



BRIANA MICHAELS

**Hard to
Find**

HELL HOUNDS HAREM

Hard To Find

Hell Hounds Harem



Book 1

Second Trilogy

By Briana Michaels

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Dedication

To Danielle – Never settle and never stop being your badass self. I
love you.

Acknowledgements

I can't fit everyone into this without adding a hundred more pages to the book, but...

Ivy Fox – We did it, woman! This trilogy was cranked out with you on the other side of the world cheering me on. I'm so glad we found each other and get to rock the sprinting buddy magic every day. Thank you for always being there with advice, laughs, and patience.

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Shawn – Damn, I love you so much. Thanks for putting up with my craziness.

Trilogy Epigraph

That which does not kill you, will try harder next time.

Chapter 1

When staring death in the face, put your middle finger up and laugh. Bishop would love to do that right now, but he was holding a gun in one hand and a knife in the other. Chasing a *malanum* through the empty warehouse, he slammed his shoulder against the door and tumbled out into the night. Booking it down the city sidewalk, he tucked his blade away, hung a left, scaled the side of a brick building with the use of his Hell Hound powers, and took down his enemy by jumping on top of the fucker. Crashing to the ground hard enough for his teeth to clack, Bishop loomed over the evil bastard, aimed his Glock, gave the middle finger salute, and pulled the trigger. Black sticky goop splattered everywhere.

“Back you go, asshole,” Bishop opened a Hell hole and tossed the *malanum* in.

He shouldn't have done that. He should have tried to question the thing first, but there was no stopping the instincts roaring in Bishop now. He'd gone too long with too little, causing his balance and better judgment to go off-kilter.

Damn. What if that *malanum* knew something the others hadn't? What if that piece of shit evil entity knew where the twins, Sebastian and Drake, were? He shouldn't have been so hasty. What the hell was he thinking? *Shit, shit, shit.*

“Ye good, Hound?”

“No.” Bishop didn't turn towards his Alpha, Valor. Instead, he stayed on his knees, covered in black sticky blood of their enemies, and tried to calm the fuck down. When Valor put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, Bishop's body wouldn't stop shaking. His tremors were much worse now. He was in bad fucking shape.

“Ye almost missed your target, Hound. Ye canna go on like this.”

Bullshit, Bishop thought. He would absolutely go on like this and had no intentions of stopping until he found the twins.

“If ye willna stop, then find your balance. Ye canna run around like a feral animal, half-cocked with no wits about ye. As your alpha, I demand ye rest.”

Bishop flinched when Valor squeezed his shoulder harder. “Doona make me take the choice away from ye, Hound.”

He knew what that meant. It would be his only warning. “I can’t stop, Val.”

“And ye canna keep going either. Look,” Val crouched down and forced Bishop to look at him, “We willna stop until they’re found. I’ve told ye this a hundred times. But we must be well enough to do this. If we’re going to be of use to them, then we must have ourselves ready and capable of handling whatever condition they are in. We must be strong enough for the entire pack, not just ourselves, ye ken?”

It made sense. Bishop knew that. But ever since the day he.... *Oh god*, he couldn’t breathe, “I can’t close my eyes without seeing all the blood, Valor.”

It didn’t matter that they’d repainted the walls, replaced the carpet, and scrubbed the house with enough bleach to fill a lake. Bishop still saw what happened. *What he did*. He could never unsee it. Never forget the way his heart exploded when he saw what he’d done under the possession of *malanum*. It haunted his nights so he didn’t sleep much anymore. It haunted his days, too. There was no escaping it.

That was the night their packs’ world turned upside down. Not only was Bishop used by a horde of *malanum*, but the twins went missing that night, too. Bishop didn’t know if he was the cause of their disappearance or if it was a coincidence. They just... vanished. There was no trace of their blood, no scent trail, nothing that might help them find where Sebastian and Drake were. The lack of evidence had led him and Valor on a wild goose chase for weeks now.

Bishop would get no rest until he found them. This pack was all he had left. He couldn’t lose them.

Valor growled low in his throat and hauled Bishop up by the back of his leather jacket. “I will continue to hunt tonight. But you’re done, Hound. Go unfuck yourself.”

“No,” he argued. He couldn’t just drop the hunt and head home now. His mind buzzed with chaos and his palms itched to beat on something. Bishop was a handful and a half; he knew that about himself, but had no way of getting better. He was a broken, twisted Hound with more passion than even he could handle. That meant he needed releases of some kind – a hunt, a fuck, a wild night, a good fight, something to take the edge off and quiet his buzzing nerves. Lately, however, all he had done was chase his motherfucking tail looking for the twins and constantly coming up empty handed.

“Unfuck yourself, Hound. That’s a direct order.” Valor released Bishop and stormed off.

“What am I supposed to do?” he called out.

Valor yelled over his shoulder, “You’re a smart man. Figure it out. Come home when you’re done and we’ll make some more calls.” He kept walking away, his knife barely visible in his big palm. Valor’s gait, long and confident, had him at the corner of Main and North within seconds.

Bishop leaned against the brick building and concealed his weapons. His hands shook so bad, he struggled to snap his gun back into the holster. Same with his knife. Fuck, his vision went wonky too. Everything blurred and had a halo.

Valor was right. Bishop was in no condition to be out hunting like this. Not for *malanum*. Not for answers. And certainly not for miracles.

Scrubbing his face again, Bishop blinked a couple times and rolled his shoulders back. He looked around, suddenly confused about where he even was. He’d lived just outside of Baltimore for over six years now and knew these streets like the back of his hand. And yet confusion assaulted him right now. He might as well have been dumped off the side of a boat smack dab in the middle of the ocean with no island in sight.

He headed right, pivoted and went left, no... right. He should go right.

Fuuuuck.

His cell went off but the vibration barely registered. Numbly, he reached into his back pocket and pulled it out. “Yeah?”

“Bishop?”

His head started throbbing. “Yeah. Who the fuck is this?”

“I tried to contact Valor, but he’s not answering his phone. Go to The Blue Lizard. Hurry, you don’t have much time.”

“The Blue Lizard? Wait, who the hell is this?” She hung up. “Hello? Yo! You there?” Nothing. Bishop frowned at his phone screen. The caller was unknown. Damn it.

Bishop hissed through his teeth, exhaling a fuck-ton of frustration, and shoved his phone back in his pocket. Looking around and concentrating, he figured out where he was in relation to The Blue Lizard and took off at a dead run towards the concert venue. It was a smaller place for bands to debut in the area. With a max capacity of three hundred heads, it had one bar that served shit beer, rail drinks, and overpriced soda and waters.

He had no idea who’d called him, but assumed it was one of Valor’s psychics he kept on retainer. If she said to go to The Blue Lizard, Bishop was damn well going. What if this was a lead? What if the twins were there?

Yeah, that was a bit of stretch, but Bishop was fucking desperate.

Hope – that no good troublemaking emotion – bloomed in his chest and Bishop could barely handle the money exchange to get into the venue. Rising stars had concerts here to grow their following and you usually had to buy your ticket in advance. Not tonight, thank fuck. It was open mic night and anyone was welcome to waltz in for a small fee of five lousy bucks to hear beginner musicians scream on stage.

“How’s it going, man?” The bouncer let Bishop past him without a pat-down.

He came here a lot. Concerts were one of the few things that calmed his nerves and reminded him that he wasn’t dead anymore. “Good, good. Hey. You see any of my boys here tonight?”

The bouncer frowned. “Just that big red-headed guy you run with. He ran by here about ten minutes ago actually. Didn’t come in though.”

“What about the twins, Sebastian and Drake?”

“Naw, man. Haven’t seen those two here for a while.” The bouncer shrugged, “I just got here about an hour ago. If you’re expecting them, they might be inside already and I just didn’t see ‘em.” He stepped aside and let Bishop through.

The Hound’s stomach plummeted to his boots. Damn, why the fuck would that woman call and say to come here if it wasn’t for the twins? *This is stupid*, Bishop thought. If the twins were alive, they wouldn’t waste time going to open mic night. Not after what happened. Talk about grasping for straws, now Bishop wanted to beat his own ass for having this much hope and stupidity.

He couldn’t help but play the fool though. Hope made you a dumb fuck. Entering the venue, he scanned the place, worked his way through the small crowd, and wanted to tear the place to shreds when he finally reached the bar. The twins weren’t here. Only misery was here to greet him.

Sadly, Bishop was used to being misery’s company.

The Hell Hound walked the perimeter of the place, looking for signs of anything that might give him a clue. Dimly lit and well used, The Blue Lizard was rough around the edges with some good bones and a lot of memories. Oh if these walls could talk, they’d tell some tales. To his relief, and disappointment, the place was clear of *malanum*. No evil in sight, damnit. And no twins, either. What a fucking waste of time this detour was. After scanning the darker corners one more time for *malanum*, Bishop took a seat at the bar.

With a flick of his finger, he ordered a shot of tequila. Why did that caller tell him to be here? Why did she say he didn’t have much time? It had to be because the twins were here, right?

“You’re pathetic,” Bishop growled to himself. He tipped back his cheap fucking tequila and swiftly ordered two more. “You’re not worthy of the pack.” He took the next shot and reached for the third. Just as he was about to pound that one too, he looked up and froze. “Holy mother of God.”

Chapter 2

Fear looked like a buxom strawberry blonde in tight jeans, a frilly shirt, and a messy bun. Matilda Jane, better known as “Tilly”, leaned against the bathroom door while trying to decide if she should go back in to puke one more time, or if she was going to be able to make it out of this goddamn place without looking like a fool.

Below her, she watched the crowd push closer and closer to the stage and knew things were about to get started. The lights dimmed, the music switched from chill to rock. Her eyes scanned the area, trying to envision herself going through with this. Her gaze swung across the way and she stiffened.

There was that guy again, looking sullen and exhausted as he stared at her from across the balcony. He was sexy in a disheveled kind of way. Every time they ran into each other, she couldn’t stop staring at him, but he never came close. Never even waved. It was starting to creep her out, big time. Tilly released her death grip on the door handle and took a step forward to confront the creeper, but her stomach roiled and she spun around to puke again instead.

Ten minutes later, Tilly was fairly certain she was finished for real this time so she splashed some cold water on her face and berated herself in the mirror. “What is your problem, Tilly? It’s a stage. That’s all. These people don’t matter. They’re here for cheap drinks and to get laid. If you sing, they won’t even pay attention. You can do this. You totally got this, woman. Go out there and do your thing.”

She fixed her mascara, took a deep breath, and bumped the door open with her ass. Spinning around, she noticed the creeper wasn’t there anymore, which was probably best right now. She didn’t need distractions.

Gliding down the metal steps, her hands shook and face felt tingly. “Stop being a little bitch. You got this.” Her foot landed wrong on the next step and she slipped, tumbling ass over tin cup down the stairs.

“Oh shit!” someone yelled.

“Dayem!” someone else laughed.

Tilly hit the bottom of the steps, landing on her back, dazed and confused. A pair of jeans crouched down in front of her, "Shit, you okay?"

No. She wasn't okay. Not. At. All. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

"Can you stand?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Tilly refused to accept the bartender's help as she rolled over to her knees and slowly picked herself up. He tried to put his hands on her waist to steady her and she hissed at how much her ass and back hurt, "Please don't touch me." She was grateful he backed off. "I'm fine. Really. It wasn't that bad."

"Here," said a man from her left. He handed her a shot of tequila. "This stuff will numb the pain."

Holy Hell, this guy was crazy hot. Which made this whole situation so much worse, by the way. Tilly tried to laugh, but her chin quivered too much for it to look genuine. Embarrassment gripped her. She hated this so much she wanted to scream. Instead of running away to cry and sulk, she slapped on her brave face and said, "I think I'll need more than one of those to numb my ass. It really hurts."

"I'll take the bottle," Mr. Leather Jacket said to the bartender before turning back to her, "You want ice?"

"For my ass or the drink?" Tilly brushed her jeans off and tested her ankle. Applying some weight to it, she sighed in relief. Thank god, it wasn't broken.

"You sure you're okay?" the bartender asked again. "I can call the manager?"

"No, I'm good. I just want people to stop staring."

Hot dude in the leather jacket lightly chuckled, "That'll be impossible."

"That bad of a shitshow, huh?"

"Not at all," he grinned, "you're just that damn beautiful."

Ignoring the compliment, Tilly took another step forward and hissed. Every move she made, her back and tailbone screamed in protest.

"May I touch you?" Mr. Leather Jacket asked. There wasn't a smidgen of humor in his tone.

It made her nervous and more embarrassed. “Depends,” when all else fails, flirt. “Where were you thinking of touching me?”

He jabbed a finger at her elbow.

Oh. “Sure,” she said reluctantly. “I can’t possibly look more pathetic than I already do.”

“Nothing pathetic about getting some help when you need it.”

“Or tequila,” she tried to deflect.

Mr. Leather Jacket laughed, “Or tequila.”

He held her elbow with a solid, secure grip, but not tight enough to hurt. With his other hand at her back, but not touching her, she figured he was preparing in case he had to catch her if she fell again. And wouldn’t that be the icing on the embarrassment cake. He escorted her over to the bar and allowed her to take her time sitting down. Gingerly. Very gingerly.

With a slow hiss, Tilly relaxed and was grateful the stools had cushioned leather tops. She needed all the softness she could get for a while. The sound of a glass bottle thumped onto the bar between her and her new friend, and then two magical shot glasses appeared.

“Got limes?” she asked sheepishly.

“Yeah, absolutely.” The bartender said, “You uhhh, you sure you’re going to be okay?”

Tilly saw how nervous he was. “Look, I’m not going to sue the place if that’s what you’re worried about. I fell. I’m clumsy. It’s fine. Can we just stop talking about it? The sooner I forget, the happier my night will be.”

The bartender nodded and left to serve beer to another patron. Mr. Leather Jacket poured her a shot of tequila and held a dish of limes for her to pick from. “Thanks,” she whispered.

Rude as it was, she didn’t wait for him before she pounded her shot. With a knowing smile, he poured her another. She downed that one too.

“I’m Bishop by the way.”

“Tilly.” Annd down went the third shot. This time, without the lime chaser.

They sat in silence for a while. She was too embarrassed and sore to talk much.

“Matilda Jane Sinclair! Matilda Jane Sinclair!” A woman with a clipboard walked around loudly announcing, “You’re up next!”

Tilly grabbed the bottle of tequila and poured a fourth. She stared straight ahead and didn’t answer the woman calling out her name. No way was she going up on that stage after what just happened. Her fall wrecked every ounce of courage she had.

Tilly and her new friend Bishop sat next to each other, both staring at nothing special, both not speaking to each other. It was almost time for open mic to start, but she wasn’t getting up unless it was to leave this place and never show her face here again. Music blasted through the speakers, *Man in the Box* by Alice in Chains got the crowd warmed up. Bishop, she noticed, stiffened when the song started. Then he got extra thirsty and poured a double. Twice.

She cut herself off after the fifth shot and sat there trying to figure out if she should leave or not. Oddly though, sitting next to Bishop made her feel good. Orrrr maybe it was the tequila. Whatever. Tilly relaxed and leaned her elbows on the bar, twisting and testing out how bad her back hurt.

Bishop kept his gaze straight ahead while he sucked on a lime. She liked that they could sit and not talk but still share a bottle. It made her less self-conscious and a lot more comfortable to be around a guy so... intimidating. Like, seriously, this man wasn’t just hot, he was dangerous hot. Dressed in leather, he had a few visible piercings and tattoos were all over his hands and neck. He looked like trouble and Tilly loved walking on the dangerous side.

“Can I ask you a question, Tilly?”

“Sure. Just make it personal, I hate small talk.”

He smiled and continued staring straight ahead. “Do you ever think about death?”

“Every. Single. Day.” Maybe that was a morbid question for some folks, but not Tilly. Oh no. She and Death were in a relationship of sorts. A toxic one.

“Do you fear it?” he asked, shoving the bottle away.

“I refuse to fear that which cannot be stopped. It’s futile.”

He turned and pinned her with steely blue eyes. “That’s not much of an answer.”

“Tilly!” A woman huffed as she pushed through the crowd and headed straight for her. “Oh my god! Did I miss it? Did you already go on?” Vivian, her sister, was a flustered hot mess. Her pencil skirt was crooked, her blouse half-untucked, and her bun was loose.

“No Viv, you didn’t miss it. I’m not going on tonight.”

“What? Why?”

“It was nice to meet you, Tilly,” Bishop stood and paid their tab. She noticed his hands shook something awful when he pulled out two one-hundred-dollar bills and slapped them onto the bar.

“Thanks,” she said, not really wanting him to go.

“My pleasure,” he dipped his head, silently saying good-bye and then he turned and melted into the crowd.

“Who was that sweet slice of yum?”

“Just some guy.” Tilly’s stomach ached and she wasn’t sure if it was because Bishop disappeared so fast, or if it was from the tequila. Probably the tequila.

Or maybe not.

“Hang on.” Tilly got up and grunted with how much her ass and back didn’t like that idea. She half-hobbled through the crowd and found Bishop standing three feet away from the speakers as the first band on stage sang some heavy metal cover song. “BISHOP!” Tilly yelled over the growing noise.

Bishop turned and pinned her with another steely blue gaze. God, how can a man look so intense? So delectable? *Shut up, tequila! Stop talking!*

The crowd shoved and crushed against her and Bishop immediately reached out to steady her again. “You okay?” he yelled over the music.

She nodded. Then, with tequila driving her crazy train, she threw caution to the wind and slung her arms around him. Falling into his body, she pressed her mouth to his and kissed him.

He wrapped his arms around her and the smell of leather and tequila went straight to her head. He deepened the kiss as a rumble vibrated between them and she didn’t know if it was the music or him. Suddenly, she was starved for more. Sinking her hands into his sandy brown hair and grabbing some of it, she swept her tongue across his. He tasted soooo good.

Bishop's body responded instantly. His tongue slid across hers and he pressed against her body. Good God, the man was all muscle and built for sin and pleasure and all the fun in between naughty and nasty.

She breathed him in. Her body set on fire. Then Tilly broke away because she realized if she didn't stop now, she wasn't going to and they'd both wind up getting arrested for indecent exposure. Hand-to-God, even as she pulled back, Tilly ripped at his clothes just to touch his bare skin. Bishop rocked back on his heels and continued to stare at her – lust and confusion warring on his handsome face. Guess she wasn't the only one wanting to walk on the wild side tonight.

But she had her sister here with her and ditching Vivian wasn't an option. No matter how good of an excuse Bishop looked like right now. Unsure of what to do next, Tilly winked, "Thanks for making my night better," then she turned and walked away.

He grabbed her hand, yanked her back and crushed his mouth to hers again. This time, he ran his hands through her hair and grabbed her ass. Grinding his hips into her, she felt how hard he was... everywhere. He broke away and smiled. "Howl for me."

"Wh-what?"

"Howl. Right now."

"Like a wolf?"

"Yeah," he grinned, "like this." He tossed his head back and let out with a howl that was more animal than man. It was all she heard – the music, the crowd, the noise around them faded into the background. She had eyes and ears only for Bishop - the hotty in leather with a pierced nostril and devilish smile.

Tilly had two lists in her life: A Bucket List and a Fuck It List.

She laughed, too drunk on tequila to care, and said, "Fuck it." She gave him her best howl.

Bishop ate her alive with his gaze, too. His smile was more intoxicating than the booze and it made her giddy. "Again, Tilly."

She howled louder the second time, lost her balance and stumbled backwards into someone. Bishop snatched her arm and brought her in close again. "You howl like that if you ever find yourself in need."

“In *need*? Like of help? What, is that supposed to be your bat signal?”

“Just howl if you need *me*.” Bishop looked behind her and nodded once, “Your friend’s looking for you.”

Tilly turned to see Vivian weave through the crowd looking like a prima ballerina. “That’s my sister and she can wait, I want to get—” Tilly turned back but Bishop was gone, “your number.”

“Damnit!” Vivian cursed, “I broke my favorite heel.” She frowned and took her other shoe off, “Fuck it.” She went barefoot. “What the hell, Tilly?”

“What?”

“You just ditched me!”

“I wanted to grab Bishop before he disappeared.”

Vivian looked around and then cocked an eyebrow, “So where is he?”

“I’m.... not even sure.” Tilly’s shoulders slumped and the taste of tequila in her mouth was starting to not taste too good anymore. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Damnit girl, come on.” Vivian helped Tilly get outside and into fresh air. “Let’s get home. We’re going to freeze to death out here.”

Do you ever think about death? Do you fear it? Bishop’s voice echoed in her head. Yes, she thought. She feared death and was fearless of life.

Curses had a habit of making one complicated like that.

Chapter 3

Bishop hung back and watched Tilly get into a car with her sister. They looked nothing alike. One was curvy and strawberry blonde. The other was a stick with dark hair. Tilly wore jeans and a simple top, her sister looked like a librarian with a tight bun and skirt. The only similarity was their uncanny way of stopping the world from spinning. Vivian caught the attention of half the crowd when she walked around The Blue Lizard looking for her sister. She was stunning, he'll give her that, but Vivian had nothing on Tilly. Damn, but that woman had an ass that could bring a man to his knees. Plus, her attitude was fucking spectacular. He liked a woman with some meat on her. Bonus points for her aggressiveness by the stage when she'd kissed him.

Bishop rubbed the back of his neck as he turned and left The Blue Lizard.

Matilda Jane. Not a very common name nowadays. "Tilly," he rolled the syllables off his tongue, testing it, savoring it.

That was too cute and sweet of a name for a woman who kissed like she was trying to set the whole goddamn world on fire. Hand-to-Satan, Bishop was floored when she approached him by the speakers and threw herself on him like that.

She owned the moment. Took what she wanted and said *fuck it* to the rest. Grabbed life by the balls and gave it a good tug. Bishop could totally get down with a woman with that kind of attitude. And yeah, he'd let her tug his balls all she wanted.

The only reason he didn't scoop her up and take her home was because he was too sexed up and unbalanced. Being a Hell Hound had its perks, but came with obligation and burdens. Being so off-kilter right now meant Bishop was weak with his self-control and clarity. If he fucked her right now, he would be more animal than man in bed. Not many women out there could handle his level of passion on a good day, but with his imbalance dictating most of his moves right now, he could absolutely hurt her by accident and he wasn't going to let that happen. And, he didn't want to take her home to the place where he'd killed people.

That kind of thing left a mark – on the house and the soul. He didn't want to bring a special woman like Tilly into such darkness. It didn't matter that the carpet was light gray, the walls a linen white, or that there wasn't a lick of evidence left of what he'd done. He couldn't bring a woman into a house that once held such horrors.

Ghosting, he ran across the street, through all the traffic, and reached his truck parked in the ally. Hitting the button on his fob, he unlocked his Land Rover and slid in. After pulling away, he scanned the area and took off down the road blasting Shinedown's *State of My Head*.

Twenty minutes later, he pulled up to his pack's grand manor. Their house was gigantic. Each Hound needed their own space because they hated being on top of each other. The twelve thousand square feet stack of bricks was a lovely fit for their needs when they moved to this territory.

Valor was already home. Shit, he didn't want to face his alpha right now. Val would see he hadn't unfucked himself yet.

Funny, even though he hadn't done a damned thing to get better, his quiet time with Tilly was enough to turn the screaming in his head down to a bearable volume, which was odd since they barely spoke at the bar. She just had a good vibe to her and it sank into him. That woman let shit roll off her back and didn't dwell. She barely sulked with embarrassment after having fallen down the steps in front of a big crowd.

Christ on a cracker. He was sorry to have missed it. Had he seen her stumble, Bishop could have moved fast and caught her before she reached the bottom, saving her from getting hurt so badly.

Instead, he arrived just in time to see the bartender dash forward and curiosity got the better of the Hell Hound. Bishop followed the skinny jean wearing emo-head to see what was up, never expecting to see a vixen on the floor all red-faced and shook up.

He felt possessive of her when the bartender reached to help her up. Ridiculous as it was, Bishop had fucking loved it when she refused to accept that bartender's help. And the Hell Hound side of him howled in victory when she allowed Bishop to touch her instead. Bonus points was sharing that shitty bottle of tequila while the bartender had to stand of the other side of the bar and watch.

Hell Hounds were cocky fuckers. Territorial animals. They sucked at sharing anything but their weapons.

Tilly had no idea who she had sat next to at The Blue Lizard. That Bishop, being the dirty dog beside her, had undressed her with his eyes while she swallowed the booze. That he sucked on his lime wedge wishing it was her bottom lip. That he licked the salt from his hand, pretending it was her clit. His mouth watered with every flick of his tongue. At one point, her gaze flicked to him and he groaned low in his throat when he smelled her lust. Her jeans were too tight and gave him a very clear picture of what was underneath. Her tits were slamming in that shirt, too and her hair twisted up on her head in a messy knot gave him an excellent vision of what her sexed up bed head would look like. In his mind, Bishop fucked her all over that bar – on the stool, against the wall, on the stage, and on the second-floor balcony.

In reality, he kept his mouth shut and eyes straight ahead while his dick throbbed in his leather pants. Keeping quiet was only easy because he was roaring in his mind while he pounded his dick into her mouth, her pussy, and her ass. Fuuuuck.

And now, it was over and he was home.

Bishop took the steps two at a time and went quietly down to the basement where he kept his drum set. He closed his eyes and focused on the image of Tilly's profile. Her sharp nose, round cheeks, big eyes. That ass.

Fuck... *that ass*.

He hoped it wasn't too bruised from her fall. Bishop groaned, his hips jutting forward on his stool as his imagination went wild with all the things he wanted to do to that curvy bombshell. The lights in the room flickered and Bishop popped his eyes open. Valor stood in the doorway and Bishop stopped beating his snare. "What?"

"Chloe said she called ye."

“Chloe?”

“Yeah.” Valor crossed his arms, “The psychic in town I keep on retainer. She just called and said to go back to The Blue Lizard. Said she told ye to go there.”

Bishop stood up so fast the stool fell behind him, “I was there for hours. There was nothing. No one.”

“Are ye positive?”

“Yeah.” Bishop’s eyes narrowed, “Why?”

“Because... she... fuck Bishop, are ye sure?”

“Yes! They weren’t there!” Ever since Bishop killed five people while he was possessed, Valor treated him like a fragile little bubble. He worded things nicer, didn’t bark as much, didn’t demand so much. It was irritating as fuck. “Say it, Alpha. Whatever the hell you’re thinking, fucking say it.”

“You’re still not yourself, Hound. Ye were ordered to find balance and you’ve disobeyed.”

“I’m trying.”

“Not good enough.” Valor came over and grabbed Bishop by the arm, hauling his ass out of the room. “You’re staying here.”

“What? No! I’m going with you.”

Valor roared with fury, “I’ll not have a Hound who canna think or see straight walk by my side. Ye stay here. *HERE*. Bishop. Och, for all I ken, the twins were there and ye missed them because ye canna see past your self-pity and hate.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. What the fuck, Valor?” Bishop shoved into him, slamming his alpha against the wall. “They weren’t there!”

Valor growled and took Bishop to the ground in a blink of an eye. “The fact that I can take ye down this easy is a sign Bishop.” He growled low in his chest, “I’m calling in someone to help ye.”

“I don’t want to fuck a whore.”

“Then don’t fuck her. But ye will get off with someone. Ye have no choice now. You’re not yourself and you’ll only get worse. Until ye satisfy that piece of ye, Hound, I willna let ye out to hunt. Not tonight, and not tomorrow. Not until ye can stand straight without tremors. How many fingers am I holding up?”

Bishop looked away and stumbled as he rose to his feet again. He couldn't tell how many fingers Valor was holding up. Could have been two, could have been five. He also hadn't been able to see what color Tilly's eyes were. Hell, he didn't even know her size until he grabbed a handful of her luscious ass when she'd kissed him. Valor had a point. Bishop was deteriorating at a rapid pace. Damn it.

"I'm heading down to The Blue Lizard and will sweep the place. If there is even a trace, a scent, a lingering bit of energy that I can connect to the twins, I'll call ye and ye can come down to meet me there." He grabbed Bishop's neck and forced the Hound to make eye contact, "Be sure you're well enough to handle it." Valor pulled out his cell, hit a few buttons, and made the call Bishop absolutely hated. "Tina, get over here for Bishop." He hung up his cell and dropped Bishop all in one swift movement. "Doona disobey me, Hound. I canna lose ye too."

Valor marched away and left Bishop on his own.

His heart beat against his chest in a terrible way when he heard the front door slam shut. Valor was actually leaving him behind. Holy shit. Bishop, consumed with rage and frustration, pounded the sides of his head and screamed.



Valor heard his Hound baying in the basement. It killed him to leave Bishop alone in the house. That Hell Hound didn't do well with silence or being locked up, which was why Valor hadn't gone the extra step by putting him in the safe room. The last thing they needed was for Bishop to lose the last bit of sanity he had left because Valor confined him to a room to keep him safe.

Feeling like a total asshole, Val hopped into his truck and slammed his head against the headrest. He gripped the steering wheel, squeezed his eyes shut, and breathed hard through his nostrils. To drown out the sound of Bishop's baying, Valor cranked up the radio and tore down the driveway.

Bishop was a desperate Hound. Valor was too. The twins were one-half of their pack and without them, everything felt wrong. Broken.

Several weeks ago, an imposter came into their home, drugged and poisoned Bishop, and used him as a vessel to house *malanum*. Bishop lost all control and killed five people who tried to help him. That wasn't his fault, it was Valor's. He should have never jeopardized others to save his Hound, but the pack was Val's first and only priority. Bishop was his second in command and in need of help. Valor made the decision, put in the calls, and led the way to Bishop's room. Valor pleaded for help that night. Was willing to do anything in the world to get Bishop better. To see his Hound be possessed by evil so terrifying there was yet a name to describe it made Valor an extremely desperate man.

That night, under the ministrations of several *malanum* that had taken over Bishop's body, five people were murdered. Then Eli made number six. At least Valor was able to bring him back that day. Thanks to the Voodoo Man, Jack, they were able to expel the *malanum* from Bishop and heal him too. But the cost was great for all of them. And unfortunately, Bishop was still paying the price.

The guilt that Hell Hound bore caused him to sink deeper and deeper into depression. Valor knew if they didn't find the twins soon, Bishop was going to check out for good. He wasn't going to live without his pack, and each day that ticked by, Bishop's depression grew darker. Soon, there would be no light at the end of his tunnel and Valor was determined to not let it get that far.

Bishop was convinced the twins were dead by his hands. Valor wasn't so sure though, and every time he tried to argue with Bishop about it, they wound up fighting.

Death might be the reason, but Valor refused to believe it. There was no blood. No trace of a struggle anywhere. They just... vanished. It made no sense.

The twins would never abandon the pack. Things might not have been perfect between the four of them, but Valor refused to accept that Sebastian and Drake would break away without saying why first.

Any lead, any whisper, anything they could use to get closer to where the other half of the pack was, Valor and Bishop have chased it for weeks. And coming home empty handed every night was finally taking its toll on the two of them.

Maiden, Mother and Crone, what a joke this was. Having psychic friends was not without some frustrating moments. Half of what they “saw” was just illusion anyway. To discern real from fantasy, a vision versus dream, was infuriating for all involved. Yet Valor couldn’t risk not following every single lead, which was why he was going on another wild goose chase tonight – back to The Blue Lizard.

He pulled into a parking garage, beat feet to the venue, paid the cover charge and entered. The place smelled like sweat, beer and cigarettes. Valor surveyed the area, keeping his aggression under control. He didn’t like places like this. It was too loud. Too crowded. Too annoying.

“Oh you’re getting on that stage, damnit!” a brunette yelled as she dragged a blonde through the door.

“I’m not doing it, Viv. I only came back to get my phone.”

“I can’t believe you fell down an entire flight of steps *and* I can’t believe I missed it.”

“Shut up and stop talking about it. I want to forget it ever happened.”

“Bet you don’t wanna forget Bishop though, huh?”

Valor’s growl ripped out of his mouth. So Bishop came here earlier as he said, but been too busy flirting to notice if Chloe’s lead was a good one or not? Val wasn’t sure how to feel about it. He told Bishop to unfuck himself, which he didn’t do, but looks like he came close. Maybe... Val’s eyes narrowed at the booze behind the bar. Or had Bishop just ordered tequila all night and left half-numbed and blind to his surroundings?

It didn’t even matter anymore. Valor walked on, ignoring the rest of the women’s conversation and continued scanning the area. Sniffing out a scent would be hard in a place like this. Too many variables. Not to mention the doors were wide open. Even in winter, this place was nothing but hot bodies and stage lights.

The strawberry blonde caught his attention again. She hadn't done it on purpose, it was something about her aura. Most folks couldn't see auras unless they were magically inclined, which Valor most certainly was. This woman's aura was... ablaze. Pulsing. Panicked.

The protective beast in him roared. Instinct demanded he put himself between her and whatever scared her. But when Valor searched for the threat, there was nothing there. The woman only stared at an empty bar stool. Still, he unhooked his concealed blade and headed towards her. All because he couldn't see something, didn't mean there wasn't something there.

It could be a *malanum* lurking in the shadows. He should have been able to see it if that was the case, but at this point, nothing would surprise Valor. He coolly held the blade behind his back, prepared to use it if he had to, but hoping that wouldn't be the case. "Are ye alright, lass?"

Her stoic expression was at total odds with her aura. It blazed brighter as Valor came closer. "Lass? Are ye troubled?"

She swallowed and shook her head. "I'm fine." She turned away as a man came to sit down at the empty stool. Valor backed off and watched the two women from a distance. Something didn't feel right...

"Let's just get out of here, okay? I'm not singing tonight Viv. I just want to go home."

"Okay. Let's go."

The fair-haired woman said something to the bartender, grabbed her phone from him, and stuffed it into her back pocket. Valor stepped into the shadows and watched them leave.

Then he followed.

Chapter 4

Numb from too much magic, Sebastian could barely lift his head. Cracking one eye open, he tried to locate his twin and found Drake sprawled out on the stone slab. The place smelled dank with mold, piss, vomit and agony. As he continued to dangle, his feet didn't touch the ground while his body swayed ever so slightly.

The movement wasn't from his body, it was from the force of his soul as it reentered him again. This type of power was tricky and came at a horrendous price.

"D," he rasped. "D, you....still with...me?"

His twin gurgled a response.

If Sebastian had the energy to feel fear, he knew his heart would be jackhammering its way out of his rib cage right about now, but as it was, his was too numb for emotion. Too numb for anything really. His heart felt like a dead bird in its cage instead.

The room they were in was made of stone. No windows. No beds. When they were first brought here, it was freezing, but there was no draft. The coldness wasn't from the outside, it was from the power of their captor.

"I couldn't make it," Sebastian tried to say, but it came out more like, "I cooen mayt." Nothing felt right. Nothing sounded right. The manacles around his wrists cut him clean down to the bone. Naked, he dangled like a hunk of raw meat ready for the butcher.

His ribs jutted out of his once toned body. His skin was shrouded in several layers of slime, blood and other fluids. The magic those fuckers poured into his system made his skull feel like it had red ants feasting on his brains. And this was just the recovery process. The worst was yet to come.

Again.

"D? You... hear me?"

“Ungh.” Drake’s body stretched along a slab of stone. His right arm dangled over the edge, his left was broken in three places, the bones protruding through his flesh. Had Drake been a human, infection would have taken his life weeks ago. But since Drake and Sebastian were Hell Hounds, they were hard to kill. Hard to tame. Hard to catch.

And hard to find.

Sebastian willed his soul to split off again, an act that hurt like a motherfucker, and he drove it into his twin for a moment. Drake jolted with the sudden intrusion and gasped. His body went rigid for all of three seconds before collapsing onto the slab again. “Fuck! Stop!”

Sebastian’s soul came back to him once more, and settled into his body with a sigh. Drake didn’t have a soul, so Sebastian shared his. *A necessary evil*, Drake would say.

Souls were incredibly powerful things with the ability to feel. Drake hated feeling anything. “Don’t Baz... I can’t... take it right now.”

But that soul push would remind Drake what was at stake here. If Drake gave up, Sebastian would too. No living without each other. No fucking way. The quick reminder was all Sebastian could do in their current situation. Talking took too much effort and given that Drake had rods shoved into his ears earlier, Sebastian doubted his brother could hear anything at all right now.

He’d heal. Slowly, but it would happen.

Whoever was doing this had a twisted streak that could make the devil cringe. Sebastian clung to the fact that whoever the fucker was would pay dearly for what they were doing to him and Drake. It was only a matter of time before their alpha, Valor, found them. That Hound wouldn’t rest until he got his Hounds back. Bishop too. Christ, that inked up Hound was a bull in a china shop when he set his sights on something he wanted. There would be no stopping those two until they found the twins. Sebastian clung to that thought like a piece of driftwood in the stormy sea.

There was no saving themselves from this. The twins had tried repeatedly, but whatever shit their enemy put into them stripped so much of their Hell Hound powers, escape was futile.

Drake twitched on the stone slab. It was a minimal movement, but Sebastian caught it.

“Baz,” Drake murmured.

“I’m... here, D.”

“I can’t...keep... going...”

Fear shot down Sebastian’s spine and he popped both eyes open to stare at his brother. “You will.”

Drake’s head tilted to the left and his right eye cracked open so they could look at each other. “Save yourself... and leave... me.”

In case Drake hadn’t noticed, Baz could no sooner save himself than he could save his broken, busted up brother. There was no hope in this room. No way out.

“We came...” Sebastian coughed, the burst of muscle contractions causing his body to scream in agony from the open wounds seeping blood onto the floor. He winced and damn if he didn’t cough again before whimpering like a wounded animal. After a couple of careful breathes he continued, “We came into this world together. We left it together. We do this... together.”

“We’re going to die, Baz.”

“So fucking be it.”

“I don’t... want that...for...”

A door opened and in stepped their captors. One was a large man with tribal tattoos on his arms; the other was smaller with beady eyes and thinning hair.

Agony wasn’t a blow to the foot with a ball peen hammer - a sharp *slam*, the crunch of bones, that searing pain that ripped up your leg and through your entire body, causing your eyes to peel wide as you screamed out. No, no, no. Real agony was a monster that devoured you from the inside out – it ate your hope and ability to think straight. It clawed your courage to shreds and spat out the shards of your once powerful roar, while you’re blind and helpless to fight against it.

Sebastian experienced such agony right now. As he heard his brother gurgle in protest, the pain Sebastian felt for not being able to do anything other than dangle was excruciating for him. The wounded Hound in him still had the instinct to protect. This was his twin, too, his fucking other half. No matter how hard Baz tried to fight against his restraints, he couldn't free himself, which meant he couldn't protect his brother. To rip his limbs off wouldn't help them, either. He couldn't hold a weapon with a bloody stump for fuck's sake.

Suddenly Baz felt like he was on the tilt-a-whirl. The room spun when someone flipped him over and brought his sorry ass to the slab.

Thank god, Baz thought. They were going to hang Drake up and start on him now. If Baz had the option, he'd always choose himself over Drake taking the hit. They swapped the twins every now and then, usually after one was too close to dying. The rotation gave both Hounds a chance to semi-heal or for the magic they experimented with to either wear off or sink in. Drake was finally going to get a break.

Baz barely felt the restraints as he was tied down. He was too busy watching his brother get strung up like a carcass in hunting season. Blood flowed freely from Drake's once muscular form. He moaned incoherently as they pulled the lever and hoisted his body up high enough for his feet to not touch the floor anymore.

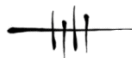
Then Baz's attention was pulled towards the direction of another horror. The tall man with dead eyes and tattoos lit something on fire and produced a small fillet knife. With a slash, he opened Baz's gut and shoved his hand inside, burying the fire into his belly. Baz tensed, his eyes bulged and mouth opened wide. Searing white-hot pain lanced him from tongue to toes. He sucked in a ragged breath and bayed. The fire they put in him set him ablaze with sensations too intense to handle. Every nerve ending he had fired off at the same time. Every inch of his body, every bone, vein, muscle, and molecule he fucking owned screamed for it to *STOP! STOP! STOP!*

Lately, their captors were trying a different series of magics on them. Sebastian suspected it required a soul to be stripped and hollowed out, but that couldn't happen if the body didn't have a soul, now could it? Survival instincts kicked in and Baz released his soul and shot it into his twin. Baz didn't have the capacity to see past the red haze of his vision, but he hoped like hell his spirit made it to Drake in time without getting caught. They normally had to touch to make the soul switch, but they weren't close enough for that right now and Sebastian was fucking desperate.

Like with everything he gave his twin, Drake would keep the soul they shared safe. His brother gurgled and groaned. *I'm sorry, Baz wanted to say. But you gotta keep it for now.*

Soulless, Baz was as good as dead and he could handle this shit without being scarred for fucking life afterwards.

His body trembled, the chains keeping him locked into place jingled and clanked. Standing by his head, the enemy smiled down at him. Baz's mind flashed to thoughts of Valor for a hot second. *Save me! Find us!* Baz fought to escape, his instinct driving him wild to get free. Baz lost control of his bodily functions when a new tool came into sight. He roared with all he had and tried not to flinch as they drove a spike through his forehead.



Tilly and Vivian spent the rest of their evening at a bar down the street from The Blue Lizard. They listened to music, drank ice water - because Tilly needed to lay off the tequila - and then Viv dropped her off at home at half-past three in the morning.

Tonight, Tilly was supposed to cross one item off her bucket list. As she stared at the piece of paper hanging on her fridge, she felt so disappointed in herself for not having gone through with it.

With a gruff sigh, Tilly yanked open her freezer and grabbed the ice cream. Nothing cured regrets like chocolate peanut butter ice cream. Snatching a spoon, she meandered across her studio apartment and straight to the bathroom. This was a double regret night - it was going to not only require ice cream, but bubbles.

What was her second regret? She didn't even want to talk about it.

Starting the hot bath, she tossed in a bubble bar and stripped down. Sticking one foot, then the other, into the hot water did wonders for her stress. Not even a quarter of the way in and she was already sighing in ecstasy.

Holding a spoonful of ice cream in her mouth, she dipped her ass down next, settled in and laid back. Damn, how can hot water feel this amazing? Her body was so sore from her fall. She probably should have used cold water for the bruising, but fuck it. She'd rather be hot than cold. Closing her eyes, Tilly ran over the series of events that happened earlier – skipping over a couple of the not-so-great parts – and focused on all the good stuff: Bishop.

What a rare, gorgeous, mysterious masterpiece of a man. The corners of her mouth turned up as she licked the back of her spoon. Tilly could only imagine what he looked like eating ice cream. He probably licked it slowly... his tongue dragging upwards, causing the ice cream to melt all over the cone from being so close to his sinfully sexy lips. Or maybe he devoured it. Sucked in as much as he could and swallowed it down, ready for more.

Hell, either one of those sounded good to her.

She placed the empty carton on the side of the tub and grabbed a handful of bubbles next. In one big exhale, she blew the tiny suds all over the place. What would Bishop be like in a tub? Wet was the only word that came to mind.

Damn, why didn't she get his number?

Just howl if you need me. Bishop's words caressed down her body. His voice, the cadence he used, the way his eyes had darkened... Tilly couldn't describe how insanely alive she'd felt in that moment.

And all it took was a howl.

Bishop. Lord have mercy. No creature ever looked hotter. No man had ever kissed her so voraciously. Tilly had a healthy sexual appetite, and she had a feeling Bishop could match her, bite for bite. Damn, but heat pooled low in her belly and she clenched her thighs together, scissoring her legs as her imagination ran wild. *If I howled, would he actually hear it?*

And if he did, would he come to her?

Chapter 5

Bishop howled until his throat felt raw. Even after Valor returned home, Bishop was still in no condition to get the fuck up. On his hands and knees, the Hell Hound looked like he was being electrocuted by the way he convulsed and shook. Bishop howled again, hoping Valor would take mercy on his pathetic ass and help him.

He'd refused Tina, Bishop's one chance at gaining some balance and he fucking declined it. She'd banged on the front door, rang the bell, screamed for someone to let her in, but he stayed right where he fucking was and refused to budge.

Call him a martyr all you want, but Bishop didn't deserve the reprieve that came from fucking. He deserved this pain.

"Och, for the love of the Gods, asshole." Valor bolted down the steps and kneeled in front of Bishop. "Why?" he snarled. "*Why*, Hound?"

Bishop was in no condition to answer. Instead, he flopped onto his side, grunting. His hips started to grind against the carpet pathetically.

"Maiden, Mother and Crone, Bishop. What a fine mess you're in now."

Bishop squeezed his eyes shut and he tried to block out all the sensations his body battled internally. Being unbalanced was a bitch. Vaguely, he realized Valor was dragging him by the back of his leather jacket. Bishop couldn't even twist around to fight his leader. He just continued to buck his hips and snarl, howl, or whimper.

He started foaming at the mouth next. Oh the humility he would feel later for this.

In the back of the basement was a door that led to Hell. Bishop tried to tell Valor to stop, but he was beyond talking. Instead, he panted. Bishop's vision wobbled and darkened. Everything had a pulse. Including, and most especially, his dick.

There was mumbling and then Bishop's world spun as he was tossed over someone's shoulder.

Lucifer, the name barely registered with how far his mind had gone past reasoning at this point. Like the fucked up animal he was, Bishop grabbed the Devil's body and stared at his ass while the Angel carried him off, slung over his shoulder like a sack of horny potatoes.

Lucifer had a luscious ass, did you know that? Neither did Bishop until just now.

"In you go, Hound."

Bishop didn't have time to register what was happening until Lucifer literally tossed him into a fire. Black flames licked his skin, his clothes melted away, dripping off of him like droplets of rain. He cried out and gripped his dick, stroking fast and hard. His head tilted back, his hips jutted forward and his teeth slammed together when he came.

He would come eleven more times – each one harder and longer than the last.

When he dropped to his knees, he growled and snapped his teeth at the flames. They wouldn't stop touching him. They wouldn't leave him the fuck alone. He didn't know how much of this torture he could stand, but there was no escaping a flame fuck like this.

It wasn't pretty. This kind of thing was messy, pathetic, embarrassing, and... in most cases, necessary.

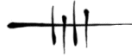
Finally, the flames died down, and with it so did Bishop's overwhelming need to fuck. His limbs no longer shook from unbalance... they now trembled from exhaustion.

And his dick? Holy Hell, it was raw.

Lucifer hauled Bishop out of there with a swift yank. "Don't do that again, Hound. That's an order." He handed Bishop over to Valor and jerked his head to the door, dismissing them. "Come back to me once he's secure, Valor."

With a curt nod, Valor carried Bishop out of Hell. God this was so ridiculous. If Bishop was a crier, he'd definitely feel the hot pricks of weakness sting his eyes right about now. As it was, he could barely swallow the lump of shame wedged in his throat.

But at least he was better now, right? He was technically unfucked. Now he could start the process all over again.



Valor was so goddamn mad, he was ready to spit tacks. This wasn't the first time Bishop had hit rock bottom, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with.

Ever since the day Bishop joined the pack, Valor had asked himself, *Why? Why Bishop?* Of all the Hounds the Devil created, why was Bishop in his pack? The answer was simple: Because he belonged there.

Valor would do anything for his pack. A-N-Y-T-H-I-N-G. And when Bishop came to him a broken shell of a man with enough PTSD to keep therapists rich for three thousand lifetimes, Valor didn't hesitate to bring him into the fold and help the Hound overcome his issues.

He worked with Bishop every day and night to bring out the best in that Hound and work through many of his issues. The Devil took care of the harder things...

As he carried the big lug of a Hound through the basement door and back into their house, Valor dropped him onto one of the seats in the theatre room, "Ye happy now?"

"Not hardly," Bishop grumbled. "I was handling it."

Valor cocked back his fist and punched his second in command right in the nose and broke it. Blood poured down Bishop's face and Valor was already preparing to swing again. Bishop roared and went after his alpha, barreling into him and they slammed against the wall. The projector screen ripped from its mount and fell, blanketing the two fighting Hounds.

"Fuck! Stop! Stop! Stop!" Bishop fought to get out from under the screen before he lost his shit. He couldn't stand being buried under anything. With a growl, he tore the screen away and backed off of Valor. "Fuck, I'm sorry!"

"Och, sorry doesna cut it." Valor closed the distance between them, "I need ye, Hound. Never do that again, got it?"

Bishop nodded, his nostrils flaring as he tried to continue to breathe. He wiped the blood from his nose and looked away from his alpha.

“Here,” Valor moved in and, with a squeeze and twist of his thumbs, he reset Bishop’s nose. “Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks. I’m sorry,” Bishop said again, looking ashamed.

“I doona want to hear it, Hound. I’ll not have your apologies. I want your strength. There’s a reason you’re my second in command. Act like it or I’ll find another, understand?”

Bishop flinched. For once, it didn’t sound like an empty threat. Why? Because it wasn’t. Valor loved his pack more than anything, which meant he would put the pack members in positions that suited the pack – not the individual members – best. “Get up here, Hound. We have things to discuss.”

Bishop followed his alpha up the steps and into the office. They each plopped their asses into chairs and glared at one another. “You could have hurt her tonight,” Valor sighed quietly.

“Who?”

“The lass at The Blue Lizard.”

Bishop shrunk back in his seat. His eyes cast to the floor, “I know,” he murmured, “It’s why I didn’t bring her here. I was afraid I’d lose control and…” he shuddered and closed his eyes.

“You’re a strong Hound, Bishop. Ye wouldna have gotten this far otherwise. I’m glad ye had the forethought to walk away from her tonight.”

“Wait, how did you know about Tilly?”

Tilly, Valor thought. *What a sweet name for a vixen.* “I went back there, do ye remember me saying that?”

“Only bits and pieces,” Bishop tapped his thumb against his knee, “I can’t remember past sitting at my drums and thinking of Tilly.”

Valor scratched his jaw, “We got a call from Chloe with a lead, do ye remember that?”

“Yeah,” Bishop said slowly.

“I went back there. Chloe was so sure we’d find the twins there somehow, but I didna find a thing. I did, however, find Tilly.”

Possessive aggression rolled off Bishop like a natural reaction. “Did you speak to her?”

“No,” Valor smiled, “but I followed her.”

“Why?”

“There’s something about her that just...” he didn’t want to go into it tonight, “her aura intrigued me.”

Bishop raised an eyebrow and glared.

“I want ye to see her again.”

“Why?”

“Do ye need an actual reason, Hound? As your alpha, if I say bark, ye bark. I’m asking ye to go to her. See if she is... *other*.”

“She’s not. I’d know it if she was.”

“Hound, this evening ye couldna tell the difference between a rug and pussy. Ye dry humped everything that ye came across, and tried to mount our maker. I think it’s accurate to say your judgement was impaired tonight.”

Bishop scrubbed his face and slumped into his chair, “Fuuuuuck.”

“Fuck is right. That was to be your only job this evening, was it not? Ye failed to follow my direct orders,” Valor stood up and leaned across the table. Bishop sat straighter, preparing to accept his punishment for the infraction, but Valor said, “For once I’m fucking glad ye didna follow through and obey. I canna imagine how terrifying ye would have been to that woman had ye turned animal on her with your lust as potent as it was.”

They didn’t need to speak further on the matter. Bishop’s imagination was a wild one. Valor’s examples of what could have possibly happened tonight were nothing compared to what Bishop’s mind would concoct. Valor snatched a pad of paper and scribbled down an address. “Here.” He ripped the paper free and shoved it across the table. “Make sure ye run into her again.”

Bishop held the piece of paper in his fist. He had no pockets to stash it in because he was still naked from the black flames. “Why is this important to you right now?”

“Us,” Valor corrected. “This is important to *us*, Hound.”

“But why?”

“I doona ken yet.” Valor walked around the desk and stared out the window that had been replaced not that long ago. “I just know in my gut she’s important to our pack.” He continued to stare into the night while Bishop got up and left the room. “Tilly,” Valor said aloud. “What the hell are ye, lass?”

And why, of all things, was Valor so damned drawn to her?

Chapter 6

After Bishop went to his room to clean up and rest, Valor went back to Hell. As he walked towards the main room, he thought about how this place had withstood the worst of times and showed no battle scars.

The walls were pristine, the floors shined. The sconces lining the walls burned bright and fierce. Fresh from above, food and drink were everywhere. New paintings replaced the ones damaged beyond repair during one of the most heinous battles the world may never know about.

Not long ago, there was a traitor in Hell. A Gate Keeper named Charlotte managed to get Hell to eat itself from the inside out. The walls of the prison cracked to the point where it started crumbling, *malanum* escaped at an alarming rate, possessions were everywhere, Hound packs disbanded, and child sacrifices were made. And at the peak of the fight, Lucifer, their maker and brother at arms, lost his shit – and his control – and damn near burned Hell to the ground to stop the evil from taking over. It was a bold move and a costly one for the Devil.

Valor felt a sting of shame for not checking on Lucifer more often lately. Val was too wrapped up in trying to find the rest of his pack to ask about how Lucifer was doing. Did that make him selfish or a responsible alpha?

Both probably.

Damn, but he could never shake the guilt he had for being part of making the mess worse.

Valor's hands ball into fists. He was the alpha of his pack and he let the enemy in right through their front door that terrible night. Scrubbing his face, Val tried to shove down the guilt he still bore for doing that. Sara, or... who he thought was Sara but turned out to be a doppelganger, came to his house with news from Lucifer and had singlehandedly primed and poisoned Bishop, then stuffed him full of *malanum* before taking off out of a window.

Valor hadn't been there for any of it. He'd left to go hunting and had unknowingly left his pack with their enemy that night.

Ye never change, he thought to himself.

Valor was in love with war. Fighting burned like passion in his veins. And being a Hell Hound meant he hunted every day and night. Fought a silent war against mankind's greatest enemy: *Malanum*.

He long thought he was made to be a warlord. That the Gods created him for battle. In his first life, as the Chieftain of his clan in Scotland, Valor reigned with a steely fist and a kind heart. His clan was strong, united, and undefeatable... until his brother came along and destroyed it all.

Now, he was a Hell Hound, and for the love of the Gods, it felt like history was starting to repeat itself. His clan was smaller now. It was a pack.

He hadn't been able to save his clan from the attack that burned his lands to ashes and he wasn't able to save the twins from whatever happened to them, either.

For all the weapons and skills he possessed, Valor was at a loss on how to fight something like this.

Arriving in Hell, he knocked before entering the great room. Once he heard Lucifer say, "Enter," Valor opened the door and shut it behind him. The Devil sat in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose while Sara, Kalen and Tanner stood in front of him.

Valor took a cautious step closer, "Do ye want me to come back, sire?"

"No. Come closer."

Sara spun around to give Valor a smile and his heart stopped. Gods, the lass was so beautiful. Valor's heart swelled with joy for her and her pack. She was pregnant. A miracle and a blessing that was never thought possible for any Hound.

He immediately went over to her first, unable to keep his smile contained. She was radiant, as all new mothers are. Her baby bump was still incredibly small, but already she held her hand over her belly, lovingly and protectively. Sara was going to be an amazing mother. And her Hounds were going to be the best fathers in the universe.

"Sara," Valor cupped her cheek, "how are ye, lass?"

"Tired. Hungry. Restless."

He chuckled. Leave it to her to answer with honesty. “Ye canna hunt in your condition, ye ken this.”

She rolled her eyes, much like she would when they were younger and married. Yup, Sara was once his wife.

“We brought her here hoping Luce could balance her a little, until she can hunt again after the baby comes.” Kalen, a.k.a. The Wolf, looked like a man who was caught in the midst of angel light. Every bit of him beamed with joy.

“The black flames are getting a work out lately,” Lucifer grumbled from his seat. “But I’m worried about putting her in it. I have no idea if it’s going to hurt the baby or not.”

Tanner and Kalen both growled protectively. Sara, however, put both hands over her belly. “Easy boys,” she commanded. “We’ve got to try.”

That made her Hounds growl even louder. “You can’t risk it, Beautiful.” Tanner crossed his arms over his chest and glowered.

“I know, but I can’t *not* hunt, either. I don’t know what to do. If I go feral-crazy, I could do more damage and won’t be able to control myself. It’s not like any of you are going to let me fight one of you like I did that day in the alley with Tanner at the grocery store. And I can’t very well be locked in a cage, either. At least if we try the fire, then maybe I can gauge when it’s too much and pull out. I’ll have control.”

Control was something Sara always needed in her life. Valor, though he knew it wasn’t his place, chimed in with, “I think she should try. It’s for the good of Sara, which means it’s ultimately good for the baby.”

Kalen barked in disagreement. Valor wasn’t about to argue with The Wolf. They’d been best friends for hundreds of years, and he knew the man well enough to never go head-to-head with a fighter like him. In this, they were cut from the same cloth.

“You’ll do as I say, when I say it,” Lucifer ended the argument. “We’re going to try the fires, but not at full flames. And I’m going in with her to monitor the baby as best I can.”

Her pack wasn’t the only ones protective of this unborn baby.

“Once Sara and I are out of the flames,” Lucifer continued, “I want to hear the progress reports regarding finding the twins.” Sara’s pack had been hunting for the twins, too, it wasn’t just Valor and Bishop looking for them.

When Lucifer stood and escorted Sara out of the room, Valor noticed the Devil moved slower than normal. Not sluggish, but stiff. Valor knew why, too. Lucifer did what he had to for the greater good of humankind and ended up knocking the balance between good and evil off kilter. Lucifer was suffering for it.

Fuck, they had so many goddamn issues right now.

After Lucifer shut the door, Kalen stiffened. Tanner grabbed his shoulder and squeezed, “Trust,” he whispered, “You know he won’t jeopardize our girl or our baby, Wolf. She’s in the best of hands right now.”

“I know,” Kalen sighed, “but I fucking hate that we can’t help her with this. It doesn’t seem fair that she’s always the one who suffers.”

Tanner lightly chuckled, “You sound like Eli.” He turned towards Valor, “Speaking of which, Eli said that he hasn’t had any luck in the territories you asked him to sniff out. And Jack’s been working with two Mediums based out of New Orleans, but they’re not having any luck either.”

“It’s like *déjà vu*,” Kalen frowned. “We’re running in circles with no leads worthy of a hunt and no answers in sight. The twins have vanished like Sara had when she’d gone missing.”

Valor frowned and nodded. “I ken it, but I’m not giving up. I’ll find my pack members even if all I come home with is a piece of bone.” He made the same vow when he helped Kalen look for Sara for over five years. Then, one day, she popped back into their lives and that pack was back on cloud nine.

If only it would be that simple this time too.

But Valor knew damn well miracles didn’t happen twice. Death was the only thing that would separate the twins from their pack and Valor wasn’t ready to accept that they might be dead somewhere. Fuck that. Besides, Lucifer would know if they died, right? Val rubbed the back of his neck, “I had a lead last night that turned out to be strangely unexpected.”

“What was it?”

“Chloe told me to go to The Blue Lizard.”

Tanner’s brow dipped down, “The concert place in Baltimore?”

“Mmm hmm, but I didna find a trace of the twins there. She seemed so sure of it though.”

“If it was another false lead, what made it strangely unexpected then?”

“There was a woman there,” Valor felt the corners of his mouth pull up and he hated that he felt a wee bit of happiness tickling his nerves just thinking about the beauty, Tilly. “She had an aura unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“And?” Kalen shrugged, unimpressed.

“I think she is *other*. I think she is something...” he didn’t even know how else to explain it. It didn’t even make sense that he would bring her up at a time like this. “Och, I’m a fool. I canna even understand what has me so intrigued. She and Bishop met earlier that night, and then I went back and I saw her too.”

Tanner and Kalen didn’t say a word, which irked the hell out of Valor.

“I canna explain it, but she has something about her that I couldna pull my attention away from.” That’s why Valor felt like she must be *other* – a term used by Hell Hounds to describe certain beings with magical abilities.

“I understand,” Tanner nodded. “You need to get laid.”

Valor felt a fury that was impossible to contain. He growled low in his throat, “It wasna like that, Hound. I’m telling ye she seemed...”

“Beautiful? Sexy? Mysterious?” Tanner could keep going all day and all his suggestions would have been correct.

“Did you follow her? Find out more about her?” Kalen asked, shutting up Tanner’s continuous string of words like luscious and desirable.

“I did. And I gave Bishop the address of her home. He’s going to find out more.”

“Well maybe it was just a coincidence and the two of you just happen to have the same taste in women,” Tanner said.

Maybe, maybe not. Valor and Bishop never had the same taste in anything other than weapons, but he couldn't deny that he was slightly attracted to her. Of course, he barely got a look at the lass, his focus had been more on her aura than anything else. Still, he couldn't get her off his mind. It was starting to annoy him now.

Tanner was probably right, Valor needed to get laid. He had better do it sooner rather than later because the last thing he needed was to end up like Bishop had earlier. Maiden, Mother, and Crone, his head hurt now.

The doors opened again. Kalen and Tanner rushed over to Sara, who was smiling and slightly shaky.

"You okay, Beautiful?"

"How are you, Darling?"

"I'm better," she smiled with relief. "It felt good. I think the baby might have liked it too. It felt like there was a guppy swimming in my belly."

Tanner placed his hand over her bump and she giggled, "I don't think you'll feel it, Sunshine Boy. She'll have to get bigger before that can happen."

"She?" Kalen rocked back on his heels.

"Well, I *think* it's a girl." Sara bit her bottom lip. "But I don't have anything to go off of other than my intuition."

Lucifer went back over to his chair and landed rather ungracefully into it. "I need to be alone," he announced. "Valor, I want Tanner or Jack to go with you when you get your next lead. I know this is hard for you, Hound, and I'm sorry I can't do more for your pack, but—"

"You need not give excuses, sire. I understand completely."
And more than most, Valor thought.

"I heard you speak of a woman," Lucifer said, "Remember, I have better hearing than you Hounds."

Valor cleared his throat.

"What's her name?"

"Tilly."

"You have nothing more than that?"

"Not yet."

Lucifer nodded. "Intuition is a powerful thing. I suggest you follow your gut with her. And don't think too hard on what intrigues you, Valor. I'm not saying she's going to be of use to you, but never discredit a female's worth." Lucifer's gaze sailed over to Sara for good measure. "Go home and rest, Darling. I'll see you soon."

They were dismissed.

Chapter 7

Tilly rolled out of bed, cursing all the way to the front door. She didn't need to look through her peephole to know who was knocking this early in the m—

Oh wait, it was two in the afternoon. Shit.

She opened the door, not bothering to put on pants, and growled at her sister when Vivian said, "Wake up, troll hair." Dressed in skinny jeans, a black shirt and red heels, Vivian practically bulldozed her way into the apartment. "Ohhh, or should I call you troll breath? Here," she shoved a coffee in Tilly's face and let the aroma of freshly brewed hallelujah-come-and-getcha-self-some wake her up.

Tilly snatched the cup and took a sip, sighing in pure bliss after she swallowed. You know what would make this better? That's right, a cannoli. Which, as it just so happens, Tilly had stashed in her fridge. They were to be her victory prize for when she successfully sang on stage last night. Now they could be her *You Blew It* consolation prize.

They sat on Tilly's futon and Vivian tucked a paper towel into her neckline to protect her black shirt from getting dusted with powdered sugar. God forbid the woman got messy.

"Are you ready for your appointment?"

Vivian took a sip of her latte, "I think so. But... I feel bad."

"Why?" Bite, chew, sip, swallow. Damn this was so good.

"Because you didn't cross off your number six on your bucket list last night, Tilly. I feel bad crossing off mine now."

"Don't you dare chicken out! I don't need both of us sulking with regrets, Viv. Besides, I'll get to my number six." She scowled when Vivian gave her a look and added, "Eventually."

"Well, do you want me to skip my six today too and we'll put it on the bottom of the bucket list together?"

"Nope. You're just one ahead of me." Tilly saw the look of concern on Vivian's face and she patted her knee. "It's fine. I swear I'll get to it. Even if it's the last thing I do."

"Not. Funny."

Tilly shrugged and ate the last bite of her cannoli. Then she sat back, crossed her legs, and purred at her coffee cup. "Hello darkness, my old friend."

Vivian took a little while to finish her food, then she sat in the same position as her sister. Only she was dressed and Tilly was in a big shirt and underwear, but whatever.

"What's that," Vivian nodded towards an old book on the coffee table. "Light reading?"

Another a dead end, Tilly thought. "Something like that." You see, they were cursed and... well... shit, let's not ruin breakfast/lunch right now by discussing it. "I better hop in the shower," Tilly smiled. "Unless you think I can go like this?"

