



# THE MARTYR

+ Geonn Cannon +

# THE MARTYR

Copyright © 2009, Geonn Cannon.  
All rights reserved.

Cover Art © 2009, eirian.  
<http://eirian.net>

Published by Geonn Cannon under the following Creative Commons license:



Redistribution and use of this work in source and binary forms, with or without modification, are permitted provided that the following conditions are met:

- Redistributions of source code must retain the above copyright notice, this list of conditions and the following disclaimer.
- Redistributions in binary form must reproduce the above copyright notice, this list of conditions and the following disclaimer in the documentation and/or other materials provided with the distribution.
- Neither the title *The Martyr* nor the name of Geonn Cannon may be used to endorse or promote products derived from this work without specific prior written permission.

THIS WORK IS PROVIDED BY THE COPYRIGHT HOLDERS AND CONTRIBUTORS "AS IS" AND ANY EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTIES, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, THE IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY AND FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE ARE DISCLAIMED. IN NO EVENT SHALL THE COPYRIGHT OWNER OR CONTRIBUTORS BE LIABLE FOR ANY DIRECT, INDIRECT, INCIDENTAL, SPECIAL, EXEMPLARY, OR CONSEQUENTIAL DAMAGES (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, PROCUREMENT OF SUBSTITUTE GOODS OR SERVICES; LOSS OF USE, DATA, OR PROFITS; OR BUSINESS INTERRUPTION) HOWEVER CAUSED AND ON ANY THEORY OF LIABILITY, WHETHER IN CONTRACT, STRICT LIABILITY, OR TORT (INCLUDING NEGLIGENCE OR OTHERWISE) ARISING IN ANY WAY OUT OF THE USE OF THIS SOFTWARE, EVEN IF ADVISED OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

Because the keys to the Kingdom got lost inside the Kingdom  
And the angels fly around in there, but we can't see them  
I got a girl in the war, Paul, I know that they can hear me yell  
If they can't find a way to help her, they can go to Hell  
If they can't find a way to help her, they can go to Hell.

— Josh Ritter, *Girl in the War*



## One

Kenzie woke at twenty-nine minutes past five in the morning, same as always. The only difference was that, this night, she had hardly slept since putting her head to the pillow. Three of the four hours she spent in bed were spent staring at the water stain on the ceiling that was shaped like France. When her watch alarm finally chirped to signal the start of morning, she pulled it off the nightstand and silenced it immediately.

As she slipped the watch onto her left wrist, her fingers brushed the slip of curved metal that was already there. She ran the tip of her index finger over the engraved words, closing her eyes as she pictured a face for each name. "Miss you guys," she said, pushing herself up and putting her feet on the floor. Her dog tags swung back into their proper place as she sat up, dangling between her breasts.

After a long moment, she got up and found her tangled tank top. She pulled it on and tugged the dog tags out so they rested against the fabric. She moved to the window, braced her hands against the frame, and looked out at the alley. A few laundry lines stretched between her building and the next, clothes waving in the pre-dawn breeze like flags of surrender. She could smell the stink of garbage on the waterfront, sewage making its way to a larger body of water. Below her, something caromed off a garbage can with a metallic echo and

stumbled on. Either a drunk or a large stray dog. Whichever, she didn't care to find out.

Kenzie was eager to leave, to start the day, but routine demanded to be followed. Besides, the odds of doing what needed to be done were slim at such an early hour. So she dropped to the floor and did a set of fifty push-ups. She rolled onto her back and did one hundred sit-ups. When she finished, she did the reverse; one hundred push-ups and fifty sit-ups. Muscles burning, body fully awake, she went into the bathroom and took a quick shower. She didn't mind the crappy old building's pipes taking ten minutes to heat the water. She liked the cold.

She cupped her hands under the spray and dumped it over her head. Her hair was short, the color of oak, and a wing of it fell loose over her right eye. She pushed it out of the way, flattening it to her skull, and finished bathing a few minutes after the water finally got hot.

She dressed in a pair of jeans and a loose silk blouse over the tank top, leaving the blouse unbuttoned. She tucked a gun in the back of her belt, making sure the tail of her blouse covered it. Her black boots were by the door, and she put them on as she left the apartment. She hid her eyes behind a pair of aviator sunglasses, a memento of her time overseas.

Her hair fell over the right side of her face again as she left the apartment and headed downstairs. A few people were in the lobby, the indigent population preparing to give control of the day over to those more fortunate, packing away their meager possessions and disappearing into the shadows of the early morning.

The day was already humid when she left the building, promising more rain in the future. The general store on the corner was just opening for business, and a street sweeper

lumbered slowly down the street toward her. Washing away the night to make a new day. She bought an apple from the general store and watched as the sweeper moved past her. She tossed the apple core into the trash and started off down the street. The elevated tracks above her rattled and hummed with the passage of a sleek silver train, but she preferred walking to riding. She put her hands in her pockets and watched the people moving around her.

People in wrinkled suits leaving buildings, checking their watches as they headed for cars or bus stops.

Other people wearing everything they owned as they shuffled between buildings and found a place to keep out of sight while the sun was out. Real-life vampires, shunning daylight and human contact for own survival. If they allowed themselves to be seen, they would be run off. Better to just hide.

Kenzie was surprised how much larger No Man's Land had grown since her last visit. Storefronts she remembered as laundromats and barber shops were empty husks, hiding behind dirty windows and lowered blinds. More than a few buildings looked like they had been burned and then left to fall, waiting for a strong wind gust to finish the job the flames started. Stacks of black garbage bags stood on the sidewalk, forming stinking mountains, and she stepped into the street to avoid them.

She reached her destination before she knew it and stopped to get the lay of the land. She leaned against the wall of a building cater-cornered to the police station, watching as cops streamed in and out of the front doors. Plywood had been put up in place of the glass, and she idly wondered if the police station had become part of No Man's Land, or if there had been some kind of incident.



The street was lined on both sides by shining police cars, marked and unmarked. As she watched, about half of them were taken out by uniformed officers. At a quarter past seven, a faded yellow Chevy Nova drove past her and pulled into an available spot in front of the station. She recognized the profile of the driver and pushed away from the brick wall. She rolled her shoulders and took off her sunglasses, hooking one earpiece in the scoop neck of her tank top. She waited for an ancient yellow Checker taxi to pass before she started across the street.

Riley Parra got out of the Nova, and a woman with short blonde hair got out of the passenger side. Riley slammed the car door, checked the handle to make sure it was locked, and tucked the keys into her pocket as she stepped onto the sidewalk. "It could use some work."

"Yes," the blonde woman said.

Kenzie was coming up from behind them, moving quickly, but not fast enough to attract attention of the cops swarming all around them. She waited until she was right behind them before she pulled the gun from the small of her back, and pressed the barrel into the small of Riley's back. "Your money or —"

She was cut off by a strong arm wrapping around hers and twisting. Kenzie didn't even have time to cry out in shock as someone used an amazing amount of strength to lift her feet off the sidewalk. Kenzie was airborne for a half-second, and then slammed into the sidewalk with the force of being hit by a Humvee. All the air rushed out of her lungs, every bone in her body vibrated, and her eyes bugged out as she tried to make sense of what had happened.

Her gun was yanked from her hand and she felt the cold barrel press against the bare skin above her tank top.

Riley's face appeared in her field of vision, the corners of her lips forced down to keep a smile from intruding. She held out her hand and said, "Bad joke, Kenzie. Let her up, Priest."

The weight of the gun vanished, and Kenzie let out the breath she was holding. She clasped her hand to Riley's forearm and pulled herself back to her feet. She brushed off the seat of her pants and eyed Priest. The woman was deceptively lithe, slender and boyish. She wore a white blouse, unbuttoned at the collar, and a gray vest. She was still eyeing Kenzie warily. Kenzie nodded to her and said, "Well, Rye, I guess I don't have to worry about your new partner being a lightweight."

"New partner...?" Priest said.

Riley said, "Caitlin Priest, I would like you to meet Mackenzie Crowe."

"Major Mackenzie Crowe, actually," Kenzie said. She extended her hand. After a moment, Priest took it and squeezed. "You have some nice moves, Katie."

"It's Priest."

"I'm going to call you Katie."

Priest pressed her lips together.

Riley said, "You picked a really bad time to pull that joke, Kenzie."

Kenzie looked at the front doors of the station and realized what might have broken the glass. "Ah, shit, Rye. I didn't..."

Riley shook off the apology. "When did you get back?"

"Yesterday. I'm not sure I'm back for good yet." She sighed. "Truth is, I'm here because I need your help, Riley."

Riley nodded, looked at Priest, and checked her watch. "We got some time. Let's grab some breakfast."

The closest diner was a dive called Coach's. Priest returned Kenzie's gun as they walked there, mumbling an apology for her reaction. "Don't worry about it," Kenzie said as she tucked the weapon back into her belt. "Given the circumstances, I would have been upset if you let me get any further than I did."

"As long as you know how to use that thing," Priest said.

"Six years as a cop, twelve years in the army. I think I got a handle on it."

She smirked and led the way into the diner. The counter stood against the back wall, with booths built into the front of it so the short-order cook could deliver the food directly to the customers. Riley guided them toward a table at the far end of the room, well away from the cloud of smoke and spatter of grease coming from the so-called kitchen. She pulled out a chair and sat facing the door.

Kenzie sat with her back to the window. "It's good to see you again, Rye. It's been way too long."

Riley smiled. "What brought you back?"

Kenzie's smile faded and she looked down at the tabletop. "Bad news, I'm afraid." She glanced at Priest and said, "Maybe she shouldn't hear this."

"Anything you say to me, you can say to her," Riley said.

"It's not that I don't trust you, Katie. It's just that I don't want to get you in trouble."

Priest looked ready to leave, but Riley shook her head and put a hand up to keep Priest in the booth. "She stays."

Kenzie shrugged. "Your call." She sighed and leaned back in her chair. "First, a little background. Let's do a hypothetical. Let's say that you walk into a room, and you see me standing over a dead body with a smoking gun. What would you do?"

"This is totally hypothetical, right?"

"Yes."

Riley said, "I would arrest you and investigate until I was satisfied about what happened. One way or another."

Kenzie nodded. "Good enough for me." She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. "I got a call from a soldier from my platoon, guy called Coltrane. He said he was in trouble, afraid for his life, panicked. He wanted to meet me, but he didn't know where would be safe. So I told him to come to the city and I would meet him here. I showed up early last night, found his hotel room. He was dead. Shot twice in the chest."

"Did you report it?"

"I'm doing it now."

Riley rolled her eyes. "Okay. Was someone standing over his body with a gun?"

"No," Kenzie said. She tapped her fingernail against the table's surface and exhaled sharply. "Coltrane is the third guy from my platoon to die in the past six months. I didn't think about it when I asked him to meet me here, because two doesn't make a pattern. But three..." She shook her head. "I mean, the first one, we were sure it was suicide. The other was just an accident. Or so we thought. Now that Coltrane is dead, I'm not sure what to think."

"You think someone is out to get your people?" Priest said.

"Maybe, Katie. But what I do know is that three of my guys have died since coming back. And all three times, the same soldier was nearby. He was in New York for Charlie, he was the last one to see Marks before he committed suicide...and he lives here now."

Riley nodded. "Okay. We'll round him up and ask him some questions. But first you need to make an official report."

"No."

"Kenzie..."

"No, Rye. I don't want this on the books until I'm absolutely sure."

Riley said, "The guy who was in all three places. He's special to you, isn't he?"

"Damned special," Kenzie said. "He saved my life."

## T W O

“We were patrolling the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the ten-thousandth time we had been over the same rocks and sand. Mountains and caves, all of it exactly the same but different. Because we knew there were Taliban in the hills, we knew insurgents were tracking us in their crosshairs. A lot of times, we only survived because they didn’t feel like wasting the ammo. But one day, I don’t know. Maybe they were pissed off, maybe they were trying to get revenge for some slight or another. We gave candy to the children of the neighboring village and not to theirs. Whatever.

“The Humvee in front of us went up like a firecracker, and then they opened fire. We weren’t even sure where it was coming from at first. We got out and took cover, and Coltrane spotted the Taliban fighters on a ridge about a hundred yards up. I laid down cover fire for my guys while they outflanked the insurgents. One of my guys, Radio, checked on the other Humvee, but there weren’t any survivors. He’s a black guy, but he was pale as a ghost when he came back to report. When I finally got a look at what he’d seen, I don’t...” She pressed her lips together, swallowed hard, and shook her head.

“I wanted to get better cover, and I went around to the back of the truck. I just wanted a better position. Next thing I knew, Radio had slammed into me and knocked me down. I thought he snapped. Seeing what he did, I just thought...but he pointed to the spot I had been five seconds from kneeling

down on. There was an IED buried in the sand. I don't have a clue how we missed it with the truck tire, but I was about to trigger the thing with my knee."

Riley stared at the empty table in front of her, wishing she had ordered a coffee or water or something to occupy her hands. She signaled to the cook, mimed drinking and held up three fingers. He nodded and went to the cooler.

"Radio is the guy who lives here now, right?" Riley said.

"Yeah. He didn't have any family, nowhere to go. When they let us come home, he asked me for suggestions of a good place to settle down. I told him this was the only place I called home. I got a postcard from him a while back. He thanked me for making the recommendation and said it was great here. He really liked it."

"Where were you?"

"Virginia."

Riley leaned back and said, "They let you, Radio, Coltrane... all of you came back at the same time, and you went to Virginia?"

Kenzie nodded. The cook brought over their water and Kenzie took a long drink.

When they were alone again, Riley said, "Walter Reed." Kenzie touched her top lip with her tongue and, after a moment, nodded again. Riley looked over Kenzie's body and didn't see anything amiss. "Where?"

