

“I asked for a tall, half-skinny, half-one percent, extra hot, split quad shot—two shots decaf, two shots regular—latte with whip. It's not a difficult order,” the dark-suited man standing across the counter barked. He shoved a full cup back at me, his brow knotted in what I presumed was his version of a “glare.” It hardly inspired any fear—I'd seen far worse.

He glanced at my nametag, then raised his chin and stared down his nose at me. “I don't know what this is, Lily , but it certainly isn't what I ordered.”

I forced a smile. This wasn't the first irate customer I'd dealt with today, and it wouldn't be the last. It seemed everyone loved to take their anger out on baristas, as though we were responsible for all their shitty life choices.

“I'm so sorry about that,” I said, my words infused with more sarcasm than his lacking wit could comprehend. “Allow me to make it again for you.” Notice how I didn't admit to any wrongdoing? That was because I'd made the coffee correctly the

first time. But I'd long since learned that arguing accomplished nothing.

"Do you need me to write it down for you?" he asked with an amusing "sneer."

"Oh, no need for that. I've got it."

I poured out the coffee and started again, all while whistling a jaunty tune and envisioning sticking a long and broad sword up his tightly puckered asshole.

"One tall, half-skinny, half-one percent, extra hot, split quad shot—two shots decaf, two shots regular—latte with whip coming right up!" I called out, my voice syrupy sweet. But inside, I was cursing his existence. At least in Hell, I could have stabbed him when he pissed me off. But stabbing on Earth was, sadly, illegal. Stupid humans and their stupid rules. No maiming, murdering, or massacring allowed. Pfft.

"You better make it right this time," he grumbled. "No wonder you work here. Can't handle a real job."

I shot the dickhead a look that would have curdled a hellspawn's blood, but he was too busy tapping away on his phone to notice. Oh, the hellfire I could unleash on his ass. But I restrained myself, and only because I didn't particularly want to smell burnt ass hair this early in the morning, or you know, scare the poor humans.

"Hey, buddy." A large hand clapped down on my irate customer's shoulder. "How about you lighten up and just let her fix the order? No one wants to listen to you being a douche."

I recognized him instantly—his name was Jack, and I'd been serving him coffee for the last year. He always ordered it black with no frills. We'd exchanged quick pleasantries a few times, but I never imagined he'd step up for me like this, especially in front of the whole shop.

My customer turned, his sneer vanishing the instant he laid eyes on Jack. Towering over the jackass, Jack's sheer size was enough to intimidate anyone into silence. It didn't hurt that he was attractive too, with his wavy brown hair and strong brows that framed his dark eyes. A chiseled jawline with a short beard completed his look, adding to his rugged charm. He looked like the epitome of every handsome hero that starred in the countless romantic comedies popular here.

"Who the hell are you?" my customer asked, his bravado crumbling in front of everyone.

"Just someone who likes his coffee without a side of bullshit machismo," Jack replied, his grip tightening on the man's shoulder. He ducked his head and said with a threatening smile, "So, how about you do us all a favour and take your coffee to go?"

The dumbass muttered something disparaging under his breath, then whirled back around to face me. He snatched the lidded cup out of my hand, and with one final attempt at a withering glare—to which I gave him a cheerful wave—he stormed out of the shop. Too bad he'd left his dignity behind.

"Well, that was fun," Jack commented as he sidled up to the counter.

Chuckling, I shook my head. "You and I must have two very different ideas of fun."

"That so?" he asked, cocking his head.

"Call me old-fashioned, but fun for me involves a lot less verbal abuse."

He laughed, the sound warm and infectious. "Fair enough."

"Thank you," I said, my voice softening. "For helping me."

He gave a half-nod while still smiling at me.

“Now, what can I get you?” I asked.

His grin widened. “How about a date? Maybe dinner this Friday? My treat, of course.”

Giggles broke out behind us from a few women in line, but I just stood there, confounded.

“A date?” I repeated. “You want to take me out on a date?”

“Well, someone has to make up for that guy’s rudeness.” Jack jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “And...I like you. I’ve been meaning to ask you out for a while now.”

He had? In the ten years I’d lived on Earth, I could count on one hand the number of men who’d asked me out. Mostly because I rarely gave them the chance. I avoided all romance, hesitant to form any lasting attachments. And for good reasons too.

See, I had a lot of baggage—and none of it came with a cute luggage tag.

My memory was...well, unreliable, to put it mildly. It wasn’t until I’d watched a few television shows that I realized the word for my condition was selective amnesia. I remembered the basics—my childhood, my upbringing, and the grueling years I’d spent training with my father’s people, who’d been obsessed with forging me into Lucifer’s perfect weapon. I even remembered uncovering a prophecy that claimed I was destined to destroy Hell and my father along with it.

Talk about awkward family dynamics.

Of course, I hadn’t told Lucifer I’d discovered the prophecy—because I wasn’t an

idiot. I had, however, confided in my so-called best friend Deidre. Big mistake. She'd run straight to Lucifer and spilled all my secrets. Apparently, friendship meant diddly-squat to her.

Predictably, my father hadn't taken the news well. He'd never intended for me to learn about the prophecy, and knowing his daughter was fated to kill him probably hadn't done wonders for his ego. His reaction had been classic Lucifer: explosive anger, over-the-top theatrics, and an unhealthy dose of punishment served with a side of spite.

What I couldn't remember was how I'd ended up here—or how I'd lost my wings. All I knew was I now had two jagged scars stretching across my shoulder blades and down my back. Someone had clearly ripped them off, and given my father's history of pettiness and violence, it seemed wise to assume he'd been the one responsible. I was no genius, but even I could do that kind of math.

But the icing on the hellish cake? Every time I tried to dig into those missing memories, I suffered pain so extreme, it felt like my skull might split open. After the dozenth migraine and zero progress, I'd told myself to stop trying.

Why he'd sent me to Edmonton, of all places, I had no idea. Nor did I know if he ever planned to drag me back to Hell. So, keeping a healthy distance from humans seemed the smartest—and safest—choice.

But Jack intrigued me. Something about his commanding nature and confident air stirred a pleasant, familiar feeling inside me. It reminded me of someone else, though I couldn't quite remember who. Maybe it was time to stop worrying so much and take a chance? Get to know someone other than my coworkers. It'd been ten years, after all. Who knew what Lucifer had planned for me? I certainly didn't.

“Lily?”

I blinked and forced my thoughts back to the present. My coworker Jazz stood next to me, a playful gleam in her eyes.

She nudged my shoulder and scooted me away from the computer. “I’ll take over here. Why don’t you take a break,” she said, offering me a wink before turning to the next customer.

I took a few steps down the counter, and Jack followed, allowing the line to finally start moving again as Jazz started taking the customers’ orders.

When we came to a stop at the far end of the counter, I met his gaze and sank into the warmth, excitement tickling my stomach. I had to admit, he definitely gave me “The Feels.”

“Well?” he asked when I didn’t respond. “Are you interested in going to dinner with me?”

Oh, I was definitely interested. Which surprised the hell out of me, considering no one else had interested me in the past ten years. Maybe I was a sucker for romantic comedies too.

Finally, I nodded. “That sounds great.”

“Perfect!” He flashed me another smile. “Does Friday night work?”

I grinned, barely able to suppress the ridiculous flutter in my chest. I was an immortal celestial, not some human teenager with uncontrollable emotions, but apparently, that didn’t stop the anticipation bubbling up inside me. “Friday sounds wonderful.”

“Excellent.” Jack pulled out his phone. “Why don’t you give me your number, and I’ll text you the details. I presume you’d prefer to meet at the restaurant?”

Truthfully, it didn't matter to me where we met. I didn't have the same fears as other women, considering my background. If he tried anything untoward, he'd learn really quickly just how well I could defend myself. But I was used to playing the part, so I nodded. He pulled out his phone and I recited my digits.

After typing them in, he glanced up at me. "It's not a fake number, is it?"

"No," I said, laughing. Not that someone would admit it was, I supposed. "It's mine."

"Great! Watch for my text," Jack said, grinning. He rapped his knuckles against the counter, then turned to leave.

After a few steps, I realized something and called out, "Wait!"

Jack turned back around.

"What about your coffee?" I asked.

His eyes widened, then he laughed, a deep, genuine sound that made me smile. "You're right. How could I forget? Same as always, please."

Smiling, I poured him a black coffee and handed it across the counter. "No charge. My treat, as a thanks for rescuing me."

Jack winked and took the cup, our fingers briefly touching. My heart quickened, and I quietly chuckled. It'd been a long time since I'd felt anything like that.

"Enjoy your coffee, Jack," I said.

"Oh, I will. Looking forward to Friday. See you then, Lily."

I watched him leave. He held the door open for a mother with a stroller, then paused to give me one last smile before walking out of sight. With a sigh, I turned back to the counter. Jazz had handled the line like the pro she was, chatting and laughing with customers as she efficiently took their orders. A few of the women kept glancing my way with sly grins, as though Jack and I had just provided them with their entertainment for the day.

Shaking my head, I slid back into position next to Jazz, and we worked through the rest of the rush in our usual smooth rhythm. But the second the coffee shop quieted down, Jazz whirled on me, her eyes gleaming with excitement and curiosity.

“Okay,” she said. “Do not leave me hanging. Dish, girl.”

I grabbed a cloth and started cleaning the counter. “Oh, it was nothing.”

Jazz scoffed under her breath and leaned in, her long blonde hair cascading over her shoulder in perfect waves. She stared at me with bright blue eyes that mirrored mine—so much so that when I first started working here, I’d wondered if she was an angel like me. The question had quickly answered itself after watching her for a couple of weeks. It’d become painfully clear when she’d accidentally spilled a full cup of boiling hot coffee on her hand. She’d suffered third-degree burns that had taken months to properly heal. Hot temperatures harmed me, but not to that extent. And I healed similar injuries within hours, not months.

Angel or not, though, she was undeniably gorgeous. I wasn’t lacking in the looks department myself—being a celestial came with its perks. But the real difference between us, aside from my midnight black hair, was how we used our beauty. Jazz wielded hers like a weapon, effortlessly charming men into doing her bidding, including leaving generous tips. Much as I loved—and needed—money, that kind of attention didn’t interest me.

“Come on, Lily,” Jazz said with a wistful sigh. “I saw the way he was drooling over you. Spill.”

I laughed, my cheeks flushing. It wasn’t every day a guy looked at me like that—I never gave them a chance. Any time someone showed interest, I shut them down. Hard. But there was something different about Jack. I didn’t want to push this guy away. I wanted Jack to drool over me.

“He asked me out to dinner on Friday,” I said, giving the counter another rub-down.

Jazz’s eyes widened in surprise. “Dinner? On a Friday night? You?”

I stifled a laugh, understanding her confusion. To her, I was practically a nun—a comparison she’d once made that had sent me into fits of laughter. Oh, if only she knew the truth. I was less Sister Act and more Rosemary’s Baby .

“Well, it’s about time!” she exclaimed.

I snickered and gave the counter one last wipe. “It’s just dinner. Don’t read too much into it.”

Scoffing, Jazz leaned forward and swiped the rag from my hand, tossing it into the sink. “Oh, come on, Lily. Don’t downplay this. In all the years I’ve known you?—”

Five, to be exact.

“—I’ve never seen you show interest in anyone. This is monumental. He’s freaking hot, and he stood up for you.” She pretended to swoon, slumping dramatically against the counter. “Mother, may I?”

“True,” I admitted, a small smile playing on my lips. “But let’s not start planning the

wedding just yet. I'd just like a good, uh, foot rub, ya know?"

"Foot rub." Jazz burst out laughing. "Yeah, let's hope he gives you a good foot rub . A wonderfully orgasmic foot rub."

I laughed. Her excitement was contagious and had me genuinely looking forward to Friday, seeing as how I'd never experienced a good foot rub before—at least not that I could remember.

"Hmm," Jazz hummed, leaning closer. "I hope you have something killer to wear."

I presumed she didn't mean my swords and daggers, of which I had an entire collection.

"Because all I've ever seen you in is an apron." She tilted her head and grinned. "Although, he might enjoy that, especially if you don't wear anything underneath."

"Jazz," I said, shaking my head.

"My point is you can't wear this to a date." She plucked at my jeans and t-shirt beneath my barista apron.

"Why not? He clearly likes the look," I teased.

Jazz rolled her eyes so hard I was afraid they'd get stuck. "You better be joking. Girl, you are not wearing that. Okay, after our shift, you and I are hitting Whyte Ave. There's a boutique nearby I think you'll love. We'll find something great."

I paused, tempted by Jazz's offer. Shopping was one of my few guilty pleasures. A girl could easily lose herself in the many, many department stores Earth had to offer. Especially the yarn stores. My toxic trait was believing I could knit. Spoiler alert: I

couldn't.

Unfortunately, I couldn't take Jazz up on her offer—duty called elsewhere. Specifically, at Wraith & Whiskey, the bar where I slung drinks for vampires, werewolves, and other paranormals. Living alone wasn't cheap, especially with pets to feed. Multiple mouths required multiple jobs.

But Jazz didn't know about my second job. And seeing as how humans didn't know about the paranormal world—other than what existed in fiction—I kept my bartender gig a secret. Thankfully, Jazz didn't invite me out too often, which made it easier to manage my double life.

“Thanks for the offer, but I can't,” I said, trying to sound casual. “I have other plans.”

Jazz frowned. “Other plans? When do you ever have plans?”

“It's just some family stuff,” I said, feigning nonchalance.

She stared at me, then sighed dramatically. “Fine, but I'm not letting you off that easily. We're going shopping before your date. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said. “How about Wednesday? I don't have anything planned then.”

“Great!” Jazz practically bounced on the spot. “Wednesday it is. And don't even think about bailing on me.”

“Wouldn't dream of it,” I replied, knowing full well that she'd hunt me down. According to the Gospel of Jazz, dressing to impress for a date was non-negotiable. The only problem was her idea of classy didn't match mine. She was probably picturing me in six-inch heels and a skirt short enough to flash panty lines—neither of which appealed to me. Raised by Lucifer and his minions, I was a warrior at heart.

My idea of “dressing up” involved armor and weapons, but Earth’s authorities didn’t love that look.

Still, shopping with Jazz sounded fun. Maybe I could talk her down from killer to something a bit more casual—and budget friendly. If I had spare cash, I would have loved nothing more than to splurge on something fancy. Alas, life in Edmonton was costly, and I needed every last dollar for necessities, like heat, water, and power.

The rest of the shift flew by without any more drama, thank goodness, and I could finally clock out. I hung up my apron, grabbed my purse, and checked the time. Five minutes to make it to the bus stop for the first of two buses needed to get me home. I had to eat and change before tackling my shift at Wraith & Whiskey, which was just another quick bus ride from my place.

As I hurried toward the door, Jazz called my name, and I glanced back.

“Wednesday,” she reminded me with a grin. “Don’t forget.”

I grinned back. “Wouldn’t miss it!”

“Now go! Before you miss your bus.”

I waved goodbye and dashed out the door, hoping to catch my ride in time. My boss at the bar didn’t appreciate tardiness, and considering he was a vampire, I definitely didn’t want to end up as his midnight snack as punishment.

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Chapter Two

February in Edmonton was no joke. As I stepped off the bus, the winter wind whipped through the streets, its icy claws tearing right through me, despite my heavy coat. My celestial heritage meant the cold would never kill me. But there were worse things than death and winter was one of them. I'd grown up in Hell, where the temperature constantly hovered around "broil." Given the choice between that and Edmonton's minus-forty windchills, I'd gladly take Hell's scorching heat any day.

I trudged down the street, mindful of the ice, and headed toward Wraith & Whiskey. The bar had a reputation among the paranormal locals that extended far beyond its grimy, graffiti-covered exterior. Every night, it became a lively sanctuary for the supernatural. Magic woven into the foundation provided them a measure of security by ensuring humans couldn't see or enter the building. To them, it simply didn't exist. For the paranormals, though, it was the perfect spot to unwind and let down their hair without fear of exposure.

Unfortunately, the same rules didn't apply to me.

I'd long since learned to guard my secrets, if only so I never gave anyone the chance to betray me again. It was a lesson hard learned. As such, my coworkers knew my name and that I wasn't human, but that was it. To them, I was just Lily the Bartender. And I was okay with that. My anonymity kept me safe.

I stepped inside the bar, and the familiar cacophony of chatter, laughter, and the occasional growl greeted me. The dim lighting provided cover for those who wanted it, and the air was thick with the scent of alcohol and sweat.

“Evening,” I said, giving the bouncer—a grizzled werewolf named Hank—a nod as I took my place behind the bar.

His eyes, aglow with the power of his wolf, slid to me, and he silently nodded back. Hank was a man— wolf —of few words. He ensured no one caused any trouble—a job I sometimes assisted with—collected his pay and left.

I tied my apron around my waist and glanced up to see all the usual faces. Some greeted me with their own smiles, others raised their half-empty glasses, silently asking for another. I’d worked here for three years. I knew the drill and set to work. Three blood-infused bourbons for the vampires at table four, and two blood and cokes for the vampire couple at the back.

Next, I mixed a coral cocktail for the siren Eliza, who currently sat at table three. The vibrant blue drink contained a touch of sea salt and a swirl of kelp extract. Smelled like rotten fish to me, but she slammed it back every single time. Last on my list was a concoction for Nixie, a night hag who liked her drinks potent and dark. I prepared her usual—a shadowy mix of black rum, a hint of wormwood, and a splash of nightshade syrup. Nixie claimed it helped her stay “sharp,” but honestly, I never asked for details. I truly didn’t want to know.

I waved to Hunter, our resident trickster and waiter, and pointed at the tray of seven drinks awaiting his attention. He sauntered over, a mischievous gleam in his eye, and with the snap of his fingers, the drinks shimmered out of sight. A second later, they appeared in front of their respective customer, each one landing perfectly in place.

Hunter flashed me a saucy wink, an impish grin crossing his face. I couldn’t help but marvel at his abilities and his open use of them. As Lucifer’s daughter, I had some talents of my own—like the ability to conjure hellfire and control shadows. But I kept my powers a secret, for fear they’d reveal my identity. My gifts weren’t common, even among paranormals.

“Thanks, Hunter,” I said, wiping down the bar.

“Not a problem,” he replied. He hitched a hip against the counter and leaned closer. “If you’re ever interested in learning what else I can do, don’t hesitate to hit me up.”

I rolled my eyes. Hunter flirted with anything that breathed—and sometimes even that wasn’t a requirement. He didn’t have a type and wasn’t shy about who he invited into his bed. If someone turned him down, he simply moved on to the next in his long, long line of admirers. I couldn’t recall a single night when he’d left the bar unaccompanied. Normally, my complete lack of interest kept his advances at bay, but I guess pickings were slim tonight if he was turning his attention to me.

The night continued with its usual rhythm of drink orders and supernatural banter. Everyone was calm and happy, not a single hint of trouble in sight. Compared to my shift at the coffee shop, it was almost...boring. Not that I relished chaos, but I definitely had an appreciation for it, one I was sure I was born with.

I briefly wondered if something might happen when Veronica, the local vampire leader, stepped into the bar with her usual grace. Alas, she merely took a seat in the back with a few of her people and had a couple of drinks. All in all, the night was proving to be a bit of a snooze fest.

Around midnight, I took a break. I poured myself a whiskey and leaned against the counter, savoring my drink. The night was far from over, but business had already begun to die down, much to my dismay. Fewer patrons meant fewer tips, which meant less moola in my bank account. I’d done decently tonight, cleared about a hundred dollars, but I was the selfish sort who always wanted more. More meant I could run the air conditioning this summer when the temperatures spiked into the thirties.

I was mid-sip and lamenting my boredom when a loud crash erupted from the back of

the bar. I lowered my glass and whirled around, only to find a fight had broken out between two half-shifted werewolves. One had the other by the throat and shook him like a rag doll.

Grinning, I downed my drink in one swallow, the burn fueling me, and stormed toward the chaos.

As I passed a table, I snagged a chair and marched over to the two werewolves, locked in a ferocious brawl as they shoved each other through broken glass and spilled drinks. I caught sight of Hank moving in my periphery, ready to do his job. But where was the fun in that? I loved a good bar brawl—it kept things interesting and gave me a chance to get my hands dirty without revealing who I was. Helping Hank break up fights was practically a hobby of mine. Besides, I enjoyed the rush of using my fists now and then.

Without any warning, I lifted the chair and slammed it down on top of the nearest werewolf's head. He crumpled at my feet with a satisfying thud, now unconscious, and the second werewolf screeched to a stop, his wide eyes fixed on me. I perched my empty hands on my hips and stared the beast down, feeling the familiar thrill of chaos course through my veins.

“Oh, don't stop on my account,” I taunted with a wicked grin. “Things were just getting entertaining.”

The werewolf hesitated, clearly torn between continuing the fight and backing down.

“Come on, now,” I urged. “Don't punk out.”

He bared his teeth and growled, then lunged at me. My instincts took control, and I reacted, swinging a clenched fist right at his face. My knuckles connected with his contorted jaw and the impact sent him flying backwards through the air until he

crashed into a table a good five feet away.

Oops. Maybe I'd hit him a bit too hard.

The werewolf slowly climbed to his feet and shook his head, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. He staggered left, then right, then finally plunked his ass down with a whine. Guess I'd smacked the sense back into him.

Hank's massive form stepped between us, and he sighed. "Take it outside, Devin."

The werewolf pushed to his feet, tail tucked between his legs, and shifted back into human form. With a quick, sheepish glance in my direction, he slipped out into the night. Luckily, Devin hadn't lost his clothes during the shift. I'd seen that happen before—much to my enjoyment—but I highly doubted the humans beyond our doors would appreciate a naked man wandering the streets.

Shaking his head, Hank turned and glared at me. "Really, Lily? A chair?"

I shrugged, unrepentant. "It worked, didn't it?"

Grumbling under his breath, Hank crouched and scooped up the other werewolf, carrying him to the staffroom until he woke up and could shift back. Until then, the werewolf couldn't leave the building. As for me, I started cleaning up the mess, shunting bits of broken furniture aside until I could carry it out to the trash later.

"Damn, Lily," a voice came from behind me.

I turned and laughed at the expression on Eliza's face, her sea-green eyes sparkling with amusement. Her lithe form practically floated toward me, turning the heads of more than a few customers. As a siren, Eliza had that effect on people—effortlessly drawing them in with her ethereal beauty.

Her people, known for their enchanting voices and mesmerizing presences, were legendary for luring sailors to their doom with a single song. But Eliza had repurposed her talents for a more practical use in modern times. Now a member of the Mercenary Guild—a group dedicated to policing the paranormal and enforcing its rules—she used her talents to charm information out of tight-lipped informants and eliminate targets with chilling efficiency. Her gifts were just tools of the trade for her, ones she wielded with deadly precision.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side,” she commented. “Nice use of the chair, by the way.”

“Gotta make use of whatever’s on hand, right?”

She contemplated me with a serious air, while casually weaving her shimmering hair into a side braid. “You know, this isn’t the first time I’ve seen you kick a little ass. You have some serious skills.” She contemplated me a second longer before finally saying, “I’ve been looking for someone to help me with a job. And I think you might be perfect for it.”

A job? Eliza wasn’t the only merc who liked to drink here, but no one had ever asked me to help them out before. To them, I was just a bartender. Granted, this wasn’t the first bar fight I’d stopped, but a brawl wasn’t the same thing as a professional job.

“You want me to tag along on one of your hunts? I’m flattered.”

“Well, you do seem to have a certain...flair,” she said, chuckling. “This particularly troublesome vampire has been causing a lot of trouble—more than your average kind. There’s a hefty bounty on her head, one I wouldn’t mind splitting with the right person. I could use an extra pair of hands, especially ones as talented as yours.”

I snorted. She didn’t know the half of my talents. But I wasn’t yet sure I wanted to

reveal that. “You do realize bartending and bounty hunting are slightly different skill sets, right?”

She smiled, her face transforming into something breathtakingly gorgeous. Phew, even I felt the pull. “I’m aware. But clearly you can handle yourself. And I saw that grin of yours when you dove into the fight. A little bored, are we? Maybe you need to introduce a little excitement into your life—werewolf wrestling notwithstanding.”

I chuckled at her assessment. It’d been years since I’d tasted real excitement—bar brawls notwithstanding. The last time was when I’d stolen two of my father’s hellwyrms and taken them out for a little joyride. That adventure had led to a full-on scuffle between me and a horde of hellspawn that had wanted so desperately to kill me.

Ah, good times.

But I held back, weighing my options. I’d spent a decade flying under the radar for a reason. If my identity got out, I’d have every riffraff within a hundred kilometers trying to make a name for themselves by challenging me. I loved a good fight or three, but not when it risked revealing my secret.

Still, her offer was tempting. So tempting.

Maybe I could take her up on it just this once? Helping her out didn’t mean I had to reveal who I was. I just needed to be careful, keep my powers to myself, and stick to using my blades. I could handle that. I’d been doing it my whole life.

I gathered up the rest of the broken furniture and set it aside before returning behind the bar, where a few customers sat, waiting for refills. Eliza followed.

“Alright,” I said, pouring some drinks. “You’ve piqued my interest. What’s the deal

with this vampire?”

“The usual,” Eliza said as she hopped up onto the closest barstool. “She’s been feeding in the open and risking discovery.”

“Feeding in the open? Rookie mistake,” I said, shaking my head. “Does she have a death wish?”

Eliza snickered. “Apparently, she’s not the sharpest fang in the mouth. But her stupidity is our gain.”

I studied her and considered the offer. “And you’re sure you want to share the reward?”

“The bounty on her head is rather substantial. More than enough for us to split two ways and still live very comfortably. There’s this little black Versace dress I’ve had my eye on...” Eliza’s gaze went dreamy, and her lips turned up into a soft smile that had the customer next to her choking on his spit.

The extra money definitely appealed to me, considering my upcoming shopping trip and date. “Well, I do need a new dress. And some excitement wouldn’t hurt. But do you actually think I’ll be of use to you?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Just bring that right hook with you. One solid hit and that vampire won’t know what day it is.”

I burst out laughing. Eliza joined me, the melodious sound drawing more attention from the patrons still lingering in the bar.

I considered the money. It definitely interested me. A part of me, the part that loved shopping, pictured me striding into the restaurant on Friday night, wearing a

ridiculously expensive dress, one that drew all eyes to me. But the realistic side of me was already thinking about savings and investment funds. This job could provide me the financial boost needed for some real freedom. I loved the idea of not having to worry about rent or bills, and still having money left over to indulge in a few luxuries. Maybe I could even cut back on my hours at the coffee shop. A little extra cash would go a long way in turning my current survival mode into something that resembled living.

An exiled celestial could dream, right?

Caving to the offer, I nodded and reached for two clean glasses. I poured whiskey into both, then handed her one. “Alright, you have a deal.”

Eliza grinned at me. “To new partnerships,” she said, raising her drink.

I clinked my glass against hers, and together we downed the liquid. I wiped my mouth and set the glass down on the counter with a satisfying clink. “So, what’s the plan?”

Eliza did the same, then tapped the rim. I poured her another, careful not to spill any.

“I know her location,” she said. “Tomorrow, we’ll go in, take her by surprise, and collect the bounty. Thankfully, her contract is dead or alive, so it really doesn’t matter how this job gets done.”

Oh, goody. It’d been a long time since I’d killed anything, and a familiar sense of adventure warmed my blood.

“I have some spare weapons I can loan you.”

I shook my head and poured myself another shot. Last one for the night. “I have my

own, don't worry about that."

Eliza's perfectly shaped eyebrows climbed her forehead. "You do?"

I snickered. "I'm a bit of a collector," was all I offered.

"Well, alright then." Eliza slid off the barstool, then drained her shot and lowered the glass. "See you tomorrow night. I'll pick you up at closing time. With luck, by next sunrise, our bank accounts will be flush with cash."

Yup, I definitely got a thrill imagining that. "Sounds good."

As Eliza walked away, I smiled. This was exactly the kind of thing I'd thrived on back in Hell, the kind of chaos I craved. I'd missed it dearly since my exile. Sure, there was a risk involved, but as long as I played it smart and kept my identity under wraps, I could handle it. Besides, a little danger never hurt anyone.

I returned to my duties behind the bar, my mind buzzing with anticipation. The night continued its usual rhythm, but there was an added spark in my step, a new energy that came from knowing something exciting hovered on the horizon.

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Chapter Three

A few hours before dawn, I dragged myself up the stairs to my apartment. Pulling double shifts—first at the coffee shop and then at Wraith & Whiskey—had me feeling like I'd gone ten rounds with a hellhound. Each step was a test of endurance, and I often wondered how anyone—human or otherwise—managed this kind of grind without collapsing. Even in Hell, with its endless days of training and fighting, I hadn't been this exhausted. One would think that after all this time, I'd be used to working such long hours, but sadly, I was not.

I fumbled with my keys, my fingers clumsy from exhaustion. After a few failed attempts, I finally managed to unlock the door. Somewhere between leaving the bar and hopping on the bus, my brain had turned to mush. It had taken every ounce of willpower I had just to keep my eyes open during the ride home.

Pushing open the door, the familiar and comforting scent of my apartment greeted me—a blend of vanilla and citrus candles. I liked to burn them to mask the lingering scent of cat, imp, and the earthy aroma of yarn. Dropping my purse with a heavy thud, I kicked off my shoes, sighing in relief as my toes finally stretched in newfound freedom.

I leaned against the nearest wall and closed my eyes, weariness seeping into my bones. I considered curling up right there on the floor. Even that sounded better than dragging myself the twenty feet down the hall to my bedroom. But I had to shower first. I was covered in booze, coffee, and who knew what else. Going to bed unclean was not an option.

Eventually, I pulled myself together and pushed off the wall.

“Purratory, Vol, I’m home!” I called out.

A slightly overweight ginger cat sauntered into view, his green eyes half-closed in disdainful judgment. Purratory, or Purrpy as I affectionately called him, clearly believed I existed only to fulfill his cuddle quota. He often vocalized his dislike of me going to work—regardless of the fact that my jobs kept him fed and living in luxurious comfort. Luxurious comfort being my rundown, one-bedroom apartment with thin walls and a perpetually leaky faucet in the kitchen that my landlord kept insisting he would fix. But to Purrpy, this was his kingdom, and I, the servant who fulfilled his every whim.

As I bent down to give Purrpy a scratch behind the ears, a tiny, high-pitched voice interrupted. “Hey, Meat Sack! Did you bring me anything fun?”

My focus darted to the source of those colorful words. A small imp emerged from behind the couch, his dark eyes gleaming with mischief. Vol stood six inches tall, with leathery skin the color of charred ash, and wore a jungle explorer outfit I’d stolen from a doll. Next to a pair of jagged horns were two tiny, pointed ears that twitched with every sound. He also had a tail that flicked back and forth like a whip. He bared his small but incredibly sharp teeth—ask me how I knew—in a grin that promised a whole world of trouble.

“Hi, Vol,” I commented with narrowed eyes. As far as roommates went, he was unapologetically the worst. It was rare for me to come home and find everything in order. Imps weren’t exactly known for their manners, and Vol embodied chaos to his devilish core—kinda like someone else I knew.

Straightening, I perched my hands on my hips and surveyed the apartment. Everything looked in order, but I knew better. Especially considering the diabolical

grin on his little face.

“What have you been up to?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he replied with an exaggerated innocence, which I didn’t buy for a second. “Just...redecorating.”

I followed his gaze to the corner of the room where a pile of unraveled yarn sat—a pile of yarn that had previously taken the form of a half-knitted hat. And this, ladies and gentlemen, was why I said I couldn’t knit. Not for lack of trying, but because the little turd never let me finish a project. Vol had a nasty habit of destroying anything I made to fashion a new nest. Because, in his opinion, one simply wasn’t enough.

We’d been playing this game for the last eight years, ever since I’d stumbled across him huddled in a snowbank, shivering and half-frozen. Truly, it was my fault for welcoming the little toad into my life. But I hadn’t been able to walk away, knowing he would die if I’d left him there. So, I’d scooped him up, wrapped him in a scarf, and carried him home. Once he’d thawed out and realized I’d meant him no harm, his impish nature had taken over, and he’d quickly made himself at home. The very scarf I’d wrapped him in had become the first casualty. He’d shredded it to make himself a bed, because the cat bed I’d bought him apparently hadn’t been good enough.

Since then, none of my handmade projects were safe. I knew better than to continue knitting, but there was this niggling thought in my head, one that said better the yarn than my bedding, couch, or heaven forbid, Purrky. For some reason, destroying my knitting projects quelled his destructive nature. So, I kept buying yarn and pretended like his antics pissed me off. Truly, I was just relieved he hadn’t demolished the entire apartment. I was pretty sure my pet deposit didn’t cover imps.

“Vol,” I grumbled, knowing he would appreciate my dramatics. “I needed that yarn for a project.”

He shrugged, perching on the edge of the couch and swinging his legs. “You needed it, I needed it. Let’s call it even. Besides, you weren’t even using it.”

Playing into my role, I glared at him. “No more destroying my things, okay? I can’t afford to keep replacing stuff!” As it was, tonight’s tips would likely go to replenishing the stash. Good yarn wasn’t cheap.

Vol snickered, clearly unrepentant. “Sure, Lily. Whatever you say.”

Purrgy, tired of us ignoring him, jumped onto the couch and plopped down in a huff. His green eyes followed Vol’s every movement, as if waiting for the perfect moment to pounce. The two had a love-hate relationship that mostly revolved around Purrgy tolerating Vol’s antics until he crossed a line, at which point the cat would swat at the imp.

No one ever said my life was boring.

With a crazed laugh, Vol leapt onto Purrgy’s back. The cat let out a yowl of protest but didn’t move. Honestly, I think he just liked the attention. They were each other’s constant companions, after all.

Vol cackled and gripped Purrgy’s fur like a tiny, demented jockey. “Giddy up, Purrgy!”

I rolled my eyes, suddenly regretting letting Vol watch a few Western films over the weekend.

After a lazy tail flick, Purrgy rose to his feet and jumped off the couch, which had Vol screaming like a lunatic. He whooped with joy and bounced on Purrgy’s back. “Let’s go!”

I laughed at the sight. “Alright, you two. Play nice. I’m going to take a shower. Don’t destroy the place while I’m gone.”

As I headed to the bathroom, the sound of Vol’s maniacal laughter and Purrky’s disgruntled meows followed me down the hall. I slipped into the bathroom, stripped, then fired up the shower and hopped in. The second the icy-cold water hit my skin, I gasped and leapt back out.

Yet another thing my landlord had promised to fix.

Shivering, I waited for the water to finally warm up, then tucked back under the spray and gave a contented sigh. There was nothing quite like a hot shower at the end of a long day. I basked in the warmth, then washed away the grime of the day, all while listening to the familiar insanity coming from the living room. Vol’s crazed laughter echoed through the walls and brought a smile to my lips.

After finishing my shower, I wrapped myself in a towel and headed back into the living room. Vol and Purrky had settled somewhat, with Vol now perched on the arm of the couch, surveying his “kingdom” with a smug expression. Purrky sprawled in his nearby cat bed, half asleep, though his ears still twitched at every sound.

Recognizing that they were done fighting for the night, I escaped to my bedroom, where I quickly dressed before Vol decided to come barging in. The first—and only—time he’d seen me naked, he’d thrown himself dramatically to the ground, wailing about how “it burned” his eyes and he’d “gone blind.” His theatrics had sounded so convincing that I’d actually worried about him. Since then, I’d made it a point to dress in private. Better safe than sorry.

Now wrapped in my coziest Christmas skull pajamas, I tucked myself into bed and stretched from tip to toe. In my head, I counted down from thirty. When I reached ten, the bed shifted under extra weight. A quick glance revealed Purrky, with Vol

astride his back, half sprawled as though their latest antics had worn him out.

Purrgy approached and nudged his cheek against my chin before tucking himself into his usual nook beside me. Once Purrgy settled, Vol hopped off and took his usual spot on the second pillow.

Smiling, I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

* * *

Wraith & Whiskey thrummed with energy tonight. The bar teemed with patrons—both familiar and new—and lively conversation and laughter echoed from each corner. Between mixing drinks and bantering with the regulars, my mind raced with anticipation of what the night might bring. After all, it wasn't every day I had the opportunity to hunt a vampire with my best swords in tow, swords quietly tucked away in the staff room so as not to attract any attention.

I slid a neon-pink cocktail across the bar to a pixie, who winked at me and left a generous tip. How she planned to carry a glass as big as her was beyond me, but I'd learned not to question these things.

A smile crossed my lips at the sight of her fluttering back to her table, where her companions awaited—a dragon shifter and a member of the fae court. In all my years pouring drinks, I'd never had the pleasure of serving such distinguished guests, as their kind didn't particularly enjoy venturing into the human world. Where they'd met the pixie, I had absolutely no idea, but the three seemed to get along rather famously. Clearly, they were involved in some form of intimate relationship, and while I wondered how a pixie, dragon shifter, and fae had, erm, relations considering their range in sizes, I figured those details were best left to them to figure out.

From the looks of it, I wasn't the only one curious about them. Their presence was

certainly causing a stir. Heads turned and whispers followed them, adding a spark of excitement to the normally dank, dark air.

My coworker, Mason, sidled up to the bar and took a seat across from me, placing his empty drink tray down on the counter. He rattled off a list of requested drinks, which I immediately started mixing.

He swivelled on the stool and perused the bar. “Busy night,” he commented, his attention drifting to the unusual trio.

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed. “Feel free to jump in and mix a few drinks yourself. I’ve been slammed since we opened.”

Mason chuckled, a deep and gravelly sound that perfectly matched his gargoyle nature. I’d never seen him in statue form, but when we first met, he’d assured me he was made of the hardest granite. I admit, I’d given him a high-five for that one.

“Trust me, there’s a reason I’m a waiter and not a bartender,” he said. “I think the only drink I know how to make is a scotch on the rocks.”

“Everyone can make that one,” I teased.

“Oh, and a gin and tonic.”

I chuckled before placing the first few drinks on his tray. As I reached for a bottle of vermouth, a sudden commotion stole my attention. My focus shot to the table responsible just in time to catch the dragon shifter laugh at something the pixie said. Then he leaned back in his seat, tilted his head up, and belched a jet of fire straight up into the air.

Silence fell over the bar for a few seconds before everyone erupted into cheers and

laughter, egging him on. The pixie squealed in delight, but the fae lord merely raised an eyebrow, completely unfazed by the show.

I merely blinked, then lifted my gaze to the ceiling to ensure the dragon shifter hadn't done any lasting damage. "Well, that's a new one. Can't say I've ever seen a dragon burp like that before."

Mason laughed. "Seen many dragons, have ya?"

"Not at all," I said, chuckling.

"Me neither. Guess there's a first time for everything."

Shaking my head, I continued mixing the last two drinks.

"And speaking of seeing spectacular things, I've recently seen something hella spectacular," Mason said.

I gave a quiet snicker. In all my years on Earth, one thing had become abundantly clear—both humans and paranormals loved a good dose of gossip. And me being a bartender meant I was always on the receiving end of everyone's secrets. I'd heard things I could never unhear.

"You know how I watch over the Alberta Legislature Building?" he asked, continuing without my encouragement.

"Sure," I said. That was his daytime spot. All gargoyles turned to stone at sunrise, so they each had a favourite perch they deemed theirs. According to Mason, he mostly slept during the day, since he couldn't do much else, but he was aware of everything that happened around him even when in stone form.

“Well, a few days ago,” he said, “I was napping in the sunlight when a portal opened up nearby, behind the building. And wouldn’t you know it, but a bloody hellspawn just strolled right out.”

My heart slammed to a complete and utter stop, and my hand froze mid-pour. I lifted my head and stared at him, goosebumps rolling down my arms. “What?”

“A hellspawn,” he repeated. “Saw it with my very own eyes.”

Had this announcement come from anyone else, I would have questioned them. The Alberta Legislature Building was by no means small, and the grounds spanned quite the distance. But gargoyles had the sharpest vision of all paranormals—they could see for miles, even in their stone form. More than that, gargoyles were “watchers,” renowned for passing down ancient knowledge from one generation to the next, so they were privy to information most others had forgotten. So, if Mason said he’d seen a hellspawn, I was inclined to believe him, much to my dismay.

Hellspawn were my father’s creation—terrifying creatures born from the darkest depths of Hell. He forged them using the souls of the damned, fusing them with the dark essence of his fallen angels. Each one was a walking embodiment of pure malice and destruction, crafted to serve Lucifer’s every whim. The process consumed the soul entirely, leaving behind nothing but a body warped by evil.

My father’s designs varied. Some, like vampires, still resembled their former human selves, but were “improved” with fangs and claws. Others were far more grotesque, with horns, bulbous poisonous skin, jagged horns, and bisected tongues. But one trait remained constant—their insatiable hunger to kill anything that moved.

Growing up in Hell, I knew these creatures well. I’d both trained alongside and killed them. I’d watched as my father grew their numbers with one goal in mind: dominating Earth.

According to Calyx—my father’s scribe—Lucifer had almost succeeded once, long before my birth. He’d unleashed the hellspawn on Earth and set them free to wreak havoc and chaos. But Heaven had other plans. They intervened and slammed the portal gates shut between Earth and Hell, thereby cutting off Lucifer’s plans to invade. But such a move had come with one downside: it’d trapped many of the hellspawn on Earth.

Over the past decade, I’d done my own research and pieced together what happened after Heaven sealed the gates to the portals. The hellspawn trapped on Earth were freed from my father’s control and left to fend for themselves. Some remained loyal to their dark master and continued to destroy everything in his name, while others chose to adapt by blending into the human world. Those who were successful interbred with humans, and from those unions, the paranormals were born—earthbound vampires, werewolves, witches, and the like. Those who refused to adapt, who wanted nothing more than to murder and feed, were hunted to extinction. To this day, people still told stories about the monsters and demons that once infested Earth. They just didn’t remember that those monsters—hellspawn—had been real.

But despite their common ancestry, there was one critical difference between the two.

Souls.

Paranormals had them. Hellspawn did not. And that lack of a soul made hellspawn truly monstrous creatures. If one had crossed over onto Earth, it meant everyone was in danger.

Maybe I’d misheard Mason. Or maybe my brain was playing tricks on me after all these years. Hellspawn weren’t supposed to be able to cross over. I mean, I was here, but I wasn’t a hellspawn. Still, Heaven had supposedly sealed the gates millennia ago. So how was one here now?

Of course, I didn't expect any answers to suddenly come to me. For ten years, this very question had plagued me—how did I get here? Why could I cross over when no one else could? And now, Mason was telling me that a hellspawn had walked right through—and in the same spot where I'd arrived no less.

That was too coincidental for my liking. What the hell was going on here?

“Are you sure?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. “There are other realms. Maybe the portal was to one of them?”

“Oh, I'm sure,” Mason commented, his gaze scanning our patrons. “My great-grandmother used to tell stories about hellspawn—tales she'd heard from her great-grandmother. She was always very clear about one thing: blood-red eyes are a dead giveaway. As is their pitch-black aura. No doubt about it—it was a hellspawn.”

A shiver crept down my spine. Blood red-eyes were confirmation enough—while not all hellspawn had them, enough did to ease any doubt. But their aura? That was news to me. I hadn't realized gargoyles could see energies like that.

I made a mental note to visit the Alberta Legislature Grounds in the next few days, just to ensure everything was copacetic. Not that I could do anything about the portal, but a quick look couldn't hurt.

“You okay, Lily?” Mason asked.

I blinked away the stupor and forced a smile. “Yeah, sorry. I'm just worried about there being a hellspawn here. That's not good news by any means.”

Mason's head bobbed up and down. “I've been spreading the word and know some people who are on the lookout. A few mercs are even excited to track it down. A new challenge they're itching to take on.”

While Mason had meant that as a joke, his words sparked fear in me. After eons of interbreeding with humans, the paranormals had lost much of their power. Few, if any, could take on a hellspawn and live to tell the tale. I could, but I was a celestial. My abilities far surpassed paranormals. Hellspawn, on the other hand, were darker—pure, undiluted evil, crafted in my father’s name. Neither humans nor paranormal stood a chance against them.

Which meant this was very, very bad news.

In all my time on Earth, I’d never encountered a hellspawn. Nor had I heard any talk of anyone crossing paths with one.

If Mason had truly seen a portal from Hell, then someone—or something—had to have opened it. But who? How? And from what side? Could it have been Lucifer?

Oh, hell. I did not love that scenario. Not one bit.

“You haven’t seen any other portals?” I asked.

“Nah. Just the one. It closed a few minutes later, and only the one hellspawn came through.”

I released a shaky breath. That was something at least.

“Hey, you okay, Lily?” Mason asked. “You seem a bit pale.”

“Huh?”

Mason laid a warm hand on mine. “You look sick.”

“No, I’m fine,” I said, and forced a fake laugh to prove it. I only hoped Mason was

mistaken. “Well, if there’s really a hellspawn in the city, then we all need to be careful. Keep an eye out. That sort of thing. Just in case.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Does anyone even know how to kill one? I mean, we definitely can’t have something like that just wandering around town. Imagine the chaos.”

“Decapitation is always the best way,” I replied instinctively.

Mason blinked at me. “Wow, you answered that awfully quick. Got some experience killing these things, do you?”

I forced a laugh. “No. Just a, uh, hobby of mine.”

“Killing hellspawn is your hobby?” Mason asked, clearly puzzled.

“More like researching them,” I corrected quickly. “I’ve read a lot about them.”

“Ah, an enthusiast,” he said, his expression relaxing. He opened his mouth to add to our conversation, but a table of shifters started waving their hands at us, signaling for service.

I waved back, then pointed Mason in their direction. “Get going. Duty calls.”

He nodded, picked up his tray, and got back to work. We didn’t have time to speak again until closing time. But for the rest of the night, my thoughts kept racing. By the time we’d locked the bar doors, I had a headache. There wasn’t any time to dwell on it, though, because Eliza was waiting, and we had a vampire to hunt.

After closing up, I hurried into the staff room, pulled on my winter gear, and grabbed my things—including my duffel bag full of weapons. Then I bolted out the back door, waving a quick goodbye to Mason. The wintry night air blasted over me, and I

breathed it in, hoping it would clear my head. But it didn't.

I found Eliza parked in front of the bar, her car running to keep it warm. I hurried to the passenger side and tossed my gear into the back seat. Then I climbed inside before the cold seeped through my layers.

Once belted in, I turned and faced Eliza, who flashed me an eager grin. "Ready for this?"

"Sure," I replied, trying to match her excitement. I certainly wasn't as excited as I'd been yesterday, and I could thank Mason for that. The thought of a hellspawn walking around Edmonton had soured my mood.

But Eliza seemed unwilling to let me stew in my misery. She nudged my shoulder, her energy practically buzzing in the car.

"C'mon, this is going to be fun!" she said. "Aren't you pumped? We've got a vampire to hunt."

I grinned, her contagious enthusiasm reigniting that spark within until I practically vibrated with anticipation.

"That's better!" Eliza chuckled, eyes gleaming, as she pulled away from the bar. "Trust me, you're gonna love this. There's no better feeling."

Yes, that I knew.

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Chapter Four

Eliza pulled into an empty parking lot and killed the engine. The heat dissipated, and almost instantly, the chill started to creep back in. I leaned forward and studied our surroundings. We'd ventured into the north-eastern part of Edmonton, a place I'd never visited before, considering I lived in the south-eastern area of Mill Woods.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"This is Beverly," Eliza said. "It's an older part of the city, with a lot of history. Used to be a coal-mining district way back when. Tunnels run all throughout the area."

I considered the location. Every earthbound vampire I knew lived their best lives in apartments, homes—whatever suited their lifestyle. The only vamps I knew to haunt tunnels or caves were hellspawn vampires. Then again, Hell wasn't exactly known for its booming housing market. The crème de la crème of real estate down there consisted of a lava pit with a view, maybe a stalagmite or two for ambiance.

Still, if someone wanted to avoid attention—especially after breaking the cardinal rule of feeding in the open—hiding off the grid made sense. And these tunnels were about as "off the grid" as it got.

"Most of the mines are sealed," Eliza continued, "but this isn't the first time I've tracked a vampire here. Shall we?"

I nodded and exited the car. The cold hit us, sharp and biting. I pulled my coat tighter around me and ignored the chill. Eliza hurried around her car and popped the trunk,

dragging her own gear bag out as I pulled mine from the backseat.

I dropped it on the ground and unzipped it, revealing my modest collection of weapons. Inside were two swords and a handful of daggers, all of which had arrived with me on Earth.

“Whoa,” Eliza whispered. “Where did you get those?”

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. “Family heirlooms.”

