



BETTER ANGELS

A Novella By

+ GEONN CANNON +

BETTER
ANGELS

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Author's Note

I know it's been a long time since I've had a novel come out, and I know a lot of people have been very patient waiting for me to produce a longer story. Now that *Gemini* is on the way (we're down to weeks, people, maybe days!), I decided it was time to thank everyone for their patience. So I present you with a novella. It's not novel-length, but it's close. With a little editing and padding, I could probably push it up to the word count necessary for a published novel. But I decided to go ahead and post it online so people could read a new, long story by me.

I say "I decided," but my webmistress did the lion's share of the work. All I did was write the thing. Easy as pie! :D On top of all the stuff she does for the website, she made sure that this book was nicely presented for all of you to enjoy. So when you send me feedback, be sure to drop a line to her as well.

I hope you enjoy the story! I get the feeling Riley Parra will make appearances in more stories in the future. We'll have to see. ;-)

For now, enjoy!

Geonn,
March 2009

At last we saw some people, huddled up against
The rain that was descending like railroad spikes and hammers
They were headed for the border, walking and then running,
Then they were gone into the fog, but Anne said
Underneath their jackets, she saw wings.

Josh Ritter, *Wings*

One

This far away from the center, the city began to reek. The tenements, the slums, the condemned buildings that still housed families unable to afford anything better, all combined to form the city's outer crust. Sometimes the elevated train still thundered through this part of town, lit from within like a shining bullet, giving the businesspeople aboard a look at what could have been. Many ignore it, some whisper a 'but for the grace' prayer, and then the train is gone again.

On street level, the stink was worse and more refined. Stinking plastic bags were stacked on the sidewalks because the garbage men couldn't be bothered to come here on a regular basis. Old Chinese food, various bodily fluids, and the underlying scent of decay. Patrolwoman Riley Parra entered the diner and felt the instantaneous shift of bodies on vinyl stools. Drug deals ceased, people stopped speaking mid-sentence, and every eye made a point to be somewhere other than the blue uniform that had just stepped through the door.

David Bowie wailed over the speaker system - "*Oooh, wham, bam, thank ya ma'am!*" - as she walked across the room to the counter. Riley was one of the few police in the city still willing to cross the imaginary line between the Good Side of the Tracks and the Bad Side. The general consensus was that if everyone on *that* side of town wanted to kill themselves, why not let them? Good riddance to bad rubbish, survival of the fittest and all that.

When questioned about why she bothered, Riley would simply put on her cap and slip the baton into her belt, shrug and say, "Call me an optimist."

She drummed her knuckles on the counter, and the owner reluctantly made his way over. He wiped his hands on a towel and showed his clean palms to her. "No crime here," he said.

"Glad to hear it, Leon," Riley said. "I need to know if you've heard about anything happening two streets over."

Leon pretended to think. "*This ain't rock and roll*," David Bowie shouted overhead, "*This is... genocide!*"

Finally, Leon said, "Nope. Nothing."

"I'm parking my patrol car right there," she said, pointing to it through the window. "Anything happens to it, Leon... if a bird shits on my windshield. I'm coming after you. Understand me?"

Leon muttered his understanding and Riley turned to leave the bar. She stopped at the door and looked over the people who were being very careful not to watch her. Skells and drunks and junkies, all watching her from the corners of their eyes, their world on hold until she had moved out of their orbits. She pushed the door open as David Bowie gave one last jab: "*Let me make it plain, gotta make way for the homo superior!*"

Riley sniffed as she stepped out onto the street. That pretty much summed up her superior's feelings for this part of town. Let them kill each other off, thin out the herd, then we can sweep in and clean the place up for ourselves. Any effort Riley put into trying to protect these people was wasted, as far as the top brass was concerned. She rolled her shoulders and started walking.

She was investigating a call that came in from dispatch, a rather bored woman explaining that her kids hadn't been home in the last three nights. The woman gave their descriptions and said, "If you find 'em, keep 'em. Probably afford 'em better than I can, anyway."

Riley was accustomed to this kind of call. No one at the department cared if she looked, the parent didn't care if she looked, and she doubted the kids, when and if she found them, would be happy that she had stuck her nose in. She would take them home, kicking and screaming, deliver them

to their disappointed mother, and return to the office to write a report that would most likely get shredded before it was read. So why bother?

“Because someone has to,” she muttered. It was the real answer to the question her colleagues always asked. It was the reason she continued to patrol the area even though no one wanted her there. For the one kid who hid behind her bed while her parents fought, or while gunfire erupted next door. She stayed for herself, twenty years ago, crying and covering her ears and praying someone would come and help.

No one ever came for her.

The people on this side of town never really agreed on what to call their little slice of Hell. Some called it the Badlands, and the more poetic called it Satan’s Shit Hole. The official name, in newspaper stories and on television, was No Man’s Land. Riley, in her reports and in her mind, thought of it as just Old City. It was where she grew up, and what had made her who she was. Even though she was one of the few to make it out and start a life on the bright side of town, it didn’t change who she was inside.

She knew that kids liked to hang out in burned shells of apartment buildings. She didn’t bother checking every building; there were subtle themes to each gathering. One was drugs, identifiable by the scents wafting from within. Another was sex, an impromptu orgy of teenagers and adults that had, more likely than not, never met before. Riley bypassed each of these with regret; there was nothing she could do on her own, and back-up would never arrive. She would have to pick her battles. Besides, there was every chance that once she got the pictures from their mother, she would have to come back and find the missing kids among the “celebrants.”

Riley was almost to the street where the missing kids lived when she heard a scream. She turned, now perfectly tuned in to her surroundings. She scanned the dark shadows between buildings, eyed the open or broken windows of the buildings, and put her hand on the butt of the weapon. She ran back the way she had come and turned down the alley from which she thought the scream had come.

Two dark shapes stood in the yellow sodium glow of a security light. One body was slumped, lifeless, held up by the other man's hands wrapped in the lapels of his coat. As Riley watched, the victor dropped his victim to the ground and stepped back.

"Police! Freeze!"

The man turned and looked at her, his face hidden by the hood he wore. He seemed to debate fight or flight, then dropped into a crouch. Riley thought he was going to lunge at her and drew her weapon. Instead, the man leapt up. He grabbed the bottom rung of a fire escape, yanked it down, and scrambled up onto the metal trellis. Riley stopped and said, "Freeze! I will shoot!" When the man continued his upward escape, Riley dropped down next to his victim. The man's eyes were still open, his features frozen in terror, but there was no doubt he was dead.

She looked up and saw her quarry was too far away and too protected by the fire escape for her to get a shot off. She dropped into a crouch, leapt, and just barely caught the bottom rung of the ladder. Her shoulders protested as she tried to haul herself up, kicking her feet as she tried to do a pull-up for the first time since the academy.

Finally, exhausted, she made it to the lowest level of the fire escape. "Freeze!" she called again, but she had no hopes that the killer would listen to her. She took a deep breath and began the ascent. She was already dripping with sweat, panting as she climbed the metal ladder. There was something wet on the rungs and her feet kept threatening to slip out from underneath her. She lost her cap somewhere along the way, and her black hair waved around her head as it came loose from her bun.

When she reached the roof, she thought all her work had been for nothing. She stood, panting, and looked for any sign of the killer. Her head throbbed, and her heart felt like it was going to explode. There was a shack at the far end of the roof, plus a small wedge-shaped outcropping that she assumed led to the stairs. She moved to the stairwell door and found a thick padlock holding it shut. She kept her gun out, aimed at

the ground as she moved toward the center of the roof. "All right, I know you didn't jump to the next building. Come on out."

Riley moved carefully, keeping her ears open for sounds of furtive movement. She reached the shack, braced herself, and stepped around the corner to face the back. She brought her gun up as she moved, ready to open fire, but it was unnecessary; no killer lurked, no length of pipe swung toward her head. She stepped away from the building and turned her attention to the roof. "All right, now, come on down. I've had enough of this."

"Pity," a voice said from right behind her.

Riley gasped and spun, but the man was too quick for her. He grabbed her gun hand, twisted, and popped the weapon from her grip. He tossed it across the roof with a flick of his wrist and closed his other hand around her neck. Riley suddenly couldn't breathe. She gasped and clawed at the man's hand as he lifted her off the tar of the roof. *God damn, how strong is this bastard?*

"You should have just let me go."

Moonlight and cast-off glow from the streetlights below gave her a look under his hood, and she felt something clench deep in her chest. The killer's face was hideous; a stretch of red, exposed muscle and yellow eyes. His mouth was the frozen grin of a skull, held together by thin rubber band tendons. Riley wanted to scream, wanted to faint, but she could only stare in terror as the man walked her to the edge of the building.

"Don't," she gasped.

The man tossed her without any apparent effort, and Riley went sailing over the edge of the roof. She fell in a slow, gentle arc, the wind cushioning her like a feather bed. She closed her eyes, anticipating the crushing, killing blow that would break every bone in her body and turn her into so much mush.

But the impact never came.

Riley opened her eyes some time later. She was flat on her back, spread out on the pavement. She could feel the sweat drying under her uniform, felt a painful throb in her back. But nothing seemed broken. She rolled onto her side and pressed her hand against the filthy concrete. She was hurt, but was undeniably alive and mobile. She coughed and rolled onto her hands and knees, then pushed herself up. Her head pounding and she squinted down the street. She was standing in front of the building she had... what? She had fallen. She must have fallen. There's no way she saw what she thought she saw. And no way anyone could have thrown her the way that... thing did.

She looked up at the building and counted the floors. Ten stories, about eight feet each. She had fallen eighty feet to the ground, maybe more, and all she had was a headache and a few sore bones. She checked her holster and found her service weapon was there, safe and sound. *It must have been a hallucination. That's the only explanation.*

Across the street, a man stood watching her. He wore a leather trenchcoat and blue slacks, his hands buried in the pockets of his coat. He dipped his chin to her, and Riley saluted with two fingers from her brow. The move made her remember that she had lost her cap, and she looked toward the alley where the chase began. When she looked back across the street, the man in the trenchcoat was gone.

Riley put her hand on the butt of her gun and walked to the alley to see if she could find her missing cap. She didn't want to have to requisition another one; she had no idea how she would even begin to fill out the paperwork.

Four years later

Blood-red flesh, eyes that burned with the fires of Hell. Riley felt the claws digging into her throat, the blood trickling down under her uniform blouse, and she knew this was it. The Thing stared at her, decayed teeth exposed in a snarl as it moved her to the edge of the building. When she was released, Riley knew she wasn't falling toward the street. Flames

reached for her, the screams of the damned echoed all around her. The Thing on the Roof watched her fall, and his hood fell back to reveal two curled horns.

Riley shouted, lashed out, and her fist met soft flesh. Someone next to her said, "Ow, watch it," and Riley realized she had been in the dream again. She sat up in bed, panting as if the air had been sucked from the room. She was drenched in sweat, her tank top clinging to her chest as she slipped out from under the covers.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom," Riley said. Her voice was raspy, as if she had been screaming all night. Maybe she had been. A past lover had once revealed that Riley would open her mouth and silently scream for ten, twenty minutes at a time. It came out as a thin, raspy wheeze, and it always ended as suddenly as it began.

Riley turned on the bathroom light, squinted in the sudden brightness, and looked at her reflection in the mirror. Four years, and she still had the nightmare about the roof. No, not a nightmare. A terror. A psychological shriek. It had been so long that she no longer knew what the hell had happened that night. She told herself it was a regular, run of the mill killer and she was tripping off a contact high from one of the parties she had passed. That was the only logical explanation. It was the only explanation that kept her sane.

Someone appeared in the bathroom door, blurry in the dirty glass. The redhead, of course. Riley closed her eyes and pushed her hands through her dark hair. "Go back to bed. I'm sorry I hit you."

"It's okay. We all have nightmares." She stepped into the room and put her hand on Riley's shoulder. Riley had to resist the urge to pull away from the touch. The redhead pushed aside the strap of Riley's tank top and traced the tattoo on her shoulder. "Wow, this is awesome. Who did it for you?"

Riley did pull away from the woman this time, shrugging so that her shirt covered the tattoo again. "You should go."

"But... I thought we talked about breakfast. And..."

“No. You should go. I’m not feeling well.”

The redhead looked disappointed, but took it like an adult. “All right. I’ll get my things.” She turned and went back into the bedroom. A few seconds later, she heard clothing being pulled on and items being shoved back into the bag they had come out of. Riley stepped to the bathtub, pushed aside the curtain, and turned on the hot water. She stripped out of her tank top and pushed her underwear down, hoping her guest would be gone by the time she got out of the shower.

T W O

Riley didn't go back to bed after leaving the shower. She could never sleep so soon after having the Dream. So she dressed in sweats, went into the living room, and turned on the TV. There was a rerun of *Family Feud* on the Game Show Network, a Richard Dawson episode. Seeing it reminded her of being in Nana's apartment, the smell of cigarettes and butterscotches and hoping maybe this time Mommy wouldn't come home after all. Halfway through one of the rounds, Riley heard a shout from down the hall. A woman's voice starting high, ending low and then breaking off into a sob.

She stood up and walked casually to the front door. She was barefoot and unarmed, wearing plain gray sweats. She took a moment to assess the situation; the junk-head at the end of the hall was standing in his doorway, hand clasped around his "girlfriend's" upper arm, bent low to whisper something in her ear. He had to bend low because she was currently curled up against the wall, one hand covering her face as she shook with her tears.

The man looked up as Riley approached. He sneered and said, "What, you want round two?"

Riley didn't answer him. She got within arm's reach of him and swung her arm like a sword. The flat edge of her hand caught him in the throat, right at the Adam's apple, and he choked. Riley followed up by grabbing a handful of his greasy hair, yanking his head back, and rushing him toward the wall. Something - drywall, cartilage, she didn't care which - cracked when he hit, and the man went down.

Riley looked at the woman, who had a vivid red mark on her forearm. There was another mark, barely distinguishable from the older bruises, on her face. She was reed thin, and she

lowered her chin in an attempt to cover her face with her black-and-white striped hair. "Are you okay?"

"I..."

"Get out before he gets up."

The girl looked at her boyfriend and decided to take Riley's advice. She scrambled to her feet, got to the stairs and disappeared in a flurry of footsteps pounding on the wooden steps. Riley turned back to the guy and hauled him to his feet. She pressed him against the wall and said, "I am a police officer. If you ever give me a reason to acknowledge your existence, so help me God, I will make you sorry. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah. Sure."

She released him and stepped back. His apartment door was open, and she could smell the combined reek of several drugs. She wrinkled her nose as she heard the familiar ring of her cell phone down the hall. She released the junkie and said, "Move. Out of the building. Tomorrow." She turned and went back to her apartment. She slammed the door, picked up her cell phone, and snapped it open. "What?"

"Whoa, testy. Did I wake you up?"

The voice belonged to Kara Sweet, Riley's partner. She sighed and sat on the edge of the couch. "We got a body," Riley said with a sigh.

"We got a body," Kara confirmed. "You're going to want your high-waters for this one."

Riley groaned. The day was getting off to a wonderful start. And the most horrible part was that it probably wouldn't even be her worst day that week. She got the specifics from Kara, then hung up and went to go get dressed.

The crime scene was at the so-called waterfront on the very edge of No Man's Land. Riley still hated the name, but the new mayor declared the moniker official during his inaugural address two years earlier. Since then, things in the bad part of

town had only gotten worse. Rather than all the dregs of society dying off, they had grown stronger. People screwing anything and everything that moved bred new generations of leeches, and the leeches expanded inward. No Man's Land had nearly doubled in size since Riley first joined the force. Before long, the entire city would fall to decay. She wondered if anyone would be alive to mourn it, or sober enough to care.

The sun was just starting to rise when Riley arrived at the scene. Kara Sweet, also known as Sweet Kara by several men on the force, was standing just outside of the yellow police tape. She spotted Riley getting out of her car and walked over. Kara wore tight blue jeans, a baggy white peasant blouse, and a brown leather jacket. Her blonde hair was cut short and spiky. Riley looked her over and said, "Did we cut your date short?"

"Call it business casual," Kara said. She gestured toward the cliff. "Sewage pipes. We're always the lucky ones, aren't we?"

Riley sighed and ducked under the tape. As they approached, she caught a whiff of the unmistakable stench that came with sewage dumping. The ground was littered with orange juice cartons, Styrofoam containers, used condoms, used needles, diapers and take-out cartons, evidence that the people of No Man's Land didn't even bother to toss their trash into plastic bags before throwing it out. She wrinkled her nose and focused on the crime scene.

A group of forensic technicians were gathered around one of the pipes that jutted from the side of the cliff like stubs of broken finger bones. Kara took Riley's hand to help her descend without falling, Kara's red cowgirl boots digging in to the mud to give her better balance than Riley's sneakers afforded.

One of the technicians handed Riley a flashlight. "Don't touch anything," he warned.

"I've been doing this longer than you," she griped. She crouched in front of the pipe and shined the light inside.

The body was lying on its side, arms and legs crossed in front. The head was bent forward, so all they could see was

thick blonde hair. She leaned to the left and saw that the man was either naked or wearing very skimpy underwear. Blood smeared the corrugated metal of the pipe, top and bottom. The middle of the man's back was flayed, as if an entire layer of skin had been excised. Riley made a face and said, "Figure that wound on the back is what killed him?"

"Don't know until we get him out of there," the tech said. "Of course, I haven't been doing this as long as you."

She handed him the flashlight and said, "Well, then, get him out of there." She brushed her hands on her jeans and joined Kara a few feet away.

Kara was looking up at the city, the lights glowing in the shattered buildings. She watched Riley approach and gestured. "You grew up around here, didn't you?"

"Close enough to smell the shit down here. Good place to hide a body. No one will smell it, no one will come down here to see it." She frowned. "How was it found, anyway?"

"Some guy's dog. Must have smelled the blood or something."

"We're lucky Fido didn't play fetch."

The technicians got the body out of the pipe and laid him out on a tarp. He was definitely naked, his porcelain white skin untouched by violence. No bruises, no cuts, no bullet wounds other than the obvious. The left side of his body was stained black and purple with livor mortis. Riley moved closer and said, "Give me some gloves." She snapped the rubber gloves on and pushed the body up so she could examine his back. One of the techs held the corpse up and Riley twisted her head to look at the wound.

"Nasty. What do you think, Kara? Blood loss? Shock?"

"Someone carved a hole in his back, so he decided to crawl into the pipe and die?"

"I don't see any other wounds." They let the body back down and Riley stood up. "Let me know as soon as you have a cause of death." To Kara, she said, "I guess there was no wallet lying around with a driver's license sitting in plain sight? So we'll

have to wait for the fingerprints to come back before we know who this guy is.”

“Yep. Care to join me in a door-to-door? See some of your old friends and neighbors?”

Riley eyed the buildings along the waterfront with distaste. “I never had any neighbors,” she said. “And any friends, I left behind a long time ago.”

Riley made the rounds in the nearest apartment buildings while Kara took the apartments further down. A few doors she knocked at revealed people who were wide awake, likely on their way to bed, while others revealed the bloodshot, wide eyes of paranoid druggies roused from their nightly comas. The only thing everyone had in common was that they were too caught up in whatever they were doing - sex, drugs, sleep - that no one had bothered to look out the window. Riley finished with the apartment on the top floor and trudged wearily down the stairs to the sidewalk.

She didn’t see Kara, so she assumed she had a few seconds to herself. She moved to the edge of the sidewalk, folded her arms, and watched as the crime scene guys wandered across the waterfront. In an ordinary town, this would be a huge happening. The dawn was breaking, people would be getting ready to go to work, and everyone would gather outside the police tape with shocked expressions that something so terrible could happen on their doorstep.

Not here, though. In No Man’s Land, life went on. People would come downstairs, see the crime tape and the flashing lights, and take alternate routes to wherever they needed to go. Not to work, most likely, unless that work involved standing on a street corner looking inconspicuous.

Riley saw her first dead body when she was five years old. He had been in her apartment stairwell, the needle still hanging from his emaciated arm. His eyes were open and he seemed to be staring at her, imploring her for help. She thought she would never get over it. But life had a funny way of trumping her worst nightmares, time and again.

“Got a smoke?”

Riley turned to see a woman exiting the building she had just canvassed. She reached into her jacket, found the pack of smokes she kept on hand for the ever-quitting Kara, and tapped one out. She held it out to the prostitute, who lit it using a match she produced from somewhere in her leather jacket. She took a deep drag, held it, then blew it from her nostrils in twin streams like a dragon. “Thanks. Had to get the taste out of my mouth.”

“Long night?”

“Three apartments,” the woman said. She took another drag. “You know what it’s like trying to be just as fresh for Appointment Number Three as you were for Number One?”

“No one likes to know they were third in line.”

The prostitute laughed gave a low, hoarse laugh. “Actually, some of them do.”

Riley said, “What time did you get to Mister Three?”

“Honey, I don’t know what time it is now.”

The prostitute was staring across the street at the crime scene, but she didn’t seem to be curious about it. Riley nodded. “You see anything happen over there?”

“Nothing I want to get involved with.”

“Just between you and me, then,” Riley said. “You give me information that helps me fill in some blanks, no one has to know where the information came from.”

The prostitute hesitated for a moment, so Riley reached back into her pocket. She pulled out the pack of cigarettes and said, “Here. For later.”

“Hmph. I cost way more than a pack of cigs, lady.”

“All I want is to talk.”

She took another drag, then took the pack. “That’s what they all say, honey.” She sighed, rolled her shoulders, and pointed across the street. “When I showed up, there were two guys

standing on the rocks by the water. Like they were waiting for someone. It wasn't too cold, but they were both wearing big jackets. Like, um. Dick Tracy. Third guy comes walking down the street and he passed me, going down to the water."

"Anything unusual about him?"

"Sometimes, a guy will pull up in a car, and he'll ask you how much you charge. Sometimes you get in the car, go around the corner, and you get a little quick cash." Riley nodded. "Do this often enough, you know what cars not to get into. You get a sense. When this guy walked past me tonight, I wouldn't have gotten into his car for a million bucks. I've been with my share of assholes, got the bruises to prove it. But this guy made me want to run home and jump back into bed."

"Got a description?"

"Mm. He was wearing one of those hoodies pulled down over his face."

Riley felt like skeleton fingers were tracing up and down her spine. *Not only impossible, but ridiculous. The nightmare is getting to you.*

"When was that?"

"'Bout three hours ago."

Riley whistled. "What did you have up there, a marathon man?"

"Quickie followed by a nap followed by a hand job," she said. "Girl's gotta sleep."

"Yes, she does. Thanks for your help."

"Any time, sugar." She looked Riley up and down and said, "I have a police discount, you know. If you ever—"

"Thanks," Riley said again.

The prostitute lifted a shoulder and walked away. She passed Kara and they exchanged hellos. Kara was fiddling with a notepad as she approached Riley. "Hey. What were you talking to Ray about?"

Riley laughed. "Her name is Ray?"

Kara lifted her shoulder. "Ray can be a girl's name. What did she say?"

"I found out there were two guys, met by a third, standing down where we found our body."

"I got you one better," Kara said. "Two guys who met with a third, and one of them had a sword."

"A *what*?"

Kara nodded and motioned over her shoulder. "Landlord down there saw a guy climbing up the embankment with a sword."

Riley frowned at that. The wound she saw would have needed precision. She pictured the victim leaning forward, head bowed, while someone brought the sword down like a guillotine blade. The sword would have to have twisted to take out such a large chunk. It would be painful, sure, but would it be enough to cause death? She shook her head; that was for Gillian to answer. She checked her watch and said, "It'll take the ME some time to check out the body. Want some breakfast?"

"If you're paying."

"I just have to swing by my apartment and pick up some cash."

"You don't carry cash in No Man's Land anymore?"

Riley scoffed. "You're lucky I still carry my badge. I'm always afraid someone is going to steal the thing and melt it down."