"Coltrane got shrapnel in the thigh. They took most of it out, but it was still going to be hell at airport security. Most of the other guys got shrapnel in the back, sides. Charlie lost his leg."

"Where?" Riley asked again.

Kenzie reached up and pushed her hair away to reveal the right side of her face. A line of scar tissue ran from her hairline down to the curve of her jaw, her ear a mangled mess. She let the hair fall, covering the damage. She swallowed hard and said, "I was in the burn ward when I told Radio about living here."

"How bad was it?"

"Not too bad. Just my face and a little bit of my shoulder. Radio blocked a lot of it." She drank the last of her water, working her top lip with her bottom teeth. She put the bottle back on the table and said, "His entire back. Shoulder to hip, some of his legs and ass."

"The IED you were about to kneel on."

"It went off a few seconds after Radio saved me. Because of where we ended up when he tackled me, he got the majority of the blast." She tapped her fingernail on the table again and said, "Three of my people died after they came home, and Radio was there every single time. Dropping by for a visit, or responding to a call for help. He took a bomb meant for me, Riley. I'm not giving him the benefit of the doubt, I'm giving him all the doubt I can spare. If he did it, I don't want him to get off. I just want to be absolutely certain that he won't get railroaded."

Riley glanced at Priest. "I'm not sure what you expect from me."

"I'll report Coltrane's murder, and I need you to request the case. Once you're on the case, I can relax. Whatever you decide. I trust your judgment."

Riley took a moment to think about it. She pictured herself in Kenzie's position, desperate to give the man who saved her life a fair trial. Kenzie wasn't really asking her to do anything



she wouldn't have done anyway. She nodded and said, "Okay. I'll see what I can do."

Kenzie walked them back to the police station and sighed as they entered the frigid air of the lobby. "You don't appreciate air conditioning like this until you're in Afghanistan in July in full gear." She grinned and looked toward the sergeant's desk. "Guess this is where civilians do their civic duty."

"If you can get in," Riley said. Groups of people filled the blue plastic chairs, waiting for someone to take their statement. More likely, the cops were waiting for the people to give up and go home. Less paperwork that way.

Kenzie said, "I'll keep in touch while I'm in town." She wrote down her cell phone number and the address of her hotel. "Same goes for you."

Riley looked at the address and raised an eyebrow. "No Man's Land? Brave."

"Broke," Kenzie said. "It's the only place I could afford for any length of time. It's not so bad. I like it there."

Riley nodded and, after considering it for a moment, stepped forward to embrace Kenzie. "I'm glad you're okay. Take care of yourself. I'll come by after I get off tonight and fill you in."

"Thanks, Rye." She turned to Priest and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Katie."

Priest looked at Kenzie's offered hand and finally took it. "It's Priest."

"No, it's not." She winked and backed away from them. "I appreciate this, Rye. I owe you."

“Big time,” Riley said.

Riley watched Kenzie go into the sea of chairs, speak to the desk sergeant, and then take her seat amid the “civilians.” She tapped Priest’s arm and gestured to the stairs. “C’mon. We’re going to be late.”

“How do you know that woman?”

“You heard her. Six years as a police officer. She was my partner back when I was in uniform.”

Priest fumed. “I don’t like being called Katie.”

“You think I like being called ‘Rye’? It’s one of Kenzie’s things. Don’t let it get to you. She picks a nickname for you, and that becomes her...call sign for you. If I see something addressed to Rye, I know who sent it. If you hear someone calling for Katie, you know who wants you.” She glanced back to see Priest was still irritated. “I didn’t say it wasn’t annoying. You get used to it.”

When they reached the office, Riley barely made it halfway to her desk before someone called their names from across the room. “Detectives Parra and Priest, I presume?” Riley looked up and saw an Asian woman standing near the open door of Interrogation Room One. She had bad memories of that room. She nodded, and the woman waved them over. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Riley used the time it took to cross the room to examine the woman. She was tall and slender, with long black hair. She wore a green turtleneck and a gray skirt, her badge hooked on the belt. She stepped to one side and allowed Priest and Riley to enter the interrogation room ahead of her. The table in the middle of the room had been moved to the back wall and was covered with various files and stacks of paperwork. A phone

and a laptop stood on the far end of the desk, wires from both running out of the room to some distant jack.

Riley walked in and turned to face the woman as she shut the door. "What is this? IA?"

"Why? Does Internal Affairs have some beef with you I should know about?"

"Depends on who the hell you are."

"Lieutenant Zoe Briggs. I'm your new boss. Interim new boss, actually." She smiled as she leaned against the table. "You missed orientation, so I'll give you the bullet points. I've been a cop for a long time, and I've been in charge of cops for about half of that time. I'm very good at what I do. Your precinct has been doing well in terms of crime rate, and I don't see any reason to change things just because I'm in charge now. If it's not broken, why fix it. Like I said earlier, I'm just your interim lieutenant, but I hope to make it permanent. I like it here. I'll like it even better when my office is habitable again."

She looked at Riley, hinting that she knew whose fault it was that Lieutenant Hathaway's office had been destroyed.

"I look forward to working with both of you. You can go." Priest opened the door and was halfway out before Briggs said, "Parra. Stay a moment."

Priest looked at Riley, who nodded that it was okay. Priest left the room, and Riley closed the door behind her.

"I've been reading some of Lieutenant Hathaway's notes about you, Detective. Seems you and she had a...special relationship."

Riley didn't want to comment on that, so she remained stoic.

"She let you get away with a lot of things. Off-the-books investigations, going off the reservation without letting anybody know where you were going... You spent a lot of time outside of the station doing God knows what with God knows who, and Lieutenant Hathaway let it slide because you got results. But where I come from, that raises all kinds of red flags. I see a secretive cop who disappears for entire shifts, and I think corruption. Do you understand where I'm coming from, Detective?"

"I do, ma'am."

"I don't want to imply you're corrupt. Your record speaks for itself. I just want to know I don't have anything to worry about when it comes to your police work."

"You don't have anything to worry about."

Briggs smiled. "Great to hear it. Thank you for putting my mind to ease, Detective Parra. You may go now."

Riley nodded and left the temporary office, shutting the door behind her. She sagged against the wall and cursed silently. New boss, new rules. No more running after Marchosias and his cronies during work hours. Fine. She could make that work. But the real panic came from Briggs hinting Riley might be crooked.

With everything that had happened since, Riley had forgotten what led to the "interlude" in Hathaway's office after Sweet Kara's death. Somewhere in Lieutenant Hathaway's office was a letter, fictional but believable, detailing Riley's criminal activities. Riley sexually serviced her boss to keep that letter out of the public eye, but she didn't know what happened to it after that. Had she destroyed it? Or was it sitting in the ruins of Hathaway's office waiting to be found? She bumped the back of her head against the wall a couple of

times before she pushed forward and crossed the bullpen to her desk.

“Everything all right?” Priest asked.

Riley said, “New world order. No off the books investigations, no special favors, no wiggle room.”

“What does that mean?”

Riley nodded for Priest to follow her. “It means we have to stop Kenzie from reporting what she saw last night. We’re going to do this quietly, on our own.”

“Briggs won’t be happy about that.”

Riley looked toward Hathaway’s office. The door was crossed with yellow crime scene tape, locked off until someone could get in to clear out the water- and fire-damaged furniture. Somewhere in that office was a piece of paper that could end her. “I’m going to do what I can, while I can. There’s a chance I won’t be a cop too much longer anyway.”

## Three

They made it downstairs before the desk sergeant decided to pay attention to Kenzie. Riley pulled her from the waiting area and escorted her outside. Kenzie put on her sunglasses and said, "What's up? They decide murder wasn't a crime anymore?"

"No," Riley said. "There's a new sheriff in town. I couldn't guarantee we would be the ones investigating it. Your friend deserves better than that."

"Thank you, Rye. I appreciate that."

Riley shook her head. "Don't worry about it." They headed to Riley's Nova, a piece of crap she had picked up at the police auction. It had the benefit of being too decrepit to worry about anyone trying to steal it, but it was a bit of an eyesore. She unlocked the driver's side and said, "Priest, I need you to run interference for me. I don't care what case you follow up on, just make sure it's official. I need plausible deniability."

"I'll do what I can," Priest said, eyeing Kenzie. "But are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"We'll be fine," Riley said. "Keep in touch."

Priest nodded. "Okay. Be safe, Riley."

Riley got into the car and leaned across the seat to unlock Kenzie's door. Kenzie slid into the seat and settled against the fabric, twisting to look in the backseat. "Nice car."

"Thanks."

"I like your partner, too. She's a doll."

"Yeah," Riley said. "A real angel." She smirked and then laughed when she caught Kenzie's confused expression. "Sorry. Inside joke. What do you know about Radio? Any idea where he lives?"

"I have an idea, yeah," Kenzie said. "But I think we'll need to do a bit of planning before we go to find him."

"I don't like the sound of that," Riley said. "All right. We'll head to your hotel to come up with a plan." She started the car, turning the engine over on the second try, and pulled away from the curb.

Kenzie looked around the car and shook her head. "Seriously, Rye..."

"It's temporary. My other car was...there was an incident."

"Towed?"

"Hit by a fire truck."

Kenzie raised her eyebrows.

"It's okay. I was driving the fire truck at the time."

Kenzie laughed. "Okay. I definitely made the wrong choice joining the army."

"I tried telling you that twelve years ago."

"Just drive, Rye." Kenzie chuckled and made a show of fastening her seatbelt as Riley took a corner. Riley smirked

and remembered their first night as partners, patrolling the streets of No Man's Land like sentries. Kenzie was Riley's second partner, following the death of Donald Rafferty. Kenzie understood the pain of losing a partner and gave Riley time to warm up to the fact of riding with someone new.

After a week or so of moping, Kenzie slapped Riley on the side of the head and said, "I know he meant a lot to you, and I know you miss him. But there's nothing you could have done. You weren't there, you couldn't have been there. Right now, there's someone else relying on you to have their back. Namely, me. I want to know I can trust you when we're on a call."

Riley promised she would get her head in the game and, after that, she had. Before long, she and Kenzie were simpatico. They developed their own form of shorthand, learned each other's way of thinking so they could anticipate. They were the best pair of uniformed cops on the streets.

Until Kenzie's father was died. A career soldier, he was slowly killed by cancer eating away at him until he withered to nothing. Kenzie made him a promise before he died, and Riley assured her that she supported her decision. Kenzie turned in her badge the next day and joined the army. Riley, in turn, began preparing to take the detective's exam. If she couldn't ride with Kenzie, she didn't want to patrol at all.

More than a decade later, Detective First-Grade Riley Parra and Major Mackenzie Crowe parked in front of the Gold Hotel.

Riley got out of the car and looked up at the building. It seemed to lean slightly to the right, like a drunk trying to lean on the guy next to him to keep from falling on the floor. Riley pocketed her keys and said, "Nice place. Maybe when a rat family moves out, I'll see if I can get a room."



“The rats don’t mind sharing.”

Kenzie led the way upstairs, turning at the waist as they reached the first floor landing. “Don’t lean on the railing. Or touch it. Or look at it weird.”

Riley moved closer to the wall and followed Kenzie up to the third floor. Someone was shouting in one of the rooms, and Riley heard daytime TV blasting in another room to drown out the sounds of the argument. Kenzie unlocked her hotel room door and said, “Home sweet home.” She went inside and Riley followed, closing the door behind her.

Kenzie put her hands on Riley’s waist, spun her, and pinned her against the wall. Riley barely managed to say Kenzie’s name before her lips were caught in a kiss, her shirt quickly being tugged from her pants. She twisted her head to break the kiss and said, “Kenzie...”

“Riley... God, I’ve missed you,” Kenzie said, forcing Riley’s head back so she could kiss her again. Riley squirmed against the wall, willing her body to shut down before it got the wrong idea. It had been a while, and she was in danger of making a very stupid mistake. Kenzie broke the kiss and said, “Get your pants off.”

“Kenzie, stop. Wait. I’m with someone.”

Kenzie froze, her hands on the buttons of Riley’s shirt. Her hair hung down in her eyes, and she tried to catch her breath and process what Riley said at the same time. “What?”

“I’m dating somebody.”

Kenzie backed away, but kept her hands on Riley’s shirt. “Shit. I didn’t...when you said we could come back to my hotel room, I thought you were...” She finally dropped her hands. “God, I’m sorry, Riley.”

"It's all right," Riley said. "I'm not saying I didn't enjoy it."

Kenzie chuckled and cleared her throat. "Uh. This is a little awkward now."

Riley shook her head. "No. It's not. Come on, Kenzie, it's us."

"Yeah? No harm, no foul?"

"Right."

Kenzie nodded and gestured for Riley to go on into the room. The space was divided into a bedroom and a kitchen, the chairs flanking a card table under the window standing in as a living room. Riley went to one of the chairs and sat down while Kenzie put her gun back on the nightstand. She sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on her knees with her hands clasped together between them. "Okay, back to business. The murder."

"Yeah," Riley said.

Kenzie pressed her lips together, then raised her eyebrows. "It's not Katie, is it? I mean, she's nice and all, but if you're dating that stick in the mud..."

Riley laughed out loud. "God, no. No. I am not dating Priest. It's...her name is Gillian."

Kenzie smiled. "Pretty name."

"Yeah."

"Is it serious?"

"It's...complicated."

"Is she into threesomes? I have a cell phone. We could call her..."

Riley chuckled. "Kenzie. Please. Focus."

Kenzie stood up and stuck her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "I've been going over and over it in my head. I'm trying to picture Radio doing it. The picture just doesn't come together in the end. I mean, it's like trying to picture the Pope wrestling an ostrich."

Riley blinked. "It's *that* unlikely? The man was a soldier, Kenzie."

"Not all soldiers are killing machines, Riley."

"I didn't mean that. I just meant that things he saw over there...he may not be the guy you remember. He might not be completely there." She tapped the side of her head.

