

MY EMPIRE OF DIRT



+ Geonn Cannon +

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OF DIRT

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Pity the bullet, and pity the man
Who both find their place in the same sad plan
Who both are like the barrel going over the falls
Crying all the way down, 'I never asked to be involved.'

— Josh Ritter, *To the Dogs or Whoever*

One

“That’s not the point,” Riley said as she slammed her car door. “It’s about the camaraderie. The friendship between the two leads.”

Priest adjusted her coat as she got out of the car and shook her head. “They fought over a woman, and the film ended with a suicidal dash against the Bolivian army. They were thieves. And you revere them?”

“Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid are heroes,” Riley said. “That doesn’t necessarily mean they’re perfect or role models. They saw that there was no hope, but they still went out with guns blazing. Despite the odds, despite the fact there was no chance they would win, they didn’t hesitate. That’s heroic.”

“I will admit, knowing your admiration of them explains a lot about you. Not everyone would go up against Marchosias.”

“Butch and Sundance would.”

Priest smiled. “Indeed they would. I’ll bring the DVD back tomorrow.”

“No rush. Watch the commentary. It’ll enlighten you.” She looked down the slope to where the body lay and said, “By the way, they didn’t fight over Etta James. They shared her.”

Priest frowned.

Riley held up the crime scene tape and Priest ducked underneath it to enter the vacant lot. Odd-shaped stones were piled in the corner, remnants of the building that once occupied the space. A group of uniformed officers stood near the far wall, surrounding a crouching person in a dark blue windbreaker. Riley said, "Tell me there's a confession pinned to the victim's jacket."

"No such luck, Detective," Dr. Mill Herron said. Riley was surprised to find she still expected Gillian to be at her crime scenes. Hopefully before too much longer, things would be back to normal. Herron stood, rubbed his hands on the thighs of his slacks, and said, "Looks to be a body dump, naturally."

Riley and Priest approached. The woman was curled in the fetal position, hands clasped against her stomach. Her eyes were wide in her too-pale face, her mouth hanging slack. She wore a black party dress, which made it hard to see the dried blood on her hips. Riley looked up at the surrounding buildings. She supposed someone could have dropped the woman from one of the windows.

"Are the injuries consistent with a fall?"

"No," Herron said. "She was stabbed. Judging from the lack of blood in the area, and the lividity, she was definitely killed somewhere else and dumped here."

Riley nodded. "Any idea how long she was here?"

"Based on body temp, I would say she's been dead for about seven hours."

Riley moved closer to the woman's body and crouched, craning her neck to examine the rubble next to her. "No purse, wallet, ID?"

Herron shook his head. "You see how she's dressed. Even if she had a purse, it was probably one of them little ones that you can't actually store anything in."

"Sure you can," Riley said. "They're the perfect size to hold a cell phone and a puppy."

"My mistake," Herron said. "Crime scene techs will go through the scene with a fine-tooth comb, let you know what they find." He looked at the scattered garbage and said, "Well. The pertinent things, anyway."

"Much appreciated," Riley said. She motioned one of the uniformed officers over. "I want a canvas of the building across the street and the neighbors here. See if anyone noticed someone parked at the curb, or anything suspicious last night."

The uniform nodded and hurried off. Riley motioned for Priest to follow her back to the car. Riley ducked under the crime scene tape and examined the crowd on the other side of the sawhorses. "All these buildings around here are businesses. If the body was dumped at, what, two this morning? No one would have been here to see anything."

"Doesn't hurt to ask."

"Nope," Riley said. She got into the car just as the crime scene unit arrived. She pulled out and let them have her spot, weaving through the field of cop cars and spectators. "If nobody saw anything, we can look for security cameras. Maybe someone in one of the neighboring buildings happened to be looking out their window."

"At the exact right time?" Priest said. "Kind of a long shot."

"I'm feeling optimistic."

Priest smiled. "I've noticed. I guess Kenzie's visit a couple weeks ago really cleared your mind."

"No. Well...maybe that had something to do with it. But that's not why I'm so..."

"Chipper?"

Riley chuckled. "I've been talking with Gillian."

"Really? Is she coming back?"

"Not yet. We've been talking for three weeks. I think she's getting closer."

Priest smiled. "That's fantastic, Riley. I'm very happy for you both."

"Is that the official line from upstairs?" Riley said. "Two women being in love, isn't that an abomination?"

"True love in any form is always encouraged," Priest said. She looked at Riley. "You're in love with her?"

Riley said, "Yeah. Head over heels."

Priest smiled. "I'm happy to hear it. You deserve some happiness."

Riley was uncomfortable with talking about herself, and changed the subject by nodding toward a coffee shop coming up on the right. "You want something for breakfast? I'm buying."

"Sure."

She found a parking spot not far from the shop. As they got out of the car, Riley's phone rang. "Crime scene guys. Maybe they found something." She reached for her wallet as she answered the phone, but Priest waved her off. "If you say so."

Blueberry muffin, coffee black.” She put the phone to her ear and leaned against the back of the car. “Detective Parra.”

“Detective, this is Officer Davis. I’m still at the crime scene on Ninth.”

“Have you found something?”

“Yes, ma’am. The owner of a coin shop across the street was in his front room last night around the time the body was dumped. He said he saw a black sedan pull up, and a man dumped something in the vacant lot. When he came back, he put the black trash bag in his trunk, looked around, and walked away.”

Riley looked across the street and saw a black sedan pulling up to the curb. She smirked; that would be nice and easy. “Any license plate number, description?”

“Guy said it was too dark for details, but he said the man was on the young side, and he was wearing a tuxedo.”

The driver’s side door of the sedan opened, and a man in a tuxedo climbed out. Riley blinked and watched as he walked around to the back of the car.

“Thanks, Davis. Keep me informed, all right?”

Riley flipped the phone shut and watched the man in the tuxedo approach her. She looked past him to the car, then looked over her shoulder to see if Priest was coming back yet. Her badge was fastened to her belt in plain sight, but she still shifted her hips to make sure the man saw it as he approached. He was an older man with jowls starting to form on his jaw line. He wore his gray hair cropped short, and when he smiled, wrinkles framed his mouth and eyes.

“Morning.”

He inclined his chin. "Good morning, Detective Parra."

She tensed.

"Before you jump to conclusions, I will put all my cards down on the table. I am a demon. My name is Crocell. But I am not here to cause you any harm. I know of your latest assignment. The unfortunate woman in the vacant lot. My employer would like to help you with your investigation."

"Your employer. That wouldn't happen to be Marchosias, would it?"

Crocell smiled and reached into his suit jacket. "No." Riley's hand went to her gun, but he revealed a business card before she could draw it. He held the card out between two fingers, and Riley took it from him. The raised letters on the front read "Andrea Silver — Ann/Dras Properties and Development." There was an address and a phone number, nothing else. Riley recognized the name; there were signs for Ann/Dras all over town.

"Okay. So what can your boss tell me about this murder?"

Crocell held his hands out palm-up. "I am afraid that is for her to tell you, Detective."

"Is she a demon, too?"

"Yes. Madame was originally called Andras."

Riley looked at the card. Andrea Silver, Ann/Dras Development. Clever. She flicked the corner of the card with her middle finger and said, "Let your boss know we'll be getting in touch."

Crocell bowed his head. "Madame looks forward to it, Detective." He glanced toward the coffee shop, and his expression soured ever so slightly. Riley knew Priest was

approaching without having to look. She held up her hand to stop Priest from overreacting. Crocell squared his shoulders. "Leave the angel at home, if you would. She would find Madame's residence...uncomfortable."

"I can't imagine."

"Leave this place," Priest said from behind Riley.

Crocell touched two fingers to his forehead and stepped back. "I was just about to do that, Zerachiel. Always a pleasure. Detective Parra." He spun on his heel and walked quickly back to his car. Riley made a note of the license plate before she faced Priest. The angel's face was glowing, awash with light, her fingers wrinkling the bag with their muffins.

"Priest...I need you to calm down."

Priest closed her eyes. She rolled his shoulders, and Riley felt a wave of heat wash over her. Up and down the street, everyone paused for just a moment as they felt the same wave. It seemed to roll across the sidewalk in gentle, undulating waves before dissipating completely. A few people shook their heads and walked on, while others appeared faintly ill. Riley felt loose in the joints, as if she had just stretched after sitting for a couple of hours. She blinked and said, "Feel better?"

"Slightly. What did that thing want?"

Riley passed the business card over the roof of the car. Priest put down the coffee carrier and took the card. "Andras. Figures. He is a great sower of discord."

"She, actually," Riley said. "Guess you're not the only supernatural being who got a sex change when you joined this mortal coil."

Priest quirked her lips and got into the car. She handed Riley her coffee and said, "Andras, or Andrea Silver, claims to

have information on the body in the lot. She wants to talk to me alone. Give me what she knows.”

“Do you believe her?”

“A witness saw a car a car at the scene. The description matched Crocell’s car. I think it’s worth seeing what she has to say.” She peeled away part of the muffin’s paper and took a bite. “What do you know about Crocell and Andras?”

“Andras is a prince underneath Marchosias. Or I suppose princess would be more apt. She commands her own legions. Andras is highly volatile. If she sees a chance to destroy you, she will take it. I don’t understand her requesting your presence. The standard procedure would be to con you into conjuring her, and then tricking you into making yourself vulnerable so she could destroy you. Requesting your presence in her home gives *you* the power. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe she really has information about the murder and just wants to be a good citizen.”

Priest stared at Riley.

“It could happen,” Riley said. She took another bite of her muffin and started the car. “Even if she doesn’t, that car has been placed at the crime scene. I need to check it out regardless of who owns it.”

Priest didn’t look happy about the situation, but she nodded. “I understand. I assume Crocell told you to come alone.”

“Yeah. He seems to think you wouldn’t like Andrea’s house.”

Priest snorted. “All right. Just promise me you’ll be careful, Riley.”

Riley smiled. "Of course. I'm always careful."

"And yet you keep getting hurt."

"Hazards of the job. Besides. I have my guardian angel watching my back. What could go wrong?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she shook her head and muttered, "I know, I know. I'll knock on wood when we get to the station."

T W O

On the way to the station, Riley called Officer Davis and confirmed the witness statement. Black car, tuxedo, young man. So it wasn't Crocell, but the car was too big of a coincidence. Andrea Silver, Andras, whatever the thing was called, was involved. And if she wanted to spill her guts to Riley, then more power to her. Riley pulled up in front of the station, the glass in the doors finally replaced after the shooting. "I might as well head out to see Andras. No point in putting off the inevitable."

"Right. It could be helpful."

Riley shrugged. "We can hope. Call me if Dr. Herron gets anything on the body, or if there are any other developments."

Priest nodded. She paused as she was getting out of the car, and bent down to look back into the car. "Be safe, Riley."

Riley saluted and waited until Priest was on the steps before she drove off. The address on the card Crocell provided was in Cobblestone Square, the one truly nice neighborhood remaining in the city. It was located nearly dead center in the "good" part of town, marked at the corners by large estates. The streets were cobblestone, as the name suggested, and Riley felt the change in the tires as she drove onto the first street.