"Fuck no," Vivian laughed. "Unless going pants-less will get us a discount at the tattoo shop, then I'll strip out of mine too."

They both started laughing and Tilly left to take a shower. When she came back out, her sister was cleaning the kitchen area. "You don't have to do that, you know."

"Well I doubt you'll hire a maid." Vivian squirted more cleaner onto the stove, "What the hell is this shit? It won't come off."

"Don't ask." She wouldn't have liked the answer.

Vivian crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at Tilly. "Why are you still doing this, Tilly?" They didn't speak for several minutes. "You're as hard-headed as mom was."

Tilly swallowed the anxiety that came with that tease. "And you're as skinny as dad was. We just can't win, can we?" Tilly hip-bumped her sister and tossed her empty coffee cup into the trash.

"I will never understand why you live like this. You're rich, in case you've forgotten, and you live like a...ugh!" Vivian waved her hands through the air all flustered.

"We have different ideas on what rich is, Viv." Besides, blowing her money on fine houses and expensive cars wasn't going to help her live. She needed answers or a goddamn miracle. Tilly loved her sister more than anything, but they lived very different lives.

They both grew up stupid rich. Unfortunately, all good lives came with a price. Tilly and Vivian were in line to pay up – just as their mother had, and their grandmother, and their great-grandmother, and so on and so on.

Tilly sat on her futon and grabbed her shoes. She glared at her latest attempt sitting on the table. She poured over that book for nearly two weeks. Nothing in it had been helpful. It was a total waste of a lot of fucking money and precious time.

Vivian started rearranging the glasses in the cupboard. Tilly watched her work, knowing there was no point in telling her to stop. Vivian was a perfectionist. A control freak. It was another battle they'd fought for a long time and Tilly never won, so she gave up.

The fact that Viv was in need of making everything perfect and beautiful made Tilly's heart ache. It was beyond a compulsion for her. It was a sign that things in Viv's life might not be going the way she wanted them to. Vivian was a smart woman. A talented one, too. She could have been a success on stage and traveled the world had she not let a man stand in her way. Tilly wasn't as foolish as her sister. She might not have all the same luxuries, but she did have her freedom. Vivian was a caged bird now.

"What's the matter, Viv? You only re-organize like this when something's wrong."

"Your place is a pig sty, that's what's wrong."

Bullshit. Tilly bit her lip and her eyes darted back to the book on the table. If she found a cure, Vivian would have longer and could do more with her life besides play Stepford wife. Now Tilly was good and pissed. She snatched the book and threw it against the wall.

"Watch it!" Vivian quickly grabbed the book and gently swiped the cover with the hem of her shirt, probably worried that the oils of her fingers might leave imperfect smudge marks on it.

Their father had been paranoid about appearances too.

"That looks priceless," Vivian said, "Where'd you get it?"

Tilly waved her off. It wasn't priceless, it cost her 2.7 million dollars to have Liam steal it. "It was in dad's old stuff," she lied.

Their father was a collector of all kinds of artifacts, Vivian would believe a lie like that.

Viv sighed and placed the book on the tiny coffee table, making sure it was perfectly aligned with the corner of the damned thing.

"Well, there's something you and I *both* got from dad then - his weird fascination with old shit. I just bought a first edition Alice's Adventures in Wonderland as a birthday gift for myself."

Tilly smirked because she knew her sister didn't truly have a love for old things. Viv collected because she was raised around antiques and she had trouble letting go of her father's ways. Not that Tilly would ever point that out to her. And Tilly didn't give a flying fuck about antiques or anything that had to do with her father. She just wanted to survive, which was why she stole ancient artifacts from wealthy collectors. Tilly was trying to outrun death the same way their mother had. Vivian however, was a cynic like their father, and never would believe there was an anvil hanging over her head. Ignorance was bliss, right?

"Can we go now? Your apartment depresses me."

Tilly tossed a pillow at her and laughed. "Spoiled little rich girl."

Vivian tossed the pillow back, "I can't deny it, so I won't try."

"How's Jimmy by the way?"

"James is wonderful, as always."

Vivian was newly married. Why? That was something Tilly often asked herself. It was like Vivian lived with one foot in reality, the other in her perfect little dream world. And Jimmy, as Tilly liked to call him because he didn't like it, wasn't good enough for Vivian. Oh sure he was smart and wealthy and spoiled her to pieces, but there was something off about him. A coldness Tilly was convinced only she could see. Vivian, on the other hand, was nothing but mush, bubble hearts and cooing noises when it came to that man.

As long as Jimmy treated Vivian well and kept her happy, then Tilly kept her opinions to herself. Life was too short to complain about every little negativity out there anyways.

"Come on, let's go shopping for a little while before your appointment," Tilly snatched her purse and opened the door for her sister.

"You hate shopping, Tilly."

"Yeah, but this is your day, not mine. Let's go."

They left the studio apartment and took the three flights of steps down to the main level, which was usually Tilly's only form of exercise. She frowned when she got to the bottom, "Now why couldn't I have slipped down the fucking steps today instead of yesterday?"

"How's your ass?"

“Still sore.” Tilly opened the main door and they stepped out onto the street and hung a left. “There’s a bookstore I want to go into down here. It’s right next to a jewelry shop I think you’re going to love.”

“Ohhh sparklies!” They hooked their arms together and strolled down the street. “So, wanna talk about that guy from last night?” Viv asked.

“Not really,” Tilly didn’t want to discuss Bishop.

“He was hot. You should have gotten his number.”

“Hey, we should try The Golden Ox for lunch! That place is delish.” Food diversions always worked when Tilly wanted to change the subject with Vivian.

“Oh hell yeah. I’m totally getting the brisket. Remember when dad used to bring us there after dance class when we were kids?”

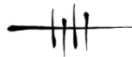
“Mmm hmmm,” Tilly’s heart clenched a little thinking about their father. “Hey, wanna grab a donut?”

“We just ate a cannoli!”

“So?”

“Good point.”

See? Food diversions did the trick every time.



It took Tilly all of five seconds after she walked into the tattoo shop to decide she was going to put one more thing on her “Fuck it” list.

“Fuck it, I’m getting one too.”

Vivian squealed with glee.

“You got an appointment, hun?” The tattoo artist had pink hair, two full-sleeves, and a nose piercing. She reminded Tilly of Bishop for a second. He had a similar piercing in his nose. And... well, not that she got a good look at him in that leather jacket, but she could see at least one hand was inked and it looked like the artwork stretched up his forearm at the very least.

Would she ever see him again? Probably not, damnit.

“No, I don’t have an appointment. Can I make one? It doesn’t have to be today, if no one’s available.” Tilly knew the likelihood of getting in today would be nearly impossible without an appointment. There was a three-year waitlist for several artists here. “The name’s Tilly, errr, Matilda Jane Sinclair.”

The woman looked up with bright eyes, probably recognizing the name. “Let me see if there’s anyone free. Do you care who does you?”

“Nope, you’re all amazing.” If they worked here, then they earned their station with serious skill and respect.

The woman beamed, “Let me see if Syd can do you. He’s in today.”

Yup, Tilly thought, this woman knew who they were.

Syd was the owner and only worked in the shop one day out of the month because the rest of his time was spent travelling to different areas of the country tattooing nipples on women who had breast reconstruction. Years ago, Syd and Tilly’s father met in a hospital waiting room and hit it off immediately.

“Matilda Jane! Well I’ll be goddamned. How you doin’ hun?”

They hugged and it was all Tilly could do to tame her smile down. Syd looked like the poster child for Hell’s Angels and had more piercings and ink than he had skin for. At six foot seven and nearly three hundred fifty pounds of muscle, most folks probably ran the other direction when they saw him coming, but not Tilly. She loved him to pieces. Besides, you can’t judge a book by its cover. Syd was a total teddy bear.

“Vivian’s getting her first tattoo,” Tilly winked.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. Come on back, girls.” They followed Syd into a small room. “I’ll do you both, how ‘bout that?”

“Do you have time?” Tilly didn’t want to hold him up if he had somewhere else to go.

“I’ll always have time for you,” he patted the table, “Hop on up, V, and tell me what you want.”

“I want a little anchor with the words *I refuse to sink* below my collarbone. Here,” she pulled a slip of paper out of her clutch, “I have this so you can get the exact measurements and work from there.”

Syd nodded, "And what about you, Tilly?"

She pursed her lips and thought of something on the fly. "I want *Death* written in swirly lettering with a pair of kissy lips. On my ass, please."

Syd's head tilted back and he laughed. "Death can kiss your ass, is that right?"

"You got it."

He shook his head and continued to chuckle. "Alright then, let's get this party started."

Vivian went first, Tilly second. Two hours later, they left the tattoo parlor and were heading home. Her sister had her badass swagger going on. No one would have guessed she cried through half her session and they had to stop three times so she could calm the hell down. Number six on Vivian's bucket list was officially crossed off. Woot! Woot!

"I can't believe you didn't cry with yours," Vivian said. "It was your ass, it had to hurt."

It really didn't. Besides, Tilly didn't mind a little pain when it also brought some pleasure. Getting a tattoo was like entering a lovely Zen zone for her. Maybe she could get another one soon, if she lived long enough to make an appointment.

They made it all the way to the block where Tilly's apartment was. "You coming up for a movie? We can watch *The Lost Boys*, order Chinese food, and pretend we're eating worms and maggots."

Vivian laughed, "How can I refuse?"

"You want to spend the night?"

"No, I can't. I have to get home. James has big plans tomorrow for my birthday."

Tilly frowned, but she understood. Really. Jimmy wanted to do something special for his wife on her birthday, which was a wonderful thing. Tilly shouldn't feel sad or jealous about that. So, she swallowed the loneliness that made her feel hollow inside and slapped on a big cheesy smile, "I'm getting a double batch of eggrolls."

Food diversions, gotta love them.

Chapter 8

Bishop rolled out of his bed with a grunt. Those black flames in Hell definitely unfucked his ass. That was the first night's sleep he'd had in a while. Scrubbing his face with both hands, Bishop leaned in and looked into his mirror.

Fuuuuck, he looked like Hell. Licking his dry lips, he blinked slowly and tried to remember what happened in the past couple of days. Let's see, besides becoming excruciatingly unbalanced, he'd scoured the city of Baltimore looking for the twins. Or at least sniff out a clue as to where they might be. He went to The Blue Lizard because he was told that was the best place to look for them. He found nothing. Not true. He found something, it just wasn't what he was looking for.

Tilly.

Bishop's body grew rock hard just thinking her name.

Annnnd then his stomach roiled because he remembered what Valor said to him just before he stumbled up the stairs and hit the bed. Bishop had almost taken her home. He almost took that beautiful creature home and fucked her to the point where she wouldn't have been able to walk for weeks. He could have hurt her. He could have—

No, he wouldn't have gone so far as to rape her. No matter what condition Bishop was in, he still had some sanity left. He wouldn't have forced himself on her. Wait... would he have? Fuck, the threat was there, lingering in the back of his mind. No, he wouldn't have... unless he went over the deep end and lost all control.

Shit, Valor was right. Bishop could have been a threat to Tilly the other night. Whether he would have stayed strong or not didn't matter.

"Christ on a cracker," he leaned against his dresser and scrubbed his face again. "That was too fucking close. Never again. Never again am I going to let myself get that fucking bad."

He'd made that promise before though, hadn't he?

Bishop looked around for a pair of jeans to wear. Everything he owned was scattered all over the floor in piles of dirty, dirtier, and dirtiest. He needed to do laundry. He needed to get his shit together. He needed a goddamn drink.

Scooping up as many clothes as he could, Bishop marched down the hall to the laundry room and started a load of darks. All he ever wore was dark clothes because it hid the stains from the sticky substance *malanum* bled.

Once he got the washer running, Bishop headed back into his room to clean up. He couldn't wait to scrub six layers of skin off and be sanitized with scorching hot water. With the door kept ajar – because he couldn't stand to be shut in – Bishop started the shower.

Precisely one hour later, he was clean, shaven, and ready to rock and roll. He switched the clothes and went back into his bedroom to wait. He had about an hour before the clothes would be dry. What could he do to kill some time? Get something to eat. Food was fuel.

With a towel wrapped around his waist, the Hound padded barefoot down to the kitchen. Valor was in his office with the door closed, so Bishop kept right on walking. He looked around the kitchen like he was lost. Marching over to the fridge, he opened the door and peered inside.

Damnit. There was nothing in here he wanted to eat. Annoyed, he grabbed an apple and bit down. It was something in his stomach and he didn't have to cook it, which was good enough for now. Next, he snagged a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. Chugging, he went for two more refills then put his glass in the sink and snatched a package of flaxseed crackers from the cupboard. Seriously? Flaxseed? Who the fuck buys this shit?

His keen Hell Hound hearing let him know that the buzzer just went off on the dryer. He ran upstairs and quickly got dressed. The clothes were still warm. Ahhh, small delights. Bishop went back into his room to grab some blades, a gun, and a few more items. While stuffing his pockets, he looked down at the folded piece of paper on his nightstand.

Tilly's address.

His heart lost its normal rhythm for a second just thinking about going to her house. Wait, was he going to go there? Valor said to get to know her better, but there was something super creepy and fucked up about knocking on a woman's door like that. He'd just have to make himself bump into her on the street somehow.

Ugh, he was a creeper no matter what.

Stuffing on his boots and snatching his keys from the dresser, Bishop's excitement kicked up a notch. He had to move, because sitting still wasn't an option. Regaining some balance meant he was firing on all pistons like the wild Hell Hound he was born to be. Bishop rushed down the steps and knocked on Valor's office door before peeking his head in, "I'm heading out."

Valor sat behind his desk, his head buried in his hands. He didn't even bother to look up, "Alright."

Bishop quietly closed the door and left his Alpha alone. The two of them were so close with some things, and incredibly distant with others. He loved Valor, loved his pack, loved his life... but after what transpired when Bishop was possessed, things fell apart quickly.

They needed to find Baz and D. The sooner their pack was back together, the sooner they could put the past behind them. Valor *looked* like total shit. Bishop *felt* like total shit for it.

He opened the front door and froze when his alpha called out to him. Val stepped out of his office. Shit, he looked fucking terrible. His dark red hair was a mess, like he'd been running his hands through it over and over. "I'm going hunting," Valor announced.

"Me too."

Neither of them could sit still for long.

Valor swiped a hand across his mouth and sighed, "Keep your cell on ye and make sure it's charged. Call if ye need me, alright?"

"Yes, Alpha."

"Hey," Val walked over and put his hand on Bishop's shoulder, "We'll find them. We'll not give up until we do. But we canna unravel in the process."

Bishop nodded once and turned to leave. He hopped into his truck and took off down the road to head into the city. Noise would be good. People. Places. Lots of hustle and bustle. He cranked up the volume on his radio and wound down his windows so the cool air would soothe his hot skin.

Too bad nothing would soothe his aching heart.



Tilly threw a pity party for herself. She sat on the roof of her building, wine in hand, and a hunk of cheese in the other. Her little portable speaker kept her company with songs from all her favorite bands. She'd called Vivian earlier to wish her a happy birthday and they'd been texting back and forth all day. It was almost like they were spending the day together, but not really.

It was okay. This gap between them was necessary. In the back of Tilly's head, some little morbid voice reminded her that to have attachments was a no, no. She should really start making the moves to disconnect anyway. They say women have biological clocks that tick. Tilly didn't have that. As a matter of fact, Tilly would never have children, she made sure of it by having her tubes tied when she was twenty-two. But Tilly had a clock of another kind ticking in her. A time bomb.

She took a long sip of her wine. This was a good vintage, it was from her father's collection. After he died, Tilly and Vivian split up the properties, sold most of the assets including the boats, the home in Venice, the chalet in Aspen, and the condo in Palm Springs. The cars, artwork, and jewels went too. The last house up for sale was the one in Annapolis. It was their childhood home, which was why they'd saved it for last. All they kept were a couple pieces of jewelry, a storage room full of antiques to sell later, and the wine.

No one tosses wine on Tilly's watch.

So now, here she was, sitting back with the cold evening breeze blowing her hair around her face. She didn't even have a chair, not that she could sit very well anyway with her ass as sore as it was. From the tattoo to the bruises, she was a hot mess back there.

No matter, a few more glasses of this red wine and she wouldn't feel a damned thing. She took another sip. Fuck this was good. She took two more. Mmmm.

Tilly checked her emails on her phone. There was an alert that one of her favorite bands was playing at The Blue Lizard next month. Shit, she took another swig. "I can't believe I failed my number six." Tilly talked to herself all the time. Answered herself, too. "You're such an asshole. Why didn't you just go for it? You already looked like an idiot for falling, you couldn't have looked any worse on stage."

She walked around the roof, pacing in a circle. She tossed her phone onto her blanket and swayed to the music playing on her little speaker. It was a beautifully sad slow song. Tilly's limbs stretched and bent, she was all straight lines and easy movements – just like how she'd been taught long ago. When the song ended, she walked over to the edge of the roof and peered down.

She could jump. She could end it all right now and fucking jump. Tilly closed her eyes and imagined it. She would turn around, face the sky, and fall back with her middle fingers up for whoever had cursed her and her family.

A gust of wind blew and she nearly lost her balance. With a yip, she rocked forward and stumbled back onto the roof. Her heart slammed into her chest and she half-cried, half-laughed.

Then she started to ugly cry.

Stupid wine, lowering her inhibitions and making her a big baby. Tilly shook off her sadness and rounded her shoulders. She wasn't going to die yet. Not until her bucket list was complete, at least.

She closed her eyes and imagined being on stage. She imagined the crowds watching her, sipping their drinks from plastic cups and singing along with her. Then she imagined Bishop standing in the middle of the crowd, his eyes burning with a heat so bright they glowed.

Joy bubbled up and out of Tilly with the image. She tilted her head back and howled. Then she laughed and howled even louder. Damn did that feel good. She did it a third time, even louder, then rocked back laughing and hit her head on the rooftop.

As she lay there cracking up at herself, the hair on the back of her neck stood on end...

A howl answered her.

What the fuck? Tilly slowly turned towards her bottle of wine and eyed it suspiciously. That's it, she's cut off. Once you start hearing things, it's time to quit.

Another howl echoed in the night. This one was louder... closer... A shiver ran down her body and she got goosebumps. Carefully, Tilly crawled to the ledge of the rooftop again. There weren't wolves in Baltimore, right? That would be crazy. But, it was definitely an animal that responded to her. Holy fucking shit, what the hell was in that wine?

Tilly leaned over the ledge and peered down.

Her heart slammed into her chest again. "No fucking way." The air rushed out of her and she scrambled back.

Bishop was here.

Chapter 9

What's the fastest way to sex Bishop up? Howl. Howl like you own the motherfucking moon.

He hadn't planned to go to her house. Hand-to-God, he had no idea how he even got there. Bishop went into the city with the intention of hunting. Next thing he knew, he was parking on a side street and walking towards the address written on the piece of paper he clutched in his hand.

He tried to talk himself out of it. Tried to convince his body to stop and head in the opposite direction.

Then she howled. It was so glorious it could make the Angels weep.

At first he thought it was his overactive imagination. Then it happened again and his pace quickened down the street towards that beautiful sound. The third one had him so fired up he automatically responded with a howl of his own.

When he reached her building, Bishop looked up and saw the crown of her strawberry blonde hair peeking over the ledge of the roof. For an instant he freaked out, scared she might fall. That fear was dashed away once she disappeared from sight again.

Bishop didn't bother going into the building and taking the fire escape to get to her. Fuck that. He used his Hell Hound powers and scaled the side of the building, reaching the rooftop in record time. He stood behind Tilly and smiled. His dick was rock hard. He growled low in his throat, an automatic response when he saw something he liked.

Tilly turned her head. Their gazes locked. Her breath hitched and he growled again.

"How did you get up here?"

"Climbed. You?"

"I..." she shook her head like she was trying to clear it. "I'm drunk. I'm so drunk right now I've gone and hallucinated the guy at The Blue Lizard. Jesus, Tilly, you really are a piece of work. You are soooo cut off."

Bishop's eyebrow arched as he watched her take the wine bottle and dump the rest out. There wasn't much left, which meant she had nearly a whole bottle in her system at the moment. For a Hound that was nothing, but for a human, it could mean she was buzzed or smashed. He'd find out in a moment which category she was in.

Bishop took a step closer. Then another.

"Holy crap. You're actually coming closer. And you're..." her eyes widened. "*Gorgeous*. Well done Tilly, your imagination is seriously on point tonight."

He chuckled at how she talked to herself. He did the same thing all the time. "So I'm a hallucination, huh?"

"A damn fine drunken fantasy, that's what you are buddy," Tilly grabbed her glass, which still had a little bit of wine left in it, and she toasted him before downing the last drop.

He took another step closer.

"You're not wearing what you had on the other night though. I must be picking you out new outfits. The shirt suits you."

Bishop grinned. The shirt was a run of the mill t-shirt. Black, of course.

Tilly took another sip of her drink and frowned because her glass was empty. "Fuck. I'm all out. How am I gonna keep this fantasy going without the wine? Why the hell did I waste what was left! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!"

Bishop closed the gap between them. "How about you let me take care of your fantasies?" He wrapped his arm around her waist and held the nape of her neck, massaging it.

"Oh... My.... God." Tilly giggled, "I am sooo good at this."

"Bet I can make it better," Bishop slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her senseless before she could say another word.

Satan's beasts, this woman tasted like sex and sin and cabernet sauvignon. With a growl, Bishop braced his body and deepened the kiss as he held her tighter. His tongue swept inside her mouth, tasting her, drinking her in. His entire soul ignited into a five-alarm blaze. When she moaned against him and met his kiss with fervor, it rocked him to the core.

Bishop spun her around, marching the two of them towards the fire escape door while he kept the kiss going. She went right along with him, happily. Tilly broke away from him long enough to say, "I'm on the top floor," before crushing her mouth to his again. Then she pulled away again to say, "I don't even know why I just told you that, you're not even real. Fuck, Tilly, shut up!" she went whole hog and kissed him harder.

He knew which apartment was hers, but he'd play innocent to get her there easily. Bishop guided her inside. With her lips still locked on his, Tilly slammed her back into her apartment door and fumbled with the doorknob. "It's fucking locked!"

He took a step away and debated on smashing the door down. That wouldn't do, though. He needed to behave if he wanted to get in.

"Hang on!" Tilly slithered out of his hold and tumbled forward, half-drunk, half-giggling, and ran back towards the exit door again. With a loud *squeak* it opened, then slammed shut. Standing in the hallway, Bishop's heartrate kicked up a notch. Breathing calmly, he stood in front of her apartment door, his body rigid, hands fisted, and waited. There was a *shick, click, shnuck*, and her door flew open. "You're still here!" Her smile was gigantic and her cheeks were flushed.

Bishop walked in and surveyed her space.

It was so... *small*. She lived in a studio apartment and there wasn't much to it at all. A bed, a futon for a couch, a tiny kitchenette, a small flat screen hung on the wall and there was a bathroom. She lived in a goddamn shoe box.

The sound of the door shutting behind him caused Bishop's body to stiffen again. He quickly went over to a window, fumbled with the lock, and opened it.

He needed an escape. He couldn't be closed in anywhere. When he drove, the window was down, when he slept, the door was open at the very least. Sometimes he just slept outside.

"Bishop?" He turned at the sound of his name on her tongue. She wasn't the hot hellcat she'd been just moments ago, now she looked like a scared kitten. "You're... this is real, isn't it? I'm not drunk, am I?" She lost some of the color in her cheeks.

“I’m real. And I’m here.” He slowly moved towards her, “but you’re probably still a little drunk. How much wine did you have?”

She bit her lip and her eyebrows knit together. “Not enough to make me reckless.”

He laughed.

“Holy hell,” she stepped closer to him and pressed her hand on his chest, “You’re really fucking here. Annd I just can’t stop my mouth from blurting out everything I’m thinking.”

Bishop cocked his head to the side and tugged the lapels of his jacket, “You mind if I take this off?”

“Uh, no?”

He shrugged out of his leather coat, carefully placing it on the futon.

“Why are you here?”

“You howled, didn’t you?” It was the only answer he could give that didn’t make him sound like a creeper, because saying *Well, my alpha has a crazy weird feeling about you and asked me to tail you for a while, so he gave me your address*, really wasn’t going to score him brownie points. Besides, she *did* howl. And whether he knew where she lived or not, if he was within earshot of her howl, he’d have come running regardless.

Tilly swiped under her eyes, instantly fixing her smudged mascara. Jesus, her eyes were incredible. Green as clover and sparkling bright. Bishop felt like he could stare into them for days... weeks... forever.

Yeahhh. No. What the fuck. Bishop cleared his throat. “I was heading out to see a friend and heard a lovely howl.” He smiled when her cheeks turned red. “Imagine my surprise when I look up and see you staring down at me. I thought you saw me, recognized me from the other night and that’s why you did it.” Not a lie. Just not exactly the truth. He got a little closer to her, “You did howl, right, Matilda Jane?”

“Tilly,” she whispered, “Just... Tilly. And yeah, I... I howled.”

The vibes in the apartment shifted a little. Bishop couldn't quite put his finger on why. Suddenly, they were staring at each other with a lot of unexpected vulnerability. She was hurting, he could see it. Not that he had any right to pry into her personal business, but he wanted to know what was wrong. That's twice now, that they'd met and she wasn't her happiest.

"Howl again, Sweetness."

She arched her brow and shook her head.

"Come on. Let me hear it," he gave her a crooked grin. "Loud and proud, Tilly." For good measure, he tilted his head back and let a melodious howl rise from his throat.

"You sound so much like an animal, it's unreal."

"Howl with me, Sweetness." He didn't want words right now. He didn't want anything but the feel of his soul shaking when he got her to howl again. "Come on, Tilly, don't leave me hanging."

"This is silly," she fussed nervously.

"Aw come on. Tell me it didn't feel good to let your inhibitions down and release a call to the wild."

Tilly fidgeted but wouldn't howl.

"Please?" Bishop howled again, but kept his gaze locked on hers. He cupped his ear, letting her know he couldn't hear her yet, and continued to howl in one long breath. Like answering a pack call, she inhaled a lungful of air and howled right along with him. He smiled as the last of his breath escaped in a chuckle and she was the only one still howling. "Fuck that sound makes me feel good, woman."

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "I can't believe I just did that. I have no idea why I did that. This is crazy."

"This is nice," Bishop smiled, coaxing her to loosen up by putting his arm around her waist.

One thing about Bishop: he wasn't shy. The Hound always went for what he wanted and never hesitated. And right now, he wanted to touch her. Feel her body. "I'm glad I was in the right place at the right time. You've just made my night a helluva lot more enjoyable, Tilly."

She put her hand on his arm, but didn't push him away. "I can't stop thinking about you." He beamed a big, fat smile and she shook her head, "Oh my god, I can't stop blurting. This is embarrassing."

"No. It's honest. I like that." Bishop tilted her chin so she'd lock eyes with him again. "What's got you so sad, Tilly?"

"I'm not sad."

"Liar," he kept his tone playful. "Keep it honest with me, Sweetness. I can see you're sad. Why?"

Again, that hidden sadness peeked out of her stunning gaze, "I don't want to be alone tonight."

"Okay," he said cautiously.

"Stay with me? I know I don't know you, but..." she stepped back from him, "I... crap, I have no clue why I'm such a..." she slumped with her next exhale and recollected her thoughts. "I'm having a shit night."

"What happened?"

She stared at him for a moment, like she was actually debating on pouring her heart out to him. He watched her think it through, it made him tense with anticipation. If something was wrong, maybe he could fix it. That's the second thing about Bishop: He deflected a lot. When he was too broke to function and didn't want to deal with his issues, he focused on someone else's troubles instead.

"So... you were really just walking by my house, the same time I howled?"

"Yyyup." Her apartment smelled like female and cleaning supplies. Bishop's gaze wandered away from hers for a moment and he saw a book sitting on the edge of a tiny coffee table. What the—

"Do you believe in synchronicity, Bishop?"

He didn't say a word and continued to stare at the book.

"It's the simultaneous occurrence of events that appear significantly related but have no obvious pivotal connection."

Uhhhh whoa, hey there Miss Dictionary. "You mean like kismet?" he asked cautiously.

"Perhaps," Tilly eyed the window he'd opened a few minutes ago. She quickly went over and slammed the thing shut.

Bishop's panic rocketed and he tore his gaze away from the book. "No!" he caught himself and calmly said, "Please leave it open."

"I can't," she said, locking it then checking to make sure it was secure.

"Why not?"

Tilly turned around and deadpanned him, "Because he might get in."

"Who?" Bishop's protective instincts kicked into high gear. "Who might get in? And through your motherfucking window, no less?"

Tilly shook her head and wouldn't answer.

Chapter 10

Sooooo, this was awkward. Tilly fiddled with the hem of her shirt and stared at Bishop. All the buzz she had an hour ago was gone now. And as far as telling this guy about her personal issues, she just wasn't going to do it. End of story. No matter how much something inside her said to spill all her beans to this random dude, she wasn't going to.

"Who are you so afraid of, Tilly?"

"Who says I'm afraid?"

Bishop cocked his head to the side, studying her. His gaze raked slowly down her body. It made her feel... not all that great actually. It was like he could see straight through her. Like he knew the difference between her lies and truths just by watching her body language.

Maybe he could. Or maybe she was dreaming it up because she was so nervous. Or maybe she'd gone insane. Sooo many possibilities here.

"Open the window, Tilly." Bishop's voice was dead calm. Deep. Sexy as fuck. "Nothing is going to happen to you with me here. Nothing is going to come through that window. I swear."

"You don't know what you're dealing with." She shook her head, "I mean what *I'm* dealing with." Shit she was hot. Sweat bloomed down her back and across her chest. At this rate, her shitty evening was going to get so much worse because Bishop was going to leave and never return – especially if she kept up this tortured, dramatic, secret keeping bullshit.

Maybe she should just say something to him? Nope. Nuh-uh. That would scare him away too fast and she really, really wanted him to stay.

You ever see something you just had to have? Even just once, for a little bit? Tilly's experienced that longing several times in her life. Once, with a dress that cost just over ten grand, another was with a steak at a restaurant downtown, and now it was happening again with Bishop.

She was standing smack dab in the garden and Tilly just wanted a bite of the fruit. Just a nibble or even a lick.

“I need that window open, Sweetness, or I can’t stay.”

Tilly stiffened. What the hell? She felt like she was just sucker punched in the gut. Bishop calmly walked over to the futon and grabbed his coat. He wasn’t bluffing, apparently. Shit! Tilly took a step forward, her hand raised to stop him from leaving. “Please don’t go.”

“I need an escape, Matilda Jane.” There was no anger or frustration in his voice. He just said it like you would “I need cream for my coffee.”

“Why? I don’t understand the big deal here.”

“I’m extremely claustrophobic. I can’t handle being in a small space without an obvious escape.”

“So the window is enough? If the place was on fire, you wouldn’t be able to jump out of the window, Bishop.”

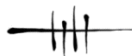
“Oh Sweetness,” he swept a tatted hand through his hair and glared at her, “you don’t know me well enough to make an assumption like that.”

“I’m too high up, you’d die if you jumped.”

“Then you’re too high up for someone to scale the side of this building and climb in through that window.”

She huffed. Tilly wasn’t going to win this argument without spilling a shit-ton of secrets. “Fine,” she bristled and marched back over to the window, unlatched the two locks, and flung the sucker wide open. A cold breeze blew in and whipped her hair around. “Better?”

Bishop came up behind her and pushed the window down so that it was only open about an inch. “I only need it a little bit open,” he whispered, then he took her mouth with his and the argument was gone with the wind.



Bishop's brain fired off in a series of questions and debates he refused to voice. He made his mouth busy by kissing the hell out of Tilly so he wouldn't start prying into her business. Maybe Valor was right to think that Tilly was *other*.

For the life of him though, Bishop didn't have a clue what else she could be besides a fine looking woman with hair like spun rose gold and lips that tasted like cherry wine. That book over on her little table, however, raised a red flag. It looked old as fuck. She was also scared someone was after her. Someone who could potentially climb in through a window with no ledge.

A ghost perhaps? Or a Hell Hound?

The idea of another Hound entering her space made him feel possessive. Bishop squeezed her tighter as they kissed because of it. And he meant what he said about keeping her safe. He would absolutely protect her. If something scaled these walls and slid into her house while he was here, Bishop was all types of prepared for that fight. Armed to the teeth, the Hell Hound never left his house without a small arsenal of weapons, carefully stashed and concealed on his person. So let something just try to slither through her window. Bishop was so fucking ready for them.

Tilly grabbed him by the back of the head and buried her fingers in his hair, scraping his scalp with her nails. It made him ten kinds of sexed up and ready to take this to the next level, so he grabbed her ass. Jesus, fuck, she had a great ass.

She let out with a whimper and jerked away.

He released his tight hold on her immediately. "What? What did I do?"

"My ass," she stammered. "I... oh god, this is so fucking embarrassing, my ass is all bruised from when I fell the other night. Your hand was on the bruise."

Well now he felt terrible. "Shit, I'm so sorry." Bishop grabbed her hand and casually brought her back into his space, "Well how about I stay to the right side of your ass then?"

"You can't touch that either," she half-sighed, half-chuckled. Burying her face in her hands to hide her shame, she mumbled, "I got a tattoo yesterday. It's still really tender."

Bishop rocked back on his heels, his smile going wide across his face. “You got your ass tattooed?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I see?”

Tilly giggled so hard she snorted. Quick as a flash, she cupped her mouth with both hands and groaned with embarrassment. “Oh my god. This is the worst fucking night ever. I have seriously been one embarrassment after another.”

Bishop continued chuckling and tried to pry her hands away from her face. “I like hearing you laugh.”

“I just snorted like a pig.”

“You happy snorted. That makes all the difference.”

Annnnd damned if it didn’t happen a second time when she started laughing again. “God Damn it!”

Now they were both cracking up and Bishop slid a hand down her side. “Come on, let me see the tattoo, Tilly.”

“No way. It’s on my *ass!*”

“Show me yours and I’ll show you mine.”

“Your ass or your tats?”

“Whichever you want. Both?”

Tilly’s eyes sparkled as she considered his bargain. “Fuck it,” she rolled her shoulders back and grinned. “You first, Hound Dog. Let me see what you got.”

Bishop stood back and peeled his shirt off nice and slow for her viewing pleasure. She was already staring at his full sleeve given that he was in a black t-shirt, but the piece she was really going to like – he hoped – was on another body part of his. Knowing damn well she was taking in all the views, Bishop rotated around and showed her the tattoo on his back. It was the grim reaper standing between two dark, dead trees with four crows flying above him. It said, “Find what you’d die for and live for it.”

“Holy shit,” she whispered. “That’s gorgeous.”

Fuck right it was. It was his favorite ink on his body and had the most meaning to him. “Alright, Sweetness, bare it and share it.”

“A deal’s a deal.” She pulled down her yoga pants and displayed the taped up gauze that covered her new ink. She carefully peeled it back and Bishop sucked in a breath when she revealed what was underneath.

The word DEATH was written in a swirly script and there was a pair of kissy lips under it.

Holy. Mother. Of. God. Bishop cracked a laugh so loud it startled her. He actually had to hold his gut as he bent over laughing. “That’s the greatest thing I’ve ever fucking seen.”

She winced and put the bandage back on. “Glad you like it.”

“So Death can kiss your sweet ass, huh?”

“You got it,” she pulled her pants back up and grinned. “Most people would probably think that’s stupid.”

“I’m not most people,” he wiped a tear from his eye and tried to control his laughing. Sweet baby Jesus, this woman was amazing. Her sense of humor was a thing of beauty. As was her laugh, her smile, her eyes and everything else he could see.

Tilly tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and waved over at the kitchenette. “You thirsty? I have,” she thought about it for a second, “water, wine, and coffee.”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having.” He didn’t want her to go through the trouble of making something special for him.

“Coffee?”

“Sounds amazing.” She could serve him swamp mud and he’d drink it. Bishop wasn’t picky, and knew better than to turn down something offered to him by a female as spectacular as Tilly.

He needed to simmer down. Back the fuck up. Be a little less eager. He felt like a puppy with all the tail-wagging he was doing tonight. But... well, hell, she just brought out a happier, easy going side of Bishop. Being around her lifted his spirits and after all he’d been through lately, a little break in his stormy clouds felt really fucking nice.

“Want anything in it?”

“Nope, just black.” While she made coffee in a little French Press, Bishop tried to keep himself occupied. He paced a little and looked around her place, trying to figure her out. Tilly didn’t have much in her apartment, just the basics. His gaze darted over to the opened window a few times just to keep his eyes on it. The coast was clear, and it better stay that way. “You live alone?”

“Yup.”

“How many apartments are in this building?” He wanted to know who lived around her so he could make sure she was safe.

“Undecided, actually. The other apartments still need to be renovated.” Tilly handed him a cup of Joe. “Here ya go, sorry if it’s a little strong.”

“Strong’s good,” It smelled divine. “Thanks,” he took a sip and moaned. Rich, decadent, and *really* strong. Fuck, it was good.

“Ummm, wanna sit?”

“Sure.” He strolled over to her little futon and sat down. He was big enough to take up most of the seat and she took up what was left. They sat in silence for several minutes. Sip, sip, ahh. Sip, sip, ahhh.

Again, Bishop eyed the book on the table. Without permission, he put his cup down and grabbed the book, inspecting it.

Holy. Shit.

Just as he was about to ask her where the hell she got the priceless artifact, Tilly stood up and dropped her coffee mug onto the table. It fell over and made a mess. She stared at the window, her eyes peeling wide, her chest rising as she started to hyperventilate.

Bishop got up, his hand immediately going towards the blade he had tucked into the small of his back. “What is it?”

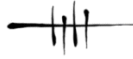
“You... You need to go.” Tilly didn’t waste time with a repeat. Flustered and scared, she grabbed his coat and shoved it into his hands. “Go. Now. Hurry!”

“Wait, what the fuck!” Bishop spun away when she tried to push him towards the door. “Tilly, what’s the matter with you?”

“You have to go!” she screamed while shoving his ass towards the door.

Did he fight her about it or go without a fuss? Bishop crossed the threshold and spun around to talk to her again. Her face was pale, eyes watery and wide. What the fuck was going on?

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. Just when he was about to say something, she slammed the door in his goddamn face.



Tilly felt the tendrils of magic slither through her body. Like a basket of cobras someone kicked and disturbed, the magic stirred and coiled, ready to strike. Tilly had mere seconds before she was going to sail into a full-blown episode of what she called, *curses and consequences*.

Sucky timing, that.

In her panic to prepare for the worst, Tilly had shoved Bishop out of her apartment. The last thing she wanted was to freak him out when she went into severe convulsions. And there was no way she could explain what the hell was happening to her. Telling a hot guy you just met that you dabbled in dark magic could really put a kink in a relationship. So did admitting you were cursed.

After booting Bishop out, she slammed the door and leaned against it. Moving fast, Tilly dropped to her knees and crawled towards her small closet. Thank fuck for small studio apartments. If this had happened in the house she grew up in, she might have not made it to safety in time.

Tilly wrenched the closet door open and crawled inside. The floor was clear just for this purpose. Locking it with a deadbolt, her vision wavered and then all hell broke loose.

Her body felt like it was being ripped to shreds from the inside out. She curled onto her side, shaking violently, and barely got the wooden spoon into her mouth in time. She cried out, her body spasming as the after effects of the black magic she tried the other night worked its way out of her system.

She pissed her pants. She bled from the nose. She lost her hearing.

Overall, it wasn't too bad. She'd definitely been through way worse, which was why she installed the lock on the inside of her closet.

Tilly laid on the floor of her tiny closet, alone, in pain, and cursed the universe a thousand times in her head until she eventually passed out.

Chapter 11

Valor aimlessly drove around the city. He was so tired and fed up with life he could scream. His cell phone rang and even the ringtone pissed him off, "Yeah?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Chloe," Valor's voice was laced with venom, "I'm trying to understand this, but I canna."

"I'm so sorry, Val. I'm trying. I am."

Then why did it feel like she was playing with him? Chloe came highly recommended and he normally would take everything she said with a wee grain of salt, but lately her calls were nothing more than false alarms and a waste of time. His hopes had been raised and shot down so often, Valor was beginning to build walls around his heart.

Chloe, a psychic, was his best shot at finding the twins. No one else had come close to even sensing them, but this woman seemed to catch a whisper from her "other sources" every now and then. Lately, her calls became more frequent, which only raised Valor's hopes higher, but every time he went where she instructed, he was left alone and hopeless by the end of the hunt. It was a fruitless effort now. The twins might never be found, but damn if he didn't pick up on the first ring and always go running to wherever Chloe told him to go.

"We've been to every place ye tell us to go, lass. The twins are never there."

He heard her sigh into the phone. "I know and I'm sorry. I don't mean to do this to you, but I'm literally giving you everything I see, when I see it."

"But ye see *nothing!*" he hadn't meant to yell it, truly. Maiden, Mother and Crone, he was so fed up, he thought he'd snap.

"Val, listen..."

“No, ye listen to me, lass. I’ve paid ye a small fortune for ye to help us find the rest of my pack. Ye send me on wild goose chases and have been for weeks. Ye tell me to go to The Blue Lizard, and like a fool I go. But they’re not there. They haven’t been anywhere ye send me or Bishop. I’ve got enough to deal with already woman, without ye adding more to my plate by feeding Bishop false leads and glimmers of hope only to have it all crash down upon our heads when nothing turns up. Your services are no longer required.” He hung up and stuffed his phone back into his pocket.

It started ringing again.

Blast that woman! Growling, Valor pulled his phone back out and snarled, “I SAID NO MORE!”

“Val? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Bishop’s voice was like pouring ice cold water on Valor’s frayed nerves. “Bishop, where are ye?”

“Leaving Tilly’s apartment.”

Valor stiffened. “You’re there now?”

“Well, not anymore. I’m about a block away. Heading east.”

“Did ye find out anything?”

“A little,” Bishop said quietly. “Where are you?”

“I’ll be home soon. Meet me there.”

“Not a chance and you know it.”

Valor frowned. He knew that was a long shot. Bishop didn’t like being at home any longer than what was absolutely necessary. Not with all that’s happened in that house. And they weren’t about to sell the damn house anytime soon. Not with the twins still out there somewhere. What if they were being held prisoner somewhere and escaped? The first place they’d go would be back to their home.

Or Hell.

No, knowing the twins, they’d return to their pack before they saw the Devil. Assuming they ever returned, which... Gods, it seemed less and less likely.

Was this what it felt like when Kalen lost Sara? This terribly heavy hollowness taking up all the space in your heart - It numbed you and turned your world into shades of grey.

"Fine. Meet me at The Blue Lizard then." Valor hung up and pulled onto a side street to park. Guess he and Bishop were in for a long night of hunting again. Valor parked and stepped out into the night. The wind whipped through his dark red hair and felt good on his skin.

He was the first to arrive, so he surveyed the space for threats. Bishop showed up about five minutes later and Valor gave him the signal that everything was clear and they both took a seat at the bar. Valor flicked his finger to get the bartender's attention and ordered two shots of whisky. Once poured and placed before them, Valor laid a hand on his glass and ran his finger along the rim. "So what did ye find out, Hound?"

Bishop sucked down his drink before answering, "She's definitely something."

Valor took a small sip and carefully placed his glass back down. Gods this cheap shit was like kerosene. "Did ye find out she was *other*?"

"No, not that I can confirm. But," he frowned, "she had a very interesting book sitting on her coffee table."

"Go on."

"It was ancient, Val. And for black magic."

A deadly growl rippled out of Val's throat, "Is it Lucifer's book?" The Devil had a precious book stolen from him during the *malanum* attacks. No one had found it yet and the Angels were still looking for it.

"No, I don't think so. It's not old enough. And not the right size going off the specs Lucifer gave us. But it was definitely rare and dangerous, I believe."

"You think she's a practitioner of dark magic?" If that was the case, then perhaps they could use her to find the twins. Any other time, Valor would give the order to stay away from her. But not now. He would do anything to find the rest of his pack. Black magic included. He could be judged later for his actions, pay the price when it was all done. He didn't give a shit. He just wanted his pack back. "Why are ye here and not bedding her right now, Hound?"

"She kicked me out."

Valor paused, his drink halfway to his lips, and he placed the glass back down. "Why?"

"No clue. One minute she was asking me to stay, the next, she was pushing me out the damned door."

"Did ye say something to her that would cause her to react in such a way?"

Bishop snarled, "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean ye no offense, but we both know you're off lately. I doona care that the black flames helped ye find some sense, ye still need to fight and fuck. Ye've done neither, so I can only assume ye scared her or insulted her in some fashion, even if it was unintentional."

Bishop slammed his fist on the bar and glared at Valor. "I didn't do a goddamned thing."

"Then why did she make ye leave?"

"I don't fucking know!"

They sat in silence, both brewing with frayed nerves and hair trigger tempers.

"She seemed *scared*." Bishop swiftly shoved his finger in Val's face, "Not of me, so don't even ask, asshole. But she acted like... I don't know... like something scared the shit out of her. Something I couldn't see."

Valor's instincts roared to life. "What direction was she facing? The window? The door?" Valor wondered if Tilly's aura changed like it had when he saw her the other night, but Bishop couldn't read auras so there was no point in asking him what it looked like.

"I searched her whole place, inside and out. I sensed nothing, Val. I don't get it."

"You must return to her."

"And say what? I lost my in, Valor. I can't stalk her, it'll freak her out and we'll get nowhere. Not to mention, she's not our priority right now, the twins are."

"Which is precisely why I want ye to go back to her, Hound." Valor took another sip of his drink and continued to stare straight ahead. Gods the cheap whisky tasted like fiery piss. "We need that book."

"You want me to steal it?"

"I didna say steal. Get it however ye can. Borrow it, pay for it, do whatever ye must to get your hands on it and bring it to me. I want to know what's in it, perhaps it'll help us find the twins."

"I told you," Bishop leaned in and snarled, "It wasn't a safe book. It was black magic, Val."

Valor placed a fifty on the bar and spun around, "Do it, Bishop." He hopped off his stool, his head cast down as he growled, "I'm hunting for the night. Go back and get that book, Hound. It will either be a waste of time, or the answer to our prayers. Either way, get it and we'll find out. I want the twins home and I'm going to do all that's in my power to see it done."

"Me too," Bishop said quietly.

"Then get that fucking book and keep close to Tilly. My instincts are roaring her name." Valor disappeared into the crowd.



The twins laid on the floor - one face up, the other face down. Their senses were so dulled they couldn't smell the dried urine nor the coppery blood dried in layers on their skin.

"You... okay... D?"

"Mmmph."

Sebastian tried to crack open one eye but his eyelashes were coated in crusty blood. "We need to... get out of here."

Drake half-chuckled, half-moaned. "But we're having so much fun."

"I'm going... to try again... as soon as I get... my energy levels... up." Shit, his ribs must still be broken. Sebastian placed his hands flat on the ground and tried to rise. "Fuck, I hurt."

Those bastards shoved so much magic in their systems it was a miracle he and Drake hadn't melted like birds in a barrel of acid. At the end of every failed experiment, the one in charge would do something to heal them enough to keep them breathing.

Every night it was the same. The pain, the rage, the cutting and magic. The blood and power. The failure and cursing. Sebastian didn't know how much longer they could survive it.

Thank fuck the twins shared a soul. It made the torture more bearable. Whoever was on the slab was soulless. The other twin would stay restrained, dangling or caged, and would harbor the soul for safekeeping. When the twins were switched out, so was their soul.

Though it seemed to be their saving grace in this clusterfuck, it left little time or energy for them to escape. Instead, they would send a sliver of it out into the world, in search of their alpha, Valor, or their maker, Lucifer. But the sliver was growing weaker and weaker. The twins were being too used, too violated, too abused for them to keep the strength they needed to make actual contact with anyone.

Hell was impassible for them. Somehow, their soul couldn't cross any spiritual barriers, which meant wherever they were was a real place in the human world. Right?

Fuck his head hurt. Sebastian moaned and collapsed back down onto the ground, face first. "If this situation sucked any harder, I might just blow a load."

Drake coughed up a wet laugh, wincing with the effort. "We've been through worse, Baz. We'll get through this."

Their Hell Hound magic had been stripped first when they were captured. There was no ghosting out for them.

"I can't hear anyone, can you?"

"Mmmph, I think my eardrums were busted again with that last round," Drake rolled over and sat up, "At least my left ear seems to be in poor shape. Can't hear shit out of it." He crawled over to Sebastian and tried to roll him over and help him sit up. "Fuck, brother."

Sebastian's stomach was cut wide open. Raw flesh was swollen and angry around the tissue trying to knit itself back together. Blood oozed from the wound, more black than red. "Shit," he groaned. "This can't be good."

"We're running out of time," Drake growled.

"We're running out of options."

The twins stared at each other for a long moment. They only had two options to begin with: live or die.

The sound of boots on stone broke their gaze and Drake looked behind him to see it was time to go another round with the hocus pocus shit. He made sure to brush his hand against Baz's arm long enough for their soul to go to him for safe keeping. Their enemy came in and dragged Drake by his ankles over to the slab again.

Drake could have walked over but his legs were broken in so many places. Running wasn't an option today. Not that it ever was. And now they didn't have enough energy to fight back at all.

Live or Die, that was the choice they needed to make. So far, they'd chosen to live, but if they didn't get the hell out of here soon, dying might just win them over.

Chapter 12

Tilly woke up still in her closet. She'd stayed unconscious until the worst was over. With a shaky hand, she unlocked the closet door and tumbled out. The closet was like a sauna compared to the cool temps of the rest of her apartment. Crawling out on her hands and knees, she took in a couple big gulps of air and regained her clarity. "Good job, Tilly. You made it through another epic failure of black magic bullshit."

She stripped out of her soiled clothes and went into the kitchen to grab the cleaning supplies. The floor was hardwood, which meant easy clean up. After a few spritz and swipes, Tilly cleaned up the mess in her closet and tossed her dirty clothes into the hamper. She was going to have to do laundry today. She'd run out of her favorite clothes and wasn't about to try and stuff her ass into a pair of jeans in her "one day I'll fit into these again pile." She'd had enough torture for one week, fuck you very much. Besides, the tattoo on her ass would scream for mercy if she tried to squeeze into a pair of her old jeans. As it was, the damn thing was starting to itch like crazy.

After an hour's worth of freshening up and getting into a maxi dress, Tilly called her sister. "Hey."

"Hey, what's up?"

Her chin trembled and her throat constricted. She hated calling her sister like this – it wasn't that Vivian would mind, but now that she was married, Tilly felt like she was always disturbing them in some way. When Tilly didn't say anything for a moment, Vivian's voice dropped on the other end of the line, "Tilly, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," her voice cracked. "I just... wanted to let you know that..." *that I just suffered again and for no good reason because I still don't have answers. I just crawled out of a closet. I'm scared and alone and hate it.* "I just wanted to let you know that they are running a cult movie classic marathon on TV tonight."

"Ohhhh! What channel?"

"Two Twelve, I think."

"Awesome! I'm totally vegging all day. I'm still hungover from my birthday night out anyways, so this is perfect. Thanks!"

Tilly swallowed the lump in her throat. She never told Vivian what it cost her every time she tried a new spell. Actually, Vivian didn't know Tilly still dabbled in magic, nor did she believe in the family curse. Vivian lived in a world where everything was roses and rainbows.

Tilly was more jaded than that. Dreams don't come true just because you wished on a star. Hopes don't float just because you toss them high. And lives were short, no matter how careful you tried to be.

"Oh, shit, let me call you back. James just came in to serve me breakfast in bed."

"No need to call back. I'll talk to you next weekend, okay? You're still coming over right?"

"Yup."

"Okay. Love you, Viv."

"Love you too," she hung up.

Tilly sat on her bed and looked around her apartment. She loved this place, but it was closing in on her right now. She couldn't breathe. Going over to the window, she yanked it open and got bitch slapped with a cool breeze. Deciding she couldn't stay put, Tilly snatched her jacket from the back of a chair and decided there was only one thing that could make her happy right now: Donuts and coffee from her favorite café.

She took the steps gracefully, humming to herself, and hip bumped the lobby door to open it. The street was busy and the wind whipped her hair around. Yanking it into a pony tail, she hustled down the street and was all too grateful when she reached the café. Someone came out just as she was going in and Tilly was struck stupid for a moment.

"After ye, lass."

Oh good god. A red headed Highlander with a big beard and cobalt blue eyes held the door for her while carrying a to-go cup. Normally she didn't go for gingers, but this guy's coloring was that of a dark sunset, you couldn't buy that shade in a bottle.

"Thanks," she slid past him and tried to not look back. It was hard though, actually... fuck it, she looked back. The guy was gone.

Tilly shook her head and made her way up to the counter, “Large dirty chai, and also a honey glazed and a toasted coconut, please.” It was a double donut kind of day. After handing money over, she stepped aside to wait for her food. The door opened three more times as other folks funneled in. And of all people to come in last, it was –

“Bishop,” Tilly whispered.

She must have said it too loud, even though she’d barely breathed his name, because the guy’s gaze sailed right to her as if he knew she’d be there.

Awkwardly, Tilly smiled and was so confucklebobbered, she didn’t hear the barista call her name. Tilly just kept staring at Bishop and he stepped out of the line, up to the counter, and grabbed her bag of donuts and drink. “Thanks,” he said to the annoyed woman behind the counter, then he spun around and gently pressed the bag and cup into her hands, “Smells delicious.”

“It’s just donuts and a dirty chai.” *Smooth, Tilly. Really fucking smooth.*

“Wasn’t talking about the food,” Bishop tossed her a killer smile and stepped back into line.

Unsure of what to say, Tilly kind of shuffled into an empty seat and placed her food on the small table for two. Bishop faced the counter. He didn’t turn around to look at her either, which was just fine by her because she got a spectacular view of his ass from this angle. Was it weird that he was here right now? Maybe, but Tilly enjoyed weird things. She’d like to enjoy Bishop too.

Maybe this would be a good opportunity to smooth things over a little bit since she made shit awkward by kicking him out of her apartment so suddenly last night. Was he mad about it? No, he didn’t act mad just now. Actually, he acted as if that whole thing hadn’t even happened.

That’s weird, right? Fuck, she couldn’t think straight. Taking a sip of her dirty chai, she purred with content. Bishop finally made it to the front of the line and ordered. He pulled his wallet out from his back pocket and she stared at the tats on his hands and fingers. Not a lot of men could pull off having so much ink, but Bishop sure as fuck could. That man was work of art.

It made her think of the little *show me yours and I'll show you mine* game they'd played. Tilly suspected Bishop would strip naked and let her see every inch of his skin if she asked. He didn't hide. He... well, he probably didn't care. Bishop seemed like the kind of guy who was transparent and comfortable with himself.

Shit, that was presumptuous of her. As was sitting at this table for two, expecting him to join her. When he grabbed his food, Bishop only winked and saluted her with his coffee cup.

Wait, what the fuck? Was he leaving? Tilly's heart slammed into her chest going all types of *No, wait! Don't leave!* and then she simmered her ass down when she realized he was pulling his phone out and had gone to the corner of the café to answer it.

She gripped her coffee cup and stared at his profile. Black jeans again, black shirt and a black leather jacket. His tattooed hand held the phone and his other brought his coffee cup up to his perfect mouth. He had a beard, too. Not as long as Foxy Boy – the ginger who had held the door for her earlier – but Bishop's was a sandy brown, clipped tight, and his nose piercing caught the sunlight. Not many guys could rock a piercing like that. This man had a pointed, sharp nose that was just straight up sexy. How the fuck was a nose sexy?

He turned and slipped his cell back into his pocket. His eyes sailed to her and he smiled. She didn't know what to do, so she said *fuck it* and sort of yelled out, "Wanna sit with me?"

If he rejected her, she wouldn't blame him. Not after what happened last night. But God, she hoped he would say yes. Bishop stared at her for a heartbeat and took a sip of his coffee, then he nodded once and came over.

"Look, I'm so sorry about last night."

"Don't apologize," he shrugged off his coat and she got a good look at his ink again. There were skulls and morbid things all over his forearms. Three fingers on his left hand had silver rings, and there were four on his right. Also, there was a black leather cuff around his wrist and a watch on the other.

This man was trouble. Tilly's mouth watered. Trouble looked fucking delicious.

“You had your reasons,” he said, “I just hope I didn’t do anything that upset you.”

“It wasn’t you, it was me.”

Bishop groaned and buried his head in his hands, “God damn, that’s the worst phrase in all the world.”

She reached out and touched his arm. “I mean it. I was going through something and... well, I’m sorry. I really am.” Then she backed off a little and grabbed her coffee cup.

He raised his head out of his hands, the left side of his mouth turning upwards. Oh his steely blue eyes were light and mischievous. What was it with all the pretty blue eyes lately? Tilly’s mother once said that blue eyes were the sign of the devil. Tilly never believed in that shit, but... with the bad boy outfit, ink, and piercings, Tilly almost believed it right now. God Almighty, Bishop was sexy as hell. Only the Devil would be so good looking.

“Sorry enough to let me take you to dinner?”

Tilly paused with her hand in her paper bag. Then she pulled out the two donuts, “How about breakfast?”

“First,” Bishop grinned, “and then dinner. My treat.” He took another sip of his coffee and kept his gaze pinned on her. “Say yes to me Tilly.”

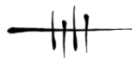
“You want me to let you take me out to dinner to say I’m sorry for kicking you out of my apartment for mysterious reasons?”

“Sounds accurate.”

She wiggled the toasted coconut donut at him, “How about you eat my favorite donut and we call it even.”

He took the donut from her, but didn’t take a bite. “How about you let me feed you your favorite donut and we’ll call it a start to what will undoubtedly end up in a wonderful evening.”

Tilly accepted Bishop’s offer and took her first bite.



As Bishop watched Tilly chomp down on the donut in his hand, every bit of him grew hard as motherfucking stone. It was no coincidence that he'd shown up here. The coincidence was that Valor had first and recognized her.

He'd sent Bishop in to finish what was started.

No part of Bishop felt guilty for what he was doing, either. He had no intentions of tricking or using Tilly. He genuinely wanted to get to know her better. Touch her. Taste her.

When the timing was right, he'd ask about the book. Talking magic with humans wasn't always easy, but if she was already into it, he'd be able to approach the subject gracefully and hoped things would progress from there. Maybe he could borrow the book? Maybe he could buy it off her. He wasn't going to steal the damned thing, that wouldn't be right. Regardless, his goal right now had nothing to do with the book and everything to do with the vixen sitting across the table from him.

Rare were the women who have come into Bishop's life and captured his attentions so fiercely. And never before had he been so enthralled with a woman like he was with this one.

The gorgeous creature was in a long, form-fitting dress. And with the curves she was rocking, it did a job on his sex drive just watching her sit and eat her donut. He wagged the pastry in front of her again and growled, "Take another bite, Tilly."

Like she knew how to play the seduction game, Tilly leaned in slowly, opened that pretty pink mouth of hers, and chomped down like a tiger would a hunk of meat. The air left his lungs when she ripped her mouth away and chewed. Never in his life had he wanted to be a donut before. He could only imagine what it would feel like to have her mouth on him. Biting him. Sucking him.

Swallowing him.

To stifle his next growl, Bishop brought his coffee to his lips and took a long sip. Tilly took the donut out of his hand and held it up to him, "Your turn, Hound dog."

Hound dog. She'd called him that before. Ohhh if only she knew how accurate that title was.

Bishop grabbed her wrist, held her in place and wasn't shy about eating out of her hand. One bite, two, he held her wrist with a firm grip while he chewed that goddamn donut and when he was down to the last bite, he made sure to lick her fingers clean. Wouldn't want to waste any of the sweet stuff now would we?

Her pupils dilated when he sucked on her digits, one by one. If the café was packed, he couldn't tell. Not now. Not with her staring at him like that. He was pretty sure the world fell away the minute he sat down with her and had shrunk smaller and smaller since then. Nothing else existed except Bishop and Tilly. And how crazy was that?

He released her wrist with a smile, but she didn't move. Tilly's chest rose up and down with her heavy breathing. Then she smiled wickedly and pulled out a second motherfucking donut to feed him.

Bishop laughed so loud he swore the walls shook around them. Or maybe the earth had just moved.

Chapter 13

After eating out of Tilly's hand, there was no way Bishop was leaving her side. They ended up spending the next hour doing the whole get-to-know-you-better thing. Turned out she was a horror movie junky, loved music, and – this was fantastic, by the way – she was a believer in the “can't be explained” stuff like supernatural shit.

They walked down the street, side-by-side. Bishop didn't have a clue where they were going, he just followed her and liked it. “I mean, if anyone can make you a believer, Dean Winchester can, am I right?” Her easy smile was contagious.

Bishop had never watched an episode of the show she was gushing over, but made a note to check it out later. Right now wasn't the time to binge watch TV. Not with the twins still missing. Speaking of which, Bishop pulled out his phone to check his texts. Maybe Valor had a new lead. Doubtful considering it had only been three hours since they'd spoken, but still, you never know. He looked down at his screen. Nope. Nothing. *Damn.*

Guilt and intrigue battled for space in his head. He should be hunting *malanum*, questioning each evil fuckface he caught before sending them back to Hell. But if his alpha said to stick with Tilly and get that book, then he needed to obey orders.

Besides, hunting *malanum* wasn't as imperative as it had been. Something about the balance of good and evil getting a little out of whack or some shit. Lucifer put a revised limit on *malanum* hunts, not just for Valor's pack, but for all districts. It was weird, going from one extreme to the other, but Bishop welcomed the break. It meant he could focus more on finding Drake and Sebastian. Fuck, now his heart hurt.

“Bishop?”

“Huh?”

“You didn't hear a thing I said, did you?”

Shit, shit, shit. “Sorry,” he frowned, “I got a little lost in my head for a second. What did you say?” He wanted to punch himself in the nuts for having lost his focus on her.

“I asked where did you want to go for dinner?”

Bishop's smile went wide across his face. "Wherever you want," he didn't care what he ate. This wasn't about him anyway, it was all about her. "There's a good sushi restaurant on the south side of the city. Or we could go into Little Italy. Or, shit, I have a friend who owns a killer Mexican restaurant just outside of the city."

"Oh I love tacos. Let's do that."

He nodded and continued to walk down the street with her. She stopped, abruptly. It took him a second to realize they were in front of her building. Holy shit, he was seriously having a lack of focus today. He needed to be more aware of his surroundings. The fact that he had blindly followed Tilly home didn't speak well for his Hound skills at all today.

"May I walk you up?"

"Sure," she shrugged.

God, was she always such a go-with-the-flow kind of woman? He had a feeling the answer was yes. The wind picked up and she shivered while grabbing her keys from her coat pocket. Bishop, though he loved her outfit choice, didn't like that it wasn't the best clothing for as cold as it was outside today.

She unlocked the door and he immediately reached over her shoulder to push it open and hold it for her to go inside first. Her studio apartment was on the top floor. Nice view, but a killer climb. Unable to stand any silence, especially in a tight stairwell, Bishop asked about the building and how she liked living there.

"It's a nice piece of property," she said, "It'll bring in a decent amount of money, even for being in a shittier part of town."

"Wait, you own this place?"

"Yeah, for now."

They reached her floor and something didn't feel right. Bishop went on high alert, scouring the hall before going to her door.

Tilly frowned, like she sensed it too as she put her hand on her doorknob. She jerked away like it burned her and she grabbed Bishop's arm and yanked. "Run. Now!" She tried to take off down the steps and Bishop chased after her.

“Whoa! What the fuck!” God damn the woman was agile. She skidded down the steps as fast as she could and dropped her keys in the process. Bishop snatched them and caught up with her on the second floor. “Hey, hold up. What the hell is going on?”

Wild eyes and flushed cheeks made her look ten kinds of terrified. She tried to break through the barrier he made with his body, but he wouldn't let her pass. No matter what she was scared of, there was nothing more vicious or dangerous than Bishop, so he wasn't worried at all.

“I can't... I gotta get out of here... let me go!” She punched him in the gut, and probably just hurt her hand on his abs. “Bishop! Move!”

“Tell me what the fuck you are so scared of, Tilly.” He grabbed her shoulders and shook her, “Look at me. Look at my face.”