It wasn’t a lie, per se. The swords were unlike any of Earth’s weapons. The first was a slender, double-edged blade, forged from infernum, a rare and indestructible metal found only in the deepest pits of Hell. Runes etched the hilt, which glowed with a hellish crimson light. I’d named this sword Inferno’s Kiss, because it could channel my hellfire, allowing it to sear through flesh and bone with nary a thought.

My second sword, Shadow’s Embrace, was shorter but no less deadly. The tenebrium metal was so dark, the blade seemed to drink in the surrounding shadows. Dark hellspawn hide wrapped around the hilt, and the blade had a slight curve, perfect for slashing.

As for daggers, I had three: Whisper, Hell’s Fang, and Oblivion’s Edge. They didn’t possess any special enhancements, but they were wicked sharp and lethal in the right hands. Sometimes, all a girl needed was a sharp stabby knife.

“Family heirlooms?” Eliza echoed. “I’ve never seen anything like them.”

I frowned, reconsidering my decision to bring these weapons along. As much as I missed using my blades, maybe bringing them on this hunt hadn’t been such a great idea. They certainly attracted attention—the kind I could do without.

“I don’t mean to question your competence, but do you know how to use them?” she asked.

A small smile came to my lips. “Definitely. My father wasn’t exactly the nurturing type. He had incredibly high expectations of me and raised me as a warrior.” I stood and held Inferno’s Kiss up to the moonlight. “Admittedly, I’m a bit rusty. I haven’t held a sword in a decade. But I’m sure the muscle memory will kick right in.”

Eliza watched me with a mix of curiosity and amusement as I began to gear up. I secured Inferno’s Kiss over my right shoulder and Shadow’s Embrace over my left, each hilt positioned for quick access. Then I distributed each of my daggers across my belt: Whisper on my left, Hell’s Fang on my right, and Oblivion’s Edge at the small of my back.

“Impressive setup,” Eliza remarked as she reached into her own bag and pulled out her weapons. She armed herself with a sleek crossbow and a pair of silver-tipped stakes, the tools of a seasoned hunter. She slung the crossbow over her shoulder and secured the stakes in holsters on her thighs.

I admired her efficiency. Eliza was a professional through and through, and it was clear she knew exactly what she was doing. “Alright,” I said, discarding my coat for easy access to my weapons. It was cold as a witch’s teat out here, but it wouldn’t kill me. “So, what’s the plan?”

Eliza glanced around, her eyes scanning the darkened streetscape. “We wait. The vampire usually returns to her lair just before sunrise. We’ll stay out of sight and ambush her when she gets close.”

I nodded. “What does she look like? Not that I’m expecting others, but it might be handy to have a description of the target.”

“Pale, dark hair, and apparently has a penchant for leather,” Eliza replied. “She’s got a bit of a gothic vibe going on.”

Didn’t all vampires? From what I’d seen, they all had the same look.

Eliza led us a good couple kilometers away from the car to what appeared to be a boarded-up mine entrance. We found a spot with a good vantage point, but out of sight from the entrance the vampire was using. Settling in for a long stakeout, we made ourselves as comfortable as possible on the cold ground.

“So,” Eliza said, breaking the silence. “How does someone raised as a warrior become a bartender?”

I quietly snickered. “I guess that isn’t the typical career trajectory, is it?”

Eliza joined in with a chuckle, her breath visible in the frigid air. “I’m not sure. I don’t know many bartenders.”

“Fair enough.” I repositioned myself to keep my daggers from digging into my hips. “I guess I just wasn’t keen on the expectations my father placed on me.” Truth. “And he had no intention of letting me lead my own life. So, when I got the chance, I carved out a new path.” That part, admittedly, wasn’t true. But I couldn’t admit that someone—most likely my father—had ripped off my wings and exiled me to Earth. That might have revealed just a smidgen too much about me.

“And this new path of yours led to bartending?” Eliza asked.

“It led me here,” was all I said. “But I had to make a living somehow, didn’t I?”

“Bounty hunting pays a lot more, you know,” she said. “I haven’t seen you in serious action yet, but you claim you know how to use those swords of yours. So why not

take that path?”

“At the time, I just wanted something peaceful. Something that didn’t involve fighting.”

“Says the woman who swatted down a werewolf in a single strike.”

I laughed. She wasn’t wrong. I had my skills—thanks to my father’s upbringing. He’d insisted his minions mold me into a weapon, and they’d done exactly that. My life in Hell had been anything but pleasant. The days had been an endless blur of training sessions, fighting hellspawn, demons, my father. Earth was a cakewalk compared to that. And when I arrived here, the last thing I’d wanted was more fighting.

But I couldn’t share any of that with Eliza.

“I wanted something different,” I told her. “Something that gave me freedom from the life my father raised me in.”

“Ah. A rebel,” she teased.

I snorted a laugh. Yeah, a rebel. An apt description considering my bloodline. I was Lucifer’s daughter, after all.

“Then what made you agree to help me here tonight?” Eliza asked.

“The money,” I admitted almost instantly. “I, uh, have a date on Friday night. And a friend of mine is insisting on taking me shopping beforehand. My bank account rests perpetually in the three digits range.” I grinned and shook my head. “Gotta admit, it’s easier to knock a guy’s socks off if you have the cash flow to buy a sexy black dress.”

Eliza lowered her head, her shoulders shaking with laughter. “All this, for a guy?”

“Oh, there are other things I need, and money is required to, you know, buy stuff. But he’s a good guy,” I told her. “At least, I think he is. He rescued me from a rude customer yesterday. Not many people would have done that these days.”

“Oh, got a savior kink, do you?”

My eyes popped wide, and I stared at her. “A savior kink?”

“Sure! Every girl dreams of being rescued by Prince Charming.”

I rolled my eyes. “If that’s a kink, I must’ve missed the memo.”

Eliza grinned, then pulled her hat lower, ensuring it covered her ears. “So, what’s his story? This Prince Charming of yours.”

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted. “But for once, I want to find out.”

“Well, I hope it goes well,” she said, her voice soft. She glanced at her watch and sighed. “When is this vampire going to show up?”

A good question. The ground was bone-chillingly cold and making me yearn for a hot shower or maybe a mug of hot chocolate.

“Are you sure this is her lair?” I asked, forcing myself to ignore the discomfort.

“Positive,” Eliza said. “I’ve been tracking her for a few nights. She’s usually back by now.”

I frowned. “Think we scared her off?”

“Anything’s possible,” Eliza said with a shrug. “But we’ll keep waiting. We don’t have anywhere else to be, right?”

Nodding, I forced my attention back onto the surrounding area, straining my ears for any hint of movement. Hopefully, our target made an appearance before sunrise. I would hate for a human to catch us mid-hunt.

Time stretched endlessly. Every now and then, Eliza shifted her weight beside me, her breath visible in the frosty air. I caught her wincing a few times, and it made me wonder what the cold was doing to her. I knew very little about siren physiology.

Just when I was beginning to think the vampire might have given us the slip, I heard it—a faint rustling in the distance.

I tapped Eliza on the arm and pointed toward the sound. She nodded, her eyes narrowing as she focused on the source of the noise.

Moments later, someone appeared. I couldn’t see her face, but from the back, I noticed a long, swinging black ponytail. She moved with an almost feline grace as she glided through the shadows, slinking toward the mine entrance.

Definitely a vampire. And hopefully ours.

I reached for Inferno’s Kiss, my fingers curling around the hilt. But Eliza shook her head and signaled for me to wait.

I raised a questioning brow, but she just shook her head again and pointed up the road. There, someone stood on their porch, dressed for what looked like a run.

My jaw dropped. A run in the middle of winter, this early in the morning? I shook my head—humans constantly astounded me. Usually, at this time of day, I’d already

tucked myself into bed, and no amount of anything could get me out. Especially not exercise .

I turned my attention back to the vampire, watching as she pulled the boards away from the entrance, then ducked inside and closed the entrance, disappearing from view.

“That’s our mark,” Eliza confirmed. “We’ll wait for the human to leave, then we’ll follow the vampire inside. Fewer witnesses, and less risk of her escaping.”

I nodded, though the anticipation was nearly killing me. It didn’t take long for the runner to pass by, completely oblivious to the two of us crouched on the ground nearby. Once we couldn’t hear their footfalls anymore, we rose from our position and crept toward the mine entrance.

Eliza reached for the boards and eased them back with nary a sound. Impressive.

She led me inside, where darkness enveloped us. I shot Eliza a glance. She nodded, silently answering my unspoken question—we could both see in the pitch black.

Together, we moved forward. The mine entrance was narrow, and the wooden supports were still standing, but the workers had long since cleared out the equipment.

We inched onward, careful of the uneven floor, and followed the path deeper into the main area. Eventually, we reached a larger chamber, dimly lit by flickering candles placed haphazardly around the room. The vampire stood at the far end, her back still to us. She was rummaging through a bag, muttering to herself. Eliza and I exchanged a glance, silently communicating our plan. I tightened my grip on Inferno’s Kiss, ready for the confrontation.

Eliza raised her crossbow, aiming it at the vampire's back. I stepped forward, my blade poised for a strike. But then, our target turned.

And my heart stopped dead in my chest.

I knew this vampire.

Chapter Five

Of all the bloodsuckers in the universe, it had to be her.

Deidre .

The ex-best friend who'd stabbed me in the back so fast, it'd been a miracle she hadn't dislocated something in the process.

Her crimson eyes locked with mine, and for one single moment, the world stood still. Then, without so much as a word, she lunged. I barely had time to brace myself before she slammed into me, her momentum driving me backward until I hit the nearest wall. The impact shook loose a shower of dust and debris from the ceiling, coating us both in a fine layer.

Damn, she was fast. Faster than I remembered. Or maybe I just wasn't used to fighting hellspawn anymore.

Eliza positioned herself to the side, crossbow raised, her finger moving toward the trigger. I couldn't let her take the shot, though. Not yet. I had too many questions that needed answering first, and I'd never get them if we killed her now.

I took control of the fight and slammed my elbow into Deidre's ribs, pushing her away from the wall. The satisfying crunch of bones breaking spurred me on, and I drove her backward, my fists pummeling every square inch of her—and deservedly so.

Rage and hatred, festering for years from her betrayal, boiled over. I kicked her into the opposite wall with enough force to crack the stone, then dashed forward and pressed Inferno's Kiss—already vibrating from the heat of my fury—against her throat.

If I applied enough pressure, I could cleave her head from her body, and the panic in her eyes told me she knew it. She froze, as though weighing her options, before growling and driving her knee into my gut. I absorbed the hit with a slight hiss of pain, then seized her by the throat, pulled her away from the wall, and slammed her back into it. Her skull ricocheted off the rock, hard enough to rattle the ceiling.

Her hands flew to my wrists, nails digging deep as she twisted and clawed, trying to free herself.

“What are you waiting for?” Eliza called out, her voice echoing in the tunnel. “Kill her already!”

Oh, I wanted to. I owed her so much pain. My muscles burned with the desire to end her. I wanted nothing more than to push Inferno's Kiss through her throat until the blade bit into the rock wall behind her. Her death would be justified, but I forced the urge down and leaned in, my face inches from hers.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Deidre?” I demanded, my voice venomous.

Eliza's footsteps paused behind me. “Wait—you know this vampire?”

“Unfortunately,” I grumbled, my eyes never leaving Deidre's face.

Deidre, ever the actress, smiled sweetly. “Lily, what a...pleasant surprise.” Her voice oozed false sincerity, her lips twisting into an insufferable smirk that only stoked my rage.

It took every ounce of restraint not to cut her head off right here and now. In all of existence, no one deserved a more violent and brutal end than her. Well, maybe Lucifer himself, but Deidre was a close second.

“Okay, well, regardless of how you two know each other, we need to kill her,” Eliza continued. “So get on with it.”

“Give me a second,” I bit out, my voice steady despite the tempest of emotions tearing through me.

“No, kill her now,” Eliza said, exasperated. “Vamps are slippery bastards—give her an inch, and she’ll rip your throat out.”

She wasn’t wrong. I’d fought enough hellspawn vampires to know their tricks. Earthbound vampires were dangerous, sure, but they were puppies compared to the monsters my father forged.

“I’ve got this,” I said, my gaze locked on Deidre. “Just give me a sec to talk to her first, okay?”

Eliza growled low in her throat but agreed, the tension in her steps evident as she grudgingly backed away.

Deidre’s smile only widened, despite my blade digging into her neck. “How sweet. Nice to see you’ve made friends, Lil. Though, that didn’t work out well for you last time, did it? Doubt it will this time, either.”

Before I could stop myself, I pushed my blade’s sharp edge into her throat, splitting her skin. Blood slicked her throat, and, for some reason, the sight of it appeased the storm raging inside me.

Deidre had been my only friend in Hell—a sad reflection on my life, I know. Hell wasn't exactly a friendly place. Its residents preferred disembowelments over tea parties. But Deidre had been different. I'd trusted her, bonded with her, shared all my secrets with her. And how had she repaid me? By selling me out to Lucifer faster than I could say "eternal damnation."

I was missing a lot of memories, but sadly not the one of her standing next to my father, cold and detached, as my world crumbled around me. I'd only recently uncovered the prophecy—the one that claimed I'd destroy Hell and my father. And like a trusting fool, I'd confided in Deidre, only for her to scurry off and whisper all my secrets to Lucifer. Turned out, our so-called friendship had been a lie from the very start, a sham orchestrated by my father so he could keep tabs on me. She was his spy, her loyalty to him and him alone.

That was the day I learned to trust no one.

Fury broiled my veins. I wanted to shove my sword up her ass and roast her like a stuck pig. But again, I couldn't. Not yet anyway. First, I needed answers.

What was she doing here? And more important, how had she gotten here? I couldn't ask either question with Eliza in earshot. I also wouldn't get any answers if I shoved my blade through her mouth. At least, not right away. Obviously, Deidre was the hellspawn Mason had spotted, but that didn't explain how she'd opened the portal in the first place. Looked like checking out the Legislature grounds had just climbed to the top of my to-do list.

I gave Deidre a rough shake. "You have five seconds to tell me what you're doing here before I remove your head. So, start talking."

"I kind of need my head to talk, Lil. Do you want answers or not?" Deidre commented casually, as though this was an everyday occurrence for her. Then again,

it probably was . It certainly had been for me when I'd lived way down south. Violence was the way of life there.

Deidre lifted her hand and touched the blood at her throat. Hunger ignited in her eyes, and while holding my gaze, she licked her fingers clean. Her mind games wouldn't work on me, though.

“So help me, Deidre?—”

She rolled her eyes. “Would you believe me if I said I missed you?” When my expression flattened, she burst out laughing. “Guess not.”

“You have two more seconds,” I said. “And then I start chopping things off.”

“Oh,” she said, mimicking a shiver. “So scary, Lily. Guess you really are daddy's little girl, after all.”

Guess she needed some motivation.

With a snarl, I wrenched Inferno's Kiss back from her throat, even though it pained me to do so, and stabbed her right through her chest. Before she could so much as choke out a curse, I grabbed two of my daggers and drove them through each of her hands, pinning her to the wall like a butterfly. I silently thanked my infernal blades and their otherworldly strength, then stepped back and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Ready to talk now?” I demanded.

“I...guess that's one way,” Eliza muttered, stepping up beside me. She lowered her crossbow as she studied Deidre. Her gaze then shifted to me, and she eyed me oddly, as though she was seeing a new version of me and trying to decide how she felt about

it. Had I not been so angry, I might have laughed. Eliza wasn't seeing a new version—she was finally seeing the real me. Someone I hadn't let out in ten years.

Deidre's bored gaze flicked down to the blade lodged in her chest, then quickly snapped back to my face. Her smile didn't so much as waver. Instead, she raised her brows as though to say, "Really?"

"Time's running out," I told her. "The next blow won't be something you can survive."

She gave a melodramatic sigh. "I forgot how uptight you can be."

"Deidre," I warned.

"Fine. I'm looking for you, obviously," she said, rolling her eyes. For someone with a blade through her chest, she was awfully glib.

"Why?" I demanded.

"Why?" she repeated, her gaze boring into mine. "Take a wild guess, Lily. I'm sure you'll only need one."

I frowned. Deidre was a hellspawn. She literally lived in Hell, under Lucifer's rule. Really, there was only one possible reason she'd be here.

"My father sent you," I surmised.

"Good girl," she said, her tone dripping with condescension.

I shot Eliza a sidelong glance. I wanted to shake all the answers out of Deidre, but I had to tread carefully. If Eliza learned my identity—well, let's just say, I would be

the only one walking out of here. And I didn't want that. I quite liked the siren.

"He's been searching for you for a long time," Deidre continued. "I'm sure Luc?—"

Instinct kicked in, and I ripped Inferno's Kiss free from her chest. Deidre choked on a gasp, then coughed up a mouthful of blood. Good. Coughing meant she couldn't talk, and as long as she was coughing, she couldn't speak Lucifer's name.

Deidre sagged forward as far as the daggers pinning her hands would allow. None of these wounds would kill her, but they sure wouldn't feel great either. When she straightened, her eyes met mine before sliding to Eliza. Understanding smoothed Deidre's features. "She doesn't know, does she?"

"Know what?" Eliza asked.

"Nothing," I retorted.

"Oh, that's rich." Deidre's crimson eyes locked on Eliza, and amusement flared within. "I could really have some fun here."

"Focus," I snapped. I grabbed Deidre's chin and pointed Inferno's Kiss's tip at her throat. "My father knows exactly where I am. He's the one who sent me here. So why would he be searching for me? You're lying. And I don't like it."

A frown puckered Deidre's face. "What are you talking about? Your father didn't send you here."

"What?" I demanded. "Of course he did, he?—"

"No, he didn't," Deidre said. "Trust me. I'm the one who's spent the last ten fun-filled years searching for you."

That didn't make any sense. Who else could have exiled me? And how? Lucifer knew everything that happened in his kingdom, his domain. Nothing escaped his notice. My father was many things—cruel, calculating, tyrannical—but never careless. If he'd cast me out, he wouldn't have lost track of me, let alone needed Deidre to find me.

Unless she was lying. But why? What would she gain? It changed nothing.

I'd assumed Lucifer was responsible—who else could it have been? But maybe I'd been wrong all along. And if I was wrong about that, what else had I gotten wrong?

The ground seemed to shift beneath me, the foundation of my reality crumbling yet again. And, just like before, Deidre was here to witness it.

I forced my thoughts back to my arrival on Earth, desperately trying to piece everything together. But, as always, the second I did, agony speared my brain. I pressed a hand to my throbbing temple, trying to block out the pain. If I pushed any harder, I'd regret it. I'd tried once and had woken up two days later with a bitch of a migraine that had lasted a week.

"Lily, are you okay?" Eliza asked.

Blinking, I pushed the pain aside and focused. "You said my father is searching for me. Why? What does he want?"

"To drag you home, of course." Deidre's laugh was sharp, grating, and entirely too amused for someone in her current predicament. "He's been quite distraught without you."

Distraught, my angelic ass. "Bullshit."

She snickered, her eyes gleaming with dark delight. “Okay, maybe distraught is a slight exaggeration. But it doesn’t change the outcome—you’re going back, whether you like it or not.”

“Not happening,” I said.

Deidre smiled, her fingers twitching slightly as she tested the daggers keeping her pinned. I knew she could free herself if she wanted—no blade could hold her for long. That she hadn’t already meant we were all unwitting players in one of her twisted games. “Bet I can change your mind.”

“I highly doubt that.” I levelled a glare at her. Nothing could convince me to return to Hell. I quite liked Earth and its luxuries—the few I could afford.

“Don’t you want to know what’s been happening back home while you’ve been here playing human?” she asked, her voice a soft purr.

I kept my expression neutral. “I don’t care.”

“Oh, but you should,” Deidre said with mock sweetness. “Because while you’ve been here, others have been paying for your defiance. You left quite the mess behind, Lily. And you know your father—someone had to pay the blood price. He made sure of that. And the lucky winner is someone you know very well.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Enough games, Deidre. Say what you came to say, or I’ll finish this right now.”

Deidre’s smile twisted, her eyes glinting with malicious glee. “I’m not playing any games, darling. Just telling you the truth.”

“You don’t know the definition of the word,” I spat.

She chuckled darkly. “Touché. But for once, I swear—no lies have passed my lips.”

I frowned, mulling over her words. Hell wasn’t a place for close friendships—as evidenced by me and Deidre. No one down there fit the description of someone my father would care enough about to punish in my place. She was trying to get under my skin. I wasn’t about to let her.

“No guesses as to who?” she taunted, her grin growing sharper, more wicked.

Snarling, I pressed the blade harder against her throat. A thin line of blood trickled down her skin, but she didn’t so much as flinch. “Enough stalling. Out with it.”

Her eyes gleamed with triumph, her smirk triumphant. “Rathiel.”

The name hit me like a slap. I blinked, stunned. Then a sharp, disbelieving laugh escaped me. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Deidre’s smirk deepened. “Your father got his hands on him not long after you disappeared. Poor Rathiel—he never saw it coming.”

Her words made no sense. Rathiel was one of Lucifer’s favorites, a fallen angel who had cast Heaven aside to join my father and the eight others who fell alongside him. But he wasn’t just a fallen angel anymore—none of them were. My father had turned them all into something far worse. Because that was what he did. He took things that were pure and beautiful and twisted them, corrupted them beyond recognition.

Under Lucifer’s command, Rathiel had merged with a sanguinarias demon and become the progenitor of all bloodsuckers. The first bloodsucker. That darkness had cursed him with a relentless thirst for blood, a hunger that made him one of my father’s deadliest—and most devoted—creations. Rathiel was my father’s weapon, his soldier, his loyal enforcer. Why would Lucifer turn on him?

I shook my head, trying to piece it together. “Nice try, Deidre. But that doesn’t track.”

She tilted her head, her smile widening. “Believe what you want, Lilith. But I’ve sat through a few of your boy’s torture sessions. I’ve heard his screams myself. Watched your father rip him apart again and again. I’ve seen parts of him no one should ever see. Heard sounds no one should ever hear.” Her tone was light, conversational—completely at odds with the horror she described. “And do you know the best part? It’s all because of you.”

Her words struck a nerve. I clenched my jaw, refusing to let her see how they rattled me. Rathiel and I weren’t friends—not by any stretch of the imagination—but I wouldn’t wish that kind of torment on anyone. No one deserved to be torn apart like that.

This had to be another one of Deidre’s games. A lie meant to unsettle me, to throw me off balance. It was what she did.

But... what if it wasn’t? She sounded so certain, so assured, and the image of Rathiel screaming under my father’s wrath clawed at the edges of my mind. My pulse quickened, and a weight settled in my chest, twisting my stomach in knots.

I refused to let her see it.

Deidre’s sharp gaze scanned my face, her smirk faltering when she found no reaction. “Really? No threats? No tears? Nothing?” She studied me a little longer. “You’ve changed, Lilith. The Lily I knew would never let someone suffer because of her.”

“You don’t know me. Not anymore,” I growled through gritted teeth.

Deidre laughed again. “Sweetie, no one here knows you better than I do.”

As much as I loathed to admit it, she wasn't wrong.

"You forget, old friend," she continued, "I can hear your heart racing, smell the fear on you. Even now, you're wondering what if . Maybe I'm lying, or maybe I'm telling the truth. Guess the only way you'll find out is if you return home."

Ah, there it was. The trap. Her entire game finally laid bare. All of this—every word—had been a ploy to lure me back to Hell. Why she thought Rathiel was the right bait, I couldn't say. Maybe because there weren't many that I cared about in Hell—if any.

"Nice try," I said, congratulating her. "You almost had me. But we both know my father would never harm anyone in his inner circle."

"Except, he is," she said. "Your father takes your punishment out on Rathiel's flesh every single day."

I narrowed my eyes, refusing to give her the satisfaction of a reaction. "Do you honestly think I'd believe a word that comes out of your mouth?" I asked. "You've been messing with my head this entire time, and I'm done listening. I shouldn't have listened in the first place."

Deidre's smile faltered for the briefest moment as I pressed my blade a little harder against her throat. Eliza's instructions were clear—the bounty was dead or alive. And guess which option I was leaning toward?

I readied myself to end her miserable existence.

"You can kill me, but that won't stop your father from getting what he wants," Deidre said, her words stopping me cold.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

Deidre laughed, satisfaction gleaming in her eyes. “I have something for you.” When I didn’t move, she jutted her chin toward her front pocket. “Go on, have a look.”

I hesitated, weighing my options, but that damn glint in her eye had me questioning everything. I slid my unarmed hand into her pocket, my fingers brushing against something eerily warm.

Slowly, I pulled the object free, revealing a small, obsidian orb.

“The Infernal Eye,” Deidre purred. Then she leaned forward and whispered, “Daddy can see you now.”

As though the inanimate object could hear her, it suddenly cleared, and a pair of crystal blue eyes peered out at me. The instant those horrifyingly familiar eyes blinked at me, my heart lurched into my throat. A chill raced down my spine, and my grip on the orb tightened. It felt wrong—wrong in a way that made my skin crawl, as if the very air surrounding it pulsed with dark power.

My breath quickened into shallow gasps, and without thinking, I hurled the orb against the farthest wall with all the force I could muster. It shattered on impact, shards of obsidian and metals raining down on the dirt floor. A thick, black mist oozed from the broken fragments before dissipating into the air.

For a heartbeat, there was nothing but silence. But then Deidre’s laughter echoed through the space. The sound was so haunting, so chilling, it might as well have been Lucifer’s.

“I did it,” she crowed, her voice dripping with devotion and reverence. “I found you and completed my mission. I did it for him. I do everything for him.”

I couldn't listen to another word. My heart pounded and adrenaline flooded my veins. Without another thought, I gripped Inferno's Kiss's hilt with both hands and swung. My blade sliced through her neck without any resistance, and her head toppled from her body.

Just like that, it was over. Deidre was dead. After ten long years of desperately dreaming of this, I had finally killed her. And yet, I had absolutely no idea how to feel about it. Deidre had betrayed me, yes—but she had also been my only companion in Hell, my only friend.

I'd contemplate my mixed emotions later. Right now, I needed to get out of this mine, away from the stench of her blood. I moved forward, gripping the daggers embedded in her hands, and yanked them free. Her body, finally released from the wall, slumped heavily to the ground, lifeless and silent.

"Wow," Eliza murmured behind me.

I startled, having nearly forgotten about her presence here.

"I have so many questions," she continued.

Of course she did. But I couldn't answer any of them. Hell, I couldn't even answer my own questions. I just knew I needed to get out of this damn mine.

I wiped all three weapons on Deidre's shirt, then slid them back into their sheaths with trembling hands. The blades would need a proper cleaning once home, but for now, this would do.

"Let's get out here," I muttered, my voice steadier than expected. "We have a bounty to collect."

“What? No. Hold on.” Eliza stepped in front of me, blocking my path. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell just happened. That vampire—who was she? And how did you know her?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, side-stepping her.

“Don’t worry about it?” Eliza barked a laugh. “I deserve to know what happened here tonight.”

I met her gaze, my expression hardening. “Eliza, it’s safer if you don’t know.”

“Safer for whom?” she demanded. “You? Or me? Because that vampire had blood-red eyes, and I’ve never seen that before. What does that mean? And what was all that talk about bringing you home to your father?”

“Eliza—”

“Lily!” she yelled, her voice echoing off the mine walls. “It feels like I just walked into something way bigger than I signed up for. Clearly, you’re not who you say you are. Your swords, this vampire, your father—you owe me answers.”

I sighed. And this was why I’d spent the last ten years keeping to myself. It was simply safer for everyone if I kept to the shadows. A lesson I’d apparently forgotten.

“Listen,” I said, “She was just...an old friend. Old enemy, more like. She betrayed me. And now she’s dead. What you saw here tonight was personal. Too personal.”

Eliza’s eyes narrowed. “That’s not good enough, Lily. Who are you?”

I shook my head. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why the hell not?” she snapped, frustration clear in her voice. “I’m not stupid. You’re obviously more than a bartender. So?”

“No,” was all I said.

Eliza balked. “No? That’s it? Just, no?”

“Yes.”

I stepped around her and headed toward the mine entrance, then froze when Eliza suddenly gripped my arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded. “We aren’t finished here.”

I glared at her hand, then lifted my narrowed gaze to hers. “Take your hand off me.”

Eliza’s focus shot to Deidre’s lifeless body, then she quickly withdrew her hand.

“I can handle the truth, Lily,” she said. “You can trust me.”

“It’s not that simple,” I said, voice low. “If I tell you, it puts you in danger. More than you can imagine. The less you know about me, the safer you’ll be. I’m begging you, Eliza. Don’t dig into this.” Because she would regret it if she did.

Eliza’s expression darkened as she weighed my words. I thought she might press me further, but then she finally exhaled sharply, shaking her head in frustration. “Fine. But this isn’t over, Lily. I’m watching you. I don’t like secrets, and I sure as hell don’t like being kept in the dark. Sooner or later, I’ll figure out the truth.”

“You’ll wish you hadn’t,” I said, hoping it didn’t come down to me or her . Because I knew who I’d pick. No questions asked. “Now, can we get out of here? I’d rather not

stick around longer than we have to.”

With a reluctant sigh, Eliza reached into her pack and pulled out a plastic sheet, wrapping Deidre’s severed head before tucking it into a leather bag. “I’ll send someone to clean up the body later. We can’t be seen pulling a headless corpse out of a mine.”

Nodding, I cast one last glance at Deidre’s lifeless body before following Eliza out of the mine. But as we made our way to her car, unease twisted in my gut. Deidre was gone, but something told me my problems were only just beginning.

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Chapter Six

I stepped into my apartment, where for once, sweet, blessed silence welcomed me, and closed the door behind me.

First order of business: boots off. I kicked them into a nearby corner with a satisfying thud. Next went my coat, toque, and gloves. I tossed them onto the floor without a second thought. And why not? It wasn't like I had anyone to impress, other than my cat and imp—but they hardly cared.

Next on the docket: weapon care. Because I certainly couldn't shower until all three weapons gleamed. I hauled my bag onto my small, wobbly, one-seater table, unzipped it, and pulled out my blades. Though mostly clean, they needed more than the quick wipe I'd given them back in the mine. Leaving a bloodied sword unattended, even one stained with the blood of a backstabbing ex-best friend, was just bad form.

I stared at the blades, the night's event replaying in my mind, sharp and vivid. Deidre was dead. I'd killed her. For years, I'd fantasized about all the different ways I could end her life. And now that I had, I hoped she'd felt every agonizing inch of my blade carving her head from her neck.

On the downside, Lucifer now knew my location. And that couldn't be good. Giving him what he wanted was always a mistake. I'd learned that lesson a long time ago. If he was this desperate to find me, there had to be a reason, and knowing my father, it wouldn't be anything good. It never was.

Deidre had claimed he wanted to bring me home, but I wasn't buying that for a second. She was a natural liar and trusting her was never a good idea. So, I had to consider other possibilities. And there weren't many.

My father wasn't exactly complex. Either he needed me to do something for him, or...and this honestly seemed the more plausible scenario, he wanted me dead. Considering who he was, I leaned toward the latter. As for why he'd want me dead, I could think of only one reason: the prophecy. My father would never allow me to destroy his kingdom, or him, for that matter.

I turned, about to head to the kitchen for my sword cleaning supplies, when Vol suddenly darted into my path with Purrpy gleefully chasing behind him. The imp clutched a tangled mess of yarn, his usual manic energy dialed up to an eleven. Strands clung to his miniature horns, looped around his shoulders, and trailed behind him like a colorful cape. Purrpy pounced on the trailing yarn, batting at it with his paws, his eyes wide with playful excitement.

"Lily!" Vol cried, his little voice high-pitched with exasperation. He gripped the strands tangled around his horns and pulled with all his strength, only for Purrpy to take another swipe at the dangling strands. "Help! I—I'm stuck."

Though both mentally and physically exhausted, I laughed at the absurdity of this scene. "Lost a fight with one of my knitting projects, did ya?"

"Not funny!" he squeaked, tugging futilely at the yarn. Purrpy, oblivious to Vol's plight, pounced again, and the imp toppled over. A series of impolite—albeit hilarious—curse words erupted from his dark lips.

Sighing, I crouched and slowly untangled the yarn from Vol's horns, careful not to harm him. "How did you even manage this?"

Vol struggled to his feet and puffed out his chest. “I was making a nest,” he declared, as though I was an idiot for even daring to ask. “Then the furball decided it was playtime and attacked me ! Not my fault your cat’s a menace!”

“Don’t dish it out if you can’t take it.”

Vol huffed, clearly displeased with my response. He shot me a withering glare before scuttling off, yarn still in hand, muttering under his breath about ungrateful humans and troublesome beasts. He continued to grumble about his “revenge” even as he disappeared behind the couch, Purrpy in tow.

I shook my head and headed into the kitchen, my thoughts circling back to the problem at hand. I saw two options: stay or go. If I left Edmonton, it would force Lucifer to resume his search. If I stayed, I’d have to face whatever he had planned for me head-on.

I grabbed my cleaning supplies and returned to my blades, wiping them clean. The thought of leaving the city didn’t sit right with me for a couple of reasons. The predominant one being that I didn’t run—from anything or anyone. Running meant abandoning the city and the people I’d come to care about. If Lucifer stepped foot in the city and I wasn’t around to stop him, he would obliterate it just to make a point. I didn’t want Hell encroaching on my life, but I also refused to sacrifice the million lives that lived here just to save my own skin.

So, no. I wouldn’t run. Not if it meant leaving others to face Lucifer in my stead.

He was my father, my responsibility, my burden. I refused to walk away and let him destroy everything that was good here. If he wanted me dead, he’d soon learn I wasn’t about to go down without a fight. Maybe I’d even take him out with me.

Of course, this was all conjecture until I learned why he was so hellbent on finding

me. But one thing was clear: I was staying. For better or for worse.

I stared at my sword and daggers, all three now gleaming, and nodded. Whatever my father had in store for me, I could handle it. His people had trained me, forged me into a weapon to fight his battles, but I wasn't one of his minions. I didn't obey him, and I certainly didn't love him. Maybe it was time for him to understand exactly what that meant.

Until then, I needed a shower. No point in worrying about what could happen until it did.

I stole a peek at Vol and quirked a grin at the sight of him sleeping atop a pile of unravelled yarn. Purgy strode my way, his tail flicking.

"I'll be quick," I told him, giving his head a little scritch before hurrying into the bathroom. I peeled off my clothes as I went, then fired up the shower, this time waiting until the water heated before stepping under the spray. The instant the hot water hit my skin, I sighed and dropped my head forward, revelling in the mini massage.

Showers, hot water, electricity—those were all things Hell lacked, and I'd certainly grown fond of the luxuries Earth offered, even if it cost me every last cent to afford it.

I quickly washed up, then turned off the water and wrapped myself in a fluffy towel. Stepping out of the tub, I strode to the sink and wiped the steam from the mirror. I stared at my hazy reflection, my angelic blue eyes staring back at me. Growing up, my father's people used to claim I was the spitting image of my angelic mother, though I had no way of knowing for sure. She'd died when I was an infant—killed by my father when she'd tried to run away with me, hoping to raise me away from his dark influence. My father had seen that as the ultimate betrayal and killed her.

Still, I liked to believe I resembled her. It was better than the alternative. Lucifer, like all angels, was beautiful, but his inner darkness twisted his beauty into something monstrous. I wanted nothing to do with that.

I turned to catch a glimpse of my back in my mirror. Two long, vertical scars ran from my upper shoulder blades to the middle of my back, jagged and uneven. I reached over my shoulder and touched the top of the closest one. The skin was raised and rough, a testament to the brutality of the injury.

My father had always told me that an angel without their wings wasn't an angel anymore. There'd been a few nights, when I was at my lowest, when I'd wondered if that was why my father had sent me to Earth. I'd lost my wings. I wasn't an angel anymore. What good was I without them? I'd assumed he'd deemed me worthless once he'd stripped me of my wings and cast me out.

Now, thanks to Deidre, I knew Lucifer hadn't been the one to exile me. Which meant I could cross off the only name on my incredibly exclusive list of suspects. So much for that theory.

With no new answers in sight, I resigned myself to sleep. I needed rest if I wanted enough energy to shop with Jazz in the afternoon. After that, I needed to check out the portal, preferably before something else crawled through.

I hurried into my bedroom and grabbed the closest pajamas—a pair featuring My Little Pony—then slid into bed, the bed frame creaking in protest. No sooner had I settled in when a half-asleep Vol climbed up, dragging his favourite scrap of fabric behind him like a security blanket.

“Move over,” he grumbled before flopping onto the pillow beside me.

Purry leapt onto the bed next with the grace of a feline twice his size, settled on my

chest, and promptly started licking his arsehole. On me.

I sighed and stared at the ceiling. “You two have no manners.”

Vol snuck a glance, then rolled his eyes. “Goodnight, Meat Sack.”

“Goodnight, you wretched menace,” I whispered, closing my eyes. Despite everything, right now, I was content. My ridiculous little family surrounded me and I felt a flicker of peace. One I hoped never ended.

* * *

The early afternoon sun broke through the thick winter clouds as Jazz and I trudged down Whyte Ave, the snow crunching under our boots. The street was lively despite the cold, with bright lights strung along the storefronts and the occasional musician braving the chill to play some tunes. The aroma of hot coffee and freshly baked goods wafted from the cafés, a comforting reminder that warmth was just a doorway away.

Jazz linked her arm with mine, practically bouncing with excitement despite the icy wind. “I’m so glad we’re doing this. We need to find you something great for your date with Jack. What vibe are you going for?”

I grinned, feeling the weight of my worries lift slightly. I woke up this morning in a good mood, determined not to let Lucifer destroy my life. He might come, and he might try to drag me back to Hell, but that didn’t mean I had to go. This was my life now, and if he tried to ruin it...well, he’d learn just how well his minions had trained me.

When I didn’t answer, Jazz snuck a quick glance at me.

“Oh, uh, something that says, ‘I’m effortlessly cool,’” I said, “but also ‘I totally

didn't spend all day picking this out.'"

Jazz laughed, her breath visible in the cold air. "Got it. Effortlessly cool it is. Let's hit Fashion Bliss first. I've had some great luck with them. It might help if I know where he's taking you. Has he said?"

"Yeah. He texted earlier today, saying he'd made a reservation at Normand's."

"Normand's. Hmm, haven't heard of it."

A quick search on her phone later, and we'd armed ourselves with enough knowledge to find me the perfect outfit.

We walked into the boutique and a friendly employee with a bright smile welcomed us, along with racks of stylish clothes. Jazz started rifling through the selection, pulling out dresses and holding them up for me to see.

"How about this one?" she asked, holding up a sleek black dress with a plunging neckline and spaghetti straps.

"Turn it around?"

She turned the dress, and I winced. Nope. That would show my scars as clear as day. I liked to think I wasn't ashamed or self-conscious of them, but deep down, I knew that was a lie. I was an angel, and an imperfect one at that. The last thing I needed was to draw attention to the scars that marred half of my back.

"Veto," was all I said.

She frowned, looking at the dress as if she couldn't believe I'd turned it down. In all fairness, it was beautiful. But I was in no mood to put my scars on display.

With a quiet hum, she returned the dress, then continued her search.

“What about this?” She held up a cozy-yet-chic sweater dress in a deep burgundy.

I took it from her and held it up to my body. “Oh, I love this. It’s cute. And I could definitely wear it again.”

Jazz nodded enthusiastically. “Try it on! And I’ll keep looking.”

I headed to the dressing room, slipping into the dress and checking myself out in the mirror. It was pretty and comfortable but didn’t quite scream “date night.”

Jazz knocked on the door. “How’s it going in there?”

I opened the door and stepped out. “What do you think?”

She tilted her head, considering. “It’s nice, but not quite right for a date.”

I nodded, my lips pursed. Maybe it wasn’t right for my date, but I did like it. And now that my bank account was flush with extra zeroes, I decided to splurge and treat myself.

“I’ll get it anyway,” I told her. “Something cute to wear during the winter.”

Jazz smiled. “Attagirl. Spoil yourself. You deserve it.”

I did deserve it. And I’d never had the opportunity to do so before.

After paying for the sweater dress, we spent the next hour hopping from store to store, trying on countless outfits. Jazz was relentless, determined to find the perfect dress. Finally, we walked into a little clothing shop tucked away from the main street.

Jazz's eyes lit up as she spotted a champagne-colored chiffon cocktail dress with lightly ruffled sleeves and hem.

"This is the one," she declared, pulling it off the rack and handing it to me.

I took it skeptically but went to try it on anyway. The second I saw myself in the mirror, I knew she was right. The dress hugged my curves in all the right places, covered my back, and had just the right amount of flair to it. I stepped out of the dressing room, and Jazz's jaw dropped.

"Lily, you look amazing! Jack is going to lose his mind when he sees you in that."

I smiled. "You think so?"

"I know so," she said confidently. "That color really makes your eyes pop. Now, let's get some shoes to go with it."

We spent another half hour searching the store for the perfect pair of boots, finally settling on a high-heeled pair that both matched the dress perfectly and would keep my tootsies warm in the freezing cold. I didn't necessarily need to take that level of precaution, but I had a feeling I'd attract unwanted attention wearing strappy heels in the middle of freaking winter.

As we walked out of the store, bags in hand, a sense of normalcy washed over me. Shopping with Jazz, finding the perfect outfit for my date with Jack—it was a reminder that, despite everything, there were still good times to be had.

Jazz linked her arm with mine again as we headed toward a nearby café. "You're going to knock his socks off, Lily. I can't wait to hear all about it."

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in days. "Thanks, Jazz. I owe you one."

She grinned. “Just promise to give me all the juicy details afterward.”

“Deal,” I said, already looking forward to the distraction the date would provide from the madness of my otherworldly problems.

Chapter Seven

And speaking of otherworldly problems...

I stood next to Mason in stone form atop the Alberta Legislature Building's roof, my gaze sweeping over the Edmonton skyline and the frozen river valley below. Despite the biting cold, the view from up here was worth the hassle. Reaching the roof had required a careful climb through a narrow set of locked staircases up to the cupola—a turret perched at the very pinnacle of the dome. Normally, this area was off-limits to the public, but with some creative manoeuvring—and a bit of hurried lock-picking—I'd made it. Now, I just had to ensure no one caught me. Explaining why I was loitering on top of a historic government building while waiting for a gargoyle to shift back into his human form would be...complicated.

I settled in next to Mason and brushed a thin layer of fresh snow off his foot. He'd positioned himself on the ledge to face the back of the building, his eyes aimed directly at the grounds below. After a decade, I couldn't recall the exact spot of the portal, but I knew it was down there somewhere. Guess it was too much to ask for a glowing sign with a flashing arrow that read, "Entrance to Hell."

I braced my arms against the ledge and peeked over. Before I lost my wings, heights had never bothered me. Why would they when I could fly? But now, my heart gave a tiny, anxious flutter. A fall wouldn't kill me, but it sure would hurt like the dickens.

Still, the view was quite breathtaking. Snow blanketed the grounds below, muting everything in shades of white and grey, the trees stripped bare for the season. The sun had just started to dip, casting a warm glow over the winter landscape. As much as I

hated the cold, I had to admit—winter looked peaceful, even beautiful.

“Definitely scored a prime location, hey Mason?” I murmured, my gaze scouring every inch of land.

The only answer was the wind, whistling through the silence—a faint, hollow hum that cut through the crisp, winter air. Mason, of course, remained perfectly still, his face locked in a vigilant, unmoving expression. Carved into his gargoyle form, he looked every bit the ancient guardian, standing against ages of frost, wind, and time itself.

Gargoyles had always fascinated me. Their transformation was unlike any other shapeshifters. The way they snapped to life when the sun finally set, as if they hadn’t just spent the entire day frozen in stone—it was both eerie and impressive.

Minutes ticked by, and the sun continued to inch its way lower. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, rubbing my gloved hands together for warmth and watching as the sky deepened into twilight. Shadows stretched across the grounds below, and the chill in the air grew sharper as the light faded. My anticipation grew, knowing Mason’s transformation would soon begin.

Finally, the sun dipped below the horizon, and dusk settled over the city. A faint cracking noise broke the silence as Mason began to shift, small fissures spreading across his hard surface. I watched as the granite layer splintered and crumbled, his rigid, winged form beginning to expand and reshape. His limbs elongated, muscles shifting beneath his skin as he grew to his full size. As the last remnants of stone fell away, he stood fully clothed, presumably in whatever he’d worn at sunup, before taking his perch. His almost grey eyes blinked open, sharp and alert, and he instantly took in his surroundings.

“Lily,” he greeted me with a half-smile. “Never thought I’d see you up here. To what

do I owe the honour?”

I turned my attention back to the snow-covered grounds. The landscape below stretched out in pristine white, smooth and undisturbed, with no sign of any supernatural ripples or hidden doorways. Just the quiet, empty beauty of winter. “I was hoping to get a look at the portal,” I admitted, chuckling, “but all I see is snow. Guess gargoyles really do have the best eyesight.”

Mason chuckled alongside me. “I can take you to it if you want a closer look.”

“Lead the way,” I replied, gesturing to the narrow stairs.

With a slight smirk, Mason did exactly that. Together, we turned away from the ledge and began our careful retreat down the winding stairwell. I had to hand it to him—for a guy his size, he moved with surprising stealth, each step soundless as we descended. But even so, I kept my ears sharp for any sign of security making their rounds.

As we reached the ground level, Mason held a finger to his lips and pointed ahead. A flashlight beam cut through the darkness just beyond the corner of the building. I pulled back into the shadows, pressing myself against the stone wall as the security guard’s footsteps grew louder. I glanced over at Mason, who remained perfectly still, blending seamlessly into the shadows beside me. We waited, barely breathing, until the guard’s steps receded and the light disappeared around the far side of the building.

Once the coast was clear, we slipped around to the back, careful to avoid any more patrols. Our boots crunched softly over the snow, the icy air stinging my cheeks.

“There was another reason I came to see you,” I said, breaking the silence.

Mason cocked his head toward me. “Oh?”

“I wanted you to know...that hellspawn you saw? She’s dead. So you don’t need to worry about her anymore.”

Mason’s eyes widened, but he nodded. “Good. Less hellspawn means a little less trouble around here. Provided more don’t come through.”

When he didn’t ask any more questions, I breathed a sigh of relief. The fewer details I shared, the better it was for everyone.

“You haven’t seen any others come through?” I asked.

“Not during the day. But I don’t hang around here at night.”

I nodded thoughtfully. One hellspawn had already slipped through, and with no one here to watch the portal, it was possible more had followed suit. I hardly expected Deidre would be the last. My father wasn’t known for patience. When he wanted something, he did whatever he could to acquire it.

Mason led me across the grounds and pointed in front of us. As we neared our destination, a shiver ran up my spine, the faintest ripple in the air brushing against my senses. Even after all this time, the energy here was unmistakable—a dark, magnetic pull I recognized all too well.

I stopped just shy of the portal’s invisible boundary, my gaze drifting over the familiar patch of ground—now blanketed in snow. Standing here, it was impossible not to think back to the day I’d arrived. One second, I’d been standing in Lucifer’s throne room, and the next, boom , I was here—thrust into a place the stark opposite of Hell.

Where I'd expected to see geysers spewing hellfire and scorched, jagged terrain, I'd instead seen soft grass, fluffy clouds, and leafy trees. Back then, I hadn't known what any of those things even were. Everything had seemed so foreign to me—the sounds, the smells, the colours.

Maybe that was why I hadn't been able to remember the portal's exact location. Everything had been a blur of confusion and disorientation. But none of that had compared to the moment I'd realized my wings were gone. The utter hysteria that had brought me to my knees.

Slowly, I reached a hand toward the portal, fingers stretched out to test the energy that lingered in the air. The sensation was faint but unmistakable—a ripple, a subtle distortion that set it apart from the otherwise quiet stillness of this world. Right here, hidden from my eyes, was a tether to Hell, an unwanted link to the place I'd once called home.

“And Bingo was his name-oh,” I whispered, my fingertips tingling.

“Can you see it now?” Mason asked.

I shook my head. I hadn't been able to see it then either—only feel it, a sensation of Hell's dark pull just beyond reach. The thought of my former home, only steps away through this portal, was surreal. But whatever nostalgia I'd once felt for Hell was long gone. There was no part of me that wanted to step back into that life.

Bracing myself, I pressed forward, half-expecting my hand to pass through. But instead, it met with solid resistance, like a locked door barring my entry. Relief flooded through me; the portal was closed, sealed off. That meant it wasn't wide open for any stray hellspawn to wander through. Not just anyone could stumble into this world uninvited.

Yet the relief was short-lived. The portal's residual power hummed beneath my fingertips—a reminder that, though it was closed now, it was far from gone. Deidre's recent arrival meant my father must have found a way around Heaven's seals, a way to breach the boundary. There was no way he wouldn't try again.

