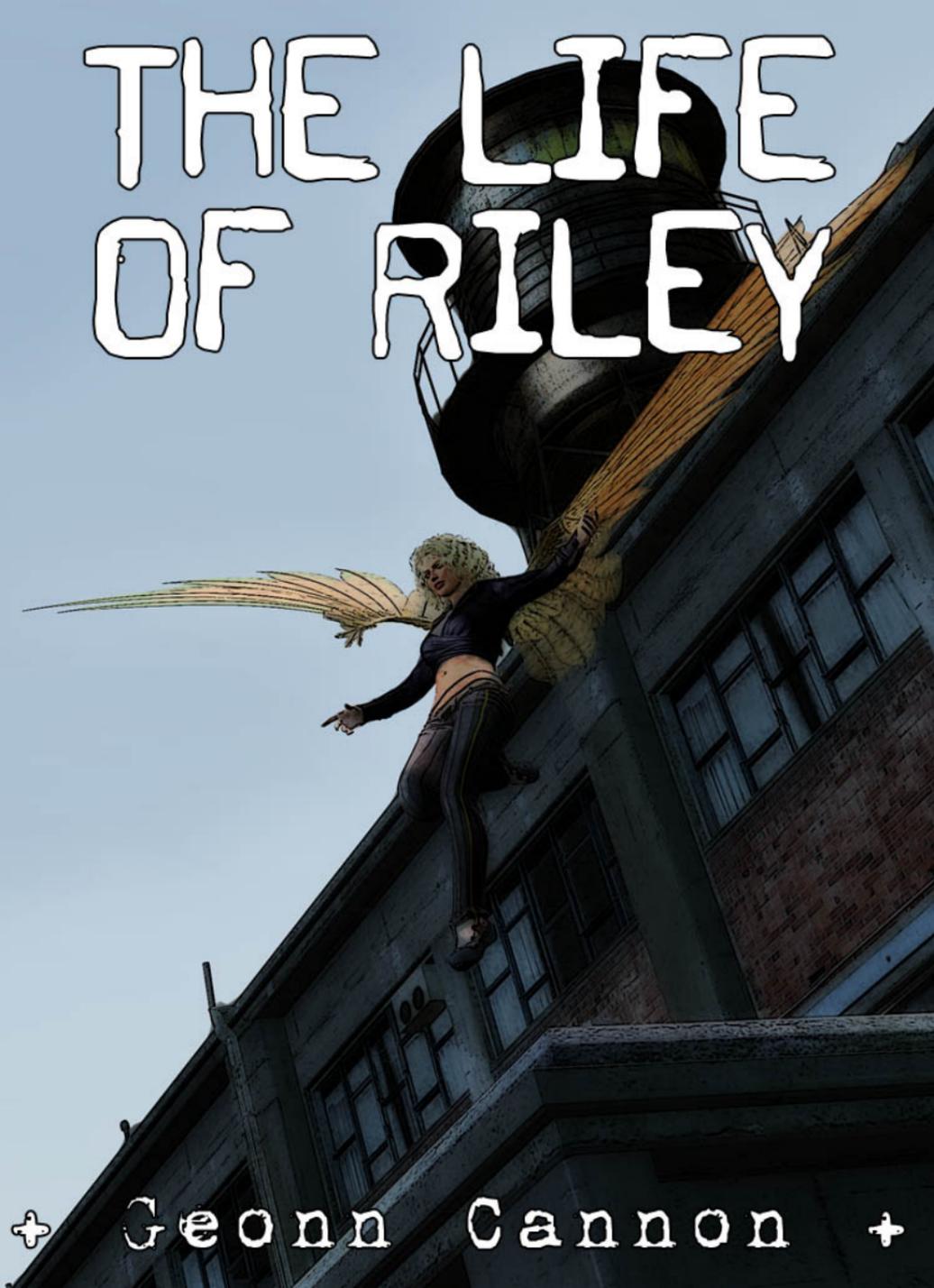


# THE LIFE OF RILEY

A woman with blonde curly hair and large, translucent, golden-brown wings is perched on the edge of a dark, industrial-style rooftop. She is wearing a black long-sleeved crop top and black leggings. She is looking towards the viewer with a slight smile. The background shows a multi-story brick building with several windows. A large, dark, cylindrical structure, possibly a water tower or ventilation duct, is visible on the roof behind her. The sky is a pale, overcast blue.

+ Geonn Cannon +

THE LIFE  
OF RILEY

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In darkness he looks for the light that has died  
But you need faith for the same reasons that it's so hard to find.

— Josh Ritter, *Thin Blue Flame*

## One

Caitlin Priest went to the roof well before dawn, already dressed for the day. She needed very little sleep, but she found she enjoyed the ritual; bathing, brushing her teeth, undressing and crawling under the blankets with all the lights off. The joy of waking was enough to make up for the inconvenience of being asleep. But she didn't give in that night. She wanted to be sure she was awake when the time came.

She wore a white collarless blouse and a pair of black suspenders. Her slacks appeared tailored, even though they were off the rack, and her shoes shone as if they had just received a layer of fresh polish. When she stepped onto the roof, her short blonde hair was pushed away from her forehead. It was still dark, the ambient glow of the city bleeding into the night sky.

Her shoes made quiet shushing sounds as she crossed the roof. She could hear sirens in the distance, and heavy engines of garbage trucks beginning their rounds. It wouldn't be long. She rested her hands on the edge of the roof and looked down at the street. Her shoulders ached. Her ears were still ringing from the explosion at Andras' compound. Such a strange thing, human frailty. She wasn't quite used to it yet.

She didn't know the exact moment of sunrise, but she felt it. She looked east and watched the sky gradually brighten, like the beam of a flashlight moving ever closer. After a few

seconds of incremental improvement, suddenly the sky was awash in brilliant colors. Brighter, brighter still. Windows began to shine like molten lava, buildings tossed their lanky shadows across the street. Finally, the sun peeked around the edge of a building and Priest felt its warmth on her face.

Priest squinted into the light and straightened her back, facing the dawn with her head held high. The moment of the day's beginning, its birth. She wondered how many people were watching the same sunrise. People who were on their way home from bad dates or overnight shifts at wherever they worked, people who woke up early to catch the train, mothers preparing their family's day...

Riley was out there, somewhere. Hopefully sleeping. Hopefully blissfully unaware of what the coming day would bring.

Priest heard footsteps on the roof behind her.

"Are you ready?"

Priest looked over her shoulder. Michael was already in his armor; she doubted he ever took it off.

"Yes," Priest said. She pushed away from the edge of the building and her wings unfurled behind her. The feathers caught the breeze, wafting gently before they curved with the movement of the wind. She lifted one foot and rested it against the brick for a moment before she shoved away. Michael followed her, his shorter wings moving faster to keep up with her. Priest led Michael into the rising sun, both of them glowing brighter as the beams wrapped around them. Priest closed her eyes and felt the city fade away beneath her as the day began.

\*

Riley barely slept that night. She took a long shower to soothe the aches she received from the fight with Andras, and then prepared for bed. Instead of sleeping she stripped the blankets and sheets and put them aside for laundry. She found fresh linens in the closet and dressed the bed with them, making sure everything was perfect. The new blanket was royal blue, the pillowcases white. It looked like something out of a magazine, and it made the floor and nightstands look more cluttered than they actually were, so she tidied them up.

By the time she gathered all the dirty laundry and put it in a hamper by the door, it was almost three in the morning. She decided that the bedroom was fine, but the living room was the first thing Gillian would see when she got back. She grabbed a trash bag from the kitchen and began picking up the empty take-out containers, shocked at her own ability to be a slob. She nearly vacuumed, but decided not to risk the anger of her neighbors.

Finally, at five in the morning, Riley stretched out on the couch to avoid wrinkling the bed she took so long to make. She dozed, tossing and turning to find a position that didn't hurt, and finally fell asleep twenty minutes before her alarm went off.

She showered again, dressed for work, and called Gillian as she searched the fridge for breakfast. She let the phone ring ten times before she hung up. She figured Gillian was out for a run, eating breakfast, or maybe still asleep. She slipped the phone into her pocket and left the apartment. The newsstand at her corner was still closed, so she got bagels and coffee from a local deli before she drove to Priest's apartment.

The storefront church Priest lived over was in the middle of a service, and Riley heard the hymns even through the foyer and the front windows. The stairwell reverberated with the sounds, and Riley prepared herself to find Priest sprawled on the floor naked again. She knocked and went into the room. “Priest. I told you to lock this door.” She looked down the hall, catching the living room in her peripheral vision. A TV with a DVD player built in sat on a milk crate, the sole piece of furniture in the apartment. Riley didn’t see Priest on the floor, so she went down the hall to the bedroom.

“Priest, you down here? Did you oversleep? *Can* you oversleep?” She knocked on the bedroom door before she peeked inside.

To her surprise, Priest had a bed. Actual box springs, headboard, sheets and blankets, the works. It was odd to see in such a spartan place, but she was glad to see Priest had someplace comfortable to go at the end of the day. But she wasn’t in bed, or in the bathroom. Riley stood in the hall for a long minute and finally decided Priest had just gone into work early. They hadn’t parted on the best of terms following the Andras thing, so maybe she was just trying to avoid awkward moments.

Riley left the apartment, making sure to lock the door behind her, and went downstairs to the church. She drove to the station thinking about her argument with Priest the night before. All she wanted was a clear, honest conversation about her role in this apparently eternal battle. Was she supposed to fight until she died and then...what? She’d never believed in an afterlife, Heaven or Hell or Purgatory. So what was her reward for giving her life to this fight?

It wasn’t Priest’s fault that she wasn’t “allowed” to know the answers. She would apologize, and they would be fine. She

would just learn to live with the fact that she was going to have to fight for the answers she wanted.

Riley parked in the underground garage and rode the elevator up to the bullpen. She was surprised to see that the lieutenant's office lacked the cross of yellow crime scene tape that had covered the door for months. She remembered the firestorm within, the demon she and Priest had destroyed by dousing him with holy water from the sprinklers. She was grateful the crime scene techs and the department brass apparently bought their ridiculous cover story. It was easier than accepting the truth of the situation.

Priest's desk was empty, and Riley eyed it as she walked past.

She knocked on the brand new door, the fresh black lettering on the glass declaring it to be Lieutenant Zoe Briggs' office. She heard a muffled acknowledgement and stepped inside. Briggs was still in the process of moving in, but there was enough memorabilia on the walls to reveal Briggs was a baseball fan. She was currently trying to center a framed print of Yankee Stadium on the wall behind her desk when Riley came in. "Detective Parra. Does that look straight to you?"

"Um...raise it up a little on the left. Up. There."

Briggs stepped back with a satisfied sigh. "Thank you, Detective. Everything else can wait, but I wanted to get this up as soon as possible. It doesn't feel like home without it." She smiled at Riley as she took a seat. "What can I do for you?"

"Have you seen Detective Priest?"

Briggs furrowed her brow and shuffled some papers on her desk. "Detective Priest was transferred, wasn't she?"

A series of emotions ran through Riley. Fear, surprise, shock, apprehension, worry. “Transferred, ma’am?”

“To Burglary. They’ve been a few men short, so Detective Priest offered to fill in for a week or two.”

“Why wasn’t I told about this?”

“I assumed she spoke with you about it.”

Riley shook her head. “When did all this happen?”

“Last week.”

Well before the incident at Andrea Silver’s house. Before Heather Cassidy was murdered, even. This couldn’t have anything to do with their argument about the answers Riley wanted. Of course, angels didn’t necessarily work linearly. Maybe she knew the argument was coming and set up an escape plan. It’s the only explanation for why she hadn’t mentioned the temporary reassignment.

“Thanks, Lieutenant,” Riley muttered as she left the office. She walked to her desk and sat down, staring at the window across the room. She drummed her fingers on the edge of the desk for a moment before she finally decided to call Priest’s cell phone. It rang twice before the call went directly to voicemail.

“This is Caitlin Priest. I’m not with my phone right now. Please leave your name and number and I’ll try to call you back as soon as I can. It may be a while, Riley.”

Riley frowned as the tone sounded in her ear. “Priest, what the hell is going on? Where are you?” She stared at Priest’s empty desk as if she expected an answer. “All right. Call me back.” She closed the phone and tapped the corner of it against her chin as she stared at Priest’s empty chair. She

didn't know what the game was supposed to be, but she wasn't going to take it lying down.

She stood up and grabbed her coat as Lieutenant Briggs came out of her office. "Detective Parra. Mind taking a case on your own?"

Riley considered saying no, but she decided it would be better to occupy her mind with a case. "Sure."

"It's in No Man's Land."

"That's not a problem," Riley said, holding her hand out for the memo slip.

Briggs handed it over and glanced at Priest's desk. "She's coming back, you know. The two of you make quite a team. I wouldn't let her waste her talents in Burglary forever."

