

# LOSING MY RELIGION



+ Geonn Cannon +

LOSING  
MY  
RELIGION

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Some prophecies are self-fulfilling  
But I've had to work for all of mine  
Better times will come to me, God willing  
Cause I can't leave this world behind.

Josh Ritter, *Lawrence KS*

## One

The church smelled of incense smoke. Sandalwood and something else underlying that Riley couldn't place. The old man she had met during her first visit to the church was moving slowly along the pews. He was humming quietly to himself as he took a handful of red-covered books from a box on the pew. He glanced up at the sound of Riley entering the church and smiled as he turned away. He slid the books into slots on the back of the pew.

When Riley was halfway down the aisle, Father Jacob said, "You know, we tend to do this on Sundays. A whole group of people come in and I just take care of them all at once. Kind of a bulk deal. You should try it one of these weeks."

"No, thanks," Riley said. She took one of the books from its slot and read the gold leaf on the cover. "What's a hymnal?"

The stooped black man raised his eyes to see if she was joking. "A book of worship songs." He smiled. "It has been a while for you, hasn't it?"

Riley returned the book to the slot. "I need your help. I need to learn how to protect someone from demons."

He sighed and said, "Like I told you before —"

“Right, I know,” Riley said. “You have to believe in the talismans or they won’t be effective. I understand that. But there has to be some kind of... barrier spell, right?”

“We’re not witches,” Jacob said. “There’s a Wiccan church a few blocks down the street if you want spells and charms and such.”

“It’s not for me. A demon has threatened someone I care about. I want to make sure she’s protected in case...”

“In case a demon comes after her?” Jacob said. He groaned as he lowered himself into the pew, gripping the back of the pew in front of him to keep from falling over. He put the hymnals in his lap and gestured at the seat next to him. “Sit down, please.” Riley did. “Did you tell me your name when you were here last, or did I forget it? My age, it could be either.”

“Detective Riley Parra.”

Jacob arched his eyebrows. “Detective. Well, you’re certainly bull-headed enough for it.” He leaned back and scratched his chin. “I don’t believe the spiritual world works quite the way you think it does, Detective Parra. I believe there is good and evil, but they’re mostly indifferent to the things we, as humans, do on this world. We’re simply below their caring. I believe there is an afterlife, a heaven and a hell. But as for angels and demons actively taking part in the affairs of humans...”

“It’s true,” Riley said. “I have the scars to prove it. I just... I need something to make sure she stays safe.”

Jacob sighed and rubbed his hands together. “Is she a believer?”

“I’m not going to tell her what I’m doing.”

Jacob frowned. "Does she even know she's in danger?"

Riley pushed up from the pew and said, "I'm sorry I bothered you with this. I'll find some other way to protect her. Thank you for your time." She turned and walked down the aisle toward the door. She was almost there when Jacob called her name. She turned and he was turned in the pew, his head bowed to look at the hymnals.

"You may say you don't believe in the rites of the believers who come here every Sunday. And yet you've been here twice looking for help. Maybe you believe more than you think." He shrugged his shoulders and said, "It couldn't hurt to have your friend's home blessed by a priest. You can sprinkle holy water. Make it a sacred place, and demons will avoid it like the plague." He shook his head and pressed his lips together. "I cannot believe I'm even entertaining the idea."

"Believe it, Father," Riley said. "You may have just saved someone's life."

She turned and walked the rest of the way to the door, pausing by the font that stood at the head of the aisle. After a moment, she dipped her fingers into the water and used it to cross herself. She wasn't sure what she hoped to accomplish, and she doubted it would do anything but make her skin wet. But she also didn't think it would hurt.

Gillian turned on the light as she entered the morgue, focused on the file in her hand. Four bodies had come in overnight, one of them important enough for the coroner to call her in the middle of the night and ask her to come in early. The light switch next to the door turned on several fluorescent lights throughout the room, illuminating the bodies lying covered on the steel tables in the middle of the room.

She looked up from the file and noticed the corners of the room seemed darker than usual. She eyed the fluorescent bulbs to see if they were dying, and made a note to talk to maintenance about the problem. They tended to avoid the morgue as often as possible. Her sneakers squeaked as she went to her locker and quickly donned her light blue scrubs. She put her hair up, washed her hands, and pulled on a pair of rubber gloves before returning to the first table.

Gillian reached above her head and switched on the microphone to the recording device. Every bed had a microphone hanging down over the head of the deceased, and Gillian always imagined it looked like they were trying to let the dead have one last word before they went.

She sighed and laid the report on the bed as she drew back the white sheet. "Medical Examiner's Report, Dr. Gillian Hunt. May 8. Subject is a thirty-four year old Caucasian woman, cause of death is a gunshot wound to the right temple. Police on the scene determined suicide." She lifted the woman's hand to inspect the fingers. It was surprising how many 'suicides' came into the morgue with scratches on their trigger finger and broken nails. She called those 'involuntary suicides' and handed it off to homicide to figure out.

"No sign of cutting on the finger. No indication suicide was forced."

She moved to the second body to begin the initial examination. "Second subject is an eighty-one year old woman found enclosed in her apartment. Believed to have been dead for two months. The cause of death, while not readily apparent, is thought to be —"

"Dr. Hunt."



Gillian lifted her head and turned toward the voice. The morgue seemed empty. “Danny?” she asked. She looked at the watch on the inside of her right wrist and moved toward the office. She had no idea why Danny would have come in so early, unless the coroner had called him, too. The office light was off, and a quick look through the open door revealed the room was empty.

She frowned and walked back to the second table. She could hear the hiss of the tape recorder, and decided her sleep-addled brain had just confused her into thinking she heard someone speak. She picked up the scalpel and hesitated before making the first cut. If she was tired enough to confuse a dream with reality, then maybe she needed another cup of coffee before she got to work.

She had just started to turn away from the table when the dead woman’s hand shot up and grabbed her wrist.

Gillian couldn’t even draw breath to scream, could do nothing but stare wide-eyed as the cold, adipocerous fingers wrapped around her bare wrist. She flicked her eyes toward the woman’s head and saw blood-red eyes staring at her. She wanted to drop the scalpel, but her brain didn’t seem able to get signals past that horrific hand.

“Doc. Torhu. Nnnnt.”

The voice came from behind her now, and snapped her back to reality. She yanked her hand back, trying to free herself from the monster’s grip, but the fingers wouldn’t give. The elderly woman, lips pulled back in a dying grimace, rolled to the edge of the table and started to fall. Gillian shrieked as her sneakers slipped on the floor, and she went down, pulling the dead woman along with her. She hit the floor, mouth still open in a silent scream, and tried to ignore the fact that a dead body was on top of her.

The hand finally released, and Gillian — no longer thinking about respect for the dead — kicked the woman away from her. She rolled onto her hands and knees, already justifying what had happened in her head. Just a death twitch, a bizarre muscle spasm. That was all, nothing sinister or supernatural. She was halfway to the door when a determined voice howled, “*Doctor Hunt!*”

The voice echoed off the metal drawers, filling the room with its anger. Gillian’s hands came up and clamped over her ears, but the words still reverberated through her skull. She was almost to the door when something grabbed her from behind. Something phenomenally strong pulled her back, swung her like a rag doll, and hurled her toward the cooler. She slammed into the cold metal drawers and pushed back, staring at her own reflection.

Behind her, she saw the blurry images of the three dead bodies starting to sit up on their tables. Something huge was approaching her from behind. It didn’t seem so much dark as it was an absence of light. Darker than any night she had ever experienced, seeming to draw her vision toward and into it.

“No,” she murmured. “No, no, no, no... please, no.”

“Doctor Hunt,” the voice said again, and she closed her eyes and began to scream.

Riley was halfway to the precinct when her cell phone rang. The personalized ring tone was Sarah McLachlan singing, “In the arms of the ang— ” Riley flipped the phone open mid-word without bothering to look at the screen. “What’s up, Priest?”

Her new partner’s voice was unusually hesitant. “I’m not sure. Maybe nothing. Where are you?”

"I'm about ten minutes from the precinct. I was going to call and see if you wanted breakfast. Do you eat breakfast? Angels, I mean."

There was a pause. "What? Oh, right. Uh, yeah, we do. I do, anyway. But no, I'm not hungry. Listen, Riley, you need to get here fast."

Riley instinctively stepped on the gas. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. I just... I have a very bad feeling that something very bad is going to happen here today. And I feel like time is of the essence."

"Get these feelings a lot, do you?"

"No. Not really."

"When was the last time?"

"The day Samael fell."

Riley hung up and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. "Shit." She fumbled in the glove compartment and placed the revolving red light on the dashboard. As it began to rotate, she stood on the gas and whipped around the other cars on the road as if they were standing still.

When she pulled into the parking garage underneath the 410 precinct building, she spotted Priest pacing between two concrete pillars. She wore a white blouse under a red sweater, her hands in the back pockets of her black jeans. She watched Riley approach and moved to meet up with her at the parking spot. When Riley got out of the car, she checked her gun to make sure she was good to go. She looked up at Priest, her new partner and the latest angel to enter her life. "Any more clues on what's happening?"

"No. Just a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach." She looked toward the elevators. "I think we need to hurry."

Riley led the way across the garage and jabbed the elevator button with two fingers. "You always get feelings about bad stuff that's going to happen? Because that could be handy."

Priest shook her head. "No. It hardly ever happens. But when it does, I know not to ignore it." They stepped into the car, and Priest reached out and punched a button.

Riley looked at the lit button for a long moment as the doors closed. "The morgue?"

Priest looked at the button and said, "Did I hit that?"

Riley pulled her gun again and pressed her palm tightly against the grip. "Fuck," she whispered. She rolled her shoulders and stepped through the doors as soon as they opened. She ran down the hall, Priest's footsteps echoing on the floor behind her. The lights were low, still operating at half-power before the official start of the day. She knew Gillian liked to keep the ambiance as long as possible; she said she wanted to give the passed souls a comforting last memory.

Riley pushed the morgue door open with her shoulder and took a moment to take in every detail. Three bodies lay covered on the tables in the middle of the room, the dark office directly ahead of her. Other than the quiet sound of the cooler motor, the room was, to coin a phrase, deathly quiet. Gillian was nowhere to be seen.

*"Go back to sleep," Gillian said, bending over the bed and kissing Riley's lips. "I have to get in early today. Bigwig bit the dust."*

*"From the President of the United States, to the lowly rock and roll star," Riley murmured.*

*"Death don't care who you are," Gillian said, finishing the quote. "I'll see you at lunch."*

So why wasn't she there? Riley crossed the floor and said, "Jill? You in here?"

Priest started to follow, but stopped short at the threshold. She drew a shuddering breath, arms out to balance herself. She hunched her shoulders and said, "Riley, get out of there."