I pulled my hand back, frustration tightening in my chest. I wanted nothing more than for Hell to stay on its side, a firm boundary separating my past from my present. But there was no guarantee it would remain closed. I certainly couldn't spend every second here guarding it. I had a life to live—a human life, with human responsibilities. Coffee to serve, drinks to pour, an imp and a cat to feed. And, for once, I had something personal to look forward to—a date with Jack on Friday. The thought of it was both thrilling and grounding. Besides, even if I wanted to abandon everything and keep watch here, what good would it do? I couldn't stop an entire army from coming through, not by myself.

“Have you told anyone else about this?” I asked.

“A few,” he admitted. “Some have come to see it, but thankfully, no one's tried to open it.”

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” I muttered. “I can't see it, but it feels closed right now.”

Mason nodded, his gaze fixed presumably on the portal. “The aura is quiet.”

I shot him a startled glance. “The portal has an aura?”

He shrugged. “Everything does. People, places, objects of power. But the portal is different. It has this strange, ethereal glow—very unearthly. I've only ever seen an aura like this once before.” His gaze shifted, landing squarely on me. “And that was with you.”

My pulse spiked, and for a split second, my control slipped. The cold air seemed sharper against my skin, every nerve primed and ready. A dozen thoughts flickered through my mind—every instinct telling me that if he knew what I was and where I was from, then he was a threat I couldn't afford to ignore.

“That so?” I said, keeping my voice steady, neutral.

Mason's expression was unreadable, and his eyes never left mine. “Mm-hmm. When we first met, I'd never seen anything like your energy signature before. But I'm not the prying type. Everyone is entitled to their secrets, so I left it alone. But then this portal opened, and let's just say, it raised some questions.” He spoke quietly. “You know more about this than you're letting on, don't you?”

Tension seized my shoulders, and the urge to keep my secret flared. Mason's gaze remained steady, holding mine, but he was piecing it all together. My fingers flexed instinctively, weighing my options—options that included making sure he never had the chance to question me again.

Mason sighed and relaxed his stance. “Look, I'm not here to dig into your past, Lily. Whatever you're keeping to yourself, that's your business.. I just want you to know that you aren't alone in this. Thanks to my great-grandma, I know more about hellspawn than most. They're the last thing I want to face. However, I also know where there's one, there are thousands more. If this doorway opens again?—”

“It could mean the end of the world as we know it,” I whispered, the words echoing in the frigid air.

He nodded grimly. “Exactly. Most paranormals know very little about our history, let alone the danger this portal represents. But I'm not most paranormals. And personally, I don't want to meet anything that comes through that door.”

He already had. “The portal’s closed. That’s all that matters,” I said.

“For now.” He shook his head. “Closed doesn’t mean stable. It opened once. It’ll open again. The only question is when. And when that happens, we’ll have a full-blown crisis on our hands.”

Mason’s words lingered in the cold air between us, his gaze unwavering as he tried to bridge the gap I kept so firmly in place. There was an intensity in his eyes—a determination that was both reassuring and unnerving. He wanted to understand, and the weight of his silent questions pressed down on me like the chill in the air.

I swallowed hard, my throat dry despite the chill in the air. “I’ll keep an eye on it,” I said, my voice carefully measured.

“That may not be good enough,” he commented. “This isn’t something one can handle alone. If things get worse—if something more dangerous than a hellspawn comes through—it’s not just your life or mine on the line. We’re talking about the safety of everyone. Paranormals, humans... everyone.”

He was right. I hated it, but he was right. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to trust him—or anyone—with the truth.

“I’m not asking for your whole story,” he continued. “But if you know anything that could help, anything that could keep this thing from spilling over and hurting the people we’re trying to protect—it would go a long way.”

I hesitated, the words caught in my throat. I considered telling him—just a hint of the truth, something that would let him see why I was so careful, so wary of involving anyone else. But the walls I’d built were too strong, too well-reinforced by years of secrecy and survival.

“I can’t,” I finally whispered.

Mason studied me, his eyes narrowing slightly as if he were weighing my words. After a beat, he gave a small nod. “Fine. I understand that you don’t trust easily, but if things get worse, you’ll need people who understand what’s at stake.”

I swallowed, forcing myself to maintain the mask of indifference. “Noted.”

He didn’t push further, but his gaze lingered on me before I finally turned away, the weight of his words and the threat of what lay beyond pressing down on me as I walked off into the night.

Chapter Eight

After two never-ending days of bouncing between my jobs and guarding the portal, I was ready for a break and grateful for my date with Jack. I stepped into Normand's and shook off the winter chill. The warmth of the restaurant washed over me, instantly melting away the biting cold. The place was cozy, with its rustic décor and intimate lighting, but I couldn't help but feel a bit out of place. Normand's was the kind of restaurant I'd never had the funds to experience. I did now thanks to Deidre's bounty, but Jack had told me tonight was his treat, a treat I planned to enjoy.

I scanned the room and spotted Jack at a table near the back, looking relaxed and effortlessly handsome. Must be nice. During the hour-long bus ride here, I'd suffered a moment of utter panic when I realized this would be my first date. And not just with Jack. Ever. Somehow, that little detail had escaped my attention until tonight. Now, it was all I could think about. What was I supposed to do? Wait for him to notice me and come over? Wait for someone to escort me to Jack's table? Or should I just walk right over since he was already seated?

Why was this so hard? Give me a sword and I could gut a hellspawn in two seconds flat. But put me in a dress, and I was completely and utterly lost. I'd seen tons of movies and read plenty of books, but somehow, none had prepared me for this.

"Ma'am?" a voice drew my attention.

I blinked and glanced over to find a dark-haired woman standing in front of me, a slight frown creasing her brow. Crap, had she been trying to get my attention?

“Sorry,” I said, laughing.

Her expression cleared. “Do you need a table?”

“Oh, uh, no, I can see my date from here.”

She nodded and returned to whatever task she’d been working on prior to my entry.

I strode to the table, my steps slowing the second Jack glanced up. The instant he spotted me, he rose from the table.

“Lily, hi,” he said.

“Hi.” Why was I so nervous? I wasn’t naturally shy—far from it. But something about this whole situation unbalanced me.

I removed my purse, then reached for the buttons on my jacket and quickly opened them. I shrugged it off and hung both on the nearby coat rack before turning back to Jack.

He stared at me, a slow smile spreading across his face as he took in my brand-new dress and boots. “Wow, Lily,” he murmured as he pulled out a chair for me. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks,” I said, my cheeks warming. “You clean up pretty well, too.” Usually when he came to the coffee shop, he wore slacks and a dress shirt, but tonight he wore a perfectly tailored suit. One that molded to his every muscle. And damn, it looked good on him.

Jack chuckled, then helped tuck me into the table. Once settled, he returned to his side of the table and sat. Seeing as how this was my first date ever, I truly had no idea

what to do with myself. Or where to put my hands. On the table? In my lap? Jack's were on the table. That seemed a safe bet.

I folded my arms, but that felt wrong. I started to readjust my position, but moved too quickly, and my elbow brushed the water glass sitting right next to me. Horror swept over me when it started to teeter. With a quiet gasp, I snatched the glass with liquid fast reflexes—reflexes far too quick for a human—and steadied it before it could fall.

Jack's eyes briefly widened, then he gave another soft chuckle. "Damn, good catch."

I gave an awkward laugh. "Just got lucky."

"I'd say."

This time, I folded my hands in my lap, determined not to touch anything else, lest I give myself away.

"You okay?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, I'm great," I told him. "It's just..." I took a breath, then lifted my gaze to meet his. "This is my, uh, first..." I bit my lip, then laughed, heat chasing across my cheeks.

"Date?" Jack asked when I didn't finish my sentence.

I winced when my cheeks grew even hotter.

Knock it off, my brain screamed at me. I was being ridiculous. For crying out loud, who cared if this was my first date? So, I hadn't dated anyone before. But I'd done other things. Lots of other things. Like ride hellwyrms and travel inter-dimensionally. Who else on Earth could claim they'd done those two things?

“Well, I’m honoured to be your first,” he said before awkwardly coughing. “Your first date, I mean.”

Before I could respond, a waiter approached the table with two menus. “Good evening. How are you two tonight?”

“Just great,” Jack said with a gentle smile.

My stomach flipped, but interestingly, it was a good flip. For a human, Jack was exceptionally handsome. I found his rugged appearance and short beard quite appealing. And I still couldn’t get over that suit. It hugged his build perfectly. The man had a great deal to offer, both looks and personality-wise.

“Wonderful,” our waiter said. “Tonight’s wild game specialties are Lac Brome Roast Duck, Alberta ten-ounce Bison Rib Eye Steak, and Alberta Wild Boar Ribs. We also have a wide range of drink choices. My personal favourite is our eighteen-year-old Glenlivet. It’s perfect for frosty nights like this.”

“Oh, that sounds nice,” Jack said. “I’ll have a glass of that, please. Neat. How about you, Lily?”

“I’ll have the same, if that’s alright,” I said. “Thank you.”

The waiter dipped his head, then handed us the menus and left.

Jack glanced at me with a raised brow, and I laughed. “I’m also a bartender. So, I’m no stranger to good whisky.”

He pressed his free hand against his chest. “A woman after my own heart. Where do you bartend?”

Shit. Shit . I shouldn't have said that. Not even Jazz knew about my second job. This whole dating thing was really throwing me off my game. "Just a small hole in the wall no one knows about," I said. Clearing my throat, I started perusing the menu. "So, Jack. What do you do?"

"I'm a compliance officer," he said.

I glanced up from the menu with a raised brow. "And what is that, exactly?"

"I make sure companies follow all the rules and regulations. It's a lot of reading through legal documents."

"So, you're like the company's moral compass? Do you get to bust a lot of bad guys?"

He smiled. "Not exactly. It's more like nudging people back onto the right path before they go too far astray. But it's satisfying to catch things early and prevent bigger problems."

I nodded, intrigued. "That does sound interesting. I bet you've seen some pretty shady stuff."

Jack grinned. "Oh, definitely. There was this one time a company tried to cover up a huge environmental violation. They had all these fake documents, but they forgot one crucial detail that gave them away. I felt a bit like a detective."

I laughed. "I can imagine you with a magnifying glass, inspecting clues. Do you wear a deerstalker hat like Sherlock, too?"

He played along, pretending to tip an imaginary hat. "Elementary, my dear Lily. But enough about me. What about you? What do you do when you're not bartending or

working as a barista?”

“I’m afraid two jobs don’t leave me much time to do much else,” I said, snickering.

“There has to be something you do for fun,” he commented.

I hesitated, not wanting to delve into my secrets. “I do enjoy knitting.”

Jack’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Knitting, huh? I wouldn’t have pegged you for a knitter.”

I shrugged. “Everyone needs a hobby. And it’s surprisingly therapeutic. Plus, it keeps me out of trouble.” Sort of. More like it kept Vol out of trouble, but I couldn’t tell Jack about my imp.

Jack raised an eyebrow. “I can’t imagine you getting into any trouble.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” I said with a laugh.

The waiter returned with our drinks and placed them on the table. “Have you decided what you’d like to order?”

I waved at Jack. “You go first. I’ll decide while you order.”

Jack nodded, then started to order the wild boar ribs. Mid-order, he stopped and shot me a wide-eyed glance. “Are you a vegetarian?”

I snorted a soft laugh. “No, not at all.”

“Phew,” he said. “Not that there’s anything wrong with being a vegetarian. I just wouldn’t want to force you to sit here and watch me eat meat if you weren’t into

that.”

Something inside me melted. I didn’t know Jack beyond his coffee order and the few pleasantries we’d exchanged over the year, but from the way he’d handled the customer at the coffee shop and the way he was behaving tonight, I could tell he was a considerate guy. Handsome, kind, funny...which one of us was the actual angel here?

Once Jack finished ordering, the waiter turned to me. I thought I’d be able to make a choice rather quickly, but once I started eyeing the prices, my nerves came back to life. Jack’s rib order was forty-four dollars, plus his whisky. Add in my drink, and whatever meal I ordered—none of which were cheap—and the bill would easily come to more than a hundred-and-fifty dollars tonight. For someone like me, who usually survived on pennies, this was rather intimidating.

“Lily?” Jack asked.

Biting my lip, I leaned across the table. “Are you sure this is okay? Everything is really expensive.”

Jack reached across the table and touched the back of my hand. “Trust me. Don’t even worry about it.”

Relief softened my shoulders, and I sat back. “Um, I guess I’ll have the Free Range Pesto Chicken Breast over Linguini, please.”

The waiter nodded once more, then collected our menus and left.

I reached for my glass and took a sip. The taste was familiar to me, considering my job, but I watched Jack’s face. He took a drink, and his eyes fluttered shut as he savored the flavour.

“Oh, that’s good,” he said.

It was.

We both placed our glasses back on the table.

“So, what about family?” Jack asked, resuming our conversation. “Do you have any brothers or sisters? Do your parents live here?”

“Nope, no family for me,” I replied, keeping my tone light and airy. This was a topic I did not want to broach. And now I was starting to see why I’d avoided dating for so long. It wasn’t like I could admit who my father was or tell anyone that he’d killed all my brothers and sisters long before I was even born, and my mother not long after.

Jack cocked his head and regarded me quietly. “No family at all?”

I shook my head.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice soft. “That...must be hard.”

“Nah,” I said, waving a dismissive hand. “Trust me when I say I’m better off without them.”

Well, better off without my father. My mother...I would have loved to have known her before she died. But some things just weren’t meant to be. It was easier to accept her death when I couldn’t remember a single thing about her.

I took another sip of whisky, then said, “How about you?”

“Oh, a whole slew of them,” he said, though his voice was incredibly soft, as though worried he might upset me. “I actually have three brothers and two sisters. All of

whom live here. As do my parents.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I said. “It must be nice living so close together. But with that many people, I bet your family gatherings can be a bit...”

“Lively?” Jack said, laughing. “It’s chaos, really.”

Ah, my favourite word.

“Especially during the holidays,” he continued. “My mom insists that everyone come over for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Seeing as how three of my siblings are married and have kids, the house can get a little cramped.”

“Do you all get along?”

“For the most part,” Jack replied. “There’s the usual sibling rivalries and occasional spats. There’s been a few fights that I’m sure would scandalize you?—”

Oh, unlikely, considering some of the fights I’d been in with my father’s lackeys.

“—but all in all, I wouldn’t trade them for anything. We’re really tight. My parents did a great job raising us and keeping us all together. My dad’s the peacemaker, always stepping in before things get too heated.”

“And your mom?” I asked, grinning as the image of his family solidified in my mind.

“She’s more likely to start the spats,” Jack said, chuckling. “She isn’t a redhead, but we’ve always said she has the temper of one.”

I laughed aloud, though a pang of envy hit my chest at the mention of his mother, one he must have sensed from the way he watched me.

“But enough about my family. You said you don’t have one, but what about friends? Anyone you would consider close enough to be family?”

I thought about Jazz and the few acquaintances I’d made over the years, then shook my head. I kept everyone at arm’s length—and for good reason. Shopping with Jazz was fun, but I’d never invited her over to my place. How could I possibly explain the mischievous imp running around in all his weird little outfits that I stole from dolls? Sure, I could ask him to hide, but I knew he wouldn’t comply for long. He found terrorizing humans quite hilarious.

“Just my cat, Purrgatory,” I said, leaving Vol out of the conversation.

Jack blinked, then started chuckling. “You have a cat named?—”

“Purrgatory,” I repeated, “With two r’s, like in purr.”

He gave a laugh, then shook his head. “That’s an incredible name.”

“Do you have any pets?” I asked.

His face softened and he leaned forward, his arms folded on the table. “A Doberman puppy named Rebel, actually.”

I managed to refrain from shuddering, but only barely. Of all the dogs I’d met since arriving on Earth, that breed reminded me the most of hellhounds. Thankfully, Dobermans didn’t have spiked tails or venomous fangs.

The waiter returned with our meals, interrupting our conversation. He placed the dishes in front of us, and I marvelled at the presentation. My pesto chicken breast over linguini looked like a work of art, and Jack’s wild boar ribs were equally impressive.

“This looks amazing,” I said, picking up my fork.

Jack nodded. “Absolutely. Let’s dig in.”

We ate in comfortable silence, savoring the flavours. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten something this delicious.

“So, what’s the best part of being a barista?” Jack asked between bites. “Other than dealing with handsome customers like me.”

I chuckled and swallowed a delicious bite of food. “The smell of fresh coffee,” I replied. “It’s an instant mood booster for me.”

Jack grinned. “I bet. Plus, you get to play with the fancy coffee machines.”

I laughed. “True. I’m a bit of a coffee snob now.”

We finished our meals, and the second I laid my fork on the empty plate, the waiter swept in and cleared the dishes.

“Dessert?” he asked.

I shot Jack a glance and raised a brow. I was stuffed , but one upside to being a celestial was my angelic metabolism. No matter what I ate, I never gained a pound.

“You game?” Jack asked.

“I am, if you are.”

He grinned. “Oh, absolutely. How about we share the torte?”

“Sounds perfect,” I said.

It didn’t take the waiter long to return with the cake. One slice, two forks. I smiled at the symbolism. I’d never had the opportunity to share something as innocent as dessert with someone before. We picked up our own forks, tapped them together like we were in a cheesy rom-com movie, then dove in. The first bite was delectable.

“This is so good,” Jack said around a bite.

I couldn’t even spare any words, too busy nomming down on this glazed treat, but I did nod my agreement. We plowed through it quickly, barely pausing to chat. When one bite remained, we stared at each other, both grinning ear to ear.

“It’s all yours,” Jack said, relinquishing his pronged weapon.

“No,” I said, laughing. “You should have the last bite.”

“Absolutely not,” he said, mock horror filling his expression. “I would never steal cake from a lady.”

I snickered, then dove in and devoured the last bite. It lingered on my tongue, the chocolaty yumminess giving me quite the sugar high. I washed it down with a sip of water, then lifted my gaze to find Jack staring over my shoulder, the sparkle in his eyes dimmed and a frown now creasing his brow.

“What’s wrong? Is there something on my face?” I swiped at my mouth, horrified at the thought that I might have smeared chocolate across my cheek or something equally embarrassing.

“No, but...do you know him?” Jack asked hesitantly, his focus on someone behind me.

I turned, and my stomach dropped. Of all the people I could have imagined standing there, he was the last. Because according to Deidre, he was supposed to be in Hell, enduring endless torture.

Rathiel.

He stood silently, as though he'd simply been waiting for me to turn. He looked almost exactly as I remembered him. The same dark, tousled hair, and the same piercing pale blue eyes that all angels possessed. But there were two stark differences. One, a scar I didn't recall him having—a violent slash that cut a cruel, jagged path along his jawline. And two, no wings. Both of which raised so many questions. Where were his wings? Had someone sheared them off, like mine? What had happened to his face? And who did it?

But there were two far more pressing questions to address. What was he doing here? And how had he escaped my father? Even as the questions came to mind, I quickly answered them. I'd destroyed the Infernal Eye and killed Deidre—though my father didn't yet know that—so he must have sent Rathiel to finish the job and drag me home.

It took every bit of restraint, but I didn't react. I couldn't. Not in public. Not with Jack here. My mind scrambled for options. I sat in the middle of a crowded restaurant, surrounded by humans who had no idea the danger that had just stepped inside. And poor Jack, who had no idea who—or what—I was. This wasn't the time or place to engage in a little light stabbing. So, I did the only thing I could—I waited. The right time would come to me, I merely needed to be patient.

“Rathiel...” I breathed.

His eyes shifted from me to Jack, who now stood protectively next to me. Rathiel's jaw clenched, and if I wasn't mistaken, a flicker of something dark crossed his

features. A flicker that vanished so quickly, I must have imagined it.

He turned his attention back to me, and I fought the urge to pull away from Jack. Odd, but there was something about seeing Rathiel here, in my realm, while I was on a date, that unsettled me.

“Lilith,” Rathiel replied, his voice a deep growl.

Jack touched one of my shoulders, a move Rathiel noticed. His eyes narrowed dangerously. I considered shrugging off Jack’s touch before deciding otherwise.

“Friend of yours?” Jack asked.

I shook my head, voice flat. “Not particularly.”

Rathiel’s gaze snapped back to me, and a flash of something—anger, annoyance, pain—twisted his features.

I frowned. Rathiel and I had never been friends. He’d been my mentor, sometimes my guard when my father ordered it, but that was the extent of our relationship.

“We need to talk,” Rathiel said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

And that was where we disagreed. As far as I was concerned, I had nothing to say to him. I wasn’t going back to Hell—end of story. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have to make my point the same way I had with Deidre. Not that I was armed—stupid dress—but I had other means at my disposal. If he pushed the issue, we’d soon find out how well he handled the heat outside of Hell.

“Kind of in the middle of something here,” I replied, eyeing the surrounding patrons.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a humourless smirk, a dark shadow passing over his face. “Now, Lilith.”

I leaned back, closer to Jack, and crossed my arms. I was Lucifer’s daughter. I commanded demons. They didn’t command me.

Rathiel closed his eyes and drew a slow breath, and I imagined him counting to ten in his head. After a long, awkward pause, he opened his eyes and met my gaze. “I’m not in the mood to play your games. Either speak to me now, or—” his sentence drifted off.

Yeah, I knew that or well. Once again, I reminded myself that we were in public, surrounded by humans. I couldn’t afford to let him unleash his or .

Sighing, I rose to my feet, and Jack’s hand slipped off my shoulder. I threw him an apologetic look. “Give me a sec to talk to him. I’ll be right back.”

Jack’s expression darkened, his concern clear. “Are you sure? Do you want me to come with you?”

Oh, that wouldn’t work at all. I waved him off, hoping to keep things light. “It’s okay. I’ve got this. I just need a minute.”

Rathiel’s expression twisted into something murderous, his jaw clenched so hard I thought I heard his teeth grind. The possessive anger radiating off him was palpable, though confusing. For some reason, he didn’t like Jack. Not one bit. But Jack didn’t notice. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me since Rathiel arrived.

“Alright, but if you’re not back in ten minutes, I’m coming to find you,” Jack said, his voice firm.

I nodded. “Deal.”

I stood and followed Rathiel toward the front door. The second we stepped outside, he gripped my arm and steered me away from the streetlights and into the nearby shadows. I yanked myself free and wrapped both arms around myself. He’d dragged me outside, into minus thirty temperatures, sans jacket. Yeah, I was cold. But that didn’t stop Rathiel’s gaze from sliding down my body, male appreciation alight in the eyes.

I scoffed, mentally berating him.

“Yes, I’m wearing a dress. Get over it,” I sniped, my teeth already chattering. “Now, let me start this little conversation so I can go back inside where it’s warm. I don’t care what you have to say, I’m not going back to He?—”

His gaze snapped up to mine. “Your father wants you dead.”

I shut up.

So, things had progressed then. I’d told myself this could happen. Logically, Lucifer wanting me dead was hardly shocking. What else could I expect from the literal devil when there was a prophecy claiming I would destroy him?

But hearing it out loud differed from merely thinking it.

And it hurt that he’d sent Rathiel to do the job.

I wasn’t sure why that bothered me so much. Of course it would be Rathiel. Of all the fallen, he was my father’s favourite. He’d trained me to fight, to survive, and had molded me into the weapon Lucifer insisted I become.

Was that why it hurt? Because I was closer to Rathiel than I was to my own father? Or maybe it was because deep down, I'd always believed that if my father ever decided to kill me, he'd do it himself.

Guess I should have known better.

What a crappy end to a wonderful evening.

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Chapter Nine

My hand instinctively moved to my side, grasping nothing but the thin fabric of my dress. The warrior in me wanted to reach for a weapon and plunge a blade deep into Rathiel's chest. But I had nothing—no swords, no daggers. Just my magic, which I couldn't unleash here without turning this street into a front-page spectacle.

I scanned the area, taking in every person nearby. Friday night crowds filled the street—people glued to their phones, a couple arguing across the road, while a man attempted valiantly to parallel park his massive “I have a small dick” truck. Too many witnesses. Fighting wasn't an option.

Maybe I could slip away. Use the shadows to vanish before Rathiel had a chance to react. But even as I considered it, I knew it was pointless. He'd tracked me here, to a random restaurant during a date. If he could find me here, he could find me anywhere. Running wouldn't stop him—just delay the inevitable.

Except, Rathiel didn't look like he wanted to kill me. I stared at him, taking in every detail—the dark, brooding aura that had always set me on edge, the calm stance, the loose hands at his sides. Not a hint of fang or hostility. The more I studied him, the more I realized he seemed almost...concerned. And that made no sense. Rathiel didn't care about me. He never had.

My thoughts flashed back to Deidre's taunting words in the mine. She'd claimed my father had been torturing Rathiel, breaking him apart piece by piece. I hadn't believed her then, but now I wondered if there was some truth to it. Had Lucifer released Rathiel and sent him after me? Was this some game to win back my father's favour?

If so, why approach me here in public? Why warn me? Why not strike when I was alone, vulnerable?

None of this added up. The Rathiel I knew was smart, lethal, ruthless. If he wanted me dead, I wouldn't have seen him coming. I'd just be dead.

"Did you hear me?" Rathiel demanded, his voice gruff and edged with a desperation I wasn't accustomed to hearing. "Your father?—"

"Wants me dead, blah, blah, blah," I interrupted, lifting my chin defiantly. "I'm more concerned about you right now. What do you want? Are you here to kill me on his behalf?"

Rathiel's eyes widened slightly, a crack in his usually stoic facade. "What?"

"Deidre said you and Lucifer had a falling out." I didn't mention the torture—I had a feeling he wouldn't appreciate me bringing that up. "Is that why you're here? To kill me and slip back into his good graces?"

"Deidre?" Rathiel's brow furrowed. "When did you see Deidre?"

"Not important," I said. "Answer my question. Are you here to kill me?"

His expression hardened, but there was a flicker of something else—something I couldn't decipher. "No, Lilith. I'm not here to kill you."

His words hung between us, heavy with unspoken truths and unresolved tension. I studied his face, searching for any sign of deception. His eyes held mine steadily, and I found myself wanting to believe him.

My mind raced through the possibilities. If Rathiel wasn't here to kill me, then what

was his purpose? Why warn me about Lucifer? Was this some twisted game, or was there a chance he was genuinely trying to help?

“Then what do you want, Rathiel? Why are you here?”

He took another step closer, and the muscles in his jaw tightened. “I’m here because you need protection. Lucifer won’t stop until you’re dead, and I refuse to let that happen.”

Okay—that wasn’t the answer I’d expected.

I shook my head. “I don’t need anyone’s protection, least of all you. I am quite capable of taking care of myself. I’ve been doing it my whole life. But regardless of all that, why?”

“Why, what?” he asked.

“Why are you so determined to stop him from killing me?”

His gaze softened. “Because...I owe you.”

I frowned. He owed me? For what? “What are you talking about?”

His eyes darkened, and he stole a step closer, his presence overwhelming. I sucked in a sharp breath, surprised when I didn’t feel the urge to step back. He loomed over me, his head angled downward as he held my gaze. “I’m here to protect you. That’s all you need to know.”

The intensity in his voice sent a shiver down my spine. I forced myself to swallow before asking, “Since when do you care what happens to me?”

His mouth flattened into a grim line, but he didn't answer my question.

I pressed my palms against his chest and shoved him backward. "This cryptic, evasive act might've worked ten years ago, but now it's just irritating. Either tell me what's really going on, or I'm walking."

Rathiel sighed and ran a hand through his hair, a gesture so human it almost made me laugh. "I have my reasons," he said. "And let's leave it at that."

"Nope. That's not gonna cut it."

He gave a soft laugh. "I almost forgot how annoyingly stubborn you can be."

"Likewise," I bit back.

"Some truths are too dangerous to know, Lily. But I'm not leaving your side, whether you like it or not."

"I don't need a bodyguard. I need answers."

He closed the distance between us once again. I didn't remember him being this pushy in Hell.

"You need to trust me," he said softly, his voice a low rumble that made my pulse leap. "I'm the only one who can keep you safe from your father."

He wasn't wrong—Rathiel was powerful. One of the most powerful among my father's nine generals. Each had their own abilities and strengths, but Rathiel stood in a league of his own. His mastery over blood was a weapon few could survive. I'd seen him in action, tearing through enemies like they were nothing more than fragile playthings. His attacks weren't just calculated—they were ruthless, leaving behind

nothing but carnage and fear in his wake.

But I knew better than to trust someone. Deidre had taught me that hard lesson. I was the only person I could rely on.

“No,” I finally whispered. “I can’t trust you. You’re his right-hand, his most loyal. I just can’t.”

He lifted his hand, his fingers halting next to my cheek, as though he wanted to touch me but remembered he shouldn’t.

A frown creased my brow as my gaze flicked from his hand to his eyes.

Sighing, he lowered his arm and stepped back.

“I’m sorry, but you don’t have a choice here,” he said, his voice steady. “I’m not going anywhere. You aren’t the only stubborn one here.”

I clenched my jaw, fighting to keep my emotions in check. “Go home, Rathiel. You aren’t wanted—or needed—here.”

Pain flickered in his eyes, but before he could form a response, I turned on my heel and hurried back into the restaurant, the warmth inside a stark contrast to the icy chill that lingered on my skin. My heart pounded as I made my way back to the table where Jack waited. His eyes lit up when he saw me, but his expression quickly shifted to concern.

He pushed his chair back and stood. “I was starting to worry. Are you alright? What’s going on?”

I forced a smile, though it felt tight and strained. “I’m fine. But I’m afraid I need to

end our date. I gotta go.”

His brow furrowed, worry etched into his features. “Are you okay? Who was that guy?”

I glanced over my shoulder, half-expecting to find Rathiel hovering in the doorway, watching me. Thankfully, the lobby stood empty. “It’s complicated. But don’t worry, I’m fine. I just need to go now.”

Jack’s gaze searched mine. Clearly, he had a million questions, but being that this was our first date, he probably wasn’t sure if he had the right to ask them.

“I’m really sorry,” I told him as I pulled on my jacket and purse. “I had a wonderful time, really. And please don’t think this is because of anything you did. It isn’t. That guy...he’s just someone from my past, and he delivered some bad news that I now have to deal with.”

Jack slowly stepped around the table. “Let me take you home, then.”

I considered it, his offer tugging at my heart. But just because I’d walked away from Rathiel didn’t mean he’d walked away from me. His words, “ You don’t have a choice here. I’m not going anywhere ,” rang through my head. We may not like each other, but I knew him well, and I knew he wouldn’t give up easily—or at all. I had to assume he would follow me home, and truth be told, I didn’t want Jack anywhere near him. It was safer for us to part ways now, lest Rathiel show his damned face again.

“I appreciate it, really. But I think it’s best if I go alone. I need some space to clear my head.”

Jack’s frown deepened. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Trust me, I’m fine. I’ll even text you when I’m home to let you know I got there safe, okay?”

He nodded reluctantly, then escorted me out of the restaurant and back into the cold. Once on the street, he reached out and touched my arm. “Promise me you’ll be careful. And if you need anything, anything at all, call me, okay?”

I nodded, feeling a pang of guilt for leaving him in the dark. “I will. Thank you, Jack.”

He stepped closer, then leaned in and kissed my cheek. “I like you, Lily. I really do. And I’d like to go on another date, regardless of whatever happened here tonight.”

A lump formed in my throat as I met his gaze. “I’d like that too,” I whispered, surprised that I truly meant it. Jack was a great guy. Any woman would be lucky to have him.

Jack lingered, his eyes searching mine as if trying to find the answers I couldn’t give him. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked again, his voice gentle but insistent.

I nodded, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

He sighed, clearly unhappy with my response, but respecting my need for space. “Alright. Just...be safe, okay? And if you change your mind about needing a ride, call me. I’ll come get you, no matter what time it is.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice soft. “I appreciate it more than you know.”

With one final nod, Jack turned and headed toward his car. I watched as he climbed inside and made sure he was safely on his way before I walked down the street to the nearest bus stop. The cold air nipped my cheeks and the tip of my nose, but I

welcomed the distraction. Anything to keep my thoughts from spiralling.

I reached the bench and sat, my mind racing as I struggled to figure out my next move. Lucifer wanted me dead. And now Rathiel was here. But he claimed he was here to protect me, rather than kill me. That was something at least. In situations like these, it was helpful to know friend from foe—assuming, of course, Rathiel was telling the truth. Call me paranoid, but I had some teeny, tiny trust issues. Let's all give Deidre a round of applause for that one.

Movement caught my attention, and I jerked my head up in time to watch a shadowed figure approach. I tensed, my heart skipping a beat—I was on high alert—but relaxed slightly when I recognized Rathiel's familiar silhouette.

Without so much as a word, he sat next to me on the bench. We locked eyes once before he turned away and stared at the street, clearly planning to accompany me on the bus.

I sighed.

He nodded once, a barely perceptible movement, but it was enough.

My fingers twitched, the familiar heat of hellfire sparking beneath my skin. The flames weren't visible—not yet—but my power was there, ready and eager to be used. “You realize I could roast you right here and now, right?” I said, my voice low and dangerous. “How do you like your vampire cooked? Medium rare?”

A ghost of a smile tugged at Rathiel's lips, but he didn't respond.

“Or I could just leave you here,” I mused.

“You won't,” was all he said.

“Oh? That sure of yourself, are we?” For a brief second, I marvelled at the two of us, having what passed as polite conversation—by our standards at least—for one of the first times. No bloodshed, threats, or daggers involved. This had to be some sort of record.

Rathiel shot me a side-glance, then nodded. “You need me.”

Some people just never learn. “I assure you, I do not. I can handle Lucifer myself.”

“You need me for other reasons.”

And, of course, he didn’t elaborate further. I stared at him, my brows arched, but when he didn’t respond, exasperation won the battle, and I threw my hands into the air. “Well? What reasons?”

Before he could reply, the bus approached, its headlights piercing through the darkness. Much to my dismay, Rathiel reached into his pocket and produced a handful of change.

My eyes widened. Where had he gotten money ?

The bus came to a stop, the doors hissing open. I stepped on, flashing my bus pass while Rathiel dropped the coins into the farebox without a word. I made my way to the back of the bus, hoping for a bit of space to clear my head. Naturally, Rathiel sat down next to me, his leg brushing mine.

“Seriously, where did you get the money?” I demanded, eyeing him skeptically.

He didn’t bother looking at me, his gaze fixed on the window. Nor did he answer my question.

I rolled my eyes, irritated by his silence. “Are you purposely trying to annoy me?”

He finally glanced at me, eerily calm. “It’s not hard to do.”

I scoffed, unable to argue with that. Turning back to the window, I watched the city lights blur by, my mind racing with questions I couldn’t ask. I wanted to grill him about Lucifer, about whatever had happened to earn him a one-way ticket to Torture-Town, but this wasn’t the time. I couldn’t even ask how he’d found me or how he’d escaped Hell. Those were conversations for a more private setting.

A few minutes passed before I blew out a heavy breath and turned to face him again. His expression was as inscrutable as ever, but there was a tension around his jaw and a tightness to his eyes that hinted at a deeper turmoil. I wanted to dig into it, to unravel all his mysteries, but all I could do was focus on the one question I could actually ask.

“Alright, I give up. What are these supposed ‘other reasons’ that make you think I need you?”

A faint, infuriating smile played at the corners of his mouth, but he didn’t answer. Instead, his gaze flicked to mine briefly before he murmured, “Not here.”

This was why conversations with Rathiel usually ended in bloodshed. The way he spoke in riddles and withheld information drove me insane. But I understood his reservations. We couldn’t air our dirty laundry on a crowded bus full of humans.

I sighed, accepting the inevitable. If I took him back to my apartment, I could at least control the situation. There, I had my weapons, and I could use my magic freely, without worrying about witnesses. And if things went south, I’d be in a much better position to deal with him. In my space, I held the advantage.

Besides, what was the real risk? If Rathiel wanted to kill me, he didn't need to lure me home to do it. He could've struck me down in the middle of the street already. And let's be real—he likely would have followed me home, anyway, so there really wasn't any point in trying to shake him. Better to face him on my own terms.

Guess I was taking him home.

Damn him. And damn my insatiable curiosity.

He'd won this round, and the worst part? He knew it.

Chapter Ten

I unlocked the door to my apartment and nudged it open. “Go on,” I said, knowing Rathiel needed permission to enter, thanks to his vampiric nature. “Get inside.”

There weren’t many rules about vamps that humans had right. Fangs? Yes. Feeding off the living? Absolutely, though they fed in secret to keep the humans from learning about—and extinguishing—they. Beyond that, most of the myths missed the mark. Crosses didn’t faze them, holy water was a joke, sunlight didn’t reduce them to ashes, and they certainly didn’t turn into bats. But one rule held true, no matter what: they couldn’t enter a home without an invitation. That was non-negotiable.

I once watched a vampire slam face-first into an invisible barrier, denied entry because they hadn’t scored a proper invite. The impact was glorious—like a bug smacking into a window, then slowly sliding down in defeat. I nearly doubled over laughing, knowing I’d never forget that splattered, baffled look from my mind.

Rathiel stepped in with deliberate slowness, his eyes scanning the room with quiet intent. I watched him for a beat longer than necessary before following him inside and closing the door behind us.

Just like that, I was alone with Rathiel. The one who had shaped me into a soldier, who epitomized strength and authority. I’d never really liked him—more like tolerated him. But he’d commanded armies of hellspawn over his long, long lifespan. And now, he stood in my apartment, with its mismatched furniture, peeling paint, and worn flooring.

With a quiet sigh, I dropped my keys on the small table next to my entrance and faced him, crossing my arms over my chest.

He didn't meet my gaze. Instead, he entered my home and started roaming about, taking in every detail with what looked like great fascination. When his gaze landed on Purrgatory, he blinked and cocked his head.

"It's a cat," I told him. "Or what humans call a cat here on Earth."

Hellcats were far larger and much fiercer, more akin to tigers but with demonic eyes and twisted horns. I'd only heard them described before, never laid eyes on one, probably because no one ever tangled with a hellcat and survived.

I walked to Purrgatory and touched his chin. His head rose a notch, and he closed his eyes, his chest vibrating with a pleased purr.

"They're harmless," I said. "Well, mostly."

Rathiel shook his head, a bemused smile playing at his lips. But then his gaze shifted, and he froze, his eyes widening as he spotted Vol. The imp stood on the living room windowsill, his beady eyes narrowed on Rathiel.

"What in the nine hells is that?" Rathiel asked, his voice a mix of shock and incredulity.

"That's Vol. He's an imp," was all I said.

The creature in question crouched and snarled, baring his tiny fangs. Rathiel quirked a brow. Then, as if to assert dominance, snarled back, flashing his own vampiric fangs, which were far larger and more menacing than the imp's. Vol's eyes widened, but instead of cowering, he puffed up his little chest, looking more like a ruffled

pigeon than a threat.

Before I could react, Vol shot off the windowsill and darted toward Rathiel. In a blur of movement, the imp scurried up Rathiel's body, using his clothes as a makeshift ladder, until he perched precariously on Rathiel's shoulder.

Vol grabbed Rathiel's nose with both hands, turning his head left and right as if examining a piece of fruit at the market. Finally, with a look of intense concentration, he lifted Rathiel's top lip and peered at his fangs.

"Oh, for crying out loud," I muttered, trying to suppress a laugh. "Vol, would you leave him alone?"

But the little pest ignored me, his dark eyes narrowing as he poked one of Rathiel's fangs. Rathiel's expression was a mix of annoyance and disbelief, his body rigid as he tolerated my imp's antics.

"What is he doing?" Rathiel asked around Vol's fingers.

"Inspecting you, apparently," I said, unable to hold back a chuckle.

Vol gave a satisfied nod before patting Rathiel on the cheek. "Welcome to the club, Meat Sack."

Rathiel jerked, as though stunned Vol could speak, and shot me a wide-eyed stare.

I just shrugged.

Vol scurried down Rathiel and hopped back up onto the windowsill. Something had caught his interest out there, and I had no idea what it was. So long as his attention was no longer on us, I was happy.

Rathiel rubbed his nose, his brow furrowed. "I've faced legions of hellspawn, but that was a first."

I shrugged, still grinning. "Welcome to my life."

He shook his head, a bemused smile returning to his lips. "And what an interesting one you have here, Lily."

"Yeah, well, Vol definitely keeps me on my toes," I replied.

The imp in question glanced our way and preened like a smug little bird.

"Well, now that we've dispensed with the pleasantries," I said, crossing my arms, "let's get down to business."

Rathiel's deep chuckle rumbled through the apartment. "No offer to sit first?"

I muttered something sharp under my breath and gestured vaguely toward the couch. "Fine. Sit. Stand. Lounge on the floor, if you want. I don't care. Just start talking, and if you don't, I'm going to kick your sorry ass out onto the curb, and you can sleep in the freezing cold snow. But not before I stab you a few times just for dramatic effect. Okay?"

"Fair enough," he said, daring to stride into my living room, completely unfazed by my threat. "But if stabbing is on the table, perhaps I should remain standing?"

"Oh, ha-ha," I snapped. "Now, what are these so-called reasons of yours?" I demanded.

Rathiel circled my living room, as though searching the best spot to sit. "Well, as you know, your father gave the order to kill you."

I impatiently tapped a foot.

“What you don’t know,” Rathiel continued, “is who he gave that order to.”

My mouth twisted. “Are you serious? That’s your big reveal?” I tipped my head back and blew out a frustrated breath. “My father controls all of Hell and the spawn he creates. I think I have a good idea who he delivered that order to. Deidre didn’t say she was here to kill me, but if he’s sent one Hellspawn through, then I’m sure he’ll?—”

“He gave the order to the other fallen,” Rathiel cut in, his voice low and steady.

Annnnd... boom . His words hit me like a punch to the chest. I froze, my thoughts grinding to a halt as my entire body went cold. My mouth dried, and I couldn’t find enough air. It felt like the floor had vanished beneath me, like I was falling through a void. I reached out, my hands brushing the nearest wall to steady myself as my legs threatened to buckle.

Rathiel closed the distance between us, his hands held out as though prepared to catch me should I fall. “Breathe, Lily.”

The sound of my name snapped me back to reality, but the weight of his revelation still pressed down on my chest, muddling my thoughts. A part of me simply refused to believe Rathiel. My father would never send his most dangerous warriors after me. They were his guard, his people, his inner circle. In all my life, they’d never left his side. And now Rathiel wanted me to believe that Lucifer had sent them all here? Just to kill me?

“You’re saying my father has sent his most fearsome after me?” Gremory, Zera, Gavrel, Tavira, Miriel, Ezrion, Calyx, Raelia... Their names flooded my mind like a curse. With each name came a face, and with each face came a wave of gut-

wrenching dread.

These weren't just soldiers—they were my father's elite. I'd trained alongside them, fought beside them, and witnessed their sadistic skills firsthand. Their cruelty knew no bounds. They were ruthless and relentless. Alone, each of them was terrifying. But together, they were unstoppable.

The thought of Lucifer unleashing them on Earth with one single command... I wanted to vomit.

Rathiel stepped closer and touched my elbow, grounding me. "Their orders are not to return until you're dead. That's why I escaped Hell, Lily. To tell you that they're already here, hunting you. I'm just grateful I found you first."

I closed my eyes, forcing myself to breathe. "How? No one escapes Hell."

"It wasn't easy," he admitted. "It took some help, but I couldn't not come for you. Not when I heard what was happening."

I opened my eyes and looked at him, my heart racing. "Why?" I asked, my voice louder, more forceful. "What changed? You were my father's right-hand for millennia. The most dedicated of all his generals. And now you expect me to believe you're no longer loyal to him?"

"That's a conversation for another time," he said, avoiding my question, his gaze steady but unreadable. "Right now, all you need to know is that I'm not on his side anymore. I came here to protect you, not to harm you."

A bitter laugh escaped me before I could stop it. "How can I believe anything you say when you spent centuries at his side, when you won't tell me why you've abandoned him? How am I supposed to trust you?"

His eyes darkened, but he didn't move. "If you want to survive, you need me."

I hated how right he was. I needed all the help I could get—I knew that. And having Rathiel at my side was far better than going at this alone. But was he truly my ally? He claimed he was, but that damn voice in my head reminded me that I'd once thought the same of Deidre, only to learn she'd been spying on me for my entire life.

"I have more questions," I said. "And if you want me to trust you, then you need to be completely honest with me. No more evading, no more half-truths."

His jaw clenched, but he eventually nodded.

I stepped into the living room and sat on the couch, needing a moment to gather myself. Purgatory took advantage and crawled on my lap. Rathiel followed and took the chair across from me.

"Let's start simple," I said, trying to focus on the practical. "How did you find me?" Because however he'd done it, his brethren would likely use similar tactics. Best to prepare ourselves.

"It wasn't difficult," he admitted, his eyes flicking to my balcony window. "This city is big, but Hell is bigger. I've tracked many through harsher, more unforgiving terrain."

I raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to elaborate.

He didn't disappoint. "It took me a few days, but I picked up on your scent yesterday. Once I had that, it was just a matter of following the trail. It led me to this odd place called a coffee shop." His mouth twitched in what might have been amusement. "Inside, there was a blonde woman who, after a little...persuasion, pointed me in your direction."

I narrowed my eyes. “Persuasion?” Jazz knew better than to give up my location. But I had a feeling Rathiel’s ‘persuasion’ had less to do with charm and more to do with his supernatural abilities. He did have those vampiric hypnotic eyes, after all. I’d never personally experienced their full power, but I’d seen him use them on misbehaving hellspawn more than once.

“You tracked my scent?” I couldn’t keep the incredulity from my voice.

He nodded, unapologetic. “The city masked it. But you’re not untraceable.” His voice softened. “Not to me.”

I swallowed hard, trying to keep my voice steady. “And I’m guessing you came through the portal at the Alberta Legislature Building?”

He quirked a brow.

I grabbed my phone and quickly searched for the building. After finding an online photo, I held it up for him to see.

He nodded after studying the image. “That’s the place.”

“Is that the only portal?” It terrified me to think there might be others scattered across the Earth.

“There are many portals between all the realms. But this is the only one I know of that’s currently working.”

I wish his words had brought me a measure of relief, but they didn’t. Just because he only knew of this one didn’t mean others hadn’t also opened. “Okay, so who unlocked this one? Deidre?”

Rathiel shook his head. “When Heaven sealed the portal gates, they used celestial power to lock them down. That means only celestial power can open it, and even then, it’s damn near impossible. However, Deidre is a hellspawn?—”

“Was,” I corrected.

Rathiel’s brows shot upward. “Truly?”

I nodded.

His expression changed, and if I wasn’t mistaken, he seemed almost impressed. He gave another small nod and continued. “Since Deidre was a hellspawn, she wouldn’t have been able to open it. Someone would have had to do it for her. And the only one who would want Deidre here?—”

“Is Lucifer,” I finished. But I already knew that. That Infernal Eye of his would haunt my nightmares forever. “So, he finally figured out how to open one up.” Memories from my childhood came to mind, of my father trying—and failing—to break through Heaven’s locks. It had been a constant source of rage for him.

Rathiel didn’t say anything to that.

Another question nagged at the back of my mind. “Why didn’t Lucifer come through himself? For as long as I can remember, he’s wanted to unleash an apocalypse on this realm. Heaven intervened before, but if he’s figured out how to open a portal, why hasn’t he crossed over?”

Rathiel lifted his hands. “Your guess is as good as mine. I’m not part of his inner circle anymore.”

I moved past that, knowing he would simply evade that question again. Besides, I

had more important questions to ask.

“I was at the portal a few days ago, and it felt closed to me.”

“Think of it like a door,” Rathiel said. “Heaven locked it, and your father, no matter how hard he tried, couldn’t break their seal.”

“Until now,” I mumbled.

“The portal isn’t what it used to be. It doesn’t stay open for long, and it takes an immense amount of power to force it open each time. More than your father is likely willing to sacrifice to keep it open indefinitely. When I crossed through, it drained me for a full day—and that was just me. The more who try to come through, the greater the cost.”

“So, if it felt closed when I was there, then it probably was?”

“Exactly. Lucifer would’ve only opened it long enough to get his fallen through, then let it close again to conserve his strength.”

“Can we seal it again? From this side? Preferably for good this time.”

Rathiel sighed, shaking his head. “It took the combined might of Heaven to seal it last time. Neither you nor I possess that kind of power, especially not for something permanent.”

Disappointment swelled within me, crushing all my newfound hopes of closing the portal and saving Edmonton—and Earth. Damn it.

“I guess that explains why my father hasn’t sent his entire army through yet,” I murmured.

“Lucifer has a plan—one I’m not privy to,” Rathiel said. “But I know he has one. And he will follow that plan to the absolute letter. And I would bet my last feather that step one of that plan is eradicating you. Afterward...” Rathiel lifted his hands in a helpless gesture.

My stomach twisted at his words. “If he wants me dead so badly, why not just do it himself? Why send the fallen?”