"Good to know," Riley said. She shrugged into her jacket and checked the address of the murder. It seemed vaguely familiar to her, but she'd spent most of her formative years running through those streets. She folded the paper in half and put it in her pocket. "ME and uniforms on the scene?"

"Uniforms, yes. Dr. Herron is still working on a body, so he'll be there as soon as he can."

Riley nodded. "Will do, boss."

On the way downstairs, Riley stopped on the third floor. Burglary occupied a space identical to Homicide's, but the room seemed infinitely smaller. Rows of file cabinets, cluttered desks, overflowing garbage cans, and the stink of a coffee machine pushed into service past its prime gave the place the feel of a squatter's paradise. Riley didn't even try to find Priest in the labyrinth of desks; she went directly to the lieutenant's office and knocked on the glass. "Excuse me, lieutenant. Detective Riley Parra, Homicide."

The man looked warily at her. He was muscular, with a military haircut and broad shoulders. His tie hung loose, as if he'd been tugging at it every five minutes. He gave her a full three seconds of his attention before he turned back to his paperwork. "Hope you're not here on business. We're swamped as it is."

"Not..." Riley cleared her throat. "I'm looking for my partner, Caitlin Priest. I heard she was loaned to you guys. I just need to speak with her about an on-going case."

"Sorry, no can do. Priest and her new partner, Doyle, already left for the day." He tapped a stack of manila envelopes on the desk next to him. "We've got eighteen cases going cold as we speak. That's not to mention the ones currently being investigated. Your friend Priest is somewhere out there going from one scene to the next. We're doing our best to give people the impression we're doing our best. You know?"

Riley nodded. "So no clue where Priest is? No way to contact her?"

"You could try her cell, but I'm sure you already tried that. She and Doyle took about twelve case files when they left, so they could be at any one of those locations, or in transit between them. I could try and find the list, if you like."

Riley stopped him before he could start digging in his pile again. Hadn't these people heard of computers? "No, that's fine."

"You sure you're busy enough up there in Homicide? We could always use another body down here."

"Sorry. Always people willing to kill someone else."

The lieutenant sighed and looked at his stack. “Yeah, same with stealing. Thanks anyway, Detective Parra. Wish I could have been a bigger help.”

“You did you best, Lieutenant Archer.”

He smiled and waved as she left the room. “You can call me Michael.”

Riley drove through No Man’s Land, thinking about Priest. At a stoplight, she drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. The radio was playing, but she was only vaguely aware of the music as she waited for the traffic to let her pass. She saw her reflection in the side mirror and scoffed at it. She shook her head. “I did just fine for years before Caitlin Zerachiel Priest showed up. I don’t need her watching my back. If she wants to take a breather for a week, then more power to her.” She chewed the inside of her cheek and said, “Of course, if she was here, I wouldn’t be talking to myself like a moron.”

She sighed and jabbed the radio to change the stations. *All By Myself* was playing on a station that usually played country. She wondered if the singer had died, and then wondered who the singer was. She changed stations and found *Alone Again, Naturally*.

“Thought this crap only happened in movies...” she muttered.

The next station, country, was playing Patsy Cline singing *Have You Ever Been Lonely?* Riley glared at the radio as the light turned green. She accelerated just as the radio signal died in a burst of static. Patsy Cline’s voice faded out, replaced by a screeching male voice. Riley reached down and twisted the knob for the radio, turning it off. Still, the voice continued.

“You’re all alone, Riley Parra. No angels on your shoulders this time. Hope you’re ready for the end.”

Riley felt a chill as the car fell silent. The radio looked normal when she glanced down at it, but the voice still echoed in her head. She fished her cell phone out of her pocket and tried calling Priest again. She got the voicemail message again, but she cut the call off before she could hear Priest’s lame apology again. On a whim, she dialed Gillian’s number. Her heart pounded as she listened to the unending tones of an unanswered phone.

“Come on, Jill...”

The call finally cut off, and the soothing voice of the operator came through. Riley tossed the phone into the empty passenger seat as she crossed over the imaginary border of No Man’s Land. She was all by herself. Alone again. Naturally.

## T W O

The address Briggs gave her belonged to an ancient tenement. Riley parked behind a patrol car, one of the last remaining older models in the city apparently. She stopped and ran her hand over the top of the cruiser. It was just like the kind she had once patrolled in. She didn't mind the new, sleeker cars the department got a couple years back, but they definitely lacked the character of the old sedans. She dropped her hand and glanced up and down the street.

The car wasn't the only thing tickling her memory. There was something uncomfortably familiar about the entire area, like seeing somebody after a few years and knowing she should know their name. She tried to ignore the added decay, replacing broken windows and trying to mentally fill the empty lots with various buildings in an attempt to jog her memory.

When she saw the faded ads in the liquor store window, recognition shook her hard enough that she had to grab the car door to steady herself. The liquor store had once been one half of a convenience store, Gilbert's, if she remembered correctly. She could see the tall racks of candy and chips, the magazines carefully alphabetized by the front door. There was a seating area across from the cash register where old men sat to read newspapers and play chess.

Riley could see a sixteen year old delinquent sidling down one of the aisles and placing a bottle of Jack Daniel's under

her jacket. Her hair was covered by a hoodie, and she wore big sunglasses that she hoped covered enough of her face that the clerk wouldn't recognize her. She played it cool as she made her way toward the door, but calm turned to panic when she spotted the white and blue cop car parked outside. There was nothing for the punk thief to do but try to run. It wasn't like the cops gave enough of a shit to chase a thief.

Riley could almost hear the thief's pounding footsteps on the pavement as the ghosts moved in front of her. A little slip of nothing, dressed head to toe in a dark blue uniform, pursued the kid. It wasn't a long chase, and the kid was thrown facedown onto the ground in front of the cop's car. Her sunglasses broke, and her dark hair spilled out from under her hoodie as the cop handcuffed her. The girl shouted and cursed, called the cop every name in the book and tried to kick her as she was hauled to the back of the car.

The ghosts faded and the liquor store came back into full relief. She licked her suddenly dry lips. She could still feel the handcuffs snap closed around her wrist. Her first arrest, her first trip down to the police station. Even then, she knew the sound of that ratcheting metal signaled the end of life as she knew it. And, as it turned out, she was right. Just not in the way she expected.

If anyone else had grabbed her, delinquent Riley Parra probably would have been processed and tossed back out onto the streets until her next arrest. The vicious cycle would have started right there. But Officer Christine Lee wasn't willing to give up on her. Lee saw Riley's first arrest as a wake-up call. She went through the ballet of processing but, when it was over, unlocked the cuffs and asked if Riley wanted a ride home. "I don't want to do this for real," Lee said as she led Riley down the steps. "You can be anything you want, and this city already has too many fucking has-beens."

And Riley cried. Something inside of her, something she thought was too hard to ever be overcome broke. She poured out all of her pain and regrets. And Christine Lee listened. They sat in her cop car, and Riley wept for everything she'd lost and everything she might lose if she continued down the same path.

Riley bit back the memory, the surge of emotions threatening to push her over the edge. She looked at the decrepit building and wondered if she should go inside and pay for the whiskey she tried to steal. Probably too little too late. Now that she thought about it, the patrol car she'd parked behind was also from the era when Christine busted her.

She cleared her throat, straightened her shirt collar, and looked around to make sure no one had seen her flashback. A man was standing on the corner, looking away from her. Riley almost ignored him until she noticed his trenchcoat was just slightly out of season. Her eyes were drawn to the tail of the coat, hanging near the man's ankles. She just barely saw the tips of two furred wings. She sucked in a breath and looked at the opposite corner. Another angel stood guard there. His hands were clasped behind his back, his eyes locked on her.

“Hope you guys are on my side.”

Neither of them answered, or even acknowledged she had spoken. She closed the door and secured her badge on her belt as she stepped onto the curb. The front door of the tenement was open, and she walked into the foyer. The building had obviously been abandoned for a while, with trash that had blown in from outside blown into the corner. The tile floor was water damaged, and half the windows on the ground floor were covered by plywood. As Riley started up the stairs, a

uniformed officer was coming down. He was holding a handkerchief against his mouth and nose, breathing deeply.

“Take it easy, officer,” Riley said as he passed. “It gets easier with time. Is your partner upstairs?”

The officer half-turned and said, “Top floor.” His voice was muffled through the hanky, but Riley thought she recognized it from somewhere. Probably one of the newbies who stood guard at her crime scenes. She watched him leave before she ascended the stairs.

The top floor turned out to be the fifth. Doors were missing from the majority of rooms, bare mattresses and paraphernalia on the floor indicating the building was a junkie hangout. The sight depressed Riley. The neighborhood hadn’t been terrific when she lived here, but at least it wasn’t *this* hopeless. She heard the static of a police radio from the room at the end of the hall and aimed herself toward that room.

When she reached the doorway, she stopped and took in the scene. Old furniture was crammed against the far wall, leaving a wide open space in the middle of the room. Judging by the scorch mark on the floor, some kind of fire had been started there. Maybe deliberate, to cook a meal, and it got a bit out of hand. A cop was standing at the picture window, looking out at the street below. Maybe taking some kind of sick amusement in his partner’s weak stomach.

“Heard you had a body for me.”

“Yeah,” the guy said. He seemed young, but his voice was already rough from cigarettes. He gestured at one of the couches without turning around. “Real sad. Woman, Hispanic, mid thirties. Looks like someone roughed her up real good before she died.”

Riley crossed toward the couch. “Any ID?”

“No, but there’s a distinguishing mark.”

“Oh, yeah?” Riley looked over the back of the couch and saw it was empty.

“Bitch has a tattoo on her left shoulder.”

Riley turned just as the cop swung his baton at her head. She twisted, but it still glanced painfully off her chin. Riley twisted with the blow, turning her back to her attacker. When he stepped forward for another swipe, Riley straightened and let her arm swing with the momentum of her movement. She backhanded the cop across the face, her nail raking across his cheek. She doubted it would draw blood, but it might distract him.

Riley tried to slip past him, but the cop put his hand in the middle of her chest and shoved her back toward the couch. His strength was unbelievable, but she didn’t have time to think about it before his fingers closed in the material of her shirt. He dropped his baton, his other hand grabbing the waistband of her jeans. Riley’s feet left the ground as the cop lifted her like she was a rag doll, her body arcing through the air until she was parallel with the ground. She went limp, but it didn’t help as she was hurled into the floor. Every bone in her body vibrated with the impact, her diaphragm, lungs and heart temporarily shocked into inactivity.

The cop stepped over her, one foot on either side of her torso, and bent down so she could see his face. His eyes were pure black, bruised and sunken as if he hadn’t slept in years. When he grinned, she could smell the decay of his teeth and the reek of his breath washing over her like fog settling on water. She coughed, eyes watering, and finally recognized the face under the ruin.

“Samael,” she rasped.

He grabbed a handful of hair and hauled Riley to her feet. She kicked at him, her foot glancing off his shin, but Samael hardly noticed. He dipped her, as if they were in the middle of a ballroom dancing demonstration, one hand in the small of her back with the fingers splayed. “This is going to hurt,” he warned, his voice still raw and broken. He shoved with all his might, which was considerable, and Riley was hurled across the small room like a major league pitch. She twisted during the point-six seconds she was in the air, trying to protect her internal organs. She didn’t know if the bones of the back were stronger than the ribs, but it couldn’t hurt.

Riley hit the wall and felt, for a moment, as if she was going to continue through the drywall. The initial impact was jarring, and then there was a sickening moment of release. Whether the wall cratered, or her bones cracked, she wasn’t sure. The pain radiated away from her in waves, coming back over her in mind-numbing, throbbing beats. She didn’t even have the strength to drop down to her knees; the wall cradled her as Samael approached.

“You’re—”

“No talking,” Samael growled. He punched her once, in the face, and the pain exploded into darkness.

## Three

The world seemed red behind her eyelids, and Riley was reluctant to open them and face whatever was out there. Her arms were stretched out to either side, her back against the wall. She tried to move her right hand and cried out as a sharp, piercing pain shot down her arm. The shock forced her eyes open, and she looked to see what had caused such an immediate injury.

A string of barbed wire was wrapped loosely around her wrist, holding it to the wall. There were four loops, each with barbs pressed warningly against the tender part of her wrist. She turned her head and saw an identical restraint on her other wrist. She looked down and saw an X of the wire crossing her chest. Several barbs had snagged on her blouse and given the material several small tears. She was on her knees, with her feet flat against the wall. She tested the limits of the bindings and discovered she could move about a quarter inch in any direction before the barbs cut her flesh. "Aha. A quarter inch. I got you right where I want you, Sammy."