The battered old trucks on either side of the street belonged to landscapers or gardeners, sweaty men in old T-shirts and baseball caps who were next to invisible to the people who lived in the houses. In neighborhoods like this, people like that tended to be invisible. Riley drove past them to a cul-de-sac. Andrea Silver's home stood at the apex of the street, the two houses on either side of her property blocked by a tall security wall. There was a wrought iron gate at every driveway emblazoned with the initials "AS." Apparently Andras owned the entire cul-de-sac and decided to make it into a compound. "Always a pleasure to see a fortress when you show up without back-up," she muttered.

Riley parked at the mouth of the cul-de-sac and quickly surveyed the area. She could see two black sedans parked in one of the appropriated driveways. She checked to make sure her cell phone was receiving a signal and fully charged as she walked down the middle of the street. People appeared at the iron gates, careful not to touch the bars with their skin as they watched her progress. The way they avoided it made her think the bars may be electrocuted. *Could be good to know if I end up being held prisoner here.* That thought was followed by the realization of what a screwed-up world she was living in.

The lawn of the main house was artificially green, perfectly landscaped with a flurry of white and purple flowers in beds around the base of the house. A brick walkway cut across the grass. Crocell opened the door before she arrived, greeting her with a smile. "Good morning, Detective Parra. We're pleased you could arrange a meeting so quickly."

"You know me. Always willing to help a concerned citizen."

Crocell stepped aside and said, "Please, come in. Ms. Silver is expecting you."

Riley took off her sunglasses as she stepped inside. The entryway was a raised platform, two steps leading directly into a sunken living room ready for a magazine photo shoot. Crocell closed the door behind her and said, "Madame is expecting you in the upstairs sitting room." He gestured at a flight of stairs curling away from the main room like a wisp of smoke.

"Out of the frying pan," Riley muttered. She led the way upstairs, Crocell a few steps behind her.

The stairs led directly to an open sitting room. Two sets of French doors stood on the wall to the right, the curtains pulled back to let in the sun. To the left was a railing, looking down into the living room. From this room, Andras could probably monitor all the comings and goings without any of her guests spotting her. A mahogany desk fronted a tall bookshelf filled with what she was sure were many quaint volumes of forgotten lore. Andras sat at the desk, waiting patiently while Riley examined the room.

"I like what you've done with the place," Riley said. "Marchosias had an office kind of like this. Yours has more in the way of...walls."

Andras smiled. "Thank you, Ms. Parra. Crocell, you may go." Her voice was tinged with an accent; Australian or New Zealand, Riley could never tell the difference.

Once Crocell was gone, Andras stood. Riley was impressed in spite of herself. Dazzling blue eyes, dirty blonde hair, strong shoulders. Her lips were curled in a smile that promised she knew more than you did, and dared you to ask her what it was. She wore a black skirt and a blue blouse, unbuttoned at the throat to reveal an onyx gem set in a gold necklace. She rested her hip against the corner of her desk and looked Riley over.

Andras crossed her arms over her chest. "I thought you would be taller."

"I thought you would be older."

Andras smiled and looked down at herself. "Yes, I'm rather fond of it myself. I saw it in a shop downtown and I simply had to have it."

"So you just hopped from your body to this one?"

"Not exactly that simple. But basically. I spent so many years as a man, I decided to see how the other half lived." She brushed her hand along the collar of her blouse, her fingers brushing her throat. "The changes are quite, ah...distinct."

Riley winced. "If you could wait until I'm gone to molest yourself..."

Andras smiled and dropped her hand.

"Your man Crocus said that you had information about a murder I'm looking into."

"To the point. That's what I like about you, Riley. May I call you Riley?"

"No."

Andras shrugged. "I'm afraid I won't be able to give you a name, address, photograph, all that. But I do know the woman who was found murdered. Her name was Heather Cassidy. And I believe you have a witness placing one of my cars at the scene? I will allow your crime scene technicians to examine the entire fleet at their leisure, but anyone could have taken any car. There is no rental agreement to be signed. If someone in my employ needs a vehicle, they know where the keys are."

"What is that, honor among demons?"

Andras raised an eyebrow. "Something like that. Would you like to have a seat?"

"No."

"Something to drink, then..."

Riley gestured at the door. "I should call the CSU about those cars."

Andras pushed away from the desk and crossed the room. "There was a party last night. I have them every so often; houses this big tend to get lonely. Ms. Cassidy was a guest at the party. I spoke with her around midnight, but I don't know when she left or who she left with. You are welcome to a copy of the guest list, but I'm afraid it won't be comprehensive. Some people brought friends and others didn't show up."

"That will be very helpful. If that's all you have..."

"It's not. I called you here for a reason, Riley. I have wanted to talk with you for a very long time. My information regarding this investigation was simply the impetus I needed to bring you here." She walked to the bar at the back of the room. "You see, Riley, I've been keeping an eye on you. Most all of us have, since you rose up and brought the fight to us. And once you killed Alistair Call..." She whistled and shook her head. "Are you sure you wouldn't like a drink?"

"You have five minutes, Ms. Silver, and I'm gone."

Andras sighed. She poured herself a glass of brandy and carried it back to the middle of the room. "History is written by the victors. Winston Churchill said that. I'm sure you've heard it. Hell, I'm sure you've seen it in action. Imagine, for a moment, that there is a ship on the ocean. And the captain of this ship is an egotistical, narcissistic bastard. He requires total loyalty from the crew. The first mate sees that this is no

way to run a vessel and attempts to take over for the good of everyone; the crew, the passengers, even the captain himself will benefit from being shown the error of his ways.

“There is a battle aboard the ship. In the end, the first mate is defeated. He, and all who followed his mutiny, are sentenced to walk the plank. Thrown overboard and forgotten. Those who remain on the ship have seen how dissention is treated. Do you think any of them will rise against the captain ever again? And how do you think the first mate will be remembered? A troublemaker. Too full of himself to see that the captain knew best. He would be pitied at best, vilified at worst.”

Riley nodded. “Right. I take it God is the captain, and Lucifer is the first mate.”

“Very good, Riley.” She winked. “Knew you were a detective.”

“The poor misunderstood demons. I can see that. You guys have just been trying to do what’s good for everyone else.”

Andras laughed. “Try having everyone on the planet belittle and malign you for centuries. Let everyone on the planet spit on you and call you evil. It won’t take very long before you start to believe it. Demons are simply angels who were cut off from the love of their Lord. I’m sure you know how it feels, Riley. To be torn away from your love. It’s as if a part of your soul is missing.”

Riley thought of the first few weeks after Gillian left and turned away.

“The pain is unbearable. We became what we are through torture. Plain and simple.”

"Is there a point to this, or did I just happen to show up at story time?"

Andras sipped her brandy and touched the corner of her lip with her tongue. "You've only heard one side of the argument. One version of the truth. You were recruited by Samael, an angel destined to fall. The very murderer you were pursuing. Has it ever crossed your mind that you were deceived? You were never given a choice which side you would follow. And since then, they have been able to dictate the rules without consequence. I've decided the time has come to level the playing field."

Riley sighed. "Look, I may not have gone to Sunday school very often, but I think I'll take my chances on the side of angels." She turned and walked back to the stairs. "I'll let myself out, thanks."

"They are lying to you."

Riley hesitated on the top step.

"They believe there is no way you will join us, so they feel free to give you whatever rules they see fit, no negotiation. You are their prisoner, Riley. It is my intention to free you."

"Definitely out of the frying pan," Riley said. She turned to face Andras. "All right, what exactly are they lying about?"

"Your tattoo, for one. It can be removed, relatively painlessly. The hold it has over you will fail. You will no longer be bound to this city as its protector. You will be free to go where you choose, when you choose." She finished her brandy and let the glass hang from her fingers.

Riley said, "I thought the tattoo just granted protection."

Andras nodded slowly. "Yes. But the act of removing it would be a sign to the powers that be. Like taking off your

badge and laying it upon your boss' desk. The badge itself has no power, but the act of taking it off speaks for itself." She touched her tongue to her lips, apparently searching for the remnants of her brandy. "I am not telling you this out of charity. I want you gone just as badly as Marchosias does. However, I believe he is going about it wrong. He wants to destroy you. I believe I can get the same results by offering you what you desire.

"I want to invite you to stay here during the course of your investigation. You will have free rein of the grounds, any information you feel will assist you in the case. During that time, you will allow me to show you our side of this battle. I will attempt to sway you to join us. Not through intimidation or mind control. If you decide to join us, it will be of your own free will."

Riley said, "And if I say no, you kill me?"

"No, of course not. At the end of your investigation, the time will come for you to make a choice. There are three options, as I see it." She held up one finger. "You will decide to keep things the way they are. Fighting on the side of angels, as you call it. If that's your decision, I won't stop you. But we will be enemies next time we meet."

"You'll just let me walk out."

Andras shrugged. "I'll have done my part. I have no interest in forcing you to follow me. Your loyalty must be true."

"Okay, and if I decide to join your team?"

"You will be welcomed into my home as a confidant, as a friend, hopefully. You will be protected from retaliation by your former friends among the angels. And Gillian will be safe as well. We'll extend our protection to her, if you wish."

Riley hadn't expected that. She swallowed hard and looked out the windows at Andras' backyard.

"You will not have to fight. Your sole responsibility will be the protection of this estate."

"You said there were three options."

"Correct. The third option...if I'm not convincing enough to bring you to my side, but I successfully show you the error of following the angels, you will be released."

Riley frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The tattoo will be removed, your obligation to this city will be released, and you will be free to leave and go wherever you wish."

Riley was stunned. "And what do you get out of this?"

"The same thing Marchosias gets from killing you," Andras said. "Two options out of three, you are removed from the fight. That is all we demons want. Some of us believe you have to be dead to accomplish that. I don't believe that's true." She walked to the bar and refreshed her glass. "That's all I had to tell you, Riley. You will have full access to my grounds during the course of your investigation. I want to find Ms. Cassidy's murderer. And if I can achieve that while taking you from the battlefield, then all the better."

Riley didn't know what to say to that, so she turned to leave.

"Detective Parra." Riley stopped. "Be sure to discuss this with your partner. I would hate for her to think we were keeping secrets from her." She smiled and sipped her drink. "Thank you for hearing me out, Detective. I'm sure it's going to be an interesting couple of days."

Three

Crocell was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. He had removed his outer jacket, leaving him in a tuxedo shirt and vest. He had a leather-bound book tucked under his arm, and he presented it to her as she approached. "Detective Parra, a list of the attendees at last night's party. Madame told me to give you a copy."

Riley took the book and flipped it open. It was a typical sign in sheet, with a multitude of different handwriting styles. She had a headache just thinking about translating everyone's name. She closed the book, Andras' offer still ringing in her ears. "Thank you, Freecell. How many people were dressed like you at the party last night? You know, the whole tuxedo route."

"There were six servers, all dressed alike. Myself, of course. And a few of the attendees decided to make it a truly formal affair. I'm afraid I can't give you an exact number."

"If I got you a description, would you be able to match it to a guest?"

"I would do my best."