Riley ignored her. "Jill, are you here? I thought you were supposed to come in early." She looked at the covered bodies on the table. A dreadful thought occurred to her, but two bodies were the wrong shape for Gillian, and the other was either a male or a female with a small-chest. Either way, not Gillian.

"Dr. Hunt?" Priest tried, finally braving the room when she decided Riley wasn't going to play it safe. "Dr. Hunt, are you here?"

They both heard the shriek. It was strange, as if coming from the far end of a tunnel. Priest was closest to the drawers and said, "Dr. Hunt?"

"Stop it!" Gillian said. "Stop it, please!"

Riley holstered her weapon and ran to the drawers. She yanked one open and then another, searching frantically. "Gillian, it's me. It's Riley. Where are you? Gillian, talk to me."

"Riley?"

She moved toward the voice and tugged the handle up. Gillian was inside, curled in the fetal position. Unlike the other bodies, Gillian appeared to have crawled in head-first. Riley grabbed the back edge of the tray and pulled the slab out of the drawer. Gillian rolled onto her back and looked up at Riley, eyes streaked with tears.

Gillian sat up and looked around the room. “They were here. They were alive.” She wrapped her arms around Riley’s neck and held on for dear life. She was freezing cold, and Riley immediately began rubbing her back through the thin scrub top she wore. “They were going to kill me. Oh, my God, Riley, they were going to kill me.”

“It’s okay,” Riley said. “It’s okay. Nobody is going to hurt you anymore.” She looked past Gillian to Priest, who was lurking through the autopsy theater like a jungle cat. She met Riley’s eyes and shuddered, then shook her head. “It’s okay. I’m here now. You’re safe.”

Gillian clung to Riley’s jacket and sobbed, her body shaking with the force of her fear.

## T W O

Riley helped Gillian into the office, and eased her into her seat. Priest got a blanket from Gillian's locker and wrapped it around her shoulders. Riley knelt in front of her lover, rubbing her thighs through her scrubs. Gillian finally stopped hyperventilating, but her hands were still shaking as Priest handed her a cup of water. She drank it all at once, started to wipe her lips against her wrist, and recoiled. She shuddered violently and two fresh tears rolled down her cheeks.

Riley reached up and brushed the tears away with her thumb. "Jill, tell me what happened."

Gillian shook her head and looked at Priest, then closed her eyes. "I can't."

"It's okay," Priest said. "Whatever happened, we'll believe you."

Gillian looked down into the empty Dixie cup and said, "The bodies on the table. They came to life. And there was... something else. Grabbing at me. I opened one of the empty drawers and got inside. The thing shut the door on me. I thought he'd locked it. I could hear him laughing outside." She shuddered and drew her knees together, hugging herself and leaning forward. "It was freezing. When I heard you saying my name, I thought it was them again."

Riley resisted the urge to push away from the chair and go searching for something to shoot. Gillian needed her to be there. She took Gillian's hands, squeezed, and brought one to her lips. She kissed the knuckles and said, "I'm so sorry."

Priest glanced at Riley and said, "I'm going to check on the bodies. See if there's any residual energy. Be well, Gillian." She touched the top of Gillian's head with her fingers before she turned and left the office. Gillian swallowed hard and watched her go and then said, "Put on some music, please."

Riley stood and went to the CD player sitting on Gillian's filing cabinet. She pressed play, and Bon Jovi began to sing. "Do you want a different disc?"

"No. Track five."

Riley hit the button until the display read '5,' and returned to Gillian. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here. If anything had happened..."

"Something did happen," Gillian said.

Riley flinched. "Right. I know. I'm sorry. I just meant that if you had been..." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "It could have been so much worse, Jill. You were so smart jumping into that drawer."

"It was terrifying," Gillian whispered. "I thought I would never get out." She burrowed deeper into the blanket, clutching it with shaking hands. "I-I can't get warm."

Riley pulled off her blazer and draped it over Gillian's shoulders. She rubbed Gillian's arms and said, "When you feel up to it, I'll take you home. I'll call your boss and tell him to send a replacement for the day."

"I think it's going to take more than a day, Riley," Gillian said. "Someone came after me. Some *thing* came after me. I



crawled into one of those drawers certain I would either never get out, or that I would be dragged out and killed. Do you have any idea..." She swallowed hard again and bit her bottom lip. "I think I'm going to take a leave of absence."

Riley nodded. "Of course."

Gillian took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The Bon Jovi ballad filled the silence between them. Outside in the theater, Riley heard Priest talking to herself about the bodies. Finally, Gillian pushed her hair out of her face and said, "I think I can walk. Can you please take me home?"

"Yeah. Come on, let me help you up."

Riley helped Gillian stand, put an arm around her, and helped her out of the office. Priest looked up when they appeared, pausing in the act of raising the sheet from one body. Riley motioned for her to drop it, and Priest complied. Riley said, "Tell Hathaway there was an incident down here. I'm taking Gillian home. I may not be back until afternoon."

"I'll cover for you."

Riley guided Gillian out of the room, aware that Gillian refused to lift her head until they were past the dead bodies. When they reached the elevator, Gillian pulled away from Riley and rubbed her arms furiously. She shook her head and said, "I don't think I can be around dead bodies anymore."

"Just take it a day at a time," Riley said. "It'll be fine. You're strong. You'll get through this."

Gillian nodded slowly, and let Riley guide her onto the elevator. As Riley pressed the button for the garage level, she risked a glance at Gillian. She was pale, withdrawn into herself, and she kept rolling her shoulders and her neck. She worried her bottom lip with her teeth and absently touched

her hair. Riley said, “Jill, if you need to talk... I’ve been there. Crowded by demons, sure they were going to tear me apart.”

“How’d you get through it?”

“I found you.”

Gillian finally met Riley’s eyes and said, “Yeah.”

Riley stepped forward and lightly kissed Gillian’s lips. She pressed close, her lips pressing against Gillian’s until they felt warm again. When she backed away, Gillian touched her lips and closed her eyes. Riley said, “I’ll help you through this. I promise.”

Gillian took Riley’s hand and squeezed the fingers.

Riley didn’t bother turning on the lights when they got to the apartment. Gillian hadn’t spoken during the drive; she just pulled her feet up into the seat, hugged her knees, and watched the city go by through the window. Riley led Gillian into the bedroom and sat her down on the mattress. Gillian said, “I’m sorry I’m acting like a five-year-old.”

“You’re not. You’re fine.” She untied Gillian’s sneakers and pulled them off. She peeled away the socks and gently massaged the arches. “This is all my fault. If I hadn’t gotten involved with this whole damn mess...”

“Shh,” Gillian whispered. “It’s nobody’s fault.”

“Marchosias warned me,” Riley said quietly. She looked up into Gillian’s eyes. “He warned me with your toy rabbit. He wanted to show me that he could get to you whenever he wanted. I didn’t learn the lesson well enough.”

Gillian leaned forward and kissed Riley’s forehead. Riley closed her eyes, glad that Gillian’s body warmth seemed to

have returned. Gillian slid her lips across Riley's right eyebrow and said, "I don't blame you for this, Riley."

Riley wrapped her arms around Gillian's waist and pulled her close for a hug. Gillian returned the embrace, gently at first but slowly growing stronger. When they finally parted, Riley pushed Gillian's hair out of her face and said, "Do you want me to stay here with you?"

"No," Gillian said. "I just need some time to process everything. Thank you for getting me home, though. I finally feel safe for the first time all day."

Riley said, "I'm glad. I'm going to go back to work and see what Priest has found out."

"Yeah. I'm going to take a hot bath."

"Let me get the water running before I go." She stood up and kissed Gillian's lips. "I'm so glad you're okay, Jill. I don't know what I do..." She touched Gillian's hair and didn't finish the thought. She smiled and said, "Okay. I'm going to go start the bath. I'll see you later. And I'll call to check up on you through the day, okay?"

Gillian nodded, and Riley went into the bathroom. She looked under the sink and found a small bottle of Epsom Salt. She had done a bit of reading on the preparation of holy water, and she found that salt was an essential ingredient. She sat on the edge of the tub and started the water, pouring a bit of the salt under the flow so it would spread throughout the entire bath.

She closed her eyes and whispered, "Okay, God. I know I'm not your number one fan. You and I haven't exactly been close. But Gillian deserves better protection than just me. She needs someone watching out for her, and I guess that might as

well be you. Protect her. Keep her safe while I'm away." She wiped away her tears and stopped the water.

Riley stayed until Gillian was undressed and safely delivered into the bath. She made the rounds of the apartment, locking windows and making sure no one was lurking on the fire escape before she felt comfortable leaving. She knew things like locks and security systems weren't a deterrent to demons, but it gave her peace of mind. By the time she got back to her car, her concern transformed into anger.

Her hands gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white, her teeth grinding together loud enough that she turned on the radio to drown it out. Alice Cooper howled, "*No more Mr. Nice Guy*," and Riley sang along, getting out some of her anger through the lyrics. She pictured Marchosias in her mind, his blood-red hand petting the head of Gillian's toy rabbit.

*Mess with me, that's fine, she thought. But you crossed the line, March. Gloves are off, no holds barred.*

On the radio, Alice Cooper sang, "*No more Mr. Nice Guy. No more Mr. Cle-e-he-ean.*"

"Damn right, Alice," she growled, banging her hand against the steering wheel again for good measure. The next song on the classic rock station was Thin Lizzy singing *Whiskey in a Jar*. Riley drove to the police station with the guitars vibrating the glass in the windows of her car. She spotted Priest standing on the sidewalk and slowed just enough to let her jump in.

"What did you find out?"

"Not much," Priest said. She turned down the radio so she wouldn't have to shout over the song. "The bodies were definitely animated by some kind of demonic force, and it

sounds kind of like something Marchosias would order. I don't think he was actually there. He would have sent one of his foot soldiers."

"Any idea which one?"

Priest thought for a long moment and then said, "I can narrow it down to three."

"Give me their names and tell me where I can find them."

Priest shook her head. "Do you remember what happened last time you went into No Man's Land without a plan?"

"Yeah, one of your buddies turned on me and nearly killed me. It's a very vivid memory, believe me."

"I meant the first time," Priest said quietly. "You walked into a demon's stronghold and you barely got out with your life. I don't suppose you melted your badge down again so you'll be armed?"

Riley said, "Maybe this time my partner will step up and cover my back."

Priest shook her head and said, "This is ridiculous, Riley. You know why Gillian was attacked. This is exactly what Marchosias wants."

"It's exactly what I want, too."

"You're not going to be a very good protector for the city if you're dead."

"He has to learn what's off limits."

"Nothing is off limits to a demon."

"Gillian is!" Riley shouted. Her shout was loud enough that Priest recoiled, the car filled with Phil Lynott singing, "*Whiskey in a jar-o.*" Riley tried to steady her nerves and slow

her breathing. Finally, in a much more subdued voice, she said, "Tell me where to find the three demons you think might have done this." Priest didn't answer immediately, so Riley said, "If you don't tell me, I'll kick you out of my car and go try to find them on my own."