She was still in the room where Samael ambushed her, but anything that might help her escape was on the opposite wall. The window was covered by a black tarp, but sunlight was still visible at the edges. As far as she could tell, it was still early morning. She hadn't been unconscious for very long, unless she had lost an entire day. No, she would be able to tell. And

the pain wouldn't be so intense after twenty-four hours. Her right side felt tight, and she assumed several ribs were broken.

Riley could hear movement outside and turned to face the door just as Samael entered. He was still wearing his police uniform, but the shirt was unbuttoned to reveal a white undershirt. Blood spotted the cotton, and Riley wondered if the gunshot wounds she inflicted on him so long ago were still bleeding. "Probably should have killed you when I had the chance," she said. "I'll make a note for next time."

Samael went to the pile of old furniture without comment. He lifted two floodlights, the kind used for night crime scenes, and placed them a few feet in front of her. He ran the cords to the wall, plugged them in, and switched them on. Riley squinted and turned her head away, the heat from the lights already noticeable on her face. Samael stepped between the lights, now just a blurry shape against the glow.

"I didn't ask for this assignment. It was a gift."

"Did I miss your birthday? That makes me feel bad."

Samael sighed. "So glib, even now. Detective, you must realize there is no rescue in the offing. No back-up. No magic bullets. No angels on your shoulders." The repeated phrase made Riley realize Samael had been the voice on her radio. "It's just you and me. Do you realize time passes differently in Hell? Or maybe it just seems that way. It's not like there are clocks around. And do you realize what it's like to be an angel there? Imagine being a cop in prison. I was surrounded by creatures who took delight in causing pain. It was their only talent, but they did it well. They took especial pride in causing me anguish. It was a game to them. Each wanted to ensure that every day was worse than the day before. Each wanted to cause me more pain than the demon that came before. I

learned new and unique ways that I could hurt. And in Hell, there are no rules. I cannot count the number of times I should have died. The things they did to me... Even angels should not be able to withstand that.”

Riley said, “Sorry. There was nothing about that in the brochures. Next time I recommend a vacation for you, I’ll be sure to check it out better.”

Samael stepped out of the penumbra of the lights and swung his hand toward her face. He didn’t slap her, and it took a moment before she felt the sting and the warm blood trickling down her cheek. She saw the blade in his hand only after she realized she’d been cut.

“I can’t repay you even a fraction of what you condemned me to endure. But I can make your death long and painful. I can have you begging for Hell. But once you get there...once you see what I have seen...” He laughed. “You can’t even beg for death, because it won’t come. Wounds don’t heal in quite the same way down there. Healing requires life force. Regeneration. You will be tortured to death, without the reward of dying. Over and over again.”

Riley felt the blood dripping off her chin. “Can’t be worse than listening to you babble.”

Samael turned and walked out of the light. When he returned, he placed an old-fashioned boom box between the two lights. He knelt down and said, “You thought yourself capable of going against demons. You thought you were only risking your own life. You walked into the den of Alistair Call with the sin of pride, and so you will pay for that sin by hearing the pain you caused.” He pressed Play and the speakers emitted a quiet, humming static. Samael rose. “You will hear the cries of Gillian Hunt as the Duchess raped her mind and violated her body.”

“Stop...” Gillian suddenly gasped, her voice sounding loud enough to fill the room.

“No,” Riley said. Everything in her seized and she pulled against the restraints. The barbs didn’t matter, she just wanted to get to the radio and silence it. “Don’t...”

Samael walked away as Gillian began to scream.

Riley closed her eyes tightly, biting down on the inside of her cheeks as she tried to block the sounds of Gillian’s torture.

The tape had faded into white noise by the time Samael returned. Blood dripped from Riley’s wrists to the floor, the barbed wire tight against her chest from repeated efforts to cross the room and shut off the tape player. She could feel the pinpricks in her chest, the sick trickle of blood running along her stomach. She would have pushed the damn wire straight through her body if it meant shutting off that damn tape.

“Which was the worst part?” Samael asked. “The screams? I didn’t know human beings could make that kind of noise. Of course, it’s nothing compared to what I heard in Hell. But it was close. Very similar.” He knelt down and turned off the tape. “But I know you, Riley. I’m sure the worst part for you was the crying.”

“Stop it,” Riley said. Her voice was rough from screaming, from shouting as she cried, imagining every horror that had been visited on Gillian. She stared at a spot on the wall, her eyes wide and twitching. The tape may have stopped, but the sounds still filled her ears.

“Such sobbing. Resignation to death. It’s heartbreaking. Did she tell you that she gave up?”

“Shut up,” Riley said.

“Gillian succumbed to the demon. I cannot imagine anyone recovering from that, no matter how far from you they run—”

Riley lunged forward, howling in pain as the barbs dug into his skin and seemed to twist. Samael watched her with detached interest until she sagged back against the wall.

“Ask me for some water.”

“Go to Hell.”

“Been there,” Samael shouted. “Ask me for some water. I am sure you must be parched. Your throat is dry. No one can hear you, by the way. The sentries you saw before you came into the building have blocked this building off.”

“More fallen?”

“No. They’re the good guys. They want this to happen to you.”

Riley shook her head. “They would never...”

“It was Zerachiel’s idea.” Riley looked up at Samael, trying to find a hint of deception in his voice. To her horror, she couldn’t hear any. “She set it up. She scheduled it. She left you so that this could happen. If you want to curse someone’s name, curse hers. Condemn your beloved Priest for what she has done to you. Perhaps if you send another angel to Hell in your place, you will be set free. Worth a try, isn’t it?”

Riley grunted as she relaxed, the twisting barbs pulling out of her flesh.

“May I have some water?”

“Say ‘please, Samael.’”

Riley closed her eyes. “Please. Samael. May I have some water?”

Samael bent down and picked something up. He walked forward and Riley parted her lips in anticipation of a drink. A bucket of water was poured over her head, leaving her sputtering. She shook her head, sending droplets flying like a wet dog, and realized belatedly that none of the water had entered her mouth. She licked her lips, trying to get as much as she could into her dry mouth. Samael laughed and returned to his position behind the lights.

“What would you do to make me stop?”

Riley grunted.

“I’m being sincere, Riley. I can be reasoned with. You can be spared this pain, this torture.”

“At what cost,” Riley muttered. She hung her head and saw the blood staining her shirt. How much blood had she lost? How much more could she risk losing? She shook her head and said, “I’m not selling my soul to you. If I die, fine. Fine. It’s about damn time.”

Samael said, “It won’t be quite that easy, Riley.” He walked forward and grabbed a handful of her hair. He forced her to straighten her spine, and wrapped something around her throat and then fastened it to the wall. When he released her hair, Riley sagged forward slightly and felt more barbed wire press into her throat. This loop was tighter than the others; she had no leeway whatsoever. If she relaxed her spine or changed posture, the barbs would cut into her.

Samael stepped back and said, “I’ll come by and check on you soon, Riley. I hope you’re comfortable.”

Riley closed her eyes and listened to his retreating footsteps. It hadn’t even been a full minute, and already she was straining to keep in the correct position. How deep could this damn necklace pierce her? Would Samael really risk ending

his little game just because she relaxed? Could it be that easy? Just go limp and let the cord cut her open. Let Samael return to find a corpse. It was one way to win. Of course, Samael would also win.

The only way to win, while making Samael lose, was to keep position until he returned. No matter how hard it might be. She braced her feet against the wall and settled in to the position Samael had forced on her. The muscles between her shoulder blades were starting to protest. She didn't know how long she could hold the position, but she would be damned if she gave up before every ounce of strength was gone.

The heat from the lights was starting to get to her. She closed her eyes against them, but still they burned. She was sweating, dehydrated, tired. She licked her dry lips and shifted her weight from one knee to the other. The movement caused the barbed wire around her neck to bite into the thin flesh. She could feel one barb resting on her pulse point. *That's how easy it would be to end this torture. Just shake your head and boom, you're out.*

She silenced the voice and closed off her mind. She refused to think of how her shoulders burned, how heavy her arms felt, how much blood must have dripped out of her already. She was lightheaded, but not enough to pass out. God, if she did pass out, even for a second, it was over. She tried moving slowly and felt the barbs glide over her raw flesh without tearing. But there was no way to use the slight freedom this gave her to escape. When she relaxed her shoulders, the barbs pressed against her throat without cutting. The wire still pressed against her windpipe, however, and made breathing dangerous.

She could hear Samael outside, moving around in other rooms. She wondered if he was gathering more toys. How long

was this little game supposed to last? Until she gave in? Until she succumbed to blood loss and dehydration? There was no way she could know what the finish line was, but she vowed that she wasn't going to give Samael an easy victory.

## F O U R

The movie played in her head for the third time. She watched Samael, bleeding from bullet wounds in his chest, get engulfed by a pillar of fire. He was gone in an instant, and Riley was left to recuperate on her own. She remembered kneeling on the roof, utterly spent, waiting for the arrival of either death or the strength to get to her feet and leave the building. Either would have been welcomed.

Riley knew this day was coming. She had just been hoping it would take longer to arrive. Her arms were numb, dead weight hanging from the wall. But she didn't dare relax the muscles. Even if she couldn't feel her hands, she still wanted them in one piece. She opened and closed her fingers for the painful pins and needles sensation that told her that her hand was, indeed, still attached to her body.

Samael finally returned and released her noose. Riley was careful not to relax too much; the straps around her chest were still in place. But having the noose gone was such a relief. She dropped her chin and let her tired muscles relax. The muscles twitched and sent a series of spasms through her body, and she realized they were locked in place. Terrific.

Samael dropped the noose to the ground and said, "Ask me for water."

"May I have a drink of water?"

“Milord.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Riley grunted.

Samael stood with his back to her. “I have been ordered to give you a gift.”

“Hope you kept the receipt.”

Samael said, “The gift is knowledge. And I was ordered by Zerachiel to bestow it upon you.” He stepped forward. “You wish to know why you were chosen. Why you are the human who must undergo these trials and face this torture. You want to know why you above all others are condemned to this fight. It is because you cheated, Riley Parra. You broke the natural order. You asked for this.”

“I didn’t,” Riley said.

Samael leaned down so that his face was directly in front of hers. She tried to meet his gaze, but the eyes were too horrible to focus on. She finally focused on his forehead.

“Remember your sin, Riley Parra.”

“*Police! Freeze!*” The voice, her voice, echoed through the room from unseen speakers. She heard shoes pounding on pavement, kicking through split-open garbage bags. She could see the alley and the back of the man she was pursuing as clearly as if she were watching it on a screen. “*Freeze! I will shoot!*”

And then a vice grip around her throat, inhumanly strong fingers lifting her off the roof. Holding her in the air and, oh, God, her first look at a demon. Her first encounter with Marchosias. She was still in uniform, barely out of her teens before she went through the police academy and put on a badge. And this is how it ends. Thrown off the roof by some asshole in a fright mask. He walked to the edge of the building

with her. She squeaked out a plea before Marchosias hurled her off the building.

*“You were chosen the night you died.”*

That voice belonged to Andras. Riley remembered now, the fall, the unending fall through the air. It was almost five years since that night, and she remembered everything about it. Except for what happened during the fall. The knowledge came back to her with alarming clarity. She died. What else could happen when someone was thrown off the roof of a building with nothing to break their fall?

She watched from afar, Samael’s gift to her. She watched herself hit the pavement. Her body half-skidded and bounced slightly, landing on the sidewalk. Her hips were twisted, one arm draped across her stomach. Her eyes were open, staring sightlessly across the street. There was no blood, surprisingly, but there was no doubt that her death had been instantaneous. Riley looked at her corpse with horror, unable to process the sight.

“What have you done?”

“She was in my way.”

Riley only barely recognized the man in the leather trenchcoat. She had only seen him alive once, their other meetings occurring in the morgue. He was Ridwan, the angel whose murder had awakened Riley to what was really going on in the city. The other man haunted her nightmares; Marchosias. They stood in the mouth of the alley, looking down at her body. Ridwan looked irritated, Marchosias looked like a man waiting for a late bus.

“The tattoo...”

“Didn’t do much of a job, did it?” Marchosias said. “I suppose technically, I just threw her. The street killed her.” He chuckled at his own joke.

Ridwan glared at the demon. “This must be made right.”

“Just another cop.”

“No,” Ridwan said. “She was the former lover of Christine Lee.”

Marchosias laughed.

“Silence,” Ridwan said. “When Christine died, this city was left unprotected.”

“And high times for my boys. It’s been a good run.”

Ridwan knelt next to Riley’s body and tenderly touched her forehead. “Balance, Marchosias. Is that not what you and I agreed to? You can destroy a protector, but only if they are aware of the battle. Riley Parra did not have that benefit.”

Marchosias sighed. “Well, it’s a little late now.”

“No. It’s not.” He brushed Riley’s hair out of her face and covered her eyes with his hand. “Riley, can you hear me?”