"Thanks. You're not so bad, for a demon."

His eager to please smile wavered. "And you are not as maddening as other mortals I've met. You should consider yourself fortunate for that, Detective Parra."

“Oh, I’m the luckiest girl in the world, Jeeves.”

He ignored the jibe and walked her to the door. “I’m told you’ll be staying with us. I want you to know that if it was Madame’s intention to harm you...well. I’m sure you know what would happen.”

Riley looked toward the landing and saw Andras standing with one hand on the railing. She held a fresh glass of brandy, which she used to toast Riley.

“Yeah,” Riley said. “I have a pretty fair idea. Thanks for the guest list.”

“My pleasure.”

She walked down the brick path to the street, checking her periphery for movement. There was a chance, however small, that the intention of the meeting was to get her to drop her guard. But she reached the street without incident. The real test was the car. There were only so many precautions she could take without Priest there before she bit the bullet and just got inside. She walked around it twice and checked underneath for any obvious signs of tampering. There were no curses painted in blood on the door, or any unholy symbols etched into the sidewalk underneath. She checked the wheel wells for any tracking devices or bugs.

While she looked, she thought about the offer Andras made. *Freedom*. If the demon was telling the truth — and really, what were the odds there? — then this whole mess could be put behind her. She could forget this town, forget angels and demons existed, let them deal with their own crap like they had been doing for millennia before she came along. All she was going to accomplish was discovering new ways to get herself killed. And if she was released, demons would have no reason to come after her, or Gillian.

Gillian could be safe.

Riley looked out the window at the Andras compound. She felt eyes on her, but couldn't spot anyone in any of the windows. Of course, demons didn't necessarily need to be physically present to spy on someone. She started the car and tossed the guest list onto the passenger seat. She would check it when she got back to the station. For the moment, she wanted to get as far away from Andras and her promises as possible.

Riley arrived to find Priest taking the statement of a slight, bald man with thick glasses. She draped her jacket over the back of her chair and put the guest list on the top of her blotter. Lieutenant Briggs was still holding fort in the interrogation room, the actual lieutenant's office still "under construction." Riley had seen a few contractors wandering through the room, but the door was currently still crossed by crime scene tape.

She went to the interrogation room and knocked on the door. The set-up was the same as it had always been, but a file cabinet stood in one corner, and the table in the middle of the room now held a computer monitor and a sea of papers. Briggs glanced up and then went back to what she was writing. "Detective Parra. What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to give you an update on the Jane Doe we found this morning. We have a name, Heather Cassidy. Apparently she was a guest at a party thrown by Andra-Andrea Silver last night. I have the guest list, and I believe Detective Priest is interviewing a witness right now. Hopefully we'll be able to narrow down a suspect list without too much trouble."

“Nice work,” Briggs said.

“Has Dr. Herron had a chance to examine the body?”

Briggs closed the file. “I think he’s just beginning, if you would like to go down and have a look.” Riley nodded and started to leave. “Detective, do you have a moment?”

“Sure.”

“Close the door.”

Riley closed the door and waited.

Briggs folded her hands on top of the desk. “When I took this job, I was told you were a lone wolf. You did things your way, and damn the consequences. I told you I wouldn’t put up with that the minute we met. In the short time I’ve been here, you’ve done a commendable job of doing things my way. Keeping me in the loop in regards to your investigations. I wanted you to know that I appreciate the effort you’re going to.”

Riley nodded. “It’s my pleasure, ma’am.”

“I’m still going to keep my eye on you.”

“I understand.”

Briggs smiled and relaxed her posture. “All right. You can go now.”

Riley left the interrogation room door open and caught Priest’s eye. She pointed toward the elevators and mouthed, “Morgue.” Priest nodded and turned her attention back to the witness. The elevator doors were just closing as Riley arrived, and she slipped between them and pressed the button for the lowest floor in the building. Allegedly, the morgue was placed next to the garage to facilitate dropping off and picking up bodies. But the truth was, it was stuck in the basement

because people were freaked out by the idea of sharing space with bodies that were being dissected.

Going into the morgue felt like seeing someone else in her apartment. It was the same space, but different, victim to the new occupant's tastes and preferences. Dr. Herron hadn't changed very much of Gillian's set-up, but the room still felt utterly alien as Riley entered. The body of Heather Cassidy lay on the center table, modestly covered by two blue sheets. Dr. Herron stood by the feet, preparing an instrument. Her midriff was exposed and Riley could see the now clean cut in her stomach. She had looked young in the vacant lot, but now she looked prepubescent. It was hard to see her lying lifeless on the table.

"Doc, we have an ID for her, in case you want to introduce yourself before you start cutting."

"Couldn't hurt, I suppose. Hello, Detective."

"Hey. Her name is Heather Cassidy."

Herron straightened and looked at the girl's face. "Ooh, yes. I recognize her now. Her father was Reginald Cassidy." He smiled down at her. "Hello, Heather Cassidy. I'm Millard Herron. I'll try to make this as painless as possible."

"Did you know her?"

Herron shook his head. "Not personally. She's in the newspapers a lot. Kind of a party girl. Kind of sad, really. I knew she looked familiar." He clicked his tongue and bent over the body again. "Shame."

"Yeah," Riley said. She felt cheated; the information Andras gave her was starting to look less than helpful if the ME would be able to tell her everything anyway.

"Do you think it's hotter in New Mexico or Florida?"

Riley blinked at the sudden change of subject. "Uh...I don't know. Florida? You wouldn't have to worry about hurricanes in New Mexico."

"True!" He pursed his lips and then focused on the body again. "She was stabbed twice. I thought it was just once, but taking a closer look...she was stabbed twice in almost the exact same place. The cut is slightly mirrored, you see?" He pointed at the wound and Riley saw a slight deviation in the line of the cut. "To hit that exactly, it would have to be two very quick jabs." He demonstrated by thrusting his hand forward.

"Crime of passion, you think?"

"Mm, yes. If it was something else, I believe we would see more injuries. Someone acted impulsively and then tried to cover it up by dumping the body." He rested his hands on the edge of the table. "I like baseball. Florida has the...Marlins? New Mexico...does New Mexico have a professional team?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. What does that have to do with the case?"

"This case? Absolutely nothing." He pushed away from the table and walked to the light board. "I took X-Rays. She has a small fracture on her cheekbone. It wouldn't have been much trouble if she had lived, painful, but not horribly so. I figure someone hit her not long before she died. Bolsters your crime of passion theory. She got into a fight and the stabbing was incidental."

"What kind of blade was it? A knife, a letter opener?"

"A knife, definitely," Herron said. "Single-edged, not terribly long. Long enough to do the job, naturally. But something that could have easily been concealed." He rested his fingers on his chin and drummed them slowly. "Humidity."

Riley glanced at him.

“It affects bodies. Lying out in the heat.”

“It rained last night,” Riley said. “The temperature was... what, in the sixties at most? If the body was affected by a heat source, then—”

Herron waved his hands. “No, no, not her. I was just thinking out loud. New Mexico and Florida are both so... warm. I’m sure it would affect decomposition.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

He looked at her and said, “Oh. Sorry. I have such a habit of thinking out loud, and it’s usually to dead bodies, I just assume people know what I’m talking about.” He smiled brightly and walked back to the table. “My time here is almost up. There are offers from two other coroner’s offices, but I’m not sure which I should take. New Mexico or Florida. To be honest, it feels like a choice between two evils.”

Riley couldn’t muster up interest in Herron’s story. If he was leaving, that meant she would have to get used to someone else in Gillian’s rightful place. “Any idea who your replacement will be?”

“I’m not getting a replacement.” He picked up a file and made a note about something he saw on the body.

“What do you mean?”

“I only took this job on a temporary basis. I didn’t want to be permanent here. No offense. I’m just not exactly a ‘stay in one place’ kind of person.” He bent down over the body and said, “Bruises on the arm. See?” He pointed with his pinky and Riley put her curiosity aside to examine the dark splotch.

“Someone grabbed her.”

“Looks like it. It seems the little lady had a harrowing last night. Unfortunate.” He straightened up and walked toward his office.

Riley said, “Wait a minute. If you’re not going to get a replacement, who is going to take care of the bodies that come in? The city coroner?”

Herron paused at the door. “No, I heard something about the former medical examiner wanting her job back. Jill something.” He waved and turned his back to her. “Nice talking with you, Detective.”

Riley couldn’t summon up the mental capacity to form a response.

F O U R

Riley took the stairs back to her desk, too buzzed to consider the elevator. She would have just bounced off the walls. She reached the stairwell door just as it opened, revealing Priest. They both startled at the sight of the other, and then Riley smiled and grabbed Priest's face. "Hey, Caitlin." She kissed her hard, on the lips, and Priest yelped as Riley released her. "How did the interview with the witness go?"

"Fine," Priest said. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve and said, "I think I enjoyed your company more when you were depressed."

Riley chuckled and leaned against the wall. "Gillian is coming back."

Priest's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Riley, that's fantastic. When?"

"I don't know. Dr. Herron just told me that he's looking at other jobs and, when he leaves, Gillian is getting her old position back. It's just a matter of time, I guess."

Priest leaned against the opposite wall. "It's great news. Truly. But...are you ready for her to come back?"

"I've been ready since the minute she left."

"The reasons she left are still here, Riley. The danger to you, the vulnerability she presents to your enemies...this battle hasn't ended yet."

Riley looked down at her feet. "Maybe I have a way to end it."

"What?"

"I said maybe there's a way." She sighed. "Andras made me an offer. If I agree to it, she'll give me the option of walking away free and clear. No more albatross around my neck. I can 'resign,' and Gillian will be safe. She's willing to take steps to come home, so maybe I should be willing to make some sacrifices myself."

Priest was fuming. "Sacrifices like your soul?"

"Caitlin..."

"This is Zerachiel talking, okay? Any deal you make with a demon is a *bad one*. My Lord, Riley, I shouldn't have to tell you that. They lie, they trick, they create loopholes that you cannot escape. Whatever she is offering you is not as appealing as it sounds."

"First of all, what they're offering me is freedom. They're giving me a choice, which is more than you guys have done. My God, Samael just waltzes in and dumps all this responsibility on my lap without so much as a how-do-you-do. You don't tell me anything. You refuse to answer my questions, or you answer them so goddamn cryptically that I'm more confused than before I asked."

Priest stepped forward. "Riley, I'm begging you. Stay away from Andras."

Riley advanced as well, closing the distance between them. "Or what?"

Priest's expression softened. "Look at what they've done to us."

After a moment, Riley realized what Priest meant. Her anger dissipated enough to realize her fists were clenched, and she was a heartbeat away from slugging her partner. She backed off a step and relaxed her fingers. "It's frustrating, Priest. Okay? Andras may be a demon, but she's offering me answers."

"Think of what the cost will be."

Riley held her hands out. "Where else am I going to get them, Zerachiel? You? God? Am I supposed to go pray and wait for divine inspiration? I'm not an idiot. I didn't just join this fight yesterday. It's been a couple of months, and I'm not a newbie. I won't go in there blind. But I have to go in there to close this case, anyway. Might as well do a little scouting while I'm at it." She opened the stairwell door and said, "Don't worry, Caitlin. I'll make the right choice."