She was trembling so much, he grabbed her tighter and pulled her in. “Tell me what the hell is going on, Sweetness.”

“Someone's been in my apartment.”

He hadn't heard a damned thing in there and her door wasn't damaged. There was no sign of a break in, just a weird feeling in the hallway. Bishop wasn't going to argue with her about it though. Either she was sensitive to energies, a paranoid lunatic, or could see through walls, he didn't fucking know, but he learned a long time ago how powerful intuition was.

“Do you know who it could be?”

“I... yes... maybe,” she tried to escape him but Bishop held her too tight for that shit. With a growl, she cocked her fist back and swung at him. The woman wasn't going to give up her fight to get free. Bishop took the hit and still didn't let go. “God Damn it! Bishop let me go!”

Bishop backed her up against the wall and spoke in low tones, “Call 9-1-1 and go down to the corner of the street and into the market. I'll meet you there.”

He turned to head up the steps and Tilly caught his arm. “I can't. And you can't go up there!”

“Yes you can and yes I fucking will.” He pulled his gun out of its holster and checked it quick. Tilly sucked in a breath when she saw it. “I'll explain later, but do what I say. Call 9-1-1 and wait for me.”

“I can’t let you go up there,” she hissed, “and I can’t fucking call 9-1-1 about this.”

The hair on the back of Bishop’s neck stood on end. “Why not?”

Her hands shook as she continued holding onto his arm. For having just tried to fight her way out of his hold a minute ago, now her feet were firmly planted on the ground and she wasn’t letting him budge.

“I can’t let you go up there, Bishop. We need to leave. Together.”

“Not happening, so either you tell me what I’m about to walk into, or I find out on my own. Either way, you’re scared and in danger and neither of those things is something I’ll tolerate. If there is someone up in your place right now –” A growl slipped out of his mouth, all animal and inhuman. He tried to suck it back in, but it was a no-go. His instincts were roaring to protect this woman and kill whatever was threatening her.

“We go together then.”

“Not happening, woman.”

She glared at him and he literally watched her eyes turn dark with resolve. “You go, I go. Up or down, doesn’t fucking matter, Bishop.”

Oh what the fuck? He didn’t want her up in that apartment. He also didn’t really want her out of his sight right now, either. Damn it, how was he going to do this?

Maybe he should call Valor. No. His alpha had enough on his plate right now. Bishop would do this on his own. He opted for safety first - the hunt and chase could come later.

“Come on.” He grabbed her arm and steered her down the stairwell and out of the building. She was crying by the time they got outside and it made him feel sick inside. He escorted her down the street and into the marketplace where it was busy and he snatched a chair from an empty table and gave it to her. When she plopped down into the damn thing, Bishop squatted in front of her, “I need to know what the fuck is going on, Sweetness.”

Her lips were a thin line.

“Look,” he sighed, “I get it. You’re scared, you don’t know me... I fucking get it. But I’m in this now, alright? I’m not the kind of guy that sees someone in distress and not get involved. So tell me what the hell is happening so I can help you.”

Her expression said a million things, all of which made him melt and harden at the same time. But it was her words that ripped the rug out from under him.

“I’m going to die.”

Chapter 14

Soooo, yeah. Tilly just blurted out, “I’m going to die.” Shit, what was she thinking? This day of reckoning was a long time coming and she should have known better than to get comfortable.

Bishop stiffened. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Tilly’s heart hammered in her chest. Best get it out with now and save them both the trouble of parting ways later. It pissed her off a little. She was really looking forward to getting to know this guy, but in the end, she knew it wasn’t going to last long. Her life was too short for relationships. It’s why she didn’t have any.

She was in deep shit and now had Bishop involved. Fuck this was bad. Tilly’s gut twisted. She was furious, but her fear of what would happen to her outweighed her wrath at the moment. Vivian was in the clear, though. Tilly had made sure to keep her sister out of the equation in case something like this ended up happening one day. No matter if it was for the two of them or not, Tilly would pay the price alone. No sense in them both going to Hell, right?

Whatever. Too late now anyways. What’s done was done.

“The fuck you talking about?” Bishop practically hissed, “What do you mean you’re going to die?”

God, why did he have to look like he actually cared? She hated that look on him. Bishop didn’t know her. She was nothing to him. And he was nothing to her but a promise of a good time. A temporary distraction.

Fuck it. He wanted the truth, here it was, and if he didn’t choke on it, he could run away and she’d wave too-da-loo. “I’m cursed.”

He didn’t snort a laugh or roll his eyes. “I’m listening.”

“I’m going to die soon. Very soon. And I’ve been trying to find a way to break my family’s curse.”

“What kind of curse is it?” he asked with a gravelly voice.

“Wiccan? Hoodoo?”

She jerked back, flabbergasted. Was he being serious here?

“Are you seriously asking me this?”

“You bet your sweet ass I am. I need to know what kind of magic it was so I can get it lifted.”

The air whooshed out of her on that note. She didn't know what to say, mainly because she was floored he actually seemed to believe her, and also because she didn't know the answer to his question. "I'm not sure."

"How long?"

"What?"

"How long do you have to live?"

"I'm not sure of that either. But," she slumped in her seat and exhaled, "no woman has lived past their twenty-eighth birthday for over five hundred years."

She watched his throat bob as he swallowed. "And... how old are you now, Tilly?"

"Twenty-seven," she whispered, "and two months."

Bishop's head dropped.

Why would he act upset? It wasn't him dying and he didn't know her long enough to give a shit about her. Maybe he was just a dude with a bleeding heart for the helpless.

"Look, I stole something to try to lift my curse. The owner probably wanted it back." That was all Tilly was willing to say.

Bishop stood and held his hand out for her to take, "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

He began leading her out of the marketplace. "I'm taking you back to my place and then I'll make some calls and see what can be done for you."

"You believe me?"

"Of course I believe you. Why would you lie about something like that?"

"I..." she didn't have an answer because he'd made a good point. No one in their right mind said shit like that and expected to be taken seriously. "I don't understand this." She ripped her hand out of his and stopped following him. "I just told you I'm cursed and going to die, and there is probably someone really bad waiting in my apartment right now and I can't get the cops involved, and you're just going to play along with this whole thing?"

"Yeah."

Alarm bells went off in her head. This guy must be a nutcase to be so chill about this. She didn't need that shit in her life, either. Her hands were full enough between attempting to live a full life, trying to break this damned curse, and also dodging the creeper following her lately. She didn't need a nutjob added to her mess. Figures, the one time she meets an interesting guy, he'd turn out to be a whacko who believed in magic and carried a concealed weapon.

She was the pot to his kettle, but whatever.

Bishop pulled out his cell and dialed without looking down. His eyes scanned the street and she couldn't tell if it made her feel protected or more paranoid. They stood there in the middle of the city block and she wished she'd worn something a little warmer. Tilly was chilled to the bone now. As if reading her mind, Bishop held his phone in one hand and shrugged out of his leather jacket and wrapped it around her while he said into the phone, "Yeah, it's me. We gotta situation. Tilly's in trouble and someone's been in her place."

A rock settled into her gut when she heard Bishop talk to whoever was on the other end of the line. He stopped scanning the crowd and glanced at her, "Yeah, I got her with me. I'm bringing her home." His jaw clenched and eyes narrowed on her. It made her feel much smaller than the five-foot-nine she was. "I'm not asking permission, alpha. She's in trouble. End of fucking story." He hung up and went to grab her again.

Tilly stepped away from him as panic slammed into her. She didn't know this guy. Whether he was being sincere about wanting to help her or not didn't even matter right now. She felt trapped and scared and the fact that he said he wanted to take her home didn't really ease her fears at all. He could be a serial killer.

A hot as fuck serial killer.

Oh god, she had the worst luck in the world, didn't she?

Tilly pivoted and took off down the street. She weaved in and out of the crowd, ran across the street, dodging cars, and made a left to head towards the business district. She could call an Uber once she got into a building that had armed guards and get the hell out of town.

Booking it down the alleyway, she skidded to a halt when Bishop stood at the other end.

Holy fucking shit! How the hell did he get there so fast? She backed up, turned and ran in the opposite direction. Hanging a left, she looked behind her, didn't see anyone, and ducked behind a bus stop. Squatting down behind the bench, something inside the leather jacket she had on jabbed her in the ribs and she reached into the inner pocket and pulled out a— "Holy fucking shit." It was a big ass knife.

"Matilda Jane," Bishop's sudden voice scared the shit out of her. She screamed and swung out with his blade. Bishop leapt back and Tilly realized there were witnesses everywhere. If she asked for help, someone was going to call the cops and one thing might lead to another and then she'd get into really big trouble. The last thing she needed was to get arrested for what she'd done and end up spending the remainder of her life behind bars for committing a crime she thought was necessary. Hiring a thief to steal a priceless artifact would definitely earn her time in the slammer. No one was going to care what her reasons were because no one would believe her.

No one ever did. That was, of course, until now.

Bishop kept a wary eye on her, his gaze shifting between the onlookers, Tilly, and the blade in her hand. "Put the blade down, Tilly."

"Not on your fucking life."

"You need to trust me," Bishop took a step closer to her, "I'm trying to help you."

"You can't help me," she stammered and lowered her weapon. She didn't want anyone else to see what was in her hand, and she wasn't going to use the damn thing anyways. Murder was so not going on her rap sheet. Not yet, at least. And there were worse places to go than jail... "Bishop, please, I don't want to get—"

"You don't know me, so I don't expect you to trust me, but I do expect you to fucking listen. You're in danger and I get that you're scared and you want to do this whole fight or flight thing. Were you lying when you said you were cursed?"

"N-n-no."

“I believe you. Now, I need you to believe me when I say I’m only trying to help. I know people. People who can maybe help you. I just need you to trust me.”

“I don’t know you, Bishop. You’re just some guy I met at a concert.”

“What happened to synchronicity?” He took another step closer to her and kept his arms up where she could see them. He looked so calm, so confident, it was... confusing her. “If you’re speaking the truth and you’re cursed to die, what have you got to lose?” He swallowed and she saw his throat bob up and down. “You’re going to die when you’re meant to die. Trust me, Sweetness, I know this for a fact. And if you come with me, maybe we can help you find a way to lift your curse and cheat death for a while longer.”

“Or maybe I go with you and you kill me.” Suddenly, synchronicity felt a lot like doom. “He sent you didn’t he?” Oh god, how could she have been so fucking blind and dumb? “You... you’re working with that creeper. You’ve both been following me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Tilly.”

Oh yes he did. He had to. It all made perfect sense now – the timing of her meeting Bishop coincided with her stealing the book and that creeper guy following her all around keeping an eye on her. Holy shit, Bishop was a bounty hunter. It made perfect sense now. He was heavily armed, alert and cautious, and—

Oh god, he’d been sent to kill her. Distract her. He came into her house, saw the book, confirmed it with his boss, and was sent back to kill her. Dread damn near crippled her now.

Bishop took another step closer, “Tilly, I’m not who you think I am.”

“Fuck you,” she growled and took off. He screamed her name and she was so focused on escaping that she didn’t see the car turning just as she ran across the street.

The last thing she saw was the creeper standing on the opposite side of the street and then she felt her body slam into something hard and it was lights out.

Chapter 15

Bishop paced up and down the hallway. The scent of ammonia and sickness clung to his sinuses and the bright fluorescent lights drove him fucking crazy. They'd taken Tilly into surgery and no one had come back out to give him an update yet. In the meantime, he called Valor.

It was no surprise when Bishop saw his alpha come down the hallway looking like a harbinger of death dressed in all black with a heavy coat and a scowl. "What news have ye got?"

"Nothing," Bishop backed up until he hit a wall and slid down on his ass. "Fuck, Val, this was all my fault."

"Did ye hit her with the car?"

"No."

"Then how do ye think it's your fault?"

Bishop ran his hands angrily through his hair and stared at the dingy linoleum floor. "She tried to run from me. I chased her and tried to get her to stop, but," he sighed heavily, "she ran out into oncoming traffic and stumbled... I couldn't catch her in time. This car took the turn and almost creamed her. It was like slow motion and full-speed all at the same time. I tried to ghost, wrap my body around her, but she still went down even with me as a buffer."

Valor kneeled down and forced Bishop to look at him. "Ye did well by her then. Had ye not softened the blow, she might be dead."

Bishop laughed cruelly, "Oh god, Valor. This gets worse and more complicated."

During the next half hour, he told his alpha everything Tilly said to him: The curse on her family, the fact that no woman had lived past her twenty-eighth birthday, that someone broke into Tilly's house and that she refused to call the cops about it. Valor listened patiently and asked minimal questions.

One really didn't get chance to say much once Bishop got going on something and he was talking a mile a minute right now. It was part nerves and part habit.

Once he finished talking, a man in scrubs came out and said, “Matilda Jane’s doing just fine. She’s got a bump on her head, a broken arm and some scrapes and bruises, but all in all she’s lucky. We’re going to keep her overnight for observation and we’ve set her arm. You can go in and see her now if you’d like.”

Bishop damn near barreled into the room he was directed to. Laying in a bed looking pathetically adorable was a blonde angel with a cast. Her hair was a wreck, mascara smudged and she was too pale for his liking. The minute he entered her room, Bishop second guessed himself.

They locked gazes and she looked fucking terrified. God damn, he never wanted her to look at him like that. Before he could say a word, Valor stepped in behind him. “Matilda Jane,” Valor purred, “I’m Valor.” In true Val style, he didn’t swagger so much as glide into the room and was the calm to Bishop’s chaos. “I’m so sorry for what happened.”

The monitors beeped fast because her heart rate accelerated and made the machines go crazy.

As Valor came over to the side of the bed, her whole body stiffened. *Beep-beep-beep-beepbeepbeep!*

“Shhh,” Valor placed a hand over hers. *Beepbeepbeep-beep-beep...beep...beep.*

Tilly’s gaze flicked from Bishop to Valor and she slapped on the same expression Bishop had seen a couple other times on her already. It was one that looked resolved and ready. Bishop would eventually call it her fuck it face...

“Go ahead,” Tilly rounded her shoulders and her eyes turned glassy with unshed tears. “I acted alone, just so you know. And...” tucking her disheveled hair behind her ear she bristled, “you can tell Marco I said he’s a first class asshole.” She stuck up her middle finger and waited for one of them to make a move.

Valor’s eyebrows popped up and he and Bishop exchanged a look before he said, “Lass, I’ve no idea who the hell this Marco is, but if I see him, I’ll give him your message.”

She deflated a little. “Then who sent you?”

“No one, lass.” Valor pulled a chair closer and sat in it. He tried to look less threatening, but it was tough. Valor was a big guy who oozed danger and seduction, threats and power. Seeing him be gentle and soft like this was a rarity.

Tilly’s gaze sailed to Bishop, “I don’t understand. You came to kill me, right? For taking the book?”

Bishop and Valor didn’t exchange a look this time. There was no need. They were both treading softly here. Christ on a cracker, the woman nearly got herself killed running from him once already, Bishop really didn’t want a repeat.

“No one sent us, Tilly. We were just at the right place at the right time.” He risked getting a little closer and was sure to keep his hands where she could see them. “I meant what I said. I’m not what you think I am, and I may know someone who can help you.”

“But we will need something in return,” Valor interjected.

A nurse stepped into the room to check Tilly and everyone stayed quiet and still until she left. “What... do you want?” Tilly whispered. “Money? You’ve got it. Name your price.”

Valor leaned in and rested his arms on his knees. “We need that book ye have. And,” he raised a hand to silence her rejection, “I’ll give it back. Hell, ye can stay and watch me use it if ye like. I doona care, as long as I get to see what’s in that book.”

Bishop stayed quiet and watched the exchange between the two of them. Tilly looked positively terrified and Valor was doing his best to be calm and persuasive.

“How do you know about the book if Marco didn’t send you?”

Her posture shifted. Bishop suspected she was going to try to bolt out of the bed and he smoothly walked over to block the door. “I told him about it, Tilly. I saw it at your apartment, remember?”

She gulped, then nodded. “Why do you want the book?”

“I just want to see if it has something in it that can help me.” Valor answered honestly. “Someone verra dear to us has gone missing and we need to get them back.”

“So go to the cops and fill out a missing person’s report.”

“I canna do that. For the same reasons ye didna go to the cops when your apartment was broken into.”

Tilly looked over at Bishop again. "They'll have taken the book," she whispered. "I know they've taken it back."

Valor's smile was dark and confident, "Then all you have to do is tell us where you got it so we can retrieve it."

"No," Bishop growled, "You'll put her in danger doing that, Val. They'll think she took it a second time and come back for her again."

Tilly confirmed it with a nervous nod. "If they found me once, they'll do it again."

Valor waved off their concerns and leaned back in his chair. "I'll take care of it, you doona have to worry."

"I..." Tilly's brow furrowed, "I think I hit my head a little too hard. None of this can be making sense like it is."

"Synchronicity," Bishop whispered. "Tilly, there's a reason we met."

She rolled her eyes, "Dude, this is not some cheesy movie where the stars align and the girl gets everything in the end. I'm a dead woman. Regardless of what you think you can offer me, I'm dead. And so is my sister." She started crying. Hard.

Bishop came closer to comfort her, but Valor beat him to it. The fucker.

"Shhhh," Valor cooed as he leaned into her. He'd slid off his chair and sat on the edge of her bed. "Look at me, lass," he tilted her chin up so they could look at each other. "Whether ye tell us where that book is or not, we'll still help ye."

"How?"

"Bishop was right when he said he wasn't what ye think he is." Valor jerked his head towards the door and Bishop quietly closed the damned thing. He figured he had about three minutes before his claustrophobia started working on his nerves, so he hoped this wouldn't take that long.

"Wh-what are you guys going to do to me?" *beep-beep-beep*. Tilly's blood drained from her face and she gripped the call box, but didn't hit the button. Bishop couldn't figure out why she would hesitate, but he was so fucking grateful for it.

“We’re going to make you a believer, lass.” Valor gave the go ahead and Bishop walked over to the wall across from Tilly’s bed. Then he climbed it. Defying gravity, Bishop used his Hell Hound powers and scaled the wall, crawled across the ceiling, and looked down once he was poised right above her.

She didn’t scream like he thought she would.

We’re going to catch hell for this, Bishop thought. It was against the rules to let a human see a Hell Hound use their powers, which was one of the reasons they had their ghost forms. But if Valor was going to break the rules, it was for a good reason.

Two good reasons, actually. Sebastian and Drake.

Leave it to Valor to persuade a freshly wounded, scared to death human woman to get closer to the possibility of finding the twins. Bishop felt torn between pride and protective aggression. He, too, would do anything for his pack. He couldn’t begrudge Valor this opportunity. But damn did it piss him off that Valor was using Tilly like this. It didn’t matter that Valor would stay true to his word and help her, because he was still doing it for other reasons. It wasn’t about Tilly’s life, it was about the twins’ lives.

“Holy fucking shit,” she tilted her head and continued to stare at Bishop, who was still on the ceiling.

He winked and did a flip, landing on the floor again.

Straightening up to his full height, the Hound waited with bated breath to see what she would do next. “I told you, I wasn’t what you thought. I didn’t lie to you and I never will.”

“And we will try everything we can to help ye, lass. But I meant what I said about us needing that book. If ye doona have it anymore, then give me the address where ye got it.”

She gulped, her eyes wide as saucers. “What if it’s not there?”

“We’ll help you before we look, to ease your mind about us keeping our end of things.” Bishop tried to smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. God, he hated this.

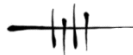
Valor kept quiet and pulled out his cell phone. Next thing Bishop knew, Valor was talking to Jack, a fellow Hound from another pack. In low tones, he briefly explained the situation and gave vague but important information and asked Jack to come to the hospital. Then he hung up and said, "It's done. I have our best magic spinner coming here for ye."

"Oh God," Tilly panted. "I don't think any of this can be real." Her heartrate picked up again.

"Och, we're real. lass," Valor's smile was all teeth and promises. "And ye canna run from us anymore than ye can run from your curse. The only difference is we're the good guys here."

"Good?" she asked, "And I'm just supposed to believe you? None of this even makes sense!"

Valor cracked a laugh and it was the first one Bishop had heard from his Alpha in weeks. "Think ye've gone down a rabbit hole, eh?" He shook his head, "Och, it's about to get so much worse, I fear."



Valor's laugh was dark, sensual and creepy as fuck given the circumstances. Tilly had dropped the nurse callbox the minute Bishop climbed the wall and crawled across the ceiling like a big bug.

She saw this shit in movies, but never in real life. Tilly would be the first to tell you that it was way fucking scarier in real life. It was also quite fascinating. She knew a thing or two about other beings in this world. Bishop and Valor were certainly *other*. And they had her surrounded.

She was stuck now. Her time was running out and these two guys offered to help her. It was worth a try, right? If it didn't work out, oh well. Really, she was a dead woman no matter what.

This was what desperation looked like – A terrified woman in a hospital bed with a raging headache, bed head, a broken arm and a sore ass who was being stared at by two good looking men dressed in all black who could climb on ceilings.

If Bishop was packing weapons, Valor was too. As a matter of fact, he probably had even more deadly shit strapped to him. He looked like a Viking, and his dark auburn hair made him hard for her to pull her gaze away from him. Wait a minute, he was—

“Foxy Boy,” she glared. “You’re the guy from the café.”

Could this get more awkward?

“When our friend comes, and you’re well enough, you’re coming back to our house with us,” Valor announced. He didn’t say a damned thing about the café.

“The hell I am,” she snapped. “I’m not going home with two guys I don’t know. Have you ever watched a murder mystery? That shit never ends well for the pretty girl.”

Bishop huffed a laugh and ran a hand through his hair. Valor, however, continued to glare at her. “Ye will obey my orders lass, and do exactly as I say. I’m not about to get your curse lifted just to have ye murdered by some man with a hard-on for retaliation because ye stole from him. Marco is it?”

She snapped her mouth shut and didn’t say another word.

“Aye, that’s a good girl.” Valor stood up and turned to Bishop, “She stays at our house until this is all sorted out. Open the door, Hound.”

Bishop was all too happy to open that damned door and Tilly felt a pang of guilt. She remembered he didn’t like to be in confined places and there were no windows in her room that opened. “I’m going out for some fresh air,” he said before stepping outside.

The minute Bishop left, Tilly had the urge to call after him, but kept her mouth shut.

“Now lass, while we wait for my friend to come, I want ye to tell me about this Marco.”

“Wh-why?”

“Because I’ve a mind to think he’s a dangerous man if he has books like the one ye took from him.”

Marco was a dangerous man. His place had lots of creepy shit that had no business being out in the light of day. She didn’t judge the guy though. Maybe he was just like her – a person looking for answers, even if he had to go to the darkest places to find them.

Or maybe he was an evil man who collected evil things. She'd met plenty of those guys too.

Either way, Tilly had known it was a big risk to steal from Marco. He had a terrible reputation, which was why it had cost her 2.7 million to have that book stolen. Tilly met the man at an auction house, where he bought the book and she snagged his information from the computer database and took the book a couple weeks later.

"Where are my things?" she asked suddenly. Valor got up and walked over to a plastic bag that had her stuff in it. He handed it over to her without saying a word. She figured he wasn't going to leave, so there'd be no privacy for her. Didn't mean she wasn't going to speak her mind. "Can I have a minute?"

With a small nod, she watched him turn to leave.

Shit, that was... really easy.

Don't believe it, Tilly reprimanded herself. This was all a trick. They're playing nice for now, but that didn't mean anything. Lots of bad guys play nice. Until they don't anymore.

Still, she could refute a lot of things, but seeing Bishop defy gravity was not something she had a good excuse for. Unless she was suffering from brain damage.

Oh fuck!

Tilly's heart raced almost as fast as her hands were trembling and she dug through her bag and pulled out Bishop's jacket. Survival mode kicked in and before she grabbed her phone, she rummaged through Bishop's coat and looked for that weapon from earlier. It wasn't there. Damn! She checked all his pockets and found a gum wrapper, some loose change and a wadded up piece of paper. On a whim, she unfolded the crumpled thing. It was her address.

Her address written in extremely neat handwriting.

"Fuck."

She had to get out of here! They were both liars! They *were* sent here by Marco. Why the fuck had she believed them? They probably drugged her with hallucinogens, that's why she saw Bishop scale the walls. Ohhhhh those fucking bastards!

Just then, the door opened and in stepped Bishop. The air whooshed out of her as she whispered, "I gotta go." She ripped her IV out and yanked the sheets off. "I can't stay here!" The walls started to wobble, panic crushed her lungs, the world spun. She hated hospitals. Any. Hospital.

None of this could be real. If it was, she was fucked. If it wasn't, she was double fucked.

"Whoa, Tilly, calm down."

"Fuck you," she barreled straight at him, desperate to escape.

Chapter 16

Christ on a cracker! Bishop hadn't expected her to body slam him. Luckily, he had her by over fifty pounds of muscle and about six inches of height. He took the hit and wrapped his arms around her to hold her still, careful of her cast. "What the fuck?"

She bit his hand, he let go, and she jumped away from him. "Stay back!" Tilly stood on the bed, ready to pounce. Fuuuuck, hospital johnnys should never look that sexy.

"Whoa, Tilly, I thought we came to an agreement."

She spat at him. Like, literally hocked a wad and aimed for his face. "You're a fucking liar, Bishop." She tossed something else at him. He looked down at the ground and saw the crumpled up piece of paper - The one with her address on it.

Shit.

Before he could say something, the door opened again and in stepped a nurse. "What on earth are you doing?" She ran over and tried to force Tilly back down onto the bed. Tilly didn't fight her. If she did, she would likely look like a maniac with how she flipped out and they might end up drugging her ass and then what would she do.

Smart girl, Bishop thought. *Really smart girl.*

In a blink, Tilly went from chaotic to compliant. The panic in her eyes retreated, she dropped to her knees on the bed, and plastered on a nervous but friendly smile. "I saw a rat," Tilly lied to the nurse.

"A rat?"

"Mmm hmmm," Tilly's eyes narrowed on Bishop and she said, "two of them, actually."

"I'll call maintenance," the nurse huffed, "where did you see them go?"

"One went right out the door," Tilly's voice was calm, cool and collected as she continued to keep her eye on Bishop, "The other is around here somewhere in this room I'm pretty sure."

"Oh god," the nurse looked under the bed first, "I hate rats."

"That makes two of us."

"I'll be back in a minute. Let me go make some calls and we'll have you moved." The nurse all but made a bee-line out of the room.

Bishop picked up the piece of paper and fisted the damned thing. “I know what it looks like, but looks are deceiving.”

“Yeah, I’d say. Here you come ‘bumping into me’ at The Blue Lizard, then you just happen to be walking down my city block that night I howled, then you show up at the café. All of that was a coincidence, huh? None of it was fucking planned?”

Bishop’s jaw clenched as he tried to think his answer through. “When we met at The Blue Lizard, that was—”

“Planned.”

“Fate.”

She rolled her eyes.

He kept his distance. “The night I was at your house... yes I had your address, but I wasn’t trying to stalk you or anything. I had no intentions of going to your house, I just,” he shrugged, “ended up there.”

Tilly grunted with disapproval and awkwardly tried to cross her arms. She winced, which made Bishop feel like total shit.

“The café wasn’t necessarily planned, either. Valor just happened to be there and so did you. He called me because I was just down the road and I came.”

“Why?” She looked hurt. He didn’t like that look on her one fucking bit, either. Especially since he was the one to make her feel that way.

“Honestly? Valor already told you, we need that book. We’re missing the rest of our—” he took a deep breath, “we’re missing our family and when I saw that book on your coffee table. I’d told him about it.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve never seen a book like it before. I thought it was crazy that you had it. Those books are rare. Dangerous too, you know that?” The face she made said she knew very well that what she’d stolen was bad fucking news and she took it anyway. “We want it for the same reason you did. We’re looking for a miracle, Tilly.”

“So you were just using me to get a book?”

Oh fuck, she looked so damn wounded in that bed, Bishop couldn't fucking stand it so he rushed towards her, "No. And I didn't come to your apartment that night looking for it either. I didn't even know you had it until I was up there with you. I came because I couldn't fucking stay away. In the middle of all my shit right now, with my life falling to pieces around me, you were a bright spot. I was drawn to you, Tilly. I still am."

She put up her hand, halting him from getting any closer and he respected her space. It didn't matter that he was dying to pull her close and hug her tightly and tell her how sorry he was and that he would do anything in his power to make this all work out. She'd likely bite his face off.

"I liked you," she whispered. "I fucking thought this was going to be a good thing."

"Who says it's not?"

The door swung open and in stepped Valor with Jack.

"Lass, this is Jack. The man who can help ye."

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Jack half-smirked. "I need to see what the bloody hell I'm working with before we start making promises."

In true Voodoo Man fashion, Jack swaggered into the room carrying a small duffle bag, shrugged out of his coat, and placed both things carefully on the chair before approaching Tilly with an easy smile and rugged good looks. Bishop was all too grateful Jack was already committed to his own pack and had a woman he cherished more than anything else in life. If not, Bishop would feel a raging surge of jealousy right now for the way Jack was smiling down at Tilly.

"Matilda Jane is it?" Jack approached with a soft and tender gaze. "Looks like you've had a rough night." He sat on the edge of the bed and Tilly didn't budge. She also didn't spit at him. Or yell. Or try to escape.

Okay, yeah, Bishop was grateful and all, but, damn. Why couldn't he turn the clocks back and start this whole thing with her over again?

“May I?” Jack pointed at her cast. Once Tilly nodded, Jack gently held her hand as he squeezed and probed her from shoulder to fingertips.

A low growl slipped out of Valor’s throat and Bishop’s head snapped to his alpha. The man’s dark gaze was pinned on Tilly. What the fuck was his problem?

Next, Jack tilted Tilly’s head back with a slight lift of his finger under her chin. He looked into her gorgeous green eyes and frowned. With a huff, he leaned in and peeled one of her eyelids open more. “Shit,” he murmured. With a grunt, Jack stood and went over to his duffle bag. “You sure about this Valor?”

Val nodded once but didn’t say a word. Bishop wondered what the fuck was going on, and then he saw Jack pull out a couple vials and a paint pen.

“What are you going to do?” Tilly’s voice cracked.

It was like all the fight she had a minute ago had fizzled out. Maybe the pain meds were starting to kick in? Bishop stayed back and watched, all the while trying to keep his shit together.

“I’m going to give you something for the pain, then I’m going to heal your arm and your concussion.” Jack returned to the side of her bed and sat down slowly. “Then, when you’re ready, I’m going to try and work some spells on you.”

Her reaction was astonishing. Relief flooded her, “You can lift it? You can lift the curse?”

“I can try,” Jack said, “but that’s all I can do.”

“So you believe me? You can see it somehow?”

“Not yet,” Jack frowned, “But what I do see is a lot of dark magic in you.”

The door flew open again, “You’re a popular girl,” the nurse smiled. “I just wanted to let you know I’ve called about the... issue you spoke of earlier and we are handling it. Have you seen any others?”

It took Tilly a minute for the question to sink in as they stood there in awkward silence. Bishop spoke up first, “No rats, ma’am. It’s all clear in here.”

The nurse gave a curt nod, grabbed Tilly's file and looked it over, wrote some shit on a dry erase board and announced she was going off shift and a new nurse would be in shortly to change Tilly to a different room. They all stayed quiet until she left again.

"Rats?" Jack asked.

"Long story," Bishop grumbled. "Can you just heal her, please?" He hated that Tilly was hurting and that she was all busted up because of him. He should have never tried to chase her down. He should have approached her differently, but fuck if he knew how to rectify the situation now. He'd just have to make it up to her later.

Jack refocused on Tilly and handed her a vial. "This isn't going to be pleasant. It tastes like shit, but will numb you enough for me to boost your healing."

"Wh-wh-what is it?"

"Magic," Jack grinned. "Which I can see you've dabbled in enough to understand the price associated with such things. Fortunately, this is white, and it's got a lot of purifying properties in it. You're not going to suffer from this, okay?"

She gulped and looked down at her lap for a minute, then, with a roll of her shoulders, she held her hand out for the bottle and made her *fuck it* face. Jack popped the top off and handed it to her carefully and she downed it in the same fashion she had the tequila shots with Bishop at The Blue Lizard.

Bishop took a step forward and leaned in, pressing his fists against the foot of the bed. He watched her eyes glass over. He watched her body melt into the pillow as she fell back.

Valor, too, moved forward. "Such trust she has in strangers."

"She doesn't think she has a choice," Bishop growled. "If she's cursed, then she doesn't have much to lose. Her clock is ticking too fast. She's down to mere months."

"And she's done a lot of spells on herself," Jack added, "She's got a shit-ton of fucking residue in her body. That's not going to work in her favor."

Bishop scrubbed his face with both hands.

"You're all so pretty," she slurred. "Like kaleidoscopes and heartbeats."

“Here we go, Matilda Jane,” Jack scooted closer to her and held her cast. Then he ripped the thing off her arm in three big chunks and wrapped his hands around her arm. “If this works, Hounds, then she’s *other*. If it doesn’t, we’re going to cause more damage. Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“Do it,” Valor ordered.

Bishop didn’t get a chance to say a word before Jack squeezed and twisted her arm while reciting an incantation. She let out a whimper and held still as Jack rubbed something that looked like mud all over her arm.

“Now, Valor.”

Val held her hand, lacing their fingers together, while his other hand gripped her shoulder.

Tilly cried out, her feet kicking under the rough cotton sheets and she thrashed her head around trying to escape the two Hounds holding onto her. Protective instincts ripped through Bishop along with a growl so deep he was sure he’d set off alarms. “What the fuck are you doing?” Bishop hollered.

“Haud yer wheesht!” Valor growled. His grip stayed firm on the woman and he started shaking, too.

“Let go, now!” Jack ordered.

Val stumbled back and rubbed his palms together, panting. “Did it work?”

They each looked at Tilly and waited for her to say something. All she did was cry though, which made Bishop want to shred the hospital room and also the two Hell Hounds who’d put their hands on her to fucking pieces.

“I don’t feel so good,” she hiccupped.

Bishop snatched the small trash can from the side of the bed and got it to her just in time. Poor woman vomited like a frat boy at his first party. She could barely take in a breath before she hurled again. Bishop held her hair back.

Jack got out of their way, “That’s going to take a while. I’m going to make sure no one comes in here while she’s purging. They’ll likely think it’s from her concussion and want to keep her here longer.” He went out the door and closed it behind him.

Tilly climbed onto her knees, the hospital johnny yanked up on one side, exposing a lot of skin. He wanted to cover her up a little, protect her modesty, so he nonchalantly brushed his hand down her leg and tugged the fabric down some.

“What did he give her?” Bishop snarled.

“I’ve no idea, but he wouldna give it to her unless it was necessary,” Valor frowned as Tilly continued heaving, “I didna ken she had so much black magic in her.”

“Do you think that’s why you thought she was other?” It would make sense. Maybe Valor could see the magic like a halo around her and would have mistaken it as supernatural powers instead of bad fucking juju.

“No, I—” Val clamped his mouth shut and moved to the other side of the bed. To Bishop’s surprise, Valor began rubbing Tilly’s back in small circles and spoke to her quietly in Gaelic. He’d never seen Valor get soft with someone before, his tone was gentle and almost apologetic.

Tilly took in a ragged breath and started coughing. “Water. I need water!” She yacked again.

“Gods, lass, I’m so sorry,” Valor looked over at Bishop. “I tried to push some of my power into her to heal her wounds. Now I fear I’ve messed her up worse than she was before.”

Tilly dropped the waste bin onto the bed, got on her hands and knees like a dog, and started vomiting even harder.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Val, what the hell can we do for her?”

“This must run its course, I’m afraid. All we can do is hold onto her at this point.”

Bishop wanted to crack his alpha in the motherfucking jaw for this. Tilly’s head tilted up and Bishop saw tears streaming down her face along with snot and spit and all kinds of nasty. Her irises were all black now, and the whites of her eyes were a faded purple. “Holy fucking shit,” he whispered. Tilly must have really been contaminated to have this much residue come out of her so violently.

“We’ve got you, Sweetness.” Bishop wiped the sweat from her forehead and ran his hands through her hair to keep it out of her face. It felt like thick satin in his hands.

Okay, now was definitely *not* the time to think about how soft her damn hair was. What the fuck.

“Water! Please!” she choked out.

“We canna give ye water, lass. Ye must expel everything first, then we can give ye something to ease ye.”

Tilly flipped Valor the middle finger then went back to puking. It was awful. After another ten minutes, Tilly collapsed and Bishop caught her before her head fell into the trash can. When he repositioned her, his heart stopped beating for a minute and he grew dizzy with panic. “Fuck, did she just die?”

Tilly moaned in response and Bishop sighed in relief.

Jack stepped back into the room and hurried over to her. “We don’t have much time.”

Bishop moved the almost full trash bin out of the way while Jack opened Tilly’s left eye to look at it. The coloring was good. At least, to Bishop it looked alright, but what the hell did he know about magic. He was just a Hell Hound.

“I don’t think it worked,” Jack frowned. “Bloody hell, I’m not sure what to do here, Hounds. She’s cleansed, but... there’s a curse still in there. I can see it now, it’s like a pin prick behind her iris. I don’t have the right magic for this kind of thing. I’m so bloody sorry.”

Valor looked completely defeated as he slumped into a chair. “Is she healed of everything else at least?”

“Mmm hmmm,” Jack looked at her other eye just to double check. “If you’re this serious about her Val, you might want to take her to Luce.”

“I canna,” he argued, “and ye ken why well enough. He’s not stable anymore. I’m already wearing him thin with what I’ve got going on with the twins. And it’s not like I can take her there to see him.”

Humans couldn’t go into Hell without being dead first. Tilly, thank god, was still alive and well. And Valor was right, Lucifer was super unstable right now. He might look strong and act alright, but those who knew him well could see there was a slight change in their maker. To ask anything of him right now wouldn’t be right. Lucifer had bigger problems than one cursed human woman who was a thief and user of black magic.

“Well, I’m going to draw some spells on her, but I don’t think it’s going to work. I’ll have to go back through my old books and see if there’s anything helpful in there. I really wasn’t expecting something like this, Hounds. Your woman has a high magical tolerance, that’s for bloody sure.” Jack took out a white paint pen and gently lifted her hospital johnny. Carefully keeping her more intimate parts covered, he drew a bunch of symbols on her belly, her thighs, neck and arms. “Help me roll her over so I can do her back, Bishop.”

They flipped her over carefully and stared at her perfectly healed tattooed ass. Guess Valor’s magic hadn’t missed a thing. It wasn’t even scabbed and looked fucking gorgeous. Jack respectfully averted his gaze and drew more runes down her back. “These will wear off in a couple days, but she’ll be out of here by then and hopefully I’ll have some more answers for you.”

“Okay,” Bishop stared at Tilly’s back while Jack finished working on it. “She’ll be staying with us, so when you find something that’ll help, contact me or Val.”

They didn’t need one more thing on their plate right now – not with the twins missing and the devil out of sorts, but some piece of Bishop was almost relieved to have this distraction... as temporary as she may be.

Chapter 17

Sebastian and Drake dangled upside down, strung up by their feet, and were both rocking serious headaches.

“You alive?” Baz asked his twin.

“Unfortunately,” Drake grunted when he tried to move.

“You hear what the guy called the other one?”

“No. I couldn’t hear anything while they worked on me.” Drake winced when he twisted around to look at his brother. “What did they say?”

“They think us being twins should have some kind of magical boost. They’re getting frustrated that nothing is working.”

“What the hell are they even trying to do?”

“Fuck if I know, D, but they called someone Master.”

Drake jerked back and his body started swaying even more.

“*Master?* What the fuck?”

“These guys must be the ones who were trying to crack Hell’s walls.” That’s what was happening when the twins were taken. The Hounds were in the middle of a war with the *malanum* and Sara, the Devil’s Darling, had come into their home, shared dinner and drinks with them, and met privately with Bishop afterwards. That was the night shit went sideways for the twins. Very. Fucking. Sideways.

“They must be the traitors we’ve been looking for. We’ve got to get out of here and tell Lucifer and the others.”

“But I like it here so much, Baz. Please... don’t make me leave now.”

He rolled his eyes at Drake’s dry sense of humor. Doing a quick inventory of his body, Baz’s wounds weren’t nearly as nasty as they had been. Earlier, he tried to send his soul out to get help again. All to no avail. Annoyed that they couldn’t figure a way out of this clusterfuck, Baz refused to stay strung up like meat for the butcher.

“Fuck this.” With a grunt, Baz started swaying his body, getting it to swing back and forth towards Drake. They looked like two bloodied acrobats. One, two, three, four – *damnit!* – five, six swings later, Baz reached Drake’s hand. The twins clasped onto each other but Drake’s grip slipped and Baz swung back and forth one more time before they got a good hold on each other again.

Baz’s body stretched and his bones cracked as he struggled climbing up Drake’s body so he could reach the ties around their feet. With one hand around the rafter, he used the other to untie the ropes. “Ready to drop?”

“Not really, but go for it. I’ll just fall.”

Baz unbound his brother’s feet and Drake crashed to the ground with a loud “oomph!” Next, Baz grabbed the rafter with both hands and untied his own feet. Bending in half hurt almost as much as stretching himself had. Every bit of him was sore. Finally, after a little finagling, Baz unbound his ankles and dropped to the ground with a little more grace than Drake had, but not by much.

Drake slowly pulled himself up to his feet and stumbled over to the stone wall. Bracing against it, he tried to catch his breath. His eyes were purple and blue with white centers. Cuts and symbols were carved into his skin. His dark hair was matted to his head and his nostrils were crusted with dried blood. For a Hell Hound who prided himself in always looking clean cut and perfect, he looked like a neglected animal with mange now. “Did you get out at all?”

Baz gripped the side of his head and staggered over to his twin. “Yeah, for a second, but everything got fuzzy. I couldn’t see much.”

“Still drawn to the same thing?”

Baz nodded and they both slid down the wall until their asses hit the floor.

“I remember,” Drake huffed, “Lucifer telling Valor something about Sara drinking the blood of twins when she was taken. Did I make that up or did that happen?”

“That’s the story.”

Drake looked at the crease in his elbow. There were holes big enough to drive nails into his veins that were still seeping blood, “Pretty sure they drained me almost dry this time.”

“Mmmph.”

“What the fuck is going on, Baz? How is any of this possible?”

“I don’t know, brother. I’m more concerned about how we’re going to get out of here. We can’t keep being guinea pigs. Soon, they’re going to figure out a way to get what they want from us.”

“And then we’re done. There will be nothing left to survive.” Drake hit the back of his head on the wall with a thump. “There’s nothing left to live for anyway,” he murmured.

“Hey,” Baz shoved a finger in Drake’s face, “don’t you fucking go there, Hound. There’s always something to live for, we just haven’t found it yet.”

“And we’re not going to. I’ve told you that a million times.”

This was the problem with sharing a soul. The twin who didn’t carry it was usually hopeless while he was soulless. It took a little while to get that low, but they always arrived at rock bottom eventually. Baz wasn’t in the mood for it so he grabbed his brother’s leg and transferred their soul to Drake. The exchange was like having the floor drop out from under him and for a split second, Baz felt like he was falling into nothingness. The transfer only lasted about two seconds, thank god. The sensations that came with giving your soul to someone else was never something Baz got used to. Drake either, for that matter. His brother jerked as the soul settled into him.

“How many Masters can there be?” Baz asked.

“Even one is one too many.”

“Three of them worked on you from what I could see. I think.”

“You *think*?” Drake frowned, “Did you forget how to count?”

“My vision is whacked.”

“Mmmph,” Drake leaned over and peeled Baz’s eyelid open more, “Fuck brother, you’ve got floaters in there. They’re all purple and gray like worms.”

“You should see your peepers, Hound. Freaky shit.”

Drake swiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand, “I’ll project our soul out again as soon as I can concentrate, okay? If it’s drawn to the same thing each time, that’s got to be a good sign.”

“Or we’ve changed too much with the magic they keep pumping into us and the dark magic is drawn to more dark magic.”

“That’s a thought.”

“Maybe we can lure it in? Use evil to fight evil. I don’t know.”

The twins knew from playing “unconscious” and listening to conversations their captors had while torturing the two of them, that the enemy was trying to turn the twins into something else. Not a Trojan horse for *malanum*, but something... *else*. The magics they were forcing into the twins was getting harder to handle and more difficult to come back from.

Visions of dark things haunted the Baz and Drake now. And, even though neither of them said it aloud, they were both worried. All it would take was the right combination of magic to turn the twins into a new weapon. And with all that’s happened so far, Master was close to reaching his goal.

What if they were turning into a divining rod of some sort? A dark magic hunter of some kind? Would they become a weapon or a tool to find something even more dangerous? Or would they be used to destroy more of Hell?

Exhaustion crashed over them like a tidal wave and the twin Hounds slid in towards each other. Their heads pressed together and their eyes fluttered shut.



When Tilly woke up, it took her a minute to figure out where she was. The city lights cast a halo out of her hospital window and there was a lovely smell of coffee tickling her nose. She licked her dry lips and cringed. Oh God... did a cat shit in her mouth? She slowly looked around her darkened room and saw a shadow looming in the corner.

Her heart hammered. Had the creeper snuck into her room? Was he here to kill her?

She sat up and tried to focus on the image and quickly reached around for the nurse call box. Blindly feeling around her small bed, she couldn't find the damn thing at all, which caused her to seriously panic.

The lights flicked on and she realized it wasn't the creeper at all. It was Valor, or as she called him in her head, Foxy Boy.

"Relax, lass." Valor rose from his chair in a graceful way. As he approached her, Valor oozed dominance and control. His movements were almost predatory in a way, and he captured her attention and held it. It was his eyes. So fierce... penetrating. And his jaw clenched and released like he was chewing on dirty thoughts and liked how they tasted. He ran his hand over his long beard. His hands were massive and his thighs in those leather pants were impressive, as were the size of his boots.

Wait, what?

"Look at me," Valor snapped his fingers.

She blinked and shook her head, shaking out the ridiculous thoughts she was having. "What?"

Valor lifted her chin with his finger and tilted her head. His gaze seared her. Tilly's lips were a tight, thin line as he continued to stare at her with a mix of concern and something else. Desire? Nah, that was just her crazy talking again. "How do ye feel?"

She swallowed the lump in her throat and shrugged, "My arm doesn't hurt anymore."

"Does anything hurt?"

She did a silent inventory of her body and discovered she actually felt really good. Was it the drugs? Or was it the insanity?

Everything came back to her in a rush. The car slamming into her, the doctors setting her arm, Bishop and Valor saying they weren't what she thought, Bishop scaling the wall like a big ass spider, and... that other guy. That guy with the duffel bag who made her drink some nasty fucking shit and then he—

Tilly looked down at her arm. Her cast was gone. She had completely healed. There wasn't a single scratch on her from the accident, just her regular scars remained. Thank god. But her stomach burned something terrible and the taste in her mouth was reason enough to not open it again.

“Here,” Valor handed her a packet of mint gum, “This will have to do until we get ye home and cleaned up.”

She quickly put two pieces in her mouth. Tilly didn’t have the energy to be embarrassed. So what if she smelled bad? It was because of what they did to her, so they shouldn’t complain. And she was too grateful for how good she felt to bitch about it. “What was that?”

“What was what, *mo leannan*?”

“That stuff I drank.”

“An elixir to dull your senses so we could heal ye properly and swiftly. I didna want ye to suffer any more than ye already had, and morphine wasna going to cut it for what we had to do to your body.”

She tried to put that all together into some kind of logic, but magic rarely needed logic to exist or be understood. “Why do I feel so light on the inside? I feel like I’m made of air.”

Valor’s slight smile made him even more handsome. “Jack was able to purge the residue clinging to ye. The lightness ye feel is the absence of darkness that came with what all ye’ve done, magically speaking.”

Her eyebrows popped up and she tried to give him an innocent look. One, unfortunately, he wasn’t buying.

“I understand,” he said softly. “You’re desperate to break your curse and are willing to do anything for a chance to do so. But,” he held his finger in front of her, “If ye dabble in the darkness, lass, ye must cleanse yourself of it afterwards or it’ll likely kill ye before this curse will.”

The air rushed out of Tilly’s lungs, “You believe me then? You seriously believe that I’m cursed?”

“I wouldna have doubted it, but Jack saw the proof and confirmed it.”

Her heart raced, “Was he able to lift it?” She held her arms up to Valor, “Is that what these symbols are for? Am I cured?”

Annnnd this was the moment her hip-hip-hooray crashed and burned.

“No,” Valor whispered roughly. “That doesna mean we’re done trying, though.”

Well, that was something at least. Tilly chewed on her gum and tried to reign in all her emotions. Her head felt a little too jumbled with a fuckload of questions and theories, but the one that stuck in her mind the most was the idea of synchronicity again. That word was seriously getting overused a lot lately. “Where’s Bishop?”

“Outside. On the roof.” Valor took a step back, “He canna be in confined spaces for verra long and we spelled the door and room so no one would enter while ye rested. Your concussion was healed as well as your arm and anything else that ailed ye, but there’s no way to explain your miraculous recovery to the physicians here so we had to spell the place a wee bit.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“You’re welcome.”

Cue the awkward silence. Tilly fiddled with her bedsheet.

“We need to get ye home.”

“I can’t go back there, it’s too dangerous.” And she couldn’t go to her sister’s house either. No way was she going to let Vivian get caught up in this latest mess.

“I wasna speaking of your home, Matilda Jane. I was speaking of mine. You’re coming back with us.”

Oh no way. Nope, nope, nope. She didn’t know these guys and shit had hit the fan enough already in the brief time she’d spent with them. “I have enough on my plate right now. Playing house with two men I don’t really know isn’t going to happen.”

“Ye doona have a choice, lass.” Valor began pulling out her clothes from the plastic hospital bag and handed Tilly her bra and panties. He dangled them off a long index finger with a grin, “Let’s start with getting ye dressed and go from there.”

She didn’t argue. She wanted out of this place as fast as possible so she could plan her escape. Marco was after her and she refused to be a sitting duck. Even without the threat of Marco, Tilly and hospitals didn’t mix well. She needed to get the fuck out of there.

Valor turned around to give her some privacy and Tilly quickly shimmied into her underwear, fastened her bra, and climbed out of the bed. Next, she grabbed her dress and tugged it over her head.

“You can turn around now.”

Valor barely looked at her as he bitched, “You’re not dressed properly for this weather.”

“I missed laundry day,” she barked, “and all my other pants are getting too tight.”

Valor chuckled and handed her Bishop’s leather coat next. “A woman should have meat on her bones,” he zippered her up, “and there’s no such thing as too tight, lass.”

Now was not the time to have lusty thoughts, but goddamn... Foxy Boy’s accent was so fucking hot. If he called her *Sassenach*, would her panties melt off right now? Yup. Definitely. To her surprise, Valor bent down on one knee and grabbed her right foot. “Lift,” he ordered and then slid her flats on one at a time. His hand felt hot as he held her ankle and Tilly grabbed his tensed shoulders to stay steady while he slipped on her other shoe.

“I’m going to have to smuggle ye out of here, lass.” He looked up at her and Tilly’s breath hitched. He looked... *Ugh, stop thinking with your head in the fucking gutter, Tilly. For crying out loud, now is not the time for this shit!*

“Are ye ready?” Valor stood and towered over her.

She didn’t have much choice other than to go with Valor for now. She couldn’t go back to her apartment, and she couldn’t stay here in the hospital and she definitely needed to get the hell out of here as fast as possible. That creeper was still out there and he most likely worked for Marco. It made perfect sense. He must have been tailing her, following her around the city, and finally reported back to his boss about where she was living. Asshole.

And the shittiest thing about it was, he had been so damned good looking.

What the fuck was up with all the hotness lately? She growled, “What the fuck is wrong with you, woman?” Tilly talked to herself as she marched towards the door to leave, “You’ve got the most fucked up views.” She glanced at Valor and shrugged, “Sorry. I wasn’t talking to you.”

Valor arched an eyebrow and almost smiled, “I’m used to that sort of thing. Ye have met Bishop, right?” He opened the door and brought Tilly in close to him, tucking her in tight under his arm. “Stay quiet.”

Nurses were talking over by the desk, there was a patient with an IV rack shuffling down the hall, and an old woman with a bag of food was heading towards one of the other rooms in the opposite direction they headed in.

Tilly and Valor made it to the elevators and Valor hit the down button with his middle finger. Once the doors opened and they stepped inside, he didn't let go of her like she expected him to. Tilly didn't try to pry herself out of his grip, either. Valor was warm, smelled nice, and gave her a weird sense of comfort, which she really needed right now.

Tilly wasn't some badass ninja warrior who handled her shit with grace and skill. She'd only gotten this far in life with a bad case of fuck its and luck. So yeah, if Foxy Boy here was going to offer her help, Tilly would take anything he had to offer.

Once they reached the bottom level, Tilly figured they could walk out of here like two visitors and be good to go, so when the door opened and Valor held her tighter, she didn't understand it.

Valor pulled out his cell and made a call, "Aye, I've got her downstairs. Meet us out front." He hung up and escorted her out the front door. "Bishop didn't give them your real name and we paid cash for the bill so there's no need to fret over a paper trail. We'll have someone scrub the file from the database regardless. Whoever this Marco is will find a record of ye having been here, lass."

Holy shit, she hadn't even thought of that.

Just then, Bishop came out of nowhere. "Tilly." He said her name with so much relief, it made her heart flutter. She would have run into Bishop's arms if Valor would just let go of her.

But Valor continued to hold her tight. "I was afraid she'd run once we got down to the first floor," he said in low tones. "I'll leave her with ye now. Get her home safely and stay there until I return. That's an order, Hound."

"Wait. Whoa." Tilly was already being steered away by Bishop and she swerved around to see Valor walking in the other direction. "What the hell is happening here?"

Valor didn't respond, the son-of-a-bitch. He kept walking away until he rounded the corner and disappeared from sight.

Bishop squeezed Tilly's hand, redirecting her attention, "You're staying with us and we're going to protect you."

"In exchange for Marco's information so you can get that book back?" She couldn't tell how pissed she was nor how grateful.

Bishop looked like he was going to say something, but instead, he clenched his jaw tight and nodded.

Again, what choice did she have at the moment? None. So she would play nice for now. Unless they tossed her into a hole in the ground, like some *Silence of the Lambs* shit, she would find a way to escape once they let their guard down.

There was just one small, teensy-weensy little problem with this plan: Some fucked up part of Tilly was already dreading the day she'd have to walk away from them.

Chapter 18

Valor couldn't get the scent of that woman out of his nose. Her hair smelled like rosemary and even though she'd been violently ill, her skin still carried the fragrance of female and she smelled divine. As he marched down the street and headed towards his car, Valor kept a wary eye out for *malanum*.

Och, what he wouldn't give right now for a swift and vicious hunt. His aggression and desire warred within him and if Valor didn't stab something soon, he was going to lean the other way on the Hound spectrum and want to fuck hard enough to be bedridden for days.

Right now wasn't the time for either of those things. He arrived at Tilly's apartment prepared to look for the book and grab some of her things. Bishop offered to do this while Tilly was in the hospital, but Valor denied his request. He wanted that Hound guarding the outside of the hospital while she recovered. Besides, Valor wanted to learn a little more about the woman they would now harbor in their home.

As if he needed this responsibility added to his plate right now. Maiden, Mother, and Crone, what the fuck was he thinking offering to help her?

He knew damn well what he'd been thinking and none of it was altruistic or honorable. Valor would do anything to find the twins and this was his best shot for now. Seeing Matilda Jane in The Blue Lizard was a sign, Valor was convinced of it. The more he learned about this woman, the louder his instincts roared to keep her close. The fact that she worked with magic was an even bigger sign. And when Bishop scaled the walls with his Hell Hound power, she didn't freak out at all.

Either she knew more than she let on or she was more than she let on. Time would tell.

Valor arrived at Matilda Jane's building and cautiously entered her apartment. The door was still slightly ajar, so he slid into the space like a shadow. His first instinct was to scan for *malanum*. He found none. Actually, there was nothing here at all.

“Gods,” he whispered. Whoever came here had wrecked her place, but there was a minimal mess. She didn’t have much in this small space. Valor sniffed the air, trying to capture the scent of the intruder so he would know it when he smelled it again. It was a harsh cologne and a faint scent of cigarettes.

It didn’t take long, considering the apartment was the size of Valor’s office at home, for him to go through the place and confirm that the book was indeed gone.

Random drawers and three small cabinets in her kitchen were all left open. So was the freezer door. There was a piece of paper on the refrigerator: “Bucket” was written in bold lettering with a few lines crossed off. He snatched it and stuffed it into his pocket to read later. Now wasn’t the time to get sidetracked.

Growling in frustration, the Hell Hound went over to a heap of clothing on the floor and grabbed what he thought were useful before rummaging through her closet next. Valor froze when he saw a lock on the inside of the closet door. What the hell? What kind of trouble did this lass get into that she would need to lock herself *in* the closet?

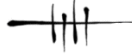
A deadly growl rose from his throat. No woman should feel so frightened that she would have to lock herself away. Was it paranoia? Caution? Or something even more dangerous like *habit*?

Valor examined the tiny space more thoroughly. The hardwood floor held the scent of cleaning products. There were also a few scratches in the wooden planks, like fingernails had carved ribbons into the floor.

“Christ, almighty,” he groaned. In the corner of the closet was a wooden spoon, which he picked up. “Teeth marks,” he whispered to himself. “Maiden, Mother, and Crone, lass, what is all this?”

He took the spoon and stepped out of the apartment with a duffel bag full of women’s clothing and a great weight in his heart. Something told the Hound that Tilly wasn’t just important to the pack, she was probably going to be detrimental to it, too.

One thing at a time, he thought. First get the book, then find the twins, and then find a way to handle Matilda Jane.



Bishop drove home with the windows cracked down. He tapped along to the song playing on the radio, looked over at Tilly and smiled, trying to coax her to get into the music more. When she didn't, he cranked up the volume and scream-sung to the song. "Oh yyyeaaahhhhhh- ahh-ahhhhh."

She almost laughed. *Almost*. "You know what that song's about?" Bishop turned the radio back down, "It's about a man in war."

"It's about resilience." Tilly stared out her passenger side window.

"Same, same."

Tilly crossed her arms over her chest. Tilly was in a war herself right now. It was against the world, against fate.

"You hungry, Sweetness? I can stop and get you something. We don't have a lot of food at the house and I'm sure with everything you've yacked up, your stomach is probably trying to digest itself now."

"I'm okay, just really thirsty."

"There's a case of bottled water on the floor in the back."

Tilly twisted around but didn't see the water, so she unbuckled her seatbelt and halfway climbed into the backseat. Stretching as much as possible, she grabbed a water and guzzled the whole thing in four chugs then grabbed another. Fuck it tasted good.

She spat her gum out into the second empty water bottle and reached for a third. The entire time, she didn't pay attention to the road like she should have. Call it denial, numbness, or a fake sense of relief, but Tilly didn't feel worried with Bishop.

She had seen enough shit in her short life to know there were more than just humans roaming around. He could be some kind of demon. Could be a Hell Hound. Could be something else...

After a while, they arrived at a gate. Bishop hit a button on his visor and the gate swung open so he could drive through. When they pulled up to the house, Tilly had to pick her jaw up off her lap. "Nice place."

“Thanks,” Bishop pulled around to the top of the circle and parked by the front door. He hopped out and went around to help her out of the truck like a gentleman. “I’ll call for delivery. You like pizza? Subs? Chinese? Name it and I’ll have it sent. I’m not much of a picky eater, so I’ll gobble down anything, but I want you to have whatever you want.”

Geez, Bishop was a talker. Tilly couldn’t figure out if she was just now realizing this or was his chattiness a new thing.

“I’m not picky either. I like everything.”

Bishop unlocked the front door to the white mansion and held it open for her. The breath whooshed out of Tilly’s body when she stepped inside. “Wow,” she sighed.

It was a lovely home. Sleek, modern. It smelled faintly like fresh paint and new carpet. The imperial staircase was exquisite with its white marble and iron rails. It was seriously impressive.

“Come on, Sweetness.” Bishop grabbed her hand and started leading her up the steps. She went along with it because, again, what choice did she have right now. Once they reached the top, Bishop took her down the hall and into a bedroom that was most definitely his.

It smelled like Bishop in here. His room was painted in neutral colors on the cool side. His bed was unmade. Clothes littered the floor. A few pieces of artwork hung, but weren’t by any artists she was familiar with. They must have been commissioned. If they were prints from a famous painter, she’d have recognized them.

Tilly put her hands on her hips. “You mean to tell me that there isn’t a spare bedroom in this big ass place, Hound Dog?”

“None that are set up for company,” Bishop smirked, “But while you shower in there,” he pointed at his private bath, “I’ll get a room ready for you.”

She felt a wave of relief.

“And here’s a charger for your phone.” He handed her a plug and turned to leave so she could have privacy.

Sooo, yeah... this was... mmmph... Tilly didn’t know what the fuck this was. She hurried into the bathroom, then shut and locked the door.

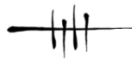
“Good god.”

The bathroom was gigantic and decorated with white subway tile, marble, and stained glass. The shower boasted three nozzles and a wide bench. Live plants climbed the side of one wall adjacent from the window, and extra fluffy towels hung on a warming rack. There were two different kinds of razors on the counter along with some shaving cream and a bar of soap. There was also a beard brush and some kind of oil.

Now she felt super weird. This was Bishop's private space and he'd just let her in without even trying to hide anything first. She could snoop around all she wanted in here and he'd never know.

Clearing her throat, Tilly slipped out of her clothes and started the shower. While the water warmed up, she snooped through his cabinets to see if he had a spare toothbrush. There was no such luck so she guzzled the mouthwash she found in the bottom of the vanity and prayed it would be enough for now.

Next, she got into the shower and sighed loudly. Fuck it felt good to be drenched in heat. Her muscles began to relax and she grabbed the bottle of shampoo and got to work. Too bad cleaning her body wasn't going to scrub away her troubles.



Valor walked in with a bag full of Matilda Jane's belongings strapped to his shoulder. He heard Bishop ordering food from the kitchen so he went in to check on him and their new houseguest. Once Bishop hung up the phone, Valor asked, "Where is she?"

"Upstairs, in my shower. I wanted to order her food before I made up the spare room."

"I'll help ye," Valor carried the glittery pink and white duffel back with him and took the steps two at a time. "I didna find the book at her place. It's gone."

"You so sure we should be looking for it right now, Alpha? I mean, given that—"

"Given that half our pack is missing and we've not a trail or scent to follow? Aye, this is a good plan. It's the only plan."

"It's bad fucking magic," Bishop growled.

Valor wasn't going to argue. Lucifer had strict rules about what magic they could and could not use, but right now Valor didn't give a flying fuck. He also knew that a lot of Bishop's unease stemmed from what had happened the night the twins went missing.

Bishop rubbed the back of his neck as he reached the top of the steps. "I can't even begin to understand how a woman like her had a book like that."

"We doona ken a thing about this woman, Hound. She may look like a rose, but..."

"She's not a bad person. She's just in a bad way."

Valor wasn't going to argue with that, either. Not yet, anyway.

"Why do we have to focus on this damn book? Why can't we just ask Lucifer for the boost in spells or something?"

Valor stepped into the spare bedroom and marched over to the linen closet in the bathroom. "The Devil canna perform any kind of dark spells right now."

Lucifer's balance, after what happened with Hell's walls not too long ago, was in terrible shape. His good side and bad side weren't to be tipped, for any reason. Valor and Bishop were on their own with the hunt for the twins – with the help of a few other packs who were keeping their eyes and ears open for clues. Asking Lucifer to help with magic would cost Satan too much. Cost the world too much.

"If Lucifer could help us, he would have by now. Ye ken that as well as I do, Hound." Valor turned Bishop's attention to something else, "Ye could have let her take a shower in here," he growled.

"So?"

He tossed Bishop a set of sheets. "Ye take that end; I'll get this one." Together, they made the bed and Valor pounded the pillows to fluff them up. Just as he went to retrieve some extra blankets, he heard a sound and froze to listen better.

A light melody rang out from across the hall.

Gods, he thought, *what a voice*.

"That woman can carry a tune," Bishop's smile was huge and obnoxious. He went for the blankets while Valor just stood there, dumbfounded. "And she's got one hell of an ass too, in case you failed to notice, Alpha."