His voice made Riley tremble, as if her body was a wire and his voice was a current from far away. She realized he was speaking to her soul, and she suddenly felt utterly small. “Do you wish to wake up?”

Riley remembered the night. She remembered patrolling No Man’s Land because no one else would do it. Someone needed to be there. Someone needed to protect them when everyone else wrote them off. And if she died, who would take her place? She knew what her answer to Ridwan was. She knew what it would always be.

“You can’t be serious,” Marchosias said. “Doing this sacrifices your divinity. It will leave you defenseless. You would make yourself vulnerable for...this?”

“Being vulnerable doesn’t necessarily mean that I will be killed, Marchosias. You can’t do anything about it, after all.” He smiled patronizingly and then looked down at Riley’s body again. “This one is worth it. She will make a difference, I’m certain.”

Marchosias shook his head and started to walk away. “Your sentimentality will get you killed one of these days, Ridwan. Mark my words.”

Ridwan watched the demon leave, then carefully lifted Riley off the ground. She stirred, eyes swimming into focus as he moved her. “What happened?” she asked.

“Rest a while longer,” Ridwan said. “You still need to heal. You will wake in a moment.”

Riley saw her eyes close as Ridwan carried her to the spot where she remembered waking all those years ago. The vision faded and she was left staring into the bright lights of her torture den, her muscles remembering their various aches and pains as she returned to the present. “Ridwan used something to bring me back to life, and that left him vulnerable to you. Did you know he had done it? Did you realize you were killing him when you swung that sword?”

“Yes,” Samael said. “And so did he. He bowed his head and waited for the end to come. He accepted it. For you.”

“So what is the tattoo?”

“Protection. Christine Lee was given the tattoo when she chose to become the city’s sentinel. It would have protected her from being murdered by a demon, if not for her sacrifice.

She feared for you, Riley, and she bestowed part of that protection to you. She inked your shoulder and gave away a portion of what kept her safe. As soon as we realized what had happened, we sent out demons to remove her from the equation. It was embarrassingly easy. A car accident.” He laughed and shook his head.

Riley bowed her head, tears burning her eyes.

“How many other good people sacrificed themselves to save you, Riley? How many more will have to die before you simply give up?” He moved forward and she felt his breath on her face. “Will you destroy Zerachiel on this quest? Will Gillian Hunt be the next to fall? Mackenzie Crowe decided to stay in the city because of you. Perhaps we will deliver her corpse to your door as a prize.” He grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. “Give up. Save them by sacrificing yourself like so many sacrificed for you.”

“They didn’t die so I could give up,” Riley said. “Take your lame threats and rotten breath somewhere else.”

Samael placed two fingers against the soft flesh above Riley’s collarbone and pressed down. Riley grunted and squeezed her eyes shut as her body instinctively moved down and away from the touch. The inadvertent retreat caused her wrists to pull the barbed wire, cutting her wrists at a new angle. He stood up, increasing the pressure as he moved, until Riley was sure one barb was embedded under the flesh. She gasped with relief when he released her. He was backlit by the floodlights and she thought she could see charred wings hanging behind him like ragged curtains.

“Your tattoo will not help you, Riley. There is no rescue coming. There is no escape. The sooner you realize that and accept your fate, the better.”

“I just realized,” Riley said, her voice filled with wonder. She looked up at Samael. “You called in a false police report. Oh, man, are you in trouble now. That’s a misdemeanor charge. You’re going to have to pay a fine and everything.”

Samael turned and walked from the room.

“Hey, get back here. I need to read you your rights. You have the right to remain silent...and some...other stuff.” She dropped her head to her chest and exhaled sharply, watching her chest rise and fall underneath the barbed wire. The floor around her was dotted with blood, some pools larger than others. It stained the wallpaper and the baseboard, with streaks and pools on her jeans and probably on her shoes and socks as well. Laundry was going to be a bitch.

She took a deep breath, testing to see how far she could stretch the harness around her torso. She could breathe in to a certain point before the barbs found flesh, and then a little more until the pain became unbearable and forced her to exhale. She carefully twisted and looked toward the roof. Her vision was blurred and unaccustomed to the darkness thanks to Samael’s lighting, but she could see that the barbed wire stretched up along the wall to a socket in the ceiling. She wouldn’t have to break the wire or cut through her body to escape, she just had to get that socket broken. How hard could that be?

Riley twisted her wrists until her hands were palm-up. The skin on the edges of her wrist was thinner, but the bone was thicker. She hoped she would be able to apply more strength in that position. She moved her body up and down, watching as the barbs moved her blouse with her motion. After a few forward thrusts, she had a bit of padding between her flesh and the barbed wire. She exhaled, braced her feet against the wall, and lunged forward.

The barbs cut, and she felt the wire tightening around her torso. Something above her creaked, and Riley dug her fingernails into her palms. It hurt, but it was a pain she could control. She could stop that pain at any time, and it distracted from the myriad other pains she was inflicting upon herself. “Come on,” she grunted. “Come on...how strong do they make these fucking buildings...?”

There was a crack, a crumbling noise, and Riley fell forward. She threw out her hands to break her fall at the last moment, sure that the barbed wire would embed itself in her chest if she fell on it. Her arms and legs were both asleep, and pieces of the ceiling tile rained down on her back, but she hardly ignored those minor pains. She examined the barbed wire wrapped around her wrists and figured out a way to gingerly remove it. She pricked her fingers and palms more than a few times, but that was no matter.

The X across her chest was harder to remove, but she found a way to get one loop undone and then ducked under the other as she pulled it over her head. It snagged her hair, pulling a few strands free in the process, but she dropped it to the floor with a sense of utter victory. She got to her feet, wobbling on uncertain legs, and moved past the blinding lights to search the room for a weapon.

She had scanned the couch before she realized something was wrong. She turned and frowned at the ceiling, then stared at the piece of it that lay in the spot she had just been imprisoned. The pool of blood was alarming. How could she have bled that much without being lightheaded? But that wasn't the main thing that caught her interest.

Small words were written on the wallpaper behind her back. She approached cautiously until she was close enough to read it.

***What do you suppose you were chained to?***

It was then that she heard the beeping.

Riley turned and ran for the door, but it was too late.

The building shook with the force of the explosion.

## F i v e

Her heart was pounding. That was good. That meant it was still beating.

Then she wondered if the pounding was causing more blood to pump out of her body. That would be less good. She opened her eyes and tried to assess her situation. She remembered the concussion of the blast, being picked up off her feet and thrown like debris. The shock when she realized the floor wasn't where she expected it to be, the pain when she finally reached the floor a few seconds later. She passed out after that.

Riley lay completely still for a few moments, waiting to see how stable the building was. Something heavy lay across her legs. Something sharp pressed against her back. But she was out of the bindings, so wherever she was now had to be an improvement. She just hoped Samael had been caught in the explosion. Damn booby trapping bastard. She finally opened her eyes and tried to figure out just how screwed she was.

Her right leg was pinned underneath a slab of concrete. The edge crumbled when she tried to push it away, but it didn't budge an inch. Tall support beams towered over her on all sides, like ribs of a giant whale that had swallowed her. She examined her wrists and saw that the bleeding had slowed to a trickle. She unbuttoned her shirt, pulling down the collar of her tank top to examine her chest. Not terrible, but she would have to put her swimsuit modeling career on hold for a while.

She tore strips from her blouse, the holes made by the barbed wire making it easy, and wrapped them around her wrists. She then daubed at the blood on her face. She hoped the cut Samael made was shallow; she would hate to walk around with a permanent scar on her face. “Off the Titanic and into the freezing North Atlantic,” she muttered. Her holster was missing, but her badge was still hooked on her belt. She supposed that counted for something.

“Detective Parra.”

Samael’s voice echoed off the remnants of the building, bouncing off so many formerly flat surfaces that she wasn’t sure where it originated. She became still, trying to listen for tell-tale movement. She heard shifting debris, broken slabs of concrete scraping against the floor as they were moved. If she didn’t speak, there was a chance that he wouldn’t find her.

“All the blood you’ve lost. Surely you’re becoming a bit lightheaded. Not to mention the thirst. How long has it been since you had something to drink, Riley? How long do you think you can survive without a glass of water? Hell, how long do you think you’ll last without a blood transfusion?” She could hear him moving behind her. She lay down on the rubble, moving as quietly as possible. The concrete floor next to her was bowed, two halves folded like leaves of an open book, and she pressed herself into the crevasse. She shifted, twisting her pinned leg painfully, and tried to use the shadow to conceal herself as his voice came nearer.

“There are angels who believe you are a lost cause. They believe they should cut their losses and appoint a new keeper for this city. Either that, or pull out completely. This city is not the war, it’s a battle. Some fronts have to be sacrificed for the better of the campaign. But with all the effort put into this city...” He sighed. “They’re starting to think it’s not worth it.

Zerachiel could be monumentally helpful elsewhere. But she is stuck here, babysitting an obstinate mortal with an inflated sense of self-importance.”

Samael came over a pile of debris above Riley’s hiding place. He scanned the area and moved away to her right.

“There will come a point, Riley. How long have you known your true purpose? Almost a year now? And what have you done to protect this city? You’ve eliminated a few demons, sure. But Marchosias is as strong as ever. He views you as a plaything. An amusement. Do you think you actually scare him? When he tires of you, or the moment you pose a real threat, he was squash you like the bug you are.”

Samael disappeared behind a slab, and Riley reached down to her leg. The piece of concrete was resting on her leg just below the knee. She hooked her fingers on the bottom edge on either side of her leg and lifted. She didn’t think she could move the entire thing, but she prayed she would be able to give herself a little wiggle room. *Come on, give me back that quarter inch I had earlier. I could really use it now.*

Her lips pulled back over her teeth, Riley strained already tired muscles as she tried to move the rock. “Just that quarter inch I had earlier. Come on, I can work with that now. Give me a quarter inch.”

Riley pushed, then twisted her leg to the side. She pulled her leg back as the slab fell, missing the toe of her shoe by a hair. She fell back against the stone, exhausted, and glanced to make sure Samael hadn’t backtracked. She rolled onto her front and tried to stand. Her leg protested with a loud shock of pain, but she bit the inside of her cheek and ignored it. She had to figure out where the entrance was, and hope that Samael wasn’t between her and it. She moved in the direction opposite of Samael and tried to get her bearings.

Straight ahead was north, as near as she could tell. The entrance to the building was on the south face. Samael had been moving to the east. Riley used the debris as cover, moving as quietly as she could across the destroyed building. She swept aside chunks of concrete and saw the faded tile of the lobby floor.

“Riley? Is that you?”

She stopped in her tracks and ducked down, trying to blend into the new rocky landscape of the building. She could hear girders overhead groaning under stress, and the entire structure seemed to move slightly starboard with the breeze. There were no sirens in the distance; divine intervention or just shoddy response time? Surely a building collapse registered with the police, no matter where it happened. Riley heard Samael’s footsteps on stone, like a rat skittering inside the walls, and moved in the opposite direction.

“If you fail, Riley, they’ll just start over again. They don’t trust you. They don’t believe in you. They want you to fail.”

*Priest believes in me. She wouldn’t have put me in this situation if she didn’t think I could survive it. She paused and added, I’m still going to punch her in the face next time I see her, though. How dare she have this much faith in me? She scanned the ground for any weapons she could find; palm sized chunks of concrete, broken furniture, anything. She was sure if she had a half hour and a MacGyver handbook she would be able to put something together, but on the fly, she was feeling useless.*

“You’re not worthy, Riley. You’ve never been worthy. Christine Lee made a grave mistake when she chose you.”

Riley’s jaw tightened and she had to bite back a retort. *Never badmouth a woman’s first love, you son of a bitch.* She

spotted something in the rubble and moved toward it, making a bit more noise than she intended. She heard Samael closing in as she cleared away the broken concrete from her prize. She nearly cheered when she discovered the object was loose, and she wrapped both hands around it as Samael's shadow fell over her.

“We can finish this somewhere else,” Samael said. “We did have a Plan B.”

Riley turned to face him, swinging the length of rebar like a baseball bat. She hit Samael in the side and knocked him off his feet. He crumpled in on himself, groping for something to keep him from falling completely and grabbing air. Riley didn't wait to fight; she knew she didn't stand a chance against him hand to hand, especially in this condition. She heard him get back to his feet and prayed she would make it to the door.

*And then what? You saw the angels standing guard out there.*

“Anywhere is better than in here,” she panted. Samael shouted her name and she turned to see him spreading horrifically burnt wings. He flew in two short hops, then launched himself at her with a howl. Riley spun on her heel, dropped down to one knee, and lifted the rebar like a spear. Samael didn't have time to change his course; he slammed into the rebar and kept going, impaling himself on the steel. Riley let the bar fall, and Samael went with it.