Priest's shoulders sagged in defeat and she looked out the window for a long time before she answered. "Alistair Call is the first one. Ethan Winn, and then another one just called the Duchess. I suggest you begin with Alistair. He's the one with the most to gain by doing this. He wants to get into Marchosias' good graces."

"How does killing Gillian accomplish that?" Riley asked, nearly spitting the words.

"He didn't want to kill her," Priest said. "You should understand that. If they truly wanted to kill her, she would be dead. What Marchosias wants is this, right here. Gillian is out of commission for the time being, and you're racing straight into Marchosias' home turf completely unprepared. You're going to let him win."

Riley ignored her and slowed at an intersection. The area of the city around them was just beginning to decay, evidence of the steady advance of No Man's Land. To her left was a boarded up hardware store, the awning hanging loose over the door like a funeral veil. Riley could see faded letters in the window where a name had once been. She looked away from the abandoned business and looked toward Marchosias' domain.

"Which way?" Riley said.

Priest frowned and stared at Riley. "That's what you want, isn't it? You want to give Marchosias what he's after so he'll leave Gillian alone."

"I'm not suicidal," Riley said. She looked into Priest's eyes and said, "Which way?"

Priest pursed her lips and finally pointed. "Straight ahead until you get to Marquis Street. There's an old fire station on the right side of the street. I'm pretty sure you'll find Alistair and the Duchess there. Maybe we'll get lucky and Ethan Winn will be there, too. Three demons for the price of one. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Riley nodded and pulled away from the stop sign.

"Promise me, Riley," Priest said. "Promise me that if things get bad, you'll get the hell out of there. Don't let them kill you."

Riley stared straight ahead through the glass, watching for the street sign where she was supposed to turn. "No promises," she said.

## Three

“PLEACED TO MEAT YOU,” was written in black paint above the windows in the firehouse’s garage door. “HOPE YOU GUESSED MY NAME” was written underneath. The letters were long and thin, long dripping lines trailing from each letter down to the pavement. Riley parked across the driveway to prevent anyone from trying to escape before she had a chance to talk to them. She got out of the car and looked down the street, watching for signs that they were being watched.

“Just accept they’re there,” Priest said. “You won’t be able to see them.”

“I want them to know I know,” Riley said. She slammed the car door and looked at the building. She wore the reflective sunglasses that had served her well ever since her foot patrol days, willing to take any amount of intimidation she could get. She considered going to the trunk to get her bulletproof vest, but she knew it wouldn’t do any good. So she walked up the door in her plain blouse and jeans. She hung her badge around her neck and let it dangle, the gold catching the light.

The fire station seemed alive compared to the businesses on either side. The wide red garage door was crowned by a Gothic carving, gargoyles sneering down at the street. Black iron sconces hung on either side of the door, the lanterns missing the glass. Riley avoided looking at the gargoyles, sure that their eyes would follow her, and approached the man-sized



door tucked to one side. She glanced back to make sure Priest was following her and saw the angel staring at the words written on the door.

“Rolling Stones. *Sympathy for the Devil.*”

“Oh.”

Riley pounded on the door. “Police. Open the door, please.” She rested her other hand on the butt of her gun and waited for a response. After a moment, she pounded again. “This is the police. Open the door.”

Finally, there was a sound of movement inside; feet shuffling against concrete, and then a rough cough. The door opened and a tall, emaciated man stepped into the space. He pulled the door tight against his shoulders and eyed both women before he focused on Riley. “What?”

“Are you a member of the volunteer fire department?”

“Mebbe,” the guy slurred. He turned and looked at Priest. “What’s the angel doing here?”

“We’re just here to talk,” Priest said. “Alistair, the Duchess, and Ethan Winn. Are they in?”

The guy screeched, “Nobody sees the wizard. No how, no way, nuh-uh,” and slammed the door in their face.

Riley and Priest exchanged a look, and Riley pounded on the door again. When the guy opened the door again, she had her gun out and aimed between his eyes. “What do I need, ruby slippers? I can make my shoes red in about five seconds. You probably won’t be around to see it, though. Open the damn door and step back.”

“Okay, okay. No need to get vi-o-lent.” He stepped back and pushed the door wide open. Riley gave her eyes a moment to

adjust to the gloom before she stepped into the doorway. The interior of the former firehouse stank like a charnel house, and Riley could detect the copper scent of blood and the off-putting scent of bodily waste. Bags of trash lined the walls, falling against each other and spilling open across the floor.

The main floor was dark, but light spilled down a flight of wooden stairs standing at the back of the room. From above, Riley heard the sounds of people moaning but couldn't decide if they were in pleasure or pain. Riley stepped into the building and Priest followed, trembling hard enough that her clothes made quiet rustling sounds. The angel whispered a prayer under her breath and crossed herself.

"Welcome to the madhouse, babies," the doorman said. He strutted past them and walked across the floor to the ruins of a fire truck. Water dripped from the back of the truck, evidence of a leak in the tank. The equipment compartment had been ripped apart, the tools scattered on the concrete floor all around. There were pools of dark liquid near the ax and the Halligen; a part of Riley suddenly knew that the tools had been used for torture.

The doorman saw her staring toward the truck and pointed his middle finger at it. "Burnin' building collapsed on it." He mimicked an explosion sound. "They were just pullin' up and, boom. Every last one became a crispy critter. They came back here to haunt, I guess. They're fun." He smiled and walked toward the stairs.

Riley looked at Priest, whose face was deathly pale. "Are you all right?"

Priest nodded distractedly. "I do not like it here," she said, her voice rough and thin. She swallowed hard and said, "Let's... please... make... this quick."

The doorman pointed upstairs. "Mr. Call is upstairs. The Duchess is probably with him." He looked Riley up and down and winked. "She'll like you."

Riley led the way upstairs without hesitation. She kept her gun drawn and looked back frequently to make sure Priest was following her. Despite the pallor of her skin, she seemed determined to back Riley up. She met Riley's gaze and nodded, then pressed her lips together and swallowed hard as they reached the second story.

What once served as the firefighter's bunk room had been turned into a den of iniquity. A semicircle of plush couches stood in the center of the room, draped with furs. A fat man wearing a soiled business suit sat on the edge of one divan, his head in his hands, his shoulders racked with sobs. Riley watched him as she approached, then turned her attention to the man and woman holding court in the center of the room.

Alistair Call stood at least six foot eight, his bald pate gleaming even in the dim light. His suit was impeccable, but he was standing barefoot to one side of the couches watching the businessman weep. He turned casually toward Riley and Priest and then looked back at the subject of his apparent concern. His brow was furrowed, his lips slightly pursed. He put a hand on top of the man's head. "It hurts, doesn't it?"

The man looked up with red rimmed eyes. He looked at Riley for a long moment, eyed the badge hanging between her breasts. Finally, he shook his head and pushed to his feet. "I should go... I shouldn't be here."

"That's right." Alistair moved his hand on the man's shoulder and said, "All your problems will work themselves out. The solution is much easier than you think." He grinned and said, "All right. Very well. Go and take care of business. Thank you for coming to me, Mr. Davidson."

The man wiped his eyes and shuffled toward Riley. Priest said, "Sir, wait..." Mr. Davidson waved her off, moving to one side so she wouldn't be able to touch him. Priest watched him walk down the stairs and then turned back to Alistair.

The demon wiped his hands on a handkerchief and smiled at Riley. "Hello, Detective Parra. And Zerachiel. Always a pleasure. You look a bit drained, Zerachiel. Would you like something to drink?"

"She finds this place repulsive."

Riley jumped away from the sound of the woman's voice. The Duchess was standing close enough that Riley felt the breath of her voice against her cheek. Riley had an instant impression of bright green eyes and red hair before her attention was drawn away. Ruby red lips parting in a smile seemed burned on her retinas, and she blinked to erase it as she spoke to Alistair. "Did Marchosias order the attack on Gillian Hunt?"

"I'm not aware of any decree. Perhaps someone chose to have a bit of fun with the good doctor." He walked to the divan and dropped himself onto the cushions, stretching his arms out over the back to either side. "I hope she wasn't hurt."

Something caused goosebumps to rise on Riley's arms, and she thought she felt a breeze ruffling her hair. She rolled her shoulders trying to get rid of the awkward sensation, focusing on Alistair. She was beginning to regret coming into this place without a solid plan. Her usual questions — where were you this morning, can anyone corroborate your story? — wouldn't work on something like this.

"Get off of her," Priest muttered, but Riley didn't understand the context and didn't seek an explanation. She was too focused on Alistair to care what Priest meant.

Alistair simply smiled. "Detective Parra, please. I've heard all about your impressive solo raid on Marchosias' stronghold. Trust me, we were all very impressed. But your fifteen minutes are running out. Our admiration at the sheer bulk of your balls is going to fade and be replaced with the realization that you may be more trouble than you're worth. We're a patient bunch. And we admire tenacity. But there will come a time when you have pushed us too far and... measures will be taken. When that day comes, if you're still in this city causing problems, you will be dealt with. You won't be able to fight back. You won't see it coming. I know you struck down Samael and decided to take up the mantle of this city's protector. Again, admirable. But what do you hope to accomplish? A simple mortal? When all I have to do is snap my fingers and you'll be ended."

A sharp hiss sounded next to Riley's ear and she jerked away. Her head swam as if she had stood up too fast, and the room spun. She brought her gun up, aiming at nothing in particular as she tried to make sense of everything that was suddenly happening all around her. She stumbled, nearly fell, and righted herself before she hit her knees.

Her blouse was open, the left shoulder pulled down to expose the strap of her tank top. Her belt was undone. Priest was sagging against the back wall, wings extended, her head hanging as if in exhaustion. Standing between Riley and Priest was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She wore a white blouse and a flowing tan dress, her feet obscured by the lace hem. Her right hand was wrapped around her left wrist, cradling it to her chest as she raised her eyes to Riley's. The beauty vanished, replaced with something so hideous Riley could barely contain the scream that rose in her throat.

"The bitch burned me," the formerly beautiful thing hissed.

Riley spun around and saw Alistair rising off the couch. All the humor was gone from his face. "The tattoo on your back. Where did you acquire it?"

"Stay back," Riley said, wishing she sounded more confident than she was. Suddenly she felt exhausted, as if she had been up for days. How much of her conversation with Alistair had been in her head? "I'll shoot."

"I'd prefer you didn't. I like this shirt." He grabbed Riley's right shoulder, well away from the exposed tattoo on her back, and twisted her to look at the design. "Well, well. It's been a while since I've seen this."

"Give her to me," the Duchess growled.