Val gripped the pillow so hard he almost tore the fabric. Once, right after Bishop was exorcised of the *malanum* in his body, they had a discussion about women. Valor said he wanted a woman who could sing. Didn't matter if she was good at it or not, he just liked the idea of a woman who would belt out a tune if it pleased her. But this? Tilly's voice was straight up angelic.

And Bishop was right, the dirty Hound. Tilly had an ass that beckoned for a good spanking. Round, full, and perfectly proportionate with the rest of her curves.

Valor cleared his throat and tossed the pillow back on the bed. "I'll call ye down when the food arrives. See that she doesn't try to sneak out of the house by climbing out of a damn window."

He left Bishop to set up the rest of Tilly's things. Gods, what have they gotten into? Every step Valor took to get out of there, his body roared to pivot and get closer to her instead. It was maddening. She had a siren's voice and Valor wanted to sink down into the depths just to keep hearing it. She was a vixen to boot. If he didn't know any better, Valor would accuse of her being sent by the Devil. Only a creature made for Hell would be so divine and alluring.

"Hell and Heaven help me," Valor finally made it down to the first floor. He just allowed a black magic spinner, who had enemies coming after her, into his home and made her a goddamned bed.

Trouble. Matilda Jane was going to be big fucking trouble. Gods, what a woman.

Chapter 19

Bishop really had zero boundaries. He opened the glittery pink and white duffel bag and thought to himself, *This is not my business. I'm probably crossing the creepy line right now touching her belongings.* Fuck it, after everything she'd been through lately, Bishop wanted her to feel as comfortable as possible, which meant he would unpack her bag and make sure everything was folded or put away nicely.

He hung up a bunch of wrinkly clothes into her closet and even set out her toothbrush and toiletries on the bathroom counter. He couldn't help but smile at the fact that Valor thought to grab Tilly's shampoo and whatever the hell this face cream gloop was in the glass jar. Hounds weren't strangers to women, they knew how particular those creatures could be about their products. Women, not the Hounds.

Hell Hounds don't give a shit what they use so long as it got the job done. That went for all manner of things: weapons, soap, weights, bedroom toys.

Bishop kept his ears perked so he would catch any sound coming from his room. Annnnd right on cue, he swiftly popped his head out her bedroom and saw Tilly doing the same from his room. They smiled at each other.

She looked amazing.

Every inch of Bishop's body hardened as Tilly walked out of his room and down the hall towards him. Those curves... those pink lips...

Fuuuuuck. The Hound was a wreck underneath his cool exterior. Those black fires he'd been tossed into earlier hadn't done that great of a job of unfucking him. Maybe Lucifer's powers were still drained, which meant the fires weren't as strong as usual. Or maybe Bishop was beyond the lick of those flames now. Didn't matter. One look at Tilly with her strawberry blonde hair still wet and her body back in that damned long dress again, the Hell Hound wanted to go wild and make her howl until her throat was raw. Then he wanted to come down her throat and snuggle up in the bed and hold her tight while she slept.

As if she could sense the desire roaring inside him, Tilly approached cautiously. "How long do you plan to keep me here?"

Bishop's hearing was a little fuzzy. It sounded like she thought she was a prisoner or something. "What?"

"How long am I supposed to stay here?"

Forever would be just great, he thought. "You're staying until we have everything squared away. Then we'll see."

Tilly's green gaze pinned him with a nasty glare. "We'll see *what* exactly?"

Bishop saw she had a weapon in her hand. That little snoop had stolen it from his stash in end table drawer. It shouldn't have turned him on, but it seriously fucking did. "Don't cut yourself with that, Sweetness. We can't risk another hospital run." He gestured towards the spare bedroom, "This is your room while you're here. Val brought back some of your things, too. I've unpacked everything for you and there are extra blankets over there in case you get cold."

"He went back to my place?"

Bishop didn't respond. He went down the steps, figuring she'd either follow him or not.

She followed him. "Bishop!"

He didn't turn around. With his state of mind right now, the last thing he needed was to see a buxom woman bound down a huge flight of steps. It would send him to his knees and have him begging like the Hound he was.

Bishop bit his bottom lip and tried to remember what her mouth felt like on his when they'd kissed at The Blue Lizard. Such a crying shame he'd been in a bad fucking headspace with his unbalance at the time. And he wasn't in a better one now, so thinking about kissing Tilly needed to stop. Now. Right the fuck now.

Shit, he couldn't stop thinking about it. It was like the harder he tried to quit, the stronger his desire roared.

"Bishop!" she snapped from behind him.

He managed to make it all the way to the kitchen without turning around. His hands balled into fists and his breathing grew labored. Shit, shit, shit.

"Bishop!"

The Hound turned around and ensnared her with a fierce grip. She wanted his attention, well she fucking had it now. Bishop pressed his entire body against hers and walked Tilly back until she hit a wall. He tried to stop himself. Truly, he did. But he was too far gone for control and didn't give a fuck about anything except tasting her again.

His nostrils flared. She smelled really fucking good and used his shampoo and soap and the combination did a job on his senses the likes of which he'd never felt before.

"Fuck, woman."

He crushed his mouth to hers and ignored her pounding fists on his shoulders. Instead of backing off, Bishop grabbed her wrists, disarmed her, and slammed both her hands against the wall, pinning them above her head as he kept kissing her. She tasted like mint and magic and he ground his cock against her, begging her to let him in.

"Easy, Hound." Valor's voice vaguely registered.

Valor ripped Bishop away from Tilly and forced him to the ground. Barking like an angry dog, Bishop fought for freedom and Valor slammed him down hard enough to ring Bishop's church bells.

"At. Ease. Hound."

Bishop *blink-blinked* and sucked in a couple ragged breathes. "Jesus... fuck... *fuck!*" He dug the heel of his boots into the floor and tried to regain some control. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

“Doona apologize to me,” Valor grabbed Bishop by his shirt, hauled him to his feet, and shoved Bishop forward. “Apologize to her.”

Shame consumed him. Tilly was flushed and still pressed against the wall. “Oh god, I’m so sorry, Tilly. I... I’m so sorry for that.” She swallowed and stayed silent.

“Do ye accept, lass?” Valor still had a hold on Bishop’s shirt collar.

Tilly nodded quickly and looked down at the floor.

“We doona attack our guests,” Valor growled in Bishop’s ear. “If ye canna find your control, Hound, I’ll find it for ye and it willna be pleasant. Understood?”

“Yes, Alpha.”

Tilly’s gaze snapped to Bishop and... oh god damnit, she looked just as ashamed as he felt. That wasn’t a good look on her at all. “It’s fine,” she said.

“No, it’s not. I shouldn’t have acted like that.”

Tilly looked like she wanted to say more, but instead of coming out with it, she turned and went back up the steps. They watched her go and only after they heard her bedroom door shut did Valor let go of Bishop.

“What the flying fuck is wrong with ye, Hound?”

Bishop didn’t have a good answer. “I’m still not right. The fires didn’t really help like they should have.”

Valor growled and walked over to the kitchen sink and splashed cold water on his face. He was silent for a minute before admitting, “Fuck, I think I’m right there with ye.”

“Double fuck.”

“I’d love to, but now isn’t the time and you’re not my type.”

Bishop leaned against the counter and tried to find his inner peace. Valor did the same and they glared at each other from across the breakfast bar. “What are we going to do?”

“Respect her and keep a safe fucking distance.”

“We need to let her go. She’s not safe with us.”

“We must have control of ourselves, Hound. And she stays. I’ll not have the lass out there like a rabbit for the wolves. We need that book and we promised to help her. We’re men of our word.”

“We’re not men. We’re Hell Hounds. And right now you and I are too dangerous for her to be with.”

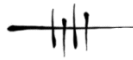
“Better us than a killer, aye?” Valor pulled out his phone, hit a couple buttons, and held it out so Bishop could see the screen. “I took a picture of this on Tilly’s ceiling. Was it there when you were?”

It was a drawing of a symbol.

“No,” Bishop took the cell and held it with shaky hands. “This isn’t good.”

“She’s been playing with fire, Hound. The lass was bound to get burned.”

Bishop’s instinct roared, “We have to protect her.”



“Wow, Tilly, you are one fucked up woman.” Tilly glared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror and wanted to cry. “What the hell is the matter with you?” She turned on the faucet, cupped her hand under the cold water, and slurped it up. She was still so thirsty. Next, she splashed her face. Dabbing dry with a hand towel, she tried to reel herself in. God damn Bishop’s kiss...

Tilly never experienced anything quite so overwhelming in all her life. And that animalistic bark? Holy Hell, he sounded like a beast when Valor pinned Bishop to the ground.

Shame flushed her cheeks again as she recalled how Bishop looked when Valor made him apologize. Yes, the kiss was unexpected, but not unwanted. Whatever boundaries Bishop crossed, she’d let him do it again. She *wanted* him to do it again.

Had Bishop not pinned her hands above her head and pressed her so tightly against the wall, Tilly would have reciprocated tenfold. Hence why she was so angry with herself right now.

This was the worst possible time to have a love affair. She was in danger. She was cursed. She had a creeper tailing her and a rich man with a lot of power hot on her ass. Now she’d gone and gotten mixed up with two men she didn’t know at all – and who were armed to the teeth – and she had been lured back to their home because she had no other place to go.

So, yeah, this would be the perfect time to distract herself with a beard ride. Naturally. “Errgh!” Tilly leaned against the counter and buried her face in her hands. “Snap the fuck out of this, woman.”

A knock on the door scared the shit out of her and she squeaked.

“Matilda Jane, it’s Valor.”

Tilly stomped out of the bathroom and opened her bedroom door. Peering out cautiously, she wasn’t sure what to say so she just stared at the Hound. *Hound*. She’d heard them both use that phrase now. Hound. They *must* be Hell Hounds. No way. Not possible. Right? Fuck.

“Are ye alright, lass?” Valor kept a little distance between them. She noticed one hand was in his pocket, the other had a slight tremor to it.

“I’m fine. Seriously.” She looked at his hand again and frowned, “Why are you shaking like that?”

He clasped both hands behind his back, “It’s nothing.”

She opened the door more and gave him a full on glare.

“You’re lying.”

His eyes narrowed on her. Then he sighed and relaxed his stance, “I’ll be fine. I just need to regain my strength. It’s been a long couple of days and it’s starting to take its toll on me.”

She wasn’t expecting him to answer her like that. Actually, she didn’t know what she was expecting him to say, but a big man like him, who obviously liked to be in charge of things, acknowledging he was weak in some way just wasn’t what she’d been expecting.

It was refreshing to get an honest answer. She wanted to see how far she could push him. “What are you, Valor?”

“A man who wants to help ye and also get that damned book.” He smiled like a charmer.

Good grief he was a good looking man. That dark auburn hair was like a warm russet sunset in autumn. He must have been about six-four and was built like a lumberjack – not too big and bulky, but definitely strong enough to do a lot of damage.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” she whispered.

“What do ye not understand, Matilda Jane?” He took another step closer.

Why did he have to talk with that sexy brogue? It wasn't helping her current situation at all, damnit. "Were we meant to meet or is this... was this..." her heart started to race, "Were you sent to me?"

Valor's eyebrow arched with a stern gaze, "Sent to ye? Who do ye think would do that?"

That wasn't a *no*, which made her grip the door handle with white-knuckle fever. "Were you?"

"No."

She couldn't tell if he was lying or not.

"I doona expect ye to believe us, lass. But we've already proven that we wish to help ye." Valor put his hand on the door and pushed it open with ease. She immediately took a step back. "I've just done a costly thing, healing ye as I did in the hospital. And I've risked much bringing ye into my home."

"Because of who's after me?"

Valor gave a half-hearted chuckle and shook his head as he stepped into her bedroom. Tilly could either stand her ground or back the hell up. She backed up. *Sissy*.

"I've no fears of man, lass. Whoever is after ye, I'll make him sorry for it. That's not the risk that's got me worried." He towered over her and tilted his head to the side, "Ye fear we were sent to ye... but I've a mind to believe it was the other way around."

Tilly backed up until her legs hit the bed. "What are you talking about?"

"I was sent to The Blue Lizard to hunt for my Hounds. Ye were there."

Hounds. "So?"

"Ye had a book of black magic, the darkest kind, just sitting in your apartment like a wee novel to enjoy."

He grabbed something from his back pocket and her heartrate kicked up speed. Was he going to pull a gun on her? A knife? Oh god!

Valor held out his cell and showed her a picture of a strange design. "This was on your ceiling, Matilda Jane. Do ye ken what it is?"

Her blood ran cold as she stared at the picture, knowing exactly what it was. "N-n-n-n-no."

Valor growled like a deadly predator. “Are ye sure?” He took up all the space in the room. The air, too.

Tilly couldn’t breathe or think or move with him like this. She had to force herself to answer with a level tone, “I’m positive. I don’t know what that is. I’ve never seen something like it before.” *On my ceiling.*

“Ye doona fear death,” his gaze raked down her body.

“What makes you think that?”

Valor pulled out a piece of folded paper from his pocket and she felt her face redden when she recognized it was her Bucket List from her fridge. He handed it over and frowned, “You’re a verra dangerous creature, Matilda Jane.” He stepped back and put his phone away. “What’s the address of the man who now has the book?”

They stared at each other, neither willing to give up their information.

Finally, Valor turned to leave, “Dinner was ordered and Jack, the one who came to the hospital, should be arriving shortly. I expect ye downstairs in ten minutes ready to speak and tell us everything.” Valor stopped at the threshold, “Bishop and I are men of our word, Matilda Jane. We’ll help ye as we said we would, but ye had better be a woman of your word too. Ye doona want another enemy, lass.”

“Is that a threat, Valor?”

He smiled tightly and walked away.

Chapter 20

Lucifer had a raging headache. Ever since the walls of Hell cracked and *malanum* ran wild, he'd been on damage control to get things back in order and this shit wasn't getting easier as the days passed.

"Yo! Luce!" Uriel, the Angel of Repentance, swaggered into Lucifer's main hall carrying a cardboard box, "I brought lunch."

Lucifer had to hand it to Uriel, the angel had, so far, kept to his word. When all Hell broke loose a couple months ago, Lucifer's brothers came down to help him fight the *malanum* back and find the traitor. In the midst of the shitstorm they were in, Uriel, along with Constantine and Gabriel, agreed to have more of a presence down in Hell. So far, Uriel still came down the most, but Gabriel and Constantine had other responsibilities to tend to at the moment so who was Lucifer to complain? Speaking of which, "Still no luck in finding the book, brother?"

"None." Uriel dropped his box onto the large table and pulled out a brown paper bag. "But I did find this sweet little joint that makes the best Swiss with mushroom burgers." Those were Lucifer's favorite.

Shoving a bunch of greasy French fries in his mouth, Uri sat down and handed Lucifer his lunch. "I haven't heard from Gabe or Con."

Instead of responding, the Devil took two big bites of his burger and wiped his mouth with a napkin. Hopefully some food in his belly would help alleviate his headache.

"How's the *malanum* count?"

"Same," Lucifer grumbled. "There hasn't been much movement since we got the cracks fixed and temporary guards in place."

During the *malanum* attacks, Charlotte, a traitorous Gate Keeper, had managed to wreak havoc among the living and the dead. She recruited outsiders who knew magics that could turn humans into vessels for *malanum* to possess. She also allowed *malanum* to escape Hell, orchestrated Sara's abduction a few years back, had done all she could to tear down the empire Hell was, and had even slaughtered her fellow Gate Keepers and Lucifer's ladies in the process.

The bitch.

Even now, Lucifer couldn't understand why Charlotte did it. She was a traitor to her maker. Had broken apart Lucifer's best pack of Hounds. Fractured Hell. Killed her friends. They executed her, of course, but by the time they realized it was Charlotte destroying everything, too much damage had been done. Still, something about the way it all ended didn't feel right to Lucifer.

Had the Dark Truth, a nasty hag who saw the deepest, ugliest truths in a soul, not confirmed Charlotte's secrets, Lucifer would never have believed it. Lucifer was so hurt and angry, he didn't spare Charlotte any mercy. One simple touch of the Devil's hand turned that backstabbing Gate Keeper to ashes.

Lucifer's touch wasn't nearly as deadly now that he had some time to regain his control. His powers, however, were another nightmare. Not that he was willing to discuss it. Lucifer needed to focus on keeping things running smoothly down here while his brothers searched for what was stolen from him during Charlotte's betrayal.

"I can't stay long," Uri said between bites, "I've got to make my reports and I wanted to check on a couple things I've been neglecting lately."

Lucifer nodded and didn't ask what those things were. Angels were always busy and Uriel was no exception. He might be the jokester of the group, but he was important for the balance of the Universe.

As was Lucifer.

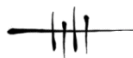
“I’ve got some Hounds filling in for Gate Keepers until Reggie and I can train new ones.” Lucifer took a sip of his drink and frowned. Gah, he hated soda. Too fizzy and sweet for him. But he didn’t want to reject any offering right now, even from his own brother, so he drank it and was grateful. Being the ruler of Hell meant he was tied to the realm and couldn’t leave, so it wasn’t like he could go shopping for the drinks he enjoyed. Maybe one day that would change, but it wouldn’t be anytime soon. And with Lucifer’s power drained and control bound by a fraying rope, trying to stretch his limits was an absolute no go at the moment.

“I’ve brought them food, too,” Uri wrapped his knuckles on the box. “I’ll bring it to them once I’m finished here with you.”

Lucifer leaned back in his seat with a sigh. “Thanks, brother.”

Uri shrugged and polished off the last of his fries. “We’re in this together, Luce.”

The Devil’s smile was tight and didn’t reach his eyes. Uri meant well with his words, but Lucifer felt more alone now than he ever had before.



Bishop needed some fresh air. He’d been sitting out on the patio for about two hours and kept looking back at the house, specifically at the window with the warm glow and silhouette that moved around every now and then.

Flustered, he ran his hand through his hair, “You gotta stop, Hound. She’s so fucking off limits it’s not even funny.” Fuck, what he wouldn’t give for a cigarette right now. He quit smoking a decade ago, but times like this made a coffin stick sound so damn good. It would at least give his hands and mouth something to do that didn’t involve groping the female in the spare bedroom.

Holy Hell, her curves. Her mouth. Her *taste*.

Bishop had pinned Tilly to the wall, prepared to have his way with her right there in the motherfucking hallway. His dick was still hard from handling her like that. His body all rigid and pumped and desperate for a repeat of what they’d shared.

She liked it. He smelled her desire right before Valor had ripped him off her. She fucking liked being pinned like that.

Bishop should be ashamed of himself. He was, in a way. Mostly, though, the Hound just wanted to go scratching at her door and beg for her to let him in.

Right between her sweet, thick thighs.

“Fuckety fuck, it’s cold out here.” Bishop turned to see Tanner, a Hell Hound from a neighboring pack, come outside. “Thought I’d keep you company out here a while. Everyone’s inside.” Tanner walked over with one hand in his coat pocket and extended the other for Bishop to shake, “How’s it going?”

“Not well,” Bishop frowned. “We have no leads, nothing that will bring us one step closer to finding what I did with the twins. And now we’ve got,” Bishop waved his hand up at the window that was the second from the left, “*that* up there to contend with.”

Tanner looked up and chuckled, “She must be something special to have you two wound so fucking tight.”

Bishop shrugged and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, “She’s something, that’s for sure.”

“Jack filled us in on Tilly and also Valor’s suspicions that she’s linked to the twins somehow.”

Bishop froze. Eyes narrowed, he tilted his head and lowered his voice, “What did he tell you about that?”

Valor’s suspicions were news to him. As far as Bishop knew, Valor was only keeping her around because she had information they needed to get a book Valor wanted. His Alpha hadn’t said anything about Tilly being a link to the twins in any way. What the—

Tanner shrugged, “I didn’t stay to fucking hear it all. I came out here to be with you instead. We’ve all been worried about you, Hound.” Tanner took a seat next to Bishop and they stared out at the covered pool, “How the hell do you like it here? It’s so fucking big.”

“How can you stand your tiny farmhouse? It’s so small.”

“We like it snug.” Tanner laughed, “Keeps us closer.”

“We like it big, keeps us sane.”

“Fair enough,” Tanner stretched and clasped his hands behind his head. He had a big, lazy smile on his face as they continued to stare at nothing special. “We find out the sex of the baby soon.”

Now there's a topic Bishop could get down with. Sara was the only female Hound and she was now pregnant. This was huge. "What do you want it to be?"

"I don't give a flying fuck. I just want him or her healthy. And preferably inherit my musical talents."

"You're musically talented?" Bishop teased.

Tanner flipped him the bird and they both laughed. Tanner's skills were legendary among the packs. The Hound could play guitar and sing like a fallen angel. He didn't do it often, but Eli once recorded Tanner when he wasn't paying attention and it ended up getting blasted through the Hell Hound chain of communication. Tanner rocked their worlds when they heard his voice. It was raw and deep and demanding, just like the Hound himself. Bishop still had a copy of it saved to his laptop and played it when he needed to be reminded of what they were all here for.

"Being a Hound isn't always easy," Bishop looked down at his boots and sighed. "I forget what I am sometimes."

"You've been through a lot, Bishop, especially these last few months. Shit's gonna take it's fucking toll eventually. But you're going to find them."

Tanner's hopefulness made Bishop flinch. "I'm starting to think we never will."

"Been there, done that, and now look where we are."

Bishop nodded and bit his tongue. He really was preaching to the choir right now. Not long ago, Tanner's pack ended a five-year hunt for their woman, Sara. They'd found her at a club, of all places, and she didn't have a clue who she was, why she was there, or even who they were. That was the beginning of one hell of a mystery, which ended in a lot of loss.

Now, Lucifer was a mess, Bishop's pack was broken, Hounds were separating from their packs to form new ones, and Sara was having a baby.

Fuck, he couldn't imagine bringing a child into this way of life. Part of him was elated for Tanner and the other Hounds in his pack, for Bishop knew they would be the best dads in the world. The other part of Bishop was relieved to not have such responsibilities again. Children were—

“We should head in and see what’s going on,” Tanner stood, white clouds puffing out of his mouth as he exhaled. “I’m freezing my balls off out here.”

Bishop nodded silently and went in first. Tanner left the sliding door slightly ajar and asked, “Want me to leave it cracked open?”

“No,” the Hound said softly. “I’ll be okay.”

That was a lie Bishop had been telling himself for so long now, he almost believed it.

Chapter 21

Tilly sat at the kitchen table with her arms crossed over her chest. Valor leaned against the counter with a scowl on his face. A bunch of new people were there too, one of whom she recognized as Jack – the guy who came to the hospital to help her. He was talking with a dude named Kalen and pointing at something in a book, while the other two new faces, Sara and Eli, plated food.

Movement caught Tilly's attention by the doorway. Bishop and a super cute blond guy walked in. "Hey, I'm Tanner," Mr. Big Smiles stretched his arm over the table to shake Tilly's hand. "How's it going in here with our Voodoo Man?"

Like he lived there, Tanner plopped down at the table and leaned over to see what Kalen and Jack were looking at. Something started to knock the underside of the table – it was Tanner's knee.

Sara walked over and calmly placed her hand on Tanner's shoulder, "All that energy, Sunshine Boy. Where do you get it?"

Tanner wrapped his arms around Sara's middle and kissed her belly.

Sara's head tilted back as she laughed, then she grunted and gasped. "Holy shit. She moved."

"She?" Valor spoke up, "Do ye ken the sex so soon?"

"No," Sara walked around the table, "I don't have a clue. But it feels like a she."

Tilly sat in silence while watching Sara touch and caress all four of the men she'd come with. They didn't look jealous or angry or shitty about it. As a matter of fact, it was just the opposite. As Sara tried to pass Kalen, he grabbed her by the waist and sat her on his lap. "Enough work. You need rest."

Sara twisted around and kissed him. Like... *kissed* him. Tilly looked away and tried to find something else to distract her. Unfortunately, her eyes latched onto Bishop who was leaning against the doorway. The air rushed out of Tilly on a sharp exhale. Bishop's mouth almost curved into a smile as his eyes continued to keep her pinned to her seat, much like he'd been able to keep her pinned to the wall earlier.

Tilly shook off the fluttery feeling in her belly and refocused on whatever Jack had just said to her. “Huh?”

“I said, I can only think of one spell, but it’s not guaranteed to work. It’s only guaranteed to hurt like hell.”

“Okay,” she responded automatically to Jack. Pain, she could do. Dying, she really didn’t want to do. Besides, most spells came at a cost and they usually didn’t tickle. Rolling her shoulders back, Tilly swept the loose hairs away from her face and said, “Let’s do this.”

“No.” Valor growled from behind her. “You’ll give us the address of the man who took the book before I allow a spell to be done on ye.”

Tilly grew hot with anger. “You’ll cure me first. Then you’ll get the information.”

Valor slowly stalked towards her. They glared at one another and she gripped the edge of the kitchen table to steady herself. The last thing she wanted was for her hand to accidentally bitch slap the bastard.

“I doona think it’s a good idea for this to be done,” Valor said in low tones, “Ye canna tell what will happen to ye and I need that address.”

He and Tilly started screaming at one another and Valor slammed his hand on the table. “You’re fucking kidding me with this right? Just give me the name, Matilda Jane! Or the location! We’ve gotten ye this far, haven’t we? Och, we’ll follow through, but I want that goddamned address first.”

“And if the spell doesn’t work?” Tilly argued.

“We’ll try something else.”

Tilly didn’t believe him. She knew damn well the minute they got the information they wanted, these men would leave her in the dust. She couldn’t afford that right now. In all the traveling she’d done, in all the circles she’d danced in, none were as potently magical as these guys. And, shit! They had friends who were even more adept at spells than Tilly had ever seen in her life! They were her best chance at finding a cure and she wasn’t going to lose her leverage.

“I get cured, *then* you get your name.”

Valor roared, grabbed a plate from the counter and threw it against the wall. Food splattered all over the place and everyone started shouting.

Bishop and Val started screaming at each other. Sara stood by the fridge with her hands on her hips lecturing about wasting perfectly good Chinese food. Tanner and Eli started cleaning up the mess and Tilly grabbed Jack's arm and begged, "Please help me."

"Then help *them*," Jack replied.

Tilly looked over at Valor again. "You're an asshole!" she screamed. Pushing away from the table, she stuck her finger in his face, "You have no idea what you're asking of me. My sister's in danger! I'm in danger!"

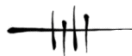
"Och, I ken it!" Valor snarled. "I'm trying to help ye!"

"You're not *helping* me; you're fucking *using* me. You don't give a shit if I live or die. You don't even *know* me." She was so mad, she wanted to scream, so she did. Tilly filled her lungs with air and let a roar shred her motherfucking throat. "If you get that book you'll be gone. Or worse, you'll use it and then bad things will happen to you and you're my only goddamn shot at breaking this fucking curse."

Someone walked by in a flash of black and she didn't bother to look and see who'd just left the room. Her eyes were all for Valor right now.

"I need that book, Matilda Jane. With or without ye, I'm going to get it." Valor grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "And doona speak as if ye ken my intentions, woman. I said I'd help ye and I fucking will. But you're not the only one in dire need right now!" He released her and she tore off through the kitchen. If she stayed in that room any longer, she wasn't sure what she'd do.

With no place to run to and no hope of finding help, Tilly marched out of the house, dropped to her knees in the front yard, and screamed for all she was worth.



Valor could hear Matilda Jane screaming outside. Every inch of his body grew tense as she let out her anger and sorrow. The night was cold, they were calling for snow, and he wanted her back inside the house.

He didn't say that though. Nor did he chase after her. When Bishop tried, Valor barked an order for him to stop and remain in the kitchen with the rest of them.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Val," Eli shook his head, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Valor didn't need to explain himself to Eli or anyone else at the table. Then he took a look at Sara and his insides twisted. "She's got herself into a bad place," he said gruffly, "and I fear that trying whatever this spell is will only harm her further."

"Better hurt than dead," Sara said.

Valor's smile was cruel and heartless, "Says the lass who ended up hurt, then dead. *Twice.*"

Sara rolled her eyes, "It worked out in the end."

"I doona want to see the lass hurt more than she's been already." He plopped himself down into a chair and rubbed his face with both hands.

"Who is she to you, Val?" Kalen asked cautiously. "I mean, you only just met her, right? Or am I missing something here?"

"Aye, we just met," he said, "but I've a feeling there's more to the lass than meets the eye. She was there the night I was told to go to The Blue Lizard."

"Which is a coincidence," Tanner shrugged. "I wouldn't read too much into that. I mean, I get it, Hound. You're reaching for straws because that's all that's left, but—"

"Ye doona understand," Valor leaned in.

"Then explain it to us," Jack sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. "You and Bishop have done nothing but hunt for the twins and all of a sudden you've switched directions and are all about this woman. What gives? Is she connected to the twins' disappearance somehow?"

Valor scratched the side of his face, "I'm not sure."

"What does your gut say?"

"My gut says I'm running out of time."

Kalen tossed his hands up in the air, “Then why are you wasting time with this woman?”

Again, Valor didn’t have a good answer. “I want to help her.” Valor met the eyes of each Hound, “You didna see her place. It was so bare and,” he had no right to share her business.

“Go on,” Jack urged.

Fuck it. “She had a lock on her closet door. On the *inside*.”

Sara made an *mmp* noise. Eli whistled low.

“And there was this as well,” Valor pulled a wooden spoon out of his back pocket. “It has teeth marks. I found it in her closet on the floor. This woman knows suffering. She’s endured it for a long time, I believe.”

“Shit.”

“Fuck.”

“Jesus.”

“Holy Hell.”

“I get it now,” Sara said softly. “You want to help her because you can’t help Baz and Drake. You’re saving who you can, because you can’t save the ones you want to.”

Valor’s hackles raised. “Saving her is a means to an end. She has information I want. I’ll save her, aye, only after she gives me what I want first. My priority is my pack. She’s the start to getting what I want and nothing more.”

“Valor,” Bishop warned. They all looked up and saw Tilly standing at the doorway with fresh tears staining her face.

Val expected her to say something, but she just stood there with her chin trembling as she glared. Then she stuck her middle finger up at him and walked away again.

Valor wasn’t insulted. He was too busy feeling sorry for her. When she walked away, he let her go and refocused on the visiting pack. Tanner went missing at some point and Valor let that slide too and didn’t go after him.

“What’s so important about this address you want from her, Val?” Kalen’s green gaze was cool and cautious.

“It’s none of your concern, Wolf.”

Jack shut his book and growled right along with Kalen. “If you want our help, you bloody well better give us all the details, Hound. We’re in this together. You helped us look for our Sara, we’re going to continue helping you look for Baz and Drake. If you have a lead, we should know about it.”

Valor didn’t want to share the specifics with this pack. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust them, it was that he didn’t want them to suffer the consequences of going after what Valor was seeking. This book was a dangerous thing. A forbidden tome, most likely. It’s why he didn’t go racing to Lucifer about it earlier. If the Devil learned that one of his Hell Hounds tried to use this level of dark magic, he wouldn’t just be furious, he’d be apocalyptic.

Valor had every intention of answering for his actions alone. Not even Bishop would be part of this quest, which was another reason why Valor wanted to keep Tilly around. She could distract Bishop while Valor went after the book and worked any spells he thought might help him find the twins.

Bishop shoved away from the table, “I need air.”

Tanner strolled back into the kitchen waving a handful of papers. “I did some research on this Marco dude. He’s got several houses around the world, but his primary residence is in South Carolina. Mid-fifties. Rich as fuck. Active in his church community and has a thing for Portuguese death metal bands.”

Valor gawked, speechless.

Tanner grabbed a plate of food from the counter before sitting down and handing the papers over to Valor. He munched on an egg roll while he said, “It’s crazy how much you learn on social media about people.”

“How the hell did ye get all this?”

Tanner finished his bite and shrugged, “Tilly gave me the name. I looked it up on your computer.”

Flabbergasted, Valor stared at the printouts. “How did ye get on my computer?” And why would Matilda Jane suddenly shared information?

“Seriously?” Tanner frowned, “Did he just ask me – *me* – how I got onto his computer?” He tossed a fortune cookie at Valor, “Hound, passwords can’t stop me.”

The fortune cookie bounced off Valor's chest and hit the floor. He was too stunned to respond with a snarky comment. Val's gaze roamed over the print outs, his heart hammering as he read over the small bit of new information he now had.

Why would Tilly suddenly give this information up? It made no sense, especially after she just fought to keep it to herself as leverage so they would help her find a cure. A sense of dread consumed Valor as it hit him. *She's given up.*

The twins weren't the only ones in serious jeopardy right now. Tilly was, too. Valor couldn't begrudge her self-preservation, nor her desire to hold her cards close to her chest with them. And now... she had folded.

Valor hung his head and sighed. He was torn between duty and desire and didn't know which to pounce on first. As alpha, he owed his pack the best possible chance of survival. As a man of honor, he desired to keep his promise to help her find a cure for her curse. It felt like there wasn't enough time to do both, so he needed to make a choice.

"Jack," Valor growled dangerously as he tried to keep his cool, "help that lass as best ye can. If ye need more supplies, I'll pay for it."

"I might not be able to do much for her, Valor. What I've got to offer her isn't going to be pretty either."

"So be it." Snatching the papers from the table, Valor stormed out of the room. The thought of Matilda Jane hurting in any way didn't sit well with him. In the end, however, the choice was hers to make. Just as this was *his* choice to make...

And Valor would choose his pack. *Always.*

Chapter 22

Tilly sat on the edge of her bed and cried. God, to hear how callous Valor was downstairs. He said she was nothing more than a means to an end. Part of her broke inside hearing him say that, but hey, he was right. Valor was using her to get something he wanted, and she was the pot to his kettle.

Tilly came here because she was using them too. Soooo, she really shouldn't be too upset about what Valor said. It was the truth and sometimes the truth hurt – even when said with a brogue accent.

Just before she headed upstairs, she'd seen that blond guy, Tanner, watch her from the hallway and figured she might as well give up. She told him Marco's full name and address because she didn't have the nerve to tell Valor directly. She was too angry. Too hurt. Too tired of trying.

After generations of searching, no one had found a way to break the curse. Tilly wasn't the first female in her bloodline to try and find a cure, but she would damned sure be the last.

Vivian. Tilly's heart clenched thinking of her sister. What if she died before Vivian did? *She'll be fine without you.*

Viv lived every day like if she had forever to live. That woman did whatever she wanted and never looked at the finish line or wonder how close she might be to it. Viv had gone to college, had a busy life, made friends, got married, bought a lovely home, and recently started talking about having babies. Vivian called it *acceptance* while Tilly called it *denial*.

Tilly's approach to the cursed life was the exact opposite. Tilly had no friends and kept her relationships to rare one-night stands. After high school, Tilly didn't seek higher education, but instead travelled the world learning how to spin spells and weave magic. While Vivian invested most of her portion of their family inheritance into her future, Tilly invested some of her money and used the rest to finance her obsession with magical artifacts that might help her find a cure.

Vivian was a glass half-full girl. Tilly was a drink straight from the bottle woman.

Crumpled in her hand was the Bucket List Valor snatched from her apartment. She hated that he saw it. Despised that he took it. Yet she was also a little relieved. Tilly didn't have sentimental value on anything. You couldn't take it with you when you go, right? So why keep it? This Bucket List was the only exception to her rule. This tattered piece of paper had seen Tilly through her best days and her worst.

Staring at the list, Tilly felt like a fool. She'd wasted her life, not lived it. So what if she followed her favorite bands around, walked the beaches in Fiji, scurried through the catacombs in Paris, and sky dived in Hawaii? Those experiences had been brief. They came and went in a blink of an eye. Held zero meaning. Had no real purpose.

Perhaps her sister had been right all along. Maybe Tilly should have at least tried to make a connection with someone. Attempt to build some sort of relationship, even if it was just a basic friendship and nothing more. God, what she wouldn't give to have someone to talk to once in a while. Not that Vivian wasn't there for her, but things were different now that Viv was married. Things had been different between Vivian and Tilly for most of their lives. Ever since their mother died.

Gutted and lonely, Tilly stifled a sob. She wanted to call Vivian because it was the only thing she could think of. She needed comfort and an escape from reality. Her sister was excellent at providing Tilly both of those things.

She looked around and didn't see her phone anywhere. "Shit," she whispered. She'd left her cell charging in Bishop's room. Walking over to the door, she quietly opened it and peered out into the hall. People were talking quietly downstairs so she figured the coast was clear. Beating feet across the hallway, she slipped into Bishop's room and flicked on the light.

There he was, laying on his bed. No shirt. No shoes.

Bishop didn't move. He just stared at her. One of his windows was cracked open and a breeze sent a chill over her.

"I... I just came to grab my phone."

His gaze sailed over to where her cell was charging on his nightstand. He licked his lips and stared at her again, silently daring her to come and get it.

Bishop continued to lay flat on his back with his hands behind his head and it made the muscles in his arms look seriously yummy. His tattoos were sinful art on his body with how the moonlight shined down on him through his open window. Another breeze blew and goosebumps rippled down Tilly's arms and her nipples grew hard. Silently, she walked over to retrieve her cell, all the while feeling Bishop's gaze searing her.

"I'd have given you the address. Eventually."

Bishop's deep laugh was half-hearted. "We'd have helped you with or without the address. *Eventually.*"

Her cheeks grew hot. As she turned to storm out of his room, she stopped and spun back around to face him. "What are you?"

"What do you want me to be?"

"Stop that," she hissed. "Stop acting all hard and callous. Just tell me what you are, Bishop. And what are those people downstairs?"

Surprisingly, Bishop sat up and gracefully prowled closer to her. "What are we?" he repeated pensively. "We, Tilly, are stuck," he stopped right in front of her, "hurt," he reached up and traced a line down her collarbone with his finger, "trying to find our salvation," he leaned in and whispered into her ear, his hot breath sending chills down her body. "We are the broken ones." He paused and stared at her, "And just like you, we're trying to live, one day at a fucking time."

Bishop ran his thumb across her bottom lip. "I'm sorry things got so fucked up. It wasn't supposed to be this way."

She knocked his hand away and took a step back.

He closed the gap between them again. "My pack is the most important thing to me, Tilly. And it's the same for Valor too."

"Your... *pack?*" *Just say it. Say what you are.* She didn't want to say she knew about Hell Hounds. He would start asking questions. Besides, what she read in books wasn't always true. And if they were actual Hell Hounds, then what she read was *definitely* not true.

Bishop tilted his head to the side and smiled. “Why did you come here?” His hand sailed down her ribs and he grabbed her hip, “Keep it honest between us, Sweetness.”

“I came here because you said you’d help me. I came here because I need protection.”

“From this Marco,” he reconfirmed.

She nodded.

“I have a feeling you’re not nearly as helpless as you pretend to be.” Bishop tucked a tendril of Tilly’s hair behind her ear. “As a matter of fact, I think Valor’s right about you. You know a lot, done a lot, and aren’t afraid of death at all. So why not just embrace your destiny, Tilly?”

“Dying young shouldn’t be my fucking destiny.”

He shrugged, “It is for some people. What makes you think you deserve a longer life than someone else?”

He might as well have slapped her across the face with a cold wet fish. “How dare you,” she hissed. With that, Tilly raised her hand to slug him and he caught her fist, mid-swing.

Annd just like he had downstairs, Bishop gripped her wrist and swiftly snatched her other and pinned them down at her side. Next, he pressed against her, forcing Tilly to back the fuck up until she hit his dresser hard enough for the thing to rock back.

Tilly glared at him like she wanted to flay the skin from his bones. Bishop, however, acted like he wanted to eat her alive – starting with the juicy pieces first – and it wouldn’t hurt in the slightest. In fact, she suspected she’d like it a lot.

It pissed her off.

Tilly tried to fight out of his hold and failed with flying colors. The air grew hot and sultry in the room. His dark grey curtains billowed as a breeze shot through the window and Tilly was thankful for the cool air on her face.

“What do you want?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“I want to kiss you.”

Her breath hitched. Her heart hammered in her chest. Jesus fuck she felt so dizzy. “And if I say no?”

“Then I’ll let you go.”

She swallowed through the tightness in her throat. Just thinking about their last kiss was enough to make Tilly tell him to go for it. But that would be dangerous, right? Now wasn't the time for this shit. She thought of what her next course of action should be, but her mind just couldn't focus on anything but Bishop's mouth.

Actually, ever since she left the hospital, her lust had taken control of her every chance it got and Bishop did nothing but pour gasoline onto her fire with each look and touch he gave her.

Valor had the same impact on her too, which was downright awful. *Damnit.*

Tilly squeezed her eyes shut and tried a second attempt to regain her wits. No good. All she saw when she closed her eyes was that motherfucking Bucket List and a boldness took hold of her soul. Those things on her list were meaningless at the end of the day. Tilly wanted more for herself. She wanted to feel. She wanted to experience life on a new level.

The attraction she felt for Bishop was animalistic. Tremendous. Unassailable.

Maybe this was a turning point for Tilly. Or maybe this was what denial looked like – a man with steel blue eyes, a killer jaw line and a sinful mouth. Bishop rubbed her wrists with his thumbs, waiting for her to say something. Blame it on the magic they pushed into her at the hospital, or maybe this was the effect Bishop had on women and Tilly was just one more of his victims, but Tilly felt like she was floating.

"Don't," she cleared her throat, "don't let me go." If he let her go right now, Tilly was pretty sure she'd float away and never be seen again. She'd lost everything... *everything*. The world was against her in every way. Eventually she was going to have to pay for her sins. Couldn't she have a little bit of something good before she had to bite the bullet and pay up? "Please..."

"Is that a yes, Matilda Jane?" Bishop dipped his head down and nipped under her earlobe, sending shivers down her body. "Are you going to give me what I want? Are you going to let me kiss you?"

There was a dangerous tone in his voice – a promise of a thrill, of an unforgettable experience. She swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded.

“Say yes, Tilly. Moan it if you have to, but I want to hear your consent.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Bishop released her wrists and cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. “Say it again. Louder.”

“Yes.”

His smile was incredible. It was a wolfish smile. One that made Tilly weak and hot. “What are your hard lines?”

Wait, what? “Huh?”

Bishop continued to hold her face, “What are your hard lines, Sweetness? I need to know them up front because once I start, I’m not stopping until you tell me to, which I hope you never do.”

“I…” Wait, whoa, whoa, whoa, what the hell was going on here? “I’m not sure I have any.”

“You’ll find them.” Tilly tensed when Bishop ran his hand up the back of her head, grabbed a handful of her hair and gave it a tug. “What’s the matter? Having second thoughts?”

Nope, she was having incredibly dirty ones. “You said you wanted to kiss me,” she moaned as he licked the column of her neck.

“And you said yes,” he whispered when his lips reached her ear.

“To you kissing me,” Right? Fuck, she couldn’t think straight with him touching her like this.

Bishop pulled away and grinned. “You didn’t ask *where* I wanted to kiss you, Sweetness. And you said yes anyway.”

The man dropped to his knees and lifted her dress, revealing that she wasn’t wearing any underwear. With a deep chuckle, he looked up at her once, seeking reconfirmation. Tilly bit her lip and gave him a curt nod.

Then she braced herself.

Chapter 23

Every man should go down on his knees, at least once in his life, to worship a Goddess properly. As Bishop lifted Tilly's dress and grabbed her bare ass, he tried to not pounce on her too fast.

No, no, no, this was going to take finessing. Right now, with his Hound abilities going haywire, he didn't want to freak her out by getting too rough and rowdy without having warmed her body up first.

He meant what he'd said. Bishop would need to know her hard lines because once his train left the station, nothing fucking stopped him. He would need to understand her limitations so he kept within them. However, that conversation could be revisited *after* he kissed her. This would likely be the only time he would toe the line.

Her thighs were soft under his fingertips. Bishop's body heat soared. He became the fire to her ice. Another glorious cool breeze gusted through his open window and he felt her skin quiver from the chill. No problem, he could totally heat her up with a few masterful strokes.

Keeping his eyes locked on hers, Bishop ran his hand up and down her thighs. Mother of God, she wasn't wearing any underwear and the fresh scent of her pussy made his head buzz and dick hard. Bishop groaned and bit his bottom lip, forcing himself to remain calm. Running his hand across her bare ass, he gave it a squeeze, then trailed his palm down her leg to lift her right foot up to rest on his shoulder. He inhaled, deeply. "I fucking love the smell of you, woman."

Bishop ran his nose up her slit and all of him went wild on the inside. Instead of wasting time with more compliments, he parted her folds with a long drag of his tongue. She tasted like tangy fruit.

Fuck! He was going to lose his mind trying to behave himself here. He wanted to do this right since they had started out on the wrong foot so many times already. Fucking her into oblivion and making her unable to stand, much less walk, wouldn't leave him in a good light with her. Or would it?

Tilly moaned and shoved her hand in his hair. Bishop sucked her clit harder. Next, he dipped a finger inside her. She clenched around him as another moan escaped her mouth.

Goddamn, her pussy was so hot. Her thigh quivered against his face and he wrapped his arm around it to hold her steady. She was so damned perfect. So fucking delicious. Bishop's control slipped and he began to fuck her harder with his tongue. Both her hands held his head in place and she started to gyrate against his mouth and fuck his face. He growled and dipped a second finger into her wet heat while he continued to tantalize her precious clit with his tongue. There was nothing sweet about eating a pussy like this. It was messy and wild. Naughty as fuck.

Fuck, she was sensational.

He felt her body tighten so he sped things up, pounding his fingers into her while his tongue flick-flick-flicked. Her sex swelled tighter, tighter, tighter and then *wham!* Tilly's body convulsed and she let out a scream that would make a righteous man believe there was an exorcism going on in Bishop's room. Her orgasm didn't last nearly as long as Bishop wanted, so when she tried to pry him off of her, he was reluctant to let her go so easily.

"I'm not finished." He allowed her leg to fall off his shoulder so she could keep her balance, and he dropped back on his heels and licked his mouth and sucked his fingers clean. "I could eat your pussy all fucking night."

Tilly's eyes flared and her chest rose up and down from her heavy breathing. "What the fuck was that?"

Bishop ran his hand down his beard knowing the scent of her cum would linger there for a good long while, "By the taste on my tongue, I'd call that an orgasm."

She stumbled forward and her dress fell, covering up the very thing he still wanted more of. "Holy fucking shit," she gasped. "A kiss, you said." She panted some more, "You... you're a really good kisser, Hound Dog."

Yes, one kiss was all he'd asked for, so it was all he took. *This time.*

Slowly, Bishop rose to his full height. His heart was pounding. His insides felt like he was plugged into a goddamn electric socket. His dick was rock hard, his balls heavy and aching. Never mind the fact that her one little orgasm he swallowed had just put a stop to his tremors.

“Glad you approve.” He stepped away, fearful that if she touched him right now he would lose what little control he still possessed.

“Bishop!” someone hollered from down below. “Get your ass down here, Hound, and bring Tilly with you.”

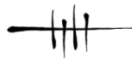
Oh, yeah... there was another pack in the house right now. For a moment, Bishop felt like the entire world had dropped away and there was just him and a beautiful woman named Matilda Jane holding things together.

Bishop calmly walked over and hollered, “We’ll be right there, Jack. Quit your barking.”

He didn’t bother putting on his shirt. With how hot he felt, Bishop doubted he’d be able to stand another layer on his skin right now. It was bad enough he was in pants. Tilly cleared her throat from over by his dresser and he watched her attempt to adjust her dress.

She looked so fucking good all sexed up like that. Bishop’s dick pressed hard against his zipper. He wanted to pull it out and stroke his length and come all over her, but now was not the time.

Bishop’s voice was gravelly, “*This*,” he gestured towards the apex of her thighs, “is not over between the two of us. I’m not finished with you, Sweetness.” Hell, with everything inside him screaming right now, Bishop doubted he would ever be finished with her.



Tilly tried to keep her composure. Taking the cool marble steps barefooted was a shock to the bottoms of her hot feet. Was her body overheated because of what just happened between her and Bishop, or was she coming down with a fever?

She felt Bishop's presence behind her. Holding onto the banister, Tilly managed to not trip on the hem of her dress. Finally, she reached the first floor. Good grief a woman could get some serious cardio in a house like this. Those stairs alone would have her thighs screaming in a couple climbs. *So would the Hound who was just between them*, she thought. "Knock it off," Tilly mumbled.

"Knock what off?"

"I..." she frowned and waved Bishop off, "I was talking to myself. Sorry, habit."

"I've got the same one myself. Drives the others crazy, but sometimes you only have yourself to talk to. At least you know you'll listen. Well, *sometimes* you'll listen to yourself, right?"

What a strange thing to say. They stopped and looked at each other for a long moment and then Bishop took the lead and she followed him into the kitchen. Everyone but Valor was still there, sitting around the table with empty plates.

"I put Valor's in the fridge for later," Sara said while rubbing her belly. "Yours are on the counter."

Tilly wondered who the father of Sara's baby was. The woman was affectionate with each of the guys she'd come with. Tilly couldn't figure out which one was her man. Hell, for all she knew, Sara was dating all four of them – not that Tilly was judging. Hell, she was *envious*.

What woman wouldn't want a harem of hotness? And they were each so attentive to her – not that Tilly would have ever allowed herself the privilege of a relationship, let alone several. But the fantasy was really fucking nice.

"Where did Val go?" Bishop frowned.

"He's pursuing that lead," Jack's tone was edgy and sharp. "We're to stay with you until he returns. Now, are we going to try this last spell or not?"

"She should eat first," Bishop didn't look happy as he plopped down on a stool at the kitchen island. Tilly's head got a little fuzzy for a second and she grabbed a seat at the table – away from Bishop.

As Sara cleared away the dirty plates, Jack pulled out a large book. "I can't promise this is going to work," he said with a light British accent. "But it's really all I have left I can offer you."

Tilly nodded, "That's fine."

"Look," Jack scooted closer to her and dropped his voice, "this is going to be scary and probably hurt like Hell. I've never even preformed something like this, but..." he ran his hand through his short-cropped hair, "Bloody Hell, this doesn't feel right. I really don't think we should try it."

"Do you have a better idea for what we can do for her?" Bishop asked.

"I don't," Jack frowned. "Curses aren't broken easily. Most of them usually lift when the one who set the curse perishes. From what I was told by Valor, this is a bloodline curse. Passed down from daughter to daughter, correct?"

Tilly stood and tugged on her dress. Holy Hell, she was roasting. "Yes. My family has only ever had girls. Each died before their twenty-eighth birthday." She tried to play it cool even though all eyes were now on her. She hated the looks on their faces. All that pity. All that *I'm so sorry* bullshit folks made with their furrowed brows and downturned mouths always pissed her off. "Soooo, are we doing this or what?"

Jack looked over at Bishop for a hot second.

"Don't look at him. Look at me," Tilly got all up in Jack's face, "Bishop has nothing to do with this. It's my curse, my body, my fucking decision." And as soon as she was cured, she was so fucking out of here. She'd already handed over the information to Tanner about Marco's whereabouts so she didn't owe them anything. *They* owed *her* now. And it was time to collect. She had shit to do. First, get cured. Second, get fucked - because what Bishop did to her upstairs had her seriously riled up. And third, she was going to burn her Bucket List and live a life that was more than a temporary existence.

"Let's do this," she waited to see what Jack wanted her to do.

Jack's gaze hardened with concern. "Okay," he said quietly. He flipped through his book that had discolored tattered and ripped pages that were testimony to its age and hard use. It smelled like wood smoke and frankincense. Artwork of ugly monsters and odd symbols littered the pages, along with pieces of objects attached to some of the pages that unfolded to expand.

Tilly recognized some of the writing, but not enough to say something intelligent about it. This book was way older than the ones she'd worked with before. It made her feel confident whatever spell Jack was going to use on her would work. She felt a shiver of excitement. Ancient magic was potent stuff. The stronger, the better.

"We're going to need a place that's easy to clean up," Jack said.

Tilly felt the blood drain from her face. "That bad, huh?" *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* "Should we just stay in the kitchen or go outside?" Did she sound eager? That's because she was.

Of all people to suggest a place, it was Kalen – a big, long haired guy with green eyes and broad shoulders. "I think we should do this outside. Enough has gone on in here as it is, wouldn't want residue to linger."

Tilly didn't miss the shift in the air as everyone remained silent. Okay, so something was up. Whatever, their business wasn't hers, she just wanted to get this over with.

Initiating the launch sequence, Tilly headed out of the kitchen and towards the door. The front lawn was just as good as the back. It's not like there were any neighbors to spy on them. This mansion sat on a huge hunk of property designed for seclusion. Besides, the front yard was closest and she was a little worried she would lose her nerve with how reluctant everyone was acting around her.

Jack and Kalen came out with her. The wind was so fucking brutal, it whipped her dress around her body and she huddled into herself a little. The coldness felt good on her face but she had to hold her dress down so she didn't flash anyone. "Should I lay down or stand, Jack?"

"Let's have you on the ground." He started pulling things out of a big box he brought. "Wolf, pour this around her."

While Tilly laid flat on her back in the grass, Kalen made a salt circle around her.

Others gathered around but she didn't pay attention to them. Instead, Tilly focused on the night sky. So many stars could be seen from here. The sky was wide open and for a minute she felt like everything had turned upside down and she was floating, drinking the night, and wearing the moonbeams like a second skin. It was the magic, of course. Nature never spoke to her except when she was about to perform a ritual or spell.

"Is this Hoodoo?" she asked when Jack started drawing symbols on his arms, probably for protection against whatever he was going to put into her.

"It's a blend of magic that's much older than Hoodoo."

Okay. Tilly could handle that. In fact, the idea of Jack using older magics on her got Tilly a little buzzy in the head. Ancient magic was generally untapped energy now, so hopefully whatever spell he used would be potent enough to break her curse. Here's hoping...

Jack pulled out a small blade and stepped into the circle with her. She figured blood would be involved at this level, so she wasn't surprised when he sank down to his knees and grabbed her hand. Some low, deep, snarl broke her focus away from Jack. "Is there a dog around—" Her words cut off when she saw Bishop's face. He looked like an animal. His head was dipped down low, a growl rippling out of his throat as he glared at Jack.

"Heyyyy," Tanner cautiously approached Bishop. "Over here, Hound," Tanner said authoritatively, "Eyes on me."

Bishop didn't budge. He continued to stare at Jack and another growl ripped from his mouth. Now he was showing teeth. Holy shit, what the hell was going on here? Tilly wanted to say something but didn't have the courage. Bishop looked frightening this way. Sexy, in a shifter-killer sort of way, but still...

Oh for the love of Pete, she watched way too many horror flicks to be thinking that shit at a time like this.

"Hound!" Tanner yelled and clapped his hands.

That got Bishop's attention. Now the sexy shifter-killer snarl directed his snarl at Tanner instead of Jack.

"Ready?" Jack placed his hand on her shoulder and squeezed.

She bit her lip and nodded quickly. Then she squeezed her eyes shut and prayed to anyone who would listen. *Please, please, please.... OW!* Just as she was about to jerk her hand away, someone held it down. Then her other arm was pinned to the ground. Her feet too. She popped her eyes open as fear started to work its way into her system.

Kalen leaned above her head with a strap of leather in his hand, "Open."

She obeyed and Kalen placed the strap in her mouth to bite down on. *Okay, okay, okay. You got this, girl. You've been down this road so many times already. You know the drill. Burn, hurt, get sick and pass out.* She just had to get to the passing out part and the rest would be easy-peasy lemon squeezy.

Tilly's vision turned fuzzy again. Panic slammed into her when Jack began his incantations. *You got this, you got this.* Annnnd here came the burn. Tilly closed her eyes and tried to get into a headspace so she could handle this type of magic. She tried to get into the state of mind where everything went kind of numb, black and quiet. She'd never done something like this with so many people around her. Tilly was used to being all by herself. She couldn't find her focus at all. There were too many voices around her. Too much movement. *Too much!*

She opened her eyes again and the stars in the sky burst into color bombs. Balls of fire slammed into her, crushing and burning her. A tremendous weight pressed down on her. No, it *held* her down. She couldn't budge.

Next, Tilly tried to lift her head but it was pinned to the ground with the rest of her. She blinked fast as the burning stars set her on fire. She was ablaze now, the pain so agonizing, her head exploded with it. Fragments of bone and bits of flesh littered the world. A hissing... a hissing so incessant and loud filled her ears and drowned out the chanting voices.

Again, Tilly tried to fight against the forces pressing against her. She felt her body tear in half. Blood welled in her mouth and she spat out the leather strap and all her teeth. Her skin melted off her cheeks. Spikes pierced her fingertips, driving all the way in until they hit her palms. Matching ones stabbed her eyes and the burning stars disappeared. She tried to scream but her throat melted into the back of her neck and dripped onto the grass.

Her lungs turned to ice. One more attempt at inhaling and they shattered like slivers of glass that cut and ripped her chest wide open. Blood poured out of her along with fire and poison and malice and anger. *Die, die, die, die.* She needed to die. It was her only escape. *Die, die, die, die!*

Tilly's body bucked against the weight crushing her. This was too much, she held on by her broken fingernails. *Let go! Let go!* Tilly convulsed, her bones exploded under her skin, shattering and splintering through her body.

Fires consumed her, at her, destroyed her. Tilly sucked in hot air and screamed.

Chapter 24

Valor called ahead to ensure enough packs were lined up at designated portals so his journey would be quick. Instead of it taking him seven hours to get to South Carolina, he made it in three. Anytime a Hound asked him what he was up to, he answered with, "I've a lead I'm following to find the twins."

When a Hound offered to go with him and help, Valor declined and said that although he appreciated it, this was just another chase that would most likely lead to a dead end like all the others had. If they insisted to accompany him anyway, he would decline more forcefully. In the end, he won every argument. Perhaps it was because he had a hair-trigger temper lately, so they didn't push him too much. Or maybe they just respected Valor enough to back the fuck off. He didn't know. Didn't care, either. Once Valor arrived in the town Marco Moreau lived in, he shook hands with Byrne, the Hound who secured this district. "Thank ye, Byrne. I appreciate the lift."

"You sure you don't want me to come with?"

"No, I'll be fine."

Byrne leaned forward and looked out his front windshield, "Full moon tonight. You need to be careful out here. Like New Orleans, this town has a lot more that goes bump in the night than most cities."

"I'm prepared," Valor tapped his concealed weapon and grinned.

"You're awfully close to Marco Moreau's place," Byrne warned.

Valor pretended like this was news to him. "Who is Marco Moreau? A drug lord or something?"

"Or something," Byrne grumbled. "He's just a guy we keep a pretty close eye on. He's got more money than God and thinks the world should bow at his feet, the cocky son-of-bitch. We've caught him running in a few circles who dabble with cult shit lately."

"Is he human?"

"As far as I can tell, yeah. But he's rich and powerful down here. Lives up the road about a mile."

Yeah, Val knew that. "Oh really? So close to town?"

“Not everyone likes seclusion,” Byrne teased.

“Well, thank ye for the lift.” Valor stepped out of the car and slammed the door shut.

Byrne rolled his window down and leaned out, “You sure you want to do this on your own?”

“Aye, I’m sure it’ll be nothing. If the twins were here, I’d ken it. I’m only coming to make sure it’s just another false lead.”

Byrne frowned, “Fuck Hound, I’m so sorry you haven’t found them yet. My pack has kept their eyes and ears open. Drake and Sebastian will be found eventually. You sure I can’t go with you... even for emotional support?”

“Do I look like a Hound that needs hand holding, Byrne?” Valor’s voice was clipped.

“You look like a Hound that’s run himself ragged. I’m only trying to help.”

“Then come when I call you,” Valor turned and walked away. As Byrne drove off, Valor sighed and dropped his shoulders. He felt like shit. He was exhausted and starved. He needed a good fuck and a long nap. Before that could happen though, he needed to find that motherfucking book.

There was no way he could tell Byrne or any other Hell Hound about this mission. He didn’t want anyone else to get in trouble if this whole thing went sideways. If Lucifer found out what he planned to do with that book, the Devil would have Valor’s head on a spike. No reason to make it a pack affair.

Valor had Byrne drop him off at a busy intersection and he walked the rest of the way. It was night, the air was chilled – not as bad as back home – and Valor hated the noises of the city even in these late hours. He preferred the silence and seclusion of his mansion. He liked to see the stars.

This solo mission felt wrong. Val’s stomach twisted in knots as guilt ate at him. He had to do this though. He had to exhaust every fucking effort to find the twins or he wasn’t worthy enough to be an Alpha.

Valor's long strides made quick work of getting from point A to point B. Marco's house was a historical masterpiece. The landscaping was pristine, from the trimmed bushes to bright white fencing. A brick walkway lead to a deep red front door. The sitting porch boasted a bench swing and hooks for ferns. It was all Southern Charm.

Charm. Hmm, Valor reached out and touched the fence, expecting to feel a pulse of magic or some enchantment on the perimeter. Certainly anyone who collected dangerous things would want to keep them protected and locked up tight. If Valor was a collector of precious items, he'd protect them well.

To Valor's disgust, the perimeter was clear. It certainly made his job easier though. He opened the gate and walked straight up to the front door. Valor wasn't going to knock. Instead, he crept around the house, checking each window, each doorway, every little space, wondering when he would find the trigger alarm that would zap his ass or at least alert the cops of an intruder.

Nothing. There was nothing. It made him more wary.

Valor pulled out his knife and, with his Hell Hound powers, scaled the house to the second story bedroom window. Peering in, expecting to see a man sleeping in his bed, Valor was shocked at what he saw instead.

"Maiden, Mother and Crone."



Bishop lost his shit. As Hounds held Tilly down on the ground and worked some fucked up ancient spell on her, all he could think was *Stop!* Maybe it was because she was convulsing violently, maybe it was because she was screaming so loudly, maybe it was because she couldn't possibly survive this much magic in one dose. Fuck!

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” Bishop grabbed Jack’s shoulders and pulled him away. He succeeded in breaking their physical contact, but Jack continued reciting the incantation over and over again. His eyes were glassy and distant, his voice low and strained, arms stiff from the energy he summoned.

“God Damn it!” Bishop wanted to kick them all away, snatch Tilly up, and make a run for it. The only reason he didn’t was because this was what she’d asked for and he wasn’t in a position to tell her what to do. She was right, this was her body, her curse, her motherfucking choice.

It wasn’t helping her though. Just look at how she was flopping like a fish! She began making gurgling noises and blood started to pour from her nose.

“Hounds!” Sara called out, “Stop!” She had to say it two more times before Jack was able to snap out of it. The other three members of Sara’s pack ceased their chanting the first time she said *stop*.

Jack stumbled and fell to his knees, “Bloody Hell, that was intense. I couldn’t pull back once it started.”

The instant Jack stopped working the spell, Tilly’s body became motionless. Bishop dropped down and cradled Tilly’s head. Wiping the blood from her face, he silently prayed that this was a normal reaction to the magic and they hadn’t accidentally fried her brain. “Enough,” he said gruffly. “She can’t take anymore. That spell was killing her.”

“Fuck, that was fucking scary as fuck,” Tanner scrubbed his face, “Let’s get her inside, it’s freezing out here.”

Bishop lifted Tilly and cradled her in his arms. When Kalen moved to help him, Bishop snarled, “I’ve got her.” No one else was touching his woman.

“Is she going to be alright?” Eli asked.

“Guess we’ll have to wait and see,” Jack held the door and everyone filed back into the mansion. “Bloody hell, I knew it was going to be painful, but whatever curse is on her soul is a strong one.”

“Is there any hope that it worked?” Tanner asked.

“Hang on,” Jack stopped Bishop from climbing the stairs. It infuriated the Hound because all he wanted to do was clean her up and fix her and protect her from this kind of pain. He stopped when Jack halted only because he, too, wanted to know if it worked.

Jack lifted her right eyelid and frowned. “Bloody fucking hell.” They failed.

Bishop held Tilly tighter to his chest and climbed the steps. He wanted to put her in his bed, but didn't. Instead, he brought her into the spare bedroom and placed her carefully on the bed. Her hair was wet and stuck to her face and neck. Gently swiping it away, he whispered, “I'm so sorry, Sweetness. I'm so damn sorry.” He kissed her forehead before heading to the linen closet for a washcloth so he could wipe the blood from her nose.

“Bishop?” Sara's voice made his heart ricochet. For a second, panic sliced him in two. He knew it was the real Sara standing there with the bottle of water, but he still suffered PTSD from his *malanum* possession. *She's real. She's real. She's real.*

Seeing Sara in his home again did a head job on Bishop. After what that fake ass Sara did to him with her charm and her whisky and her let's-lure-the-trusting-Hound-away-and-push-malanum-into-his-body trick, could you blame him for spooking easy?