Riley didn't stand around to gloat. She ran through the maze of the destroyed building, coughing as she inhaled the dust floating around the site. *Come on, I just need a man-shaped hole. I just need sunshine.* She squeezed between two slabs and saw the answer to her prayer. A broken window, empty except for a splintered frame, led out to the main street. She

ran across the room and ducked through to the outside, taking deep breaths of fresh, clean air.

The building where she'd been held captive looked like a crushed soda can, collapsed in on itself with the outer walls of the bottom two floors standing up like the sides of a shoebox. Riley ran across the street, hoping the meager distance would offer some protection, and examined her surroundings. She was on the eastern side of the building, and the sun wasn't visible over the buildings. Sometime after noon, then. She glanced in the direction of her car, and doubted the angels standing guard would let her anywhere near it. But would they hand her back over to Samael for more torture?

She had no idea. The thought terrified her. If she couldn't even trust the angels, then she was truly alone for the first time since this whole battle began.

Sometimes, she decided, when you weren't sure who your friends were, you needed to go deeper into enemy territory. At least there you knew where people stood, and you knew they wanted you dead. She looked over her shoulder to make sure Samael wasn't following her, but the interior of the building was silent. She coughed up another lungful of concrete dust, checked to make sure her bandages were secure, and ducked down an alley. The tricks and secrets of her childhood came flooding back to her as she sidestepped an overflowing dumpster and leapt halfway up a chain link fence.

If there was one place where Riley Parra knew how to disappear, it was in the warrens of No Man's Land.

## Six

Bruce Springsteen expounded about his glory days through speakers that blasted through the open door of the Original Bar pool hall. Riley moved inside and tried to fade into the shadows, moving her badge to the pocket of her jeans before she moved deeper into the room. Cigar smoke, stale beer and body odor filled the air, riding on a fog that draped from the ceiling like an old sheet. Riley waved off the bartender's grunt of inquiry and found a phone booth at the back of the room. It was actually semi-enclosed, offering her a bit of privacy from the rest of the room. She closed the door behind her and searched her pockets for money. "Great. Figures."

She picked up the receiver anyway and dialed zero, hoping to get someone to accept collect call charges. After a moment, an operator answered. "Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

Riley frowned. "What? No, I didn't—"

"What's that, ma'am? A potential assault victim staggering around in the Original Bar? We have officers en route. Don't let the victim leave, whatever you do."

Riley slammed the phone down and backed out of the booth. The bartender was staring at her, and a few of the men behind the curtain of smoke seemed much more interested in her as well. She shrugged and said, "Getting to where I can't even go out on laundry day, people think I got hit by a car."

She moved toward the bar's front door, but one of the patrons moved to intercept her.

Riley shifted her weight to her left foot, leaning back as the man grabbed for her. She ducked under his outstretched arms, put a hand on his back, and shoved. His momentum carried him straight into the bar, where he sprawled. Riley swung her legs and kicked his feet out from underneath him, and he hit his chin on the bar as he fell. Two more men came at her from behind and she grabbed a bar stool to defend herself with.

"We're just trying to help you, miss. The cops will be here soon, just..."

Riley fished in her pocket for her badge and held it up for them to see. "I *am* a cop. I don't know who is supposedly coming to get me, but my guess is they won't be my friends and I don't want to see them. So I'm going to walk out the door, you guys are going to stay in here and get plastered, and everything will be fine. All right?" She eased toward the door, relieved when they didn't follow her.

As she stepped out into the daylight, she heard sirens dangerously close. Maybe that was why the barflies hadn't pursued her; they didn't think she had time to get away. But Riley had grown up running from the cops in No Man's Land. She turned and darted down the street, taking the first alley she found.

Long in the past, when the city government still cared about No Man's Land, the main road had been widened to four lanes. It was an unnecessary improvement, and it played havoc with the property lines along the project. Some buildings were demolished, only to be rebuilt farther back on their plots. Others simply lost half their parking lot. The buildings that moved were brought uncomfortably close to

their neighbors, forming a tight meandering passageway. This practically inaccessible alley had been closed off by a tall fence, but that hadn't even hindered a ten year old Riley Parra.

She worked her fingers under the edge of the fence and pulled, forming a gap just wide enough for her to slip through when she was six. Now that a few decades were under her belt, she pulled harder and tried to improve the gap with little luck. She turned sideways, sucked in a breath, and wormed through the opening. The brick wall scraped her back, and she nearly got pinned at one point, but she made it through. The fence fell back into place with a solid slap, and Riley was alone in the tight space.

At least she hoped she was alone. It was hard to tell in the darkness.

The passageway was so tight that she had to turn sideways, and the brick still scraped against her shoulders.

When she was ten, these secret passages were ways out. Ways to escape her father and his friends. She never really cared where she was going back then, just as long as it was out. She would wander during most of the night, just trying to stay warm and keep her stomach full. She was around eleven when she realized how easy it was to just grab something off a shelf and duck out of a store. The majority of clerks wouldn't run very far over a candy bar. Losing one dollar wasn't worth huffing and puffing down the street in pursuit of a preteen thief.

Once Riley discovered how to pick her victims, stealing became easier and the prizes became bigger. She would wait until the clerks were distracted by a larger group — usually punks with shiny guns tucked in their sweaters, waiting for a chance to break open the cash register — before she started

loading her own pockets with food. Potential armed robbers were the perfect decoy for a young, harmless girl in a dirty T-shirt.

She moved up to books, cassette tapes, the occasional outfit from a department store with bored teenage saleswomen popping their gum and reading their magazines as she made her way out of the store with her loot. People who thought thieves were lazy or unwilling to work didn't understand how difficult it was to steal without getting caught. It was a job in and of itself and, by the time Riley got home with the things she'd stolen, she felt like she had earned every single thing she now owned.

As she got older, stealing got easier. It also got easier to worm out of trouble when she got caught. When she became a teenager, lanky but with curves in the right places, she learned that a lot of business owners were lonely men who were afraid of their wives. When one caught her, all she had to do was rub against them a little, coo for forgiveness, maybe thrust her chest out toward them. Then when they took the bait, she jumped away and screamed rape. It was easier for them to let her go than to explain what their hands were doing on her ass.

She would be there still, she thought. She didn't have any motive for getting a real job. Why would she? Who needed money when the stores were practically giving her the stuff free of charge? And when she did need money, people were so stupid about their wallets and purses. She used other people like portable ATMs. It was going so well until that stupid cop wouldn't overlook one stinking bottle of whiskey.

What right did that stupid cop have? Tackling her like that, handcuffing her and tossing her into the back of the squad car. Riley still remembered the kaleidoscope of feelings washing over her as they sat there. Fear, anger,

embarrassment, humiliation, shame. She was fingerprinted, photographed, and for the first time, she felt like a true criminal. And then that cop took her out to the car, sat her in the backseat, and just watched her in the rearview mirror. When she finally spoke, she turned to face Riley. Looked her right in the eyes. And all she said was, "So did you enjoy how this felt?"

Riley didn't know how close to the edge she was until she started crying. And once she started, she couldn't stop. The cop came around to the back of the car and opened the door, sliding in next to Riley. She pushed her forward, undid the handcuffs, and sat next to her in the back of the cruiser until the tears dried up. Riley wiped her face on the sleeves of her sweater, sniffing and blinking rapidly to clear her vision.

Christine put her hand on Riley's shoulder and rubbed gently. "In that case...what do you want to do about it?"

They set up a regular meeting in a coffee shop. Christine would buy Riley dinner if she could prove she had been in school that day. Before long, they were talking about Riley's father and her home life. When Christine started to talk about Riley's future, Riley realized she had never thought that far ahead. Christine told her that people who ran without a destination in mind ended up falling flat on their faces.

Riley didn't know she was falling in love with Christine. She didn't recognize the feeling, and didn't understand why she was having such strong feelings for another woman. When the high school's prom came around, Riley was surprised to find she wasn't interested in mocking the venture. She instead thought of ways she could ask Christine to go with her. She came up with a noncommittal way of breaking the ice, and felt her heart constrict when Christine said no.

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Riley,” Christine said. She put her hand on Riley’s back, both of them sitting on the same side of the booth. “I’m flattered you asked. But it...wouldn’t look right. I’m a lot older than you.”

“Not that much,” Riley said, fighting back tears. God, why could this woman always make her feel like a little kid?

“You’re seventeen,” Christine said. “Even a little bit older is a...a lot of problems.”

Christine drove her home as always, in the front seat of the cruiser instead of the back. When she parked at the curb, Riley turned in her seat and said, “I don’t want to go up there. I want to go home with you.”

“Riley...”

She didn’t give time to finish the statement. She leaned across the console and kissed Christine’s lips. Her heart soared, slamming against her chest as Christine relented and then began to kiss her back.

Riley had been with men before, but she counted that as the night she lost her virginity. It was that moment she realized that making love and fucking were two very different things. As she lay in bed next to Christine that night, struggling to stay awake to remember every minute detail of their first night together.

Riley reached the end of the alley, her reverie broken by the apparent renovation of the area. She doubted any official construction projects had destroyed her exit; more likely some tenant took it upon himself to make an improvement at the detriment of his neighbors. Riley could just barely make out the shape of a wooden fence fronted with chicken wire. She hooked her fingers in the wire and hauled herself up, the

sagging barrier making her feel like she was trying to climb a rope ladder.

When she reached the top, she saw a dizzying drop to the ground on the other side. She looked for alternative exits and saw a lead pipe attached to one of the buildings. “Well, no one will be looking up.” She tested the strength of the pipe and, content it would hold her weight, moved from the fence to the pipe.

It wasn’t an easy climb, and she thought she was going to fall more than once, but she finally got to the roof. She hauled herself over the edge, lying flat against the hot tar for a moment to catch her breath. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the sun, letting it warm her face as she took stock of her sorry state.

Her clothes were torn and bloody. She had wounds on her wrists, chest and throat that could open up at any time. How much blood had she lost already? How much more could she spare to lose? She remembered having the same debate while she was imprisoned, but that had been hours ago. Hadn’t it? Didn’t the body regenerate blood? No, why would hospitals need blood donors all the time if blood just fixed itself? Oh, God, she would need a transfusion. That meant hospitals. She hated hospitals.

It would all be a moot point if she stayed here a little longer. Let the sun bake her into the tar. Let the demons find her and realize they were too late. It would be the easiest thing in the world. Just close her eyes, fall asleep...she wouldn’t even realize she hadn’t woken up. No more battles, no more wars. No angels, no demons.

No Gillian.

It always went back to that. She opened her eyes and grunted as she pushed herself up. She took a moment, standing under her own power and trying to decide which direction to run.

## Seven

*“Gonna hurl myself against the wall, ‘cause I’d rather feel bad than feel nothing at all.”*

Riley leaned against the brick wall and listened to Warren Zevon shout his way through the song. She didn’t mind; he was getting her state of mind pretty accurately. She may feel like hell warmed over, a hundred miles of bad road, and something the cat dragged in all wrapped up in one, but it was better than not feeling anything. She cradled her hand to her stomach, eyeing the scrapes and tears from the barbed wire. She didn’t even want to think about what her neck looked like. Her blouse was in tatters, her undershirt red with streaks and drips of dried blood. She was weak. Thank God for brick walls to lean against.

The worn-out sneaker next to the boom box scuffed the sidewalk as its owner moved back toward the alley. He leaned against the wall and pretended to listen to the music as he waited for another customer. “So what exactly is it you need?” Muse asked.

“Gun. Something with stopping power.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, and I never am, don’t they give you one of those when you become a cop?”

Riley said, “I don’t have time to explain right now, Muse. Can you get me a gun?”

“Yeah, I think I could hook you up with something. Give me an hour or two.”

“Can’t do it, Muse. I need a gun right now. I know you’re carrying.”

He laughed. “Shit, that’s my security blanket. You want to leave me naked out here? You know how much fire would rain down on me if people knew I was unarmed?”

“I’m unarmed, too, Muse. I’ve got enemies on my ass right now.”

Muse hesitated. He reached under his oversized Seattle Seahawks jersey and pulled a gun from the small of his back. He looked down the street to make sure no one was watching and then ducked into the alley. “You best... hoh-holy...” The street patter dissipated and Muse said, “What happened to you?”

“You should see the other guy.” She held out her hand for the gun.

“You don’t need this gun, you need a bazooka. You need an army. Give me twenty minutes and I’ll put one together for you.”

Riley shook her head. “This is my war.”

Muse handed over the gun and said, “Yeah, just make sure you survive it, hear me?”

“Yeah.” Riley checked the ammunition before sticking the gun into her belt. “Thanks, Muse.”

“I was serious about that army. You need back-up?”

Riley smiled. “I appreciate the offer. But I’d be more likely to get whoever followed me killed.”

He nodded. "Where you planning to go?"

Riley looked out into the street and shook her head. "I don't know. I'm probably going somewhere I shouldn't and do things that are ill-advised."