“Your father surrounds himself with followers who would die for him without question,” Rathiel said. “They don’t know any other way. To him, they’re just tools—resources to be used without risking himself.”

“But why? What danger am I to him?” I asked, frustrating bubbling to the surface. “Sure, there’s a prophecy, but I’m here . Not in Hell. What could I possibly do to him from here? The portal separated us. Why send the fallen after me now?”

Rathiel leaned forward, his gaze searching mine. “What do you remember about your life before you arrived on Earth?”

I blinked, thrown by the sudden question. “What?”

“Just humor me,” he insisted. “Before all this—before you arrived here—what do you remember?”

“I remember Hell. Training with you and the others, learning to fight,” I said, unsure of where he was going with this.

“And?” Rathiel pressed. “What else? What do you remember about the prophecy?”

I blew out a heavy breath. “Just that it claims I’ll destroy Hell and Lucifer.” I shuddered as that memory surfaced and I closed my eyes. “He was so angry,” I

whispered. “Deidre had just betrayed me. She’d told him everything. I remember his power, the weight of it, the pain—it was unbearable. He nearly broke me. Then, there was a lot of darkness, falling, me screaming, pain. And then I woke up here.”

“Do you remember escaping the throne room? With me?” Rathiel’s voice grew almost eager, eyes searching mine for any hint of recognition.

I frowned deeply, closing my eyes against the pounding that began in my skull. “Escaping with you? No. That never happened. At least, I don’t think so. I don’t remember—no. You...you weren’t there. Or were you? Maybe? I can’t—” Agony assaulted my skull, and I dug my fingers into my hair with a frustrated groan. “Please...don’t make me try to remember. It hurts.”

Silence.

When the agony finally receded, I opened my eyes to find Rathiel staring at me, a different kind of pain alight in his gaze. He instantly blinked it away, but I’d seen that flash. Just as I was about to ask him about it, I realized something. Something that had my heart dropping to my feet.

His question...the way he’d worded it.

Before you arrived on Earth, what do you remember?

Such an odd way to phrase that question.

“How did you know?” I murmured, one piece of the puzzle suddenly coming together in my head.

“Know what?” He cleared his throat and averted his gaze—a clear sign he was nervous.

“How did you know I can’t remember everything?” I repeated, my words loud and pulsing with rage. When he didn’t respond, I kept pushing. “You wouldn’t have phrased your question that way if you didn’t already know.”

Rathiel grimaced, his jaw tightening.

My blood boiled. “Answer me!” I snapped, pushing Purgatory off my lap as I stood, fists clenched at my sides. “How did you know?”

He didn’t speak. Then, with a sigh, he raised his hands, as though trying to calm a raging storm. “Lily, let me explain. It’s not what you think.”

Oh, I had a feeling it was exactly what I thought. But I wanted to hear it directly from him. “Spit. It. Out,” I commanded.

After a deep breath, he nodded. “Before you arrived on Earth, some of your memories were erased to protect you.”

“Protect me,” I repeated with a dry laugh. “Who did it? Who wiped my memories?”

Rathiel’s expression shuttered, and he lowered his gaze. The silence that followed was suffocating, thick with tension, as if the air itself held its breath.

“You,” I whispered. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

Chapter Eleven

The guilt in Rathiel's eyes told me everything I needed to know. After ten years of wondering, here it was. The truth. And it shattered me.

"You bastard," I choked out, taking a single step toward him, my hands trembling with the urge to strike. "You had no right. Were you the one who sent me here, too?"

"I had to," he said quietly, his voice barely audible. "It was the only way to save your life."

His words rattled in my skull, bouncing around like some cruel joke. I scrubbed my hands down my face, trying to make sense of the chaos in my mind. "Start from the beginning, Rathiel. And if I don't like what you have to say, so help me, we'll find out what happens when I burn you alive."

Rathiel's face hardened, the guilt in his eyes replaced by a steely resolve. "You have to understand, Lilith. You were a threat to Lucifer. A powerful one. If you remembered everything, you would have killed yourself trying to get back to Hell. I couldn't let that happen."

My eyes narrowed. "Remember what, exactly? What was so important that you had to erase it?"

Rathiel sighed, defeat slumping his shoulders. Finally— finally—he spoke. "You led a rebellion against your father. You rallied the strongest, the fiercest, the most vicious to fight against Lucifer's tyranny. You nearly succeeded, too, but in the end, he

crushed your forces. He destroyed everything you built. And then...he crushed you . He tore off your wings and was about to obliterate you. I couldn't let that happen."

The words hit like a hammer to my chest, knocking the air from my lungs. "I...led a rebellion?" I whispered, the words foreign and strange on my tongue.

The idea of standing against my father, the most powerful being I'd ever known, seemed absurd. Yet, the conviction in Rathiel's eyes told me it was true. My stomach churned as I considered his words, and I couldn't reconcile what he said with the person I thought I was.

"I hate my father, yes," I said, my voice shaking. "And yeah, I've broken his rules and defied him every chance I got. But lead a rebellion? Fight against him? No...that's not me."

"Except it is," Rathiel assured me. "You proved to be the strongest among us all. A true warrior. You led us. You gave us hope. I just wish we'd won the fight."

The words hung in the air, heavy and strange. I stared at him, my mind trying to make sense of what he had just said. I wasn't sure what stunned me more—Rathiel claiming I'd led a rebellion, or that he was including himself in that group. "Us?" I asked slowly, my voice cautious. "You...fought with me?"

His head dipped in a single nod. "I did."

I couldn't wrap my head around it. Rathiel fighting alongside me? That didn't track. Rathiel had always been faithful to my father, the enforcer who did everything asked of him without question.

" You betrayed Lucifer?"

“Yes,” Rathiel said quietly, his voice resolute.

The idea was absurd. It didn’t make any sense. “Why?”

He didn’t answer.

A bitter laugh escaped me, but it lacked genuine humor. “You’re lying,” I said, though the conviction was slipping from my voice. “You would never betray him. You’re loyal to a fault. Always have been.”

“I wasn’t loyal to him, Lilith,” Rathiel said, his voice hardening. “Not in the way you think.”

I shook my head, still trying to make sense of it all. “You were his weapon, Rathiel. His tool. My whole life, I watched you do his bidding, no questions asked.”

“Because I had no choice,” he growled. He pushed to his feet and strode to the window, his steps slow but purposeful. “When we fell from Heaven, your father insisted we take vows and pledge ourselves wholly in his name. We did so without a thought. It didn’t take long for us to realize that we’d given up something truly precious.” He sighed, a sound full of heartbreak. “Our free will. We could not disobey. The magic binding us together wouldn’t allow it. No matter your father’s orders, I couldn’t to do otherwise.”

I blinked, shock rippling through me. I didn’t know the fallen had given up their free will. Suddenly, my whole life began to make more sense—the way my father’s inner circle obeyed his every command without question. All these years, I’d believed them loyal by choice. But I understood differently now. Lucifer had shackled them to him. Rathiel too—until Lucifer freed him.

“Then...how?” I whispered. If he couldn’t disobey, how could he have sided with

me?

Rathiel's jaw clenched, his voice laden with the weight of old wounds. "When you joined the rebellion, your father was furious. But he's a strategist first and foremost, always planning three steps ahead. He saw an opportunity, and he ordered me to infiltrate the rebellion. He believed that, with me there, he could tear the rebellion out at the roots. I was supposed to prove my loyalty to the rebellion by denouncing him, betraying him in front of your followers. Make everyone believe I had turned against him. But in order to accomplish that, he made a fatal mistake. He released me from my vow."

The air left my lungs in a sharp rush, the last of the puzzle pieces falling into place.

"He thought he was being clever." Rathiel's lip curled in disdain. "He knew I would need my free will if I was going to convince the rebellion, and you, that I was truly on your side. Without it, I couldn't have defied him convincingly. So, he severed the bond."

I couldn't fathom my father's arrogance, the complete certainty he must have had in his control over Rathiel in order to take that risk.

"He believed you'd remain loyal regardless," I said.

Rathiel nodded, his expression tight. "He never considered that I might take my freedom and never give it back. He underestimated me."

My heart pounded as the gravity of his words sank in. "So you took that freedom and...what? Sided with me in this rebellion?"

"Yes." Rathiel's voice was steady, resolute. "I finally had the chance to make my own choices. For the first time in centuries, I could do as I please. And I did exactly

that. I chose you over him.”

“But why? There’s nothing special about me, I’m just?—”

Rathiel closed the distance between us in three long strides. “Everything about you is special. You are a true leader, Lilith. Where you inspire loyalty, your father commands through fear. Where you lead with kindness, he rules with an iron fist. He is a blight on Hell. You are the light. He is nothing but darkness.”

I started to shake my head, but Rathiel wouldn’t have it. “It’s who you are, Lilith. It’s in your bones. You led us with fire and conviction, and that part of you hasn’t changed. It never will.”

I shook my head, refusing to accept what he was saying. “I’m nothing now, Rathiel. My memories are gone, my wings—” I stopped, my breath hitching. The phantom pain of my wings being ripped away flared at the thought.

He took another step toward me, his gaze never leaving mine. “Your wings were only a part of your strength. They didn’t make you who you are. Your father may have taken them, but he did not break you. I saw to that.”

Something clicked. Deidre’s words in the mine came rushing back, loud and clear, echoing in my head.

You left quite the mess behind, Lily. And you know your father—someone had to pay the blood price. He made sure of that. And the lucky winner is someone you know very well.

I had dismissed her words at the time, believed it to be part of her twisted mind games. But now? Now it was all starting to make sense in a way that made my heart absolutely ache.

Your father got his hands on him not long after you disappeared. Poor Rathiel—he never saw it coming.

“That’s why...” I breathed, my gaze locking with his, realization crashing over me like a tidal wave. “Lucifer tortured you because you sided with me.”

“Lucifer tortured me because I saved you,” Rathiel amended. “Your father was going to kill you. So many had already died trying to retrieve you from his clutches. I did what I had to do.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why were you so determined to keep me alive?”

Regret flickered in Rathiel’s eyes but he blinked it away. He squared his shoulders, his voice steady, as though reciting a rehearsed line, and said, “Because of the prophecy. You’re the one destined to bring him down. We just needed another shot at it. You had to live.”

My mind reeled. “So, you sent me here. To Earth.”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “It was the only place I could think of where you’d be safe. Where Lucifer couldn’t reach you.”

“How did you even get me here? How did you open the gate?”

“It wasn’t easy,” Rathiel admitted. “There’s a secret to opening them. One your father never figured out—but I did. It wasn’t easy. Like I said, forcing the portal open requires immense power. Sending you through took everything I had. I was...vulnerable. By the time Lucifer found me, I couldn’t fight back.”

My breath hitched. He’d sacrificed himself to save me. But as I replayed his words in my head, something didn’t add up. “Wait,” I said slowly, my stomach knotting. “If

you opened the portal first, how did my father figure out how to use it? How does he know the secret now?"

But understanding crashed over me, sharp and unrelenting. And even though I was pissed at Rathiel, my heart broke for him. "You told him, didn't you?"

He didn't answer right away, but his frame vibrated with tension. "Yes," he said at last, his voice low and fierce. "I told him."

I placed a hand on my stomach, unable to fathom what my father had put Rathiel through. Lucifer was hardly a saint—he'd earned the name Satan for a reason. And even for someone like Rathiel, a decade of torture at my father's hands was a long time.

Rathiel's eyes darkened and his jaw tightened. "After ten years of torture, I broke and gave him something, anything to stop him. He already knew where you were, but he didn't know how to open the portal. I didn't want to tell him, but—" Rathiel's voice cracked, his eyes flashing.

A wave of nausea rolled through me. My father was a monster, and yet, hearing Rathiel admit it aloud made it worse somehow. My voice trembled as I asked, "What did he do to you?"

He sucked in a deep breath and quickly composed himself. I watched in awe as he pulled every emotion back, tucking it deep down inside him until his face reflected nothing more than a stone mask. "It doesn't matter," he said. "What matters is I'm here now."

"It does matter," I insisted, my hands shaking. "Rathiel, he—he tortured you for ten years because of me."

His gaze snapped to mine, fierce and unyielding. “No, Lilith. He tortured me because he wanted to. Your father doesn’t need reasons to hurt others—he does it because he enjoys it. This was never your fault.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to cling to the absolution he offered, but the weight of it all pressed down on me, suffocating. I could barely form a coherent thought as the realization sank in. Rathiel had endured Hell’s worst—Lucifer’s worst—all to keep me alive.

“You sacrificed yourself,” I said, my voice barely louder than a whisper. “You sent me here, knowing he’d find you. You?—”

“Enough,” Rathiel said sharply, cutting me off. His jaw clenched, and he turned away, his hands gripping the back of the armchair as though to steady himself. “It doesn’t matter. I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Lilith. No matter the cost.”

He had so much pain hiding beneath the surface. I wanted to press harder, find out what exactly my father had done to him. But I feared doing so would cause him even more pain, and that was the last thing I wanted to do. I was Lucifer’s daughter, but I wasn’t a sadist.

I scrubbed my face, hiding the wetness pooling in my eyes. “And my memories? How did you wipe them?”

“I broke into your father’s vaults. He has a collection of powerful relics, some ancient, some dangerous.”

“You...stole from Lucifer?” My disbelief clashed with the strange mix of admiration and horror swirling in my gut. I wasn’t sure if that made him brave or utterly desperate.

“It was the only way,” he said, voice low. “You would have done anything to get back to Hell. I had to make sure you wouldn’t even try. The relic I used strips away—and stores—memories.”

My heart leaped. If it stored memories, then maybe... I took a step toward him, hope surging in my veins. “Then I can get them back?”

Rathiel’s mouth twisted in regret. “No. I lost the relic when Lucifer imprisoned me. I don’t know where it is now, or who has it.”

The hope that had surged within me quickly drained, leaving a cold, hard knot of anger. The most personal moments of my life—everything that made me who I was—now in the hands of someone else.

“Then we’ll get the relic back,” I bit out, my frustration boiling to the surface. “You did this. You fucked with my head. You stole my memories. Now, you’re going to make it right. I don’t care what it takes.”

“Lily—”

“No, Rathiel. I want them back.” I snarled, fury sparking in every word. “You don’t know what it’s like to forget who you are. You talk about me like I’m some great hero—but I don’t remember her! I don’t feel like her. She’s a stranger to me. You invaded my mind and you stole who I was, and now you’re telling me I’ll never get that back?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off, voice trembling with the force of my rage. “You had your reasons, fine. I understand that. But the only way you can even begin to make this right is by helping me get those memories back. Promise me you’ll help.”

“You don’t need those memories to be strong, Lilith,” Rathiel said, his voice firm. “You’re still the same person. A warrior. A leader. The memories may be gone, but the essence of who you are—that hasn’t changed. You don’t need them to fight.”

I shook my head, disbelief flooding my veins. “So what? I’m supposed to just...forget about them? Pretend this is all fine and move on?”

“I’m saying we need to focus on what’s ahead of us. On stopping Lucifer. On fulfilling your destiny. We can’t change what’s happened, but we can still fight for the future.”

Frustration bubbled over, and I glared at him, my voice raw. “This is my life you’re talking about, Rathiel. You took everything from me. Everything. You had no right.”

He reached out, hesitating before resting a hand on my shoulder. “I know,” he said softly. “And I’m sorry. But right now, we need to stop Lucifer. That’s the priority. Once that’s done, we can talk about your memories.”

I jerked away, unwilling to let him off the hook so easily. “Fine,” I snapped. “But this conversation isn’t over. When this is done—Lucifer, the prophecy, all of it—we’re going after that relic.”

Rathiel nodded, his expression solemn. “Agreed.”

I took a deep breath. We had bigger problems to deal with right now, so I had to push my emotions down into the deepest, darkest pit inside.

“You can sleep on the couch,” I muttered, turning toward my bedroom. I paused, glancing back over my shoulder, my voice sharp and low. “But don’t think for a second this means I forgive you.”

Pain flashed across in his face, but he eventually nodded.

I turned my back on him and headed to my room. No matter how angry I was—and I was incredibly angry—Rathiel and I had to work together. But once this was over, he and I were going to have a long conversation about everything. And if he ever pulled a stunt like this again, I would shove a stake so far deep into his chest, he'd be coughing up splinters for eternity.

Chapter Twelve

I slipped into my bedroom, threw my purse in the corner, then pinched the bridge of my nose. Questions echoed in my head, and my temples throbbed. Ten years of uncertainty, of speculating and imagining all the worst-case scenarios, and not once had I ever imagined this. Finally, after waiting for so long, I had my answers, and honestly, I had no idea what to make of it all.

Rathiel had taken my memories, my home, my life, and all because he cared about some stupid prophecy. And Lucifer—he'd taken my wings, stripping me down until all that remained was this empty shell who barely recognized herself. My life in Hell had been brutal, but it'd been mine .

Betrayal, anger, and a deep sense of loss filled me. How was I supposed to reconcile the fact that the vamp who'd trained me and taught me to fight had also robbed me of everything that made me me ? What was I supposed to do now?

I stopped in front of a small, crooked mirror sitting on my dresser and stared at my reflection. But the more I stared at it, the less familiar it felt. I wasn't sure who I was anymore. Rathiel said I led the rebellion, but that idea was ludicrous, right? The Lily I knew would never have raised a hand against her father, let alone an army. Even in my wildest imagination, I never would have envisioned that scenario.

And I still couldn't believe that Rathiel had been the one to exile me.

For some reason, that hurt a hell of a lot more than believing Lucifer had done it—which only confused me more. I'd never given a crap about what Rathiel thought

of me. So why did I care so much now? Why did this betrayal hurt so badly?

I rubbed my brow and quietly swore. I'd been looking forward to my date with Jack all week. I'd gone shopping, bought a nice dress...only for Rathiel to waltz in and upend my entire life. For that reason alone, I wanted to sock him in the balls so hard, he coughed up his testicles.

A part of me—the logical, more reasonable side—reminded myself that Rathiel hadn't had it easy either. He'd survived ten years of torture. Most would have cracked in far less time. I recognized that, and I empathized. My father was a masterful artist when it came to the torturous arts. But the other part of me—the vindictive, vengeful side—couldn't ignore that we were only in this position because of Rathiel. He'd fucked up my life six ways from Sunday, then let my father capture him.

Sighing, I sat on my bed before flopping backward into a pile of thin, cheap pillows. I wasn't given much time to wallow though, thanks to the sudden chiming of my phone.

I hauled my ass back up and retrieved my phone from my purse.

A quick text popped up on my screen.

Jack: Did you make it home safely?

Interestingly, my rage and frustration quieted at the sight of his name, and a small smile graced my lips. Unlocking my screen, I opened the chat and typed out my response.

Me: Sorry, I meant to text you. I did make it home, thank you. And thank you for dinner tonight. I really did have a lot of fun.

The three dots appeared, and I patiently waited for Jack's response to pop up.

Jack: Glad to hear it. Would I be insane to invite you out again? Maybe this time without your long-lost cousin—I assume?—interrupting our evening?

I snickered.

Me: I would love to see you again.

Jack: What about your brother? I mean, he seemed like a nice guy. But I generally prefer to keep my dates to myself.

I quietly chuckled. He was fishing, trying to suss out who Rathiel was and what he meant to me.

Me: Tell ya what. Next time we go out, I'll make sure it's just the two of us.

Jack: Ah, good to hear. Your dad probably shouldn't be out that late at night anyway. Guys his age need more sleep than us younger studs.

I laughed aloud at that, a sound I quickly masked behind a cough. My apartment was small, and we angels—fallen or otherwise—tended to have sharper hearing than humans. I didn't want Rathiel overhearing me.

Me: You think highly of yourself.

Jack: Just checking. I mean, I know he's your uncle and all, but really, he isn't invited.

I slowly shook my head, my cheeks starting to burn from smiling so much.

Me: I'll make sure he doesn't bother us again.

Jack: Great! How about dinner for two at La Ronde? Sunday night?

My eyes widened. La Ronde? Wow. Jack was pulling out all the stops. I considered my schedule. I had a double shift again tomorrow, but Sunday, all I had was the coffee shop, which would give me time to buy another dress before the date. Twenty bucks said Jazz insisted on tagging along again. I only hoped Rathiel wouldn't. I didn't want him anywhere near Jazz again.

Me: Sunday night sounds great.

Jack: Wonderful, I'll make dinner reservations for seven o'clock. Can I pick you up this time?

I considered my options. If I bussed, Rathiel would likely follow me again. And I really didn't want that. If Jack picked me up, he'd know where I lived. But that didn't bother me. I simply needed to meet Jack downstairs, so he didn't see Rathiel literally in my apartment. Couldn't imagine that conversation going over well.

Consenting, I quickly typed out my address before signing off with Jack and plugging my phone in for the night.

I marvelled over the fact that my small conversation with Jack had chilled me right out. Then I stripped off my dress, hung it up, and climbed into a set of comfy pajamas with a shirt that read: I'll get over it, I just need to be dramatic first .

I cracked my bedroom door open and peeked out into the hallway. From this angle, I could see one corner of the couch, and the top of Rathiel's head. With a deep breath, I scurried into the bathroom and took care of all my needs before returning to my room, where Purgatory and Vol waited.

Smiling, I crawled into bed and let Vol's soft snores lull me to sleep.

* * *

I woke to the sound of something crashing in the living room. My heart skipped a beat, and I shot up in bed. I'd almost forgotten about last night, forgotten that I'd let Rathiel camp out on my couch. But everything came rushing back, and I sighed, rubbing my eyes. I made myself promise that, at the very least, I would be kind to Rathiel today. I reminded myself that it wouldn't be polite for me to storm out there and light a fire under his ass—no matter how much I wanted to.

Another crash echoed in the living room, followed by a hiss and a low growl. I threw back the covers and stumbled out of bed, my feet tangling in the sheets as I tried to move too quickly. Whatever was happening out there, I needed to get a handle on it before my neighbours called the cops.

I opened the door and padded down the hallway, still groggy from sleep. The sight that greeted me in the living room nearly had me doubling over in laughter.

Purrgratory and Vol appeared to be in the middle of an epic showdown—right on top of Rathiel. He stared at the ceiling as though afraid to move, lest my kitty's claws found their way to a more sensitive area. Purrgratory, his ginger fur puffed up like a dandelion, stood perched on Rathiel's chest, swiping a paw at Vol. The little imp, not to be outdone, stood on Rathiel's shoulder and held fast to his hair, hissing right back at the cat.

"Get off, you flea-ridden furball!" Vol screeched, his tiny voice full of outrage as he crouched lower. "I'll skin you alive and use your pelt as a bathmat!"

Purrgratory, clearly unfazed, responded with another hiss, swiping at Vol with lethal precision. Rathiel's quick reflexes were the only thing that saved his face from the

cat's sharp claws.

"Enough," Rathiel growled, sitting up so abruptly that Purgatory toppled off his chest with an indignant yowl. Vol, however, clung to his shoulder like a stubborn burr, still glaring at the cat. "I swear, I'll roast you alive!"

I couldn't help it. I started laughing, the sound spilling out of me before I could stop it. Rathiel turned his head toward me, his eyes narrowing, but there was a hint of exasperated amusement in his expression.

"Is this your idea of a wake-up call?" he asked, his voice dry.

I shrugged, trying to keep a straight face. "Not exactly. They're usually not this...energetic in the morning. Must be something about your presence."

Vol, still perched on Rathiel's shoulder, crossed his tiny arms and glared at the cat. "You mangy, sun-worshipping excuse for a beast! Touch me again, and I'll send you straight to Hell's litter box!"

I grinned. "Looks like you've officially become the battleground for a cat and an imp. Congratulations."

Rathiel sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. "Wonderful."

I chuckled, then turned and headed to the kitchen. "I'm making coffee. Want some?"

"I have no idea what that is," Rathiel replied as he followed me into the kitchen, Vol still riding his shoulder like an unhinged parrot.

Vol snorted, his little face twisting into a mischievous grin. "Oh, you're in for a treat, Meat Sack. Coffee is the nectar of the damned. It's like liquid energy—dark, bitter,

and strong enough to raise the dead.”

I shook my head, reaching for the coffee beans. “Don’t listen to him, Rathiel. It’s just caffeine. Essential for surviving Earth.”

“Oh, it is,” Vol continued, his tone dripping with exaggerated enthusiasm. “It’s the only thing that keeps these mortals functioning. Without it, they’re as useful as a sorority girl with a hangover. You’ll see. One cup, and you’ll be hooked—assuming it doesn’t burn a hole through your stomach first.”

Rathiel shot me a sideways glance, one eyebrow arching. “As delightful as that sounds, it seems I must remind you that I can only drink blood.”

I froze mid-reach for the coffee grinder, blinking. “Huh. I serve the vamps here all sorts of drinks. But, yeah, I guess there’s always blood mixed in, now that I think about it.”

Vol chuckled. “Booze and blood, eh? Sounds like my kind of a happy hour.”

Ignoring Vol’s commentary, I turned on the coffee grinder, the noise filling the kitchen as I mulled over the thought. “Maybe it’s an earthbound thing,” I said, raising my voice to be heard over the machine. “They must have adapted to blend in with humans better. I mean, if they’re living here, they’ve probably had to get creative to avoid suspicion.” I faced Rathiel with pursed lips. “You can’t eat anything at all?”

“Have you ever seen me eat food?”

I frowned as I pondered his question. “No. But I honestly wasn’t exactly paying attention. It’s not like we had family dinners in Hell or anything.”

I leaned against the counter and stared at the grinder as it whirled away. His diet

presented a minor problem, seeing as I didn't exactly stock my fridge with the crimson stuff. And for some reason, I didn't love the idea of him feeding on humans. There was something about the thought of Rathiel sucking on someone's neck—a female someone—that had my stomach twisting.

Shaking off that uncomfortable image, I pushed forward. "I'll figure it out. You obviously need blood, and while I don't have any lying around, the bar does." I tapped my fingers on the counter, already brainstorming solutions. "I'll talk to my boss. Figure out a way to snag some supply without raising too many questions."

"Discretion," Rathiel replied, his voice dry. "A skill I know you've always excelled at."

I narrowed my eyes at him, catching the faintest twitch of his lips. Almost a smile. Almost. "Relax, Captain Bootlicker," I shot back. "I'll keep it vague. It's not like I'm going to waltz in and announce that I'm stockpiling for a vamp who's crashing on my couch."

To my surprise, his lips actually curved into a small, subtle smile, one he tried to hide from me.

"What's so funny?" I asked, my suspicion immediately piqued.

"Oh, nothing," Rathiel replied, his voice deceptively light. "It's just been a long time since I've heard you call me that."

I blinked. "Since I called you Captain Bootlicker?"

He merely shrugged, the faint smile still playing at the edges of his lips.

"When did I ever call you that?" To your face, I wanted to add. Usually, I kept that

little insult to myself. But then it clicked, and I groaned. “Let me guess. It’s one of the memories you took from me?”

Rathiel opened his mouth to respond, but I held up a hand before he could say anything.

“Don’t. Just—don’t. Let’s not go down that rabbit hole right now.” I grabbed the coffee pot and poured myself a mug, the rich aroma filling the kitchen. “I’ve got enough to deal with without focusing on my existential memory crisis.”

“Fair enough,” Rathiel replied.

“Good.” I sipped my steaming coffee and muttered into the mug, “Captain Bootlicker. Sounds about right.”

This time, Rathiel didn’t bother hiding his smile.

I ignored it and returned to the problematic conversation at hand. “How long do we have? Before you need to feed again, I mean.”

“I should be good for another day or two. I fed right before I found you at the restaurant.”

The words hit me like a sharp jab to the ribs. My hands paused mid-motion, hovering over the coffee grinder. “On a human?” I asked, the question sharper than I’d intended.

Rathiel’s eyes flicked up to meet mine, his gaze steady and unflinching. “Yes.”

That same image from earlier flashed in my mind—Rathiel leaning into a woman’s neck, his fangs piercing their skin. My stomach twisted uncomfortably, and I silently

told myself to knock it off. First, what did it matter if he fed off a man or woman? And second, it wasn't like he had a buffet of options. He was a vampire—feeding was non-negotiable. Earthbound vamps did it all the time. Still, the thought left a sour taste in my mouth. Maybe it was the idea of him endangering a human. Yeah, that had to be it.

Still, the uncomfortable sensation lingered, gnawing at the edges of my thoughts. “Fine. But you’re not doing that again while you’re here. I’ll figure something out. Like I said, the bar stocks blood.” I gestured vaguely toward the fridge. “We’ll make it work. The most important thing is keeping your presence here a secret. We don’t want anyone catching wind of your visit. Which leads me to another question: where are your wings?”

He paused, his piercing gaze darting to mine. “My...wings?”

“Yeah, where are they? Did Lucifer rip yours off too?”

Understanding smoothed his expression. “No. I’ve always been able to retract my wings. I just never felt the need to before now.”

Ah. So, he wasn't wingless like me. I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that. Sad, definitely. I'd believed we had one thing in common—the loss of our precious wings. But turns out I was wrong. He still had his, he just had the ability to tuck them away. Lucky bastard.

“Okay, just keep them out of sight. Don't let the humans see them. Wings would be a dead giveaway that the paranormal exist, and we don't want that.”

“Noted,” he said. “Now, if I may ask a question?”

I took another sip of coffee. “What do you wanna know?”

“That man last night,” Rathiel started, his voice dropping to a lower, more dangerous tone as he leaned in just a fraction. “Who is he? Is he someone...important to you?”

Heat flushed my cheeks, and I tried to hide it from Rathiel by ducking into the fridge and searching for some breakfast.

I pulled out a carton of eggs, using it as an excuse to avoid Rathiel’s gaze. His question hung in the air, heavy with tension I didn’t fully understand. I knew Rathiel well enough to sense there was more behind his inquiry than just casual curiosity.

“Jack?” I finally said, placing the eggs on the counter as I gathered my thoughts. “He’s...nice. A good guy. We were on a date, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I glanced at Rathiel, gauging his reaction. His expression remained unreadable, though something flickered in his eyes—something I couldn’t quite place.

“A date?” he repeated, his voice betraying nothing, though the way he stood, the way his body tensed, told me he was anything but indifferent.

“Yeah, a date,” I confirmed, grabbing a pan and setting it on the stove. “Again, it’s something humans do. They go out for dinner, drinks, share a laugh or two, and then?—”

“They fuck,” Vol suddenly said, finishing my sentence for me in a manner far cruder than I would have put it.

Rathiel’s entire demeanor shifted, his jaw clenching so hard I could practically hear his teeth grinding. The air around him seemed to thicken, charged with something dark and dangerous. He shot a sharp glare at Vol, who merely grinned, unrepentant, as he perched on the counter like a smug little gargoyle.

“That’s one way to put it,” I muttered, feeling the need to diffuse the sudden tension. I cracked an egg into the pan, focusing on the sizzle instead of the oppressive silence that had settled over the kitchen.

“And have you?” Rathiel asked, his voice deceptively calm, though there was an edge to it that sent a shiver down my spine.

I turned to him, my eyes narrowing. “What exactly are you implying, Rathiel?”

“I’m not implying anything,” he said, his tone carefully measured, but his gaze locked with mine, intense and unyielding. “I’m asking if you two have shared more than a laugh or two.”

My heart skipped a beat at the possessiveness in his words, even if he’d masked it behind a facade of indifference. It was the same tone he’d used when training me, that hard, commanding edge that left no room for argument.

I crossed my arms, leaning against the counter as I stared him down. “Not that it’s any of your damn business, but no. We haven’t. Last night was our first date.”

“Yeah, it usually takes until the third date for the woman to put out,” Vol said, snickering.

I glared at my imp. “No more television for you, you menace.”

Rathiel’s gaze never wavered from mine, and I thought he might press the issue further. But then he simply nodded, the tension in his shoulders easing ever so slightly, though his expression remained unreadable.

I returned to the stove and started scrambling my eggs before they burned to the pan.

“What in the world are you making?” Rathiel asked. “It smells like sulfur.”

I leaned forward and sniffed, to ensure the eggs hadn’t spoiled. But they smelled fine to me. Shrugging, I said, “These are eggs. And they’re delicious.”

“Another human delicacy?” Rathiel inquired.

“Sure.” I’d take eggs any day over the lack of fine dining Hell had to offer.

“And why are you making eggs?” Rathiel pressed.

“Because I need to eat. You may subsist off blood, but I sure don’t. And since I have a full day of work ahead of me, I need to fuel up.”

“Work,” he repeated.

Vol let out a snort. “Work is what these humans do to keep themselves from going completely broke. They trade their precious time and energy doing the most mundane tasks—making drinks, moving things around, pretending to care about stuff—for shiny coins and bits of paper. It’s a never-ending grind.”

He leaned closer to Rathiel’s ear, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “And my favourite Meat Sack here? She spends her days serving the poor, lowly mortals coffee. Keeps them from going mad, you see. And at night, she slings drinks at a bar catered to the paranormal. What a glamorous life she leads.”

“One you ought to be grateful for,” I retorted. “It keeps you fed, stocked with yarn, and dressed in those ridiculous outfits of yours.” Of which, today’s looked like it belonged to Safari Ken.

Laughing gleefully, Vol climbed down Rathiel and shot back into the living room,

chittering loudly as he shot past Purgatory.

“And how often do you need to work?” Rathiel asked.

“Depends on the week and the schedule. But most days and nights. Someone has to pay the bills for this glamorous place,” I said, spreading my arms wide to gesture at my decrepit kitchen. “And speaking of which, I need to get a move on if I’m going to make the bus in time. I trust you’ll be fine on your own today? Don’t wander off. And don’t let Vol convince you to do anything . Assume he’s always lying.”

“Hey!” Vol called from the living room.

“Absolutely not,” Rathiel said. “I’m coming with you.”

I sighed and scooped my scrambled eggs onto a plate. “Rathiel, I don’t have time for this argument.”

“Good. Because I have no desire to argue with you. We have no idea where the other fallen are. So, I’m going with you, and that’s the end of this discussion.”

I shook my head, then took my plate to the table. I truly didn’t have time to argue, especially when I knew he’d simply follow me anyway. And now, I needed to waste more time finding him a winter jacket. Hopefully, one of my neighbours had one they could spare.

Guess today was now “bring your vampiric bodyguard to work” day.

Chapter Thirteen

As we exited the bus, the cold morning air slapped me right in the face, a sharp reminder that regardless of my infernal problems, we were still very much on Earth. Blowing out an icy breath, I readjusted my purse and hurried onto the sidewalk before the bus closed its doors with me still descending the stairs. Had I experienced that before? I'd never tell.

Rathiel walked beside me, his presence an unwanted shadow I couldn't shake. He moved with a deadly, silent grace that definitely called attention to him, even though he was trying to blend in. He, however, kept his gaze fixed firmly ahead, as though nothing in the world could deter him from his self-appointed mission: to hover over me like the wannabe bodyguard he was.

"This really isn't necessary," I muttered, my voice laced with frustration. "I've been managing just fine on my own for a decade."

Of course, he didn't even spare me a glance. Why would he? Instead, his eyes scanned the street, searching for any threats, with an intense focus that spiked my irritation.

"Yes, well, a lot has changed," he said, as if I didn't already know that. "You are far from safe. Any of Lucifer's fallen?—"

I waved a frantic hand and shushed him. "There are innocent ears around," I hissed under my breath. "You can't just drop the L-word like that in public!"

This time, he shot me a look, but I pointed at the people walking around us. Thankfully, they were nose-deep in their phones and oblivious to our conversation, but that wouldn't always be the case.

“As I was saying,” Rathiel continued. “We must take precautions, Lilith. And if that requires me escorting you to and from work, then so be it.”

There was that name again. Lilith. No one had called me that in ten years. And every time he said it, I wanted to punch him in the throat. Yes, it was my name, but that name belonged to someone who didn't exist anymore.

Instead, I rolled my eyes. “Surely, they wouldn't be so stupid as to attack in broad daylight?”

“My brothers and sisters are dangerously intelligent. I doubt they'd make such a bold move, but I won't deny there's a chance. You're strong, but you're not invincible. Why walk blindly into danger when we can take precautions?”

His voice was cool, matter of fact, like this was nothing but a mission to him.

My frustration flared, pushing me to snap back. “I've handled things alone for years. I'm not some damsel in distress that you have to rescue. You, above all else, should know that.”

Rathiel grabbed my arm, his grip firm but not painful, stopping me dead in my tracks just as I reached the curb in front of the coffee shop. The sudden contact made me gasp and my pulse skip a beat, but I ignored that and instead focused on the anger simmering just beneath my skin. I glanced down at where his fingers pressed into my arm, then back up to his face, ready to tear into him with a sharp retort.

Except, I came up short when I caught the desperate glint in his eyes. “You don't get

it,” he said, his voice dropping to a fierce whisper that sent a small shiver down my spine. “I’ve seen what happens when Lucifer catches you unaware. I’ve watched you nearly die once, and I will not go through that again, Lily.”

I didn’t move. Rathiel’s words, and the raw edge to his voice, made my stomach twist painfully. He’d already told me about my near-death experience, though he’d opted not to divulge too many details. But the way he spoke about it now—with that haunted look in his eyes—rendered me speechless.

I stared at him, searching his face for answers. His crystal blue gaze caught mine, intense and unwavering, and seemed to pull me in deeper. Then, without warning, his eyes dropped—slowly, deliberately—to my lips.

My heart kicked into overdrive, and my breath stuttered. A pulse of something oddly familiar swept through my body. I didn’t understand it, but my body responded before my brain could catch up, warmth pooling in my core, my breath catching in my throat.

This feeling, this pull toward him, didn’t make sense. I should have been pushing him away, demanding answers. Instead, I stood rooted to the spot, trapped in the growing tension between us. His gaze, now back on mine, was like a brand, searing into me, awakening confusing feelings. For a split second, I saw something vulnerable in his expression that made my pulse quicken even more.

“Lily...” His voice was a low growl, filled with something that sounded like desperation. He didn’t finish the thought, didn’t need to. The way he said my name, the way he looked at me—it was all achingly familiar.

Pain lanced through my skull, and I stumbled backward, clutching at my head as the world tilted on its side.

“Lily?” Rathiel’s voice cut through the haze, his hands steadying me by the elbows.
“Are you okay?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed through the pain.

What had we been discussing? I truly couldn’t remember.

One moment, my thoughts had been a tangled mess, and the next, something blazed through it—burning away the thick cobwebs until I could think clearly once more. For a fleeting second, everything made sense. But just as quickly, the moment slipped away, and the cobwebs thickened again.

I cleared my throat. “What were we, um... What were we talking about?”

“Lily?” Rathiel repeated. The pressure on my arm increased, and Rathiel guided me toward a nearby bus bench. “Sit,” he ordered.

For once, I didn’t argue. My knees bent of their own volition, and my butt hit the cold bench. Rathiel didn’t speak, but he crouched in front of me, his hands a gentle presence on my thighs. I focused on breathing and hoped the pain soon passed.

Finally, I opened my eyes and lifted my head. The sunlight didn’t spear my eyes, and relief loosened my shoulders.

“Are you alright?” Rathiel asked, his voice gruff.

I pressed my fingers against my temples and rubbed. “It’s never happened like that before.”

His brow furrowed, his concern etched in every line of his face. “What hasn’t?”

I exhaled sharply, lowering my hands from my head. “The headaches—they usually come when I try to remember something. But this time...” My voice trailed off, the words sticking in my throat as the realization hit me. I glanced up at him, my pulse quickening. “This time, I wasn’t trying to remember something. It was you. You were standing so close to me...and it triggered a memory, I think. The pain hit before I could figure out what it was.”

“Does this happen a lot?” he asked.

“More than I like. And it’s always when I try to remember something.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured as he rose from the ground and sat on the bench next to me, his hands dangling between his legs. “I never knew that would be a side effect. I had no idea the artifact could cause that.”

A bitter laugh slipped out before I could stop it. “That’s why you don’t mess around with Lucifer’s toys.”

He flinched, and I almost felt bad. Almost.

I pushed myself up from the bench, shaking off the lingering discomfort. “Come on,” I said, my tone brisk. “I have to get to work. If you’re coming with, try not to make a spectacle of yourself.”

“I’ll be discreet,” he said.

“Yeah, right,” I muttered.

* * *

Rathiel definitely was not discreet.

From the second we stepped into the coffee shop, it was clear he didn't blend in. Heads turned, conversations paused, and the usual hum of morning chatter dulled to a low murmur as every set of eyes in the place zeroed in on him. Most were regulars who rarely glanced up from their laptops, but today, they seemed to forget about their devices and instead openly stared at Rathiel. Even Mr. Grayson, an elderly gentleman who always sat by the window engrossed in his newspaper, peeked over the top of it to get a better look.

Frowning, I turned and studied Rathiel.

Okay, yeah, he was drop-dead gorgeous in a way that should absolutely be illegal. He might be the biggest pain in my ass, but even I could admit he was breathtaking.

Thankfully, Rathiel didn't seem to notice the attention—or if he did, he certainly didn't care. He strode through the shop with a confidence that bordered on arrogance, his presence commanding attention whether he wanted it or not.

I, on the other hand, just wanted to pretend like everything was perfectly normal. I ducked behind the counter and tossed my purse into my locker in the back room before quickly tying on my apron. But when I stepped back through the door, Rathiel was still the center of attention.

Jazz abandoned her task of refilling the pastries and sidled up next to me, her eyes wide with curiosity. “Hi,” she whispered, barely containing her excitement. “Who the heck is that guy? He came in yesterday asking about you. So, who is he, and why's he here?”

I tried to keep my tone casual as I grabbed a rag and started wiping down the counter. “That's Rathiel. He's...my cousin.” I hated the lie as it rolled off my tongue, and from the twisted grimace on Rathiel's face, so did he. But it was the easiest way to explain his presence without delving into anything remotely close to the truth.

Jazz blinked. “Cousin?” Then she shot me an appraising look. “Well, isn’t your family tree rife with good genes.” Then she grinned. “Cousin means he’s open season then, hey? He looks like he stepped straight out of a magazine. Is he a model or something?”

I snorted, imagining him on the cover of the Hellhounds and Demonic Horses magazine. “He’s just visiting. Don’t get attached. He’ll be leaving soon.”

Jazz gave me a look that said she absolutely planned on attaching herself to him, in any way possible. “Visiting, huh? Well, I hope he comes in often while he’s in town. He’s definitely good for business.”

I rolled my eyes with a smile. “You’re hopeless.”

“I’m just saying, a little eye candy never hurt anyone,” Jazz said, grinning as she finally picked up a tray of croissants to restock the display. “And speaking of eye candy, how did your date with Jack go? I’ve been dying to hear the details.”

I busied myself with the coffee machine, more to avoid meeting Jazz’s curious gaze than anything. “It was...nice,” I said, keeping my voice as nonchalant as possible.

Jazz wasn’t having it. “Nice? That’s all I get? Come on, Lil, spill. Did you have fun? Did he kiss you? Are you seeing him again?”

My cheeks warmed, and I was grateful for the distraction of the steaming milk in front of me. “Yes, I had fun. Yes, he kissed my cheek. And yes, I’m seeing him again.”

Jazz practically squealed, nearly dropping the tray she was holding. “Ah, that’s awesome! I’d hoped you two would hit it off. But what about Mr. Broody over there?” She jerked her thumb in Rathiel’s direction, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“You sure he’s just a cousin? Because that man looks at you like he wants to eat you alive.”

I nearly choked on the steam. “What? No, Jazz. It’s not like that. He’s just...protective.”

“Protective, huh?” Jazz wagged her eyebrows, clearly enjoying this way too much. “Well, if you say so. But just so you know, if I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t mind being ‘protected’ by someone like him.”

I glanced over at Rathiel, who now sat by the closest window, his intense gaze fixed on something outside. As though sensing my attention, he turned his head, and our gazes met. I bit the inside of my lip and found my thoughts drifting back to the conversation we’d had outside the coffee shop, and the way he’d looked at me. There was something about him I couldn’t ignore. But thanks to the lingering pain in my head, I wasn’t able to dive into that topic.

Everything about him confused me. Last night, I’d been ready to roast his wings over an open fire. Today, though... Yeah, I was still pissed, but somehow the anger had lost its bite. As Lucifer’s daughter, I tended to stray more toward vengeance and punishment than forgiveness. But with Rathiel? For some reason, it didn’t stick. Maybe I was just exhausted. Holding onto fury took a lot more energy than I had to give right now.

“Lily,” Jazz’s voice cut through my thoughts, and I blinked, realizing I’d been staring at Rathiel again. “You okay? You seem a little...distracted.”

I shook my head, forcing a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just a lot on my mind, I guess.”

She grinned, then threw me a wink. “I bet. Hard to think when you’ve got that hanging around.”

When I didn't respond, Jazz gave me a playful nudge with her elbow, drawing my attention back to her. "Are you sure you're fine?"

I glanced back at Rathiel, who watched me like a hawk. But this time, there was something different in his expression. The intensity was still there, but something almost tender softened it. My breath caught, and I quickly looked away, feeling a rush of heat creep up my neck.

Jazz chuckled, clearly amused by the entire exchange. "Yeah, you're not cousins," she said, laughing. "That's not how relatives look at each other."

I groaned, rubbing my forehead. "Fine. He's not my cousin. It's complicated."

Jazz arched an eyebrow, her grin widening. "Complicated, huh?"

I shot her a warning look, but there was no malice behind it. "Just drop it, okay?"

"Fine, fine," she said, holding up her hands in mock surrender. She winked at me again before moving back to the pastries, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I pressed on with my day, but I couldn't shake the lingering effects of Rathiel's gaze. There was a part of me—buried deep beneath all the anger and confusion—that was drawn to him in a way I didn't fully understand. Maybe it was the way he'd spoken to me earlier, or the way he kept insisting that he was here to protect me.

Whatever it was, it was making it hard to focus. I took order after order, my mind still spinning with everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours. The next time I glanced up, I drew Rathiel's attention. And this time, neither of us looked away. I held his gaze, searching for something—anything—that would make sense of the conflicting emotions churning inside me. But all I found was that same intensity, that same unspoken connection that seemed to hang between us, as heavy as it was

confusing.

Jazz sidled up next to me again, a knowing smile playing on her lips as she caught the silent exchange. “Yeah, definitely not cousins,” she teased, her voice low so only I could hear. “More like ‘I want to rip your clothes off right now’ kind of vibes.”

I stifled a laugh, shaking my head. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

“Just calling it like I see it,” she said with a smirk. “But hey, if you’re not going to make a move, maybe I should. Think he’d go for a blonde?”

This time, I did laugh, the sound easing some of the tension that had settled in my chest. “Good luck with that,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Jazz’s eyes gleamed with mischief, but then she leaned closer and whispered, “All teasing aside, Lil. Just be careful, okay? In my experience, these situations—two guys circling around the same girl—never end well. For anyone involved.”

Her words struck a chord, and I nodded, appreciating her concern. “I know, Jazz. Thanks.”

Jazz gave me a quick, supportive squeeze on the arm before heading back to her duties, leaving me once again with my thoughts and Rathiel’s gaze burning into my back.

Chapter Fourteen

The day blurred by in a whirlwind of coffee orders, clinking mugs, and a constant stream of chatter that never seemed to let up. There were times when I'd felt like I was drowning in a sea of caffeine-deprived customers, each one more frantic than the last. The only break I managed was a quick thirty minutes—just long enough to sneak out, grab some lunch, and then dive right back into the chaos. By the time my coffee shop shift finally ended, I was running on fumes. But, of course, there was no chance to catch my breath. After a quick pit stop at home to swap my outfit for something a bit more bar-appropriate, Rathiel and I were back out the door. No amount of convincing or pleading would shake him from my side, so I didn't even bother arguing this time.

Saturday nights at the bar were always a circus, and tonight was no exception. The place was packed, every corner filled with rowdy groups clamoring for drinks. While I hustled behind the bar, Rathiel set up camp in one of the darkest corners, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. At some point, I managed to slide a glass of virgin blood his way—booze-free, not the “virginal maiden” kind—and earned a quiet thanks. For now, it would have to do, since my boss wasn't in tonight. No boss meant I couldn't take any blood home.

A few of my regulars shot me curious looks, clearly wondering who the new guy was. I just shrugged it off and kept working. There was no time to stop and feed the gossip mill, not with the bar this packed. I did, however, notice Mason watching Rathiel from across the room, his lips pressed together in a way that made me uneasy. Now that I knew about the gargoyle's ability to see energies, I had a feeling he was reading more than Rathiel's mood. If I had to guess, his aura likely mirrored

mine—and the portal's. Which likely had Mason asking wondering some pretty uncomfortable questions.

Meanwhile, Eliza tracked my every move with unnerving intensity, as if she was determined to uncover all my secrets. She hadn't once set foot near the bar, but she was also never without a drink—no doubt thanks to her lovely siren charms. At least Eliza and Mason hadn't crossed paths long enough to discuss recent events and compare notes, which was the only silver lining to this awkward situation.