“Yeah, Sara?”

She entered the bedroom and handed him the bottle. “It's laced and ready to go. Jack said to make sure she drinks all of this and,” she handed him a tiny vial, “all of this needs to be consumed with food. Sage dip and lots of carbs, okay?”

He took the Angel Dust infused water, the vial of whatever the fuck, and nodded.

“We're not going anywhere, okay? Not until Valor gets home. So if you need anything, howl. Tanner and Kalen are going to patrol your district while you take care of your girl. Jack's already crashed on your sofa and Eli's going to stay with me.

Bishop didn't have words. He knew why they weren't going to leave him alone. It was because they thought him unstable. Maybe he was. If being possessed by evil and killing five innocents didn't make a man question his sanity, then living with the guilt of knowing there was a possibility that he killed half his pack in the deep dark woods somewhere sure would make one unravel. Don't get Bishop started on the confusion he faced every time he looked at Tilly.

This woman couldn't have come into his life at a more terrible time. It made Bishop want to push her away and at the same time latch onto her because she was a breath of fresh air when he'd suffocated in his personal hell way too long.

A small whining noise came from the bed. Sara and Bishop both looked down at Tilly and then Sara quietly left the room. She didn't close the door, thank fuck. The last thing Bishop needed was to be locked into a room at a time like this. He wouldn't have wanted to break away from Tilly even to open the damn door again so he'd have needed help.

Christ on a cracker, he was so fucking damaged.

A Hound should be stronger than this. More solid and confident. Fearless would be nice. Bishop wished he was *fearless*. But that just wasn't the case. Fear owned his ass and right now he feared for Tilly.

She moaned again and her eyes fluttered open.

"Hey," he whispered softly. "Can you hear me?"

She nodded a fraction of an inch.

Bishop leaned in and got to work. "I'm going to put a wet cloth on your face, okay? Your skin is really hot and I just want to wipe it down a little to help you." It wasn't a lie. She was burning up like she had a fever, but he also really wanted the blood off her face. It was fucking him all up, seeing her like that.

Gently, Bishop patted down her forehead and temples, then her cheeks and chin, before finally going for her mouth and under her nose. She didn't budge or make a peep the whole time he worked on her. "Sweetness, can you open your eyes for me?"

She cracked her right one open and he saw how glassy it was. *Shit. That can't be good.*

"Did it work?" her voice cracked.

Popping the cap off the bottle of water, he deflected, "How about you try to sit up and drink this." Bishop slid his arm behind her shoulders and lifted Tilly to a sitting position so she could drink without choking. The sooner this Angel Dust was in her, the safer she would be. Not that she wasn't already safe, because he was right here with her and there was no way anything was going to come at her if Bishop was around, but still, extra precautions were great.

"Drink." He tipped the bottle back and she took a sip. Some of it trickled down her chin.

With a weak arm, Tilly grabbed the bottle from him and continued to chug until there was none left. "I'm so thirsty."

Nodding, he kept his eyes on her, walked backwards, got to the door and yelled, "Can we get more water up here? She's awake." Then Bishop sat on the side of the bed and told himself to not touch her. She might not want that in her fragile state. Or maybe she would? Hell, he didn't have a goddamn clue.

"Did it work?" she asked again.

Bishop wouldn't be able to avoid the topic forever. "No, Sweetness, I don't think so."

Tilly leaned back against her pillow. Then she started sobbing. Bishop literally felt himself turn into a puddle of helpless sludge. Eli came in carrying a tray of food and more bottles of water. "Sara's putting in a grocery order to be delivered. You don't have much in the house, but I was able to make this. Pasta will be good for your girl and I made it with a lighter sauce. As soon as more groceries come, I'll make her what she needs to counteract any residue left inside her." His eyes darted to Tilly then back to Bishop, "Rest easy, Hound. She's a strong one." He left on that note.

Bishop stared at the plate of pasta and the smell of garlic and butter made his stomach turn. Tilly managed to stay upright. Damn, she was so strong and resilient.

“Here, let me do it,” Bishop curled fettuccini noodles around the fork tongs slowly. Next, he blew on the pasta so it wouldn’t be too hot for her, then he fed Tilly. She was either too shaken or too exhausted to argue with him, so he was able to feed her. Bishop was a grateful son-of-a-bitch he could do this tiny thing for her. Especially since he hadn’t been able to do anything else to help her out.

She chewed the food slowly, tears welling in her eyes. Tilly’s tears would likely cause him to shatter. He looked down and concentrated on twirling the stupid pasta.

“I knew it wouldn’t work,” she said after swallowing more water.

Bishop held the fork out and kept his focus on her chin, not her eyes. He saw her tremble and it made his heart clench. *Please don’t cry, please don’t cry, please don’t cry.*

“I had to try though. For a minute...” Tilly took the bite and chewed while talking, “I actually thought that if it hurt that bad it might work. You know how they say no pain, no gain. But there was a point when I realized it really wasn’t going to happen and I just wanted it to be over.”

He couldn’t imagine the level of pain she tolerated on that fucking lawn. Bishop cleared his dry throat and twirled more noodles. When she sniffled, his gaze snapped to hers and he clenched his jaw tightly shut. Pretty sure he cracked a tooth in the process too.

Tilly exhaled loudly and snatched the fork from Bishop’s hand. The Hound sat there stunned speechless as she shoveled another forkful into her mouth. Tilly ate like this was normal. Other than the tears she wiped away, no one would have ever guessed she’d just gone through something horrendous and been left with the realization that she was going to fucking die.

“What’s your full name?” he asked.

“Why?”

“Just wanted to know the name of the bravest woman I’ve ever met.”

She wasn’t flattered. “Matilda Jane Sinclair.”

He couldn’t understand it. Either Matilda Jane Sinclair was the strongest creature in the world, or the fucking coldest, most closed off human in existence. “How are you so calm about this?” he finally asked.

Tilly's gaze flicked to him and she finished chewing. "I've lived my whole life going from one failure to another. I knew this was a shot in the dark. I knew better than to really get my hopes up. I'm going to die," she stated with an icy tone. "The good thing is at least I'm not going to leave anyone behind."

Bishop ran a hand down his face and cursed. "We can try again. I know someone else who might be able to help." Lucifer would know how to fix this. Fuck Valor and anyone else who tried to stop Bishop from going to the Devil about it. This woman was too damn young to die. Maybe one of the Crossroads Demons could help? They were kind of like wish granters, right? Just make a bargain and get what you want. Bishop was prepared to make an exchange on behalf of Tilly. The only problem with using a Crossroad Demon was they seemed to have gone off grid since the whole Hell crumbling nightmare.

Bishop literally felt split in two: Half of him wanted to find the twins, and the other half wanted to make sure this woman lived the rest of her days to the fullest so she'd die with no regrets. Both felt imperative. This shouldn't be happening. He didn't know this woman enough to feel so torn about his duties. But their paths crossed at the worst possible time – Bishop's most vulnerable time – and he felt a certain degree of obligation to help her out since he couldn't do a damn thing to lift her curse.

"Don't bother trying to ask someone else," Tilly devoured the last of the pasta. "I'm done."

Wait, done with fighting death or done the pasta? Bishop continued to hold the tray in his lap and noticed she'd leaned in a little closer to him.

"There's just one thing left to do now," she said quietly.

"What's that?" Shit, why did his voice have to sound so husky right now? He cleared his throat, "What can I do to help you, Tilly?" *Temporary*, he thought. *She's only temporary, like a snowflake.*

"I want you to leave me alone, Bishop." Tilly turned away from him and closed her eyes.

On the inside, he screamed and roared and protested. On the outside, he stayed calm and respected her wishes. Holding the tray with both hands, he cracked the handles with his tight grip, and then he quietly left the room. He wanted to leave the door open just a little, but that was out of habit, which meant he forced himself to shut the damn thing behind him.

Bishop glanced at one of the twin's rooms and his heart cracked even more. He failed to find the twins and failed to help Tilly out of her jam. Useless... he was so motherfucking useless.

As Bishop headed back to the kitchen, his heartbeat echoed inside the empty shell he called a body. The twins and Tilly weren't the only ones he'd failed either. Bishop slammed the tray down on the counter and buried his face in his hands.

Holy Hell. The world was starting to close in on him. Maybe he should let it this time. Let the weight of the world bury his sorry ass for good. At this rate, they were never going to find Baz and Drake. Bishop didn't want to live without his pack – his *whole* pack. Going on without the twins was just not an option for him. Period.

And poor Tilly... she was too young, too wonderful, too good to fucking die yet.

Maybe he could trade his life for Tilly's? *Yeah*, he thought. If he could get ahold of one of those Crossroads Demons, maybe they could work something out. If not, then he'd go to Lucifer and lay a new bargain down on the table for him. It would be a win-win. Bishop would get put out of his misery and Tilly would get a longer life.

Resolved, Bishop gave the search for Sebastian and Drake one more month. After that, Bishop was out of here. Permanently.

Here's hoping Tilly lived long enough for him to make the trade.

Chapter 25

Master stepped into the chilled, damp room. His nose crinkled from the pungent odor clinging to the stone walls. Somewhere, water dripped and the *ploink, ploink, ploink* was already grating his nerves. His servants, though obedient enough, hadn't been successful at all with the task he'd set them.

He needed to be cautious with the actions he took. Being caught was one thing, being stopped was quite another. Walking around the room, he watched as his servants finished yet another spell. The Hell Hound they were focusing on was stretched out on a stone slab and... ah, it wasn't water he heard dripping, it was blood. Hell Hound blood to be exact. Master avoided stepping in the mess and walked over to stand at the head of the slab.

Shrouded in his usual, Master hovered over the wounded Hound. The dog's eyes were swollen, magic had turned his pupils an explosion of colors, and his skin was pasty and damp with sweat. Along his torso, herbs burned and symbols had been cut into his flesh. Impressive for a Hell Hound to last so long in these conditions. This level of magic was not for the faint of heart. "Why is he still unchanged?"

"Nothing works for very long," his servant said while untying the Hound's restraints. "We've tried everything you gave us. His soul seems immune to all our magics."

"You must not be using the spells correctly." Master leaned down and got a good look at the Hound. God Almighty, what Lucifer saw in these once-were-humans was beyond him. They might have strength and a good amount of convenient power, but just like humans, they were fragile creatures. Bendable. Breakable. Usually with fractured minds and tortured pasts that stained their souls.

Wait a minute, "Where is his soul?"

"What?"

"His. Soul. Where is it?"

The servant gawked at Master and frowned. "In his body, sire."

Master peeled the Hound's eyelids wide open and hissed. "This one has no soul, you fucking fool! You can't turn a soul if there isn't one!"

They both peered down at the dark-haired Hound. Suddenly, the soulless fucker thrust his head forward and launched a wad of spit in Master's face. The act took him by surprise and he stumbled back, furious and insulted. With a lash of power, he struck out and clocked the fucker on the side of the head, sending the Hound rolling off the slab and crashing to the floor.

"Now!" the Hound yelled and Master felt something barrel into him from behind. His masked appearance almost faltered as he stepped into the puddle of blood and slipped. Catching himself, Master quickly moved away and struck the Hound again. The dog's jaw cracked with the hit, but he didn't fall.

Hell Hounds were resilient creatures. Lucifer hadn't chosen weaklings. These things could take a beating. *Good to know.*

The male twins came at him, together. Master slammed both Hounds with a spell that took away their memories for a moment. They would forget what they were doing. It was a temporary solution but was all he could do in this state.

They stumbled and held their heads. While they stayed dazed and confused, Master moved around the room studying them. How could the one be soulless? Did Lucifer hold the Hound's soul like a prized possession? *Yes, Master thought, that must be it.*

Leave it to Lucifer to covet. That Angel always was so fascinated with humans. Their spirit. Their innocence. God only knows why. Humans were weak and fragile and lived such short lives, they barely had time to hone the skills needed to be great warriors.

Malanum, however, were more agile and equipped for war. Being dead already meant they couldn't be killed. It was why Master wanted more of them so badly. But *malanum* were not without some of their own issues. Obedience and fealty were two things Master had yet to gain with them. It's why he wanted Hound's blood. There was something in their life force that made them loyal to the bone. If he had his way, Master would snatch every dog Lucifer owned and turn them into vessels for his war. It hadn't gone so smoothly with his first attempt, but he could hardly take the blame for that. He'd given all the right tools to Charlotte and her little boy toys.

When they performed the ceremony on Sara that night nearly six years ago, Master hadn't been able to stay for too long. His energy wouldn't allow it at the time. Since then, however, he'd grown stronger. He could visit the human world more often, and was able to keep his identity concealed.

"Seize that one," Master commanded. His servant lunged forward and grabbed one of the dazed Hounds by the throat. Master bent forward and growled, "Where is your soul, dog?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Time to raise the stakes a little higher. "Bring in the girls."

"Yes, Master." His servant dropped the docile Hound to the ground and left.

Master. It had such a lovely ring to it.

He made sure everyone he worked with on the outside was called Master. If shit went sideways, it was *Master's* fault. If things went well, it was *Master's* success. He learned long ago that taking credit for another's actions was an easy way to gain power without getting his hands dirty. Lucifer followed the same line of thinking, did he not?

Master also learned that humans were the most egotistical creatures next to Angels. Give humans a high and mighty title and they relied on that narcissistic high, like a drug addict with an endless supply of heroin. Steve Alder, the self-absorbed piece of shit from New Orleans, was a good example of how intoxicated one could become off his own ego.

So many servants running around with the same title made the real Master harder to catch. Harder to find. The best part was it also gave certain warriors a false sense of victory and security. Master watched the twins' expressions while the "girls" came through the door moments later. They were another set of twins.

Why all the twins? Well, they had a certain, unique quality to them that was unmatched by anything else. Their blood, their soul, their emotions, all of it was double the potency in energy and power. Psychic qualities were amplified between them. Their empathy, too. Blood magic, at the level Master was using, required nothing but the best.

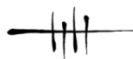
"Come here, my child," Master cooed to the girl on the left. She sniffled, her eyes darting everywhere as she stepped closer. It could be difficult to resist his pull. A blessing for him, a curse for them. "Shhhh, come, come," Master watched her step into his space and her eyes squinted as she looked up at him. "I won't hurt you, unless *they* make me." He made sure she got a good look at the Hounds.

The child whimpered more while her sister stood at a distance, trembling with her fists by her side. Master turned and growled at the Hounds, "Give me your soul or watch them die."

The girl in front of Master squeaked, but when she tried to take a step back, he latched onto her arm and she let out a blood-curling scream. He didn't blame her for the reaction. He would scream too if he were face-to-face with death.

Neither of the Hounds moved or relented. They were either still too stunned by the spell, or were the most stubborn bastards to walk the earth.

Fuck it. Master cocked his head to the side, "Are you ready to die, child?"



Drake snapped out of his stupor when he heard a scream so shrill it damn near busted his ear drums. Baz stood to his left. The room wobbled and vibrated. Drake shook his head and stumbled towards the sound of another scream.

“What’s it going to be, Hound? Will you give me your soul or shall I make her suffer for your greed?”

Drake froze. He couldn’t see who was talking to him. It was just a big white blob of light that screamed like a child. No... wait... it *was* a child. A little girl. Holy fucking shit! She was identical to the one on the other side of Baz, only the one screaming was being held back by a white light.

“I have no soul to give,” Drake swallowed the bile in his throat.

A bone-chilling laugh rose out of the white light. “I think you’re lying.”

Drake watched in horror as the girl jerked back and her head snapped to the side, her screams immediately cut off with a quick succession of cracks. She dropped to the ground, silent and lifeless, with a broken neck.

Riding a fresh wave of fury, Drake barreled into the white light but it was like hitting an electric fence. Thrown backwards, he cracked his head against the wall. Lights out.

Baz snapped his teeth. Instead of going after the enemy in white, he went for the surviving girl. Snatching her arm, Baz pulled her around so she could hide behind him. “I’ve got you,” he said.

Crouching down low, Baz made sure he could protect her with his body and figured out who to go after first. Seeing what happened to Drake when he went after the white-light figure, Baz decided to attack the fucker who had experimented on them.

He spun out and roundhouse kicked the man in the head. The fucker went down like a sack of bricks. Baz swiftly turned around to check on his brother, who was still out cold, and then his gaze flicked to the little girl again.

Something large struck Baz’s lower back and he dropped to his knees. His Hound skills weren’t there anymore. He should have heard the *malanum* approach, but didn’t. The evil piece of shit charged right at him with no fear – that shouldn’t have happened. A *malanum*’s instincts were to fear and run the other way from a Hound. *Shit.*

Six more came at him. They scaled the walls, climbed the ceiling, and moved with the agility Baz and Drake no longer possessed and Drake got up and swayed on his feet. Baz immediately grabbed the little girl to protect her.

While the *malanum* surrounded the twins and the little girl. The bastard Baz just kicked in the head scooped up the dead girl's body as blood poured out of a cut on his left temple and dripped all over the child's clothing. The surviving twin cried harder. Wracking with sobs, she seemed rooted to the spot, her arm outstretched towards her sister.

Baz couldn't figure out what to do: Protect the living girl or the dead one. *Malanum* rushed him and he grabbed the living girl and held on tight to her. As Drake took down two *malanum* with just his fists and teeth, Baz covered the girl with his body and he kicked away another *malanum*. Drake twisted and snatched the fucker, then pounded its face to pulp. There was no safe place in the room for the girl to hide. *Malanum* reached for her and tried to tear at her clothing and scrape her arms.

Crouching down, Baz let out a loud bark and attacked the remaining *malanum*. The girl screamed, his twin roared, and the *malanum* let out various keening noises and vicious snarls. At some point Baz went numb and the fight, however long it lasted, left him. He sank to his knees, his bloodied body exhausted between magic and exertion.

Jesus fucking Christ, when would this ever end?

"Now that, Hounds, was impressive." The figure shrouded in white light moved around the room unscathed. "Come," he commanded.

Baz watched the wounded *malanum* leave the room like well-trained soldiers. Some crawled, some walked, some needed to be dragged. Baz didn't have the energy to try and stop them. Helpless, he watched everyone leave the room and kept his eyes locked on the white-light. He blindly reached behind him and felt a tiny hand yank his. He gave it a squeeze and hoped the little girl was going to be okay.

"This is your last chance, Hound," the white light said from the doorway. "Give me your soul."

“I don’t have one to give,” Drake growled.

“I don’t believe you. Everyone has a soul. You can’t live without one.”

Drake stayed silent and Baz lost his ability to stay upright. He slumped forward, bracing himself with one arm on the ground, the other still held onto the little girl.

The enemy moved slowly towards the door. “While you think about a different answer to give me, keep the girl.”

The child whimpered behind Baz.

“Take care, Hounds. Oh, and, just a warning - the small ones wither faster than most. I doubt she has more than a few days left in her. The longer you make me wait for what I want, the less time she has to live.”

The door slammed shut again.

Chapter 26

Bishop could barely breathe. Too much screamed in his head. He needed to get the fuck out of the house. “I have to get out of here,” he said to Tanner. “I can’t fucking be here right now. Let Tilly sleep. When she wakes, get her whatever she needs, no questions asked, got it?”

“Yeah, sure,” Tanner followed Bishop out of the kitchen and down to the basement.

“Stop following me, Tanner.”

“Where the fuck are you going? Your alpha wanted you to stay here until he got back.”

“Fuck him. I can’t sit here and do nothing.”

Tanner grabbed his shoulder and Bishop wanted to bite his hand off. With a growl, he snapped his teeth in warning. Tanner swiftly let go and put both his hands up. “Easy, Hound.”

Bishop inhaled, exhaled, then cursed under his breath. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m not right in my head anymore.” He kept walking until he got to the back end of the basement where there was a keypad.

“I get it. I seriously do. But we don’t want you going out there on your own.”

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beeeeeeep. Bishop punched in the security code and the wall opened up to reveal an arsenal of the finest weapons money could buy. “So come with me, then.”

“Holy fuckballs,” Tanner gasped.

“Grab whatever you’re comfortable with.” Bishop went for the automatic weapons and noticed Tanner hadn’t budged.

“I’m... I’m not much for guns.”

Bishop slammed his fist on a large button and a drawer about six feet long popped open, revealing a variety of shiny slicey-dicies. Tanner whistled in approval and grabbed two medium-sized knives, before going after a curved s-shape blade.

Bishop lashed out, held Tanner's wrist and growled, "Not that one." That one was Baz's favorite. Bishop didn't want it touched by anyone but Baz. Tanner nodded and pointed at the one next to it that was a little bigger. He arched his brow, waiting for the go-ahead.

"That one's fine," Bishop adjusted his holster, grabbed a few boxes of special ammo. "This is about your size," he tossed Tanner a Kevlar vest.

Tanner's eyes widened. "What the fuck do I have to wear this for? *Malanum* don't have guns."

"Just put it on," Bishop kept loading up, "I'm pretty sure a certain female upstairs would be really fucking mad if you even got a bullet in your heart. Or in your ass. Or any other of her favorite body parts, for that matter. I'm just trying to look out for you. Bullets have been known to ricochet, ya know."

Tanner was about to be a father, which meant he now had more at risk when he went on a hunt and Bishop felt responsible for him if they were going to be hunting partners tonight.

"We never use guns on our hunts. We're knife peoples." Tanner tucked his blades into accessible places. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You using protection out there too?"

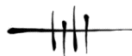
"I have no need for protection." Bishop turned and hit the button, closing the wall back up and didn't bother with a fucking vest.

"Pretty sure I know at least one person in your life who cares for you. They're not going to want you damaged either, Hound."

Bishop deadpanned Tanner. "She doesn't care about me like that. And I cannot possibly be more damaged than I already am." He turned and walked away.

"I wasn't talking about Tilly, Bishop. I meant your *pack*."

Fuuuuuck. Bishop bit the inside of his cheek and climbed the steps ready to set the world on fire.



Bishop and Tanner arrived at their destination in record timing, which was a good thing considering neither of them had a lot of patience. Bishop picked the hunting spot – an old warehouse on the south side of Baltimore. The sun was rising by the time they found their first *malanum*.

Bishop clutched the thing by its neck and growled, “I’m looking for this guy, have you seen him?” He held his cell phone out with a picture of Baz on it. The *malanum* hissed and spat while trying to fight out of the Hound’s grip. “Answer me!” Bishop gave the fucker a good shake, “Have you seen him?”

“If I tell you, will you release me?”

“Yes,” Bishop replied with a friendly tone while he held the fucker by the throat. “I will absolutely let you go.”

“What?” Tanner barked from the other side of the parking lot. “No!”

“Shut the fuck up,” Bishop warned Tanner. To the *malanum* he said, “Have you seen him?”

“No,” the *malanum* croaked, “never seen him.” He bloodied Bishop’s arms, scratching and clawing at him.

“Okay,” Bishop smiled. Then he opened a Hell hole and tossed the bastard in. The *malanum* screamed like a pig and vanished out of sight. Bishop closed the Hell hole and turned to Tanner, “What?”

“I thought you were actually going to let him go.”

“I did let him go... right back to where he belonged. *In Hell*.” He rounded his shoulders, eager to find another *malanum* to question.

“You want to head down this way?” Tanner pointed in the direction of an alleyway known for drug deals and dead bodies.

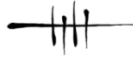
“Looks like a great place for a stabbing or two. Let’s go.”

Together, the Hell Hounds headed into a sketchy neighborhood. Most of these row homes were boarded up, the rest were dark and quiet. White puffs of smoke blew out of their mouths while they did the walk and talk.

“Sorry we couldn’t do more for your girl.”

“She’s not my girl. She’s just Tilly.” Bishop didn’t want to talk about that woman right now. If he started, he’d not stop and then he would want to rush home to check on her and that wasn’t going to work. His focus needed to be on finding the twins.

Tilly was safe in his house. The twins... were not.



The night of hunting wasn't as satisfying as Bishop would have liked, but he did manage to cool off a little of his burn. Of course, he still had the scent of Tilly's pleasure lingering on his beard and that helped too.

"Fuck that felt good. You've got some good honey holes in this city," Tanner wiped off his blade and tucked it away as they marched down the road. "Wanna stop for coffee?"

"Sure, why not?" He could use a few shots of wakey-wakey juice. Bishop hadn't slept much in the past few days and there was still so much left to do. Valor should be home soon. Bishop had checked his cell all night for a text from his alpha and absolutely hated the disconnection he felt – not just with the missing twins, but with his alpha too. When Valor's text came in saying he was about an hour away, Bishop had felt dizzy with relief.

Tanner ordered five different drinks and asked for a caddy, "I'm bringing some back for my pack. You didn't have much in your pantry and my Beautiful needs coffee to stay sane."

"Isn't caffeine bad for the baby?"

Tanner shrugged, "I'm not about to argue with Sara. If she wants coffee, she's getting coffee. She'd never do anything that would hurt the baby, so I figure this is safe. Besides," Tanner winked, "I only buy her decaf and have it all flavored up and shit. She doesn't even know the difference."

"You serve her brown sadness water?"

"With lots of sugar and two shots of cinnamon whatever the fuck they call it. She loves it."

Bishop chuckled and ordered four coffees – two for him, one for Valor and one for Tilly. His heart clenched when he saw the display of blueberry muffins. Drake loved blueberry muffins. Fuck, that's just what he needed. To be crushed by a goddamn muffin right now.

He swiftly turned his back to the glass pastry case and stared out the big bay window while he waited for his name to be called. This was the same café he sat in with Tilly the other day. Shit, *Tilly*. He needed to get back to her and make sure she was doing okay. Hopefully she would still be sleeping in her room when he returned and he could go up there with special room service.

Her room.

Yeah... that's not cool. He meant to think *spare bedroom*.

"Let's roll!" Tanner knocked the door open with his ass and held it for Bishop. They got back to the truck, turned up the music, and flew home with the windows cracked a little for Bishop's peace of mind.

"Thanks for hunting with me, Sunshine Boy."

"Anytime, Bishop. Seriously, you need us, we're fucking here for you."

God, how could Tanner be so willing to forgive and forget? Bishop didn't remember it, but when he was possessed, he hadn't just killed five innocents in his house. He also ripped Eli's heart out of his chest and killed him too. Valor was able to bring him back, and no one ever spoke of it again. Didn't mean it hadn't happened though. For Tanner and the rest of his pack to be here helping him and Valor, well... fuck...

Bishop didn't have that kind of forgiveness in him.

If someone threatened him or his pack once, he'd sever ties and walk away. Bishop never offered a second chance.

It wasn't you. It was the malanum using you. It's not your fault. He tried to convince himself that he was innocent. The little voice of reason got swallowed by the screams of his past though. Fuck him, this sucked so hard. Time for a distraction. Bishop gripped the steering wheel and turned down the music, "So when do you find out about the sex of the baby?"

"Soon. Sara thinks it's a girl."

"Oh yeah?" Bishop smiled, imagining a baby girl with four dads like Tanner, Jack, Kalen and Eli. She'd be a spoiled princess for life.

"Does Sara like sweet stuff?"

"You mean her cravings?"

"Mmm hmm."

“Yeah, I guess,” Tanner’s knee bobbed while he tapped along to the music, “Actually, she’s always liked sweet stuff, but she’s really bumped up her Lucky Charms intake lately.”

“Might be a girl then,” Bishop hung a left and yielded onto the highway. “She taking all the right vitamins and stuff? Not lifting heavy things? Getting plenty of rest?”

“Oh yeah, for sure. She’s getting pissy about how little we let her do on her own. And this no fighting and hunting thing is a challenge for her Hound side, but we’re doing all we can to keep her balanced.” Tanner continued tapping to the music. “Shit, now you got me thinking about having a girl.” Tanner was positively vibrating with joy. His big smile grew wide enough to take up half his face. “Oh man, little girls love to have tea parties, don’t they?”

Bishop gripped the steering wheel tight as a wave of dizziness took hold of his good senses.

Tanner barked a laugh, “I’m going to love seeing Kalen dressed in a tiara sitting at a little table with a teacup and cookies.”

Bishop almost ran off the road and swerved back into his lane, nearly ramming into the median in the process.

“Fuck! Shit! What the hell, you okay?” Tanner’s body swayed as the car jerked around.

“I’m fine,” Bishop growled. Air, he needed more air. He wound all the windows in the truck down. *Inhale. Exhale.* He turned the radio back up and blasted Shinedown’s 45. Inside, Bishop screamed and thrashed and howled. Outside, he calmly drove them home. The rest of the way there, the two Hounds discussed the latest concerts they’d been to, the best place to get cheesesteak subs, and whatever else Bishop could think of. *Anything but tea parties.*

They pulled up to the house just behind Valor. The alpha climbed out of his car with a scowl and stood with his arms crossed, waiting for Bishop to get out of his truck.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“No,” Valor growled.

“I’m heading in,” Tanner breezed past them and went inside.

“What the hell are ye doing, Hound?”

“I went hunting,” Bishop said. “I needed to get the fuck out of the house. I can’t stand being in there too long.”

“Where’s Matilda Jane?”

“She’s most likely in her room.” *Her room.* Damn he did it again. Bishop toed his boot against the asphalt. “She didn’t do well with the curse removal. She wanted to be left alone so I respected her wishes and obeyed.”

Valor sighed heavily. “I was afraid it wouldna work. At least we tried.”

“There was no *we*. You left. You fucking *left*, Valor.” Bishop headed inside, carrying his caddy of coffee. “Here,” he passed a cup to Val. “I’ll bring Tilly hers while you go talk with Sara’s pack.”

“I wish to talk with Tilly first. There’s something she needs to know.”

Bishop frowned, “What’s that?”

Valor paused at the bottom of the steps and whispered, “Marco is dead. Someone killed him.”

The instinct to protect roared loudly in Bishop’s mind and he raced up the steps. He knew Tilly was safe in this house, but for this Marco guy to be dead? Shit.... Bishop’s hackles raised. Valor being hot on his heels didn’t soothe the Hound’s nerves either.

“Matilda Jane,” Val knocked on her door just once before opening it. “Matilda Jane!”

Bishop dropped the coffee caddy and the hot liquid splashed all over the rug. He looked around the empty room and cursed. “Fuck! She’s gone!”

The window was wide open and there was a note on the bed that said, “*Thanks for trying. Have a nice life.*” It was written on the back of her Bucket List. He clutched the note and turned to his alpha. Valor, however, was already running down the steps and out the front door to find her.

Chapter 27

Tilly figured she was a dead woman anyway so why bother being afraid of what was to come. She needed to embrace her goddamn destiny and that wasn't going to happen if she hid at some dude's mansion.

Once she slipped through the window, Tilly climbed into a huge oak that grew exceptionally close to the house. Then she shimmied down the tree, slipped and crash-landed on her ass. She called a car service to meet her at the end of the long drive and prayed the whole time she wouldn't get caught. She didn't know Jack and the others well enough, but didn't want them to see her looking like the Hot Mess Express she was right now.

Part of her felt guilty for sneaking out the way she had, but she didn't owe them an explanation. They were even now. Besides, she didn't know what to say besides goodbye. Tilly wasn't good at saying goodbyes. She was good at doing a cut-and-run. Snipping lines that tied her down was her specialty.

Maybe they would run into each other again, maybe they wouldn't. Who cared? Not her. Nope, not her at all.

Hopefully Valor got whatever he needed from Marco without getting killed. At least one of them should have success with their mission. It sure as shit hadn't been her.

Tilly's cell buzzed in her hand. She left with nothing except her phone. Looking down, she declined the call and ignored it.

After Bishop told her the spell hadn't worked and she was still cursed, Tilly waited for him to leave and then she bawled her eyes out. Her face was still swollen, eyes still red. There was no more hope for her. She'd reached the end of the line.

So, Tilly put one more thing on her mental "Fuck It" list and had a car service pick her up and take her back to her apartment. The place was a mess. She looked up and saw the symbol painted on the ceiling. How the hell did Marco get up that high? And what the fuck was he thinking using that magic on her?

Dick.

Tilly started cleaning. She was still hot, but not like she'd been in Bishop's house. If she had a fever, maybe it was finally breaking. She refused to link her heat to Valor right now. "Shit, it's sweltering in here!"

She went over and opened a window for fresh air. If something wanted to climb in and get her, they better be prepared for a fight. She'd go to her death swinging. Putting protection charms on her sills stopped working a long ass time ago. Tilly had to learn vigilance and how to deliver a mean right hook by the time she was sixteen. Her aim's only improved since then.

Wrenching the window open, icy air blasted her in the face and blew her hair back. Next, she searched around for her wireless speaker and connected it to her phone so she could crank up her tunes. Grabbing a broom and dustpan, she carefully walked over to where the dickhead had smashed her antique mirror and started sweeping.

She wanted to scream and cry and smash her walls. She was so angry. So frustrated. It felt like there was a war raging in her body. Tilly sang her heart out and put on a solo concert in her trashed apartment. Tilly spun around and laughed so hard, it fucking hurt her ribs. To do anything else would destroy her right now.

"Fuck you!" she screamed at the ceiling and for good measure she flipped the symbol the bird. Two birds actually. "FUCK YOUUUUU!"

BOOM!

Tilly spun around just in time to see Valor and Bishop walk over- yeah that's right, *over* – her door. They literally busted down her goddamn door. Fuckers.

"Damnit!" she stomped her foot and tossed her broom across the room so she wouldn't beat them over their heads with it. "Why can't people stop breaking my fucking house!"

Bishop reached her first. He cupped her face gently in his hands while his gaze raked down her body. It wasn't in a lustful way; it was in a *is she okay* way. He looked scared out of his mind.

Was she okay? Hell no. Not at all.

"I'm okay," she tried to jerk away from him, but he wouldn't let go. "I said I'm okay, Bishop. Stop!"

Next, Valor towered over her. She tried to meet his gaze, but his expression stunned her. She couldn't figure out if he wanted to kiss her or scream at her. "You're in trouble, lass."

"For what? Sneaking out?" She knocked Valor's arm away, forcing him to let go of her. "We're even now boys, so you need to leave."

Valor looked like a dark, angry beast with the way he glared at her. Not that she liked the sexy broody look on a guy or anything. Nope. Uh uh. Shit, she got hotter. "Look, Foxy Boy," she poked him in the chest, "I don't care what you do to your big old house, but that," she pointed at her door on the floor, "wasn't yours to break."

"We'll fix it," Valor snarled. "And doona call me Foxy Boy."

"Foxy Boy," she hissed just to watch his face turn crimson.

Valor's cell went off and he grabbed it out of his pocket, glowered at the screen and answered it with, "What? Aye, we're fine. No, we've got her. We'll return soon." He kept his eyes on Tilly while he said to Bishop, "That was Kalen." Valor's gaze narrowed on Tilly, "Ye had us all worried, lass. Disappearing like that will cost ye."

"Go fuck yourself. I don't owe you anything. We're even."

"Tilly," Bishop touched her elbow, "You need to come back with us. Now."

"I'm sorry, Hound Dog. Did you think because we had a moment or two, that gives you the right to tell me what to do now? You need to leave. Don't act like you give a shit about me. You don't even *know* me." *So stop staring at me like I just broke your heart. Those puppy dog eyes aren't going to work on me.*

"I *do* care, damnit." Bishop's head tilted, "You snuck out the goddamn window. You could have been hurt!"

Tilly rolled her eyes.

Valor barked, actually *barked* like a vicious wolf, then he grabbed her by the arm and shook her. "You're in danger! Would ye just listen to us, damnit!"

Tilly didn't care. No danger out there was worse than death and that was the only real thing after her now. "I don't give a shit," she murmured. "Leave me alone."

Valor jerked back like she'd slapped him. "I went to Marco's house. He was murdered, lass. Gruesomely. And this symbol," he pointed at her ceiling, "was also on his ceiling."

That meant whoever came here was most likely *not* Marco. Fuuuuck. Tilly blanched just a little.

Snagging her courage like a leather strap, she whipped her fear back. There was no room in her for that emotion. She would be fearless starting right now and would stay that way until she took her last breath. "Well then, I can imagine you're not too happy about not finding that stupid book. Looks like we both failed last night." She crossed her arms over her chest and took a step back.

It didn't matter that she had the window open and it was about fifty degrees in her place right now. She was sweating and starting to shake. Stupid fever was probably getting worse again. "I need you two to leave."

"Not a chance, Sweetness." Bishop stood opposite her with his arms crossed over his chest. "We're not leaving you unprotected. Not with a murderer on the loose."

"There are plenty of murderers out there," she argued. "And the one you think was in this house already came and went. He won't be back." Yeah, the fact that she was being so calm about all of this spoke volumes about her denial abilities.

"We aren't built that way," Valor said in a low tone. "We're built to protect life."

"I don't even know what the hell that means. But I'm not the life you need to protect." Now her voice was quivering, "My life is about to get cut real short, Valor." *Do not cry. Do not cry.* Tilly's throat constricted and it hurt to swallow.

"Fine," Valor growled. God, he growled a lot. What was up with that? "Then before we leave, let me show ye what this man is capable of. What ye think ye doona need protection from. And keep in mind, he kens where ye live, he's been here already, and that," he pointed at the symbol on her ceiling, "could verra well be an enchantment meant to do more than just harm ye. It could be a way to get to ye without even using a door."

“Oh... shit...” Tilly’s eyes widened when Valor flicked his hand out and a huge black hole appeared in the middle of her floor. “W-w-what the hell is that?”

“Hell,” Bishop answered her.

“*Hell?*” Tilly took a step away. “Are you here to take me there?”

The two men looked at each other for a brief moment. “No, lass. Never. I just wanted to show ye a little proof that doorways and passages can easily be made with the right magics.”

“H-h-how did you do that?”

“I told ye, we’re Hell Hounds, lass.”

She didn’t know if she should laugh or go grab a knife from her kitchenette. Well, now she finally had a definitive answer, right?

Hell Hounds. She had two big, gorgeous, dangerous Hell Hounds standing in her trashed apartment. They didn’t look like what she’d read about. They weren’t black with talons and teeth the size of a tiger’s with leathery skin and red eyes. Maybe these were half-breeds?

“Okay,” she cautiously said. “You’re Hell Hounds. Thanks for letting me know. That at least explains the barking and howls.”

“Ye believe us?”

Nodding was all she could manage. Tilly cleared her throat and ignored how hot her cheeks felt. Maybe she should be honest and tell them she had the book they wanted so badly already memorized. If they needed a spell, she could give it to them. But first, she needed to know what they wanted it for. Hell Hounds belonged to Satan, according to what she’d read. Tilly wasn’t about to get involved in the Devil’s business. She would prefer to stay far away from Hell, actually.

Sweat trickled down her back. “So... since we’re on an honesty kick right now, why’d you need that book so badly?”

Valor pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. “We’re looking for our—”

She stumbled back, gasping.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Bishop grabbed Tilly by the elbow to steady her. “What the hell?”

Oh fuck... she couldn't swallow. Her mouth went bone dry and she felt sick. Right there, looking back at her with a stunning smile and dark eyes, was a photo of the creeper who had been following her around for *weeks*. Tilly's heart hammered in her chest.

She wanted to be scared to death of Valor now too. Clearly he knew the creeper. Knew him well enough to have his goddamn face on his phone!

Valor frowned in confusion. "Answer me," he hit the phone screen again, lighting the picture back up and lifted the phone up into Tilly's face. "Do ye ken who this is?"

She took another step back. She couldn't speak. Couldn't move. Couldn't fight back. Fear paralyzed her right between two Hell Hounds. Ohhhh noooo. Satan had come for her. The biggest, baddest, scariest motherfucker in the universe had sent his dogs to eat her. Why? Why-why-why-why?

Tilly backed up more. "I don't understand," she squeaked. "I... I...."

Valor looked past Tilly to Bishop. "Her aura has gone wild. We're going to fucking lose her."

Tilly's heart pounded in an unhealthy rhythm, her vision whacked out and so did her hearing. Oh god, she was going to black out. If she did, Tilly was as good as dead.

"Easy, lass." They held her up when her knees buckled. She didn't have the sense to fight them off. Was this how she was going to die? Death by Hell Hound.

No. Not possible. "You said you'd protect me," she cried. "You said I was *safe*." But they had lied. They knew this creeper who was following her around. Wait... no. They were looking for the creeper. Maybe they were trying to save her from him?

Or were they working together?

Tilly hiccupped back a sob. She didn't want to believe that either, but what other explanation could there be?

Valor and Bishop half-carried, half-dragged her over to the bed and sat her down. Tears spilled down Tilly's cheeks because she was going to have to accept this. Now it all made perfect sense. The timing. The targets. The hunt, lure, and capture. Hell Hounds, her ass. They were hired thugs. Magically enhanced killers – which is *exactly* something Marco would have in his arsenal.

It would be just like that asshole to do this to her. He probably staged the murder and went off grid with the book. Put that symbol on her ceiling to scare her into not retaliating.

Congratulations, Tilly, you just won the jackpot of karmic justice. You played with fire, now you're getting burned.

It all made sense. Unless...

Unless they were working for someone else and the creeper was the one who studied her habits and sent these two in once they had her routine memorized. Bishop was the lure – and she fucking fell so fast for him too. She never could say no to a bad boy with tattoos. And when he came to her house, he saw the book, would have verified she had it and then reported back to Valor, because it was so obvious Foxy Boy ran the show. Then what? They needed to get to Marco and had to use Tilly to find him? Oh shit! Valor murdered Marco! And now he was here to tie up all the loose ends and kill her too!

No. That didn't feel right either.

Nothing felt right about this. Every situation that pinned Valor and Bishop as bad guys felt wrong. Fuck her six ways to Hell, the paranoia was strong today.

We're made to protect. You're safe with us.

Those words played on repeat in her head and Tilly squeezed her eyes shut, trying her best to figure this out. Oh god... she was going to puke.

Tilly dropped her head and continued to keep her eyes shut tight. She didn't want to know how they were going to execute her. Gun? Knife? Break her neck? She just hoped it was a swift death. *Please, God, make it fast. I don't want to feel it.*

"Matilda Jane," Valor's voice was both close and faraway. "Matilda Jane, please... open your eyes and look at this."

It was going to be the business end of a gun; she just knew it. Her nostrils flared as she tried to breathe. *Fuck it*, she thought. *Stare death down. Don't look away, woman. Meet it head on.* Tilly held her breath and popped her eyes open.

Not a gun.

Not even close to a gun or any other kind of weapon.

It was Valor's cell phone with a picture of the creeper again. Tilly thought she had double vision for a moment because there were *two* creepers in the picture. Identical twins.

"Have ye seen them?"

Tilly nodded.

"When?" Bishop's voice sounded strained.

She wanted to pull her gaze away from the photo, but instead her focus narrowed in on the picture. Leaning in with devastatingly handsome smiles, one had his arm around Valor, the other guy had his arm around Bishop. The photo was so innocent. So happy. Killers don't look that happy. *We're made to protect. You're safe with us.* She felt Bishop's hands move up her thighs, her body responding immediately. "I...I..."

"Damnit, Tilly! *When?*" Bishop urged, this time squeezing her leg. "When did you see them?"

Fuck he sounded so desperate. So scared. She slowly looked over at Bishop and lost her breath. Goddamn, no man should look so pained. What the hell was happening here? "I... I saw one of them right before I got hit by the car."

"That's not possible, lass."

She swung her gaze to Valor, "I also saw him at The Blue Lizard a few nights ago, too."

Bishop and Valor looked at each other and Tilly tapped the cell phone so the picture would reappear again. That was definitely the creeper. One of the twins was absolutely the guy she kept seeing around town. "I don't understand any of this."

"*This is my pack,*" Valor dropped to his knees in front of Tilly, "and if you've seen them, we need your help, we need to know everything."

“Y-y-you’re not here to kill me? Tie up loose ends for Marco?” Her face was all tingly and her limbs felt like they had fifty pound weights strapped to them.

“What the— no!” Bishop squatted down to her left and kept rubbing her legs. “Tilly, we’re not here to hurt you. We told you, we’re built to protect.”

“Built to protect,” she repeated. “And these two... they’re your *pack*?”

“Aye.” Valor eyes were tense, “We’ve been searching for several weeks and canna find them anywhere. It’s always a dead end.”

“Oh god,” Tilly closed her eyes and sighed in relief. “I’m... I....”

“Please, lass.” Valor squeezed her thighs, “Please, I beg of ye. Help us. If ye’ve seen them before, ye may see them again.”

Listening to the desperation in their voices and seeing it in their eyes wasn’t going to make turning them down easy. The last thing Tilly wanted was to go to her grave with nothing but failures. She might not be able to save herself or her sister, but the savior in her wanted to save someone. *Something*.

It might as well be this pack.

“I’ll help you.”

Chapter 28

“How the fuck did we miss them there, Val?” Bishop started pacing. “How the fuck is this even possible? If they’re out there, and she’s seen them, why haven’t they come home?”

Valor rubbed the back of his neck and said nothing. Falling back on his haunches, he stared at the photo on his phone.

Bishop practically vibrated. “It’s my fault. They aren’t returning because of me. FUCK!” Bishop pivoted and punched a wall, his fist went right through the drywall like it was made of tissue paper.

The violent act made Tilly jump.

“How did ye see them, Matilda Jane?”

“What did they look like?” Bishop added, “Did they look okay?”

“Did they speak to ye?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Tilly waved her hands in the air to silence the two men. Errrr, Hell Hounds. Shit, this was fucking crazy. She’d seriously gotten mixed up in something that she had no business being a part of.

And had stayed in their house. In one of their beds. And let Bishop –

Deep breathes. Deep breathes. “Hell Hounds,” she said quietly. Bishop nodded. So did Valor. “Tell me everything, boys. From the beginning.”

“First tell us about the twins,” Bishop argued.

“No,” Tilly stood and crossed the room. “I want to know what a Hell Hound is capable of... besides the whole walk on the ceiling thing, which I’m now understanding wasn’t a drug-induced hallucination like I thought.”

Valor and Bishop looked at each other. “Might as well give the lass all the information. It’s only fair, if we want the same from her.”

“We don’t have time for this!” Bishop roared. He grabbed a chair and smashed it against the wall, splintering the damn thing.

Tilly cringed and took a step closer to Valor.

Bishop realized how out of control his anger was and said, “I can’t... fuck... I...”

“Leave us, Bishop.” Valor commanded. “Return when you’re certain ye willna frighten her any more than ye already have.”

Tilly wanted to protest, but Bishop was frightening her. This wasn’t the Bishop she’d met at The Blue Lizard. This was a monster with a hair-trigger temper and a penchant for destruction.

She looked at him and tried to figure out what happened to the man who sat and drank tequila with her. The man who kissed her like she was the breath of life to a dying man. The man who fed her in bed with compassion and empathy just a few hours ago.

“God, I’m... I’m so sorry, Tilly.” Bishop slowly got to his feet and scrubbed his face with both hands. He was shaking. “I’m too fucked for this. I’m too fucked for you.” He turned and left without another word.

Valor repositioned so she was protected behind him until Bishop left the apartment. “He’d never hurt ye, Matilda Jane.”

“Tell that to my chair. And my wall. And my door.”

Valor sighed, “Bishop’s a complicated creature, but he’s not a monster. He’d never hurt a woman, even if his life depended on it. But he’s in a verra bad place right now, lass. The twins’ disappearance, he feels, is all his fault.”

“Why?”

When Valor motioned for her to take a seat at her futon, Tilly cocked her eyebrow. “You like to boss people around, don’t you? Even in their own house.”

“Aye, I do. I’m the alpha. I command, all others obey.” Valor smiled and it was incredibly sexy.

Tilly’s breath whooshed out of her and she took a seat. Then she squirmed because why the hell did she just take orders from a guy she didn’t know? Valor oozed dominance and her body responded in a natural way to him – she couldn’t tell if she liked it or not.

The futon groaned when he sat next to her. Valor had to have been six-foot five or something like that. He was built like a warrior. There was this weird ancient feel to this man’s energy. That didn’t make any sense. How old could he even be? Thirty? Thirty-five, tops? Maybe a damned fine forty?

“Hell Hounds protect the living by hunting *malanum* – evil spirits that slip through Hell’s prison walls and resurface in the living world. We hunt them down, capture and put them back where they belong.”

“That’s what the hole is for?”

“Aye.” Valor nodded, “It’s a Hell hole.”

Tilly was so glad she was sitting down for this.

“Have ye ever seen a *malanum*, lass?”

“How would I know if I’ve seen one or not?”

Valor tugged his beard thoughtfully, “They are pitch black. The older they are, the more boney and leathery they look.”

“No,” she said quietly, “I can’t say I’ve ever seen something like that.” She’d seen other creatures that were close to it though.

“I’m glad. They’re frightening creatures to behold.”

“What does a *malanum* have to do with the creeper? I mean, the twins.”

Val met her gaze and stole her breath with how his blue eyes glowed like fire. “I’ve a feeling *malanum* took the twins.”

“They can take people?”

“They can do anything they wish when they’re set loose. ‘Tis one of the many reasons they’re so dangerous and why our job is so important.”

The more Valor talked, the safer she felt. It wasn’t magic making her feel that way, it was Valor. Just... Valor. She felt safe with him. She felt safe in his house. And with Bishop too. “What else can *malanum* do?”

“Possess people. Force a good man to do despicable things.”

Tilly curled into herself a little.

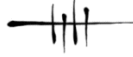
“And they are an evil so pure and strong, they can infect other spirits and turn them into monsters.”

“Holy hell.”

“So, lass, I need to know what my Hound looked like when ye saw him.” Valor reached for Tilly’s hand and held it gently. “I need to know what I’m up against. It had to have been his spirit ye saw so many times, for I was there with ye in each of these places – or Bishop was – and we didna not see nor sense him. That must mean it was his spirit that ye saw.”

“I don’t see ghosts,” Tilly argued. “I’ve never been able to see ghosts.”

“Well, lass, ye do now.”



Valor sat and talked with Tilly the entire time in ghost form and she could see him. It was a test of sorts. Either this woman was excellent at playing ignorant, or she had no idea she possessed the ability to see past the grave. Or, at least she could see a Hell Hound in all his forms.

Valor thought back to the moment he saw Matilda Jane at The Blue Lizard. He remembered her aura. Her multi-colored, scared to death aura. “The night ye went back to the club for your phone,” Valor started, “ye were staring at an empty stool. It wasna empty, was it?”

She took a few heartbeats to answer. “No,” her voice quivered, “The creeper was there.”

“And,” he held her hand and began rubbing her knuckles with his thumb, “when ye tried to run from Bishop and was hit by the car, ye mentioned the creeper was there, too? Was it the same one?”

She nodded, “He was standing on the corner, staring at me. I saw him and panicked and I didn’t see the car turn and come towards me.”

Valor swallowed a lump in his throat. “Did he look... well?”

“I don’t know,” tears filled her eyes. “I don’t know what I saw now. I don’t understand this.” She popped up onto her feet and moved away from him. Valor turned back into his corporeal form and she didn’t even notice the change. “Why is he following me?”

“I doona ken.” He wanted to step closer to her, wrap his arms around her wee body and tell her she would be okay, that this wasn’t something to be scared of. But he was no liar. The bottom line was: She had an extraordinary ability and he intended to take advantage of it.

Tilly went over to the open window and Valor's arms ached to touch her. While she stared down at Bishop patrolling the sidewalk, Valor studied her profile. Gods, what a beauty she was. He hadn't truly appreciated her appearance until just now. The slope of her delicate neck, the strawberry blonde hair that had a slight wave to it. Those green eyes were the color of ferns. Her cheeks were full, as were her deep pink lips.

"How many people know about Hell Hounds?" she asked.

Val cleared his throat. "Not many." He approached her slowly.

"And yet you told me about this so freely. Like it was common knowledge." She spun around and hugged herself, "Why?"

"You asked."

"That's an answer, not the truth, Valor."

"We need your help. I was giving ye something so ye'd return the favor."

Her green gaze narrowed, "That's not the truth either, *Hound*."

"Because..." *Maiden, Mother, and Crone, please forgive me,*
"Because dead men tell no tales, lass."

"And I'm as good as dead because of my curse." She spun back around and stared out the window again. He hated himself when she swiped away tears, "I get it."

No she didn't. She didn't understand that this was killing something inside him right now. That using her was the last thing he wanted to do, but he was a desperate man who was at the end of his rope. A Hell Hound with a moral compass that had no true north anymore. Not now that his pack was gone.

"You're willing to go to great lengths to save your pack." Tilly's voice was small. As small as Valor felt at the moment. "You'd use any means necessary to try and save them. Even elicit the service of a cursed and dying woman if it got you closer to getting what you want."

Valor started to feel weak at the knees. "Aye," his voice was so gruff it sounded inhuman.

“I don’t blame you,” she blew out a big breath, “I’ve done some pretty horrible things myself. Used people for my own potential gains. I know the meaning of ruthless. I know what desperation will drive a good person to do.” She spun around and looked him in the eyes. “I’m fine with it. I can’t save...” her voice cracked, “I can’t save me and Viv. If I can save your Hounds, then maybe God will forgive me for every bad thing I’ve done and let me into paradise when my time comes.”

Valor dropped to his knees because her aura right now slayed him. *Oh gods.*

“I’m a damned woman, Valor.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks again. “It’s too late for me, but I don’t want it to be too late for your pack. I’ll help you as much as I can, for as long as I can.”

Valor’s jaw clenched. His soul bayed. His heart broke in two. This hurt so much he fought for breath... Because he was going to use her. He would use her to find his Hounds. He was going to use her for however long it took, or for however long he could.

And that made him a despicable beast who didn’t deserve her.

Chapter 29

A few hours later, Tilly was back at Valor and Bishop's house. Everything she owned and cared to keep had fit in two large trash bags and one carry-on suitcase. She never kept much because she always lived with the philosophy of, *You can't take it with you when you go.*

That mindset felt like an anvil swaying over her head now.

There was a strange silence between the three of them. She wasn't very good at reading people, but something felt... she didn't know, *awkward* wasn't the right word, but there was something odd between them. More so with Valor than Bishop.

If Valor was feeling guilty about their arrangement, he shouldn't. He might be using her to get to the twins, but, like she'd said no less than five times already, she was fine with it. She was using him to gain a little redemption. Like she said, they were even.

Tilly hadn't been raised in a religious household. The curse laid upon the women in her bloodline had a lot to do with that. Over the generations, it went from praying for mercy and miracles, to what the hell else could possibly be out there who might have an answer since God wasn't helping worth a damn, to fuck it, maybe there isn't a God at all and shit is what it fucking is, so be it.

That's where Tilly's head was now. *So be it.* They carried her things inside and for some reason, the other people were still in the house. The place thrived with an energy so vibrant it had a warm pulse to it.

"It's about time you returned," the tall one with Celtic tattoos said.

"Sorry for the delay," Valor and Kalen gripped forearms and Valor almost smiled. "I leave your pack alone for a few hours and come home barely recognizing the place, Wolf."

Tilly had to agree. The atmosphere was so different now.

"We tend to make a home wherever we go, no matter how long we stay," Kalen grinned, "I blame Sara."

Valor laughed. The sound of his deep voice chuckling shifted something in Tilly. She found herself smiling in spite of her current situation.

They walked into the large kitchen and found Sara, Tanner, and Jack playing cards at the table while Eli stayed busy putting things away in a pantry big enough to park a car in. "The groceries came. I made the sage stuff Tilly needed."

"Thanks," Valor almost blushed. "What do I owe ye?"

"Your money's no good to us, Val," Sara said. She slapped her cards on the table and squealed.

Tanner and Jack tossed theirs down in defeat. "I don't know why we play with her," Jack teased. "She always wins."

"I don't mind," Tanner grinned. "She gives the loser really great kisses."

Sara blew Jack a kiss and scooped up the money on the table, stuffing it into her back pocket.

"What the hell happened?" Kalen asked.

Bishop answered first, "She's seen the twins."

Everyone stood. "Let's go get them then. Where are they?" Tanner's excitement was palpable.

"It's complicated," Valor said. "They've come to her as a ghost that Bishop and I can't see."

"What the actual fuck?" Tanner tossed his hands in the air. "How's that work?"

"We doona ken, but we'll figure it out. This is more difficult than I anticipated." Valor didn't move while everyone else seemed to bustle around. "I need to do this," he spoke with authority, "alone." Everyone started to object and he silenced them with a wave of his bear paw sized hand.

"We're in this with you, Valor." Kalen wasn't going to back down.

"We will respect his wishes, Hounds." Sara walked over and grabbed Valor's hand, giving it a squeeze. "If you need anything, call us, alright?"

"We'll be fine," Valor said with soft eyes as he looked down at Sara. Hell, even Tilly almost believed him with the tone he used. *We'll be fine.*

Kalen grabbed his shoulder and squeezed, “We’re not giving up, okay. We’re going to find them. Let us go home to gain some strength and we’ll return in rotations, like we discussed. If you don’t need our help with the twins, we can at least take your district and hunt for you until you can do so yourself.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Valor said. “I’ve got this handled. I appreciate it though.”

“What’s changed?” Jack asked, suspiciously.

“Her,” Bishop nodded towards Tilly.

All eyes were suddenly on her. Feeling awkward, Tilly dropped her gaze to the floor and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Someone lifted her chin and she looked up to see Sara standing in front of her with a bitchy face. “Never look down.”

Huh? Tilly’s brow knit together in confusion.

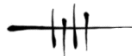
“Never look down,” Sara repeated. “You don’t submit, you hear me. You’re with the big dogs now, Tilly. Never cast your gaze to the floor, it gives the other person the upper hand. It gives them dominance over you.” She leaned in and whispered, “Keeping eye contact is key in lots of things.” Sara winked and walked away with a, “Hounds, let’s roll!” One by one, the men followed behind her.

Holy shit! Sara was the alpha of their pack? Annnnd double holy shit, Tilly was actually thinking in terms of packs of wolves and alphas and betas and... she looked over at Valor and Bishop. Valor was the alpha. So what was Bishop?

“This is crazy,” she whispered as the front door slammed shut. “*Packs*. Hell Hound packs.”

Valor held his arms out in a welcome gesture, “Welcome to our world, lass.”

Sara’s advice echoed in her mind, *Never look down*. Tilly’s lips curved and she kept her gaze locked on Valor. “What now, *Alpha?*”



Tilly ate the sage dish Eli left for her and then, over a dynamite meal of burnt grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup – because none of them were stellar chefs – Tilly, Valor and Bishop discussed the twins.

Valor filled her in on how long they'd been missing, and she filled them both in on how long she'd been running into the guy she kept having to stop herself from calling *The Creeper*.

Sebastian and Drake were their names. Or, as Bishop kept referring to them, Baz and D.

And no, they weren't turning into *malanum*, as far as she could tell, which made both the Hounds look insanely relieved. They all agreed they were going to have to wait until the next time Tilly saw them to figure out their next move, so in the meantime, she wouldn't be out of their sight. There was no rhyme or reason to their appearances and Valor wasn't going to miss an opportunity, so Tilly was to stay under the radar of either Bishop or Valor until one of the twins came to her again.

"I'm so fucking grateful they've been seen, but I don't understand why they're going to her and not one of us," Bishop stuffed the last bite of his fourth sandwich into his mouth.

Tilly swirled her spoon around her soup bowl. She didn't have much appetite but didn't want to look ungrateful about the dinner. Valor had gone through the trouble of trying to cook it, she should at least try to choke some of it down. "Maybe I attract them?"

"Well, you attracted me," Bishop playfully winked.

Valor growled from his seat. When Tilly looked over, he stopped immediately, grabbed his glass, and took a sip of whisky.

"You have a better theory, Foxy Boy?"

His glower stretched across the table, "Doona call me Foxy Boy. And no, I doona have a better idea."

Bishop chuckled quietly and grabbed his glass of ice water, "Foxy Boy," Bishop rolled the name around on his tongue, "It suits you, Val."

The alpha looked positively furious, "Haud yer wheesht, Hound!"

Tilly's eyes grew wide as saucers. "Holy shit! You just went ten kinds of Scottish on us." She snatched Valor's glass and took a sip of his Deveron 12, "Say Sassenach."

He growled at her.

"Please?"

He growled louder.

Bishop whispered loudly, "His accent gets stronger with every sip, Sweetness."

Valor stood up so fast, his chair toppled over. "Excuse me." He left the table and disappeared from sight.

"It's part of being a Hell Hound, Sweetness." Bishop wiped his mouth with a napkin, "We get aggressive when we're off balance."

"Off balance," she repeated, thoughtfully. "How do you balance out?"

The dirty dog had the audacity to smile big, "Fucking and Fighting."

Tilly's cheeks grew hot, as did other places on her.

Bishop leaned into her personal space, "We're incredibly complicated creatures, yet very simple. We were made in our maker's image and it came with some consequences. We were granted powers that help us do our job, but it comes at a price." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, "Kinda gives new meaning to pound of flesh."

A hot flash hit Tilly hard. Snatching her ice water, Tilly downed the rest of it in a few big gulps and placed the emptied glass back on the table.

Bishop watched her every move. "The heat you feel," he said gently, "is probably residue from Valor."

"W-w-what?"

"You keep feeling hot. It's not you, it's him." Bishop squatted down between her legs and cupped her cheeks with both hands.

"Yeah, you're burning up, Sweetness."

"It's a fever, I think."

"No. It's Val. He had to transfer some of his power into you after the car accident. He's running hot right now too. This is just a side effect of his magic in you. It'll either wear off after a while, or subside once he's balanced, I suspect."

“Once he’s balanced, like after he’s hunted enough *malanum* or fucks someone?” Her hands curled into fists and yup, she felt hotter.

Bishop cocked his head to the side and watched her reaction cautiously. “Does that bother you?”

“No,” she lied.

“Good,” Bishop stood up and grabbed her hand, “Come on, Sweetness. Let’s go unpack the rest of your things.”

She took his hand and realized Bishop was even hotter than her. The truth hit Tilly hard enough to knock the wind right out of her. “You’re unbalanced too, aren’t you?”

Bishop didn’t answer. Instead, he squeezed her hand tighter and led her up the stairs. When they reached her bedroom, Bishop waltzed in and Tilly stopped in the doorway. He turned and tipped his head, silently asking her to join him. Her bags were on the floor. Valor must have brought them up earlier. She wondered where he was now. Then she tried to figure out how she’d managed to land herself in this clusterfuck of a situation.

She was in a house with two unbalanced Hell Hounds that each had more muscles than most MMA fighters and could easily do whatever they wanted to her. They were built to protect. *Could have been a lie*, she thought. A trick.

But, something in her said that wasn’t true. It was the same voice in her head that said she was safer with them than anywhere else. It was also telling her this was where she needed to be right now.

That *thing* was probably called Delusions of Grandeur. Or Insanity.

Bishop cleared his throat, “You want to be left alone, don’t you? I’m probably crowding you. I have a bad habit of that.”

“No,” she said unconvincingly. It wasn’t that Bishop was crowding her, it was that she really didn’t know the correct way to respond to anything that’s happened in the past twenty-four hours. Tilly wiped her brow with her forearm.

“I can leave.”

“No,” she took a step into her room. Then another and another. “I’m just trying to get a handle on all this, okay?”

Bishop released the bag he was about to unzip and grabbed Tilly's hand, bringing her in close to his chest. "Fuck, Sweetness. I keep forgetting you aren't from our world. You just... you feel like you fit. And with everything that's happened, my head is so fixated on finding the twins that I forget other people out there have lives and feelings and their own problems. I'm a selfish asshole for not thinking beyond my own troubles. Fuck, I suck."

Tilly buried her face in his chest and breathed in the scent of him. "You don't suck. If I were in your shoes and my sister was missing, there's nothing else I would be able to focus on either. Nothing else in the world would matter to me except finding her and keeping her safe."

Bishop squeezed her hard and sighed. "I still feel like shit." He pulled back and smiled down at her. The look he made seared her. "It's not over for you, Tilly. We're not going to give up on helping you."

She felt her gut twist. Tilly pulled back, grabbed a bag, and unzipped it. "I don't want to talk about the curse anymore."

"But we—"

"I said I don't want to discuss it." Her words were clipped. She wrenched open her bag, snatched whatever was on top and stuffed them into a drawer. "I just hope this all works out for you guys." Her situation wasn't going to improve. And hey, why should it? Some people aren't cured and they die from whatever had a death grip on them. Tilly was no better than anyone else. No reason to think she or her sister would be the lucky ones.