Riley realized she had again forgotten the woman was there. She pulled away from Alistair and stepped back, hoping to keep both demons in her line of sight. She was sweating, and her arms hurt. She flexed her fingers, tightening the grip on her gun, and said, "Gillian Hunt. Who ordered the attack on her? Marchosias?"

"The misconception is that you're thinking too much like a human," Alistair said as he moved to stand next to the Duchess. "There are no edicts or assignments. Marchosias is the Grand Marquis of Hell, but he's more of a hands-off sort of supervisor. If a random demon thought it would be fun to drive your little girlfriend crazy, then they would go ahead and do that. Odds are, you'll never find out who it was."

Priest pushed away from the wall and said, "Riley, we have to leave this place."

Riley dipped her chin toward Priest in acknowledgement and buckled her belt. She shrugged her blouse back onto her shoulder, raised her gun to Alistair, and tried to tamp down the fear that she was in way over her head. "You could find

out. You're going to ask around, and you're going to tell me who did it. You're going to deliver them to me."

"Why would I do that?"

Riley said, "Because you don't want to end up like the Duchess."

Before Alistair or the Duchess had time to question what she meant, the Duchess howled in pain. Priest had approached the demons from behind and managed to take the Duchess' burned hand. Light seeped between Priest's fingers, her face dark and determined as she poured energy through the burn from Riley's tattoo.

The Duchess howled, her voice inhuman as she dropped to her knees. Black spider webs tracked down her arm until the flesh was black all the way to her elbow. Priest finally released her hand and stepped back, stumbling a bit over her own feet as she retreated. The Duchess stared at her hand with a mixture of disbelief and fury, her lips pulling back over the needle-sharp teeth of a piranha.

Riley tried to appear unmoved as the reek of burning flesh filled the room. "All I want is the name, Alistair. Give me the name, and I leave you alone. For now. Priest, you all right?"

"Yeah." The voice was barely audible, with no strength behind it.

Riley moved toward the door, keeping her eyes on the demons. Alistair's friendly manner evaporated, his eyes turning into embers as he tracked her retreat. When she reached the top of the stairs, Riley said, "You have twenty-four hours, or I come back and finish what I started."

Priest released the Duchess, who fell to the floor. She looked up and narrowed her gaze at Riley. "You will suffer."

“Sure,” Riley said. “Par for the course.” She waited for Priest to start down the stairs before she finally turned her back and followed.

They hurried down the stairs, their footsteps echoing hollow in the main garage of the former firehouse. Priest hit the floor running, wings tucked in against her back so they wouldn’t slow her down. Riley kept her eyes straight ahead, ignoring the way the shadows moved in her periphery. Priest threw open the front door and lurched out into the sunshine. Riley followed two steps behind, squinting at the brightness of the day.

It took her a moment to realize the street was full of activity. Priest was bent over next to the car, spitting into the gutter after apparently throwing up. Her wings were no longer in sight, her hand trembling against the hood of Riley’s car. But the main show was in the middle of the street. A garbage truck stood idle a few feet away, at the end of the block, and two police cars were blocking off traffic. A man in a business suit was lying in the street, a spray of blood spreading out from his head.

Riley recognized the man’s suit and knew he was the man they had seen leaving Alistair’s office.

“Insurance,” Priest said, touching the cuff of her shirtsleeve to her lips. “He needed money and Alistair told him the insurance would pay enough to cover his debts if he... in the case of an accidental death.”

Riley said, “Why?”

Priest shook her head. “The guy came to Alistair for help.”

“So Alistair made him kill himself? Why?”



“He didn’t make the man kill himself,” Priest said. “He just planted the seed. The decision was all his.” She nodded at the body in the street. “As for why...” Priest shrugged. “Maybe he was just bored.”

Riley looked away and walked toward her car. “Are you feeling better?”

“A little every minute we’re out of that place,” Priest said. She breathed deeply a few times and said, “I know you want to try to find Ethan Winn, but I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it. Maybe we take a quick breather.”

Riley didn’t even try to argue. “Okay. We’ll retreat for the time being. I want to see Gillian anyway. It’ll give Alistair a chance to look for us. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Priest shook her head. “Waiting is not going to do any good. Alistair will simply alert Ethan — not to mention every other demon within hearing distance — that you’re on the warpath.”

“So they’ll know I’m coming.”

“And they will kill you.”

Riley climbed into the car and didn’t answer until Priest climbed into the other side. “I don’t care. If they don’t know that Gillian is protected, then I don’t care if they kill me. When I’m dead, they’ll have no reason to go after her.”

“My Lord,” Priest said. “Is that actually your plan?”

“No,” Riley said. “It’s the back-up plan.”

Priest seemed to relax. “What’s your main plan?”

Riley pulled away from the curb, eyeing the police officers dealing with the death behind her. “I’ll let you know when I come up with it.”

## F O U R

At the first church they passed after crossing the border of No Man's Land, Priest said, "Drop me off here."

Riley pulled to the curb and looked at the dark stained-glass windows. "I think they're closed."

Priest unfastened her seatbelt and opened the door. "They'll let me in. Riley, I want you to think about what you're doing here. The forces you're up against are so much bigger than you. You saw what happened to me at that firehouse. If an angel can barely stand up against them, what hope do you possibly have?"

"I didn't ask for this job, Priest," Riley said. "Believe me, if I thought I could get out of it, I would be out of here in a heartbeat. But I can't just turn my back. You heard Alistair. He wants me to leave this town and forget it ever existed. I can't do that. And not because of what Samael said, and not because I feel obligated. I'm staying because this is *my* city. I was born here, and I've bled here, and I'm not giving up on it just because a demon is trying to scare me. I'm willing to die for the cause, but I am not going to let someone hurt Gillian because of my crusade."

Priest sighed and shook her head. "Raguel told me you were stubborn when I took this assignment. I should have listened to him."

“Are you going to be all right in there?”

“Oh, yeah,” Priest said. “I’ll be right as rain. I just need a little first aid. Take care of yourself, and of Gillian. Do not go back into No Man’s Land without me.”

Riley nodded and Priest finally got out of the car. Riley watched until Priest disappeared around the back corner of the church, swallowed by shadows, and then pulled away from the curb. She still felt ghostly fingers on her skin, shivers running through her body as she started to remember the Duchess touching her. It terrified her to think that the demon had been able to move around her, touch her, undo her clothing, without her even noticing. If she couldn’t even prevent her own near-rape, then what did she hope to accomplish running into buildings waving her gun and badge around like they meant anything?

Riley thought about her position throughout the drive back to Gillian’s apartment. She parked at the curb and jogged across the street, letting herself into the building as if she’d lived there for years. The lobby was empty, but she could hear the rattle of the Coke machine from the laundry room down the hall. It felt like home. More like a home than anywhere else she had stayed in her life.

Gillian’s apartment door was locked, and Riley took the key from her wallet to get inside. The living room was middle-of-the-day dark, and she could hear music from the bedroom. She recognized Vienna Teng’s voice, but not the song. The main part of the apartment was dark and still, and Riley quietly went to the back hallway. The bedroom door was open and she saw the light of Gillian’s bedside lamp against the wall.

She stopped in the doorway and looked at Gillian, curled up in the bed. She was clutching Gravy the Rabbit, the toy

Marchosias used to threaten Gillian's safety. Gillian had changed into a pair of white pajamas, her knees drawn up to her chest and her feet crossed at the ankles. She looked so innocent, at least thirty years too young, and Riley felt a pang in her chest at the sight. "I'm sorry, Jill," she whispered from the doorway. "I'm sorry I brought this into your life."

Gillian stirred at the sound of Riley's voice and looked around blindly for a moment. She saw Riley in the doorway and breathed in, a quick gasp that was quickly stifled as her brain recognized who it was. She covered the gasp by yawning and put Gravy the Rabbit aside. She said, "Riley. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I just wanted to take a quick shower. How are you holding up?"

Gillian shrugged. "Hurry back."

Riley nodded and went into the bathroom. She stripped down to her underwear, turned on the extra lights that Gillian used to put on her make-up, and examined her body carefully. The demon could have done any number of things while Riley was blinded, could have done anything before touching her shoulder and breaking the spell. She checked her breasts and stomach, turned around to make sure the small of her back was unmarred. She was about to consider herself unharmed when she noticed the change to her tattoo.

The design was two torches joined at the base, surrounded by a yellow circle. The woman who gave it to her, Officer Christine Lee, told her that it was a symbol of power. She was sure it was the reason she wasn't completely fooled by the Duchess, but she wasn't sure how it truly worked or what its origins were. And now, both torches and the surrounding circle had changed color from sunset yellow to a deep, dark red.

She reached back and touched the edge of the circle. It didn't hurt, but the color made it look like a wound. As she watched, the color faded to a less violent shade, and she decided it was residue from direct contact with a demon. She shuddered and turned to face the mirror so she wouldn't have to look at it anymore.

She got into the shower and scrubbed away the encounter, trying to push the questions out of her mind. When she got out of the shower, she dressed in the same clothes she'd been wearing earlier and went back into the bedroom. She sat on the edge of Gillian's side of the bed and took her hand. "How are you doing?"

"Coping. Trying to get those voices out of my head." She took a deep breath and looked Riley over. "What happened to you? You looked like five miles of bad road earlier."

"And now?"

Gillian smiled weakly. "A little better."

"Just two miles, then?" Riley leaned in and kissed Gillian's lips. When she pulled back, she said, "I was trying to find the people who did this to you."

"Riley, don't. Just leave it alone."

Riley frowned. "Gillian, look at what they did to you. I can't just let that go. They came after you because of me. They have to know I won't allow that."

Gillian closed her eyes. "I love that you're ready and willing to do that. But getting yourself killed won't solve anything."

"Either I teach them a lesson, or they take me down. Either way you're out of the line of fire."

"Do you honestly think I want that? To be alive without you?"

"What other choice is there?"

Gillian said, "This town has angels for all its demons, right? There's no need for you to stay here and get tossed around. They're treating you like a plaything, Riley. You need to get out of here. We both do."

Riley frowned and thought back to her conversation with Alistair. "That's it. That's what they're trying to do."

Gillian looked up. "What?"

Riley said, "They want to get me out of town. They're scared."

Gillian reached up and put her hand in the middle of Riley's back. She let her fingers slide down Riley's shirt and come to rest on the mattress.

Riley arched her back to the touch, but didn't let it distract her. "It's why they just scared you. They wanted me to run."

"I want you to run," Gillian said. "Is that their plan? Then fine. I'm all for it."

Riley turned and said, "I told Priest that I won't run. I refuse to turn my back on this city."

"Why? It's killing you, Riley." Gillian sat up and put her arm around Riley's shoulders. "Do you think that will count as a win? If you end up thrown off another roof, or if you get ambushed again, what do you really think it will accomplish?"

Riley pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. She focused on the warmth of Gillian's body next to her, the strong pressure of Gillian's hand against her back. She was sitting in the bed she was just beginning to get used to sharing with the

woman she loved. Was she really willing to risk all of this for a city that had done nothing but stomp on her again and again?