Mercifully, the night passed without any major drama—no broken bottles, no bar fights, no shapeshifting—and when closing time finally rolled around, I was more than ready to get out of there. Cleaning up and cashing out took another hour, but soon enough, Rathiel and I were stepping out into the crisp night air and empty streets. A quick glance at my phone had me wincing—we only had one hour left before the bus service stopped running for the night.

Usually, I didn't love winter. But tonight, the cool air was a welcome relief after the stifling heat inside the bar. Rathiel and I walked in silence, the only sound that of our boots crunching in the snow. The quiet between us felt almost companionable, a stark contrast to the chaotic atmosphere we'd just left behind. I stole a few glances at Rathiel as we walked, his gaze scanning the surroundings with a sharpness that reminded me just how different he was from the humans I'd spent the last decade blending in with.

We turned the corner, and I was just starting to unwind when I collided with something—or rather, someone. I stumbled back, my immediate reaction to apologize dying on my lips as I looked up. The man I'd bumped into was tall, broad-shouldered, and when our eyes met, a cold shiver ran down my spine. An awareness tingled within me, one that suggested he was paranormal. But there was something else off about him, something that had every alarm bell ringing in my head.

“Watch it,” he muttered, his voice low and gravelly as he brushed past me, not bothering to stop or even look back.

Before I could respond, Rathiel took a step toward him, his lip curling in warning as his fangs peeked out. His entire posture screamed danger, his protective instincts flaring up.

I slapped a hand against his chest, stopping him before he could escalate the situation. “Easy, tiger,” I said, forcing a smile toward the retreating man. “It’s fine.”

The man glanced back for the briefest second before continuing down the street, oblivious to the tension he’d stirred.

Rude, much? I rolled my eyes, then continued down the street. I gave Rathiel a side glance. He still watched the guy, muscles tense. It wasn’t until I touched his arm that he let out a slow exhale and followed beside me.

“This place is so different from home,” Rathiel finally commented, his voice a low rumble that barely cut through the quiet night.

I laughed softly, the sound breaking the tension in the air. “Yeah, up here you can’t rip innocents apart because they bump into me,” I teased.

Rathiel huffed, the smallest smirk curling his lips. “Wouldn’t dream of it.” After another minute, he added, “But it’s not just that. It’s louder. Busier. Brighter.”

I glanced up at him, noting the way he scanned everything—the stars, the buildings, the streetlights. It was like he was cataloging every detail, committing it to memory. The way he took it all in reminded me of my first few days on Earth, where everything had felt so overwhelming, so chaotic. Back then, I’d barely managed to keep my head above water. But Rathiel? He was a soldier, through and through,

adaptable to everything and anything. The first time I'd seen a car whiz by on the street, I'd jumped back with a scream.

"It's also a great deal colder," he noted, his voice laced with a dryness that made me smirk.

I chuckled at that. "Only for about half the year. The other six months can reach temperatures that have me wishing I was back in Hell. It's the extreme swings that annoy me. In Hell, you know it's a gazillion degrees, and the fires will burn the hair right off your ass. But here, you never know what to expect. One day, it could be cold as balls and raining cats and dogs—don't worry, it doesn't actually rain cats and dogs—and the next, it's blisteringly hot out. Winter always seems to surprise the humans too, even though they know it's inevitable. Then they're so relieved when summer hits, only to gripe about the heat a few weeks later. It's actually quite comical to listen to."

Rathiel huffed a short laugh. "I must say, I'm impressed. I don't know how you do it, Lily."

"Do what?" I asked, frowning.

"Live here," he said, his tone carrying a hint of admiration. "You've made this place your own. I feel like a stranger in a foreign land, but you...you've thrived."

I certainly wouldn't say thrived. "Trust me, it didn't happen quickly or easily." I lifted my hands to my mouth and blew into them, rubbing them together to ward off the chill. "My first year here, I slept under a bridge. Believe me when I tell you this cold is nothing compared to the cold I experienced while trying to sleep outside in the middle of winter," I admitted. "My second year, I bounced around a lot of shelters. Humans have a lot of rules, procedures that made things challenging. To get a job, you need a social insurance number and ID. I didn't have either of those."

“Then how—?” Rathiel began, but I cut him off with a wry smile.

“I met someone who promised they could help. Not all humans follow the law, and this person assured me they could get me some identification—illegally, of course. To this day, I have no idea how he did it, but he got me what I needed to survive.”

“And that’s how you got your jobs?”

“Well, it didn’t happen right away,” I told him. “It took me a few jobs to get a knack for it. But eventually, I landed the barista position. It didn’t pay much. A part-time job paying minimum wage isn’t enough to survive. But luckily, I stumbled across the bartender position a few years later. The tips keep me afloat and comfortable, but it’s still a struggle. Life here is different. And don’t get me wrong, humans have their problems too. War, racism, discrimination. But hey, there’s no hellspawn and no Lucifer. So that’s a win.”

Rathiel’s steps slowed as he turned to face me, his gaze intense. “You truly are a marvel.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks, but before I could turn away, something caught my attention. From the corner of my eye, I caught a figure moving toward us. I froze, my breath hitching as I recognized the guy I’d bumped into earlier. He’d walked past us in the opposite direction. So why was he behind us now? And heading toward us.

“What can I say?” I murmured quietly, more to myself than to Rathiel. “I’m a quick learner.”

“He’s been following us since you bumped into him,” Rathiel stated matter-of-factly, as if discussing the weather.

I startled, my gaze snapping to him.

So, he'd noticed too. Because of course he had.

Rathiel still looked completely at ease, his posture deceptively relaxed, like he didn't have a care in the world. He tucked his hands into his pockets before continuing onward, his stride unhurried, almost lazy. But I knew him too well to be fooled by the facade. There was a subtle tension in the way his eyes continuously scanned our surroundings, in how his jaw tightened ever so slightly, betraying the awareness that thrummed just beneath his calm exterior.

It was a quiet, simmering readiness, a vigilance that lay just beneath the surface of his collected demeanor. To anyone else, he might've looked like he was simply out for a late-night stroll, but I could sense the vampire lurking beneath the surface, his instincts sharp and honed. He was playing it cool, but he attuned every fiber of his being to the potential threat behind us.

Rathiel had taught me to always be hyper-aware of my surroundings. A girl never knew when a hellspawn had a blade aimed at her back. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe this guy was just a harmless paranormal who happened to be walking the same way. But since Rathiel had noticed this guy too, I believed my instincts were right. And I wasn't someone who ignored her instincts.

I kept my pace steady, pretending I hadn't noticed anything, but my mind raced. There was only one way to find out if he was really following us. I needed to test him. "Let's cross the street," I suggested, my voice low. "See if he follows."

Rathiel nodded once, already anticipating my move. We crossed, and I led us away from the bus stop, taking a less direct route. I stole a quick glance back, just in time to see our tail cross the street after us.

"Persistent," Rathiel muttered, his tone darkening. "He's not just some lost soul wandering the night."

“No,” I agreed, my heart rate picking up. “This isn’t a coincidence.”

Without saying a word, I led Rathiel down the sidewalk. I took a deep breath, trying to act nonchalant as we continued walking. But no matter what direction we took, he followed.

Rathiel remained calm beside me, his gaze sweeping the streets with that same intense focus. He didn’t ask any questions, didn’t demand answers. Instead, he simply fell into step with me, trusting that I knew what I was doing. I had to admit, it was a relief to have him by my side, especially now.

I led us down another side street, which thankfully was deserted this time of night. It wasn’t the most ideal path to take, but I needed to confirm my suspicions. As we rounded the corner, I risked a quick glance over my shoulder. Sure enough, our tail was still there.

What did he want? Why follow us? And why keep such a distance? If he wanted something, wouldn’t he have made his move by now? If he was just looking for an easy mark, he’d certainly chosen the worst two people on Earth. Rathiel and I would obliterate him in a heartbeat.

“Lilith,” Rathiel said, his voice hardening as his eyes flicked to me. “I can take him out now. Just say the word.”

While a part of me wanted to unleash Rathiel and let him handle the situation, the more cautious side of me screamed for patience. We knew nothing about this guy—who he was, what he was capable of, or what he wanted. Yes, he could be one of Lucifer’s spies, despite me not recognizing him. Ten years is a long time for alliances to shift, for new threats to emerge. Or this guy could be some random earthbound paranormal who planned to mug us. We couldn’t afford to act rashly; we needed answers before making a move.

“Not yet,” I said, “We need to figure out who he is and what he wants. And that means questioning him. Which means?—”

“Which means I get to have some fun.” Rathiel flashed me a rare grin, one that showed his fangs, and stopped my heart dead in my chest—but not from fear. From something else. Something exciting.

It took me a few seconds to pull my attention away from Rathiel and glance back at our tail. The guy was still there, trailing behind us at a steady pace. But what struck me as odd was how little he seemed to care that I kept checking on him. He didn’t bother to close the distance, and there was no urgency in his steps, like he wanted us to know he was there but wasn’t in any hurry to catch up. The whole thing was unsettlingly strange.

We continued down the street, and I led us toward a narrow alley just ahead. The dim light from a nearby streetlamp barely penetrated the shadows, making it the perfect spot for a more private conversation. If we were going to confront this guy, I wanted it to be somewhere away from prying eyes. Somewhere we could handle whatever happened next without causing a scene or exposing the paranormal community to humans. Yes, it was two in the morning, but I knew from experience that a fair number of humans were still awake at this hour.

We strode deeper into the alley, the sound of our footsteps echoing off the walls. Once we reached the middle, I stopped and turned, Rathiel at my side. Our pursuer appeared, but he hesitated at the mouth of the alley, as though surprised to find us waiting for him.

“Why are you following us?” I called out, my voice echoing down the alley.

The guy didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled his hands out of his coat pockets and strode closer. Too close for comfort. His gaze flicked between me and Rathiel, assessing,

calculating. Then, a slow, almost amused smile spread across his lips, which pulled back to reveal an incredibly sharp set of fangs. A second later, he lifted his hands, and claws sprung from his fingers.

Okay, a vampire. We could handle that. Especially seeing as how Rathiel was literally the progenitor of all vamps.

“Why do you think?” he finally replied, his voice dripping with condescension.

I clenched my fists, suddenly wishing I had Inferno’s Kiss or any of my blades here. “I’m not in the mood for games. What do you want?”

“It’s not what I want,” he said. “It’s what he wants.”

Disappointment had me blowing out a slow breath. Lucifer. Because of course it was about him. Which made this guy a hellspawn vamp.

Before I could answer, the sound of approaching footsteps rose to my ears. I straightened just in time to watch six additional shadows fan out behind the vampire, blocking off the alleyway entrance. The presence of bright, glowing red eyes confirmed my suspicions. Mr. Toothy and his friends were hellspawn vamps. And we’d walked right into their trap. Lucky us.

One vampire, no sweat. Two or three, sure. But eight? Eight was a bit much—even for Rathiel and me.

I silently cursed in my head and inched closer to Rathiel, whose body vibrated with tension.

“So much for a friendly conversation,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m starting to think this might have been a bad idea,” I admitted as I shed my winter jacket and silently gestured for Rathiel to do the same. We’d need our full range of movement.

Without another word, the vamps circled us, their movements synchronized like they’d done this a thousand times before. Maybe they had. But they didn’t know us. They didn’t know what we were capable of.

And they were about to find out.

Chapter Fifteen

The vampires didn't waste any time. They lunged at us in unison, their fangs gleaming and their claws flashing under the faint streetlight. I barely had a second to react before the first one was on me, his claws aiming for my throat. I ducked and spun, instinct taking over as I let years of hand-to-hand training guide me. I might not have my blades, but Rathiel had taught me how to turn anything into a weapon—including my own body.

I grabbed the vampire's outstretched arm and twisted, using his momentum against him to throw him off balance. A quick elbow to the jaw sent him stumbling back, but he didn't go down. Expected, considering their infernal heritage. Guess I'd simply have to hit a bit harder. I landed another strike, this one packed with far more punch, and the vamp dropped hard.

Rathiel was a force of nature beside me, moving with a lethal grace that belied his size. He caught one vampire by the throat, his fingers digging in with inhuman strength, and lifted the bastard clean off his feet. The vampire thrashed in Rathiel's grip, but it was no use. Rathiel's hold was like iron, unyielding, and with a single, swift motion, he slammed the vampire into the alley wall with enough force to crack open his skull.

The vampire let out a strangled gasp, his eyes wide with terror as blood trickled from his mouth. Rathiel wasn't done. He tightened his grip, his own claws digging deeper into the vampire's throat, cutting off any chance of escape. With a swift, brutal twist, Rathiel snapped the vampire's neck. The vampire's body went limp. Rathiel wrenched his enemy's head to the side, and with a sharp jerk, ripped it clean off.

Blood sprayed across the alley walls, and the body crumpled to the ground in a heap. Decapitation was the surest way to kill a hellspawn, after all.

It'd been a long time since I'd witnessed that level of brutality, and I thought I might toss my cookies. Thankfully, I barely had time to register what Rathiel had done because another vampire was coming at me, claws extended, and fangs bared. I ducked under his swipe, spinning around to deliver a kick to his gut that sent him staggering back. He recovered quickly, but I was ready. I charged forward and grabbed him by the arm, flipping him over my shoulder. He hit the ground hard, but I didn't give him a chance to recover. I dropped to one knee, grabbing his head with both hands, and twisted with all the strength I could muster.

The vampire's neck snapped with a sickening crack, but I knew that wasn't enough. I had to finish him, Mortal Kombat style. I tightened my grip on his head, gritting my teeth against the strain, and with a cry, I wrenched it free from his body.

Warm blood splashed my arms, and I squeezed my eyes shut while silently willing my gag reflex to settle down. I definitely preferred using blades to my bare hands. This was brutal—and disgusting.

I tossed the head aside and turned to find Rathiel locked in combat with two vampires at once. They circled him like wolves, trying to find an opening, but Rathiel was too quick, too powerful. He ducked and dodged their attacks with ease, his movements fluid and precise.

One of the vampires lunged at Rathiel, but he sidestepped at the last second, grabbing the vampire by the hair and slamming him into the alley wall. The force of the impact stunned the vampire, and Rathiel didn't hesitate. He reached for the vamp's head, and I looked away a second before the sound of ripping flesh and sinew rose to my ears. I turned back in time to watch the body hit the ground and Rathiel turn to face the other vampire, while I faced the remaining three.

Their eyes gleamed with a mix of fury and bloodlust. But they weren't stupid. Clearly, they could see Rathiel and I weren't easy prey. But while we had the skill, they had the numbers. The odds certainly weren't in our favour, and they seemed unwilling to back down.

Two of the vampires rushed at me simultaneously, their fangs bared and claws ready to tear me apart. I had no time to think, only to react. I spun to the side, dodging the first set of claws, and delivered a hard kick to the second vampire's knee, sending him crashing to the ground. The first vampire recovered quickly and lunged at me again, but I met him head-on, my fist connecting with his jaw in a satisfying crunch. The impact didn't slow him down as much as I'd hoped, so I followed up with a swift uppercut that snapped his head back.

I couldn't afford to waste any time. While the vampire staggered, I grabbed his head, my fingers digging into his greasy hair, and with a surge of strength, I yanked it to the side and pulled with all my might. The vampire's head came free with a nauseating rip, and his body collapsed at my feet.

The vampire I'd kicked down was already back on his feet, a snarl twisting his face as he launched himself at me. I braced for the impact, but before he could reach me, Rathiel appeared beside me, moving like a blur. His fist collided with the vampire's chest with a force that sent the hellspawn flying back, crashing into a stack of garbage bins.

Rathiel's gaze met mine for a brief second, then he lunged for the vampire, dragging him up by the collar and twisting his head clean off before tossing the body aside like it was nothing.

That left two.

The final pair of vampires exchanged a quick glance, doubt creeping into their

expressions. Suddenly, they didn't have the numbers anymore. But they were too deep into this to back out now. Lucifer wouldn't accept failure, and they knew that. Their resolve hardened as they prepared for one last desperate attack.

"You take the one on the right," I called to Rathiel, my voice steady despite the adrenaline still coursing through me. "I've got the other."

We moved in unison, closing the distance between us and the remaining vampires. My opponent hissed, baring his fangs in a last act of defiance before lunging at me. I ducked low, feeling his claws swipe just above my head, and sprang up with a fierce punch to his ribs. Bones cracked from the impact, but he didn't slow down.

Before I could react, he latched onto my arm with a vice-like grip and yanked me toward him. He spun me around, my back against his chest, then wrapped his other arm around me, pinning both of my arms to my sides. He was stronger than the others, his grip almost crushing as he lifted me off the ground. I struggled against him, trying to free myself, but his hold was relentless and unbreakable.

My muscles screamed in protest as I squirmed and twisted, but nothing seemed to break his hold on me. Dark laughter echoed in my ears just as hot, rank breath fanned my neck. Panic flared in my chest, my breath coming in short, sharp bursts as I realized I wouldn't break free in time.

"Never had an angel before," the vamp rasped before scraping his fangs against my throat. "Bet you taste good."

Oh, gross.

I was about to throw my head back in a final, desperate attempt to break free, when suddenly the vampire behind me vanished. I staggered forward just as a sharp wail echoed through the alleyway. Spinning around, I saw Rathiel standing over the

vampire, who now lay slumped against the wall, the impact having fractured the bricks. Rathiel had him pinned with one hand, his eyes blazing with fury. The vampire thrashed and tried to struggle, but Rathiel's grip was unyielding, his strength fueled by pure, unbridled rage.

Rathiel pulled the vamp off the wall and slammed him to the ground with enough force to rattle the pavement. The vampire let out a strangled cry, but Rathiel didn't relent. He was on him in an instant, his hand a blur as he grabbed the vamp by the throat, fingers digging in deep.

"You dare lay a hand on her?" Rathiel's voice was a low, menacing growl, dripping with barely restrained fury.

The vampire gasped, his eyes wide with terror as he thrashed beneath Rathiel's hold, but it was no use. Rathiel was beyond reason, his focus solely on destroying the creature who'd tried to bite me. Blood dripped from the vampire's temple and pooled on the ground, dark and glistening under the faint light of the alley.

The other vampire hesitated a few yards away, his gaze darting between me and Rathiel. Without thinking, I surged forward, grabbing him by the neck and held him tight, knowing we needed one to question. His hands clawed at my grip, but I tightened my grip. I had questions, he had answers. He wasn't going anywhere.

Rathiel lifted one hand, a ripple of crimson magic illuminating his fingers as he called on his ability to manipulate blood. I'd only seen him do this once before with a misbehaving hellspawn, and I knew it wouldn't be pleasant to watch.

The blood on the pavement quivered, responding to Rathiel's powers, then began to rise in a thick, sinuous stream. It gathered midair, in front of Rathiel, and coalesced into a dark, glistening mass under his control. I watched, breathless and horrified, as the crimson liquid hardened into dozens of needle-sharp spikes that shimmered under

the dim alley light, poised for Rathiel's command.

At his silent command, the spikes shot forward, piercing the vampire with brutal accuracy. The hellspawn thrashed violently, his screams tearing through the alley as his own blood betrayed him, stabbing into his flesh with relentless precision. His cries turned guttural and inhuman.

Rathiel clenched his fist, and drove the spikes deeper, punching through the vampire's body with a sickening crunch of breaking bone and tearing flesh. The air reeked of blood and agony as the hellspawn's thrashing slowed, his body twitching violently as the last of his strength gave way. Finally, his head slumped back, his lifeless eyes staring blankly into the night as his shredded body collapsed to the ground in a gory heap.

The remaining vampire, still locked in my grip, bucked violently, his elbow slamming into my side. Pain shot through my ribs, but I held firm. He snarled and twisted, his claws raking at my arm, leaving shallow scratches that stung like hell. I gritted my teeth, tightening my hold and slamming him against the alley wall.

I pressed my forearm against his throat to pin him. He writhed like a trapped animal, thrashing and clawing at me, his strength fueled by desperation. His knee shot up, catching me hard in the thigh, and I stumbled just enough for him to twist free.

He bolted, his boots pounding against the pavement, but he didn't get far.

"Rathiel!" I called out.

Without even glancing up, Rathiel waved his hand, and the blood instantly ripped free of the dead vampire on the ground and condensed into a single massive spike. An instant later, it shot across the alley like a missile and impaled the last vampire in the back. The force of the blow sent the vampire staggering forward, his arms flailing as

the spear punched right through him.

The hellspawn fell to his knees, clawing desperately at the weapon protruding from his chest. His lips moved, gasping for words that wouldn't come. He crumpled sideways, his body twitching in the snow before falling still. The light in his eyes dimmed and died, leaving him lifeless in the alley.

Huh. Guess I should have told Rathiel to keep him alive.

The alley fell quiet, save for the faint sound of blood dripping onto the pavement. I scanned our surroundings, a grim smile tugging at my lips. We still needed to remove their heads, just to be thorough, but we'd killed them all. Guess we made a good team after all.

Rathiel whirled on his heel and crossed the distance to me in an instant. He cupped my face and tilted my head back and forth as he inspected my throat. His thumbs brushed lightly over my jaw, his touch surprisingly gentle for someone who'd just dismantled two vampires with the brutal efficiency of a war god.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his voice low but urgent.

"I'm fine," I murmured, reaching up to cup his hands. "He didn't bite me."

Rathiel's gaze held mine for a beat longer than necessary. I swallowed hard, pushing aside the strange, unsettled feeling his concern stirred in me. I drew his hands away from my face and was about to suggest we clean up the mess, when movement in the shadows behind Rathiel caught my eye. The first vampire, the one I'd knocked unconscious—I hadn't killed him. And now he was barreling right toward us.

"Watch out!" I shouted, my voice sharp as I tried to shove Rathiel aside.

I was too late. The vampire's claws tore through Rathiel's back with a sickening rip, shredding through fabric and flesh. Rathiel staggered, dropping to one knee and almost dragging me down with him. He let go of me and bowed over, blood blooming across his shirt in a dark stain, soaking the fabric. It would take more than that to kill him—I knew that without a doubt—but that knowledge didn't stop the surge of fear and fury that erupted within me.

The vampire turned toward me, baring his bloodstained claws, but I didn't give him a chance to strike again. Something primal ignited within me, and I reached deep inside myself, to the part I'd kept buried for so long, one that pulsed with the heat of Hell itself. I hadn't summoned my powers in a decade for fear of exposing myself, but seeing Rathiel injured awakened that part of me. I wanted our enemy to burn .

My desire to cause chaos and destruction and death sparked the fires within me, and my hands ignited with blazing crimson flames. The power surged through me with a fierce, undeniable intensity, and for the first time in ten years, I felt like myself. Like I'd just woken up from a long nap.

With a sharp cry, I flung my arms out, and hellfire erupted from my hands, roaring through the alleyway like a living entity. The blaze scoured across the ground, casting a blood-red glow over the scene as it whipped toward the remaining vampire.

The hellspawn barely had time to curse out loud before the flames engulfed him, his screams echoing off the alley's brick walls. I directed the fire with everything I had, keeping it controlled, guiding it around Rathiel as the fire devoured everything in sight, including the corpses, reducing their bodies to nothing but ash in a matter of seconds.

But as powerful as the hellfire was, I could feel it draining me, pulling on my strength as I struggled to keep it from touching Rathiel. He was right there, just inches from the most intense flames. I gritted my teeth, focusing every ounce of willpower on

controlling the blaze, forcing it to curve away from him, to protect him at all costs.

Finally, when all evidence of our presence here tonight was nothing more than a pile of smouldering ash, I let the flames flicker out, leaving the alleyway in silence, save for the crackle of dying embers.

Panting for breath, I hurried to Rathiel's side and dropped next to him, my hands still tingling from the aftershocks of the hellfire. He was bleeding heavily, his face pale, but his eyes were still alert, still full of that fierce determination. I glanced at his back, where the vampire's claws had torn through his shirt, revealing deep, jagged gashes that cut through muscle and exposed torn flesh. I was pretty sure I could see some bone peeking out at me.

"Hey...you okay?" I whispered, while fully knowing he wasn't.

He nodded weakly, but the pain in his eyes was evident. I could see that the wound had taken more out of him than he wanted to admit. Of course, he'd never let it show, not fully. That was just who Rathiel was—stoic to the point of stubbornness. He could be bleeding out, and he'd still fight. Hell didn't breed weak soldiers. It was infuriating, really, but I knew better than to push him on it. This was how he coped, how he kept control, and I had to respect that.

"Let's get out of here. I'm sure someone's called the cops by now," I told him. "Can you move?"

"Yes," he stated gruffly, before pushing to his feet.

He stumbled and I immediately darted forward to catch his weight.

Fear twisted in my gut, sharp and unforgiving. Why did it bother me so much to see him hurt? I'd faced dangerous situations before, seen others injured, but this...this

felt different. Rathiel was different. It wasn't just that he was stronger, faster, more capable than anyone I'd ever known. There was something more—an ache in my chest at the sight of him bleeding, at the thought of him in pain.

I shook my head, trying to clear the confusion. Now wasn't the time to get lost in thoughts and feelings I couldn't make sense of. But the unease wouldn't leave me, a nagging sensation that I was missing something important, something unattainable that lay just out of reach.

With one last look at the smouldering alleyway, I extinguished the remaining flames and slipped an arm around Rathiel to steady him. His weight was heavy against my side, but he kept his footing, his pride clearly refusing to let him lean on me too much.

“I need to get you back to my apartment so I can look at those wounds,” I said, glancing at the blood still seeping through the shredded fabric of his shirt.

He grunted, giving a terse nod.

We'd barely taken a step when I paused and cursed. With a wince, I turned and glanced back at the alleyway, where Rathiel's and my winter jackets lay in a pile of ash and soot. I wasn't one to carry a purse, I usually just stuffed everything in my pockets—wallet, keys, phone. Which meant, I had no money, no bus pass, and no way into the apartment. All of it, gone.

“Shit,” I muttered.

“Shit is right,” a sharp voice replied.

Adrenaline surged, and instinct kicked in. I let go of Rathiel seconds before hellfire blazed to life in my palms. My heart pounded as I readied to launch a fireball at the

intruders, my instincts screaming that it had to be more vamps. But then, through the haze of panic and flames, I recognized their faces.

I shook out my hands and snuffed the fire. “What the hell are you two doing here?”

Eliza’s wide-eyed gaze swept over the scene—the vampires’ charred remains, the blood splattered across the alley, and Rathiel leaning heavily on me for support. Her expression was equal parts horrified and awestruck. “You did this?” she whispered, disbelief clear in her eyes. “I mean, I saw it, but...wow.”

“You saw ?” I repeated. “Were you following us?”

“Yeah,” Mason answered bluntly, without the slightest hint of guilt. “Caught the tail end of your light show. Pretty impressive, by the way.” His sharp gaze settled on Rathiel, his tone turning gruff. “Those weren’t just any attackers, were they? Hellspawn, I’d wager?”

Eliza faltered, then whipped around to stare at him. “Hellspawn?” Her voice was barely a whisper, her face a mask of shock. “Like...from Hell? Are you serious?”

Mason’s slow nod confirmed it.

Her jaw dropped. “The eyes,” she murmured, almost to herself. “Blood-red. Just like the vamp we killed earlier this week. She was a hellspawn too?” Her voice wavered, confusion and hurt mingling in her words. “Then you...”

I opened my mouth to respond, but no words came. I wasn’t ready for this conversation—not here, not now. My grip on Rathiel tightened, and I started steering him toward the street. “We took care of it,” I said curtly. “Now, if you don’t mind, we’re leaving.”

“Oh, hell no,” Eliza said, before bursting out into manic laughter. “You don’t get to walk away this time. There are hellspawn here? On Earth?”

“Say it a little louder, why don’t you,” I sniped.

Eliza had the grace to appear chagrined, but she didn’t back down. Instead, she stepped in front of us and blocked our path. “Not so fast. He’s hurt,” she said, gesturing to Rathiel. “You won’t get very far in his state. Let me give you a ride home and you can pay me back by giving us some answers.”

I gritted my teeth, glancing at Rathiel, who remained silent, his face a mask of stony endurance. Guess he had no opinion on this. And from the looks of it, Eliza and Mason weren’t about to let us off so easily. The secrets I’d held close, the ones I’d fought so hard to protect, were slipping through my fingers.

Eliza raised an eyebrow. “Enough hiding things, Lily. I think we’re way past that point. We deserve to know what’s going on.”

A dozen excuses sprang to my lips, but they all felt hollow. Eliza and Mason already knew more than I’d ever intended to share—too much, in fact. Thanks to Mason, Eliza now knew Deidre was a hellspawn, and someone I had once considered a friend. Paired with Mason’s knowledge of the portal, it wouldn’t be long before they put two and two together. They weren’t innocent bystanders anymore.

I could keep running, keep trying to dodge their questions and brush them off, but the walls I’d built around my life were cracking, no matter how tightly I clung to them. And the more I pushed them away, the more they would pry—until one wrong step ended their lives.

With a deep breath, I met Eliza’s gaze, my voice low and weary. “Fine. But you’re right—this isn’t something you can just walk away from. If you want answers, you’ll

have to accept all the consequences that comes with them.”

Her expression softened, just slightly, as she caught the gravity of my words. Mason gave a curt nod, and together, they waited, the weight of the unspoken hanging between us. This was about more than revealing secrets. I was inviting them into a world from which there was no turning back.

I only hoped I was making the right choice.

Chapter Sixteen

We sat in Eliza's car in the lot outside my apartment building, the engine turned off but the cold creeping in. Eliza sat in the driver's seat, her hands still resting on the wheel as if she wasn't entirely sure what to do now that we'd parked. Beside her, Mason stared straight ahead, his eyes unfocused, lost somewhere between disbelief and grim acceptance. Silence filled the car—heavy, stifling silence—the kind that said everything and nothing at the same time.

Rathiel sat beside me, his eyes closed and his head resting against the window. He needed the rest, though he'd never admit it. His injuries weren't healing, and that scared me more than I wanted to admit. The hellspawn's claws had done more damage than I'd realized, and the gashes embedded deeply within his back seemingly refused to close. If a hellspawn had injured me, I would have healed by now. So why hadn't Rathiel?

I tore my focus away from him, and instead leaned forward, the leather seat creaking under my weight. "You both okay up there?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light, though the tension was suffocating.

Eliza let out a shaky breath, her knuckles white from gripping the wheel. She nodded slowly, though her eyes never left the windshield. "Yeah. Just...processing." She finally glanced over her shoulder, her eyes locking on mine. There was no accusation in her gaze, just a mixture of exhaustion and disbelief. "So you're..."

"Lucifer's daughter."

She gave another slow nod, as though that was something she heard every day. “And he’s...”

“Lucifer’s right-hand. Or was.”

A third slow nod. Clearly, she wasn’t processing this very well. “And you’ve just been living your best life up here until recently when your f-father”—she stumbled over that word—“sent that hellspawn vamp to bring you home.”

“That’s the gist of it. Except, as I said, now he wants me dead. It’s a whole thing. Look, if you’re done asking questions, I need to get Rathiel inside.”

Mason turned, irritation flaring in his eyes. “It’s a lot to take in, Lily. You could give us a few minutes.”

“You can take it all in on the drive home,” I said. “I really do need to get Rathiel inside.”

Eliza’s brow furrowed, her gaze softening. “You know, this explains a lot,” she murmured. “All the secrecy, the way you never seemed quite like other paranormals. It makes sense now.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Glad my lineage clears things up.”

Mason turned in his seat, his eyes narrowing. “And the portal—that’s the same one you came through?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Ten years ago. It’s closed right now, but that could change. And if it does, I’ll handle it. This isn’t your fight.” Maybe now that they knew my connection to the portal, they’d understand.

Eliza turned fully in her seat, her eyes sharp. “Oh, hell no,” she said firmly. “This is our problem now too. This is our home. And we’ll fight, even die, to protect it.”

Huh, guess not.

Her words hung in the air. I truly didn’t know what to say. Part of me wanted to push back, to tell her that she didn’t understand, that this was more dangerous than she could imagine. But the determination in her eyes was unmistakable, and I knew arguing was pointless. I wasn’t going to convince them to walk away—not now.

I looked at Mason, who gave me a small nod. “We’re in this together,” he said. “No matter what comes through that portal. You can’t continue guarding it day in and day out. We can help with that. Eliza has contacts with the merc guild. And I know people too. We can help , Lily. You just need to trust us.”

Ah, my least favourite words. But it seemed I didn’t have a choice in this matter. And honestly, I was willing to say anything if it got me out of this car and upstairs, where I could take a look at Rathiel’s wounds.

“Fine,” I bit out. “But I would like it stated for the record that I’m against this.”

“Noted,” Eliza said, smiling.

I nodded once, then reached for the door handle. “Alright. I need to get Rathiel inside before he passes out. We can figure out our next steps once we’ve all had some sleep.”

Eliza bowed her head with a mocking smile. “You got it, Princess.”

Oh, I was going to regret this. Grumbling under my breath, I reached for the door handle and stepped out before helping Rathiel. He wound an arm around my shoulder

and staggered up against the side of the car.

“You got this?” Mason asked. “I can help get him upstairs.”

“We’re fine,” I replied, shutting the car door.

Eliza peered at me through her open window. “You sure you can handle him?”

“We’re good. Get going.”

I repositioned Rathiel’s weight, then hauled him toward the apartment door. Once there, I paused to watch Eliza and Mason drive off. Relief had me blowing out a breath. No more awkward FAQs—at least, for a little while. I could only imagine the questions they’d come up with next. But for now, Rathiel and I were alone.

I pulled him inside the apartment complex, then froze. Somehow, I’d forgotten that I burned everything. And no keys meant no building access.

I cursed quietly. Without my keys, we’d have to wait for someone to open the door, and at this hour, I wasn’t sure how long it would take. A quick glance at the time revealed that it was nearly four in the morning.

“Fuck it,” I grumbled.

I braced Rathiel against the wall, then grabbed the door handle and gave a sharp pull, one that broke the deadlock and allowed me to open the door. One hurdle down. I grabbed Rathiel and eased him into the hallway, then toward the elevator. Three floors later, we stood outside my apartment door, which also needed keys. I could also break this one down, but I’d prefer not to. So instead, I leaned forward and rested my forehead against the door.

“Vol,” I murmured, hoping the little imp heard me. “Now would be a superb time for some help. Can you unlock the door, please?”

The only response was silence. I cursed under my breath and was considering other options when a loud click echoed through the hallway. I grabbed the doorknob and gave it a twist, relief untwisting my stomach when the door opened.

Vol stood in the middle of the room, a triumphant grin on his wrinkly little face. I gave him a quick smile, then dragged Rathiel inside to the couch.

“Here, lay down,” I urged, helping him lower himself onto the cushions. He fell forward with a grunt, his face twisted with pain. I quickly knelt beside him and lifted his shirt to get a better look at the wounds.

His blood-soaked shirt clung to him like a second skin, but below were a series of four gashes where the vampire’s claws had ripped through his flesh. I couldn’t see the bone anymore, nor was he bleeding profusely, so the wounds were healing, but they hadn’t healed enough for my liking. Rathiel wasn’t a true celestial anymore, thanks to Lucifer’s meddling, but he should have been healing faster than this. I would have.

Celestials were a difficult lot to kill. I knew that from my own personal experience. I also knew a wound like this should heal in under an hour.

Well, it’d been two hours since the attack. And in that time, Rathiel had barely improved. Definitely cause for concern.

While studying Rathiel’s injuries, a small head popped up next to me. Vol’s eyes widened, though he quickly masked it with a smirk. “What happened to him? He looks like he’s been through a meat grinder,” he commented.

“Vol, not now,” I snapped.

“Go away, imp,” Rathiel growled, his voice tight with pain, though his glare lacked its usual intensity. At least he’d finally spoken. I was beginning to worry.

Vol raised his hands in mock surrender, though the grin on his face remained. “Hey, just trying to lighten the mood. You’re looking a little worse for wear, that’s all.”

Ignoring Vol’s commentary, I resumed my inspection. “They haven’t closed yet. Shouldn’t they have done that by now?”

Rathiel merely offered another grunt. Super helpful.

Purrgratory padded over with nary a feline concern. He brushed up against Rathiel’s arm, his purr echoing through the room. Rathiel’s hand absently reached down to scratch Purrgratory’s head, his touch gentle despite the pain he was in. The sight of it tugged at something inside me—a reminder that, despite everything, there was still a softness to him, something he rarely showed but was always there.

I rose to my feet and stared down at Rathiel’s back. Then, with a scowl, I said, “Be right back,” and hurried toward the apartment door.

“Lily—” Rathiel started, but I’d already ducked out into the hall before he could utter another word.

I jogged to the next unit and lifted my hand, about to knock, when I paused and considered the time. Most people weren’t up at such a wretched hour. But most people weren’t Willow Bick.

Willow was a professional baker, and an eccentric, self-proclaimed witch who spent her free time studying the Wiccan arts—or so she’d told me once during one of our shared elevator rides. She didn’t possess a lick of magical ability, but she was the type of person who believed in the power of crystals and moon phases. She was also

the most grounded person I'd ever met, which led me to believe she'd have a first aid kit. Something I lacked.

And thankfully, since she always woke before the sun to get a start on her day, I knew she'd be up right now.

With that in mind, I knocked firmly on her door, and a few seconds later, it swung open to reveal Willow in her work attire including a flour-dusted apron, a hairnet barely containing her wild curls, and a bright, welcoming smile that never seemed to fade.

"Lily!" she greeted, her voice cheerful. "What brings you to my door at this hour? Not that I mind, of course."

"Hey, Willow," I said, trying to keep my tone casual despite the urgency. "Do you happen to have a first aid kit I can borrow?"

Her brow furrowed in concern as she quickly looked me over. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine," I assured her. "It's for a friend. He got a little banged up at the bar tonight, and I realized I'm not exactly prepared for that sort of thing."

Willow's eyes softened with understanding, and she nodded enthusiastically. "Of course! Let me grab it for you. I keep it in the kitchen, just in case I ever have a knife mishap. Happens more than I care to admit. But we'll just keep that little secret to ourselves."

I chuckled. Willow didn't actually know the meaning of the word "secret."

She disappeared into her apartment, and I could hear her rummaging through

drawers. When she returned, she held a metal first aid kit and held it out to me with a smile. “Here you go. Take whatever you need. And if you need any help, just holler.”

“Thanks, Willow. I appreciate it,” I said, taking the kit from her.

“Anytime, Lily. You know where to find me,” she replied with a wink before closing the door.

I hurried back to my apartment, hoping Rathiel was still conscious when I got there. As soon as I stepped inside, I saw him lying exactly where I’d left him, his posture rigid, and Vol hovering nearby, looking far too curious about Rathiel’s injuries for my liking.

“If he dies, can I eat him?” the imp casually asked.

I froze, shock widening my eyes. “Vol!” I hissed. “What is wrong with you?”

Vol shrugged, his expression annoyingly indifferent. “What? Waste not, want not, right?”

“Your jokes are not appreciated.” At least I hoped it was a joke. But just in case... “Rathiel isn’t dying, and you’re not eating him,” I snapped, moving quickly to Rathiel’s side. The sight of him lying there, fighting to hold on to consciousness, sent a pang of worry through me.

Rathiel, despite his pain, managed a low chuckle, though it was more of a grimace than anything else. “Leave him be, Lily. He’s just trying to get a rise out of you.”

“Well, it’s working,” I muttered, shooting Vol a glare before hurrying over to Rathiel’s side. I knelt down beside him, placing the medical kit on the floor as I quickly assessed his condition. He was still bleeding, but not as badly as before. Still,

that his wounds hadn't healed completely was troubling.

The glint in Vol's eyes suggested he found the whole situation more amusing than concerning. "I'm just saying, if he does kick the bucket, I'm first in line."

Ignoring Vol's morbid comments, I focused on Rathiel. "I got a first aid kit."

He raised a questioning brow.

"It's just something humans use when they're injured. It's—oh, never mind. Let me patch you up. I can explain what it is later."

Rathiel didn't argue, which was a bad sign in itself. He just closed his eyes and let out a slow, pained breath. I hurried to open the kit, pulling out what I needed to take care of the wounds on his back.

As I carefully cleaned the deep gashes, Rathiel remained silent, his expression set in a stoic mask. Though he didn't flinch or wince, tension sang through his muscles, a clear sign that the pain was more than he was letting on. He lay there, his eyes half-closed, focused on the cushion beneath him, as if it could distract him from the discomfort.

I let out a soft sigh, more to myself than anything. "You really don't have to keep pretending you're made of stone, you know."

He didn't respond, his silence more telling than any words could be. It was like trying to get through to a fortress—one that had long since decided to shut the world out.

"Fine, be stubborn," I muttered, focusing on finishing the task.

After dressing his wounds as best as I could, I took a step back, assessing my

handiwork. The bleeding had slowed, but the injuries were still bad—worse than I'd expected.

"You're healing," I said softly, "But it's so slow. I don't understand what's happening."

Unclenching his jaw, Rathiel said, "I don't heal like a celestial. Unfortunately, it'll take more time."

I frowned. He didn't heal like a celestial? Why not? And why hadn't I ever noticed that before? "Okay, I'll bite," I said. "What's so different about you? And why is this taking so long?"

Rather than answer, he winced and averted his gaze.

"Rathiel?" I repeated, dropping back down to his side. "Talk to me. Tell me how I can help."

"I need—" He broke off, then shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I'll be fine. It'll just take some more time."

"Or you could just tell me what's going on," I argued. "Maybe I can help? I'd rather get you back on your feet. You're bleeding all over my apartment, and I'd like my security deposit back when I leave this place."

"I don't know what that means," he grumbled.

That made me chuckle. "Come on, you stubborn oaf. Talk to me."

Sighing, Rathiel slitted open his eyes and stared at me. "I'm a vampire, Lily. I'm not a celestial anymore, despite my wings. Your father—" His jaw tightened, and an

angry growl rumbled in his chest. “Your father tainted me when he turned me into this .”

“So, you don’t heal like a celestial anymore,” I surmised. “And being that you’re a vampire...”

His eyes snapped open, and I saw something in them that unnerved me—hunger.

“You need blood,” I whispered, the realization startling me. Of course he needed blood. He was a vampire, and after a fight like that, especially with wounds that severe, he would need to feed to recover. “Oh,” I murmured, understanding washing over me.

“Just go to bed,” he uttered through clenched teeth. “I’ll be fine.”

I scoffed. Seeing as how I’d rarely obeyed his orders in the past, I didn’t see myself starting now.

“Okay, so you need blood,” I murmured, pushing to my feet.

I ran through the options in my head. Rathiel needed blood to heal if we wanted him to heal faster. That left me with three choices: I could lure some poor, unsuspecting mortal to my apartment for him to feed on, which wasn’t exactly ideal. I could let him drain Vol, a thought that was far more tempting than it should’ve been. Or...I could let him feed on me.

A shiver shot down my spine, and the little hairs on my arms and neck stood at attention. The thought of Rathiel biting me, feeding on me...it stirred something deep within. Something I couldn’t put a name to. For some reason, the idea didn’t disgust or terrify me. In fact, it did the opposite. It intrigued me. The concept felt undeniably intimate— too intimate. I should have been horrified by the idea of being his

midnight snack. Except, I wasn't. And I think that terrified me more than him actually biting me.

All I knew was I couldn't let him suffer. His injuries were my fault. It seemed only fair that I gave him what he needed to heal.

Right?

"Alright," I murmured, my decision made. "You can feed on me."

Rathiel's eyes widened in shock, a mix of alarm and something else—something darker—flashing across his face. "Absolutely not."

I crossed my arms and lifted my chin. "You're in pain, Rathiel. You need to heal, and feeding will help with that."

"I'll manage," he replied through a gritted jaw, the strain in his voice betraying his desperation. "I've suffered worse. I won't take blood from you."

He had suffered worse. A lot worse. But that didn't mean he had to suffer now.

I dropped to my knees beside the couch and grabbed his hand in mine. His eyes widened, as though he hadn't expected me to willingly touch him. "This isn't about you taking something from me," I said, my voice firm. "This is about us helping each other, working together."

He cursed quietly, conflict warring in his expression. If I wasn't mistaken, I spotted a little hope in those eyes of his, even as he shook his head.

"I refuse to hurt you," he muttered, as if trying to convince himself more than me.

“You won’t,” I assured him. I wanted to say more, tell him that I trusted him, but that would be a lie, and I tried not to lie to people unless absolutely necessary. People in my life— cough, Deidre, cough —had given me more than enough reasons not to trust them. Even Rathiel had contributed to that little emotional wound of mine, what with the whole stealing my memories conundrum. But he’d also given me enough reason to help him. He’d not only escaped Hell with the specific purpose of finding and protecting me, but he’d also stepped in and stopped that vampire from turning me into a nummy chew toy. Truly, this was the least I could do for him.

Rathiel peered into my eyes, as if searching for any hint of fear or hesitation. I merely smiled, determined to show him I had no intentions of backing down.

“Are you sure?” he murmured.

“No,” I said, laughing. “But I’m the only one here, so... I mean, unless you want to munch down on Vol?”

“Hey!” the imp barked from across the room.

“Kidding, kidding.” I paused. “Well, mostly.”

“Lilith—”

“For crying out loud, Rathiel. I offered. Say thank you, and just get on with it already.”

His mouth flattened into a grim line, but finally, he nodded.

“Alright. We’re doing this,” I muttered more to myself than to him.

Rathiel started to push up from the couch, moving slowly, his movements deliberate.

I slid an arm around his waist—mindful of his injuries—and helped steady him as he climbed to his feet. But as he stood, the space between us disappeared. His chest brushed against mine, and I realized a little too late just how close together we stood.

With each inch he rose, my head tilted back more, until I was staring up at him. My breath hitched, caught somewhere between a gasp and a sigh. I was used to his height—it was part of his whole intimidating vibe—but having him this close, feeling the solid warmth of his body pressed against mine, was intoxicating.

The world shrank to just the two of us. His hands, still resting on my shoulders for balance, tightened slightly, his fingers brushing against my throat. We slowly walked backward until my back hit the wall.

“You sure about this?” he asked again, his breath ghosting over my face.

“Positive,” I whispered, though my voice wasn’t as strong. “Now, are you going to stand there all night, or are you going to do what needs doing?”

His gaze darkened, something dangerous and alluring flashing in those celestial blue eyes. “Patience is a virtue,” he murmured, but there was a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

I swallowed hard, all the while ignoring the sudden heat pooling in my stomach. “Do it.”

His expression softened, if only for a second, before his focus lasered in on my throat. Slowly, deliberately, he leaned down, his lips brushing against my neck, right where my pulse beat frantically beneath the surface. I shivered, the anticipation making my heart race.

This was it. No turning back now.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” I breathed, barely recognizing my voice.

I just hoped I knew what I was doing.

Chapter Seventeen

Rathiel bit, his fangs piercing my neck. A jolt shot through me—sharp with a hint of pain. My breath caught and my hands instinctively gripped his arms as his hold on me tightened. Quicker than expected, the pain faded, the sting melting into pleasure.

Warmth spread from my throat downward, like the slow bloom of heat on a winter's day. It wasn't just a physical sensation. It was deeper, more complex. A warmth that seeped into my bones and settled in my core. It felt as though every nerve in my body had suddenly come alive, humming with a strange, almost hypnotic energy that echoed through my veins and pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

I'd expected discomfort, maybe even a little fear. But this was different. The feel of his mouth against my throat, of his arms wrapped around me, his fingers digging into my back. My mind scrambled to process the flood of sensations and emotions spiralling through me.

The more he drank, the more that warmth spread through me, penetrating even the darkest parts.

And me? I leaned into him, my fingers gripping his arms as if to hold him as close as possible. His chest was a wall of heat against mine, his knee creeping between my legs, his weight pressing me against the wall. A small voice in my head whispered at me to push him away, to put some distance between us, but my body refused to obey. I liked him this close to me. I didn't want to push him away.

A flicker of something stirred—a memory, a shadow of a familiarity I couldn't quite

grasp. As if my body remembered something my mind had forgotten. I wanted to probe that feeling, dive into it and pull it apart until I remembered everything .

But then, like clockwork, the throbbing began. That agonizing and utterly annoying pain that always started behind my eyes before sweeping through the rest of my head. It started faintly, then grew sharper, warning me to stop. I winced, forcing myself to stop digging into the haze of lost memories. If I kept pushing, the pain would ruin this moment.

I swallowed, letting the memories slip away, leaving only the heat of Rathiel's body and the pulse of his bite. Focusing only on the sensations, I kept the pain at bay. No thinking, no probing. Just feeling.

Rathiel's grip tightened, and a low growl rumbled in his chest and vibrated against me. The sound should have alarmed me, but instead, it sent another wave of warmth through me, one that pooled deep in my stomach. Without a thought, I tilted my head and gave him better access, a notion that terrified me. I wasn't just allowing this—I craved it. Craved him.

