



EVERNIGHT
TEEN

KEEPER
OF THE
Gate

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DEDICATION

To Kristen for pushing me to write this story.

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KEEPER OF THE GATE

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Chapter One

The night hung heavy over New York City.

A man in dark clothing ran hard down an unlit alleyway, shoes clicking on the slick asphalt. The pavement steamed from a late-night shower, and sinister snakes of white vapor curled upwards as if in some ancient dance. Gasping for breath in the humid air, the man didn't bother to dodge puddles as he clumsily jumped over a line of empty cardboard boxes. The heavy scent of cooking oil stuck in his nose, but he pressed on despite the bile rising in his throat. Heart pounding painfully, lungs burning with the effort, he knew he couldn't stop. Beads of sweat rolled through his thick black hair into his eyes, but he blinked against the haze. He couldn't stop, knew he mustn't stop—no matter what happened.

Clutching the medallion in his hand, he prayed he would get there in time. The sharp corners of the triangular pendant bit into his flesh, spattering blood on the pavement as he moved through the night. He didn't care about the blood, didn't care about the pain and knew he must push all distractions aside. The demon was waiting for him to make a mistake. It wanted him to falter, to hesitate, so it could strike. It wanted the medallion. He could not let it come to that. He could not let the beast get the key.

Traffic sounds beckoned from the other side of the buildings and the man wanted to be there. Wanted to move among the people, his people, but knew he couldn't travel as quickly through the bodies on the sidewalk. He needed to get to the church before the demon arrived. He needed to hurry.

He pulled at the Roman collar tucked neatly around his neck. It felt as if the church was choking him, squeezing the very life it had given. He had devoted his entire existence to the ministry, had believed in the powers of the Lord to bring salvation to the world, but tonight he doubted his faith. How could he defeat the beast, when he battled his own demons? How could he defeat the beast when his own faith was flawed? How could he doubt the plan? Destiny loomed before him like a shadow in the night. Father James knew he would never outrun it.

Nearing a corner, a warning sounded in his mind. James slid to a stop, his feet warmed from the friction. Taking a deep lung full of the electrified

air, he could sense the demon nearby. Its presence was suffocating, overpowering. His blood ran like ice—he was already too late.

Not wanting to give up, he scanned the lane frantically. A fire escape ladder hung partially lowered to his right and a dented metal door to his left – which way should he go? More sweat dripped into his eyes, heat from his thudding heart threatening to burst as this simple decision froze him.

Something deep in his chest released, and he flung himself at the rusted metal ladder.

James knew he hadn't jumped high enough, but there was nothing he could do to correct that now as he hovered, suspended for a moment like a feather in the air. He willed himself upwards, strained to pull his arms, but his fingers barely touched the bottom of the ladder and he slipped and fell hard on his back. The precious golden pendant wrenched out of his grip with the impact, and bounced awkwardly out of reach. With the wind knocked out of him, James lay for a moment and fought to suck air into his burning lungs. Blackness yawned above, and his vision momentarily darkened. He had hit his head hard, really hard, and fought to hold onto consciousness.

Despite the stifling heat, despite the humidity, his body bristled with goose bumps as another, more sinister, shadow loomed.

Born from the shadows, a giant mass blocked the clouded sky overhead mere feet away.

A strident screech, like nails on a chalkboard, filled the air as the shadow began to take shape. Pops and rips emanated from the black mass and James watched, frozen, as it began to take form. The creature was taller than most men, perhaps over seven feet, with bubbling tar-like skin and an enormous misshapen head that lolled heavily to the right. Its small, pin prick eyes glowed like molten gold and its great gaping mouth, jaw presumably too heavy to hold shut, was filled with rows of shark-like teeth.

The creature seemed to smile at the man, great gobs of saliva dripping to the pavement, and it screeched again to the moonless sky. Father James knew those eyes, had been haunted by them for years, and now he would finally find death in them. Horrified, James watched as the demon's attention left him and fell on the gold medallion twinkling magically in a shallow puddle of water. As it moved to grab it, he yelled, "No! *Vadre retro santana!*" (*Go back, Satan*).

Temporarily stunned by the Latin incantation, the demon blinked and refocused on the man now scrambling to stand.

Struggling to remember the prayer he had spent a lifetime memorizing, James' voice shook when he spoke. "I . . . I put on God's armor to resist the Devil's devices."

The demon covered its head with its long paw-like hands and screeched.

Finally able to stand, Father James moved cautiously toward the medallion, never letting his sight leave the creature. He continued the invocation, sweat dripping from his lips as he spoke. "I carry the shield of faith to put out the burning arrows of the evil one. I...I accept salvation from God to be my helmet, and receive the word of God from the Spirit to use as a sword."

Striking the brick wall, the demon convulsed amid a shower of stone, its golden eyes never leaving James' small form. It shrieked again in warning and lunged, its posture threatening.

Jumping at the sudden movement, Father James clamped his eyes shut. "Stand behind me, stand b-behind me," he whispered fervently before peeling an eye open. He was almost at the medallion, fingers trembling as he stretched closer to the puddle. "In the name of Jesus Christ..." his voice shook with the terror in his soul, "...I bind all spirits of the air, fire, water, ground, underground, and netherworld."

Stooping quickly, he grabbed the pendant from the tepid water and held it close to his heart with both hands. Feeling comforted by the warmth of God's presence, he fell to his knees. "I bind all forces of evil." Squeezing his eyes tightly, he took a deep breath to calm his hammering heart and did not miss the distinct scent of ozone on the air. "And claim the blood of Jesus on the atmosphere." He moved his hand in a sweeping motion. "The water, the ground, the underground and the netherworld."

The rescued pendant, still clutched tightly in his hands, exploded with light. Squinting against its brilliance, the priest held his hands away from his chest and gingerly examined the rays of light spilling from the cracks between his fingers.

Shielding its face with a deformed arm, the demon screeched gratingly and then spread leathery wings to lurch awkwardly upwards. Its

shadow, temporarily visible on the tall buildings, soon disappeared completely into the night sky.

Staggering to his feet, Father James took only a moment to lean heavily against the destroyed brick wall as the light faded from the pendant, before he threw himself forward and continued running down the alley.

He was almost at the church, could almost smell the candles and incense, and imaged what a relief it would be to feel the deep red carpet of the altar under his knees. Wheezing for air, he reached the end of the alley and could finally see the front of the church. His heart soared. He had never been this relieved to see it. Instinctually, he looked both ways before darting across the street and was reaching for the door when something swooped down and pulled him screaming into the air.

The golden pendant tinkled lyrically and tumbled end over end before disappearing into a sewer grate.

Chapter Two

“Anna, there’s no way I’m giving up on you!” Stacey shook her head and chomped into a large green apple. I startled and wiped a droplet off my cheek, as she continued through a full mouth, “There’s a guy out there for you! I just know it.” A tiny shard of apple skin trembled as it clung to her chin and in a lot of ways, strangely, I could relate. Today I *was* that trembling piece of green skin. “No one is actually meant to be single forever,” she sniffed. “You’re too awesome!”

I’d heard this lecture many times and couldn’t help the smile that tickled the corners of my mouth. She sure knew how to make me feel better. “Thanks,” I snorted. “But aren’t best friends *supposed* to say nice things like that?”

“Anna!” She shoved me playfully and I moved her hand away. “Of course we are.”

God, I loved my friend. “You’re a loser,” I mumbled in defeat and smoothed my shirt.

“More of a nerd, actually.”

We laughed and my gaze drifted across the field again. Heat snakes shimmered above the pavement of the track, and he was there, like an apparition through the wavering air. My eyes darted to the tree line as the piercing hum of heat bugs penetrated the stagnant air. I knew I couldn’t stare, in case he was looking this way. I looked at the grass, the track, the line of trees at the edge of the field and then at him again. My heart pumped a little harder and I gulped. I repeated this several times and was beginning to feel dizzy when Stacey shoved me.

“Would you go and say hi to him. *Please!*”

I snorted dismissively and tore my gaze away. This guy wouldn’t be any different than the last. “I can’t. I . . . I can’t handle the rejection.” I would never have admitted this to anyone but Stacey.

“Don’t you snort at me, Annalisa Harold!” she scolded. “I know when it’s time for you to go and talk to a guy. Being friends with someone since kindergarten will do that.”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled and nibbled my lip. Tears lumped in my throat as I thought of the hundreds of other rejections over the years. I’d

never had a boyfriend for longer than a few days. Ever. Does that happen to other people? I eyed some students lounging along the brick wall of the school, and it made my heart ache. Was I too ugly? Did I smell? Questions I'd asked a thousand times remained unanswered.

I'd finally accepted that I might be single forever, when this new guy had appeared at the beginning of the school year. Was this my last chance to find a boyfriend? Did I want to take that gamble, knowing the odds were stacked against me? And, more importantly, would my confidence survive another blow? Doubtful. "I . . . I don't think I can. It's going to be like the others. I can't do it aga—"

She cut me off, hand held forward. "I don't want to hear it! There is nothing wrong with you. I wouldn't lie." She paused to make her point. "I have this weird feeling he's different from the others. I've never felt this way before. Trust me for once. Okay?"

Squinting against the high sun, I shaded my eyes and re-examined the dark-haired guy sitting under a tree at the edge of the school property. There wasn't anyone left I hadn't considered—so what was another heart-wrenching blow to my confidence? I'd tried dating the jocks, the crazy emo guys, the guys that liked skateboarding and hacky sacks, the losers, the nerds—*everyone*. Perhaps there was a slight chance that of the three hundred guys at my school, there really wasn't anyone for me—but Stacey wouldn't even let me *think* that.

"Wake up, Anna! Can you just trust me this time?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. . ."

"You need to start thinking positively." She shuffled and turned to face me. "Let's go over a scenario. Okay?"

I was about to say no, but she obviously wasn't interested in hearing my side and didn't wait for my answer. I sat, left with my mouth hanging open, as she started to talk. "Let's say this unsuspecting new guy is interested in you."

"He won't be," I interrupted.

She hardly missed a breath. "Tell me what you're going to say to him."

I waved my hand dramatically and groaned at the all-too-familiar conversation. "I don't know, uh . . .hi?" I said stupidly.

“Good!” She congratulated me like I was a dog performing a trick and patted my arm. “And then what?”

“Do we really have to do this?” I folded my arms in a protective stance. “I know what I have to say, Stacey. Chill out and give me a second, okay? You bugging me to go over there is not making it any easier.”

“Sorry.” She seemed genuine. “I really want you to find someone.” She smiled sweetly and then in an instant her face was serious. “And if I have to hear about this guy for another day, I’m going to literally kill you.”

“I know, I know.” I let my eyes find the guy again. “God, I’m such a wimp.”

She grinned and squealed. “I’m so excited!” The piece of green apple on her chin fell into her lap. “It’s like the thrill of the hunt or something.”

Although my stomach knotted at the thought of talking to him, I knew Stacey was right. I’d spent the last week pretty much stalking this guy. It was time to take it to the next level. Stuffing my phone back in my bag, I said, “Fine. I’ll do it. What do you think I should say? And don’t suggest, ‘hi’!”

She snickered, “No, that’s your idea.” Stacey took another ground-shaking bite of her apple and seemed to be deep in thought. “Why not talk about the weather,” she mumbled from behind her hand. “That always seems to work when I’m trying to make small talk with a guy.”

I shoved my friend before standing. “The weather? Are you serious? What am I, like forty?”

Her eyes were wide as she stared up at me. “What? You think I’m kidding?”

“You’re no help.” I brushed the back of my pants.

“I’m being serious here, Anna,” Stacey insisted. “I would start with that.” Her words faded as I walked away.

The sun was directly overhead and the heat of it burned my scalp as I moved out of the shadow of the school. Three picnic tables to my right overflowed with people, but no one seemed to notice as I started across the yellowed grass of the football field. I kind of had that affect on people, though. Most of the time I was invisible. And guys don’t want invisible girlfriends.

Each of my footfalls crunched in the dry grass. It had been an excessively hot summer and most of my time had been spent out at the

cottage. At one point, I was even able to swim everyday for two weeks. Today, in the stifling heat that was this miserable school day, I was missing the cool depths of Bantam Lake. New Haven, Connecticut didn't usually have crazy hot summers, though, and I couldn't remember the last time we'd gone so long without rain.

Palms sweating, heart thumping, I still hadn't decided what I was going to say to this guy. Should I demand to know the title of the book he was reading, or should I start with something more boring, like the weather as Stacey had suggested?

I almost ran back to my friend when he shifted suddenly in his spot under the large tree. Jeez, I was jumpy... The sun glinted off his chestnut hair when he ran his hand through it, and my heart almost melted when it stuck up in all directions. God, he was cute. I held my breath as he adjusted his dark-framed glasses, thinking he might notice me, but he returned to the book in his lap. I was invisible. Definitely not a good start.

I felt like a stalker. I knew where his locker was, knew each of his classes, what he liked to eat and when he would be sitting under the tree. I was head-over-heels obsessed with this guy and had absolutely no idea why. None of my friends even knew his name.

Trying to look casual as I walked across the empty field proved difficult, and I tucked my hands into the pockets of my pants to ease the discomfort. I glanced back at Stacey, who was still leaning against the school and then dropped my gaze to the ground when she smiled widely. Stupid nerves threatened to set off a laughing fit.

As though to calm me, an unexpected breeze rustled the dry grass at my shoes before whooshing up my body and through my long red hair. There were days when I loved my hair color, but most of the time I hated it. People often complimented me on it, but then the questions would start.

'Oh, you're a natural redhead? But your parents are both dark! Maybe your mother was a little too friendly with the mailman...'

I knew the questions and comments all too well, and hated explaining I was adopted. There were times when I thought of making something up, like my great-great Aunt Bertha was a redhead, but my mother disliked that and didn't want me to be ashamed of my roots. Why should I care, though? I had no clue what my true roots were.

Patting my wind-rustled locks, I stole several glances at the guy sitting under the tree as I neared. I was expecting some type of reaction to my approach, but he seemed uninterested and didn't even look up.

Absently, I adjusted my shirt and patted my hair for what felt like the millionth time. As I moved closer, my heart thumped harder and harder. Kind of like a proximity alarm. I hadn't been this nervous to talk with a guy since elementary school. Maybe he was the one... Perhaps *he* was the guy I had been searching for all this time.

He lifted his head as I moved toward him. My stomach nearly dropped into my shoes, and I had to stop myself from running away when our eyes met. I was thankful I didn't have to walk anymore, because my knees suddenly felt weak.

His voice was as I had imagined. Smooth, reassuring. "Hi," he said plainly and stared up at me with the most translucent aqua eyes I had ever seen.

My body went numb. My tongue didn't want to work. "Hi," I finally managed. "I saw you sitting here and, you know . . ." My sentence trailed off.

What did I want to say, again? Oh, yeah. "I, ah, I wanted to say hi."

Smooth, Anna. Real smooth.

He adjusted his glasses and smiled weakly. "I saw you watching me."

My cheeks flushed hot and I wiped my sweating palms on my pants. "You saw me?"

"Uh huh." He gestured toward Stacey. "You and your friend over there watch me every day. I was wondering when you were going to come over. I'm Devin."

I was absolutely mortified and wanted to melt away. My voice trembled as I started to talk, and I had to clear my throat before the words would come out clearly. "If you knew I was watching you, why didn't you say something? What were you waiting for?"

Shrugging, he looked back at the book in his lap. "I knew you'd come when you were ready." He flicked a small green bug off the cover. "I didn't want to influence you."

My cheeks burned and I became defensive. "Influence me? How?" Confusion set in. What was he talking about?

Smiling with perfectly straight teeth, he slowly lifted his beautiful eyes toward me again and said, "I wanted you to approach me on your own terms."

I looked back at Stacey, who was shielding her eyes as she watched us. Not sure what to say next, I pulled at my shirt awkwardly and looked at my shoes.

My attention was drawn back to him when he opened the book in his lap, and I wondered if this was a hint he was done talking. At this point I was close to walking away, but as I was about to turn, something held me. I needed to know more about this guy. *Screw it.* I wasn't leaving.

"So ah, Devin," I said awkwardly. "The weather has been crazy lately, don't you think? It's so hot."

Another good line. Stupid Stacey!

"What?" He shielded his eyes when the sun reappeared from behind a lone cloud.

My mind whirled. "I mean, wh-what are you reading?"

He dropped his eyes and smoothed his hand across the pages lovingly. "A Bible."

Laughing, I said, "Yeah, right!"

He quieted, and I cleared my throat to break the awkward silence. This did not look very promising. "Seriously. What are you reading?"

Sighing heavily, he looked annoyed. "I'm reading a Bible, Anna. Why is that so difficult for you to believe?"

Crinkling my nose I wondered how he knew my name. "Who reads *The Bible* at school? What, are you going to become a priest or something?" I meant this to be a joke, but his tone suggested he didn't think it was funny at all.

"Maybe," he said, defensive. "It's easy for you."

"For me?" Boy, was I confused.

"That's right," he nodded and scanned the field before returning his gaze to mine. "Some of us don't have our paths chosen by Him, like you do. Some of us are still searching for our way."

Okay, this guy came across as a freak. Damn it, and he was so cute. I would *never* find a guy. Maybe I should look into becoming a nun or something.

Nodding my head sarcastically, I shrugged and started to back up. This time I felt certain he was hopeless. "My path has been chosen. Great. Sure. Whatever you say. Well . . ." I waved like an idiot, " . . . have fun reading your Bible." As I turned toward the school, he spoke again.

"You know, it wouldn't hurt for you to pick one up every now and then. There are some beautiful readings. He would be pleased to see you reading again, you know."

"Thanks," I said without turning. "I'll keep that in mind."

Stacey was still shielding her eyes as I approached and I made a thumbs-down motion out of Devin's view and then gagged myself.

"Sorry, Anna," she said when I moved up beside her. "I'm sure you'll find someone before we graduate college."

I couldn't stop the smile that crept in. "Shut up." I stooped to grab my bag and flung it over my shoulder. "Maybe I'll become a nun." Giggling, we moved toward the school.

Stacey held the door as I walked through. "Not that it really matters, Anna," she said as she followed close behind, "but did you at least find out what he was reading?"

We pushed our way through the throng of kids in the cafeteria. The cool air felt refreshing.

"The Bible."

"What? Yeah, right." She thought I was joking. "If you didn't ask him what he was reading, what did you guys talk about? The weather?"

I wasn't about to tell her I actually *did* mention the weather and answered quickly. "I'm not kidding around. I asked him what he was reading and he said it was his Bible."