Riley drove to her apartment while Kara went straight to the diner. Riley left her car running as she went inside, jogging up the stairs. When she reached her floor, she saw the black-and-white haired girl sitting on the floor outside her boyfriend's apartment. She looked up, recognized Riley, and had the

decency to look ashamed of herself. She looked down at her hands, twisting the sleeves of her jacket between her fingers.

“You don’t understand,” the girl said.

Riley shook her head. “Thank God for that.”

She walked past the girl without looking back, retrieved her wallet, and headed back downstairs for breakfast. She would have prayed that she wouldn’t run into the girl again in a more professional capacity, but she was done with praying. Too many had gone unanswered.

Three

The Four-Ten Diner took up the ground floor of a run-down building that straddled the current line between the haves and have-nots, the bright from the dim, and No Man's Land from the 'good part of town.' A circular counter took up most of the space in the middle of the room, with stools all around it like satellites orbiting a planet. Several booths hugged the walls, for those diners who preferred the illusion of privacy.

Riley entered and spotted Kara sitting in the furthest booth from the door. She waved off the hostess and rounded the counter. Kara spotted her and said, "I already ordered you a coffee and the Big Time Breakfast."

"The kind with pancakes?"

"Mm-hmm."

Riley slid into the booth and shrugged out of her jacket. "Thanks."

"You look pissed off."

"Vicious cycle," Riley sighed. She folded her hands on top of the table and looked around the room. Few people from the good side of town risked coming this close to No Man's Land unless they had the protection of a badge. Conversely, no one from No Man's Land risked coming so close to the good side of town for fear of running afoul of the police. The Four-Ten, realizing they had to adjust or go broke, began catering exclusively to cops. At the moment, she and Kara had the place to themselves.

Riley sighed and leaned back. The vinyl of the booth cracked against her shoulders. "What do you think about our fellow with the sword?"

“Role-play gone wrong.”

Riley shook her head. “The worst role-play I ever had, I ended up handcuffed to my bed minus a wallet and my TV. That’s a far cry from getting part of my back hacked off.”

“True,” Kara said. “You never did thank me for letting you out of those handcuffs.”

“It took you an hour to show up.”

“I could have taken some pictures. Made you a legend at the department.”

Riley rolled her eyes as their breakfast was delivered. Riley tapped the edge of her coffee cup and told the waitress, “Keep this coming.” She poked at her eggs briefly before she dove in. It already felt like it had been an extremely long day, and it truly hadn’t even started yet. She was going to need all the energy she could get just to make it to dusk.

Kara looked up as the front door of the diner opened. “Uh-oh. Gird your loins.”

Riley tensed slightly and turned as someone came to a stop next to their table. She tried to hide the irritation on her face when she recognized Lieutenant Nina Hathaway’s signature perfume. Hathaway put her hand on Riley’s back, right under the collar of her blouse, and said, “Good morning, ladies. I heard you got an early start today.”

“Yep,” Kara said. “Body down on the waterfront.”

“Well, close it quick. It’s probably just another drug deal gone bad. We don’t want to waste unnecessary resources on something like that. If either of you need to take off early today, let me know.” She moved her hand to Riley’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’ll let you ladies get back to your breakfast. Good luck with the case.” She backed away, but left her hand in place much longer than necessary.

When she was finally gone, Riley sighed and shook her head.

“You know what you need to do,” Kara said. “You need to fuck her. And do it badly. Make her forget you ever existed.”

Riley scoffed. "If only it was that easy."

"You saying you don't find her attractive?"

"Oh, she's attractive," Riley said. She turned and watched as Hathaway took a seat at the counter. Strong features, high cheekbones, and long dark hair that looked red in a certain light. She wore one of her navy blue business suits, with a black shirt and matching tie. Riley shook her head and went back to her breakfast. "She's just not my type. And she's my boss."

"All I'm saying is, the women you drag home with you, how would it be different than spending the night with Hathaway?"

"I never have to see those women again," Riley said. She was saved from further discussion by her pager going off. A moment later, Kara's sounded as well. She reached down and checked the number. "Dr. Hunt is ready for us." She pulled her wallet from her slacks, dropped enough money for the meal, and slid out of the booth.

Hathaway turned to watch them leave and said, "Be careful you two."

"We'll do our best," Kara said. "It's a dangerous old world out there."

The body that had been pulled out of the pipe was spread out face-down on one of the cold metal tables in the morgue. Two other new arrivals occupied the tables to either side, covered by stiff white sheets. Kara applied gel under her nostrils to keep the stink away, but Riley didn't bother. They pushed into the starkly lit room where Gillian Hunt, the medical examiner, stood waiting. She was a few years older than Riley, chestnut-colored hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes were large and green, her thin lips pressed together as she leaned against the tile wall.

"Give us good news, Jill," Riley said as she walked into the morgue.

"Afraid I don't have much," Gillian said. Her voice was still dipped in the honey of the South, despite having moved from there in her teens. She pushed away from the wall and led the detectives to the table. "No wounds besides the obvious gouge on the back. Victim was a white male in good health, about twenty-five to thirty years old. No identifying marks or scars. Unusual lack of body hair. Not shaved, just... not there. He has hair on his head, eyelashes and eyebrows, so it's not alopecia universalis or chemo. I'll know more once I run some tests."

Riley looked down at the body. The missing piece of flesh and muscle looked like a diamond at this angle. The muscles that flanked the exposed spine looked like hamburger meat, but it had been a clean cut. The spine didn't appear damaged.

Gillian continued. "Also, I thought this was weird." She touched the skin just above the top curve of the wound. "These muscles here."

"What about them?"

"I have no idea what they are. I've never seen them before. They're extremely well developed. Whatever they are, they were cut completely in half."

Riley moved closer and examined the exposed musculature. The extraneous muscle began near the deltoid on each side, and stretched toward the spine. She frowned and shook her head. "That's weird. So how did he die?"

"At first glance, I would say he bled out. I'll know more once I finish the autopsy."

Riley stepped back and sighed. "Anything interesting on the type of blade?"

Gillian shook her head. "No such luck. It was a single, very sharp blade with nothing identifiable about it. You could find a couple dozen in novelty shops, I bet."

Kara said, "Hey, there's an idea." To Riley, she said, "I'll spring for the sword if there's anyone you want to frame."

“Let’s give the case a full day before we start cheating,” she said. “But I’ll keep your offer in mind.” She put her hand on Gillian’s arm and said, “Thanks, Jill.”

“Any time you need me to look at a body, you know where to find me.”

Kara followed Riley out of the morgue and laughed as they approached the elevator. “The hunted has become the predator.”

“What are you talking about?”

Kara nodded toward the morgue. “You and the Doc. Now *that* was flirting. I guess she is your type?”

The elevator doors opened and Riley stepped inside. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kara pressed against Riley’s side. “Any time you need me to... look at a body, Detective...” Her voice was thick Southern Belle, and she fluttered her eyelashes. “Why, you just call me right up and I’ll be there right away.”

Riley rolled her eyes. It was going to be a very long day.

They spent the next hour and a half calling shops in the area that might conceivably carry such a sword like the kind Kara’s witness described. Riley was shocked to discover that there were a multitude of shops within walking distance that provided swords, maces, full-body knight armor, and everything else you could want to create your own medieval castle.

She dialed the next number and looked across her desk at Kara’s workspace. Her desk was covered with little toys, knick knacks, and photos of family. A little girl with unbelievably large eyes smiled up at the photographer with a smile missing three teeth. Riley’s desk, on the other hand, had one photo of herself at the police academy graduation, and various stacks of memos and reports waiting to be filed. Nothing more personal than a coffee mug with her name on the bottom. She sighed, closed her eyes as the phone was answered and began the spiel.

"Hello, sir. I'm Detective Riley Parra..."

One of the shops said they sold custom swords, but they didn't want to discuss customer information over the phone. Kara decided she would be the one to go, leaving Riley to man the phones and do the paperwork. Riley was in the middle of writing down the location of the body when someone across the bullpen called, "Parra! Line three."

She picked up the phone and pressed the flashing light. "Detective Parra."

"Are you the detective working on the waterfront murder?"

"I am," she said. She wondered if the report could have possibly hit the news yet. "Do you have any information on that?"

"Do not take things at face value. Nothing is what it seems. Have you looked into his eyes?"

"Whose eyes?"

"The eyes of the victim."

"Listen, if you want to..." There was a click, and she knew the call had been disconnected. She sighed, shook her head, and placed the phone back in the cradle. She got up, stretched, and looked around the bullpen. She saw Lieutenant Hathaway in her office, eyeing her through the blinds. She realized that, by stretching, she had stretched her blouse across her breasts and given the boss an eyeful. *Hope you enjoyed the show you just got*, she thought. *It's as close as you'll ever get to the real thing.*

Riley went into the break room still thinking about the call. She couldn't help wondering if she had, in fact, seen the victim's face. When the body was taken from the pipe, she was too busy looking for any other wounds to pay too much attention to what the man looked like. And then, in the morgue, Gillian - Dr. Hunt - had laid him out facedown so they could see the peculiar muscles in his back.

Ordinarily, it wouldn't have bothered Riley. She had investigated entire cases without knowing what the victim looked like. Disfigurement, beheadings, plain old negligence

to look at a picture. But she knew that the phone call was going to bother her. And the body was right downstairs. It would only take thirty seconds to take a peek. Besides, it would give her a chance to (*see Gillian again*) put off paperwork for a while.

She got a cup of coffee and carried it to the elevator doors. The family of the victim would appreciate her effort, if they ever found his family. If he had a family to find. It was human decency. The strange phone call was entirely beside the point.

Riley arrived at the morgue to see all three bodies were covered and Gillian was nowhere to be seen. She ignored the middle table and walked to the office at the back of the area. Gillian was sitting at her desk with the crumbling remains of an egg sandwich on the desk in front of her. She was turned away from the door, going through an open filing cabinet drawer.

Riley stopped and considered Gillian with a critical eye. Sure, she was attractive. But any woman who could avoid looking like death warmed over after working under fluorescents all day, wearing little to no make-up and pea-green scrubs deserved praise. They flirted a bit, sure, but that didn't mean Riley wanted her. It didn't mean there was any underlying attraction that she was denying.

Gillian turned, spotted Riley out of the corner of her eye, and drew in a sharp breath. She coughed, pounded her chest, and shook her head. "God. Detective Parra. I didn't know anyone was down here."

"Sorry," Riley said. She wanted to pat Gillian's back, help her get the obstruction clear, but that would involve crossing the threshold of the office. It felt like a violation of privacy that she wasn't comfortable taking after spending so long ogling the woman. She waited until Gillian could breathe again and said, "I was wondering if I could take another look at the body."

"Sure." Gillian said. She stood up and Riley stepped aside to let her out of the office. "I was going to start the autopsy right after breakfast."

Riley gestured at the other covered bodies. "These guys don't take precedence?"

"Not for autopsy," Gillian said. "One person was shot in the face; the other was a hundred and three years old."

"A hundred and three?"

"Never even saw the bus."

Riley smirked as Gillian pulled back the sheet. "What did you want to look at?"

"The face."

The body was still lying facedown, so Gillian moved to one side and put one hand on his shoulder, the other in the middle of his back above the wound. She rolled the body until it was on its side and Riley stepped forward. She turned her head to the side and looked at the death mask of the man they pulled from the drain.

Plain features, pale eyebrows which were almost invisible against the bloodless face. His mouth hung slack. There was absolutely nothing remarkable about him, no reason for him to stand out in a crowd. But nonetheless...

It came back to her in a rush of memory. A man standing on a street corner, wearing a trenchcoat and staring at her. She had seen him moments after The Thing threw her off the roof of the building. It was the man she had seen the night she should have died.

"Riley?" Gillian said.

"Oh, my God. I know this man. Or... I've seen him."

"Where?"

Riley shook her head. "I think he saved my life."

F O U R

Riley and Gillian stood looking at the back of the dead man. Finally, Gillian broke the silence. "Are you going to remove yourself from the case?"

"There's no reason to. I only saw him for a moment, and we didn't even speak to one another. I'm not even sure he *did* anything. He was just there. No history. Nothing to compromise my professionalism." Not to mention the fact that if she handed the case off to someone else, it would likely be buried and forgotten within a matter of hours. For some reason, she couldn't let that happen. He had been present on one of the most unusual nights of Riley's life. He was proof that the night had happened. She felt she owed him.

She shook her head and looked at Gillian. "Do you have a picture of his face?"

"Yeah," Gillian said. She went to the file and withdrew a glossy photograph. It had been taken from overhead, the man's features washed out by the morgue lighting. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Riley nodded. "Fine. It was just a shock to the system when I saw him. We can keep this just between us, right?"

"Sure. Just take it easy. It looked like seeing his face took a lot out of you." She reached out and touched Riley's arm. "Take care of yourself. I don't want to see you down here unless you're upright and conscious."

"You and me both," Riley said. She took the picture and said, "Thanks, Doc."

"Any time, Detective."

Riley took the photo of the dead man up to the lab and gave it to an artist who could make the man look sort-of alive again. Now she at least knew he was from No Man's Land, or at least had a past there. Maybe he had friends, a family, people who would miss him. The artist said he would get it out as soon as possible and she left him to his work.

Upstairs, there was a report from AFIS waiting on her desk. No matches to the dead man's fingerprints. She put it aside and called the switchboard downstairs to get a trace on the number that had just called her. After a moment, the operator came back on the line. "I'm sorry, Detective Parra. No call has been put through to you in the past two hours."

Riley frowned, but she felt a twitch of unease at the news. "It may have come through the tip line," she said. The call hadn't come to her phone, after all. Someone had told her there was a call for her. She looked around the bullpen, but couldn't remember where the shout had come from. "Could you check all incoming calls during that period?"

There was a quiet sigh on the other end of the line as the operator did as she requested. "There were no calls."

"What?" Riley said. "No calls at all? We're talking a ten minute period."

"I can only tell you what the computer tells me, Detective. I'm sorry."

Riley pressed her lips together. "Fine. Sorry. Thank you for your help." She hung up and then stared at the phone.

She could explain away the fact there was no record of the call. If someone called any other phone in the office, and then asked for her phone. There were a multitude of things to be concerned about. First, how did the caller know she would recognize the body? How did he even know she was on the case? How could the call not only vanish from the records, how could the department have gone ten minutes without a call? Even now she could hear three or four phones ringing across the room.

The man from the pipe had no identity. And yet someone was already pulling strings to throw the investigation off the

tracks. Why go through all this trouble when there was a very good chance they would hit a wall by the end of the shift? As much as Riley hated to admit it, the body could easily become just one of the many faceless buried in a Potter's Field. Unknown, not mourned, just forgotten.

She wished she had gone with Kara. Going from store to store might be dull and monotonous, but at this point, she would have preferred the boredom.

Kara returned just after noon with a package from the sub shop down the street. Riley, who had noticed her hunger ten minutes before her partner walked in the door, grabbed for the bag before Kara could even sit down. "Tuna, no tomatoes?" she said.

"Yep," Kara said. She took off her jacket and draped it over the back of her chair. "I figured my trip shouldn't be a complete bust. You wouldn't believe some of the people who hang out in these medieval gear shops."

"A lot of Dungeons and Dragons geeks?"

"Hey, I played D&D," Kara said. "But you're pretty close. Guys who are picking out codpieces like I picked out my last car."

Riley smirked. "Probably buying them all a few sizes too big." She took a bite of her sandwich and leaned back. "So no luck?"

"All the swords in all the stores are blunted, and every owner was offended by my implication that they could be sharpened and become a weapon. But I got a look at their customer list, and eighteen swords have been sold across the city in the last six months."

Riley shook her head. "Great. Armor piercing bullets aren't bad enough, now we have to worry about gang bangers swinging Excalibur at my head next time I go into a warehouse."

"They ain't never givin' up the Gat," Kara said with a bad mobster accent. She tore off a chunk of her sandwich and popped it into her mouth.

"Do you have the customer list?"

"Yeah, but I don't see what good it would do."

Riley shrugged. "Just because someone bought a blunt sword doesn't mean it stayed blunt. There are a lot of ways to sharpen a sword. It's worth looking into. And it's not like we have a boatload of leads in this case."

Kara raised her eyebrows and dipped her head. "True." She bent down and withdrew a few sheets of paper from her bag. She passed it across their desks and said, "The ones circled in red are regular customers. Unless you think our guy was killed by nineteen year old Scotty Bernstein, I don't think you'll find our guy on there."

"Can't hurt to look," Riley said as she scanned the list.

"If you say so. That's why you're the detective and I'm the eye candy."

Riley snorted and shook her head.

Kara decided tagging along on the interviews would be more productive than sitting in the office, so she offered to drive. They used the map in the glove compartment to narrow the list of possibilities from eighteen down to eight. People over the age of 75, addresses that weren't within walking distance of the waterfront, and women were considered unlikely and crossed out.

The first house on the list was a duplex on the north side of town. The neighborhood managed to present the togetherness of the good part of town while still shamefully exhibiting the worst parts of No Man's Land. The front yard of Martin Meade's house was ringed by a rusted chain link fence.

Riley scanned the yard for a dog, and saw only abandoned toys and a tall swing set that looked potentially fatal to any kid dumb enough to get onto it. Riley unlatched the gate and led

the way across the dry, yellow grass. The porch had a washing machine and dryer parked on either side of the door, both of them looking older than the swing set. There were tools and car parts housed within the washing machine basin.

"I think I saw this place in Good Housekeeping," she said as she rang the doorbell.

Kara covered her mouth with her hand and pretended to scan the neighborhood.

The door opened and revealed a man in baggy sweatpants and a white T-shirt. His head was shaved and three hoop earrings ran along the outer shell of his ear. He looked between them and said, "What?"

"Martin Meade?"

"Yeah?"

They flashed their badges. "I'm Detective Parra, Detective Sweet. We'd like to ask you a few questions and then we'll be out of your hair."

"Questions?"

"You bought a sword about three months ago, is that correct?" He nodded. "We'd like to see it, if we may."

"Why?"

"We just need to confirm something."

He sighed and stepped back into the house. They waited and, a few seconds later, he reappeared with a sword. It was about four feet long and the blade caught the afternoon sun. Riley took the sword and immediately saw that the hilt had a thin layer of dust. The edge was, as reported, blunt. She turned the weapon around in her hand, but she was already discounting Meade as a suspect before she checked the list from the store. The sword in her hand matched the one on file.

She handed the sword back. "Thank you, Mr. Meade."

"Whatever."

“Could you do me a favor?” Kara asked.

Meade lifted his shoulder in a half-assed shrug.

“Can you say two words together?”

“What?”

“Humor me.”

“Why?”

“Any two words.”

Meade frowned at her, sure he was being mocked but unsure how. He looked between the two women and finally said, “We done?”

Kara smiled. “Thank you.”

“Whatever.” He pushed the door shut.

Riley brushed past Kara on the way to the car. “It’s not polite to make fun of the mentally disabled,” she said.

“You have your hobbies...” Kara said. She said, “Where to now, boss?”

“Lake Street. And then six more after that.”

Kara sighed and rolled her eyes. “It’s going to be a long day.”

Kara pleaded exhaustion after five visitations and convinced Riley to call it a day after five houses. Kara drove Riley back to the station where her car was waiting in the underground parking. Kara leaned back and looked through the windshield. “So we’ll tackle the other three places tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I’m going to come in late. Try to sleep in and make up for the early morning today. It’s not like the body is going anywhere.”

Kara nodded. “All right. So we’ll skip breakfast. I’ll meet you up at the office around ten. I doubt the last three will be any better than the first five. Maybe we could skip it completely.”

"You just want to get out of knocking on doors. What, you got a new pair of shoes or something?" Kara shrugged. "Are you heading home?"

"The night is young," Kara said.

Riley nodded. "It may well be, but I'm not. Paint part of the town red for me."

Kara saluted as Riley got out of the car. Riley shut the door, stepped back, and watched until Kara's taillights disappeared around a row of cars. She sighed, rolled her shoulders, and pulled her keys from her pocket. She had just opened the driver's side door when the elevator bell sounded. Riley tossed her jacket into the car and casually glanced up to see who was coming out of the elevator.

Gillian's hair was down, and a long black coat covered her scrubs. She wore a pair of black-framed eyeglasses and looked like it was taking all her energy just to stay upright. Riley thought about ducking into her car, but she found herself waiting until Gillian noticed her. Gillian, though exhausted, mustered up a smile.

"Hello, Detective Parra. The Neanderthals had it right, huh?"

Riley was thrown. "Uh..."

"Walking with their knuckles dragging the ground. None of this staying upright crap." She leaned against the trunk of Riley's car and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Oh. Right. Well... imagine how bad their backs must have felt."

"Touché," Gillian said. "Calling it a day, then?"

Riley nodded. "Only so many doors my knuckles can knock in the course of one day."

"And only so many people you can stand speaking to." She smiled.

"Do you need a ride to your car?"

Gillian shook her head. "I'm right down here at the end of the row."

Riley nodded. "Okay." She didn't know what else to talk about, but she didn't want to end the conversation. "Did you get a chance to finish the autopsy on my guy?"

"Yeah. The report is on your desk. Basically it says what I thought originally. The guy wasn't beat up, didn't fight back, and died from bleeding out. He had been dead for about three hours when you pulled him from the pipe. Rigor mortis was just setting in."

"Good timing," Riley said. "Would've been hell to get him out of the pipe if he was literally a stiff."

Gillian smiled and pushed away from Riley's car. "Well, I've kept you long enough. Thanks for letting me rest for a moment."

"No problem."

"Good night, Detective."

"Good night, Doctor."

Riley got into her car and used the mirrors to watch Gillian walk away. She wondered if there really was an attraction there. There was admiration, and camaraderie. Riley impressed Gillian the first time they met by entering the morgue without plugging her nose or appearing disgusted. Every other detective on the force relied on Vaseline or holding handkerchiefs in front of their faces, but Riley, in Gillian's words, was the first person to "look me in the eye and speak to me without a mask."

I'm not going to create a crush on a coworker, she swore to herself as she backed out of her space. I'm not going to sleep with a coworker. I am not going to put myself in a situation where I will have to work with a former lover.

F i v e

Riley was surprised to find the apartment at the top of the stairs was vacant when she got home. The door was open, revealing a quickly evacuated room. She stopped at the doorway and leaned into the room. She saw a few items that remained, dropped on the floor and forgotten. She suddenly recalled the scene that morning, the skunk-haired girl and her boyfriend. It felt like a lifetime ago. She felt a twinge of guilt about making the kid move, but she doubted he would have stuck around knowing a cop lived three apartments away from him.

She tossed her things onto her couch and closed the door behind her. Then she took the time to turn two locks and stretch the safety chain into place. *The only difference between us and the criminals is that we willingly lock ourselves into our cells.* The voice of her first partner echoed in her head as she turned and went into the kitchen. She hadn't thought about him in years, but now she longed for his guidance.

Donald Rafferty was one of the few cops who saw the decaying of the city and understood that it was only a matter of time before the entire place fell to the dogs like No Man's Land. He did his best to stop the decline, but there were times when he would shake his head and throw up his hands. "Like trying to catch every damn snowflake before it hits the ground. You might catch a couple, but before you know it, your boots are buried."

Raff died when some teenager decided he needed a new set of wheels. Raff stepped in and the kid panicked. All he had was a switchblade, but he made it work for him.

Because of Rafferty's death, Riley never got involved with a lot of the crimes she found off-duty. A kid dealing drugs outside of the restaurant where she was getting Chinese just gave her the hairy eyeball until she was back in her car. If she passed someone using a Slim Jim on a car, she would cross the street. But there were times when she just couldn't hold back. Times like that, she could be dangerous. She could break a guy's nose and kick him out of his home.