"Sounds like the Detective Parra I know," Muse said. He pulled a cell phone from his jeans and held it out. "There. You're leaving me totally naked, but I think you need it worse than I do. Go on, just make sure I get it back. Put a note on there for the medical examiner if you have to. It's got all my contacts on it."

"Legal contacts?"

Muse shook his head. "I cannot believe...I'm doing the woman a favor, and she goes and gets all 'cop' on me. Talk about gratitude."

Riley smiled and took the phone. She doubted it would give her anything but static, or a hotline straight to the demons chasing her, but it was comforting to have it in her pocket. It was amazing how quickly she had gone from never having a cell phone to being utterly dependant on having one nearby. She pushed away from the wall and gathered her strength for another dash.

"Muse," Riley said. "You've always been a good friend. I appreciate you always being here for me."

"Stop, you're going to get me misty. Hold on." He went back out onto the street and returned with a bottle of water. "It's a little warm, but—"

Riley snatched the bottle away from him, twisted off the top, and took a long swig. She wiped her lips on her sleeve, gasping as the water revitalized her. "Thanks for the spinach."

"No problem, Popeye," Muse said.

Riley slapped him on the shoulder as she left the alley. She knew he was watching her go, just as she knew that his offer of an army was sincere. Muse had a lot more power than even she knew, and she was lucky enough to be considered his friend. Maybe if she survived, she would take him up on the offer someday. She could use an army when the time came to take Marchosias down once and for all.

She stopped at the corner and thought about that for a moment. She came to No Man's Land because it was the one place she knew angels feared to tread. It was demon territory. But at the moment, angel territory was far more hazardous to her health. She flipped open Muse's phone and stared at the keypad. Did it matter who she tried to call? Would Samael and his cronies intercept the call? She dialed Priest's cell phone and waited.

"You've reached Caitlin Priest's phone. She's not going to help you, but if you leave your name and location, we'll come and finish destroying you."

Riley looked at the street sign. "I'm at the corner of Harding and Sixth Avenue, in No Man's Land. I'm heading south. You want to finish what you started before I blew up your toy box? Come and get me, you son of a bitch." She snapped the phone shut, but left it on. She figured the angels could track her without the cell signal, now that they had an idea where she was, but she didn't want to make it difficult for them. She wanted them to come now.

She found an abandoned car nearby and checked the handle. Locked, naturally. That was no problem for someone with a No Man's Land education. Riley grabbed the car antenna and snapped it off with a flick of the wrist. She held it by the bottom and swung the antenna at the car window with a wide sweep of her arm. The ball at the end hit the glass, and

it shattered instantly. Riley dropped the antenna and opened the door, carefully sweeping the pieces of glass off the seat before she climbed behind her wheel.

The steering column came off easily, and Riley twisted the appropriate wires. She had never “stolen” a car, but she had gone on her share of joyrides. The engine roared in less than thirty seconds, and she pulled the door shut behind her. She glanced down the street and saw Muse watching her. He shook his head and wagged a finger at her. Riley winked, even though he was probably too far away to catch it, and pulled away from the curb.

She had barely made it one block before she spotted a shadow on the sidewalk. It was too big to be a bird, and she didn't have to look to see what it was. “Careful, showboat,” she said. “You'll blow your cover. Then where will you be?” She didn't change direction or try to evade the angel; she just sped up to give the impression she wanted to lose him. She wondered if it was Samael or one of the guards she spotted outside the building. Either way, it didn't matter. Samael would get there eventually, if he was still in the fight. And if he was out of the fight, well, she didn't care where he was.

Riley waited at the stoplight, trying to get her bearings. She knew where she wanted to go, but she wasn't entirely sure how to get there from where she currently was. Her attempt at navigation was disturbed by the angel dropping to the road next to her car. He landed gently, a tap of wingtip shoes on the asphalt, and Riley calmly turned her head to look at him. He wore a green V-neck sweater, his hair hanging sloppy over his forehead as he leaned down to look into the broken window.

“Who are you? Angel of the morning, baby?”

“I am Puriel. I am the one who set these events into motion. You will cease your flight and return to the trial at once.”

Riley frowned at his extended wings. “You want to hand me over to Samael, knowing what he did to me? He had your permission for that, did he?”

Puriel said, “It was for the greater good.”

Riley pursed her lips. “You know, as attractive as that sounds, Purell, I think I’m going to pass. But thanks for the offer. I’ll mention your service to my sadomasochistic friends.”

Puriel reached into the car and Riley twisted to evade his grasp. She turned in the seat so that she was facing the door and wrapped both hands around his forearm. She twisted, and then swung the arm against the edge of the door. Puriel howled as she repeated the move until his arm bent back at an unnatural angle. He withdrew his arm and Riley stepped on the gas, peeling away from the stop sign in front of an oncoming car.

Riley heard a horn honk and waved an apology through the back window. The other driver flipped her off, but his attention was diverted when Puriel launched himself onto the trunk of her car. His wings were unfurled and waved with the breeze. He extended his wings, maybe in an attempt to slow her down, but it failed. Riley picked up the speed, wondering what her tailgater thought of her new passenger.

“Kind of blew your cover, didn’t you?” Riley called out the window.

Three more shadows crossed the road in front of her. She craned her neck, swerving to avoid a parked car as she counted the angels filling the sky above her. “There’s four,” she muttered. She took a sharp corner and heard Puriel’s weight thudding against the trunk as he tried to keep his grip.

“Come on, buddy,” she muttered. “Give it up. Eat some asphalt.”

One of the other angels landed on her roof. The car seemed to slow a bit, and Riley knew the other angel was extending her wings to increase the drag. Riley pressed her lips together and said, “All right, you guys want me to stop so bad...” She pushed the accelerator up just a little faster, pushing it into the red, and then stood on the brakes and twisted the wheel. The car fishtailed, almost standing on its front tires as it laid down twin rows of burnt rubber.

Puriel and his cohort were thrown from the car like buckshot, twisting in midair as they tried to catch a breeze on their wings. Riley threw the car into reverse and backed away from them as fast as she could. “Come on, guys. You can’t be that easy to get rid of.”

Sure enough, Puriel and the other angel were already in pursuit of her again. Riley stopped, put the car into drive, and revved the engine. Puriel motioned for his partner to head up, in case she meant to ram them. Riley didn’t plan anything of the sort; she just had somewhere she needed to be. She turned down a side street and watched the sidewalk for signs the angels were still following her lead.

“How many now,” she muttered as she tried to count the interweaving shadows. Maybe six? Seven? Riley gave up trying to count. She looked in the rearview mirror and saw Puriel had settled for flying not far behind her. She wondered how many people were watching the spectacle out their apartment windows, how it would be explained away if anyone happened to get video footage. Not her problem.

Riley started seeing familiar landmarks and knew that she was nearing her destination. Judging from the expression on Puriel’s face, he knew where they were, too. He fell back

slightly, as if debating whether to continue the pursuit or retreat. It was the moment of truth, and Riley watched him very carefully for a decision.

Finally, he flexed his wings and closed the distance between them. He flew alongside the car, trailing just behind the broken driver's side window. "I suppose you think you're clever."

"I have my moments," Riley shouted back to him.

"What do you hope to accomplish?"

Riley shrugged. "Hopefully enough confusion that I can slip away unnoticed."

"You'll only get yourself killed!"

Riley laughed. "This day is going to end with me dead no matter what happens. You guys have pissed me off enough that I just want to take a couple of you with me." She twitched the wheel and the car lurched to one side. She clipped Puriel and sent him tumbling to the street. Riley saw him getting to his feet as she rounded the last corner.

Marchosias' building, where Samael fell and Riley nearly died on two different occasions, loomed ahead of her. It looked innocent, but she could feel the evil radiating from the brick even as the distance between the front of her car and the wide double doors shrank. The shadows of angels scattered, unsure whether to proceed or retreat. It was too late to turn back now, and Riley belatedly wondered if her stolen car had airbags.

The car leapfrogged the curb and went up the front steps of the building like a ramp. Riley went limp, hoping to spare herself broken bones, and closed her eyes as the car shattered the front doors of the building. An airbag did indeed explode,

slamming her back into her seat and suffocating her before she managed to fight it out of the way. She kicked the door open and stumbled out into the foyer of Marchosias' building. Demons lined the edges of the room, staring at her car with shock.

Marchosias stood on the first floor landing, eyes flaming as he shouted, "What in blazes do you think you're doing?"

"Cutting out the middle man," Riley said. She covered her head and moved forward as the front of the building cracked. She took cover in front of the car's hood as a hole was blown in the wall and angels began to pour into the hotel.

## Eight

The chaos was like something out of a Renaissance painting. Demons leapt from the upper levels, howling as they locked onto angelic targets. The angels seemed to glow as they engaged their enemy. What followed was a cacophony of howls and bells, metal sliding against metal, bloody husks falling to the tile floor as another player was taken from the game. Riley held Muse's gun like a totem, knuckles white as she watched the battle raging above her head.

Puriel had launched from the hood of her car, grappling with two demons in torn jeans. A demon grabbed Riley by the collar and tried to pull her to the ground. She planted her foot on his face and said, "I am really not in the mood." She put all her weight on that foot and pushed off the demon's face as she crossed the lobby to the base of the stairs. She had memories, horrible memories that were too scarring for even nightmares, about these stairs. Demons overpowering her, whispering ghastly things in her ear. But there was no other way to Marchosias, so that was the way she would have to go.

A clawed hand grabbed the back of her shirt and Riley twisted away, tearing the material. She turned and saw a hideous creature with an exposed skull of a face and wickedly curved claws for hands. Riley swung her gun around, holding it by the barrel as she smashed the butt into the demons face. His exposed skull cracked and caved in on itself and he fell back, blind and defenseless.

Puriel was hurled against the front wall of the building and the foundation seemed to tremble under Riley's feet. A few of the angels had produced swords and were hacking at the demons with blades of yellow flame. The demons weren't defenseless, however. Black swarms of flame assaulted the angels and pushed them back, the entire lobby of Marchosias' building crackling with unspent energy. It looked like the worst electrical storm in history, Riley's nostrils burning with the scent of charred flesh and clothing.

Riley knocked back another demon that wanted to take her on and ran up the stairs. Marchosias was watching the mayhem unfold with the slightly irritated expression of a man who discovers his neighbor's dog on his lawn. He spotted Riley's approach and flashed a smile before he retreated into one of the apartments. A blast of pure white light blinded Riley for a moment, and she turned to see a handful of demons falling dead to the floor.

She wasn't dumb enough to run blindly into the room where Marchosias fled, but she knew that nothing she could do would protect her from his attack. She lowered her gun and stepped into the doorway. Marchosias stood at the opposite end of the room, smiling broadly. He was standing in front of an open window, the breeze blowing past him and ruffling his shirt. He applauded in a slow, mocking way and said, "Very impressive, Detective Parra. Two armies want you dead, so you push them together in the hopes they...what? Kill each other? Do you truly want the angels dead?"

"Hey, do unto others. That's in the book they all love so much. Live by the sword, die by the sword. I think that's in the book, too."

"What did you hope to accomplish? Eliminating me in one fell swoop?"

Riley smiled. "More like if I have to go down, I'm taking everyone with me." She brought the gun up and said, "Mind if I empty this into you?"

"It won't do anything."

"It'll make me feel better." She fired once, hitting Marchosias in the shoulder. He jerked with the impact and slowly straightened, looking down at the wound. He touched the torn shirt and Riley said, "Sorry. Would you have preferred a head shot?"

Marchosias shrugged. "Whatever makes you happy, Detective Parra."

Riley stepped forward. "I heard you and Ridwan talking the night I...got this job." Marchosias smiled. "You said there had to be balance. Good and evil. If I'm the champion for the angels, does that mean you have a champion as well?"

"It would stand to reason, wouldn't it?"

"Who?"

Marchosias smiled. "Oh, that would make it far too easy for you, Detective Parra."

She shot him in the other shoulder. He grunted and shook his head, like a prizewinning boxer shaking off the blow of a lesser opponent. "They won't be distracted forever, you know. Perhaps you should use this clash to your advantage."

Riley looked past him to the window. "Fire escape?"

"Hmm?"

The angels would be occupied for a while, taking down the legions of Marchosias' followers. It would be a good time to lose them. She stuck the gun back into her belt and crossed the room. Marchosias moved out of her way as she leaned out

the window and eyed the fire escape. It was well secured, looked sturdy, and it was the one way out of the building that wouldn't make her lose any more blood. She looked back at Marchosias. "I'll be back, you know."

"I would be offended if you weren't, Detective. Besides, you owe me a new front door."

Riley smirked and said, "Yeah, I'll get right on that." She brought her gun up and fired one last time for good measure. The bullet caught Marchosias in his forehead and knocked him off his feet. Even if the shot didn't kill him, she was sure it would cause a bit of a headache. She turned and threw herself down the fire escape, her feet barely touching the steps as she moved toward the street.