Kenzie paused in her pacing. Not much, but just enough for Riley to notice.

"What?"

"Radio...was odd." Riley stayed quiet, waiting for Kenzie to elaborate. She finally sighed and sat in the chair opposite Riley. "We called him Radio because he chose to communicate through song titles. He could speak normally. We heard him all the time, on the sat phone and talking to commanding officers, he was erudite and clear. It was just a game to him."

"What do you mean he communicated through song titles?"

"Ask me some questions."

Riley frowned and said, "Okay. What did you have for breakfast?"

"Brown Sugar."

Riley smirked. "Did you have eggs with that?"

"A Taste of Honey."

“How was that?”

Kenzie shrugged. “Getting Better.”

Riley said, “He would have entire conversations like that?”

“Always.”

“Stop it.”

Kenzie held out her hands. “I’m Sorry.”

Riley reached down and put her hand on the butt of her gun.

Kenzie said, “All right, I think I’ve made my point. And he was a lot better than me. He could have entire conversations with someone. Country, blues, classic rock, modern music, it didn’t matter. We had people writing down a lot of what he said, so we could check they were actual songs. He never slipped up once. After the attack, he did it non-stop. I don’t know if it was because of what he saw, or the injuries... whatever it was, he wouldn’t speak normally. If he couldn’t come up with a title, he just kept quiet until whoever he was talking to rephrased the question.”

“Guy like that shouldn’t be hard to find.”

“Well. I know where we can find him, but I don’t know exactly where he is.”

“That doesn’t make much sense, Kenzie. Either you know where he is, or you don’t.”

Kenzie looked at the window and tapped the heel of her shoe against the floor. In the silence, Riley heard sobbing from next door; the fight’s inevitable conclusion. Finally, Kenzie said, “I didn’t want to tell you this until it was too late for you to back out.”

"We're there," Riley said. "I'm out on a limb here. We need to find Radio as soon as possible so we can question him about this whole mess. Spill it."

Kenzie exhaled and said, "He's Underground."

Riley closed her eyes and covered her face with both hands. "Of course he is."

"That's another reason I came to you. I knew I was going to have to go down there eventually. I don't want to go alone, and I don't want to go with someone I don't trust completely."

"The Underground," Riley muttered. She shook her head. "I knew from the moment you showed up that this wasn't going to be easy. I wish I'd realized it would be suicidal."

"There's nothing inherently dangerous about the Underground."

Riley barked a laugh. "You've been gone for over ten years, Kenzie. Things have changed. And not for the better. I haven't even thought of the Underground since I walked the patrol. For all I know, there are..." She nearly said demons, but caught herself at the last moment, "...there are entire gangs of criminals down there. It could be Mad Max down there and we wouldn't have any idea."

"Rye...please. I owe this guy. I would prefer to go down there with you, but I'll go alone if I have to."

Riley pushed herself out of the seat and muttered under her breath. If Marchosias and his demonic legions had control of No Man's Land, she could only imagine what kind of power they had down below. It would be like walking into the mouth of Hell and announcing her arrival with a bazooka. But as much as the thought terrified her, she couldn't imagine letting Kenzie take the risk on her own.

She turned and said, “All right. I’ll go with you.”

## F o u r

The Underground was not officially a part of the city. Nearly a hundred years earlier, a fire decimated several city blocks, creating entire neighborhoods of uninhabitable buildings. The city leaders decided to regrade the streets two stories higher and start rebuilding from the ground up. The project was massive, and took several years to complete. When it was finally finished, it created a large underground labyrinth of abandoned buildings. The Underground was originally meant to be sealed and forgotten about, but it quickly became a refuge for the homeless and criminal element.

On countless patrols, Riley and Kenzie had chased a suspect through alleys and down hidey-holes only to have them duck into an "Underground Entrance." They would call dispatch, who would tell them to throw in the towel. The higher-ups figured the Underground was too risky, and the criminal would probably never be seen again after venturing into the maze unprepared. A few reckless souls had tried to map the Underground, using antique land surveys and a minimal amount of spelunking, but the resultant guides were unreliable at worst and completely confusing at best.

*And I just promised to go down there,* Riley thought. She looked at Kenzie and said, "How certain are you that he's even down there?"

Kenzie went to the nightstand and took a postcard from the drawer. She handed it to Riley without saying anything,

letting her make up her own mind. The words on the postcard were close and small, written with a very steady hand. "Ground control to Major Tom. Diggin' up bones, here there and everywhere. Got to get you into my life. Let's spend the night together (you can't always get what you want). I'm under the boardwalk. Time is on my side. I can see clearly now, here in the real world. I'll be seeing you. Radio."

Riley looked up. "You can actually understand this?"

Kenzie nodded. "It took some education, but I can translate. He says he's going through the past, moving around, which tells me that he was visiting his fellow soldiers in New York and Chicago. He admits to being there. Then he says he wants to see me." She smiled. "He implies we should sleep together, but he knows that'll never happen. As for 'under the boardwalk,' where in this city would that describe?"

Riley gave her the point.

"Time is on my side means that he's not in any rush. That last part means he understands something. I think he's innocent of the murders, but he knows who is doing it."

"What about the first line?"

"Ground control to Major Tom?"

"That's not a song title. It's the first line of *Space Oddity*. Does he do that often?"

Kenzie nodded. "Now and again when he wants to refer to someone specific. I was *Ride, Captain, Ride* until I got my promotion. Usually he would just start letters with *Hello, It's Me*."

Riley tapped the postcard against her thigh and looked out the window. "It's going to be hell trying to question this guy. Even if we are able to find him down in the Underground."



"We'll find him. Most people in the Underground are hiding. They'll run from us. But Radio wants to be found. We go down there, we make the effort, and he'll find us. Trust me. You do still trust me, right, Riley?"

"Yeah," Riley said. "I just need a little time to psych myself up to going down there."

Kenzie nodded. "Take all the time you want. I was planning to head down closer to night. Seemed like a pretty nocturnal place last time I was here." She stood up and said, "You're welcome to hang out for a bit if you want. I'm just going to hop in the shower."

"I think I'll track down Priest. Try to keep from being fired."

"All right." Riley stood, and Kenzie moved to intercept her. "Listen, Riley. The whole...groping, kissing incident aside, it's really great to see you again. I've really missed you." She took Riley's hand and squeezed it. "Even if our reunion can't be quite as...horizontal as I was hoping, I'm really glad to just be with you again."

Riley leaned in and kissed Kenzie's cheek. "I don't have a lot of friends. I think you're it, in fact. And you were the first woman I slept with that I didn't want to kill after we broke up. Maybe we're just meant to be friends."

"Maybe," Kenzie said. She grunted and shook her head. "Such a frustrating thought."

"I'll see you tonight, Kenzie."

Kenzie released Riley's hands and headed for the bathroom. She paused in the doorway and said, "Hey, your partner, Katie..."

"I'll be here around five."

“Is she single? Is she gay?”

“Okay, five it is.”

“Come on, bitch, don’t hold out on me.”

“Nice seeing you, too, Kenzie.” Riley shut the hotel room door behind her and shook her head. The last image she needed in her head was Priest and Kenzie rolling around naked on a bed. She wondered if Priest would unfurl her wings when she came. Against her will, the image popped into her head fully formed. Riley’s laughter echoed up the stairs as she headed back to her car.

Their first time had been after a particularly nasty shift. An anonymous 911 caller reported a group of people going in and out of a supposedly abandoned warehouse at all hours. They got the call, and rolled up at a few minutes past three in the morning. Kenzie took the back door while Riley checked out the front. The building was supposed to have a security guard, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The first shots came from the back of the building, where Kenzie was. Riley pulled her gun and made a break for the front door. She burst through and found eight men, all armed, facing the opposite direction. Riley shouted her identification, and three of the men turned toward her with their weapons leveled. Riley opened fire, and the three went down. All three were hit in the leg, and the others scattered like cockroaches.

Riley used the radio to coordinate the back-up units, drawing a tight net around the warehouse before the guys could get away. Riley made sure the wounded shooters wouldn’t bleed to death, then handcuffed two of them together. It was the best she could do with one set of handcuffs. She thumbed her radio. “Kenzie, I need your cuffs.

I got three of the bastards down.” No answer, and Riley’s blood ran cold.

“Kenzie.” Riley didn’t bother telling the shooters to stay put; they were too busy focusing on the new holes in their legs. She went to the back door, which was standing open and revealed a wide concrete loading dock. A security light bathed the entire area in crisp, white light, like a spotlight on a stage.

Kenzie was lying in the center of the light, a black body shape that looked like spilled oil. Her arms were spread out to either side, her right leg bent at the knee.

“Mackenzie,” Riley gasped, her shoes making skittering noises on the concrete as she ran. She dropped to her knees and cradled Kenzie’s head in her lap, brushing the hair out of her face and looking for the wound. Kenzie’s eyes fluttered open, and she coughed weakly, scanning Riley’s face for answers. “What...”

Riley laughed and touched the front of Kenzie’s bulletproof vest. POLICE was written across the chest in white block letters, and the fourth letter had the circular butt of a bullet embedded in the center of it. Riley laughed again, shook her head, and said, “They shot you in the ‘I’.”

Kenzie looked down at herself, laughed, and groaned as the action caused her bruised chest to move. Riley, the thoughts of a flag-draped coffin erased from her mind, her partner alive and groaning in her arms, was too caught up to think of the potential damage. She bent her head and kissed Kenzie, long and hard, her heart soaring when Kenzie returned the kiss.

“Couldn’t help it,” Riley said when they finally parted.

“Wouldn’t want you to,” Kenzie said, her face flushed.

Riley kept the kiss in her mind as she replayed the entire confrontation with her superiors. They took her gun, standard procedure, and made her put her statement in writing. At seven in the morning, they were finally allowed to leave. Kenzie waited for Riley outside the station, dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, and said, "I'm not going to pussyfoot around, Riley. Come home with me. I'd really like to make love to you."

Riley was grateful that she wouldn't have to be the one to ask.

They decided to take it all the way, not content to leave it as an "adrenaline thing." Riley confessed she had wanted Kenzie for years, while Kenzie was willing to explore the idea of Riley being more than her work-partner. "The women I date," she explained, their bare legs twisted together under the blankets, "always use my job against me. The danger. The butch factor. Might be nice to throw that all out and just...be with each other."

Riley moved her hand down between Kenzie's legs and said, "Sounds good to me."

After that, they took every opportunity. The backseat of their squad car, sometimes a simple hand job in the front seat, sometimes a quickie in the on-call room. Kenzie admitted that one of the draws to becoming a cop was the uniform, so Riley wore it during sex whenever possible. It got to the point where simply putting on the uniform to go to work would turn her on.

When Kenzie handed in her badge, she went to Riley's apartment to tell her she wasn't quitting the relationship. But Riley was torn between loyalty to the force and loyalty to a woman she thought she loved. "That thing you said about women using your job against you. The women who used the

danger as a reason not to be with you. I don't want to be one of those women. But I think I am. I don't think I could handle knowing you were over there. In danger. I'm sorry, Kenzie."

Kenzie took the news well. She smiled, nodded, and called it a clean break. They would end their relationship the morning Kenzie shipped out to basic training. They spent the time between making love, giving each other good memories to last until they met again. When Riley woke the next morning, she expected Kenzie to be gone. But she was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching the sun rise through the window. Riley kissed her shoulder, pulled her close, and offered to drive her to the airport.

Riley sat in her Nova, the engine chugging even though she was parked at the curb. Groping with Kenzie in the hotel room brought back the memories of their time as a couple. It seemed like ages at the time, the longest relationship she had ever been in, but looking back it was barely more than a footnote. But it was one of the most influential relationships in her life, and she had just let it end. She let it slip through her fingers because it was kind of hard.

They had parted with a hug and a promise to keep in touch, and Riley watched Kenzie disappear through security. A few letters both ways, one or two risqué pictures that made it past the military's mail security, but they eventually fell out of touch. She tried to remember the last exchange, tried to remember the last thing they wrote to one another, but she drew a blank.

Riley refused to see parallels between her relationship with Kenzie and what she was currently going through with Gillian.

*So why are you sitting here staring at your cell phone trying to keep yourself from dialing her number?*

Riley opened the phone and dialed a number, listening to the metallic tone on the other end. After three rings, the call was answered.

“Hey, Priest,” she said, hating herself for surrendering. “Where are you?”

## Five

Riley pulled up at the address Priest gave her, and immediately spotted her partner sitting on a brick retaining wall that surrounded an outdoor diner. She parked along the curb and approached from behind, walking in Priest's blind spot. Regardless, as she approached, Priest held up a plastic bag with a sub sandwich and a bag of chips. Riley took it from her and took a seat on the wall next to her. "That's creepy."

Priest shrugged. "I'm your guardian angel, so I can sense you when you're nearby. I can feel your presence."

"I know. *That* is creepy."

Priest smiled.

"So what did we do today, in case the boss asks?" She opened the sandwich and saw it was her favorite. Some days it was good having her guardian angel as her partner.

"Canvassing. The Benedict murder."

Riley nodded. "Good choice."

Anthony Benedict was murdered in the city's one nice hotel, dropped from one of the higher floors to land in a bloody pile in the middle of the lobby. The lobby was an open-air pavilion, and people on every floor had a clear view of the man dropping like a stone. Canvassing would involve tracking down every single person who could have conceivably seen

the drop and asking if they saw anything else that might be of use.

Riley took a bite of her sandwich and said, "Listen, Priest. Thanks for filling in for me."

"No problem. Protecting you means more than just following you on suicide missions." She took a chip from her bag and chewed it slowly. "What's your take on the new boss?"

"I don't know. She's probably a good boss if you're willing to follow the rules."

"Some people just have unreasonable expectations."