She took a beer from the fridge and went into the bedroom. She undressed out of what she considered her uniform and changed into a pair of shorts and a thick sweater. She wasn't lying when she told Kara she wasn't young anymore. She couldn't bear the thought of heading downtown, trying to decide which bar was on the "right" side of the street in the good part of town, and then setting up camp in the dim hopes that someone who was attractive *to* her as well as attracted to her would wander through.

Riley remembered the redhead from the night before. She was a witness in a previous case, and Riley had sensed the attraction immediately. As she and Kara were leaving, she handed over her card and said, "If you need anything, give me a call. Day or night." A week after the case closed, the phone rang. They met at a restaurant near Riley's apartment, and the woman slipped her hand onto Riley's thigh under the table.

They parted on good enough terms, she thought. Nightmare-induced punching aside. Maybe the woman would appreciate an apology. Riley picked up her phone and stared at the numbers. She knew the redhead's number. All she had to do was dial and talk to her, ask her to come over, and she could be wrapped around a warm, naked body within an hour. Faster than she could get Chinese food in this neighborhood.

She dropped the phone onto the couch beside her and stared past the TV to the window. She heard sirens outside, probably crisscrossing the streets in a vain attempt to keep the criminals from No Man's Land from gaining a foothold in the bright and shining city. *Our boots are buried*, she thought. *We might not realize it yet, but it's true. We're all in No Man's Land. One day we're going to have to stop lying to ourselves about it.*

*

Riley stood on the waterfront with a man in a long trenchcoat. She held a sword. It wasn't like any of the swords she handled earlier in the day, while they were interrogating people. She could tell this was the real deal just the way it felt in her hand. And it was heavy. She wondered what kind of strength it took to use a weapon like this. The waves were lapping at the shore, but she and her companion were standing on rocks and the water didn't touch them. She wrapped both hands around the hilt of the sword and held it up in front of her. The edge was too thin to see, and she felt it could cut her eye just by looking at it too closely. She lowered the sword and turned to face her companion.

It was the man from the street. He didn't look at her, but he smiled. He knew she was looking.

Riley lifted the sword again and rested it on his shoulders. One quick slice down. Like carving a turkey. She twisted the knife in her hands and the edge of the blade now pointed to the back of the man's neck. With one twist of her shoulders, his head would be in the water. She frowned. "Why did he cut a hole in your back?"

"Because it wasn't about my death."

"He didn't want you dead."

"He was unconcerned that death was a consequence."

Riley turned and saw the Hooded Man standing on the edge of the rocks. His back was to the apartments, and his hands hung limp by his sides. In the dim light, the fingers looked like they were tipped with deadly talons. Representatives of the sword he had used, she figured. It was the man from her dreams, the man - or whatever it was - that had thrown her from the roof. She couldn't see his face, but she knew what it looked like. Horrific. Unreal. So hideous she had never even bothered to put the description out onto the wires because she knew she would be labeled as a crackpot. She prayed he was just a holdover from the other dream; she couldn't handle it if he was really involved here.

The Hooded Man flexed his sharp fingers and backed away into the shadows and then he was gone. Riley lowered the sword and looked at the bright man again. "What happened to me that night? The night I fell off the roof. I should have died."

"You know what happened. Otherwise you would not expect a dream to tell you the answer."

"This isn't a dream," Riley said.

The man finally looked at her and the world seemed to flash with brightness. "Very astute of you, Detective." He smiled and Riley had to close her eyes against the light. She turned away from him as the glow continued to burn, warming her through her clothing. She realized she had dropped the sword and her hands shot out to grope for it.

Instead, she found herself groping for her alarm clock. It shrieked at her, half past six in the morning, and she cursed herself for forgetting to reset it before going to bed. She shut it off and sat up, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. It was no use trying to go back to sleep now; once she was awake, she was awake. She pushed the blankets away and rolled out of bed. She was naked except for a pair of underwear and her apartment was cold. She heard thunder and knew a storm was moving in. The flash of light in her dream must have been lightning.

She could still feel the hilt of the sword in her hands, the intricate carvings in the gold. She wondered if she would recognize it when she found the actual murder weapon. *If* she found the actual murder weapon. If the rest of the names on Kara's list turned out to be nothing, then they would have gone twenty-four hours without a lead. Definitely a bad sign.

Riley went into the kitchen and searched the fridge for breakfast. She didn't want to close the case. She didn't want to give up on the man in the morgue for reasons that were beyond her. Maybe because some faceless entity was trying so hard to make her move on. She was reminded of the mysterious phone call as she poured herself a glass of milk. The killer cut off part of the victim's back, undressed him... unless he undressed the man first. Maybe it was a tryst gone

wrong. She shook her head. Three men meeting for a tryst wasn't unheard of, but why would one of them bring a sword?

Unless the two men Ray saw had been meeting for a tryst and the Hooded Man stumbled across them. But why would the Hooded Man just happen to be carrying a sword? He had to have known what he would find and planned it out in advance.

She imagined someone standing at his apartment window, watching lovers meet on the waterfront. *If they ever show up again, I'll be ready. I'll make sure none of those fairies ever come here again.*

Riley shook her head. Using the murder as an example didn't work since the body had been hidden. If he wanted to keep others away, he would have left the body out in the open where everyone could see. And why only kill one person? Had the other man been lucky enough to escape? If so, where were the dead man's clothes? Why would the killer have taken them? Plus there were no waterfront addresses on the list of sword owners.

Riley rubbed the temple and finished off her milk. There were too many questions she would probably never have answers to. She knew the chance of the case turning into a nice, neat package she could wrap up with a bow was a fantasy. The most she could hope for was to find someone with a bloody sword. She couldn't even hope for a motive with this one.

She walked mostly naked across her apartment and searched her coat until she found the folded list of sword owners. There were only three left, and she was awake anyway. She decided she might as well cross the last three names off the list before going in to work. Kara would be grateful she had saved her the trouble. She carried the list into the bedroom to get dressed.

Riley handed the sword back to the man. He was a squat, toad-shaped man with thick Coke-bottle glasses. He took the

sword and lifted his basset-hound eyes to her. "I certainly hope it wasn't used in the commission of a crime."

"No, sir," Riley said. "There were a few swords that were sold with sharp edges. We're just trying to make sure no one hurts themselves."

"Oh, oh, well that's very kind of you. Have a nice day, Detective."

She nodded and stepped back at the man closed the door. She reluctantly left the protection of his covered porch and flipped her collar up against the rain. The first person on the list for the morning wasn't home when she arrived, so she had to wait until he returned from his jog because his wife had no idea where he kept the sword. When he finally showed up forty-five minutes later, drenched and shivering, he asked if she could wait until he had taken a quick shower. She reluctantly agreed.

Now, with one sword left to check, she found herself losing hope. Of course, it would be her typical dumb luck that the killer was the last person on the list. Sometimes life just screwed with you that way. She climbed into the car as her phone began to ring. She checked the display screen and answered it. "Sweet Kara."

"Hey. I know I said we'd skip breakfast, but I thought I might bring something in. What's your pleasure?"

"Bagels. Any kind." She started the car.

Kara heard the engine over the phone. "Are you already on your way in?"

"No, actually, I'm saving you some legwork. Save you from knocking on doors in this rain. I'm getting the list out of the way."

"The list? The sword owners? But it's raining. And I thought we were going to do that this afternoon."

Riley pulled away from the curb. "I woke up early and decided we might as well get it out of the way. You can thank me later. Be sure to get me cream cheese."

“Yeah, sure. Riley, I should really be out there with you. What if one of these guys goes postal with his sword?”

“I’m fine. I only have one address left. Don’t worry about it. Cream cheese,” she said. She hung up before Kara could protest any further. She shook her head and checked the list for the last address. “See if I ever do her any more favors.”

Six

Riley parked at the cracked curb and checked the map again. Either the address on the list was either wrong, out of date, or a fake. She looked through the swishing windshield wipers at the empty apartment building. Dark fins of soot marred every broken window, the lots on either side reduced to nothing but rubble. The building stood in the middle of a demolished block, the pathetic survivor of some holocaust or another.

The devastation had happened years ago, so she checked the date on the customer list. The buyer - someone named Nathan Overstreet - claimed to live in this building two short months ago. Riley doubted that, and figured he had just pulled the street name and number out of thin air when he created his false ID. But at least it meant they had some semblance of a lead in their dead end case. Still, she couldn't leave without giving the place at least a cursory once-over.

She got out of the car, having just started to dry out, and was immediately soaked again. She slammed the door and stalked to the trunk. Kara was going to owe her a week's worth of lunches after this. A month, maybe, depending on what she found in the building. She opened the trunk and withdrew her Kevlar vest. She was pulling the straps shut when a car pulled up behind her and flashed the headlights.

Riley turned, one hand on the butt of her gun, and squinted at the flooded windshield. It was Kara, already throwing open her door and stepping into the storm. She frowned and slammed the trunk lid. "Sweet Kara. I told you I would handle this."

"Look, there's no need. I recognized the address on the list when I got it. I swung by here, and I saw it was obviously fake.

I just never took it off the list. I forgot. Come on, we're getting soaked. Let's get back to the office."

"We have to check it out, Kara," Riley said. "I offered to do it on my own. It's your own fault you're getting soaked."

She turned and started walking toward the building again.

"Riley, please stop!"

Riley turned. "What is your problem? If you checked this place out yesterday, why didn't you mention Overstreet was a fake name? Seems like a pretty strong lead to me. Just go to the office, Kara. I'll be there in half an hour."

"I can't let you go in there, Riley," Kara said. She pulled her gun from the holster and held it by her side, barrel pointed at the ground and trembling slightly.

Riley tensed and moved her hand to the butt of her own gun. "Sweet Kara, what are you doing?"

"I can't let you go in there," Kara said again. She brought her gun up and aimed it at Riley's head. "I'm sorry. Just get into your car and leave."

The rain was still pounding down on them, but Riley no longer felt the cold. Her heart was thumping, her hands trembling as she tried to make sense of what was happening. Kara wasn't wearing a coat, the rain soaking her lavender blouse. Her spiked hair was ruined, and she looked like a little kid.

"Why don't you just tell me what happened, okay? What did you find out?"

"He found *me*," Kara said. "I don't even know how he knew we were investigating, or who I was. But he came up to me in one of the shops. He gave me so much money, Riley. Enough for..." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "He just wanted this whole thing to go away. It doesn't matter anyway. One person. One person from No Man's Land who we are never going to identify. What does it matter?"

"It matters because he was a person," Riley said, moving closer to Kara. "It matters because we're cops."

“We’re damage control,” Kara snapped. “Nothing we do makes any difference. Every year No Man’s Land is bigger and bigger and nothing we do is going to change that. So why not? Why not just let this one go? God, if it hadn’t been for that man and his fucking dog, we wouldn’t even have known about this body. He would have disappeared and no one would ever have known. Let’s just let it be, please.”

Our boots are buried, Riley thought, and felt a dark depression settling over her. “No,” she said. “I can’t accept that. I can’t accept that, or I’m going to go home tonight and put my gun in my mouth.”

“Riley, please.”

It was hard to tell, but she thought Kara was crying now.

“Put the gun down. We can forget this ever happened.”

“It’s too late,” Kara said. Her shoulders sagged and she slumped forward slightly.

Riley saw an opening and lunged forward. Kara saw her coming and instinctively pulled the trigger. Riley shouted as the bullet hit her mid-chest, the vest softening the impact so it felt as if she was broad-sided by a log instead of shot. She fell forward, wrapped her hand around Kara’s, and forced the gun up and away from them. They grappled on the street, faces inches apart, and now Riley could definitely see the tears in Kara’s eyes. They were both drenched, and Riley squeezed a pressure point. Kara shouted and dropped the gun.

Riley slackened her grip, and Kara suddenly shifted her weight. They fell together, and the back of Riley’s head impacted the side mirror of her car. Stars danced in front of her eyes as she hit the ground. Kara pushed herself up and scrambled for her gun. Riley put her hand on the butt of her own gun, but something kept her from drawing down on her own partner. She just couldn’t do it.

Kara got to the gun just as Riley got to her feet. She put a hand in the middle of her vest, trying to ease the pain from the first shot. She wrapped her arms around Kara’s waist and pulled her down. Water erupted around them and Kara tried to twist out of Riley’s grip. They scrambled together in the

water, Riley's feet slipping as they tried to find traction, and Kara swung the gun up again. Riley grabbed Kara's hands and squeezed, praying it would keep her from pulling the trigger.

Riley was on top of Kara, the gun sticking up between them. "God damn it, Kara."

"I'm sorry, Riley," Kara said. "It was so much money. And it's not like it mattered."

"It always matters," Riley said. "Let go of the gun. Kara, please, let it go."

"I'm sorry." Kara pushed the gun forward and Riley felt the cold barrel brushing against her chin. She jerked instinctively away from it and braced for the sound of the shot. This close, the sound would deafen her. But the gun didn't go off. Praying the gun was waterlogged, Riley lifted her body and dropped her weight onto Kara's arms in an attempt to make her drop the weapon. Kara cried out, her arms pinned to her chest, and the gun went off like a nuclear explosion.

The last thing Riley remembered seeing was Kara's head whipping back and ricocheting off the asphalt. Then the world was white and red, filled with a high-pitched howling whistle. Riley shoved away from the sound, completely insensate, not even feeling the rain now. She suddenly realized she must have been shot, must have gotten the top of her head taken off, and now she was stumbling around like an idiot chicken.

She fell and felt the smooth metal of her car door. She searched for, found and pulled the handle, shoving herself into the warm, dry interior. She dripped on the driver's seat, rainwater and blood, and panted until she could hear the sound of her own blood rushing through her ears. Her eyes were wide but sightless, her mouth hanging wide open like a beached trout. She reached out and found her radio, pulling the mic from the cradle.

"Officer down," she rasped into the speaker. "Officer... involved shooting. Officer down. We need..." She looked down and saw, outlined in white, that her hand was covered in blood. "Oh, God. Oh, my God." She dropped the mic and slid

out of the seat. The ground was hard and freezing under her ass, and she covered her face with both bloody hands.

Soon, the ringing faded into the sound of approaching sirens. She reached for her badge, but it wasn't there. She knew it had to have fallen off somewhere during the fight, but she didn't know where. She didn't want to look. Didn't have the strength to look. The top of her head was blown off anyway. She dropped her hands and rested her head - strange how it felt whole - against the door of her car.

Across the street, through the flashing red and blue lights, she saw a man in a hooded sweatshirt. His clothes didn't seem wet with the rain, but only because the raindrops seemed to evaporate before they touched him. His hands were in his pockets.

Someone grabbed Riley by the shoulder and hauled her forward. She was pressed face-forward to the ground and someone roughly began to frisk her. "I'm a cop," she said, returning to reality. "I'm a police officer. I lost my badge somewhere... somewhere around here. I'm a cop."

The rough hands stopped and someone conferred with another uniform nearby. While they were distracted, Riley lifted her head and looked across the street.

The Hooded Man was gone.

An hour later, Riley was in the back of a squad car with a thermos of coffee. Someone's jacket was wrapped around her shoulders. She could see and hear again, although there was an underlying whistle to every sound. The sun was rising, and the rain had been reduced to a steady drizzle. It gave the entire morning a fairytale quality. Unfortunately, there was no way for Riley to deny what really happened.

She was in the center of a maze of activity. The cops, armed with her badge number, had decided to take her at her word and trust her version of events for the time being. They found her badge behind the driver's side front tire of her car. They also took her gun, even though it was Kara's gun that did all the damage.

And what damage. Riley would never get Kara's ruined face out of her mind. It was going to be a fresh piece of her nightly terrors. The thought made her ill, and she closed her eyes against the encroaching headache. There were several layers of gauze wrapped around her head, but the wound where she impacted her car's mirror still throbbed.

My partner tried to kill me for money.

She wanted to sob, but she couldn't. She just kept running her thumb over her fingertips, making sure everything was still there.

Sweet Kara, what did you do?

She looked out the window as the crime scene guys swarmed the scene. The rain soaked their jumpsuits and made everyone look miserable. And there, amid all the activity, Kara lay sprawled in a puddle. She wanted to tell them to move her, because it looked like she was going to drown. But she knew that wasn't possible now. She closed her eyes and turned away.

Riley wasn't sure when she drifted off, but she jerked awake when someone knocked on the window. The movement caused her headache to flare, and she winced as she sat up in the seat. She was straightening herself as the door swung open and a few stray drops of rain hit her legs. Nina Hathaway ducked down into the car and invaded Riley's space. *Oh, wonderful*, Riley thought. "Lieutenant."

"Detective," Hathaway said. She looked at the gauze around Riley's head, then reached out and touched it. "How are you? Does it hurt very badly?"

"Feels like I died and forgot to stop moving."

Hathaway didn't even crack a smile. "What happened here?"

Riley closed her eyes and explained what she and Kara had been doing since the start of the case. The canvass and the sword hunt. She felt tears stinging her eyes when she explained what happened that morning. "She said someone paid her to keep me away. To drop the investigation."

Hathaway nodded and looked over her shoulder. "Move over." Riley reluctantly moved to give Hathaway room. She got into the car, shut the door, and turned in the seat to face Riley. The moment was far too intimate for comfort, and Riley tried to ignore how close the woman's body was to hers. *I can't handle this today*, she thought. *Just back off.*

"Someone should go through Kara's stuff. Find out if she wrote down anything about the money."

"Someone already did," Hathaway said. Her voice was low, as if she thought they might be overheard. Or maybe she just wanted Riley to lean in closer. Riley refused the bait and rested her aching head against the back of the seat. "I went through her desk as soon as I heard what happened. I wanted to know what I might be walking into."

"Did you find anything?"

"Yeah. She talked about the payoff and the bribe."

Riley sat up, despite the pain in her head. "That's great. Did she give a name?"

"Yeah," Hathaway said. "Yours."

Riley frowned.

"Kara said you were taking bribes. She said she was coming down here this morning to catch you in the act and turn you in." She opened the car door and stepped out into the rain. "You're going to have to ride with me back to the station."

Seven

Riley got out of the squad car and followed Hathaway across the street to her unmarked car. She got into the passenger side, once again soaked in clothes that had almost been dry, and stared ahead as Hathaway started the engine. They drove past the flashing lights and the absurdly bright yellow tarp that covered Kara's body. Riley closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see it again, resting her head against the glass of the window.

"You should get checked out first."

"I'm fine. I don't want to go to the hospital."

"Someone needs to take a look at you."

Riley opened her eyes. "Gillian. Dr. Hunt." She was the only person Riley felt like seeing at the moment.

"The medical examiner?"

"Hey, if the fight had gone a little differently, I'd be seeing her anyway, right?"

Hathaway shrugged and faced forward. "Fine. It'll save me a trip."

They pulled into the parking garage and Riley followed Hathaway to the elevator. Hathaway pressed the button for the morgue and the elevator lurched into motion. "Am I under arrest?"

"No. See Gillian and then come up to my office after she's had a look at you."

"What if I run?"

The elevator doors opened. "We'll chase you," Hathaway said. "Don't be too long."

Riley stepped into the hall, and Hathaway disappeared behind the closing doors. Riley stood in the hallway for a moment, eyes closed, fluorescents light flickering above her head. The strobe made her feel like she was in a movie; everything felt false enough for her to believe it. She was freezing cold, her head throbbed, and she felt like curling up on the floor and sleeping until she died. But every time she closed her eyes, she saw Kara's head whipping back and hitting the pavement. All the blood.

Finally she walked into the morgue. Gillian was already moving toward the door and said, "Are you all right? They called and told me what happened. There was a shooting...?"

Riley said, "Kind of a brawl. I took a car mirror to the back of the head."

Gillian craned her neck and Riley leaned forward so she could see the injured area. Gillian nodded and said, "All right. Come on. Get on the table."

"It's that bad?"

Gillian managed a weak smile. "You can sit up if you'd like."

Riley moved to the table, put her hands on the edge, and grunted. She hung her head and said, "I don't... I don't think I can..."

"Here," Gillian said. She stepped closer and put her hands on Riley's hips. "Jump," she said softly, and Riley managed to give herself a bit of lift. Gillian took care of the rest, pushing her back until she was seated on the cold metal. "Okay. You hit your head. Were you hurt anywhere else?"

"Shot in the vest," Riley said.

"Okay. Take off your shirt, let me take a look."

Riley unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged out of it. She wore a tank top over her bra, but she still felt vaguely uncomfortable when Gillian began the examination. She touched a spot just above Riley's left breast and Riley hissed. "Ow. You found it."

"There's going to be a bad bruise there," Gillian said. "It's going to hurt like a bitch for a while."

Sweet Kara holding a gun on her. Pulling the trigger. Trying to kill her.

"It's going to hurt for a long time."

Gillian walked around the table to examine the head wound. She pushed Riley's hair out of the way and said, "The skin isn't broken. Going to be a nasty lump there for a while, though. I'll get you an ice pack." She moved her hands and looked down. She tilted her head to the side and said, "Oh, wow. I didn't know you had a tattoo." She pushed the straps of Riley's tank top and bra out of the way to see the entire ink. The tattoo was a small circle around two lines joined at the base. The flames looked more like red diamonds than flame. "What does it mean?"

"It's a symbol of protection," Riley said. She didn't know why she gave the real answer; she had always seen it as a private thing. Whenever a girlfriend or doctor asked in the past, she would say there were flaming chopsticks because MSG gave her heartburn, or wizard wands, or flaming drumsticks because a drummer broke her heart. But with Gillian, she wanted to tell the truth. "They're torches to ward off evil."

"Oh, I see. Because you're a protector?"

"Because I need protection," Riley said.

Gillian put her hand on Riley's shoulder, covering the tattoo with her palm. "Riley, if you need to talk about what happened... I want you to know I'm here for you."

"Thanks," Riley said. She leaned back, not wanting to break contact with Gillian's hand. "I should probably go upstairs. Hathaway probably wants to read me my rights."

"What? Why?"

Riley turned. "How much do you know about what happened today?"

Gillian shook her head. "Not much. There was a fight and a shootout. Sweet Kara is dead. I only know that much because they called and told me to be ready for her." Gillian took her hand away and crossed the room. She opened the freezer and filled a small blue bag with ice. She closed the top of the bag and carried it across the room. "Here."

Riley took the ice, picked up her shirt and slid off the table. "You're probably going to hear a lot more before the day is out. Don't judge me too harshly."

"I'll do my best," Gillian said. A buzzer sounded across the room and Gillian's head whipped toward it. Her eyes were pained, her voice a whisper, when she said, "That will be them." She looked back at Riley. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Yeah. Do your job." She looked at the door through which men in blue jumpsuits would wheel Kara's body. "Say good-bye to her for me."

"I will," Gillian said softly.

Riley shrugged back into her shirt and went back to the elevator. She winced as she touched the ice to the back of her head and wished she had another pack for her chest. Of course then she would need three hands. She remembered one of her first cases with Kara, standing outside a Korean restaurant with a fresh bag of take-out in one hand and a Styrofoam cup in the other when it started to rain. Kara, holding only a drink, opened an umbrella and held it over both of their heads. "*So I'll be your third hand,*" she said with a shrug.

Her eyes suddenly flooded and she sagged against the elevator wall, dropping the ice pack to her side. She felt utterly weak, drained and she didn't want to do anything, see anyone, or deal with what happened in the street. She wanted to walk into Hathaway's office, lay down her badge, and leave.

When the elevator doors opened, she forced herself out into the bullpen. Everyone stopped and looked in her direction, everyone aware of whose body was lying down in the morgue. She avoided their eyes, kept her head bowed and focused on

the floor in front of her. Hathaway's office was across the room, so she had to do the walk of shame past every desk. She only stopped when she reached Sweet Kara's desk.

The purse Kara never carried was tucked in the knee space, and a half-eaten Danish was wrapped in a napkin next to her computer keyboard. Riley forced herself to keep moving forward, lifting her head to focus on the glass windows of Hathaway's office. The blinds were drawn, obviously to keep the firing or arrest or whatever was waiting private. Hathaway wasn't one for big theatrics when it came to doing her job.