"Sweetness."

She ignored Bishop and stuffed more clothes into drawers. Then she opened her carry-on, grabbed an armful of shoes, and tossed them onto the closet floor in a heap.

"Tilly."

Stop saying my name like that, she thought. The last thing she needed was to hear her name said with a painful, sorrowful tone like that.

"Matilda Jane!"

“STOP TALKIING!” Angrily, she threw a handful of clothes at him. Bishop caught some of it, which turned out to be a pair of panties.

Perfect.

She marched over and tried to snatch them while they dangled on his finger. He jerked them out of reach just before she could get them. “Look at me.”

She refused.

“Look at me, woman!”

Never look down. Tilly deadpanned him and ignored how much her eyes stung with unshed tears.

Bishop’s arm dropped and the panties fluttered to the floor. “God damnit.” He got all into her personal space again. “Give me permission to kiss you. Please.”

What was it with this guy? Instead of asking, Tilly nodded because she wanted to make the pain go away. She wanted to forget. She wanted to feel something that wasn’t pain or failure.

“Say it,” he whispered. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Kiss me, Bishop.” She placed her hands on his pecs, “On the mouth, this time.”

It felt like he moved in slow motion. His hand rose and gently gripped the nape of her neck. The other wrapped around her waist. Bishop tilted his head to the side and came in nice and slow. Gracefully. With purpose.

His mouth seared hers and she sank into his embrace. He inhaled through his nose and groaned, then he darted his tongue out, begging entrance. She opened for him and the kiss went from soft and sweet to almost a power struggle for dominance.

Things escalated swiftly.

Bishop grabbed her ass with both hands and picked her up. She wasn’t a petite woman, but he made her feel delicate and light as a feather. He swiped one arm out, knocking her bag off the bed before laying her down. Breaking free from their kiss, his eyes darkened. “I don’t want to fucking stop at just a kiss.”

“Me either,” she panted.

Bishop crushed his mouth to hers again and this time it was aggressive and hungry. She let him have control because her wits were totally gone with the way his tongue moved in her mouth and how his hands roved over her body.

He broke away again. "Limits. I need to know your limits." He ripped off his shirt. Holy fucking shit, he was so fucking hot. "Limits, Tilly." Bishop sucked on her bottom lip and pulled it back before releasing it so she could talk.

"I don't think I have any."

Bishop froze. "You have them. Everyone does."

Tilly shook her head. "I... I'm not sure."

"Can I eat your pussy again?"

Uhhhh say what-what? "Ummm"

Bishop grabbed the hem of her shirt and tugged it over her head. "Fuck, your tits are incredible."

Ohhh god. What the hell had she gotten into? Fuck it, she didn't care. She just didn't want it to stop.

"What can I do to you, woman? I need to know what my limits are with you."

Her heart climbed into her throat then dropped to her core. Never in her life had someone said anything like this to her. Tilly didn't know how to respond. "What do you want to do to me, Hound Dog?"

Bishop's gaze darkened even more. His skin was so hot she could have sizzled a steak on his chiseled motherfucking abs. *Ohhh those abs.* Holy hell, Tilly's head was swimming.

"I want to lick every inch of you," he put one foot up on the bed and started unlacing his boots. "I want to eat your pussy until you scream." He kicked off that boot and started undoing the other one. "I want to fuck you – your mouth, your pussy, your ass. I want to come all over your body and make you orgasm harder than you ever have in your life." He started working on the fly of his pants. "I want to bend you over that dresser and fuck you from behind. I want to pull your hair and make you say my name." Gone were his pants and he went commando. Holy fuuuuuuck. His dick was perfect. "I want to lap up your cum and swallow you down while you howl my goddamn name until you can't fucking breathe."

Oh. Dear. God.

“Does that sound good to you?” Bishop’s arms were shaking as he stood there before her, naked, hot, and waiting for permission again.

“I-I-I don’t know if I can actually do all that.”

“Then we need a safe word.”

“Are you always this way?”

“You mean do I need to know my limits? Yeah, cause once I start, I don’t fucking stop until I know I have to.”

He meant *need to*, right? No guy could last as long as it would take to do everything on Bishop’s wish list in one night. Right?

Right?

“I behaved with our last kiss,” his voice was deep and rough, “I’m not inclined to act like a gentleman again.”

Another heat wave slammed into her. Tilly swayed.

“Do you still want this?” Bishop’s jaw clenched, his chin turned up slightly.

Did she still want this? What a loaded question. She decided to not think too deep on that one. “Yes,” she groaned. “Fuck yes. And stop asking permission. Just go wild. I want wild.”

“Safe word, Sweetness. Let me hear it.”

Tilly’s mind felt too scrambled to come up with a good word, “Bananas.”

Bishop nodded and then...

Chapter 30

Her scent was the first thing that nearly brought him to his knees. As Bishop stood before her, naked, hard, and vibrating with need, he had to check himself. This woman was magnificent. She smelled like paradise – all feminine and sex and sweet things.

He stared down at her, one hand on his cock, the other reaching out to trace a finger down the valley between her luscious mounds. Fuck, her tits were perfect. Natural. Every bit of Tilly was ripe and sensual and –

“Take off your pants,” he commanded. Bishop would have done the honors himself, but he was perilously close to losing his control. If he reached for her zipper, he’d likely rip the jeans from her body and turn them into scraps of cloth. She probably wouldn’t appreciate that later.

Tilly obeyed. Opening her fly, she lifted her ass up and peeled those blue jeans off like she was unwrapping candy for him to devour. Next, without breaking her gaze from his, Tilly slowly pulled down her panties. Such confidence she had. Such beauty. He didn’t know where to feast first. A low growl resonated up and out of his chest. Bishop pressed his hand on her neck and gently lowered her down on the bed. Then he crawled on top of her like a lion and licked his bottom lip before saying, “If it gets too rough, say the word and I’ll stop.”

Her cheeks flushed and eyes grew wide. “I don’t mind rough.”

He dipped down and bit the side of her neck. Again, he needed to see her limits. Fucking *bananas*. He hoped she wouldn’t say the word, but would respect it if she did. Not everyone could handle his wild side...

While nipping her earlobe, he pinched her pebbled nipple to test how hard she liked it. She moaned and pushed into him. He dragged his tongue down to circle her other nipple before sucking it into his mouth. Holy Hellfire, she was sexy. Her skin burned under his touch, which only fueled his own fire.

Sliding down her body, Bishop nipped, kissed, pinched and squeezed everything he could grab, making sure to alternate between rough and gentle. The effect was just what he intended – by the time he reached her sweetest spot, she was a panting, desperate, needy ball of desire.

“Bananas!” she yelled out.

He didn’t go any further – even though he was one inch away from tasting her wet heat, Bishop didn’t move a fucking muscle towards her pussy. He backed the fuck off.

“We need protection,” she panted. “I don’t want to stop, but I know what I’m going to want after you’re done with your mouth down there, and we’re going to need a condom. Lots of them.”

He smiled broadly, “Okay.” He stood up and wiped a hand down his face as he tried to collect his cool. How did he fucking explain that he didn’t have any condoms and that they weren’t really necessary without sounding like a douche canoe?

But the thing was, condoms weren’t necessary for Hell Hounds. They couldn’t spread or contract human diseases and they couldn’t get females pregnant. Or... well, fuck... that wasn’t entirely true because Sara was a Hound and she was pregnant. Bishop didn’t know if Hounds could get Hounds pregnant or if that was a special case because, you know, it was Sara and she gets special things because she’s the Devil’s Darling. But in all Bishop’s life as a Hell Hound, no one else had fathered a child.

“Hounds don’t carry diseases,” he said to fill the awkward silence. “STDs and all that aren’t an issue for us.” Then he started to jabber-jaw, “I’m not just pulling your tail with that, it’s the truth. Not that I expect you to believe me, but you’re right, we should be careful. I don’t know if that’s possible to get you pregnant or not.” He was rambling and he knew it. *Fucking idiot.*

“I had my tubes tied,” she replied.

Bishop’s gaze snapped to hers and some piece of him felt like it cracked a little on the inside. “Why?” Shit, he had no right asking her that. It wasn’t his business. Her body. Her choice. Still, he wanted to know everything about Tilly. “You don’t have to answer. Sorry.”

“I know what it’s like to grow up without a mom,” she sat up and sighed, “I wasn’t about to take the risk and leave my kids behind. I’ve gone my whole life making sure I left *no one* behind.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and deflated a little. “That was a total mood killer, wasn’t it?”

Bishop sat at the edge of the bed, not looking at her. God damn he hated how unfair life could be somedays. She denied herself the possibility of a child because life was denying her the possibility of a future. She was so young. Too young to carry this much weight on her shoulders. He must have stayed quiet too long because Tilly bristled and covered herself up.

“I have a terrible habit of ruining a good moment, huh?” she half chuckled. “First, I kick you out of my apartment just as you were showing me your lovely ink and now look,” she threw her hands up in the air, “I just baby bombed you. I suck at this.”

“No you don’t.” He reached over and rubbed her thigh. “I’m thinking neither of us are in the right headspace. These interruptions might be a sign. We gotta move a little slower or something.”

“I don’t want to move slow,” she fussed. “I don’t have much time left, Bishop. I have less than a year left to live and that’s hoping I live up to the day of my next birthday. I could die tomorrow and if this is my last night, I don’t want to spend it thinking about the things I failed doing. I’d rather enjoy it. With you...”

Another piece of Bishop’s heart broke. Tilly was acting like this might be the last thing she did on earth and how fucking scary was that? But she was right, she might not live long and had every right to want to spend her days doing anything she fucking wanted. The fact that she wanted to spend time with him didn’t make him feel proud, it made him feel like shit. He was in a bad headspace thinking this could be a damn good time and an easy balancing for him. He wasn’t worthy of her.

Didn’t mean he wouldn’t try to be, though.

Bishop crawled up and scooped her into his arms.

“What the – what are you doing?” she allowed him the cuddle, but didn’t seem very happy about it.

“I’m going to hold you,” he said, then he kissed the top of her head. Ignoring the fact that his dick was screaming in protest and was so hard, it could snap, Bishop brought Tilly in close and kept his cool.

“I don’t want to be cuddled, I want to be fucked.”

Yet, she wasn’t fighting to get out of his embrace at all. “When was the last time you felt safe, Tilly?”

She stiffened in his arms, “What?”

“When was the last time you felt safe?”

She was silent for so long, he was about to regret asking when she finally piped up with, “Never.”

Another piece of his insides crumbled. “Why not?”

“For lots of reasons. None of which I really want to talk about right now,” she propped her head up to look at him, “Are you trying to ruin the mood more than I did? Because if so, you’re doing a fantastic job, Hound Dog.”

Bishop laughed and forced her head back down to rest on his chest. “How about we start over.”

“Again?”

“Mmm hmmm. Third time’s a charm, right?”

Tilly reached down to wrap her hand around his dick and he caught it before she had the chance. Then he brought her hand up and kissed the back of her knuckles. “I’m Bishop.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“And you are?”

“Are you joking?”

“Nope, I’m Bishop.” He smiled into her hair, “And I’m a Hell Hound. It’s nice to meet you... what was your name again?”

Tilly laughed despite how flustered she was. “I’m Matilda Jane. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

“Come here often?”

“Only once.”

Bishop laughed so loud she jumped. When he finally settled back down, she propped up on one arm and rested her leg on his thigh. Being like this with her in his arms felt really fucking good.

“So... Matilda Jane, that’s a nice name.”

“Tilly. Just call me Tilly.”

“Tell me something about yourself, Tilly. Something no one else knows about you.”

“Are we actually doing this?”

Bishop cocked an eyebrow and waited for her to give him an answer to his question. They stared at each other for a long minute and she huffed, “Fine. Okay.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully, “I’m scared of heights.”

He didn’t believe that for a minute. He found her on the rooftop of her apartment the other night. “Really? So why did you live on the top floor of that building and go up on the roof?”

“Because I think you should face your fears head on. Just because I’m scared to do something doesn’t mean I won’t do it.”

This woman was fearless. “Nice,” he grinned. He traced a circle around the tattoo on her ass with his middle finger. “Your turn to ask me something. If you want.” Would she want to know shit about him? He hoped so.

“When did you first realize you were claustrophobic?”

Ouch. She went right for the jugular. “A long time ago.”

“Tell me the story.”

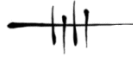
It wasn’t a question. It was a command. He debated on changing the subject and distract her with some kissing, but didn’t go that route. Later, he would look back on this and see if for more than just a sharing moment, but for now, he figured if he was going to expect her to help them find the twins, he needed to establish some trust. Trust came with openness. Openness came with sharing shit about yourself you might not necessarily want to share.

The last thing he wanted was to sound like a fucking pussy. This story wasn’t exactly badass Hell Hound material. “I was trapped in something and couldn’t get out. I didn’t deal well with it.” There. That was the truth without any of the ugly shit attached.

“What did you do?” Tilly lifted her head again to look at him, “When you didn’t deal well with it?”

He had to stop himself from clamping his jaw shut. *Inhale, exhale. It’s not a big deal, Hound. Just tell her the truth. She’s in the thick of it anyway, might as well let it all out.* “I went crazy. Then I died.”

Yeah, that was probably not the best way to answer.



“You... *died*?” Was Bishop talking in code or something? He couldn’t have died unless he was a ghost right now, which he wasn’t, because his massive warm body was pressed against her skin and he was breathing. Ghosts can’t breathe, can they? Fuck, she didn’t have a clue. Tilly was in way over her head. “Explain.”

It was another demand. She made sure to keep eye contact with him and wait. She could feel his heart pounding in his chest, its speed picking up until she thought it was going to burst. “I’m sorry,” she shook her head. “I’m not being very sensitive. You don’t have to tell me if it’s upsetting to you.”

She moved her head off his chest to give him some space but he stopped her with a hand on her wrist. Gently, he placed it back on his bare chest. The tattoos across his pecs were exquisitely detailed, they looked life-like. “No, you should know what you’re with.”

“*What* I’m with?” He meant who, right?”

“We didn’t tell you how Hell Hounds are made.” Bishop swallowed and took two deep breathes. “I’m a dead man, Tilly.”

“That makes two of us,” she tried to half-joke. Honestly, the way he was staring at her made her so nervous, her first line of defense was to lighten the mood a bit. It didn’t work though. Bishop’s intensity only seemed to grow with every heartbeat. “You’re serious?”

Bishop nodded.

“But you don’t seem dead. You’re not a zombie. Are you some kind of ghost?” Was she talking to a spirit the same way she could see the cree— uhhh, Baz or Drake? “Wait, wait, wait, start at the beginning, please. I want to understand this and I don’t think that’s going to happen without the whole story.”

Bishop’s exhale was his surrender. “I was buried alive,” he spoke quietly. The pain in his eyes said he wasn’t even close to joking. “I’d been drugged and announced dead. I was put in a pine box. The drug wore off just as they started to shovel the dirt over my casket.”

Tilly’s cheeks grew tingly. “Oh my god.”

“I uhhh,” Bishop’s whole demeanor changed, he closed up a little bit, his gaze broke away from hers, “It took me a few minutes to understand where I was... what had happened. It was so dark and tight. There was no room to move. Everything was muffled. I couldn’t see. I didn’t understand what was happening until it was too late.”

Tilly got a chill up her arms.

“I tried to bang on the top of the casket. The smell of pine and dirt and worms filled my nose. I screamed for them to stop. For them to let me out.”

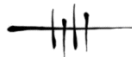
“They didn’t hear you?”

“Oh, they heard me. They just didn’t care.”

Tilly’s blood drained from her face and she felt woozy. “Holy shit,” she whispered. “Why would someone do that?”

Bishop pulled away from her and she let him. If he needed space to get out the rest of his story, then so be it. “What happened after that?”

The way his shoulders bunched, the shaky exhale he made, the pain in his eyes, she would never forget this moment for as long as she lived. But she needed to know. “What happened next, Bishop?”



You just had to go there, Bishop thought. Couldn't you have fucked her senseless and never said a word? She has plenty of scrumptious body parts to stuff into your mouth to keep your tongue busy, but nooo you just had to get all personal and dark and sabotage this moment. Why did he have to do that? Because he wanted more than just her body. He wanted her secrets, her thoughts, and anything else she had to give. To get those things, there needed to be an exchange. A truth swap.

Bishop sat at the edge of the bed, grateful the far window was cracked open a tiny bit so he could feel the breeze. It made telling the story a little easier because the wind was a good reminder that that was then and this was now. He was safe. Fresh air always helped his sorry ass cope with this past.

“What happened next, Bishop?”

“Well,” he looked down at his big, strong hands and saw the ink that stretched from his knuckles to his wrist to forearm. “I pounded my fists against the top of the casket. I screamed until my throat was raw. I tried to kick, but there wasn’t enough room. I was still too weak from the drugs and failed to splinter the wood.” He continued to look down at his hands. “I tried to claw my way out next,” he stretched his fingers, staring at his clipped nails, “I failed to do that, too.”

He felt Tilly’s hand on his lower back and he cringed. “Don’t touch me right now. Not when I’m telling you all this.”

“You can stop,” she said, “I don’t want you to have to relive something that awful.”

“No,” he sighed, “You need to fucking understand what you’re living with.” Bishop turned to her. God damn she was beautiful with her round cheeks and sad eyes. “I’m not sure how long I lasted, but it felt like a month and a minute all at once. I tried to break through, but there was too much weight on the casket and my air supply ran out. I remember...” *fuck you motherfucker, don’t you break down in front of her*, “I remember asking why. Why me.” *Why her?* “Why this way? And you know what?”

“What?”

“No one fucking answered, Tilly. Because there was no damn answer. Sometimes shit just goes wrong and stays wrong.” There. That was the truth. He wasn’t going into the details of what put him in that casket. He couldn’t bear to retell that part of his dead man tale. Bishop cleared his suddenly dry throat and ran a hand through his hair. “I suffocated and died. Then,” he put up his finger to silence her before she could ask another goddamn question. “I found myself standing in front of an Angel.”

Tilly straightened her spine and nodded for him to go on.

“I was offered a deal. Become a Hell Hound and protect the living, or go to a place where there was peace and light.”

“Heaven?”

“I suppose,” he shrugged. “I don’t know because clearly I chose Hell Hound.” He stood and walked around to grab his pants from the floor. As he stepped into them he said, “I traded my soul for an eternity of protecting the living and I’ve never looked back.”

“Satan,” Tilly scowled, “You sold your soul to Satan instead of going to Heaven?”

“You bet your sweet ass I did.”

“Why would you do that?”

Bishop zippered his pants and reached for his shirt next. He needed to get the fuck out of here. Too much emotion was swirling in him and he couldn't afford to go crazy in front of Tilly. “I had my reasons.”

Tilly grabbed his arm as he tried to leave. “Why?” she urged. “Why would you choose this life instead of an eternity of endless joy and peace?”

“That might be what Heaven is for you, Matilda Jane, but it wouldn't have been for me. Heaven was my Hell.”

“Why?”

He closed his eyes and tried to reign in his agony. “Because,” he gritted out, “My daughter was there. Seeing her every day for the rest of my life would have been Hell.”

Tilly's eyes were round as moons, “*Why?*”

Because I fucking failed to protect her. “Because I wasn't worthy enough to be her father. And I didn't deserve to be with her in the afterlife.” Bishop all but ripped the door off the fucking hinges to get out of that room. Storming down the hall, he almost ran into Valor. “Don't,” he warned as he passed his alpha.

Valor didn't get close and Bishop was all too grateful to get the fuck out of the house and into the backyard. He sucked in the chilled air, his breathes turning ragged.

Fuck the world and what it did to him. Fuck the world for what it's done to his pack. Fuck the world for cursing Tilly. And fuck him.

Dropping to his knees, Bishop tilted his head back. “Fuuuck!” he roared. “I hate you!” He pounded his fists into the frozen ground. “I HATE YOUUU!”

Bishop felt like everything in him turned inside out and upside down. He'd just told the worst story of his life to a woman who should never hear such horrors. Shame on him for thinking being honest was a smart thing to do. And shame on him for trying to find a bit of comfort in the arms of an innocent woman who was in a fragile fucking state right now.

Shame, shame, shame.

Damn his motherfucking piece of shit soul, but Bishop wanted to run back up to her bedroom, hold her tight and be the man he wished he'd been in his first life. He wanted to be a good Hound for his pack. *Fuck!* He wanted his pack *back* so he could make up for what he might have done to them too.

But none of that was going to happen because he was too broken and all he did was wreck everything he touched. Hot, unshed tears stung his eyes and he glared up at the sky again. Was his daughter looking down at him right now? Did she see what he'd become?

"You're better off without me," he choked.

Everyone would be better off without me. Bishop inhaled icy air and howled until his throat was raw.

Chapter 31

The air whooshed out of Tilly when she heard that animal howling outside. It was Bishop. Somehow, she just knew it was him making such a sad and terrible noise. After he stormed out of her room, she quickly got dressed, but that howl stopped her in her tracks. Actually, it rattled her so much, she had to sit back down.

A knock brought her attention to the doorway. Valor stood at the threshold with a scowl. "Are ye alright?"

"I'm not the one howling like a wounded animal. Your Hound is."

Your Hound. How could this all feel as normal as it did? Tilly suspected it was partly due to the fact that she'd studied and practiced magic since she was old enough to get away with it. She was no fool – she knew there were things out there that lived amidst the mortals. But Hell Hounds? *Real* Hell Hounds?

Bishop didn't look like a big black beast that did the Devil's bidding. He didn't have fur or talons or razor sharp teeth. Neither did Valor. And it was a full moon. Neither were shapeshifting. God, did Hollywood get anything right?

Another thought crept into her. If Bishop died and sold his soul to be a Hell Hound, did that mean Valor had too?

"How old are you?" she asked nervously.

"Old enough, lass." Valor moved into the room, looking uncomfortable. "Why do ye ask?"

"Bishop told me how he died."

She heard Valor suck in a breath. "He usually doesna speak of that day. I'm shocked he shared it with ye." The mattress sank as Valor took a seat beside her. "So now ye ken that we sold our souls for this life."

"Mmm hmm."

"Do ye think us lesser men now?"

What a crazy question to ask. Tilly looked over to see Valor staring at the floor and she said, "Not at all. To each their own, right? You must have had your reasons, just like him. I can't say I would do the same, but..." she shrugged and didn't say anything more.

“Ye seem to accept things verra easily.” Another howl erupted from the open window and Valor squeezed his eyes shut, “We never share our stories or our secrets. This life is a verra lonely one sometimes.”

“Probably because you have to move around a lot. Can’t stay in the same place for too long, right? Mortals would grow suspicious.” Valor looked surprised that she would guess that. “I watch a lot of movies, Foxy Boy. I’ve read a good amount of PNR, too, so I get it.” *And also books of magic*, but she left that out.

“PNR? What the hell is that?”

“Paranormal romance.”

“Ah,” Valor cleared his throat and stood again. “How about we get out for a wee bit?”

“Where too?” She was down with getting a little fresh air. As big as this house was, it really didn’t feel huge at the moment. It felt as small as her apartment. And she was still burning up. Annd sexually frustrated, no thanks to her having ruined yet another moment with Bishop.

They descended the steps and Tilly paused, “Should we tell Bishop we’re leaving?”

“No,” Valor handed her a random coat from a closet in the foyer, “Leave him be. It’s best to give him space when he gets like that.”

Tilly bit her lip and followed Valor outside into the night. The coat Valor gave her smelled like him. The scent made her insides flutter for some dumb reason. She inhaled deeply, like an addict chasing her next high.

“Come,” he urged. “I want to show ye around.”

The wind blew hard, but it felt good on her cheeks. Tilly was seriously fucking hot so she shrugged out of the coat Valor gave her and carried it instead.

“You’ll get sick if ye doona bundle up. This weather has been brutally cold, even for this time of year.”

“I’m burning up,” she explained. “Bishop said he figured it was because of the energy you gave me.”

Valor touched her head with the back of his hand and frowned. “Christ, you’re on fire.”

“I thought it was a fever but Bishop didn’t think so.” They continued walking. “He said it would go away once yours cools off.”

“Aye,” Valor’s voice was gruff and low. “Maiden, Mother and Crone, I didna expect my energy to stick to ye. That’s never happened before.”

“How often do you go around healing people?”

He frowned harder, “Never. I doona give my gift out to anyone other than my Hounds.”

Well now she felt a little special. Of course, he needed something from her, so she wasn’t fooling herself into thinking this was something it wasn’t. “Tell me about them. About Sebastian and Drake.”

Valor’s features softened. “I was hoping ye’d want to learn about them.” He stopped in front of a large area with stunted shrubs and stone work. “This is Drake.”

Tilly arched her eyebrow, “This nice big hunk of dead bushes and grass with some rocks is Drake?”

He chuckled. “Look closer, lass. Really see the beauty hidden here.”

Tilly walked around slowly. It was hard to see everything with it being night time. She bent down and looked at a series of stones balanced on top of each other. Were they cemented that way? Valor flipped a hidden switch and the area came to life with a warm glow, showcasing a lot more.

“This stone is amazing.”

“That’s Drake’s passion. He likes to take busted rocks and re-configure them until they fit together like that,” he pointed over to a large area with a fire pit in the center. Every rock was carefully chiseled and positioned to make a spiral in bursts of color variations. Some were smooth, others were rough, all laid down in a perfect display. It was a masterpiece of nature. “There’s a walking labyrinth in the garden as well.”

Stunning, she thought. It must take an extreme amount of patience and thought to create something like this. “What’s that over there?” she pointed at a small building closer to the tree line.

“A dojo,” Valor grinned.

“And that?” She jerked her head towards the inground pool.

“An unfinished project. Drake started a waterfall for the pool just before he went missing.” Valor’s cell phone went off. He glowered at the screen and hit the decline button.

“Don’t not take a call because of me. I can wander if you need privacy.”

“I doona need to speak with her.”

“Her?” Damn but a jealous pang stabbed Tilly in the gut. What the fuck? Tilly had no right to feel jealous. It’s not like she and Valor were a thing. And, wow, hello? She just tried to fuck Bishop less than an hour ago. Tilly locked her lust back in its cage.

“Can I ask ye something, Matilda Jane?”

“Sure.”

“Why the bucket list?”

Odd choice of topic to change to, but whatever. “I was bored.”

That was a lie, of course. One Valor allowed her to get away with. His blue eyes sparkled mischievously as he nodded his head, “I see.” They went back inside. “Follow me,” his pace stayed slow. “I want to show ye the basement next.”

As they went down the carpeted steps, Tilly couldn’t help but smile at how lovely the place was decorated. It was clean, modern, simple. Lots of white. It smelled new – fresh paint, fresh carpet. “Did you guys just build this place?”

“No, we’ve been here for several years.”

“It smells like fresh construction. Everything’s so spotless.”

Valor cleared his throat, “We just aren’t here much. No time to damage the place with throwing wild parties and turning it into an acceptable bachelor pad.”

She laughed. He sort of laughed. They hit the bottom step and she took in the view. There was a huge theater area with a movie screen hanging on the far wall. A popcorn maker was in the front left corner. A drink station on the back wall. Valor didn’t pull her in there. He tugged her towards another doorway. “This house is large for a reason. We each need our own space to cool down. This one’s Bishop’s.”

Valor opened a door to a music room with serious sound proofing materials to withstand the deluxe drum set in the middle of the room.

“He plays music?”

“That Hound *is* music. It feeds his soul. Bishop goes to as many concerts as he can, so long as he’s not out hunting, and banging away on these drums is his outlet. He’s incredible with his rhythm. I canna carry a tune in a bucket and have two left feet, but Bishop? Och, the Hound can play verra well.”

Tilly whistled in approval as Valor shut the door and opened another one across the hall. “This is Baz’s space.”

It was a billiard room. A huge pool table sat in the middle with a series of multi-colored hand-blown glass lights dangling above it. Trophies lined the left wall. There was a stereo system to her right, and huge photos were mounted in frames around the room.

Tilly stepped in, slack jawed. Every photo was of Valor, Bishop, and the twins. Each were a candid shot that was printed in black and white. Their posture and easy smiles showed how much this pack loved each other. *They’re a family*, she thought. A terrible pang flicked in her gut.

Baz and Drake were mirror images of each other – same smile, same build. Except... “Their eyes,” Tilly said quietly.

“Aye,” Valor didn’t say anything more. With a jerk of his head, they left the room and he closed the door.

“So, Drake plays with rocks. Bishop plays the drums. Baz plays pool. What do you play with? What’s your great escape?”

“Tell me yours first.”

Tilly stuffed her hands in her pockets. “I like to sing.”

“Are ye any good?” His smile was light, but his eyes were darkening.

“I’m alright, I guess.”

“I’d love to hear ye sometime.”

Had he heard her already? The mischievous grin on his face right now made her suspicious. He probably heard her sing in the shower her first night in the house. If he wasn’t going to admit it, she’d play along. “Ohhhh I don’t know. I’m not good at much in front of an audience.”

“Perhaps ye’ve not found the right audience then.” Valor hit a few buttons on the wall and the new door they stood in front of unlocked. “This is my getaway.” He opened the door and welcomed Tilly to a shooting range.

“Holy shit!” her heart fluttered. “I can’t believe this is in your house!”

“We’ve reinforced the room to make sure it’s bullet proof. It’s also soundproof so the noise willna bother anyone upstairs or in the other rooms.”

“Is that actually possible?” Tilly walked over and inspected some of the handguns laid out on a counter. *Of course Valor would play with guns.*

“You’d be surprised what’s possible for a Hell Hound, Sweetheart.”

“*Sweetheart?*” she teased, “You don’t actually think I’m sweet, do you, Foxy Boy?”

The Hell Hound moved in, taking up all the space and air in the room. He leaned down and she could feel heat rolling off him in waves. “Only one way to find out,” he whispered, his lips almost touching hers.

Just as Tilly was about to close her eyes and press her mouth to his, she felt his arm brush hers and then he took a step back. “Do ye ken what to do with this, lass?”

Something heavy and hard was placed in her hand and she sucked in a breath. Tilly looked down and smiled at how big it was. “Indeed I do, Foxy Boy.”

Valor’s eyes flashed with desire, “Prove it.”

Chapter 32

They went through six boxes of bullets in no time. It had been a while since Tilly held a gun in her hands, but it didn't take her long to fine-tune her aim and hit the mark every time. Valor was one big smile after another, no doubt impressed with her skills.

Hell, he even let her shoot his AK-47.

That one was a tougher weapon to wield and she didn't hit her target where she wanted, but still managed to hit part of it. After they finished, Tilly still felt a little buzzy from the adrenaline. It felt good to blow holes into things. She placed her unloaded gun down on the counter with the rest and took off her ear muffs.

"Och, lass, ye surprise me."

"Why? Didn't think a woman like me could handle all this without shooting herself in the foot somehow?"

"I'm not talking about your shooting skills, Calamity Jane, as fine as they are. I mean your willingness."

"To shoot?"

"To jump in."

Tilly shrugged and hit a lever that brought her last target over to her. She ripped the paper man off the clips and crumpled it up. "I like having purpose," she said as calmly as possible. Even though her instincts wanted to roar about it. "I like being needed and helpful."

"You could volunteer at a soup kitchen to satisfy that kind of desire then." Valor took apart each weapon and pulled out a large tool box filled with gun cleaning supplies. He sat on a stool and motioned for her to do the same. "I..." his voice dropped and became gruff, "I wish to know more about ye, Matilda Jane."

"Please don't call me Matilda Jane."

"It's your name, is it not?"

"Just call me Tilly. Matilda Jane makes me feel like a ninety-five-year-old granny with no teeth."

Valor chuckled, "Alright, Tilly it is then."

She handed him a barrel to clean and oil. "What do you want to know about me?"

Why was she allowing him this? Tilly felt like she'd just opened Pandora's box – *her* Pandora's box – and she didn't even know this man. Not really. Yet some part of her wanted to tell him everything about her past, her fears, her hopes and her desires. All the secrets she's kept hidden for years.

Patience and intrigue cooled his gaze. "I wish to know why ye had a lock on the inside of your closet." Valor didn't look down at the weapon he was cleaning, he stared at her instead.

Tilly gulped. See? This was a secret she'd kept from everyone, including her sister, but had longed to share this fear with someone. Valor would be her someone. "I've tried a lot of magic on myself. It doesn't always end well. Sometimes, when I work a particularly dark spell, the cost is a physically violent one. I can feel it before it comes, which took practice and lots of failure before I could recognize the symptoms, and I lock myself into the closet so I can't hurt anyone or myself."

"And the spoon with the teeth marks?"

"It's what I shove into my mouth so I don't accidentally bite my damn tongue off."

Valor placed the gun back on the counter, his eyes still fixed on her. "How long?" His voice was even deeper now, "How long have ye suffered like this?"

She couldn't bear the way he was staring at her. All that pity and sadness. She wanted to slap it off his handsome fucking face.

"How long, Tilly?"

"The first time I paid the price for dark magic, I was fourteen. And I've paid it often ever since."

Valor swept his face and stroked his long beard.

"Why do you shake so much? You and Bishop both have some serious tremors. Is that a Hell Hound thing?"

"Aye." He went back to cleaning another gun. Clearly some piece of his pride was bruised over her asking about it.

"It effects your aim," she said. "Is there something you can do to fix it?"

"Aye."

"So what are you waiting for?"

Valor kept looking at everything other than her. “I’ll deal with it when I can.”

“Is there something I can do or get you?” Maybe they needed a prescription refilled? A deep tissue massage or something? Fuck, she didn’t have a clue how Hounds worked, but they shouldn’t walk around like big sexy vibrators.

“Does your sister dabble in the magic as well?”

Oh, so that’s how we’re gonna play, huh? Turn the spotlight back on the other person so it’s not on you anymore? Fine. “God, no. Vivian would never do anything like that. She barely believes in the curse to begin with.”

“Why not?”

Tilly’s hands balled into fists in her lap. “I guess she’s the dreamer of the two of us.”

“Why do ye say that like it’s a bad thing?” Valor looked over at her, his brow furrowed. It made him get a little crinkle between his eyes.

“It’s not a bad thing. But we don’t have time to dream. At least that’s how I feel about it. I’ve spent my whole life trying to break our curse so we can live long lives and Viv –” she grew mad just thinking about it, “Viv has spent her whole life living and not worrying about how long she has.” Fuck, Tilly couldn’t swallow the lump lodged in her throat now.

See? This was why she didn’t share. Sharing stripped away your layers and left you vulnerable.

“Have ye not lived then, Tilly?”

They stared at each other. The silence in the room was so loud, Tilly had a ringing in her ears. God, how could a man look like that? Valor focused on her with such intensity, it made her squirm in her seat.

“I’ve lived,” she croaked, “I’ve just spent my life protecting the ones I love.”

Valor tilted his head, “And who do ye love, lass?”

Her palms were sweaty. It was too goddamn hot in here. “Me and my sister.”

His brow arched, “No one else?”

“My parents are dead. I have no other family.”

“No one else *outside* your family?”

Tilly stiffened. What the hell was he trying to get at? Was he trying to make her feel like the most pathetic and lonely human in existence? Because if so, he was doing a damn good job.

“I don’t have time for love,” she stood, preparing to march out of the room.

Just as she stormed past him, Valor caught her arm and yanked her back. He didn’t do more than that, but his grip was a powerful one. She couldn’t escape him. He stared at her with this crazy fucking burning gaze that made her insides feel like they were melting.

Never look down. Ohhh but she wanted to. Tilly wanted to pull her gaze away and look anywhere but in his blue eyes. They were too knowing. Too dark. Too understanding. And waaaay too mesmerizing.

Valor released her arm and she stormed off again. This time she made it out of the room.

However, she didn’t make it very far.

Chapter 33

Valor watched Tilly leave his shooting range. To sit there and not chase after her was an exercise in control the likes of which he'd never suffered before. He didn't even know why he wanted her so badly. But he did.

He wanted to fix her.

He wanted to protect her.

He wanted to kiss her.

He wanted to keep her.

It was the unbalance in him talking, which was why he made sure to stay right where he was – ass on the stool, gun cleaner in one hand, the other a hard fist. Maiden, Mother, and Crone it was hot in here. Valor wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

He couldn't continue like this. Tilly was right, his aim was awful. The next time the twins came to Tilly, they would hopefully be able to find out where they are. Once they had a direction to go in, Valor needed to be at his best.

He needed to gain some balance.

Och, the idea of laying with a woman turned his stomach. That's why he didn't answer Tina's call earlier. He didn't want to fuck anyone right now.

No, that wasn't true. He wanted to bury his cock deep into someone and that someone just left the room all flustered and rosy cheeked and—

Gods, her ass. Valor stared at it, every chance he got.

The black flames. Surely the black flames would take the edge off, right? Valor stood and abandoned his precious weapons – something he'd never done before in his life. But his balance needed to be a priority right now. His state of mind and body was only going to worsen. He could feel weakness coiling around his limbs and that was not acceptable.

Alphas were not weak.

Valor wrenched open the door and hung a right down the hall, bee lining it to the doorway that led to Hell. Hitting the security code, Valor ignored how bad his tremors were and cursed when he hit the wrong number by accident. He had to start over. He hit it wrong again.

“FUCK!”

He punched each number slowly and deliberately and – thank the gods – the mechanism unlocked and opened the way to his salvation.

The heavy door slammed shut behind Valor as he marched down the corridor. He didn’t bother knocking before pushing open the double doors to Lucifer’s main chamber. It was empty. Fuck!

“Lucifer!” He yelled. “*Lucifer!*” The Devil appeared from another doorway, wiping his hands off with a towel and Valor dropped to one knee. “I need help, sire.”

“You need more than help, Hound. You need to explain to me why the *fuck* you went to that fucker’s house in Byrne’s district.”

Valor froze. Panic tried to jar him, but he wouldn’t allow it. “I was searching for something, my Lord.”

Silently, Lucifer turned and walked over to his large throne and took a seat. Valor kept his gaze to the ground and tried to remain stoic. Anger coiled around Valor’s heart. Had Byrne come running to Lucifer just after he dropped Valor off at the closest portal? Damn it!

“What, pray tell, kind of lead did you have that would bring you all the way to Marco’s house?”

Valor swallowed and risked a glance at his maker. He didn’t know how to respond without getting into a world of trouble with the truth.

Lucifer leaned forward with a scowl, “Answer me while you still have your motherfucking tongue.”

“I had hoped to find something there that might help me locate the twins.”

“And,” Lucifer slowly tilted his head to the side, “did you find it?”

“No, sire.”

“What was it?”

“A book, sire.”

“A book? What kind?”

Valor deflated and submitted. "A dark one, my Lord."

Lucifer growled. "You know it's forbidden to use such things. Where's the book now?"

"I..." damnit it, "I doona ken. I went to Marco's house, but he was dead. Killed, my Lord. His house was destroyed and any trinkets or collections he may have had were taken. As far I as I could tell, that is." Shelves were bare and paintings had been taken from the walls, leaving nothing but nails and dust lines.

"And you didn't think that was something you should have reported to Byrne?"

Now Valor felt like a piece of shit. Yes, he should have told Byrne, but to do that would mean admitting he'd overstepped his boundaries and that wasn't something Valor wanted to deal with at the time. It still wasn't, actually. The Hound had so much shit hitting the fan right now, there wasn't a shield big enough to protect him from getting splattered.

Fuck.

"I didn't tell Byrne because I was selfish." There. He admitted it. "I just wanted to get back to my Hounds and I had blinders on. My only goal was to hurry home. I didn't think that human's death was of great importance to Byrne. It was an oversight that was part ignorance and part selfishness and for that, I will happily accept the consequences of my decision to return home without reporting what I saw." Valor dropped his head, put his fists onto the floor, and braced for punishment.

Lucifer stood and stepped closer to him. Valor kept his gaze locked on the floor. His limbs shook so fiercely, it was difficult to keep still.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Valor," Lucifer grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and hauled the Hound onto his feet. "What the fuck is going on with you up there?"

All of the wind left Valor's sails and he slumped in Lucifer's hold. "I just need... help."

"Is Sara's pack not helping you?"

"Aye," Valor sighed, "they are. But I need balance, sire. I've got too much going on and running on too little."

“You just bitched at Bishop for making this same mistake,” Lucifer forced Valor’s chin up so he could look him in the eyes, “I expected better of you, *Alpha*.” Valor tried to rip his chin out of Lucifer’s hold, but the Devil gripped him harder. “You’re not usually so foolish.”

When Lucifer let him go, Valor’s knees buckled and he caught himself before crumpling to the floor like a weak kitten. It took every ounce of energy he had left to stand ram-rod stiff as Lucifer slowly walked circles around him.

“You said *Hounds*,” the Devil frowned. “Did another Hound decide to join your pack recently?”

It was a valid question. Recently, Lucifer disbanded all the packs and gave them the choice to stay where they were or find a new pack to belong to. Valor exhaled a shaky breath before saying, “It was a slip of tongue, my Lord. I only have Bishop... and the twins. No other has joined my pack.”

“Slip,” Lucifer cocked his dark brow, “of tongue?”

Valor sighed. He was so fucking busted. “We’ve found someone who has seen the twins. She’s helping us. It was she who first had the book I wanted. The tome was stolen from her. I went to steal it back. The thief was dead, but she is still with me – unharmed and protected now.”

“And her safety is important to you?”

“She’s precious.”

The Devil laughed and it was cruel and ugly. Gods, what’s happened to him? Lucifer was never usually so cold. Valor couldn’t describe the vibes he was getting from Lucifer. The Devil’s aura wasn’t as unchanged as his demeanor, but something wasn’t right about him. Or maybe something wasn’t right about Valor. Maybe they were both in a bad way.

“I doona understand how I’ve unraveled so,” Valor admitted. “I’ve never faltered in such ways before. My pack is everything to me, Lucifer, and as I hunt the *malanum* and ask them questions, and I stare at the photos I have of Baz and D, and I look at how Bishop is slowly detaching and turning into a madman, I feel like I’m running in circles, chasing my tail. I’m howling for my pack in a dark so deep and soundless, I fear they will never hear it. I’m getting nowhere, and the worst part is,” he took a step forward and grabbed Lucifer’s arm, “I fear if I stop running, the floor will fall out from under me and my pack will never recover. The twins will not be found and all I have will be lost.” *Again.*

Lucifer’s jaw clenched. Sorrow filled his eyes. It made Valor feel understood and pathetic at the same time. He fucking hated it. Yet, he had no one else he could talk to. Yes, he could have gone to Kalen with his troubles, but he didn’t want to bother his life-long friend with such things. Kalen had been through something similar when Sara had disappeared. Valor didn’t want to dig up old memories – it solved nothing. Kalen was in a better place now and he deserved to stay there.

“How did they do it?” Val whispered. “How the Hell did Kalen’s pack survive five years without her?” Lucifer gave a half-chuckle and didn’t respond. Valor tried again, “Was their pack just as weak and unsteady and I never realized it?”

“At first, yes,” Lucifer said, “but they are a different pack of Hounds, Valor.”

“Meaning?”

“They were stronger because of their bond. You love your pack, but never really fully bonded with Sebastian, Drake, and Bishop. There were times when Kalen’s pack got bad enough they each came to me for help – much like you are right now – but it was different for them. None of you were made the same, you know. Each has their own hang-ups, their own weaknesses and strengths. None are better or worse than another. You just haven’t secured a true solidarity like Sara had with her Hounds long ago.”

Valor bit the inside of his cheek. He didn't even know how to respond to that. It felt like bullshit to him. "I've given everything I have to my pack, sire. I love them. I would do anything for them. Have I not proven my devotion?"

Lucifer's jaw clenched again. His expression remained stoic, "You have. But you are just one member of your pack. Leaders are only as strong as the ones who follow them."

Valor growled, "Are ye saying my Hounds are *weak*?"

"Not at all. But they aren't their strongest either."

Val didn't have time for one of Lucifer's life lessons right now. He needed to get better and return home. "I need to be in the black fires," Valor begged. "I have to be at my full strength for when we go after the twins."

"You're out of luck then."

"What? Why?" Was the Devil going to deny him such a mercy? Was this his punishment for not reporting the book or the thief to Byrne?

"My power isn't..." Lucifer stopped speaking and growled. Then he shook his head and continued, "I cannot spare what is left. It must be saved for another."

Valor almost asked, but he knew *exactly* who Lucifer was saving it for. His Darling Sara. She was the first female Hound and was now with child. That child would most likely be a creature of epic worth. Precious. One of a kind. They would want to ensure the baby's well-being at all costs and that would include the mother's balance while pregnant.

God. Damn it!

Lucifer took his seat again and steepled his fingers, "I wish to know about this woman you're *protecting*."

"Her name is Matilda Jane."

"And?"

"And she has seen the twins. I think one of them has astral projected."

"To her?"

Valor nodded. "I canna begin to understand the reason, but I doona care right now. If they can astral project, then they're still alive. We're waiting for them to return to her."

“Why her, I wonder?” Lucifer leaned back and rubbed his chin, pondering all the possibilities Valor already thought of.

“She’s cursed,” Valor finally said. “I’ve not said anything, but I wonder if that’s the reason.”

Lucifer knew what Valor was implying. “Cursed how?”

“She’s to die before her twenty-eighth birthday, like every other woman in her bloodline has.”

Lucifer whistled and stood again. “How old is she, Hound?” He was too caged and restless in Hell and the strain showed.

As the Devil paced, Valor tried to keep himself upright. “She has less than a year to live.”

“You’re hoping I can lift it.”

“Aye.” No sense in lying. It was another reason he’d come here tonight. To beg, plead and bargain if he had to. Tilly had been through too much and hadn’t lived nearly long enough. “She doesn’t deserve this, sire.”

“The cursed rarely do, unfortunately.” Lucifer scratched his arm, “There is no lifting a blood curse.”

Val sagged. “Are ye sure?”

“Positive. The strongest curses are the blood and soul varieties. They lift only when they’ve been fulfilled or the one who cursed them lifts it or dies.”

“I doubt she even kens who cursed her family.”

“Then,” Lucifer placed a hand on Val’s shoulder, “there’s no hope for her.”

“There must be something we can do.” Valor held back the urge to howl in anger and regret. He felt so bad for Tilly. “I beg of ye, sire. Please, if there is something ye can do to help me gain balance, then I’ll be more fit to care for her. To protect her.”

“And find the twins,” Lucifer added.

“Aye,” Val growled, half-insulted, “what the fuck do ye think I’ve done all this for? I’ve run myself fucking ragged looking for them. And now I’m close. So close. I need balance or I may fail them all.”

“How is it you were knocked off kilter so fast, Hound?”

Valor bit the inside of his cheek. Now he was going to get into more goddamn trouble. *Fuck it*, he thought. Go big or go home. At least the crime would be worth the punishment. "I gave Tilly some of my magic to save her. She was hit by a car and was suffering from both her injuries and spell residue."

Lucifer's eyes blazed with fury. "You pushed Hell's magic... *my* power... into a goddamn *human*?"

"Aye," Valor thrust his chin out defiantly. "She needed it, so I gave it to her." No regrets there. Who knows what would have happened to Tilly had he not intervened.

The Devil roared, grabbed Valor by the throat, and smashed him against a wall. "You could have fucking killed her! How the hell she survived is an honest to god miracle, Hound!"

"She's..." okay, he couldn't breathe with Lucifer's hand on his throat squeezing like this, "she's fevered. Her body temp matches mine. It's the only part of me left in her."

Lucifer's eyes darkened. He released Valor and turned, giving the Hound his back. "Then you can blame yourself when she dies."

Chapter 34

Tilly walked around the basement, going from room to room looking at everything and nothing. After the weird shit that happened between her and Valor in the shooting range, her head felt like it might explode from all her thoughts and mixed emotions.

Seeing a man look at you with such intensity is bound to fuck you up. The only other guy who ever looked at her like they could see way down deep into her cursed soul was Bishop. Good Lord, Tilly had hit the jackpot. She couldn't help but think of how ironic this was – she'd found not just one guy, but two, that had potential for a serious romance story and she was practically tip-toeing around her grave.

She wasn't going to live long enough to really enjoy them. Uhhh him. Shit, she couldn't have both. Guys don't go for that, right? Oh look at her, being all cocky and whatnot. As if she was going to have an opportunity to pick one for her personal boy toy. Tilly and her Hell Hound Harem.

Nope. She'd have to be Tilly, the Hell Hound Heartbreaker. Yeah, that was better. She'd rather break their hearts than the other way around anyway. It was better to leave than be left behind. And only one of them was going to make the great escape soon – her.

She couldn't imagine selling her soul to the Devil for a chance to come back to life. There was nothing in this world worth doing that for. She couldn't even say she'd do it for Vivian because unless Vivian was immortal too, what would be the point? She'd have to watch her sister die no matter what.

No thank you.

Tilly went back into the room with the pool table in it. This space felt strange to her. Probably because it belonged to a stranger, *Baz*. She picked up the eight ball and started pushing it across the green felt. It ricocheted off one side of the pool table, then the other, before returning to her hand. *Bump, bump, thump. Bump, bump, thump.*

She glanced at the pictures hanging on all four walls. Tilly had to admit, the twins were gorgeous. The one she saw – who she'd thought was a creeper following her – didn't look nearly as clean shaven and healthy as these guys in the photos looked.

She hadn't mentioned that to Valor or Bishop yet. The man she saw looked sickly and pale. His hair was a matted mess. His cheeks hollow, dark circles under his eyes. And he still looked handsome as Hell in some weird ass way. *Bump, bump, thump. Bump, bump, thump.*

Crash, bidda-bidda-bidda boom!

Tilly turned towards the sound of drums pounding in another room. *Bishop*, she thought. Tilly dropped the eight ball back where she found it and left to hunt down the Hound playing drums like a rockstar. His door was cracked open and he had head phones on. The lights were bright and the room was decorated in signed concert posters.

Bishop's head bobbed and thrashed as he pounded on the drums. She stepped into the room and Bishop stopped playing and lifted his headphones off.

"Don't stop," Tilly begged, "I'm trying to figure out the song."

"You won't," he growled, "because it's not one. I just like to push my polyrhythms on the hat, and bass drum cross rhythms with triplets in different time signatures. It's just noise really."

"Noise," she didn't believe it for a second. His heavy breathing and fiery eyes said this wasn't noise to him. It was freedom. She wanted him to keep looking like that – all wild and revved up. "Play something I might know."

"I don't know what you know."

"Play anyway." It took Tilly a moment to figure out the song, but when she did, her smile nearly split her face in two. "Master of Puppets is awesome. Keep going."

Bishop didn't listen. Instead, he dropped his drumsticks on the ground and, like a predator, he stalked around his set, approaching her with a swagger. He looked like sin and pain as he came closer. Caging her in with both his arms braced on the wall, Bishop glared at her.

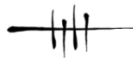
Neither of them said a word. His eyes were dark, no life at all danced in them. He leaned in. His mouth was a hair's breadth away from hers. A growl rose up from his throat and the vibration of it rippled down his body and straight into hers.

Dangerous, she thought. This man looked like he wanted nothing more than to tear the world apart, piece by piece, until it was as broken and splintered as he was. She knew the feeling. Been there a time or two herself.

Bishop's gaze remained locked on hers. That look said too much when his tongue spoke too little. Something in Tilly moved and shifted. She wanted to fix him. Heal him. Make him better.

"Bishop," she whispered. Her heart hammered in her chest as she ran her hand through his hair. His eyes softened a fraction. She wanted to kiss him. No, she wanted to crawl up his body, latch on and devour him.

Just as she was about to lean in for a kiss, the Hound pushed himself away from the wall, away from her, and left the room without saying a word.



Bishop didn't know if he should laugh, cry, commit murder, or dig another grave for himself. He wanted to be happy. He wanted to weep for everything he'd lost. He wanted to annihilate every *malanum* in sight then dive down into Hell's prisons and slay a bunch more. And he wanted to die. He *deserved* to die. He wasn't a good Hound – not the Hound he always prided himself in being. He'd turned into a weak pup.

Tilly deserved a beast. Nothing less.

That didn't stop him from wanting her though. And how fucking shitty was that? He had the case of the *fuck me pleases* when the twins were still out there, in need of help.

Bishop leaned against the wall in the theatre room and tried to calm the fuck down. God, he felt raw. And the way Tilly stared at him just now was the last thing he wanted to suffer. It was like she could look right down into his damned soul and see the pathetic man whimpering inside. He didn't want her to see that piece of him. The man who was betrayed by his wife... the father who lost his child... the man in the box who could not claw his way out of the darkness and died suffocating and alone in a coffin when no one would come to help.

Bishop stared down at his hands. These hands wielded many a weapon, fought countless *malanum* to keep the world a safer place. They were strong, calloused, big.

Yet these hands couldn't save his ass in that coffin. He'd scratched and clawed at the wooden lid until his fingernails split and fingers bled. Even now, someday when he was too stuck in his memories, Bishop could look down at his hands and see the blood run and splinters poking out of his fingertips.

The dead never truly let go of their first life.

That was a lesson the Devil gave him when he first became a Hell Hound. Made sense, really. Especially for those who were given a second chance. He'd yet to meet a Hound that didn't die in a terrible way. In this, they were equals. They were each granted a second life and were remade in the Devil's image to be protectors of the innocents. The guardians of the living and hunters of the evil *malanum* that slithered across the lands infecting wayward spirits and making a fucking mess of things.

It was the best job in the world – being a Hell Hound.

Bishop never regretted his decision to become one until recently. The guilt of what he may or may not have done to the twins was eating him alive. Add to that the fact that Tilly was a temporary gift in his life and he wanted to scream. Turn time back. Stay dead and buried and be a wayward soul who refused to go where he belonged. Fuck, he felt so damn lost.

“Bishop?” Tilly's voice rose from his music room. “Bish—
mmmm!”

At the sound of Tilly's words being cut off, panic slapped Bishop's ass and he peered down the hall, worried something had happened. What he saw made his blood run cold and boil at the same motherfucking time.

Valor was kissing her.

Oh hell no. That woman was fucking his. *His!*

Valor pressed Tilly against the wall with her arms up over her head, pinning her in place. If his alpha was half as unbalanced as Bishop was, then Valor might not even realize he was being so aggressive. The door to Hell was left wide open, too. Valor was never so careless.

Fury propelled Bishop forward. Jealousy had him ripping his alpha off of Tilly. He grabbed Valor by the shoulders and yanked him away. The two Hell Hounds began circling each other, growls of warning and snarly threats ripping out of both their throats.

"Stay the fuck away from her."

"Ye doona order me, Hound. I'm your alpha."

"I don't give a fuck." Bishop's head dipped, his gaze locked on Valor's. "She's not yours to touch."

"Guys."

They ignored Tilly. Honestly, they were so far gone into Hell Hound mode, they hadn't even heard her when she tried to call out their names.

"I saw her first," Bishop snarled.

"I doona care." Valor continued to circle around. They were half-in the hallway and half-in the theatre room. "I must do this."

Bishop growled louder. Jealousy had him seeing red. He didn't want one more thing taken away from him. Tilly was *his*, goddamnit. "The Hell you do, alpha. She's mine. All fucking mine."

"And she can still be yours."

Bishop stopped short. What the fuck was Valor trying to pull here? He wasn't a sharer. Never was, never would be. What did he want to do, have her first because he was alpha, before giving her away to a lesser man?

The thought had Bishop seething. He plowed into Valor and slammed his alpha against the wall. In return, Valor pushed back and they toppled over a reclining couch. Rolling around on the ground, taking turns punching and strangling each other, they were two animals fighting for one female and it wasn't pretty.

"Stop it!" Tilly screamed.

They ignored her.

"You think just because you're alpha, you get to have her?"

Bishop straddled Valor and clocked him in the jaw, "Not going to fucking happen."

Valor head-butted Bishop, sending him backwards which gave the alpha the upper hand. He rolled over and pinned Bishop to the ground. "She's going to fucking die if I doona take care of her!" When Bishop fought back, Valor blocked his swing, then grabbed Bishop by the throat and squeezed.

"Listen to me," Valor roared. "Fucking *listen* to me!" His nostrils flared as he tried to take in a few breathes. He shook all over. Bishop could feel the tremors in Valor's hands as he continued to hold Bishop by the throat. "I've fucked up. My power in Tilly, what I gave her to heal her, it's going to kill her if I doona balance out. Her temperature will continue to rise and her brain will fucking fry." He released Bishop with a shove. "I'm not taking her away from ye, Hound." Valor swayed on his feet, "I'm only trying to save her."

A squeak brought their attention over to the mouse in the hallway. No, not a mouse. It was an extremely scared Tilly. "I'm going to die?"

Valor stumbled over to her. "Not today, lass." He grabbed her by the back of the head and kissed her hard.

Bishop closed his eyes, his head dropping in defeat. The sight of his alpha with his woman was too much to bear. And the sound she made when Valor deepened his kiss?

Well, Bishop's body reacted the only way it knew how...

Chapter 35

Drake and Baz stared at the child they'd been left with. She stood there, completely unafraid of being locked into a room with two prisoners and left to starve while Baz and Drake watched until they either gave in or let her die.

They were naked, which made it even worse.

The Hounds both covered up as much as they could with their hands and tried to keep their distance, in case she was fearful of them, but also wanted to be close enough to keep her protected in case those cocksuckers came back.

"What should we do?" Drake asked.

"I'm not sure," Baz lowered himself down, awkwardly keeping his modesty intact and approached the girl. "Hey, don't be afraid, okay? We'll find a way to get you out." It was a lie. At best it was a frail hope.

Drake spoke in a soft voice, "What's your name?"

The child didn't respond. Instead, she walked over to where her twin had fallen dead. She dropped to her knees and spread herself across the floor, in the same position her twin fell dead in moments ago.

"We can't let her die, Baz."

"I know it."

"Can you send our soul back out? See if we can reach Valor?"

"Isn't that what we've been trying to do?" Baz stood back up and walked over to his brother, "The only person I keep finding is that woman. She's not going to be helpful. I don't even think she understands what she sees when she looks at me."

"Then we have to try harder. See if you can speak to her. Use your hands if she can't hear you."

Baz went back to looking at the child. She wasn't moving. She wasn't crying. "Do you think she's in shock?"

"How the hell would I know?" Drake stepped closer, cupping his junk as he knelt down, "Hey, girl. You okay?"

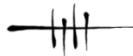
Baz rolled his eyes. Drake had zero kid skills.

The child looked up at Drake and mumbled. Nothing she said sounded like words. Drake's eyes widened and he placed his hand under her chin. "Open." The girl opened her mouth and Drake cursed. A lot.

"Language!" Baz barked.

Drake stood up and marched over to his brother, "Her tongue was cut out."

Holy motherfucking Hell.



Lucifer paced around his room. He felt like a caged beast in too small of a space and did nothing but pace. It was infuriating. He summoned Sara to come down and join him for a bit. Was he being a selfish prick, ordering a pregnant woman to leave her men to be with him in Hell for a while? Probably, but he didn't give a rat's ass. He was Satan. If he wanted company, he would damn well have some.

He felt Sara's presence before he saw her. Maybe it was the piece of his soul still inside her, or maybe they were just that connected because of their long-term relationship. Maybe it was because he smelled the bag of cheeseburgers she was carrying in. It was hard to say.

"Eli made you these," she said while sucking on a tootsie pop. Sara handed over the bag and sat down on Lucifer's throne. She was the only creature in the world he allowed to sit there. Not even his brothers have had the privilege of putting their asses on his seat.

Yet.

"How are you, Darling?"

"Good," she rubbed her belly, "I just wish I could do more."

Preaching to the choir, he thought. Reaching into the bag, he grabbed a carefully wrapped foil package with a hot burger in it. Fuck he loved meat. He took his first big bite and groaned. Eli was one hell of a cook. "What do you know of this woman Valor has taken into his home?"

"She seems nice, I guess. Strong. Willful. I like her."

Lucifer grinned. Sara's approval made him feel a little less concerned. "Val said she's cursed."

"Jack confirmed it," she crunched down on her Tootsie Pop, devouring the center. While she chewed, she unwrapped another one. "We tried to use some spells to break it. I think we caused more harm than good though. Nearly lost her on the front lawn."

"Shit," he whispered. "So he's serious about trying to cure her?"

"They made a pact. He said he'd help her break the curse if she gave him information on some guy."

"Is that all you know?"

Sara shrugged, "Pretty much. We didn't really have a lot of time to chit chat. Valor was out the door fast once she gave us the name. We left shortly after he returned." Sara laughed and stretched her body to lie across his throne with her head resting on one armrest and her legs dangling off the other. "She thought she was slick sneaking out of the house."

Lucifer's brow arched.

"We let her go," Sara shrugged. "Kalen followed her back to her apartment and she didn't see him. He waited until she was safe in her home, then he returned to us. When Valor and Bishop arrived, we acted like we didn't know anything about her running off."

"Why the fuck would you do that?"

Sara sighed and stayed quiet for a moment. "I think she's good for them. They care for her. They needed to hunt her down. Feel the fear."

"Fear?"

"Of maybe losing her."

Lucifer shook his head. "It's going to happen. That curse cannot be lifted."

"She knows."

He grabbed another burger out of the bag and took a huge bite while contemplating. Finally, "You think she's Hound material?"

"I think she's good for that pack. I have no idea if she's Hound material. But I don't want her to be a Hound."

Lucifer couldn't blame her. No one became a Hell Hound without suffering a terrible death and still having the drive to not give up and find peace. If Tilly wanted to be a Hound, it came at a violent price. Sara didn't want that for her. Neither did Lucifer. Or Valor...

"She's in danger," Lucifer said. Now the burgers felt like rocks in his gut. "Valor pushed his power into her."

"Shit," Sara cursed. "I didn't know about that. Jack only said they fixed her and cleansed her out."

"Mmmph." He walked over to his throne. "Maybe Jack didn't realize what else Valor did."

"Why the hell would Valor shove his power into a human like that? He had to know it would backfire. What an idiot."

"I doubt he thought past the moment he was in, Darling."

"Can nothing be done?"

"Yes, but that's on Valor now." Lucifer squatted down in front of his throne and smiled, "May I touch you?" Sara pulled her hand away from her belly so Lucifer could replace it with his. "Such a miracle," he whispered.

"Well, you'd know all about those, Angel."

Lucifer chuckled and bent down to kiss her belly. "I can't wait to meet him."

"Him?"

"Or her."

"Can't you tell?"

"Nope, whoever's in there is very quiet." He pulled away and sighed. He loved having Sara with him, but knew she couldn't stay for very long. She'd want to return to her extremely protective pack soon. So imagine his surprise when she yawned and asked him if she could stay and take a nap. "You know you don't have to ask me that, Darling. You can stay as long as you want."

"Thanks," she smiled lazily.

Lucifer didn't ask if she wanted his bed. If she did, she'd take it. This was as much her home as it was his. But instead of finding a more comfortable spot to stretch out on, Sara curled up and fell asleep in his chair.

He couldn't help getting the feels. He missed when she and Kalen lived down here with him. He hated being so lonely. Hated being so trapped. Seeing Sara curled up in his throne reminded him of all the goodness he was fighting for. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her. She wasn't just what kept her pack together, she was what kept Lucifer from unraveling into loneliness and despair.

His world was changing. *He* was changing. When Hell began crumbling and they fought *malanum* with the fate of the world in his hands, Lucifer had done things – terrible things – for the greater good. He'd destroyed evil. Yes, he was victorious, but Lucifer had put something else in jeopardy.

He put his own soul on the motherfucking chopping block.

The price needed to be paid soon. He just needed to hold out a little while longer, make sure his Hounds were solid and secure with their packs. He needed to wait long enough for his brothers to find the missing book and start to hold up their end of the deal by taking over Hell in shifts. And he needed to get more Gate Keepers.

There was too much still left to do.

And the baby, Lucifer closed his eyes and prayed for his Darling's unborn child. While Sara lightly snored, the Devil stood guard and watched over her. Sara's pack would be down here soon to check on her, of that he was certain. Until then, he would enjoy this moment.

It was rare that the Devil got to protect the innocent... and he knew his days were numbered now.

Chapter 36

Tilly couldn't understand what was going on. What did Valor just say? That she was dying? Did he mean that in the *she's cursed* way or in the *she's going to die in a matter of seconds* way?