Why? Why did this feel so right, when everything in my rational mind told me it shouldn't? All that mattered was Rathiel—his touch, his closeness, the way he made me feel like I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

A low moan escaped my lips, surprising me. I hadn't intended to make a sound, but it slipped out, a honest reaction to the maelstrom of sensations whipping through me. Rathiel stilled, as if startled by my response, but then he resumed, this time slower, more deliberate, as though savouring every second of this.

My hands moved of their own accord, sliding up his arms to his shoulders, clutching at the fabric of his shirt as if anchoring myself to him. I didn't want to let go, didn't want to break whatever spell wove itself around us.

Rathiel's lips lingered, but when he finally began to pull back, an unexpected pang of loss twisted my heart. The world around us seemed too quiet, too still, as if it had been holding its breath with me.

"Lily," Rathiel murmured, his voice rough and low, barely more than a whisper. His breath was hot against my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. He didn't say anything more; he didn't need to. The way he said my name, the way his hands trembled slightly as he held me, spoke volumes.

I straightened my head and slowly opened my eyes. Rathiel's gaze locked with mine, intense and unwavering. His hand lingered at my throat, his thumb tracing slow, deliberate circles against my skin, like he was committing everything to memory.

Then his gaze dipped, lingering on my lips. The room seemed to shrink around us, the air charged with an unspoken tension that had been simmering for too long. My pulse quickened, a thrumming beat in my ears that matched the rise and fall of my chest. I couldn't look away, couldn't move. It was as if I were tethered to him, unable to pull away.

His eyes flicked back up to mine, searching, questioning, as if he needed to be sure I wanted this as much as he did. Or maybe he was trying to understand the same confusing mix of emotions as me—an inexplicable longing that made my heart race in ways I didn't fully understand.

Rathiel leaned in, the inches between us disappearing until his warm breath brushed my lips. I didn't stop him. The thought never even crossed my mind. But just as our lips were about to touch, a sharp, high-pitched voice cut through the charged silence.

"Gross!" Vol let out a disgusted groan. "Knock it off, you two. Because, seriously, if I have to endure one more second of that, I'll gouge my own eyes out. And believe me, Meat Sack, the idea is tempting."

Rathiel stiffened, his forehead nearly touching mine. He gave a frustrated growl, then stepped back, the heated tension between us dissipating like a deflating balloon.

“And please,” Vol continued, “if you two are planning to swap spit, at least do it somewhere I don’t have to watch. I’m allergic to all this ‘will-they-won’t-they’ garbage. Makes me break out in hives. Big, disgusting, itchy hives.”

I blinked, then peered around Rathiel to find Vol standing on the couch armrest, his little hands perched on his hips, and his impish gaze locked on me.

“Remind me again why I let you live here?” I demanded, my voice low and annoyed.

“Because you can’t survive without me,” he retorted. “Now, are you done here? Or should I grab some popcorn for the next act of this disasterpiece?”

“Get out,” I growled. “Now.”

Vol’s laughter echoed through the room as he hopped off the couch and darted off. Where, I had no idea. Nor did I care to know. I had a bigger problem to contend with right now. And his name was Rathiel, who looked so much healthier now.

For the first time in...well, ever, I was speechless. My heart raced, and not just from the intensity of what’d almost just happened, but from all the emotions swirling around inside me. Ones that defied explanation. My damn body wasn’t helping either. The lingering tingle from his bite pulsed beneath my skin, sharp and insistent, like a brand that wouldn’t fade. And worse, there was something else, something deeper. A longing I didn’t understand.

I wanted to dive deeper into these feelings, explore them until they made some freaking sense. But I knew better. The last thing I wanted right now was a mind-crippling headache that had me cursing every celestial relic in existence.

I pressed my fingers to my neck, brushing over the puncture marks that were already healing. But the feeling hadn't gone away. His bite lingered, searing and electric, refusing to be ignored. Questions ricocheted through my head, each one more confusing than the last. Feeding him was supposed to be straightforward, a simple necessity. But whatever had just happened between us was anything but.

When I finally looked up, Rathiel was watching me. He'd put some distance between us, and not just physically. His gaze was steady, guarded, the way it always was when he didn't want to give anything away. There was something more to this—something I couldn't quite put my finger on, and that unsettled me more than I wanted to admit. I wasn't the type to get rattled easily, but right now, my thoughts were a jumbled mess.

“Okay, so who's going first? You or me?” I asked.

Rathiel didn't say a word.

“Great, me then.” I blew out a heavy breath, then lowered my arm. “Clearly, I'm missing something—which really isn't all that surprising considering my unique circumstances. But that was far more intense than I expected.”

Rathiel averted his gaze. “Don't read too much into it. Bites can stir up emotions. That's all.”

That was his explanation? Seriously? I might have been missing a good chunk of memories, but I wasn't stupid. Far from it. “You're not even going to try to explain what just happened?”

He shrugged. “You offered to feed me,” he said in a measured tone. “And that's what I did. There's nothing more to it.”

“You nearly kissed me,” I countered. I wasn’t about to mention how badly I’d wanted to kiss him back—or how much I’d enjoyed every second of it. Those private thoughts needed to remain private for now. Especially when he was being so cagey. “I don’t have a lot of experience feeding vampires. Actually, none. But that didn’t feel like a quick bite. That felt...” I cleared my throat to keep from uttering the word erotic —thank goodness. “...different.”

Rathiel’s jaw tightened, and I could almost see the wheels turning as he carefully measured his next words. It was infuriating, this constant dance where he said just enough to keep me from walking away, but never enough to give me real answers.

“Think of it as a biological response,” Rathiel explained, his tone clinical, detached. “The bite is designed to be pleasant. It ensures that our prey returns willingly. We get the sustenance we need, and they get a temporary thrill.”

“That’s your explanation?” I raised a skeptical brow. “Biological response?”

I’d felt the stirring of a headache, a telling sign there was a related memory lurking beneath the surface, one triggered by the bite. That alone told me more than Rathiel was. Had he bitten me before? Back when I led the rebellion? If he had, why erase it?

“Listen, I’m not asking for a detailed report,” I continued. “But I won’t ignore what I just felt. Clearly, you felt it too. You wouldn’t be acting this way if you hadn’t.”

He didn’t respond, and I knew what that meant. He wasn’t going to tell me what I wanted to know. Not now, anyway.

I let out a short, humourless laugh. “You know, you’re really good at this whole ‘cryptic and vague’ thing. It’s like a second language for you, isn’t it? But here’s the thing—I’m not some gullible idiot who’s going to nod and smile while you dodge every question with a half-assed answer.”

He hesitated, just for a fraction of a second, but it was enough for me to see that I'd hit a nerve. But whatever it was, he wasn't going to budge. And that realization pissed me off.

"You're making this more complicated than it needs to be," Rathiel said finally, his voice dropping a notch, as if he were trying to diffuse the situation. "It was just a side effect of the bite."

My temper flared, but I reined it in, not wanting to let him see just how much his evasiveness angered—and hurt—me. "Right."

He studied me intently, his gaze sharp and searching, like he was waiting for a reaction. What kind, I had no idea. For a moment, I thought he might actually crack, might let something slip. But then his expression shifted, smoothing back into that infuriatingly calm mask he wore whenever he wanted to shut me out.

I exhaled sharply, running a hand through my hair as I tried to process what had just happened. My body still buzzed with a tingling warmth that refused to fade. It made it hard to think straight. But beyond that, it angered me to know I was standing on the cusp of something important. Something I should remember but couldn't.

If I wasn't mistaken, Rathiel seemed almost...disappointed that I didn't remember.

Well, he had no one to blame for that but himself.

"Fine," I said, letting out a harsh breath. "Keep your secrets, but don't think for a second that I'm going to drop this. You may not want to explain, but I'll figure it out on my own if I have to."

Whatever Rathiel was hiding, whatever that bite triggered, I was going to figure it out. And when I did, he'd have no choice but to admit the truth—whether he wanted

to or not.

Chapter Eighteen

The morning came far too soon. It was also too bright, and frankly, a little too chipper for my liking, given my emotional hangover. I'd managed two hours of sleep before my alarm started blaring, reminding me that I had to drag my ass to my dreaded day job today. After this early morning's misadventures with the vampires, the unexpected use of my powers after a decade of not touching them, and Rathiel's bite, I was exhausted. The last thing I wanted to do was slog through an eight-hour shift battling caffeine-deprived monsters—especially with Rathiel sitting nearby.

I'd tried—rather unsuccessfully, I might add—to convince him to stay behind at my apartment. He'd responded as expected, and merely glared at me until I sighed and motioned for him to get his ass out the door. Now, we sat together on the bus, both of us freezing without our winter jackets. But since boarding, he'd barely said two words to me, choosing instead to imitate a brooding statue. He did it well, at least.

I glanced sideways at him. His expression remained as closed off as ever, his eyes focused on the front of the bus. Though, from the look of his twitching jaw, he was quite aware of my stare, and it seemed I was making him uncomfortable. Me. Making him uncomfortable. The very thought was laughable.

Just about as laughable as whatever happened between us last night.

Between the couple hours of sleep I'd managed, I'd decided that I'd imagined everything. That he was right. The bite didn't mean anything. I'd heard vampire bites could be seductive. Addicting, even. Like Rathiel said, it kept their prey coming back for more. Why hunt when your victims could come looking for you?

That had to be it. Or rather, it was the only explanation I would accept.

Of course, it was easier to convince myself of all that when he wasn't sitting right beside me. My neck still tingled from last night, as was my stupid traitorous body. Parts of me actually ached for him. It had to be the bite.

Right?

The bus squealed to a stop, and I snapped out of my thoughts. This was our stop. Someone else had pulled the bell, thankfully. But it left us scrambling to disembark before the doors shut and the bus continued down the road.

Rathiel followed suit, his movements fluid and controlled, like he had all the time in the world. I'd noticed with venomous envy this morning that he didn't look the slightest bit tired, unlike me, with my puffy, bruised eyes. It made me hate him a little.

I continued down the sidewalk, toward the coffee shop. The silence between us stretched long and heavy, each step filled with questions I didn't ask. Why bother when I knew he wouldn't answer?

We reached the door of the coffee shop, and I hesitated, my hand on the handle. Rathiel stopped beside me, his gaze fixed on the door, but I could feel his awareness of me, of the tension between us. I took a deep breath and pushed the door open, the familiar scent of coffee and baked goods washing over me like a balm.

Inside, the shop was quiet, the early hour ensuring a slow trickle of customers. I tossed my bag into the back room and grabbed my apron, tying it around my waist with practiced ease. Rathiel moved to the same spot as yesterday, settling in with the air of someone who had all the time in the world to watch and wait. His eyes, though, were on me, tracking my every move with that unnerving intensity that made my skin

prickle.

After learning that Jazz had called out for the day—much to my dismay—I busied myself with the morning prep, grateful for the distraction. Grinding coffee beans, setting out pastries, wiping down counters—mundane tasks that kept my hands busy while my mind spun in circles. No matter how hard I tried to focus on the job at hand, my thoughts kept drifting back to Rathiel, to the questions that still hung in the air between us.

I just wish I knew how to get him to give me answers. Maybe I could pin him down and force him to talk. No, my body liked that idea a bit too much. A training session, then? Obviously, we hadn't sparred in a very long time. Maybe I just needed to get his blood pumping to get the words flowing. It was certainly an idea, one I found myself actually entertaining.

The morning rush began to pick up, and I threw myself into the work, forcing myself to smile and chat with the customers as if nothing was amiss. But every time I glanced over at Rathiel, I found him watching me, his gaze never wavering. At least it didn't bother me anymore—apparently, I was adjusting to his presence. Lucky me.

By the time the morning rush began to slow, I was running on autopilot, my body moving through the familiar motions of serving coffee and handing out pastries. I leaned against the counter and let out a breath. It would pick up again around lunch, when people needed their second dose of liquid caffeine. But until then, I could take time to regroup.

I had to mentally prepare for my date with Jack tonight. I hadn't explicitly told Rathiel about it, but one could assume he'd overheard me and Jazz discussing it yesterday. I'd been hoping for Jazz's help to pick out a dress. She wasn't here, though. Which left me one option—an option I was hesitant to explore after last night. But what choice did I have? Rathiel refused to leave me unsupervised, and I

needed another dress.

Sighing, I tossed a dirty rag into the nearby sink, then strode toward him.

His gaze tracked my every step, but his expression didn't so much as flicker. Not even a pleasant smile. Personally, I preferred his dark and brooding expressions. Gave me a wonderful shiver I would never admit to out loud.

"I need to buy some things after my shift. A new phone, for starters. But also, a dress," I said unceremoniously.

Rathiel merely lifted an eyebrow.

"And you're going to help me find one."

His eyebrow arched just a fraction higher, his piercing gaze never leaving mine. "And why exactly do you need a dress?" His voice was low and skeptical.

I hesitated, knowing full well that my answer would hit a nerve, even if he wouldn't show it. "I have a date tonight."

A brief flicker of emotion crossed his face, but it was gone an instant later, replaced by the same unreadable mask he always wore.

"With Jack," I added, my voice quieter than I intended.

Rathiel's jaw tightened, just enough for me to notice. "A second date," he stated, the words clipped. Finally, he let out a slow, controlled breath and shifted his gaze away from me, staring out the window instead. "And you think this is a good idea? With everything that's going on?"

His tone was flat, devoid of the emotion that had briefly flickered across his face. It was almost as if he was trying to detach himself from the situation, to keep whatever he was feeling under tight control.

“It’s just a date, Rathiel,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady. “I’m not going to let my life come to a screeching halt because of everything that’s going on.”

His gaze snapped back to me, sharp and probing. “Because of what, exactly? Because your father knows where you are? And wants you dead? And has started sending hellspawn here to kill you?”

I scanned the immediate area, relieved to find no one overheard his last remark. “Nice,” I bit out, rolling my eyes. “Announce it to the whole freaking world, why don’t you? Look, I like Jack. And he likes me. So, I’m going to go on this date with him, regardless of your opinion on the matter.”

Rathiel’s eyes narrowed slightly, his expression hardening. “This is reckless.”

“Maybe. But that’s not your call. The only choice you have is whether or not you accompany me shopping. You can go back to my apartment and wait for me there, if you choose to.”

Anger flashed in his eyes, but he quickly blinked and centered himself. “Fine,” he said, his voice quieter. “I’ll help you find a dress .”

There was no enthusiasm in his tone, no warmth. Just a cold acceptance that made my chest tighten with a mix of guilt and something else I didn’t want to name. I hadn’t expected him to be thrilled, but I also hadn’t expected his reaction to cut this deep.

“Thank you,” I said, though the words felt hollow, as if they weren’t nearly enough to fill the growing chasm between us.

Without another word, I turned away and headed back to finish the rest of my shift, trying to ignore Rathiel's presence. A damn near impossible feat. At least for me.

By the time my shift ended, I was even more exhausted. I only hoped I could find a dress quickly and return home with enough time to nap before my date tonight.

I untied my apron and hung it up, happy to have one less thing to worry about. I headed back to Rathiel, who stood and silently made his way to the door, holding it open for me.

We took a small detour to my bank's closest branch to replace my debit card, then hurried to the phone store. Once I booted up my new phone, a text message from Eliza came in telling me that she'd already managed to recruit a few more people to guard the portal. Impressed with her efficiency, and relieved to have a few less items on my to-do list, I ushered Rathiel to the nearest clothing store.

Rathiel kept a steady pace beside me, his hands tucked into the pockets of his pants, his expression still unreadable. It was unnerving—this silence. I was used to our banter, to the push and pull of our interactions. But it felt like something had broken between us, and I wasn't sure how to fix it.

"Welcome!" a saleswoman greeted us as we entered. "Can I help you find something?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but Rathiel stepped forward before I could speak. "We're looking for a dress," he said, his voice calm and authoritative. "Something for a special occasion."

The saleswoman's smile widened, and she motioned for us to follow her deeper into the store. "Of course. We have a lovely selection of evening gowns and cocktail dresses. What sort of event will you be attending?"

“A date,” I blurted before Rathiel could reply. His jaw clenched at the word, but he said nothing.

The saleswoman’s eyes sparkled with interest, clearly thinking Rathiel was the date I spoke of, and she began pulling a few dresses from the racks. “Let’s see. You have such a lovely figure. I think something fitted would be perfect. Maybe a deep blue or black, to complement your dark hair color and eyes.”

I nodded. As the saleswoman held up a few options for me to consider, I stole a quick glance at Rathiel. His expression remained blank, but I saw the tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes seemed to darken whenever the word “date” cropped up.

I sighed inwardly, realizing that shopping with him might not have been the best idea after all.

“Why don’t you try this one?” The saleswoman held up a sleek, black dress with a plunging neckline both in the front and the back, and a slit up the side. “It’s elegant, but with just enough edge to make a statement.”

“Ah. Uh, no exposed back, please,” I commented.

Rathiel’s head snapped toward me, his eyes narrowing. But his expression cleared the second his attention jumped to my back. The weight of his stare made me itchy, but rather than cower, I lifted my chin and met the saleswoman’s confused gaze. After a moment, she said, “Of course,” and continued searching her racks.

“How about this one?” she asked, holding a lovely black dress with a boat neck and, once again, a slitted side.

“Much better,” I said.

I took the dress from her and headed to the fitting room, my heart pounding a little harder than it should have been. I didn't want to think about Rathiel's reaction when I stepped out wearing the dress. I also didn't want to think about the strange tension between us, or the way his presence seemed to wrap around me, making it hard to breathe.

But as I slipped into the dress and caught sight of myself in the mirror, I couldn't help but wonder what he would think. Would he approve? An image suddenly flashed in my mind, and it was not of Jack ripping this dress off me, but rather a certain vampire standing just outside my change room.

Gathering my courage, I stepped out of the fitting room and faced Rathiel. His gaze swept over me, lingering on the curves of the dress, the way it clung to my body like a second skin. An almost hunger flashed in his eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared, replaced by his usual guarded expression.

"What do you think?" I asked, my voice more tentative than I intended. I cleared my throat and tried again. Shyness wasn't me.

Rathiel didn't answer right away. He seemed to be struggling with something, his jaw working as if he were holding back words that wanted to spill out. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and gravelly. "It's good."

I rolled my eyes. This dress went far beyond good . But I had a feeling that was all he would give me.

I forced a smile and turned back to the mirror, trying to hide the confusion that was swirling inside me. "Great. I'll take it, then."

"Wonderful," the saleswoman said, a smile lighting up her face. Maybe I should have checked the price tag first. She seemed overly eager for the sale. Luckily, my bank

account had plenty of zeroes in it now, and money was no object. A weird notion for me.

I changed back into my clothes, then paid for my dress and yet another pair of shoes that apparently cost a quarter of my rent. Afterward, I found the nearest department store and bought Rathiel and I brand new winter jackets. They weren't needed, but we would attract less attention wearing them. And less attention was a good thing.

Once we had everything we needed, we grabbed the next bus back to my apartment. With luck, everything would go well tonight.

But when was I ever that lucky?

Chapter Nineteen

The building buzzer sounded, adding a jarring note to the chaos already brewing in my apartment. I glanced at my little dilapidated intercom and sighed. Jack was downstairs, waiting for me, and I should have been tingling with excitement.

Instead, I was standing in the middle of the kitchen, decked out in my new dress and shoes, wondering when, exactly, my life had turned into a supernatural sitcom. In the living room, there was a sulking vampire sitting on my couch, while Purgatory dozed in the moonlight at his feet. And in my kitchen was my mischievously endearing imp who had recently embraced a newfound passion for disaster flicks.

It was my fault, really. I'd let Vol watch Armageddon while I napped. And now, Vol sat atop my toaster, dramatically reenacting the scene where Rockhound rides the nuke like a deranged cowboy, whooping and hollering as though he was saving the world from utter annihilation.

Like I said, my fault.

Clearly, I couldn't let Jack up here. How on Earth would I explain all this to him?

I headed to the intercom, but before pushing the button, I called to Vol, "Get off the toaster!"

"Saving the world here, boss!" Vol shouted back, clinging to the toaster like it was a bucking bronco.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. This was not how I envisioned starting off this date. A normal woman would invite her man up, maybe offer him a drink, before heading out into the world with her arm tucked against his. Not me, though.

Before Jack thought I was ignoring him, I pressed the button and spoke into the intercom, “Be right down.”

Jack’s voice echoed back, “No problem, take your time.”

The instant I reached for my jacket, Rathiel stood. I whirled on my heel and glared at him. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” he replied, his gaze darkening.

“Whatever you’re thinking about doing. Don’t. I’m going on this date, and you’re staying here.” I jabbed a finger at him for emphasis.

Rathiel stole another step closer, his mouth pressing into a grim line. “Need I remind you that the fallen are hunting you? Or that less than a day ago, hellspawn vampires attacked us?”

“We haven’t seen hide nor hair of the fallen,” I reminded him. “You say they’re hunting me, but there hasn’t been any proof of that yet. As for the vampires, I’ll remind you that I roasted their asses. I can do so again. I refuse to bring you on my date.”

Vol snorted, then patted the toaster and hopped off. Thank goodness. “No point arguing with her, Meat Sack. Just let her go. Besides, I got a few movies lined up for us tonight. Trust me, you’re gonna love them. We’re watching Queen of the Damned and Nosferatu .”

My lips twitched, and it took every bit of restraint I possessed not to burst out laughing. Oh, Rathiel would just adore those movies.

I smoothed down my jacket, then reached for my hat and mittens. “Don’t do anything crazy while I’m gone. Do not follow me. No lurking in the shadows. No vampire telepathy—if that’s a thing.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Your opinion of me is rather lacking.”

“Well, don’t forget, I’ve known you for a very long time.”

Vol waved a tiny hand. “I’ll keep vamp-boy in check. You just make sure you don’t trip and fall into Jack’s arms all swoony-like. Unless that’s the plan.”

Rathiel tensed and I sighed, shooting Vol a tight smile. “Thanks for that.”

He saluted me with a toothy grin.

As I headed out the door, the heavy weight of Rathiel’s gaze lingered on me. I just hoped he didn’t follow me. I couldn’t afford another of his surprise appearances while on a date with Jack.

I made my way down the stairs, each step echoing with the nagging thought that Rathiel might ignore my explicit instructions and follow me anyway. I half expected to hear the whisper of his footsteps behind me, but the only sound was that of my heels against the cement steps. I finally reached the lobby and took a deep breath, mentally shoving all thoughts of brooding vampires and chaotic imps to the back of my mind.

When I stepped outside, the cool evening air hit me, and I spotted Jack leaning against his car, a casual smile on his face. He looked effortlessly charming, dressed in

a way that seemed both relaxed and thoughtfully put together—something I'd never successfully accomplished.

“Wow!” he said, straightening as I approached. “You look amazing.”

I beamed at him. He hadn't even seen the dress yet.

“Thanks,” I replied.

As we got into the car, I cast one last glance at the building, half-expecting to find Rathiel peering down at us from the balcony, but it remained empty. Perhaps a sign that he intended to listen to me for once. I buckled in, and Jack started the engine, the low hum of the car welcoming me.

“So, La Ronde, huh?” I said, trying to focus on the evening ahead. “I'm impressed.”

Jack grinned as he navigated the city streets. “I figured I'd go all out. You deserve a night to remember.”

“Don't I ever,” I muttered.

“What was that?” Jack asked, glancing over with a playful smile.

“Nothing, just excited,” I quickly covered.

Jack's smile softened, and he reached over to gently squeeze my hand.

I returned his squeeze, guilt tugging at me as I thought about Rathiel and everything I'd left behind in the apartment. But tonight was supposed to be about me and Jack. Maybe I was foolish for trying to hold on to some semblance of normalcy, but I was determined to give it a shot, even if only for a few hours. I liked Jack. My feelings for

him differed from how I felt for Rathiel—softer, gentler, less murderous, for sure. And that seemed the healthier choice.

The drive to La Ronde was pleasant, and Jack kept up a light and easy conversation. I laughed more than I had in weeks, the tension of the past few days slipping away. By the time we arrived at the restaurant, I'd almost forgotten about the supernatural shit-show that was my life.

La Ronde was just as impressive as I'd imagined—a revolving restaurant offering a panoramic view of the city. The lights of Edmonton twinkled below us as we the host led us to our table, and I took in the breathtaking view.

I removed my jacket and draped it over the back of my chair.

“Beautiful view,” I murmured.

When I turned, I found Jack staring at me with an awestruck smile, his warm eyes sparkling with interest. “Not as beautiful as you.”

To that, I laughed. “Okay, that was a pretty cheesy line. But also appreciated. Thank you.”

Jack grinned, clearly pleased with himself. “Hey, I aim to impress. Especially when I'm dining with someone who could light up the entire city.”

I rolled my eyes playfully.

The waiter appeared at our table then and handed us menus with a practiced flourish. I opened mine, pretending to peruse the options, though the words were swimming in front of my eyes. The truth was, I couldn't stop replaying last night—Rathiel's bite—in my head.

“What are you thinking?” Jack asked, his tone casual as he glanced over his menu.

“Hmm?” I blinked, realizing he was talking about the menu, and not my current thoughts. “Oh, um, maybe the filet mignon? That sounds good.”

“Solid choice,” Jack said, nodding appreciatively. “I think I’ll go for the rack of lamb.”

The waiter returned, and Jack gave him our orders, adding a bottle of red wine to go with the meal.

“Drinks should be here in a minute,” the waiter said before leaving.

Thanking him, Jack reached across the table, his fingers brushing lightly against mine. “Are you sure everything’s okay? You seem a little...distracted.”

I searched for the right words. “It’s just been a bit of a crazy week, that’s all. But I’m here now, and I’m really glad we’re doing this.”

Jack’s smile was warm and understanding. “Me too.”

Before I could respond, the waiter arrived with the wine in hand. He poured a generous amount into each of our glasses, then left us to our conversation. I took a sip, savoring the rich, velvety flavour.

“So,” Jack said, leaning back in his chair with a grin, “tell me something about yourself that I don’t know.”

I considered his request. Except, everything that came to mind, I couldn’t divulge. I pictured myself being brutally honest. Like, “Well, I’m Lucifer’s daughter. A trained warrior who knows a thousand different ways to kill a man, or rather, kill hellspawn.

I'm currently rooming with a former fallen angel who confuses me in about a dozen different ways. And my father wants me dead."

I almost laughed, picturing that particular conversation. Jack would run screaming into the night. So, instead, I pulled out something entirely random and completely irrelevant to my personality. "I have an uncanny ability to remember the most useless trivia. Like, did you know that a group of flamingos is called a 'flamboyance'?"

Jack blinked, then laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "That's actually amazing. I love it. What other little facts do you know?"

"Crocodiles can't stick out their tongues," I quickly added.

He gave another light chuckle, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "And what led to you learning all this?"

I opened my mouth, almost about to admit the truth, before catching myself and adjusting the answer just a smidgen. "Earth fascinates me. And I love discovering all the quirks and details of the life that lives here." It wasn't a lie. Earth did fascinate me. I just left out the part about me not being from here, which was the real reason I'd taken to studying it so intently.

Jack's eyes softened, a hint of admiration lighting up his features. "It's rare to meet someone who's so genuinely curious about the world. Most people take it for granted."

I gave a small shrug. "It's mostly useless information, but it's fun to throw out there now and then."

"Okay, my turn," Jack said, eyes twinkling with mischief. "I once tried to make a soufflé in high school because I thought it would impress a girl. Not only did it

collapse completely, but I also nearly burned down my parents' kitchen, so I took her out for ice cream instead."

I stifled a laugh and shook my head. "Well, I think the ice cream was probably the better choice. You can never go wrong with ice cream."

"True," Jack agreed, smiling. "But I haven't tried making a soufflé since."

We continued to share stories, the conversation flowing easily between us. With each passing minute, the unease that had been gnawing at me earlier started to fade. Jack was funny, kind, and just the right amount of charming—everything I needed in a guy.

Dinner arrived, and we dug into our meals with gusto. The chef had cooked the filet mignon perfectly, the meat melting in my mouth with each bite. Jack's rack of lamb looked equally impressive, and judging by his expression, it tasted as good as it looked.

"This is amazing," I said, savoring another bite. "I'm officially impressed."

Jack chuckled. "I'll take that as a win."

We continued eating, the conversation pleasant. It made me wonder if I could have this—a nice dinner with a nice guy and not worry about the chaos waiting for me back home.

But as we finished our meals and the waiter cleared the plates away, a small, persistent voice whispered in my mind. As much as I wanted to stay in this bubble with Jack, I knew I couldn't.

Jack leaned in a little closer. "How about dessert? I hear their crème brûlée is to die

for.”

I smiled at Jack, trying to push away the persistent tug of unease that had been creeping back into my thoughts. “Crème br?lée, huh? You’re really pulling out all the stops tonight.”

His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “What can I say? I’m on a mission to make this the perfect night.”

I chuckled, his sincerity cutting through my nerves like a warm knife through butter.

He grinned, clearly pleased with himself, and signaled the waiter and ordered for us. As we waited for our dessert, Jack’s hand found mine again across the table, his thumb brushing gently over my knuckles.

“Seriously though,” Jack said, his tone softening, “I’m really glad we’re doing this. I’ve been looking forward to tonight all weekend.”

There was something in his voice—a mixture of hope and sincerity—that made my heart clench.

I smiled, squeezing his hand in return. “Me too.”

Before either of us could say anything more, the waiter returned with our desserts—a beautifully presented crème br?lée for each of us, the caramelized sugar on top glistening under the dim lighting. Jack’s eyes lit up as he picked up his spoon.

“Allow me,” the waiter said, tapping his spoon lightly against the top, producing a satisfying crack as the sugar crust broke.

I allowed him to do the same to mine, and I grinned when the sugar shattered.

“Mm. This looks perfect,” I said, scooping up a bit of the creamy custard beneath.

The waiter dipped his head and left, leaving us to the delectable looking treats.

Jack took a bite, closing his eyes in pure appreciation. “Wow,” he mumbled around the bite. “Okay, this might just be the best dessert I’ve ever had.”

I took my own bite and had to agree—it was smooth, rich, and just sweet enough to be decadent without being overwhelming. “You’re right,” I said, savoring the flavour. “This is amazing.”

We ate in content silence. I let myself enjoy the treat and think of nothing else. To think of anything else would have been a crime.

After we finished our desserts, Jack leaned back in his chair, looking at me with an expression that was both thoughtful and hopeful. “So, what do you say we take a little walk? There’s a park nearby with a great view of the city. It’s not La Ronde, but it’s a close second.”

I hesitated, my mind racing as I weighed the risks. Under any other circumstances, a walk in the park sounded perfect. But I knew what lurked in the shadows out there. Jack had no idea what he was asking, and I wasn’t about to put his life in danger just for the sake of extending our evening.

A part of me wanted to believe we’d be safe. But I wasn’t willing to risk it. I’d never forgive myself if my problems put Jack in harm’s way.

When I didn’t immediately answer, he reached across the table for my hand. “Hey, it’s alright. We don’t have to. While I’d love to spend more time with you, I can take you home, if you’d prefer.”

I forced a smile and gently squeezed his hand. “I appreciate that. I have an early shift in the morning.” No, I didn’t, but it was an easy excuse.

Jack smiled, though it looked a bit forced. “Ah. Well, I mustn’t keep you out too late then.”

“Thank you. Any other night...”

He waved off my excuses. “Don’t apologize. Let’s get you home, shall we?”

We stood from the table, and Jack took care of the check before leading me back to the car. The night air had turned a bit cooler, and I pulled my jacket tighter around myself, trying to shake off the unease that settled over me. As we drove back to my apartment, Jack continued chatting, but I could tell he was disappointed the evening was ending so soon. A part of me felt guilty, knowing that my decision was based on fears he couldn’t even begin to comprehend.

When we pulled up outside my building, Jack parked the car and came around to open the door for me. I stepped out, and as I turned to thank him, he surprised me by leaning in and pressing his lips gently against mine. The kiss was sweet, soft, and perfectly nice—exactly the kind of kiss that should have sent my heart racing.

Except, it didn’t.

It was...pleasant. Like sipping a warm cup of tea on a cold day. Comforting, but without the fire that simmered beneath the surface whenever I was with Rathiel.

I pulled back, dismayed and disappointed, but tried not to show it. “Thanks for tonight. It really was wonderful.”

Jack ducked his head and met my gaze. “I’m glad you had a good time. We should do

this again sometime—when you're not working the early shift."

"Definitely," I agreed, though my voice lacked enthusiasm. "Goodnight, Jack."

"Goodnight, Lily," he replied. He circled around his car before quickly hopping in and driving off into the night. I stood there and watched until his taillights disappeared.

I turned toward the building, then paused. For some reason, my gaze rose, climbing to the second level.

The second I spotted Rathiel on my balcony, my heart kicked into overdrive. He stood at the edge, his fingers gripping the railing, his eyes locked on me. He didn't move, but the intensity in his rigid stance sent a shiver down my spine. Clearly, he'd been waiting for me, watching for my return, had seen the kiss.

I couldn't tear my eyes off him. The distance between us suddenly felt like an ocean, vast and insurmountable. The kiss with Jack had been nice. Normal. Boring. But whatever was between Rathiel and me...it blazed. It burned with a fierce intensity that both terrified and drew me in. Our relationship was anything from simple. It was riddled with unspoken emotions and secrets that confused and infuriated me. Yet, no matter how much I tried to resist it—resist him —the pull between us was undeniable.

Without a word, Rathiel turned and disappeared into the apartment. I stood there another minute, my heart pounding for reasons completely unrelated to Jack, before finally gathering the courage to head inside.

Chapter Twenty

It was my day off.

Usually, that meant lounging on the couch, devouring bucket loads of candy, and laughing at Vol and Purrgatory's antics. Not today, though. Today, there was no lounging, no candy, and definitely no laughing. Instead, there was a whole lot of broodiness, gloominess, and doominess—all compliments of one Rathiel.

Ever since last night, he'd been trying to keep his distance. But such a feat was next to impossible when sharing a cramped living space like my apartment. Every time I turned around, there he was, underfoot. I'd tripped over his behemoth-sized body more times than I'd tripped over Purrgatory—and that said a lot, because Purrgatory was a sadistic little nugget when it came to winding through my legs.

It was beyond frustrating.

Naturally, Vol found our situation utterly comical. So much so that he'd decided to make matters worse, as Vol oft did. In the last hour, he'd found Purrgatory's stash of toys and had turned the apartment into his own personal battlefield. Armed with a makeshift slingshot he'd cobbled together from a rubber band and a bent spoon, he kept launching cat toys across the kitchen—and right at Rathiel. With alarming precision, I might add.

“Fire in the hole!”

I whirled around at the sound of Vol's shout and watched as a small jingly ball

smacked Rathiel right in the forehead. Rathiel went deathly still, his terrifying glare aimed right at Vol. That should have convinced the imp to knock it off—it would have convinced me—but instead, Vol just grinned and loaded up another toy, this time a fuzzy mouse. Apparently, he'd chosen death today.

As he pulled back the rubber band, I took a step forward, about to snatch the stupid slingshot from his little hands, when Vol released the ammunition, and struck Rathiel in the shoulder.

Rathiel snarled and lunged forward.

With a small gasp, I snatched Vol up, my fingers pinning his arms—slingshot and all—to his sides.

“Alright, everyone. Let’s just take a breath,” I said, my voice deceptively calm.

Vol squirmed against me, but truly, the six-inch imp was no match for me. I merely tightened my grip and held up the menace so I could look him in the eyes.

“Knock it off,” I growled at him. “Or next time, I’ll let Rathiel kill you.”

Vol rolled his eyes.

“I’m serious, Vol,” I snapped. “Sense the mood. Neither of us is enjoying your antics today.”

I set Vol down with a sigh—knowing full well he had no intentions of listening to me—then watched him scamper off, abandoning me to the tension-filled kitchen.

I snuck a glance at Rathiel, who averted his gaze. Yeah, that was it. I’d had enough.

“Come on,” I said, pivoting on my heel. I stalked to my piddly little coat closet and pulled out our jackets. I tossed his over without a word, then reached inside for my bag of blades. With a quick unzip, I grabbed Inferno’s Kiss and strapped it on—hidden beneath my jacket but accessible.

Rathiel’s gaze sharpened as he watched me gear up. “Where exactly are we going?”

“We’re going to check out the portal,” I replied, pulling my jacket on. “Make sure all’s well with it.”

“Now?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

“You got a better idea?” I replied, my tone sharp. I couldn’t stand being cooped up in this apartment another minute. I adjusted my collar and stared at Rathiel. “We both need some fresh air, and who knows,” I added with a smirk, “maybe we’ll find a hellspawn or two to kill. Might help you snap out of this funk.”

“I don’t have a funk.”

“Oh, you have a funk,” I corrected him. “Trust me. You stink of funk.”

Rathiel paused mid-zipper, eyeing me like he wasn’t quite sure if I was serious.

“You’ve been moping around here like a kicked puppy, and frankly, it’s driving me insane. I figure cracking a few skulls open might improve your mood.”

Rathiel’s mouth twitched, caught between a smirk and a scowl. “And if we don’t find anything at the portal?”

“Then you get to enjoy a walk in the cold with my charming company.” I shot him a mocking smile and opened the door. “Don’t forget your sword.”

* * *

It was a long walk to the Alberta Legislature Building, but I didn't mind it. I wasn't lying when I said I'd needed some fresh air. By the time we neared our destination, night had settled in, and the streets had quieted. We passed a few couples out for walks, bundled against the chill, and paused to take in the view of the North Saskatchewan River. By the time we reached the grounds, security was out in full force, patrolling close to the building.

I led Rathiel toward the portal, hoping no one would disturb us there.

"So..." I started, glancing over at him as we walked. "Now that we're out here enjoying this lovely winter air, care to tell me what's bothering you?"

I mean, I had an idea. But that was the issue. I only had an idea. Because Rathiel kept everything locked up tighter than Fort Knox and trying to get an answer out of him was like pulling teeth. Even his secrets had secrets. And it was maddening.

Rathiel's jaw clenched—oh great, that again—and he gave me one of his signature scowls. "I'm fine."

Inwardly, I screamed. A long, ear-splitting mental scream that, if I had my way, would have shattered every window in a five-kilometer radius. He infuriated me. I just wanted to grip him by the shoulders and shake him until his aggravating head popped right off.

Instead, I took a deep, cleansing breath and tried another approach. I stopped walking and placed a hand on his arm, all gentle-like.

Rathiel froze, his gaze dropping to where my fingers rested. If I wasn't mistaken, his breath hitched and his pupils expanded. I wasn't stupid. Obviously, there was an

attraction between us. Anyone with eyes could see that. But the way he reacted to me suggested there was something more than attraction between us. And it pissed me off that he wouldn't talk about it.

Because it left me drowning in questions he refused to answer. It wasn't like I had anyone else I could ask, either. He was the only person I could rely on right now. But he guarded his secrets like a dragon hoarding gold.

It made me want to punch him. Hard. In the gonads. Twice.

"Look," I said, my voice low and deceptively calm. "Something's clearly bothering you. Let's talk about it."

Rathiel blew out a heavy breath, one that fogged in the winter air, before muttering, "I can't."

I considered his response, then asked, "Can't or won't? Because there's a huge difference between the two."

"Both," he replied.

"Rathiel," I growled, that murderous rage creeping up in me again. He just had this unique way of pulling it out of me.

"It's complicated, Lily," he said.

"Of course it is," I snapped, sarcasm dripping from my words. "Because, with you, everything's complicated. Secrets wrapped in riddles buried in puzzles."

He tore his gaze away from me.

I considered backing off. Again. Like I had every time before this. But backing off hadn't gotten me anywhere with him. And every time, I was left with more questions. No, I needed to push. And when he retreated, as I expected he would, I'd need to push harder. I refused to continue living in the dark, struggling to piece together scraps of my own life. These were my memories, and this was my life. Rathiel had no right to withhold any of it from me. I didn't care about his reasons anymore. I didn't care that it might be too dangerous for me to know the truth. No one had the right to decide this for me—especially not him. Not when he was the one responsible for exiling me here.

I tightened my grip on Rathiel's arm, my fingers digging in. "This is your last chance," I told him. "I deserve the truth. And I don't care what your reasons are anymore. Whatever happened, whatever it is you're hiding, it's my life. I deserve to know."

His eyes fluttered shut, and, shockingly, he didn't speak. Just as I was about to issue my final ultimatum, he broke and murmured. "You'll hate me."

My chest tightened at the sound of his small voice. I'd never heard him speak like that before. He sounded almost...sad. But I couldn't let that distract me. I couldn't let my sympathy for him deter me from learning the truth.

"You're risking that either way," I said. "Wouldn't it be better if I hated you for the right reasons rather than the wrong ones?"

His eyes opened and he frowned. "That's some messed up Lily logic."

I bit back the smile that threatened to curve my mouth. I couldn't let him think I was letting him off the hook.

When I didn't offer him anything further, he sighed and shook his head. "You think

you're angry now. But if you knew the whole story, if you knew everything ..."

"That's not your call to make," I said. "And things are only going to get worse the longer you continue to hide things from me. The only way we can heal and move forward is with honesty."

He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes stormy with the battle he was clearly waging inside. "You don't understand."

"Then help me understand." I took a step closer, my gaze never wavering. "Because I'm not backing down this time. And if you don't come clean about everything—and I mean everything—I'm revoking your invitation to my home."

His eyes snapped back to me, sharp and almost panicked. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" I asked. We both knew I would. I didn't bluff.

If I retracted the invitation, he wouldn't be able to enter my apartment again. Which meant he'd spend his nights sleeping on the streets, or making a nest in a tunnel like Deidre had. My apartment was hardly luxurious, but it had a shower and a place for him to rest his head. Not to mention, it had me. I had a feeling he wouldn't risk losing any of that.

We stood there, the tension between us thick enough to cut. Rathiel scowled at me, as though he believed his glare would force me to change my mind. But nope. It barely affected me. I'd seen worse. My father was Lucifer, for crying out loud. Rathiel might have been his right-hand guy, but he didn't possess a fraction of the anger, hate, and fury that my father did.

Finally, Rathiel exhaled, a heavy sigh of defeat. "Fine. But you're not going to like it."

I smirked, sarcasm slipping back in. “When have I ever?”

Before Rathiel could continue, he stiffened beside me, his gaze drifting away as if something had caught his attention. I rolled my eyes. Classic avoidance.

“Really?” I scoffed, crossing my arms. “I’m not going to fall for that?—”

He didn’t even glance my way. “Shush.”

I blinked, a snarky retort ready on my tongue, but something in the way he stood—rigid and focused, like a freaking bloodhound—made me pause. He wasn’t just trying to avoid the conversation; he’d picked up on something.

“Vampire,” he muttered, the word so quiet I almost missed it.

I sniffed the air, catching the faint metallic scent of blood carried on the breeze. “Oh.”

The irritation faded, replaced with a sharp spike of adrenaline. With the portal so close by, I wondered if we’d stumbled across a stray hellspawn that needed some murdering. We certainly couldn’t let it wander the streets. Guess our conversation would have to wait.

Rathiel began moving, following the scent trail away from the portal. I fell into step beside him, our footsteps silent in the snow as we weaved through the grounds, keeping to the shadows. Soon, a figure came into view—a tall vampire draped in a dark coat, its collar turned up against the cold. He moved with an air of ease, strolling as if he had all the time in the world, his gait unhurried and casual.

I shot Rathiel a glance, raising a questioning brow. The vampire didn’t seem particularly threatening. In fact, as he passed a few bundled pedestrians on the sidewalk, they hardly gave him a second look. Not one person seemed unnerved by

his presence, and no trace of alarm lingered in the air. I frowned. “Is he simply out for a walk?”

Rathiel’s brow furrowed, but he didn’t respond. Instead, he urged me to stay close as we trailed the vampire from a safe distance. For several blocks, we kept to the edges of the street, moving in tandem with the vampire’s leisurely pace as he drifted through the quiet residential area. I was just beginning to wonder if he’d led us on a pointless journey when he finally turned a corner, his steps carrying him toward the gates of a nearby abandoned cemetery.

The wrought-iron gates creaked softly as he slipped inside, disappearing into the shadows between the tombstones. Rathiel and I exchanged a glance before we followed, slipping through the gates as silently as we could manage. Our steps were slow as we navigated the rows of gravestones. Up ahead, the vampire had come to a stop before a modest tombstone, his head bowed, a strange stillness settling over him.

An earthbound vampire, then? Visiting the grave of a loved one?

I sighed, about to signal that we leave, when the atmosphere around us suddenly shifted.

Something dark and far more dangerous, swept through the cemetery like a cold gust of wind, sending a shiver down my spine.

Rathiel stiffened again before he slowly pivoted, his body coiling.

“What is it?” I whispered.

The vampire, who had been still and contemplative just seconds before, suddenly tensed. His head whipped up, and his gaze darted around, eyes wide with alarm. Without a word, he spun on his heel and sprinted out of the cemetery, his steps frantic

as he disappeared into the shadows of the night.

I barely had time to register the vampire's panicked flight before Rathiel grabbed my shoulder and yanked me back hard, stepping in front of me. His wings unfurled so fast and with such force that they shredded his winter jacket, the jagged, blackened feathers tearing through the fabric like paper. In one swift movement, his wings created an impenetrable shield in front of me, blocking my view.

"Rath—" I barely managed to choke out before he lifted his hand and silenced me with a sharp motion.

I craned my neck, leaning out from behind the cover of his wings just enough to glimpse of a figure that clearly had Rathiel on edge.

And my stomach dropped.

Gremory.

One of Lucifer's fallen angels and a carnage demon. One of the worst.

"My, oh my," Gremory's voice slithered through the air, cold and cruel. "Look who we have here."

He stood perched on a nearby mausoleum, his wings, black as night, stretched out behind him. He was larger than I remembered—and far more menacing. His presence seemed to fill the entire cemetery, oppressive and suffocating like an impending storm.

Rathiel's stance was rigid, his wings still spread wide, keeping me behind him, but I could feel his entire body vibrating with tension. He was ready to spring, every muscle tight like a predator waiting to strike.

I swallowed hard.

If Gremory was here...well, that could only mean one thing.

The moment we'd dreaded had arrived—Lucifer's fallen had found me.

Chapter Twenty-One

“The Great Rathiel, Lucifer’s most loyal dog.” Gremory’s voice was thick with mockery, cutting through the eerie silence of the cemetery. His wings unfurled behind him like an omen, their dark feathers gleaming faintly under the moonlight. He tilted his head, a cruel smirk twisting his lips. “Oops. I guess that title’s a little outdated now, huh? More like Lucifer’s biggest mistake?”

I stiffened, my pulse spiking, but my training kicked in an instant later. My hand shot to the hilt of Inferno’s Kiss, and I drew my sword, the familiar weight grounding me as I stepped out from behind Rathiel’s wings.

“Lily—” Rathiel growled.

I shook my head sharply. No. I was a warrior and just as lethal as Rathiel, if not more, considering I could blast hellfire at anyone who pissed me off. I would not hide, and I certainly refused to cower behind someone else.

Rathiel’s wings remained outstretched, but his body was a wall of tense energy, poised for action. His silence was deafening, the calm before the storm.

I studied Gremory. His towering frame was impossible to ignore, every inch of him radiating power. His silver hair framed his sharp features, highlighting the cruel curve of his lips and the icy gleam in his blue eyes.

Gremory appraised me, his smirk widening. “Ah, Lucifer’s little princess steps up to play,” he sneered, his gaze roaming lazily over me as if I was no threat at all. “And

here I thought you intended to hide behind your fallen knight like a scared little girl.”

I narrowed my eyes, the heat of my hellfire simmering just beneath my skin. Inferno’s Kiss thrummed in my grip, the blade instinctively igniting with fire in anticipation of battle. “I’m not hiding from anyone, least of all you, Gremory.”

He let out a low, callous laugh, the sound sending a ripple of unease through me. “Cute, but we’ll see how long those little flames last when I snuff them out.”

Without warning, Rathiel moved, his wings snapping shut as he advanced a step toward Gremory, his sword raised and ready. “I’ll kill you before you lay a hand on her.”

Gremory’s eyes flicked back to Rathiel, amusement draining from his expression, replaced with a cold, deadly intent. “Oh, brother,” he purred, his voice laced with venom. “You couldn’t protect her before. What makes you think you can now?”

Before I could respond, Rathiel lunged, his blade flashing in the moonlight as it sliced through the air, aimed for Gremory’s throat. But Gremory was fast—faster than I’d anticipated.

He sidestepped the blow effortlessly, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth as he spun away, his wings flaring out behind him. “Tsk, ts,” he taunted. “Did you really think it would be that easy?”