Riley knocked and stepped into the office. "Boss."

"Come in, Riley. Shut the door." Hathaway was at her desk, signing a report. Riley shut the door behind her and stepped closer to the desk. She folded her hands in front of her and waited for whatever Hathaway threw at her. Hathaway glanced up and said, "Have a seat."

"I'd rather stand."

Hathaway shrugged, closed the file, and leaned back. "We have a bit of a problem here. After I received the call about what had happened, I decided I could take the time to look at your desks to see what you two were caught up in. I found this on Kara's desk." She pushed a different file closer to the edge of the desk and Riley picked it up. She flipped it open to find a typewritten affidavit.

'It's killing me to do this, but I don't think I have any choice. I need to have it down on paper what Riley Parra is up to so it doesn't come back and bite me in the ass. She's still my partner and I love her, but I can't afford to be taken down with her.'

What followed was an elaborate work of fantasy. Relationships with drug dealers, imaginary confidential informants, frame jobs, bribery. One instance of Riley shooting a suspect who tried to run and then leaving his body for, quote, "some other department to deal with," unquote. Kara claimed she watched everything from the passenger seat of their car, conflicted but certain that loyalty to her partner was more important than loyalty to the department.

The bottom of the page was marked with Kara's signature.

Riley felt her face burning, and her chest felt tight. It was hard to breathe. A woman she trusted with her life had written these words. A woman she had trusted more than any other woman in her life had betrayed her so totally. Riley wished Kara had just shot her in the back of the head. Quick, painless. None of this guilt and duplicity.

"It's..." she started, and she felt tears in her eyes and didn't trust herself to finish. She licked her bottom lip and tossed the paper onto the desk. "It's a lie."

Hathaway stood up and walked around the edge of the desk. "You've worked here a long time, Riley. I've seen a lot of cops come through here. Not one of them has cared as much or worked as hard as you do. None of them have half of your dedication. I know you're trying to clean up the town, however impossible that may seem. I admire that in you. But I also know that you draw the line. I know that you wouldn't be half as frustrated if you crossed that line and became some... vigilante hunting the streets."

Riley finally met Hathaway's eyes.

Hathaway was speaking softly now, like a friend. "If you were doing the shit Kara accused you of, the streets *would* be cleaner. Your case clearance rate would be much higher than it is. You would be a lot less frustrated. I don't know what happened to Kara Sweet, but I do know this entire thing is a work of fiction."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"No one outside of this room knows what I've found. And no one outside of this room has to know precisely what happened today. You found a suspect in the pipe job, you cornered him, and there was a firefight. Kara's gun accidentally went off. You did everything you could to save her, but there was no chance."

Riley just stood still, unable to believe what she was hearing.

"All your problems would go away, Riley. Kara would get her benefits. She would die a hero. There wouldn't have to be... ugliness. Her reputation wouldn't have to be tarnished."

"I understand."

"There is just one... issue. I'm taking a big risk covering all this up. If any of it, and I mean *any* of it gets out later, I'm the one who is going to hang. I'm willing to do it for you as a favor... but you have to ask me." She reached out and brushed her hand across Riley's cheek.

Riley frowned and said, "Lieutenant. W-will you—"

"No," Hathaway interrupted. Her voice was still soft, and she had moved closer to Riley. They were almost touching. "I want you to ask me for a favor, Detective Parra. I want you to ask properly." She touched Riley's cheek again and whispered, "Get on your knees."

Riley's eyes flared and it was all she could do not to pull away. Hathaway couldn't possibly be suggesting... She closed her eyes and remembered all the little touches, the looks, the comments about how Riley was dressed. She clenched her jaw and closed her eyes. It would make everything go away. The lies in Kara's letter, the stain on Kara's reputation. She had sisters, her parents were still alive, her little niece. They deserved her pension. She was a good cop who had gotten caught up in one very bad mistake.

"It all goes away?"

"Like it never existed."

Riley ran her hand over her face. She looked at the closed blinds, ran her tongue over her bottom lip, and slowly got onto her knees.

Eight

Riley bent over the bathroom sink and cupped her hands under the faucet again. She splashed her face, ran her fingers through her black hair, and winced as her hands ran over the bump on the back of her skull. She looked at her reflection, bright blue eyes staring out from a pale face. She supposed it could have been worse; it could have been a male boss. Still. It was what it was, and it was done. She wouldn't have to defend herself against a dead woman's accusations, and Kara wouldn't get her name dragged through the mud. All's well that ended well, wasn't that the saying?

She cupped her hands under the faucet and splashed her face again.

When she left the bathroom, her collar wet and the color still not back in her face, she found Detective Charles Timbale waiting for her. "Hey. Detective... um, Riley. I just wanted to let you know, we're all behind you on this. Everyone in the station, down to the uniformed officers. You need anything to track down this bastard, you let us know."

No need. I see the bastard every time I look in the mirror. "Thanks, Chuck," she said. "That means a lot."

"You just say the word. The full might of this police force will come down on the motherfucker so fast he won't know what hit him."

"Thank you. I should probably get back to work."

Timbale frowned. "You're kidding. Are you sure? I thought... I mean, I'd be taking a day to get my head straight."

"I'll take some time when I catch the bastards responsible," Riley said. "Thanks for the support, Chuck." She brushed past him and went to Kara's desk. She pulled the seat out and resisted a surge of sadness as her brain reminded her Kara would never again sit there. She took the seat for herself and scanned the top of the desk. Kara met the guy who bought her off at one of the sword shops. A quick search didn't show up the list Kara had used, so Riley checked her computer.

First he called me up and tried to throw me by playing Mr. Mysterious. At the exact same time, he was probably waiting for Kara to show up so he could pay her off. Who the hell was this guy? She had to give him credit, though. If he had come to her with a money offer, he would have been on the floor in handcuffs before he could even finish saying the words. Intimidation was better, relatively speaking. It scared her to think this guy could play them off each other so well.

Riley saw an email notification in the bottom corner of Kara's screen. Her head suddenly swam with the knowledge that Kara's family - the ones whose benefits Riley had just prostituted herself to protect - needed to be informed that she was dead. She wanted to be the one who told them, but she would give anything to hand the responsibility off. She moved the mouse and clicked on the email link, telling herself the blackmailer could have contacted Kara in that way.

One of the new emails was titled "Worse every day." Riley clicked on that and scanned the message.

"Melody is doing her best, putting on the brave face, but there's only so much an eight year old can take."

Riley couldn't look away from the screen. She read the rest of the email, and key words seemed to blaze out like neon signs. Malignant. Insurance won't cover... Eight-years-old.

Kara did it for her niece. She didn't decide to become crooked, she chose her sick niece over a nameless body in No Man's Land. Riley didn't show any emotion as she stood up, still staring at the flickering screen of the computer. She bent down, arm straight, and swept everything off the desk with one swift movement. The computer monitor teetered on the edge, and Riley gave it a shove. It hit the ground with a crack

like a gunshot. Someone put their hands on her shoulders and she pulled violently away. "Don't you dare touch me."

"Detective Parra," Hathaway said from her office door.

Riley turned and stared at her from across the room. Hathaway's arms were crossed, the picture of professionalism. Riley was glad she didn't have her gun anymore.

"Take the day."

"I don't—"

"Take the fucking day," Hathaway repeated. "You've been through hell. Go home. Sleep it off." With that, she turned and walked back into her office.

Riley picked up the coffee cup from her own desk and twisted at the waist. She hurled the cup at the office door, watched the coffee splatter in a wide brown wave as the cup exploded. She rolled her shoulders and looked at the mess she had made. She looked up and saw Officer Yancy was the woman who had put her hands on her shoulders. "Sorry," she said. "Her... family might want some of this stuff."

Yancy nodded. "Okay."

Riley pushed a hand through her hair, hesitated for a moment as if unsure what to do or where to go, then walked to the elevators.

Riley sat on a bus bench and stared at the street light on the corner. There were no busses here, the benches a relic from a forsaken and forgotten age. They were colloquially called bum beds, and both ends were stained with drool, urine, blood, and other colors she didn't want to identify. She was sitting on an unfolded newspaper, her hands clasped between her knees, across the street from the building where she had been born.

Her father was a man named Benjamin Parra. When she was little, she thought her mother was a woman who changed appearance from day to day. One or two days, she would be a brunette with tiny, severe eyes. Then the next day she would have transformed into a blonde in a long Jack Daniel's T-shirt

and nothing else. Riley didn't understand why she had to keep reminding her mother of her name every time she became someone else.

She was six when she finally figured out what was happening. She was twelve when one of her father's friends watched her cross the room and actually licked his lips. It was Riley's choice to go to bed with him, just to see what it was like, but she only remembered crying and wanting it to be over with as soon as possible. She fucked the boy at the corner store, too, and it wasn't so bad, but it was no fun, either.

Christine Lee was a puny little thing, hardly bigger than sixteen-year-old Riley, and a police officer. They met in a spotlight, just like in the movies, but this spotlight was on Christine's hood and their first embrace was Christine tackling the hooded shoplifter and pressing her face into the pavement. They talked while Christine drove Riley home, and soon Riley was crying and apologizing for every bad thing she had ever done.

They started to meet for coffee and lunch, and Christine would only pay if Riley proved she had been to school that day. The school had a prom, which was more of a joke than an actual party, and Riley nervously asked Christine to go with her. Christine said no, but politely. At the end of that night, they shared their first kiss. And the next morning, Riley woke up in her first strange bed.

Christine Lee died in a car accident five years later. Riley joined the police department in Christine's honor. It was Christine who, one night after they made love, inked the tattoo on Riley's left shoulder. They were both wet from the shower, Riley straddling a chair naked, and Christine on a stool behind her. Christine taught her that the world you inherited didn't have to be the world you left behind. Nothing was pre-determined. Not even No Man's Land.

Riley swallowed hard and looked down at her hands. Christine would roll over in her grave. To see how much No Man's Land had spread, like a cancer slowly overtaking the body. To see her protégé, for all her work and all her lessons, turning into a crooked cop. Regardless of her reasons, she had

killed her partner and allowed everything to be neatly swept under the rug. There was no such thing as a good cop any more. No Man's Land was winning.

She stood up, hands in her pockets, and looked up at the building where she had started her life. There were nights she liked to pretend she was far away from those beginnings, but the building was never more than fifteen minutes away. Faster by elevated train. For all the lies she told herself, she was still in the same town and fighting battles that started decades before she was born. She tilted her head back and inhaled the scent of the town.

Riley always laughed when she heard that bullshit line, 'you can't go home again.' Home was the one place in this world you could never get away from.

She wandered the streets, thinking about the man in the drain pipe. Kara was dead because of him. She wanted to drop the case; it had already caused enough damage and pain, and they were no closer to knowing who he was than yesterday. On the other hand, stopping now would make Kara's death meaningless. They would never find out who gave her the money, or why he was so desperate to stop the investigation.

Besides, she wanted the bastard. She wanted this case closed so that the nameless man wouldn't haunt her dreams for the rest of her life. She already had enough demons taking up space in her brain, she didn't need another.

She finally found herself at her current apartment building, another distressing reminder of just how far she had actually managed to progress in life. She could go from the beginning to the end in just a matter of steps, walk it without breaking a sweat. The lobby was vacant and quiet as she entered, and she took the stairs to her floor. The apartment she had cleared out was still vacant, the door standing open like an invitation to squatters. Riley ignored it and started pulling off her jacket as she unlocked her front door.

The apartment was a mess.

Riley cursed her lack of a service weapon and moved to the table next to the door. She opened the top drawer, lifted the false bottom, and removed her spare. She checked the ammo and took in her surroundings. Her things had been tossed to the floor, her couch cushions tossed into one corner. The window to the fire escape was open and she could hear street sounds below. She avoided debris that lay on the ground and peered into the kitchen. Her dirty dishes seemed untouched, but the counter had been swept clean.

She heard a sound from the bedroom and moved in that direction. The door was slightly open, and somebody was moving around inside. She measured each step, making sure she didn't step on broken glass or any of the weak floorboards that would creak and give up her position. She was halfway to the door when it swung open and a blonde man stepped into her line of vision.

"Freeze!" she said. "Police officer."

The man brought his hands up and she saw a flash of something black in the left hand. *God fuck it, not again*, she thought as instinct took over, and she fired. The man grunted and fell back into her bedroom. Riley could already hear the sirens and the discussions. She saw her badge being taken from her. Two shootings in one day, for a case no one else believed was worth investigating. How on Earth could anyone spin that?

She stepped into her bedroom and saw the blonde man sitting with his back to the bed. His legs were spread in front of him, his head bowed and his left hand still clasped over his chest. He wore khakis, a light blue shirt, and - now that she saw him clearly - his hair was white, not blonde. The tail of his trenchcoat spread out underneath him like a cape. Riley was two steps away from him when he suddenly looked up at her.

She gasped and backed up, raising her gun again. "Don't move."

"You shot me."

The black object was next to his hand. Riley stepped forward and swept it away with her foot, seeing too late that it was just

a wallet. She cursed under her breath and said, "I'm going to get you some medical attention."

The man said, "There's no need for that." He held out his hand to show that there was no blood. The hole in his shirt was also clean.

Riley frowned and kept her weapon trained on him. "What the hell?"

"May I stand?"

She nodded and stepped back, out of arm's reach as he used the bed to push himself up. He groaned and stretched. "God. It doesn't kill, but it hurts like a son of a bitch."

"Who are you? What are you doing in my apartment?"

"I'm here to tell you not to give up. As for who I am, well... that's a little more difficult to explain."

"Try."

"My name is Samael. I was on the waterfront two evenings ago when my friend perished."

Riley lowered her gun slightly. "Samuel?"

"Sam will do."

Your friend. You know his name?"

"Indeed I do. His name was Ridwan."

Riley raised an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. And the man you were meeting with?"

Samael stepped forward and Riley raised the gun again. He held his hands out and said, "I apologize. The man we were meeting with. I believe he is the reason you were brought into the investigation, Riley Parra. You know him. His name is Marchosias, and he was the man who threw you off a roof four years ago. And Ridwan was the man who saved your life."

"Ridwan, Marchosias... what are you guys, some kind of weird religious cult?"

Samael smiled and said, "Well. I suppose you could say that." He took off his trenchcoat and let it fall to the floor. Riley lowered her weapon and let it hang from slack fingers as she watched his wings spread out. They were enormous, ten feet from one end to the other.

"Marchosias is a demon," he said. "And Ridwan was an angel."

Riley dropped her gun and said, "Fuck."

N i n e

Riley sat on the counter that separated her kitchen from the living room. Samael began cleaning up the mess of her apartment as he spoke, his wings once again concealed under his jacket. “Marchosias has ruled over the area which you call No Man’s Land for several hundred years. Ridwan was charged as protector for the remaining area. For years, they’ve struggled to achieve balance.”

“March was winning,” Riley said.

“Marcho—”

“Yeah, I’m not going to remember that.”

Samael considered it for a moment and then shrugged. “Very well. Yes, for the past several decades, *March* has gained a bit of a foothold. But this sort of thing can be fluid.”

“Fluid. You mean in a hundred years or so, No Man’s Land may not even exist.”

“Correct.”

“Bullshit.”

Samael replaced the couch cushions and sighed. “Humans have very limited points of reference. Four hundred years ago, New York City was swampland. It became little more than a shantytown three hundred years ago. And now it is one of the greatest cities in the world. It might not see a renewal in your lifetime, but there is hope for this city. At least... there was.”

“So after centuries of playing by the rules and treating this city like a giant chessboard, Ridwan just, what, got tired of it? Decided to skip to the end and kill his opponent?”

Samael looked away from her. “We were there for a meeting. Ridwan wished for an impartial third party to observe, so he requested I attend as well. Tempers flared.”

“Wings,” Riley said. She pictured the strange gouge in the corpse’s back, the muscles Gillian couldn’t identify. “Son of a bitch. March cut off Ridwan’s wings.”

Samael sighed. “He is probably displaying them as a trophy.”

Riley nodded and then closed her eyes. “God damn it. I can’t close the case. You’ve handed me everything I need, and my hands are tied. I can’t walk up to my boss and tell her ‘A demon did it.’ Even if I did, how would we arrest him? Or incarcerate him? Forget the death penalty.”

“You have fought for this case from the beginning, though no one else wanted you expending the time or the effort. You have fought to correct the sins in No Man’s Land though you yourself admit it is impossible. Correct?”

Riley stared at him.

“Do both. Punish Marchosias for what he has done to Ridwan, and when he is gone, No Man’s Land will experience a renaissance of life and hope and prosperity.”

“You expect me to take down a demon?”

“I believe it is your destiny. You have fought him before and you won.”

Riley laughed. “I was thrown from a building.”

“When every other human being would have died of fright from a single look at Marchosias’ face. You continued to fight. When dozens of detectives would have given up on this case within an hour, you continued to search. You were handed this case because it belongs to you. This is your fight. You must destroy Marchosias before he destroys this city once and for all. There is always a balance. Without Ridwan, you must become that balance.”

Riley slipped off the counter. “You’re full of shit.”

“Please, Detective Parra. After everything this case has taken from you, do not give in now. You have his name. You know where to find him.”

Riley stopped, her back turned to the room. She picked up her cell phone and dialed a number she knew by heart. “Hey. Yeah, it’s Detective Parra. Listen, I’m... going to take a few days off. Yeah. Mental health. Thanks. I appreciate it.” She hung up the phone and said, “The pipe man, uh, Ridwan’s case has been passed over to another detective. I’ve got a few days to look into it myself, and that’s it. All right?” She turned to see Samael’s reaction, but the apartment was empty.

On the bright side, she thought, at least he cleaned the apartment before he disappeared.

Riley and Kara sat in a nearly-empty bar, nursing their latest glasses of whiskey. Kara picked hers up, downed the dregs, and pulled her top lip back against her teeth. “Ah, that’s good.” She ran her thumb along her bottom lip and tapped the bar with her knuckle. “Another, good barkeep.”

The bartender was a broad shouldered, football player gone to seed type. He refilled Kara’s glass, and Riley shook her head when he offered to do hers. When he left, Kara said, “All right. Tell you what.” She fished a quarter from her pocket and placed it on the bar. “I’ll flip you for him. Heads, I go, tails, you go.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The bartender,” Kara said. “He’s giving both of us the eye, so we’ll have to decide for him. Unless you’re open to sharing.”

Riley took the quarter and slipped it into her own pocket. “He’s all yours, Sweet Kara.”

“Aw, come on. Don’t give up so easily.”

“No, really,” Riley said. “I’m more interested in...” She nodded at the end of the bar.

Kara turned and saw a blonde nursing a bottle of beer. Kara arched an eyebrow and said, "O-oh. Finding out all kinds of things about my new partner." She slipped off the stool.

Riley grabbed her arm. "Hey, wait. Where do you think you're going?"

"Jukebox," Kara said. "Don't be so paranoid."

Riley released her arm and Kara headed across the bar to the jukebox. Riley relaxed and went back to her drink. A few seconds later, the Rolling Stones began singing *Let's Spend the Night Together*. Riley looked over in time to see Kara stop next to the blonde at the end of the bar and lean down, whisper in her ear, and point at Riley. Riley groaned and shook her head, pressed her palm against her forehead, and said, "I'm going to kill her."

When Kara returned, she said, "She's waiting."

Riley looked at her.

"Your dance partner. Hurry, before the song ends."

Riley looked at the blonde, who was smiling in her direction. Riley hesitated and then slipped off her stool. "We're going to have to have a talk about this sort of thing."

"You can't control Sweet Kara. You can only hope to contain her."

The blonde slipped off her stool as she nervously approached the blonde. "Uh. Hi. Riley."

"Natalie. Your, um... friend said you wanted to dance with me."

"She's my partner," Riley said. "I mean... not... I mean, she's my partner on the force. Police force. I'm a... detective. A single detective, which is odd because I'm so good at talking to women in bars."

Natalie smiled. "All of that is very good to know. So. The dance?"

"Right." She put her hand in the small of Natalie's back and guided her onto the bar's small dance floor. As she put her

hands on Natalie's hips, she looked across the room to where Kara sat flirting with the bartender. It was supposed to just be a drink after work, not a hook-up. She didn't want to take some woman home to her crappy apartment, she didn't want to get naked with someone new. All she wanted was a drink to get a feel for her new partner's personality. Well, mission accomplished, she supposed.

About a minute after they started dancing, the song ended. They were about to separate when another Stones song, *Wild Horses*, began to play. Riley started to pull away, but Natalie said, "No. Let's keep going."

"You sure? It's kind of a slow song."

"Slow songs are okay," Natalie said.

By the end of the song, Riley had her lips on Natalie's neck. By the time Kara's two-dollars worth of songs ended, Natalie's fingers were just under the waistband of Riley's pants. The final song faded and the bar fell silent, so they pulled slightly apart. Natalie looked at Riley's lips and then down at the undone buttons of Riley's blouse. She squared her shoulders and said, "Do you want to get out of here?"

"Yeah. I just have to tell Kara."

They parted and Riley went back to Kara. "I'm going to kill you. Tomorrow." She tossed a couple of bills on the bar and said, "The drinks are on me."

"You're welcome," Kara said.

"Do you need a ride?"

"Henry is taking care of that," Kara said. The bartender turned at the mention of his name and Kara winked at him.

Riley said, "You just wanted me out of the way so you could get laid."

"Hey, I was willing to do the threesome. But Option B works just as well." She and Riley both looked toward the door, where Natalie was waiting with her jacket. "Blondie just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Make it worth her while."

Riley rolled her eyes and left Kara at the bar. She grabbed Natalie's hand as she walked past and they headed for the door. Natalie looked over her shoulder and said, "So you guys work together? Is she a good partner?"

Riley smirked. "Yeah. I'd say she passed the test. Where is your car?"

Riley poured the last of the whiskey into the glass and set the bottle down hard enough to make the ice shift. She couldn't sleep because thoughts of Kara kept intruding on her mind. They were partners for two years. Two years of putting their lives in each other's hands. Walking up to unknown doorways, with unknown elements within, knowing that your life depended on the person standing just behind you. Her relationship with Kara was the longest and most rewarding relationship in her entire life.

Gone in a flash.

Kara pulled a gun on her. In what world did that make sense? And was it a world she wanted to live in?

Her spare gun sat on the bar, pointed toward the fridge instead of at her. If a bullet went into her tonight, she wanted it to be her choice. She stared at the liquor in front of her. Maybe she was insane. Maybe she was lying on the street with rain falling in her eyes and her brain was creating this fucked up world. Angels battling demons in the streets of No Man's Land was one thing. A Kara she couldn't trust? That was beyond the pale.

She picked up the gun and looked at it. Maybe the trick was to end the illusion with one big, drastic display and she would wake up in real life.

She put the gun down. Or maybe an angel had come into her apartment and told her that she was destined to kill a demon.

"What are you doing?" she whispered. She picked up the glass and pressed the edge against her bottom lip. Her chest still hurt, and the knot on the back of her head made it hard for her to lie down in bed. So why not stay up and drink?

Finish all the liquor in the house and then go out and buy more, drink until the night made some sort of sense.

A demon ransacked my apartment, and an angel cleaned it up. What's so odd about that?

"Always knew you were special."

Riley jumped at the voice, but then she realized it was just her overtired imagination playing tricks on her. There was no way Kara was really sitting next to her. She closed her eyes, sucked her top lip and ran her finger over the rim of the glass. "Yay, me. I'd rather be a sheep."

Kara chuckled. "You know why I took the money, right?"

"Your niece." Tears burned her eyes. "I didn't know."

"I could have told you. Would you have turned your back on this case if you had known?"

Riley answered honestly. "I have no idea. I think if I knew all this would happen, yeah. I would have let it slide."

"You want to know something? The second I pulled my gun, I wanted a way out. I didn't want to kill you, Riley."

