

FALLEN
& FALLEN
SAINT

SIDNEY REETZ

Hell Bat Publications

Copyright © 2017 by Samantha Wagner

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Hell Bat Publications, Arizona.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission.

ISBN (ebook) 978-0-9862876-3-3

ISBN (paperback) 978-0-9862876-2-6

Manufactured in the United States of America.

FIRST EDITION

First US printing January 2018

Cover art and design by TJ Geisen

www.sidneyreetz.com

PROLOGUE

LUCIFER

Thirteen Years Ago
Lost Port, California

“You need to leave and not come back.”

I looked up from the scrolls strewn about my desk to see Raziel in the doorway to my office. The Angel of Secrets had his arms folded across his chest with his hip leaned arrogantly against the door frame.

Were he any other angel, those words would have been met with blunt and brutal force. Yet over the years, the drunken fool I'd first met in Ireland had been replaced by a creature I found myself treading carefully around these days.

I shouldn't have been surprised at his appearance; I'd felt a confrontation brewing between us for some time now.

In response to his tone more so than his words, I felt the sting as my eyes flashed from blue to red. “Excuse me?”

Raziel's own hazel eyes glinted in the dim light of my office. “You heard me,” he said, his thick Irish brogue rolling off him to fill the room.

I met Raziel's gaze with no emotion on my face.

Back when the taint had been consuming me, I would have

acted instead of using my head. Now that the taint had been purified, I felt calmer under pressure, clearer, and perhaps deadlier for it.

Ignoring the other angel, I signed off on the scroll before me and took my time rolling it. Reaching over my desk, I placed it in the pile of other such documents for Azrael to pick up in the morning. Leaning back, I braced my elbows against the arms of my chair. My only response to Raziel was to cock an eyebrow.

That seemed to unsettle what courage he'd entered the room with. I could tell by the way he hesitated before striding into my office to face me square on.

I'd never admit it to him, but he continuously impressed me. Sobriety suited him well. The buzz cut he'd worn had been allowed to grow out years ago. His brunette hair, now shoulder length, had been tied back in a half tail. Even in the dimness of the room, I could make out the subtle other colors within it; blond, mahogany and traces of red. He hadn't filled out in body mass since he'd never lost any; yet gone were the baggy flannel shirts and pants, replaced with form fitting jeans and a green button-down shirt.

Raziel, the Angel of Secrets, was once again in peak form.

"You all need to leave," Raziel amended. "Or I will have to take Aria to live with her sister and Azazel."

Anger flash boiled within me, yet I redirected it before it could explode. "Aria is *my* ward," I stated more as a challenge. "She and her sister are *my* responsibility. In light of my duties, I have given over *some* of their daily care to you and Azazel." I narrowed my eyes on him. "That does not mean that you usurp my authority on decisions about their well-being or place of residence."

Raziel's jaw moved as if he were grating his teeth and trying to watch his words just as carefully as I. "I'm suggesting this in response to Aria's future well-being."

"Suggesting? Funny, it sounded like an order to me." I pushed myself up from my chair and stood to face him eye to eye. "Talk to me Raziel," I sighed to dispel the tension. "What threat

are you trying to protect her from?”

“You,” he replied instantly.

“Watch yourself,” I snapped, purposefully allowing a bit of my control to slip. “I vowed to her mother that I’d protect her.” I glanced to the corner of my office where, just that afternoon, the girl had been practicing on the harp as I’d worked. “She’s ten now. For the past seven years, I’ve held to my word. She’s happy and wants for nothing. What threat could I possibly be to her?”

“That’s not—” Raziel bit off what he’d been about to say with a growl. He turned and paced around the room, stopping at the harp. He leaned down and picked up a few pages Aria had been composing. “Physically you’ve taken care of her. Seven years and we haven’t seen or heard a thing from Michael, Uriel or Heaven. However, that’s not the threat we need to protect her from right now.”

“Get to the point, Raziel.”

He turned sharply and glared at me. “Despite what Aria’s soul might have been in a past life, or why she was reincarnated into a human body, she is human. She’s growing up like a human. She’s *maturing* like a human.” He lifted his eyebrow at me, but I didn’t follow his logic.

“Aria is the Seraphim Angel Soulfiel reincarnated. You and I know this. So what are you—”

“You and Soulfiel were mates.”

He couldn’t have stunned me more if he’d teleported across the room and slapped me. “You are wrong there,” I hissed. Of all the things he could have hit me with, this was below the belt. “Not that it is anyone’s business, but Soulfiel and I were comrades only.”

“Stop fucking lying to yourself! You’ve been doing it since the dawn of time, Luce. Aren’t you tired of it yet?”

Reflexively, my lips curled, exposing my fangs.

“It might not have been a typical mating like we see with the others. Nevertheless, you two were committed to one another. You just wouldn’t admit it to each other or yourselves. Perhaps if you two had more time...”

I didn't even notice that I'd fisted my hands and braced them against the top of my desk; not until flickers of Hell Fire began escaping from between my fingers. "You presume too much. Tread — carefully," I spat.

"Presume?" Raziel said in surprise. "Umm, hello? Angel of Secrets over here. I'm not *presuming* shit." He came forward, all traces of his former reserve melting away as he leaned into the other side of my desk. He didn't even flinch at the Hell Fire within inches of his flesh. "You want it flat out? Here it is: Aria is maturing like a normal human girl. She's going to be entering puberty. Things are going to change for her and everyone in this house knows how close the two of you are. Let me put this as bluntly as I can, Mr. Devil: I don't want you to be the first male to break her heart. You didn't just break Soulfiel's heart, you killed her. Remember Ruby? You didn't intend for her to come to harm either, but she died because your enemies came for *you*. Heaven above, Luce, even Syn was almost murdered by her stepfather thanks to *your* unintentional actions. Then there's Nuriel; who got cast out of Heaven for helping *you*. Are you seeing a pattern here? You're a chaos element."

I moved faster than Raziel could track. One moment we were facing off over my desk and in the next, I had the bastard pinned against the nearest wall by the throat. The impact broke one of the shelves and leather-bound volumes rained down around us.

Instead of fighting me off, Raziel held his hands up in supplication. No, the jerk used the sharpest weapon in his arsenal: words. *I adore that child. I love her as if I'd fathered her myself. I will not see the past repeat itself with Aria. I've waited long enough. I need to take her away from here. Away from you.*

The sincerity in those telepathic words found a weakness in my emotional armor I didn't know I had. I released the other angel and backed away from him.

"I would never hurt her," I said.

"You wouldn't intend to," Raziel said, adjusting his shirt and glaring at me. "You protected her so far, Luce. You've lucked out, but that luck won't last forever. Let me take it from here."

I will not see the past repeat itself...

The memory of Soulfiel bleeding out in my arms whisked those thoughts out of my mind. I hadn't meant to kill her. It had been an accident, yet it didn't change the fact that she'd died upon my blade, at my hands. I'd never considered myself capable of hurting her - and still, I'd been her downfall.

Ruby's smile faded up from my memory. I'd hidden my true nature from her and that failing on my part had led to her trying to protect me from an Archangel's attack. She hadn't stood a chance and once again I'd had to stand helplessly by as someone I cherished died in my arms.

Ruby's face morphed into her eldest daughter's and I remembered the tears and fear on Syn's face when her stepfather, Marshall, had held a gun to her head. The man had been highly unstable to begin with and, as I'd come to find out, molesting his children. When he'd learned that I'd moved in with his family, he'd assumed I'd arrived to replace him. He'd officially free-fallen off the edge of sanity at that point. His whole mission had been to cause as much terror and pain for Ruby and the girls as he spiraled into madness.

And my sister, Nuriel... I'd gone to her for help knowing it might put her at some risk to do so. I hadn't expected it to go as far as it had. She'd been gathering information for me in Heaven that would have stopped a serial killer's mad spree. Instead, she'd been caught and accused of spying for Hell. The last time I'd seen her had been at Uriel's feet; battered and broken, she'd obviously been brutalized for information. She'd vanished after my confrontation with Michael and Uriel. I hadn't heard from her since.

I turned away from Raziel and, as if my eyes were pulled to it, I looked at the harp. I went to it and numbly caressed my fingers across the strings. She would have still been playing it if I hadn't ushered her off to bed tonight.

The realization came to me slowly, as all things do when you see them day in and day out.

I'd become complacent having her close; to hearing her

music playing in the house, her voice singing, the riotous laughter of her playing with Legion or the hellhounds. Without my even noticing it, she'd become the heartbeat of this house for me.

If I didn't hear her voice, I worried and searched until I found her sleeping or reading in some quiet corner.

I'd justified my actions by telling myself that I'd been fulfilling her mother's dying wish for me to protect her. Knowing Aria to be the reincarnation of an angel I'd given my heart too though... to analyze it any further took me to an uncomfortable place; a place I'd always mentally run from.

Ruby and her annoying Tarot cards had even foretold it. I'd found my Queen of Cups. How had Ruby described that to me? The house of the true heart?

Everything about me stilled at that.

I hated it. I tried to deny it but Raziel was right.

"You'll take her to San Francisco to live with her sister?" I found myself asking in a hollow voice. "Syn's just finishing her internship at that designer's studio; the one Azazel set her up with."