"I hope so," Priest said as she followed Riley from the stairs. "I hope Andras really lets you make a choice at all."

Riley led the way back to their desks. "What did the witness tell you?"

"He didn't have much. Like he said, it was dark and he was half asleep, so he can't give much of a description. But the body-dumper was wearing a tuxedo, just like Crocell. He arrived in a black sedan..."

"Of which Andras has an entire fleet. She had a party last night when, at a conservative estimate, a dozen people were dressed in tuxedos." Riley opened the book Andras offered her. "This is a list of everyone who was at the party. Or at least those who signed in." She ran her thumb down the page, estimated how many names were on one sheet, then thumbed

through to see how many pages were filled. "We've got about forty names here. If we figure each of them brought a date, that's about eighty people who could have done it."

Priest stood behind Riley's seat and looked at the list. She pointed to one name. "Phil N. DeBlanc?"

"Okay, eighty suspects give or take. We'll also eliminate the women. We may not have a description, but the coin dealer did say it was a man." She turned the page so Priest could see it better. "Recognize any names?"

Priest nodded. "Several. Valefar, Gamigin, Shax and Sitri. Not to mention mortal celebrities. Looks like Andras throws quite the shindig."

Riley straightened in her seat. "Shit."

"What?"

Riley pointed to a name at the bottom of the page and then looked across the office. Lieutenant Briggs was still in her office with the door open, but Riley couldn't see her from where she sat. "Do you think we can trust her with this?"

"I don't know," Priest said. "I don't feel anything hanging around her, evil or otherwise. But she's still an unknown agent."

"She is our boss." Riley looked down at the sign in sheet, the last name on the first page of signatures. She could see the man's face perfectly. He was standing on the other side of her detective's badge when she earned it, and he was the man in the newspaper whenever there was an outcry about the crime rate. His autograph said Preston A. Benedict, but she knew him better as the commissioner of the police department.

"Andras isn't necessarily a criminal," Priest said. "We can't take this to Briggs until we know for a fact he did something

wrong. Ann/Dras is a big development company. They have projects going all over the city. Maybe the commissioner was just glad-handing.”

Riley raised an eyebrow. “Slow down with the lingo, Starsky.”

“Who?”

Riley shook her head and continued through the list. “Some big names on this list. A mayor’s aide, a newspaper reporter, a couple of vice cops. Andras chooses her friends well.”

“She’s wily,” Priest said. “I hope you keep that in mind.”

Riley pressed her lips together and ignored the insinuation.

“How do you want to play this?”

“We can’t just randomly walk up to these people and ask them where they were the night of the murder. We need to find out who among them knew Heather Cassidy.”

“Heather...?”

“The victim,” Riley said. “Sorry. I got her name from Andras.”

Priest nodded. “I hope you don’t plan on asking Andras for a list of Heather’s friends.”

“No,” Riley said. She opened the bottom drawer of her desk and pulled out a phone book and did a quick search for Cassidy. “I don’t turn the newspaper over to get the answers for the crossword, either.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I’m a detective.” She stood up and grabbed her coat. “Let’s go.”

*

Heather Cassidy lived in a loft downtown, far seedier than her parent's money could have afforded. Riley and Priest rode up in an ancient freight elevator, listening to the clanging of gears and chains over their heads. Riley looked up at the rusted roof of the car and said, "If this thing falls, you'll grab me and fly, right?"

"Fly where? We're locked in a rusted metal box."

Riley grunted. "You have a point."

Heather's loft was on the third floor, and Riley was grateful that they made it without incident. "How about I bust open the window and you fly me down when we're done here?"

"Sounds good to me."

The elevator opened in the middle of the loft, and seemed to serve as a dividing point of the space. To their left were the bedroom and bathroom, both lit by a huge window the size of the TV in Andras' living room. To the right was the spacious living room and kitchen. The furniture was straight out of a thrift store, but it had a certain eclectic charm. A large canvas hung on the far wall, covered with finger-painted portraits, names signed in dripping watercolors, and a sea of handprints in every color of the rainbow.

"I thought her father was some kind of big deal," Priest said. "Why would she live here?"

"Rebellion. Kid who has always had everything resents it, decides to see how the other half life. It usually lasts a couple of years before she comes to her senses and runs home to her silver spoon." She picked up a brown paper bag, looked inside, and wadded it up.

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

Riley snorted. “The only experience I have is from busting the spoiled brats for possession. Then I have to hear their sniveling calls to Daddy to come bail ‘em out.” She carried the bag across the kitchen and scanned the floor for a trash can. There was a tall, narrow cabinet next to the fridge, and she hooked her index finger under the handle. “That’s when they didn’t overdose before we—”

Riley barely registered the man, her focus locked on the glint of light off the thing in his hand. When he lunged out of the closet at her, she swung her left arm up, ducked down, and used the guy’s forward momentum to roll him across her back. When she stood, he tumbled to the ground, clipping the center island with his hip before he sprawled on the tile. Riley pivoted, pulled her gun, and aimed it at the back of the man’s head. “Don’t move, don’t twitch a finger.” She kicked the drywall knife away from his hand and said, “Who are you?”

“Calvin. Calvin Coley. Please don’t kill me.”

Riley growled and bent down to grab the collar of his shirt. “I’m not going to kill you. If you’re lucky, I’ll just arrest you for assaulting a police officer.” She hauled him to his feet and pressed him against the island as she patted him down. The kid trembled throughout the frisking, his eyes darting around the room until her words registered.

Coley tried to look over his shoulder at her. “You’re cops? Oh, thank God.” He sagged against the edge of the island. “Listen, you gotta help me. My girlfriend...”

“Heather Cassidy?”

“Yeah. She, she’s missing. She’s been missing since last night. Or, I guess this morning. I don’t really...know. I haven’t felt...really right since last night. Nothing’s right anymore. I

can't think. But she's gone, I know that, okay? She went to some party, and I haven't seen her since."

Riley glanced at Priest, whose eyes were filled with compassion. Riley, however, was still seeing the knife coming at her. "Hands behind your back."

"Detective Parra, perhaps we could show a bit of compassion."

Riley hated good cop, bad cop. She hesitated and then released his hands. "Step over there." Coley did as requested. "Mr. Coley, I'm sorry to be the one to inform you, but Heather Cassidy was found murdered this morning."

Coley stared at her for a moment, and then glanced at Priest as if for confirmation. When she nodded, he seemed to deflate. He caught the edge of the fridge and hung his head. "I should have gone with her. I should...have gone."

Priest crossed the room and helped Coley stand. "It's all right. Take your time. Let's go have a seat in the living room, okay?"

"Do you know where Heather was going last night?" Riley asked as she followed them from the kitchen.

"To a party at that developer's house. Andrea Silver." Riley nodded. "Heather said that she was going to get some money from Silver. A couple hundred dollars."

Priest said, "Why did she need money?"

"Her father cut her off. Because of me." He sniffled. "He said his daughter would never get married to some nobody. Guess he was right." He looked at his bare left hand and curled his hand into a fist.

Riley couldn't help feeling sorry for the guy. She sighed and finally took a seat. "How did Heather know Andrea Silver?"

"Heather's dad hired Silver's company all the time. New projects and stuff. I guess they were old family friends. Heather heard about the party and decided to see if she could get an invitation."

"What time did she leave?"

"Around one in the morning."

Riley glanced at Priest, who met her gaze with a frown. "Are you positive about that?"

Coley nodded. "She said that she didn't want to be a party crasher. She planned to get there as things were dying down."

Priest said, "Calvin, would you excuse us for a moment?"

He nodded and Riley walked back toward the elevator. When she turned around, Priest was right behind her. Priest said, "Dr. Herron put the time of death at two in the morning," Riley said. "If she left here at one..."

"She had time to get to the party." She looked at her watch. "But she wouldn't have been there very long at all. Maybe half an hour?"

Priest said, "Someone had to have grabbed her and killed her almost immediately after she got to the party. How does your suspect list look now?"

Riley said, "Down to one." She looked over at Coley, who was rocking back and forth with his head in his hands. "I'm going to have another talk with Andrea Silver."

Five

Riley expected a wave of energy, a flash of light, some indication that Priest was infusing her old Nova with some kind of special power. But Priest finally dropped her hands from the roof without any fireworks. "It won't turn this thing into a tank, but it should keep any demons from being too interested in it." She put her hands on her hips. "I really wish you would let me go with you."

Riley patted Priest on the shoulder. "I think you would have a hard time keeping your cool there. I know, I know. I'm hardly the level headed one in this relationship. But I think it's best if I go in alone."

"That's exactly what Andras wants."

"Yeah, well...if I pretend to play by her rules, maybe she'll give me more information." *Not to mention maybe she'll answer some of my questions about my tattoo.* She opened the car door and said, "As soon as we close this case and Heather Cassidy's killer is behind bars, I'm going to cut ties with Andras. Do you need me to drop you off at the station?"

"No. It's a nice day; I think I'll walk."

"If you're sure." Priest started to turn away, and Riley said, "Priest. I do a lot of stupid things, and I make a lot of hair trigger decisions. But a demon is a demon. I'm not going to go dark side on you, Yoda."

Priest didn't turn around, but she said. "Still. Careful, you should be."

Riley grinned. "You rented the DVD?"

Priest smiled over her shoulder. "It's actually not bad. Stay safe, Riley."

"There is hope for you yet, Priest." Riley suddenly remembered something she wanted to ask. "Hey, Priest. Why would the demons at Andrea Silver's place be afraid to touch the gates?"

"Are they iron?"

"I assume so."

Priest nodded. "Iron is anathema to demons. It burns them. It's like putting salt on a slug. It won't kill them, but it'll send them back to the depths of Hell."

Riley raised an eyebrow. "Good to know."

"Riley, if you're close enough to use iron against a demon, it may already be too late."

She shrugged. "Sometimes it's nice to have the option of a last-moment attack."

The compound was a bit more active when Riley arrived the second time. She spotted a few people behind the gates, tending the yards and doing various things with gardening tools. She walked past them and wondered what happened to the original owners of the houses. Andras had the money to buy them out, Riley was sure, but demons rarely got what they wanted by throwing cash around.

The front door of the main house opened as Riley approached. Crocell smiled and said, "Detective Parra. Do you require assistance with your bags?"

"I'm not staying, D-cell. I need to talk to your boss. Where is she?"

"Madame is indisposed at the moment. However..."

"You'll go get her for me."

Crocell's smile wavered. "I was going to say—"

"I don't care." She snapped her fingers and shooed him away. "Chop-chop."

Crocell stepped forward and fixed her with a level stare. "You are a base life form. You are so far below me, that it sickens me to show you even a modicum of respect. Can you imagine bowing to vermin? Such as it is for me. If I were given the order, I would eviscerate you where you stood. I would keep you alive as I tore your—"

"Can I have a glass of water while you're at it? I'm a bit parched."

His eyes widened and Riley saw a flash of fire behind them. Riley didn't budge despite the fact her brain was screaming at her to run.