"You'd rather die yourself?"

"Yeah. You didn't compromise yourself. Not even when I asked you to. You're a good cop, Riley. Remember that. Believe in it." She leaned down and Riley felt ghostly breath on the side of her face. "And never, ever let the blonde at the end of the bar go without at least taking a chance." She brushed ghostly lips across Riley's cheek, and then she was gone.

After a while, Riley finished her glass and carried it to the sink. She poured out the ice, rinsed the glass and placed it on the drying rack. She turned, leaned against the counter, and looked out the window. Sirens were sounding, somewhere deep in the city. Maybe someone following a lead on the pipe man case, although not bloody likely.

Solving the case would, according to Samael, bring No Man's Land out of its downward spiral. She wouldn't be able

to bring Marchosias in the usual way. But maybe, instead of bringing him to justice, she could find a way to bring justice to him. She turned off the light over the sink, casting the apartment into darkness before she went to bed.

T e n

Riley woke late and dressed with the feeling that she was playing hooky. The morning felt surreal and unusual, to be in her apartment so long after the sunrise was just wrong. While she dressed, she thought about her mysterious guest. She never checked out the guy's wings, she didn't actually see them coming out of his back. He could have been wearing a bulletproof vest to explain why he wasn't hurt by the gunshot.

Despite her rationalizations, she couldn't help but believe the man's story. She believed that Samael was an angel, and that pipe man had been killed by a demon. She wanted to go by the old 'if you hear hoof-beats' adage, but nothing added up as perfectly as Samael's story. Regardless of what the truth was, she wasn't going to find it in the good part of town. She was going to have to spend some quality time in No Man's Land. She put on a bulletproof vest under her blouse, shrugged into her jacket, and put her back-up gun into a shoulder holster.

Whether she called it muscle memory or just plain not thinking, Riley didn't realize the magnitude of what she did until it was too late. She left her apartment an hour before the train began boarding, so she decided to stop for breakfast. It wasn't until she stepped into the Four-Ten Diner that she realized her mistake.

The hostess looked up as she entered and gave her a smile. "Good morning, Detective. Is your partner joining you this morning?"

Riley felt like she had been punched in the throat. "Uh... no. I just... stopped in to see—"

"Detective Parra."

She closed her eyes. *Shit. I would prefer the demon right now.* She sighed and crossed the room to where Lieutenant Hathaway sat. "I was just having a late breakfast. Why don't you join me?"

"I was actually just going to grab a muffin to go," she said.

"Well, you're off, right? Taking a couple of days to process everything that happened? A couple of minutes won't kill you."

Riley gave her order to the waitress and slipped reluctantly onto the stool next to Hathaway. "How is this going to work?" she asked quietly, facing forward to avoid Hathaway's eyes. "Do you own my ass now? You say 'jump,' I say 'on what?'"

"That's a little uncalled for..."

Riley scoffed. "I'm just trying to figure out how much of me you bought yesterday. Are we even because I went down on you? Or is this going to be a regular thing? Are you going to make my life hell if I don't eat breakfast with you?"

Hathaway sipped her orange juice and waited a long moment before she replied. The waitress returned with her muffin, and Riley stared at it as she waited for a verdict.

Finally, Hathaway said, "Consider us even, Detective. Any relationship we have beyond this point will be your choice."

Riley stared at her. "You realize that you didn't seduce me yesterday. You raped me."

Hathaway's eyes flashed. "The situation was..."

Riley took her muffin and said, "Don't talk to me about the situation. You got what you wanted, and I was saved a lot of headaches, and Kara's family was protected from scandal. Everything came out fine. We'll close the book on that and forget it ever happened. From now on, our relationship is strictly professional. Have a good day, Lieutenant."

Hathaway continued to stare forward and nodded. "You, too. Keep your nose clean."

Riley left a dollar on the counter and left the diner. She was halfway to the el station when she changed her mind about her destination. No Man's Land could wait; she wanted to check out Kara's apartment before some other cop gave it the once-over.

Riley had Kara's spare key due to their habit of bailing each other out of dates gone wrong. Stepping into the apartment immediately reminded her of the times she arrived in the middle of the night to find Kara and some anonymous guy sprawled naked on the couch. Once, Riley arrived to find two naked men asleep in Kara's bed, but Kara was nowhere to be seen. A quick search of the apartment revealed her partner was on the fire escape, shuddering with a blanket wrapped around herself.

"They said they wanted a threesome," Kara said as Riley let her back in. "But they seemed more interested in each other. So I figured, why not, as long as I can watch. But then they wouldn't *leave*."

Riley kicked the guys out, claiming someone had called in a noise complaint. The guys dressed and left, and Riley spent the rest of the evening watching a movie with Kara on the couch.

The apartment looked exactly the same as always; a familiar controlled mess. The kitchen table was covered with magazines and open phone books. Riley went to the table and smiled when she saw the books were open to the map section. Kara pored over the maps like they were the Holy Grail, priding herself on knowing where every street in town was. She knew all the shortcuts, could tell how far one street was from another, and never hesitated when she headed out on a call.

Riley flipped the book shut and went to the stereo. She pressed play and a Missy Higgins album began. As the music filled the apartment and gave it some semblance of life, Riley began her search. She cleaned up the coffee table, stacking mail and placing it in a plastic bag after examining the return addresses. If anyone came in, she would just claim to be

tidying up for her late partner. In reality, she wanted to find any evidence of Kara's bribe so Hathaway's blackmail wouldn't end up being useless.

She found a card and opened it to find a dark sea of tightly-packed penmanship. It took her a moment to figure out the hieroglyphs, but once she identified a few letters, the rest fell into place. The note was from Kara's sister, talking about her niece's illness. There was desperation in her words, a need to do whatever was necessary to save the little girl's life.

Riley closed the card and put it aside, disgusted with herself. How could she have not known what her partner was going through? Had Kara been that good at hiding her turmoil? Watching an eight-year-old die was hard on the soul. A good partner would have noticed. A good partner would have offered to help, and would have made a bribe unnecessary. But Riley was too caught up in her own shit to notice, and Kara was left to literally make a deal with the devil.

A shoebox on the top shelf of the closet held several packs of hundred dollar bills. She took the shoebox to the desk and found the card from Kara's sister. She made a note of the address; Kara had given her life for the money and Riley wasn't about to let it waste away in some evidence locker. She concealed the money with several layers of bubble wrap, and then covered it all with a brown paper bag.

She put the money into her coat pocket and continued to explore the apartment. She went into Kara's bedroom, the late morning light coming through the window and giving her enough light to search. The room had been redesigned since Riley's last visit, and the differences were for the worst, in her opinion. She had no idea how Kara managed to sleep with the new layout; the light would hit the pillows right after the sun rose. Maybe it was her version of an alarm clock.

Riley opened the closets and found a blue suit. She figured Kara wouldn't want to be buried in formal wear, so she removed the jacket and left the blouse and slacks on the foot of the bed. It would save her friends and family a little effort, and it would save Kara the embarrassment of being put to rest in the wrong thing.

She happened to glance at the floor and noticed grooves in the carpet. Drag lines that went from one wall and disappeared under the bed. She frowned and stepped back. Apparently the bed was moved recently, and its original position was better situated in regards to the window. Riley moved to the headboard and pushed it away from the wall. There was an electrical outlet with the face removed. Riley knelt down and felt inside the rough hole until she found a piece of paper. The paper was folded several times, and her name was written on the face.

“Riley Parra.”

She unfolded it with trembling hands, afraid of discovering another skeleton in Kara’s closet. But she sat with her back against the wall and rested her elbows against her knees as she read the note.

“Riley.

I don’t know how to begin writing this. It was hell acting like nothing happened when I saw you in the station today. All our big talk, all our complaining about crooked cops, and now look at me. I guess you can never know whether you’re a good cop or a bad cop until you take the true test. I took it, and I failed. I took the money. And when he told me to cover my ass by lying and saying you were crooked, well, I did that, too.

“I don’t mind sacrificing my life or my career for Melody. But it tore me up to pull you down with me. I only hope you forgive me, Riley. I hope you find it in your heart to understand. If you’re reading this, you’ve probably found out what happened and I’m sitting in prison somewhere. Please, come and find me and let me say this to your face. You mean everything to me, Riley. I love you, and I’m sorry if I caused you any strife.

"I'm going to hide this note somewhere the crime scene guys won't look (half-assed as they are) but I know you will. You're a good cop. A great cop. One of the last remaining out there, it seems. I wish I had been a better partner to you. The only problem is, the partner you deserve doesn't exist anymore. They would have to clone you.

"I really do love you, Riley, and I hope you accept this apology. Don't hold it against me. I was doing terrible things for the right reasons, but that doesn't excuse it. If you've busted me (and it will be you that slaps the cuffs on, I have no doubt), then I'll plead guilty. I'll do the time. I just hope you understand.

"Signed, Sweet Kara."

Riley covered her eyes with both hands and leaned forward. "Then why did you make me fight you, you stupid bitch? Why didn't you just put down the gun and walk the fuck away?" She pictured a scenario where Kara walked away, took the bribe money to her niece and disappeared into the sunset. Would Riley have been willing to live with the knowledge she let a crime happen?

For a little girl, she thought, you're damn right I would, too.

She sniffled and folded the note. "Sorry to disappoint you, Sweet Kara. But I don't think I'm the great cop you think I am. I would have let you go."

When her eyes were dry, she put the note in the pocket with the money. She pushed herself up, put the bed back into place, and made one last survey of the apartment. She turned off the stereo and looked to make sure the apartment was the same it was when she arrived. The phone book was closed, but that wouldn't matter to the crime scene guys. She left the apartment, locked the front door, and headed downstairs.

A lot of the people in Kara's neighborhood were unemployed, and the streets were livelier than she would have expected so close to afternoon. Down the street, an

elementary school playground was filled with screaming, running kids. Riley stood on the sidewalk for a while and watched them, trying to remember when she had ever seen a playground without kids screaming and running. Were there designated kids who were assigned the job of circling everyone else, running and shouting? Or did it just happen spontaneously? She knew that if she ever saw one with kids playing quietly, she would feel uneasy.

She walked to the el station and bought a token. There was a train due in the next five minutes, which meant she would have to wait between ten and fifteen minutes before it arrived. She looked to her right, her view given the benefit of the station's elevation. She could see the edge of Kara's neighborhood, and the subtly grimmer buildings on the other side of the line. The windows weren't as bright, and every surface had a subtle patina of decay. Somewhere in that warren of buildings, a demon was waiting. Pulling the strings to destroy what was left in the good part of town.

As the train pulled into the station, Riley thought of the kids in the playground, and of Kara's niece. She could do nothing, and let those kids inherit a world even shittier than hers. Or she could do something and try to make their worlds a little brighter.

The train doors opened and Riley stepped inside. She found a seat at the front of the train and, fifteen minutes later, she arrived in the heart of No Man's Land.

Eleven

Muse Skaggs leaned against a chain-link fence, drumming his hands on his thighs, snapping his fingers in tune to a beat only he could hear. He bobbed his head as he watched down the street, lips pursed, waiting for someone to come and give him some business. He didn't mind how long it took; he had all day. Ninety percent of business involved sitting and waiting and trying to avoid the rare boys in blue. Cops, though, were more of an urban legend than an actual threat. He liked to say he kept an eye out for the cops and the Sasquatch, but he wasn't scared of either since all the Bigfoot lived up north somewhere.

He didn't see her approach, but he suddenly found himself sharing a piece of sidewalk with Detective Riley Parra. He straightened and said, "Ah, the lovely lady cop."

"Don't waste my time, Muse. I need a hit."

"Got a big day planned?"

"Something like that." He reached into his pocket and she grabbed his wrist before he could pull his hand free. "What the hell are you doing? Gonna hand it to me right here on the street? What, you have cameras watching me?"

"Calm down," he sighed. "Ain't nobody care that you're getting juiced. But if you'd like to step into my office, pay my rent."

"Down here," she said, and led him around the chain link fence into the alley. They stopped halfway down, next to a dumpster, and Riley looked over her shoulder to make sure they were alone. She said, "Academy Award, here I come."

"You weren't that good," Muse said. He leaned against the wall. "I didn't call you."

Riley pulled a pair of twenty dollar bills from her pocket. She made sure he saw them both, folded them in half, and bent down to place them under a broken brick. "I was hoping you might want to earn a little spending money."

His eyes were locked on the brick as he spoke. "Stuff I know, only worth a little bit. What do you want to know?"

"Is there someone big in town? Someone who likes to keep his face out of sight but likes to pull the strings?"

Muse scoffed. "Every man out here is just a puppet. Most of the strings lead back to your part of town, though. You know that."

"I said I want someone big. Someone operating from No Man's Land. Might go by March or Marchosias."

Muse's expression changed instantly, his street patois fading. "You don't mess with someone like that, Detective. I don't care who you are, or what you have hanging off your belt."

"He got Sweet Kara killed."

Muse closed his eyes and backed up against the wall. He covered his face and shook his head. After a moment, he exhaled sharply and said, "So I guess we're down to one good cop in this godforsaken town."

Riley snorted at his choice of words. "March. Where is he? I'm going to make him pay for Kara."

Muse hesitated before taking an address book from the pocket of his coat. He flipped through and said, "The guy has his fingers in everything. Strings crisscrossing the city. Puppet master, Machiavellian, everything bad." He handed her an address. "This is where he hangs his hat. You go there, you better be protected. I mean for real, Detective."

"Is he dangerous?"

"Brainwasher. You walk in a regular old dope fiend, and you come out the Gordon Gekko of crime. Worse gets worse there. I don't want to find out that you got tainted by going there. I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

She could tell he was sincere, so she didn't mock him. "I'll do my best. Thanks for the info, Muse. Keep your nose clean."

"You know I don't sample my own stuff, woman. Now get outta here. Got business to attend." He pushed away from the wall, his swagger returning as the mask he put on for the world fell into place. Riley watched him go and wondered how many others in No Man's Land had to create an entirely new persona just to survive. She wondered how many of them started to believe the mask was real. Somewhere inside Muse was a smart kid who referenced Machiavelli and eighties movie characters in the same breath. She prayed that kid managed to survive, but she didn't hold out much hope.

She waited until Muse was back at his perch before she walked to the other end of the alley and disappeared.

Riley didn't believe buildings had auras. She knew a few cops who claimed they could tell 'bad' buildings just by looking at them, but that was sure it was mainly knowledge of who lived inside. She never believed someone could sense evil, but as she stepped out of the alley, she changed her mind. The building Muse sent her to was undeniably *wrong*. It didn't look much different than its neighbors, with the dirty windows and crumbling bricks that made up the rest of the neighborhood. But just looking at this particular structure made her eyes hurt. She wanted to scream, back away, run, but she couldn't.

She kept Kara's image at the back of her mind as she crossed the street and approached the front doors. Sweat erupted on her palms and trickled down her back. She was terrified, and she wasn't exactly sure why. Something evil was waiting for her. Nothing as simple as a junkie who needed his next fix or a bipolar maniac with a shotgun. That was just humanity. This was something more.

Riley put her hand under her jacket to touch her badge, hoping it would act as a talisman. She climbed the steps to the front door and looked up at the steel numbers on the portico: 842. She half expected 666, or something similar, but she assumed not everything was as easy or obvious as in the

movies. She tried the doorknob and found it was open. She took a deep breath of cool, fresh air, braced herself, and stepped inside.

The lobby branched out on either side of her, leading to a vacant desk on one side and a pair of quietly-humming vending machines on the other. Riley pulled her gun from the holster and cleared the lobby to make sure she was alone before she moved to the stairs. "Hello, is anyone home? Police officer! I'd like to speak with you for a moment, if I could."

Silence from above. She reluctantly started up the stairs. The atmosphere of the building seemed heavier than outside. Her head felt wrapped in cotton, her vision swimming slightly as she climbed the stairs. At the first landing, she turned to the right and began checking the rooms. Every room was an apartment, fully-furnished, but none of the doors were closed. It was as if the residents had just packed up and left. Trash and dirty dishes lined every horizontal surface, and trash cans overflowed onto the floor.

Things that were once people occupied some of the rooms. Junkies in soiled underwear with a needle hanging from their arms, a naked couple clutching each other on a threadbare couch. And all around them, dark figures. Riley would have dismissed them as shadows, but they seemed to turn and follow her as she walked past the rooms. She felt eyes in the mist, and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. If Samael was telling the truth, then these rooms were flooded with demons.

"What are you doing here?"

The voice was deceptively calm, and Riley turned slowly to make sure the man saw her gun. He was standing on the top stair, blocking her retreat. He was immaculately dressed, well-groomed, and seemed utterly out of place in the festering ruins of the building. She had no idea where he had come from. He watched her, his eyes on her gun.

"I'm a police officer," she said. She pushed her jacket out of the way to show her badge. "Detective Riley Parra. I'm just here to talk to your boss. Is he here?"

“Police officers don’t talk,” the man said. He came closer and Riley smelled the reek of decay coming from him. “Police officers lie and obfuscate. Police officers are problematic.”

She heard footsteps on the stairs; more people coming to see what all the fuss was about, no doubt. She moved closer to the wall, hoping to prevent anyone from sneaking up from behind. “You’ve had some bad experiences. I’m sorry to hear that. But maybe if you would just let me speak to your boss—”

“He doesn’t wish to speak with you. Or any police officer. He wishes to be left alone.”

Riley nodded. “I understand that, and I apologize for the inconvenience. But sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to do.”

The man was close enough now that she could see his eyes. They were completely red, not bloodshot but blood-filled, and his breath reeked of sulfur when he spoke. “You are about to make me do something I do not wish to do, Detective Riley Parra.”

She knew the time for negotiating was done. He reached up to push her gun out of the way, and she pulled the trigger. The man yelped and pulled back, cradling his hand to his chest. Riley wanted to make a break for the stairs, but someone wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back. She struggled, but the grip was too tight. Something sharp pierced her side, just above the waistband of her jeans.

The man, or creature, holding her sniffed her hair. “I smell fear and pain. And loss. So much loss. I smell a woman who stepped over her own mother in the street and didn’t realize who it was. So close to your mother at last, and you left her in the gutter to die. Just like your partner. Sweet, sweet Kara. Everyone around you dies, death surrounds you, seeped into your pores. I can smell it, and it smells...”

Riley lifted her gun and fired over her shoulder. The effect was deafening, but the creature fell back. Whatever he had held against her side jerked back with his body, and it tore through the thin material at the side of the bulletproof vest, cutting it like scissors through tissue paper. There was a white

hot flash of simple pressure before the pain caught up with her brain and she realized her skin was being torn open. She shoved away from the creature and ran for the stairs just as the demons started to flow out of the rooms and descend from upstairs.

One of them grabbed her around the waist and Riley twisted to get away. The move opened the wound in her side and she cried out as she hit the ground. A demon was on top of her instantly, its horribly human face in hers. It parted its lips in a wild sneer, showing yellow teeth and a serpentine tongue. Riley rested her gun on the creature's tongue and pulled the trigger again. She was panicking, drenched with sweat and dripping blood as she scrambled to her feet.

A creature grabbed her again, shackle-strong hands closing around her wrists. "Do you wish to leave now, little girl?" It was the first demon, the one who had spoken to her. Her ears were still ringing, but she could hear him perfectly. She realized he was in her head, and she felt her grip on reality becoming loose. A wound on his forehead, where she had shot him, was quickly healing. She wanted to sob, she wanted to curl into a ball and weep, she just wanted it to stop.

"You can empty your gun on us, and we will keep coming. But all you need is one bullet to stop it all." He guided her hand up, and she pressed the barrel against her temple.

"Pain, pain, go away," another demon sang.

"Squeeze," a chorus of voices said inside her head. "Do it. One bullet."

Riley pressed her feet against the floor and bent her knees slightly. She leaned forward and then threw herself backward with all her strength. The demon was thrown off-guard and slammed into the plaster wall. His grip weakened and Riley shoved away from him before he could regain his bearings. The demons swarmed on the stairs and she knew she would never get past them. She didn't break stride when she reached the banister. She just grabbed the railing and hurled herself over into open air.

The demons howled as she fell, and every bone in her body trembled as she hit the ground. She rolled, praying she had saved her legs, and got back to her feet as fast as humanly possible. As she raced for the front door, she heard mocking laughter in her head, shrieking voices of the damned following her as she retreated.

She didn't stop until she was blocks away. She felt like she was high, her head still swimming whenever she tried to focus on anything. She touched her side and hissed as she felt the torn flesh and muscle through her useless bulletproof vest. Bulletproof, maybe, but apparently not demon-proof. Maybe the demon's knife had been drugged with something. She was achy, nauseated, and it was taking all her strength just to stand upright.

She took off her jacket and blouse, wincing as she twisted to get the vest off. She wadded up the blouse and pressed it hard against the wound on her side. A dark crimson trail ran down her left side and disappeared into her shoe. Riley scanned the street and tried to clear her head, tried to think of what to do next.

She didn't have anywhere to go. She was in No Man's Land on unofficial business, on a case her boss wanted to be closed by any means necessary. Her partner was dead. She was completely alone. The veins in her temple throbbed and she brought a bloody hand up to massage the pain away. She closed her eyes and stumbled forward, praying she wouldn't walk into a street and get hit by a bus.

"Never even saw the bus."

She remembered Gillian's joke and realized she wasn't alone. There was one place she could go. It might push the limits of their relationship to show up like this, but it was either that or losing her life. She somehow found the strength and focus to climb the stairs to the el track, and dropped onto a bench. She closed her eyes and pictured Kara, six short months ago, showing an invitation to a housewarming.

"That medical examiner, Dr. Hunt. She moved. I guess it's technically a, an apartment warming? Whatever, it's an

excuse to get drunk and eat cake with people from work. I'm in."

Riley didn't go to the party. She thought it would be weird, but she wasn't entirely sure why. She had feelings for Gillian, she understood that now. The understanding was the last gift Kara gave to her. She was attracted to Gillian, and she didn't want that attraction to fade or become strained because of a romantic entanglement. If it grew into a full-blown crush, that would be the end of their working relationship.

The train arrived, and Riley stumbled on board. She dropped into the seat and looked out the window, shocked to see the sun setting behind the buildings of No Man's Land. Had she dozed on the bench? Could she possibly have slept through five or six hours of train arrivals? She reached down and touched her side. The wound was still seeping blood.

She prayed that she had lost consciousness, that she had slumped on the bench and gone undisturbed for the entire afternoon. Blood loss would do that to you, wouldn't it? And in No Man's Land, it was nobody's business if they saw you bleeding on a bench. They would just go on about their business.

Riley closed her eyes. She had just dozed on the bench for five hours. That was all that happened. Because the alternative was that somehow, she had lost most of the day in the hellish apartment building. And if she stopped to consider what had happened during the missing time, she would truly go mad.

Twelve

Riley nearly slept through the correct stop. She straightened in her seat and looked around the train car. A woman wrapped in what was probably every article of clothing she owned sat on the opposite bench, her hand wrapped around the metal bar like it was a lifeline. Riley stared at the homeless woman, who stared back. The woman didn't seem alarmed by the amount of blood on Riley's clothes, or the fact that Riley's hand looked like it had been dipped in red paint. Just another dreg of society on the late train.

Ancient speakers were valiantly attempting to announce the next station through a veil of static explosions. A man at the far end of the car was sitting with one arm draped over a boom box, Lou Reed's voice transformed into an eerie hiss when he sang, "*And the colored girls go 'doo, doo-doo, doo-doo, doo-doo-doo...*"

The train lurched to a stop and Riley looked at the surrounded neighborhood. She pulled herself up, ignoring the horrendous pain in her side, and moved toward the doors. She stepped off the train and lost her footing, clinging to a trash can as she waited for her head to stop swimming. "*They said, 'Hey, Joe, take a walk on the wild side.'*" She spent one afternoon in No Man's Land, and now she was limping through the streets waiting to die. She'd walked on the wild side enough for one life, she decided as she finally found her feet.