She stopped, and a group of guys nearly ran right over us. "Really?"

"Yup," I laughed humorlessly. "Oh, and he said I should read one too."

We broke out in to a giggling fit and before we parted ways in the hall Stacey said, "No wonder he's sitting alone. Freak show! Guess I'm not so sorry after all. The right guy is going to fall right out of the sky. You watch..."

"Thanks," I smiled warmly at my friend. "I really appreciate you bugging me. Sometimes all I need is a kick in the butt."

"I know." Stacey winked and moved the opposite way down the hall before yelling over her shoulder. "Text me!"

I waved weakly. "Okay."

Turning, I was about to move to my locker when I ran smack in to Devin's chest.

"Jesus!" I cursed and he frowned. "What the? How did you get in here so quickly?" Rubbing my nose, it felt like I had cut it on the bones sticking out from his chest. I wondered if he was anorexic or something.

He towered over me. "Where are you going?"

Snorting, I tried to move around him but he blocked me. "You know you're starting to creep me out, Devin. Can you get out of my way? I'm going to History."

He scowled. "You have English now."

Looking at him suspiciously, I suddenly remembered it *was* a Day One schedule, and he was right. "Oh, yeah." Glancing toward the cafeteria, I realized it would be faster to get to class if I darted outside and walked around the back of the cafeteria and gym. A lot of people used that shortcut to avoid the mass of bodies in the hallways between classes.

Before I turned from him I said, "What, are you stalking me now?"

Smiling deeply, he shifted his books in his arms. His eyes sparkled. "No more than you've been watching me."

I lifted both eyebrows. "Great." The weirdo religious guy was stalking me. "Listen, Devin, I have to go before I'm late for class."

Without waiting for him to respond, I turned and bolted through the cafeteria and out the back door. Running past the windows of the dining hall, I quickly broke out in a sweat. It was hot, really hot, and the temptation to run into the shade of the trees and disappear for the afternoon was great. Here I was two weeks into school, and I hated it. My fantasy of getting together with the cute new guy already quashed, I had nothing to look forward to.

As I reached the brick wall of the gym, my thoughts were interrupted when a twig cracked behind me. Immediately I thought of Devin, and turned ready to tell him to buzz off, but there was no one there. A cloud passed in front of the sun just then and a million shadows leered out from the bushes along the edge of the field. My intuition started tingling like

crazy, and abruptly I knew something didn't feel right. The section of the school where I stood was windowless since it was right behind the gym. No one knew I was out here—anything could happen.

"Hey! Who's there?" I demanded with forced confidence as I waited for someone to appear from around the corner. "We're both going to be late. Stop messing around."

My attention was drawn to an alleyway leading to a door at the back of the gym, when something moved. The doorway was filled with foreboding shadows that started to writhe and advance. How could the shadows be moving like that? Squinting into the thick blackness, I disregarded every instinct screaming to run, and moved closer to the dark alley.

Feet away from the moving black mass, I asked hesitantly, "Hello? Is someone in there?"

A blood-curdling shriek, like someone running their nails down a chalkboard, exploded from the dark space and my body went cold. Stumbling, I fell backwards and hit my head on a rock hard enough to see stars.

Beautiful sparkling orbs spun in my vision as I lay stunned, and the first clear thing I saw was my binder open beside me. Papers swirled in the hot breeze, and I was about to start chasing after them when a vise gripped my leg. I screamed out as nails dug into the flesh of my ankle. Struggling to focus on what pulled me, I was surprised to see nothing more than thick blackness. Unable to breathe in my terror, I clawed at the ground and kicked at the shadows—but this thing, this blackness, had a hold like steel.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and with white-hot terror I found myself staring at two yellowed eyes in the liquid black of the alleyway. This shadow was somehow *alive*, and now the black blob was starting to take form.

Having found my voice, I screamed a loud, "No!" as the final bell sounded. My cries were lost in the shrill sound of the buzzer.

My foot was almost in the shadows now. In a final attempt to save myself, I used my other foot as a brace against the brick wall. The entity pulling me was undeterred, and I had to roll over onto my stomach to stop it from splitting me in half. Digging my nails into the gravel, tears poured down my face when I realized I was losing this battle. Whatever was in the

shadows, whatever wanted me, had won. Images of my family flashed before my eyes. My mother, my father, my dog Charlie—I would never see them again.

Taking one deeper lung full of air, I was about to cry out one last time when Devin ran from around the side of the school. His face was plastered with a look of determination and he moved as though he knew what wanted me. As he jumped into the doorway of the alley, my leg released and I scrambled away.

The thing shrieked again and I fumbled backwards, unable to stand as my legs turned to Jell-O.

Devin stood with his arms spread as though I might try and run past him and into the darkness. Looking at me over his shoulder, he yelled, “*You need to ask me to help you, Anna!*”

The thing in the alley snarled and the shadow started growing.

“*You need to ask for my help!*”

Fumbling over my tongue, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the mass of blackness growing larger yet in the alleyway. It was a thing of nightmares, something I had run from many times in my sleep.

“*Yes! Help me! Please!*”

“*Damn it!*” Devin shrieked. His arm was encased in a tar-like substance. Struggling to free himself, he shouted, “You need to say the prayer!” Screaming in pain, he fought to look at me. “*Say it, Anna! Quickly!*”

“*What prayer?*” I screamed back. “*What are you talking about?*”

Devin moaned, and I watched in shocked horror as the black tar started creeping up his arm. Falling to his knees, he writhed in the gravel. I was helpless—helpless to save him, or myself. As though it were alive, the mass seeped down the brick walls toward me.

It was coming for me again.

Howling in pain, Devin lurched backwards when the entity wrapped around his knees and started consuming his legs. “*Anna! Please! The prayer!*”

My mind whirled. Prayer? Did I know a prayer? I had attended church as a child, but I only remembered a few prayers. My voice shook when I spoke. “Uh, now, now I lay me down to sleep...”

Back arched, Devin shrieked. “*Not that one!*”

“Well, which one?” Tears streamed down my cheeks and I considered running. As I turned from the horror growing in the darkness, the cloud that had passed in front of the sun slid along the sky and a sunbeam stopped me dead in my tracks. The world changed then and a cool wind passed through my body. I felt cleansed, calm, and the words of the prayer Devin needed to hear flashed. I was at peace and knew what I had to say.

Turning slowly, I recited the prayer as though I had known it all my life. “Angel of God, guardian and protector of my soul, shelter me under your wings.” It was as though a warm hand wrapped around my heart then and I stood helpless to stop the tears of joy that rolled down my cheeks. I had never felt so sure of anything before. “Light my path,” I said with renewed determination. “Direct my steps. Defend me against the spirit of evil. But above all, come to my help in the struggle for my life.”

The words flowed from my heart and, despite the black thing growing in the darkness, I felt peaceful. Somehow I knew I was safe.

With a great roar, Devin burst free of the black mass that had nearly encased him and stood with arms stretched to the clouds. Stumbling backwards at the sudden movement, I hit the ground again and skidded to a stop on my elbows. The shadow that had only moments before seethed in the darkness shrunk to the corners of the alleyway. Surprisingly, Devin burst into the sky and I lay squinting as he hung suspended over me. I covered my ears when he yelled toward the heavens and with back arched, reached upwards.

“Father! Do not leave me!” Writhing in pain, he twisted and held his head in his hands. Dark hair stuck out from between his fingers as he lurched back and forth.

With a chest-vibrating pop, the sunbeam held him frozen in the air. Howling, seemingly paralyzed, he made a sound so horrifying I felt my soul being ripped apart. How could I help him? He had saved me only seconds before. What was I going to do now?

Mind whirling for a way to help, my heart stopped dead in my chest as his shirt exploded with a loud thunderclap and two snow-white wings fanned out from his back. He spun slowly in the air. Arms that were once thin and weak rippled with strong muscles. His stomach and chest were also heavily muscled and his chestnut hair was now the color of the sun.

The last thing I remembered before falling into unconsciousness was the sight of Devin's eyes, shining with a light of their own.

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Chapter Three

The alarm on my bedside table beeped incessantly, and as I reached over to turn it off a sharp pain exploded across my brain and up the arm I leaned on. Squinting at the red numbers, I groaned. It was six in the morning, and time to get ready for another day of school.

After flicking the noisy sentry off, I fingered a large welt on the back of my head. This was the source of my brain-numbing pain, but I had no idea how it had happened.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and reviewed the events of the previous day as my thoughts cleared. Like a sickening wave, everything came back: The black thing in the alleyway, the prayer...Devin, as an *angel*. But what had happened after that?

Showering and dressing as quickly as possible, I thundered down the stairs and fumbled to find my school bag in the entrance closet. Dashing for the kitchen, I grabbed my mother's toast out of her hand as she prepared to take a bite, and crashed out the back door of our kitchen with a quick goodbye to my stunned parents. Stacey and her family were our backyard neighbors, and I crossed easily into her yard after almost falling into the gooseberry bushes lining the property.

Ralph, Stacey's wiener dog, barked happily as I approached the back door and nearly snatched the toast out of my hand as I bent to scratch behind his ears.

"Hey! That's not very nice, Ralphie!" I scolded and moved around him to the back door. Without knocking, I let myself in.

Jason and Jordan, Stacey's elementary-aged twin brothers, were fighting over something and the kitchen was a total disaster, as it was on most mornings. Stacey's mother, Doris, struggled to resolve whatever the issue was and looked up as I passed.

"Good morning, Anna dear. You're early."

"Let go of it, you ass!" Jason, the younger of the two twins, stuck his tongue out at his brother.

My presence forgotten, Stacey's mother snapped her head back toward the boys. "Jason Timothy!" she scolded. "I do not want to hear language like that in this house! Do you understand?"

I moved quickly through the living room toward the stairs at the front of the house. The argument continued as I trotted up the carpeted stairs to Stacey's room, but it was nothing I hadn't heard a million times before. As was the norm, music blasted from behind my friend's locked door and I had to wait for the song to end before knocking. The door flew open and the look on Stacey's face suggested she thought it was one of her brothers.

Her freshly washed face changed from a severe scowl to a wide grin. "Oh, hey! You're early."

I pushed past her and into the room. Unlike my disaster, Stacey's room was tidied and ordered.

"I need to talk to you about yesterday."

Stacey frowned and moved to the desk where she sat to do her makeup. "Yesterday? Sure."

I had no idea where to start. I was missing a significant part of my memory, and wanted to see what she knew without sounding like some freak show. "Umm, did we talk about anything strange yesterday?"

I watched with interest as she started to apply the thick black eyeliner she wore every day and wondered how *I* looked. I'd hardly glanced at myself in the mirror as I rushed to get out of the house. "We talk about strange things all the time, Anna. What do you mean?"

Shifting my position on her bed, I curled a piece of crimson hair around my finger as the images of the writhing black tar flashed. "Well, did we talk about anything *unusually* strange?"

She turned and frowned. Only one of her eyes was done. "Are you feeling all right?"

"S-sure," I lied, struggling to maintain eye contact.

"You weren't up all night researching for that stupid project in History, were you?"

I frowned. "Project? What project?"

Shaking her head, Stacey turned back toward the mirror and leaned in, her nose almost touching the glass. "Yeah, right. Pretending you don't remember won't make it go away. Deal with it, Anna. It's worth forty percent of our final grade, and due at the end of next month. You know, Charlie warned me Mr. Patrick was an as—"

My head spun. Project? I cut her off. "Wh-when did we find out about this project?"

Stacey turned toward me again, eyes wide. “Are you losing it? We received the sheet yesterday during History. You know? Our last block History class!” She waved her thin hand. “Hello, Anna! Are you awake?”

I yanked my bag off the floor and struggled to pull my binder free. Everything looked in order, and nothing suggested the papers had flown all around the football field. With sweating fingers, I flipped through the pages until I found the project paper Stacey was talking about. As I continued to flip through, I also found notes I’d handwritten and dated yesterday.

Sitting dumbfounded, binder open in front of me, I touched the lump on the back of my head. The last thing I remembered from yesterday was a winged Devin suspended in the air in front of me. After that I’d blacked out. Was it possible I’d dusted my clothes off and gone to class like nothing had happened? Had I hit my head so hard that I had some kind of delayed amnesia? I eyed my friend suspiciously. Maybe this was some sort of a setup. Perhaps Stacey and Devin were setting me up.

But why?

I flipped through more pages in my binder until I found the English section and was once again shocked to find notes dated yesterday. And as much as I wanted to think Stacey was setting me up, the notes were written in my own hand and logically I knew my best friend wouldn’t play such a horrible joke.

The only person able to answer my questions was Devin. I had to find him.

~ * ~

To my utter desolation, Devin wasn’t at school for two days following the encounter with the strange black shadow. I barely contained myself long enough to make it home later on that first day, where I spent most of the night trying to find him online. It was strange, but he wasn’t on any of the social networking sites and no one at school seemed to know how to get a hold of him. I had to talk with him. Had to know I wasn’t crazy thinking I’d been attacked by some tar monster lurking in an alleyway behind the school. I did a random search for Devin on Google and as a last resort even pulled out the phonebook. Nothing. There was no sign of Devin anywhere. It was as though he didn’t exist.

A part of me liked having the distraction of trying to find him, because I was too terrified to sleep. If that thing in the alley *had* been real,

what was it? *Could* I really have been attacked, or had the encounter been some messed-up dream? I caught myself every time I started doubting my memories and touched the tender lump on the back of my head. The lump was real. I'd fallen backwards and hit my head on a rock when the creature first appeared, so the encounter *had* to have happened.

Right?

Doubt nagged and other options began to surface, sickening me. Maybe I'd fallen while running around the back of the gym in my rush to get to class and knocked myself out. Maybe I dreamt the whole 'Devin as an angel' thing.

My mind whirled with possibilities and the next two days without Devin's presence were spent wondering if I'd dreamt the whole thing up. Two sleepless nights had started to take a toll, and I was exhausted from trying to come up with plausible explanations. Every time I closed my lids thinking I might actually be able to sleep, the fluid yellow eyes of the creature stared back from the darkness of my dreams. Every shadow held remnants of its tarry black fingers, every sound was its stealthy approach. Slowly losing my grip on reality, I knew I had to talk to Devin. I needed to find out if things had happened as I'd imagined.

I arrived at school on the third day after the *encounter* without Stacey. Normally, we walked together, but today it had taken me much longer to get ready. Hiding the dark circles under my eyes had proven difficult, and Stacey had finally left me behind.

Terrified, I walked by myself, the over-filled travel mug I clutched in my fist the only thing keeping me focused. I'd dug out the biggest coffee mug I could find, to the surprise of my parents, and received more than a few strange looks as I struggled down the street with it.

Stacey met me in our usual place on the front steps of the school. I knew right away she was going to bug me about the coffee. I took another tentative sip of the sour black liquid as I walked up the stairs, and the first of the day's sun rays popped over the roof of the school right into my eyes. It was going to be as blazing hot today as it had been for the last two, I could tell by the dryness in the air. The sun and warmth did little to melt the ice in my soul, however, and I shuddered.

Stacey eyed me in amusement as I rested my coffee on the wide cement railing along the stairs before pulling myself up beside it. "What's

with the giganto cup of coffee?” she asked and then bent to adjust the laces of her heavy black army boots.

I ran the back of my hand across my lips and looked out over the expansive front lawn of the school. “I had zero sleep last night. Don’t bug me. It’s the only thing keeping me alive right now.”

Stacey stood and crinkled her nose. “Well, maybe you should slow down on all the coffee and energy drinks, if you want to sleep.” She shoved my bag, and several cans of Rocket Juice clunked together.

I caught the backpack before it toppled off the edge of the stairs and frowned at her. “*Hey*,” I scolded. “Do you have any idea how expensive those cans are? Careful!”

Her leather jacket groaned as she put her hands on her hips and looked accusingly at me. “You have a serious problem, Annalisa Harold! You need to lay off the caffeine—you’re starting to lose it. Think about how you’ve been acting the last few days.” She popped her gum and chewed vigorously for a few seconds before continuing. “And come to think of it. . .” I watched mesmerized as she blew another enormous bubble nearly the size of her head before sucking it all back in to her mouth. “When did you start drinking coffee, anyways? I thought we decided caffeine stunts your growth.”

She was really starting to annoy me. “I decided since this morning,” I said quickly and picked at the rubber soles of my high-top Keds. “And it doesn’t really affect your growth,” I continued. “That’s some stupid urban legend.” I had to change the topic or else I might kill her. “Have you seen Devin?”

Smiling, she pulled her hat lower on her head and twisted the strands of hair poking out from under it. “You asked me that, like, two hundred times yesterday.” Folding her arms across her chest, she continued. “I didn’t think you liked him.” Tilting her head, she persisted. “He’s the *freak show* Bible guy. Remember? Or have I missed something?”

I shrugged noncommittally and avoided her gaze.

Growling, she said, “I’ll totally support you if you like him, Anna. You know that. Do you? Do you like him? Tell me!”

Dropping my eyes, I mumbled. “I don’t know.”

Taking a deep breath, she talked through the exhalation. “What am I going to do with you?” The moment was broken as several of our friends

walked past into the school. Once we were alone again, Stacey continued. "In answer to your question about Devin, no. I'm sorry, Anna. I haven't see . . ." She trailed off and I looked up to see her staring across the parking lot.

I scanned the row of buses unloading students and my heart fell out of my chest. Devin was walking up the sidewalk wearing a heavy sweater despite the heat of the morning. Silently, I urged him to look up and see me but he continued with his head down, his books under one arm, and his other hand shoved into the pocket of his jeans. Everything about him was so—*normal*.

Stacey corrected and started twisting another strand of hair around her finger. "Scratch that. There he is."

My stomach roared with millions of tiny butterflies. I don't know what I had expected to see, but it sure wasn't this. In my vision Devin had had wings, rippling stomach muscles and nearly bleached-blond hair. So where were these things now? Where were the beautiful white feathery wings that seemed to grow right out of his shoulder blades? There was no way he could be hiding them under the sweater. Where was my angel?

I stopped my thoughts dead and nearly laughed out loud at the absurdity of it all. *Angel? Did I really think Devin had turned into an angel?* I had to have imagined the whole thing. Perhaps I'd hit my head harder than I thought.

Stacey elbowed me and I nearly fell backwards off the railing.

"So are you going to talk with him, or what?"

Still staring at Devin and without looking at my friend, I answered, "No." I jumped down and struggled to get my bag over my shoulder as my feet touched the cement stairs. "Come on. We'd better get to class."