"Tell me about it," Riley said. She watched as Priest ate another chip, and pointed at the half-eaten sub sandwich with her pinkie. "Do you need to eat?"

"This is basically a human body," Priest said. "Just with a bit different in the way it was put together. I need to eat just like anyone else."

"Huh. Good to know."

Priest chewed and stared across the courtyard. Riley remembered the place in its heyday, which only made seeing its present state of decline sadder. Weeds stuck up through the broken tile of the dining area, and a few of the umbrellas covering the tables were tattered and torn. A handful of people were eating their lunches there, businessmen and women from the surrounding buildings.

"So what is Kenzie asking of you?"

"She thinks Radio is in the Underground. She needs me to watch her back."

Priest tensed. "The Underground."



"I know," Riley said. "I'm not happy about it, either. It's dangerous as hell, we have no idea what's down there..."

"You're wrong," Priest said. "It is just as dangerous as Hell — actual Hell — and you don't know *who* is down there. Riley, it's a forgotten realm. Demons have full reign down there. I know you understand what that means. I know you know what going down there will mean. The second you step foot on their territory, they will know. Marchosias and everyone under him. They'll know, and they'll come after you."

Riley said, "Then we'll have to move fast."

"That tattoo on your back. The one that protects you up here. It will still work in the Underground."

"Good to know."

"It will be all that's left. A charred remnant, a flapjack-sized piece of charred flesh. They will show you no mercy, Riley."

Riley said, "I'm not going to change my mind. Kenzie needs my help. I'm going. That's the final word."

Priest pressed her lips together. "Sometimes a guardian angel has to take drastic measures to protect their wards. Sometimes they have to go to extremes."

Riley straightened and rubbed her hands together. She kept her eyes locked on the opposite side of the courtyard, aware that Priest was looking at her. "I would think long and hard about doing that, Caitlin. Because I would be done with you."

"You don't decide that."

"Want to test that theory?"

Priest was quiet for a long time, and then began gathering her trash. She stood up, carried it to the trash can, and turned to face Riley. "I'm not going to hurt you, Riley. You have

enough bad things to watch out for without that. Besides, I think you would drag yourself to the Underground with two broken legs. But I'm not going to watch you kill yourself. If you go to the Underground, you're going alone."

Riley finally met Priest's gaze. "I'm used to it. Got along just fine before you came along."

"Things have changed, Riley."

"Yeah. They have." Riley stood up and said, "I'm going to back up my friend. My partner. It doesn't matter that she turned in her badge, she's still my partner. I know you understand that, Priest. I can't back away, and I can't turn my back on her when she needs my help. That's who I am."

They stared each other down for a long time, neither one willing to break the silence. Finally, Riley said, "So I guess the question is who do you want to be. Are you my partner, or are you just my guardian angel?"

"I'll cover you with Lieutenant Briggs."

Riley relaxed and said, "Thank you."

"But I can't be in two places at once. If I'm covering your ass, I won't be able to protect you in the Underground. You'll be on your own."

"That's fine," Riley said. She tossed her trash into the can, and said, "The important thing is that Kenzie won't be alone." She checked her watch and said, "I'm going to head back home and grab a nap. We're going into the Underground tonight at twilight."

"Look, Riley...I apologize in advance. I know you don't like me to say this, and I know you don't believe in it...but I'll pray for you."

“No need to apologize,” Riley said. “I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

The hardest part of returning to Gillian’s apartment was facing the memories every time she opened the door. Simply stepped into the living room was enough to cause vivid flashbacks to the first time she visited, bleeding to death and weak from her first true face-off with the demons that inhabited No Man’s Land. The kitchen reminded her of domestic mornings together, eating freshly scrambled eggs and sitting across from someone who had just hopped out of the shower. The bedroom caused the most splendid and most dangerous memories of all.

In the weeks following Gillian’s departure, Riley hadn’t even been able to walk through the front door without breaking down. But recent events at the police station had made it just as bad, in terms of nightmares and lack of calm. Rather than seek out a whole new port in the storm, she decided to face up to her fears and returned to Gillian’s apartment. The memories were still strong, and painful, but she was overcoming them.

She emptied her pockets and took off her shoulder holster, kicking off her shoes as she sat on the edge of the bed. She rolled the kinks out of her neck and stretched, settling down on the cool blankets. With her eyes closed, Gillian’s scent all around her, she could imagine that Gillian was really there and not thousands of miles away. But if Gillian was there, she wouldn’t have to take off her own blouse.

Her mind wandered to the few times she had come home after a shift, the handful of nights Gillian was waiting to greet her. Soft kisses, shoulder massages, and a slow, loving undressing. Riley had never felt so pampered or more loved

than those nights. She ran her hand over her chest, fooling herself that it was Gillian's hand. Slowly, she undid the buttons of her blouse and ran her fingers over her chest.

*Kenzie is back. She wanted you. You were in a hotel room, with Kenzie Crowe kissing you, and you did...nothing.*

It was the true test, as far as she was concerned. She hadn't realized how deep her feelings for Gillian went until the moment she was pushing Kenzie away.

She moved her hand down to her belt, resting the palm against the crotch of her jeans. She licked her lips, swallowed, and lifted one leg as she began to rub through her pants. Gentle kisses, Gillian breathing against her hair, breath washing against her neck. Long days and aching muscles were a small price to pay knowing that Gillian would make it all better in the end. Now, the days were just tedious and the muscles went without a massage.

Riley opened her eyes and looked at her cell phone on the nightstand. *Call her. Just pick up the phone. Take the first step, damn it.*

She couldn't bring herself to do it. Gillian was the one who left. Gillian was the one who made the calls. She needed the space to figure out what she wanted to do. She would come back when she was ready. If she was ready. She didn't need Riley pressuring her to make the decision faster.

*But she needs to know you care. That you're waiting. She needs to know you love her.*

Riley made a fist with her free hand and bumped it against her forehead. She moved her hand faster between her legs and arched her back as she came.

Nothing was going to happen with Kenzie. She was still in a relationship with Gillian, and it would stay that way until Gillian told her otherwise. Riley sat up, still breathing hard, and picked up her cell phone. She was grateful for the speed-dial, taking away her option of stopping mid-dial and immediately connecting her to Gillian's phone. Three rings, Riley's breath caught as the call was answered.

"Hi..."

"It's me. I miss..."

"...reached Dr. Gillian Hunt's phone. Please leave a message and I'll get back to you when I can."

Riley crumbled and felt like crying. She listened to the white noise on the other end of the phone for a long time, hand balled into a fist around the comforter. She swallowed, tears burning her eyes, and said, "I miss you. I love you." She closed the phone and dropped it on the bed next to her. The tears finally came, and she curled up on Gillian's side of the bed to let them flow.

Riley got back to the Gold Hotel at ten minutes to five. She headed up to Kenzie's room, making sure she didn't look like she had been crying. She knocked on Kenzie's bedroom door and, when there was no answer, tried the knob. A knot of tension grew between Riley's shoulders as she stepped into the quiet room, well aware that Kenzie wouldn't purposely leave her room unlocked. Not when several of her soldiers had just been killed.

From the doorway, she could see into the bedroom. Kenzie was curled on the bed with her back to the door, her right leg stuck out and the left pulled tight against her chest. She had one fist curled next to her head, trembling violently and

rocking her head against the pillow. Riley lowered her gun and said, “Kenzie?”

“No,” Kenzie groaned.

Riley crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. Kenzie’s eyes were open, but unfocused. Riley put her hand on Kenzie’s shoulder, and her wrist was immediately locked in a vice grip. Kenzie’s eyes swam into focus, her hair falling back to reveal the scars on the side of her face. Riley managed not to recoil, but it was difficult. She swallowed hard and said, “Kenzie. It’s me. You’re safe. You’re home.”

Kenzie looked past Riley at the hotel room and relaxed slightly. Her fingers relaxed and she pushed herself up. “Rye. God.”

“You okay?”

Kenzie nodded. “Yeah.” She exhaled sharply and looked at her watch. “You ready to make the descent into purgatory?”

“Yeah.” Riley took Kenzie’s hand and pulled her off the bed. “I’ve still got your back.”

Kenzie grinned. “Good to know.”

## Six

The bus station was a long abandoned mess, the parking lot ringed with a chain-link fence that seemed to work better as a trash-catcher than a deterrent to trespassers. A sign for “Ann/Dras Developments” hung lopsided from the links. Riley parked outside the fence and Kenzie got the padlock off the fence with a modicum of effort. She pushed the gate open just enough for Riley to slip through, then closed it behind her. The Depot, as it was known among the criminals she and Kenzie chased through the lot, was infamous as an entry point to the Underground. Few people were insane enough to venture inside.

Riley led the way across the loading area. The front door was long gone, the entrance a gaping hole in the side of the building. They were halfway there when something inside shifted, and a person stepped out of the shadows. Both Riley and Kenzie had their guns drawn before they recognized who it was.

“Damn it, Priest,” Riley said as she returned her gun to the shoulder holster under her jacket. “What are you doing here?”

“Watching your back,” Priest said. She wore a lightweight jacket, the pockets weighted down with supplies. “You and I are staking out a suspect in the Benedict murder. Should take all night.”

Riley nodded. “Thank you.”

Priest gave a slight incline of her head, still obviously annoyed that Riley wouldn't listen to reason. "I'm your back-up. I can't let you go down there alone."

"She wouldn't have been alone," Kenzie said. "How did you find this place, anyway?"

Priest glanced at Riley and said, "I had a hunch." She looked at the sky. "It's going to be dark soon. We should get in and out as quickly as possible."

"Sounds like a good plan," Kenzie said. "Lead the way, Katie."

Priest glared at Kenzie before she turned around and went back into the Depot. The red light of the setting sun made the interior look like it was aflame, rotting benches and piles of trash casting long shadows across the tile floor. The ticket agent's booth was in the process of falling down, slowly but surely, and it was here that Priest led them. She took a flashlight from her pocket and aimed it into the square skeleton of the booth. The floor was gone, replaced by a jagged hole. A wooden ladder led down into the darkness. "This just goes to the basement," Priest said. "There's a staircase on the other side of the building, but the ladder actually looks safer." She aimed the flashlight at Riley and Kenzie. "Who is going first?"

Kenzie said, "It's my stupid mission. Might as well be the canary in the coal mine." She brushed past Riley and stepped into the booth. She tested her weight on the top rung of the ladder and slowly began to climb down. "The, uh...fourth rung from the top is a little weak. Katie, you may want to be careful of it since I think you weigh the most of us."

Riley stepped closer to Priest and whispered, "Don't smite her."



“I don’t smite.”

“Well, whatever you do. She’s just testing the boundaries, seeing how far she can push you. Don’t let her get to you. It’s her way of bonding.”

Priest sighed and leaned over the hole. “Thank you for the information, Mac.”

Kenzie looked up, squinting into the light of Priest’s flashlight. “Hey, what do you know, she bites back. Good to know.” A second later, she said, “All right, I’m down.”

Riley motioned for Priest to go, and followed a few seconds behind her. Priest dropped her flashlight at Kenzie’s request, and Kenzie examined the confines of the basement. “Over here,” she called. Riley and Priest made their way over to a concrete set of stairs that seemed to lead into the ground. Kenzie crouched and felt around, finally finding a hatch. “Here we go. You’re both sure you want to go down here?”

Riley said, “I promised, didn’t I?”

“How about you, Priest?”

Priest glanced at Riley to make sure she’d heard right. Riley raised her eyebrows and shrugged. Priest said, “Riley is your partner, and I’m hers. I’m going.”

Kenzie opened the hatch and said, “Well, then here we go.”

The hatch covered a stone staircase, tight walls on either side giving the impression of a tomb. Kenzie aimed the flashlight up at the curved ceiling, her free hand pressed against the stone walls on either side to keep her head from swimming. The stairs seemed to go straight down, their bodies pulled forward by gravity. Riley and Kenzie both had to

fight the feeling they were falling, but Priest managed to descend without much trouble.

The bottom of the passage was capped by an ill-fitting door, light pouring through on all four sides. Kenzie pushed the door open and they emerged into a wide, low space that looked like the lobby of an apartment building. Directly across from the entrance was a latticework of lumber wrapped in wires and extension cords. An iron grid formed a ceiling over their heads, bare bulbs hanging from bare wires. The light was dim, but bright enough for Kenzie to turn off the flashlight.

“Where do they get power?”

Riley went to the wall, where several holes had been punched in the Sheetrock. She peered into the hole and knocked on the wall with a knuckle. “They hook into the power of buildings above them. Leech it out. They only take a little so it won’t be noticed. Same with water.” She looked at Kenzie and saw she was smiling. “What?”

“Come on, Rye. How many times did you wish we could come down here after some crook? Now here we are.”

Riley smirked. “Keep your mind on the mission, Kenzie.”

The east and west sides of the “lobby” were fronted with brick archways. Riley randomly went to the east entrance and peered through to the darkness. Another thin passageway led to her right and left, lights hanging at five- or six-foot intervals along the wall. “Okay. East or west, right or left? We could split up, but I don’t like the idea of any of us going off on her own.”

“Good point.” Kenzie joined Riley at the entrance and shrugged. “This way is as good as any. The hard part is going to be remembering the way out.”

"I've got it," Priest said.

"Glad you came, then, Katie." Kenzie checked her watch and said, "Okay. We'll give this way fifteen minutes. If we don't find anything, we'll come back and try the other direction. Sound good?"

"Works for me," Riley said. She stepped through the archway and found herself completely in the Underground. Nightmares, urban legends, lies told by parents to make their children behave, all came flooding back to her memory. She exhaled and looked at the expanse of dark brick in front of her. The ceiling arched over her head, thick strips of wood stretching from one wall to the other and supporting the stone ceiling. Riley pushed aside irrational fears to make room for the rational fears and began walking. She resisted the urge to pull her gun; the people down here were jumpy enough without her adding a weapon to the mix.