Gillian moved her hand up to Riley's shoulder and squeezed. "You know I'm right, Riley. We should just get out while we can, before this place takes any more pieces out of us. Forget about angels and demons."

Riley rolled her shoulders, lifting them against Gillian's impromptu massage. "I can't," she said quietly.

Gillian leaned in and rested her head on Riley's shoulder.

"Were you born here?"

"No," Gillian said. "Georgia. My family moved here for Daddy's job when I was sixteen."

Riley put her hand on Gillian's hip and rubbed in slow circles. "This city can get into you. I was born here. I spent my teenage years in No Man's Land stealing from convenience stores. I spent a couple of nights a week sleeping on the streets. This city is like my home. And I don't want to walk away if there's a chance I can fix it."

Gillian continued her massage for a long time, moving her hand from one shoulder to the other. Riley closed her eyes and pulled her legs up, resting her chin on her knees.

"Can you stay?"

"I should check in at work."

"Okay."

Riley turned her head and looked at Gillian. "Do you need me to stay?"

Gillian said, "No. I'll just nap some more when you go."

Riley nodded. "I should probably go soon." She touched Gillian's cheek and pulled her close for a kiss.

When they parted, Gillian gripped Riley's collar and held her in place. "I'm serious, Riley. I want to go. I don't think I could stand living in this place very much longer after... what happened."

Riley reached up and covered Gillian's hand with her own. Every time she closed her eyes, she pictured Gillian curled up in the morgue drawer, the terror in her voice when she shrieked for them to go away. Riley was responsible for that terror. She kissed the back of Gillian's hand and said, "We'll go."

"Yeah?"

Riley nodded. "Yeah. You're more important to me than anything else. I love you."

The corners of Gillian's mouth curled. "You've never said that to me out loud."

"Yeah, I have," Riley said, picturing herself bent over a sleeping Gillian and brushing the hair out of her face. "But this time you can hear it."

Gillian kissed the corner of Riley's mouth and said, "I love you, too, Riley. Come home soon, please."

"And in one piece."

"Preferably."

Riley smiled at that and gently eased Gillian down onto the mattress. She propped herself up on one arm and said, "Close your eyes. I'll go when you're asleep."

"It may take awhile," Gillian said, her eyelids already drooping.



Riley touched Gillian's cheek. "I can wait."

Riley walked into the bullpen to find Priest was already at her desk. Riley was almost to her desk when Hathaway stepped into her office doorway and said, "Detective Parra. A minute?"

Riley stifled a groan and adjusted her path. She passed Priest's desk and whispered, "How are you doing?"

"Much better. Thank you."

Riley nodded and continued into Hathaway's office. Hathaway closed the door and stepped around Riley to lean against the corner of her desk. Riley had a flashback to the horrible night Kara died, but forced her mind back to the present. "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"I heard there was an incident in the morgue today. Is Dr. Hunt all right?"

"Yeah, she's fine. She just needed a little time to get over the whole... thing."

Hathaway nodded. "What exactly *was* the thing? Priest was pretty vague about it all. She only said that Dr. Hunt had a disarming experience with one of the bodies. Is there something the replacement ME should know about?"

"No, ma'am," Riley said. "Who did you get to replace her?"

"Dr. Mill Herron," Hathaway said. She crossed her arms and said, "Riley, where were you this morning?"

Riley shrugged. "Following a lead on an open case."

Hathaway nodded toward the bullpen. "Are you sure that will follow what Priest claimed you two were doing?"

"I assume she would only have told you the truth, lieutenant, so I'm not terribly worried. We were in No Man's Land questioning a person of interest."

"What case?"

Riley sighed. "I'm not going to tell you."

Hathaway raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I'm not going to detail every single step-by-step of my investigations. I don't have to justify my police work to you, lieutenant. Detective Priest and I were in No Man's Land following a lead, talking to someone who had information pertinent to the case in question. If the information goes anywhere, I'll fill you in. I promise. Is that all?"

"No, it's not all." Hathaway pushed off the desk and stepped forward. "If something happened in my morgue this morning, I want to know. I don't want you playing vigilante. I don't want you dragging Caitlin Priest down along with you. Have I made myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Riley said. "May I be excused now, ma'am?"

Hathaway waited a breath before she nodded and stepped back. "Go on."

Riley turned and left the office. When she was safely at her desk, she glanced across the room to make sure Hathaway's office door was closed before she leaned forward. "Priest. What did you say to Hathaway about this morning?"

"We were following a lead on a case," Priest said. "I don't think she believed me. I still looked pretty rough when I got back."

"The church didn't help?"

Priest made a so-so gesture with her hand. “It was still bad enough that she noticed. We’re going to have to be careful if we go after Ethan Winn.”

“When we go after him,” Riley corrected. She leaned back in her chair and squeezed the bridge of her nose. She remembered her promise to Gillian, their plan to just run away and let the city sort itself out. But she had to finish this one last thing just to show the demons they had messed with the wrong cop.

## Five

Riley used the database to pull up a record for Alistair Call. The few cops who had run up against him in the past believed he ran several street gangs in No Man's Land, organizing them and keeping them stocked in weapons and drugs. He'd been dragged in several different times for a variety of offenses, the most popular of which seemed to be the corruption of a minor, but nothing ever stuck to him. He was one of many such figureheads on No Man's Land, one of the reasons so many cops had just given up on the place.

There were no records of any associate using the moniker "the Duchess," but Riley wasn't surprised. She was still unnerved by how easily the demon managed to slip under her radar. She was in a hostile environment, well aware of the two demons sharing the space with her, and somehow the Duchess just... slipped out. She was going to have to pay special attention the next time their paths crossed.

Ethan Winn was another story. There were no files on him, no arrests, no record he had ever been brought in for questioning. She logged onto the internet and did a search for the name and came up with nothing. Praying he wasn't another trickster like the Duchess, she said, "Priest. What's the story on Winn?"

Priest glanced around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear and shrugged. "He's a puppet master. He likes to stay hidden. He's pretty much equal to Alistair, but he

doesn't get hassled as much because so few people know to look for him."

Riley went back to the database and said, "How many others are there? I mean, in total. Just so I'll know what I'm dealing with."

"Marchosias commands thirty lieutenants throughout No Man's Land."

"Thirty isn't so bad."

"Each one commands a smaller group of underlings."

Riley said, "Naturally. How many underlings?"

"Figure at least fifty for each demon. More if they're higher up on the totem pole."

Riley groaned and rubbed her face with both hands. She remembered the scene in Marchosias' lobby. She couldn't remember how many demons there had been, but she was sure it was less than fifty. She tried to imagine thirty demons each with a legion doing their bidding, and she felt all their weight dropping onto her shoulders. "God, what have I gotten myself into?"

She rested her hands on the desk and stared at her computer screen. Thirty demonic leaders, each with a horde of their own. Every fiber of her being wanted to drive into No Man's Land that minute, exterminate each and every one of them, and damn the cost. But she knew that plan would only get her killed. She just felt so helpless every time she pictured Gillian at home in bed, holding that damn toy rabbit.

"What would happen if I killed Marchosias?"

Priest lifted her head. "For one thing, I don't think you could. No offense."

“Humor me. Would the others just go away?”

Priest leaned back in her chair and considered it. “No. They would all start jockeying for position. They would try to take over as Grand Marquis of No Man’s Land. Some of them would get killed in the power struggle, but then the strongest would take Marchosias’ place at the top of the hill. You might cause enough confusion for them to stop focusing on humanity for a few years, but it would just be a temporary fix.”

“Long enough to get away unnoticed,” Riley muttered.

Priest stood up and walked to Riley’s desk. She next to Riley’s chair and said, “Look at me, Riley. I don’t know what you’re thinking here. You cannot run. Do you understand me?”

“Why can’t I? Fuck this city. All I want is Gillian. I have her. All I have to do is take her and run. Forget about Marchosias and all the demons coming after us. We can forget this town even existed.”

“Can you really turn your back on your home?”

“What do you think I would possibly miss? My coworkers? The boss who forced me to have sex with her? My father, if he’s even still alive. As long as I have Gillian, this city can go to hell for all I care.”

“It would, Riley. Literally. This city would be consumed from the inside out. Marchosias would have free reign and then what would be standing in the way of spreading to the next town? Across the state? The country?”

Riley lashed out and swept the open files off her desk. They hit the floor with a clatter, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Riley shot to her feet and stared down at Priest.

“Why does it have to be *me*? Find some other patsy to take my place when I’m gone. I’m sure it wouldn’t be hard for you guys. There are millionaire televangelists on TV every night getting senior citizens to send in their last five bucks. Should be easy for you to find some other idiot willing to lay down their life for a lost cause.” She stormed toward the stairs and Priest followed. “Get yourself a new partner, Priest. I’m out once I finish this.”

She made it to the stairwell before Priest grabbed her arm and pulled her back. Priest waited until the door was closed before she spoke. “We can’t just get another champion, all right? It doesn’t work like that. This city was protected by angels for centuries. Ridwan, and before him, Haniel. When Samael killed Ridwan, things were a bit traumatic to say the least. There had never been a situation like that. With the establishment in disarray, the city was unprotected. No one was assigned to it. Until someone took the mantle upon herself.”

Riley groaned. “Oh, don’t tell me.”

“You declared yourself this city’s protector when you killed Samael. If you shirk those duties, the city will be left wholly unprotected again.”

“What about you? Raguel?”

Priest shook her head. “Not our department. Raguel is kind of like a manager. He keeps angels from going off the tracks. He’s the Vengeance of God, so he’s not going to dirty his hands with mortal affairs.”

“And you?”

“I’m your guardian angel, Riley,” Priest said.

Riley let the words echo in the stairwell for a moment, letting them soak in. Finally, she shook her head and said, "You're what?"

"I was sent here to keep an eye on you. Because even though you made a stupid mistake going up against Marchosias, the declaration was binding. So I was sent to make sure you didn't get struck down immediately. But I'm also here to make sure you don't try to renege on your promise. This is your job now, Riley. Keeping Marchosias from solidifying his power."

"So because I said one thing in the heat of the moment, you guys own my ass for the rest of my life?"

"We're not that arbitrary, or cruel. You're special, Riley. And don't ask me why, I'm not privy to the details. But that tattoo on your back... you have to know that's not an ordinary piece of artwork. You saw what happened with the Duchess' hand. That kind of power doesn't happen accidentally."

The door opened and a uniformed officer stuck his head in. He looked at the two of them and said, "Uh, Detective Parra? You have a call."

"Who is it?"

"He just said, 'Call for Parra.'"

Riley glanced at Priest. "Send it to my desk."

The officer nodded and said, "Line six."