Valor stormed back over and crushed his mouth to hers again. His kiss was nothing like Bishop's. Valor's was rushed and forced, which went against how she'd imagined it being. Tilly slammed her palms into his shoulders and pushed him away. "Stop."

Valor obeyed, but it definitely wasn't what he wanted to do. "Ye doona understand, lass."

"You're right," she kept him away with her arms outstretched. Sweat dripped down her back. "So explain this to me."

Bishop growled as he rose from the floor, "Yeah, Alpha. Explain it."

Valor swiped both his palms down his face and grumbled something indiscernible and most definitely in Gaelic. "You're hot."

Tilly gave him a *what the fuck* face. "Uhhh thanks?"

"No!" he waved his hand in the air, "I mean your body temperature. It's rising." No one argued there. "I wasna thinking when I pushed my power into ye, lass. For that, I'm so fucking sorry. But ye canna hold my energy. It's not meant for humans. My heat will continue to rise."

Bishop stood beside Valor and scowled. They all looked back and forth at each other. Valor placed a hand on her cheek and Bishop did the same to her other. "She doesn't feel that hot to me," Bishop said.

"And that's why we've missed it. We're fucking boiling, Hound. Our unbalance has us a mess and she's the same heat. Humans canna suffer this much. Fevers over 105 can cause delirium. Above 108 can cause death."

Bishop paled. "Shit," he whispered, "What do we do?"

"We doona have to do anything."

Tilly moved away from them and slid over against the wall. "We most certainly do! I can't die like this."

Bishop grabbed her hand and squeezed, "That's not going to happen, Sweetness."

Panic and fear danced down her skin. "What do we do to fix me?" Whatever it was, she was going to do it. Drink some disgusting potion. Okay. Work another spell. Fine. Whatever it was, it needed to be done and *now!* As more sweat dripped down her back, Tilly felt like a ticking time bomb. "Speak, damnit! Tell me what we have to do!"

Valor's jaw clenched. "Fuck."

"Fuck is right!" she yelled. "What do we have to do?"

"I said, *fuck.*" Valor's answer caught both her and Bishop off guard.

Maybe she hadn't heard him right. "Excuse me?"

Valor pushed against her hands and her arms bent, allowing him to press his body against her. "Ye canna remain with your body so hot. It's not a fever, lass. If it were, then you'd be chilled with a fever. But look at ye," Valor reached up to brush the hair sticking to her sweaty temples, "You're on fire. Humans canna survive heat like this."

"Oh god," she whispered.

"I'm sorry, lass. I am. But it's the only way."

"And what? Fucking is going to make it all better?" That sounded like the dumbest goddamn excuse to get laid she'd ever heard of. "I feel like this is a stupid trick." And yet, the seriousness of Valor's tone said the exact opposite. Add to that Bishop's fury and intensity and she didn't know what to think anymore. Shit, was this really real? Who has problems like this in their lives? Who, damnit!

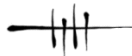
Tilly looked over at Bishop and wanted to cry. The man was torn. She saw the pain in his eyes. The worst part was... she didn't know how to feel about it. She and Bishop were on a little bit of a roll, but she couldn't deny her attraction to Valor too. It was something she'd been hell-bent on keeping a secret she would take to her grave. But now? This was a life or death situation, not a heart breaking one.

"Together." Tilly announced before putting a whole lot of thought into what the fuck it meant. "You two got me into this mess. You two can get me out of it... together."

“Are you sure about this?” Bishop asked.

Nope, she wasn't. Quite frankly, she felt insane and stupid. Maybe her brain was already boiling and making her have seriously bad judgment.

“I'm sure.” She reached out and snatched Bishop by the neck and brought him closer so he was all in her space too. Tears stung her eyes. She was scared and turned on and desperate and confused, but one thing was certain, “I'm not ready to die.”



Could this be more awkward? Maybe.

Valor kept his jaw clenched as he allowed Tilly to lead the way up to her room. Bishop was right behind her. Val brought up the rear. They didn't speak at all. It made this entire situation feel so forced and wrong.

To add more misery to the mix, Valor's insides were screaming in jealousy. Envy coiled like a snake in his gullet, ready to strike. All he kept thinking about was the way Tilly had looked at Bishop just now. “*I don't want to die*,” she'd said to him.

To him - Bishop. Not him - Valor.

She liked Bishop and was attracted to him. Valor felt like a fool because when he and Tilly were in the shooting range earlier, he could have sworn there'd been a spark between them. Not now though. Not after the exchange they just had. Christ, even when Valor grabbed and kissed her, Tilly didn't melt into him like he thought she would. He told himself it was because he'd taken her by surprise. She'd come out of Bishop's music room, calling his name, and Valor, in a state of pure panic, had grabbed and kissed her.

He shouldn't have done that. He should have gone slower. Sweeter. Gentler. Or maybe he shouldn't have done it at all. Fuck, he was a muddled mess.

As they headed to the bedroom, Bishop grabbed Tilly's waist and whispered something in her ear. She didn't flinch away from him. Not like Valor expected her to. In fact, Bishop touched her like he was already quite familiar with her body. Had they already been intimate with each other? Valor didn't know, but the way they acted made him assume the answer was yes.

Again, the snake of jealousy within him coiled tightly and hissed. He'd been down this road before. In his first life, with Sara as his bride and Kalen as his second in command.

Valor's heart hammered in his chest and he felt nauseous. Now wasn't the time to be fighting over a woman. Actually, there was never a good time to fight over a woman. Still, his mind wouldn't let go of the fact that he'd been down this road before.

No, he thought. Before, with Sara and Kalen, it was different. Yes, Valor relinquished his own wife to his best friend, but there was no love lost between him and Sara. Their marriage was an arrangement, an alliance. They had no true attraction to each other, just a deep respect and love for their clans. It was easy to give her away.

But Tilly? This woman was a different story. She stirred things inside Valor he'd not felt in a very long time. He didn't want to admit how he felt. Not to himself, or to Bishop, or to her.

She was a human. She was temporary.

And she was more attracted to Bishop than to Valor.

Fuck, Val silently cursed, *and now I've got to do this knowing she doesn't even desire me at all.*

He was going to go through with this for Tilly's sake and for his own. He needed balance so they were better prepared when the twins showed up again. This act of lust was a means to an end. That's all. It wasn't personal, it was maintenance.

Tilly went into her room first, "Just... give me a minute, okay?"

Valor nodded and Bishop said, "Of course, take your time, Sweetness," and then she disappeared into her bathroom. Bishop scowled, "Are you saving her because you care, or because she's our only link to the twins?"

"Does it matter?" Val didn't want to admit he cared for her, not after seeing the exchange between her and Bishop.

“Bananas,” Bishop said while poking Val’s shoulder. “Her safe word is Bananas.”

Valor’s responding growl was involuntary and loud. “You’ve lain with her?”

“No,” Bishop snapped back, “but we’ve... I’ve been...” Bishop sighed heavily and ran a hand down his face, “fuck.”

Again, Valor had to cool his jets and control his jealousy. He had no right to feel this way. Someone needed to tell that to the piece of him roaring inside its cage. “I doona ken if this is a good idea,” Val admitted. “I’m worried.”

“She’ll let us know if it’s too much.”

“We’ll be too much and ye ken it.” He held his hands out, “Look at us.”

“Don’t underestimate her.” They heard the water start to run in the bathroom sink. “Shit, is your heart pounding as hard as mine is right now?” Bishop went over and cracked open a window. “I feel like I can’t breathe.”

“Aye.”

“Maybe we need to make some rules. I mean, how much do we need to do to her to get right?”

“I’ve no idea, Hound.” Was Bishop not at all upset that they were about to *share* this woman? Valor couldn’t get a read on his Hound at all. The Alpha had never shared a thing in all his life. Doing so now wasn’t going to be easy for him. Bishop was different though.

Lucifer’s words ran through Valor’s head on repeat – the conversation they’d had about Valor’s choice to push his energy into a human to heal her and how the repercussions of said actions would be dire. His unbalanced energy had seeped into Tilly, along with the natural heat that Hell Hounds had. As he stood there like a fool, Valor wondered if Tilly’s flirtations had even been genuine or a residual side effect of his power.

The only good thing about this was, after they exchanged energy again, Tilly’s injuries were to stay healed. Or at least they were supposed to. *Gods, what if they didn’t?* Valor’s stomach clenched at the thought.

“Let’s go slow with this, alpha. I don’t want to ruin a good thing.” Bishop went over to the bed and slipped off his boots.

Valor tilted his head, "What do ye mean by that?"

"She's something, Val." Bishop yanked off his shirt. Leave it to that Hound to get right down to business. "I'm telling you, the way I feel... the way she feels... she's a good thing."

"Aye, she's a temporary gift."

"So let's make up some rules so we don't ruin this." Bishop started unbuckling his pants next. "Maybe if we pleasure her to the max and find a small amount of pleasure from our own release, the exchange will be enough to save all of us."

"What makes ye say that?" *What have ye done with her already?*

Bishop's gaze dropped to the floor. "Just, trust me, okay?"



Strange what one thinks about when death was barreling down on them. *I want you both.* If she was about to die, she might as well die a happy woman, right?

Tilly wasn't kidding herself about what this situation really was. She might have a small amount of feelings for Bishop, but it was a bad boy crush and nothing more. She'd been attracted to him from the start. If you saw him, you'd want a bite of his sweet ass, too. And Valor? He was a mountain she wanted to climb. A challenge, who coincidentally looked slightly appalled right now.

Jesus, she really was going to do this. What a terrible way to have a fantasy come true. Was this karma getting back at her for all the wrong she'd done? Tilly doubted she was even going to enjoy a smidgen of what they were about to do because this wasn't about pleasure and intimacy, it was all about balance and stopping her body from cooking like a motherfucking slow roast.

Fucking Hell Hounds. They were as dangerous as they were sexy. Yup, karma. This was all about the karma. Tilly was too nervous to even try and act sexy. *Come on, woman. Be cool. You've got this. It's not a trick to get you to fuck them... because you wouldn't even need to be tricked to fuck them.* She'd been so worked up and dying for sex ever since.... Oh shit, ever since she'd been hit by that car.

It clicked then. Her cravings of the sexual variety weren't some kind of reckless survivor side effect from almost dying, it was *Valor* in her. She was feeling the desires *Valor* must feel.

Well now she didn't even know if what she felt was real at all. Whatever, it didn't matter. Right now, as sweat poured down her back and neck, Tilly got her head back in the survivor game. *Live. Just live through this, damnit!*

She came out of the bathroom fully prepared to take the lead and get the party started. Then she saw the two men waiting for her and she was stunned stupid. God, the looks on their faces were enough to make her knees buckle. Steeling herself, Tilly swiped her sweaty palms on her thighs and said, "Alright boys, let's do this."

Bishop already had his shirt off and his pants undone. *Valor*, however, was fully clothed and he looked hesitant. She didn't appreciate it. Tilly needed to have courage for this, and that wasn't going to happen if these two didn't exude some serious confidence themselves. She was depending on them to pull her through this.

Slowly, Tilly swaggered past Bishop, caressing his cheek as she walked by, and stepped directly into *Valor's* space. "Alpha?" Her voice was deeper and more sultry than normal. The idea of what they were about to do caused all kinds of heat to pool in her lower half. His blue eyes pierced her, his expression hard and severe. *Valor* looked like fire and sex and danger and bad things that would undoubtedly feel really fucking good.

Tilly grabbed him by the beard and tugged roughly. "Save me," she demanded. *Valor's* breath punched out of him and she could feel it, actually *feel* the spike of desire in herself.

So it was true. They were connected by the energy he'd shoved into her. Tilly wanted it out more than ever now. She needed to feel only her emotions, only her desires. And preferably not melt like fondue in a pot and die before that could happen.

Bishop pressed against her back and he started nibbling on her neck. Val's gaze sailed to him, then back to her. Another spike. Another flood of heat. When Bishop began sucking on her earlobe, Tilly's breath hitched and she grabbed Valor's shirt and yanked him closer. "Save. Me."

She took the lead and pressed her lips to his. Valor groaned when her tongue darted into his mouth. He tasted like bourbon and wicked magic with a hint of spice. In no time at all, he took over. Valor shoved his palm on Bishop's shoulder, like he was trying to hold him back from touching her again. They both growled.

"Play nice, Hounds," she warned. "Together, remember?"

Valor let out another possessive growl, but he didn't argue.

They sandwiched Tilly and her lust kicked into high gear.

Bishop pulled Tilly's shirt off while Valor watched. To fuck with him a little, Tilly leaned back into Bishop's body and winked at Valor. To her astonishment, both the Hounds worked together to get her pants off. As she stood there with a Hound at her back and another at her front, Tilly felt the strangest things. She felt confident, adored, desired and... safe.

These men, as big and powerful as they were, would never hurt her. It wasn't wishful thinking; it was the truth. She could see it in their eyes. Feel it in her gut.

Tilly grabbed Valor's shirt and ripped it off. The threads tore with a satisfying sound. Hidden treasure laid underneath – lots of muscle, lots of skin...

"Do ye like what ye see?" Valor backed her up until her legs hit the bed and she was forced to climb onto it.

The lights dimmed.

This was so fucking happening.

"Tilly," Bishop said from behind her.

She turned to see her tattooed Hound naked and crawling onto the other side of the bed.

“Come here,” he commanded. Bishop laid down with his head at the foot of the bed. She crawled over, giving Valor a great view of her ass as she made her way to Bishop. He smiled, his eyes hooded as his tongue darted out to lick his lips. “Can I kiss you?”

She knew what he was asking for.

Tilly took a moment to appreciate Bishop laying there for her pleasure. His thighs were thick, ink decorated so much of his body, which was ripped and tan and fucking magnificent. How the hell did she get this lucky?

Then her gaze sailed to what prowled closer to her. Valor. Another masterpiece. He stripped down and – good god – she had no words for how stunning he was. Warriors. They looked like two warriors. And they were all hers for the night.

Valor stood at the edge of the bed and hooked his finger, signaling for Tilly to come closer. She straddled Bishop and stared at Val as she unhooked her bra and let it fall off her shoulders and to the floor.

Bishop grabbed her ass and ripped the panties clean off. Then, he slid her body up until she was sitting on his face. Valor cupped the back of her neck and bent down to kiss her mouth while Bishop kissed her core. Tilly’s moan was nothing short of undignified.

“I think she likes this, Hound.” Valor grinned. “Keep going.”

Following orders, Bishop held Tilly’s hips and his tongue continued to flick and penetrate her.

“Ride him, lass.” Valor held her chin so she was forced to look at him, “Ride him while you look at me.”

Heat didn’t pool between her legs, it gushed. Slowly gyrating her hips, she rode Bishop’s mouth and groaned when he slid a finger inside her. Her lust went off the charts. She thought she was going to burst into flames, combust, melt and disintegrate.

She fucked his face harder.

“Oh... god...” Tilly watched Valor stroke his dick with one hand, his other still holding her head. Holy mother of god, this was insane. Just then, Bishop plunged another finger into her pussy and she cried out. Jerking forward she braced her hands on Valor’s pecs. He rumbled a throaty chuckle and continued stroking himself.

“Move down, Hound. She doesn't have enough room to brace herself.”

Bishop, without missing a beat, scooted down on the bed and took Tilly with him. It happened so fast, her head spun. She licked her lips, still staring at Valor stroking himself.

“Do ye want a taste?” Valor teased.

Tilly nodded. She was too gone for words. Leaning in, she flicked her tongue out and licked the precum off the head of his cock.

“Fuck his mouth while I fuck yours,” Valor commanded.

She obeyed. Happily.

It took no time at all to find a beautiful rhythm together. She sucked Valor off while Bishop relentlessly hit her g-spot with two fingers and tongued her hard and fast. The sensations overwhelmed her. Tilly's body tightened, there was a buzzing in her brain, and she felt like she was floating.

“Fuck,” Valor barked. “Make her come, Hound. Now.” His pace sped up and so did Bishop's.

The tightness intensified in her lower body and all of a sudden, *wham!* Her orgasm exploded and Tilly clamped down on Valor's dick with her mouth while her hips bucked against Bishop's tongue.

“That's it. Come for us,” Valor held the back of her head and his strokes picked up speed. He roared when she grabbed his balls, tugged them down, and screamed around his dick while he came down her throat.

“Good girl, scream your pleasure around my cock.” Valor's dick pulsed against her tongue, jets of cum filled her mouth. “Swallow me. Fucking swallow me down, woman. Bishop, more - she needs more.”

Bishop seemed all too happy to comply. He flicked her clit with just enough pressure to trigger a second orgasm. Tilly latched onto Valor's thighs and struggled to hold herself up as she rode Bishop's mouth and continued to suck Valor off.

The Alpha Hound tasted like salty sweetness. He roared as another orgasm unleashed and Tilly wanted to enjoy it as much as possible. Breaking free from both of them, she slid off the bed, got down on her hands and knees and crawled to Valor like a cougar. His breath punched out of him as he growled.

She grabbed his dick and sucked him hard. Tilly swallowed down as much of his shaft as she could and groaned when she felt him jerk and spill into her mouth and down her throat again. Valor sank his fingers into her hair. “Fuck,” he growled, “Ye feel incredible, woman.”

His hips rocked back and forth while he fucked her mouth. She had no idea what was happening here. She didn’t even like giving blow jobs, but this was too good to back away from. Valor tasted so fucking delicious. The feel of him in her mouth, the idea of what she was doing with two of the sexiest men she’d ever seen, and the fact that Bishop was watching her suck Valor off right now – never in her wildest dreams did she ever see this happening.

As Valor’s second – no, third! – orgasm subsided, he pulled out of her mouth, still panting. She licked her lips, savoring his flavor. The room smelled like sex and spice. Tilly felt both chilled and hot. Weak and powerful.

Slowly, Valor grabbed her hand and helped her rise. “Gods,” he whispered before bending down and kissing her.

This was the kiss she’d been waiting for. It wasn’t forced and hard like their first had been. This one was rock steady and hungry for more. Valor’s tongue danced with hers. Then he sucked in her bottom lip and pulled it just a little before letting go with a smile, “Ye taste amazing, lass.”

“So do you,” she said all breathy and weak.

“Feeling better, alpha?” Bishop asked from his upside down position on the bed.

“Aye, a little,” Valor looked at Tilly, “How do ye feel, *mo leannan?*”

She couldn’t tell how she felt. She was still riding an adrenaline high. Bishop reached out and grabbed her hand, “Come here,” he tugged her back onto the bed.

Where Valor had a dusting of hair across his chest and down his sculpted abs, Bishop was silky smooth. Both looked sexy as fuck. And both had beards. Bishop’s was trimmed short while Valor’s was much longer.

She'd never really thought about beards before, but her thighs felt so sensitive when Bishop rubbed his mouth against her skin, it felt really good. She looked at Bishop and grinned, her pleasure was all over his face. She'd ridden him that hard. That much. Could she do it again so soon? Take that much sensation again? Tilly wasn't sure. But she wanted more.

"I don't want another beard ride," she said. Bending down, she kissed Bishop like they were old lovers. Something about him made her feel so comfortable and delectable. His hands sailed all over her skin, making her desperate for more touches. More caresses. More kisses and more Hound.

Bishop positioned Tilly over his hips. She sucked in a breath when she felt the tip of his dick swipe over her cleft. "I'm not going in, okay? Just trust me, Sweetness."

She looked up at Valor. His eyes were hungry and... something else. She didn't have time to think more about it. Her eyes fluttered shut and she became lost in the sensations of four hands on her. Valor closed in and kissed her again, while Bishop rubbed the head of his dick over and over and over her sensitive bundle of nerves. His speed increased. "So wet," he murmured, "Fuck you're hot like this, woman. I can smell your scent all over me."

Oh God, she was going to come again. Hearing Bishop talk like that, paired with all the hands on her, she wasn't going to last very long. Tilly braced herself, her fingers gripping the bedsheets, and her eyes squeezed shut.

"Howl for us," Bishop groaned, "Fucking howl, Tilly. I want to hear it."

One, two, three, four strokes of his head on her clit later, and the heavy tightness holding her down exploded. Tilly screamed, bucking against Bishop's body.

Valor groaned and she felt hot jets of cum hit her breasts. Then Bishop let out a roar as he finally came. She could feel his pleasure shoot out all over her belly.

Bishop's hips continued to buck wildly beneath her and she wanted nothing more than to be filled by him. It took so much control to not slide down his cock and ride him harder and faster than she had his face. Instead, she decided to turn the tables a little – give Bishop a taste of his own dirty mouth. “Can you come again?” she teased.

“Fuck...” Bishop's back arched as he continued to stroke himself, “Yessssss.”

“Then keep going,” she scratched her fingernails down his body - from his chin to his thighs and gave his balls a good squeeze. “Smell my cum on you, Hound? Think of that while you imagine fucking me. Think of how wet you make me. I'd be even wetter if you fucked me.” She flicked her gaze to Valor next. “Would you like that, too, Alpha?”

Bishop barked as he arched again. He gripped her hips and forced her to stay right where she was, “I gotta fucking feel your sweet pussy on me.” He started rubbing the head of his dick against her slit in a fast flicking motion again. “Kiss her!” Bishop yelled. “Fucking kiss her, Val!”

Valor crushed his mouth to hers. The intensity was too much, too glorious, too exhilarating to hold back. *Flick, flick, flick*, Bishop kept rubbing himself against her and Tilly caught the wave of one last orgasm. Her nails dug into Valor's shoulders while Bishop held her waist.

“Howl! *Howl!*” Bishop commanded.

She did. Tilly screamed and roared and howled until her throat hurt. Then she collapsed on top of Bishop, panting and lightheaded. Her limbs shook, her face was tingly, and she felt empty and drained. *And this was only foreplay*, she thought. “Are you two okay? Are you better now?”

Valor pressed the back of his hand against her cheek. “Aye, lass, we're right as rain. And you're much cooler now.”

Relief flooded her. Tilly cried. She didn't even know if it was because her life was spared for a little bit longer, or from too much coming. Can you cry from orgasming too hard? Maybe. Probably. Oh Hell, she didn't know, but the tears were here and they weren't stopping.

“Shit,” Bishop wrapped his arms around her and held her close. “I’ve got you, Sweetness. I’ve got you.”

While Tilly clutched Bishop, she kept her eyes on Valor. She wanted to say something, yet the words burned away before they left her tongue. His blue eyes locked onto hers for a hot minute and then he bent down, grabbed his clothes, and left the room.

Chapter 37

How the fuck did things spiral so out of control for him? Valor still wasn't completely balanced, but what they did was enough to take the edge off... for now. He didn't have the heart to push things further with Tilly, and he'd never in his life done something with Bishop in the goddamn room as a motherfucking participant before.

Valor barged into his bedroom and shut the door. Scrubbing his face with both hands, he growled at nothing in particular. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Tilly's face. The way her head tilted back and her eyes burned with desire as she took him into her mouth. He kept telling himself that this was only to gain some balance. But that was a lie. He wanted her the moment he first saw her. Unfortunately, so did Bishop.

Would Valor be willing to step aside and allow his Hound the chance to be with her? Yes. Was he going to? Fuck no.

Valor did everything for his pack, but he had no intentions of sacrificing Tilly. Something in him howled for her on a primal level. It made no goddamn sense, either. This was nothing more than lust at first sight. She wasn't even going to be around much longer.

All the more reason to love her while ye can, his instincts said.

He stuffed his legs back into his pants and zipped them. His dick was still hard. Valor realized that even though he was slightly better now, he would never be fully right again. No amount of sex was going to cure his sorry ass. No amount of hunting would either.

Are you two okay? Are you better now? Tilly's concern hadn't been for herself in her bedroom. Her focus was on them. Gods, what a woman. How could one be so selfless? She might have agreed to the threesome for her own self-preservation, but somehow, during the madness of so much pleasure, the woman's priorities had shifted.

Was he okay? Not at all. Without his pack back under this roof, safe and sound, Valor was never going to be okay. What made it worse was, in the throes of passion, Valor hadn't thought of the twins at all. His focus was on saving the beauty who knelt down and gave as much pleasure as she'd received.

A small knock on the door had him reaching for a fresh shirt and tugging it on. He felt too vulnerable to answer it without being fully clothed. He cleared his throat and smoothed back his hair, "Come in."

Tilly popped her head in first and looked around the room.

"Come all the way in, *mo leannan*."

"I just wanted to thank you," she was in a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt big enough to hang off one shoulder. Both pieces of clothing belonged to Bishop. "You saved my life."

He didn't see it that way. She'd saved their asses too. "Ye look cold," he said gruffly.

Tilly rubbed her arms, "The window in my room is open and it's like forty degrees out."

"Ye can shut the window if ye like."

"No, I don't want him to feel trapped."

Valor froze. "He's told you much about himself then."

Tilly walked over and sat down on a chair in the corner of his room. "And you haven't really told me anything about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell."

He watched her cautiously. Tilly looked around his bedroom. It was decorated in deep crimson fabrics, furnished with mahogany, and the lights were dimmed so it felt sensual and warm.

"Red must be your favorite color," she smiled. "It suits you if it is, Foxy Boy."

Yes, red was his favorite and not because of his deep auburn hair. "It would be any warrior's favorite color. It's what ye see the most of in battle. Everyone bleeds red."

She tucked her legs under her luscious ass. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Valor turned his back to her and walked over to his dresser to grab socks. "What?"

"How did you die?"

He should have known that was coming. Valor braced his hands against the top of his dresser and stared at her through the reflection in his mirror. "Violently."

"In battle?"

"Aye."

Tilly bit her lip. Her cheeks reddened. “What was it like? To die... violently.”

He had a feeling he knew why she was asking this and his insides squirmed. “It was verra painful.” He turned around and leaned against his dresser with his arms crossed over his chest, “and quick compared to what others suffered.”

She unleashed a shaky breath.

Valor walked over to her. He bent down on one knee and reached for her hand, “If I can save ye from that, I will, lass.”

“I don’t want to die horribly,” she sniffled.

I don’t want ye to die at all, he thought. She was too young. So fresh. So wild. So... precious.

“Can you tell me how you died?” Tilly squeezed his hand, “Just... give me the worst of it. I want to know what to expect, just in case.”

“You willna die the same as I did, *mo leannan*.”

“I still want to know.”

Why? Why was she so fixated on this? “Alright.” He released her hand, and took a seat on the edge of his bed. He would give her the short version of his treacherous death. The basic facts.

“My clan was attacked. I watched as my world was stripped away, one clan member at a time, all around me. In the end, I was run through with a broadsword. Several, in fact.” He swallowed the lump in his throat. His death never rattled him, it was what he witnessed right before it that haunted his worst dreams at night. *Sara, screaming her rage with her last dying breath. A woman who meant the world to him and whom he could not save from dying savagely before his eyes.*

Valor looked away from Tilly. Fuck, this was harder than he thought it would be.

“The pain was sharp. The first stab felt like an explosion. Stars burst in my vision and every molecule in my body screamed. Then I was stabbed again and again. The pain dulled with every slice. I dropped, my face in the mud, and was gone.”

When he looked over at her, Tilly had tears streaming down her cheeks. Well now he felt like an asshole for telling her the truth. “I shouldna have told ye this.”

“I’m sorry,” she swiped her tears away before he could do it for her, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s / who am sorry, lass. I should have not been so... detailed.”

“No,” she wiped her nose with the back of her hand, “I’m not sorry I asked. I’m sorry you went through that. I’m sorry you weren’t saved.”

“Och, *mo leannan*,” he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. “Death comes for us all. No one is ever saved from that.” Tilly fell apart in his arms. It made him feel all torn up inside.

“This isn’t fair,” she cried into his chest.

No, it wasn’t. A blood curse like hers was a terrible, evil thing indeed. There had to be some way to save her. Maybe Lucifer had forgotten something? Maybe he wasn’t thinking clearly when he’d told Valor there was no hope for her. The Devil hadn’t been himself lately – his mind no doubt preoccupied with the missing book, the need for new Gate Keepers, and his own imbalance. Maybe there was a way to save their girl.

“Would ye wish to be a Hell Hound if ye had the chance?” It was a shot in the dark. Sara was the only female Hound, but –

“No,” she said, “I don’t want to sell my soul to Satan. I don’t want to be damned.”

A coldness washed over Valor. *Damned*. Was that what she thought Hell Hounds were?

“I shouldn’t have brought this up.” Tilly pushed away from him and wiped her face again. “Let’s forget about this okay? I ummm, I just...” she sighed and walked over to the door. With her hand on the knob she said, “I was going to make something to eat for me and Bishop. Are you hungry?”

Valor swallowed another lump in his throat. There she goes, trying to take care of them again. “Aye,” he said softly. “I’m famished.” *Not for food*, he thought, *but for more of you*.

Tilly smiled, the change in her was instant. “I make a mean bowl of cereal.”

Valor laughed. “Sounds delicious.”

She opened the door and gasped. “V-v-valor.”

He stepped up behind her and looked out at nothing. Her aura was radiating with fear. “What is it? What do ye see?”

Tilly took a small step forward, her one hand outstretched behind her to grab Valor's, the other reaching forward into an empty hallway. "Oh my god," she gasped. "Where are you? Tell us where you are!"

Valor looked everywhere and still saw nothing. His instincts were screaming to do something, but he didn't know what the Hell to do!

"Please! Tell us where you are! Can you hear me?" Tilly moved forward, stopped, and then jerked back with a yelp. "No, no, no, no!" She spun around and looked up and down the hall.

Bishop ran out of his bedroom with a blade in his hand. "What the fuck is going on? Is there a *malanum* in the house?" The Hound was on defense, one hundred percent prepared to attack the intruder and protect their woman.

"No," Valor said numbly, "It wasna a *malanum*."

"What the fuck was it then? Christ on a cracker," Bishop grabbed Tilly and brought her into his chest, "You okay? You look like you've seen a fucking ghost or some shit."

"She did," Valor said. "Didn't ye, *mo leannan*?"

Bishop backed off enough for her to answer with, "I just saw one of the twins."

"What?" Bishop stepped back even further and looked around the hallway. "Where? Are they still here?"

"N-n-no," she said.

Whatever she'd seen spooked her. Dread shrouded Valor as he watched Tilly's aura swirl in ugly colors. She was scared shitless. Valor felt all his emotions fade like fog burning off by the sun. There was no feeling in his tone when he asked, "Was he turning black?"

Tilly's mouth clamped shut. With a big, shaky breath, her gaze rose until she stared at Valor. "Black water was pouring out of his mouth and his eyes were... unnatural. They were purple and pink and red and black."

"Awww fuck, fuck, fuck!" Bishop panicked. "We're running out of time, Val!"

"I have an idea," Tilly said, "but I'm not sure how to do a part of it. Can you call Jack?"

Valor didn't even ask what her idea was. He swiftly moved to get his cell phone, dialed the number, and handed the phone to Tilly. When he heard what she was asking about, Valor wanted to protest, but bit his tongue.

As she asked Jack questions, Bishop also realized what she was going to try to do and he shook his head at Valor, silently begging his alpha to not let her continue. Valor ignored his Hound's pleas to step in and stop her.

Tilly hung up and frowned. "He doesn't know how to do it, either. Damn it!" She ran her fingers angrily through her hair. "Okay, okay, I know what to do," her hands trembled, "but you're—" she bit her bottom lip and her cheeks flushed. "You..."

"What, lass? Speak!"

"You're not going it like, but you're going to have to trust me, okay?"

Chapter 38

Baz's body jolted when his spirit slammed back into him. He coughed and black liquid spewed out of his mouth, spraying his twin in the face. Drake slapped his back a couple times while he continued to choke. Once Baz was able to catch his breath, he blinked the tears back and searched for the child who was imprisoned with them.

Something was very wrong. His body was shutting down in a strange way. His vision was so blurry it was hard to make out objects, and even though they were in nearly complete darkness, he felt like the one meager candle lit in the corner of the room was too fucking bright.

"I saw her," he coughed.

"Same woman?"

"Yeah," Baz rolled onto his hands and knees. "Where's the kid? I can't see her." He wanted to keep an eye on her at all times.

"She's in the corner," Drake frowned. "She's fine. Not like she can go anywhere."

Baz wasn't so sure about that. She didn't act right for being a young kid who just watched her twin get murdered and also happened to have her tongue cut out at some point. The girl was awfully calm and unafraid, especially considering she was trapped with two strange men who were naked in a cold and dark room. This place was nothing more than a cave – dank, primitive, and fucking gruesome.

"Did she respond to you this time?" Drake helped his brother stand.

Baz swayed on his feet and leaned against the cold stone, "Yeah," he coughed, "Yeah, she saw me. She tried to ask me something, but I couldn't make it out."

"Where was she?" Drake asked. "Could you figure out her location?"

Every time they tried to astral project, their soul would automatically be drawn to this same strange woman. It was never in the same place, either. And, as far as they could tell, she wasn't calling them with some kind of magic. Actually, she seemed just as shocked and terrified to see them as they were surprised and confused to see her. Each and every time.

"I think," Baz blinked hard and fast, "she was at our house."

Drake stiffened, his one hand clenched around Baz's arm to help him stay standing. "Are you sure, brother?"

"Yeah. I was in our hallway. Upstairs."

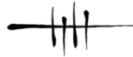
"Did you see Bishop? Valor?"

"I only saw her. Just... *her*." Baz slumped forward, his legs giving up and buckling. Drake caught him before he fell.

The girl crawled over on her hands and knees. She grabbed Baz's leg to get his attention, then bit the inside of her wrist, drew blood and dipped her finger into it.

"What the hell, kid? What are you—" Words failed Drake as he watched the child draw across Baz's stomach. "Holy hell, what are you?"

The child didn't respond, she just kept finger painting.



This was probably a very bad idea. No, scratch that, this was most definitely a terrible idea. Tilly turned to Valor, "I need salt, all the candles you have, a marker, a knife, and a bowl."

Bishop groaned, "I don't like this."

"Do you want your pack back or not, Hound?" Tilly felt strong. Confident. It's like she'd been training her whole life for a shot like this. A chance to save someone, even if it wasn't who she thought it would be. And it felt good, it felt right. "Get me what I need, Bishop. Let's get this done."

The Hound obeyed, growling and cussing his way down the steps.

"This is dangerous, lass. Ye ken what you're trying to attempt?"

She noticed Valor wasn't trying to stop her, just warn her. "This ain't my first rodeo, Alpha."

His eyes darkened. "You've called upon the *Loa* before?"

"No," she looked down, "someone else."

"Who?"

She felt her face grow hot. Valor was making her feel like a child – or maybe this just felt like a flashback. "Zaza."

It was obvious by the look on his face, Valor didn't know who that was. She'd have rather not used the cursed *Loa*, but he was her last hope at finding the right spin of magic since Jack didn't know the spell. There wasn't enough time to research it – not after what she saw what Baz looked like.

Tilly turned and started towards the steps. Holding onto the banister, she felt her courage rise with every step she descended. Bishop was in the kitchen still rummaging through the drawers to find a marker. "I can only find this." He held up a piece of chalk.

"That'll do." Tilly snatched it from his hand and started drawing the alphabet on top of their kitchen table.

"I really don't like this," Bishop said for the tenth time. "Val we can't allow her to risk herself."

"It's her decision," Valor growled as he watched her mark up their nine thousand dollar, hand-carved table. The chalk didn't stick to it very well, but it was enough. "We have several wards up, this Zaza may not be able to get in, lass."

"He will." Tilly didn't look up as she drew all over their table, "Wards don't stop him. He's slicker than snot on a door knob."

Bishop left the kitchen and came back a few minutes later carrying two daggers and a gun. He handed the gun and one blade to Valor. "Just in case."

She wasn't about to say Zaza couldn't get stabbed. She had no idea if the spirit could or not, but if anyone was able to do some damage to him, it would be these Hounds. Tilly just hoped it didn't come down to that. The last thing she needed was a pissed of Zaza.

Tilly lit the candles and poured salt on the floor around the table. Next, she yanked out a few of her hairs and placed them in the bowl. Taking the small knife Bishop retrieved for her, she placed it at the center of her makeshift Ouija board. She lit the hair in the bowl on fire, placed both her forefingers and middle fingers on the handle of the small knife and made sure the tip of the blade was pointed at Hello.

“Zaza, Zaza, Zaza, I summon thee.” Nothing happened, of course.

The schmuck.

“Come on now, I know you hear me, damnit.” Tilly repeated the summons three more times.

Valor cleared his throat, “Like I said lass, this Zaza may not be able to cross our threshold with our charms and wards.”

“We had to amp them up a few months ago,” Bishop explained.

Tilly didn’t care about their wards or why on earth they had to ramp up their magical barriers. She knew damn well Zaza heeded no warnings and not even an ocean made of holy water could keep him from swimming to what called him.

“Fuck it,” she hissed, “You’re such an asshole, you know that?” She thumped her fist on the table for good measure. What a dick Zaza was! “I’m telling you right now,” *no good piece of shit*, “If you don’t come here when I call you,” *dark ass demonic fuckhead*, “then I swear to God I will tell,” *trying to play all hard to get acting like you can’t hear me say your name*, “Lucifer what you did in 1983 to that goat.”

Tilly’s arm jerked as the blade in her hand jumped around the chalk letters. She stabbed each one, her blade controlled by the asshole she’d summoned. “Y-o-u w-o-u-l-d-n-t d-a-r-e.”

“Don’t. Tempt. Me. Zaza.”

The table shook in fury. Bishop and Valor both jumped between Tilly and the table and started growling and snarling like angry wolves.

“Move!” Tilly shoved them away, the blade in her hand still out of her control.

“W-h-a-t d-o y-o-u w-a-n-t n-i-g-h-t-i-n-g-a-l-e”

“Nightingale?” Valor frowned.

Tilly kept her focus on the table. "We need your help. How can I summon someone's spirit who isn't dead?"

"C-a-n-t"

"How can I find a spirit that is lost?"

"C-a-n-t"

Tilly pounded on the table in anger. "Come on! Please!"

The table shook again, this time more violently than the last. The bowl of singed hair bounced its way over the ledge and crashed onto the floor. The candles lit around the kitchen flickered.

"Stop throwing a temper tantrum and act your fucking age, Zaza. I'm serious. I need help!"

Abruptly, the table stopped moving. Everything grew quiet. There was a light ringing in Tilly's ears. Then her hands grew cold. As if ice water was being poured over her, the sensation glided down her arms and back. Her breath blew out in white puffs.

"Get her," Valor growled, "We must protect her."

She felt hands wrap around her again, warm and strong.

"Don't," she growled. "Don't move me."

Tilly glared at the table and watched as a dark figure rose out of the center. Her heart slammed in her chest, her nerves going into overdrive as Zaza showed himself. He was a frightening creature. And agile, quick, and cunning to boot. He was also excellent at shapeshifting and changing his form from man to woman to this...

"Nice horns," Tilly smirked. "They suit you."

Bishop growled possessively behind her. She had a feeling he couldn't see what she was looking at. Neither could Valor. But she was damned sure they could sense Zaza's presence.

"You have nerve, Nightingale."

"I'm a ballsy woman, what can I say."

Zaza chuckled. Standing on the table, being as tall as he was, his head almost hit the ceiling. He crouched down and leaned in until he was only a few inches from her face. He smelled like rotten vegetation and sulfur. It was all Tilly could do to keep from crinkling her nose.

"Long time, no see." Zaza's forked tongue slithered out of his mouth. "We made a deal, remember?"

"Yes, and I've stuck to it."

“Until today.”

“Because of our deal.” Tilly gripped her blade a little tighter, “I promised to not call you unless it was an emergency. It’s now an emergency.”

Zaza rocked his head from side to side. His long nails scraped the wood table. They stared at each other for a long minute. “You are grown,” he said. “Living to your full expectancy, I see.”

Her cheeks flushed.

“And,” he looked around the room, “You got a couple of dogs. My, my, Nightingale, your circle has grown from one to three, and then there’s me.” He dipped his head and smiled with sharp, pointed teeth. He climbed off the table and walked around the circle, toeing the salt ring with his bare foot. “You keep strange pets,” he said, “but they’re cute.”

“And they’re off limits.” Tilly positioned herself so she stood between Zaza and Bishop. The last thing Tilly wanted was for Zaza to possess one of her Hounds.

“They’re damaged. Good eats, this one,” Zaza flicked his tongue out at Bishop who still didn’t have a clue Zaza was nearly pressed against him.

“Tilly,” Bishop growled again. “What’s going on? What the fuck am I feeling right now, woman?”

Valor gripped his dagger and pushed the table out of the way. Zaza smiled, “Mmmm a ginger.”

“Not. Yours.” Tilly snapped, moving to stand in front of Valor next.

Zaza roared in fury, making the candle flames rise and flicker again. “You call me here and offer nothing. Where is your hospitality?”

“What would you like?” Tilly held her hand up, “Besides the men.”

“You *protect* them?” Zaza refocused on her. Stretched to his full height, he towered over everyone in the room. Long, lanky, and vicious as hell, Zaza was a force not to be reckoned with. “You suddenly have a care?”

Tilly felt her cheeks redden. “Maybe.”

“Naughty girl. Making ties when you will be severed from this life so soon.”

“Shut the fuck up,” She hated that this Loa was so blunt about things that hurt. “Please, just help me, Zaza. You can rub it in my face later.”

“I want more than gloating rights, Nightingale.”

She tried to keep her eyes locked on his. *Never look down. Never look down.* “What do you want then?”

“Blood.”

“Fine, but it will be mine. Not theirs. And not too much. I’m not going to die today because you can’t control your gluttony.”

Zaza laughed – it was deep, throaty, and seductive. “You make demands like you have the ability to see them followed through,” he touched her hair. “What is it you want, Nightingale? I want specifics before I decide if you’re worth it or not.”

“I need help summoning the spirit of someone who is still alive. They can astral project, I think. And I need to communicate with them.”

Zaza whistled. “Hefty favor.”

“Will you help me or not?” Tilly rounded her shoulders and prayed her nerves didn’t fray. This was a dangerous deal she was trying to make.

Zaza lifted his hand, in doing so, it compelled Tilly’s blade – which was still in her grip. The knife turned, the tip of the blade pointed down, and Tilly’s other hand went up to meet it.

“Tasty little thing,” Zaza purred. He closed in on her, scraping his talon across her chin. Next, he grabbed Tilly’s arm and forced her to bend over the table. She grunted with the force and he stood behind her, grinding against her backside.

The two Hounds were barking and gnashing their teeth. They still couldn’t see him, though. That much was made obvious now. Zaza laughed when it was confirmed who had the upper-hand. Him. It was always, always, always, him. “I could fuck you right now and they wouldn’t be able to stop it.”

“You won’t,” Tilly gritted.

He bumped her ass. “You so sure? It’s been a while for me, I’m not so picky anymore.”

“Yeah, but...” she grunted when he bumped against her ass again. “I trust you, Zaza. You wouldn’t.”

He hissed in her ear. “You aren’t a child anymore, so round and ripe now,” Zaza shoved her harder, trying to get a reaction. She refused to give him one. With a swipe of his hand, the blade moved like it was alive, and stabbed into Tilly’s arm, deeper than she anticipated.

Blood poured from the wound and she screamed in pain.

All around her, anger and danger spun. Zaza laughed as he grabbed Tilly’s arm and licked her wound. Suckling on her, his eyes pierced the two Hounds who were screaming and pounding on the barrier he’d placed between them and his meal.

The terror of Zaza’s trickery wasn’t surprising... but seeing the two Hell Hounds lose their shit because they couldn’t get to her was.

Tilly shook her head, her gaze locked on Valor. God, the fury and fear on his face right now sent a shiver down her spine. She shook her head again, trying to silently let him know there was nothing to be done. This was the price she had to pay for Zaza’s cooperation. This was the price she had to pay to get one step closer to finding the twins.

A terrible thunder rumbled. It was Bishop. His fists pounded against the barrier. The veins in his neck stuck out as he screamed at her with wild eyes and his mouth wide open as he continued to roar and claw at the barrier between them.

The sight stole her breath.

A sharp prick under her chin broke her gaze from Bishop. Zaza’s talon pierced her chin as he forced her head to shift towards him. He continued to drink. To drain. With his free hand, Zaza ran his nails down between her eyes. They locked gazes and Tilly’s world went black.

Chapter 39

“FUUUUCK!” Bishop was *this close* to losing what little bit of sanity he fucking had left. He had no goddamn clue what was going on, but this shit was beyond his level of coping skills.

Tilly was being rammed from behind, her body rocking against the table, and she wasn't even fighting back. He was too lost in a haze of red to make out her words. All he could think was *Save her! Protect her! Get her back! Get her back! Get her back!*

The barrier came out of nowhere. It slammed up so fast, both the Hounds stumbled back from the energy they'd not been prepared to face. Jesus fucking Christ! What the hell was in there with her?

Bishop had nearly lost his head when he saw Tilly's arm move out and the blade stab her arm. To know something so powerful had Tilly trapped and was now feasting on her goddamn blood had Bishop's sanity going into a tailspin.

He would turn mad from this. On top of everything else in his head, this act would be what finally broke him.

Valor barked like an animal from the other side of the table. He rushed around and grabbed Bishop, tackling him to the ground. “Easy, Hound.” Valor growled in his ear, “I canna battle the two of ye at once. Ye will obey. She knows what she's doing. We have to trust her judgement.”

Bishop thrust his hand up and clocked Valor's nose with the base of his palm. It was enough of a stunner for Bishop to shimmy out from under his alpha and then he pounded on the barrier again. “Look at her now! Look at her Val!”

Oh my fucking god, Bishop thought. His heart beat so fast he couldn't fucking breathe. Tilly was possessed.

Tilly. Was. Possessed.

She stared at him with black eyes and a cold calmness. Her arm still stretched out, her blood dripping down all over the table, Tilly stared at them with dead, black eyes. It triggered Bishop so fast he felt sick.

“MATILDA JANE!” he roared. Bishop used his shoulder and tried to slam his body against the barrier. It was no use though. Nothing was getting through the damned thing.

Valor ripped him away and slammed him against the far wall. “Stay back!” his alpha commanded. “Stay the fuck back, Hound!”
“But she’s—”

“On her own. As she knew she would be.” Valor grabbed Bishop by the throat and forced him to look away. “Ye canna go in there. Even if the barrier drops, ye canna go near her.”

It was because of the possession. Bishop’s heart raced and he downward spiraled into a terrible flashback - The kitchen. The table. Fuck, he could smell the spaghetti sauce and garlic bread. He heard the clinking glasses. The twins laughing...

The trigger was instant. Bishop’s flashback of getting possessed went all Technicolor chaos in his head. The rest was all imagination, because he didn’t have any idea what he did under the influence of the *malanum* that had taken over his body and mind that night.

Bishop gripped Valor’s arms. His fingers dug into his alpha’s flesh and he roared. So much fury pulsed in him, he felt like he was going to explode. Valor held him steady, keeping him away from Tilly and the danger she was in. It was infuriating. It was dishonorable. It was –

“Necessary,” Valor barked. “I canna lose ye, Hound.”

“And I can’t lose her!” Bishop fought against Valor’s hold to no avail.

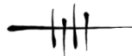
“She’s not lost,” Val argued, “and she’s a strong one. She’s done this before, ye ken it if ye’d just look with your eyes and not your heart. Look at her. She set this up. She’s not afraid.” Valor’s grip didn’t relent. “I can see her aura, Hound. She’s calm. She trusts whatever the hell is in there with her.”

Bishop tried to jerk out of Valor’s hold, but he still wasn’t able to. In a last ditch effort – which was mostly instinct and habit – Bishop howled. He howled like an animal in need of help.

But his pack wasn't going to come to the rescue. He was on his own. The twins weren't going to respond. Valor was literally holding him back. And Tilly? Oh god, his sweetness was taken prisoner in her own motherfucking body. Bishop tried to catch his breath, blink past the unshed tears, and calm his motherfucking ass down, but his efforts were half-hearted and pathetic. He was too far gone for this.

There was no coming back...

Not for the twins. And not for Bishop.



Zaza smiled. "Your Hound is baying."

"I know." Tilly sat with Zaza in a spiritual space. It was a sandy dessert with nothing around them but sand, sand, and more sand. The wind would kick up every once in a while and the granules would sting her skin when they hit her arms. "Please let me get back to them." She could hear their voices echoing in the vast red sky like disembodied ghosts stuck in limbo.

"Why do you care so much for them, Nightingale?"

"I... I don't."

"Liar." Zaza rocked his head from side to side again, humming. "Your curse is a sweet one, it's ripened since you last called upon me."

"Speaking of which, now that I've paid you, please help me."

"You wish to summon another?"

"Yes," Tilly rubbed her arm. Her wound hurt like a bitch and she was bleeding all over her lap. This was the deepest he'd ever cut her. "I need to summon a spirit that's still alive. And I need to hear him. Or have him hear me. I need to communicate with him somehow."

"You replacing me, Nightingale?"

"Now why would I do that?"

He smiled devilishly, "Has this soul come to you before?"

"Yes."

"So you've made contact already?"

“Sort of. I just see him. I didn’t even realize it was a spirit. He looks like flesh and bone to me. I thought he was a stalker.”

Zaza’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “He is cursed then, yes?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” She frowned, “Is he drawn to me because I’m cursed?”

Zaza parroted her, “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Tilly rolled her eyes. “Dick.”

“You should see how big it is,” he flirted. “You wouldn’t want to go back to those Hounds once you shared my bed. I’d have you singing, Nightingale.”

“Zaza,” she warned.

“Tell me more about this spirit.”

“I don’t know him.”

“And you’re willing to risk yourself for him anyway. You make no sense.” Zaza shook his head, “For being so brilliant, you’re very stupid. Did those dogs fuck the sense out of you?”

“Please, Zaza? This will be the last favor I ever ask for.”

He clucked his tongue at her. “You can’t make a promise like that. So long as you breathe, you may still want Zaza to come.”

“I won’t. I’ll leave you alone.”

“You’ve said those words before. Many times.”

“I mean it this time.”

“Who is it you wish to summon?”

Tilly licked her dry lips. “His name is Sebastian. He’s also a Hell Hound.”

“You know they are dangerous creatures, yes?”

“They’re not dangerous to me.”

“They told you about themselves?” Tilly nodded her head and Zaza huffed, “Strange. I thought the rules were no telling the mortals.”

“Yeah, well I’m a special case. And I’m going to be dead soon anyway so,” she shrugged and acted like the truth didn’t hurt as much as it really did.

“You know what they do, right?”

“They send evil back to Hell.”

Zaza nodded with a smile that grew wider and more crooked. “To Hell... where all the cursed ones end up.”

Tilly's breath hitched.

"Oh yes, Nightingale. The cursed belong to Hell. And with all the naughty things you've done, you've certainly earned your cell in prison."

A chill swept down her spine. "I... I don't care. I'll accept whatever my fate is."

Zaza laughed again and it was seductive and deep. "You are a strange bird, Nightingale."

"Stop wasting my time, Zaza. Shit or get off the pot."

"I can tell you how to do it. But the energy it will cost may be more than you have."

"I don't care."

"It could kill you."

Tilly's palms grew sweaty. "I'm going to die anyway, might as well have my death be for something good."

"Martyrs are overrated."

"So are Ouija boards, but here we are."

Zaza laughed again. "Okay, Nightingale. I will help you, one last time, but this is the end of the line for you and I."

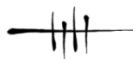
Tilly nodded and tried to ignore the odd sense of loss she suddenly felt. She and Zaza... well, there would be no more she and Zaza after today. In the grand scheme of things, Zaza was one more tie that needed to be severed anyway. They both knew it.

"I will miss you, Nightingale."

Her chin trembled, "I'll miss you too, Zaza."

He laughed with his head tilted back towards the red sky.

"You're such a fucking liar."



Valor kept his grip on Bishop. He couldn't explain the level of torment this was. To have his Hound baying on one end, his woman trapped and alone on the other, and Valor helpless to save either of them. It was fucking agony.

He'd been in this position before. Twice, as a matter of fact, and it didn't get any fucking easier.

Holding Bishop back, Val kept his eyes on Tilly. More specifically, her aura. He watched it swirl and pulse like a heartbeat. So long as it remained strong and steady, he would tell himself not to worry. Her eyes stayed glued to him, black orbs staring blindly right at him. This was what had him suffering chills of despair.

Another possession was occurring in his house. It was a fast pass to a flashback of him finding Bishop with black orb eyes and no mind of his own. The atrocities committed that night were still too unbearable to speak about.

Valor doubted he would ever get over it. Bishop wasn't himself then – but the visions that haunted Valor's nights were crisp and clear of his Hound tearing apart people they knew and cared about.

Val froze when he felt the barrier suddenly drop. It was like air getting vacuumed out of the space and his ears popped. He released Bishop and the two of them scrambled to get at their girl. She fell forward and face planted into her own blood that pooled on the kitchen table. Her eyes were back to their lovely emerald green.

"Mo leannan," Valor carefully grabbed her shoulders and tried to turn her around. "Tilly, can ye hear me?"

Bishop snatched her from his arms and cradled her. He gave Valor a deadly glare and snarled. Such possessiveness was understandable... but not tolerable for the alpha.

Tilly moaned in Bishop's arms and her eyes fluttered open. "Bishop," she whispered.

"I've got you," he cooed, "I've fucking got you, Sweetness." Bishop carried her out of the kitchen and into the living room. Her wound dripped blood in a trail for Valor to follow. "Get something for her arm," Bishop yelled as he walked away with their woman.

Their. Woman.

Valor shook the thought out of his head and went for a clean towel. He stormed into the living room and dropped down beside Bishop. "Maiden, Mother, and Crone, lass," Valor swept the hair from her face, "never do that again."

"Don't worry," she sighed, "I won't. Zaza's not going to come back. It was part of our deal."

Valor gently grabbed her arm and wrapped the towel around it to staunch the bleeding. He wished he could use his power to heal her, but that didn't go so well last time and he was a Hound who tried to never repeat a mistake.

"We're going to have to stitch that up," Bishop said. "That's a deep wound." He popped up onto his feet and returned with a first aid kit. "Fuck, we don't have anything to numb it with."

Their kit wasn't equipped with much because they'd never needed a lot. Their pack healed fast naturally.

"It's okay," Tilly said from the couch, "Just do it so we can get moving. I have a way to summon Baz back."

She called him Baz. As if she knew him. The sound of that Hound's name on Tilly's lips warmed Valor from tongue to toes.

What the fuck was going on? Valor shook his head to rattle his brain and continued to hold Tilly's hand while Bishop rummaged through their first aid kit.

Valor kept a wary eye on her aura and the color of her eyes. He was worried they would turn again, that whatever had possessed her might still be lurking within her, hiding, waiting.

Tilly must have sensed his worry because she smiled softly, "He's not in me. Not anymore. You don't have to worry."

Bishop gently grabbed her arm to inspect the damage and Tilly winced.

"Her tendon was just barely missed, alpha."

"He knew what he was doing, it wasn't our first exchange." She tried to sit up so she could watch Bishop sew her arm.

Valor kept watching too, and he saw there were several scars going up Tilly's arm. "These," he said, tracing a finger down her sweet skin, "These are all scars from doing this before?"

Tilly nodded. Valor wanted to punch himself in the nuts for not noticing the scars before now. He'd seen the woman naked, for crying out loud. He should have noticed the scars on her arms before today.

"I thought you were a cutter," Bishop mumbled while making the first puncture to stitch her up. "I just didn't want to ask you about it yet." His gaze flicked to hers, "I can't tell if I'm relieved or more angry now." He bent over and went back to the stitches.

Tilly exhaled loudly, “Well, it’s probably better you learned this way. Had you asked, I would have let you believe I was a cutter. That’s a more acceptable answer than saying a spirit form likes to drink my blood in exchange for favors.”

A growl erupted from Valor’s throat. It was ten kinds of possessive too, and he didn’t bother trying to hide it. The thought of someone – or *something* - else swallowing anything of hers made him mental. “What must we do, *mo leannan*?” Perhaps if he stayed busy, he could take his mind off Tilly and her sweet body being gobbled up by someone other than him.

“I need personal objects from the twins. Also, sage, patchouli, a piece of string or something like it, and a radio.”

“That’s all?”

“No, but I’ll tell you more when you return with that stuff.”

Valor popped up and got to work. Bishop said something in low tones and Tilly laughed then squeaked with pain.

“Mmmph, sorry Sweetness.”

“It’s okay.”

The hell it was, Valor wanted to snarl. She shouldn’t suffer any more, not by their hands or anyone else’s.

Bishop’s tone was gentle, “I can’t believe this isn’t hurting you more.”

“I’m used to it,” Tilly said.

With his back to the two of them, Valor grabbed the doorjamb and closed his eyes. He needed to not be a possessive beast right now. That Bishop was able to make her laugh shouldn’t anger Valor, it should please him. The minute he thought it through, the weight of jealousy lifted a little.

He left the room and went in search of the items she’d asked for. It was time to find the twins and be done with this nightmare.

As he passed the kitchen and saw the blood smeared all over the makeshift Ouija board on his table, Valor stopped dead in his tracks. Circled, in Tilly’s blood, was the word she’d written in chalk: *Goodbye*.

Chapter 40

Ever feel like you've been hit by a Mack truck after being chewed up and spit out by a shark? Yeah, Baz hadn't either, but that sure as fuck had to feel similar to the agony he felt now. Baz blinked back the brightness and squinted. He was so disoriented, he felt like he was floating.

Wait. He was floating. Or was he sinking?

Shit, hold up. Baz tried to gulp down air and found it impossible. His mouth was sewn shut. Every time he tried to open up, the threads tugged tighter and when he tried to lift his arms, he realized they were tied down.

How the fuck did this happen?

And – oh shit – his soul was still in him! He couldn't see more than a couple feet ahead, so he had no idea where Drake was. Closing his eyes, he tried to focus on hearing his brother. If D could just make a sound then he'd at least know his twin was still alive.

How long had he been out? Why was he so numb?

"He's waking," a voice said. "Bring the herbs."

Baz tried to fight against his restraints. A weight was placed over his legs and he wasn't able to move them at all. Panic spiked in his veins and he tried to howl for help.

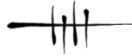
Where was the girl? Where was his brother? What the hell was happening?

The scent of burning herbs poured into his nostrils. An abalone shell appeared in front of his face, but he couldn't see past the tattooed hand that held it.

Baz's head got all kinds of fuzzy and he coughed, which didn't go so well with his damn mouth being sewn shut.

Drake, he thought as the world started to fade to black, *Drake, brother, where are you?*

Just as he closed his eyes, extreme pain ripped through him and Baz jerked upright, his eyes peeling open wide and then he was flying...



“Is it working? Do you see him?” Bishop rocked impatiently back and forth. His hands were clasped with Valor’s, Tilly stood in their circle. Blood dripped from their clasped palms, each having to offer blood for this particular magic to work.

Tilly gathered the other objects – a favorite pair of boots that belonged to Drake; a faded, worn shirt of Baz’s; a leather cord and a pottery dish with herbs burning in it. The radio she’d asked for sat on the counter, making a static noise.

While the Hounds chanted a protection spell she’d quickly taught them, Tilly got to work on the summoning spell Zaza taught her. Wrapping her fingers with the leather cord, she inhaled the herbs, spoke the right sequence of words, and prayed to anyone within ear shot that this would work.

Imagine her surprise when Baz’s soul flickered into view.

“He’s here,” she said.

Baz didn’t look good. Blood was smeared all over his body, he was covered in dirt and sweat. His bones were protruding from his hips and collarbone. He stumbled forward, unable to hold himself up. Tilly caught him before he dropped.

The Hounds kept chanting.

“Mmm mmph mmph!” Baz couldn’t open his mouth. It was as though –

“Whoa, whoa, hold on.” Tilly pulled out the smaller blade she’d tucked into her back pocket and shoved it between his lips. She felt invisible strings snap as she swiped the blade across his mouth.

Baz gasped. Inhaling deeply, he clutched Tilly’s shoulders. “Help... me.”

“We’re trying, Baz. Tell us where you are!”

“I don’t know... I can’t fucking see.” His voice echoed in the radio.

Tilly felt the tightness begin in her throat – what Zaza warned her about was starting and she didn’t have much time. “Is Drake with you?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t know what happened.” Baz’s body arched and he howled in pain. “They’re doing things... I don’t know what...” he yelled out again, his eyes squeezing shut. “Fuck! Valor! Bishop! Get my Hounds. Please lady!”

“They’re right here. We just need to,” she winced and wrapped her hands around her throat, “find you. Tell us something. Anything about your location.”

Baz dropped to the ground, writhing in pain. Tilly watched in horror as Baz’s soul twisted and convulsed on the floor. An unnatural shriek flew out of his mouth and he clawed the air. His dark hair fell into his eyes and he bayed like an animal being slaughtered.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

Tilly dropped down and tried to help, but didn’t know what do to. She saw the blood on his chest and didn’t see a single wound that would make him bleed in such a way. Maybe the injury was invisible, like the strings in his mouth had been, or maybe this blood wasn’t from a wound at all. She looked more carefully at it.

The smears were in a pattern. She... she knew this from somewhere... she knew... Tilly wrapped both her hands around her throat. She couldn’t breathe. Snatching the knife she’d dropped to the ground, Tilly grabbed Baz’s hand and carved into it. As she made the last mark, he disappeared again.

Valor and Bishop broke the circle and Valor reached Tilly first. She tried to gasp for air, but couldn’t. *Too... tight.* She pointed at her neck and shook her head. *Too tight! Too tight!* Stars started winking before her eyes, her vision turned foggy, and her limbs got tingly.

Tilly clawed at her neck, scratching and suffocating at the same time. The squeezing only grew tighter. Stars started blinking in her vision. Opening her mouth, she tried to suck in air. Nothing. Nada. She continued to choke and hold her throat.

“Tilly!” Bishop yelled. He wrapped his hand around her neck, like he could pull the invisible noose off her neck. “Shit!” He reached around and untied her hand – the one she’d bound the leather strap to. As he unraveled it, the tightness around her throat eased.

Finally, she was free from the strangulation and she coughed and sputtered, swallowing air as fast as she possibly could.

The two Hell Hounds helped her stand.

“Are ye alright?”

“Yes,” she cleared her throat. “Shit, Bishop,” Tilly clutched onto his arm and squeezed, “Thank God you knew to do that. I would have fucking died if you hadn’t unraveled me.”

“I’m just glad I thought of it. It was a total shot in the dark.” Bishop’s eyes softened and he dipped down and kissed her once before asking, “Tell us where they are, Tilly. Please say you know how to find them.”

“He’s in trouble. Like... a lot of fucking trouble.”

Val stiffened. “Where are they? Did he say?”

“He didn’t know. But they’re doing things to him. His mouth was sewn shut and...” she shook her head, dismissing the idea of telling them *everything* she saw Baz do on the ground. It would only upset them and she didn’t want that. They looked strung out enough already. “I think I know where he is, but I’m not a hundred percent.” She broke out of Bishop’s arms and headed for the kitchen. “Do you have a computer around here?”

“Aye,” Valor led the way and escorted her into his office. The room was all leather furniture, bookshelves, paintings and tall windows. She dropped into his leather swivel chair and turned on his lamp.

Holy hell, it was night time again. She didn’t even know what day it was anymore.

Shaking the thought away, her fingertips clicked away on the keyboard and she pulled up a search engine. “Baz had blood smeared all over his body. It looked like a hexagon with squiggles in the middle.” She typed while she continued, “I thought it was from an injury, but it was too clean. It was smeared, but not smudgy. It was drawn on, I think. And there was a mark towards the top. And... a moon. I think.”

Shit, now she wasn’t feeling all that confident in her theory.

Tilly hit the search button and pulled up a map. Okay, now she felt a little better. She wasn’t crazy. “There,” she pointed at the screen. “That’s it.”

“France?”

“Yeah. He’s in Paris, I think.” Tilly tucked her hair behind her ear. “I mean, I’m pretty sure.”

Bishop leaned down and looked at the computer screen. The glow of the computer cast shadows all over his handsome face and made him look more severe than sexy. “*Paris?*” he said again. “How is that possible? And what would the moon be?”

Valor snatched a piece of paper and a pen and slapped it down in front of Tilly. “Draw it, lass.”

Tilly made a quick sketch. She was not an artist by any stretch of the imagination, but she could draw a blob and a crescent moon without too much trouble.

“A waning moon?” Bishop asked. “What the fuck does the phase of the moon have to do with where they are?” He scooted the paper around and looked at it from a different angle. Tilly sat back in the chair and stared at the maps of Paris while the two Hounds tried to figure out what the moon phase had to do with where the twins were.