"You want to tear me apart so bad? Fine. The feeling is mutual. But someone has ordered you to keep your hands off. Someone you're obviously scared to death of. So here's the deal. You stop making empty threats, and I won't make you kiss my feet when I enter a room. Got it?"

Crocell worked his jaw, glared at Riley without blinking, and then forced a smile. "As you wish, Detective Parra. If you'll wait in the sitting room, I'll get Madame for you."

Riley walked into the living room while Crocell went up the stairs. Riley put her hands in her pockets as she scanned the living room. The space flowed directly into the kitchen, and Riley assumed this was where the party happened the night before. She glanced at the coffee table and frowned when she spotted the objects sitting on the corner.

A hammer and a nail, placed at right angles to each other. Riley walked around and looked more closely at the tools. There was no evidence of carpentry, no dust or damage that she could see. She wondered if it was some kind of crucifixion reference, but that didn't make any sense. The nail was more of a spike, anyway, the sort of thing used for railroads and very old construction. Riley was reaching for the hammer when Andras said her name from the top of the stairs.

"Riley. I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

Andras wore a coral-colored robe, her hair held up by a jade pin. The robe ended mid-thigh, and Riley couldn't tear her gaze from the woman's toned, lithe legs as she descended the stairs. That was probably the whole purpose of calling to her from the landing, a forced ogling designed to throw Riley off. Riley was determined not to let such blatant manipulation work; she had seen plenty of legs, the majority of them nicer than these. Well. Half of them nicer, maybe. A good percentage. *Damn.*

Andras stepped into the living room and Riley saw that the front of the robe was gapped enough to reveal her cleavage. "I was just taking a bath." She lifted her arm and ran her fingers along the skin, dragging her robe sleeve up. "It's one of the indulgences I found myself addicted to after I took human form. The way your skin feels after a bath...there's nothing like it." She brushed her hand down Riley's cheek, and Riley

was too startled by the contact to realize how close Andras had gotten to her. "Feel?"

"Yeah. Soft."

Andras' lips parted in a smile. "I'm glad you came back, Riley." Her hand rested on Riley's shoulder and she stepped even closer.

"Andras..."

"Yes, Riley?" Her voice was barely a breath, a puff of warm air that washed over Riley and seemed to rattle her thoughts like leaves on a tree. She closed her eyes and tried to force them back into order, but suddenly Andras' lips were on hers. Riley gasped, and Andras slipped her tongue into Riley's mouth. A fog seemed to fill her mind, flooding across reason and common sense so all she could focus on was how good it felt to be kissing someone. Such a tender touch, sweet lips that tasted of brandy, a flash of a tongue against hers. She desperately wanted to touch the skin she had glimpsed when Andras descended the stairs, wanted to kiss every inch, but something...something was...

Riley pulled back, hands firm against Andras' shoulders and pushing her away. "Stop," she gasped.

Andras moved her hand down Riley's side. "Yes. Perhaps we should take this upstairs."

Riley squirmed away from Andras, the fog clearing the further she got from the demon. "Holy hell." She swallowed hard and licked her lips. She took a few steadying breaths before she risked facing Andras again. "Don't...do that." The words sounded hollow in her own ears, but it was the best she could do under the circumstances.

"As you wish," Andras said. "I merely assumed your return... well." She smiled and held her hands out. "I have desires like anyone else. And you are a very attractive woman."

Riley decided to ignore that. "What's with the tools?"

Andras looked down at the hammer and smiled. "Consider it a visual aid."

"For?"

"It's not important." She tugged the two halves of her robe together, a modest move that actually drew more attention to her breasts. And the fact she was naked underneath the silk. "If you didn't come here to take me up on my offer, why have you come?"

"I have some questions about Heather Cassidy. According to her boyfriend, she didn't leave home until about one this morning. Our medical examiner estimates she was killed around an hour later. Not much time to get here and mingle. Plus, you lied to me. You told me you saw her around midnight."

Andras shook her head. "No, I said I spoke with her at midnight. We spoke on the phone."

"Was she ever at the party? Can you confirm she made it to the house?"

"I'm not sure. I never saw her."

Riley started for the door. "Thanks, Ms. Silver. I think I can see just how much help you'll be. I'll contact you if I have any further questions."

"Your tattoo was given to you after a night of passion with the first woman you ever loved. Christine Lee. You thought the tattoo was a gift, but it was truly a curse. She cursed you to

this battle, Riley, by branding you. Marked you for the angels to take notice. When she died, all that weight dropped on you. What I'm offering you is freedom."

Riley faced Andras. "You lied about Heather Cassidy. Or, fine, you screwed with the facts so I'd draw the wrong conclusions. When you kissed me, I couldn't think or reason... so I hope you won't be offended when I say I plan to stay the hell away from you."

Andras raised an eyebrow. "Does your head remain clear when you kissed Gillian? How reasonable are you when she touched your bare stomach and then slid her hand higher?" Andras slowly approached. "Perhaps you are too quick to blame my nature." She brought her hand up to touch Riley's hair. "Perhaps you are merely lonely. Ah, I know the feeling all too well."

Riley twisted her head and Andras touched air. "I wish I could say it was nice talking to you, Andras. I'll come back if I want any more lies or cryptic clues."

Andras smiled. "I'll hold you to that promise, Detective."

Riley left the house without spotting Crocell, still trying to shake the haze caused by Andras' kiss. *It had nothing to do with feelings. She's a demon. So why is my heart still pounding? Why are my hands shaking?* She shook her head. "Because you realize how damned close that was." If she hadn't stopped it, she had no doubt she would have ended up in Andras' bed. Naked, vulnerable, and... She pushed the image out of her head. She would have been putty in Andras' hands. And then, well, there's no telling what might have happened or how she would have ended up. An image of her bloody corpse decorating the front of Marchosias' building eradicated any remnants of the spell Andras cast on her.

Riley got into her car and stared at the wheel for a long moment. She was safe here. Priest's blessing wasn't the strongest weapon against demonic interference, but it would do the trick. It was like taking an antacid to quell the stirrings of heartburn. Preventative measures to keep her from unnecessary pain. She gripped the steering wheel and thought back to the tableau in the living room.

Andras smiling down at the hammer and the nail. What did that mean? Heather Cassidy was murdered by a knife. Calvin Coley had attacked Riley with a knife in the apartment, but that didn't mean anything. Anyone who hears an intruder breaking in would grab a handy weapon, and nine times out of ten, that was a knife.

Riley looked back at the house and saw Andras standing in the upstairs window. She was still in the robe, her hair down around her shoulders. Her smile widened when she realized Riley was watching her, and she lifted her hand in greeting. It was only after Riley waved back that she realized the sun was shining on her car's window. The glass would have been a mirror, and she should have been invisible to the demon.

The thought made her shudder and drop her hand. She turned to face the street and saw Crocell standing on the corner of the cul-de-sac. His hands were in his pockets, eyes locked on her car. Riley was suddenly very aware that she hadn't given the car a check before she got in, but she wasn't going to let Crocell know he had shaken her with just his presence. She gripped the key and twisted, biting the inside of her cheek when the engine roared to life.

She refused to look at Crocell as she drove past him, but she did look in her rearview mirror as she turned the corner. He had moved to the middle of the street to watch her leave.

“I actually considered taking her invitation to move in,” Riley muttered. “I must be out of my goddamn mind...”

She was glad she was alone in the car, because she couldn’t think of anyone who would disagree with that statement.

Six

“What does a hammer and nail mean to you?”

Priest looked up as Riley passed her desk. She rested her hands on her desk blotter and thought for a moment. “Construction work?”

“Not visibly. Maybe there were some renovations and the carpenter left them behind. Although I didn’t notice them this morning.” Riley shrugged and sat down. “Not that I was looking for them when I was there the first time.”

“I wish I had been present for the start of this conversation.”

Riley smiled. “Sorry. Andras had a hammer and a nail sitting on the coffee table. She said it was a visual aid.”

“To help with the case?”

“I don’t know. I assume so.”

Priest watched Riley carefully. “What else happened while you were there?”

“Nothing,” Riley muttered. She ran her thumb over her bottom lip and said, “She also changed her story. She said she *spoke* with Heather Cassidy at around midnight. She never actually saw her at the party.”

“The dump vehicle and the tuxedoed man place her at the property, however briefly.”

"I timed the distance between Heather's loft and the Andras compound. It took just over half an hour to get there, with just a little traffic. Figure about twenty minutes in the dead of night. How far is the Silver compound from the dump site?"

"At that time of night, ten minutes. Give or take."

Riley nodded. "Sounds right. So Heather arrives at the party at one-twenty. She must have been killed by one-forty-five at the latest. Not a lot of time to piss someone off. Unless she was going there to confront someone."

"Blackmail?"

"Coley did say that she expected to get some cash. She wasn't going to the party as a guest; she was going because she knew someone would be there."

Priest gestured at the guest list. "Coley said that she only expected a couple hundred dollars. The people on that list, you could blackmail them for thousands and they wouldn't miss it. Some of them could afford millions in order to save face. So why such a low payday?"

"Maybe it was a bluff. Or maybe she decided to ask for a low amount and increase the odds the people will pay. If you can afford to pay a blackmailer two million dollars, think of how fast you would run to an ATM if they only asked for five hundred."

Priest said, "An economical thief? And you say I'm naïve."

Riley smirked. "I've been corrupting you with too many bad movies. Let's say she was blackmailing someone. They agreed to pay, and set up the meeting at Andras' party. She said herself that the guest list was fluid. No one really knew for sure who was there and who wasn't. It was about as anonymous as you could get. She shows up, maybe she

decides to ask for more money after seeing rich people amusing themselves. Target gets angry, grabs a knife, stabs her.”

“The party was still going at the time. It may have been slowing down, but people would have been around. You think the guests will cover up a murder?”

“Maybe Heather and her killer met outside by the cars. But even if it happened in the middle of the living room, there’s no guarantee anyone would come forward. You know how these rich people are. They think they can buy anything, even an alibi for murder. They get attacked, they throw money at the problem. Before long, it’s their go-to solution to everything. It’s just the way they think.” She sighed. “When you’re...” She blinked.

“What is it?”

Riley straightened in her chair. “When you’re a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail. That’s what Andras was trying to tell me with her little visual aid.”

“Okay. What does it mean?”

Riley shook her head. “I don’t have a clue.”

“Are you the hammer or the nail?”

Riley rubbed her chin. She obviously hoped Andras considered her a hammer; being a nail was too dangerous. Hammers attacked. Hammers...solved problems. “I’m a hammer.”

“Good. What’s the nail?”

“This case?” Riley said. “Heather Cassidy.” She scanned the room. “Andras?” She put the pieces together, amazed to find out they fit. “You and I are both hammers. We found out there

was a demon involved and, because of who we are, we immediately focused on her.”

“Naturally.”

“Maybe we need to take the demons out of the equation. If anyone else had taken this case, they would have put Andrea Silver to one side as soon as they interviewed her. She doesn’t have anything to add; she didn’t even see Heather the night she died. The only connection is Heather driving to Andras’ place in the middle of the night to get some money.”