Stacey threw her arms into the air dramatically. "Are you kidding me?" She hissed. "You've only been talking about this guy constantly for the last two days and now that you see him, you want to run away?"

I hated keeping secrets from Stacey, but there was no way I could tell her what was going on without sounding clinically insane. Angels? Really? "Forget it," I said quickly. "I—I changed my mind."

She groaned and pulled her hat down over her face. Mumbling through the fabric, I hardly heard her words. "I will never understand you, Anna."

I snatched her hat and turned to move into the school despite her protests.

"Hey! Give that back!"

Once inside, she snatched the fedora from my grasp and pulled me into a quiet doorway. Patting the hat back into shape, she asked, "You *are* going to actually talk with him at some point. Right?" She shook her head. "Maybe not today, or even tomorrow, but at some point you are going to have a conversation with this guy." Her eyes were wide, pleading, when she finally looked at me. "Right?"

I rolled my eyes and she continued talking despite the fact I was walking away. "Tell me there's going to be some end to this obsession. Please! I can't take much more."

All through first class, I thought of Devin, and decided to walk by his locker at the bell. Perhaps by that time I'd gather enough strength to ask him what had happened the other day.

I slid out of my desk as the bell rang and quickly pushed my way through the throng of people in the hallway. Devin wasn't at his locker when I finally made it there and I scanned the hallway disappointed. Hundreds of people moved through the narrow corridor, some bumping me as they moved past, and I began to wonder if he was even going to stop at his locker between classes. I glanced at the hall clock nervously and nibbled on the corner of my lip. Second bell would be ringing in less than three minutes and I didn't want to be late for class. Reluctantly I ran to my locker, switched binders and then made it to next class before the bell. I'd have to wait until lunch to talk with him.

At lunch, I couldn't move quickly enough to the window of the cafeteria to see if Devin was at his usual spot under the tree. Not surprisingly, he wasn't there.

My thoughts were interrupted by Stacey.

"Where have you been, Anna? I've been waiting at my locker for like four hours!"

"Sorry," I apologized absently while I scanned the sea of bodies in the cafeteria for Devin. "I, I forgot."

She shoved me then, hard, and had my attention. "You forgot?" Her mouth hung open, eyes wide. "Would you snap out of it? Either tell me you like this guy, or I'm seriously going to kick your butt!"

Sighing, I scanned her heavily made up eyes. I knew my friend, and this was one of those moments when there was no way she was giving in. No lie would be convincing enough to trick her. Resigning myself, I finally said, "Okay. I like him a little."

She smiled and folded her arms across her chest. "I knew it! Who cares if he's a bit strange, right?" She shrugged.

'A bit?' I thought and nearly laughed out loud at the absurdity of the situation.

If she only knew.

"Can you help me find him? I'd really like to talk with him. I *need* to talk to him."

Grinning from ear to ear, she said, "Sure."

We walked around the school, and were about to give up hope of finding Devin, when we came to the school's auditorium. After pulling the door slowly open, we poked our heads in and nearly missed the lone figure sitting in the shadows on stage.

My heart leapt and I grabbed my friend's arm. "Oh my god! There he is," I whispered and started backing up. The heavy door puffed closed and we stood in the mostly deserted hallway.

Stacey stepped in my way as I continued to back away. "Oh no, you don't!" she scolded. "Get in there and talk with him. You need to talk with him. For both of our sanity!"

I nodded at Stacey. "You're right."

"I know," she said matter-of-factly and smiled before her tone grew serious again. "Now go on!"

With a deep breath, I adjusted my shirt, and pulled the door open before I could change my mind.

Devin's head lifted as I stepped into the cool dark room and I knew he saw me. Only five minutes until the bell, so I moved quickly down the center aisle past the hundreds of empty chairs. Shadows taunted from the many darkened corners and I had to force myself not to run in fear.

Using the stairs at center stage, I dashed quickly up and then slowed as I moved over to where Devin sat. After a few awkward moments of silence, I sat down in front of him. It felt weird to be on stage with an audience of cushioned chairs and the yawning blackness caused the hair on my neck to prickle.

"Hi," I said carefully, trying not to think of the massive space, and rubbed at my neck. The black entity could be hiding in any one of the sinister shadows.

He flipped a page in his Bible, but didn't answer.

"Um. What happened the other day?" I whispered. "You know, outside? Am I losing my mind?" No need for small talk about the weather this time.

He shook his head and used his fingers to comb his hair to the side. "I don't know what you're talking about."

My stomach fell. Maybe I *had* imagined the whole thing. Perhaps I should get up and walk away before I said something that would make me look stupid or crazy. Perhaps I should leave.

He interrupted my thoughts and glanced up briefly. "Can you go away so I can read?"

I was getting angry. "So, nothing out of the ordinary happened the other day?" Too late. My mouth didn't seem to care if I said something stupid. "You know, behind the gym? That *thing*?"

Eyes glued to his book, he shook his head no. "I was never behind the gym."

I thought back to my vision of what happened and suddenly the prayer returned. "So you're sure?"

"Yup," he said quickly.

I nodded. "You're certain that two days ago you didn't come and help me with some bizarre shadow monster?"

He talked to the book. "The only bizarre thing going on around here is you stalking me to talk about monsters." He lifted his face to mine. The corners of his eyelids trembled and he seemed to struggle to maintain eye contact. "Monsters? How old are you, anyway?"

My stomach lurched at how stupid I suddenly felt. His next words nauseated me. "Now can you go away? You and your little friend can worry about monsters while the rest of us focus on reality. No wonder you can't keep a boyfriend."

I was absolutely mortified. He was new to the school, but even he knew about my history with guys. Was it really that obvious to everyone? A lump the size of Mount Rushmore rose in my throat and I was certain I would cry right in front of him. I tightened my jaw, forced the feeling away,

when something urged me to say the prayer. The words filled my mind as they had before and the tears were forgotten. “Angel of God, the guardian and protector of my soul...”

His head snapped up, forehead furrowed deeply. “Stop! Stop it, Anna.”

Narrowing my eyes, instantly I knew he had lied. He *did* remember what had happened behind the school. He *knew* about the black tar thing. I had to continue, and held his eyes as I spoke. “. . .Shelter me, under your wi. . .”

“Cut it out!” He said more forcefully and his voice echoed in the vast space. The Bible lay forgotten in his lap.

“Tell me the truth, then.” I waited, arms folded, and the tension between us became almost visible. “What was that thing behind the school, and why do I distinctly remember seeing you with wings?”

Silence.

I repeated: “Tell me, Devin. Tell me what happened or I’ll say the prayer again. I *know* you know about that—that *thing*.” I was starting to get flustered and could feel hot tears behind my eyes. “I need to know I’m not losing my mind.”

He slammed the book and glared at me. Eons passed in the intensity of his eyes, but I refused to look away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said finally and broke his stare. Gathering his other books off the floor, he rose quickly and started walking away.

I struggled with the words of the prayer, but they were lost. Cursing, I charged after him as he bolted off the stage. I grabbed the back of his sweater before he could disappear behind the curtains and was going to demand he explain everything when he cried out in pain and collapsed to his knees. His Bible tumbled end-over-end back stage and came to a rest, pages fluttering before settling open.

I stood stunned. I hadn’t touched him that hard. He’d acted like I’d punched him in the back or something.

He took a deep shuddering breath, staggered to his feet, and then bent to gather his books. Propelled out of my stupor, I moved to pick up the Bible. “No!” he boomed as I reached for the large leather-bound book, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. “No,” he repeated more gently. “Don’t touch it!”

I stepped back gingerly and watched as he tenderly lifted the aged manuscript, brushed the cover gently, and then held it close to his chest. He stood a foot from me, head hung, and I held my breath as his eyes slowly found mine. A single tear glistened on his cheek before he wiped it away hurriedly.

It was as though he wanted to say something, but seemed to change his mind at the last moment and bolted down the stairs at center stage.

I flopped down unsure of what to do, and stared dejectedly at his retreating form. What had happened? Who was this guy?

The door to the auditorium puffed open but I didn't hear it close. I squinted into the shadows to see Devin standing in the tunnel of light from the hallway.

"You're not losing your mind."

Chapter Four

Propelled by Devin's last words, I fumbled to my feet and darted off stage as the bell rang. There was no way he was going to get away with saying I wasn't losing my mind without explaining himself. As I burst into the hallway, I ploughed into a thick sea of bodies. Apologizing to several guys for knocking their binders to the floor, I scanned the hallway for Devin. His head was barely visible through the throng of people and, as quickly as I was able, I started to push my way after him.

He was moving to English class—I had his schedule memorized—and if I didn't catch him before he got there, I decided I would follow him into class. His head appeared every now and then as we moved through the crowd to the door of his English class, where he finally disappeared completely from view. Frantically, I shoved several surprised people out of the way and burst through the door. My breaths were ragged and I'm sure I looked crazy standing there, my hair a tangled mess around my face.

Final bell sounded and the teacher leaning on the desk at the front of the class looked at me over his glasses.

"Please have a seat."

I scanned the room and noticed Devin glaring at me from the back. Before the teacher figured out I wasn't supposed to be there, I moved to the empty seat beside Devin and slid in gratefully.

Devin's expressionless face was covered with a thin sheen of sweat and I wondered why he didn't take his sweater off. "You're supposed to be in *your* English class right now," he hissed without looking at me.

Keeping my eye on the teacher, I leaned over when he turned and started making notes on the board. "I need to talk with you." I scanned Devin's profile. "Can you please talk to me?"

The teacher turned around then and I slumped in my chair. To my utter horror, he started taking attendance and it wasn't long before I was standing in the hallway, the classroom door closed behind me. Dejected, tears brimming my eyes, I moved slowly down the hall to where my real class was.

I knew I'd probably end up in detention, but at this point I didn't care. I didn't know what to do.

I was utterly alone.

My entire life was in an upheaval and I had no one to talk to. What was this thing that had come after me? How could I live knowing every shadow might come alive? A shuddering breath boiled from my chest, and I pressed my lips closed with my fingers as though this would help contain the tears. I leaned against the lockers trying to stop the burning, and squeezed my eyes against the desolation. I couldn't lose it now. I had to hold myself together. I had to be strong.

I took one more shuddering breath and then ran the rest of the way to my class. I'd figure this out somehow.

~*~

After much soul-searching, and very little paying attention in class, it was settled. I would follow Devin after school. There was no way he would get away with not talking to me. I would do whatever I had to, even if that meant following him like some crazy stalker.

Managing to duck out five minutes early from my last class, I moved stealthily through the hall. I had to get to my locker before setting my plan in motion.

Final bell rang as I was making my way to Devin's locker, and almost instantly the empty hallway came alive. Shoving through the mass of bodies, I stopped two rows from Devin's locker, squeezed myself into the doorway of an empty classroom, and waited patiently for his return.

It wasn't long before he appeared from the crowd, looking even more hunched over than at lunch. I flinched when someone bumped into him as he pulled his locker open. He collapsed into the open metal door and slammed it shut again. Several people looked in his direction but no one seemed to care as he stood with his face pressed into the red chipped metal of his locker. Biting my lip, I waited anxiously as he rested like this. Willing him to move, I almost went to his aid when he finally stood shakily and popped his locker open. He grabbed several binders, held them close to his body along with his Bible, and staggered down the hallway, almost running into a group of people in the process.

I trailed him easily through the school, but once we were outside it was harder. I didn't feel completely comfortable unless I was three or four blocks behind, but worried he would turn a corner and I'd lose sight of him for good. Picking up my pace, I was about two blocks back when he turned

down a road and disappeared. Running now, I fought to keep my bag on my shoulder and stopped at the corner to peek around. Thankfully, he was still on the sidewalk.

He walked hunched over for ten more blocks and I wondered if he was ever going to stop when he disappeared again. I ran to the corner and was mildly shocked to see he had stopped in front of Blessed Sacrament Church.

This guy read The Bible at school. What was stopping him from going to church afterwards? Made complete sense.

Right?

He paused in front of the gothic building and then moved slowly up the wide stone steps.

Groaning, I stepped back behind the house and kicked a stone. I'd walked this far in the blazing heat to find out Devin was going to *church*? I almost turned and walked back to school, but stopped. The reality was I really needed to talk to him. It was time to get answers, even if it was at church. And besides, it didn't feel as though I *could* walk away, even if I tried.

By the time I reached the ancient building, Devin had disappeared behind its heavy metal door. Despite the heat of the afternoon, a chill ran down my back when I looked up at the gargoyles smiling from their perches. Their sculpted faces were distorted, stretched into hideous smiles, and they watched me. They watched and questioned my presence in this holy place as they glared down from their stone prisons.

Before I could change my mind about following Devin, I adjusted my bag, took a deep breath, and pulled the heavy door open. It thumped closed behind me and I nearly jumped out of my skin when it hit me in the back as though urging me further in. The air inside was cool, tranquil, but the heavy scent of candles sat right in the middle of my chest.

I couldn't breath. *Gasp.*

Couldn't move. *Gasp.*

I had to get out of there. As I turned and grasped the door handle with sweating hands, images of Devin froze me.

His eyes bore into my soul and a sense of peace washed through my chest, taking the vise with it. Devin needed me. I needed him. I couldn't leave.

I turned slowly, being sure to take long even breaths, and leaned my head on the door, eyes closed.

Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. Nice and even. Breathe in, breathe out. Just remember your breathing.

I continued this mantra over and over as I examined my surroundings and started deeper into the belly of the church. A fountain trickling holy water was the first thing my ears detected, and years of attending mass as a child brought me to dunk my fingers into the cool liquid before making the sign of the cross.

As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, the crushing weight in my chest almost completely gone, I began to see more details. Pretty standard, actually: long nave with two rows of pews, beautiful stained glass windows, statues of the saints. My dad, a history professor at the university, had ensured I knew all the gothic churches had been constructed in much the same manner. Examining the architecture was one of the few ways I made it through the hour-long sermons as a child, and I did the same now as I moved. The pointed arches, cluster columns, ribbed vaults—it was all here. I examined the altar at the front of the room. The door to the left, I assumed went to the sacristy. There were a few other fire exits in the main church and I noted those in case I needed to make a break for it. As far as I could tell, the sacristy was the only door that led deeper into the building. This was where Devin must have gone.

Hopefully, anyway.

Swallowing, I started in that direction. It was strange, but I had expected to see Devin kneeling in one of the pews praying. Perhaps he was taking this priest business seriously and completing some sort of co-op.

As stealthily as I was able, I moved from the middle aisle to the one along the wall. The large stained glass windows made up a large portion of the walls and I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. Gleaming glass eyes of the saints followed as I moved like a thief and I started to actually feel like I was intruding in this holy place. Jesus hung in anguish from a crucifix behind the ornately carved altar and a deep sadness filled my soul as I looked into his pain-filled face. I had always had a hard time going to church, so none of this crushing grief in my chest was new. My adoptive parents were extremely religious and had brought me to church every Sunday as a child. It wasn't until high school I'd finally convinced them to

let me stay home. I couldn't handle it anymore. Being in the building actually, *physically*, pained me. As strange as this sounded, it was as though I could actually feel Jesus' pain. Like I was experiencing every torturous moment he'd spent on the cross. Try telling *that* to your parents without sounding like you were losing your mind.

I peered around the frame of the arched stone doorway of the sacristy, fully expecting to see Devin standing there, and was more than disappointed he wasn't. This room was narrow with dark paneled walls and an emerald green carpet runner. A large closet with sliding glass doors held many long robes for the altar servers and priests. Papers, sheet music, and hymnals were scattered across every table and shelf in the room. It was a crazy, disorganized mess. Another arched doorway stood open at the end and with a determined grunt, I moved toward it. My shoes sunk into the green carpet and the floor moaned, but I was thankful my footfalls were mostly muffled.

As I neared the door, I could hear hushed voices and held my breath, listening. Peering slowly around the casing, a long hallway with many closed doors welcomed me. One lone window, with another beautiful stained glass image, was at the end of the hallway. This time the glass held a beautiful rendition of Mary holding the baby Jesus. Mary's eyes were cast down admiring the babe in her arms, but his eyes seemed to be locked with mine. I swallowed nervously, and that's when I noticed the last door in the hall stood open.

Maybe this was where Devin had gone. I hoped I was right, because I presumed the other doors would be locked. As I walked slowly down the hallway, the voices grew louder. I examined each of the closed wooden doors as I passed and wondered what ancient symbols might be scribed into the heavy dark oak.

Like the white-hot terror I'd felt when confronted by the monster in the alley, my blood ran cold when a man screamed. My entire body went numb, feet frozen in place, when a wet slap sounded in the thick air. Another torturous scream ripped through the deserted hallway and my body came alive with a jolt of static. I turned and ran back the way I came, in a blur of motion. Panting in sheer terror, I stopped once I was in the main part of the church and stood trying to catch my breath in the center aisle. I could feel Jesus' wooden eyes on my back and turned to look up into his face.

The same pain that always gripped my soul lashed out with razor claws and I clutched my chest in agony. There was only one way to get rid of the claw around my heart. I had to get out, had to leave. What I wanted to do was run out of the church, run back to the street, but what I actually did was nowhere near this.

With fresh tears on my cheeks, inexplicably I ran back in to the long room. It felt like there was a fifty-pound boulder in my bag as I dragged it behind me and contemplated dropping it. Once I was down the hallway again, I stopped short of the open door beside the beautifully lit window of Mary and her babe.

Another ear-splitting scream ripped through the air. I covered my ears with no chance of blocking it out.

I touched the frame of the door. The wood was cold, smooth, and the inside of my nose stung with the heavy scent of varnish. My heart hammered so hard I could hear it in my ears. I stepped closer to the open door, holding my breath, and closed my eyes before placing my face against the wood. Did I really want to see what was beyond the door?

Two more slaps sounded painfully in the deserted hall and I inhaled sharply before finally building up enough courage to peer cautiously around the doorway. The sight that greeted me could not have been recreated in my worst nightmare. I nearly fainted.

Chapter Five

With the heavy scent of varnish stuck in my nostrils, I digested the scene before me. Devin was naked from the waist up and kneeling over a low wooden table placed in front of yet another stained glass window. Struck by how thin he was, I could distinctly see the outline of ribs along his side.

The walls and floor were the same stone as the outside of the church and a wrought iron lantern hung suspended from the high ceiling by a heavy chain. A ceiling-to-floor stained glass window shone brilliantly, with thousands of colors, and Devin's body seemed alive with the tiny pinpricks of light. Saint Patrick was the focus of this artwork, as indicated by the plaque at the bottom, and it appeared as though he were actually looking down at the two people in the room as serpents curled around his feet.