"Yes," Raziel said. "Azazel is a master at hiding from Heaven. She'll be safe."

I nodded and forced myself to pull away from the harp. "You'll report to me every week about how she's doing. That's non-negotiable."

The song she'd been composing had been a ballad, I noticed numbly.

"And—" I felt the words choke in my throat, but forced them out, "I get to say goodbye."

CHAPTER ONE

LUCIFER

Present Day
Paris, France

“What are your orders?”

“Kill him,” I said.

My second-in-command turned his shocked green eyes to me. In the defused light of the city, the disfiguring scar that ran down the side of his face was thrown into sharp relief. “What of the physical body he is possessing? The human is innocent.”

Shifting my gaze to the alley below us, I could clearly see the members of our raiding party cornering the demon. After all this time, we’d finally found one of the two demons who’d escaped Hell and had been slipping through our clutches for the last two decades. For twenty years he’d been at large and for twenty years he’d been leaving behind a trail of blood.

There were many things I detested about my job. This being one of them. Unfortunately, what needed to be done and what you wanted to do were hardly ever the same thing.

“I will try to exorcise him, but if the human must be a casualty to ensure Murder doesn’t escape us again, then so be it.” I nodded my head at the Notre Dame Cathedral not far from us.

“Let’s make this quick and keep it quiet. We can’t stay in enemy territory much longer.”

Azrael and I teleported simultaneously, both of us taking form at the mouth of the darkened alley.

Thankfully, the sounds of the fighting from within were all but silent to the ears of the slumbering city engulfing us. One of the benefits of a large city was all the atmospheric white noise it possessed that you could hide behind.

I approached the ring of five fallen angels penning in the one possessed human. Even blatantly outnumbered, the filthy human held his own against my troops. I stepped sideways as a member of my team flew through the air and collided face first into the dumpster to my right.

Like a pack of wolves sensing the appearance of their alpha, the remaining angels parted to either side of the alley allowing me to pass.

With my fist clenched in the pockets of my bomber jacket, I stopped not five feet away from the panting, perspiring human male we had cornered. Through strands of grease coated hair, he glared at me through sickly green eyes with goat slitted pupils.

“Are you through running, Murder?” I asked.

A spike of pity raced through my soul for the fate of the human if we couldn’t exorcise the demon from his body. Murder had been named adequately after the Fall. He’d lived up to that name as if it were a title. Even if we did save the man, to be possessed by a spirit that had gone beyond depravity before the pyramids had been built would cause massive mental damage.

Perhaps it would be for the best if we eased his passing, I told myself.

In our native angelic tongue, the demon spat, “Never. I find this game of cat and mouse greatly amuses me, Light Bringer.”

My hand lashed out faster than the demon could track and caught him by the front of his shirt. I shouldn’t waste more time on words. We were practically standing in the shadow of one of Heaven’s earthly fortresses and those around me were my responsibility.

The demon simply wheezed a laugh, wrapping his hands around my clenched fist. “The game to end all games.” He sneered, displaying a mouth full of rotting, yellowed teeth. He leaned into me, his breath fermented enough to peel paint. “You should think more upon who the cat is and who is the mouse.”

“Luce!” I heard Azrael yell just as a blinding, white light, exploded out from the body I held.

The wave of energy hit me, throwing me back a good six feet. The others were not so fortunate. The thudding sound of bodies slamming into the walls around me mixed with the cracking of plaster and more than a few surprised curses.

Pain lacerated my eyes. On trained reflex, I tightened my grip on the demon and refused to let go. By all the saints in Heaven, I would not lose him again! Blinded and moving on instinct, I tried to trip Murder and roll him into a submission hold on the alley floor. The ratcheting sound of fabric tearing answered my ears as my grip on the demon slipped.

“Where is he?” I heard a member of the raiding party cry out. “I can’t see a thing!”

“What the Hell was that?” another gasped.

“Was that a Holy Bolt?” someone else asked.

“No,” I replied. “Whatever it was, he used it to blind, not to strike.”

Rubbing at my eyes, I pushed myself to my feet only to be met with the sight of the alley empty of our demon’s presence.

“On your feet, all of you!” I ordered. “He’s within a physical, human body. Unless he dumped his host, he can’t have gotten far. Fan out and search every inch of this city! Now!”

The raiding team of five rapped closed fists against their armor in salute before dashing out the mouth of the alley.

Azrael, still blinking his watery eyes, approached me. “Let us hope he doesn’t vacate that human. If Murder manages to take another host, we might not find him again.”

I hadn’t wanted to say that in front of the others.

On a sigh, I turned to look down the alley at the direct view of the cathedral in the distance. “If he’s walking the border this

close, you and I both know exactly where he fled to.”

“He probably thinks we’re afraid,” my second murmured. “That we’ll give it a wide berth; making it a secure sanctuary until we leave.”

“Secure until Heaven finds him hiding out on their back step.”

“Should I call the others back?”

I shook my head. “Too many, too close. We’re going to have to run this fast and quiet. Just you and me.”

“And here I told Amanda I’d stop taking on suicide missions with you.”

“Your mate clipping your wings again?” I teased, my eyes scanning the park beyond the mouth of the alley.

“Yeah, and if you return me to her bleeding, *again*, she’ll clip yours.”

“Right. Remind me to heal you before you go back to her tonight.”

In unison, we both dispelled our physical bodies, donning our winged spiritual forms. We launched ourselves out of the alley and toward Notre Dame.

* * * * *

Murder was not hard to spot; it’s not hard to find someone who is openly waiting for you. We found him sitting on the front steps of the cathedral, casually lounging back as if moon bathing.

I landed at the base of the steps, Azrael dropping back to cover me. At any moment the angels of Heaven guarding the cathedral would spot us. I didn’t know who or what Heaven had stationed here and I wasn’t keen on finding out.

Stupid of me, I know. Any idiot who knowingly charges into a field of land mines deserves what’s coming to him. Yet, how could I retreat and regroup when we’d finally zeroed in on one of the two demons that had not only escaped from Hell, but who had managed to stay on the run for so long? Among the other inmates of Hell, the two had practically become mythical heroes.

As soon as I landed, I donned my physical form and leapt, closing the distance between us to grab Murder by the hair and tackle him. If I could move fast enough before he could get off another mock Holy Bolt—

For angels, an exorcism is a lot easier than you might imagine. With my free hand, I pushed my spirit into the physical body under me, clutching for the foreign soul of the demon. I grasped and found — nothing.

I found no soul to grasp. Not the demon's or the human's.

Below me, Murder's hands clamped down around my spiritual wrist. I tried to pull myself free only to find that some part of him had sealed itself to my exposed spirit.

Locking eyes with me, the demon smiled coldly. "I will enjoy repaying this night to you tenfold, Light Bringer."

Shadows danced under his skin as he spoke, darkening into what I first took to be bruises. Symbols morphed out of those shadows as he laughed. Behind me, I could feel Azrael looking over my shoulder. The demon's eyes went distant suddenly, dead and lifeless.

Not good, my senses screamed in warning.

That's when the body below me exploded.

The blast threw me back into Azrael, knocking him off balance. Blood and gore showered upon us like some sick piñata. Azrael shoved me off him and I rolled to a crouch.

The remains of the body Murder had been inside of were barely recognizable anymore. The steps of the cathedral were spattered with blood, bone, and gore that reminded me of a macabre Jackson Pollock painting.

Next to me, Azrael tried not to lose the contents of his stomach at the sight and smell of it all. The angel had regained his lost empathy for such things during the Renaissance in which a brutal attack and subsequent torture had left him disfigured for the rest of eternity. To this day, he always wore clothes that covered as much of his scarred flesh as possible.

"He — exploded?" Azrael choked. "How?"

"I don't know." I caught myself before nearly slipping on a

bit of large intestine. “The symbols on his face. You saw them?”

“Yes. What were they?”

“Not a clue, but I’ve seen them before at—”

The movement of shadows across the stones below us caught my eye. My gaze flew up the side of the cathedral just as a figure launched itself off one of the stone gargoyles and plummeted down toward us.

“Azrael! Company!” I yelled.

Throwing my weight into my second’s side, I sent us both flying to the left. The cathedral angel smashed to earth exactly where Azrael had been standing, his Celestial Blade buried a quarter of its length into the ancient stone.

Rolling back to a low fighting stance, Azrael looked up at the fortress before us and audibly gulped. *Company, eh? Yeah, you could say that.*

Taking my gaze away from the angel ripping his sword free and beginning to circle us, I dared a glance up. Every edge of the cathedral boasted a row of very stern looking, very armed and battle hungry Cherubim.

Oh, I sent back on a breathy laugh, fuck.

Cherubim, or Cherubs, were not the Valentine’s Day cartoon characters humans instantly think of when they hear the word. Cherubim, while not as powerful as a Seraphim or one of the seven Archangels, were without a doubt the tanks of the Angelic Hierarchy.

Created to be guardians and protectors, they were the third deadliest of the ten Angelic Choirs and the most renowned for their warrior prowess.

As a former Archangel myself, a small squad of them were no match for me. Yet, as I gazed up at the sheer number of them clinging to the cathedral above us, I felt a spike of nervousness ping through me.