Most of the buildings had been demolished when the city was raised, replaced by thick stone supports. But here and there, they found buildings hiding in the shadows. Doors, windows and signs were all gone, but there were obvious signs of occupation. A flat pillow here, tangled blankets there, a barricade built out of shoeboxes and plastic bags, little hints of an attempt at civilization.

The streets, such as they were, varied wildly in width. Sometimes Riley and Kenzie were able to walk side-by-side, while other times they were forced to turn sideways and scoot, clothes brushing against the stone walls as they walked. They heard voices raised in the distance, music playing somewhere, but they never crossed paths with anyone. Occasional shadows fled across the walls in front of them, and Riley knew that their presence was known. The citizens of the Underground were evading them.

"I guess that's good," Riley said as she heard scuttling footsteps coming from up ahead. "Like rats. They're more afraid of us than we are of them."

She turned a corner and shined the flashlight into the grinning face of a pale man. She recoiled, shocked at finally seeing another person. He was standing in a gap in the wall, his shoulders hunched to make room, his eyes blinking rapidly at the light. His grin widened and he sniffed the air. "Riley Parra. Oh, good, good. Riley Parra."

Riley tensed and moved her hand to her gun. "That's right, pal. Who's asking?"

The man erupted in laughter and turned, scooting down the gap with the speed of a spider. Seconds later, he was out of the flashlight's range.

"How the hell did he know your name?" Kenzie whispered. Her voice was more surprised than angry.

"Don't know. Maybe they get the papers down here. I'm kind of a big deal."

"Right," Kenzie chuckled.

They continued on until they found a long shack with an open front. Tables stacked with baskets and bowls filled the empty space under the wooden roof. Underground residents shrunk away from the newcomers, but they didn't flee. Kenzie moved past Riley and led the way into the apparent marketplace. "Excuse me. We're looking for a friend of mine. We were wondering if you could help."

The person closest to Kenzie, someone so enshrined in rags that Riley couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, shook their head rapidly and backed away.

“He’s a tall man, uh...light-skinned black guy. He was a soldier, like me.” She pulled her dog tags out, and a few of the people stopped shrinking away. “I just want to talk to him. He’s a good friend of mine. He’s called Radio because —”

“He talks like a radio.”

Riley and Kenzie both turned and saw a man wearing a fedora watching them. He eyed Priest and moved closer, his right foot dragging behind him. He looked at Kenzie’s dog tags and said, “You really his friend?”

“I was his commanding officer in Afghanistan. I just want to make sure he’s okay.”

“People who end up down here, sometimes they don’t even want to see their friends.”

“I’d like to let him make that choice, sir.”

The man pursed his lips and made little ‘bup-bup-bup’ sounds with his lips. Finally, he dipped his chin and said, “Okay. Name’s Jeremiah.” He eyed Riley and Priest and said, “You two are cops?” They nodded. “Ain’t got no jurisdiction down here. You best understand that ‘fore we go anywhere.”

“We understand. We’re not here to arrest anybody. We just want to talk.”

Jeremiah held up his large, gnarled hands. The joints were swollen and reminded Riley of old tree branches. They weren’t pretty, but they were strong. He dipped his chin and said, “Good enough for me. But if he wants you to leave, you leave. On your own, or we’ll make you. Clear?”

“Perfectly clear.”

Jeremiah looked at Priest again, and said, “All right. Follow me.” He motioned them toward one of the tributaries that

branched off from the clearing. Kenzie walked behind him, with Priest and Riley bringing up the rear.

*“Riley Parra!”*

Riley and Priest both turned, even though the shout came from some distance away. It was impossible to tell exactly how far in the tunnels. Riley glanced at Priest and said, “In and out as quick as possible. Works for me.”

“Me too.”

They turned and followed Jeremiah and Kenzie deeper into the Underground.

## Seven

Jeremiah asked them to stop at the next crossroads, raising one old hand as he continued deeper into the maze. They heard his voice, and then someone answered him. Kenzie straightened and said, "That's Radio." She started to move, but Riley put a hand on her arm.

"Let's do this the way Jeremiah wants. Let's show the old guy a little bit of courtesy and see how far it gets us."

Kenzie nodded and relaxed again, but craned her neck to look down the corridor. A moment later, Jeremiah returned. "He said he'll see you. Said he's been waiting."

"He said that?" Riley said.

Jeremiah's lips curled into a smile. "Actually he said *I've Been Waiting for You*. Neil Young, 1968."

Kenzie smiled. "Thank you, Jeremiah. You've been a big help."

He nodded his head and stepped aside. "Go on in."

Kenzie led the way around the corner. Radio was pushing himself to his feet, brushing his hands over his dirty jeans. He wore a red hoodie under a black jacket, the hoodie pulled up over his head. He was tall, but not lanky, so it was difficult to tell how big he was until Kenzie stepped up next to him. He wore a beard that had once been neatly trimmed but was

starting to grow up in rough patches on his cheeks. His skin was ruddy, dark but suffering from a lack of sunshine. He grinned when he spotted Kenzie and wrapped his arms around her.

Kenzie chuckled as he squeezed her. "I've been waiting for you."

"Jeremiah told me you already used that one," Kenzie said when he let her go.

Radio chuckled and put his hands on her shoulders. "Hello." He looked at Riley and Priest, his smile fading. "Goodbye, stranger."

"No, it's fine, Radio. They're good. I trust them." She pointed at Riley. "She was my partner on the force. She's just here to watch my back, make sure I stay out of trouble."

Radio seemed to debate himself about their presence, and Riley said, "Why can't we be friends?"

Radio's grin returned and he relaxed. "Good enough." He gestured at a low divan sitting against the far wall, threadbare cushions on a rickety wooden frame. Kenzie and Riley sat down, but Priest remained standing. Radio looked at her as he sat down, then turned his grin back on Kenzie. "Welcome back," he said.

"It's nice to be back," Kenzie said. "It's nice to see you, Radio. Are you well?"

Radio held his hands out. "I will survive."

Kenzie smiled. "Good. I'm glad." She glanced at Riley and said, "We should talk about why we're here. I got your postcard. I know that you were looking into something, and it's causing a lot of problems. Do you know about Charlie and Coltrane...?"



Radio looked down at his hand and shifted on his seat. He nodded. "A Day in the Life."

"I heard the news today, oh, boy," Riley said, quoting the song. Radio nodded. Kenzie raised an eyebrow, and Riley shrugged. "I'm learning."

"Hard to say I'm sorry," Radio said.

Kenzie reached out and touched Radio's hands. "It wasn't your fault."

"What a fool believes."

"Hey," Kenzie said. "I'm trying to help you here, you son of a bitch."

Radio pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. Finally, he nodded and covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Okay, we know that you went to see Charlie and Marks before they died. Can you tell us why?"

Radio's tongue poked between his lips and he rocked back and forth on his seat. He rubbed his hands together, searching for the right thing to say. Finally, he said, "Livin' on the edge. Suspicious minds. Daytime friends."

Riley leaned forward. "Look, Radio. I understand this defense mechanism. Trust me. But we need you to just tell us what you saw."

"If you don't know me by now."

"No, I understand. You want to use this thing to protect yourself. But there have been three murders that all seem to point to you. I need to know what you had to do with them."

"Cut him some slack, Riley."

Riley closed her eyes. "This isn't a game, Radio." She turned to Kenzie. "What's his real name?"

"Russell Miller."

"Russell, please. Just stop this game and tell us what we need to know."

Radio stood up and waved them away. He glared at Kenzie. "I should have known better."

Kenzie and Riley both stood. "Radio, stop. Please, let's just..."

"We'll take you to jail. Maybe you'd feel more comfortable talking there." Kenzie glared at Riley, but she wouldn't be stopped. "You break the rules when it suits you. Switching to lyrics if the title doesn't suit you, like calling Kenzie Major Tom. You'll break the rules for a letter, but not to catch a murderer?"

"I can't help myself," Radio said, his voice trembling.

"I think that's bullshit."

Kenzie said, "Wait, Radio..."

"It's too late."

Kenzie moved between Riley and Radio and held her hands out to them. "Just hold on. Radio, please. You came to me for help. Riley is...she doesn't understand, okay?"

Radio glared at Riley and his shoulders sagged. He nodded to Kenzie. "For you." He returned to his seat, glaring at Riley. "Sorry seems to be the hardest word."

"I'm not apologizing to you. This is nonsense."

Radio glanced at Kenzie, shrugged, and held his hands out. "We can work it out. If you could read my mind."

“Sorry, left that superpower upstairs,” Riley muttered.

Kenzie sighed and turned to Riley, “Look, you’re probably not going to be much help. So why don’t you and Priest just... step outside? Radio and I will get through this. I have practice, I know how to parse what he’s saying. Just give us five minutes. Please, Riley.”

Riley stood up and said, “I still think you could tell us without this song and dance. For what it’s worth.”

“Would I lie to you?”

Riley scoffed and motioned for Priest to lead the way out. They stepped out of the room and Riley heard Radio begin speaking immediately.

She crossed her arms over her chest and looked down the “street.” Radio’s apparent home was separated from the public thoroughfare by a simple wooden wall with a door cut into the side. To the right was a brick wall, weeds growing through the foundation and snaking up through the mortar. The entire area was cast in shadows, just enough light coming from the weak bulbs for her to realize how close the walls and ceiling were. She felt like she was in a crawlspace under a house. She glanced at Priest and saw she was valiantly trying to hide her own discomfort.

“How are you holding up?”

“As well as can be expected.”

“I’m glad you came.”

Priest looked Riley in the eye. “I didn’t have a choice. You were coming down here no matter what. If you died...” She shook her head. “You’re stubborn, Riley. I knew that when I accepted the chance to watch over you. But I thought you would stop short of suicide.”

“Sometimes you have to put yourself at risk to protect someone you care about.”

“Apparently.”

Riley looked back in the direction they came. “Do you still remember the way out?”

“I do.”

“Just making sure. This place is...” She swallowed and stuck her hands into her pockets. “I don’t know what it is.”

“We’re underground,” Priest said. “It’s instinctual. You equate being underground with being buried. Death.”

Riley nodded. “That, and the fact you told me this place was worse than Hell.”

Priest allowed herself a small grin. “Well, there’s that, too.”

“Seriously, Priest. I want to thank you. If you hadn’t...”

She was interrupted by Kenzie raising her voice inside Radio’s hovel. “Think,” Radio shouted. “Please! Think.”

Kenzie stormed out of the home as Riley and Priest reached the front door. Her face was red, her eyes wide and wet with tears. “Get out of my way, Riley. We’re out of here.”

“What did he say?”

“He’s a damn liar,” Kenzie said.

She put her hand on Riley’s shoulder and tried to shove her out of the way, but Riley anticipated the move. She grabbed Kenzie’s arm, pulled it down, and twisted. She put her arm around Kenzie and pulled her close to her chest, her chin on Kenzie’s shoulder. Kenzie fought, but Riley had the upper hand.

“What did he say?”

Radio came out of his home and said, “The cold hard truth.”

Kenzie brought her hand up, aiming her finger at Radio. “You shut your damned mouth!”

Priest said, “Riley...”

Riley looked over her shoulder. Jeremiah had arrived, drawn by the commotion. A group of fellow Undergrounders stood behind him, craning their necks to get a better look at the commotion. Jeremiah kept his hands clasped behind his back, looking at the scene before he calmly asked, “Is there some sort of problem?”

“No problem,” Riley said. “Right, Radio?”

Radio nodded and gave Jeremiah a thumbs-up.

Kenzie fought to escape Riley’s grip and said, “We’re done here. You can fry, for all I care. Screw you, Russell.”

Riley frowned and said, “Let’s just all calm down and talk this out.”

Radio’s eyes widened and his lips moved for a moment before he finally shouted, “Help!”

“What — ”

Something came down hard across Riley’s shoulders and she went down hard. Kenzie fell with her, and they landed in a heap on the ground. Riley rolled onto her side and saw one of the Underground dwellers pinning Priest to the wall with a baseball bat across the chest. He had one hand clamped over her mouth, pressing her hard against the stone of the wall. Jeremiah lifted his lead pipe, wielding it like an axe, and said, “Sorry, Detective Parra. You understand how it is. Loyalty and all.”

Jeremiah swung the pipe down toward Riley's head. The wide arc of the blow was deflected by Radio's arm, which appeared out of nowhere at the last second. The pipe hit hard enough to make Riley wince, Radio's lips pulled back over his teeth as he spun on Jeremiah. "Respect!" He shouted as he shoved Jeremiah away from Riley. Jeremiah stumbled and his feet came out from underneath him. He landed on his ass, sprawled in the middle of the street.

Radio had already turned on the man holding Priest. They grappled briefly, the man releasing Priest to focus on the true threat, and Radio managed to drop him as well. Kenzie stood and helped Riley to her feet, their disagreement forgotten for the moment. Priest looked toward the ceiling, eyes closed, and said, "There are more on the way."

"How do you know that?" Kenzie asked.

"She knows," Riley said. She grabbed Radio's arm, forcing him to look at her. "Is there another way out of here? Another way back to the surface?"

Radio thought, and then nodded quickly. He motioned for them to follow him. They ran past his home, down a side alley. Riley was reminded of the old TV show *Fraggle Rock* and had the insane urge to start singing. The urge passed when an inhuman voice howled in the caverns behind them. It was echoed by a series of hoots and catcalls, and then another shout of "Riley Parra!"

Kenzie looked at Riley as they ran. "Guess you really are famous."

"Fame is overrated," Riley said. "Go. Run." She looked over her shoulder and discovered Priest had vanished. "Damn it, Caitlin," she muttered. She didn't have time to go back; she

just hoped that Priest would be able to find them wherever Radio was leading.