Riley led the way out of the stairs, following the officer across the room. She lifted the phone as she sat down, waiting until Priest was at her own desk before pressing the six button. "Detective Parra. To whom am I speaking?"



“That was a nifty trick with the tattoo. I fully expected you to have an ace up your sleeve, but nothing of that caliber. The Duchess may lose that hand. I hope you’re happy.”

“Thrilled, Mr. Call.” Riley picked up her pen. “So why don’t you keep my happy mood going and tell me what I want to know. Who sent the demons after Gillian?”

“If I give you an answer, you’ll owe me, Detective. We’ll be sort of like partners. Won’t that be fun?”

“This isn’t a quid pro quo situation, Ali. This is a ‘you tell me what you want, you get to live another day’ sort of thing. So why don’t you go ahead and give me that name before you crawl back into your hole?”

Alistair sighed. “Fine. Although I’m sure your lovely partner has already told you what name I’m going to say. And how is Zerachiel? Listening in, I assume. Quite a nice change, seeing you as a female. Interesting choice.” He sighed, getting back on topic. “The name is Ethan Winn. Your partner will know how to find him. It has been a pleasure speaking with you, Detective Parra. I’m sure we’ll soon get a chance to discuss that tattoo at length. Good-bye for now, Riley.”

Riley hung up the phone and looked across the room at Priest. “We’re going to have to come up with a lie to tell Hathaway.”

“You let me take care of that,” Priest said. “I’ll be right back.”

Riley watched her go, and picked up the phone to dial Gillian’s cell phone. After a handful of rings, she was about to give up when Gillian answered. “Hey, don’t hang up. I’m here.”

“Hey. Were you sleeping?”

"Dozing," Gillian said. "It's all right. I was dreaming about you."

Riley smiled and leaned back in her seat. "Oh, yeah?"

Gillian chuckled. "I was thinking about what we were going to do when we get out of this place. I got an offer from a hospital in New York. They could probably always use cops out there, so you would have a place to work."

"Yeah," Riley said. "Jill..."

"Uh-oh. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I promise. It's just that there's something I have to do. A case I'm working on. I'm not sure when I'll get home tonight. I may miss dinner."

Gillian's voice hardened. "I know we haven't been together very long, but I do know that tone. You're lying to me. You're going after whoever tried to attack me this morning."

Riley looked down at her fingers, ashamed that she was so transparent while proud that Gillian loved her enough to read her so well. "Jill, I can't just ignore what they did to you."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm just asking you not to exchange your life for mine. I'm in one piece, I'm alive. There's no need for another Riley Parra Suicide Mission."

Riley looked across the room at Hathaway's closed door. "They need to know. They need to know I won't lie down."

"Why? Why does it matter if we're leaving, Riley?"

Riley reached up and touched her left shoulder. She could almost feel the tattoo burning under her shirt. "Sweetheart..."

"No, Riley, no." Gillian sighed, and her breath carried across the receiver like broken waves. Riley closed her eyes

before the sound made her cry, too. "We'll talk about it tonight, because I know nothing I say now will keep you from running off like a chicken with her head cut off. But be safe. Come back to me."

"I will," Riley said. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

They hung up and Riley took a moment to compose herself. She took her gun from the drawer, slipped it into the holster, and went to Hathaway's office. She knocked lightly before she opened the door and stepped inside. "Priest? You about ready... to go...?" She frowned at the sight that greeted her.

Priest stood behind Hathaway's desk, her hands on Hathaway's shoulders. Hathaway's eyes were closed, her head rolled forward as if she were asleep. Priest said, "Hello, Detective Parra. Say hello, Nina."

Hathaway slurred, "Hello."

Priest squeezed, and Hathaway sat up straighter.

"Nina? Detective Parra and I are going into No Man's Land on assignment from you. Do you remember that, Nina?"

"Mm-hmm."

"What was the assignment?"

Hathaway frowned as if the question was unexpectedly difficult, then focused on Riley. She pressed her lips together and cleared her throat. "Detective Parra. I'm glad you're here. I need you and Detective Priest to go into No Man's Land. Your confidential informant, Muse, called with a tip relating to the Harmon case. I want you to get out there as soon as possible and see what he has to say." She swallowed, frowned, and moved her lips as if there was suddenly a bad taste in her

mouth. She focused on Riley, and then turned to look over her shoulder at Priest. "What...?"

"Feeling better, lieutenant?"

"Yes. I... I, uh..." She shook her head as Priest walked around to the front of the desk. She straightened her shoulders and said, "Did I call you both in here?"

"Yes, ma'am," Priest said. "You gave us the assignment to check out Muse's information."

Hathaway nodded. "Oh, of course. Yes." She checked her watch and said, "You better hurry. You know he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"No, he doesn't," Riley agreed. "We'll be back as soon as we can." She turned and followed Priest out of the office, closing the door behind her. They were halfway down the stairs before curiosity got the better of her. "Why can't we use that on everyone?"

"Because it's not a parlor trick. I know how big a deal this is to you. I knew that you would have gone into No Man's Land with or without permission. I figure this way, you get the option of back-up."

"Still. A stubborn eyewitness, a suspect who doesn't want to cooperate..."

Priest grabbed Riley's shoulder and pressed her against the wall. "I will not use it unless absolutely necessary, in the event of an absolute crisis. The things it does to the human mind... it's not pretty. Lieutenant Hathaway will probably be feeling the effects of it for weeks, but she won't know quite what's wrong. Every time I do it, I feel like I'm raping the person. So do not ever, ever ask me to do it just to make your job a little easier, am I understood?"

“Yeah,” Riley said. “Sure. Whatever.”

Priest backed up and rolled her shoulders. She smoothed down her hair, took a few calming breaths, and said, “Sorry. I just... I hate the feeling. Let’s go.”

Riley led Priest lead the way down the stairs. She had been partners with Caitlin Priest for almost a month, but she was starting to think she still hadn’t truly met Zerachiel. She dreaded the situation where Priest would let her true nature take over completely. Riley straightened her shirt and headed downstairs behind her partner.

## Six

“Alistair said you would know where to find Winn. You got a feeling?”

Priest nodded slowly. “Riley, you have to understand this is a trap.”

“I would expect nothing less from a demon. Just point me where I need to go.”

“They’ll be at the firehouse. I’m sure Winn showed up there five minutes after we left. He and Alistair will have taken good use of their time to prepare for you coming back.”

“Can I count on you as back-up?”

Priest pressed her lips together and looked out the window. “I don’t know. I will be slightly better prepared than I was the first time, but it took a lot out of me to take down the Duchess. And I only managed to temporarily take her out of the equation. There’s a chance she’ll be back to full power already.”

Riley shuddered. The thought of that woman slinking around in the shadows without being seen gave her the creeps. “Is there any way you can make me immune to whatever she does to block herself from my sight?”

“No. I couldn’t see her myself, not in the way you’re thinking about. There was a concentration of dark forces all around

you. All I could do was focus on it. And then she touched your tattoo and the spell shattered.”

Riley nodded and thought back to Alistair’s reaction to the artwork. “Do you know anything about the tat?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it. The design or its effect.”

“Samael had the same problem with it,” Riley said. “His hand burned even though he touched it through my shirt. It’s the only reason I survived our fight.”

Priest nodded and frowned as Riley turned right at the intersection. “I thought we were going into No Man’s Land.”

“We are. I just have to make a stop first.”

She drove until she found a Catholic church and she parked in front of the steps. “Come on in. Juice yourself up before the big fight.”

Priest shrugged and got out of the car. She followed Riley into the building, pausing to take a knee as she crossed the threshold. The interior of the church was lit with flickering candles. Riley expected music or at least conversation, but was greeted instead by a weighted silence. She walked directly to the holy water font and cupped her hands. She pushed her hands under the water, soaking the cuffs of her shirt, and closed her eyes. “Priest, you want to help me out with this? I’m kind of a heathen here.”

“What is it you want me to do?”

“I don’t know,” Riley said. “Pray? Bless the water?”

“The water is already blessed. But without faith...”

“I know, I know, it’s just water. But if I have faith it’ll work, then that should count for something, right?”

Priest looked at the water and then put her arm around Riley. She rested her palm over Riley's tattoo and closed her eyes. Riley self-consciously scanned the church, trying to see if anyone was watching their little ritual. Priest's hand grew warm on her back and she shifted uncomfortably until the heat went away.

"Amen," Priest said.

Riley pulled her hands from the water and, without thinking, dumped her handfuls of water over her head. She soaked her shirt, spluttered and wiped the water from her eyes. She smoothed her hair down with her palm, her long hair plastered to her head. "What the hell?" Riley said to Priest. "Couldn't hurt, right?"

"I suppose," Priest said. She dipped two fingers into the water and crossed herself. "Are we ready to go now?"

"Yeah," Riley said. She looked toward the front of the church. They also had a crucifix hanging over the pulpit, a white Jesus as opposed to Father Jacob's church, staring mournfully down at the sinners congregating before him. The statue made Riley uneasy; the constant guilt trip hanging in front of you every week, the knowledge that no matter how many pews you sat in or how many times you hit your knees and sang a little song, you would never pay back what you owed. She didn't know how people could live that way.

"Yeah," she said again. "We're ready. Let's get out of here."

Riley parked across the driveway of the firehouse again. As she climbed from the car, she looked at the sky and watched heavy clouds rolling in. "Well, that's kind of cliché," she said. "Convenient mood lighting."

"It's the demons inside," Priest said. "They're drawing their power. It causes all kinds of atmospheric disturbances. Rain,



hurricanes... you remember what happened when Samael fell.”

“Vaguely. Angels cause storms, too?”

“Thousands every day across the world,” Priest said. She looked warily up at the firehouse door and pulled her gun from the holster and examined it closely. “I was hoping I could masquerade as a cop without having to use this thing. I heard most cops go their entire career without drawing their weapon once.”

“A lot of cops say that,” Riley said as she walked toward the door. “None of those cops work No Man’s Land. You do know how to use it, though?”

“Yeah,” Priest said. “I’m not sure whether I hope it will do any good or not. I don’t fancy the idea of shooting any living thing, even if it is a demon.”

“You’ll get over that once they start shooting at you.”

Riley walked up to the man-sized door and tried the knob. It was unlocked, so she turned and shrugged at Priest. “Looks like they were maybe expecting us.” She stepped to one side and pushed the door open with her foot, leading with her gun as she stepped inside. The garage was just as dark as that morning, and Riley could hear whispering voices in the darkness. Her mind flashed back to the time in the lobby of Marchosias’ building when the demons first overwhelmed her, flooding her mind and senses as they tried to drag her inside.

“Stay calm, Riley,” Priest said from behind her. “I have your back.”

Most of the holy water had evaporated during their drive to the firehouse, but she could feel some of it dripping from her hair and pooling under her collar. She wasn’t sure if it was

completely a mental component, but she actually did feel calmer. She kept both hands on her weapon, resisting the urge to wipe the water away from her face. The garage seemed deserted, but she wasn't about to take that at face value after what happened last time.