Yeeeah. Hey, Luce? Azrael said, his mental voice wavering. In a case like this, it is perfectly acceptable to scream while retreating at full speed, right? So long as no one from our side of the war sees?

Like some holier than thou version of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, the angels watching us spread their wings, gathering themselves to launch en masse.

Backing away from the angel circling us, I said to Azrael, *Yep. I'm in complete agreement with that plan. Let's teleport back to the safe house in Lost Port.*

Agreed.

The angel before us seemed to be the vanguard for his brethren. He lunged between Azrael and me, separating us just as the flock dropped from on high.

Moving in to occupy the Cherubim's attention, I gave Azrael the first opportunity to get out. I would not leave until I knew he was safe.

Dodging a swipe of a blade from the Cherubim in front of me, I nearly missed the dive-bombing strike of another directly overhead. With a thought, I manifested my own white wings and did the angelic equivalent of bitch slap; smacking one of my attackers into the concrete at my feet with a wing. Cracks splintered outward from the body's impact, sending up dust and debris.

My Seraphim Blade manifested in one hand as my left ignited with the blue and violet flames of Hell Fire.

Prepping for a teleport across the planet by fixing the destination firmly in my mind, I glanced across the square to be sure Azrael had already made the jump.

Instead of being absent, the red headed angel head butted a Cherubim over the shaft of his Celestial Scythe. With an expert flick of his wrist, he flipped the length of the weapon over the back of his neck, dropping the deadly, curved blade of the scythe into his dominant hand. He fell into a spin, striking upward at the angel coming at his back.

Azrael, get out of here! I telepathically snapped, forcing all of my authority as the Satan of Hell into the direct command.

Azrael's green eyes caught mine across the space separating us. His face visibly paled a hue. *I can't! The area is warded against teleportation!*

I think my heart skipped a beat as his words sunk in. *That bastard demon! He led us into a trap!*

I should have paid more attention to his words instead of acting rashly. My blade connected with another Cherubim's, silver sparks lighting the darkness around us as we parried each other's blows. With a shove and a savage kick to his midsection, I threw him back into three of his charging brothers in arms.

Azrael, fall back! Retreat! The ward can't be that large or it would take too much energy to keep it active.

We need a— My second's words were cut off by an audible cry of pain.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Azrael had been pushed back toward an alcove where an ambush had been set. He rolled clear, but I could see a Celestial Dagger protruding from his shoulder.

Like a pulse reaction, I felt the Hell Fire flare and spread up my arm as my fist clenched. I'd almost lost that angel once to a similar ambush.

Instead of deflecting the sword coming at me next, I pivoted out from in front of the Cherubim and twisted. I reached out with my flame drenched hand and snagged his forearm. The flesh under my grip ignited and within a breath I'd scorched through muscle to the bones below. The angel screamed, instantly dropping his weapon and falling to his knees.

"Hell Fire?" I heard one of the Cherubim ask another somewhere behind me.

"It's The Betrayer!" Another angel shrieked. "Satan himself comes!"

I smirked darkly, feeling all of our enemies eyes focus on me. Good, if they were on me, it would give Azrael a moment to regroup.

"That's right," I chuckled villainously, rolling my Seraphim Blade over my wrist and catching it. "*The Satan himself is here to lay a smack down on your Cupid, diaper wearing, hearts and candy, lame ass, archer selves. You know, I have a theory: if your Choir were half the warriors they say you are, then why were you*

not able to stop the war in heaven single handed? I think you're all just like the church, using scripture to scare people into respecting you."

Most of the Cherubim took a step back in shock. I'm not sure who last had the cajones to blaspheme their Choir, their honor, and the church in the same breath; but I'm pretty sure we don't hear about them for a reason.

The momentary lapse gave Azrael enough time to inch his way over to me. We threw our backs against each other as our enemies reeled overhead.

I took a moment to glance over my shoulder at my second. Although he'd removed the dagger at some point, fresh blood dripped from the cuff of his coat and slickening his hands, making his scythe harder to keep a grip on. His eyes were tight with worry and I could see a touch of fear in them. That near brush had more than likely rekindled his PTSD.

I had to keep his mind focused on the battle around us or we were both dead.

Now you've done it! Amanda doesn't mind me returning you to her covered in other people's blood, but your own is another matter. Sheesh, just stab me in the heart now and make my death merciful, I laughed.

How sad it is, Azrael replied, his telepathic voice sounding winded, *that my mate has you more whipped than I?* He lunged forward, severing the tip of a wing belonging to an angel that got a little too close.

I snorted and threw a ball of Hell Fire into the chest of the nearest Cherubim. It splattered against the armor, eating through it like the acid blood of an alien from a film Syn had made me watch once. *She loves you. She couldn't care less about me.*

Ah, good point. Yeah, you're screwed.

Shifting my footing, I said sternly, *Be ready to move.*

I'd managed only a decent amount of control over my Hell Fire abilities in the last two decades. I'd always feared the fire after it had started the great inferno in Rome once upon a time. Just as powerful as it was deadly, it was equally intelligent. Every

time I reached for it, a sentient awareness pressed against my mind, allowing me to gather small emotions from it. Foremost among them were hunger, rage, and defiance.

In truth, it scared me. I hadn't had it in Heaven, yet it had been there when I'd awoken in Hell. No explanation. No reason.

After taking two children under my wings, I'd forced myself to harness it as my secondary weapon in a fight. Far from being a master over the element, I'd tamed it enough on small scales; larger were still a bit dicey.

Whatever you are going to do, do it fast, Azrael snapped.

My eyes fixed not on the chest of the angels circling us on the ground and in the air above, but on their wings.

Yes, mother, I said distractedly.

The flock used a closed telepathic circle just as Azrael and I were, preventing us from eavesdropping on each other. Watching each angel's wing tip flex in preparation for a dive, I knew exactly the moment the order was issued to strike.

I breathed deeply as they dropped.

Uhh, Luce?

Thirty feet away now. Just a little closer.

Luce!

Twenty feet. Closer...too big and I wasn't sure if I could control it.

Azrael's back thudded into mine. *Lucifer!*

With only seven feet separating us from the assassins bearing down, I dropped to one knee, dragging Azrael with me and smashed my clenched fist into the stone. The flames ripped out of me, spreading with the speed of thought to circle Azrael and myself. It didn't stop there; the walls of the ring fanned themselves into a seven-foot high dome over us and blew outward. The ensuing shock wave incinerated everything within ten feet of us.

In the fire's wake, the ash of its victims drifted down like an apocalyptic snow.

I was grateful I was already on my knees. My head began to spin and ache, the energy the fire drained from me causing me to fall forward as sweat beaded my brow. There was definitely a

price to be paid for using that talent. I'd be feeling the drain for days. Thankfully, it didn't knock me on my ass for weeks on end anymore. That was progress, right?

I couldn't really recall the exact steps of the next few moments. With my head too muddled from the energy drain, I couldn't track much more than my labored breathing. The fire hadn't taken out all of the Cherubim; still those that remained had fallen back. They probably thought I could pull that trick off twice in a row.

The next thing I knew, Azrael had one of my arms thrown over his shoulders as he dragged me toward the Seine River. We were just nearing the Pont au Double Bridge when a containment ward flared up in front of us. Moving too fast to stop, we both hurtled right into it; which did wonders to rattle my brain around further.

"Shit," my second hissed.

Shaking my head, I got enough of my senses back to take in our surroundings and predicament. "You can break it. You've done so before," I mumbled, remembering a long ago night in Lost Port outside an Italian restaurant.

Azrael gave me a gimlet stare. "From the *outside*," he said slowly, maybe for my benefit. "You can't break containment wards from the *inside*. Hence, you know, the containment part." *Think you've got another one of those fireworks left in you?* Azrael asked, his eyes suddenly narrowing on something behind us.

I scoffed, pressing my back into the warded sheet of air behind us and causing it to flare with blue/silver light. *Not unless you can drag me home unconscious. Hell Fire isn't just a weapon, it's alive. I won't risk leaving you against this horde on your own. So let's nix that off our list of possibilities, shall we? Can you get a call out to the rest of our raiding party?*

I shook my head and tightened my grip around my Seraphim Blade. How had I managed to keep a hold of that?

Azrael was a master with telepathy. If it were possible to reach out through a containment ward, he was the only one capable of doing it.

Oh, jeez, the Angel of Death scoffed at me, I didn't even think of that! Hmm, I'd be quite the fool right now if that idea had only just occurred to me. He leveled his green eyes on me and lifted one eyebrow.

Sarcasm noted and to be paid back with interest, I said. Clenching my fist once more and allowing the flames to lick up my arm to my shoulder, I braced as the first of the newly formed ranks broke free of the pack and came for us. *Ideas?*

Here is an idea, a female voice broke through our telepathic circle chidingly. *You two start keeping your back up with you instead of sending them off on a wild goose chase. Particularly when going into a certain death situation. Now get the fuck down!*

Azrael and I looked at one another before dropping to our stomachs on the stones of the bridge.

Below, a roar heralded a surge in the Seine River. It rose on a great wave, its muddy, murky, water punching into the air shaped like a fist. That fist swiped over the bridge and crashed through the shimmering ward, shattering it in a flash of silver and blue sparks. It continued on its deadly arch, catching every one of the Cherubim in its wake and dumping them into the river.