“A couple hundred dollars. Are we still on the blackmail theory?”

Riley heard Andras in her head, a whisper of a voice breaking through the fog. *“I have desires like anyone else. And you are a very attractive woman.”*

“Heather was a call girl.”

“What?”

Riley counted off the reasons on her fingers. “Andras told me that she has desires just like anyone else. But Andrea Silver is a prominent businesswoman; she can’t exactly go out to clubs hoping to pick up a one night stand. Maybe that’s what the whole party was about; she was trying to get laid. But either she didn’t get any takers, or she didn’t like the potential conquests who were there, so she called in professional help. I’ll bet she had used Heather in the past. She calls Heather up as the party is winding down, asks her to come over for a little fun.”

“Our earlier timeline only gives them a twenty-five minute window for sexual relations.”

Riley shrugged. “Yeah.”

“That’s nowhere near enough time.”

Riley laughed, and then realized Priest was serious. “Good lord, woman.”

“What?”

Riley waved her off. “Okay, let’s not assume they had sex. What happened? She ran into someone she knew downstairs.”

“Why would they kill her? And it seems that if Andras called someone for sex, she would be aware when they arrived. Hell, Crocell met me at the door both times I visited.” She chewed her bottom lip. “Someone in that house saw something.”

“Good luck getting it out of them.”

“I’m not even going to ask.”

“Oh, right. You’re a detective.”

Riley said, “Sarcasm is not becoming on you, Caitlin.”

Priest shrugged and leaned back in her chair. Riley watched her, surprised at how comfortable they were with each other. She would never have dreamed about replacing Sweet Kara, but necessity and happenstance and a horrid chain of events... she supposed she could have ended up with a worse partner. She rested her elbows on the arms of her chair and looked up at the ceiling as she rattled the facts of the case in her brain.

The rattle of the chains in Heather’s loft elevator came to mind. It would drive her crazy if she had to live next to something that damn noisy. You could probably hear it from every apartment, all day long. Riley furrowed her brow and said, “Coley knew we were coming.”

“Mmm?”

“He wasn’t hiding in the kitchen closet all day. He heard us coming. He must have heard us talking when we were in the apartment, too. He didn’t attack until I found him.”

“So?”

“He thought someone was coming after him. The elevator was a cue to get the knife and find a hiding place. He thought we were there to kill him. But he claimed he didn’t know Heather was dead.”

“His surprise seemed genuine.”

“But he knew someone wanted him and Heather dead. Maybe his surprise was just because he didn’t realize Heather had been caught.”

Priest nodded. “So we need to find out who he was so afraid of.”

Riley stood and grabbed her jacket off the back of her chair. “And we better hope we get to him before Heather’s killers do.”

“We’re not going to be able to ride up in the elevator,” Riley said. “We’re going to want the element of surprise this time. Did you see any stairs last time we were there?”

“Just the fire escape.”

Riley winced. “Probably make just as much noise as the elevator did.”

“I’m not going to fly you through the window.”

“One of these days, you’re going to fly me.”

“It’s not a parlor trick.”

Riley smiled. "I know. It's better than a parlor trick. It kicks ass."

Priest rolled her eyes as they pulled into the parking lot of the building. Riley slowed to a crawl and scanned the building. The fire escape looked hazardous; she wouldn't trust it to perform its true purpose, let alone provide them with a stealthy way to enter the building. She tried to determine if there were any new cars parked outside the building, but it was impossible to tell.

She parked near the doors and got out, walking around to the trunk of the car. She handed Priest a Kevlar vest before donning her own. She fastened the Velcro on the shoulders, checked her guns ammo, and said, "Okay. Let's hope this is all pointless and we're actually ahead of the game for once."

They entered the building and Riley started across the lobby toward the elevator. She was almost there when Priest said, "Riley." She turned and saw Priest standing at a door marked Maintenance Only. Riley walked back and tested the knob. The door was unlocked and revealed an incredibly narrow staircase. Priest said, "I saw better craftsmanship when we were in the Underground."

"But hey, it's rent-controlled," Riley said. "Come on."

They moved quickly up the stairs, passing doors that gave maintenance men, landlords, and other various entities access to the apartments. Riley thought it was ironic that anyone could reach any loft via the elevator, but the worker's entrance seemed to have more security than anything else in the building.

When they reached the apartment where Heather and Coley lived, Riley tested the knob. The door was unlocked, and she leaned her shoulder against it. The door opened a crack, and

she pulled on the knob as she leaned on the door to keep it from opening too far. She peered into the apartment, scanning for movement or signs of a struggle. She spotted Calvin Coley sitting at the kitchen table, one bare foot bouncing on the floor as he stared at the elevator. A rifle was propped against the table next to him.

Riley was imminently grateful Priest had found the alternate entrance. She turned to Priest, nodded once, and pushed the door open far enough that she could walk through. "Mr. Coley, this is the police. Stay right where you are."

Coley nearly jumped out of his skin, his hands going for the gun.

"Don't touch that gun, Mr. Coley. That's your last warning."

He froze, eyes wide as he moved his head slightly to look at her. "It's you again."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Coley." Riley was even with the table, and she reached out to take the gun away. She handed it to Priest before she relaxed. "Expecting visitors?"

Coley swallowed hard.

"Let me guess. Heather's pimp?"

He blinked, looked at Priest and then said, "Wha... n-no, Heather wasn't a prostitute."

"We know what she was going over to Andrea Silver's house, Calvin. We're not vice, so we could care less about how Heather got her money."

Coley wrapped his hands together in tight fists and held them between his knees. He shifted uncomfortably on his chair, and said, "She wasn't some streetwalker. She was a call girl."

"Much more respectable," Riley said.

"It was," Coley insisted. He shook his head and said, "It's not like she planned it. Some woman came up to her in the supermarket and said she could earn a lot of money. Hundreds of bucks for one night."

Riley remembered what Andras said about her host body: "*I saw it in a shop downtown and I simply had to have it.*" Riley said, "You didn't mind loaning your girlfriend out?"

"Heather said she would only work for women. It cut down on her income, but, you know, it wasn't like she was cheating on me."

Riley rolled her eyes.

"So who wants to kill her, and why?"

"Her boss. The guy who runs the escort company. Heather... had been skimming. She would take jobs off the books. We were trying to save some money so we could move somewhere nicer. Maybe get a nest egg so she wouldn't have to keep doing this shit. She started giving her home number to some of her regulars, so they could call her without going through the agency. She gave them a discount, but she still got more money because the agency didn't get the cut."

Riley said, "I guess the boss didn't take kindly to her becoming a free agent."

The elevator behind them started to rattle. Priest looked at the metal grate that covered the door and said, "Looks like we're about to have company."

Riley said, "Mr. Coley, the maintenance stairs. Get there. Now."

"He's not messing around. He'll..."

“Now, Mr. Coley.”

He looked at them for a long minute, then hurried into the safety of the closet. Riley went to one side of the elevator and checked her ammo again. She glanced at Priest. “How much ammo do you have left?”

Priest lowered her voice to a drawl and quoted the movie. “We’re going to run out unless we can get to that mule and get some more.”

Riley chuckled at the movie quote. “Whoever is coming up in this elevator, I doubt it’s as bad as the Bolivian army.”

“Are you sure?”

Riley sighed. “Why take chances.” She pressed her back against the wall and waited for the elevator to arrive.

Seven

The elevator reached the apartment with a heavy thud. Priest met Riley's eye and nodded, and Riley winked. When the heavy door slid up, Riley pressed herself back and attempted to blend into the cracked drywall. A man exited the elevator and paused, standing just a few feet in front of Riley as he scanned the room. "Mr. Coley," he said, his voice echoing off the empty apartment walls. "We just want to talk."

The man stepped forward and Riley scanned him for weapons. He carried a gun in his left hand as he crossed toward the maintenance door. He was wide in the shoulders, tapered at the waist. Riley didn't want to try him in a hand to hand fight. Of course, if it got to that, she would just fight dirty. "Sonny, head down to the lobby and make sure our friend isn't trying to escape."

Riley stepped forward while Priest swung around and aimed her weapon into the elevator. "I've got a better idea," Riley said. "Why don't you all just put your guns down and we'll have a nice friendly conversation?"

The man turned slowly, casually, and eyed her vest. "You're the police?"

"Now we know you can read. I feel like we've bonded. Lose the gun. Priest?"

"Two in the elevator. Both armed."

“Can you handle them?”

Priest said, “Yeah.”

“I’m Detective Parra. That’s Detective Priest.”

The man seemed to debate whether or not to give his real name, and then finally said, “Steven Linder.”

“A pleasure.” She gestured at the seat Coley had just vacated. “Sit a spell.”

Linder walked to the chair and sat down. He put the gun on the table and then pushed it just out of easy reach. “Sonny, Kevin, why don’t you give the detective your weapons and join us in here.” He opened his jacket and showed Riley that he was unarmed. Riley stepped to one side and looked over her shoulder. The two men in the elevator, carbon copies of Linder in cheaper suits, handed their guns to Priest and entered the room with their hands out and their fingers splayed.

“Nice and polite,” Linder said. “We wouldn’t want the detectives to get the wrong idea.”

The men took seats around the table. Riley waited until Priest retrieved Linder’s gun before she relaxed her stance. “Now, Mr. Linder. Want to explain to us why you were entering this private residence with a loaded weapon?”

“On the contrary, Detective. Have your partner check the weapon.”

Riley watched as Priest took out the clip. Priest raised an eyebrow. “Empty.”

“Ms. Cassidy and her boyfriend owed me some money. I find that with most debtors, all you have to do is make the threat. Sometimes you just need to show them the gun, and

their minds fill in the blanks.” He smiled. “Besides. A dead man can’t exactly pay his debts, right?”

“No, but he can serve as an example to others,” Riley said. She looked at the two men sitting next to him, Sonny and Kevin. They were both wearing suits that looked like they’d been pulled randomly off the rack. “Your boys always dress like that? Maybe some nights they decide to dress to the nines and wear a tux?”

Linder chuckled. “No, Detective. You are looking at the extent of their wardrobe, I’m afraid. I’ve tried to improve their fashion sense, but...”

“Did you try to get your money out of Heather Cassidy last night? Maybe you tried to intimidate her with a knife and things got out of hand. You and your boys started to rough her up a little, next thing you know Sonny-Boy had stabbed her.”

Linder’s smile seemed more forced now. “We had a conversation with Heather last night, yes. We knew she was taking jobs off the books, so I had Kevin keep an eye on her apartment. He followed her when she left, and I met him at that woman’s house.”

“Andrea Silver.”

“Yes, I believe so. Things did get heated, Detective, I’ll admit that freely. But we did not kill her. When I left, she was alive.”

Riley glanced at the two goons again. “When *you* left?”

“I decided Kevin and Sonny could have a conversation with Heather for me. There was no need for my presence.”

“Meaning you didn’t want the people at Andrea Silver’s party to see you arguing with a prostitute in the street.”

Linder leaned forward. “She was not a prostitute, she was—”

“A woman who had sex for money. Call ‘em like I see them.”