## Eight

Trying to make sense of the twists and turns in the path would have driven Riley crazy, so she just focused on the back of Kenzie's blouse and prayed Radio knew where he was going. Occasional howls echoed after them, the thrill of the hunt. Kenzie glanced back a few times to make sure Riley was still behind her. At one point, she said, "Priest?"

"Watching our backs. Go!"

Kenzie shook her head as she ran. "Those howls. They don't...sound human."

"Bad moon rising," Radio muttered up ahead.

Riley said, "That is really not helpful, Russell."

He stopped at a dog-leg turn and pointed to a wooden shack. "Up around the bend. Get together." He waited and then grabbed Riley's arm. "One?"

"She's watching our back. It's okay. She'll find us."

Riley and Kenzie went into the building with Radio watching back the way they had come. When they were safely inside, he closed the door and set his shoulder against a section of counter that had broken away from the wall. Kenzie flipped on her flashlight and joined Riley and Radio in the effort to get the door blocked. Kenzie said, "How is Priest going to know where we are? We can't just abandon her out there."



"It's okay," Riley said. "Trust me. Priest is...resourceful. She'd be angrier if we put ourselves at risk for her."

Radio said, "She works hard for the money."

Kenzie, suddenly reminded of their argument earlier, shot him a look of pure venom. "You don't speak to me. Ever."

"Don't bring me down."

"Shut up," Kenzie growled. She got in his face and said, "Just shut the hell up, okay, Radio? For once in your goddamn life. Sounds of silence, right?"

Riley stepped between the two of them and whispered, "We have everybody in the Underground chasing our asses. Isn't that enough without fighting amongst ourselves?" Kenzie backed away, tossing the flashlight onto the counter as she passed. Radio nodded, his face twisted into a distraught expression as he backed away as well.

"Great. Good." She sighed and examined their hideout. It was the front room of a restaurant, tables and chairs and accoutrements all long-since scavenged. The walls were ripped apart, the innards removed for some sundry construction project or another. Most of the ceiling tiles were gone, the remnants sagging in their frame like rotten teeth in a diseased mouth. Kenzie's flashlight was the only thing between them and total darkness, so Riley fervently hoped that Priest put in new batteries before she left. Or that she used holy batteries.

Riley started to follow Kenzie into the kitchen, but she was reluctant to leave Radio on his own without the flashlight. "Will you be okay out here?"

He smiled. "Solitary man."

"Right. Yell if someone besides Priest tries to get in here."

“You got it.”

Riley went into the kitchen and found Kenzie standing over a sink. She was violently twisting the faucet with one hand, working one spigot with the other. She heard Riley approach and slapped the side of the sink with her hand. “Stupid piece of shit.”

“Well, it has been out of service for over a century.”

“People down here have lights, they have damn neighborhoods. They can’t hook up the water? For fuck’s sake.” She rubbed the hand she’d used to hit the sink and glared at Riley. “You look like shit.”

The sweat on Kenzie’s face had drawn all the dirt particles out of the air, giving her already dark complexion an added layer of grime. Her hair was rearranged from repeatedly raking her fingers through it, the ends limp and dripping sweat onto her collar. “Good, because you’re a beauty queen, and otherwise people wouldn’t be able to tell us apart.”

Kenzie scoffed and unbuttoned her blouse.

“That wasn’t a come-on.”

“Oh, get over yourself.” She shrugged out of her blouse, leaving her in a white T-shirt. She balled up the shirt and used it to wipe some of the dirt off her face. The result was a smeared, smudged mess. Riley halfway wished Kenzie was wearing a tank top just so she could see how bad the burns on her shoulder were, and she felt like a pervert for thinking it. When Kenzie finished wiping her face, she wrapped the sleeves of her shirt around her waist and began to pace.

“What the hell happened with you and Radio? What did he say?”

“I’m not going to talk about that.”

"Come on, Kenzie. It's the whole reason we're down here. Priest is God-knows-where because we're helping you out. And now we're just going to forget it because you didn't like what you heard? You didn't believe Radio was a murderer. Has that changed?"

"No."

"Do you think he's the kind of person who would lie to you?"

Kenzie clenched her jaw and crossed her arms over her chest. Finally, she said, "No. He wouldn't."

"So what did he say?"

Kenzie found a milk crate at the back of the room and turned it upside down, testing the weight with her foot before she sat down. "There was a member of our platoon we called Player. Travis Unger. He was always regaling us with stories of his many conquests back home. If someone said they dated a model, Travis dated a supermodel. If someone said they slept with an actress, Travis had an orgy backstage at the Academy Awards. We all thought he was full of shit, but we humored him." She smiled. "Then one day he got a package. It was full of pictures. Boy, he acquired a crowd as he started to put them up over his bed. It was like an issue of the National Enquirer. Famous names, famous faces, and all of them draped all over Player like he was the second coming of Don Juan.

"Player wasn't in the ambush where we all got hurt. When we came back, he stayed over there. But he got back recently. Radio said Player came to see him when he came home and wanted to catch up. I didn't even know he was home. I don't know. He didn't contact me." She toyed with her fingernail and shook her head. "Player told Radio that he was just

touching base, but something got Radio spooked. He ended the visit as quickly as he could and sent Player away.”

“Player met with Radio down here?”

“I guess so.”

“Brave guy.”

“Soldier.”

Riley nodded.

“Something got Radio so spooked that he decided to go check on the others. He says I had the timeline wrong. He got to New York just after Charlie died. He was in Chicago in time to find Marks after he killed himself. Everyone died right before Radio got there.”

Riley frowned. “Someone is picking off members of your old platoon? Why didn’t he get Radio?”

“Would you try to kill someone down here? These guys look out for each other, for better or for worse. Do you really think we would have found Radio so easily if they thought we weren’t friends? Radio had protection. Charlie, Marks and Coltrane weren’t so lucky.”

“Why didn’t Radio get in contact with you?”

Kenzie looked past Riley to the door. “He didn’t think I would believe him. He’s telling me that Player is the one killing our people. And I just cannot accept that. I cannot believe someone under my command is capable of such...evil. And what does he have to gain from it?” She shifted her feet on the floor. “I think you’re right, Riley. Maybe Radio is cracking up for good. Maybe he’s making all of this up.”

“Sisters of mercy,” Radio said from behind her.

Riley turned and saw his silhouette framed by the door. He hung his head and stepped into the room like a child knowing he's about to be scolded. "Wicked game. On the road again. Held up without a gun, looking for the next best thing. Love is a many splendored thing. Blue eyes crying in the rain. Blinded by the light. Love on the rocks. Ain't no cure for love."

Riley looked at Kenzie. "Did you understand any of that?"

Kenzie was frowning up at Radio. "Who?"

"Woman." Radio shrugged.

"What woman? An Afghani woman?"

"You got me, babe. Rumors. Other side. Play with fire."

Kenzie stood up. "You better be damn sure. Rumors are one thing..."

"I saw her standing there."

Riley said, "Will someone please translate for me?"

Kenzie sighed, keeping her eyes on Radio as she spoke. "Radio claims that Player had a thing with some woman over in Afghanistan. If you've ever seen some of the women over there, you would understand. Gorgeous. Bluest eyes you've ever seen. Player met her when he was...on patrol?" Radio nodded. "They had sex, and Player apparently fell for her. Kept the relationship secret. He thinks...Player inadvertently set up the ambush that got us all hurt."

"What?" Riley said.

"When will I see you again?" Radio said.

"She wanted to meet him. Player told her that we would be out on patrol that day. Oh, God. She used him to get information about our movements."

Riley said, "So why is Player killing you guys now?"

"Do you hear what I hear?" Radio said. "I can see clearly now."

"Player is worried we saw or heard something that made us realize what he'd done. He's trying to cover his ass because he got used. He's trying to finish the job his whore started."

Radio nodded sadly. "The boys are back in town."

"Shit. He killed Coltrane last night. Odds are he's going to come after Radio again."

"Don't worry," Riley said. "No one's going to get past that barricade."

Priest stepped into the room, eyed everyone, and said, "Hey."

Kenzie was on her feet, gun in hand, before she realized who the new arrival was. Her jaw dropped and she gave Riley a confused look.

Priest, oblivious, walked across the room. Her clothes were dirty and torn, a mixture of blood, sweat and grime coloring one side of her face. She pointed at the sink and said, "Does that work?"

Kenzie lowered her gun. "What the hell?"

"Relax. I meant that no one except Priest can get in." Radio went back into the main room to make sure the door was still blocked. Riley walked up to Priest to make sure she was all right. The few wounds she could see were superficial, and the majority of the blood seemed to belong to someone else. "What happened out there? Are you all right?"

"Fine. The sink?"

“Broken,” Kenzie said.

Priest sighed and pressed her hand against her temple. “Wonderful.” She fished in her jacket with one hand and withdrew a bottle of water and a handkerchief. She handed them to Riley, who twisted the bottle open and wet the hanky. She cleaned up some of the blood from Priest’s cheek and pressed the wet cloth to a wound near Priest’s hairline. “Local boys?”

“Yeah. From downtown,” Priest said.

“Great,” Riley muttered.

Kenzie said, “What the hell is going on with the two of you?”

“Nothing,” Riley said. “Why?”

Radio came in and shrugged at Kenzie.

“How did she get in here?”

“I told you,” Riley said. “She’s a good partner.” She took Priest’s hand and placed it on top of the compress. “Are you going to need...confession?”

“No. Church can wait until morning.”

Riley took that to mean she hadn’t overused her powers as an angel. She figured it was the closest approximation to good news that they would get, so she took it without complaint.

“And you say Radio is hard to understand,” Kenzie said. “What’s going on out there?”

Priest sagged against the wall. “A bunch of locals got all riled up by outsiders. They discovered Riley and I were down here, and they figured we were fair game. Because we’re cops, and we don’t have any jurisdiction.”

Riley nodded. "Yeah. We've made our fair share of enemies."

Kenzie decided to drop the subject. "Radio, is there any route to the surface near here?"

Radio rubbed his face with both hands and paced for a moment. He snapped his fingers and said, "Proud Mary."

Kenzie frowned.

"Maybe he means a lyric," Riley said. "Good job in the city... working for the man?" Radio said nothing. "A minute of sleep, rolling on the river?"

Radio snapped his fingers and pointed at her.

"River...the waterfront. The waterfront?" Another nod, this time a wide smile.

Kenzie said, "You're getting good at this."

"Don't get too excited," Priest said. She went to the wall and said, "Riley, shine the flashlight over here." Riley lit up the wall, giving Priest a wide shadow as she used a charcoal pencil to draw a rough box-shape on the wall. She quickly sketched a row of lines, and then added a few landmarks. Kenzie watched as the map appeared on the wall. "We're here," Priest said. "Give or take, we're underneath Cleveland Road." She made a quick series of lines leading down and to the left. "This is the path we took to get down here."

"If you say so," Kenzie said.

"The waterfront is here. It's about ten blocks away from where we are right now. And right now, the people who want us dead are here, here, here and here." She made marks that showed they were pretty much completely surrounded. The waterfront was cut off from them.



Kenzie groaned and looked at Radio. "Any other nearby exits?"

Radio winced and nodded.

"Is it cut off?"

Radio looked at the map Priest had drawn and reluctantly shook his head.

"Great. Show us the way."

Another negative shake.

Priest said, "Why not? Is it a bad place?" He nodded emphatically. "In No Man's Land?"

Radio nodded.

"So it's in No Man's Land. We'll fit right in with the homeless."

Radio looked hopefully at Priest. "It comes up...in a bad building. The basement of a bad building."

"Bad, bad Leroy Brown."

"Baddest man in the whole damn town. He means it comes out in the worst building in town," Priest corrected. Realization dawned and she said, "Oh."

"What?" Riley said.

Priest leaned against the wall and checked her handkerchief. It was smeared with blood and dirt, but the wound had closed. She looked at Kenzie. "The reason the nearest available entrance is because a lot of the bad guys chasing us used it to get down here. It's the basement of the biggest crime boss in No Man's Land." She looked at Riley. "Guy goes by the name March...or Marchosias."

Riley said, “And that’s the only way back to the surface?”

“At the moment,” Priest said. “Yeah.”

Riley leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor. “Of course it is.”

## N i n e

“Who is March Otis?” Kenzie asked.

“No one you need to concern yourself with,” Priest said.

“If I have to fight my way out of his building, I would like to have some background. Who is he? Some guy you and Rye took down?”

Priest said, “Imagine a criminal mastermind. Some business-minded villain who decided to start up his own crime empire. He’s the puppet master. He hires people to do his dirty work on the street and then just sits back to reap the rewards of his ill-gotten gains. Because he has someone else doing all his dirty work, the cops can’t touch him. He’s bulletproof. Al Capone times a million.”

Kenzie said, “And that’s March?”

“No. March is that guy’s boss.”

Kenzie raised an eyebrow. “Okay. I take it you two have some history.”

“He nearly killed me,” Riley said. “Well, his boys. I barely managed to get out with my life the first time. The second time I only made it out because I had an ace in the hole.” To Priest, she said, “There’s no way.”

“There’s no *other* way,” Kenzie said. “Look, we’ll probably be in and out before Otis even knows we’re there.”

Radio said, "Santa Claus is watching you." Everyone turned and stared at him, and he waved his hands. "Private eyes."

"He's right," Riley said. "March knew we were down here seconds after we showed up. He's going to know we're in his building. His turf, his rules."

"Well, we can't stay down here forever," Kenzie said. "In case you didn't notice, these people don't seem to like you much, either."

Priest said, "We'll go in the morning. March is nocturnal. He'll be at his weakest at sunrise. With luck, we'll reach him at just the right time and we'll be able to get out before he can gather his strength. The downside is that we'll have to spend the night here."