I couldn't see the angels being dragged down below the surface of the water. However, the silence that ensued as their cries were cut off abruptly by the gurgle of waves seemed far louder.

The sound of clapping filling the silence brought mine and Azrael's heads up. Leaning against the bridge's railing was an angel, gratefully one solidly on our side of the war. Leviathan, or Levi as he preferred to be called, smiled victoriously down at us. He looked completely out of place with the Paris landscape, dressed in plastic flip flop sandals, beige surfing shorts, and an open, white, button-down shirt.

"Aren't you just sick of us being your cavalry?" he laughed, his pale blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

Next to him, the female angel perched on the railing overlooking the Seine snorted. Betty, formerly known as Behemoth, glared at us and unlike her mate, her green eyes were

reprimanding.

“We almost had him,” I sighed, pushing myself to my feet and offering a hand out to Azrael. “Murder,” I clarified. “He led us into a trap.” I nodded at the cathedral. “Then he vacated his host body and destroyed it.”

“Is that why there are bits of someone’s hypothalamus in your hair?” Levi snorted. “And here I thought it was just a good ol’ Cherubim brawl.”

“Ha ha,” Azrael said dryly. He brushed his fingers over his head, shaking free fleshy debris I didn’t want to put a name to. The movement made him hiss in pain and clamped a hand over his bleeding shoulder.

Betty looked about suspiciously. “If he vacated the host, you should have seen him in his spiritual form and caught him easily.”

“You would think,” I muttered. “Nothing came out of the body, but—” I gestured at the mess clinging to my chest and the thighs of my jeans. “Our demon definitely was not in that body when it self-destructed. Trust me on that.”

“How is that possible?”

The memory of the symbols dancing across the human’s skin replayed in my mind, as did the last time I had seen something very similar. It had been on a front lawn battlefield as Raziel threw himself into beating down the Archangel Michael. Similar symbols had faded into being on his skin as well.

“I don’t know. I’m going to find out though,” I said.

Next to me, Azrael lifted his hands to his head, a curse exploding out of him through pain clenched teeth. Oddly, he looked as if he had suddenly come down with the worst ice cream headache the world had ever seen.

Were we under attack again? We were still far too close to the cathedral.

Levi, Betty, and I all surrounded our comrade, summoning weapons to hand and looking in all directions for an attack.

“What is it, Azrael?” I asked.

My second shook his head and leveled a glare at me. “You were the one that ordered me to start fielding any ‘calls’ to you

from the King of Glitter,” he spat.

“Uh oh,” Levi sighed. “Tell me he doesn’t mean who I think he does.”

Azrael rubbed at his temple. “He wants to talk to you. Here.” And in the manner of one handing over a telephone, he opened the telepathic connection to me.

WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU? Something sounding like a screeching banshee strangling a bag of cats shrieked directly into my head. *You were supposed to be here three hours ago! Devil cakes, you might be sex on a stick I wouldn’t mind licking all night long, but this is cruel even for you. No one, and I mean no one, stands up my BFF on her nightmare princess day!*

I’m not sure if I made a similar cry of pain. The Watcher angel Azazel’s voice felt like glass grating around inside my skull. That combined with the effects of using Hell Fire and I was sure I’d found something ten times worse than a migraine.

Azazel, tone it down! What is the matter with Syn? When the Watcher said BFF, there was only one person he referred too.

What is the matter? What is the matter! Oh, you are such a self-centered ass! What have you been doing all this time? Playing with your demon minions? Sun bathing by the lava pits? Playing a round of kick the sinner in your fiery domain?

Calm down!

I AM CALM! The connection between the two of us suddenly muted. I could nearly see the angel putting me on telepathic hold as he counted to ten. *Don’t you dare tell me,* he finally said in a voice laced with venom, *that you forgot what day it is.*

“Quick, what day is it?” I asked Betty.

“Umm, here? Saturday the fourteenth,” she supplied.

“So in Lost Port that makes it Friday—”

“—the thirteenth.”

“Oh shit,” all four of us all said in unison. “Syn’s wedding!”

Azrael leaned over the railing of the bridge to look at the water below. “Hey, Levi, Betty, can you bring the Cherubim back? Really, that is going to be a more merciful confrontation.”

CHAPTER TWO

ARIA

Heaven needs you, Aria.

Not again.

We need you. Come to us.

My back collided with the nearest wall as I pressed my palms into my temples.

Do not fool yourself with the company you have been forced to keep. You are one of us, not them.

Just leave me alone! I mentally screamed back at the voice calling to me like some siren song.

“Aria?” Someone started knocking on the other side of the bathroom door. “Are you ok in there?”

The dress I’d half pulled on slipped from my torso and pooled about my feet. Somehow that made me feel even more exposed to the mental assault. Another jolt of pain lanced through my mind and I whimpered, my feet gave out on me. My body hit the floor and all I wanted to do was cower in the nearest corner.

Sometimes it was a man’s voice; today it was the woman. Her call tended to be more persistent and powerful, which always left a migraine in her wake. The man’s was more seductive and laced with promises. Their tones were always hypnotic when they

called out; beckoning to me, telling me lies about my family in an effort to lure me — somewhere. I doubted it was the Heaven they kept trying to sell to me.

“Aria? I heard something. Are you okay? Just open the door, sweetie. You’ll need me for the corset anyway.”

You belong to Heaven, Aria, the woman crooned. All Saints belong on Heaven’s side of the war. We need you.

I am no saint and I belong to no one! Now leave me alone! “I’m fine,” I called out, my voice cracking slightly. “I just tripped. I’ll be out in a second.”

I dropped my hands from my temples and sighed as the building headache began to recede. It tended to be a sign that my singing siren had backed off.

The episodes had started about six months ago. At first, they came to me just on the verge of sleep or wakefulness. I’d thought they were just my mind replaying the lingering threads of dreams, but then they had started calling at all hours. It had only happened maybe once a week at first, then they’d gotten more persistent until I heard them every day.

Thankfully, they hadn’t yet crossed the line into multiple times a day.

I had a wedding to go to and no one wanted to see the maid of honor screaming for the voices in her head to shut up.

I pushed myself up from the bathroom floor and haphazardly pulled my dress up. The garment had been designed and personally tailored by my sister, the seamstress goddess of Hollywood. She’d kill me if she found one wrinkle in it.

Not only had Syn started up her own line of gothic fashion that had taken the tween world by storm, she’d also branched out into movie costumes and red carpet runways. The creative teams she led were booked out for the next five years with requests for designs. There’d even been talk of an Oscar nomination for one of the films she’d worked on.

Once back on my feet, I finger combed the spiral curls of my hair back into place and checked to make sure my makeup hadn’t been smeared.

After five minutes of struggling with the corset strings, I held the dress against myself and waddled to the door. Opening it, I pouted, “Help.”

Cleo, the lead guitar player of my band, spun and looked at me with wide eyes. Which was freaky since she’d started wearing white out contact lenses; coupled with her thick, dark eye makeup, the effect tended to be hard to look away from. Maybe I was getting a taste of my own medicine since people found it hard to look away from my own natural aquamarine eyes.

“Where’s Azazel?” I asked, trying to look about the room. I’d expected him to be at the door.

“Wedding emergency,” Cleo said. She expertly spun me to face the bathroom mirror and instructed me to grab the edge of the sink as she started adjusting and pulling the corset strings of the gown. “I heard him leaving the bridesmaids dressing room muttering something about a stuck up, good for nothing devil. Sounded like a fight with his boyfriend, if you ask me.”

“Devil?” I turned to look at her over my shoulder just as she yanked hard on the strings. Instantly, steel boning compressed around my torso, my waist line suddenly crushed smaller than it had ever been in my life. I let out a yelp.

“Can you still breathe?” Cleo asked with a giggle.

“Barely,” I gasped.

She grinned at me in the mirror. “Good! That means we can go tighter.”

* * * * *

After what felt like an hour of being on the receiving end of Cleo’s sadism, she finally pronounced my appearance to be flawless. The corset drove me insane though and I longed for my usual jeans and blouses. And tennis shoes, I groaned as we exited the bathroom and Cleo produced the stiletto heels that went with the gown.

“I’m under orders from your sister,” Cleo apologized, shoving the shoes into my hands. “You’re the maid of honor and you’re nearly a foot shorter than the rest of the bridesmaids.”

“How is it my fault that all of my sister’s friends are European models?” I whined.

Cleo smirked as I placed a hand on her shoulder and leaned on her to slip the shoes onto my feet. “Honey pie, they’re all image and no substance. You, on the other hand, all you need to do is say one word and no one will remember anyone else here tonight.”

With the second shoe half slipped on, I cringed at her words. She was referring to my voice. Ever since I’d been a child my voice had been different from everyone else’s. Growing up, I’d assumed it had been because I’d been singing since I’d been a toddler. Then when Raziel had moved me to San Francisco and I started to hang out with the local music crowds in my teens, I’d begun to notice people being affected when I sang. Back then I’d been going through the typical angst of growing up. As a result, my songs had been somber and depressing, describing moments in my life of loss, longing, and inadequacies. Every time I performed those songs, my audience would become instantly melancholy.