Linder rolled his eyes. “How very closed-minded of you. But fine, whatever you wish to call her. I have a reputation in this town. I would prefer not be associated with that kind of engagement.”

“So really, your alibi just covers yourself.”

Kevin and Sonny stared at her without malice. Innocence or stupidity, she couldn’t tell.

“You boys want to take a shot at defending yourselves?”

One of the goons said, “Mr. Linder left when the old man came outta the house. He asked us what we was doing on his property and we explained we were just trying to get payment from the whore.”

“Kevin,” Linder snapped.

Kevin shifted and looked down at his lap. “Sorry, Mr. Linder. Anyways, the old guy told us to get off the property. Sonny and me, we told him we weren’t on his property. We was on the street, right? Public grounds. I tol’ the old guy we weren’t leavin’ without the who- without Ms. Cassidy. He said that we should talk about it in private, so we went into the house.”

“Did you see the owner?”

“Don’t know who the owner is.”

“Andrea Silver. She’s about five foot ten, thick blonde hair, eyes like ice. Gorgeous. Golden skin. Strong hands.” She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and realized Priest was staring at her. She thought back over her description and wondered where it had come from. She cleared her throat and focused on Kevin. “Ring a bell?”

"Nah. We all went in this back office, me and the old guy and the girl. Sonny stayed with the car."

Riley waited for him to continue. When he didn't, she said, "And?"

"We had a nice talk."

Riley blinked. "About what?"

"Things."

Linder and Sonny both looked confused at Kevin's sudden reticence. "Are you all right, Kevin?"

"Just fine, Mr. L."

"Answer the detective's question. What happened in the office?"

"We had a nice talk."

"We covered that," Riley said. "What did you talk about?"

"Things."

Priest held up a hand to stop Riley's next question. "Kevin, what color was the carpet in the room?" He turned to look at her, frowning as if he didn't understand the question. "Did you sit or stand? Were the overhead lights on? Just a lamp? Could you hear the sounds of the party going on outside?"

"We had a nice talk."

Riley said, "What is he, hypnotized?"

Priest pressed her lips together and looked at Riley. "Duchess Gillian."

Riley's eyes widened and looked at Kevin. The eyewitness said a young man driving a black sedan had dumped Heather's body in the vacant lot. Riley had excluded Crocell

because of his age. But if demons could jump into someone's body...

"Mr. Linder, how long was Kevin inside the house?"

"About forty-five minutes," Linder said, still looking at his flunky.

Priest said, "What happened when he came back?"

Linder thought about it. "He had cash. He said that Heather saw the error of her ways and gave him some money. We were supposed to pick up the rest today. It's the whole reason we're here. He was out of breath, though. Sweaty. I thought he'd just roughed her up."

Riley could picture it in perfect, horrible clarity. Crocell, Kevin and Heather all in a private room together. Crocell, for one reason or another, possessed Kevin. Whether he had done so before or after he killed Heather, they would probably never know. He had changed clothes, carried Heather to one of the sedans, and left the complex without Linder or Sonny noticing. Dumped the body, swapped outfits and bodies, and went on with his evening. The money was probably a sick joke on the demon's part.

Riley holstered her weapon and nodded toward the elevator. "Take the next one down. You're done with this apartment. Calvin Coley's already lost enough."

"As you wish, Detective Parra," Linder said.

Riley pulled down the grate of the elevator and stepped back, jabbing the ground floor button with two fingers. "It was Crocell," Priest said. "He possessed that kid up there. Probably used his body to kill. He's going to have nightmares. Phantasms. Just because he wasn't in control of his body doesn't mean his soul will forget."

Riley, not for the first time, thought of what horrors Gillian had been subject to. What nightmares had driven her to retreat across the country? She said, "Is there any hope for him?"

"Not by himself. He'll need help. Long-term."

"Yeah," Riley said. She scratched her forehead and said, "Damn. I should have realized. Crocell was right there in my face the whole time."

"He was a demon. You expected animosity from him."

"Right," Riley muttered. "Doesn't make me feel any better about missing him." She realized Priest was choosing her words carefully. "What?"

"Perhaps you weren't in your right mind. Gorgeous and golden skin? Riley, you were speaking about Andras like a lover."

Riley shook her head. "No."

"Did she get to you?"

Riley pressed her lips together. "Yes. A little. But I got past it." She looked at Priest. "Trust me?"

"I do."

"Andras doesn't have a hold on me."

The elevator reached the ground floor and Priest said, "You don't have to keep assuring me you're on the right side, Riley. If there's anything in this mortal world I trust, it's that you are a good person. I believe that with all my heart."

Riley shrugged as she stepped off the elevator. "Glad one of us has that much faith in me. C'mon. Let's go try to arrest a demon."

Eight

Riley called in back-up on the way to Andras' compound. When she hung up, Priest said, "Do you think that's wise? Involving people who have no idea what they're walking into?"

"Maybe Andras and Crocell will be on their best behavior because of their presence," Riley said. She waited a moment and then said, "Yeah, I don't buy that, either. But we can't walk in by ourselves."

Priest raised her eyebrows. "You're growing."

Riley smirked.

She parked at the mouth of the cul-de-sac and looked toward the building. "You know, there's a chance Andras doesn't know anything about the murder. Maybe she'll sacrifice Crocell and this whole thing will end peacefully." She looked at Priest, who was smiling at her like a parent humoring a child. "It could happen."

"Yes, I suppose it could."

Riley settled back in her seat. "So this is playing by the rules. It's dull."

"Keeps you alive."

"But is this really a life worth living?"

Priest shrugged. "It gets you home to Gillian."

Riley smiled. "Okay. By the rules it is."

"I'm very happy she's coming home, Riley. I've been praying for it."

"God reunites lesbian lovers? What would Pat Robertson think?"

Priest shook her head. "He's not one of ours."

Riley snorted. She watched the front door of the house open, and Crocell stepped out onto the porch. He stood with his arms across over his chest, staring at Riley's car. "I think we've been made."

"Sorry. That's my fault. They probably felt me coming from two miles away."

"Should we have stopped by a church first? Recharged the batteries, topped off the tank?"

Priest chuckled. "No, I'll be fine."

They could hear sirens rising in the distance. Riley checked her watch and said, "Looks like they're making good time. What do you say we get a little head start?"

"You call that playing by the rules?"

Riley shrugged. "Nothing wrong with bending the rules a little bit." She opened the car door and climbed out, forcing Priest to climb out as well to follow her. Riley had her badge on her hip, the Kevlar hanging from her shoulders, gun in a hip holster where she could easily grab it. With their sunglasses, she knew she probably looked like something out of a John Woo movie. If only there were a couple of doves to fly slow-motion across her path, it would be perfect. When Priest got up next to her, Riley said, "On the way home, I'll rent you a copy of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*."

“Angels are good, demons are the bad and that would make humans...”

“Watch it, wing-girl.”

Priest smirked.

“I liked you better when you were ignorant.”

They got to the center of the cul-de-sac before Crocell left his post. He stood on the sidewalk and said, “The angel is not welcome here.”

“I am here under the protection of this badge, Crocell. I am a police officer in this city, and you will afford me the respect of one regardless of my nature. Is that understood?”

Crocell glared at her.

Riley leaned toward Gillian. “Does it have a first name?”

“State your name for the record, demon.”

Crocell said, “Go to hell, Zerachiel. I would be happy to give you a guided tour once you get there.”

Riley pulled her handcuffs off her belt. “Fine. The hard way. Crocell, you are under arrest for the murder of Heather Cassidy. You—”

The street behind them exploded.

Riley and Priest both ducked, scattering to avoid the raining bits of cobblestone that rained down on their backs. Riley looked up in time to see Crocell running toward the house. “Priest, you okay?”

“Fine,” Priest said. She was watching the smoke settle.

Riley got to her feet and raced toward the house. The door was already closed when she reached it, so she ran onto the

grass and aimed herself for a window. She stopped her advance long enough to slam the butt of her gun against the glass, hitting it in all four corners of the pane until it cracked. The concussion of the bomb blast had weakened it, so the shards fell apart easily. Riley reached inside and unlatched the window, and she was inside a moment later.

Crocell was nowhere to be seen, but the house felt much different. Darker, deeper. Riley felt a moment of vertigo when she tried to focus on the far wall. She closed her eyes, centered herself, and counted to ten. When she opened her eyes, the effect was diminished but still there. It was like she was drunk and standing on the edge of a tall staircase; gravity seemed to be tugging her in every direction at once. She scanned the ground floor and, determining Crocell was most likely heading for higher ground, took the stairs two at a time.

When Riley got to the landing, she spotted Crocell hunched next to a window that looked down on the front walk. Riley aimed at the middle of his back and picked up where she left off. "Have the right to remain silent." The sirens sounded like they were right outside the front door, echoing off every surface of the house. "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to have an attorney present during questioning. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you." She was standing right behind him then, gun aimed at the back of his head. "Do you understand each of these rights I have explained to you, you son of a bitch?"

"He won't be able to answer you."

Riley kept her gun where it was, but looked over her shoulder. Andras was standing between Riley and the stairs. She wore a strapless red sheath dress, her shoulders bare. The material clung to every curve, and for a moment Riley thought

she was completely naked. Her hair was down, but seemed caught on a breeze that Riley couldn't feel. Riley took her attention from Crocell, realizing the body was nothing more than a shell now.

"The police are so sexist. Assuming that it must have been Crocell who possessed the young thug's body."

Riley raised her gun. "Why?"

"To get you here," Andras said as she walked forward. "To make you my offer. The body was dumped in your jurisdiction, during your shift. I didn't lie about my motives, however. I do have the answers you're looking for. If you want them." She reached up and wrapped her fingers around the barrel of Riley's gun. "Do you want to let this go for me?"

Riley's fingers went limp and Andras took the gun from her. She smiled and held the gun by her side. "Such a good girl. Why don't you take off your shirt for me?"

Riley frowned.

"I just want to see that lovely tattoo of yours."

Riley tugged the Velcro holding her vest up. It was just so damn heavy. She let it fall to the ground with a heavy thump. *Like a dead body*, she thought. She felt something plucking at the top button of her shirt. She looked down and saw it was her own fingers. She undid one, then moved to the next. Andras chuckled and said, "Do you realize when you were chosen, Riley? What exact moment you became this city's sovereign protector?"

"The...tattoo?"

"No. That just lit you like a beacon. The angels were giving you protection, you owed them service." Andras put her hands on Riley's chest and spread them out, pushing the blouse off

her shoulders and letting it fall to the floor. Riley hadn't even realized she had finished undoing the buttons.

"Then the roof. Samael fell."

Andras shook her head. "Not then, either. You were chosen the night you died."

Riley frowned.

Andras whispered, "Turn around. Let me see that beautiful artwork." Riley hesitated. "Riley, please. Don't you want me to remove it for you? Don't you want to be free?" Andras stepped forward, her body pressed tight against Riley's. When she spoke, her lips brushed against Riley's and made her shiver. "Ask me. Please, Riley. I want to do it for you. Perhaps afterward we can find other ways to spend your time." She licked Riley's bottom lip.

Riley brushed her hand down Andras' arm.