Kenzie shrugged. "Spent the night in worse places, with worse company. How will we know when it's safe to go?"

"I'll tell you."

Radio said, "Countin' on a miracle?"

"You'd be surprised," Riley said. She looked at her watch, but it was too dark to read. Probably for the best. "Okay. Kenzie, Radio, you guys set up camp here. Maybe Priest has a tent and some sleeping bags in that jacket of hers. I'm going to see if I can find anything of use. Maybe someone was using this place as a squat and forgot their freezer full of TV dinners."

"Look for a microwave, too."

"I'll get right on that. Priest, want to give me a hand?"

They left Kenzie and Radio in the back room with the flashlight and went into the darkness. Priest took a second light from her pocket and clicked it on.

“Okay, seriously. What do you have in those pockets?”

“I have what I need,” Priest said. She kept her voice low so that it wouldn’t carry back to the others as they moved through the shell of the building. “We’re not just facing demons. A lot of the people down here have been recruited by Marchosias’ minions. They’re paying, and they’re paying well. By morning, every single person and demon down here is going to be looking for you. Dead or alive.”

“Eh, why should life be easy?” Riley moved a stack of garbage and smelled brimstone. Either there was a fire at some point in the building’s history, or a demon had been squatting in the corner. Maybe both. She turned and caught a glimpse of Priest in the backwash of the flashlight. “What about you? Looks like you took quite a beating.”

Priest gingerly touched her forehead. “Yeah. I kind of got into a brawl with a whole group of people. Close quarters like that, I couldn’t tell the humans from the demons. I didn’t want to risk torching some mortal, so I had to rely on brute strength. I’m not used to that.”

“Looks like you did a good enough job.”

“I just scared them a little. They’ll be back.”

Riley found a door and managed to shoulder it open, the wood so warped that it cracked as she pushed it open. She took the flashlight from Priest and used it to destroy some gossamer spider webs before she stepped into the room. Shelves hung from brackets on the wall, ready to collapse if another ounce of weight was placed on them, and a ladder leaned against the back wall. Riley scanned the floor with the flashlight and bent down to pick up a discarded tablecloth. She folded it as best she could and picked up a second one that was bundled against the wall.

She came out of the storage room and looked toward the kitchen. The flashlight was still on, and Riley could see Kenzie's shadow moving across the far wall. "All right, here's the plan. We camp out here until you tell us it's clear. Then we walk the ten blocks to the exit, slip out through March's basement, head home and forget this ever happened. What about March? Do you think he's going to be that big of a problem?"

Priest raised an eyebrow.

"Fine, bad choice of words. Do you think we can handle him?"

"I don't know. He may be reluctant to show his true colors with humans around. But don't count on it. This isn't going to be a cakewalk."

"It never is." She gave up on the storage room and went back to the former kitchen of the restaurant. Kenzie had laid out her blouse on the floor, padded with Radio's hoodie. Radio himself had shed at least three layers and was making a bed for himself. He saw Riley and Priest return and pointed to another pile of clothes in the far corner. "Wow. Guess there's a benefit to dressing in layers."

Kenzie was sitting on her pile, arms folded across her knees and her face pressed into her elbow. Riley nodded to the clothes and said, "Thank you, Radio."

He nodded and smiled.

Riley tossed the tablecloths onto the floor in the middle of the room and said, "In case anyone wants a blanket. You might want to kick it a few times to make sure there aren't any spider nests."

"Thanks for putting that image in my head, Rye."

Riley took off her shoes and shoulder holster, laying them on the floor near the bed before she rearranged Radio's borrowed clothes. She sat with her back against the wall, her socks looking like neon lights in the darkness.

"Goodnight, my someone," Radio said.

"Night, Radio," Riley said.

"Night, Riley."

"Goodnight, Kenzie."

"Goodnight, Priest."

"Goodnight, Kenzie."

"Goodnight, John Boy," Riley and Kenzie said together. Riley chuckled and rested her head against the wall. "I'm going to stay up for a while. I'll wake you in a couple hours, Kenzie."

"Sounds good."

Riley shut off the flashlight and the room was thrown into total darkness. Riley closed her eyes, trying to ignore the shifting and settling in of her fellow prisoners, focusing on sounds outside. She kept hearing voices, skittering noises in the walls, and hushed orders. It sounded like rats, but it was hard to be sure. Demons had possessed a group of pigs in the Bible, right? So why not rats? It would be hard to find better scouts.

Something shifted in the darkness nearby and Riley tensed, but Kenzie whispered, "It's me, Rye. You're here somewhere, right?" Riley stuck her right leg out until it met Kenzie's shin. Kenzie grabbed Riley's leg and let her hand slide down it as she moved toward the wall, her palm skimming over Riley's knee, her thigh...

“Hey, hands.”

“Sorry.” Kenzie sat down next to Riley in the darkness and whispered, “Couldn’t sleep. Thought I would keep you company.”

“Just talking, right?”

“I’m no home wrecker. Try though I may.”

Riley smiled into the darkness.

“Tell me about Gillian.”

“She’s...she was the medical examiner. It took me a long time to realize I had feelings for her. Some really bad stuff was going on, and she got caught in the middle of it because of me. She was in the hospital for a while. When she got out, she told me she needed some space. I just wanted to make her happy. But now...”

“You miss her.”

“I miss her like hell. But...I can’t ask her to come back.”

Kenzie scoffed. “Why not?”

“She left. She needed space. It has to be her choice to come back.”

“True. But she has to know you want her back, Riley. You know that saying, if you love something, set it free? Of course you know it. You’re living it. That saying is stupid. Sure, fine, if you love something, give it space. But don’t just give up. Fight. Gillian’s been gone how long? And you’re still saying you’re with her. You’re not with her, Riley. She’s gone, and you’re both alone. It doesn’t have to be that way. You don’t need to martyr your relationship just because you think it’s *her* responsibility to make the first move.”



“What if she thinks I’m being...overbearing?”

“She won’t. I know what she’s going through, Rye. She had to leave you, and it killed her. She doesn’t want to be the one to always make the first move. She wants to know she’s missed. If she retreats, you move forward. If she turns her back on you, walk around her. Don’t give up until she tells you she’s absolutely done.”

Riley said, “Kenzie, when you left for Afghanistan...”

“This isn’t about me, or what might have been. You don’t need to defend yourself to me. We had something good, and we both decided to let it go. You have a second chance at that. Don’t let it go again.”

Riley was surprised by a sudden kiss on her cheek.

“That was your cheek, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I realized after I leaned in, I wasn’t sure how you were... anyway. You deserve her, Rye. And she would be a fool to let you go easy.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She heard clothes rustling in the darkness, and then the presence next to her was gone. A few seconds later she heard Kenzie stretch out on top of her bedding.

Riley rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes. Since discovering the true nature of No Man’s Land, learning the truth about Marchosias and angels and demons and eternal warfare, it seemed like everything had been taken from her. Kara, Gillian, her apartment, her car, even Lieutenant Hathaway. But Gillian could be brought back. She didn’t have to let them take her away. She could fight. She

lifted her hip and pulled out her cell phone, flipping it open to check for a signal.

“You’re Going to Die” was written across the screen in blood red letters.

Riley nearly dropped the phone, but the message vanished before the message from her brain got through to her fingers. She was shaken, but she pushed past it and looked for the reception bars. Absolutely nothing. She closed the phone and slipped it back into her pocket. She bent her knees and rested her arms on them, her hands dangling. It was going to be a damn long night.

## T e n

Riley woke early the next morning to the sound of whispered conversation. She rolled onto her back and saw both flashlights were aimed toward the ceiling, forming a giant X that illuminated dust motes swirling in their beams. Priest and Kenzie were crouched next to them consulting a map Priest had drawn with her charcoal. Radio sat at the far end of the room, obviously still in Kenzie's doghouse.

Riley pushed herself up and grunted, shaking the sleep from her brain. Priest and Kenzie both looked over at her and returned to their map without a word. Radio smiled and said, "Good morning, star shine."

"Morning, Radio," Riley said. She stood up, stretched, and said, "Is there a bathroom in this place?"

"There's a bucket in the farthest room from this one," Kenzie said. She picked up one of the flashlights and handed it to her. "Ignore the smell."

Riley grunted and disappeared with her flashlight. She found the farthest room and quickly began listing the species that might have died within its confines. She took off her undershirt and wrapped it around the lower half of her face before she dared enter. By the time she stumbled back out, her list of possible deaths included seven species of animal,

including humans, and she wondered if they had all been diseased when they crawled there to die.

She tossed the flashlight back to Kenzie when she got back. "You sure know how to pick them."

"You should have smelled the actual bathroom."

Riley put her blouse back on and checked her watch in the flashlight. It was fifteen minutes past five in the morning. "What do you think, Priest?"

"Close enough. I don't want to be down here any longer than necessary."

Kenzie said, "Your girl is pretty good, Rye. You definitely traded up, partner-wise."

"Says you," Riley said, crouching by the map. "This one doesn't rub my feet."

"Does she do that thing I showed you...?" She held up two fingers and wiggled them.

Riley smiled. "Not with me, she doesn't. Gillian, though..."

Priest thumped the ground with her knuckle. "Can we focus on the escape route, ladies?" Riley chuckled and nodded for Priest to take the floor. "I got the gist of the layout from Radio. There are a couple of blind turns, some dead ends, all of which are probably going to be full of people waiting to take us out. We have to move fast."

"Nobody gets left behind this time," Kenzie said, looking at Priest.

"Trust me, I learned my lesson."

Kenzie stood up and put her blouse back on. Grime and blood stains covered the back like an abstract art project. She spoke to Radio without looking at him. "Are you ready?"

"Born to run."

"Priest, you want to make sure the coast is clear?"

Priest nodded and got to her feet, taking one of the flashlights into the main room.

Riley straightened and looked at a spot above Kenzie's head. "Orders, Major Crowe?"

Kenzie playfully clipped Riley on the chin. "Just hang back and look pretty, Private." She made sure they had all their things and picked up the second flashlight. As they went into the main room, Priest was returning from outside. "No one is coming."

"How did you move that counter by yourself? It took all three of us last night."

"Pilates," Priest said. "Let's go." She waited by the door while everyone else filed out. Riley stopped and looked back, watching Priest bow her head and move her lips as she silently mouthed a prayer. Riley watched Kenzie and Radio carefully moving into the corridor and went back, sliding her hand into Priest's. Priest squeezed and finished the prayer, then pulled the door shut. "Thanks."

"Couldn't hurt," she said.

She turned and followed Kenzie down the corridor. The lights hanging from the wall were dim, but they were still brighter than the pair of flashlights. The corridor was practically lit by the sun compared to their pitch black night. Radio stopped at a crossroad and leaned out to make sure no one was coming. Riley figured they were safe; the denizens of

the Underground might be willing to spend a few hours looking for someone, but practical needs outweighed anything else. They needed to get out and scrounge before the sun came up and the respectable people reclaimed the world aboveground.

The ground beneath their feet, uneven and covered with a loose layer of gravel and stones, kept slipping them up and forced them to move slowly. Priest stopped and peered into the relic of an old apartment building and then hurried to catch up with the others. Kenzie tore the sleeve of her blouse on a particularly tight corner and cursed quietly. Priest brought up the rear and occasionally reported sounds she heard coming from behind them. "Muttering. It's close," she whispered, and Riley nodded. Not much they could do about it in such tight confines.

Riley figured they had gone about six blocks when all hell broke loose. Radio had gone around a corner, Kenzie right behind him, when Priest suddenly shouted, "Everybody down!" The first bullets ricocheted off the walls, raining chips of stone down on them. Riley and Kenzie both pulled their weapons and spun around to return fire. The explosions were deafening in the confines of the caverns, and Riley's nostrils burned with the scent of gunpowder.

She tried to retreat, but Radio slammed into them and said, "Get back!"

Kenzie barely avoided a swinging baseball bat to the skull, ducking at the last moment before it would have taken off her head. She twisted at the waist and fired behind her, catching the wannabe Babe Ruth in the chest. He fell back into the people shoving down the path behind him and tripped them up.

"Not this way!" Kenzie called.

Riley said, "We're blocked here, too." She glanced at Priest. "So much for the power of prayer, huh?"

Priest ignored her. "Remember the apartment building we passed two blocks back?"

"Yeah."

"Can you get back there?"

"No one gets left behind. Especially not you. You've risked your life enough for me."

Priest said, "Okay. Kenzie, Radio, cover your eyes!" Riley didn't realize the warning was meant for her as well; she thought Priest merely wanted privacy to spread her wings. She was caught off-guard when Priest held her hands out and an explosion of light burst forth from the palms of her hands. Flames licked the walls of the corridor and the people swarming them fell back so they wouldn't get burned. A crowd of screaming faces retreating in fear was the last thing Riley saw before her vision went black.

"Okay, we...Riley?"

Riley grabbed Priest's arm to keep from falling, blinking rapidly to clear the spots and fuzz from her vision. "I'll be fine. Just go. Go!" She pushed Priest forward, holding on to her for dear life. She felt Kenzie's hands on her back, keeping her on the path as she ran. Their feet scraped the stone, echoing through the winding corridors of the Underground, and Riley suddenly smelled everything all around them; garbage and decay, vermin and unwashed flesh. Some of the latter may have been coming from her own body, but that didn't make it any less disgusting.

Riley was guided into the lobby of the apartment building, and she heard something heavy skidding across the floor. She

widened her eyes, trying to focus and failing. She could see blobs of shapes dyed red, swirling bugs of yellow and white swarming in her eyes. Someone touched her arm and Riley said, "It's all right. I'll be fine. It's just..."

"What the hell did you use, a fucking flamethrower?" Kenzie asked.

"Never mind," Priest said. "We need —"

"Everyone shut up," Riley said. She held her hands out in front of her and listened. "Something is upstairs. Coming down quick."