Of course, as a performer, you want to connect with your audience like that. However, every time I played the effect became worse. I began to feel as if my songs were dooming my audience to clinical depression every time they heard me.

On one occasion, I remembered a woman bursting into tears and running out into the street. She’d been so distraught that she hadn’t seen the car until it slammed into her. Later I’d found out that she’d survived the accident, but that she’d probably never walk again.

After that day, I vowed to only write uplifting songs with positive messages.

The transformation in my audiences’ moods after that decision had been life changing.

At fifteen, I’d been asked to perform at an outdoor festival for a local charity. Afterward, I found out that the charity’s volunteer rates and donations had skyrocketed to five thousand times their expected numbers.

After hearing me perform, people had taken the messages

within my songs out into their lives and caused a change. The ripple from that one performance had turned into a wave.

Raziel had done some research within the community in the weeks that followed. He found that suicide rates had dropped, that local community outreach programs saw their highest volunteer rates and that month the SFPD logged their lowest number of criminal incidents.

That was how I'd found my calling.

"Please don't say that," I pleaded with Cleo. I shoved the stiletto onto my other foot and tried not to topple over as I released her shoulder. "The only people that need to be remembered tonight are the bride and groom."

"Right, right. Wait," Cleo called and held up one finger as I tried to pass her. She turned and dashed to the nearest table, grabbing up a stack of CDs and a silver Sharpie marker before shoving them at me. "Amanda said some fans were at the gates trying to get in. I thought we could try and bribe them off with some freebies. Sign?"

I looked down at the stack she held. Our second album had just come out and when I'd last checked, our first single had hit the number one spot on the charts. Some were predicting that it would be a new record breaker for holding that spot.

"The others haven't signed them yet? You know my rule, Cleo. This band isn't just me. It's all of us. You guys all sign first. Not me."

Cleo snorted at me. "Aidan, Rico, and Nate are outside hitting on all the super model bridesmaids. I'll have them sign when I can corral them. Come on, the press is here too and they know about the tour coming up. Give me something to shove in their mouths and shut them up."

I pushed the CDs back to her. "This is my sister's wedding, not a press conference. I'm sorry; we can deal with this later. I need to be with Syn right now. See you at the ceremony." I gave her a quick hug before slipping out of the room.

The moment I stepped outside of the calm of that room, the chaos about me suddenly leapt to life. Even on the second story of

my sister's lavish, gothic, estate, there were people everywhere. Bridesmaids were dashing in and out of their dressing room, some calling out wardrobe malfunctions, others needing makeup alterations or searching for purses. The caterer at the end of the hallway called out to me as a few guest wandered aimlessly about. Security, probably busy keeping the press out at the main gates, had left the wedding guests to wander about like sightseeing tourists.

I sighed and mentally rolled up my sleeves before heading in to organize the chaos.

* * * * *

I had just signed off on the caterer's clipboard and when a peculiar awareness tickled up my spine. I froze on the grand staircase as something within me shifted. The sensation felt akin to a weather vane that suddenly caught a strong wind. Everything within me rotated in that wind's direction and I found myself unexplainably looking at the doors of the atrium as I descended to the first floor.

When my sister had redesigned the estate, she had included the atrium for one purpose. Being a closed off room with no windows, save the skylight, it offered a secure spot for teleportation without prying eyes. Only members of our family had keys for the two double doors to that room.

Someone had just arrived.

I didn't know how I knew that. I'd never been able to sense when Raziel or Azazel teleported in or out of a room. Could it be something else?

Reflexively, my hand went for my jeans pocket and the house key I usually kept within. When my hand brushed the fabric of my dress, I cursed softly. The key was still upstairs in my room.

"Madame?" the caterer called, pulling my attention back to him. "The kitchens?"

"Ah, yes." I busied myself with showing him the estate's kitchens where he and his team could set up for the evening. My

motions were robotic though; my mind continually shifting back to that odd sensation as it repeatedly pulled my attention back to the atrium.

By the time I'd put that chore to bed, crisis after crisis suddenly dropped into my lap. The DJ had never shown up. So in a mad dash, I'd found my band mates and asked them to take our spare gear out of storage in the basement and set it up. They all seemed excited at the prospect of playing that evening for such a high profile crowd, which I blessed them for. After that, the flower delivery van had arrived with the wrong order just as the photographer informed me that he'd suddenly doubled his prices.

Azazel, where are you? I mentally screamed as I took over each fire that came at me. He'd offered to be the wedding planner, not me!

By the time I got the flowers and greedy photographer settled, one of the bride's maids tapped me on the shoulder. "Aria, your sister needs you. Like *now*."

At the urgency in her voice, I didn't hesitate. Lifting the hem of my dress, I hurried off as fast as my hateful shoes would allow.

Syn's room was on the top floor of the estate and although a small elevator had been installed, it'd been crammed full of people and deliveries. Instead, I dashed up the main staircase faster than I'd ever taken it. In hindsight, that hadn't been a smart idea on my part. Heels and a corset were not sprinting attire. By the time I'd hit the second floor, I'd already kicked off the shoes and held a hand to my diaphragm as I panted for air.

You'd have to be blind to miss my sister's room. The doors to her bedroom were a replica of *The Gates of Paradise* by Ghiberti. The darn things were so massive I had to throw my shoulder into one just to budge it.

I burst into the room anticipating that someone had fallen and broken a leg or my sister had passed out or gotten the wedding jitters and called the event off or—

"That was fast."

Panting, I turned and found my sister standing in front of her three way, full-length dressing mirrors. She was clad in her

wedding dress, which I'd only seen glimpses of during her sketching process.

Of course Syn wasn't your typical bride. If someone had dared to tell her that she needed to wear a white dress to her own wedding, we'd have found the carcass on the beach by morning.

Syn twisted before her mirrors, testing the sweep and flow of her full-length, black gown. The upper torso of the garment was similar to my own dress with the folds of a sari cascading over her right shoulder and an under bust corset framing her waistline. Unlike my dress though, she had a full-length skirt that poofed out like the gypsy wedding dresses I'd once seen on TV.

True to her gothic soul, Syn had taken the style and made it her own. The skirt of the dress had strategically placed rips and tears in the fabric, allowing the red under-skirt to peek through. Hidden among the folds of fabric were small bats embroidered with elaborate filigree. The design at the hem resembled wrought iron gates surrounding a graveyard she'd seen in London a year ago.

"Your friend," I huffed, waving absentmindedly at the doors I'd just come through, "said you needed me. It sounded like an emergency."

"Which friend?"

"Blond hair. Tall. I don't know all your friends are seven-foot giants who look like they need a weekend at a buffet. I can't keep them straight."

Syn didn't look at me but continued to scrutinize the flow of her dress. "Oh, right, I forgot I asked Jeanine to find you. Hey, does this hem line look even to you from over there?"

"That's what you needed me for?" I wheezed. I stumbled over to the black velvet chair nearest her and collapsed, dropping my shoes to the floor. I gasped instantly and reshuffled myself so that the corset didn't feel like it was cutting me in two. How did women sit in these things?

"Well, yeah. Azazel disappeared on me and you're the only other person I trust." My sister flicked her black and red ombre dyed hair over her shoulder and rolled her eyes at me. As she did

so, her elaborate head dress tinkled and chimed with her movements.

Instead of a traditional veil, my sister had worked for weeks to design a piece with curling horns reminiscent of an Ibex. I had no idea how she'd attached the thing to her head. I couldn't see a head band anywhere. The horns had chains and charms hanging from them and connected to an intricate, silver, circlet over my sister's forehead.

"Okay," Syn sighed. "That isn't the only reason." She came down from the small dais she'd been standing on like a descending queen. "Truthfully, I needed everyone out of here for a minute so I could just breathe. That's partially why I moved the bridesmaids changing rooms to the first floor."

I pushed myself up. "You're not getting cold feet, are you?"

"No! Oh, curse me, never! I just..." She trailed off, looking away from me and crossing her arms over her chest. "I just really, really need my sister right now."

"What's wrong?"

Syn's blue eyes brimmed with tears. "I wish mom were here."

I was on my feet before I knew it and hugging her close. "I know. I wish she were here too."

I meant the words, I did. They just felt very hollow coming from my lips. Our mother had died when I'd been only three years old and there was a good twelve year age gap between me and my sister. Hence, Syn had known our mother far better than I before she'd passed. When she had been killed, I corrected myself.

"I know," I amended through a tightening throat, "she'd be so proud of you."

My sister dropped her head onto my shoulder. I had to swing my head out of the way before one of the horns on her head dress bashed me in the eye. "You think? She and I — we left it on a really bad note before she died. I never told her how sorry I am for being such a bratty daughter."

I bit my lower lip. This was what Syn had needed and why she'd called me. She needed to fall apart for a bit before she faced

the rest of the world.

I reached for the gift that hid within me before I spoke again. I infused my next words with emotions of courage and self-forgiveness as I said, “She knows and there is no need to be sorry, Syn. She’d only want you to cry tears of happiness on your wedding day.” I pushed her back and held her at arm’s length so I could look her in the eyes. “So, go out there and marry the man who kept proposing to for the last ten years. Don’t you think you’ve kept him waiting long enough?”