"Mm," Andras said, shivering. "I like it when you touch me."

Riley took Andras' hand in her own, her fingers twisting around the gun that Andras still held. They both looked down, and Andras said, "Oh. Let me get rid of that for you."

Riley took the gun from Andras and, her voice slurred, said, "No." She brought the gun up and fired twice. Andras howled in pain as she was pushed back by the shots. Riley put her free hand to her forehead as Andras' shrieks echoed through her skull. It was as if every nerve ending in her brain was set on fire. The world around her tilted and spun, the walls seeming to expand and contract like she was inside of a giant lung.

"Everything I've done for you, everything I've offered you!" Andras howled, her voice ugly and wretched. Blood poured down her dress.

"This tattoo is protection," Riley said. "That's what Christine Lee said to me the night she put it on my back. What would you have done once I was unprotected?"

Andras stared at her for a long moment, and then smiled. "I would have torn your mind asunder as my brethren rode your soul to Hell."

The entire front wall of the house imploded and the concussion threw Riley and Andras over the railing like confetti caught on a gust of wind. Riley landed on the couch, while Andras had a rougher landing on the floor. Riley rolled to the floor, hitting her hands and knees and trying to figure out which way was up. She heard Priest's voice outside, a wordless shout of anger, and prayed she was okay. Riley started to get to her feet, but she had only moved her right foot when Andras was on top of her again, arms wrapped around Riley in a fierce embrace. They twisted and Andras threw Riley to the floor and pinned her there.

Andras' face was hideous in her fury, eyes ablaze and teeth bared. The beautiful woman whose body the demon inhabited was nowhere in evidence. When she spoke, she spit a mixture of saliva and blood. "No holy water, no blessed bullets," Andras said. "You're not prepared this time, Riley Parra. This will be your final stand."

Riley closed her eyes and pictured Gillian. She pressed the gun against Andras' chest and pulled the trigger. Andras growled, "You will fail, Riley. I told you this would end in death. You will not be so fortunate. When you die, you will be dropped into Hell and the torment will last for eons. You cannot imagine the anguish." Riley fired twice more and Andras reared back to swat the gun away.

Riley took advantage of the demon's awkward position and bucked her off. Andras tumbled, and Riley threw herself at the

coffee table. She had one hope...and there it was. She grabbed the nail Andras used for her earlier 'visual aid,' and just barely had time to grab the hammer before Andras swiped at her back. Riley howled as fingernails sharper than they should have been rent through the skin like a razor blade through wrapping paper.

Andras then pressed against Riley from behind. "This could have gone so much easier," Andras said, her voice again a low, seductive purr. "You could have been destroyed writhing in ecstasy. Instead you will know, oh, so much pain before I finally release you."

Riley twisted at the waist and pressed the tip of the nail against Andras' temple. Andras had time to gasp before Riley swung the hammer.

Andras fell back, her arms and legs limp, and hit the floor with a lifeless 'thud.' Riley said, "Cold iron...bitch. You should pick your visual aids better."

Riley felt blood dripping down her back as she got to her feet. The floor continued to shift under her feet, but she made it to the gaping maw that had once been the front of the house. Priest was on the front lawn, wings fully displayed, facing toward the street. Riley thought of everything she had ever described as a war zone — bad No Man's Land streets, a junkie's apartment, her own apartment — and realized how utterly wrong she had been. Dead bodies, presumably hosts to demons, littered the destroyed street. Smoke and flame still rose from the pit that blocked the mouth of the cul-de-sac.

Riley coughed and put her hand on Priest's shoulder to steady herself. "Priest. Got this covered?"

"Holding my own," Priest said. She lowered her wings and moved to Riley's side. "Are you...where is Andras?"

"She had a headache. We postponed the fight until she was feeling better." She put her arm around Priest's shoulder and winced as the move pulled at the torn skin on her back. The wind changed and a smell of sulfur washed over her. "How are we going to explain this one?"

"Booby traps in the Silver homestead. We came to arrest Crocell, and he set them off. Wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. You and I got caught in the blast, but we were far enough away that we weren't too badly injured."

"Speak for yourself," Riley scoffed. She frowned and said, "There's a problem with your story."

"No," Priest said. "There's isn't."

Riley was about to argue when the house exploded behind them. They were thrown off their feet, and Riley braced for the inevitable concussion of the blast to hit them. Suddenly, she was gently lowered to the ground face first, cool wind blowing across her exposed back. Priest dropped to the grass next to her, arms draped over bent knees, head bowed as she caught her breath. Riley looked back at the street and saw how far away from the house they were. "You flew me."

"Desperate times."

"You're going to have to do that again sometime I can appreciate it."

Priest sighed. "You're never satisfied."

Riley laughed.

Priest looked at her and said, "Riley, there is blood on your face, but no wounds. Did Andras bleed on you? Did any of it get into your mouth or eyes?"

"I don't know."

Priest looked out at the street. Riley heard the scream of sirens.

“Why?”

Priest shook her head. “It’s probably nothing.”

Riley grunted and said, “Oh, yeah. That’s always a good thing to hear.” She wanted to argue more, but it took every ounce of strength she had not to pass out. She finally decided that she might need that strength later and sagged against the grass. It was so nice and cool, she might as well take advantage of it. Priest would wake her when the cavalry arrived.

Epilogue

Riley took the tray from the counter, thanked the clerk, and carried it back to the table where Priest was waiting. They hadn't gotten released from the scene until almost eleven, forced to explain the situation to the SWAT team, the firefighters, Lieutenant Briggs, and then the reporters who were clamoring over each other for their exclusive. The latter was punishment, Riley thought, for going in before their back-up arrived. Riley dutifully explained what happened to the sea of microphones, squinting at their impossibly bright spotlights, and silenced further inquiries with a terse 'no comment.'

She lowered herself into the wooden seat, amazed she could even stand up. "So while I was out, my back seemed to get healed a little."

"I didn't have anything else to do," Priest said. She took her meal off the tray and placed it in front of herself.

"Thanks. I know you're reluctant to do the healing thing."

Priest shrugged. "I was busy wiping out Andras' second string. I couldn't even take a moment to think about helping you until it was too late. Healing your wounds was the least I could do to make up for leaving you alone."

"What blew up the front of the house?"

"I was swarmed by the damn reinforcements. I gave them a light show."

"Wish I could have seen that."

Priest said, "You would have been permanently blinded."

"Oh." She shrugged. "That's fine. Burn my eyes and I'll just have my superhero partner heal them."

"It's not a get out of jail free card, you know."

Riley whistled. "Look at you, with the pop culture references."

Priest winked and poured ketchup onto her plate.

Riley opened her sandwich and dismantled it, putting the pickles, lettuce and tomato aside. She closed the sandwich, then ate one of the pickles by itself. She chewed slowly and then said, "I was tempted. What Andras offered me, the freedom, the answers. I wanted to say yes. It took everything in my power to say no."

"I understand. You've grown."

"Don't give me that bullshit. A demon is a demon. And I'm sure that Andras told everyone she could find about her little plan. She may even have told them how close it came to working. There are going to be others who come after me with the same promise. Answers, explanations. One of these days... I'm going to cave."

Priest was staring at her sandwich.

"Of course, it won't be much of a temptation if *you* answered some of my damn questions."

Priest exhaled and placed her hands on the table. "Riley. I want to tell you. Honestly, I do. But there are..." She licked her

bottom lip and then looked away. "There are angels who have seen the face of God. They never speak again. They never *blink* again. One glimpse of His visage is enough to stun them for eternity. There are some things that are just not necessary to know. There is knowledge that can be fatal. When it is time, your questions will be answered."

Riley stared at her sandwich and leaned back in her chair. "Yeah."

"That is a solemn vow, Riley."

Riley nodded. "I understand, Priest. I do. Just...go back to your sandwich. I still need to take you by the video store before I head home."

Priest winced at the lack of emotion in Riley's voice. "I'm sorr—"

"I get it."

Priest leaned forward and picked up her sandwich. They finished eating their meal in a not-quite comfortable silence.

Priest begged off of the trip to the video store when they finished eating. It was late, and she could tell Riley's heart wasn't in it. They left the diner and Priest stood on the sidewalk to button her jacket. The night was surprisingly cold, and there was a smell of rain in the air. "Need a ride home?" Riley asked.

"No. I'll walk. Thank you."

Riley nodded.

"Are you going to speak to Gillian tonight?"

"Yeah."

“Give her my love.”

Riley nodded. “Got plans?”

“I’m going to find Linder’s man, Kevin. He needs help understanding what happened to him, and what he did while under Andras’ influence.”

Riley said, “Good luck. Let me know how it goes.” She started to walk away and then stopped. “We’ll be okay tomorrow, Caitlin. But...I just need to be pissed off at you for a while, okay?”

“I understand.”

Riley looked at Priest in the glow of the streetlight for a moment and then nodded. “Okay. See you tomorrow.”

“Sleep well, Riley. Pleasant dreams.”

Riley lifted her hand in a lazy wave as she crossed the street to her car. Priest watched her unlock the door and then slide inside, her body still stiff from the fight with Andras. Priest hadn’t healed every ache and pain, but she couldn’t sit idly by. She had no independent confirmation, but she was fairly sure the lowest cut on Riley’s back would have proven fatal.

Priest was aware of someone beside her. She didn’t have to look; she knew his presence anywhere. “Michael. Good to see you again.”

Michael wore, as always, the “armor of God.” It changed with the times, and now resembled a desert camo uniform. He looked like a soldier just air-dropped from Afghanistan, his hands clasped behind him as he settled into a parade rest. “Quite the battle. I heard Detective Parra took down the demon on her own.”

“Just like Alistair Call,” Priest reminded him.

“Mm.”

Priest had been dreading the next question, but she still cringed when he asked it.

“Did she ingest the demon’s blood?”

“There’s no way to know.”

Michael was silent for a long time as Riley finally pulled away from the curb and drove away. “She won’t be silenced. She wants the answers to her questions.”

Priest whispered, “Yes.”

“And damn the consequences.”

“She is not...”

“She is strong enough. She has felled two demons and an angel, Zerachiel. She is strong enough. And if there is the slightest chance she ingested the demon blood...” He sighed. “This is the time. She must undergo the trial.”

Priest closed her eyes and a tear broke free. She pressed her lips together and said, “And if she dies? If the damned trial kills her?”

Michael stepped in front of Priest and said, “Being down here has changed you, Zerachiel. You know what happens if the trial kills her. It means she wasn’t worthy for the position in the first place. As it has been for millennia, as it will be now. Riley Parra will face the trial, and she will either be successful, or we will find someone to replace her.” He started to walk away and spoke over his shoulder. “The trial should begin sooner rather than later, Zerachiel. We will let you choose the time and the place.”

Priest watched him go, and then looked in the direction Riley had driven. She was sobbing openly now, dreading what

lay ahead for Riley. Riley was Zerachiel's charge, Zerachiel's responsibility. But she was Caitlin Priest's friend.

Priest started walking, but she wasn't going to find Linder and his men. She was going to spend as much time as possible in as many churches as she could find. Riley would need all the help she could get.

+ end +