At first I thought the red coloring on Devin's back was from the sun shining through the window, but soon came to see he had what looked like hundreds of long cuts on his back. His shoulder blades bore two palm-sized wounds that oozed. The rest of his back was covered in a mess of crisscrossing long cuts that looked very deep.

There was another, older man in the room. This aged man stood beside Devin, his long white robe spattered with blood, and he held a large white towel in his hands. Sweat glistened on his balding head and beautiful fairies of light from the window danced across his face.

I held my breath when Devin lifted himself off the table. Gripped tightly in his right fist was a short leather-wrapped rod with long braided metal strings hanging from it. He lifted the device and with a determined groan whipped the metal ropes across his shoulders. I had to stifle my own cry when he screamed and blinked hot tears down my cheeks. New wounds ripped open across his arched back as he continued like this over and over. His body trembled with each strike.

The other man in the room, whom I'd nearly forgotten about in my shock, stepped over and grabbed Devin's hand mid-swing. "Have you not shown penance yet, my son?" His voice was raspy and he fought to draw in wheezing breaths. "Enough." He demanded weakly. "Please, Devin. I cannot bear to watch any longer."

Devin shook his head, hair hung around his face. “No,” he gasped. “I must continue.”

The older man looked doubtful and seemed to not want to let go of Devin’s arm.

“Please, Father.” Devin looked up at him, body shaking uncontrollably as he pulled his arm from the old man’s grip. “I must continue. If I do not. . .” he paused, head wavering as though he were going to pass out. The old priest moved forward but Devin held a bloodied hand up and boomed. “No! Stop! Do not assist me.” Silence. I held my breath as he continued. “If I do not show penance, I will not be able to stay here. She needs me, until she is strong enough to come back to us.”

The old man lifted his hands to the ceiling in defeat and then fell to his knees beside Devin, head held in his hands. I felt sick to my stomach when Devin started hitting himself again and had to close my eyes against it. Moving back around the door frame and into the hall, I leaned against the wall unable to move. I heard the slap of the whip-like device and lost count of how many times Devin used it. He sobbed, cried out for mercy. Every strike lashed at me and the fingers in my ears did little to block them out. The screaming, the sobbing, was ripping my soul to pieces. I was helpless, frozen in time, and running was the only thing that made sense. My survival instinct screamed for me to run, to flee, but some ingrained need held me frozen. I needed to be here, needed to witness this horror, and was stuck.

A lump in my stomach the size of a boulder rolled, and my legs were frozen tree trunks rooted deeply to the floor. If I were going to be sick, it was going to happen right here. I couldn’t force my legs to move even if my life depended on it. The air around my head hummed and I could almost see Devin’s pain rippling in the air. Squeezing my eyes shut, I breathed evenly, trying to calm the nausea rising. For the moment, it worked.

Something whispered, something urged, and reluctantly I opened my eyes and peered around the doorway again. I watched for several agonizing minutes as Devin beat himself to near unconsciousness.

‘*Stop! Just stop!*’ I wanted to screech, but nothing but air came out. I had heard about canings and lashings before, but never imagined they would be so brutal to witness firsthand. How could someone do this to himself?

I had no idea how many times he had been lashed. A deep sadness boiled up from my soul and I knew I'd lost a piece of my humanity. I couldn't stop the tears that poured down my cheeks. My heart, my soul, was on fire for Devin and there was nothing I could do to help him. I nearly jumped out of my skin when the aged man spoke.

"Please tell me your sins have been forgiven, my son." The man held Devin's bloodied wrist again. "Please say our Father accepts your penance," he sighed heavily.

Hair hanging around his face, Devin spoke from behind sobs. "Y-yes. H-He accepts my penance."

The man pressed his hands together in prayer, his voice thin with tears. "Thank you, blessed Mother." He was sobbing now. "Thank you."

"I am thankful, Father." Devin drew in a sharp breath and his head made a hollow *thunk* when he collapsed onto the wooden table. Without moving he spoke, voice muffled. "I am thankful you have forgiven me." He cried pitifully. "Thank you for your mercy. I am deeply honored and will suffer a thousand deaths if only to continue this task for one more day. My love for you is unfaltering." Mournful sobs filled the room and I was crying right along with him. "For you have set me free of the fires of Hell and given me joy unspeakable." More shuddering breaths shook his damaged torso. "In you, Father, I find strength and courage to go on."

The man in the long robe used the wooden table to stagger to his feet and stood as rigid as a statue. Without a word, he walked through another doorway out of my sight line and disappeared.

Devin collapsed in a heap in front of the table and lay sobbing, face pressed into the stone floor.

Scanning the room and empty hallway behind me, I wasn't sure what I should do. I wanted to help him, but was terrified. Slowly, I slid down the wall and sat heavily.

Great gut-wrenching moans escaped Devin's crumpled form and I leaned hesitantly around the door frame again. He lay as he had moments before with his cheek pressed to the floor, face covered with strands of sweat-drenched hair. I had never heard anyone cry so desolately, and listening to him released more tears from my soul. Helpless to stop them, I let them come and stared at his bleeding back, tears pouring like rivers down my cheeks.

I realized then my lungs were burning and exhaled loudly. Devin's eyes popped open and he looked at me through the mess of hair. His aqua eyes rippled with tears, beckoned for help, but he lay there motionless, speechless. Quiet.

I was frozen. Should I try to help him? Should I run away? Should I pretend I hadn't witnessed this brutal beating? *Could* I leave now?

I stood shakily and took a hesitant step forward.

"Stop." He cried, struggling to lift his arm. "Please, just stop."

I looked in the direction the other man had gone without moving further into the room. "I have to get you out of here," I hissed, and wiped tears away with my fingers. "Let me help you."

Devin cried out as he pushed himself up from the floor. Several of the gashes on his back tore open and he stumbled and collapsed again. His head hit the floor with a sickening thump.

I couldn't help myself this time. My stomach clenched and new tears streamed down my cheeks as I moved over to him. Searching for a place to touch him, I finally decided to grab his arm. This was one of few spots free of blood.

His voice was stronger this time, more forceful, and he pulled free of my grip. "I wish you would just go away." He shook his head. "Go!"

"No way!" I hissed, trying not to talk too loudly. Anger flooded in with my terror, and it was a mix of emotions I'd rarely experienced. I'd made up my mind. I wasn't going anywhere without him. "Not until I know you're safe."

"I'm fine, Anna. Go away."

"No, you're not fine, Devin! Look at you!"

I watched with trepidation as he pulled himself from the floor and stood unsteadily. My eyes darted repeatedly to the doorway the other man had disappeared through. He could return at any moment. "Come on!" I urged, and my panicked heart did not understand why he was moving so slowly. "Before he comes back."

"*He* is not someone you need to worry about." He drew a shuddering breath. "Perhaps you could stand to learn something from him and *leave*!"

My blood ran cold and I planted my hands on my hips. "Sure I can learn something," I hissed, heat flamed in my chest. "Learn that it's okay to watch someone beat themselves to a pulp?" I spat. "I . . . I don't even know

what to say to you right now.” I rubbed my forehead as I tried to think of the next logical step. “You’re a mess! I think we need to go to the hospital before you bleed to death or something.”

Devin shook his head and stared at me through the hair hanging in his face. Face stained with tears, eyes puffy from crying, in an instant my heart melted for him and I felt like crying again. Damn mixed-up emotions. He frowned and wiped his hair out of his eyes with trembling fingers. “You shouldn’t have come.” Voice quavering, he gestured to the door. “Just go. I . . .” he stammered. “I don’t want you to see me like this. I-I’ll be fine.”

“No!” I stomped my foot like a child. “There is no way I’m going anywhere before I know you’re okay.” I drew a shuddering breath. “And while we’re on the topic?” I crossed my arms after tucking my hair behind my ears. “What was that? I’m not leaving here without answers! No chance!”

Screw him.

“You don’t need to worry about that. Forget it.” His beautiful liquid eyes held mine. “It’s time for you to leave now. I—I’m going to be okay. Okay?”

Narrowing my eyes, I shook my head. “No! I’m staying.”

“Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

“Because,” I fired back. “There’s something seriously wrong with you.” I held his gaze challengingly and he looked away defeated. “I’m not leaving until I know you’re okay. Until I get the answers I came for . . . until, until . . .” I was stammering and clenched my fists at my sides to ground myself. “I’m not leaving. Deal with it!”

Cursing, he grabbed my arm gingerly and pulled me into the hallway. Practically dragging me, he opened a door on the other side of the hallway and hauled me through it roughly. My eyes kept returning to the cuts on his back as we walked, and I still couldn’t believe I was looking at something real. The sickening boulder in my stomach shifted again and I returned my gaze to the hallway so I didn’t have to look at all the blood. This corridor was different from the last, in that there was no carpet on the floor and no natural light. We soon came to a set of stone steps disappearing under the thick walls and I followed him blindly down the winding, narrow stairwell. When we finally came to the bottom, he stopped and leaned heavily against

the wall. He sobbed openly for several long minutes, forearm held shakily over his eyes, but moved away when I touched his arm.

"I'm fine," he hissed and wiped his face with an open hand. "Just don't touch me. Stay . . . away."

"No!"

"Stay away!" His voice boomed in the small area and I jumped back.

I wanted to cry, wanted to scream. What was his problem? Didn't he realize I was here trying to help?

I watched as he moved cautiously again, the wounds on his back dripping now, to pull a large metal key out of the pocket of his jeans.

The air in the small hallway was stale, old smelling, and held the scent of a thousand candles. Resisting the urge to help him for fear of being yelled at again, I watched as he inserted the ancient brass key into the lock with trembling fingers. Just when I was certain he wasn't going to have the strength to turn it, the lock clicked noisily. I started to follow him into the room when he stopped in the doorway. "Can you please leave?" he asked, pleading, the anger gone from his voice.

I shook my head despite the fact I was talking to his back. "Not a chance."

His shoulders fell and I followed his hunched-over form into the dark, trying not to look at his blood-drenched back. I stood within the doorway until a light snapped on.

The room before me was not what I expected. The walls and floor were made of the same large block stones as the outside of the church, and the ceiling soared at least ten feet overhead. There was a stale dampness in the air that stuck in my nose, and I rubbed my sweating palms on my jeans before shoving them into my pockets. A single low cot with a thin grey blanket was pushed up against the wall, and a worn wooden table with Devin's copy of the Bible was directly across from it. An uncomfortable looking wooden chair stood beside an antique wardrobe, and a fireplace with a hearth as tall as I was finished the mostly barren space. There were no windows. There was nothing personal. My first instinct was to call it a jail cell.

"Where are we?" I asked and my voice echoed in the large space.

"My room," Devin answered quickly and closed the door.

"Your room?"

He glanced sideways at me as he bolted the door, but didn't respond.

"You live here?" I asked perplexed, and wondered if I should be nervous about the locked door. "At church?"

He limped over to the table and bent painfully to kiss the cover of his Bible. He then made the sign of the cross and moved to the mantle where he rummaged for something.

I continued despite his silence. "You live in the basement of the church?"

Limping, he moved to the single wooden wardrobe and leaned inside. His voice was muffled. "This is my bedroom. I sleep here."

He pulled out a t-shirt and I watched in doubt as he attempted to pull it over his head. The material stuck to the blood on his back and he cried out several times as he tried to pull it down over his shoulders.

"Stop!" I yelled, not able to stand watching Devin torture himself. "You need bandages or something before you put that shirt on." My stomach turned, as the wounds on his back were like great gaping mouths. "Do you have something? A-a bandage or twenty, or some sort of wrap?" My stomach heaved and I swallowed.

I jumped when he ripped the now blood-soaked shirt off his head with a roar and flung it across the room. Cursing, he said, "You shouldn't even be here, so don't start telling me what to do!"

His tone ripped at my heart. My mind yelled for me to turn and leave, but my heart wouldn't allow it. I put my hands on my hips. "Why don't you stop being such a jerk and let me help you?" My heart pounded, mouth dry, and my frustration threatened to unleash tears.

He stood studying my face and after several minutes of uncomfortable silence, reluctantly retrieved a roll of gauze from the wardrobe and handed it to me. "Fine." He spat and turned with his back toward me. "Hurry up, and then get out of here."

Not sure of how I was going to start to bandage the large area, I examined the parts of his back that hadn't been touched by the whip. The olive-colored skin of his arms and shoulders was lightly covered in pale freckles and it didn't look like he had an ounce of fat on him anywhere. Blood was slowly oozing from the wounds and my stomach tumbled. I dropped my bag onto his bed and said, "I, um, need to wipe some of the blood away first." My stomach threatened to unload its contents and I

fought with my revulsion. “And your pants are completely covered in blood. You’re going to need to change those.”

He marched out of the room wordlessly and returned shortly with a bowl of water and a cloth. Sitting down on the cot, his back to me, he leaned forward and held his head in his hands. “Don’t worry about the pants. Just hurry up.”

As I carefully dabbed at his back with the thin white cloth, a million questions raced through my mind. What was that self-whipping all about, and why had Devin wanted it? Was I in danger? Had I really seen Devin with wings, or had that been part of some crazy dream? Were these large oval-shaped wounds on his back from his wings? And what was that thing in the alleyway behind the school? Was this creature still coming after me?

I worked quietly, trying not to touch the blood with my bare fingers, and pushed the questions away. I had never seen so many cuts before and could only image how painful the large gashes might be. As the blood absorbed into the white cloth, hundreds of puckered lines appeared under the fresh ones. Obviously, this was not the first time he had experienced this type of assault. *What the heck?* I thought for what felt like the millionth time. *What could he have done to deserve this type of punishment?*

Taking a chance, I said, “I think you might need stitches for some of these. They don’t seem to want to stop bleeding.”

He didn’t respond and I let it drop. Let him bleed to death, for all I cared then.

He complained only once as I worked. When the wounds looked ready to be bandaged, I told him to stand.

Using the rusted metal bed frame for support, he stood slowly and then turned toward me. His eyes were cast downward and I stood looking up at him. His skin was smooth, pale, and the right corner of his mouth curled slightly more than the other, making it look as though he were smirking. Long dark lashes almost brushed his cheeks and when his eyes slowly found mine it was impossible to look away. Like the fluid waves of the ocean, his gaze pierced my heart and a warm feeling spread throughout my body. This sensation, this feeling, was like home. It felt like I had been away from family for a long time and was just getting back. I had always known these eyes, had gazed in to them for a millennium, but how could I have? Devin and I had only just met.

I didn't know what to say. What *could* I say that would make sense? My heart was bleeding in pity and my mind was fighting with the bizarre sensation of having known Devin for a very long time despite the ridiculousness of that notion. I wanted to wrap my arms around him, wanted to stroke his hair and wipe his tears away, not only to soothe his pain but my own. Tears boiled up from the pit of my stomach and I looked away as one escaped down my cheek.

Surprisingly, his voice was soft. "Don't cry for me, Anna. Do not waste any more on me."

I snorted sarcastically and wiped the renegade away. The fist in my chest was unrelenting and it took all I had not to reach out and touch him. "Yeah, okay. I see beatings like this every day. No problem." How did he expect me to feel? Picking up the roll of gauze from the cot, I gestured with it without looking him in the eyes again. "Turn around and lift your arms up. I can't stand to look at you anymore."

Without argument he complied, and as I walked around him carefully covering his wounds with the gauze, his gaze followed me. The heavy fist in my chest changed to a deep fluttering and I was once again struggling to keep the tears down.

The gashes on his back soaked right through the first few layers of the white material and I had to use the entire roll. I was certain there were a few cuts large enough to warrant stitches, but my suggestion had already fallen on deaf ears and I wouldn't mention it again. When I finished, I was in front of him, eyes level with his neck.

Looking up, I said with a weak smile, "There. All done."

"Thank you," he said with little emotion. "I would appreciate you not talking to anyone about what you saw here today."

I crinkled my nose and opened my mouth to speak when he cut me off.

"Promise me you'll keep this to yourself."

I crossed my toes and nodded. "Okay."

After a few uncomfortable seconds standing motionless in front of me, he moved to select another shirt from the old wardrobe and struggled into it before carefully sitting down on the low bed, head in his hands. "I need you to leave now, Anna. Please . . . please leave. Life here was much less complicated without you around."

“What do I say to that?” I sat cautiously beside him and the old cot squeaked under my weight. My closeness seemed to pain him and he flinched before turning away. Frowning, I talked to the back of his head. “You know I can’t leave.” My mind whirled with the events of the last few days and I asked carefully, “What is going on? Who *are* you, really? What was that creature behind the school?”

Leaning away slightly, he turned to look at me and my breath caught. His gaze penetrated my chest and into my heart. Another wave of warmth swept through my body, and the sensation of familiarity was stronger than ever. He seemed about to say something when his eyes snapped to the closed door. “He’s coming!”

We jumped up at the same time and before I could start running around the room in a panic, he pulled me over to the wardrobe. “Quick,” he hissed and shoved my bag at me. “Get inside and stay quiet!”

I jumped into the small closet and tried to get comfortable amid Devin’s clothing. Hangers clanged musically overhead and I held my body perfectly still waiting for them to stop. The door of the wardrobe was partially open and I peered hesitantly through the crack. I had a perfect view of Devin and most of the room.

My heart leapt into my throat when the lock clicked loudly and the man from upstairs appeared in the doorway. What if he had heard me? Was I in trouble?

Devin dropped to his knees as the man walked across the room and bowed his head, hands folded in front of his chest. “Father Curtis,” he said respectfully. Tiny spots of blood started to show on the back of his white t-shirt. “Most reverend son of our Lord God.”

The priest limped over to where Devin was kneeling and placed a hand on his head. I was certain I saw a tear on his wrinkled cheek.

“Devin,” he said hoarsely, his voice cracking. “My heart cannot take any more of these whippings. I have come to bandage your wounds and ask for mercy.”

“I have taken care of them this time, Father. Thank you for your kindness.”

The aged priest looked lovingly down and smoothed Devin’s chestnut hair. He sniffled loudly and rubbed his bulbous nose with a swollen knuckle. “Please tell me we are finished for some time.”

"I cannot guarantee we are done with them," Devin said without lifting his head. "It will all depend on the girl." He glanced toward the wardrobe where I hid. "If she needs me, it is my duty to be there."

Surprisingly, Father Curtis fell to his knees and placed his head on the floor in front of Devin's knees. "I am too weak to continue." His sobs filled the room. "It burns my heart, my soul. Kills the person I am." The priest groaned into the floor. "Please forgive me. I cannot continue to witness the flogging of one of God's messengers."