“Yeah.” Syn laughed, all of her remorse sliding off her like water off a duck’s back. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“And you better do it before I tell Azazel you’re crying off all his cosmetic handy work.”

At that my sister laughed and playfully punched my shoulder. “You brat!”

I grinned. “Made you laugh though.”

“Thank you. Love you, sis.”

“Love you more,” I replied, completing our verbal tradition.

Sniffing, Syn pulled back and seemed to take note of our height difference. Looking down she snapped, “Where are your shoes?”

I groaned.

“I don’t want to hear it, missy. Wear them. It’s not like I gave you platforms.”

“I’m just going to go barefoot. Look, the dress is long enough no one will be able to see.”

“You’re wearing the shoes,” Syn decreed, “or I’m taking back all the dresses I made for your tour.”

“I’m going to fall,” I whined. “For all I know, I’ll break my back and ruin your wedding! EMTs do not a good wedding reception make, you know?”

“Unless they’re built like the dancers from Magic Mike. Then it would be an epic reception!”

“Sis!”

“What?” she said innocently. “I’m not a married woman yet. I’m allowed.” My sister spun elegantly over to the little stool

before her vanity mirror to check her makeup. “You’re wearing the shoes. Or do you want my maid of honor to look like a Hobbit in all of the wedding pictures?”

I gave a very unladylike growl and plucked my shoes out from under the chair. Sitting down again, I maneuvered the horrible heels onto my feet.

“It’s either those or I get you a box to stand on the whole night.”

“I’ll take the bo—”

My words froze on my tongue as that shiver of awareness tickled my spine once again. I turned and looked at the northernmost window. Moving toward it, I pulled back the heavy black curtains with their red and gold trim to look at the gardens below us.

Syn must have seen my reaction. Before I knew it, she was at my side. “What is it?”

I shook my head, my eyes moving about the silent statues and topiaries looking for — what? Still, that unfamiliar sensation persisted; not really calling but definitely declaring itself here.

“I think,” I said, my voice distant. “I think someone is here.”

Syn burst out laughing. “The wedding is in an hour and over five hundred invitations went out. I’m sure a lot of people have arrived already.”

“Only half R.S.V.P.’d,” I replied robotically, still scanning.

“No one R.S.V.P.’s in this day and age. So, expect them all.”

Aria, the male voice whispered into my mind.

I lifted my hand to my temple. *No!*

You need to come to me. Things are beginning to spiral outside of my control. I can protect you, but only if you come to me of your own free will. Please, for your own good.

I sucked in a breath sharply as the pain began to throb in my temples. *Both of you have never called out to me on the same day.* I wasn’t really sure if I’d thought that or somehow sent it. *You need to leave me alone.*

Next to me, Syn had suddenly gone quiet. When I looked up at her, she glared at me through hooded eyes. “Them again?” she

asked coldly.

I nodded and turned away from the window. “Yes,” I admitted.

Syn had been the only person I’d confided in about my problem. I hid nothing from my sister. Nothing.

Very well, the male said, the tone of his voice suddenly turning to granite. *If you will not come to me, I will be forced to come to you.*

Wait! What? The pressure on my head instantly abated and I knew he’d left.

“You promised me,” Syn said, her voice pulling my mind back into the room, “that if it got any worse you were going to tell Raziel.”

“I was going to,” I sighed. “Then the tour came up and the band has put so much into it already. It would crush them if we were forced to cancel and you know how Papa Raziel is. If he gets wind of this, that is if I’m not completely crazy and just hearing things, he’ll cancel everything. He’ll sweep me away against my will and hide me in some cave out in the middle of nowhere just like he did five years ago.”

Breaking the tension, Syn cracked a smile. “Oh yeah, wasn’t that when he suspected you had a boyfriend?”

I groaned. “Don’t remind me!”

Syn lifted a hand to rub one of her claw-like nails against her lip. “Alright, if that’s your choice, I won’t say anything to him. You have my sisterly word. We both have enough people trying to lord over us, we can’t do it to each other. However, you have to promise me that once this tour business is over, you’re going to talk to him about it. He’ll flip out, that’s a given, but he can probably help too.”

“Alright. Deal.”

“Now, in the manner of a good sister, I’m going to keep a promise in exchange for blackmailing a favor from you.”

My hopeful mood suddenly deflated.

Once again, I got a glimpse of that insecure part of my sister she only let slip out around two other people. “Can you go check

on Dorian for me? Make sure he's not getting cold feet? Oh, and make sure his groomsmen are wearing the right cufflinks."

"Future brother-in-law wrangling job accepted."

The moment I slipped out of the room and down the hall, I leaned against the nearest wall to take the shoes off.

"Oh, no you don't!" Syn snapped, though there was no way she'd seen me. "Wear them. You need the practice!"

* * * * *

I'm grateful I only have one sibling, I thought with a stab of guilt.

Being the maid of honor in a wedding was by far the most stressful and chaotic experience of my life. Once more, as soon as I left the sanctuary of the dressing room, I was accosted by people, each one with an emergency that couldn't wait for one reason or another. Throughout all of it, I hadn't seen Azazel once.

I knew the Watcher angel to be a master at not being found, yet this was ridiculous!

I passed the atrium when I finally bumped into Azazel coming out of it. Flanking him from behind were two angels I hadn't seen in years.

"Betty? Levi? Is that you?"

Levi was by far the friendliest angel I'd ever met. Surfer blond with a deep tan, he always reminded me of Brad Pitt in his early years. Quick with a smile, he was a warm and welcoming soul.

Tonight though, gone were his trademark board shorts and Hawaiian shirts. He'd been dressed in one of Syn's expertly tailored suits she'd designed for the evening. The oriental collar and the trim lines of the garment gave Levi almost an exotic James Bond look.

"Aria!" he cried out. He scooped me into his arms and twirled me around before setting me down.

"It's good to see you." Betty reached for me next and wrapped me in her strong arms.

Like her mate, Betty was also out of her garment element. In place of her swim suit and casual attire, she sported a sheer black dress with a plunging neckline that nearly cut down to her navel.

“It feels like it’s been ages. By the way, thank you for the CDs you sent. Though I might need more copies. Legion keeps stealing ours.”

“No problem,” I assured her. “I’ll send you as many as you’d like. You guys look great by the way.” I peeked around them. “Did Azrael and Lucifer not make it?”

At that Azazel snorted. Like Levi he was dressed in a suit that set off his gunmetal grey eyes and long black hair. Though he looked perfect for a *GQ* cover, it was the first time in ages I hadn’t seen him in a dress. “Oh, they made it alright and you should have *seen* what they dared to wear. Blood and guts might work as accessories in Hell, but not at my BFF’s wedding. This lot needed a makeover A.S.A.P., so forgive my absence.”

“I told you,” Betty hissed. “There was a problem in Paris that needed to be handled.”

Azazel mockingly raised an eyebrow. “What? An orgy of intestines that—” He snapped his words off sharply as the look of confusion on my face began to fade into horror. “Right, we have a wedding to launch. You two,” he gestured to Betty and Levi, “you’re on usher detail. Chop. Chop. Aria, can you get—”

I held up my hands and began backing away. “I’m already on a mission for the bride. Levi, Betty, let’s catch up at the reception, shall we?”

At their nod, I turned to head for the rear doors leading out into the gardens where the main event would take place.

As soon as I did, the sound of screeching tires echoed down the hall from somewhere outside. An instant later, a bang reverberated down the halls just before every light in the house went out.

Someone, I’m pretty sure it was Azazel, screamed in an octave that could have shattered glass. Heart pounding, I flailed about in the sudden darkness only to be caught by Betty just as I started to trip over something. In that moment, I envied their

enhanced vision.

Betty steered me to the nearest wall as a wail went up from the other wedding guests in the house. People were crying out and I heard something crash to the floor in the reception hall.

My sister was going to kill me.

“That idiot!” Azazel yelled from my right. “Azrael says that the damned florist’s delivery van just ran into the electrical transformer on the south end of the estate! Ugh, I’m going to sue their asses for every penny they have!” I saw the Watcher’s silhouette storm off in the direction of the drama. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

Angels and their telepathy, I had to remind myself. I tried not to be envious of their abilities. I really tried.

I kept my hand against the wall and made my way out to the gardens. Outside was just as dark as inside, thanks to the new moon Syn had insisted on being wed under.

Without the lights that had been brought in to illuminate the paths and stone steps for the guests, I worried that we’d have to move the ceremony into the reception hall and try to make do with candles. It would certainly be up Syn’s alley, still, she’d had her heart set on having the ceremony among all her faux cemetery headstones for the pictures.

Dorian and his groomsmen were waiting in the small guest house on the other side of the garden, which meant I had to trek through the path in the dark. Maybe that wouldn’t have been such a problem if Syn had set up her home in logical, straight paths. But no, showing her love for *The Shining*, my sister had designed her garden amid a maze of hedges over ten feet tall. Intermittently, statues hidden in the topiaries reached out like prison victims begging to be released.

I dodged under one figure whose clawed hands almost snagged my hair and nearly twisted my ankle in the damned shoes. Growling I kicked them off and knelt to grab them.