Her childhood bedroom had led to the fire escape, and she had many memories of pushing open the window and carefully moving down the metal steps to the street. She did it barefoot, so as not to wake her father. Not that he would have cared that she was leaving. She was just worried that, if he knew she was outside, he would lock the window so she wouldn't be able to get back in. Her nights on the streets were spent learning how to drink and smoke, how to act tough when she was scared out of her mind.

Riley remembered her first lover, a boy who worked the graveyard shift at the corner store. He caught her stealing, and threatened to call the cops. She convinced him to let her off with a warning by taking him into the back room and undressing. The resulting few minutes weren't very fun, but it was better than being taken downtown and fingerprinted. It was over quicker, too. When she discovered the clerk would let her steal more and more stuff as long as she let him do things with her, it was like being handed the keys to the candy store.

It wasn't until she spent the night with Christine that she realized what sex was supposed to be like.

She ran down the street, the sounds of Armageddon inside the apartment building curiously muted. Her mind was foggy, her head throbbing from either dehydration or exertion or both. She ignored the pain and moved down the sidewalk, turning to look into the sky. It was nearly dusk; she simultaneously wondered how the day had disappeared so quickly and how it could possibly be any longer.

Riley got to the corner before her legs gave out. She put her hand out to the wall, stopping herself from crumbling to the pavement, and breathed deeply. Her body was shaking, pushed to the limit. She pressed her shoulder to the wall and used it to keep herself from falling over, her chest heaving with the effort of drawing breath.

She heard cars on parallel streets. People shouting at their kids from apartment windows. She heard the incessant beeping of a garbage truck making its rounds and the rumble of the el train snaking through the sky. Tires screeched on another street and the banshee wails of police sirens were carried on the breeze. After the explosion, she knew she was alive because she heard her heartbeat. The same was true of No Man's Land. This was the heartbeat, the pulse, and it was still strong. That was why she was chosen; because she cared about No Man's Land. She cared about the people there and, even though she may be alone in the belief, she knew it could be saved. It just needed someone to fight.

Someone was approaching her from the direction of the apartment building, but she was too tired to care or to run. She opened her eyes and watched Puriel approach with detached indifference. The sun was now out of sight and the shadows stretched long across the ground. He was unarmed,

but his clothing had been torn and burned away in several places. His hair was mussed, his left arm hanging uselessly by his side. Riley sighed and held her arms out to either side.

“All right. You got me. What now, you take me back to Samael and he shoves bamboo shoots under my fingernails? Waterboarding? Maybe force me to watch reruns of *Hee Haw*? Shall I lay prostate before you, or whatever it’s called?”

Puriel stood in front of her and said, “The sun has set. The daylight of your trial has ended. It’s time for the judgment.”

“What happens if I don’t pass that?”

Puriel’s face had no emotion. “Then you will not live to see the sun rise again.”

Riley looked at the sky. It was purple, a few clouds still capturing the sun’s rays and glowing golden. She knew she wouldn’t be able to survive No Man’s Land in the dark, not in her condition. Angels to the left of her, demons to the right, and the most dangerous creature of all: mortals who hadn’t gotten had the benefit of being saved from a life of crime. Even if she found a semi-safe place to bunk, she would never find the strength to do it all over again tomorrow. It had to end.

She held out Muse’s gun by the barrel, and Puriel took it from her. She sagged against the wall and said, “I’m going to need a hand.”

Puriel stepped forward and ducked under Riley’s arm. He put his hand around her waist and helped her stand. “You’re certain?” he asked. “There is no going back. And this part of the trial will not be easy.”

“Good. Because the first part was kind of a cakewalk.” She grunted as her position put pressure on her ribs. “Lay on, MacDuff.”

## N i n e

Riley wasn't sure exactly where she was taken. Puriel loaded her into the backseat of a car and someone else fastened her seatbelt. Two angels sat on either side of her in case she tried to make a break for it. They shouldn't have bothered. With the setting of the sun, her last bit of energy had dried up. She was far too tired to try anything clever. She rested against the back of the seat and closed her eyes, letting them take her wherever they wanted.

She didn't recognize the building Puriel led her into, which caused a moment of alarm. She thought she knew most of the city, and the parts she didn't know at least had a recognizable skyline. "I'm not in Kansas anymore, am I?" she asked.

"Just relax, Detective Parra," Puriel said.

The front door of the building led to a long hallway, the walls draped with blue velvet. Riley resisted the urge to sing, but she did chuckle to herself as Puriel guided her into a large loading area. Lanterns formed a square in the middle of the space, surrounding a metal folding chair. Puriel pointed to the chair and said, "Have a seat, Riley Parra."

"Don't mind if I do," Riley said. She started toward the chair and noticed people standing in the shadows watching her. "Hey, guys. Wouldn't happen to have a La-Z-Boy or something like that, would you? A recliner would really hit the spot right about now." She sat on the chair and realized just

how tired she had to be; the simple act of sitting and relaxing was like a gift from the gods. She sagged against the back of the chair and closed her eyes, afraid she would fall asleep given just a little incentive. Her head started to loll before Puriel spoke.

“Now is your judgment, Riley Parra.”

“Great. Can’t wait. Hope I win.” She looked at the silhouettes in the darkness. “I doubt that’s a jury of my peers.”

Puriel walked along the edge of the lit area, still bearing the wounds of his battle in the demon-infested building. “That was a very wrathful thing you did this afternoon, Riley. Leading us into a battle with demons.”

“You poked the bear,” Riley said. “Got you out of my hair for a while.”

“The battle still rages. Now that we have engaged the enemy, it will be difficult to retreat without allowing them a great victory.”

Riley shrugged. “Hey, great. That means you’re doing something. I’ve kind of been waiting for that.”

“Protecting this city is your responsibility, Riley.”

“And I used the tools at my disposal. I had a half dozen pissed off angels looking for a fight, and a building full of demons that wanted to kill the first thing they saw. So I figured I would take care of you both at the same time.”

Puriel nodded slowly. “Regardless, you are charged with the cardinal sin of wrath. How do you plead?”

Riley held her hands out. “Guilty, I suppose.”

Puriel nodded and a murmur flowed through the spectators. He held up a hand, and they quieted. “To the cardinal sin of pride. How do you plead?”

Riley considered the question. “I worked hard to get where I am. To be a detective, to have a life of my own.” She thought of her time in No Man’s Land, the criminal she would be now if she hadn’t been pulled up by Christine Lee. “I’m proud of who I’ve become, yes. If that’s a sin, then fine. So be it. Guilty.”

Puriel clasped his hands behind his back, and Riley realized his wounds were considerably less serious than a few minutes ago. “You do not lie to increase your stature. You do not accept accolades for achievements you have made. You do not flaunt your victories in the face of your enemies. You are therefore found not guilty of the sin of pride.”

“Well, how about that. Things are looking up for me.”

“And to the cardinal charge of lust?”

Riley laughed out loud. “Oh, and things were going so well. Guilty.”

“You have committed adultery.”

“I’ve caused adultery to be committed, yes,” Riley said. She remembered the blonde woman in the back of her squad car, the wedding ring catching the streetlight as they grappled for buttons and zippers. It was a moment of weakness, but Riley was a young cop enamored with the power her new badge provided. The woman offered a deal in order to get out of her arrest, and Riley was more than willing to sully the uniform a little bit.

“You have lusted for others.”

“Yeah,” Riley said. “Lusted, and consummated that lust on several occasions.”

“But not since your devotion to Gillian Hunt?”

Riley frowned. “No.”

“Given the opportunity to give in to lust with Mackenzie Crowe, you did not yield to temptation.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Puriel said, “To the charge of lust, you have been found guilty. To the cardinal virtue of chastity, you are also found guilty.”

“Virtue?” Riley said. She chuckled. “No one’s ever accused me of that before. So, what, do those two kind of cancel each other out?”

Puriel didn’t answer. “To the cardinal sin of envy, how do you plead?”

“Envy?” Riley said. She looked down at the ground and thought about it. “I don’t envy anyone or anything.”

“Really.”

She shook her head. “I accepted my lot in life when I was a kid. I thought I would be a No Man’s Land rat until the day I died. When I was offered a way out, I took it. I worked hard to become a detective, but I would say that was out of personal pride, and you’ve already charged me with that. So no. Not guilty.”

Another murmur went up around her and Puriel slowly nodded. “Very well. The corresponding virtue is kindness. How do you plead?”

Riley shook her head. "I've never been exceptionally kind, either."

"You are wrong, Riley. You have always been kind to your friends, to your coworkers, and to your partners. You have gone above and beyond the responsibilities of a friend."

"I didn't do anything special."

"Do you think we don't know about the money?"

Riley blinked. "I...I don't..."

"You will not break a confidence you made to yourself? Not even to save your life?"

Riley looked away. "The money isn't...anything special."

"One hundred dollars from every paycheck. How long will your penance last? How much do you believe you owe Kara Sweet's niece?"

Riley shook her head. "I'm only giving her the money Kara would have given her if...I hadn't..."

"Kara Sweet had been corrupted by a fallen angel. Her soul was tarnished. Your execution gave her a fighting chance to save her soul when she stood before her Judge."

Riley hung her head. "It's still a sin on my record."

"Perhaps." Puriel nodded. "You are now found guilty of the cardinal virtue of humility. As well as kindness."

"What's that? Three sins to three virtues? I'm doing better than I thought. What's next? Keep 'em coming."

Puriel actually smiled a bit at that. "Sloth."

"I've been known to hit the snooze button once or twice."

“That is not the same. You are charged with a failure to utilize your talent and your gift. How do you plead?”

Riley shook her head. “Not guilty. I’ve been busting my ass trying to save this city. I put this badge to use every single day.”

“Wrong.” Puriel stopped pacing and turned to face her. “There was one moment. A time when you could have helped but you chose not to. The consequences of that action were immense. So much could have changed with one word, one helping hand. You were a patrol officer in No Man’s Land. It was dusk, and you had worked for two shifts. It was winter, and it was cold. You were eager to return to your car for the warmth. Your shift was nearly over. All you wanted was a warm bed and sleep.”

Riley didn’t doubt his words. He could have been describing any number of nights during her patrol days.

“She called out to you.”

“Who?”

“The snow was just beginning to fall and you were worried about the roads. You saw her, but did not slow. The woman had blankets, after all, and a coat. Surely she would find someplace warmer before anything bad happened to her. Right?”

Riley vaguely remembered the street woman. She had been bundled in frayed blankets with a knit hat pulled down over her ears. Her eyes looked so desperate. But there was a homeless shelter not far away, and they had cots and warm meals. It was walking distance; she didn’t have the time or the energy to deal with it. So she just said, “There’s a shelter about two blocks to the east. They’ll take care of you,” and continued on.

That night, the temperature dropped below freezing. Riley had a passing thought about the homeless woman, but she was sure she'd made it to the shelter. She was more concerned about the warm body curled against hers — the conquest of the week — and the cocoa warming on the stove to think too hard about it.

“She died,” Riley said, surprised to find how much that information hurt. “I didn’t...the shelter was just around the corner.”

“The woman was weak. Ill. She would have required your assistance to get into the patrol car; two blocks would have been impossible. A hospital may have pulled her back from the precipice, and maybe she would have had the opportunity to speak with you.”

“What could she have possibly told me?”

Puriel said, “The woman was your mother, Riley. Jacqueline Inez Parra.”

Riley recoiled as if she had been punched. “That’s a damn lie.”

“She was watching you. She knew your patrol. Your mother was very sick, Riley. She heard voices. She took medication, but that only aggravated her symptoms. Do you even remember why she left?” Riley shook her head slowly. “She left to protect you. She was afraid that she was going to harm you. The night she left, she held you under the bathwater for nearly twenty seconds before she realized what she was doing.”

“Mom...was schizophrenic,” Riley muttered. She’d wrapped her arms around her stomach, rocking slowly as she remembered the few facts her father had given her.

“Your mother was tormented by demons. Demons who knew what you would grow up to be, and wanted you dead. She was strong enough to escape, save your life, but she never recovered. She lived on the streets and did whatever she could to follow your life. But she never dared reach out to you. Until the moment when you could have saved her life, and you did nothing. Riley Parra, to the cardinal sin of sloth, how—”

“Guilty,” Riley said.

Puriel nodded. “To the cardinal virtue of patience, how do you plead?”

“I don’t...uh, I-I don’t know.”

“Endurance against adversity. Resolving conflicts without violence, and to show mercy to those who sin against you.”

Riley scoffed. “Like when I shot Kara in the head?”

“Like when you applied pressure to the wounds of the one who violated your body. You showed compassion to Nina Hathaway.”

“She was bleeding to death because of me.”