This caught my attention. God's messenger? An angel?

Devin's voice was soft, reassuring. "You do not have a choice in this. Our Father has selected you. Without you, I cannot stay here. I need you, Father Curtis." He stood. "Give up your mortal confines, take up God's sword, do his bidding. We must all suffer for the greater good."

Devin placed a hand on the man's arm and gently urged him up. The priest seemed unable to support his weight and clung to Devin's jeans, howling as though his pain were physical. Continuing in the same soft voice, Devin said, "Come now, Father. Rest. Tomorrow you will find the strength of a new day."

The priest shrank away and fell forwards onto his hands. "I have more grave news, my son." He paused on his hands and knees. "Father James is gone. He has been taken by one of His minions." The man's eyes were wild as he looked desperately up at Devin. "The key is lost! He has been taken to the Underworld."

"Please calm yourself," Devin cooed reassuringly and offered the priest his hand. "Let us pray together."

"These prayers are doing nothing." The man spat and slapped Devin's hands. "I . . . I cannot continue like this. We have failed. He has not heard our prayers."

Devin smiled weakly and it felt as though his next words were for me. "All prayers are heard, Father. Have faith our Lord knows what is needed and has provided for us. Now please," Devin took the man's hands in his. "You must rest for the night. There is much to be done tomorrow. Your prayers are about to be answered."

After coaxing the priest to his feet, Devin wrapped a strong arm under his and the pair moved slowly toward the door. Father Curtis continued to sob horribly. "Please do not make me do this. I . . . I can no longer complete

this task. I am a failure. Humanity will succumb to the fires of Hell because of me.”

Suddenly my cell phone chimed with an incoming text message. I snatched my bag, but it was too late to silence the phone. Father Curtis stood frozen in the doorway looking back in to the room.

“What was that I heard?”

Devin turned and stared at me through the crack. He did not answer the man. My stomach cramped and my entire body turned to ice. What was I going to do?

I held my breath as the priest continued. He looked right at the wardrobe when he spoke. “Is there someone here?”

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Chapter Six

I thought for sure Devin was going to give me away and held my now-silenced phone in my fist. Clothing on metal hangers in Devin's wardrobe brushed my face, but I didn't dare move to push them away. I held my breath and waited to see what would happen.

The priest looked up at Devin. "Is there someone here, my son?"

Devin's gaze remained glued to the wardrobe, his face impassive. "There is no one here, Father. We both know that is not permitted. I accidentally packed another student's cell phone into my bag and it must have gone off. I plan to return it tomorrow." He changed the course of the conversation. "Come now. You need to lie down."

The priest wiped his eyes and with some more urging from Devin, finally turned and moved toward the door.

I waited several long minutes in Devin's room once they had disappeared, but white-hot terror began to crescendo in my chest until I could no longer stay within the confines of the stone walls. Something huge was going on, something evil was growing, and I no longer wanted to be a part of it.

Bolting from the room, I ran blindly through the hallways of the church. Terror, pure and untouched, pounded in my chest. With every beat of my heart, the real world under my feet became thinner and thinner, as though I were running on melting ice. My focus became one thing only: escape.

I was fleeing from something looming over me—something that followed so closely I had no chance to outrun it. My eyes were blurred with tears and soon I became so horribly turned around, I had no idea where I was. Nothing looked familiar, and just when I thought I'd never find my way out I burst into the main chapel. Jesus looked down upon me with sad eyes, and I stopped dead in my tracks right in the middle of the central aisle. I wanted to turn and run, could feel the instinctual part of my mind screaming for me to move, but some unseen force held me.

And then something happened. A wave of sound passed through me, through every cell and molecule in the room, and everything came alive. The statues were suddenly staring right at me. Lifeless stone heads turned

slowly in my direction one by one with the sound of stone on stone, and the hair on the back of my neck bristled. As I scanned the faces of the stone statues, my heart fell into my shoes as I realized the large statue of Jesus above the altar was also moving. My heart screeched to a halt, but I couldn't stop myself from looking in His direction. How could these statues be moving? How could the stone representation of Jesus above the altar be *moving*? My breaths were coming in short gasps and my mouth hung open as I closed my eyes and turned fully toward the front of the church. I could feel Him looking at me, but could not bring myself to open my eyes.

Do not be frightened, Anna.

I gulped and said through cotton balls in my mouth, my eyes squeezed tightly closed, "Wh—what?"

Do not be frightened, my child. I have come to release you.

My voice was like a squeak in the large room. "Release me . . . from what?" Surely, I was imagining all this. These statues couldn't be alive. There was no way I was having a conversation with the figure of Jesus suspended above the altar. I slowly tore an eyelid open, convinced I would see nothing but an ordinary church, so imagine my horror when the statue above the altar smiled deeply. Jesus was still nailed to the cross, wrists and feet impaled with the thick iron spikes, but His face was alive and joyous. I still couldn't move my body and closed my eyes again. Whimpering, I covered my face with my hands.

Eyes that were once blind now see.

And then the wind started. The entire church filled with a torrential wind that felt as though it would tear the very clothes from my body. I could feel something in my chest changing then and thought I might be ripped in two when my legs were released from whatever concrete held them and I was able to finally run. A scream rose from the pit of my stomach, and without opening my eyes completely I turned and ran from the church.

I burst through the heavy front doors and tumbled down the cement stairs to come to a rest on the sidewalk. An older woman with coke bottle glasses tapped me with her cane, and I screamed shrilly while scrambling to my feet.

"Are you on drugs?" she asked through clicking dentures. "My grandson is on drugs all the time." She shook her head and her thick grey

curls bounced around her fat face. “Punk-ass kids. Thinkin’ you’re all that.”

Shading my eyes from the sun with an arm, I stared stunned at the woman’s face. Surprisingly, she poked me again and then held something out.

“He said you might need this.”

I pushed her cane out of my ribs and squinted in confusion. Her face was as puckered as an old prune and she eyed me doubtfully. The golden pendant she held in her fist glinted in the sun and she shoved it at me again. “Here! He said you need to take this.”

I held my arms up. “N-no thanks, lady.” I was still in shock from what had happened and couldn’t wrap my mind around her strange request.

I hunched over, hands on my knees, and willed my body to calm. The adrenaline pumping through my veins had begun to subside, but I still felt numb. I was brought stunningly back to reality when something hit me over the back with a metal twang. Not surprisingly, it was the woman and her aluminum cane. She thrust the pendant in my face.

“Hey! Ouch!” I swung out weakly, not really intending to strike the woman, but she was unrelenting and shoved her hand in my face again. “What the heck is wrong with you, lady? I don’t want your stupid pendant.”

She smiled widely and her dentures clacked together. “You will, my child. You will.”

An older car drove by then and the sun glinted off the shiny chrome bumper. Temporarily blinded, I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head. Barely seconds later, I opened them cautiously and was about to tell the woman to buzz off only to discover I was alone on the sidewalk. I turned in a complete circle wondering if she had started down the sidewalk, but there was no one around for blocks. The only thing left to indicate she had been real was the gold pendant lying on the ground at my feet. I wasn’t going to take it at first, but thought of the woman’s insistence and squatted to examine it. The gold was beautiful and shone gloriously in the bright sun. The three-looped design looked familiar, but I wasn’t sure where I had seen it before. Carefully, I picked up the palm-sized ornament from the sidewalk and tucked it into my pocket as I stood.

I glanced back at the massive church looming behind me, and images of death flashed before my eyes. Statues were coming alive . . . people were flogging themselves.

Surely, I had lost my mind.

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Chapter Seven

Amazingly, I found myself at school the next day. I sat in my usual spot on the front step waiting for Stacey, energy drink by my side, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from a line of ants crawling across the cement steps. In the last four days, I'd maybe had twelve hours of sleep and had begun to feel as mindless as the ants. I marched in, behaved like they expected me to, and then marched out at the end. But things were much more complicated than sleep deprivation from a few restless nights. Couple the talking statues with Devin's beating and the strange demon shadows hiding at the back of the school, and you'd have it: one psycho Anna, with massive black circles under her eyes. Suddenly, I knew how it must feel to lose your mind. I was pulled from my thoughts when Stacey called my name.

"Anna!"

I smiled half-heartedly at my friend as she clomped up the stairs. Her natural bleach-blonde hair shimmered in the sunlight. I took a long swig of my drink.

"You know I'm worried about you, Anna."

I looked at my friend over the end of the can and took another few gulps before setting it beside me. "Why?" I asked and wiped my lips.

Stacey squinted and looked around the yard. "I know there's something wrong, but every time I ask, you lie and say it's nothing."

This was a familiar conversation. I'd been online with her for well over three hours the night before, trying to explain nothing was wrong.

I cleared my throat. "There really isn't anything."

"See," she said. "You did it again."

I crinkled my nose at her. "Did what?"

She crossed her arms. "You lied to me, Anna. I've known you since we were kids. You can't lie to me. I *can tell* when you're doing it!" Her bright eyes scanned my face. "I thought we were best friends. What's happening to us?"

I sighed heavily and watched as Devin appeared at the edge of the school grounds. My heart started pounding. I wanted to go to him, but bit my lip and looked at my friend instead. "We *are* best friends. It's just—"

How could I say this? “It’s just that there’s something really serious going on right now. I don’t want to get you involved.”

“I knew it!” she said excitedly, her eyes glinting. “You *have* to tell me now.”

I watched Devin’s approaching form and Stacey followed my gaze. “It has something to do with this Devin guy, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t answer Stacey and we were silent as Devin slowly made his way up the cement walkway to where we stood. He was in jeans and a heavy sweater, and this time I knew why. Some of the large gashes on his back were so deep I wouldn’t doubt it if they were still bleeding.

Devin walked up the stairs, eyes on his feet, and stopped three down from us. He looked at me, over at Stacey, and then back at me again. Then, surprisingly, he continued into the school without a word.

Stacey leaned over and watched him go. When he was out of earshot, she put her hands on her hips and I knew I was in for it. “Okay,” she said in a serious tone. “If you don’t tell me what is going on right now, I’m going to lose my mind!”

I knew I wasn’t supposed to say anything, could feel the warning bells in my chest, but I had to tell someone. Jumping from the railing, I grabbed Stacey by the arm before moving toward the school. We weaved our way through the crowd until we came to the auditorium. The theatre group was meeting on stage, but I knew they wouldn’t hear our conversation if we sat in the house.

It was roughly five minutes to first bell. After negotiating a long aisle, we plunked ourselves down. We sat facing each other in the worn cloth seats and I nibbled my lower lip knowing I was probably about to make a huge mistake.

With a deep breath, I told her everything. I revealed every detail: about Devin, the demon, the priest, the beating and even about the strange woman outside the church that had given me the pendant. Afterwards, I felt much better.

Stacey had been chewing a bright pink fingernail as I talked and her wide eyes stared back in what looked like shock. Strangely, I thought she wasn’t going to believe me. Perhaps she thought I was crazy. After a few moments of stunned silence she said, “That’s the most messed up thing I’ve

ever heard. No wonder you don't want to sleep. Do you still have the pendant?"

Exhaling in relief, I nodded and pulled the small golden ornament from my bag before handing it to her.

She turned it over in her hands and held it up to the dim lights overhead. "Wow. This is awesome. Do you think it's real gold?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

Stacey brought it close to her eyes and squinted. "Looks like there's something written here."

I frowned. "Really? I didn't see anything on it. Can you read it?"

"No. The letters are too small."

I frowned. "Have you seen this before? It looks familiar to me, but I can't think of from where."

Stacey shook her head. "No, but I bet Charlie would know."

I put the pendant into the pocket of my jeans and considered this. I'd forgotten about Stacey's older brother Charlie, and his obsession with the occult. Although I wasn't convinced this pendant had anything to do with the paranormal, or *anything* important for that matter, I sure wasn't going to discount it at this point. Talking with Charlie worried me though, and I didn't want anyone else to know what was going on. "I don't think we should go to Charlie, Stace. No one else can find out about this. Promise me."

She whacked me in the arm. "Don't insult me. Of course I'm not going to say anything. But I still think we should at least show this to Charlie. He doesn't need to know the whole story. We can tell him we found it. That's it."

I nodded as first bell rang. "All right. We'll go to him after school today."

"Friggin' right!" Stacey said excitedly. "This is serious, Anna. We need to figure out what's going on as soon as we can."

As we moved up the aisle to the theatre doors, Stacey walked backwards in front of me. "I wonder if both of us should confront Devin about what's going on. Do you think it would help for him to know I know?"

"No!" I pretty much yelled this and it caught her off guard. "Especially make sure he doesn't find out I told you," I whispered and

glanced back at the group walking off the stage. "I don't have a clue how he's going to react, but I bet it's not going to be good. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone."

"Well, you need to talk with him again," she whispered back, and bumped into the door of the auditorium. "Everything going on is because of him. We have to find out what his connection is. And more importantly, we need to know you're safe from whatever that shadow thing was."

I pushed the heavy auditorium doors open. "I know. I know." Devin had vehemently stated he didn't want to talk to me, so I had no idea how I was going to answer any of those questions.

"Promise me." She grabbed my arm and had my attention. "Anna," she said cautiously. "Promise me you'll keep trying to talk to him."

We stood in the open doors of the auditorium as hundreds of people moved past in the hallway.

I nodded at my friend. "I promise."

Stacey lifted her hand toward me. "Pinky swear?"

I looped my baby finger around hers. "Pinky swear."

We parted ways and amid the drone of voices I began to go over in my mind how I was going to talk with Devin. I suspected he would avoid me, so imagine my surprise when I noticed him sitting at the back of my English class. Frozen in the doorway I wondered why no one else seemed to notice him. Didn't anyone else realize he wasn't supposed to be in this class?

I shuffled to the back of the room and silently took the seat beside him. He was leaning forward in his desk, obviously in too much pain to sit properly.

"How is your back?" I asked as I scanned the other people in the room. It was probably too noisy for anyone else to hear our conversation.

"Why did you tell her?"

Devin ignored my question and my stomach fell. "What are you talking about?" I asked stupidly, figuring he might not actually know anything for certain and was testing me.

His face was mostly hidden by his hair and he brushed it out of his eyes before speaking through clenched teeth. "You shouldn't have told Stacey about me or the pendant, because now she's involved." He shook his

head and his jaw rippled. “You’re going to regret that decision. Why couldn’t you just trust me?”

My stomach was already a knotted mess worrying about myself and now I was adding Stacey to the mix. *Great*. Immediately, I wished I had listened to the warning bells discouraging me from telling Stacey. The pendant dug into my leg and I shifted. “Well, maybe if you’d told me what’s going on I wouldn’t have had to talk to her.” I became defensive. “How can I decide what I can or cannot say if you don’t tell me anything?” I thought I might start crying and scanned the room to make sure no one was listening. Final bell sounded.

The teacher droned on and on about something I couldn’t follow. My thoughts were so preoccupied, I hardly noticed when the bell rang at the end of class and Devin bolted from the room. I tried to follow him, but by the time I made it into the hallway he had disappeared.

I struggled to maintain a normal façade for the rest of my classes, but I was truly only present in body. I needed to talk to Devin, and the end of the day wasn’t coming quickly enough.

It felt like years before final bell sounded and I waited for Stacey at her locker. We’d planned to walk to her house and talk with her brother Charlie about the pendant. She walked up to me already in deep conversation with her brother on her cell phone.

“Charlie! I’m glad you’re home.”

She stuffed her books into her bag as she pulled them from her locker, the cell phone propped between her shoulder and ear.

“Anna and I need help.” She paused and a look of disgust spread across her face. “I don’t care,” she continued. “You *have* to make time.”

I knew this might happen. Charlie hated us and I don’t think he’d said more than two words to me in more than a year. I doubted he was going to help us do anything.

“You better!” Stacey threatened after a few more moments of listening. “Or mom is going to find out about your stash.”

There was another long pause and Stacey winked at me as she slammed her locker closed. “Great! See you in ten. Bye.”

“There,” she said as she flung her bag over one shoulder. “He’s home right now.” She winked. “And he said he’d love to help us out.”

As we walked to Stacey's house, I kept looking around for Devin. What if I never saw him again? What if that demon thing decided to come after me again? What if, what if? My life was filled with so many 'what ifs'.

Our streets came into view, and when we moved down hers we could see both of her parents' cars were missing from the driveway.

The golden pendant in the front pocket of my jeans seemed to beckon. Without pulling it out, I wrapped my fingers around it and could swear it started to grow warmer. Soon, it felt too hot and I pulled my hand free of my pocket with a yelp.

Stacey went silent mid-sentence. "What? What's wrong?"

I tucked my hair behind my ears. "There was a bee," I said idiotically. "It scared me."

Stacey shook her head and kept walking. "Jeepers," she cursed. "I thought something was wrong."

Stacey continued to ramble on and on, and my worry deepened. What was I getting myself into? Would Charlie be able to help—or would he add to the confusion? And what was going to happen to Stacey now that she knew? I needed to talk with Devin more than ever, but the thought of returning to the church terrified me.

Chapter Eight

We sat on the floor in Charlie's room, listening to his *rules*.

"First off, it's not Charlie anymore. You need to call me *sir* if you're in my room." His deep baritone voice rumbled in his throat.

"Screw you." Stacey grabbed a bunch of dirty clothes and threw them at her brother.

Hardly flinching, he knocked them away and folded his fingers across his bolted stomach. "I'm not screwing around, Stace. Either you call me 'sir' or you get out."

I tried to stay out of this argument and looked around the room for the first time in five years. Behind the mishmash of rock posters and ceiling-high bookcases filled to overflowing, I could tell he had painted the walls black. This was fitting for Charlie, though, and matched his clothing and hair. It had been probably more than a year since I'd actually seen him in person and surprisingly, he'd gained a ton of weight. His bloated face was covered with a spray of whiskers that made him look thirty instead of twenty-five.

He ran a hand through the thick black hair of his long Mohawk and started picking at the nails of his pinkie fingers. I wouldn't say he was emo, but definitely stood on the fence, what with his obsession over everything black. My attention was brought back to him when he spoke. "What's your decision?"

Stacey was fuming. I could see it in her face and clenched fists, and silently urged her to calm down. She looked over at me as though reading my thoughts and said through gritted teeth, "How badly do we want this information?"

I shrugged. "It's up to you. I think we can probably do some research on our own." I glanced over at Charlie, who was stroking the whiskers on his cheeks noisily, and hoped he believed my lie. "We don't need him."

Stacey nodded. "Good."