As I did so, something within my soul suddenly shifted. Far more peculiar a sensation than the nagging feeling I’d had before, it was as though a part of me I’d never known existed had fallen

and locked itself into place. For some reason, I felt as though I'd just found the missing piece of a puzzle under the couch after decades of searching and finally being able to complete the picture because of it.

The sharp caw of a bird brought my head up to see three very large ravens perched on the hedge above me. As soon as I noticed them, the birds ducked their heads in unison. The movement made me feel as if they were bowing.

The one on the far right of the trio gave a throaty rasp and spread its wings before it dove down toward me. Its companions quickly followed and with great beats of their wings, they swooped over me and up into the night sky. As they passed, I could clearly see their red eyes tracking me.

Ravens didn't have red eyes.

As I watched the birds wing away and a gentle illumination slowly faded into being over the tops of the hedges. I didn't tell my feet to walk, but they did. My eyes were fixated up at the light as I somehow found my way without fail through the maze and into the break among the hedges. The entrance to the heart of the garden had been marked by a giant stone archway and as I passed under it, I sensed that my world was on the brink of change.

An inky darkness consumed the heart of the maze. I knew the chairs and altar had been set up for the ceremony earlier that day, still, I couldn't see any of the decorations. The only thing I could see was one lone tree.

Syn had planted a cherry tree years ago which stood in almost the exact center of the garden — and it was glowing. Serene, pure light poured out of it like a visible aura. It wasn't the right time of year for a tree like it to be in full bloom, yet it was. Each soft pink flower glittered with an inner light.

My eyes moved down the tree to see the streak of black against its trunk. A man stood there, his palm held against it and his head bowed as if in concentration. Even bowed and from a distance, I could tell he was tall. I'd gotten used to tall people being around me, but this man could top even Levi by a few inches.

I didn't make a sound. At least I don't remember making one. Something must have keyed him into my presence though. He turned sharply and spun to face me.

Unlike Levi's welcoming energy, this creature's aura could only be described as slumbering violence. It left no question that anyone foolish enough to awaken the beast would be in for a world of regrets. Likewise, anyone who touched him wasn't going to lose just their hand for trying.

Unlike a movie star or celebrity, he had the charisma of a warrior emperor who didn't need to command you to kneel before him; you were already upon one knee before you realized it.

I felt drawn to him, like the gathering currents of the sea drawing me to the edge of a whirlpool. However, it didn't pull me under; I felt in control enough to choose whether or not I succumbed and fell over the precipice.

His features were cold and hard with narrowed eyes framed by dark lashes. Shoulder length, black hair edged a face that appeared neither young nor old.

Thanks to my sister's profession, I'd been around male models before. I'd seen what society had declared the cream of the crop of male perfection. This creature before me made them all look like trolls in comparison.

He was perfection. He was flawless. He was — angelic.

In the darkness, his two blue eyes focused on me and shown with an inner light no human possessed. There could be no mistaking those eyes. Once you saw them, you never forgot them. No one else had them because they'd been crafted with all the hues of blue God had forgotten to place in the world. They belonged to only one soul.

I stepped into the garden and whispered, "Lucy?"

CHAPTER THREE

LUCIFER

Azazel pulled on my last string of patience. As soon as our group teleported to the estate, he'd been waiting for us like a fashionista shark. I'd put up with his wardrobe demands only because I agreed that we were not dressed for a formal event. Syn was a horror fan, yes, but guts and gore were not the themes for the evening.

After healing the wound on Azrael's shoulder, my second slipped away to find his mate. I'd likewise ducked out intent on finding Raziel. That plan had been put on hold when I heard the car crash and every light on the property had gone out.

Azazel is working on damage control out front, Azrael broadcasted for every angel on the property to hear. He wants us to keep the guests calm while he tries to get the lights back on. It's not looking good though. Syn might need to cancel tonight and reschedule at another venue.

I stopped in my tracks, my fist clenching. *That's not happening*, I sent back to him. With my mind racing, I added, *Do me a favor and get all of the guests out of the gardens. Syn's wedding isn't canceled. Just buy me some time.*

What are you going to do?

I grinned. *I'm not called Light Bringer for no reason.*

* * * * *

As I entered the garden there were only a few stragglers left that I had to give a gentle, mental shove to get to leave. I didn't need any wandering eyes to see what I was about to do.

Forcing myself to clear my mind, I reached upward with one hand and laid my palm against the trunk of the nearest tree.

Let there be light, I thought sardonically.

The soothing silver and blue glow started below my hand and slowly spread outward. The light crawled over the tree, seeping out onto its branches and broad leaves. Each flower flexed and slowly unfolded into a tiny, perfect blossom with a spark of glowing color at its heart.

Light Bringer hadn't been a name simply handed to me. It had been a title I had earned. This particular ability had once been a secret pride of mine. However, I hadn't seen much use in being the light bulb angel since Edison had happened to the world.

Humans would easily explain away the effect as some trick Syn had devised. They'd probably assume it to be some elaborate, glow-in-the-dark paint or declare the tree a fake. It wouldn't be the first time I thanked Occam's razor.

I had just started to pull away from the tree when my senses keyed into — something. It wasn't the familiar feeling of my instincts throwing themselves on guard for an attack or the unsettling aura of someone stalking me; quite the opposite. It was as if a hidden compass within me had spontaneously keyed into its magnetic north. The needle spun wildly only to stop and lock itself in place.

Some reflex or hidden force made me turn at that precise moment. When I looked behind me, she was just there.

Two aquamarine eyes shone out of the stygian darkness.

Emerging from the ornate arch leading into the garden, a woman glided into sight. As she stepped closer, the light from the tree slowly unveiled her. Dressed in a form fitting black gown, the corset cinching her waist modestly displayed a feminine figure

any hormonal male would have found desirable.

Despite her alluring attire, as she walked forward, I caught the glimpse of her bare feet peeking from under the hem of the gown. Something about that struck me and gave her an almost ethereal nature; like some mythical nymph come to life.

Peeking from the colored folds of her dress were artfully embroidered feathers cascading down one side of the gown. They shimmered like opals in the silver light I'd called forth. The path of feathers led my eyes upward, over the curves of her hips, waist, and chest, to the single white feather woven into her hair at her left temple.

"Lucy?" she called softly.

Her hand lifted to that feather, artfully twisted among a wealth of mahogany colored curls. Her fingers caressed the feather almost as if it were a type of worry stone.

Everything within me froze at the sight of her. Every worry, every fear, every constant pressing responsibility simply faded out of my mind; replaced only by the sight of this woman before me. The sheer power of her simple presence was enough to make me want to fall to one knee before her and pledge... I'm not sure what.

Aria.

I hadn't seen her in nearly thirteen years.

Gone was the ten-year-old child. She'd been replaced by an intoxicating beauty who radiated purity and kindness as casually as some women wore perfume. Even the darkness of the cemetery and fog around her seemed to brighten a touch and become less foreboding in her presence.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't speak. I could only gaze at her and feel drawn in; as if I were caught in some gravitational pull I was unwilling to break free of.

To my relief, she broke the spell before the feeling pulled me under. Both of her hands lifted to her lips as her eyes brightened, threatening to spill over the haunting makeup someone had applied to her features.

"Lucy?" she whispered again, yet I felt her words vibrate through me as if she were standing only a foot away. "Is that really

you?”

“Aria?”

She took a hesitant step toward me, one hand beginning to reach out.

Whatever spell had descended between us in that garden was suddenly shattered by a reprimanding male voice.

“Aria, what are you doing?” An angel emerged out of the arch behind her and took Aria by the elbow. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” He stopped at the look in her eyes, his gaze tracking to me. “Ah,” he said flatly. “Lucifer. Glad you could make it.”

I nodded in recognition to Raziel, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of the girl.

I don’t know if Aria felt something similar or not. Her eyes never left mine. To her father she said, “Syn sent me to check on Dorian and then I saw the light in the garden.”

Raziel’s hazel eyes flicked between the two of us. His brows suddenly came down and he forced Aria to look at him with a gentle hand. “The wedding is still on and I’ve got Azazel screaming orders in my telepathic ear. I need you to get Dorian and his groomsmen in place. We’ve got ten minutes.”

“Papa, I—” Aria started to protest, her eyes flicking back to mine.

“Go.” With a careful briskness, he pushed Aria back through the arch and toward the guest house. Turning back to me, he said, “Thank you for taking care of the light issue. However, I think we could use more here and inside the reception hall. I need to start letting guests in here to take their seats.”

I nodded, only half hearing what he said. That damned inner compass of mine was still locked onto Aria. Even out of view, I could sense her dashing through the hedge maze and away from us. My eyes shifted to the right as she emerged out of the hedges and turned toward the guest house.

Dammit, how did I know that?

“Luce?”

Work, I told myself sternly. *Get your mind back on work and*

stop thinking about — Eyes the color of the purest tropical sea water — *other things...*

Thankfully, the sound of Raziel sternly clearing this throat was the swift kick in the rear I needed to jar my mind loose.

“We need to talk,” I said, remembering the symbols on Murder’s body before it had self-destructed.

“Yes.” Raziel’s eyes flicking to where Aria had disappeared before returning to me. “We do. However, we have a wedding to survive first.” Without waiting for a reply, the angel turned and marched out of the garden, turning left where Aria had turned right.