Priest and Kenzie ran across the room, and Riley felt Radio's hand on her shoulder. It was large, but surprisingly gentle as he guided her across the room. "Everybody hurts."

"You can say that again, buddy."

She recoiled as gunshots filled the air. In the silence that followed, Riley's ears rang and she feared she had lost another sense. "Priest? Kenzie?" Thank God, she could hear her own voice. "What happened?"

"Ugly motherfucker," Kenzie said. "Anyone else?"

Riley listened hard and then shook her head. "All quiet on the western front."

"Good. Come on." Someone, she wasn't sure who, grabbed her hand and she was pulled up the stairs. After a few shaky newborn colt steps, she managed the staircase with minimal help. By the time they reached the top floor, the red had faded a bit and she could see a hazy cloud she thought was Kenzie moving in front of her. "We're going to have to go through the ceiling."

"You're kidding, right?"



“You want to try running the gauntlet again?”

Kenzie sighed. “You’re insane, Katie. Luckily, I like that in a woman.”

Riley heard banging and cursing as they used the old furniture that was left behind the punch a hole in the ceiling. She blindly moved to her right and wrapped her hand around the stout leg of a table. She stumbled forward, bumped into Priest from behind, and joined the fray. Sheetrock washed down over them, peppering Riley’s face and shoulders. It was all she could do to keep her eyes and mouth shut; she didn’t know if asbestos had been invented when the building was put up, but it was the least dangerous thing endangering her at the moment.

“I think I’m feeling some resistance...” Kenzie said.

Riley heard a hollow echoing sound every time Kenzie thrust upward. “I think you’re getting somewhere, Kenzie.”

Kenzie grunted. “Just a little...”

Something broke, and a tidal wave slammed Riley and Kenzie off their feet. They sputtered and coughed, their fall broken by a rickety banister that kept them from riding the wave all the way back to the ground floor. When Riley opened her eyes, the blobs had transformed themselves into actual blurry human shapes. Priest stood over her, offering a hand. Riley clasped her hand around Priest’s forearm and let herself be pulled to her feet.

She turned to face Kenzie and smiled. “Well, well.”

Kenzie’s hair was plastered to her head, her T-shirt clinging to every curve. She spit up a mouthful of water and said, “What?”

Riley smiled. “Definitely worth getting my eyesight back.”

“Flirt.”

They went back to the hole, which was still raining down like an insane water feature. Priest said, “We still have to get through there. It’s just water.”

“Right,” Riley said. “Better than going through March’s building.”

“Much better,” Priest said. She looked at Riley and said, “What was that you were saying about the power of prayer?”

“Big guy lend a hand?”

Priest smiled.

“Yeah, yeah, mysterious ways. Maybe God just wanted to watch a wet T-shirt contest.” She looked around the landing and found a chair that looked sturdy. She brought it over to the waterfall and gestured at the seat. “I would say ladies first...”

“But there are no ladies present,” Kenzie said. “Up you go, Rye.”

Riley grabbed the edge of the hole they had punched out and, with an assist from Radio and Kenzie, pulled herself up through the deluge. She sputtered, completely underwater for a few seconds before she emerged in the center of a whirlpool. She gasped and spit up mouthfuls of water, swimming for the edge of whatever body of water she happened to be in. She grasped a smooth stone lip and pulled herself up, her clothes hanging from her like sandbags. She sat on the edge and watched as Priest appeared, followed by Kenzie. Riley helped them up and out of the water, before she turned to see where they had come up.

They were in a lobby that stretched twelve stories straight up. People stood next to the waist-high barriers on every floor,

looking down at the spectacle taking place below them. Riley looked behind her and saw people in identical navy blue suits rushing toward them. She recognized the building and laughed, taking the badge from her belt and holding it over her head. "Police. Police business. We're investigating the death of Anthony Benedict."

Security officers, dedicated to keeping their hotel as the one four-star stay in the city, stopped short, but didn't relax. Kenzie helped Radio out of the whirlpool, which was now just a swirl of water circling the make-shift drain. The fountain was almost empty now.

Riley climbed out of the fountain and helped Priest, Kenzie and Radio out as well. She wiped the water from her face and walked up to the closest security guard. "You might want to tell your boss that the foundation under that fountain is weak. Probably would have been an issue before too long even without us tunneling up through it." She smiled and walked on past him, her shoes squelching on the tile as she headed for the doors. From the sounds of their shoes, she knew that the others were right behind her.

She stepped out into the sun which, after a night in the Underground, seemed unbelievably bright. She shaded her eyes with one hand and turned to see Radio had both hands covering his eyes completely. "Ain't no sunshine," Radio said. "Where I come from."

"Where to now?" Kenzie said.

Riley said, "First, we get some dry clothes. Then we find Player and make him pay for what he did."

## Eleven

Riley got a dry outfit from her locker at the station, while Kenzie took Priest and Radio back to her hotel room to get them changed. Riley left the locker room with her blouse unbuttoned over a white tank top, hurrying to catch the cab that was going to take her back to the Depot to retrieve her car. It was hard finding a cabbie willing to go into No Man's Land, rarer to find one willing to wait while she changed clothes. She prayed he would still be there, and that the Nova would still be outside the Depot.

Halfway across the bullpen, someone called her name. "Detective Parra."

Riley considered just barreling on, but she knew it would cause more problems than it solved. She turned and faced Lieutenant Briggs, very aware of the clock ticking downstairs. "Yes, ma'am."

"I haven't seen you since our little powwow yesterday. I assume you and Priest have been keeping busy?"

"Yes. Very busy. In fact I'm..."

"In the middle of a case?" She crossed her arms. "I would love to hear about it."

Riley didn't know the name of the person she and Priest were supposedly staking out all night. And she had no idea how to dovetail that cover story into the true fact that she and Priest were seen climbing out of a hotel fountain at a quarter to six in the morning. She said, "Detective Priest and I have been investigating a murder, off the books. We needed to find a witness. In order to do that, we needed to go into the Underground. Found the witness, got a suspect, we're on our way to bring him in now."

She stopped talking and waited for Briggs to request her badge.

"You'll need back-up. Take a tactical team."

Riley blinked. "Yes, ma'am."

"You should have had one in the Underground with you last night."

"All due respect, ma'am, that would have just scared everybody off. We never would have gotten anything."

Briggs stared at her, then nodded. "You have a point, Detective." She turned and said, "Charleston. Get SWAT together. Detective Parra will tell you where to go."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"It's not always better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission." She held up a finger. "Last warning, Detective."

"Understood."

Briggs said, "Come with me to my office." Riley followed Briggs to the interrogation room and waited patiently while the new lieutenant coordinated a SWAT team to accompany them on the raid of Player's apartment. She chuckled, shook her head, and said, "Honesty. Who'd have thought?" She

looked at her watch, halfway hoping the cabbie was still waiting and also hoping she wouldn't put the guy's kid through college with her fare.

Riley led the team up the stairs, the bulletproof vest digging into her shoulders. She stopped at the top of the stairs and looked back to see Priest pressed against the opposite wall. She nodded, and Riley moved toward the door. Room 4-F, assigned to a Sergeant Travis Unger. He used his real name so he could take advantage of the military discount. Kenzie knew he would go for the cheapest option while still staying above the poverty line. He had been easy enough to track down after that.

Riley pounded on the door. "Mr. Unger? Police, we'd like to ask you a few questions."

A SWAT team member in her earpiece said, "Suspect's window just opened; he is attempting to flee."

Riley turned and planted her foot just under the doorknob. She was inside the apartment before it hit the wall, crossing to the window on the opposite side of the room. Unger was still leaning out, trying to figure out why there was no fire escape, when she grabbed the back of his shirt and hauled him back into the apartment. She used the momentum of her pull to toss him onto the floor, where he sprawled face-down with his arms splayed to either side.

"Travis Unger," Riley said as she took the gun from the back of his belt, "you are under arrest for the murders of Charles Deluca, Timothy Marks, and Colin Tran. You have the right to remain silent. If you give up that right..." She looked up as she continued to recite the Miranda rights, and saw Kenzie enter

the room. She was decked out in the same protective gear as the rest of the team, but she was unarmed.

Riley hauled Unger to his feet and said, "Former Officer Crowe, would you take the prisoner downstairs?"

"Gladly," Kenzie said. She roughly grabbed Unger's arm and forced him to lead the way out of the apartment. She stopped at the doorway and turned back. "Hey, Rye."

"Yeah," Riley said, adrenaline still pumping.

"Take a picture of yourself in that get-up. Vest, sweat glistening on your forehead. Put it in an envelope, send it to Gillian. Her reaction will be worth the postage."

Riley chuckled and said, "Take the prisoner downstairs, you has-been."

When Kenzie left, Priest came inside. "Nice bust."

"Thanks. You look kind of odd in that gear."

Priest looked down at herself and thumped the middle of the vest. "I've always got the full armor of God. Sometimes you need the armor of Man, as well."

"Amen," Riley said. She motioned for Priest to follow her out of the apartment, pulling the ruined door shut behind her.

The hotel was blaming Riley for the broken door. The department was willing to cover the cost, but it required extra paperwork. Riley, as a show of cooperation to the new lieutenant, decided to get it out of the way as soon as possible instead of putting it aside for a slow day.

The bullpen was dark, since Riley's procrastination kept her at her desk long after everyone else went home. She was

seeing double by the time Radio and Kenzie appeared in front of her desk. She leaned back, dropped her pen on the file, and said, "Well. Look who is back among the living."

Radio smiled, and Kenzie said, "Radio's done giving his statement. Written, of course. They want him to stay close in case he has to testify, but Player has pretty much given up trying to hide what he did. Everything Radio said was true. Unger met the woman on patrol, and she seduced him. She used what he learned to set up the ambushes. His father was a career soldier, like mine, and he couldn't bear the thought of what happened getting out. Death before dishonor."

"So he murdered three people. And he was going for four."

"Under pressure," Radio said. "Evil ways. No way out. Dust in the wind."

Riley smirked and shook her head. "Radio, you're one weird dude. But I'm glad I got to know you." She held out her hand, and Radio shook it.

"Someone saved my life tonight."

Riley said. "You did some saving of your own. Take it easy."

Radio grinned. "I'll be around."

"Where are you going?" She looked at Kenzie and said, "Dave Matthews Band, back in oh-two."

"California Dreamin'."

Riley nodded. "It never rains in southern California."

"Last train to Clarksville."

Riley said, "North to Alaska."

"Oklahoma."



“Positively Fourth Street.”

Kenzie held up her hands. “All right, you guys, stop it. Radio, head on down to the car. I’ll drive you to the station.”

“Never been to Spain,” Radio said as he retreated.

“Go your own way,” Kenzie called after him. She sat on the edge of Riley’s desk and said, “So. It was nice working with you again, Parra. You’ve got some chops. A couple of moves I haven’t seen. Shame I couldn’t see what you were capable of in bed.”

“Yeah, well. You can’t always get what you want.”

“But if you try sometimes, you get what you need.” She bent down and kissed Riley’s lips. It was a gentle kiss, chaste, a memento of what they once had. She smiled and slid off the desk. “I’ll see you around, Rye.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah,” Kenzie said. “Something’s going on in this town. Could be fun to stick around and get in my share of trouble.”

Riley sighed. “I’ll start your file now.”

Kenzie saluted and looked past Riley’s chair. She smiled. “Hey, Katie. It was nice working with you.”

“Take care, Mackenzie.”

Riley watched Kenzie go downstairs before she turned to Priest. “Where have you been?”

“Hathaway’s office.” Priest dropped a singed manila envelope on Riley’s desk. “You can do whatever you want with that.”

Riley straightened in her seat. “Is that...?”

“The fake note Kara was forced to write. Yeah.” Priest took her jacket off the back of her seat and shrugged into it. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Riley.”

“Caitlin.” Priest stopped at the top of the stairs and said, “Thank you. You’re a good partner. I need to stop taking advantage of that.”

“You’re a good partner, too, Riley. I’ll let you know when you’re taking advantage.” She smiled and waved over her shoulder. “Good night.”

“Night.” Riley slumped in her seat and stared at the burnt file on her desk. She chuckled, squeezed the back of her neck, and went back to her paperwork.

## Epilogue

Riley ached. She was bone tired, stiff from spending the night before on a concrete floor. Everything hurt. She went to Gillian's apartment, too tired to even entertain the ghosts and memories she usually had to tap dance around. She stripped down to her underwear and dropped on top of the blankets, sighing as the blankets seemed to mold to her body. It was exquisite. She felt herself beginning the backward slide to sleep, her body slowly drifting away from consciousness, her mind fading.

Her cell phone chirped.

Riley groaned and pulled the pillow on top of her face. No more distractions. No one got murdered, no one got hurt. No one else she loved was in danger. She was unnecessary for the next eight to twelve hours. It was a nice fantasy. But not one she could entertain for long. She rolled to the edge of the bed, found her jeans, and freed her phone from the pocket. She flipped it open without bothering to look at the Caller ID. "Parra."

"I love you, too."

Riley's heart seized. She felt as if someone had punched her in the chest, sucked the air from the room, and her mouth tried to form words. When the dam finally broke, the tears began to flow as well. She sobbed into the mouthpiece and finally managed to say, "Gillian?"

“I got your message. Are you okay?”

Riley rolled onto her back and sucked in a deep breath of air. She closed her eyes, thousands of miles closed in the space of four words. She smiled and said, “Yeah, Jill. I’m...doing well. Now.”

“Are you busy? Can you talk?”

“Yeah,” Riley said. She pushed herself up, leaning against the headboard. Exhaustion vanished as she rearranged herself on the bed. “Yeah, I have a couple of minutes.” She wiped her cheeks and said, “How have you been?”

+ e n d +