“Regardless.”

Riley closed her eyes. “Alright, fine, mark me down for that one. What is the purpose of this? Do I get merit badges on the way to Hell or something?”

“The balance is necessary, Riley. If we are to accept you as this city’s champion, we must believe you are a good person at heart. We must know we are entrusting this battlefield to the right person. We must determine whether you are virtuous at heart, or if your soul is overburdened by the mark of sin.”

“I eat in moderation and I don’t throw away money on extravagances. Gluttony, not guilty. As long as I have money

for rent and food, I'm happy. As long as I have a little extra cash to take my girlfriend out to dinner a couple times a month, I'm happy. Greed, not guilty. Is that seven?"

"Three virtues remain."

Riley thought about it and said, "Can't think of 'em. Says something about a society that focuses more on the sins than the virtues."

"Temperance, Charity and Diligence. You are charitable to Kara Sweet's family, as I have noted before. You are moderate with your money and time. You are exceptional at your job, despite a willingness to break the rules when you deem it necessary."

"Three for three," Riley said. "So what's the verdict, guys? Is my soul heavier than a feather, or is there some other test to run?"

"The judgment has been passed, Riley. You have been found virtuous."

Riley was surprised to feel a surge of pride at his words. She pressed her lips together and scanned the shadows, looking for a familiar shape. She doubted she had met any of the angels watching her trial, but she was hoping... "Listen, do you know if Zerach- *God*." She clutched her side and lurched forward, falling out of the chair. "What..."

"Your body is failing. We tempered your pain as much as we could, but now that your trial has ended..."

Riley clenched her jaw against the pain suddenly shooting through her body. She hadn't realized when they stopped her from hurting, but now that it was back, she could barely stand it. She tried to stand and fell hard to her knees. "You sons of bitches...you can't just..." Her words faded into an incoherent

shout of anguish. She crawled forward a few steps before her arm gave out. She could no longer support her weight on it.

“Things will change now, Riley Parra,” Puriel said. “I hope you are prepared.”

“You can’t just leave me here,” she grunted. But the sound of shoes on concrete echoed through the space, the sound of angels leaving her to fate. Riley spit blood onto the floor and said, “Oh, you pious assholes.” She fell to the floor, panting. She rolled onto her back, surprised to see the sky overhead.

It was daybreak. The sun was rising in the east, making the windows shine like liquid gold. Riley panted, blinking into the growing light. *The spirits did it all in one night*, Riley thought, then closed her eyes to the pain. She heard tires screech on the pavement and running footsteps coming up next to her. A woman leaned down and looked at her face. “Oh, God.”

The woman wore a Kangol cap and a nice blouse. Riley thought she looked like something out of a novel about Old New York. Or would it have been New Amsterdam back then? She turned her head and saw the curved bumper of a Checker cab. That, plus the woman’s attire, made Riley wonder if the angels had tossed her back to the turn of the century to atone for her sins. *Might be nice. No Man’s Land wasn’t nearly as large then as it is now.*

Riley squeezed her eyes shut as the woman called for an ambulance on her cell phone. She didn’t hear the actual words, and she doubted an ambulance would get there in time to save her.

The good thing about the trial was that now she was fairly sure she was going to Heaven. She just didn’t realize she was due to arrive so soon.

## T e n

She could hear her heartbeat. In her head, and in a loud mechanical beep coming from over her right shoulder. She turned toward it and looked at the peaks and valleys that was evidence of her survival. She had bulky bandages on her wrist, and she felt another around her neck. She looked down, but her chest was hidden by a white hospital gown. There were blue checks on the material, and she could tell she was naked underneath it. The indignity of being a patient. She rested her head on what must have been the softest pillow she had ever had the honor to use and closed her eyes.

“...some cabbie brought her in.”

Riley opened her eyes. She wondered how a doctor and nurse could have gotten into her room so quickly. She was sure she hadn't fallen asleep. The doctor noticed she was awake and offered her a smile. “Well, good morning, Detective. Glad to see you're back with us.” He pulled something from his pocket and leaned over the bed to look into her eyes. “We were starting to get a little...”

Riley refused to believe she had drifted off in mid-sentence, so she decided to believe the doctor had merely vanished into thin air. She turned her head toward the window and watched rain streaking down the glass. She could hear thunder, but there was no lightning to go along with it. She listened to the

music of raindrops for a while, hoping it would push her back into rest. She didn't know how long it had been since she was left in the street, but she could use another couple weeks worth of sleep.

“Hello, Riley.”

She turned slowly toward the door and saw Priest standing just outside the room. She was drenched from the rain, her dress shirt wrinkled and her tie loose. She had her hands clasped in front of her, as if in prayer.

“I won't ask to come in...”

“Can I tell you to come in?”

Priest looked up and, after a moment, entered the room. She walked up to the bed and laid her hand on top of Riley's. “I am so sorry.”

“Don't be,” Riley said.

“I arranged the test to give you the answers you sought. I knew it would be bad, but...” She shook her head. “I did not know they were recruiting Samael. If I had known...” She swallowed hard. “Perhaps that is why Michael forced me to leave.”

“Michael?” Riley said. “Lieutenant Archer, from Burglary.”

Priest smiled. “He did have a hand in getting me ‘transferred’ at the last minute.” She brushed Riley's hand with the tips of her fingers. “I am in awe of your strength. So many others failed their trials in the first hours. The few who actually finish...”

“Yeah. Well. I'm stubborn.” She swallowed and winced. “So, I go through all that to get a couple of questions answered. Is there a plaque or something, at least?”

“The answers weren’t your only reward, Riley. You’ve changed things. You have been deemed a worthy champion. You will have the full support you require. You’re no longer alone in this fight. Of course...that may not be readily apparent. The angels will be occupied with the war you began. You may be called upon to clean up some of their messes.”

Riley closed her eyes, surprised to find they were wet with tears. “Well. What else is new?”

“Everything, Riley. The battle has taken a dramatic shift. You effectively called in the cavalry. Demons are frightened, the angels are inspired in a way they haven’t been in ages... your trial has changed everything. There is real hope for No Man’s Land.”

Riley smiled. “Stop it. You’ll make me blush and I can’t spare the blood. So...how long do I have to be in here?”

“They gave you a blood transfusion yesterday...”

“Yesterday?”

“You were unconscious for nearly thirty-six hours, Riley.”

Riley winced. “Ow.”

“Yes. They want to keep you for another few days, just to be certain you’re healing properly. You had four broken ribs, a broken leg, two broken fingers...”

Riley looked at her hands and saw that the last two fingers on her right hand were splinted. “Huh. Wonder when I did that.”

“And that’s just the beginning of the list. Riley, if I had known...”

“Hey. Every job has a little hazing, right? And now I have some muscle on my side...it was worth it, I guess.” She relaxed

against the mattress and groaned. “I’m going to steal this pillow. Will that affect my sin-to-virtue ratio?”

Priest smiled. “You’re not angry at me?”

“No,” Riley said. “You were only doing what I asked you to do. Next time just punch me in the nose and tell me it’s a million times worse than that. I’ll let it go, trust me.”

“Duly noted.” She looked down at Riley’s legs and said, “Is there anything else I can do for you? I feel the need to serve a penance for my part in what happened.”

Riley started to say no, but she hesitated. She looked at the heart monitor and said, “Yeah. There is one thing you could do for me.”

Kenzie Crowe had never been much of a sentimental person. She toyed with the pink flowers, trying to arrange them so that they were evenly spaced with the yellow ones. The bouquet was a grossly overpriced gift shop variant, but she hadn’t thought about flowers until she was already in the hospital. She and Riley were both anti-flowers, but she felt that they would be a nice ironic gesture. Riley would appreciate that. And the bigger they were, the bigger the irony.

The teddy bear tucked under her arm was maybe a bit over the top. But damn it, this was Riley. And the gift shop didn’t exactly have a huge selection.

The elevator dinged, and she stepped out of the car. She hated hospitals, with their counterintuitive feel of a quiet rush. Everything was so hushed and muted, but every nurse and doctor seemed to be moving at double-speed. Kenzie had spent far too long in them after she came home, and she was

reluctant to set foot in one even as a visitor. But, as previously stated...this was Riley.

The note from Lieutenant Briggs said that Riley was in Room 242, at the end of the hall. Kenzie checked her hair in the glass of a picture frame as she walked past, wanting to make a good impression on her former partner. She knocked on the door frame and said, "Rye, get your hand out from under your gown, you got company." She pushed the curtain out of the way and saw the bed was empty.

"Rye. Come on out." She knocked on the bathroom door and then peeked inside.

"Riley?"

She stepped into the hallway and hesitated before she moved to the nurse's station. "Excuse me," she said. Lieutenant Briggs came around the corner at that moment and spotted Kenzie as the nurse looked up from her computer monitor. "Was Detective Riley Parra taken anywhere? For tests, or an X-Ray, maybe?"

"Just a moment." The nurse tapped on the keyboard.

Briggs said, "What's wrong?"

"Riley's not in her room."

"She's gone."

Briggs and Kenzie both turned and saw Priest walking toward them from Riley's room. Kenzie frowned. "I was just... where did you...? What do you mean 'gone'?"

"She left the hospital."

"Not according to our records," the nurse said. She stood up and placed her hands on her hips. "Where, exactly, did Ms. Parra go?"

“That’s not important,” Priest said. “She’s safe.”

The nurse shook her head. “Ms. Parra was a very sick woman. She needs to be in a hospital under the care of a trained physician...”

Priest smiled. “Don’t worry. I think she has a doctor with her.”

## Epilogue

Riley kissed the dip of Gillian's spine and shifted her weight on the bed. She stretched out next to Gillian, covering the left side of her body with her own. She put her hand on Gillian's right hip, covering the tattoo Riley had given her the night before. It was a smaller version of the one on Riley's left shoulder, granting a portion of Riley's protection to her. She kissed Gillian's shoulder, and Gillian twisted to kiss Riley's lips. "Mm. I've missed that," Riley whispered.

"Better get your fill in. In case we have to go back early."

Riley smiled and kissed Gillian harder, sliding her hand down Gillian's bare hip. Gillian shifted on the mattress and Riley moved closer to her. Gillian's legs slid between hers easily, their bodies moving together like they had never been apart.

"Will your tattoo be less effective now?"

Riley brushed Gillian's hair out of her face. "If the supernatural shits in town really want to hurt me, they can. I know that now. The tattoo was a security blanket for me. Giving it to you...it will make the difference. I know that, too. So yes, it will probably be a little less effective. But I would give up all the protection for you."

"I wouldn't want that."

"I know."

Gillian kissed the flat of Riley's chest. Riley kissed her way from Gillian's mouth to her ear. There were two piercings, even though she only ever wore one in each ear. She wanted to remember every inch of Gillian in case they were ever apart again.

Gillian brushed her thumb over the bandage on Riley's neck. "You must have been in such pain."

"I can cope," Riley said. "Priest healed me a little bit before she brought me here. Enough that I could...appreciate being with you again." Her hand slipped and Gillian's chuckle turned into a groan of pleasure. Riley kissed her neck.

"Remind me to thank that woman next time I see her."

"So you're definitely coming back with me?"

"Yes."

Riley moved her hand and Gillian whimpered. "Say it."

"This is torture, Detective," Gillian moaned.

"I got an education in that recently. I'm a product of my environment." She bent down and nibbled Gillian's ear. "Say it. I need to hear you say it."

Gillian said, "When you fly home...I'm coming with you."

"And now?"

Gillian whimpered. "What...?"

"Are you coming now?" Riley asked.

"Oh," Gillian said. She exhaled sharply. "Yes, Riley."

Riley kissed Gillian's lips and said, "I love you."

Gillian put her arms around Riley. She pulled her close and said, "I love you, too." Her hands slid across Riley's back, over

already-healing wounds from her trial. “You have to get back to the city, don’t you? Rejoin the fight. Demons versus angels.”

“Yeah. Only at the moment the angels and demons are kicking each other’s asses without my help. The war won’t be short, but I’m not fighting it alone anymore. Still, I think I’ll give them a little time to settle down before I go back.”

“A vacation? You?”

“I think I’ve earned it.”

Gillian smiled and moved her hands along Riley’s flank. “Got any plans for your free time?”

“Some,” Riley said. She bent down and kissed Gillian’s bottom lip. “But I’m open to suggestions.”

Outside the bedroom, a rain had begun to fall. It was a quiet, southern United States kind of rain without the threat of severe weather. A steady downpour that turned the world gray-blue and washed away the heat of the world. It beat against the glass, keeping the world inside isolated from the world outside. The light provided by the meager glow of the bedside lamp barely allowed the two women to see each other, but it was enough for the moment. Later, they would turn on the overhead lights and explore one another again. Later, they would take the time to appreciate being together again.

Right now, they had more pressing things to attend to.

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