"Mr. Call," Riley shouted. Her voice echoed against the bare concrete. "Mr. Winn? I thought we could have a nice conversation about what happened this morning."

"Riley," Priest whispered. Riley glanced back and saw Priest nod toward the ravaged fire truck. A thin person wearing a football jersey was perched on top of the cabin, watching her with a wide smile on his face. When he knew she had seen him, he flipped around on his hands and knees and scurried out of sight like a cockroach under the glare of a kitchen light. "I saw two others," Priest said.

"Call off your boys, Alistair," Riley said. "We're just going to have a nice chat."

"You reek of holy," Alistair said, his voice coming from everywhere around them.

Riley lifted a shoulder as she moved closer to the foot of the stairs. "Yeah, well, you hang around with angels long enough..."

"It's just a simple talk, Alistair," Priest said. "Don't make it more than it is."

"Zerachiel!" Alistair said. "Winn was so hoping you would come back this time. He was so envious of the fun we had with you last time."

Priest said, "Yeah, I'm sure the Duchess can't wait to see me again."

“Unfortunately, the Duchess is still mending from your little attack. Worshippers aren’t what they used to be. It’s taking the poor dear a while to gain enough power to properly heal.”

“My heart weeps,” Riley said. She reached the bottom of the stairs and pressed her back to the wall, dropping into a crouch so she could see the floor above. “Is Mr. Winn actually here? I would love to talk with him about what happened this morning. Of course, if he’s not willing to talk with me directly...”

“I am here, Detective Parra.”

The voice was like thick velvet, the voice of a late-night disc-jockey on a blues station. Each word was clipped as if it was carved from stone before spoken.

Riley said, “Why don’t you come down here where we can speak like civilized people.”

“That is unlikely. I am a demon and you are a police officer. How can evil incarnate and a thug with a gun hope to emulate civilization?”

Riley rolled her eyes. She looked back toward Priest and saw that she was looking back and forth across the garage, her gun lowering as if she was focused on something else. Riley watched her while she spoke. “You threatened my girlfriend. Why? A power play to oust Marchosias? Trying to earn brownie points?”

“You are a small thing,” Winn said. “You are a mortal. This morning was merely a demonstration of what you are getting yourself into. I am merely a lieutenant of Marchosias. Imagine the kind of power *he* has. Imagine attempting to stop that when all you have is a puny gun and the lifespan of a human being. Quit now while you are still in one piece.”

“Riley,” Priest whispered. She moved closer and said, “There are windows in here.”

Riley frowned and whispered, “Yeah, I noticed the architecture. I want to do my living room like th— ” She stopped when she realized what Priest meant. The sky overhead was filled with storm clouds, but it was still early afternoon. There should have been *some* light. Riley pushed away from the wall and looked toward the ceiling. “How did Gillian describe the creature in the morgue?”

“Darkness,” Priest said. “Absence of light.”

“Shit,” Riley said. She straightened, realizing it was stupid to try and find cover when the person they were after was already surrounding them. “Ethan Winn, I presume.”

The smoke coalesced in the middle of the room, taking on a vaguely human shape. Priest stepped back from it, her lips pressed tightly together.

“You okay?” Riley said.

“I’m nauseated,” Priest managed. She swallowed hard and shook her head. “It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.”

Alistair came down the stairs, hands in his pockets. He still wore the self-righteous smirk. “I was hoping to have fun with you for a while longer, Detective Parra,” he said. “I applaud you on your ingenuity. Looks like it won’t be as easy to fool you as it was the first time we met. Marchosias asked me to give you something.” He took his hand from his pocket and reached into his jacket. He fished around and then smiled. “Ah, here it is. Catch.”

He tossed something at Riley, and she stepped out of its trajectory. She kept her gun steady on him and glanced at the object out of the corner of her eye.

It was a thin, laminated card with a metal clip on one end. It landed face down, but Riley knew exactly what it was. She had pulled the clip off of Gillian's scrub top enough to recognize the morgue ID. She focused on Alistair and tried to control her breathing. "Where is she?"

"Oh, my Lord," Priest gasped.

"What is it?" Riley said. Her voice was raw, tears burning the corners of her eyes.

"We burnt the Duchess. If she doesn't have enough worshippers to heal, then she'll go to plan B. Demons don't allow themselves be crippled for long."

Riley frowned. "Plan B?"

"Possession, my dear detective," said a woman disgustingly smooth, seductive voice. A familiar purr underlined the words. Riley's blood went cold and she finally lowered her gun.

Gillian stood at the base of the stairs, wearing a white blouse and a flowing tan gown. Her hair was wet and smoothed down against her skull, her teeth showing as she crossed the floor toward Alistair. "The last thing you said to each other was a declaration of love," the Duchess said with Gillian's voice. "You should be grateful. So few get that opportunity."

"Let her go," Riley growled. Her voice was feral, her teeth clenched hard enough to hurt.

The Duchess laughed. "That won't be happening, dear. Did you really think you could call down a demon for a chat? Did you think you would punish him for what he did to sweet Gillian Eleanor Hunt? That is not what this meeting is about, Riley Parra."

Priest suddenly groaned and clutched her stomach. Riley couldn't tear her eyes from the blasphemy of Gillian's face to check on her. Priest hit one knee and her wings spread out from her back, reaching out to their full span. "Riley..."

"You wanted to ensure no one ever hurt Gillian again," the Duchess said. "You wanted to be together with her, and to be safe. We're prepared to offer that to you."

Riley saw Ethan Winn moving closer to her.

"Possession," Priest gasped.

"We'll be together forever. Nothing will hurt us. All you have to do is accept him."

Something cold and clammy touched the back of Riley's neck and she hunched her shoulders to get away from it.

"Just relax," the Duchess said in a soothing whisper, far too like Gillian's voice for comfort. "It will be over before you know it. And you and Gillian will be together forever."

Riley closed her eyes and felt tears rolling down her face. She felt Ethan Winn's approach, a skip in her heartbeat as he moved within arm's reach of her. All it would take was a moment. She prayed she wouldn't be conscious for the depravity. She parted her lips to let him in.

## Seven

The Duchess tightened her grip on the back of Riley's neck, her smile widening as Ethan Winn's lips touched Riley's. Riley released her gun and brought up her right hand, moving slowly, letting both demons distract themselves on her imminent conversion. Right before Ethan completed the kiss, Riley shoved her hand upward. Her palm, which had been pressed against the grip of her rifle, was sweaty and still wet from being dipped in holy water. Her fist passed through Ethan's "head," and he recoiled with a god-awful screech.

The Duchess' eyes widened and Riley turned and slapped her across the face. It tore out a piece of her to watch her hand hit Gillian, and she resisted the urge to drop to her knees and beg forgiveness. The demons backed off and Riley retreated, dropping down next to Priest. "Are you all right?"

"No," Priest said. She looked at the demons, eyes red and watering, and said, "Focus on them. Ethan Winn can —"

A sudden gust of wind knocked Riley and Priest off their feet. Riley sprawled, and Priest went flying like a piece of paper on the breeze. Her wings caught the gust and carried her all the way across the room until she was enveloped in shadows. Ethan moved forward, his form a little less composed. "Bitch!" he howled as he stalked toward Riley.

"Why didn't I soak my bullets?" Riley muttered. She got to her feet and prayed she had enough holy water on her head

and shoulders to make what she was about to do count. She ran forward, her head bowed as she charged. Ethan stepped to one side to avoid her, as she figured he would, and she waited until she was next to him to throw her body to the side.

She passed through the mist, as could be expected, and a part of his gossamer body passed across her left shoulder.

Ethan howled again as the tattoo burned a trail through his body. Riley came out the other side deathly pale, shuddering as if she had just gone for a walk in Antarctica in her pajamas. She stumbled and turned to find the Duchess walking casually toward her. "You will watch your heart beat in your girlfriend's hands," she swore. "You will die knowing that I used her body to kill you."

"Okay. And then what are you going to do about her?"

The Duchess started to move forward, but Priest was too fast for her. She wrapped her wings around the Duchess and white light began to pour from them both. The Duchess screamed in Gillian's voice, and a rusty nail tore through Riley's heart. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from screaming at Priest to stop hurting her. She rolled onto her front and pushed herself up, wiping the back of her sleeve across her lips. She could still taste whatever made up Ethan's darkness as if they'd been brushed by a rotten banana peel.

"How long can you hold her?"

"I don't want to push it. Riley, Ethan resurrects the dead. Not as they were, as they are. He did it to the bodies in Gillian's morgue and the firemen..."

"Right," Riley said.

Priest suddenly cried out, and her light wavered. Riley turned away, knowing there was nothing she could do, and



focused on Ethan and Alistair. Both had vanished into the shadows. Riley ran across the garage, her shoes echoing on the concrete, and scanned for any kind of movement. She reached the fire truck and climbed onto the side runner, peering in through the broken windows. The seats were torn apart, the dashboard gutted of the radio and other niceties. The steering column was intact, however, and a key ring decorated with a rabbit's foot hung from the ignition. The floor was filled with fetid ooze.

Ethan Winn said, "You're only making this difficult on yourself, Detective Parra. You'll never get out of this building alive."

"People keep telling me that," Riley whispered.

Something grabbed her from behind, and she found herself hauled down off the truck and tossed to the concrete floor. She yanked the gun from the holster and brought it up as she fell, firing blindly behind her. She saw only a glimpse of the dead fireman's face before it rocked back with the impact of the bullet. Riley was moving as soon as she hit the floor, pushing with her feet to get away from the truck and the horrific dead man. Across the room, the Duchess and Priest were still entangled in a column of light.

Three firemen corpses stood between Riley and the stairs. She was sure Alistair had disappeared to the upper level, but she didn't relish the idea of trying to get past the zombies. They still wore their turnout jackets and helmets, their faces a charred horror story behind the glass masks. One of them carried an axe in a glove that wrinkled as if it was empty, but she knew it was simply skeletal.

Riley moved along the edge of the truck, and the remnants tracked her movements. "Don't worry, guys," she said as she climbed back onto the runner. "Don't mind me." She saw the

fireman who she shot in the head lurking to her right near the front of the vehicle. She fumbled over the side of the truck until she found the controls. She remembered the story the demon told her; the fireman died on their way to a fire. She prayed that meant their tanks were full, and the water hadn't evaporated as she twisted the knob.

She heard the rush of water in the mechanism and moved to the back of the truck. The firemen saw what she was doing and rushed her, making quiet hissing sounds low in their throats as they moved. Riley saw one of them stumble, his leg apparently breaking inside of his pants, and grabbed the hose from the back of the truck. She tucked the hose against her side, aimed the nozzle at her pursuers, and pressed the heel of her hand against the lever on the handle.