As she walked, she looked at her surroundings with a critical eye. The good part of town had its own problems. Drugs and violence, pain and misery. Apartment buildings had signs advertising vacancies, hardly a day went by when she didn't see a moving truck somewhere. People were taking the easy way out, leaving while the leaving was good. They knew it was

only a matter of time before things went bad and stayed that way.

“What am I doing,” she whispered. She was trying to single-handedly save a city that didn’t want to be saved. Who would care if the place burned to the ground? Gather the ashes and let the wind take them. Why was she killing herself for this town?

When she reached Gillian’s building, she climbed the front steps and looked at the call buttons. Most of the names were too faded or scrawled to read, so she just pressed one at random. A few seconds later, a loud buzz sounded and the front door opened when she tried the handle. Riley straightened as best she could, grunting as the skin pulled against the wound on her side, gritting her teeth as she walked through the lobby.

“Them good ol’ boys a-drinkin’ whiskey and rye,” someone sang tunelessly from the other side of the lobby. “Singin’ this’ll be the day that I die.”

Riley climbed the stairs as she recalled the end of that song. *“The three men I admire most, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, they caught the last train for the coast.”*

She figured it was an appropriate epitaph for the city. “Bye-bye, Miss American Pie,” she whispered. Her hand left red stains on the wood as she climbed, and she realized that she would probably fall over if she didn’t keep hold. The weakness was shocking, frightening, and it made her wish she hadn’t come. *I don’t want to die on Gillian’s doorstep*, she thought. But it was too late to turn back now.

“Says Apartment 4-D,” Kara said, reading from the invitation.

“Forty?” Riley said.

“No, stupid. Four-dash-D. Are you coming?”

Riley shook her head. “Nah. I don’t really do that kind of pointless gathering crap. You have fun, though.”

Riley knocked on the door just under the gold numbers. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. She just wanted to

sleep. Maybe if she slid down to the floor, she could close her eyes and rest until Gillian answered the door. She was just starting to slide when someone on the other side of the door said, "Who is it?"

"Detective Riley Parra," Riley said, "Badge number 2128. Four-ten precinct..."

The door opened before Riley could recite her social security number. Gillian's hair was mussed from sleep and she was wrapped in a sea-foam green robe. Her eyes widened and she out her hands out to steady Riley before she fell over. "Oh, my God. What happened to you?"

"They fought the law, and the law... got its ass kicked."

Gillian guided Riley into the apartment and pushed the door shut with her foot. Riley was surprised at the apartment's décor; it looked like something out of a fifties movie. Two lamps with brown-yellow shades flanked either side of the couch and Gillian turned one on as she passed. She gestured at the couch. "Sit down."

Riley looked at the ugly brown and tan couch. "I'm bloody."

"For God's sake," Gillian muttered. She grabbed an afghan off the back of a nearby armchair and tossed it onto the couch. "There. Bleed on that."

Riley sat down and nearly fell asleep on contact. Ugly though it may be, the couch was the most comfortable thing she had ever sat on. Gillian took off her coat and gently removed the blood-soaked blouse Riley had been using to staunch the blood. Riley leaned to the side as Gillian examined the cut through her tank top. "God. Weren't you wearing a vest?"

Riley lifted her head and looked around the room groggily. Where had she left her vest? "I was," she said. "It's... I don't know. I left it somewhere." She pictured the bench where she had dozed. The vest was probably already protecting the torso of some punk gangbanger. She dropped her head back against the back of the couch and said, "It's gone. Useless piece of shit." She ran her tongue over her dry lips and wondered if there was water.

"Let me guess, whoever did this had some connection to Kara's death?"

"Mm," Riley grunted.

Gillian sighed. She stood and went into the kitchen, and returned with a folded white towel. "Here. Use this to put pressure on the wound. I'm going to get some water and my medical kit." She disappeared back into the kitchen.

Riley looked at the towel in her hand. It was mostly white, with a stripe of blue along the bottom. A yellow duck was embroidered in the bottom right corner. Riley stared at the duck and then started to laugh. She turned the towel so she wouldn't bleed on the duck, and pressed the towel to her wound. Laughing hurt her side, but she couldn't help herself.

When Gillian returned with a bowl of water and a black bag tucked under her arm, she had put on her black-framed eyeglasses. She frowned and said, "What's so funny?"

"There's a duck on your towel."

"Yeah. I like ducks."

That made Riley laugh harder, and tears rolled down her cheeks from the pain. "This entire town is so fucking ugly. But you have ducks on your towels. I love that."

"Well, thank you," Gillian said. She eased Riley's tank top up, exposing her stomach. Riley looked down and all humor left her. The cut was ragged, running from her hip to the bottom of her rib cage. It was a bright and angry red, dark blood staining her skin around it. Gillian wet the towel and gently cleaned the wound. Riley closed her eyes and tried to keep her wincing to a minimum.

"This is going to need stitches. And you could probably use a transfusion."

"No," Riley said. "I don't want a hospital. Can you do the stitches?"

"I'm usually doing them on corpses," Gillian said. "We didn't exactly get points for neatness at my school."

Riley nodded. "It's okay."

Gillian was kneeling on the floor in front of her, and Riley couldn't help but notice the stretch of bare leg exposed by the open halves of Gillian's robe. Gillian was nearly finished cleaning up Riley's side when a door closed down the hall. Riley's eyes immediately shifted toward the other side of the apartment, but Gillian looked resigned. "I'll be right back. Keep pressure on that wound."

Gillian stood and pulled the two halves of her robe together. She went to the hallway just as a tall black-haired woman appeared. Gillian didn't step in her way, but she held her hands up. "Hey, can we talk for a second? Just wait." She moved the woman deeper into the hall, but Riley could still hear her hushed voice. "She's someone from work. She's hurt. I don't know. Just stay, all right? No, it—" She sighed and listened to what the other woman said, and then muttered, "Fine, all right, go."

The black-haired woman walked through the living room without glancing toward the couch. She stepped into the hall and slammed the door behind her.

Gillian returned, her lips pressed together in anger. She knelt in front of Riley again and continued cleaning the wound. Riley said, "Damn, I'm sorry. I didn't... I didn't think that you might be..."

"Don't worry about it. That wasn't about you."

"Are you sure about that?"

Gillian nodded and chuckled without humor. "Oh, yeah. You're just her latest excuse. Her *last* excuse." She finished cleaning up the dried blood and reached down to open her bag. She hesitated and said, "Look, this is going to look like shit. You'll probably have a pretty nasty scar. You really should go to a hospital."

"I don't care about the scar. Please, Jill."

Gillian sighed, shook her head, and pulled out her kit. Riley closed her eyes - she didn't mind getting shots, but she hated to see the needle - and winced as she was injected. A soothing

numbness spread through her mid-section and she relaxed slightly. "Okay," Gillian said a moment later. "First living patient. Wish me luck."

"You don't exactly inspire confidence."

"You think my bedside manner is bad, wait until you get my bill."

Riley smiled and rested her head against the back of the couch. She could feel Gillian's fingers tugging at her, prodding the wound, but there was no pain. Riley relaxed and, in moments, felt herself drifting off to sleep.

"Riley?"

Riley was lying on the couch, and everything felt strange. At first, she thought it was aftereffects of the anesthesia, but then she realized she was no longer wearing her jeans. Or her socks. Her eyelids fluttered and she woke up, looking down at herself. Her bloody clothes had been replaced by a pair of blue scrubs. Her feet were bare. She touched her side and felt the bulky bandage under the crisp material of the scrub top. "What...?"

Gillian put her hands on Riley's shoulders to keep her from sitting up. "Whoa, hold it. Slow down. You need to give yourself some time to heal."

Riley grunted and fell back to the couch. She moved her hand and said, "Where are my clothes?"

"They're being washed."

"You undressed me?"

"You can trust me," Gillian said. "I'm practically a doctor."

Riley smiled.

"It's nothing I haven't seen before. Strictly professional."

Riley nodded. "It's okay if it wasn't. Strictly, I mean. You are still human."

This time Gillian smiled. "Well, someone has a high opinion of their beat-to-shit body." She pulled a blanket up over Riley's lower body and said, "Get some rest. You apparently went through a hell of a lot today. Your body needs time to catch up."

"Yeah," Riley said. She didn't want to think about everything that happened in No Man's Land, and she really didn't want to think about the note she had found in Kara's apartment. Her eyes snapped open and she tried to sit up. "Oh, shit," she said, and then winced as pain shot up her side. She covered the bandage with her hand and said, "My clothes. My jacket. It's..."

"I found the money," Gillian said from the hallway. "It's in a plastic bag, tucked between the kitchen counter and the fridge." She leaned against the wall and looked down at the ground. "I don't know what you and Kara were into, Riley. I don't want to know. I know you well enough to understand whatever it is, I shouldn't be worried about IAB coming and knocking on my door. Get some rest, Riley."

Riley settled back against the couch and nodded. "I'm sorry for ruining your night."

"Don't worry about it. Good night. If that's possible for you."

Riley looked away. "I'll try."

Gillian disappeared down the hall and Riley stared at the ceiling. She heard Gillian's bedroom door close, and looked around the living room. It was a beautifully quaint room. In the weak lamplight, she could see pictures hanging in frames on the wall. An old-fashioned rotary phone stood on the end table, next to a cell phone resting in a charger. She plucked at the afghan covering her and knew it was handmade, probably the work of some relative.

She realized this apartment was the answer to her earlier question. People like Gillian were why she fought. People who made a life in this city and weren't willing to turn their backs on it. She was fighting for all the people who were hoping for a brighter day. If she didn't, no one would. She couldn't give up. But it was so damn hard fighting by herself.

She pushed the afghan away and carefully rose from the couch. She held her side, hoping to keep the stitches from popping, and shambled down the hallway. All the doors were open except for one. She saw a bathroom, some sort of office, and she passed them without a thought. She paused at the closed door and twisted the knob.

The bedroom was dark, and she listened hard for the sound of snoring. A second later, Gillian said, "Riley?"

Riley opened the door the rest of the way. Gillian was sitting up in bed, blankets gathered around her waist. She wore a nightgown with lace shoulder straps, her hair down on her shoulders. Her glasses rested on the table next to the bed, along with a bottle of pills and an alarm clock. Riley wasn't sure why she had come down the hallway and she looked at her hand on the knob. "I should have knocked."

"That's okay."

"Can I... can..."

Gillian pushed down the blanket on the opposite side of the bed. "Come on."

Riley stepped into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. She crossed the room, climbed into bed, and settled down against the pillows.

Gillian lay down next to her and turned her head. "You deserve a soft bed after a hard day."

Riley closed her eyes and, without warning, began to cry. Gillian moved close to her and cradled her head to her chest.

Thirteen

The demons claw at her, pulling her away from the stairs. Their voices are a sibilant hiss in her head, threats and nightmares, winding around her head like snakes. There is no escape from them, their claws tear through her clothes and pierce her flesh. She feels blood seeping underneath her clothes and she falls to the ground with a shout and a scream as she is dragged back into the darkness. One presses his lips to her ear and hisses, "What makes you think you really got out of this building alive?"

The others laugh and Riley screams because she knows it's true, she knows the demon is telling the truth. Everything after - the train and Gillian - was an elaborate fantasy created by her brain to keep her sanity. But now she knew the truth and she couldn't run away again, and she screams louder and longer than she knew was possible as they begin to tear her apart.

She never got out, she will never get out, not even through death. She screams as the demons devour her, because she knows it will never, ever stop.

Riley was jerked from the nightmare by Debbie Harry telling her that the "*The tide is hi-igh!*" She pushed herself up and immediately remembered the tear in her side. She winced and clutched her side, staying still until the pain subsided. She rolled onto her back and stared at the bedroom. The closet was open, revealing a row of green scrubs alongside casual outfits. She could hear the shower running in the next room and she turned to put her feet on the floor. There was a fat, stuffed duck sitting on the floor in front of the nightstand, and Riley stared at the tiny unseeing brown eyes.

She wasn't sure when she finally fell asleep, but she was pretty sure she was in Gillian's arms. She covered her face and rested her elbows on her knees. What the hell had she been thinking, getting into bed with Gillian? She would never be able to show her face in the morgue again. The list of places where she would feel comfortable showing her face was already painfully short, and she hated Gillian's domain being taken off the list.

The shower shut off, and Riley tried to push herself up. She grunted as she shuffled across the bedroom floor, one hand on her side. She was almost to the door when Gillian came out of the bathroom. "Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

Riley didn't turn to look at her. Whether Gillian was in a towel or a robe, she was more than likely closer to naked than Riley had ever seen her. She said, "I was just going to see if I could find my clothes. Get out of your hair."

"You're still recovering. Crash on my couch today."

"No, you've done enough."

Gillian put her hands on Riley's shoulder, and Riley nearly jumped out of her skin. "I'm the closest thing you have to a doctor right now, and I'm saying rest. I do not want to have to re-stitch your wound." Gillian began to massage Riley's shoulders. Riley closed her eyes; it felt so good. "You nearly got your head taken off in that fight, some asshole shot you..."

"Kara shot me."

Gillian's hands froze. "What?"

"I shot Kara." She took a deep breath and turned to face Gillian. She was in the same robe she had worn the night before, her hair slicked back against her head and darkened from the shower. Riley closed her eyes and explained everything that had happened since discovering the body in the drain pipe, leaving out only the part of Samael entering her apartment and revealing the existence of angels and demons. She told about Kara's false affidavit, and Hathaway's offer to cover it up in return for a "favor."

When she finished, she felt physically lighter. She opened her eyes and looked at Gillian, expecting to see revulsion or horror. Instead, she saw understanding. "Sounds like you've had a rough couple of days."

Riley scoffed. "Yeah, you could say that."

"So stay here. Sleep on the couch, watch some crappy game shows. Get your energy back. Get your feet back underneath you. You're not going to do anyone any good going out like this. I don't want to see you get hurt. Well, any more hurt than you already are." She smiled and moved her hands to Riley's cheeks.

Riley's smile faded as Gillian leaned in. She said, "Wait," just as Gillian's lips met hers.

Riley put her hands on Gillian's shoulders to push her away, but instead she closed her eyes. She parted her lips, and moaned as Gillian's tongue touched hers. She moved her hands to Gillian's hips and was very aware that there was nothing underneath. They parted, and Gillian gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before pulling back. "Do you remember the junkie who blew his head off down on Sonomala?"

South No Man's Land, Riley immediately translated. She vaguely remembered the apartment, the blood painting one window bright red. She and Kara walked in and the medical examiner stood up and extended her hand over the corpse.

"It's where we met," Riley said.

"I've wanted to do that right then and there. But it seemed inappropriate at a crime scene."

"Good call."

Gillian smiled. "And after that, we only seemed to meet when there was a corpse around. So there was never a really opportune time."

"You could have come up to my office some slow afternoon."

"That would have involved taking the first step."

"You didn't seem to have a problem with that just now."

Gillian shrugged. "I spent last night watching you sleep. I didn't think there would be any better time."

Riley felt herself blushing. "You watched me sleep?"

"All night," Gillian said softly.

She remembered the nightmares and flinched. "Did I..."

"You made some noise," Gillian admitted. "But I managed to calm you down."

"You should have tried to sleep."

Gillian shook her head. "I couldn't. I had to make sure you were safe."

Riley touched Gillian's bottom lip and leaned in for another kiss. Gillian moved to put her hands on Riley's hips, but her hand brushed the still-sensitive wound on her side instead. Riley hissed through clenched teeth and pulled back. Gillian said, "Shit. I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just a little sensitive." She looked at Gillian and said, "Maybe when I've had a chance to heal a little more."

Gillian's eyes sparkled. "Yeah?"

Riley nodded. She kissed Gillian, taking the time to really appreciate the feel of the other woman's body pressed against hers. They finally pulled apart, and Gillian forced herself to take a step back. She messed with the tie of her robe and said, "That woman, last night. She wasn't... I mean, you don't have to worry about breaking us up or anything. She and I were just..."

"I understand."

"We just help each other out sometimes. It's just been a little more frustrating lately." She scratched her forehead and wrinkled her nose. A strand of hair fell forward and hung in front of her face. "I should... stop talking and get ready for work."

Riley reached up and brushed the strand of hair away. Gillian looked up, green eyes wide. Riley said, "Who knows."

Maybe something good can come out of this whole damned mess.”

Gillian smiled. “I would really like that.”

Riley leaned in and kissed Gillian’s cheek. “I’ll go see if I can muster up the strength to cook you breakfast.”

“I’ll take Pop Tarts. But you, I’ll cook you something. You need to get your strength up after the day you had yesterday.”

“Okay. I’ll get out of your room so you can change.” She stopped at the threshold. “Unless you need a hand with something.”

Gillian put a hand on Riley’s shoulder and gently pushed her out of the way so she could shut the door. Just before the door latched, Gillian said, “All in good time.”

Gillian made oatmeal and sausages, ordering Riley to eat both of them. “Lots of iron,” she said. “Make up for your blood loss.”

“Is that so?” Riley said.

“Hell if I know. You’re the only patient I’ve ever had who was alive the day after I worked on ‘em.”

Riley said, “I wouldn’t put that in your ads.”

“Who needs ads? The wounded hunt me down in the middle of the night.” She added another pair of sausage links to Riley’s plate. She finally abandoned the stove and sat down next to Riley at the dining room table. “All right, I know you’re not going to just sit around the apartment all day. What are you planning?”

“Nothing strenuous,” Riley said. “I barely managed to get my foot in the door last time before I got taken down. I need a better battle plan.”

“Planning sounds safe.” Riley nodded. Gillian put her hand on top of Riley’s and said, “Promise me you won’t go back into No Man’s Land. In your condition, you would definitely not make it home again.”

Riley looked into Gillian's eyes and saw the anxiety and fear behind them. She quickly looked away and said, "I haven't had anyone waiting at home to worry about me in... a really long time. If ever. I haven't had anyone who cared."

Gillian stood up and moved next to Riley's chair. "Look at me." Riley lifted her eyes and Gillian cupped her face. "At the risk of sounding corny, I care. I didn't finally share my bed with you just to have you disappear before I get to see you naked. Do you hear me?"

"You saw me naked last night."

"Shut up," Gillian said. "Promise me."

"I promise."

Gillian bent down and kissed Riley's lips, holding the position for a long moment before she backed away. "All right. I'm going to go. Be safe."

"I will."

She turned in her chair and watched Gillian gather her things for work. She slipped her horn-rimmed glasses on, checked to make sure her cell phone was in her pocket, and said, "Okay. I'll be back around six. Try not to have any more wounds by then."

Riley waved good-bye and turned back to her breakfast.

Riley decided to take a bath when she finished her breakfast. She usually preferred showers, but every now and then she just wanted to sit and relax. Unfortunately, the huge fresh wound in her side would hamper that, so she was going to take whatever she could get. She went into the bathroom, trying to shake off the unease at being alone in such an intimate area of Gillian's apartment. "You've been in her bed," she told herself, "and she would probably tell you to do this if she was here. Get over yourself."

She reached over her head and grabbed the back collar of her scrub top, bending forward to pull the shirt off without stretching her wound any more than necessary. She turned to

the mirror and lifted her arm. She carefully peeled away the bandage and winced when she saw the extent of the damage. The wound would definitely leave a nasty scar. It scared her that she didn't even know what the demon had used to cut her open. A knife? The sword used to cut off Ridwan's wings? She remembered several of them had clawed, animal hands. Maybe it had been his fingernail.

Riley shuddered and put those thoughts out of her mind. She sat on the edge of the tub and turned on the hot water. As the tub filled, she took a quick moment to snoop. Evidence of Gillian's newly-exposed duck fetish was everywhere; a duck-shaped bottle of liquid soap, pale ducks on a blue background dancing over the shower curtain, and a small porcelain duck standing next to the sink.

When the bath was full, Riley turned and lowered her feet into the water. She wet a washrag and then swept it up her arm. She hissed as the water touched her myriad of bruises, cuts and scrapes. She washed her chest and stomach, avoiding the wound on her side. She would have to clean it eventually, but she didn't want to see it any more than necessary. Instead, she looked at the white marble tile that made up the tub's alcove.

Her side already felt marginally better. She wondered if Gillian slipped some painkillers into her oatmeal. She also wondered if there were any more pills in the house. Maybe she would still try to save the city. Maybe she would go after Marchosias like Samael wanted. But whatever she decided, it could wait until she finished with her bath.

Fourteen

When Riley finished her sponge bath, she risked a naked walk through Gillian's apartment to retrieve her clothes from the dryer. When she stepped into the dining room, she gasped when she realized someone was already there. She brought one hand up to cover her breasts before the man turned and she realized who he was. "Shit. Samael. Don't you knock?"

"No," he said. "Most people never realize I'm here." He tilted a small white cookie jar - surprisingly not duck-shaped - and withdrew an Oreo.

Riley stopped the pretense of covering herself and continued to the laundry room. She retrieved her clothes and stood in the doorway to dress. "What are you doing here now?"

"I wanted to apologize for your ordeal at Marchosias' apartment building. I had no idea that would happen."

"Yeah, demons. You never know what they're up to." She winced as she pulled her tank top on. There was a rust-colored stain on the left side, and she doubted it would ever completely come out. "I could have used your help there. Maybe kept my head clear."

Samael looked down at his cookie. "I do not believe I would have been effective against Marchosias' forces."

Riley rolled her eyes. "You know, if you picked me as some sort of champion, I think you guys might want your deposit back. I don't know how you expect me to fight a guy I can't even get close to."

"You'll have to come up with a way."

Riley slapped the counter and lifted her arm. “Maybe you missed what his minions did to me yesterday. I didn’t have a chance.”

Samael sighed. “There is always a way to overcome.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should have picked a smarter human.”

Samael took a few more cookies from the jar and walked around the counter. “You will find a way to stop Marchosias because of what is at stake. Your honor, Kara Sweet’s memory, your city. The promise of a relationship with Gillian. Everything you hold dear hangs upon Marchosias being defeated. This city can be returned to its former glory.”

“What if the city needs a sacrifice? What if that is my role in all of this?”

Samael shrugged as he walked past her. He put his hand on her left shoulder and quickly pulled it away before she could break his wrist. “Then you will die for a cause greater than yourself. An admirable death.”

“Yeah,” Riley scoffed. “Maybe for you.” She looked over her shoulder and saw that Samael had disappeared again. She sighed and shook her head, then took the rest of her clothes from the dryer.

Riley chanced leaving the apartment later that morning. By the time she reached the train station, she felt like someone was digging their fingers into her side. She rode all the way to her apartment and managed to disembark, walk to her front door, and get into her apartment without keeling over. She immediately went to her medicine cabinet and dry-swallowed a handful of pain pills. She leaned against the sink and looked at her reflection.

Gillian kissed you this morning.

The smile that spread across her face caught her off-guard. She chuckled, looked down at the sink and shook her head. She pushed her hair out of her face and went into the bedroom to find some clean clothes.

Her bed was a cinder.

She stood in the doorway and stared at the remnants of her mattress. The blaze seemed to have been contained around the bed, a near perfect circle of ash surrounding the bed frame. The window was closed, nothing else in the room seemed to have been affected. She pictured crime scene techs surrounding the room and throwing out theories of spontaneous human combustion. *"Parra ever smoke in bed? Well, there ya go."* But she knew the truth. Marchosias sent someone to finish the job. They thought she would crawl home and climb into bed. Had they looked to make sure she was there before they lit the torch? Or was it just a blind job? Had they reached out from No Man's Land and tried to kill her from miles away?

Riley realized her hands were shaking and she stuffed them into her pockets. She took a deep breath, ignored the bed, and went to the closet. Instead of just changing clothes as she planned, she filled a duffel bag with enough things to get her through the week, and slung the strap over her shoulder. She figured that would be enough. If Marchosias was still around in seven days, odds were that she wouldn't be.