I didn’t wait for Rathiel to recover. Fueled by fury, I summoned hellfire to my hands, flames licking up my arms as I raised them, and hurled a fireball directly at him.

Gremory’s eyes widened for a split second before he spun to the side, effortlessly dodging my attack. The fireball sailed past him and slammed into a nearby tombstone, shattering it into pieces. His grin widened as he straightened, brushing

imaginary dust off his shoulder. “You’ll have to do better than that, little girl.”

And I would. I wasn’t near done yet. Inferno’s Kiss gleamed in my hand as I darted forward, Rathiel at my side. We moved as one, our blades flashing in the night as we aimed strike after strike at Gremory, who blocked and dodged with infuriating ease. His wings provided an impenetrable shield, deflecting our attacks like we were mere children playing at war.

Rathiel’s face twisted with frustration, and my anger surged, threatening to boil over. Gremory wasn’t just toying with us—he was savoring it, like a predator playing with its prey.

“Is this really all you’ve got?” Gremory sneered, his voice dripping with disdain. “Lucifer thought you’d be a challenge. What a disappointment.”

I gritted my teeth, determination coursing through me as I adjusted my stance, gripping Inferno’s Kiss tighter. I would wipe that smug look off his face if it was the last thing I did.

Together, Rathiel and I moved, our blades a blur of motion as we attacked in tandem, striking from opposite sides. Gremory’s laughter faded as he focused on defending himself, his wings straining under the pressure of our combined assault.

Just as I saw an opening, I swung my sword toward his exposed side, flames licking the edge of the blade. But Gremory outmaneuvered us both. With a savage grin, he parried Rathiel’s strike and spun toward me, his hand glowing with dark magic.

I barely had time to register the danger before he blasted me backward with a pulse of energy—a skill I’d never seen him use before. My body collided with a gravestone, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs as I crumpled to the ground.

“Lily!” Rathiel shouted, his voice filled with panic.

I coughed, struggling to catch my breath as I pushed myself to my feet. Gremory advanced on Rathiel, his wings casting a dark shadow over him, the air thick with malevolent power.

“I told you,” Gremory said, his voice dangerously low as he closed the distance. “You can’t protect her. Word’s out, brother. Lucifer wants both your heads served to him on silver platters.”

Rathiel didn’t waste a second. He lunged forward, his blade flashing in the moonlight. But Gremory anticipated the move. Magic burst from his hand, and with a casual flick of his wrist, he deflected Rathiel’s strike and stole his sword, now gripping it in his own hand.

Both Rathiel and I stumbled to a stop, stunned. I’d never seen anyone disarm Rathiel before. Nor had I ever seen Gremory use that kind of magic before.

“You’ve stabbed me more than enough for one lifetime, thanks,” Gremory commented casually.

“I’ve stabbed you once in the thousands of years we’ve known each other,” Rathiel argued. “And that was twelve years ago. You can’t possibly still be whining about that?”

“Hmm,” Gremory hummed. “Let’s see if you’re still whining about this in twelve years.” Then, without warning, he struck, driving Rathiel’s own blade straight into his side.

The sound of metal slicing through flesh was sickeningly sharp in the stillness, followed by Rathiel’s sharp intake of breath.

I gasped, breath catching in my throat as if Gremory had stabbed me. I'd never seen someone move so fast before. My pulse spiked, and a wave of adrenaline crashed over me, freezing me in place. Fear tangled with rage, tightening in my chest. For half a second, all I could do was stare—at Rathiel's blood staining Gremory's hand, at the sick pleasure twisting Gremory's features. And then instinct kicked in, and I surged forward, my grip on Inferno's Kiss tightening as fury propelled me back into action.

Gremory lifted a hand and blasted me with another burst of power. Except, this time, it locked me in place rather than throw me back. "I wouldn't, girl. You're not ready to play this game. Not yet."

I struggled against Gremory's magic, but it held me tight. His power wound around me like thick vines, locking me in place. My muscles strained, but it was like fighting quicksand—every movement tightened the vines. I glanced at Rathiel, who gripped Gremory's shoulder with white-knuckled determination.

Gremory gave the blade a final twist before pulling it out with a sickening sound, and Rathiel's body jerked in response. Blood dripped from the sword, but Gremory didn't bother to wipe it away. He spun the blade lazily in his hand, like it was a toy, while Rathiel staggered, his hand instinctively moving to cup his wound.

With a growl, Rathiel moved to take a step toward Gremory, but he flicked his wrist, and another pulse of dark energy slammed into Rathiel, forcing him to his knees. Dark energy encircled his body, locking him in place, just as it'd done to me.

Gremory sneered at Rathiel. "Stay down," he spat, eyes gleaming with malice.

Rathiel raised his hand, and the blood dripping from his side quivered before rising into the air. The power crackled around him, illuminating his strained features. The crimson liquid twisted and churned, pulling together into thin, razor-sharp blades that

hovered midair, glinting under the faint light.

But Gremory's lips curled into a wicked grin. "Oh no, brother," he sneered, his voice a dangerous whisper. With a sharp motion of his free hand, an arc of dark energy lashed out, slamming into Rathiel's chest.

His body jerked violently, his concentration breaking as the blood he'd commanded collapsed back into the snow with a sickening splatter.

"Look at you," Gremory taunted, his voice menacing. "It's pathetic, seeing you like this. Are you proud of yourself? Are you happy with the choices you made?"

Rathiel let out a strained breath, his muscles taut with resistance as Gremory's magic held him captive. Dark energy coiled around him like unbreakable chains, forcing his arms outstretched and his head bowed. His entire body trembled with the effort to break free, but the crushing weight of the spell rendered him immobile, his power to command the blood now beyond his reach.

"You were our brother !" Gremory shouted. "You were the best of us. Now, look at you." He sneered, and his voice grew more venomous with every word. "You betrayed us. Betrayed him . And all because you two had the stupid fucking sense to fall in love with each other! Was she worth it, brother? Worth the pain, the torture?"

Wait.

What?

Fell in love with each other?

I stared at Gremory, my heart thudding painfully in my chest. The words rattled around in my skull, barely making sense. Gremory's face contorted with rage, his

voice crackling with fury as he continued to spit his accusations. But all I could hear— really hear—was that last sentence.

“Rathiel...” I whispered.

He didn’t respond.

My mind spun in a thousand directions at once. The pieces I hadn’t been able to fit together before suddenly began to slide into place. The way my body always seemed to respond to him. The memories that hovered just beyond my grasp, teasing the edges of my consciousness. The pull I couldn’t ignore, the yearning that always lingered beneath the surface, no matter how hard I tried to deny it.

It all started to make sense.

Like how his presence always felt like a tether, an anchor grounding me, even when he pissed me off. The inexplicable feeling of trust, even when he’d given me no reason to trust him. The way my heartbeat raced whenever he was near. It wasn’t just instinct, wasn’t just familiarity from our time together. It was so much more.

The realization hit me hard. My knees nearly buckled as the weight of it all came crashing down, my mind racing through the possibilities, through everything I’d lost—everything he had stolen from me.

I tightened my grip on Inferno’s Kiss, but I wasn’t thinking about the blade. I was thinking about him. About us. My mind surged with the full force of everything I didn’t know, but now was beginning to understand.

The way he would sneer at any mention of Jack, or the way he’d scowled the night Jack had kissed me. I’d chalked it all up to his overprotectiveness, but clearly I’d been wrong.

He loved me. Maybe even still loved me.

And I had absolutely no idea how I felt about that. My brain was a jumbled mess. Because of him .

Gremory's sneer twisted into something darker as he stalked toward me, his boots crunching in the snow with each deliberate step. His wings unfurled further, casting an ominous shadow over me. "You really thought you could hide from us? From your father?" he mocked, his voice low and dripping with venom. "All this time, playing house up here, thinking you could escape the inevitable."

Gremory circled me like a predator, his eyes gleaming with cruel amusement. "Tell me, Lilith—how does it feel, knowing he threw everything away for you?" His gaze flicked to Rathiel, who remained on his knees, blood still pouring from the wound Gremory had carved into his side. "How does it feel to know that this is how your epic love story ends?" He scoffed, lifting Rathiel's blade in his grip, the metal catching the moonlight. "Look at the two of you. Pathetic and weak."

I gritted my teeth, my fingers tightening around Inferno's Kiss as the weight of Gremory's words bore down on me. My chest burned, each venomous syllable lighting a match against the simmering fire inside me. But I stayed silent, refusing to give him the satisfaction. Instead, I tightened my grip on Inferno's Kiss and let the power build with every breath.

Gremory leaned in, his face inches from mine, the stink of his breath hot against my skin. "Loving you cost him everything. And guess what? Now, you get to watch him die."

I glanced at Rathiel, his blood staining the snow beneath him, his face pale but defiant. Gremory's laughter rang in my ears, a taunt I couldn't bear any longer.

“You’ll have to tell me what that’s like,” Gremory continued. “Provided I let you live, of course.”

Something inside me snapped.

“Shut up!” I screamed, my voice tearing through the night like a battle cry. Fury ignited in my chest, blazing through me like a wildfire. My magic surged, the power I’d buried for so long searing through my veins with blistering heat. The force of my anger surged outward, and suddenly, everything shifted. Gremory’s binding spell shattered from the sheer force of my rage, the magic dissolving like smoke in the air. Energy exploded around me, and just like that, I could move again.

Gremory stumbled back, his eyes wide with shock. “What—how did you?—”

I didn’t let him finish. With a flicker of thought, I called the shadows to me, cloaking myself in darkness, and vanishing from Gremory’s sights.

His eyes darted wildly, his wings twitching as he spun in place, trying to find me. “Lilith!” he bellowed, voice tight with frustration as dark magic crackled from his fingertips. “Stop hiding and face me, or?—”

I didn’t let him finish his threat. The shadows shifted with me as I slipped behind him and struck him with a burst of hellfire. The force sent him stumbling forward and the stench of burnt feathers filled the air.

Gremory released a furious roar and whipped around to retaliate, but I had already vanished into the shadows once more.

My heart thundered in my chest as I darted around him, reappearing for split-second strikes. I lashed out with hellfire, then disappeared, keeping him off-balance, keeping him guessing. His anger mounted with every miss, his swings growing wilder as he

realized he was losing control. He might have been a chaos demon, but I was chaos.

“You think you can play this game with me?” Gremory spat, his frustration palpable. He gripped Rathiel’s sword and stalked toward him, positioning himself right in front of Rathiel. “You forget—I know who trained you. I know exactly what you’re capable of.”

Yet he’d completely underestimated me.

“And I know where your heart truly lies,” he snarled, lifting the blade high above Rathiel, poised to bring it down in a killing blow.

I wasn’t about to let that happen. Sure, I was pissed at Rathiel— furious , really—but I wouldn’t let Gremory rob me of the chance of killing him myself. Sprinting forward, I threw myself forward and let the shadows fall away as I reappeared between them. I threw Inferno’s Kiss up in an instant, clashing against Rathiel’s sword with a violent screech of metal on metal.

Gremory’s smug grin flashed as he pressed against my blade, but I was already two steps ahead. I twisted my wrist, locking our swords together for a heartbeat before I lashed out with a sharp kick to his knee. The impact made him stumble, but I didn’t stop there. I drove my foot into his groin, sending him reeling backward with a grunt of pain.

He bent forward, and I seized the moment. I shot up, cracking my knee into his face with bone-shattering force. His head snapped back, blood spraying from his nose, but I didn’t hesitate. As he staggered, I unleashed a blast of hellfire straight at his shoulder, watching with grim satisfaction as the flames tore through his shirt and seared into his flesh.

Gremory howled in agony, his wings flaring wildly as he struggled to regain his

footing, but I was relentless. I stepped forward, swinging Inferno's Kiss in a deadly arc, aiming for his ribs. He managed to block, but barely. His movements were growing sluggish, the pain slowing him down.

I didn't give him time to recover. Another burst of hellfire exploded from my hand, striking him square in the chest. With a scream, Gremory dropped Rathiel's sword and desperately slapped at the flames that ate away at his flesh. But he couldn't stop them. This wasn't ordinary fire—it was hell fire. It burned at my command, and I gave them free rein to consume anything they touched. His skin blistered and blackened as the fire crawled up his chest, licking at his neck, searing his face.

Panic flared in Gremory's eyes as he realized the truth—he couldn't douse the flames, and I had no intention of pulling them back. I had to give him credit, though. Even while burning alive, he still fought.

With a snarl, he launched himself at me, fists swinging wildly, but I was already moving. I ducked under his arm, sliding Inferno's Kiss across his thigh in a clean, vicious slice. Blood sprayed across the snow, and Gremory's howl of pain echoed through the cemetery as he stumbled back, his wings beating frantically in a desperate attempt to snuff out the fire.

He released a pulse of dark energy in a last-ditch effort to push me back. The blast exploded outward, but I melted into the shadows just in time, letting his magic pass harmlessly by.

I reappeared in front of him and grabbed him by the collar, my hellfire surging through me, the heat of it burning at the edges of my control. With a snarl, I blasted him point-blank with a torrent of flames.

Gremory shrieked, then flung himself backward and into the snow just as the fire spread to his wings. His eyes were wide and wild with pain, his body twisting in a

desperate attempt to escape. He flung himself backward, rolling in the snow, but the flames wouldn't die. They clung to him, burning brighter, hotter, devouring everything in their path.

He slammed his fists into the ground, trying to summon more dark energy, but nothing came. He was too far gone. Desperation flickered across his face as he clawed at the snow, his wings flapping weakly in a feeble attempt to extinguish the flames. But nothing could stop it. Not now.

I raised my hand, ready to end it, a final surge of hellfire burning brightly in my palm. Gremory's eyes locked on mine, filled with fear and disbelief.

With a desperate cry, he shoved himself to his feet, his wings barely holding him up as he stumbled backward. Flames still clung to his body, trailing after him as he leaped into the sky. His singed wings carried him into the air, his figure retreating into the darkness, the smell of burnt flesh lingering in his wake.

I stood there, my breath coming in heavy, furious bursts as I watched him disappear into the night. The rage still simmered inside me, boiling just beneath the surface, but for now, Gremory was gone.

I turned to Rathiel, who now stood, freed from Gremory's magic and soaked in blood. His face was pale, his eyes shadowed with exhaustion and pain. He didn't say a word—he just looked at me, his gaze heavy.

“Is that why you stole my memories?” I glared at him, my heart thudding painfully in my chest. “To hide that you loved me?” That we loved each other, apparently.

Rathiel's lips parted, but no words came. The silence that followed was crushing, filled with the weight of everything unsaid. His lips moved as though he wanted to speak, but no sound escaped. He stood there, his gaze filled with a sorrow so deep it

was like staring into a void, a darkness that mirrored the one inside me.

“Why?” I asked, my voice trembling with the weight of everything I’d just learned.

“Why would you hide that from me? Were you ashamed or something?”

Finally, he staggered a step toward me, his expression crumbling under the weight of his guilt. His voice was hoarse when he finally spoke. “No, Lily. I was never ashamed of loving you.”

“Then why ?” I demanded again.

Rathiel’s face crumpled, and for the first time, I saw the full weight of his guilt. “To protect you,” he whispered. “I thought it was the only way. You were dying, Lily. Lucifer... He held you in his hands, ripped your wings off, and held them up for the entire realm to see. He meant to kill you. And I couldn’t let him do that. I couldn’t lose you like that. Not to him. I had to send you away. And to keep you safe, I had to erase everything. Everything about us. About what we were. Because I knew—I knew—you would never give up. You would never stop trying to find me. And if you returned to Hell, Lucifer would destroy you. So, I?”

“You destroyed us instead,” I whispered, my heart shattering into a thousand pieces.

Finally, I had the truth. All of it.

I just didn’t know what to do with it.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I stormed into my apartment after Rathiel, and slammed the door shut behind me with enough force to rattle the walls. Vol shot up like a meerkat, took one look at me, then darted under the couch. Purgatory gave a small hiss before leaping gracefully off the window ledge and bolting into my bedroom, his ginger fur a blur. For once, they'd both made the wise decision to stay out of my way. Probably for the best. I had a feeling blood would spill tonight—well, more blood.

Rathiel slowly moved toward my coat closet and gingerly removed his ruined jacket.

I glanced at his blood-soaked side, then growled under my breath and stomped over. I shoved my sleeve back and exposed my wrist.

Rathiel froze, his gaze locked on me.

“Go on,” I snapped, my voice sharp. “Before I change my mind.”

He froze, staring at my wrist like it was some kind of trap. Then, with a slow shake of his head, he stepped back. “I’ll heal on my own. It’ll just take longer.”

“Don’t be stupid,” I bit out. “You’re injured. And as pissed off as I am right now, I don’t want you bleeding all over my floor.”

Rathiel hesitated a beat longer, but instead of taking me up on my rather generous offer, he limped into the kitchen, where I’d stashed Willow’s first aid kit. I hadn’t had a chance to return it yet. He flicked the tabs open, then started rifling through the

contents. He set aside a gauze pad, some wrap, and some medical tape.

Without a word, he grabbed a pair of scissors and sliced through his shirt, the fabric parting to reveal the rock-hard planes of his torso. His muscles flexed as he assessed the wound, every line of his body as sharp as the blade that had cut into him.

My mouth suddenly dried, and I had to mentally slap myself. Now was not the time to be eye-humping his—good lord, was that an eight pack?

Ugh. I mentally slapped myself again, then dragged my gaze away from him and forced myself to stare out the nearest window. I was mad at him. Furious. Downright enraged. I couldn't allow his sinfully well-formed physique to distract me from that. But after a few moments, the silence weighed too heavily on me. With a huff of frustration, I turned back around—and spotted him wincing as he struggled to dress his wound.

“For heaven's sake,” I muttered.

Before he could respond, I marched over and yanked the gauze out of his hands. “Stand still,” I commanded, stepping closer. Without waiting for permission, I took over, carefully taping the gauze over the wound. Afterward, I wrapped a bandage around him, my fingers brushing against the warm skin of his abdomen. His body tensed at the contact, and I did my best to ignore the heat that surged through me.

It was so damn unfair—how one simple touch, just the brush of my fingertips against his stupidly perfect body, sent a rush of warmth straight through me. I was pissed at him. I should've been thinking about all the lies he'd told, all the secrets he'd kept from me. But instead, all I could focus on was the way his muscles flexed beneath my hands, the solid heat of his skin against mine.

Why did everything have to be so complicated? He was cryptic, broody, and

frustrating beyond imagination. Yet, my body didn't care. The physical attraction between us was too strong—and didn't that just piss me off.

I swallowed hard, trying to steady my breath as I continued wrapping, keeping my movements clinical, precise. When I finished, I tied the bandage off, my hands lingering on his skin just a fraction of a second too long. Once I realized what I was doing, I jerked my hands back and looked up, meeting his gaze. We stood inches apart, the space between us charged with everything neither of us was willing to say.

I stepped away, putting distance between us, needing space to breathe and think. My heart was pounding in my chest, my emotions a tangled mess of anger, attraction, and frustration. I folded my arms across my chest, both to guard myself and to stop my fingers from reaching for him again.

“We should talk,” Rathiel finally said, his tone softer than I expected.

I shot him a withering look, trying to keep the fury simmering beneath my skin in check. “Oh, now you want to talk?” My voice came out sharp, but there was no mistaking the edge of hurt beneath it. “After days of dodging every single question I’ve thrown at you? But now that I know the truth, now you finally decide it’s time to have a conversation?”

Rathiel’s expression tightened, but he didn’t back down. “I know. I should have told you sooner.”

“You should have been the one to tell me, period!” I shouted.

He winced and glanced at the apartment door. I sucked in a steadying breath and raked my hands through my hair. I had to calm down. The walls were paper thin, and I couldn’t afford any of my neighbours listening to this argument.

“You should have been the one to tell me,” I repeated, my voice quieter but no less furious. “Not Gremory. Not like that.”

Rathiel sighed and pushed his hands through his hair, wincing when the movement tugged on his wound. “I know. And I’m sorry that’s how you found out.”

“But you aren’t sorry that you kept all this from me?” I pushed. “That you stole my memories to begin with? That you exiled me here? And if we were so damn in love, how could you leave me? How could you abandon me? Why didn’t you come through the portal with me? We could have made a life here together!”

His expression fell, defeated. “I would’ve given anything to come with you. But I’d already wiped your memories, and I didn’t have the power to send us both through. It took everything I had just to get you through it. Lily, when I say it nearly killed me, I’m not exaggerating.” He paused, his voice trembling. “Lucifer found me afterward, and I was too weak to stop him. He dragged me back to the palace and...”

“And he tortured you,” I finished.

Rathiel’s jaw tightened, and he turned away, pain etched into every line of his body.

“I just...I guess I don’t understand,” I said. “Lucifer almost killed me. Clearly, you managed to save me before he could do it. So, why did you feel the need to do all this? Why take everything from me?”

For a long moment, Rathiel didn’t answer. And when he finally did, it was so quiet I almost didn’t hear it. “I panicked.” He faced me again, his eyes filled with undeniable pain. “Lily, I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you.”

My breath caught. He’d said love . Not loved .

“When I fell from Heaven, I thought I’d never know love again, never feel the light again. I barely even remember Heaven anymore. All I recall is this warmth . Being in its presence, you basked in it. Until you, it was the thing I missed most. Then you came into my life and became that warmth for me.”

“My memories of you aren’t the same. I remember us fighting, bickering. Hell, in my memories, I loathe you.”

A melancholy smile tugged at his lips. “That was how it started for us. It wasn’t like I could admit my true feelings, not when Lucifer owned my free will. But once I was free, things changed between us. You started to trust me, and I could just be myself around you.”

My heart twisted, but I needed to hear this.

“But then Lucifer got his hands on you, and I couldn’t—” His voice broke, his pain bleeding into the air between us. “I couldn’t lose you. In all my thousands of years of existence, nothing terrified me more than that day. I’ll never forget your screams when Lucifer”—he paused, swallowing hard—“took your wings.”

Even I shivered.

He gave a gruff laugh. “The ironic part is, if you had your memories, you’d understand why I did what I did. The only thing that mattered to either of us was keeping the other alive. That was our greatest fear—losing each other. Lucifer nearly succeeded. Sending you here, wiping your memories... it was the only way to give you a chance at life. Nothing else mattered. Not even when your father condemned me to an eternity of torture.”

I was speechless. Rathiel had never spoken so many words at once, never laid himself bare like this. And the depth of the love he described...it stripped me bare. I sucked

in a shaky breath, unsure of how to respond to any of this.

My heart pounded in my chest, not from anger this time, but from the weight of his words. What he'd done—it wasn't simple, and it wasn't something he could fix. I understood that he thought he was protecting me. But that didn't make everything miraculously better.

I turned over his words and considered all that he'd said. That I would have understood if I had my memories. That seemed impossible to me. The way he spoke of me, of the person he knew. I wasn't her. Not anymore. And I most certainly did not understand.

I scrubbed my hands down my face, then dropped my arms to my side and just stared at him.

“I don't even know what to say,” I admitted quietly. “You say you did all this out of love. And call me crazy, but a part of me wants to believe that. People do the strangest things when they're in love.” I paused, searching for the right words. “But the rest of me has no idea what to think or how to feel or even how to react.”

I trailed off, shaking my head as I tried to piece my emotions together. Confusion churned in my gut, but the anger wasn't as hot anymore. It had dulled, simmering beneath the surface, replaced by something more complicated.

“You took everything from me,” I said quietly, but this time there was no accusation in my voice, only the simple truth. “This person you're describing, who loved you so much she would die for you, she doesn't exist anymore. You erased her. And I don't know how to get her back, or even if I want to.”

His eyes flickered with regret, but he didn't argue. He just stood there, watching me with a haunted expression, as if he knew there was no right way to fix this.

“You say you love me, and that’s, well, confusing, but I don’t love you. I don’t know you. Not the way you know me. The Rathiel I remember was nothing more than my father’s favourite soldier. My mentor who drove me insane. In my memories, you’re just a pain in my ass.”

Pain crumpled his face. I didn’t say this to hurt him—I said it to make him understand.

He took a tentative step toward me, his voice low and rough. “If I could undo it, I would.”

No, he wouldn’t. I knew him well enough to know that he’d do it all over again if he thought he was doing the right thing.

I studied him, then said, “I think I understand why you did this. But I don’t think I can forgive you for it. Nor do I know how to move forward from this.”

He swallowed. “I understand.”

“I need some time and space to think. To really digest everything.”

He gave a small nod.

“I’m, uh, going to go to bed,” I said. “It’s late. I’m exhausted. And I have an early shift in the morning.”

“Of course,” Rathiel murmured.

I started for my bedroom, eager to get away from him and give myself some space. As I walked past him, Rathiel’s hand gently caught mine. His touch was soft, tentative, but enough to stop me in my tracks. I froze as he lifted my hand and

pressed it against his chest, right over his heart.

“I have one more thing to say,” he started. “I know you feel like the person you were is gone. And maybe you’re right. Maybe that version of you doesn’t exist anymore. But you’re still you. You’re still fierce. Still loyal. Still the person who would fight to protect the people she cares about. That’s who I fell in love with. And I know she’s still here.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but the words stuck in my throat. His hand remained on mine, cradling it against his chest, as if anchoring both of us together.

“I understand why you can’t see it,” he continued, his gaze never leaving mine. “You’ve been through hell—literally. You’re angry, and you have every right to be. But this, us, we didn’t start as some grand love story. It started with me being your mentor and driving you insane, as you said. I was just a soldier in your father’s army back then. Captain Bootlicker, as you so fondly dubbed me. But eventually you started to see past that, and we grew into something so much more. It can happen again, if you’ll let it.”

My chest tightened, a flood of emotions rushing through me. I didn’t know whether to scream, cry, or run away. His words were too much, too raw, too honest.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me,” he said quietly, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I’m not even asking you to love me again. I’m asking for a chance. A chance to be here, with you, as you figure this out. I’ll be patient, Lily. I can wait, no matter how long it takes. Because I believe in you. In us.”

I stood there, my hand resting against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. I should have pulled away, should have put more distance between us. But I didn’t.

“And just to show you what I mean,” he continued, his voice a low murmur. Before I could process what was happening, he leaned in and captured my lips with his.

The contact sent a shock of heat through me, and without thought, I leaned into him, my body moving instinctively, meeting him halfway. The kiss wasn’t soft. It was deliberate—slow yet consuming. A different kind of fire ignited within me, one fed by passion rather than anger. And without hesitation, I parted my lips.

A soft gasp escaped me as he tilted his head, his tongue brushing mine, and the world seemed to tilt with it. Instantly, the kiss became something more—richer, filled with a heat that had been building for far too long. Every emotion I’d been struggling to ignore surged to the surface, and I met him with the same fervor, the same hunger.

His other hand moved to cradle my face, his thumb gently stroking my jaw as our connection deepened, the intensity between us sparking like wildfire. Damn it. How could a kiss completely destroy me? My heart slammed against my ribcage, my breathing quickened, and when he finally pulled away, I just stood there like a fool, eyes still closed as I revelled in the feel of his mouth against mine.

Rathiel rested his forehead against mine. “All I ask is for a chance. No pressure. No expectations.”

His hand slid from mine, and the absence of his touch hit me like a physical loss. He took a small step back, giving me space, though his presence remained overwhelming.

“Take all the time you need,” he murmured, his voice holding an edge of vulnerability I’d never heard before. “You’re worth waiting for, Lily. You always have been.”

I finally opened my eyes to find Rathiel had retreated fully into the living room, his

back to me as he sorted out the couch.

Fingers pressed against my lips, I turned and fled to my bedroom.

I closed the door behind me and fell against it, my chest heaving as I panted for breath. I slid down the door, my back pressed against the cool wood as my knees pulled up to my chest. My mind replayed everything I'd said in the living room, all the bold declarations about not loving him, about not being the same person he'd known. At the time, they'd felt right. But now, with my heart still racing and my body still on fire, I wasn't so sure. How could I not love him when one touch, one kiss, tore apart everything I thought I knew?

I pressed my fingers harder against my lips, as if that would somehow erase the memory. But it didn't. It lingered, etched into my lips, burned into my mind. How could something so simple unravel me so completely? And how could I deny the pull between us when it was this intense?

Maybe I didn't know Rathiel the way he knew me. Maybe I didn't remember our past. But this undeniable chemistry between us, the way my heart fluttered at the mere thought of him, and how my body responded to his touch... it felt real. Too real.

I hugged my knees tighter and stared blankly at the darkened room. Damn it, that kiss had complicated everything. It had torn down every defense I'd built. And it didn't help that his touch lingered, still burned my lips. How was I supposed to figure things out when all I could think about was him?

Chapter Twenty-Three

The battlefield had become a graveyard for my rebellion. The scorched ground stretched endlessly before me, littered with the broken bodies of those who had fought beside me. Blood and ash clung to the stifling air, and each breath seared my lungs, the sulfurous stench and smoke choking me. I tried to move, to stand, but Lucifer's grip, cinched around my throat, pinned me to the ground.

His grip tightened, his cold, unrelenting fingers digging into my skin as he lifted me up, holding me high in the air, my feet dangling uselessly above the ground. I clawed at his fingers, desperate for air, desperate for escape, but his hold didn't falter. I couldn't move, couldn't fight. My wings hung limp behind me, and my heart drummed so violently, I feared it might burst.

"You think you can defy me?" my father snarled, his face twisted with rage.

I gasped, struggling for a breath that refused to come. My chest heaved in vain, and my mouth gaped. Panic surged through me as darkness clawed at the edges of my vision, but it wasn't just the suffocating grip on my throat—it was the crushing force of my father's power. Lucifer didn't just control the realm; he commanded it, bent it to his will. His fingers tightened and my wings twitched weakly, a pathetic reminder of how powerless I was in his grasp.

"Did you really think," he growled, the sound vibrating through my bones, "you could stand against me?"

The ground trembled beneath us, the entire realm seeming to quake from the force of

his fury. His black wings flared wide, casting a massive shadow over the battlefield. Even the distant geysers, which once roared with unrestrained passion, seemed to shrink, their flames sputtering under the weight of his presence.

I tried to summon my powers, to call the fire to me, to summon the hellfire I controlled, but not a single flicker sparked inside me. Lucifer had won. He'd beaten me, and he knew it.

"I will tear you apart," Lucifer whispered, malice dripping from his every word.

A glint of cruel satisfaction flickered in his eyes before he slowly, deliberately, turned me in his grasp, his grip loosening. He faced me toward the battlefield, forcing me to look upon the devastation, and I sucked in a rasping breath. My fallen soldiers, the shattered remnants of my rebellion, lay strewn across the scorched ground, broken and defeated. Blood and ash coated their bodies, and my heart broke at the sight of their sacrifice.

But it wasn't just the dead that surrounded us.

Lucifer's forces stood like dark sentinels amidst the carnage, their eyes fixed on me. They encircled us, an audience to my destruction, their expressions cold, indifferent to the violence. This was no longer just punishment—it was a spectacle. A message to all who dared defy him.

Lucifer loosened his grip just enough for me to drag in a lungful of air.

And then the agony struck.

It was sudden, brutal.

His fingers dug into the base of my wings, sharp and merciless. Searing agony shot

through my back like liquid fire, spreading with an unbearable heat that consumed everything in its path.

A scream tore free of my throat—raw and ragged, echoing across the battlefield. My father tore asunder every shred of muscle and bone. Blood poured down my back in hot, sticky streams as he tore my wings from my back, piece by piece.

I gasped for breath between screams, my body convulsing with each savage wrench as Lucifer tore into me. He didn't pause, didn't hesitate. Every movement was deliberate, every second filled with unbearable torment. He wasn't just ripping my wings from my body—he was destroying me. Shredding my soul.

Finally, with one last, excruciating tear, my wings were gone. The scream that escaped me was ugly. A burning void seared across my back where my wings had once been, and the pain, the loss, the overwhelming emptiness crashed over me in relentless waves. My father had ruined me, left me nothing more than a shattered shell of what I once was.

I sank into despair, wishing for the darkness to take me. If I could just sink into it, maybe I'd never resurface. Maybe I could finally be free. But amidst the torment, a sound cut through the haze.

A voice. Distant at first, muffled by the overwhelming pain.

“Lily!”

It was soft, but insistent, pulling at the edges of my consciousness. It pulled me away from the darkness, dragging me away from my father's clutches.

“Wake up. Come on, Lily. Wake up!”

The agony in my back began to dull, and the searing heat pressing down on me faded. My vision flickered, and the battlefield—and Lucifer—dissolved around me. The voice grew clearer, more familiar, and something warm and solid held me in place.

I quickly realized I was dreaming, and that realization yanked me back into the waking world.

My eyes shot open, and my body jerked violently. Remnants of the nightmare clung to my mind and agony speared through my shoulder blades. I thrashed, arms flailing, but then I realized—I wasn't alone.

“Shh, Lily,” came Rathiel's voice. He wrapped his muscular arms around me, holding me tightly to keep me from hurting him—or myself. “You're awake. It's over. It was just a dream.”

Every inch of me trembled and sweat soaked my pajamas. My pulse pounded relentlessly in my ears. Phantom pains shot down my back and I cried out, arching in Rathiel's grasp. It felt like my wings were still there, the weight dragging down on me. But I knew better. I knew they were gone. Forever.

Rathiel pulled me against his chest and his voice, low and soothing, cut through the remnants of my fear and pain. His hand moved to the nape of my neck, and he combed his fingers through my hair, gently stroking, his touch soft and reassuring.

“It's okay,” he whispered, his voice a low murmur against my ear. “You're safe now. I've got you.”

I shuddered, my body still trembling, but his steady presence anchored me. He brushed his lips against my forehead, the brief, tender kiss sending a small wave of warmth through me, cutting through the remnants of fear. His other hand moved to cup my cheek, brushing his thumb gently across my skin, his touch so careful, as

though I might break.

Gradually, my breathing slowed, the violent pounding of my heart easing into a steadier rhythm.

“I know I’m not your favourite person right now,” Rathiel said, and I gave a watery laugh, “but do you want to talk about it?”

I instantly shook my head. I very much did not want to relive the horror I’d just woken from. The pain, the terror, it was still too fresh.

He stroked my hair again, in a way that had me practically purring in his arms. It didn’t surprise me that he knew exactly what I liked—but it did frustrate me. He knew far too much about me, like how to calm me when upset.

“Talking about it helps sometimes,” he said. “It can ease the fear, even if just a little. It’s like you’re releasing it into the world, so it doesn’t torture you anymore.”

I doubted that. I had a feeling this nightmare would haunt me for the rest of my life. Rathiel didn’t understand—I’d felt everything. Every rip, every tear. The loss of every single feather. And the fact that my father had been the one to torment me broke my heart. Not that Lucifer and I were ever close on the father-daughter scale. Even so, it hurt.

At the same time, I didn’t want to give my father that kind of power over me. I didn’t want his presence haunting me every single night. What I wanted was to stab a few more holes in him.

Sighing, I considered my options. I could keep the nightmare to myself and let it fester, or I could let it go. Perhaps talking about it would help.

I swallowed, then braced myself. “I was...on a battlefield,” I began, my voice shaky. “Everyone was dead. My soldiers, the rebellion. Their bodies were everywhere. My father—” I choked on a breath and closed my eyes.

Rathiel’s hand resumed gently stroking through my hair and my pulse slowed, responding to his touch.

“I can feel his grip on my throat, even now,” I whispered, my voice hoarse. “I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. He lifted me into the air like I was nothing. I...I tried to summon the hellfire, but it wouldn’t come. I was so weak. He turned me to face the battlefield. All I could see were the bodies of everyone I had failed. There were so many.

“And then...” My voice completely broke, but I forced myself to continue. “And then he took them. My wings. He just ripped them away. I could feel it happening. Every tear, every drop of blood, every scream. It was too real. It didn’t feel like a dream. It felt like I was reliving it.”

Rathiel’s entire body went rigid, and his hand stilled in my hair.

“What?” I asked, a sense of dread creeping into my chest. “What is it?”

When he didn’t answer, I rose on my knees and turned to face him. I couldn’t take the silence, and I needed to see his eyes. His gaze was distant and his face pale.

“Rathiel,” I pressed, my voice rising. “What’s wrong?”

He finally exhaled a slow breath and pulled his hand away from hair. His eyes met mine and he offered a wan smile, but I could see right through it. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and calm, exactly like how one spoke to a frightened animal. “That’s one of the memories I took from you. You shouldn’t remember that.”

I stared at him, unsure I understood him correctly. That hellish scene had been a nightmare and nothing more, right?

“Your dream,” Rathiel continued quietly. “The way you described it, that’s exactly how it happened. How he—” his expression shuttered—“punished you. It took all our resources to free you from him before he killed you. Few made it out alive. But that’s exactly how it happened.”

A chill ran down my spine and all the little hairs stood up on the back of my neck. “How...how is that possible? Those memories are gone. I’ve never had a dream like that before.”

“I don’t know,” he murmured. “Maybe the artifact is weakening? It’s been ten years, after all. Or maybe...”

“What?” I pressed when he fell silent.

Rathiel sighed and brushed his fingertips across my cheek. “It could be Calyx.”

My pulse skittered at the sound of his name. “What about him?”

“He’s a nightmare demon, and one of the fallen. This could be his doing. A psychological way of tormenting you. Forcing you to relive— remember —your worst memories.”

“But I don’t have a headache,” I countered.

“I don’t know,” Rathiel said. “I’m only speculating. He has the power to torment people in their dreams, though. Maybe because you’re not actively trying to recall it, you’re not experiencing the side effects?”

Excitement—and dread—bubbled within me. I wanted nothing more than to remember what happened before I arrived here, but a part of me also feared that. If these were the types of memories Rathiel scrubbed, what other horrors awaited me?

“What does this mean?” I asked. “Could he possibly unlock the rest of my memories?”

“Calyx was there that day. I suspect that’s the only reason he could do this— if he’s even the one responsible. It could be the artifact, for all we know.” Rathiel glanced away from me, his expression perplexed. I could practically see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to make sense of this. “Calyx is the only one with this kind of power. The only one who can access people’s minds.”

I shuddered, loathing the idea of a fallen angel mucking around in my already mucked-up head.

“It fits his personality,” Rathiel continued. “He would want to hurt you. To remind you of all the pain you’ve suffered. This is a game to Calyx, to all of them. Lucifer delights in causing pain and torturing people. His soldiers are no different.”

“You are,” I stated unequivocally. “You’re different. You’ve never been like them.”

His face twisted into a harsh expression. “As you so kindly pointed out tonight, you barely know me. You know what I’ve shown you. I’ve lived eons before you were born, Lily. You don’t know what I’m capable of.”

A spark of defiance flared in me, chasing away the lingering dread. I thought back to Gremory and the way I’d brought him to his knees, searing him with hellfire, showing him that I wasn’t some helpless pawn in their twisted game. I’d stood my ground, refused to cower in the face of my father’s forces.

I lifted my chin, meeting Rathiel's intense gaze. "Maybe I don't know what you're capable of, Rathiel. But they don't know what I'm capable of either."

A glimmer of pride lit Rathiel's eyes. His lips curved into a rare, genuine smile. "No, they don't," he murmured, his voice warm. "But they're about to find out."

I gave a feral grin. "Yes, they are."

Chapter Twenty-Four

After a bit of sleep, I stumbled out of my bedroom and knuckled the sleep from my eyes. The apartment was oddly quiet—no maniacal imp dashing around, chasing a hissing cat, and no grumpy vampire clattering in my kitchen. All was silent. It was just me and the sound of my footsteps dragging across the cool floor.

Yawning, I glanced toward the living room and stopped short, blinking. Rathiel lay sprawled out on the couch, his figure too large to rest comfortably. His long legs hung over the edge and an arm dangled over the side. But that wasn't the sight that stopped me. No, that honour belonged to Purgatory and Vol. My cat had claimed a spot on Rathiel's chest and was purring so loudly, I could hear him across the room. As for Vol, he'd curled up like a smug little gremlin in the crook of Rathiel's arm, his hands and feet twitching every so often. The domestic image made me smile—a fallen angel, an imp, and a cat, all snuggled together. Awake, they loathed each other, but while slumbering, they almost looked friendly.

I watched the three of them, imprinting the image into my mind. My gaze lingered on Rathiel's devastatingly handsome face. His usual tension and guarded expression had smoothed out in his sleep. He looked younger, softer—human, almost. For once, he didn't carry the weight of centuries on his shoulders.

Sadly, this peace wouldn't last. Not if Lucifer had his way.

And with that thought, I'd ruined my mood.

I tore my attention away from the couch and shuffled over to the small kitchen table.

I dropped into the nearest chair and sighed. I was due to work in two hours, but a part of me didn't want to move from this chair.

Going to work meant pretending my life was normal. And right now, my life was anything but.

I had a fallen angel possibly fiddling around inside my head, a vampire living on my couch and professing his love for me, and the literal devil hunting me down. Most people would crack under that kind of pressure. Thank goodness I wasn't most people.

I did, however, need to make some changes.

And one of the first changes I needed to make, unfortunately, was quitting my jobs. I didn't technically need the money anymore. My bank account balance was more than enough to support Rathiel, Purgatory, Vol, and myself for a few years at least. If we were frugal. And seeing as how I was the Queen of Frugal, I was confident we would manage.

I loved my jobs. But with hellspawn and fallen angels strolling around Edmonton like they owned the place and Lucifer plotting my demise, slinging shots and pouring coffee seemed like the least of my concerns. I'd already decided hiding wasn't an option, nor could I keep pretending like none of this was happening. Ignorance put innocent people in danger—people like Jazz, who didn't know the first thing about the existence of the paranormal—and they didn't deserve that.

I'd spent years trying to carve out a normal life for myself. Sure, it involved a chubby ginger cat obsessed with cuddles and a demonic imp with the temperament of a feral raccoon. But it was my life. My chaotic, deceptively normal life. And now it was all crumbling down around me, thanks to Lucifer and his merry band of psychopaths.

I drummed my fingers against the table and glanced at the three snoozing doofuses on the couch. Vol and Purgatory were my family—maybe even Rathiel—and it was up to me to make smart choices. Choices that wouldn't endanger their lives. Me working these jobs slapped a target on my back. It made me vulnerable. And it put a lot of normal, human-like people in danger.

So, no more coffee shop, and no more bartending. I'd need to call my bosses and tell them. Family emergency would have to suffice as an explanation. It wasn't a lie, *per se*, but it would work.

I'd have to say goodbye to Jazz too. After five years of working together, she deserved more than me just disappearing from her life. The regulars at the bar would understand, and maybe a day would come where I could pop in and visit. Have a drink or two as a paying customer.

A gentle chime echoed from my room, one that I recognized as a phone notification.

I glanced at the clock, noting the early hour, then frowned. Who would be texting me at this time of the morning?

Quietly pushing back my chair, I tiptoed to my room and grabbed my phone before returning to the kitchen. Tapping the screen, Jack's name popped up.

Jack: Good morning! I assume you're working today. Maybe I could drop by for a coffee later? What time is your break?

I stared at the message a little longer, a dull ache forming in my chest. Jack, with his sweet texts and well-meaning gestures, was such a stark contrast to the utter madness consuming my life right now. The truth was, I liked him. A lot. But...he wasn't Rathiel.

I slowly turned and glanced at the couch. Rathiel had shifted his weight, and Vol had slid between him and the couch. The poor imp looked to be struggling for his life, his hands and feet kicking about in the air.

I bit my lip to quiet my laughter, then hurried over and rescued him before he suffocated to death. I freed him from Rathiel's side, and Vol sucked in a sputtering breath the second he popped free.

He stared up at me with utterly wide eyes, his fangs on full display.

I held a finger to my lips, shushing him so he didn't wake Rathiel, then placed him on top of one of the couch cushions. Vol glared at Rathiel, then tucked into a little ball and drifted back to sleep.

My phone chimed again, and I returned to the kitchen to read the new message, noting that Jack had sent a little coffee and heart emoji. I released a long, slow breath. If I were human, I could have easily fallen for a guy like him. He was perfect. He just wasn't perfect for me. And like Jazz, he was another innocent I couldn't afford to drag any deeper into my shit-show of a life.

I tapped our message and waited for the keyboard to pop up.

Me: Hey, good morning to you too. Hope you slept well. I'm actually off work today.

I did actually have a shift today, provided I didn't quit. I hit send before I could overthink the message, then turned my phone onto vibrate mode so as not to disturb the rest of the household. A second later, my phone buzzed.

Jack: Oh? Want to do something together then?

I ran a hand through my mussed hair and considered my options. None were pleasant.

“You need to break things off with him,” Rathiel’s sleep-laden voice rumbled behind me.

I jumped, having not heard him stir or rise from the couch. I clutched my phone to my chest and whirled around. “You scared me!”

Rathiel stood in the kitchen, his piercing eyes studying me intently. Even though he’d just woken up, he was still unfairly beautiful, even with his sleep-tousled hair and rumpled clothes.

“I didn’t mean to,” he commented. Then he gestured to my phone. “But you know I’m right.”

I raked my teeth over my bottom lip and lowered my phone, staring at the screen. Rathiel wasn’t wrong. He’d merely said what I’d already been considering. But hearing it aloud made it seem more painful. I liked Jack. He was easy, fun, normal—everything I wanted, but couldn’t have. My life was too dangerous for him. How would I even begin to explain everything to him, let alone tell him who I was?

Then, of course, there was Rathiel. He complicated things in ways I hadn’t even begun to understand. We’d both glossed over the fact that he’d openly admitted he still loved me. I’d denied that I loved him, but heck, I wasn’t even sure I believed myself at this point. Especially after that damn kiss.

What I did know was I didn’t want to hurt either of them. Though, heartbreak seemed inevitable at this point. I had to choose whose heart I was more willing to break.

“I know,” I finally said.

“If you keep him in your life, you’ll get him killed,” Rathiel said, stepping closer. He reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from my face.

I winced, knowing I couldn't deny Rathiel's words. Of course he was right. My father would never allow me to care for a human. Or anyone, really, for that matter. But Jack didn't stand a chance against Lucifer. And if my father's people learned about him, they'd kill him just for fun.

"He doesn't belong in our world," Rathiel said. "I know that hurts to hear. But for his own good, you need to end things."

"Yeah," I whispered.

I stared at my phone, the weight of the decision pressing down on me. Breaking things off with Jack was the right thing to do, but it still hurt.

With a heavy heart, I typed out my response.

Me: How about coffee this afternoon? Brew Haven at three?

I stared at the words, knowing they didn't even begin to scratch the surface of what I really needed to say, but they'd have to do. I refused to break up with him over text. I hit send, and regret instantly settled in my gut. There was no turning back now.

Jack: Sure. See you then.

Rubbing my face, I slipped my phone into my pajama pants pocket, then headed to the bathroom. "I need a shower." And some space . But first, I needed to call my soon-to-be-ex-bosses, so they knew not to expect me today—or ever again. "Can the three of you manage on your own for about an hour or so?"

Rathiel nodded, his gaze tracking me. "You made the right decision."

Then why did I feel so shitty?

* * *

It was just before three p.m., and I'd already survived two breakups today. First with the coffee shop, then with my bartending gig. Both bosses had handled it about as well as a toddler losing their favourite toy—lots of shouting, guilt trips, and a few threats about burning bridges. I couldn't blame them; it wasn't like I'd given them any notice, and they'd both expected me to work a shift today. I'd also left a message for Jazz to call me, but since she was working, I knew not to expect that call until later.

And now it was time for breakup number three. I had a feeling this would be the worst of the trifecta.

I stood outside the Brew Haven and took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of freshly roasted coffee. Normally, the scent calmed me, but today it made my stomach hurt. I walked inside and spotted Jack sitting near a window, his face illuminated by the sunlight streaming in through the glass, with two mugs of coffee sitting on the table. He hadn't noticed me yet, too absorbed in whatever he was looking at on his phone.

For a second, I hesitated. He seemed so peaceful, so...uncomplicated. I wanted to pretend like this was a normal date, and I was a normal girl, meeting a normal guy for coffee.

But that wasn't my life, and it never had been. I wasn't even human, for crying out loud. Unlike Jack, who would age and eventually die. I wouldn't. Eventually, he would start to notice, and no amount of beauty products would help me explain away my unageing face.

At least Rathiel had agreed to sit this one out. It'd taken a lot of begging, some yelling, and then a direct order from me that he stay behind. He'd snarled and growled and flashed some fang, but eventually relented. This was my mess to clean

up, and I really didn't need nor want my bodyguard watching over my shoulder.

As though sensing the weight of my stare, Jack glanced up, and a brilliant smile spread across his face. My heart broke at the sight of it. But I squared my shoulders and walked to the table.

"Hi," he said, his smile still on full display as I took the seat across from him. His warm brown eyes sparkled in the sunlight and his cheeks dimpled. He was handsome, no doubt about that. And hopefully, he'd make some other woman happy.