The water shot out in a clear, solid blast. She hit the first body mid-chest and knocked him off his feet, then swung the hose around to hit the other three. She continued firing until they had all been pushed to the far side of the room, then she dropped the hose and made a break for it. The zombies didn't get up; she figured every remaining bone they had was now broken.

She didn't think of anything as she raced up the stairs; all she could see was Gillian's beautiful smile, her self-conscious smirk when Riley caught her singing along with the radio. The way she ruffled her hair after pulling a T-shirt over her head, and the way she covered her mouth with her fingers when she yawned. The way she said Riley's name at work compared to how she whispered it at home.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she spotted Alistair standing among the velvet sofas. "That was rather impressive, Detective Parra. I've never seen a human stand up to something like that and maintain their sanity."

Riley fired twice, and Alistair's body jerked with the impacts. He grunted, shook his head and said, "Honestly. Haven't you learned anything yet?"

"Bullets don't kill you," Riley said. "But they make you bleed." She slammed into him and reached into her hair, running her fingers through the strands. They came back wet.

"What are you —"

Riley shoved Alistair down onto the couch, straddling him like a lover. She pressed her hand against one of his wounds and the moisture seemed to be sucked into his body.

Alistair's body went rigid, his eyes wide as the holy water seeped into his blood. "No, no, no! You bitch! You bitch!"

Riley pressed harder, perched on her knees so she could bring her full weight against his chest. Blood and water mixed together on her palm and Alistair's body went into spasms. "You messed with the wrong fucking bitch," she growled. "You and all of your kind will pay for what you did to Gillian. Because I believe in holy water. I believe it will fuck you up."

Alistair's shriek became too piercing for Riley to bear, and she jerked away from him. The damage was done. As she stumbled away, she saw his flesh began to blacken and blister. The couch underneath him burst into flames and he was engulfed by them. Alistair stopped shouting curses at her and convulsed, his body eaten from within by the holy fire.

Riley finally managed to turn away from the disgusting site and ran for the stairs. Her shoes pounded the stairs, which she belatedly noticed were wooden. The first was already spreading across Alistair's den of iniquity and would soon engulf the entire structure. "Not good, not good at all."

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw Priest kneeling over Gillian's prone body. The splinters in Riley's heart twisted and she dropped to her knees next to her limp girlfriend. She pulled Gillian's head into her lap and stroked her wet hair. "Caitlin. Please, don't tell me..." She looked up at Priest and barely kept herself from recoiling.

The angel's features were drawn, her face a death mask. She swallowed with great difficulty and rasped, "She is alive. Barely."

"So are you." Riley knelt and gathered the limp, but still warm, body into her arms. She looked at the face and realized the truth. The Duchess was gone. She cradled Gillian to her chest and said, "We have to get out of here."

"That won't be so easy," Priest said. Her voice sounded like wind blown through torn sheets. Riley wondered how she was still standing. "We have company."

The sound of fire was coming down the stairs, and Riley knew it was only a matter of time before the garage was ablaze. But her main concerns were the dark gremlins lining the exterior walls. They were bunched together near every exit. "Shit," Riley said. She doubted the holy water trick would work again, let alone whether she would be able to pull it on all of them. "They won't let us pass just because their boss is dead, will they?"

"No. The one who kills you will become the new leader."

Riley looked at the fire truck and said, "Think God is getting sick of saving my ass?"

"What are you thinking?"

"The ghost truck had water. Maybe it'll drive."

"Not a chance in hell."

Riley shrugged and ran to the driver's side. The demons, wary of a distraction meant to draw them from the doors, stayed put and watched. Priest climbed into the truck, keeping her feet away from whatever was flowing on the floor, and Riley gently transferred Gillian to her arms. She pulled herself up and gripped the ignition. "If you have any pull with the guy upstairs, I suggest you use it now."

"I'm calling in every favor I've ever had right now."

Riley closed her eyes, turned the keys, and felt her heart stop.

The engine roared to life.

Riley yanked the door closed as the demons realized her plan. They surged toward the fire truck as Riley slammed her foot down on the gas. The fire truck lurched forward and Priest said, "Wait, Riley, slow down, where did —"

The truck crashed through the ancient garage door, splintering it around the truck's block face. A moment later, it slammed into Riley's car and demolished the passenger side.

"Where did you park," Priest muttered.

"Whoops," Riley said. The storm that was brewing when they first arrived pelted the truck with fat, quarter-sized drops of rain. She swung the wheel around, taking them out onto the main street. "We got any hitchhikers?"

Priest looked in the long, thin side mirror and then leaned out the window to look back with her own eyes. "No, no one." She reached over and clicked the windshield wipers on and off to clear the windshield, but nothing happened. She shook her head and said, "Looks like we used up all of our prayers."

"You better hope we haven't," Riley said. She looked down at Gillian, her head lying in Priest's lap, and tried to ignore

how lifeless she looked. She bit the inside of her cheek and stood on the gas pedal, driving the ancient fire truck through the streets of No Man's Land as the rain pounded down all around them.

## Epilogue

Riley helped Priest down the aisle, Priest's arm tight around her shoulder. She felt as if she weighed ten pounds, nothing but skin and bone under her clothes. Riley walked her to one of the back aisles and sat her down, kneeling next to her to make sure she was going to stay upright. "We should have brought you here first."

"No. Gillian needed the hospital worse." She licked her lips and swallowed. "I'll be fine. You go be with her."

Riley said, "The Duchess...?"

Priest shook her head.

"Exorcised?"

"No," Priest said with a quiet chuckle. "That would have been easy. But there was no guarantee it would have stuck. I had to make sure the Duchess really left and wasn't just... pretending."

Riley nodded. "So Gillian is Gillian."

"Yes." She sighed and tried to lie down in the pew.

Riley winced at the way Priest moved, her body twitching now and then with some new pain. She waited until Priest was lying down and said, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Pray."

“Yeah,” Riley said.

She stood up, and Priest said, “Riley... this was a battle. A small battle. We killed three out of thirty, and Marchosias is still out there somewhere. We only won a battle. The war hasn’t even started yet.”

“I know,” Riley said.

“I’m just telling you. You should be prepared.”

“For what?”

Priest looked away and closed her eyes. “Casualties.”

Riley winced and looked away, focusing on the altar at the front of the church. When she looked back down, Priest appeared to be asleep. She slipped out of the pew and walked down the aisle toward the doors. She hated leaving Priest there, but she couldn’t bear to be away from Gillian longer than necessary. The doctors were competent, and she was sure they were doing everything they could, but she felt that if she wasn’t physically at Gillian’s side, then something terrible was going to happen. As bad as she felt leaving Priest on her own, she couldn’t be in two places at once.

At the front of the sanctuary, Riley paused next to the holy water font. She stepped over to it and thought of Alistair’s anguish as he died. She thought of Gillian’s pain, and the death they had planned for her and Priest. Maybe there was something to the stuff after all.

She dipped her fingers into the water and crossed herself. “Caitlin Priest.” She repeated the move. “Riley Parra.” And once more, this time pressing the fingers hard against her body. “Gillian Eleanor Hunt.”



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Riley didn't want the bed offered by a kind-hearted nurse. She didn't want coffee or dinner. She sat in the uncomfortable blue armchair next to Gillian's bed until dawn, then walked the halls just to clear her mind. She couldn't stop shaking. She couldn't stop worrying that Gillian's heart monitor would suddenly flatline, or that her eyes would open and she would speak in that horrible Duchess voice.

The doctors had no idea what had caused Gillian's comatose state; there was nothing physically wrong with her. For all they could tell, she was simply asleep. She just wasn't waking up. There was nothing they could do but monitor her condition.

Late on the second day of Riley's vigil, Lieutenant Hathaway arrived. She looked at Gillian and then nodded to Riley and said, "As long as you need, Detective."

After three days, Riley was physically weak. She refused to sleep, although she did doze with her head resting on Gillian's chest. She wanted to be close in case Gillian woke up. She finally relented and let the nurses bring her food, but she ended up only picking at the meals. On the fourth day, it started to rain. Riley went to the window and pressed her forehead against the cold glass. The rain cascaded down the other side of the window and she closed her eyes, hoping the rain would wash away all the crap in No Man's Land. Just clean everything up and wash it down to the river.

Her eyes were closed, her lips moving soundlessly through a prayer, when she heard something moving behind her. She turned and saw Gillian shifting under the blankets, her hand

coming up to touch her forehead. She murmured, "Riley, have you showered yet? You have to go to work."

Riley moved to the bed and took Gillian's hands. "Hey. Hey, baby. Nice to see you awake."

Gillian looked around the room and seemed to realize where she was. "How long was I away?"

"A couple of days." She kissed Gillian's knuckles.

Gillian shook her head. "I meant... how long was I... h-her?"

Riley said, "No more than an hour or two."

Gillian closed her eyes and then squeezed them shut tighter. "I keep hearing her in my head. Awful things she said, and showed me... trying to make me shut down."

"She's gone now. Priest saved you."

"I remember. She is so beautiful, Riley."

Riley smiled.

Gillian's smile faded. "Is she dead?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." She brushed Gillian's hair and said, "I'm going to be here every night until they let you go home. Then I'll take some time off, wait on you hand and foot at home. We're going to get through this together."

Gillian brushed Riley's palm with her thumb. "I know you want that. But I also know it's not possible. So I'm going to stay with my mother for a few days."

"Your mother... in Georgia?"

"Yeah. I have to get away from this city, Riley. They're going to keep coming after me just to get to you. I'm not strong like you. I can't deal with all of this."

"I'll leave with you, Jill."

Gillian rolled her head against the pillow and said, "Riley, I know I was pushing for that. And I love that you're willing, but it's not possible. So just listen to what I have to say, and accept it. All right? For some reason, you've been chosen. You're going to bring this city back from the brink. And I know I should be there to help you, but I can't. I'm an anchor. I'm your weakness. You'll never do what you need to do if you're worried about me."

"This city doesn't mean jack to me if you're not here," Riley said. "You're the only reason I give a damn."

Gillian touched Riley's cheek and said, "No. It's not. There's something special about you, Riley. It's why you were chosen. You need to stay here. And I need to go."

Riley pressed Gillian's hand against her forehead and let out a strangled sob.

Gillian put her hand on top of Riley's head and shushed her. "It's okay, Riley. It's not forever. I'll be back."

"Promise?"

"I swear," Gillian said.

The door opened and Riley heard the squeak of a nurse's shoes. Gillian said, "Could we have a moment, please?" The door closed again, and Riley turned Gillian's hand over. She kissed the palm, and then the tip of each finger.

"Do what you have to do," Riley said, barely keeping her voice steady.

Gillian nodded. "Same to you, Riley."

Riley put her head back down, this time on Gillian's stomach, and closed her eyes. Gillian stroked Riley's hair and turned her head, watching the rain streak down the windows.

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