She left her apartment and headed downstairs. She stopped on the sidewalk and looked up at her window from the street. There were no scorch marks, no claw marks on the windowsill where some gargoyle hunkered and sent a fireball at her bed. But she knew without a doubt that one of Marchosias' demons was at fault. *So the options are die trying to save the city, or die to make sure I won't be a problem in the future.*

Riley shook her head and crossed the street. The girl who had been to a grand total of one church service in her entire life, and that was on protection detail for the mayor's grandmother, was now caught up in some holy war between angels and demons. Damned if she did, truly damned if she didn't.

"Maybe I should have gone to church once or twice," she muttered.

*

Riley didn't want to go inside. The building was imposing from the outside, so she could only imagine what the inside was like. All polished oak, stained glass windows casting rainbow shadows on the floor. Great big wooden guy nailed to a cross at the front of the room. What kind of morbid decoration was that, anyway? Wake up Sunday morning, put on your best clothes, ride the train with the junkies and the hookers, then take a seat and look up at a blood-stained, half-naked guilt trip.

Riley finally mustered up the courage and climbed the stairs. A black sign declared that Sunday services would begin at 10:30, and a soup kitchen was open every night at six. The heavy wooden doors creaked as Riley stepped inside, and - as in the demon fort - she felt as if she had entered another world. She tried to walk slowly, very aware of how her footsteps echoed, and happened to look to her left to see what was apparently a bird bath.

She frowned at it. Did churches have birds? She walked over, dipped her fingers into the water, and flicked them. What the hell was the thing?

"Holy water."

Riley jumped back a step and spun around. A stout black man in a cassock was approaching from the far side of the sanctuary. He smiled and said, "I apologize, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right. I've just had a lot of people jumping out at me lately."

He nodded as if he understood and gestured at the water. "Holy water. Some of our parishioners like to cross themselves with it." He dipped two fingers in the water and demonstrated. "You're not a regular churchgoer, I take it?"

"No," she said. She pulled the strap of her bag higher on her shoulder and looked at the crucifix at the front of the room. To her surprise, Jesus was black. She was about to comment when she realized the priest was black, too. "Oh. This isn't a black church, is it? I could leave..."

The priest laughed. "Don't be ridiculous. You obviously have questions, and answers aren't easy to come by no matter what your skin color. My name is Jacob."

"Riley."

"What can I do for you, Riley?"

If you can't trust a priest, she thought. She said, "Do you believe there are angels and demons in the world?"

"Oh, yes. There are legions, I'm certain. And I don't mean Legion." His chuckled died off when he noticed her blank look. "Boy, it has been a while since you were in a church. The short answer is yes, I believe they walk among us. The long answer is more complicated. I believe humanity is influenced by these entities, rather than the angels or demons truly interacting with our affairs."

"Tell that to my side," she muttered.

He frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"Nothing. Never mind. What about an exorcism? If someone is possessed by a demon. Would that work if no one was possessed? Like if the demon was just... around?"

Jacob shook his head. "I'm not sure what... my dear, just what is it you're dealing with? Do you believe someone in your life is a demon?"

She sighed. "Let's skip the psychoanalyzing, okay? Just tell me what someone should do if they come face to face with a demon. The horned one. Whatever." She gestured at the sanctuary. "Don't you have weapons? Holy water, crucifixes, silver bullets. Anything to ward off evil spirits."

Jacob took a deep breath and folded his hands in front of him. "I'm afraid there's a slight problem with your request. If one of the church members came to me with this problem, yes, I would suggest several things. Prayer, crucifixes, yes. Holy water. But those items only work if you have faith in the power they represent. Wielded by an unbeliever, a crucifix is no more effective than a common piece of wood. I take it you are... not a believer, Riley."

“No. Not for a long time.”

Jacob reached out and touched her arm. “I can see you’re in pain. I know whatever trial you are facing right now, it weighs on you. And platitudes aren’t worth the paper they’re written on to you. But have faith. Trust in God to help you, and he may surprise you. You may even come out the other side of this as a believer.”

“Somehow I doubt that, Father.”

He smiled. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more assistance to you.”

“Right. Don’t sweat it.” She turned and started walking down the aisle to the front doors. When she was almost there, she stopped and turned. “Father.” Jacob turned to face her. She pointed at the crucifix and said, “You’re saying that is just a piece of wood without the strength of a belief behind it.”

“That’s right. Belief is strong enough to change the world. To turn an ordinary word carving into something that can push back the darkness.”

Riley nodded slowly. “Thank you, Father. You’ve actually been a really big help.”

She thought over her predicament at length before she finally made a decision. She found a phone book in one of the city’s few remaining pay phone booths - although the receiver had been cut off and taken who-knows-where. She found a shop on the reputable part of town, a building she had passed countless times without ever giving it a second thought. She knew a lot of cops used the place, though, so she decided it was trustworthy. She made a note of the address and dialed her cell phone as she walked.

“City morgue.”

“What are you wearing?”

Gillian chuckled. “Nothing but a surgical mask.”

“That’s more creepy than sexy.”

"I know. I just pictured it. What's up?"

Riley didn't know how to answer that question. She didn't have any official news, she didn't want to tell Gillian her plan until she knew it would work, so why in the hell had she called? She finally realized she had just wanted to hear her voice. "I just... wanted to call you. And say how much I appreciated last night."

"It was my pleasure. How is your side?"

"It's been getting better all day. I may be full strength tomorrow."

"Heaven forbid," Gillian said. "I may have to tie you to the bedposts before I leave for work."

Riley nearly tripped over her feet. She looked around to see if anyone was eavesdropping and said, "Really?"

Gillian laughed. "I need to get back to work. I'll call you when I have some more time."

"Okay. Jill..."

"Hmm?"

For some reason, she wanted to say something she had never said outside of the heat of the moment. She didn't doubt it was true, but she was terrified of how true it was. She said, "I, um... I don't know."

"I don't know, too," Gillian said.

Riley smiled and hung up without saying goodbye.

The bell over the door chimed as Riley entered. Security cameras peered down from every angle at the interior of the store. Riley crossed the room to the man waiting at the cash register. "Good evening, ma'am. How can I help you?"

Riley dropped her duffel bag on the glass case that displayed various guns with price tags tied to the trigger guards. "You can make custom bullets, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Can you make them out of bronze and brass with copper tips?" He rubbed his chin and she added, "I have the material. I just need to know if you can do it."

He nodded. "Oh, sure."

Riley unhooked her badge from her belt and dropped it on the counter. He raised an eyebrow and Riley showed him her police ID to confirm it was hers. "I need you to melt that down and make me some bullets."

"Out of your badge?"

"Yeah."

"That's—"

"Crazy. I know." It was her shield, an emblem of power and protection. It was a symbol of the one thing she still believed in, despite all of its flaws. She was a police officer, this was her shield, and she believed it would kill demons. "Will you do it?"

The man rubbed his chin. "I suppose."

"I'll give you an extra hundred bucks to have them ready for me tomorrow morning."

"Tomo—" He scoffed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'll do my best."

"Tomorrow morning, no later than ten, or no deal."

The man looked at her badge and then finally held out his hand. "We have a deal."

Riley shook his hand. One way or another, everything was going to get settled before the sun set tomorrow.

F i f t e e n

Riley wasn't exactly sure why, but she returned to Gillian's apartment rather than risk going to her own. On the surface, she could claim fear that the demons would return and take another whack at her when they discovered they missed her the first time. She went up the stairs, let herself in using the spare key, and tried to ignore the feeling of strangeness as she walked into someone else's apartment.

It was an unusual trait for a cop, especially for a homicide detective, but she always felt awkward in stranger's homes. She was an intrusion, something that didn't belong, and she never knew the lay of the land. Once, as a rookie, she had nearly screamed when what she thought was a cat statue suddenly stood, stretched, and jumped down from its perch. She used that as a lesson to never take anything for granted. A closed door might be a closet or it could hide a stairwell leading to a torture chamber.

She went to the stereo and picked out a CD so the apartment wouldn't be quiet. She couldn't stand silence for long periods, plus it gave her a chance to check out Gillian's music collection. She found a Leonard Cohen CD and let it play when she went into the bathroom. She lifted her shirt to inspect the dressing on her side. Fortunately running around all day didn't seem to have caused any further damage.

Leonard Cohen said, "Let's sing another song, boys, this one has grown old and bitter," from the radio and Riley hummed along as she went into the kitchen. She found herself distracted by a series of framed photographs on the wall separating the dining room from the rest of the apartment.

There were photos of Gillian as a much younger woman, maybe fresh out of high school, with a woman who must have

been her mother. Gillian stood alone in front of a waist-high brick wall, gesturing at the hills behind her.

Riley shook her head and examined each picture. She had no idea what she was doing in the apartment. She and Gillian were coworkers. Even if they did try to make something, they were destined for disappointment. She didn't want to have to avoid the morgue just because it would be awkward. Besides, Gillian wasn't even her type. Too old, although she was only a few years older than Riley, too straight-laced. Riley went for the women in tight jeans and loose blouses. She didn't want someone this... stable.

So why are you in her apartment? Why was she the only one you thought of when you thought you were dying?

She went into the kitchen and hoped to silence the voices in her head by any means necessary. Even if that meant taking drastic measures.

When Gillian arrived home two hours later, she paused in the doorway and sniffed. "Riley? Are you cooking something?"

"Yeah. In the kitchen."

Gillian dumped her bag and took off her coat as she crossed the room. "Well, if you're going to cook in my apartment, I would prefer you do it there." She went into the kitchen and couldn't help laughing.

Riley looked up at the laugh and looked down at herself. She realized she was standing in a kitchen wearing a red-and-white checkered apron. Her black hair was tangled in a sloppy ponytail, her blouse open at the collar. Her sleeves were rolled up, and a dried red sauce clung to her forearm. Gillian covered her mouth and looked around. "What are you doing?"

"Making spaghetti."

"Uh-huh. Where did the dishes go?"

"Washed and dried."

Gillian nodded. "Okay. How is your side?"

Riley waved her off. "Fine. It's good." She sighed and said, "I just needed to do something productive. I couldn't sit around and sulk all day."

"I understand. I'd still like to take a look."

"Okay. After dinner."

Gillian moved closer to the stove and looked into the pan. She put her hand in the small of Riley's back and Riley tried not to tense at the touch. It was a good touch. A very good touch. Gillian said, "Looks good. You're an excellent chef." She smiled at Riley and seemed to realize how close they were standing. Riley swallowed, her eyes drifting from Gillian's lips to the v-neck of her scrub top to the pan on the stove. Gillian sensed the tension and said, "Riley..."

Riley turned and suddenly kissed Gillian's lips. Gillian kept her eyes open through her kiss, her hands resting lightly on Riley's hips with high awareness of the wound. Riley turned away from the stove and pressed herself against Gillian for a moment before she broke the kiss. Riley sagged against Gillian and said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Gillian said. She put her hands in the small of Riley's back. "It was good."

Riley looked at the stove and said, "I'm not even really that hungry."

"And I had a big lunch."

Riley looked up at Gillian. There was desire in her eyes, and Riley suddenly realized how wanted she was. It was disconcerting, flattering, frightening. She stepped back long enough to lift the pan of spaghetti off the stove, move it to another burner and turn off the heat. Then she turned and kissed Gillian again. Gillian was a few inches taller than her, and still wearing shoes, so Riley had to stretch a bit. She winced as her stitches pulled, but Gillian soon made her forget about the pain.

When they parted, Gillian said, "With your wound, you're going to have to be on the bottom. I get the feeling you're not... quite used to that."

Riley smirked. "Never let it be said I turned down new experiences."

Gillian kissed Riley again and started backing out of the kitchen. Riley followed, moving her lips to Gillian's jaw and throat. When they reached the hall, Gillian moved Riley until her back was to the wall, then leaned back to look into Riley's eyes. She stepped out of her sneakers, kicking them toward the living room to even the playing field up a bit. Riley ran her hands over the crisp material of Gillian's scrub top, her hands trembling as they cupped her breasts.

Gillian placed her hand over Riley's shirt, covering the bandage on Riley's side with her palm. She looked down and ran her hand gently over the cotton. "I'll be gentle with you, Riley."

Riley pushed away from the wall and wrapped her arms around Gillian. They managed to make it down the hallway, Gillian reaching out blindly to open the bedroom door. Riley stopped at the foot of the bed they had shared the night before and sat down, spreading her legs as Gillian stepped forward. Gillian bent down and kissed Riley, easing her down onto the mattress.

As she traced Riley's lips with her tongue, her hand trailed over Riley's body. She cupped her breast, ran the back of her hand over Riley's stomach, and toyed with her belt buckle. She climbed onto the bed, straddling Riley's lap, and leaned back to begin undoing the buttons of her blouse. Riley watched as her shirt was unbuttoned, the two halves pushed aside, and then looked up to gauge Gillian's reaction.

Gillian ignored the rectangular gauze on the left side of Riley's midsection and put her hands on Riley's belly. The warmth of her palms spread across her whole stomach, and Riley groaned. Gillian let out a shaky breath and whispered, "I've thought a lot about this, you know. As long as I've known you, I've wanted you. I never thought I would be lucky enough to... to be with you like this."

She moved her hands up and cupped Riley's breasts through her bra. She chuckled and shook her head. "I'm a little nervous."

"It's okay," Riley whispered. She arched her back and reached back to unhook her bra. Gillian curled her fingers around the straps and gently pulled it up and off. Gillian looked down, eyes wide and staring. She parted her lips and touched the corner of her mouth with the tip of her tongue. After a moment, she bowed her head and kissed between Riley's small breasts. She brought both hands up, cupping them and brushing her thumbs over the nipples. Riley closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip, arching her back as Gillian's lips moved higher. She brushed her tongue over the bruise left by Kara's bullet and Riley barely contained a shout. She wasn't sure if it was pain or pleasure, but she decided it was somewhere in between.

Gillian lifted her head and kissed Riley's chin. "Tell me if I hurt you."

"It's okay," Riley whispered again.

Gillian moved her hand to Riley's cheek, cradling the smooth line of her jaw. "You're gorgeous with your hair down. Such pale skin, beautiful features. My God, you don't even know."

Riley closed her eyes and leaned into Gillian's caress. She kissed Gillian's hand, just below her thumb, and reached down to undo her own pants. Her hands tangled with Gillian's, and a moment later, her jeans were being pushed down and off. Gillian lay next to her and reached down, running her hand up the inside of Riley's leg. She moved slowly, moving her fingers against the soft flesh behind Riley's knee, her thumb running in circles over her thigh. By the time her hand finally cupped Riley through her underwear, Riley could barely breathe.

"Please," she said.

Gillian kissed her way down Riley's body. She paused to swirl her tongue in Riley's navel, then moved off the bed. She settled between Riley's legs and pulled her close. She slipped her arms under Riley's legs, moving them onto her shoulders. Gillian met Riley's eyes, wet her lips, and bowed her head.

Riley pressed the back of her head into the mattress, a dull throb spreading from the knot where she had hit the rearview mirror a few days earlier. She brought both arms up and pressed her fists against her temples, focusing on nothing but Gillian's lips and tongue. She whimpered when Gillian pushed aside her underwear, and Gillian softly asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Riley grunted. "Keep going."

Gillian's tongue touched her, and Riley bit her bottom lip to contain the shout building in her chest. Gillian moved her hands up, lacing her fingers together on Riley's stomach. Gillian moved her tongue slowly, an excruciating exploration that was driving Riley right to the edge. Right before she let herself fall, Gillian lifted her head and placed a kiss on each of Riley's thighs.

"You have to let me come," Riley gasped. "Gillian..."

"Shh," Gillian whispered. She stood up and quickly shed her scrubs. She dumped them on the floor, her bra and boy-shorts following in short order. Riley skimmed her eyes down Gillian's body; slender and lean, average breasts with dark nipples, and a thin patch of copper-colored hair between her legs. She climbed onto the bed, straddling Riley's right leg as she pulled Riley up for another kiss. She put hand on Riley's side and said, "Are you okay," against Riley's lips.

"Yeah," Riley said. She pushed herself down until she felt Gillian's thigh pressing tight against her. She put her hands on Gillian's hips, raised her own thigh, and then rocked her hips forward. "Oh, God..."

"Go slow," Gillian whispered breathlessly. She had one hand on the back of Riley's head and the other on her breast. They rocked against each other slowly, Gillian doing most of the work because of Riley's side. Riley leaned forward and kissed Gillian's breasts, resting her face between them to inhale the scent of Gillian's sweat.

Riley moved her head up, tentatively licking Gillian's neck. Gillian sighed and Riley closed her teeth around her earlobe. Gillian gasped and curled her fingers in Riley's hair. "Oh, God, Riley..." At the sound of Gillian saying her name, Riley arched

her back and came. She bit her bottom lip, and Gillian said, "You can cry out... if you want..."

Riley released a tortured, shattered groan, and then sagged against Gillian's body. She moved her hand between their bodies, found Gillian's clit, and gently circled it until Gillian came as well. She watched Gillian's face - eyes closed, chin lifted, lips slightly parted - until the orgasm washed over her. And then, finally, she cupped Riley's face and whispered, "Riley..."

They kissed, still wrapped around each other, and Riley fell back. Gillian fell with her, covering Riley's body with her own. She ran her hands over Riley's body while peppering her face with lazy kisses. Gillian groaned and looked down. "Is your side...?"

"Sh. It's fine."

Gillian said, "Is it all right if I lay on you for a little while?"

Riley nodded.

Gillian ran her fingers over Riley's face, starting at her hairline and moving down to her chin. Riley closed her eyes and allowed the exploration. "You're so gorgeous, Riley. You better get used to me saying it." Riley pressed her lips together, but then relaxed. She hated her chin; she always felt it was a weak, little girl's chin. Her lips were too wide. Her eyebrows were too full. She was attractive, but she didn't think anyone had ever described her as cute. But now, for the moment, under Gillian's touch, she let herself believe she was.

Sixteen

Riley knew she should sleep, but it wouldn't happen. They broke their lovemaking into two rounds, taking a quick break for dinner. They wore robes into the dining room and made quick work of the final dinner preparations. When they finished, they returned to the bedroom and explored each other again. When Gillian finally suggested they get some rest, Riley agreed and spooned against Gillian from behind. But she didn't sleep.

She stared at the window and thought of the war happening in the streets of her town. It seemed like so much work and wrath for such an inconsequential piece of real estate. She didn't understand why Ridwan and his fellow angels were willing to give their lives to protect it. A quiet voice at the back of her brain asked, *"Isn't that precisely what you've been doing your whole life? You've never been in love. You've focused everything on being a cop. This city is all that matters in your life."*

Riley kissed Gillian's shoulder and smiled when she murmured in her sleep. The city *was* all that mattered in her life, at one point. Not anymore. The thought scared her. Her entire life, she had only had one person to care about; herself. That changed slightly when Kara Sweet became her partner, and Kara's safety became as paramount as her own, but that was different. She knew that whatever happened the next morning at Marchosias' apartment building, she was going to work like hell to survive, for Gillian's sake.

An hour or so before dawn, Riley slipped out of bed and took a shower. She went into the living room, pausing to make sure Gillian was still asleep, and sat down at the desk behind the couch. She found stationary and a pen, then hesitated before she began writing.

“Gillian.

Tonight has meant everything to me. I don't want you to think my leaving means anything bad. I just have something I need to do. One last case needs to be closed. I may not come back from it alive, and I apologize if that's the case. I would hate to think we started something tonight that can't be finished. Thank you for giving me something beautiful tonight. If you don't hear from me by tomorrow night, you should probably assume the worst. There's nothing the police will be able to do. Just know I tried my best to do the right thing. Not for the city, or for myself, or for Kara, but for you. You deserve better than what we have. So I'm going to try my damndest to give you a better world.”

Riley stared at the note and drummed her pen on the edge of the desk. She lifted her head and stared at the wall and then, before she could change her mind, scrawled, “I love you,” at the bottom of the note.

She signed it, folded it, and carried it into the bedroom. She rested it on the nightstand where Gillian was sure to see it, then bent over the bed and lightly kissed Gillian's lips. “I love you.”

Gillian stirred, but didn't wake. She sighed and said, “Riley...”

Riley closed her eyes and brushed Gillian's hair. She didn't want to say good-bye, and she didn't want to leave with a promise she couldn't keep. So she simply said, “I'll never forget tonight.” She backed out of the bedroom, still talking herself in to what she had to do. She took her bag off the chair as she crossed the living room and left the apartment before she could change her mind.

Riley stopped at an ATM before she went to the gun shop. The cost of the custom bullets, plus the extra fee for having them ready for her so quickly, nearly wiped out her bank account. It was a problem she would deal with if she survived

the coming attack, which was so unlikely that she didn't want to think about it. She drove to the shop and arrived just as the owner was flipping the sign on the door over to 'open.'

She could tell the owner hadn't slept. He still wore his clothes from her previous visit, and he hadn't shaved. "Just got 'em done," he said as she followed him through the shop. "I managed to get you twelve rounds. I'm not sure..."

"That'll be fine," she said. She prayed to God it would be.

He picked up a box and flipped open the top. The bullets were perfect and silver, with rings of copper and bronze on the tips. Riley took one out and twisted it to watch the shell catch the light. This was her badge, her totem, the symbol of her one true belief. That despite some of the people involved in it, the police department was her god and this was her crucifix. It would have to work.

She paid the man, took her bullets, and went out to her car. She sat behind the wheel and realized the sun was rising. It was captured between two buildings, framed as if on a movie screen, and she froze to watch it. If it was going to be her last sunrise, she wasn't going to waste it. As the sun tracked higher, the sky changed colors. Orange and yellow, bright, sweeping colors. Sunrises, she thought, were always better than sunsets. They were the exact same thing, albeit from different directions, but a rising sun always seemed brighter than a setting one.

When the sun disappeared behind a building, she got to work. She dumped the bullets from her gun into a coat pocket and loaded the weapon with the custom-made ammunition. Concrete Blonde was on the radio and Johnette Napolitano growled, "*God is a bullet, have mercy on us everyone.*"

Riley slipped the gun into the holster and muttered, "You said it, sister."

Riley drove into No Man's Land rather than taking the train. If she survived, she figured she would want to make a quick getaway. If she didn't, well, it didn't matter what happened to the car. Driving allowed her to see, once again, that the line

between No Man's Land and so-called respectable society was more blurred than ever. A few businesses that were in business a year ago were now closed, standing empty and forlorn. Apartment buildings grew less and less desirable the closer they were to No Man's Land, which caused a domino effect on the neighbors.

No one person can ever fix this. Not even a cop. Not even if that cop kills one demon. This is not the work of one person, and it can't be fixed by one person.

Riley shook her head and silenced the voice. She focused on the memory of Kara. "Got a smoke?" Riley giving her the eye as she handed over a cigarette. "Thanks. Quitting is hell."

Trying to finish her paperwork while Kara recounted the latest bar conquest. "Six foot five and covered in denim and tattoos. Looked like the Marlboro Man, hung like Mr. Ed."

She remembered a crime scene their first year as partners. Two little kids were found dead in their beds. Their mother, their killer, was on the couch when the cops arrived. She gestured at the bedroom with her cigarette but didn't look away from the TV until she was thrown to the ground for the handcuffs. They were looking over the scene when Riley noticed Kara was missing and went looking for her.

She found her in the alley, hugging herself, sobbing uncontrollably. Kara never explained why she was hit so hard, and Riley never asked. She leaned against the wall next to her partner, lit up a cigarette despite the fact she didn't smoke, and gave it to Kara. Kara smoked until the tears dried up and then finally said, "It's just shit, you know. Sometimes..."

"Yeah, I know," Riley said. "You want me to handle it?"

"No," Kara said. She knocked her fist against Riley's shoulder and said, "But thanks, partner."

Kara's head jerking back as Riley pulled the trigger.

Riley punched the steering wheel.