"Hi," I replied, tucking myself under the table. "Hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

He shook his head. "Not at all. I was just looking up what movies are playing nearby, if you're interested? Since you're no longer working today, I figured we could take advantage of that and spend the day together."

Time to rip the Band-Aid off and put an end to this. My gaze dropped to his mouth, and I remembered our kiss. How I hadn't felt anything. Not compared to Rathiel's. He infuriated and frustrated me. And sometimes I wanted to punch him in the throat. But that heat was something Jack and I lacked. Even if my life wasn't in danger, even if fallen angels and my father weren't hunting me, that would be enough to end things between us. I just didn't like that I was about to hurt him.

"Actually, Jack," I started, already wincing when his brows knitted together.

"Everything okay?" he asked, leaning forward slightly and taking my hand.

I slowly drew my hand back. "Things have changed in my life recently. Things I can't and don't want to go into detail about. But I—I have to end things between us."

Jack leaned back in his chair, his expression crestfallen. “What? Why? I thought things were going great.”

“They were.”

“Then what’s going on here, Lily? I’m confused. Is this why you asked me to come here?”

I blew out a breath and turned to stare out the window. “My life has gotten really complicated lately.”

“Don’t feed me that line.”

I faced him and sighed. “Look, Jack, you’re amazing. You really are. But me? I’m a mess. And my life is”—I paused before blurting out the words too dangerous —“a train wreck right now. There’s a lot you don’t know about me?”

“There’s a lot everyone doesn’t know about everyone,” he countered. “The point is spending the time to get to know each other.”

He wasn’t making this easy.

When he continued talking, I held up a hand to stop him. “No, Jack. I’m sorry, but no. I can’t continue seeing you. And trust me, it’s for the best.”

“Can’t,” he said, latching onto that specific word. “And earlier, you said you have to end things. Lily, is someone forcing you to do this?” He sat up straight, his frown deepening. “That guy from our first date. Is it him? Are you in danger?”

“No, I’m not in danger,” I said. “This is just how it has to be.”

He stared at me a little longer—almost as though he didn't believe me. I held his gaze until he eventually sighed and turned to glance out the window. "If this is what you want."

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

We sat there for a bit, stewing in the uncomfortable silence, before he finally stood up. "I should probably go."

"Okay," I said, my chest tight.

Jack hesitated, his hand lingering on the back of the chair. "Take care of yourself, Lily."

"You too."

He cast me one last glance before he walked out of the Brew Haven.

I sat back and shook my head. Some days, my life just plain sucked.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I gave Jack a one-minute head start before I stepped out of the coffee shop and onto the street, the city's hustle and bustle surrounding me. I tucked my hands into my jacket pockets, since I'd forgotten my gloves today, and started walking toward the bus station a couple of blocks away. It would give me a few minutes to gather my thoughts and settle my emotions.

I kept my head down as I walked, my breath puffing out little clouds of mist in front of me. The winter chill was biting, the kind that sank deep into your bones, but I didn't care. I needed the sting of the cold, something to wake me up from the haze of guilt and sadness that had settled over me.

But as I neared the next block, something felt off. The usual sounds of the city had faded, and the bustling crowd had thinned to almost nothing. I glanced up, my brow furrowing. The streets were practically empty, and the quiet was unsettling.

I stopped in my tracks, my breath fogging the air in front of me as I glanced around the deserted street. A prickling sensation crawled up my spine, warning me that something wasn't right. The world had gone too quiet—unnaturally so. The kind of quiet that screamed “danger” without actually making a sound, and my instincts were pushing at me to pay attention.

I scanned the area, and that was when I noticed them.

Two figures melted out of the shadows on either side of me, their movements so precise it sent a chill down my spine. I recognized them at once—Tavira and Zera.

There was no mistaking them. They had the same dangerous, predatory air about them that I remembered from Hell.

Tavira, with her wild, dark hair streaked with silver and gleaming eyes, looked as though she had stepped straight out of my nightmares. She exuded pure power, her very presence crackling with energy. Of all the fallen angels, her eyes were the only ones that weren't blue, but rather a molten gold, complements of the feranox—beast—demon she'd merged with. She wore a luxurious fur cloak that hung over her shoulders, the fur a mix of black and silver that shimmered as she moved. Surrounding her were a pair of felines—lions, tigers, and leopards, all of which seemed to shift in the air, their ghostly forms swirling around her like a crown of deadly spirits.

Tavira's appearance alone was enough to unnerve me—she utterly loathed me—but it was her cold, calculating smile that really made my skin crawl. She moved with the grace of a predator, her steps silent but powerful. Clearly, she wasn't here for a friendly chat.

Nor was Zera, who stood opposite Tavira. Her silver hair cascaded in soft waves down her back, contrasting sharply with the swirling black tendrils of shadows that coiled around her form. Unlike Tavira, Zera's beauty was haunting, ethereal, and cold as ice. Her eyes, an unearthly shade of pale blue, glinted in the sunlight. Whereas Tavira's energy burned with animalistic power, Zera's carried the chill of death itself.

The air around her seemed to warp, shadows thickening and twisting unnaturally, responding to her as if they lived solely to serve her will. She was likely the reason everyone had disappeared—the humans must have sensed her aura, their instincts kicking in to flee without understanding why. This was Zera's signature. Like me, she could command shadows, bending them to her will and wielding them as a weapon. The difference was, she was stronger—far stronger. Zera's abilities superseded mine, and in her presence, the shadows obeyed her, and only her.

At least I could still summon hellfire, and without any humans nearby, I had free rein to use that power. Unfortunately, I was still facing off against two fallen angels. The odds were not in my favour.

Cursing under my breath, I stripped off my winter jacket and let it fall to the street, revealing the triplet daggers strapped to my hips. I hadn't brought Inferno's Kiss with me today—because there was no way to hide a sword while out in public—but I hadn't left the apartment unarmed. I wasn't that stupid.

“Look who it is,” I said, breaking the silence. “Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumb. When you see my father again, tell him he should man up and come kill me himself. I'm getting tired of fighting his lackeys.” Rathiel had always said my snarkiness would get me killed one day. Guess today was that day.

Tavira's smile widened, but it wasn't warm or kind. It was the smile of someone who knew they were about to tear you apart. A spirit flickered next to her, and I could have sworn it had taken the shape of a lion. Oh, goody.

“You've always had a mouth on you, Lilith,” Tavira said. “Guess time doesn't change all things.”

“Guess not,” I shot back. “Just like how you two are still following Lucifer's orders. Looking for a pat on the head? A treat? I can help with that.”

Tavira took a step closer, her long fur cloak rustling as the ghostly predators around her flickered in the air. “Lucifer wants you dead. And who are we to refuse such a request?” Her golden eyes gleamed with amusement, but there was no mistaking the malice underneath.

My muscles tensed as I eyed them both, calculating. Tavira was unpredictable, and Zera was lethal with those shadows. One wrong move, and I was done for.

“And you thought attacking me in the middle of the street during the day was a good idea?” I taunted. “Guess you two aren’t the brains of the outfit.”

“No one would dare disturb us,” Tavira stated.

As if on cue, Zera’s shadows darted forward, a twisting mass of black tendrils aimed directly at my legs. I barely had time to dive out of the way, rolling to the side as the ground where I had stood cracked and split under the force of her attack. I sprang to my feet, pulling my daggers free as I faced them both. My breath came in short, sharp bursts, but I forced myself to stay calm. If I could keep them talking, maybe—just maybe—I could figure a way out of this.

But before I could even think of a solution, Tavira’s ghostly beasts surged forward, their jaws snapping at the air as they closed in on me. With a surge of adrenaline, I threw myself backward, barely avoiding the spectral claws that raked through the space where I’d just been standing. My heart pounded in my chest, but I couldn’t stop moving. One wrong step, and it was over.

Zera’s shadows slithered closer, wrapping around the street like living vines, herding me into a nearby alley, her pale blue eyes following my every movement with cold precision. Tavira’s smirk never wavered, as though she was merely toying with me.

I gritted my teeth, keeping my grip tight on my daggers. I struggled to form a plan, knowing this fight wouldn’t be an easy win, if there even was a win for me today. I knew exactly what Tavira and Zera were capable of. I’d faced them in countless battles throughout my years of training. Ten years on Earth likely hadn’t helped me any. I knew exactly how outmatched I was. One slip, and I’d be returning to Hell under far less ideal circumstances.

The alley narrowed around me, its brick walls towering, trapping me in a darkened corridor of inevitability. I gripped the hilts of my daggers tighter, the cold metal

grounding me as I scanned the alley for something, anything, that could give me an advantage. But I found nothing. Just the claustrophobic walls, the slick concrete beneath my feet, and two of Lucifer's most dangerous angels closing in.

"Well, this is cozy," I said, my voice sharp with defiance even though my heart hammered in my chest. "Reminds me of home."

Zera's lips twitched ever so slightly, as if my bravado amused her. Tavira, however, seemed more than ready to end this. The ghostly lions and tigers surrounding her flickered like dying embers, their eyes glowing with an unearthly light.

Tavira took another step forward. "You know how this is going to end. Your father has tolerated your existence until now, but your time has run out. Why prolong the inevitable?"

I snorted, masking the creeping panic rising in my throat. "If you think I'm going to lie down and let you two kill me, you clearly haven't been paying attention. I have no intention of dying today."

Tavira's laugh echoed off the alley walls, a sound that crawled under my skin. "You think this is negotiable? Sweetie, the only option you have is how you die."

The words cut through the air like shards of ice. I glanced at Zera, who still hadn't spoken, but her shadows were tightening, inching closer with every passing second. They coiled and uncoiled like serpents, waiting for the command to strike.

"Well, then," I said. "If I'm going down, guess I'm taking you both with me."

Summoning every last bit of energy I had, I ignited hellfire in my palms, the flames sparking to life with a brilliant, searing heat. The alley lit up, casting flickering shadows across the nearby brick walls, and Zera's eyes narrowed. The darkness

recoiled, tendrils withdrawing from the flames.

A small, dangerous smile came to my lips. Her shadows didn't like my fire. Interesting. In Hell, I'd never had the chance to test my hellfire against the fallen. I'd kept it hidden, honing it in secret, but now...

The flames flared, surging with a life of its own. With a snap of my wrist, I hurled a wave of fire directly at Zera's shadows. They retracted instantly, like serpents dodging a flame, but it wasn't only her shadows that reacted. Zera, herself, stumbled back, her hand flying to her abdomen as though the flames had hit her directly. Her usually composed expression twisted in pain, and for the first time since I'd known her, there was something other than cold detachment in her eyes.

"Well, well," I said, unable to resist a smirk. "Looks like I hit a nerve."

Zera's ice-blue eyes locked onto mine, her expression a mixture of confusion and fury. She struggled to regain control, her shadows flickering erratically around her like dark, broken wings. The air twisted around her as she attempted to gather her magic, the tendrils coiling, straining to strike again.

I refused to give her the chance.

Hellfire surged through me again, fiercer this time, blazing through my chest as I pushed every ounce of will into the flames. I launched another wave, the inferno ripping through the air and colliding with her shadows in a sizzling clash. The darkness shrank back, curling like burnt paper, and Zera gritted her teeth, her eyes flashing with pain. The sight of her weakness—of her fear—filled me with satisfaction, but I knew better than to linger in this small victory.

Just as I pulled my arm back for another strike, a gust of wind whipped past me—Tavira. She moved too fast to follow, her clawed hand slicing down in a deadly

arc, aiming for my throat. I barely twisted out of the way in time, but her ghostly beasts were already upon me, their fangs and claws tearing through the surrounding shadows, snapping at my heels.

Another swipe of Tavira's claws came for me, and I met her halfway, my daggers clanging against her strike with a jarring screech. I was losing ground, forced backward by each blow. The hellfire sputtered in my hands, the flames flickering as my concentration fractured. I couldn't let it fade. Zera's shadows were circling again, gathering strength, ready to strike the moment my fire faltered.

Tavira fought harder, attacking with a ruthless energy I struggled to match. Her golden eyes gleamed with predatory joy, the kind that made my stomach twist—she was savoring this. I tried to spin out of her reach, but one of her ghostly tigers pounced, its spectral jaws snapping dangerously close to my leg, driving me back into the alley wall.

My heart hammered against my ribs, breaths coming in ragged gasps.

Tavira's next swing came down, but this time, since I couldn't move back, I stepped in, slashing upward with my dagger to deflect her claws. The impact jarred my arm, but I held steady, driving her back a step. Her eyes widened, the glint of surprise flashing before it quickly morphed into something darker, more dangerous.

"Not so easy, is it?" I spat, reigniting the flames in my free hand. I refused to back down.

Her smirk faded, and she launched forward, claws extended in a vicious arc. But I was ready this time. I ducked low, pivoting on my heel to swing my dagger across her exposed side. Tavira twisted just in time, but not enough to avoid the edge entirely. My blade sliced a shallow cut along her ribs, and her hiss of pain was all the satisfaction I needed.

I pushed into the attack, refusing to let her gain the upper ground. I whirled around, about to drive my dagger through her heart when a voice I hadn't expected to hear shouted through the alley.

“Lily!”

My heart dropped.

I whipped my head toward the entrance of the alley, and there he stood. Jack, wide-eyed and breathing hard, stood frozen at the sight of the chaos unfolding before him, clutching my winter jacket in his hands. What the hell was he doing here?!

His expression was one of pure shock, his gaze darting between Tavira, Zera, me—and the fire flickering in the palm of my hand.

No. No, no, no!

“Jack, get out of here!” I screamed, panic tightening in my chest. But it was too late. Zera's eyes shifted toward him, and her lips curled into a predatory smile.

“Oh, now this is interesting,” Tavira mused, her golden eyes gleaming. “A human? Really, Lilith? How...quaint.”

Zera moved toward Jack, and cold panic burst through my chest.

“Run, Jack!” I shouted. I swung my dagger, but the disruption had cost me, and Tavira easily deflected my attack. She shoved me backward, into the path of her damn spectral beasts. They circled around me, teeth snapping and claws flashing. I fought wildly, trying to fight them off, but my blades passed through them like mist.

Zera advanced toward Jack, her shadows creeping toward him. Jack finally seemed to

snap out of his shock, taking a step backward as Zera approached.

“Stop!” I shouted. I yelled, panic rising in my throat. My heart pounded as I fought against the ghostly creatures, trying to push my way through to get to Jack.

But Zera reached him first.

Time seemed to slow.

No.

Not him. Please, not him.

Zera’s pale, slender hand shot out, her claws catching the faint light as they wrapped around Jack’s throat. His eyes widened in terror, his breath catching in his throat as he struggled against the iron grip of the fallen angel.

“Zera!” I screamed, throwing myself forward, but Tavira blocked me, her fist colliding with my face. I dropped to my knees, blackness stealing my vision. Shaking it off, I pushed to my feet and sliced my daggers through the air, catching her just under the chin.

She screamed and jumped backward.

The distraction worked, her pack of wild cats flickering out of existence. Long enough for me to burst forward and race toward Jack.

Zera’s grip tightened, lifting Jack off the ground effortlessly as though he weighed nothing at all. His feet kicked against the air, his hands clawing at her wrist in desperation.

If I had my wings, I could have flown. It would have been faster.

“Please!” I yelled, my voice cracking. “He’s not part of this!”

Zera’s cold, icy blue eyes flicked toward me, her expression unreadable as her shadows writhed and twisted. “Oh, but he is now.”

Zera’s expression didn’t change as her grip tightened once more, and with a sickening snap, Jack’s body went limp in her grasp. She tossed him aside as though he were nothing more than a discarded rag doll, his lifeless form crumpling to the ground with a hollow thud.

I stumbled to a stop, time suddenly standing still. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. The world around me swirled into a blur as I stared at Jack’s body, my mind refusing to accept what had just happened.

No. This couldn’t be real.

But it was.

Rage surged through me like molten lava, burning away the numbness that had gripped me. My body trembled and my chest heaved with fury and grief.

Zera’s cold eyes shifted back to me, her shadows slithering forward, but I didn’t care anymore. There was no fear left. Only anger. Only vengeance.

Hellfire roared to life within me again, hotter and more intense than ever before. The flames erupted from my hands, engulfing the alley as I launched myself toward Tavira and Zera, the fury inside me burning brighter than ever before.

My father had sent his goons to kill me, but instead, I would send them back to him.

In pieces.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The world burned around me. Hell, it could consume me for all I cared. My vision tunnelled on Jack's lifeless body, crumpled like a broken doll against the alley's cold cement. The sight of him coupled with Zera's smirk all blurred together into a seething rage that clawed at my insides.

I'd kill her and Tavira both and send them back to my father. And then he'd know—he'd created a monster.

I unleashed a scream, one that shook the very ground beneath my feet as hellfire surged through the alley. This wasn't just fire. It was pure destruction. The flames roared, devouring everything in their path. Zera's shadows practically shrieked as my fire swallowed them whole and obliterated them.

But it wasn't enough.

I stalked through the alley, my steps slow and measured. The heat crackled over my skin, but didn't burn my flesh, because I wouldn't allow it to. I was in complete control. And I gave the flames a direct purpose, two targets that were very much flammable. I focused my wrath—and the wrath of my power—on them .

"Burn," I snarled at Zera, launching a firestorm in her direction. It whipped through the air, moving at unimaginable speeds, its heat inescapable.

Zera's eyes widened with panic as the flames closed in, and with a choked cry, she stumbled back, her shadows scattering in a desperate attempt to escape the hellfire. I

didn't have the skill to wrest control of her shadows, but extinguishing them was well within my reach—and I did, snuffing them out in a heartbeat.

Zera steadied herself, her gaze darting over my shoulder. Before I could turn, searing pain suddenly lanced my back. A scream ripped from me as I staggered forward, the fire faltering for a single second. Gasping, I twisted to find Tavira behind me, her beasts prowling at her sides. Blood stained her lion's claws, his eyes glinting with hunger as he licked his lips in anticipation.

The creatures pressed in, tightening their circle, shadowed forms flickering in the inferno's glow. Their energy pulsed, dark and threatening, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness. But I refused to give them that satisfaction. Not now. Not ever.

Fury blazed through me, fueling my flames until they swelled into a roaring tempest. With a guttural cry, I thrust my hands forward, unleashing hellfire that exploded outward like an unleashed storm.

The flames crashed into Tavira's beasts, and their shrieks filled the air as the fire consumed them. The shapes writhed in agony, and in seconds, they were nothing—reduced to little more than smoke and ash, snuffed out as though they'd never existed.

Tavira dodged the surge of flames, her face twisting with disdain. She sneered, her lip curling. "Lucifer's daughter, finally showing her true nature," she taunted. "Perhaps you're more like him than anyone realized."

"Do not compare me to that sadistic piece of shit," I snarled back. "I am nothing like him."

She scoffed, but before she could respond, a deafening crack split the air above us. My head snapped up, and through the smoky haze, a figure descended like a falling

star.

Rathiel landed beside me with a force that cracked the cement, his wings snapping out in a single, powerful motion.

Oh, thank goodness. Backup had arrived.

My flames raged around us, but with a flick of my wrist, I redirected them, pushing them away from him.

Our eyes met and an unspoken understanding passed between us. Then, with a sharp nod, we turned back to the fight, a seamless unit. Rathiel moved like lightning, his blade flashing dangerously as he lunged at Tavira. Meanwhile, I turned my full attention on Zera. I wanted her head, and I was more than happy to take it myself.

Zera's grip tightened around her sword's hilt, her eyes darting around for any remnants of her shadows—but they had all but abandoned her, shrivelled to nothing under the force of my hellfire. Now, it was just her and me, my daggers gleaming in my hands, flames still dancing at my fingertips.

“Just you and me now,” I said, a hate-filled grin stretching across my face as I advanced. “And I don't love your odds.”

I surged forward, fire crackling at my back. Zera swung, the blade cutting the air in a vicious arc, but I ducked low, narrowly avoiding the strike. I gripped my dagger and stabbed it straight at her exposed side.

Metal clashed against metal, sparks flying as her sword met my dagger. Zera gritted her teeth, forcing me back, but I pushed harder. The heat of my fire swirled around us, suffocating, relentless. Her sword trembled in her grip as I grabbed a second dagger and unleashed all my fury on her. My strikes came faster and harder, driving

her toward the alley wall.

My blade grazed her arm, tearing through the flesh. Blood splattered across the scorched ground, but Zera only hissed, her grip tightening on the sword. Desperation flared in her eyes, and she swung wildly, the sword missing me by inches.

I was relentless. I moved with purpose, each step driving her further back, each strike of my dagger chipping away at her defenses. She swung again, but her movements were slower, clumsier, exhaustion written in every motion.

Rathiel had drilled sword training into me every day of my miserable existence in Hell, whereas the other fallen angels all relied on their powers. They weren't as skilled in swordplay as he and I were—and it showed.

With a swift lunge, I slid under her next strike, spinning on my heel and catching her across the back of her right leg. She cried out, stumbling forward, and I didn't wait. I followed her, my fire blazing at my fingertips as I hurled a burst of flames at her feet. The blast sent her crashing to the ground, her sword skidding across the alley.

Zera struggled to rise, blood dripping from her wounds, her chest heaving with effort. "You think this ends with me?" she spat, voice shaking. "You'll never be free. You'll die, just like your friend did."

The mention of Jack sent a fresh wave of fury coursing through me. My vision narrowed on her as I stalked forward, flames crackling along my fingertips. "I've never liked you," I bit out. "But I never thought you were this stupid. You're on the ground, bleeding, I'm about to kill you, and you antagonize me further?"

Zera's eyes widened in panic as I raised my hands, the fire surging in response. She scrambled to her feet, grabbing the sword with trembling hands, but it was too late. I hurled the fire forward with all the rage and grief in my heart, the flames engulfing

her in an instant.

Her scream ripped through the alley as she crashed into the wall, the fire eating away at her flesh, her sword falling uselessly from her hands. She clawed at the air, her face contorted in agony as the flames consumed her.

But I wasn't finished. I wanted Zera to feel everything she'd inflicted on Jack—and more. Before this week, I'd never burned someone to death before. Now, I'd burned two. One would think this would horrify me. But it didn't. Maybe I was more like my father than I'd thought. I couldn't worry about that right now.

I stepped forward, the fire blazing hotter, brighter, until Zera's movements slowed. She tried to lift her sword again, but her strength faltered. I wrenched the weapon from her grip, her eyes widening in shock. Without hesitation, I raised her own sword above my head, and with a swift, decisive stroke, brought it down on her neck. Her head dropped to the ground with a sickening thud, her lifeless body following suit.

Chest heaving, my gaze locked on her severed form. Satisfaction didn't come. Instead, a dark, hollow weight settled in my chest. But before I could fully absorb what I'd done, a sharp scream pierced the air behind me.

I spun around just in time to catch Rathiel's blade carving into Tavira's side. Her eyes widened in shock, fury and pain twisting her features as she staggered back, clutching the deep wound. Blood seeped between her fingers, staining her clothes. She looked to Zera's corpse, her detached head surrounded by a smouldering ring of hellfire. The flames had already begun consuming her body, erasing any trace of her existence. Tavira's eyes darted back to me, then to Rathiel, her breaths labored.

Her expression faltered as fear flickered in her eyes. Her wings twitched, and desperation shadowed her face as she took a shaky step back. She was calculating her escape, weighing her odds.

Rathiel lunged, but Tavira was faster. With a frustrated snarl, she unfurled her wings and leapt into the air, propelling herself upward. But Rathiel wasn't about to let her go.

He lifted a hand, and the blood pooling around us on the cement rose at his command. It surged upward, twisting and stretching until it coiled into a whip-like lasso. The crimson rope snagged Tavira's ankle and yanked her back down. She dropped with a scream, her wings flailing as she fought against Rathiel's hold.

The impact rattled the ground as she slammed into the pavement. Rathiel didn't hesitate. He closed the distance in a blur, his blade arcing through the air. Tavira barely had time to raise her hands in a futile attempt to block him before the blade sliced clean through her neck.

Her head hit the ground with a dull thud, her body going limp. Rathiel stood over her lifeless form, his blade dripping with blood. The blood lasso unraveled, collapsing into a dark pool at his feet.

Rathiel turned toward me, his eyes sweeping over my body, assessing for injuries. In an instant, he closed the distance between us, his movements swift and purposeful. His hand brushed my shoulder before carefully sliding over my back. I winced as his fingers grazed the wounds, the pain sharp and immediate. The lion's claws had torn deep, and now that the fight had ended, the reality of the injury set in. My breath hitched at the sting, the adrenaline no longer numbing the pain.

His jaw tightened as he noted the blood, his fingers hesitating over the torn fabric of my shirt. "You're bleeding," he muttered, more to himself than to me. His touch was surprisingly gentle, but I could see the concern tightening his expression.

I winced again, shaking my head, my voice coming out hoarse. "It's nothing," I insisted, though another wave of agony rushed through me. I tried to shake it off, but

now that the battle was over, the pain pulsed deep and sharp with every breath. “It’ll heal.”

Rathiel’s gaze flicked back to my face, clearly wanting to argue, but the distant wail of sirens interrupted us. They were growing louder, cutting through the crackling of the dying flames and the heavy tension between us. His expression hardened again, his worry masked beneath urgency.

“Can you move?” he asked.

I nodded, though my legs felt weak beneath me. But as I started to step forward, my gaze drifted back to the alleyway entrance, and the world around me seemed to slow. Jack’s body. It lay there, broken and still, crumpled against the cold cement, his life stolen from him in an instant.

The flames that had raged inside me flickered and died. The heat, the fury, all of it drained away, leaving only a hollow ache. My chest tightened, and the air felt too thick to breathe. Jack...was dead. Because of me. He had no part in this war, and yet, he’d paid the price for it.

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Jack. My feet were heavy and rooted to the spot, my mind a storm of disbelief and horror. This wasn’t supposed to happen. I’d broken up with him for exactly this reason—to keep him alive . And I’d failed.

I didn’t realize how long I’d been staring until Rathiel’s voice cut through the fog. “Lily,” he said, more insistent now. “We have to leave. Now.”

I nodded slowly, my throat tightening as I tore my eyes away from Jack. “What about him?” My voice barely escaped as a whisper. I could burn him until nothing remained, like I had Zera, but the thought nauseated me. If I did that, his family and friends would never know what happened to him. My thoughts went to his five

siblings, and tears rose to my eyes.

“He’s human. We’ll let the human authorities handle this,” Rathiel replied, his tone firm but not unkind. He bent down, scooping up my charred winter jacket, likely to keep the police from finding it.

The sirens were closer now, echoing off the alley walls, a reminder that time was running out. Rathiel’s arms slid around me, pulling me against his chest. His wings flared wide, and with a powerful beat, he launched us into the air. The ground dropped away beneath us, the city blurring into a haze of distant lights as we soared higher into the sky, away from the alley, from Jack’s lifeless body.

I clung to him, the wind whipping through my hair as the reality of everything sank in. Jack was gone. I had failed to protect him, and no amount of fire or fury would change that.

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The world was quiet when we landed on the balcony. Rathiel tucked his wings away, but the cool night air did nothing to numb the ache inside me. He opened the door and shooed Vol and Purgatory out of the living room before guiding me inside with a soft touch to my back, careful not to touch my injuries. The pain was still there, a dull throb, but compared to the hollow ache in my chest, it barely registered.

I walked inside, my steps slow, almost robotic. My mind still replayed the image of Jack lying there in the alley—broken, lifeless. I'd killed Zera, but was it enough? This was all my fault. I'd welcomed Jack into my life. My dangerous, psychotic life. I was an angel, for crying out loud. The daughter of Lucifer. I had no business fraternizing with humans. And he'd paid the price for my foolishness.

I dropped into the nearest chair and stared at the wall. It was as though the fire that had burned inside me had died completely, leaving only cold embers in its wake.

Rathiel stood near the balcony door, observing me closely. He hadn't said much since we left the alley—giving me space, I suspected—but the tension in his shoulders told me he was worried. I could feel his concern, like a shadow hanging in the air between us.

He took a slow step forward, then another, as if unsure of what to do. "Lily," he began, his voice soft, cautious.

I didn't respond. I couldn't. I was too...numb. Empty.

Rathiel moved closer, crouching down in front of me, his silver eyes searching my face.

“How did you find me?” I asked, my voice completely devoid of emotion.

“It wasn’t hard,” he said. “You weren’t answering your phone, and I grew concerned. The bus would take too long, so I took to the skies. I saw the fire and knew.”

“Someone could have seen you,” I mumbled.

“I don’t care. You’re more important.”

That broke me. “I—” My voice cracked, the words caught in my throat. I shook my head, tears stinging my eyes, but I blinked them back. “It’s my fault, Rathiel. Jack...dead because of me.”

His expression tightened, his eyes darkening. “It’s not your fault,” he said firmly. “Zera killed him, not you.”

“He was looking for me,” I rambled. “I broke things off with him and left the coffeeshop. I don’t know, maybe he was watching? Waiting? He thought I was in trouble. Maybe he planned to follow me? Or maybe he stumbled across my jacket and came looking for me. I don’t know. But that’s the kind of person he was. He was kind, Rathiel. He wasn’t like us. He was the stark opposite of us.” I sucked in an unsteady breath. “I should have done more. I should have protected him better.”

I leaned forward and dropped my head into my hands, gripping the roots of my hair. Voices echoed in my head, telling me that this was all my fault. That if it weren’t for me, he’d still be alive. And the voices were right.

Rathiel peeled my hands away from my head and squeezed them tight. “Lily, stop.”

His voice wasn’t soft or gentle this time—it was steady, commanding. It cut through the fog in my mind, forcing me to lift my head and meet his gaze. I could feel the

storm of emotions raging inside me, threatening to tear me apart, but there was something in the way he looked at me that kept me from spiraling completely.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” he said. “You’re going to destroy yourself if you don’t stop.”

I pulled one hand free from his grip, wrapping my arms around myself, trying to hold it all together. “You don’t get it,” I whispered.

He gave a harsh laugh. “You think I don’t understand? Me? The guy who stripped you of some of your most important memories and abandoned you here?” He shook his head, his dark locks spilling in front of his eyes. “I understand guilt better than anyone. But I also understand that blaming yourself won’t fix anything. It won’t bring him back.”

“It isn’t about bringing him back!” I snapped, the words escaping before I could stop them. “It’s about the fact that I was supposed to protect him, and I failed. Just like I’ve failed at everything else.”

“What are you talking about?” Rathiel asked softly.

“Hell? The Rebellion? The prophecy?” I gave a bitter laugh and pushed to my feet, pacing through the living room. “I failed at those too, didn’t I? That’s why I’m here. Because I couldn’t cut it. Because I couldn’t kill Lucifer. I’m a failure.”

Rathiel rose to his feet, following my movements with a calm intensity, but he didn’t speak right away. He let my words hang in the air, like he was waiting for them to sink in. When he finally did speak, his voice was quieter, but no less steady.

“We may not have won the war,” Rathiel said, “But what you did wasn’t meaningless. You are not a failure.”

I stopped pacing and faced him, fists clenched tightly at my sides, trying to steady the trembling in my hands. “Then why does it feel like everything I touch turns to ash?” My voice rose. “Jack is dead. Lucifer crushed the rebellion. You wiped my memories and sent me here. What’s left, Rathiel?”

He silently watched me.

I took a shaky breath, the words spilling out before I could stop them. “I’m just...broken. A useless, wingless angel who can’t even get her own life together. How am I supposed to fight for anything when I don’t even know who I am anymore?” My voice cracked. “Am I even still an angel?”

“Don’t do that,” Rathiel said, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t reduce yourself to that. You’re not broken, and you’re not useless. You fought, Lily. You fought harder than anyone. Yes, the rebellion failed, but that doesn’t mean you lost.” He took a step closer, his voice gaining strength. “You survived. You survived your father and you’re still here. That’s a win in my books.”

I shook my head, unwilling to let his words soothe me. “Surviving isn’t enough. I was supposed to do more than that. I was supposed to make a difference.”

“You have,” Rathiel said firmly. “You’re making one right now. Zera and Tavira are dead, and you fought off Gremory. You’re still fighting, even if you don’t realize it.”

“I’m tired, Rathiel,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “I’m tired of all of this. Of pretending that I have control over anything.”

Rathiel’s expression shifted to sympathy. He closed the distance between us and wrapped me in his arms. Any other day, I might have pushed him away, distanced myself from him, but today, I needed this. Needed him and the comfort he offered.

“I know,” he said. “It’s been a long battle. And even though you don’t remember it, you’ve suffered more than anyone ever should. But I know you. You’ll keep fighting because that’s who you are.” His body shook with a soft laugh. “You don’t know how to do anything else. So, take the time to feel this loss and to process it. And when you’re ready, you’ll pick up the pieces and put your life back together. Because you don’t know any other way to be.”

I opened my mouth to argue, to push back against everything he was saying, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead, a cold, exhausted emptiness settled over me. Rathiel was wrong. Or maybe he wasn’t. I didn’t know anymore. My mind wasn’t exactly firing on all cylinders right now.

“I’m scared,” I admitted, the words spilling out before I could stop them. “I’m scared of what I’ll become if I keep going. What if I’m not strong enough? Or worse, what if I end up just like him ? Tavira—she said something.” I didn’t repeat her words about me finally showing I was Lucifer’s daughter. “Something that hit a little too close to home.”

Rathiel’s expression softened, the fire in his eyes dimming as he stepped even closer. “You’re not your father,” he said, his voice quiet but filled with conviction. “You’re nothing like him, Lily. You never were. You never will be. And this right here proves that to me. Your father would never grieve the loss of a human life. I don’t think he even grieved when he killed your mother. He’s incapable of such emotions. You aren’t.”

There was truth to his words, but it didn’t stop the fear from creeping in. What if I was more like Lucifer than I wanted to admit? What if the darkness inside me was growing, festering, waiting to take over? I thought back to the fight, when I burned Zera alive, and the intense satisfaction that swept through me. It terrified me. I’d never relished causing someone intense pain like that before. But her, I’d burn again and again. For all eternity, if I could. That was dark .

“I don’t know if I believe that,” I whispered.

Rathiel reached out and gently took my hands again, pulling me closer, his gaze never leaving mine. “Then believe me. Believe in me. I’ve known you your whole life, and I know who you are. Yes, there’s darkness in you. But there’s also light. So much light. And no matter what happens, you’re going to keep fighting. You won’t become like him because you won’t let yourself.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to cling to his words and let them wash away all this guilt and pain. But it wasn’t that simple. It was never that simple.

“And if I fail again?” I whispered, voicing another of my fears.

“Then I’ll still be there,” he told me. “I wasn’t lying when I said I love you, Lily. Nothing will ever change that. I’ve seen you at your best and your worst. And I love the whole package.”

His proclamation didn’t make me feel any better. If anything, it made me feel worse.

Shaking my head, I pulled away from him. “I can’t deal with this right now,” I finally muttered, dragging a hand through my hair. “I need some space.”

Rathiel’s gaze softened, but he didn’t press. “Okay.”

I met his gaze, my stomach twisting when I found nothing but unconditional love there. I didn’t deserve it. “I need to sleep,” I stated suddenly. What I needed was to be alone. “I’ll figure out my next step tomorrow.”

“Sure,” he agreed.

I gave a tired nod, the heaviness in my chest still there but dulled. “Alright.”

Without another word, I made my way to the bedroom.

Before I stepped through the door, I glanced over my shoulder at Rathiel. “Don’t hover. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll try not to,” he said, his lips quirking in the faintest hint of amusement. “But no promises.”

I shook my head, a half-smirk pulling at my own lips despite the ache in my chest. I turned and closed the door behind me, then leaned against it. The weight of everything wasn’t going to disappear overnight, but maybe, just maybe, I’d find the strength to face it all tomorrow.

* * *

The soft hum of the television filled the quiet apartment, the only sound breaking through the stillness of the early morning. I stood in the middle of the living room, arms crossed, and stared at the screen. My body felt heavy, stiff, like the weight of everything from yesterday afternoon still clung to me, refusing to let go.

The news report blurred on the screen, but I couldn’t turn away. They were talking about the alley. About Jack.

“...police have identified the victim found in a back alley as twenty-nine-year-old Jackson Williams. His body was discovered after a nearby resident reported a fire in the area. Authorities are investigating the cause of death and the unusual burn patterns found at the scene.”

My stomach twisted at the mention of his name, the unwelcome knot of guilt coiling tighter. I swallowed hard, trying to push the rising nausea back down. But it wasn’t just the guilt. It was the reality crashing down on me all over again.

The reporter's voice droned on, calm and detached, the way they always sounded when talking about something horrific. "While the fire has been contained, witnesses reported seeing unusual activity in the area. Police have not confirmed any details, but we've received word that investigators are looking into possible gang-related violence. There are no suspects at this time."

Unusual activity. They had no idea what really happened.

I stared at the screen, the words becoming background noise as the image of Jack's body lying in that alley replayed in my mind, over and over. It didn't feel real, but the empty space in my chest told me otherwise.

"Lily?" Rathiel's voice came from behind me.

He'd still been asleep when I'd ventured out of my room, but I hadn't been able to resist turning on the news.

"They're saying it was gang violence," I murmured, not turning to face him.

Rathiel came to stand beside me. "That's the easiest explanation for them to cling to. They don't know what else to think."

"Of course they don't." I shook my head, bitterness creeping into my voice. "They'll never know the truth. And I can't tell them or Jack's family." I clenched my jaw, turning away from the screen and moving toward the window. The morning sun had just started to creep over the horizon, casting soft light through the glass. "Doesn't matter," I said, my voice clear and strong. "Jack's dead. And nothing's going to change that."

I turned away from the window, my gaze locking onto Rathiel's. "I didn't sleep much last night. I spent the whole night just thinking," I said, my voice steady despite the

storm of emotions swirling inside me. “Trying to decide what to do.”

Rathiel’s expression remained unreadable, but his shoulders subtly shifted, waiting for what I would say next.

“I could let this guilt swallow me whole. I could sit here, wallowing in pity, blaming myself for everything that happened.” I paused, taking a breath as the words came out, solid and deliberate. “Or I can do something about it.”

His brow furrowed slightly, though he didn’t interrupt. I could feel the weight of his focus on me, the intensity of his presence pressing in like it always did. But this time, it didn’t overwhelm me. It fueled me.

“And I know what needs to be done,” I continued, stepping closer to him, feeling the conviction settle deep within me. “We’re going to march into Hell and kill Lucifer. Once and for all.”

Rathiel’s expression shifted, his eyes narrowing. “Lily?—”

“No.” I cut him off before he could get another word in. “This isn’t just about revenge or anger anymore. It’s about stopping him. It’s about finally fulfilling the prophecy. Lucifer won’t stop hunting me. Especially now that two of his fallen angels are dead. And then there’s you.” I waved my hand at Rathiel. “You chose to side with me. And that’s not something Lucifer will ever forgive. Yours is the ultimate betrayal. I’m not the only one he’s hunting here. He won’t stop until we’re both dead.”

Rathiel’s eyes darkened, the tension rolling off him in waves as he stepped forward. “Lily, no. You can’t be serious.” His voice was rough, strained, as if he were fighting to hold something back. “You have a chance at a life here. On Earth. Away from Hell, away from him. You don’t have to do this.”

I met his gaze head-on, refusing to back down. “You’re wrong.” The words came out sharper than I intended, but I didn’t soften them. “Staying here doesn’t help anyone. My being on Earth is dangerous. Look at what just happened to Jack. My being here puts everyone around me in danger. Humans don’t stand a chance against fallen angels, devils, hellspawn...any of it.”

“I can protect you here ,” Rathiel pushed. “Returning to Hell is suicide, and I won’t let you throw your life away.”

“I’m not throwing my life away!” I snapped, frustration and determination bubbling to the surface. “Don’t you get it? This isn’t just about me. This is about all of us. The prophecy isn’t just about restoring Hell. It’s about restoring balance. Lucifer’s war spills over into the human world every time he sends his soldiers after me. And until he’s stopped, every last human that walks the Earth is in danger.”

Rathiel gripped my arms, his hands firm but gentle. His blue eyes bore into mine, a storm of fear and fury swirling behind them. “Lily, your father nearly killed you last time.” His voice cracked with a raw edge I hadn’t heard before, almost panicked. “I barely saved you in time. Remember? All this is because he won .”

“You’re the one who told me to keep fighting!” I said.

“Keep fighting as in keep living! Keep moving forward!” he shouted. “Not keep fighting as in facing your father head-on!”

The intensity of his grip sent a wave of heat through me, but it wasn’t comforting. His fear was palpable, his emotions spilling over in a way I wasn’t used to seeing. It rattled me more than I wanted to admit.

His grip tightened, to the point of almost hurting. “He’ll rip you apart, Lily. He almost did. And I couldn’t stop it.” His breath hitched, gaze searching mine,

desperate. “Do you think I can stand by and watch that happen again?”

“It won’t be the same as last time,” I tried, but Rathiel shook his head, deaf to my words.

His grip didn’t loosen. “How is this time going to be any different? How can you stand there and say that? You were barely alive when I got to you. You don’t know what it was like to see you like that—” His voice broke, and he shook his head again. “I can’t lose you,” he whispered. “Not again. I can’t go through that again.”

My heart clenched at the pain in his words, and I reached up, cupping his face gently in my hands. His skin was warm beneath my palms, his breath uneven as he fought to keep control. “Hey,” I whispered softly, my thumbs stroking the sharp lines of his cheeks. “Take a breath. Just breathe with me for a second, okay?”

His eyes met mine, wide and filled with a mixture of fear and anguish, but he didn’t pull away. I kept my hands steady and brought our heads together until our foreheads touched. “Breathe,” I repeated, and together, we inhaled slowly. Soon, his grip on my arms loosened as he matched my breaths.

Slowly, the tension in his body started to melt away, his breathing evening out as I continued stroking his face. “I’m here,” I murmured, my voice low and quiet. “And I’m not going to die, I promise.”

“You can’t promise me that.”

“Okay, well, I’m not going to let him kill me. How’s that?” I smiled, my shoulders relaxing when Rathiel’s expression softened.

His hands dropped to my waist. He was still terrified, but the panic began to fade. “I don’t know what I’d do if—” He trailed off, his voice breaking.

“You won’t have to find out,” I assured him. “I promise. But we can’t keep hiding here on Earth. It puts too many people at risk. We have to stop him. And we’ll do it together. We’ve got this.” I just hoped I sounded confident, because honestly, I didn’t feel it. But I couldn’t let Rathiel see that. If he sensed any weakness in me at all, he’d likely lock me in my bedroom until I saw reason.

Rathiel’s eyes searched mine, as if looking for some shred of doubt that would give him a reason to stop me. When he found none, he closed his eyes, his brow furrowed in frustration. His grip on my sides loosened and he finally let go, stepping back.

“I need a minute,” he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. “I need some air.”

I watched him step out onto the balcony, the weight of everything we’d just discussed settling heavily on my shoulders. The reality of what we were about to face loomed over me like a storm cloud, and the slightest tremor of doubt shivered through me. Could we really do this? Could we march into Hell and end Lucifer once and for all? Or was I fooling myself?

Before I lost myself to my thoughts, movement caught my eye. I glanced over to the couch and found Vol sitting there, his wide, unnerving eyes fixed on me. He looked almost shocked. He sat uncharacteristically quiet, as if, for once, he had no sarcastic comment to offer.

“What?” I asked, my voice rougher than intended.

Vol blinked, his tail flicking in what might’ve been apprehension. “You’re really gonna do it, aren’t you?” His voice wasn’t mocking or sharp this time—just curious.

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, Vol. I really am.” Then I cocked my head and impulsively asked, “Wanna come with?”

Vol's eyes lit up, the shock quickly fading as his signature impish grin spread across his face. His tail twitched, and in a flash, the devious spark I was so used to seeing in him returned. He stood up on the couch, hands resting on his hips in a dramatic pose that didn't match his tiny stature at all.

"Hell yeah, baby!" he declared, his grin widening. "Finally, something fun. I was starting to think you'd lost your edge."

I chuckled, the tension in my chest easing just a fraction at his ridiculous bravado. Leave it to Vol to bring some levity to the direst of situations. I crossed my arms, giving him a playful, knowing look. "You do realize we're literally going to Hell, right?"

Vol shrugged, unbothered. "Yeah, but I was born for that." He winked, his grin never faltering. "Besides, I've been bored out of my mind, always locked up in this apartment. Hell sounds...fun."

Fun. Definitely not the word I would have used. Shaking my head, I let out a small, genuine laugh. "You're impossible, you know that?"

Vol jumped down from the couch and headed for the balcony door. "And you love me for it. Let me talk to angel-boy out there. I think I can convince him this is for the best."

On that note, he rapped his hairy little knuckles against the window until Rathiel turned. Rolling his eyes, Rathiel slid open the door and let my imp hop outside with him. I couldn't help but smile. The two hadn't had an easy start to the relationship, but it seemed they were growing on each other.

With a deep breath, I turned and spotted Purgatory sitting atop the fridge. "Hmm. What to do with you, big guy?"

An imp in Hell made complete sense to me. But a domesticated cat raised questions. It wasn't like there were any stores in Hell where I could buy pet supplies. Thankfully, he was a mouser, so I had faith he'd learn how to hunt the many pests in Hell. But we were going to fight a literal war. What help would he be with that—other than possibly providing Vol a steed to ride into battle. The image brought a smile to my lips.

“What do you say, Purrky? Wanna give Hell a chance?”

My cat puffed up his chest and let loose a very regal meow that I took to mean yes.

Guess we were all going then. A party of four—or maybe even six, if I could rope in Eliza and Mason—straight to Hell.

* * *

Did you enjoy Lily and Rathiel? Continue their story in *The Road to Hell* ...

Lucifer's rebellious daughter, driven by revenge. A vampire bound by regret. In the depths of Hell, their forbidden love could reignite—or consume them both.

Being Lucifer's daughter comes with baggage. And by baggage, I mean a destiny I never asked for, a prophecy I can't escape, and a to-do list straight from Hell. Literally.

Our mission? Destroy the fallen angels still loyal to my father and sever his ability to create more hellspawn. Without them, his army is finite—and beatable. But that's not all. To stand a chance against Lucifer, we'll need to find new allies and rebuild the rebellion he crushed the last time I dared to defy him. Easy, right?

And then there's Rathiel. The vampire who stole my memories, exiled me to Earth,

and shattered every ounce of trust I had in him. I should hate him—I want to hate him—but the way he looks at me, the way he sets my blood on fire with a single touch, makes it impossible. When he's near, I can barely think. When he's gone, I can hardly breathe. He's a constant reminder of everything I've lost—and everything I still want.

The path forward is clear: take down the fallen, reclaim my memories, and rally an army before Lucifer crushes us for good. But the hardest battle? Facing the feelings I can't control for the one who hurt me the most.

Because in Hell, some battles are fought with fire—and others with the heart.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:39 am

I stood from the couch and grabbed my jacket. I slipped it on and was halfway to the door when Rathiel's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"Where are you going?"

"To the bar," I said, keeping my tone light. "Mason's working tonight, and with luck, Eliza might show up too. Figured I'd knock out two birds with one stone."

"There's no way in Hell you're going alone," he said, striding toward me, his long legs making quick work of the distance.

I turned, frowning. "I'll be fine. It's just the bar. You know, the one where I used to work?"

"That's exactly the problem," he shot back. "That's the first place the fallen would look for you. I won't risk it. Remember what happened last time."

I flinched, the memory hitting like a punch to the gut. Jack's lifeless body flashed through my mind, but I quickly shoved the thought down and forced myself to hold Rathiel's gaze. I opened my mouth to argue again, but before I could get the words out, he closed the distance between us. His hand came up, and he gently clasped my chin, tilting my face up so I had no choice but to look at him. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver through me, and the emotions in his eyes—raw, vulnerable, and fierce—made my breath catch.

"I will not risk your life again," he said, his voice steady but brimming with intensity. "Not now, not ever. I've already lost you once, Lily."

His thumb brushed lightly against my jaw, and my heart thudded painfully in my chest. “You don’t remember,” he continued, his voice dropping to a whisper, “but I do. I remember what it felt like to see you broken, bleeding, and slipping away. I’ll be damned if I let that happen again.”

“Rathiel...” I whispered, unsure of what to say, unsure if I could even speak past the lump in my throat.

He leaned in slightly, his eyes never leaving mine. “You don’t have to do this alone, Lily. Not anymore. Whatever comes, wherever we go—I’m with you. Always.”

For a moment, I couldn’t breathe. The sincerity in his words, the way he said my name like it was a prayer, left me completely undone.

“Fine,” I said softly, my voice barely above a whisper. “But only if you promise not to hover like some overprotective watchdog.”

His lips twitched in the faintest ghost of a smile. “No promises.”

“Figures,” I muttered, stepping back and trying to ignore the warmth lingering where his hand had been. “Let’s go, then.”