We rose and moved toward the door, but Charlie's voice stopped us as Stacey was about to pull it open. "Fine," he said defeated. "I'm bored right now and am somewhat curious about what, if anything, you have."

Smiling widely, Stacey turned toward me. "Show him."

I hesitated and thought of Devin's warning. If we showed this pendant to Charlie, then he too would be involved. Exactly what, though, did being involved mean? Were our lives in danger? Would Stacey's family be hunted by whatever this demon thing was?

I was thrust from my thoughts when Stacey shoved me. "Wake up, Anna!"

I nodded and slowly pulled the pendant from my pocket. The metal seemed to vibrate in my fingers and I released my grip on it. It tumbled to the floor and disappeared under Charlie's bed.

"Swift move," he grumbled as he huffed and puffed to his knees to reach under the unmade single bed. He stood moments later and held the pendant in front of his eyes. At first he looked unimpressed, but as he turned the item around in his chubby fingers his face turned to deep concern. Forehead wrinkled, he lumbered over to his desk and flipped on a hinged lamp before flopping down on an aluminum chair that looked as though it would collapse at any moment. After some shuffling through a drawer in his desk, he produced a large magnifying glass.

He leaned in for what felt like eons examining the pendant under the glass before finally asking, "Where did you get this?"

Stacey and I looked nervously at each other, suddenly realizing we hadn't actually decided on a lie.

We said simultaneously, "In the park. . ." "In the football field," and looked guiltily at each other.

Charlie waved his hand without looking up. "Never mind. Grab that red leather bound book from the shelf closest to the door."

It was a command, not a question, and I moved to where he had indicated without hesitation. I scanned the eight rows of shelves and noticed spell books, bibles of every religion, history books and many other hardcover novels about the occult, but no red leather-bound book. I continued examining the shelves until I came to the far end of the second row, where my eyes were drawn to a very thick book with a blood red binding. I assumed this was the book he wanted and ran my fingers along the spine. Strangely, the material seemed to tingle under my fingers and I did the motion again with the same result.

Charlie popped his head up. "What's the hold up, Anna?" His tone changed as though he were talking to a very young child. "Bring the book

here. There's a good girl."

I took a breath to prepare myself for the tingling and pulled the large manuscript from the shelf before carrying it hurriedly over to Charlie. There were some strange markings on the cover, but no writing I could read. I stared at the worn volume as I fumbled across the laundry-ridden floor and struggled several times not to drop it when I tripped. It was as though the book were alive and tingled under my arms as I held it closer to my body. I pretty much threw it into Charlie's arms when I'd made it the short distance across the room.

"Easy, moron," he scolded. "This book is over two hundred years old."

Stacey snorted and eyed her brother in disgust. "Where would *you* get a two-century-old book?"

"Not that it's any of your business, loser, but the church had a garage sale a couple of years ago and I found it in the basement." He placed the volume on his desk and turned from us.

"The church sold you a two-hundred year-old book." She shook her head at me. "Sounds like you took it." She mumbled, but I doubted he'd heard her.

I flopped back down on the floor beside Stacey and together we sat staring at Charlie as he flipped through this strange red book.

"What do you think it is?" Stacey asked, sounding impatient. Charlie raised a finger to silence her.

"Shut up."

Stacey grumbled beside me and I rolled my eyes, hoping it would help her relax. I had initially thought this was a bad idea, but now really wanted to see if Charlie could give us some information about the strange three-point star pendant.

"Here," he said finally. "I found something."

We moved to stand on either side of Charlie as he read from one of the yellowed pages. The writing in the book looked as though it had actually been penned and I was surprised at how small the letters were. No wonder Charlie used a magnifying glass as he read.

Charlie moved a black nail under the words as he read.

"This is a *triquetra*. The symbol represents the Holy Trinity."

I knew right away what he was talking about from church, but Stacey piped up. “The Holy Trinity? What’s that?”

Charlie cleared his throat and leaned back in his chair, the pendant pinched between his fingers. When he spoke his tone had changed considerably, and it sounded as though he actually wanted to talk with us now. “Christians believe God exists as three separate beings.” He touched the three points on the pendant as he spoke. “The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Each of these beings is different from one another, but in spirit the same.”

“Sounds like you’re saying there are three Gods, then.” Stacey was asking the same questions I had as a child.

Charlie shook his head and ran a hand through his Mohawk before answering. “No. The trinity is three beings, or persons, but separately they are not God. God is the essence of these three things. Do you go to church, Anna?”

“I did,” I said truthfully. “But it’s been a few years.”

“Well, at the beginning of a Christian Mass, everyone makes the sign of the cross.” I watched as Charlie touched his forehead, chest and each shoulder and said, “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. When you do this, make the sign of the cross, you’re asking God to be in your mind, your heart and your actions. The *triquetra* represents this and I’ve seen it many times on books and in stained glass windows. Some people also wear them on chains.” He held the pendant under the light again. “I thought that might be the case with this one, thought it might have been someone’s necklace, but there’s no loop to suggest anyone would actually have worn this. Truthfully, I think it’d be kind of bulky to wear anyways. This was used for something else.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Charlie frowned and three deep lines creased his forehead. “Maybe as decoration for the front cover of a book, or a door or something.”

Stacey and I looked at each other across the desk we were leaning on, and I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was. This pendant was a symbol used to represent Christian beliefs and nothing more. Relieved, I stood. “Well, that’s cool.”

Charlie placed the triquetra on the desk and buried his head in the book again. “Now, hold on. There’s more.”

I leaned over once again and watched Charlie's profile as he scanned the aged manuscript. I doubted he'd had a shower in days—the stink of him was beginning to make my stomach turn.

"Here it is," he said finally and I looked at what he was reading, although it was extremely difficult to see the words. "The triquetra also has special powers." He frowned and scanned the page, his nose almost touching the magnifying glass. "This whole book has been translated from an ancient Pagan manuscript...so it's pretty jumbled." He paused again. "The author didn't actually know for sure if the information he translated was correct, so you can decide on the validity of the information."

"Well, what does it say?" I asked impatiently.

Charlie cleared his throat. "That three triquetra pendants were forged when God created the Earth."

Although it was beginning to feel like I didn't want to know, I asked, "Created for what?"

"To lock the gates of Hell."

A ripple of fear crawled under my scalp as Charlie continued. "Once the gates were sealed, the three pendants were hidden on Earth. Guarded by the Keepers of the Gate."

My mind swirled with this new information, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask first. I held up my hands in surrender. "Hold on now." I dug my fingertips into my temples. "You said this book was translated from a pagan manuscript? What manuscript?"

"Beinecke MS 408," Charlie said matter-of-factly. "Otherwise known as the Voynich Manuscript."

"Are we supposed to know what that is?" Stacey asked, her voice thick with sarcasm.

The annoyance that had shown in Charlie's face returned with the sound of his sister's voice. "No, I wouldn't think morons like you would have a flipping clue what the Voynich Manuscript is." He paused, seemingly considering his next words. "The Voynich Manuscript, for the idiots in the room, has baffled linguists for centuries. Gifted cryptographers have spent years studying it and they still are not certain what the manuscript is about. All they know is that it was probably written in the 1400's in a language no one can identify. I think scholars have agreed the topics in the book are divided into six sections." Charlie squeezed the

bridge of his nose, seemingly in deep thought. “There’s astronomy, biology, pharmacology, cosmology, recipes and herbal. In this case, your triquetra is mentioned in the astronomy section.” His eyes glinted. “You may be in possession of one of the keys to the underworld.”

I looked down at the three-point star, unable to believe this small piece of jewellery could be of any great significance. Laughing, I stood with my hands on my hips. “How could something simple like that lock the gates of Hell? It’s a great story, but I doubt there’s any truth behind it.”

Charlie shrugged. “Think of it as a key of sorts. I don’t know how it would work exactly... There’s nothing mentioned in the book about the mechanics of it.”

I laughed uncomfortably again. “Well, I doubt it’s anything more than a legend. And even if it was true, what are the chances this is one of the three true triquetras? It all sounds crazy, actually.”

Charlie leaned back, hands behind his head, and I almost fainted from the stink coming from his armpits. “There’s a way to find out if you have one of the three marked pendants.”

Stacey was the one who spoke next. “How?”

Charlie chuckled. “You have to lose it.”

I frowned. “What?”

“The true triquetra cannot be lost. The only way to get rid of it is to give it away.”

The skin on my scalp tingled. “Impossible to lose it? I don’t get it.” I thought of the strange old woman who had given me the pendant.

“I mean the pendant refuses to be lost. I’m not sure how it works—that’s all it says in the book.” He leaned over the manuscript again. “In order for the true pendant to be found, one has to first lose it.”

Stacey was sitting on the floor and we turned in her direction when she spoke. “So, if someone finds the true triquetra as you call it, then they have a key to the gates of Hell?” She sounded skeptical. “So assuming we could actually find out how to *get* to Hell, you’re saying if Anna has a true triquetra, then she can open the gates?”

Charlie shook his head. “No. Only the Keepers of the Gate are able to use the keys.”

My scalp was tingling again and I scratched at it. “H-how many of those Keepers are there again?”

Charlie spun in his chair. "I'm thinking three," he said to the book as he scanned the pages again. "You know, one for each pendant. But I don't know for sure. Let me check."

I grabbed the pendant off the desk and moved to sit beside Stacey as Charlie leaned in toward the book again. We looked at each other in silence and then down at the triquetra I held in my palm. Could this be one of the true triquetras? Could this be one of the keys to Hell? Would that begin to explain all the craziness that had been going on?

Charlie interrupted my thoughts. "No, there are only two Keepers of the Gate. The third pendant is held by an angel."

Stacey sounded agitated. "So why doesn't God kill the Devil? If he's got a front door key to Hell, why doesn't He go in there and get rid of him?"

"That's a very good question, Stace—and something that is up for much debate." Surprisingly, Charlie sounded genuine when he spoke to his sister. That did not happen often. "God, in essence, could come to Earth and take over everything. He could dictate what you ate, wore, how you acted... *everything*. But God doesn't operate like that. He has given us free will because He does not want to be a dictator. We decide if we want to follow the Devil." Charlie waved his hands dramatically. "God does not make bad people. People do. But I'm not going to sit around all night talking religion with you losers, so get lost."

We stood at the same time and moved to the door. As I was about to step through Charlie said, "Anna?"

"Yeah?" I turned.

"Are you going to try and lose the pendant? You know, just to see?"

I touched my pocket where the pendant was nestled. "I don't think so." I wasn't so much concerned about losing it as finding out it had come back to me.

~*~

Later that night, I walked down our street to the mailboxes on the corner. Picking up the mail had been a chore of mine for years, and in the chaos of the last few days I'd completely forgotten to stop after school. The night was warm and clear, but I couldn't enjoy the few stars twinkling overhead. I was too worried about the shadows. I hadn't seen another shadow demon since that day behind the school, but I couldn't get it out of

my head. And I also couldn't stop thinking about the pendant. What if this was the true triquetra key to Hell? Didn't I have an obligation to know if I was in possession of some rare artifact?

I stopped beside a sewer drain on the side of the road and listened to the water rushing past. I could easily drop it into the fast-flowing water underground and never see it again.

Continuing toward my house, mail tucked into the pocket of my hoodie, I stopped beside another sewer grate, but this time pulled the pendant from my pocket. The gold shimmered in the streetlights and as I was about to turn it around in my fingers, I lost my grip and it fell to the sidewalk. I held my breath as it clinked musically and then tumbled end over end to come to a rest on top of the grate. Breathing a deep sigh of relief, I reached to grab it but as I did so, my shoe skidded in loose gravel and I toed the triquetra inadvertently into the sewer. Falling to my knees, I wrapped my fingers around the heavy metal grate and stared into the darkness below. I hadn't wanted to test the theory by trying to lose it, but my clumsiness had caused me to do that anyway.

I jumped to my feet and shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans, fully expecting to find the pendant there, and was slightly disappointed to pull out nothing more than a handful of pocket fuzz.

I walked the rest of the way home dejected. As I moved to my room and flipped my light on, I almost missed the glint of gold. I froze in my trek to the closet and turned slowly on the spot. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as I realized the pendant was resting against the alarm clock on my bedside table.

Chapter Nine

The weekend finally came and I had only one goal: to find Devin and make him explain what was going on. If it meant I needed to camp out in a tent in front of the church, so be it. If it meant I had to actually go inside the church and return to where I'd witnessed a statue of Jesus talking to me, then so be it. I was going to get some answers, today, even if it killed me.

After a quick breakfast and shower, I packed my school bag with a makeshift lunch of granola bars and water, and then made certain I had the pendant in the pocket of my pants. As I walked down the sidewalk to the church where I knew Devin lived, the sun was beginning to make its way higher into the sky. Already a hot one, I could smell the heat still hanging in the air from the previous day. Several people were mowing their lawns, paper boys were out delivering and more than a few people were walking their dogs. For everyone else it was a regular day. For me, it felt like my first step toward an eternity of suffering. Obviously, I had with me one of the three ancient triquetras—but what, if anything, did that mean? What was I supposed to do with it? Was I in danger from this demon shadow even more now because I had this key, or would Satan himself come to reclaim it? I shuddered despite the heat of the morning and hefted my bag more comfortably on my shoulders.

It wasn't long before I was standing in front of the church. The building was a massive stone monument with horrific carved gargoyles leering over the edge of the massive roof. It took a very long time before I built up enough courage to walk up the steps but to my utter disappointment the large metal doors were locked.

Dejected, I sat down on the cement steps and waited. People went about their lives, the corner store across the street was busy with kids of all ages, and a park not far down the road was alive with laughter. All I wanted to do was rejoin normal society. I wanted to swing on the swings, I wanted to get brain freeze from a massive slushy I couldn't possibly finish. I wanted to be normal, but with the way things were going I would never have that again.

I startled when there was a loud click from the door behind me and turned as a man poked his head out. My heart stopped when I realized this

was Father Curtis, the priest that had witnessed Devin flogging himself.

“Oh! Well, hello there, dear.”

I rose and moved down the stairs to the sidewalk. “H-hi,” I said, my voice shaking. My entire body was poised to run and it took nearly all my willpower not to. Father Curtis would have no idea who I was, as he hadn’t seen me. As far as he was concerned, I was some kid wanting to get into the church.

“I’m sorry you’ve had to wait for me to open the door. There has been some vandalism inside the church in recent years. We’ve resorted to locking up during the night.” His care-worn face looked sad. “Even God’s house is not immune to the hand of the devil.”

He was holding the door open for me, but I wasn’t sure I even wanted to go in—let alone with *him*.

Waving his hand dismissively, he looked away. “Well, you come in on your own terms, then. God bless, my child.”

And with that, he let the doors clunk closed. Sweat poured down my back, my stomach was a knotted mess—there was no way I could do this. I started down the sidewalk and was about three blocks away when I changed my mind and turned around. Today was the day of answers. I wasn’t going to allow myself to run away. Could not let myself give in.

I marched right into the church and stood within the doors while my eyes adjusted. The large statue of Jesus was as I remembered it before it had come alive and spoken with me. There was nothing to indicate the same thing was going to happen again, but I eyed the other smaller statues warily, and was ready to bolt if any of them so much as moved a hair.

It took a lot of willpower, but I finally passed through the foyer and into the main part of the church. Now that I was here I wasn’t really too certain what my next step would be. Should I go right into the hallways behind the altar and tromp down to Devin’s room, or should I wait to see if he would come out here at some point during the day? Would the priest be back, and if so, could I ask him if Devin was around?

In answer to my questions, a soft voice spoke from the shadowed pews at the back of the church.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t come.”

I squinted in the direction of Devin’s voice and saw only his shadow outlined. “I need to know what’s going on.”

He nodded. "I know. And I can no longer hide this information from you. Did you bring the key?"

I knew right away he was talking about the triquetra. "Yes." My voice echoed. "I have it."

"Then it is time."

"Time for what?"

The shadow stood and stepped into the aisle along the wall. Devin started walking briskly toward the door at the front of the church. Hurrying, I followed him. I caught up as he was disappearing into the low room off the main one.

"Where are we going?" I asked through short breaths.

He hardly slowed as he spoke and never once turned. "It is time you knew your true calling. Events have been set in place, events we cannot stop now without you."

"My true calling?" Devin had known I was going to show up at the church, but how? He knew I had the triquetra, he knew everything.

I followed him silently through the maze of corridors behind the main room of the church and recognized the stained glass window of Mary and the baby Jesus. Devin used a key to open one of the doors in this hallway and we continued down more cold hallways until we reached an ancient-looking wooden door. He grasped the cast iron handle and finally turned to look at me. "I'm going to show you what God had planned for you all these years. It may be quite disturbing at first, and I apologize for that, but there's no other way."

He pulled the door slowly open, and stale dank air washed over me in a wave. Bare bulbs hung from a wire suspended along the wall and Devin flipped a switch before descending the crumbling stone steps. I tried to look around him as he disappeared downwards and it appeared as though the steps descended for miles. I lost sight of the lights as they vanished down into the earth.

I froze at the top, hand on the cold stone wall. "Where does this go?" I thought maybe we were walking to Hell itself.

Without stopping, Devin said, "Come on. You'll find out soon enough."

He was quite a ways ahead and I forced myself to follow him down. It was dangerous navigating the ancient stone steps, and several times the

rock gave way under my feet. I skidded and nearly tumbled head over heels a few times, stopping to catch my breath about halfway down.

Glancing up the narrow stairwell, I could faintly see the outline of the door at the top and started to feel claustrophobic. The walls were closing in, and I imagined millions of tons of rock falling in around us. Suddenly I wanted to run back up, needed to get out.

As though hearing my thoughts, Devin was at my side in an instant. He took my hand in his. "It's okay. Nothing is going to happen to you as long as you're with me."

I stared into his eyes and could feel my reservations dissipating. It was strange, this effect he had on me, and I could have stayed lost in his eyes all day.

"What is going on, Devin?" I asked weakly.

Without breaking my gaze, he touched my temple lightly and then let his hand fall away. "You will know soon enough. Trust me, okay? Everything is going to be fine."

My heart melted. He had never spoken this kindly before. How had things changed? I glanced back up the stairs, but knew my path lay with Devin and turned toward him. "Nothing feels fine anymore."

He smiled, humourless, and continued to hold my hand as he pulled me gently down the stairs. I loved the feel of his hand in mine and was disappointed when he released it as we stood in front of another door at the bottom of the stairs. This one was even more ancient looking than the last and I was surprised to see the triquetra symbol burned into the wood at the center. There was a whole mishmash of other intricately carved lines, but all seemed to lead to the symbol.