She leaned forward and clicked on more and more images. “Hounds?” They kept talking like they hadn’t heard her. She thrust her hand out and hit Valor’s arm, “Alpha!” Valor shut the fuck up and gave her his undivided attention. “I was wrong. It’s not a moon. I think it’s a C.”

“A C?” Bishop repeated. He leaned in again to see the image she’d pulled up. “Oh fuck. Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck.” Bishop grabbed the sides of his head and turned away, cursing and panicking.

Valor frowned at the screen. “It makes sense. More sense than a moon does.”

“FUCK!” Bishop yelled again.

“We have to go,” Valor turned to leave and Tilly followed him.

Her heart raced with excitement and worry. “I can call to have a private plane ready.”

Valor stopped and pivoted towards her. “Ye canna go with us, *mo leannan*. I’ll not have ye in anymore danger.”

“But—”

“I said no and that’s final.” He turned and walked away.

“BISHOP!” he barked.

Bishop came out of the office, looking like a man about to go to his own fucking funeral. What the hell was going on here? Tilly followed them down to the basement.

“Oh, so now that you have a good lead, I’m no use to you? Fuck you and fuck you too. Assholes.” Tilly even flipped them both the bird just to drive home her point.

Bishop took the bait and turned on her. “You can’t come, Tilly. There’s no fucking way we’d let you. This is going to be hard enough without the added stress of making sure you’re kept safe, too.”

“I didn’t ask for bodyguards, and you don’t have to worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

Valor went over to a wall with a key pad and punched in a bunch of numbers. The wall opened up and a full arsenal of weapons was revealed. He started making choices for him and Bishop, tossing him a few select weapons and ammo.

“You think you’ll pass security with all that, Rambo?”

“We doona need a plane. We can travel using other methods.” Val stormed past her on a mission to get to the twins as fast as possible.

Tilly spun around, “I’m coming with you.”

“Bishop, control her.” Valor disappeared around the corner.

“Control—” she glowered at Bishop when he approached. “Seriously? You’re going to take his side?”

“Yeah. I am. If it’s a choice between keeping you safe and putting you in more danger, I’m going to choose safety every time.”

“Says the Hound who allowed me to risk my fucking life just now to get in contact with the twins. I had no idea Hell Hounds were such fucking hypocrites.”

Bishop cringed. “I didn’t know you were going to be in that much danger, Tilly. You left the risks of your actions *out* of your explanation.”

“So you’d have stopped me from doing it had you known?”

Bishop cast his eyes to the ground. “It’s a moot point now. What’s done is done. I’m not about to put you through anymore shit.”

She slapped him and hoped like hell his face stung as much as her hand and her pride did right now.

Bishop’s jaw clenched. His eyes stayed on the ground as he said, “I have to go.”

“Good luck to you then. There’s no windows to open down there. It just gets darker and tighter the further you go.” Tilly brushed past him and felt like a total bitch for saying that. It was a low blow, even by her standards.

Outside, a horn beeped. Bishop jogged past Tilly and opened the front door. Valor was already in the truck, his hand still pressed down on the horn. “You won’t be here when we get back, will you?”

“What do you think?” Tilly’s heart hammered in her chest.

“Please...please stay so—” Bishop sucked back whatever his next words were. Like he’d just accepted her answer and wasn’t even going to try to beg her to stay. He turned and ran towards the SUV. As they drove away, Tilly ran outside and watched the car lights fade into the dark. It felt like another tie was just severed. *Snip*. It didn’t feel freeing at all this time. It felt heart breaking.

Steeling herself, she said out loud, “Get a grip, Tilly. You need to get out of here. Go live your life.” She helped them find the twins, her job here was done. It was time to leave. Time to live. She’d accept her death however it came – murder, car accident, choking on a peanut butter sandwich. She wasn’t going to be afraid anymore. “Time to go.”

So why was she still standing there out in the cold?

Because she wasn’t done here. Not by a fucking long shot.

Tilly marched back into the house, took the steps two at a time, and ran into her bedroom. Snatching her phone from the charger, she dialed a number saved just for emergencies. “Paul, it’s Tilly. Can you please get the jet ready for me? Yes, now. Paris. Yes, I will. Okay. Thank you.” She hung up and grabbed just the necessities, stuffing them into a black book bag that belonged to one of the Hell Hounds. She found the damn thing in a closet while looking for all the shit she was going to need to join the hunt.

Grabbing keys from a glass bowl by the front door, she hit a button on the key fob and listened for the *beep, beep!* Tilly smiled. Looked like she was taking a Dodge Ram 3500 to the airport.

Double checking that she had everything, Tilly started the engine and headed out.

Sometimes synchronicity had a very macabre sense of humor, she thought. “Catacombs of Paris, here I come.... Again.”

Chapter 41

“I hate this,” Bishop loaded his gun and double checked the safety.

“Which part?” Valor pulled out his phone and tried to dial while speeding down the road, “Ditching Tilly, or knowing the twins are suffering terribly?”

“Both. All of it.”

Valor’s phone connected and Kalen’s voice blasted through the truck’s sound system, “Hello?”

“Wolf, I need help. Can ye set up a train of portals? I need to reach Paris.”

“*Paris?*”

“The twins are there.” The way Valor gripped the steering wheel, he was all but strangling it. “Can ye help us?”

“Of course, yeah, hang on a second. Tanner!”

They could hear Tanner in the background, “What’s up, Wolf? You just woke Beautiful with your big fucking mouth.”

“Shit. Sorry. Listen, can you set up a fast track for Val and Bishop? They need to get to Paris.”

“Oui, oui. Right now?”

“No, next Christmas.”

“Fucker.”

There was some shuffling around. “Where are you now, Val?” Kalen’s voice was deep and serious.

“Still in Baltimore, we just left the house.” Valor pulled onto the highway.

“How’d you find out where they were?”

Tanner piped up with “They found the twins?” in the background.

“Shut up so I can hear, Tanner,” Kalen growled. “How did you find them?”

“Tilly,” Valor and Bishop said at the same time.

“How?”

Bishop answered, “She summoned Baz’s soul.”

“So that’s what Jack was talking about.” Kalen’s end of the line got muffled for a minute and then, “Is she with you now?”

“No,” they both answered again. Bishop growled, agitation and impatience were quick fuses to light for both of them today.

“We didn’t want her involved, we left her at home.”

“*Home?*” Kalen’s disapproval was obvious, “The girl just went to great lengths to fucking help you and you left her *alone* when you know there’s a good possibility that someone could still be after her?”

“She’s at our house, not hers. No one even kens she’s there and it’s a fucking fortress with the highest security measures possible against human invasions,” Val argued. “And I canna juggle five things at once right now, Wolf. She’s home, where she will remain safe. Bishop and I are going to get the twins and then we’ll return and go from there.”

“Annd there’s your first mistake. Damnit, Val, you fucking suck when it comes to women, you do realize that right?”

Valor’s face grew hot, he strangled the steering wheel harder. “You think she’s going to sit still and wait at the door for you to come home? No woman worth her salt is going to do that. Not after what she’s already done for you.”

Bishop ran his hand down his face, cussing under his breath. “He’s right. You know he’s fucking right.”

“All the more reason to hurry the fuck up with this mission then, Wolf.” Valor kept his eyes locked on the road and stepped on the gas.

“Where in Paris are you headed?”

“The Catacombs.”

The silence on the other end of the line filled the truck. Bishop’s window was already cracked open, and the tension in the air caused Valor to lower his window too. No one said a word for over a minute. They all knew what the catacombs would do to Bishop’s psyche, but no one was going to point out the obvious – or tell Bishop to not come.

“Wolf!” Tanner’s voice cut through the tension, “Tell ‘em it’s all set up. I got the line to run all the way to Paris, but the French pack isn’t answering. Should I use the mirror?” His excitement came through loud and clear. “He need us to come?” Tanner asked in the background. “Eli and I can go, you and Jack can take Beautiful to hang out with Tilly.”

“No need to use the mirror. So long as we land in Paris, I can take it from there. We doona need ye to come along.”

“You sure?” Kalen asked.

“Aye, Wolf. Stay where ye are.”

“Okay, well, if you change your mind...”

“Got it, and thank ye. Thank Tanner for us too.”

“Good luck. Call us when you get them home.”

Valor hit a button on his steering wheel and hung up. Bishop ran a hand through his hair and wound his window down more. They drove in silence for longer than Valor thought Bishop would be able to stand. Then three, two, one... Bishop turned on the radio and started drumming his thumbs against his thighs. “Do you think she’ll be there when we get back?”

Valor’s jaw clenched. He’d told her to stay, but...

Bile rose in his throat. He didn’t have the capacity to worry about more than the twins right now. Tilly was a grown woman. She could make her own decisions. If she chose to stay and wait for their return, he’d find a way to make all this up to her. If she chose to leave then... Well Hell, he’d still find a way to apologize and make things right between them.

They arrived at the first portal, which was still in their territory, and Valor plowed into the dark hole. They came out still going about ninety miles per hour.

“What do you think is happening to them?” Bishop’s voice was barely audible. “Who would be doing something to them?” His grip tightened on his knees.

“I doona ken, Hound.” Valor tried to keep his voice as calm and steady as possible. Bishop was going to snap, he could tell. “I’m just glad we have a direction to go in now.”

“Thanks to Tilly.”

“Mmm hmm”

Silence again. The radio was nothing but background noise that Valor could easily tune out while Bishop was no doubt focusing on the songs to distract himself from whatever was screaming in his head.

“I heard him scream,” Bishop stared out the window. “I heard Baz screaming over the radio when Tilly summoned him.”

Valor strangled the steering wheel again, “Aye, so did I.”

“I can’t get it out of my head, Val.”

“Me either.” He didn’t even want to discuss it.

Hearing Baz beg Tilly, his voice a static panicked sound coming through a speaker, was something neither of them had prepared for. And to hear the struggle, the terror, the fear in Baz – a Hound that was never rattled by anything – was a terrifying thing indeed. Valor wasn’t even going to bring it up. They’d both heard it, neither of them could move any faster than they were. He stepped on the gas again.

Bishop rammed the back of his head against his seat. “What if we don’t reach them in time?”

“We will.”

“But what if we—”

“Fuck,” Valor turned up the radio and put all the windows down. The air was freezing cold, *Head Like a Hole*, by Nine Inch Nails blared through the speakers, and the sky was as bleak as their hopes.

Bishop rolled his window up. “Put the windows up, Val.”

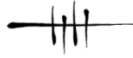
He did. The windows closed and the air shifted in the vehicle. Bishop rubbed his hands nervously on his thighs again. He was practicing how to deal with being trapped in a small space. Talk about a crash course. Bishop was failing miserably. Thirty seconds in and Bishop paled.

Shit.

This wasn’t going to work. There was no way Bishop would make it in the catacombs. The Hound said something and Valor only caught the last half of it. He turned the radio off, “What?”

“I said I’m not coming out without them.” Bishop glared at his alpha, “If they don’t make it out of there... neither do I. Understand what I’m saying to you, alpha?”

Fuuuuck.



Baz lost his breath. His mouth gaped open and a new fresh Hell wreaked havoc in his body. They were trying to rip his soul away and it felt like he was being shredded with claws dipped in acid.

Another wave of nausea caused him to dry heave. Still strapped down to a table he could barely move. His vision was nearly gone, all he could see were silhouettes in black and shades of purple. His palm burned like a bitch where that woman carved into his palm.

Whoever that woman was in his house had some serious power. She'd not only cut the ties in his mouth, but was able to see and summon him. He had no idea how she was able to rip his soul away without his permission. Nor did he care. He was just so fucking grateful that she had and that she knew Valor and Bishop. Maybe she was one of the psychics Valor was so fond of. If so, Baz would apologize to him later for criticizing that breed of magic users for calling them quacks.

Baz heaved again. His back arched as a new wave of excruciating pain lanced him. Baz's throat and belly convulsed as his head jerked forward. He cried out again. His palm burned stronger.

"It's not working," someone said.

"Try this."

A cold, wet sensation rippled down Baz's torso, followed by an electrical charge. His body spasmed violently.

"Damn, nothing's fucking working."

"We don't have much time left. Master will have our asses if we don't have this soul before he returns." There was shuffling and some metal clanking. "How the hell did he cut his mouth bindings?"

"No idea," the other said. "His brother's been tied up. They've been separated the whole time."

"Girl, did you do this?"

Baz heard a mumbling sound and then a hard slap. The Hound went apeshit under his restraints knowing damn well they'd just struck a child. He roared in fury as a new wave of energy pulsed inside him.

"Hit her again," the first voice commanded.

There was another striking sound, followed by a whimper. In the distance, Baz now heard his brother's muffled growls. At least Drake was there and still alive.

"Again." Another strike. Another cry.

Heat tickled Baz's ear. The acrid scent of their enemy's hot breath filled Baz's nostrils. "We can do this the slow way," another slap, another cry, "or the easy way," another much louder crack, and a much louder scream. Baz stiffened with fury. "The choice is yours, Hound. Give us your soul, or listen to the sounds of us beating this child until she's nothing but raw meat and broken bones."

Live or die.

He might have been stripped of most of his Hell Hound powers, but one thing still remained – Baz's protective instincts. He couldn't allow a child to die because of him. In the back of his head, he knew this was a joke of a bargain. They would kill the girl no matter what. They were going to kill Baz and Drake too. The suffering could all stop if Baz just gave up.

This whole time the twins had tried their hardest to hold out a little longer, prolong the inevitable, with the hope that a miracle would happen. But it was too much. He desperately wanted to tap out. Maybe that woman would tell Valor and Bishop about him and they'd hunt harder. Faster. And could at least bring back their corpses to Lucifer. Waiting any longer for a search and rescue wasn't an option anymore.

"Will you relinquish your soul?"

Crack! Another tiny bone broke. The girl screamed. Drake screamed. Baz roared.

Hot tears trailed down his temples. "Take it." Baz slammed his head back on the stone slab and squeezed his eyes shut. He was damning both himself and his twin – Drake was surviving as a Hound because Baz shared his soul with him.

"And this is of your own free will?"

He nodded.

“Good dog.”

Both twins screamed while the enemy started to pull Baz’s soul away.

Chapter 42

Tilly walked into the hangar and smiled. “How are you, Paul?”

“Doing just fine, just fine, darlin’.” They hugged tightly. Paul had been flying their family plane for over twenty years and when Tilly’s father died, Paul was right there crying alongside his grave with Vivian and Tilly.

“Come on,” she pointed at the aircraft, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Paul helped her climb the narrow steps and she saw the co-pilot, Paul’s son, “How’s it going Dwayne?”

“Good, Tilly. Been a while, huh?” Dwayne kept busy checking and rechecking everything. “We’re cleared to go. Just have a seat and buckle up.”

Tilly sat down in the seat she always took. It was by the window, facing forward. A flashback of their father and Vivian sitting across from her formed: *Vivian and their father sat side by side, talking about what landmarks to see first and planning out an itinerary in Vivian’s special notebooks she used just for traveling. The wonky shape of France was cut out and pasted onto the page with little star stickers marking all the places Vivian wanted to go to.*

Tilly closed her eyes to cut off the memory.

Their father had given them everything growing up and still Tilly’s heart grew bitter with every year that passed. Money didn’t buy her life a longer span. Money hadn’t saved her mother from their curse. Money bought them memories, gourmet dinners, fine clothes, and experiences that lasted only as long as their vacations did.

He loved his daughters dearly, but Tilly harbored a healthy amount of hate and resentment for him that only grew as she got older. Then he died...

“Fuck,” she cursed under her breath. She looked out the window and felt a terrible sense of dread as the plane began to taxi. What the hell was she doing? Winging it. That’s what she was doing. Tilly was winging it – her decisions, her life, hell, if she had makeup with her, she’d wing her eyeliner too at this point.

Talk about flying by the seat of your pants. Tilly's stomach dipped as the plane took to the skies. Pulling out her phone, she plugged in her headphones and closed her eyes. She needed to get some rest. Lord knows she was going to need all the energy she could muster soon.

Energy. That was something else she didn't want to think too hard about. After the exchange between her, Valor, and the added benefit of Bishop's magic touch, Tilly felt so much better now. She wasn't hot or sluggish or swollen with need anymore. Part of her was relieved, the other part was disappointed and she didn't even know why. At least she was no longer cooking like a pot roast in her own skin. As a matter of fact, she was a little cold.

Tilly curled into herself, turned up the volume to her music, and closed her eyes again. As Two Feet began singing *Back of my Mind*, she prayed, "Help me out here okay? Please?" She wasn't sure who she was praying to.

She would have prayed to her mother, but didn't know where her mother even was. Hell? *The cursed ones belong to Hell*. Zaza's voice slithered into Tilly's head. She didn't want to think about her mother burning in Hell. She didn't want to think about her mother at all.

"Dad," she said, "Can you even hear me?"

She doubted it. He hadn't listened to her when he was alive, no reason to think he would now.

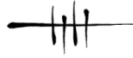
"Please... if *anyone* can hear me... protect them."

She didn't bother to ask for protection for herself. Prayers wouldn't work for her because she didn't stand a chance of surviving much longer anyway. It would be a waste of breath. When she opened her eyes again, Tilly stared down at her hands and thought of the mark she'd carved into Baz's hand.

Holy Hell, he looked terrified when she'd summoned him. Baz didn't look like the same person that kept popping into her life at odd moments in random places for the past few weeks. He looked like a zombie. And the pain he was in... shit, no man should ever scream like that. Tilly doubted she'd ever get the sound to stop ringing in her ears.

Strange, what one does in a panicked state of mind. In her rush to help in some way, Tilly had carved a spell on him that would hopefully work as she intended. If not, then—

Well, fuck. She didn't want to think about the *if not's*...



Bishop ran alongside Valor down the streets of Paris. “Do you think we're too late?”

“No, they're strong. They wouldna give up.”

The closer they got to their destination, the more Bishop's sanity frayed. It felt like it took a lifetime to reach Paris. When they arrived, the pack in charge of this district wasn't there to meet them. No matter, they didn't need a ride to the catacombs. They could run from here.

Still, they could have used some direction. Bishop didn't know a damned thing about the catacombs because he never planned to step his claustrophobic ass into an underground tunnel of bones. Valor didn't know much about it either. Still, they weren't going to let anything stand in their way of getting back the twins.

“I don't feel them,” Valor frowned. “I thought I'd sense my Hounds.”

My Hounds. Bishop rolled his eyes. Valor always was a possessive creature. *His* pack. *His* Hounds. Bishop claimed just as much rights to their pack as Valor. “*Our* Hounds, alpha, *our* Hounds.”

Valor swallowed and nodded. Well now Bishop felt like shit. Valor was the Alpha, of course he'd take ownership of their pack, it was his duty and responsibility. The Hell Hound had spent all their years together making sure they were all safe, that their district was patrolled to their greatest capabilities, and losing the twins had been just as big a blow to Valor as it had Bishop.

Annd then there was the damage control and cleanup of Bishop's *malanum* driven massacre Valor did alone.

That's exactly what Bishop thought of it as, too. No matter how many times Valor argued against it, Bishop could only look at what happened that night as nothing short of a massacre. People died by Bishop's hands. Bishop saw it no other way. He'd killed innocents. Even if he had no control of his body, nor a single fragmented memory of doing it, it was his hands that had blood on them. It was his hands that were soaked in bleach and fresh paint because he insisted on helping Valor remove all traces of death and violence in the house afterwards.

Bishop blew out a long sigh. His alpha had gone to great lengths to save Bishop from being completely devoured by evil that night. Fuck, just hearing about how Valor showed up at Jack's house and the fallout that happened there still made Bishop want to puke. Some weak piece of him was so relieved he had no recollection of anything that happened while he'd been possessed. He could hardly handle the knowledge of what happened, he knew damn well his sorry ass wouldn't cope at all if he had the actual memory of it.

Why the hell was he thinking about this right now? *Because you're about to face your truth, fucker. You're going to finally find the twins and see what you did to them. All their suffering is your fault.*

Before he knew it, they were standing at the opening of the catacombs and Bishop's throat grew tight. *Shit.*

"Ye doona have to come."

"The hell I don't, alpha."

Valor gripped Bishop's shoulder and squeezed. "Let me rephrase this. Ye canna come."

Bishop blew up. "What?" he smacked Valor's arm off his shoulder. "Fuck you, alpha. I'm doing this." They glared at each other for several heartbeats. Bishop's body started to tremble in fury. "You can't do this alone."

"And ye canna handle closed spaces." Valor tried to push him back, away from the opening. "I have to keep my focus on the twins, I canna spare ye—"

"*Spare me?*" *oh fuck you fucking fucker fuckhead,* "Spare me what? The time? The pity? The energy?"

“Your *life*,” Valor growled. “I canna spare you from your fears and your mind, Hound. We all have our limits. You’ve reached yours and going in there,” Valor pointed behind him at the opening, “that’s going to unravel the small amount of sanity you’ve managed to regain since the *malanum* possession.”

Bishop’s heart beat so hard, it felt like it was going to explode. “I’m fucking going!” *Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.* “I’m the reason they’re there, Valor. I get that you want to protect your pack and that my sorry ass is all that’s left of it, but you can’t stop me from doing this. If that was the case, you’d have left me home, but you didn’t,” he shoved Valor back a couple steps, “You didn’t leave me—”

The look on Valor’s face coupled with his silence was like a punch in the balls. “Oh my fucking god.” Bishop stiffened, “You... you fucking brought me with you to take me away from her, didn’t you?”

Val almost looked away. His gaze flickered with hesitation. “Aye.”

Bishop’s hands balled into fists. He had no words. Rage blazed inside his veins.

“I mean to keep ye both *safe*. Leaving ye behind with her wouldna have done anyone any favors.”

“You don’t trust me,” Bishop tried to swallow the lump in his throat. “I can’t fucking believe this, Valor. After all we’ve... after everything that...” he couldn’t breathe. His heart broke into a million shards.

“It’s because of everything we’ve been through.” Valor’s voice was much softer now. He took a step closer. Then another and another, until he was inches away from Bishop. Val grabbed him by the nape of the neck and brought their foreheads together. “I’ve seen ye at your worst, Hound. And I’ve loved ye even when ye didna think ye deserved it. I’ve gone to great lengths to save ye from yourself because I love ye.”

Valor squeezed the back of Bishop’s neck even harder, massaging it in a meditative way. Bishop continued to glare at his alpha and keep his mouth shut. He was too jacked up with fury to talk.

“I trust ye, Hound. Always have. Always will.” Val paused and cleared his throat. “If I’d have left ye home, you’d have found a way here anyway and Tilly would have followed ye. I couldna allow that. If I brought ye, at least I’d have back up for when I get the twins out of there. You’d be the first to see that they’re neither dead nor harmed by your hands, which I ken is the nightmare that haunts ye every night.” He continued to keep Bishop’s forehead pressed to his. “After everything we’ve been through - not just lately, but since the beginning, ye should ken I’ve only ever done what’s best for the pack. Ye going in the catacombs is not what’s best for the pack. Ye being here to help is. So stay. Here.”

“No.”

“Bishop—”

“No!” He grabbed Valor’s throat and squeezed the shit out of it. “I need to do this. I need to be a stronger Hound, god damnit. For —,” he caught himself, “For us, for the future.” He gulped down the rock in his throat, “I’m not a man who can sit back and watch the fight. I never was and you know that. I have to do this for the same reason I had to pry up the blood soaked carpet, paint the walls white, and pour gallons of bleach on everything my madness touched in our house. I have to do this, because there is no other choice for me. This pack is all I fucking have, Val. It’s not just yours, it’s ours. I hold just as much responsibility as you do here. If I—” fuck his chest felt too tight, “If I can’t keep up, then go on without me. I’ll have your back. I will always...” deep breath, deep breath, “I’ll always have your back, Valor. Just like you’ve always had mine.”

Valor’s shoulders sagged and he yanked Bishop into a stiff embrace. “Maiden, Mother and Crone,” he grumbled. “Alright. Alright.”

They stared at the graffiti covered entrance. Valor pulled out his cell and tapped a few buttons, pulling up a map of the catacombs. “This is all we have to go in with and my battery is nearly dead.”

“We need flashlights then and I don’t have my cell with me so,” Bishop looked around like they were going to find a flashlight stand. They’d left in such a rush, neither of them had really thought about the supplies they needed beyond the weapons strapped to their bodies.

“Let’s get better prepared and find our pack, Hound.”

They set off to get what they needed to go on the most important hunt of their life.

Chapter 43

Ten hours. That's how long it took for Tilly's plane to touch down. Not bad, really, but it was ten hours of being unable to do a damn thing and that was torture. Grabbing her bag, she got off the plane and asked for Paul and Dwayne to sit tight because she didn't plan to stay long. No, this wasn't a shopping trip, she'd said, but she didn't know how long she'd be either.

Tilly shoved her cell, with a fully charged battery, into her backpack along with a spare charger. This wasn't her first trip here. It wasn't even her second or third. Tilly had been in those catacombs several times and knew the underground city like the back of her hand.

Thanks to her father's willingness to spoil his children, and Tilly's obsession with the dead, she'd been in the Catacombs of Paris multiple times. Exchanging currency before leaving the airport, she had enough to get a taxi to the catacombs and back.

Hailing a cab just outside the airport, Tilly climbed in and told the driver where she wanted to go. The traffic was heavy, horns honked, people yelled, and pedestrians struggled to cross the street without getting hit. What the hell? The traffic lights were all blinking, the taxi driver cursed as they slammed their brakes, almost causing another accident.

Crazy.

The trip should have taken a little less than an hour. Instead, it took two. By the time she got to where she needed to be, Tilly was so fucking frustrated, she was ready to spit tacks. Then the driver told her the fare total and she growled – actually *growled* – at the bastard. He was trying to charge her double the right amount.

She tossed the correct amount of money at him and got out, flipping him the bird. What was he going to do? Chase her down? Cuss her out? Report her for not allowing him to swindle her ass? Fuck him.

Tilly slammed the door shut and walked away with the driver still yelling at her. Again, this wasn't her first time. She knew the games folks played and wasn't about to be a victim of a greedy asshole.

Finally, she reached the entrance of the catacombs. Dark, cold concrete surrounded her and the colorful graffiti was like an urban welcome sign. Boosting the backpack on her shoulders, she took a deep breath and walked forward. Being in here was such a no-no, but it never stopped her from diving into the underground world. In fact, being forbidden was part of the draw.

Over 200 km of tunnels and bones beckoned her to come inside. The place was tightly patrolled, but Tilly knew how to sneak in. She was by no means a cataphile, but she had a tremendous respect for those who were and had made a few acquaintances during her days exploring the tunnels before. She stared up at the entrance to the legal tours. No way would it be possible for the twins to be tucked away in the controlled sections of the tunnels. She needed to go a little deeper and that required a shortcut. The tourist section wouldn't get her there, but the back way would.

She headed to an old train station littered with more graffiti. Pictures of strange faces and poems decorated the concrete walls. Sticking to the railroad tracks, she grabbed the straps to her backpack and set off to find the hole in the wall.

Yes, an actual hole. The dirt dugout at the base of the structure was smooth and worn from all the trespassers. Shit, she hoped she could still fit. Why did donuts have to stick to one's thighs for so long?

Tilly breathed deep, her palms growing sweaty, her nerves starting to get the better of her as she slipped into the tunnel. Rock and dirt, graffiti and trash, it all added to the creepy factor. She heard small voices echoing from behind her and saw another group of people entering from the same place she just had. They stared at one another.

It was the first time Tilly actually got afraid. She was in the catacombs by herself. There was safety in numbers and, well, shit, this was a really stupid fucking plan. What the hell was she doing here?

Being a badass, that's what.

Normal people would take one look at this situation and say, "Oh shit, this is seriously scary." People like Tilly were more like, "Hold my beer."

Digging out her flashlight, she clicked it on and looked around. Somewhere, in this massive grave, were Hell Hounds. Valor and Bishop were in here somewhere. The thought eased her anxiety tremendously.

I can howl if I have to. They'll hear me.

That might not be true though. Squeezing her eyes shut, Tilly had a serious case of what the fucks. What the fuck was she thinking? What the fuck was she going to do? What the fuck was going to happen? What the fuck was Valor and Bishop going to think once she found them?

Because she *would* find them.

And *they* would find the twins.

Tilly had no idea why this meant so much to her. It's not like she really knew these guys. She didn't have an attachment to them, nor did she owe them a damned thing anymore. On top of all that, her being here wasn't what they wanted, it's why they left her ass at their house. Yet, she couldn't help but think there was a reason for all this. A reason why the twins came to her and not them. Baz had somehow sought her out. Was drawn to her. And for her to have been able to summon his soul? That had been a motherfucking miracle. One that even Jack said was most likely an impossibility when she'd talked with him on the phone about how to get it done.

Shit like that just didn't work out so conveniently without a reason - Not even in movies or romance novels.

Maybe, in some twisted ridiculous way, Tilly was here for selfish reasons. This was just as much about her as it was about the pack. She needed to do something to earn a get out of jail free card for when she died.

Tilly hadn't spent her life playing house and making good things happen. She'd spent it in much sinister and forbidden ways. Every spell she cast grew darker and darker – much like these tunnels she was slinking through right now.

Hit a dead end, you try a new way. Stumble and fall, you bleed and get back up.

God, this was depressing. Her life was exactly like the catacombs – cold, hard, and lonely. And what was it all based around? Death.

Oh the irony.

She kept aware of her surroundings and climbed down, down, down, deeper into the dark madness. At some point, the graffiti and manmade hangout areas were gone. Trudging through water that came up to her ankles, her pants were soaked and she was freezing cold.

Bracing herself with her hand on the wall, Tilly slowly trudged further into the tunnels. Her heart started pounding. This was a mistake. A huge, big, massive mistake.

She should have told her sister where she was going. She should have told Paul and Dwayne too. Why was she so fucking stupid?

It wasn't stupidity that kept her secrets, it was *fear*. Fear of being judged or put away for her crazy ideas. Fear of being asked if she wanted help. Fear of the possibility of someone actually caring about what she did and what would happen to her.

She'd spent her life with no attachments – friends or otherwise. All she had was her sister, and lately, Tilly had been pulling away from her too.

Detachment was a lovely coping mechanism.

That's what you do when you die. You detach. Break away from the life you had. Hide from the living. Keep to yourself in your cold and dismal grave.

Damn, why was shit getting so heavy in her head? She needed to snap the fuck out of it.

The tunnel curved and gave her choices of which way to go. Thus far, she knew where to go, but pretty soon her path would become completely foreign to her. Tilly hadn't a clue where Valor and Bishop would be, but took some comfort in the fact that they'd have to arrive at the same place eventually.

She shivered. There was a vibe to this place. If you were sensitive enough to feel it, you could navigate through. The Hell Hounds would definitely pick up on the energy here. She hoped.

Shit, this was such a stupid idea.

A flicker of something up ahead snagged her attention. A shadow moved from around the corner and Tilly's heart slammed into her chest. Big build, all black, deep voice... "Bishop?" A small relief nestled into her gut as she took another step forward. She didn't want to shine the light directly into his face so she pointed it at his black pants.

"I knew it," she smiled.

The man in front of her stumbled forward, the shallow water splashing around him. He dropped down and scrambled towards her on his hands and knees. Tilly froze watching the figure coming at her like an animal.

Not Bishop! Not! Bishop!

Tilly's eyes peeled wide and she screamed.

Chapter 44

Valor and Bishop entered the catacombs through the legal tour. It was all dusty stone, walls of skulls, pillars of crumbling bones and signs about the dismal fate of the dead. They'd gone through it in their ghost forms. This way, barriers couldn't stop them.

Valor had to give Bishop credit - He said he was going to do this and so far he was, even though the Hound struggled every step of the way. Sweat poured down the Hell Hound's temples. His t-shirt was soaked.

Valor led the way and whispered words of encouragement whenever he could hear Bishop struggling to breathe.

He didn't envy Bishop right now. The Hound had been buried alive and died trying to claw his way out of an early grave. This was nothing more than a glorified tomb, and looking at the map of the catacombs, they were several miles deep into the labyrinth now.

Darkness wasn't an old friend to them. Darkness was a cloak for *malanum*, which they'd already killed fifteen of down here so far.

Never in Valor's life was he so grateful to see their enemy. He didn't go after a single one of them – he'd left each evil motherfucker for Bishop to handle. It was a small reprieve from the madness he was fighting. A balance of sorts.

The Hound would want to protect – so Bishop's instincts kicked in every time they discovered a *malanum* down here. Valor would stand back and watch the show of fine form and deadly skills that Bishop had in spades. No *malanum* stood a chance.

Hours passed and Valor was starting to give up on the infinitesimal amount of hope he'd had when they first started this mission. No matter which way they turned, they got more lost. Scents were confusing. Darkness crowded them. Echoes, wind whistling, the stale scent of old death and rock. The energy felt just as strange. Like little gnats crawling upon your skin.

Six *malanum* hovered in yet another dead end. This time, Valor pulled out his blade and stepped next to Bishop, ready to take them down. Bishop's body trembled fiercely, the growl that rumbled out of his throat crackled and grew deeper, louder. He was turning animal in this darkness.

Valor allowed it to happen.

If Bishop needed to tuck his humanity away to survive this, then so be it. It was his decision to come down here. It was his decision to face this fear. If he wanted to lose his mind to regain his pack, then that was on Bishop. It wouldn't be the first time they had to drag the Hound back from the brink of madness.

One way or another, in this pack, they were all damaged dogs.

A small cry captured Val's attention. Next to him, Bishop froze and the growl died in his throat. *Malanum* crept around – some on the ceiling, some on the walls, and one walked right up to him.

"Houndsssss," the bastard hissed. "How did you escape?"

Bishop rushed at the *malanum* and tackled it to the ground. While he rolled around punching and choking the damned thing, Valor took on the two that dropped from the ceiling. It was a lot of fists, barking, snarling, and blood – both black and red spilled. In the end, the two Hell Hounds stood victorious. They opened a Hell hole in the wall because the tunnel was too narrow for it to be on the floor. They didn't want to risk falling in while they fought this last *malanum*.

The bastard clutched the side of the wall, his talons scraping the stone while he screeched. Bishop held him by the throat. Valor held up his cell and showed the *malanum* a photo of the twins. "We ken they're here. Show us the way and we'll save ye."

The *malanum* laughed. Black blood dripped down his chin and he spit on the cell screen. "I'm saved already, dog. Master has saved us all."

"Master?" Bishop's eyes narrowed, and he turned to Valor with a frown.

"Drop him," the alpha commanded.

With a simple flex of hand, Bishop released the *malanum's* neck and the darkness sucked him in, dropping his sorry ass back to Hell's prisons.

How can there be so many down here? Valor wondered. Why wasn't the Paris pack patrolling the area better?

His flashlight flickered, the light grew dim. Swiftly, Valor reached into his pocket and pulled out another set of batteries.

"Hang on."

He made fast work of changing the old batteries for fresh ones and shined the light towards Bishop. The Hound was braced against the wall, his shoulders bunched, arms shaking. "I... I can't... I can't breathe, Val."

"Aye, ye can." They were both crammed in the tight space together. "Look at me, Bishop."

Bishop's eyes were squeezed shut. He wouldn't turn his head when he said, "You need to leave me. Go."

"Never." Valor grabbed his shoulder and squeezed. "We go in together, we come out together."

"Then we're going to die here, alpha. I can't... I fucking can't... keep going."

"Then at least ye willna die alone this time."



He'd reached the end of his rope. Bishop knew deep in his bones that this was a suicide mission. He'd taken the risk because he wanted the punishment. He *deserved* the punishment.

If he could just be with Valor long enough to find the twins, then he'd wink out of this world knowing he'd done a good thing. He got his pack back. But that wasn't going to happen. His mind was too weak, too twisted, too dark already to continue this journey.

This place was a coffin. One big motherfucking coffin.

Only it wasn't a tight pine box for Bishop to scratch and beat on. It wasn't a small space where the air got sucked away and he'd suffocate swiftly. Nope, this was way worse. It was a labyrinth for the dead. A twisted path to the land of no return: complete madness.

“I thought...” no air, “I could get you there,” face tingly, “and you could save them,” so hot, “and if I could just say I’m sorry,” can’t see, “then they would know,” ears ringing, “I didn’t mean to do what I did,” can’t feel arms, “I didn’t mean to let the *malanum* into me,” can’t think past the screaming in my head, “I didn’t mean to hurt them.”

Bishop squeezed his eyes tighter. The sounds of a man screaming echoed in his head. The air was gone. Darkness consumed him. Ate him. Gobbled him up and spit him out. There was no way out. No escape. No hope. No life. No answers. Just black, black, black and cold, cold, cold.

Bishop’s world turned upside down. He couldn’t feel his body. Could think past the screaming. *Christ! This motherfucking screaming!* He felt like he was floating, sinking, flying apart and curling into a ball all at the same time.

He wrapped his arms tightly around his body. He was lost. No longer in control. More screaming. More *screaming!*

High-pitched echoes vibrated in his bones. He popped his eyes open and realized his mouth was clamped shut by Valor’s hand. His alpha’s expression hardened. Holding Bishop against the wall, Valor urged him to be silent.

In another tunnel that veered to the right, a howl lit Bishop’s world on fire. It spiked in Bishop’s ears and zipped down his bones, igniting a frenzy of Hell Hound instincts to catch fire and burn inside him. Busting free from Valor’s hold, the madman in Bishop’s head stayed curled in the dark recesses of his weak mind, and the Hell Hound in him rose up and busted out of its cage. Baring his teeth, Bishop’s head dipped down and he stepped forward. His boots crunched on broken stone and bits of bone. They were so deep in the tunnels, piles of the dead surrounded them in the corridors. Everywhere they looked, the remnants of life were strewn about in broken bits and shards of bone.

The howl sounded again, this time more choked than the last.

Bishop tore down the tunnel. He wasn’t thinking, only reacting. Valor yelled at him. Bishop didn’t have the sense to respond to his alpha. He was animal. Animals do not have words. They have actions. He ran smack into a dead end.

Another howl rose from the darkness.

Bishop tilted his head and sniffed the air. Recognizing the scent, his eyes darkened and he slammed his shoulder into the wall as he turned around and headed in another direction. Valor stayed hot on his heels, but wasn't able to control or stop him from progressing deeper into the nothing. Into the deep. Into the crypt.

The roar in his ears was mind-numbing. Grabbing the corner of another wall, Bishop swung his body and got onto all fours. He took off like an animal. The world was upside down, sideways, no ways, all the ways. He howled, expecting a response, and when he got one, his heart hammered in his chest. Cold air cooled his burning skin as he continued to follow the sound.

"NO!" Valor roared.

Up ahead, a *malanum* attacked their Hound. Bishop's body tightened and his aggression elevated more. He slammed into the enemy, tackling it to the ground, and began tearing it limb from limb. Black *malanum* blood splattered all over his face and arms. The ringing in his ears intensified. The *malanum* laid limp, trapped under Bishop's powerful legs, and when it bellowed in agony, Bishop met its screams with a louder one of his own.

The scent in the air fucked with his head. Valor was saying something, but Bishop couldn't make out what it was. The ringing, the screaming, the madness in his head was starting to drown out everything else. Bishop caught the familiar scent again.

Valor jabbed a finger in the air towards the wall. As if someone slowly turned up the volume in Bishop's brain, the ringing faded and the sounds of his alpha's voice increased. "Grab her!" he yelled.

Bishop swung around to where Valor pointed. "Oh shit!"

Curled into a tight ball with her arms over her head, legs tucked in tight, Tilly sat with her back against the wall. Dirt and tears stained her cheeks, her green eyes wild with fear as she stared at the *malanum* he'd just shred to pieces.

"Tilly," Bishop tried to say it softly, but his Hound instincts were still rocking his system hard, so it came out as more of a growl. She looked up at him. Gulping, she flicked her gaze back to the mangled *malanum* still rolling around, limbless on the ground.

Bishop tried to approach her as careful as possible. Was she going into shock? What the fuck was she even doing here at all?

Oh shit... was this a hallucination? Mad people see shit all the time. Maybe Tilly was a figment of his fucked up insanity.

"Sweetness," he reached down and touched her face. Her eyes were glued to the *malanum*.

Valor opened a Hell hole and kicked the fucker inside it. Once the Hell hole closed, Tilly let out a long, shaky breath. Quick as a flash, she gripped Bishop's arm and dug her nails into his flesh. "Am I dead?"

"No, lass," Valor said when Bishop hadn't answered her. "You're not dead."

Bishop took her hand and helped her stand. It took her a minute to collect herself. "That thing ran at me and I freaked. I howled and it backed off. So I just kept howling at it. It looked like it was hesitating to eat me or not."

"*Malanum* are scared of us," Bishop explained.

"Maiden, Mother, and Crone, lass. What the hell are ye doing here?"

"Helping," She went from scared shitless to tough as nails. "Obviously."

Bishop was so confused he didn't know if he wanted to laugh, cry, or yell. "How the hell did you get all the way down here?"

"*Why?*" Valor spoke over Bishop. "Why the *fuck* are ye here when we told ye to stay home where ye were safe?"

"I'm just as safe here as I would have been at your house." She readjusted a black backpack strapped to her shoulders and Bishop recognized it as one of his. *Holy shit, was this actually really real?*

"How?" he croaked. "How could you possibly think this was a safe and good idea, Tilly?"

She tucked her hair behind her ears and lifted her gaze to meet his. That green fire glowing in her eyes seared him. "Because," she bent down and picked up a flashlight, "I knew you'd find me. I knew if I didn't find you first, I could howl for you and you'd find me."

Her confidence behind those words nearly made Bishop's knees buckle.

"Come on, boys," the fear that consumed her moments ago had burned away to a hard, determined exterior. "We need to go this way."

Valor grabbed her elbow, halting her. “How do ye ken?”

“That’s the direction everything else has been running out of.” She yanked her elbow out of Valor’s hold. “I know these tunnels. Well, I *knew* these tunnels, more stuff has crumbled since I was last here. I’m afraid I’m almost to the end of my familiarity. But from what I’ve seen, this is the way.”

Again, Bishop was all mixed emotions – part of him was strangely relieved to see Tilly, another part of him was furious that she’d jumped into a deathtrap for no good goddamn reason, and another piece of him was so overwhelmed with the potential of getting closer to rescuing the twins, he’d almost lost focus on the fact that he was trapped in his worst nightmare.

Tilly turned and headed down another tight tunnel, “Onward, Buttercups, we’ve got Hell Hounds to find.”

Chapter 45

Somewhere between point A and point B, Bishop lost. He lost the will to live.

Lost the need to escape.

Lost his fight against the enemy within.

Lost his mind to the darkest pieces of his past that had been buried with him long ago.

And he'd come to the point where he needed to accept that he'd lost his pack.

Fury ate away at him, leaving nothing but a gaping black hole where once his heart beat. Despair so deep and raw hollowed him out, and it felt too powerful to be just his to own. Valor's energy must be seeping into him... or was it the twins?

Holy Hell.

This was the final stage of death. Bishop knew it well. Been here before. It was when the world shut you out and closed all the doors and windows so you couldn't go inside and get warm again. The lights turn off, plunging your pathetic lonesome ass into darkness so thick you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. You give up on telling your body to breathe.

You give up on every fucking thing.

Bishop crawled behind his alpha and Tilly. The last thing he wanted was to let Tilly see him a frail and weak man. He wasn't going to physically die here this easily or swiftly. Not like the humans could.

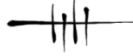
Not like Tilly could.

So his body moved forward because that's all he knew to do. They would have to give up soon. Tilly would need food, rest, fresh air.

Fragile. She was so fucking fragile. So damned temporary.

And she was wasting her time searching for two Hounds she didn't know. Risking her life for total strangers she'd never meet. It didn't make sense.

Nothing made sense.



Leading the way as they crawled on hands and knees through another tunnel, Valor held the flashlight in his mouth. His night vision used to be so much better, but not now that his balance wasn't what it should be, which made the flashlight necessary and a bitch. Manholes and rusty ladders were left behind in favor of too tight spaces for him to squeeze through. He felt like they'd been searching for weeks down here.

For the love of the Gods, why anyone would have a fascination with this place was beyond him. The dead were everywhere – and some of the bodies were fresh. He figured they were urban explorers that had gotten lost and died while trying to find their way out.

He couldn't help but think that could have been Tilly's fate had they not found her. It made him feel uneasy. A lot of things about that woman made Valor feel uneasy.

She was a dangerous creature. A suicidal, impulsive woman with nothing to lose.

And now, under his protection, she was his responsibility. Valor wanted to wring her neck and kiss her hard at the same time.

They belly-crawled forward, and with his head and back scraping the ceiling, all Valor could think was, *At least Tilly will be an added distraction for Bishop*. The Hound needed all the help he could get. This mission had pushed Bishop well past his limits and Valor doubted very much that he would reach a full recovery from this.

If only they could reach the twins...

Tilly snatched his boot and tugged it hard, silently halting Valor. "Bonjour," she said nervously, "Oh, English, good."

Valor looked ahead but didn't see anything. Then he looked back at Tilly and saw her aura pulse like it did when she was scared. The alpha stiffened. Pulling the flashlight out of his mouth he whispered, "What do ye see, lass?"

Her voice dropped to a whisper, "There's a man with a bottle standing at the mouth of the tunnel up ahead. He looks like he's been down here awhile."

Valor would have noticed if a man was standing before him. “Is he all or partially black and leathery looking?”

Her gaze flicked past Valor and she shook her head. “He’s just a guy, but...” she flinched and the air temp dropped, “Something’s wrong with him. He’s... he’s not right.”

Valor swallowed the possessive growl he wanted to set loose on the new threat, “I canna see him.”

Bishop mumbled to himself from the back, as he had since shortly after they started crawling – most likely because he was clutching onto his sanity again.

Valor wished he had a goddamn headlight so he could have both his hands free, but they’d been unable to find any at the stores earlier. Making do with what he had, he handed the flashlight to Tilly, “Hold this so I have both my hands free.”

Valor pulled out a blade and holding it between his teeth, he moved forward cautiously. If it was a ghost, the damn thing might run away as the Hell Hound got closer. Or...

His boot was yanked again. He didn’t turn to look at Tilly, because he wanted to keep his focus on any movements up ahead. He growled as his method of asking *What?*

“He says it’s not safe.”

Well no shit, Sherlock.

“He... he says the dead rise in the House of Hell.”

Great, he’s a quack ghost. Valor pushed forward, determined to keep moving until he reached the twins.

“Pete? Your name is Pete?” Tilly asked. “Yes, I’ll make sure I tell them,” she cooed. “Okay, okay. I will. Yes, I swear it.”

Valor stopped moving again, his teeth grinding against the blade in his mouth. Bishop growled like a caged predator in the back of the line.

Valor’s teeth ground against the blade. Tilly didn’t grab his boot this time, instead, she squeezed his leg. Valor tried to ignore the feeling of her hand on him like that.

“He wants his family to know he died looking for the booze, but he did find the booze so at least he found what he was looking for. He also said the howls will stop once they turn.”

All the air sucked out of Valor on that note. He crawled forward faster and his broad body scraped and clothes snagged the walls. Stone and bone cut into his knees and palms. When they reached the end of the tunnel, they were at another dead end. Symbols ran across the stone.

Valor flashed his light everywhere, looking for another opening. There wasn't one. It was an absolute dead end. Tilly tried to hit the stone as if one of them would be some kind of hidden key or lever. It wasn't *The Goonies* down here. It was war. And they were behind enemy lines and most likely outnumbered.

A howl from the other side of the wall cracked Valor's soul, splintering it into a million pieces. "Oh gods," he said, pressing his hands against the stone. "They're in there."



Bishop's head snapped up at the sound of a familiar howl. Oh. Fuck. No. "Baz!"

On hands and knees, Bishop crashed into the stone wall. Baz... Drake... they were there, just beyond his reach! Bishop's heart slammed into his chest while his fists pounded into the stone. Sparks of fire and ice zapped his system but he was too far gone to care. His mind had no space for pain to register. His body had no limits it would not endure.

Not when it came to rescuing his pack.

On his left, Tilly was chanting and etching into the stone with a piece of rock. To his right, Valor was trying to break his way through the walls. Bishop screamed like a madman as he clawed at the barrier separating him from his pack.

God, to be so close to everything and not be able to reach it!

"FUCK!" Bishop roared. His fingertips grew numb as he scratched and clawed at the wall. Dig, dig, dig, dig, dig. In no time at all, blood streaked the stone from him tearing his skin on the rough edges. He wasn't going to stop. Not until he reached what lay beyond this wall. He'd wear his fingers down to stubs if that's what it took to break through this motherfucking rock.

“GOD DAMNIT!” He pulled out his gun, racked the slide, and shot at the wall. The bullets ricocheted around the room and Tilly screamed. Valor slammed Bishop into the wall, knocking the gun out of his hands.

“You’ll hurt Tilly!” Valor yelled in his face.

Bishop tried to get a grip. He hadn’t thought about her safety, only that the twins were behind the wall. Fuck him straight to Hell, he could have killed her with a stray bullet just now.

This was going from bad to worse.

“Are ye alright, Tilly?” Valor asked when Bishop didn’t seem to have the right mindset to communicate.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Tilly hadn’t stopped her scratching into the wall with a stone. “I can’t hear out of my left ear now, though.”

Valor let go of Bishop. “Doona use the gun again. Not around her. Not down here. Understood?”

Bishop nodded and pressed his hands and forehead to the wall. *Get a grip! Get them out! Do something, Hound!*

“Here, here, I got something!” Tilly called out.

There was a waver in the wall. Like a ripple in water. At first, Bishop thought it was from the concussion Valor most likely just gave him, but then he watched Tilly stick her hand inside.

“It’s a charm. I can’t break it, but we can get through it with the crack I’ve made.”

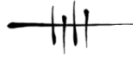
Valor went slightly slack-jawed. He took a step forward and Bishop stopped him, “No. I’m going in first.”

He and Valor deadpanned one another and Valor conceded. He knew what this meant for Bishop. It was as much his pack as it was Valor’s and the guilt Bishop had been living with all this time required a certain amount of atonement as far as Bishop was concerned. That meant, he would take the heat and be the first line of defense against whatever they encountered on the other side of this wall.

Besides, he wasn’t fit to protect Tilly right now. Not after how careless he’d just been with that goddamn gun.

“Hurry, boys. I don’t know how long the crack in the spell will last.”

Without another word, Bishop stepped inside.



When staring death in the face, put your middle finger up and laugh. Bishop always thought of that as the best response, but right now, as he stared at death, all he could do was reach behind him blindly to stop Tilly and Valor from coming any further into the room they'd stepped into.

Bodies littered the floor. Not the ancient bones from cemeteries exhumed years ago, these were all fresh. Like, some were still bleeding out.

Ages ranged from child to elder and some had curses placed upon their foreheads with something that stained their skin. The dead stared blindly – if they even still had eyes, which some did not – and the pungent scent of open bowels and old blood was thick in the air.

“Oh my god,” Tilly squeaked.

Bishop latched onto her arm and kept her behind him. He needed to protect her.

She looked over in the corner, “Who did this to you?”

Bishop saw no one that could respond, because everyone here was dead. They were standing in the middle of a slaughter house.

“*Master?*” Tilly said.

Valor’s voice dropped to a deadly level. “What?”

“He said the Master has.” Tilly repeated. “Who the fuck is Master?”

The room was silent. Dead men tell no tales, right? And none of these corpses were fucking talking.

“I... I don’t understand,” Tilly clutched Bishop’s arm harder.

“What are you saying? No... stop... you’re talking too fast, I can’t—”

A howl they knew all too well sliced through the walls.

“Baz!” Bishop climbed over the bodies and reached a wooden door. “BAZ!”

Chapter 46

Shit had gone from bad to worse for Baz. In the past God only knows how many hours, the enemy had done all they could to tear his soul out of his body, all to no avail.

It's not that they weren't giving it their all, but Baz's soul wouldn't relent.

The Hound remained on the chopping block with his restraints reinforced. The amount of magic that had been injected, shoved, and poured into him was enough to make him wish for death. The only reason he didn't give up was because of Drake, but he couldn't deny his grip was slipping fast.

Now blind, Baz's other senses heightened to make up the difference. He could hear Drake's grunts as his twin fought against their captor. There was only one in the room with them as far as Baz could tell. But the fucker was a strong one and knew his way around spells.

Baz's hands were balled into fists. They'd remained that way since his soul had slammed back into his body just after seeing that woman.

That woman... *Maybe she was some kind of angel*, he thought. He'd never seen one, besides Satan, so maybe. For some unknown reason, she was who his soul went to every time he astral projected to seek out their alpha. This last time, he almost reached his goal – he'd made it to their house and that woman was in their kitchen, of all places. But he couldn't tell her where he was so she could relay the message to his alpha. Everything went downhill so fast after that...

No one was coming to save his ass. Pain, sharp and terrible, stabbed his body in random places. Like his nerve endings were firing randomly all over the place, Baz howled as the bastard working on him did something else to his torso. A cold, dull pain turned blazing hot and sharp, sending electric shocks through Baz's arms, legs, and head. He couldn't catch his breath.

Oh fuck, just let me fucking die and be done with this!

Drake was screaming his name, trying to get him to listen, but Baz's head rocked back and forth. No. No. No. Darkness and pain ate him from the inside out. Not even his first death had been this excruciating. He needed it all to stop. *Just... stop!*

The bastard working on him slammed both his fists into Baz's belly. "Give it to me!" The air punched out of the Hound and he dry heaved. He couldn't catch his breath. Mouth wide, he gasped and gulped, unable to take in air.

"Give it to me!" the enemy yelled again.

I'm trying, he thought. I'm fucking trying, but I can't!

Baz would have wrapped his soul in a Tiffany box and tied it with a silver bow if it meant relief at this point.

Of all the spells they'd cast, all the torture they'd put them through, this was the worst. Despair shrouded Baz like a wet, cold blanket. He shook violently, his body trying to push out all that had been shoved into him.

Death... he craved it now. That sweet release from all this. If there was a gun within reach, Baz would wrap his mouth around the business end and happily eat the bullet. If he could get his hands on a razor blade, he'd slit his arms from elbow to wrist. If there was a manmade drug laced with poison, he'd slam that needle into his veins and beg for more until his body turned into a goddamn pincushion. Or a knife... oh fuck yeah, a knife would be perfect. Baz would waste no time plunging the blade deep into his heart and curl it around his twisted soul like a spaghetti noodle, rip it from his chest and fling it out of his body just to die with a carved hole into his chest that couldn't be healed.

No looking back. Just... sweet, beautiful death.

Jesus, why was he giving up like this? He wasn't suicidal, he was a survivor. Blinking hard against the darkness, he could almost see again when another wave of agony crashed into him. He cried out, tears spilling down his face. He didn't understand what was happening. What the fuck was going on? Baz gurgled and frothy copper tasting blood spewed from his mouth.

"Drake!" He needed to hear his brother's voice. He needed to latch onto something as he got eaten alive by magic. "*Drake!*"

“I’m here, brother,” Drake’s voice was cut short. There was a thump and hiss.

“You’ll pay for that, dog.”

Drake’s voice was muffled as he spat out angry curses that were short-lived. There was another sharp thump. Drake bellowed in pain and Baz arched as he tried to break free to save his brother from whatever they were doing to him. The scent of fresh cooked meat wafted into his nose and Baz’s stomach heaved again.

Let me die, let me die, let me die.

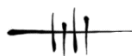
Drake roared again. Baz felt something wet splatter on his face. He went apeshit, slamming his body against his chains until his energy was spent.

The scent of fresh blood filled Baz’s nostrils and he cried out. They were killing his twin. Blood, fresh and hot, sprayed all over Baz’s face. “DRAKE!” he coughed and sputtered, “No!”

Everything went cold. Hands yanked and pulled on him. “Take it,” Baz croaked. “Just kill me and fucking take it.” Baz screamed for all he was worth. His throat felt lined with poisoned razor blades. He screamed and shook his head until the fight in him was totally gone. “I’m begging you now,” he rasped, “just like you said I fucking would,” he groaned with heartache, “Kill me, asshole. And make sure I never come back.”

He was going to die now. Thank fucking God this was all over and he could join his brother on whatever side a dead Hell Hound would end up on. He was going to miss his pack so fucking much, but surviving without Drake wasn’t a possibility. Not for this set of twins. Baz went where Drake went. To Hell... and now to –

A woman’s voice called out, “Over here! I found them!” He knew that voice, it was the Angel. She’d come to take him away... *Finally!* Baz lost consciousness just as he heard her say, “We’ve got you, Hound. Stay with us, okay? Stay with me.”



Tilly’s blood popped, fizzed and boiled with adrenaline and terror. “Over here! I’ve found them!”

Finally, they'd found the twins. It felt surreal. Almost too good to be true. Valor had gone into the room first, slipping in like a shadow, while Bishop attacked another set of *malanum* in the hallway. Valor went after a beady eyed man who was covered in blood and filth. He didn't last long once Valor unleashed his fury.

There was so much to take in. It smelled so bad, Tilly puked. *Oh god*. She should have expected this, but thinking it and seeing it wasn't the same. She ran towards the Hound chained to a large piece of stone.

Don't look at the chains. Don't look at the blood. Don't look at the rusty utensils coated in—

Taking shallow breathes through her mouth, Tilly focused on Baz. "We've got you, Hound. Stay with us, okay? Stay with me."

Bishop was somewhere behind her now, ripping the other Hound free. Valor had slit the throat of the beady eyed man who held the twins captive the instant he'd stepped into the room – the fucker never saw the alpha Hound coming. Blood had sprayed everywhere.

Tilly yanked on the ties that cut into Baz's skin. "Help me!" she yelled at Bishop.

"Move! Move!" Bishop knocked her out of the way and started slicing away on the ropes with his knife. Tilly turned to see Drake. His skin was sallow and eyes were rimmed with dark circles.

Naked, bruised, cut and bloody, he was mal-nourished and frail. All around her was death and a creepy as fuck energy started slithering over her skin. She needed to keep her focus on the things she could handle, and not look too closely at her surroundings.

"Can you walk?" she didn't wait for a reply. Tilly put one arm around Drake and tried to prop him up on his wobbly legs. They needed to get the fuck out of here. Fast.

As Tilly tried to haul Drake out of the room, she ignored the chaos scattered all around them – the blades, spikes, tools and worse.

Stop looking.

Tilly grunted as she supported Drake's weight, but she wasn't giving up so easily. Fuck, she'd gotten this far right? She could get out of here.

This whole time, her dark poetic mind thought that if she died in the catacombs of Paris on a rescue mission, then... well... it would suck but wouldn't be the worst way to go. Here however? Oh hell no. She wasn't going to die in this place. It was a butcher shop, tainted with evil so foreign, no religion would have a word for it. She didn't want this to be her end game. She wasn't going to pick this as her final resting place. She had to get the hell out of here. Now!

Valor ripped Drake away from her. "Here," he handed her his gun. Automatically, she checked the chamber and made sure it was ready to be put to use. Valor pulled a second gun out and held it in his right hand while he held Drake against him. "Shoot anything that moves, lass."

"Got it." Taking the lead, Tilly stayed hyper-alert. Never in all her life was she more thankful for the training she had in self-defense. If it moved, she'd fucking hit it.

Adrenaline pumped in her veins while the magic she'd placed on the wall to enter this place danced along her skin like tiny biting bugs.

Everything had a price. Even gaining entry to this space had cost her, not that she was going to tell Val or Bishop that. It was worth it. Finding Baz and Drake, seeing what they'd gone through, knowing she was part of getting them out of here – the price she would pay for the magic she'd used was absolutely worth it.

No regrets.

There was movement up ahead. Tilly pointed her gun, ready to shoot. Small oil lamps lit the corridor. The tunnel was wide enough for three people to walk side-by-side, which was nothing like the tight spaces they had to squeeze through to make it this far. Someone had put a lot of work into this area.

There was a scream. Then a crunch. A child ran past, going from the right of the hall to the left.

"Wait!" someone yelled. Then a man in black went chasing after the girl. Two more stumbled after him.

"My Gods," Valor rumbled, "It's the Paris pack." They kept going down the tunnel until they had to make the decision to go left or right.

Drake groaned as he continued to lean on Valor, "That girl..." he hissed as he tried to take another step without Valor's help, "Follow her."

"Are ye sure, Hound?"

Drake nodded. "We weren't the only..." he took another step, "ones down here. Other pack..." he slumped against Valor and cursed, "fuck just fucking follow... her."

They headed down the corridor. Bishop stayed quiet as he carried Baz in his arms. Tilly's head was throbbing. Her heart beat in double time in her chest. Her palms were sweaty.

This was both exhilarating and scary as Hell.

Spending time with these Hell Hounds had given Tilly a false sense of invincibility. She needed to remember that if anyone was going to die here, it would be her. Not them. She needed to be cautious.

A trail of blood went down the hall to another door. Suddenly, the girl reappeared. She waved her hand, beckoning them to come closer. Her wild eyes spoke the urgency that she didn't share with words and she stretched her arm out, pointing down the hall to their left.

Like fucking idiots, they went that way.

The girl stayed put and watched them go. Tilly turned to see the girl run in the opposite direction.

Up ahead, a howl echoed, followed by shift in the air. There was no wind current this deep into the catacombs. That force was from something else.

"Shit," Tilly held her gun up again and stepped forward slowly. Barks, loud and vicious, rattled her bones. She hesitated and stepped back. Valor growled, shifting Drake's weight to Tilly and he commanded everyone to "Stand back!" He rushed down the corridor, gun out and ready, then he fired several shots, all in different directions.

Tilly tried to move forward as fast as she could, but Drake's weight slowed her down. She groaned and growled as she half-dragged him along. She needed to make sure Valor was okay.

"Valor!" she yelled. A flash of dark red hair popped into her line of sight. *Thank god*, she sighed.

“It’s clear!” Valor ran back and took Drake from her again. This time, he slung the Hound over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. “There’s a manhole. It’s open.” He led the way and Tilly and Bishop silently followed him.

Tilly’s head throbbed so badly, she was starting to lose vision in her left eye.

There was a rusty ladder just ahead. Valor reached out for Tilly’s hand but she shook her head, “Them first.” Tilly practically shoved Bishop towards the ladder.

“I’m not going without you,” he gritted out.

“I’m right behind you, Hound Dog, I fucking swear. Go!”

Bishop’s jaw was clenched tight and climbed as fast as he could towards freedom with Baz out cold and slung over his shoulder.

Next, Tilly pushed Valor into the ladder. “Go, goddamnit! I’ll follow you!”

Valor growled. His reluctance was going to cost them big time if he didn’t hurry the fuck up!

“GO! I’ve got your back. You can’t shoot with one hand on Drake, the other on the ladder. I’m going to cover you.”

It made sense and Valor fucking knew it. Nodding once, he tucked his gun in the back of his pants and climbed the ladder, his boots slamming against the rungs as he escaped with Drake. “Now, lass! Climb! Now!”

Tilly tucked the gun in the back of her jeans and she climbed the ladder using both her hands. She didn’t dare look back, not with the light of day just above her. A sharp pain shot into her leg. She yelled, lost balance, and dangled.

The hilt of a blade stuck out of her calf.

Looking back up, she watched the Hell Hounds reach their freedom. Her body jerked and she lost her grip as a tattooed hand yanked on her leg.

“No, no, no, no!” Tilly kicked frantically to get him off her.

“Tilly!” Valor roared. He reached for her arm while another hand pulled hard on her ankle. “Grab my hand!”

She held onto the ladder wrung with one hand as her body starting swinging and slamming into the rusty ladder. She screamed for all she was worth and tried to kick the enemy away. Her vision continued to close in until she couldn't see out of her left eye at all. Something hard clamped down on her wrist – *Valor!*

Tilly pulled out the gun with her free hand and fired a shot blindly towards her foot. A roar shredded her throat. The hand around her ankle pulled and slammed her lower half against the escape ladder so hard, she dropped her gun.

Tilly was ripped away from the ladder and she screamed.

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Thank you!

About the Author

Briana Michaels grew up and still lives on the East Coast. When taking a break from the crazy adventures in her head, she enjoys running around with her two children. If there is time to spare, she loves to read, cook, hike in the woods, and sit outside by a roaring fire. She does all of this with the love and support of her amazing husband who always has her back, encouraging her to go for her dreams.