"I could bring her back."

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel and she focused on the road. She knew what that voice was. Marchosias. He knew she was coming, and he was scared. Her heart pounded and she tried to push him away, but he was too strong.

“Do you think it’s outside of my abilities? I could make it like this never happened. Send you back a few days. You’d never even see that crime scene. Wouldn’t you be so much happier? Wouldn’t everyone be so much happier?”

She pictured Gillian sprawled in her bed, the taste of her lips.

“No,” she whispered. “You’re scared. You should be. Because I’m coming.”

The demon laughed in her head, and then his voice faded. Riley wanted to scream, wanted to jump from the car and run for the hills, but she couldn’t. If she ever wanted to erase the image of Kara’s death from her memory, she had to see this through to the end. No matter what it cost, she had to kill Marchosias.

Riley parked a block away from the apartment building. She held the gun with one hand and admired the sleek, sharp lines. She didn’t even know if the damned bullets would work. She prayed they would, and had faith they would, but she couldn’t remember the last time she had put any stock in faith. Everything she was supposed to have faith in - family, the church, her superiors - always let her down and left her behind.

But the department had always been there. They always stood behind her, gave her the faith to walk in dark places. She lifted the gun and rested the barrel against her forehead. The smell of oil and gunpowder was comforting, and she breathed deep. It didn’t occur to her until a minute had passed that she was praying. She asked for a blessing - how could it hurt? - and lowered the gun.

The street was empty, but she couldn’t help feeling as if she was in a western. She could feel eyes on her, people hiding behind curtains and lurking in the shadows, waiting for her.

She had a vision of herself standing in the middle of the street, feet apart, gun slung low on her hips as she called Marchosias out. It would never work; she looked ridiculous in cowboy boots.

Riley opened the door and climbed out of the car. She knew she should have holstered the gun, but she didn't want to. It took a couple of seconds to draw the gun, and she might not have the luxury of time. She kept the gun down against her thigh and watched the buildings as she walked. There were no tell-tale signs she was being observed, but these were demons she was dealing with. Who knew how many eyes they had?

She was almost to the front door of Marchosias' building when movement on the opposite side of the street caught her eye. She tightened her grip on her gun, turned, and groaned when she recognized Samael.

He was dressed as he had been in her apartment; business casual. His wings were again folded and hidden by a trenchcoat, but she could see the bulge they made near his shoulders. He crossed the street and fell into step next to her. "What's wrong?" she said. "Did you suddenly grow a conscience? Get embarrassed about having a human do your dirty work for you?"

"Every human deserves a guardian angel," he said. "I fear you don't know what you're getting into with Marchosias."

"Well, if I don't, then it's your bad. Everything I need to know about March, I learned from you, Sam I Am."

He pressed his lips together in displeasure. "I can't do anything once we're inside," he said. "Do you understand? I can't raise my hand against the demons in their sanctuary."

"So basically you're as useless as you are out here."

"I'm trying to make sure you understand—"

She spun on him. "You're the one who told me I was destined to do this. You're the one who told me all of this shit and told me I couldn't back down. Stop trying to hedge your bets." She checked her gun, glared at him, and said, "It's too late to second guess. I'm going in there and I'm going to do

what you should have done on the waterfront that night. It would have saved everyone a hell of a lot of trouble.”

She didn't wait for his reaction. She turned, opened the front door of the building, and stepped into the demons' lair.

Seventeen

The lobby was unchanged, but Riley felt a surge of apprehension as she stepped into the darkness. She had a vivid memory of herself running from the building, the demons she wasted bullets on rising and rejoining the attack. Goosebumps rose on her arms and she felt a trickle of sweat in the small of her back. She closed her eyes and focused on the knowledge that, only a few hours before, Gillian's tongue had traced along her spine. She was protected. She opened her eyes and walked deeper into the lobby.

She heard quiet, hissing whispers coming from the floors above. "I know you bastards are up there. Come on out. There's no use hiding."

They seemed to peel away from the woodwork, sliding from the shadows and into the light. Their eyes were dark, smoldering, and she looked at their lips to avoid being entranced by them. One of the demons started down the stairs, smiling brightly at her. He was bald, with broad shoulders that strained the material of his shirt. He laughed, a sound like rocks scraping against each other, and said, "Well. Look who has come back for round tw—"

Riley's bullet hit him in the middle of his broad forehead. His entire body jerked with the impact and his hand tightened on the banister. Black spider webs spread out across the dome of his head and thick black smoke rose like a ribbon from the hole as he collapsed. The echo of the gunshot filled the lobby, echoing off the walls. None of the demons moved as their point man crumpled to the ground. They looked at his body, then turned to face Riley. Their hisses and growls grew louder.

"He's not getting up," Riley said, keeping the smoking barrel of her gun as steady as possible. "We can wait as long as you

want, but he's down. I have enough bullets for all of you." Providing they all went down with a single bullet. Even then it was questionable. "All I want is your boss. I can either mow you guys down until I find him, or you can let me pass and everyone here moves a step up the corporate ladder." She looked at the dead demon. "Or two steps, depending on how low that guy was."

The demons didn't speak, but she got the feeling they were conferring. She waited. Eventually, they began to back up and fold themselves back into the darkness. One by one, they vanished until the stairs were clear. Riley moved to the stairs and finally let out the breath she had been holding. Samael entered and eyed the dead demon. "Impressive. Bullets dipped in holy water?"

"No," Riley said. She started up the stairs, taking care to step carefully around the demon's body. Samael followed her. She didn't stop at the first floor; too many bad memories, and she knew Marchosias wouldn't bother with an office there. She felt comforted having Samael behind her; she wished she didn't, wished she could tell him to take a hike. But knowing he was there kept her moving forward.

The second and third floors made her skin crawl. They looked normal, if dark, but she found she couldn't focus on any surface for very long without shuddering and looking away. There was something there, a presence, and she wanted to be away from it before it permanently scarred her. She never once let herself think about leaving the building, didn't allow her brain to rationalize that everything she passed, she would see again when she left. Would the demons who were so easily cowed by her demonstration allow her to go free when she had killed their boss?

She took her right hand from her gun and wiped it on her jeans, then repeated the move with her left hand.

"Perhaps you should request back-up."

"I'm not a cop anymore," she said. She suddenly realized it was true. She had no badge, and she was using her back-up gun. "Besides, what would I say? Officer needs assistance, demon infestation in progress?"

The stairs ended at the top floor, and Riley looked down the hall at a row of closed office doors. She didn't relish the idea of checking them all, but something besides fear made her turn away from them. She went around a small outcropping and found a fire exit. She leaned on the press-bar and let a burst of sunlight into the narrow hallway. She felt a surge of fear and realized this was it; this was where Marchosias was hiding.

Riley stepped out onto the roof and squinted into the sun. The wind picked up her hair and whipped it around her head. It didn't take long to find what she was looking for.

Directly ahead of the stairwell door, was an office. The windows hung in mid-air, curtains motionless despite the breeze. There were two potted plants marking the far corners of the office, and a huge oak desk in the center of the space. Marchosias, the demon who had thrown her off another roof so many years ago, sat behind the desk with his feet up. He smiled as Riley and Samael stepped out onto the roof. The door swung shut behind them and locked with a loud click. Riley suddenly wished she had melted more badges. Like every badge on the force.

Riley started across the roof toward the desk. She felt a gust of wind against her back and turned to see Samael's coat dropping to the ground, his wings unfurling out to either side of his body. Riley felt comforted by the sight, and hated that she felt comforted. She turned away and continued forward. "I assume you're Marchosias."

"Indeed I am, Detective Parra." He wore a black suit and a red tie, his hands folded on his stomach. His face wasn't quite the death mask she remembered. She wondered if her memory was faulty, or if he had been putting on some kind of performance for her. This time, he had skin. His lips pulled back over yellow teeth, and his eyes - now crimson and shining - wrinkled when he smiled. "It is so nice to see you again."

"Yeah, I just bet it is. Show me your hands."

Marchosias widened his eyes, and would have raised his eyebrows if he had them. “Do you believe I would need a weapon to harm you?”

“Humor me.”

He sighed and showed her his hands. “What now? Are you going to handcuff me? Read me my rights?” He laughed. “Are you going to arrest me for a crime I didn’t commit?”

Riley smirked. “Right. I have a witness who places you at the scene.”

“I’m sure you do. I was there.”

Riley flashed back to that night, standing with Ray the Hooker on the street. She saw Ray staring at the water, a haunted expression on her face, and she said, “*This guy made me want to run home and jump back into bed.*” Her gun wavered and she had a sudden, horrible realization. “She was scared of you. But she didn’t know why.”

Marchosias gestured at himself. “Does she really need a reason, dear?”

“No,” Riley said. She was talking more to herself than to Marchosias now. Her hands shook as she put it all together. “No, but she would have known why she was scared if you were carrying a huge fucking sword. Where was the sword?”

Marchosias opened his suit jacket and looked at the inside pocket as if seeking a misplaced wallet. “What sword?” he asked.

“The sword you used to hack off Ridwan’s wings. And what did you do with the wings after you chopped them off?”

“You know, I would really like to help you, Detective. I would.”

“I know,” she said. She brought her gun back up and turned around, aiming it at Samael’s head. “You, on the other hand. You had that nice, big coat that could have concealed a sword. What did you do with the wings?”

Samael stared at the gun for a long moment and then his shoulders sagged a bit. He lowered his wings and said, "I emptied garbage bags that were nearby and placed the wings inside. I sent them out to sea. They're... they're gone."

"Why?" Riley asked. It was nearly a hiss.

The answer came from behind her. "Because Ridwan was suggesting a truce. He wanted to come up with a plan where we wouldn't have to fight any more. He would get part of the town, and I would pull back and keep a portion of No Man's Land. We were meeting to discuss particulars of the deal on neutral ground. The waterfront is... is... well, for lack of a better term, it is a no man's land. Neither of us had any power there."

Riley said, "You weren't there as a moderator. You were there to talk Ridwan out of it. You wanted to stop him from making the deal."

"He was making a deal with a *demon*," Samael hissed. "He was not in his right mind. He was giving up. Surrendering. Showing weakness."

Riley shook her head, tears burning in her eyes. "He would have given people hope. If No Man's Land stopped spreading, people would see that. They would see that they didn't *have* to give in to the inevitable. Maybe things would have changed. Maybe No Man's Land would start to shrink. Right, March? If people made the decision, if people changed the town for the better, that wouldn't have affected your deal with Ridwan."

"I suppose so. Free will, and all that. But if they decided to keep on the way they were, and No Man's Land continued to spread, well. Nothing Ridwan could have done about that, either. We were just taking ourselves out of the equation a bit. Seeing how the mere mortals dealt with being masters of their own destiny for a change."

"Humans don't change," Samael sneered. "Humans never change. Ridwan would have sacrificed everything, and this city would have crumbled. Within years, it would have been nothing but a shameful memory. And Ridwan would have been a shell of himself. I couldn't bear to see that happen."

"So you murdered him," Riley said. "And mutilated his corpse?"

She pictured it; two angels standing in the darkness, one carrying a sword. Had it been flaming, like the angel protecting the Garden of Eden? She pictured Ridwan dropping to his knees and bowing his head in supplication. Accepting his fate and allowing his fellow angel to slaughter him.

"I thought... if his body was found, the police would merely drop the case. I removed his clothing so it would look like a tryst gone awry. I thought he would be buried and forgotten." He looked at Riley. "I never would have dreamed your dedication, or your connection to us."

Riley scoffed. "You thought Ridwan was giving up."

"Your predicament remains the same, Detective Parra," Marchosias said. "How does one arrest an angel?"

Before Riley could answer, the sky darkened. All three people on the roof - representatives of three vastly different species - looked to the sky and saw large black clouds from horizon to horizon. Thunder roared, shaking the building under their feet.

Marchosias gasped. "Oh, pardon me, Detective. I'm afraid you have an entirely new set of problems."

"No," Samael said. His voice was barely above a whisper, his head tilted back to expose his throat. "No! I did it for the right reasons! Don't do this!" He trembled and his wings curled around him. Riley stepped back and bumped into Marchosias, recoiling away from him as she brought her free hand up to cover her eyes. Samael was consumed by red and black flames, his screams piercing her eardrums. She tried to turn away, but she couldn't move, couldn't think. After what felt like years, the flames died down and Samael stumbled to his knees.

The angel wept, his charred and black wings arching out of his back like limbs of a dead tree. His entire body trembled with his sobs.

"That is the sound," Marchosias said, "of an angel falling. Detective, I would suggest you flee."

Riley looked at him, but he was gone. His office was gone. If she were a betting woman, she would say that the entire building below them was empty as well. Samael pushed himself up and looked at her. His eyes were red, his teeth clenched. Other than his scorched wings and the fact his shirt had burned away, he was physically unchanged, but looking at him made Riley feel sick with dread. His skin, pale before, was now the color of wax. His hair was dead and slack.

Samael spoke, and his voice was like tires on gravel. "Why didn't you just destroy him? Why didn't you put one of your damned bullets in his head? Why didn't you end this?" He leaped, his ruined wings carrying him across the roof to Riley.

She fired and missed, one of her precious bullets flying uselessly into the void.

Samael was on top of her then, his face a fright mask inches from hers. She could see the burst veins in his eyes, the blue irises turned deep blood red. His flesh looked diseased from this distance, and Riley was sickened at the thought of him touching her with those corpse fingers. He choked her, tears streaming down his face as he tried to force her to her knees. "Don't..." she gasped, and pressed the gun against his stomach.

Samael released her throat to swat the gun aside, then he slammed his fist into her side. Riley howled and doubled over, dropping her gun from sheer shock. Samael didn't let up. He extended his fingers and she felt the bandage burning away, felt her flesh starting to burn. Her wound opened and fresh blood soaked the side of her shirt. Riley's eyes flooded and she bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out. "I'll destroy you," Samael hissed.

"I'm the last chance this city has," Riley managed to say.

Samael grabbed the front of her shirt and shoved her back. She stumbled and fell to her ass, staring up at him as he advanced on her. "This city can rot," he said, his voice like the slithering of a horde of rats running through the sewer.

“Sodom. Gomorrah. Cities fall. Cities of the damned. This city has destroyed two angels, it will not destroy another.”

Riley swung her foot out when he was close enough and made contact with the side of his knee. Samael dropped, but she knew he wouldn't be down long. She put a hand to her side, hoping to staunch the bleeding as she scrambled to her feet. She saw the gun lying a few feet away and she lurched toward it.

“Don't you see?” Samael taunted. “It's over. This city has gone to hell.”

Riley jumped and covered the gun with both hands just as Samael descended on her. *No fucking fair. If he can fly, I should be able to fly, too.*

He grabbed her shoulder to haul her up and howled in pain. He flew back, and Riley rolled over to look up at him. She could see something burnt into the flesh of his palm, but she couldn't make out the shape. She remembered him touching her yesterday in Gillian's apartment, remembered he pulled his hand back quickly as if burned. It was the same spot he had just touched now; her right shoulder.

He had touched her tattoo. Protection. Riley reached up and tugged on her blouse until it hung open to expose her tattoo. She rolled her shoulder forward and tried to look at it. The lines were glowing, the black ink transformed into deep crevasses. She drew strength from it and realized that her badge and the police weren't the only things she had faith in. She turned and looked at Samael as he alighted on the far side of the roof. He turned and looked at her. “It doesn't have to hurt,” he said.

Riley brought the gun up and fired. The tiny piece of metal from her badge hit Samael high in the left shoulder and he reared back, baring his teeth in a primal scream. She took advantage of his distraction and ran across the roof toward him. By the time he recovered from the searing pain of the bullet, she was on top of him. He put an arm up to ward her off, but it was too late. She slammed into him and they both toppled.

She felt her shoulder throbbing, a steady, burning pain. But it was a good pain. It was protection. They rolled, limbs twisting together as the momentum of Riley's charge pushed them toward the edge of the roof. Riley managed to dig her heels into the roof and rose into a crouch as she watched Samael dig his fingers into the sticky tar and stop himself just before he went over the edge. He staggered to his feet, black blood seeping from the wound in his shoulder. Thin spider webs, like the ones on the bald man downstairs, spread away from the wound like bolts of black lightning.

Riley flexed her fingers on the gun and Samael met her eyes. There was no emotion in them; red had become black, inhuman. He sneered at her and rose to his full height. His ruined wings spread out to either side of him and they shook in the breeze like shreds of a scorched curtain. "This city will be completely unprotected."

"No," she said. "It won't."

She fired all but one of the remaining bullets into his chest. Samael's body glowed, the dark light flaring as each bullet entered him. When she was finished, his chest was smoking like a refinery, black smoke billowing around his head. Riley said, "I know you won't die. I know you'll just... go somewhere else. So just go. And don't come back." She fired the last bullet into his chest, and Samael rolled back with the force of the impact. Flames licked around his arms and legs, rising around his torso until he was engulfed. The wind lifted the flames into the air until they became embers, then faded.

As soon as he was gone, the dark clouds began dumping rain on her as if trying to wash away evidence of what had happened. And, the adrenaline seeping from her system, every pain Samael had inflicted upon her began to throb, then ache. She dropped to her knees and let the rain wash over her. She looked down at her side and saw a wide blossom of bright red blood staining her shirt, and it was still spreading. Some part of her realized she was losing massive quantities of blood, again, but she just watched it swirl around her in the pools of rainwater.

Her head hurt. If she was wrong and there were demons downstairs, she was unarmed. And they would know it.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. The rain washed over her face.

In a few minutes, she would go downstairs and pray the demons really did leave with their boss.

Maybe when the rain stopped, she would go look.

Maybe.

Epilogue

Riley opened her eyes when the music began to play. She turned and looked out the window of her car, where the black-clad legions were gathering. Every cop in the city was here, decked out in their dress uniforms to pay respect for a fallen colleague. Riley looked away and rested her gloved hands on the steering wheel. Her presence was the height of hypocrisy. She was the one who pulled the trigger. If not for her, Kara would still be alive.

She sighed and opened the car door. She straightened her uniform jacket, settled her cap, and put on a pair of sunglasses. She felt like a limo driver, probably didn't look much different from one, either. She hated the uniform; it was one of the reasons she took the detective's exam as early as she did. She rolled her shoulders, a tug on her side reminding her of the fresh stitches in her wound.

Riley barely remembered leaving Marchosias' apartment building. She remembered flashes of going downstairs and the empty rooms all around her. She was grateful for that; it wouldn't have taken a demon to kill her as weak as she was at that point. The next clear memory she had was Gillian's voice on the cell phone, and a blurry, half-conscious arrival at the hospital. A fresh batch of stitches, a blood transfusion, and Riley was well on the way to feeling human again.

The fresh, bright, antiseptic light of the hospital also had the side effect of making the battle on the roof seem too surreal to have actually happened. But she knew it was real. She would never be able to forget what happened to her there. And she was never going to forget what happened in the hospital, either. She woke up after the first blood transfusion, her first awakening since being sure she was going to die, and found

Gillian asleep in the chair next to the bed. She'd refused to go home until she knew Riley was going to be safe.

Riley spotted Gillian in the crowd of mourners and made her way over to her. She whispered apologies to people she passed and took her position at Gillian's right. Gillian wore a black and purple dress, her hair done up and her eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses. Gillian glanced over and slipped her hand into Riley's. Riley accepted the touch and squeezed.

They listened to the priest's words and bowed their heads for the prayer. Riley closed her eyes and pictured Sweet Kara, her bright eyes and knowing smile. She thought about the way Kara could read people with just a glance, and the way she could cheer someone up at the drop of a hat. Kara was always hit hard by cases involving children, her rare tender side coming out when she had to hold the hand of a kid who'd been abused. Riley had lost a partner, a friend, and a sister. At the end of the prayer, she whispered, "I'm sorry, Kara."

Gillian pressed gently against Riley's side, a comforting weight, and Riley briefly returned the weight as a thank you.

When the priest dismissed them, Riley kept her hand in Gillian's and led her to the aisle. She scanned the crowd until she found faces familiar to her from Kara's desk. "Jill. There's something I have to do... Will you come with me?"

"Of course."

Riley slipped through the crowd and approached the family. An eight-year-old girl, Melody, sat quietly in one of the folding chairs as her parents tried to fend off a group of well-wishers. Dawn, Kara's sister and Melody's mother, glanced at Riley and then looked away to finish a conversation. She thanked whoever she had been talking to, let them walk away, and then broke away from the group. She walked up to Riley and said, "You were Kara's partner, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Riley Parra. I just wanted to say how sorry I am for your loss."

"It's your loss, too," Dawn said. "Kara absolutely loved working with you."

Riley looked down at the ground, grateful for Gillian's hand in hers. It gave her strength. She swallowed the tears that threatened to fall and said, "There's something Kara wanted you to have." She reached into the pocket of her uniform jacket and withdrew a slim wooden box. Inside was all the money Kara received from her bribe. "Don't open it until you get home. But it's something Kara sacrificed a lot to get."

Riley looked at the little girl, who looked completely wiped out despite the fact it was still before noon. She smiled. "We used to call your aunt Sweet Kara. I'll bet she called you Sweet Melody."

The girl smiled shyly and looked away.

Dawn held the box to her chest and said, "Thank you, Riley."

Riley nodded and excused herself. She let Gillian lead the way across the lawn to the cars. In a group near the trees, Riley spotted Lieutenant Hathaway and tensed slightly. Gillian caught the look and said, "Are you going to be able to work with her?"

"I'm going to have to," Riley said. She hadn't been back to work since their confrontation in the diner, but Hathaway had called several times just to check up on her. "We need you back on the streets." Riley decided to take the olive branch at face value. Whatever happened in Hathaway's office was in the past, and it would stay there.

During her recuperation, Riley told Gillian everything. Angels, demons, the entire story from start to finish. In hindsight, she realized that it was obvious Samael was the one who gave Kara the bribe. There was too much compassion in the bribe to have been a demon, in her opinion. She didn't worry about sounding insane, she just wanted to tell one person exactly what had happened to her the past couple of days. And if she couldn't trust Gillian with that, what chance did they have?

When she finished the story, Gillian took a sip of her tea and said, "When I was eighteen, I went mountain-climbing. I lost my grip and I started to fall. And... I don't know. I felt like

someone was holding me up while I focused on a handhold and grabbed it.”

“So you believe me.”

Gillian didn’t flinch. “Every word.”

The difficult part was filling out a report on the body in the pipe. She was a terrible fiction writer. But she finally managed, with Gillian’s help, to write something that at least seemed feasible. A drifter named Samuel (no known last name) killed a fellow drifter named Rick Wan. Riley and Kara were involved in a shoot-out with Samuel at the abandoned building, during which Kara was fatally shot. Riley tracked Samuel down to No Man’s Land and, in the process of the investigation, lost her badge. She filled out the appropriate paperwork and now had a brand-new badge. Ridwan was buried in the potter’s field, the file was shuffled away to some store room, and the case was closed. It was like the pipe man case had never happened.

They stopped near Gillian’s car and Riley turned to face her. Gillian said, “Do you want to come over?”

“Yeah.” She leaned in and kissed Gillian’s lips. “I’ll follow you.”

Gillian nodded.

Riley reluctantly let go of Gillian’s hands and turned to walk back to her car. Something near the trees caught her eye, and she spotted a man standing away from the rest of the mourners. He wore a dark suit with a white tie, his long blond hair slicked back out of his face. He smiled when he realized he had been seen, and lifted a hand in greeting. He joined the crowd of mourners leaving the graves, and Riley tilted her head to get a better look.

There was a bulge in the back, just between the shoulder blades. The tail of his jacket flipped up when he walked, she saw the white feathers of his wings.

She smirked and let the man disappear into the crowd. She unlocked her car door and took one last look at the city that

surrounded the cemetery. She was going to have to ask Gillian for an early night; she had a lot of work to do in the morning.

She had a whole city to fight for.

+ end +