Devin gestured. "Take the key out of your pocket and place it against the door."

I pulled the pendant from my pocket as he suggested and held it in front of my eyes. It sparkled magically in the dim light of the landing, and I could almost feel its anticipation.

"I think it knows where we are," I said weakly, not sure how I knew this.

Devin nodded toward the door. "Place it there."

Closing my eyes to gather my courage, images of friends and family suddenly came flooding in. I wanted to cry. For some reason it felt as

though everyone around me was slipping away. Like the smooth edges of the triquetra, my family was sliding away and there was no hand hold. Determined, I popped my eyes open and with trembling fingers touched the edge of the triquetra to the wood. Instantly, the carved lines exploded with a bright red light and I lifted my arm to shield my eyes. Devin grabbed my shoulders and pulled me away. Together we watched the light grow from the door to the walls all around us. I spun on the spot and watched the line twist and curl before finally culminating in a spot against the wall opposite the door. With a loud pop that nearly knocked me to my feet, the red light disappeared and a section of rock slid away.

“W-what was that?” I asked, breathless.

A grin played on the corners of Devin’s mouth. “A hallowed lock meant to be opened by one person.” His eyes twinkled. “In this case, that person is you.”

Not really hearing him, I stared into the blackness beyond the stone doorway. “What’s in there?”

“I’m not sure,” Devin answered carefully. “This is your room, not mine.”

I frowned up at him. “My room?”

He smiled down at me but his eyes were sad. “Welcome back, Keeper of the Gate.”

Chapter Ten

“Okay, so let me get this straight.” I massaged my temples. “You *are* an angel.”

“Yup.”

“You’re my angel.”

“Uh huh.”

“Sent here to protect me?”

“Now you’re getting it, Anna.”

“What about your wings? Wh-where are they?”

“I can’t keep them while I’m on Earth unless I am in service to you.”

“Service to me?”

“While I’m protecting you.” He sighed heavily. “I’m sure we’ve been through this a few times already. I have no ability in human form. Remember? I have the power of our Lord only when I am in celestial form.”

“So you can’t keep them . . . your . . . your wings, while you’re here, unless I’m in some sort of danger?” I thought of the black shadow behind the school and shuddered. “Like on the day you saved me from the black tar. Right?”

“That’s right.” He looked sideways and sounded unsure of his next words. “They need to be removed while I’m here. And at all costs, I must remain in human form while on Earth. The longer I am in celestial form, the more chance there is of us being revealed to them.”

“To whom?”

“The humans.”

Strangely, I didn’t feel as though he were including me in that group. I paced back and forth several times before continuing. “So how do you do that? You know, how do you take them off?”

He flipped the ball of paper he’d crumpled into the air again and I watched as it zipped toward the massive beamed ceiling many feet overhead. “It’s not easy. Obviously.”

“But how do you do it? How do you get them off?” I thought of the brief glimpse I’d had of his wings. “Did it hurt?”

“Stop asking stupid questions,” he fired back, and flung the paper ball across the room. “Of course it hurt. The pain is beyond the physical aspect mortals experience...” He stopped midsentence and glared over at me. “But. . .” His voice was calm again. “I don’t need to explain any of this to you. You *know* how it all works.”

I flinched at his anger. “B-but I *don’t* know how anything works. Why do you think I do?”

He shook his head, forehead furrowed in anger. “I don’t believe you’ve forgotten everything.” His next words were barely audible, as though he were talking to himself. “Would I be so lucky?”

It was strange listening to someone talk as though they knew more about you than yourself. “Lucky? Why?”

“Noth . . . nothing,” he mumbled dismissively, and smoothed his hair with both hands.

“Maybe I’m the wrong person, Devin. Isn’t it possible you think I’m someone I’m not?” Deep inside, however, I knew this statement was not true.

“No chance of that,” he mumbled. “You know this is where you belong. You need to let the memories come. Let go, Anna.” His eyes seemed to shimmer magically. “Remember who you are.”

I paused, unsure, and examined his profile. “I have no idea what I’m supposed to feel or ask and I sure don’t know what you mean when you say let go and remember. Let go of what?” I looked around the room as though the answer was going to fly down and smack me in the head. “I think I’m on information overload or something.” The reality of everything struck me. Angels were real? Secret portals with glowing red lights were real? My mind could hardly comprehend it. “Where are we?” I asked gently, afraid that somehow my question would piss him off again. “I need you to tell me.”

He examined my face and seemed to consider my words. “We’re in your room.”

I snickered humourlessly at this vague answer. We were definitely in a library, but it certainly wasn’t one I recognized as my own. The room had the same crafted stone as the outside of the church but was longer than my eyes could see. Ten rows of books disappeared into the endless space and I had to stop myself from looking up at the fifty-foot high ceiling only

supported by thick beams of rough wood. Every time I did look up, it felt as though the stones were going to come down on my head. I stood up and walked down a small portion of the aisle closest to where Devin sat to take my thoughts away from the tons of rock overhead. There were books of every color and size, but none of the bindings had titles familiar to me. In fact, most seemed to be written in other languages.

"I don't recognize any of these books, Devin. Is there one here that might help me understand?"

He laughed, "You won't be able to read any of those books."

"Why?"

"You're not in the right form."

I wrinkled my nose and looked back to where he had plopped down in an overstuffed, antique looking, leather chair. "Right form? What do you mean?"

He sighed. "It would be much easier to show you. I'm tiring of your questions."

I nodded and was beginning to think I was dreaming. "Show me. Oh, ah, sure." Smiling awkwardly, I was about to walk back over to where he sat when my eyes were drawn to the pale purple spine of a book that stuck out from the others. As I reached up to touch it my fingertips started to tingle. The closer I moved to the book, the more electricity prickled until I had to pull back for the pain.

As I rubbed them on my jeans, Devin spoke. "You can only touch the ones you were meant to."

"How am I supposed to know which ones those *are*? There must be a billion books here."

"You'll just know," he sighed.

I continued my examination of the room when a shadow moved across one of aisles. This entity was much larger, more hulking, than any person could be and my skin turned cold.

I ran over to where Devin was slouched in the chair. "There's someone else...*something else*... in here!" I hissed and ducked behind his chair. My stomach rolled in horror and I debated bolting. Perhaps the shadow creature from behind the school had found me at last.

Devin must have retrieved the paper ball because he threw it casually into the air again. This time, however, it landed with a weak crunch on my

head. "Of course, there are others here. Do you think you're the only one permitted to use the portal?"

I stood slowly and eyed the rows of books suspiciously. There was no sign of the *thing* moving around. "I...I don't understand. Portal? Others? I thought you said this was my room? You're going to need to start explaining things soon, or I'm out of here. What was the thing I just saw?" *Was he purposely trying to confuse me?*

"You are in no danger here, Anna."

"How am I supposed to know that? You haven't given me a straight answer about anything!" My stomach was a knotted mess and I fought to keep my bottom lip from trembling. I did not want to cry.

He reached behind the chair for the crumpled paper ball at my feet. "All right," he sighed in annoyance. "Come here," he groaned as he stretched for the paper.

"Are you going to start telling me what's going on?" I wasn't moving an inch unless I was going to get some answers.

He sounded exasperated and snatched the ball. "Yes, yes. Come over here."

Falling to his knees on the floor in front of his chair he smoothed the paper ball flat and pushed his glasses back. I moved over slowly, not taking my eyes off his profile as he spoke. "This room, this portal as we call it, exists on many different planes."

"Planes? What do you mean?"

"Just shut up and listen," he snapped without looking up.

Eyes narrowed, I crossed my arms and fought back tears. "Why are you being such a jerk?"

He inhaled deeply and glanced up, not making full eye contact. "Sorry. I need you to listen carefully. Let me finish before asking questions. Okay?"

Although I was ready to leave, I nibbled on the inside of my cheek before deciding to give him another chance. "Fine," I grumbled and dropped to my knees beside him. "I'm just looking for answers, Devin."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's frustrating for me to explain this all again." Clearing his throat, he continued. "Beings from many other planes come and go as they need from different points and times in space. This room, this library of sorts, is what you might call purgatory. It's a semi- physical

place between Heaven and Hell.” He pulled a stubby pencil out of his jeans and drew a sloppy circle in the middle of the paper. “This circle is where the library is.”

I nodded dumbly but was still digesting the purgatory comment. A semi-physical place, between Heaven and Hell? What the . . . ?

Devin smoothed his hair and continued. “Branching out from the main room of this library, from purgatory, are millions of spokes. Think of it almost like one of those huge wagon wheels the pioneers used. Ethereal beings, like me and you, have our own entrance to the library. We each have our own spoke in the wheel that leads to the library beyond. This,” he gestured around us, “this is your room. This is where your spoke joins the center of the wheel.”

I nodded and watched as he started drawing crooked lines branching out from the circle. “But why a library? What are all these books about?”

He looked over at me. “These books hold the secrets to the mysteries of life and beyond. All beings, from all planes and all worlds, are connected via this library. You will find answers to most of life’s mysteries here.”

My head swam. *All beings, all worlds?* I struggled to organize my questions. “Okay. So all these worlds you’re talking about are joined to . . . to this library. B-but how do they all fit? I thought you said there were millions of spokes. This library is not that big.”

“They exist on different planes, different places in space, that don’t actually join to the library until they are needed.”

“So you’re telling me there are a bunch of other doors with a bunch of other chairs surrounding a bunch of other podiums?” My voice raised several octaves as I realized he’d called me an ethereal being. *Huh?*

He shook his head. “No. This sitting room?” He gestured to everything around us. “It’s what you need, but would not necessarily be useful to me. You need these twelve chairs.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea,” he laughed. “You tell me.”

I stared at the drawing and nearly jumped out of my skin when he crumpled the paper again. “Now sit.” He moved back to the chair he’d been previously seated in. “We have a lot of information to go through.”

My knees ached from being on the cold stone floor and I rubbed them as I stood. There was no way I was going to be able to sit as Devin had

suggested and I started pacing back and forth behind him instead. My thoughts were all jumbled up and my mouth talked as though powered by a motor I couldn't turn off. "How can I just *sit* when there's so much going on? What *is* going on? Am I dreaming? Is all of this a dream? Angels? Gatekeepers? And what about that black tar *thing* in the alley behind the school? Was *that* real too?" I gestured to the stone doorway we'd entered. "Magical stone doors with creepy red lights? Devin?" My head whirled and I didn't think I could reign in my emotions again. "I think I've completely lost my grasp on reality."

With a grunt he rose from the chair and marched over to grab my arms. He held me so I had no choice but to look at him. "Sit down," he said firmly, his beautiful aqua eyes looking between mine. "I will tell you everything, but I need you to calm down and trust me."

I drew a long deep breath and shuffled over to a chair across from him. There were twelve identical chairs arranged in a circle and in the middle of this wheel, stood a large stone podium with an aged manuscript. I found my eye returned to this odd book often because it looked very similar to the Bible that Devin carried around. Strange vein-like designs, carved deeply into the rock floor, also decorated the heavy podium and the legs of each of the chairs in the circle. These hieroglyphs were beautiful in their intricacy and complexity, and I wondered who had taken the time to craft them so beautifully.

"Okay," I said finally although it still felt like I was floating. "Please tell me in plain English what the hell is going on."

Devin smirked. "Hell is right."

I frowned. "What?"

"Nothing." His grin disappeared and he sat forward in the chair. "You are not human, Anna. Not in the true sense, anyways."

I laughed. "Are you trying to freak me out or something? What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means exactly what I said." His eyes glinted as he adjusted his glasses. "You. Are. Not. Human."

The humor in my chest faded and my words were wisps. "I don't understand." I had no idea how I was supposed to react to a statement like that.

"You were sent to Earth from Heaven to be hidden from him."

"From whom?"

"The Dark Angel."

"Who's that?" I asked weakly, although I already had a pretty good idea who he was talking about.

"Lucifer. Beelzebub. Diablo." Devin paused and his eyes rippled with his next words. "The Devil."

"Why would he want me?" My voice squeaked when it came out. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "An-and wouldn't I be safer in Heaven anyway?" At least my brain was still partially working. I wrung my hands. "The Devil isn't allowed in Heaven, right?"

"He himself is not allowed in Heaven but there are many of His minions who pass through the gates. And no, it's much easier to hide you in human form."

My original question had not been answered. "Why would He, th-the Devil, want me, Devin?"

"He has been in search of the Keepers of the Gate since their birth and you just so happen to be one of these Keepers. He wants to destroy the keys and open the gates so He can have full dominion on Earth and all the planes." Devin tapped his fingers together thoughtfully before meeting my eyes again. "The key has been returned to you because your location has been revealed. Now that He knows where you are, He will not stop until you and the key are destroyed. It is no longer safe for you to remain in human form. You are far too weak. At least in your true form, you have a chance until we can secure the gates once again."

I gulped. "But you said it's easier to hide me in . . . in human form." *Did he say until we can secure the gates once again? What the . . . ?*

He nodded. "And you *have* been safe for a very long time but an ancient creature, born to seek you out, has escaped from the Dark City. The black tar, as you call it, is one of his minions. It has only one purpose: to destroy you and the key." His troubled eyes found mine. "I can only hold it at bay for so long, Anna. You are much stronger than me."

"Hold on a sec." I held out both hands and tried to organize the multitude of questions I wanted to ask. "The black tar at the school was after me because I'm some sort of Keeper of the Gates?"

"Yes, Anna. And it continues to hunt you."

“Great. That’s great.” I nibbled my nail. “But you’re my guardian, right? So I’m safe for now?” My voice cracked and I struggled to push images of the black tar aside.

He smiled tightly and nodded.

“Have you always been my guardian?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. So why haven’t I seen you before?”

“We’ve actually known each other for an eternity.” He smiled weakly. “My existence has been spent *watching your back* as the humans say. It is what I was created for, and it is what I will do until He is done with me.” His eyes slowly found mine, voice soft. “Not a moment has passed when you haven’t been in my thoughts.”

A warm shiver passed through my body but I pushed it away and shook my hands at him dismissively. “Well, I don’t remember you, Devin.”

He held my gaze, eyes looking back and forth between mine. “I know.” His words were sad and the warm shiver returned. “I’ve kept my distance up until a few months ago, because there was no need for you to remember your past.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He laughed. “On the most basic level, have you ever heard of believable deniability?”

I frowned. “Huh?”

He sighed. “Your memories of an existence before being human were completely erased to keep you safe. You needed to believe you were really Annalisa Harold, high school student, for your own protection.” Pausing, he looked at me quizzically. “But you were supposed to get all your old memories back when the triquetra was returned to you. I’m here to ease that transition. Believe me,” he nodded. “I never thought you would struggle to remember.” He eyed me suspiciously. “We’ve done this many times before. What is going on this time?”

“Hold on,” my breaths were short and a wave started cresting in my chest. “You’re telling me my memories were intentionally erased? That . . . that my memories were wiped out?” Of all the emotions I could feel, anger surfaced. “How dare you?” I jumped up. “*How dare you!*”

“It wasn’t me, Anna.” He held his hand up. “I don’t make the rules. I merely follow them.”

My heart was beating hard and all I could do was pace—back and forth, and back and forth. There was so much information to digest and being angry sure wasn't helping. I took a long breath and looked Devin square in the face. "So let me get this straight again. The D-Devil's minions have been searching for me because I am a Keeper of the Gates of Hell?"

He nodded.

"And the only reason they found me is because some ancient creature, created to hunt me, escaped?" My voice escalated several notches with my last words. "So why not hide me again? Why do I need to remember my past as some non-human . . . *thing*?" I swung my arms around. "Seems like a much easier thing to do than to yank me out of *life*! How fair is that?"

Devin's gaze took on a faraway look and it sounded as though he were talking more to himself than to me. "I'm sorry you feel this way but as I said, you were supposed to get your memories back. It wasn't expected to be this hard."

"Well I didn't get them back and it *is hard*!" My anger was fueling my tears and my chest heaved. Perhaps I was having a complete mental break. "This is crazy, Devin. I'm not human?"

"No, you are not. But hold on, because it's going to get crazier."

I threw up my arms exasperated. Devin continued.

"The worst possible thing has happened, Anna. The locks on the gates of Hell have weakened and are failing. Further breaches will release horrors unimaginable. The creature that came after you, you know the black tar, is but a sliver of what horrors are held behind those gates." Tears glistened in his eyes. "How could we have known this would happen? None of the prophecies had foreseen it." His eyes met mine. "He will come for you now, as soon as the opportunity presents itself, so I must be ever vigilant while you are in human form." His features hardened, eyes narrowed. "You cannot stay like this much longer. We need you to come back to us. We need you to reseal the gates."

"Hold on." I froze in my incessant pacing and lifted a finger to stop him. "The gates that were breached," I repeated. "You mean the gates of . . . of Hell, right?"

"Yes." He did not try to hide the annoyance in his voice.

I cleared my throat and tapped my fingers together. "So He . . . the Devil wants my key?" I looked up. "You mean the triquetra, right?"

“Yes.”

“What’s the big deal?” I flinched. My tone was much too desperate. “Even if He did get the keys and destroyed them, what’s stopping God from changing the locks and whipping up a new set?”

He laughed loudly and the sound echoed through the large room. “Whip up a new set?” he mocked. “Oh yes, Anna. It sounds so simple when you say it like that.” His features darkened. “You cannot possibly understand the battle that occurred to create those gates and the keys that fasten them.”

I studied his features. “It seemed like it might make sense.”

“Well it doesn’t,” he snapped.

Flinching at his anger, I pulled another question from the mental pile I’d created and sat back down again. “You keep saying ‘in human form’? What, exactly, does that mean?”

“You must feel it,” he said gently and touched his chest. “Deep down inside?” His eyes searched my face for understanding. “For me it’s like an ember that won’t go out. He is always with us. Our creator who shaped and molded our true forms is always there, whispering.” He closed his eyes and lifted his face to the ceiling before opening them again. His features changed so drastically that instinctually I looked up to see what had brought such joy. There was nothing.

When he spoke again his voice was different. “His love burns with a fire so white it brings tears to my eyes.”

Strangely, I knew what he was talking about. This ember, as he called it, was the emptiness I’d felt my entire life. *It* was why I couldn’t be in church, *it* was why I could never find the perfect guy and *it* was why my heart beat so strongly for Devin. I was not of this world. I knew it was true—but still did not want to accept it.

“He is happy you’ve returned, Anna. He took great care in crafting the Keepers of the Gate.”