Within moments I could hear guests being directed toward the wedding altar, which was my cue to leave. As I moved, my hand brushed over trees, bushes, and sculptures. Colored light exploded into being in my wake.

I slipped out of the garden, feeling much like the snake fleeing Eden as I forced myself back toward the estate and not toward the guest house where my instincts were screaming at me to go.

Someone had found hundreds of candles and set them to light the foot paths and doorways. As I passed each one, I tapped the wax on the side, causing the whole column of each candle to glow and issue more light.

I began to head inside when the blare of a police cruiser’s siren from the front of the estate had me stopping in my tracks.

“What now?” I muttered.

A moment later, I turned the corner and saw the flashing lights of the vehicle parked before the gates to the estate’s drive.

Altering my course, I approached just as two officers got out of the car. In response, a female form practically materialized out of the darkness to intercept them.

“Officers,” Amanda Rodriguez called out in her clear, crisp, ‘I take no shit’ tone. “How can I help you?”

She’d dressed in a tight fitting, black pants suit that displayed her perfectly toned body. I’d never know the woman to miss a day at the gym. Emblazoned across the back of her jacket was a

stylized pair of white tribal designed wings that nearly matched the white blond of her short cropped hair.

She opened the main gate for the officers as the entertainment news reporters and paparazzi began to shout questions and snap photos from across the street. Per ordinance, they legally had to maintain a twenty-foot distance from the property. At my approach, their cameras began snapping in rapid fire as they began to call out to me. I ignored them.

The two officers were glancing around the area, obviously ogling the grounds, the upper-class guests, and the media frenzy just outside the gate.

The lead, an older man with salt and peppered hair, tipped back his hat and turned toward the former Homicide Detective as I came up behind her. His gray eyes widened in alarm. “Amanda? Shit is that you?”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Azrael’s mate tilted her chin up and eyed the one who had spoken. Her green eyes turned hard suddenly. “Mahoney,” she said in a clipped tone.

The older officer continued to stare. “We, uh, had two calls in regards to this address. One for the traffic blocking the main public street and another for a reported explosion.”

“We had an incident involving a delivery van and the onsite electrical transformer. It happened on private property.”

“We’ll be taking care of it with the delivery company in the morning,” I stated firmly.

Both officers finally broke their gazes away from Amanda to give me an appraising look. I was all too familiar with such a visual inspection. The shoulders of both men tensed as they craned their necks up to look me in the eyes. Mahoney took a step back. His younger partner stood his ground.

“Right. No one is injured, I trust. We—” Mahoney broke off his words, shaking his head in bewilderment as his gaze swung back to Amanda. “Damn, Rodriguez, you look exactly the same as the day you left the force. That was, what, ten years ago? Twelve?”

Standing beside her, I could see Amanda’s posture straighten.

Over the last two decades with the female, I'd learned just how private a person she was. So her reaction didn't surprise me. What did, however, was the way her eyes flicked nervously to me before fixating back on the officer.

I lifted an eyebrow at her, remaining silent.

Somehow, what her former colleague said had knocked Amanda off her typical cool and calm pedestal. She snapped back, "No one was injured. The driver is fine, though if he says sorry one more time, he might not be. I can assure you that all is under control here."

The second officer cleared his throat. "That's fine, Miss, but we'd like to at least see the driver and the incident area. We'll also need your guests to park off the main road."

Need help? I sent privately to Amanda. *One mental push and I can send them both away.*

I've got this. She thought back at me. Amanda didn't have the gift of telepathy, still, I could read her mind easily if she opened it for me to tune into. *They are starting to pull the good cop, bad cop routine. I think it's because of all the high profile guests and photographers. I'll show them how we're handling the situation and promise to have the valets move the cars.* She looked over her shoulder at me and gave a sly smirk. "Ceremony is in five minutes. You better get moving."

I nodded and clapping her on the shoulder before turning to head back into the mansion. "Call me if you need me."

One thing I loved about that human was the lack of hand holding she needed. Perhaps my generals needed to start taking lessons from her.

"Who's the big fella?" I heard the older officer ask as I walked away. "Heard you were married. That him?"

"That's my husband's boss," Amanda replied. "Now, if you'll follow me, you can speak with the driver."

I pushed the front doors open to the estate and entered. The front entry bore Syn's decorating style. However, there were hidden signs that Aria lived here as well. The pictures gracing the walls were one such mark. Though each one had been encased in

a black frame with bats and other macabre ornamentations, the photos were cheerful and colorful.

For the wedding, most of the photos had been changed out to show Syn and her soon to be husband from the day they met to the engagement photos. However, there still remained a good number of photos from prior years of Syn and Aria growing up.

I stopped as the last picture in the line caught my full attention. Leaning down, I picked up the chunky frame, wondering if my eyes were deceiving me.

The picture had been taken shortly after Ruby's death, just as we'd all been settling into life at the coastal house. We'd taken the photo at Syn's annoying insistence. She'd gotten into photography that spring and had always been trying to pose us for a shot.

Of course, Syn and Aria had changed drastically. They were both women in the prime of their lives. However, none of the other faces had changed at all. Myself, Betty, Levi, and Azrael were still the same as the day we had been created. Azazel was the only exception since his personal style changed from week to week.

My eyes fell on Amanda's face in the photo. She'd been in her late twenties when it had been taken, which meant she was pushing fifty today. Yet the woman I'd just left outside mirrored the image of the woman in the photo.

The glass in the frame suddenly cracked, the fractures spider webbing out from my fingertips. I set the photo down before I did worse to it.

The officers outside had been right; Amanda had stopped aging.

Azrael, what have you and your mate been doing behind my back? I snarled inwardly.

"Luce, you made it!"

I turned to see Syn descending the staircase in her wedding finery. She had a line of bridesmaids on either side of her to make sure she didn't trip.

As each of the maids looked up and caught sight of me, they all stumbled on the steps. Thankfully, they each caught themselves and avoided a disaster. Tittered to one another in high pitched

squeaks, their eyes darted to me and away, only to come back.

Syn ignored them and cascaded down the stairs like a queen coming to address her people. I crossed the floor to her and she threw her arms around me in an embrace. I had to throw my head to the side as the elaborate headdress she wore almost impaled me.

“Sorry for being late,” I whispered in her ear. “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

She pulled back, tears brimming her eyes.

“Remind me again,” I playfully chided her, “why you wanted *me* to be the one to do this?”

Syn slapped my shoulder. “Really?” she scoffed. “I’m about to say ‘I do’ over here and all you can think is ‘why me’?” She tilted her head up and though her tone was condescending, she smiled. “Need I remind you that you are my guardian on all the legal forms?”

“Oh, so now that matters? Remember when I told you that you couldn’t have your own mansion.” I gestured at the estate around us.

She snorted and took my arm, twining it about hers and she ushered me forward, her mile long train and maids walking behind us. “Well, you said no and Azazel said, ‘here take my mansion I never use.’ I was, what, twenty? How could I say no?”

I sighed. “Azazel is your enabler, that’s for sure.”

Syn laughed and I could tell she was trying to distract herself. Her nervous energy translated in the trembling of her fingers against my arm. “I love Azazel to pieces, but he can’t handle this. The giving away of the bride to the groom thing, I mean.” She gestured between the two of us with a finger. “If he were in your place right now, he’d throw me over his shoulder and cart me away.”

“Why on earth would he—”

“It’s the natural reaction of a BFF at their BFF’s wedding,” Syn said with her trademark roll of the eyes. “He’s probably going to need you and the others more after tonight.”

“Great,” I sighed on a halfhearted laugh. “Because, you know, we are just a happy family that always gets along. Yep,

totally the Brady Bunch over here.”

She elbowed me roughly in the ribs. One thing about Syn, the more she hurt you, the more she cared about you.

We left the estate and stopped at the entrance to the gardens. The groomsmen were all there and each one paired themselves up with one of the bride’s maids. From within the maze someone began playing the funeral march on a harpsichord.

“By the way,” Syn whispered, gazing ahead at the illuminated trees and candles, “thank you for the lights. I couldn’t have imagined it better. We should really start hiring you out to Hollywood as a lighting rigger.”

“Not on your life,” I replied through my teeth as the first couple started walking through the garden to the wedding altar.

I felt her again before my eyes found her. My head moved without my consent, so I once more looked to where she’d appear before she actually did.

Aria rounded the corner, looking flushed and hurried. Behind her followed a man I had never seen before. “I found Rick at the bar,” she said in a huff. “He—” Her words died the instant she saw me.

“The bar, Rick? Already?” Syn snapped. “I swear if you were not one of my husband-to-be’s best friends, I’d reenact a few scenes from *Silence of the Lambs* on you.”

The gentleman in question rolled his shoulder, using the move to maneuver Syn’s sister under his arm. “Relax, bridezilla. I’m here on time, aren’t I?”

My eyes never left Aria’s until Rick moved her into place in front of Syn and I. For some reason, my gaze moved down to Rick’s arm around her shoulders.

As the pair of them started down the aisle ahead of us, Syn whispered, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I managed to say through a tight jaw.

“Then why are you growling?”

I froze and looked at her. Had I been?

At a cue I didn’t hear, Syn pushed me forward and we were on our way down the aisle.