“Stop!” I yelled and jumped up. My voice was wavering terribly. “Just stop!” I started pacing again, hands held tightly against my chest. “I know I said I wanted the truth, but we need to slow down a little.” I paced frantically in silence, forcing myself to take deep breaths. “All right . . .” I said when I felt ready. “You’ve said that before. Keeper of the Gate.” I massaged my temples. “What exactly is that?”

He dropped his gaze from the ceiling and his mood darkened. "You are one of three Keepers able to unlock, and lock, the gates of Hell. Simple as that." His eye brow quirked. "Haven't we already been through this?"

"Simple," I mumbled and nibbled a nail, ignoring his question. "Sure."

"Close your eyes," he said softly and came to stand in front of me. His closeness was suffocating and my legs were frozen. "Close your eyes, Anna. Feel it."

I shook my head. "No. I'm afraid."

He reached out and gently ran his finger down my cheek. "You are not afraid of anything." His eyes twinkled and the sudden change in his mood struck me. "These are not words I've heard you say before." He half smiled. "I hate to admit it, but I like it."

I looked him straight in the eyes. "I am not who you think I am," I said, and my words were whispers of untruth.

Liar!

I clenched my fist and pushed the doubt away.

"Close your eyes," he insisted and took my hands in his.

Frozen. I was frozen to the spot. My next decision would dictate the course of the rest of my life. I wasn't sure if I was ready.

He smiled and the corners of his eyes crinkled. "You are ready."

Could he actually hear my thoughts?

"Now close your eyes, Anna. Trust me."

Slowly, I let my eyes roll back and my lids close. The air in the room seemed to be sucked out in a whoosh and a flood gate opened in my chest. Images of scalding flames flashed and abruptly I was standing in front of a mile-high wrought iron fence. Blackened bars, some so bent they had ninety-degree angles, stretched forever in each direction from two crooked gates directly in front of me. Squinting, I moved closer and examined three slots in the center of the gates. They were identical in shape to the triquetras and I stuck my finger into one. The metal was cold and rough to the touch and when I pulled my finger free it was covered in a fine layer of soot I rubbed on my pants.

Shuffling closer yet, crunchy piles of ash shifted under my feet and I had to clutch the blackened bars for support as I started to tumble forward. Having lost my balance, my face passed between two of the fence rods. Just

as my ear bumped the prickly black bars, the air was pulled from my lungs by a fire so hot it singed the inside of my throat. Invisible razors slashed at the skin on my face and great gaping wounds poured rivers of blood down my cheeks.

Throwing myself backwards, I stumbled through the ash and landed in a winded heap. Gasping, I breathed cool air again in grateful gulps and stared in awe at the city beyond. With trembling fingers I gingerly touched the large gashes on my face and was shocked to feel them closing. More shockingly, the blood on my fingers and face started sliding off, as though it were oil on water, and I watched mesmerized as it formed large bubbles that floated in front of my face. With a startling pop, the scarlet bubbles shimmered magically and then floated through the fence before disappearing behind the buildings beyond. My eyes scanned the city, and tall charred buildings of ash leaned tiredly amid smouldering brick roads bursting fountains of lava.

The cloudless sky pulsed shades of red and a hole in the middle, right above the city, swirled black clouds. Every few seconds or so a giant mushroom cloud of black smoke puffed upward from somewhere in the center of the city and disappeared into the swirling mass of blackened clouds. In a flash, people began to appear. People of all shapes and sizes crawled from cracks in the road, from the buildings, from the pools of lava and I stared horrified as they all called out to me. The tortured faces of the damned screamed in pain and moved like zombies to where I stood on the opposite side of the fence. Some had flames licking at their tattered clothing and one woman tried unsuccessfully to extinguish a flame eating at the flesh of her arm.

My eyes watered in horrified terror as their blistered, bubbling, fingers reached for me. I stepped further back when a young woman's bone exposed fingers brushed my shirt and stared astounded at the thousands of souls lined up along the fence. They were screaming for help, for mercy, but there was nothing I could do. Their anguished cries intensified and the pain of it flashed with such passion in my chest it caused my knees to weaken.

Suddenly I was back in the library and I had to grab onto Devin for support. The vision slowly faded but the scent of burnt flesh would be stuck in my nostrils for an eternity.

Devin led me over to one of the chairs. "I see you remember."

I could hardly breathe. “I—I thought Hell was a frame of mind or something.” I took another long inhalation. “It’s really a *place*?”

Devin chuckled. “Oh, it’s real, all right. The City of Fire. It has its very own spoke in the wheel. And believe me, you don’t want to be in the library if that plane is opened.”

As reality fell away, I slid off the chair and onto all fours. My breaths were ragged bursts that sent dust curling up from the floor and no matter how I tried couldn’t seem to catch it. The burning fires of Hell sought my soul, but worse yet, the scorching pleas of the damned ripped my heart to pieces. How I wanted to help them. Wanted to throw the gates open and release them all.

Devin’s voice was soft. “We cannot save them all, Anna. I know it is difficult for you to understand at this point, but some people actually *deserve* to be there.” His last few words faded and his eyes grew sad. “I struggle with that, memory . . .um . . . *reality*, every day,” he corrected quickly and stood straight.

“But h-how can he let them suffer like that?” I asked breathlessly, eyes searching his face. “How can he leave them in the eternal fires?”

He stared at me motionless for several long seconds and I waved at him. “Hello! What? What is it, Devin?”

His eyebrows crept slowly together and he shook his head as though woken from a trance. “N-nothing,” he said, not so convincingly, and started to pace. “The ones left in Hell chose their path on Earth, Anna. Our Father suffers greatly knowing the choices they have made.”

“But can’t He save them?”

“Of course, but then the most fundamental freedom would be rescinded.”

I looked up and waited for him to continue. “What freedom?”

His eyes sparkled. “Why, choice, of course.”

I struggled to push the images and pain away.

Devin smiled weakly. “We have been selected to experience suffering as the humans do. He says it helps us to stay connected. ”

“What am I, Devin?” I asked in a whisper.

His face lit up and he broke into a full smile. It was, perhaps, the first time I had seen him smile so openly. “As I said before, I think it will be much easier to show you.”

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Chapter Eleven

I stared into Devin's smiling face and was actually starting to get angry. It felt as though he was stalling. "If it's easier for you to show me, then let's do this." I put my hands on my hips. "Show me what I am."

"We need to clarify a few things first."

I threw my hands into the air, exasperated. "Are you serious? Clarify a few things?"

He continued hurriedly. "As I mentioned you are one of three Keepers to the entrance of Hell. That pendant the old woman gave you outside the church the other day is your key. It will only work for *you*. It was made specifically to be wielded by you."

I laughed shrilly and the sound was out of place in the vast room. "Okay." I didn't believe him. "Stop messing around. This can't be real." Surely this was all an intricate joke. I laughed with forced humor. "Wh-what is really going on?"

Devin frowned. "And I thought we were making progress." He sighed. "Take a deep breath, Anna. Everything I'm telling you is true. I am being completely serious here, and I need you to believe me. There has been a breach in the gates and only the Keepers can reseal it. But there's a grave problem."

"Problem?" I threw my head back and laughed loudly. "Ha! Of course there's a problem: The D-Dev . . ." I couldn't say it. "The Dark King is breaking out of Hell and coming for me. This is what you're telling me. Right? That's our problem." I could feel my eyes watering as I held Devin's gaze. The thought my entire life had been a lie made me sick to my stomach. I didn't want to believe it. I fought to hold onto his words.

"Yes, you're correct—but it gets worse."

I nodded. "Sure. Of course it gets worse. Is Stacey in on this with you? How long have you two been planning this?"

Devin frowned. "Gather your wits, Anna. This is no time for jokes."

"I'm not joking," I said through trembling lips.

Devin shook his head and eyed me, his gaze uncertain, before continuing. "Father James, the second Keeper, has disappeared. We fear one of the Dark One's minions is responsible. We need your help to find James

and his key before they are both destroyed.” Devin adjusted his glasses and tapped his fingertips together pensively. “Worse yet, if the gates are penetrated any further before we find Father James, the Dark One will be free to roam the Earth.” His eyes were dark, almost black and my blood turned to ice. “We must not let that happen, Anna. All life on Earth would cease to exist as it is now.”

“The Dark One?” I squeaked again, my mind struggling to grasp his words. “You mean—” I couldn’t say it.

“The Devil, Anna. Yes.”

Panic washed over me. “Why are we sitting around here, then? Shouldn’t we be doing something? Shouldn’t we be stopping him?” My mind whirled and I placed trembling fingers against my temple. “Shouldn’t we be putting out garlic and crosses or something?”

“Garlic?” Devin lifted an eyebrow.

I shook my head and nearly toppled over as the room began to spin. Holding onto a chair, I had to force my words to come out smoothly. “Forget the garlic. What are we going to do to stop him?”

“We need to find Father James and the second triquetra. That will be a good start.”

“A good start?” I said breathlessly. “I think we need something more than a good start.”

“At this point, that is the logical place to begin. Once we find James, we will join with the third Keeper and begin to repair the damage to the gates.”

“Wh-who is . . . is the third Keeper, Devin?” I was feeling faint again, and my heart pounded like thunder in my ears.

Devin looked about to answer when something inside me snapped. I wanted out, had completely given up and didn’t want to be here any longer. The Devil was breaking out? Father James, the second Keeper of the Gate, was missing? People were on fire and I wasn’t human. I couldn’t take anymore. “I don’t want to talk about this.” I waved my hands frantically as I spoke. “Use one of these other Keepers in place of me. I want to go home. I want my life back.”

Devin’s head snapped toward me. “It doesn’t matter what you want. It’s what He wants. It is what you were *created* to do.” His eyes narrowed. “You are a Keeper of the Gate, created expressly to ensure the gates stay

sealed. You would not exist without this task.” He looked down at his shoes in thought and said, “You’ve been in this human form far too long. I didn’t think it possible, but it seems you’ve completely forgotten who you truly are. Perhaps your memories will never return.”

“I am Anna,” I snapped defiantly and squeezed my eyes shut as though that would stop his words. “I am Annalisa Harold.” I peeled my eyes slowly open. “I’m a high school student who has almost finished grade twelve.” A lump rose in my throat because the words sounded wrong. Fake. “After graduation, I’m going to go to college. I-I’m going to be a nurse.”

“Forget all that. That life is not real.”

My bottom lip started to tremble. “Don’t say that. It *is* real.” I was desperate. “It *has* to be real.”

Forehead crinkled, Devin leaned forward and continued, unrelenting. “We made that up. We wanted you to believe you were one of them so you would blend in perfectly.” His eyes looked between mine. “Your mom, your dad, your family—all of those relationships are false. None of it is real.”

“You’re lying!” I spit defiantly. “I don’t believe you.”

He held my gaze and I could see the torment in his eyes through the haze of tears in mine.

“I’m sorry, Anna. There’s nothing I can do to change this. Try to understand that it *will* make sense very soon.”

Without thinking, I bolted from the room and ran at full tilt up the hundreds of crumbling stone steps. I burst into the hallway of the church, gasping for air, but didn’t allow myself a reprieve to catch my breath. Pushing harder than I ever had before, I somehow managed to find my way through the church and out the front doors.

The beautiful blue sky had clouded over while I was inside and it looked as though it was finally going to rain. I doubled over on the small section of grass outside and retched several times before catching my breath. Not wanting to waste time standing around so Devin could appear and drag me back down into the library, I glanced both ways down the sidewalk before moving right.

Despite the heat and humidity, my body shivered involuntarily. By the time I made it home, my teeth were rattling with shock. My parents were out, thankfully, and as I walked into my room I was horrified to see Devin stretched out on my bed.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed and the knot in my stomach returned tenfold. My breaths came in shuddering gasps.

“You cannot run from Him, Anna. You don’t get to pick your destiny.”

I shook my head desperately. “No. Too bad for him. I don’t want it. I don’t want this *destiny*.” The door clicked closed behind me and I jumped when it locked on its own. “Get out of here, Devin. I want you to leave.”

“What you want doesn’t matter.” He frowned. “Don’t you see?” Standing, he brushed his t-shirt off and took a tentative step toward me. “You were created for a purpose... all of us were. Your path has already been laid out before you. You cannot change that.”

“But what about free choice? Don’t I get that, at least? Didn’t you say that is one of the fundamental freedoms or something?”

His face fell. “Of course you have free will. We all do. But how could you choose to turn your back on humanity? If you do not do what you were created for, many will suffer. The people you call ‘family’ will burn in Hell, and you’ll be right there stoking the fire.”

I was going to faint, could feel the air leaving my lungs, and hobbled over to my computer chair where I sat with my head between my legs. Closing my eyes, I breathed deeply and thought of my parents. Did they know about this? Had they known who I really was, all this time? Like a tidal wave, I realized: my choice had indeed been made. Devin was right. I couldn’t turn my back on my family, on my friends.

“Come back with me. Come back to the portal,” Devin urged, hand on my head.

I stared at the gleaming hardwood under my feet. “I need some time.” Pulling my head away from his touch, I wiped hot tears from my cheeks. I looked imploringly at him. “Please. I need some time to digest everything. This is so much. . .”

He stared down, forehead furrowed. “I don’t know, Anna. Time is vit—”

I cut him off. “Twenty-four hours. That’s all I ask. One more day, to say goodbye to everyone. After that, I’ll be ready for everything. I . . . I’ll be ready.”

Hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, he tilted his head toward the ceiling before making eye contact again. “I can’t do that,” he whispered. “You have no idea the danger you face in human form.”

“You’ll be here, right? You’ll be protecting me. What’s the danger?”

“You’re not the only one who is threatened, Anna. His minions will destroy all around you. Your parents and family are included. I do not have the ability to protect them all.”

My heart sank. I had never felt so helpless. “So what’s going to happen to me, then? Am I just going to disappear? Everyone will be worried sick.”

“Your death will be staged. Our Lord will ensure it looks like you passed in a tragic accident.”

My heart fluttered at the thought of the grief my death would cause my parents. “Isn’t there another way? Why do we have to hurt them like that?”

Devin ran his hands through his hair and it stuck up in all directions. “Would you stop trying to change everything?” He hissed, and his eyes glowed with passion. “This is the way we’ve done it since the beginning of time. He will not change his policies for some lowly warrior like you.”

This caught the attention of my sorrow-numbed brain. “Warrior? What?”

Devin sighed and folded his arms across his chest. “I have never been questioned like this before.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “As a Keeper of the Gate, you must also be able to defend yourself. You’re a very skilled warrior.”

“But why?”

“Look at it this way: your *job* brings you face to face with creatures most people will only encounter in nightmares. But enough with the questions right now.” He waved his hand dismissively. “We must leave. Your questions will be answered in due time.”

I crossed my arms. “No. I refuse.”

His face was ashen.

“I want my twenty-four hours.”

“Absolutely not.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m not asking, Devin. Leave right now, or else.”

The corner of his mouth twitched in what I thought might be amusement and his demeanor changed. “Or else what?”

My arms and legs started tingling then, like my fingertips had when I'd tried to touch one of the books in the library, and I felt different. Really different. Almost as though my body were electrified. "Or . . . Or else I'm going to make you," I stammered, not certain of what I actually meant.

He smiled broadly and walked briskly over to stand in front of me. "Now, *that's* the Anna I know. Please," he held his hands toward me, a wide smile on his face, " . . . make me."

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Chapter Twelve

I was thrown off guard and bumped into the computer chair when Devin stepped closer. My voice cracked. “What?”

He smiled and moved again but this time he was nearly on top of me. “You said I had to leave or else you were going to make me. So do it! Make me leave.”

Backing away, I turned toward the wall. “Can’t you just leave me alone? All I’m asking for is time to say goodbye to my family. Why is that so hard?”

I could feel the heat of him directly behind me but didn’t turn. “You know the reason.” His tone was quiet and serious. “I am not going to repeat myself.”

“Go away, Devin.” Tears of frustration would not be held at bay any longer and my words were laced with hatred. “*Just leave me alone!*”

“No.”

Heat building in my chest suddenly exploded and I turned and shoved him as hard as I could. He staggered backwards a couple steps, but caught himself easily.

“That was pathetic,” he mumbled and moved back over to me.

“Stay back!” I demanded, fists held defensively forward.

He laughed at my threat and grabbed for both of my wrists. Arms flailing wildly, I avoided his hands but somehow he flipped me around to pin my body against the wall with his. He slipped his legs between mine and spread them wide.

“Get . . . off . . . me.” I huffed under his weight and struggled to pull away. He only dug his knees into the backs of my legs more forcefully. Laughing, he pressed his torso harder against my back before fumbling to grab my wrists.

“Make me leave, Anna,” he whispered breathlessly into my ear as he forced my hands over my head. His fingers dug into my wrists and this brought tears to my eyes.

“You’re hurting me!” I hissed through clenched teeth and leaned away from his face. “Get off me!”

He grunted with the effort and after a bit of a fight took both of my hands in one of his. With his free hand he took a fistful of my hair and yanked my head back.

"Ow!" I swore and blinked tears down my cheeks.

"You better hurry." He hissed. "Make me leave before someone gets hurt."

The heat of his breath in my face fueled the fire in my chest and I screamed in frustration, fear and anger. He laughed gratingly and this only ticked me off more.

"No one can hear you scream. It's just us." He pushed my knees painfully into the wall with his legs. "Maybe you like this. Huh?" he asked, pressing his torso harder against me. I cried out as the air was squeezed from my lungs. "I am in complete control, Anna. I could do whatever I pleased with you right now. What are you going to do about it?"

"Why are you doing this to me?" I sobbed and my anger fizzled. My words came out in a great shudder. "Get off. Please."

"Come on!" Spittle sprayed my cheek when he yelled and I clamped my eyes shut. "You're not Annalisa Harold." He yanked my hair again and I whimpered. "Stop crying," he demanded and let up his grip a fraction. "You're a warrior. A Keeper of the Gate!" Air huffed from my lips as he pressed against me again. "Now. . .come . . .on! Make me leave!"

I wriggled and struggled to move away but it felt like he was made of iron. I sobbed breathlessly, my muscles spent. His suggestion I was some type of warrior was ridiculous.

Devin's voice was laced with anger. "He will destroy your family. He will torture your friends. Is that what you want for them?"

I couldn't breathe, could hardly think of anything but taking a lung full of air. My cheek pressed against the cold drywall and tears dripped like ice down my neck. I wanted to get away from him, wanted to breathe, but sorrow sapped my strength. Perhaps I should give in to him. Perhaps that was what I needed.

I cried then. Long, mournful sobs racked my trapped chest for what felt like hours. We stayed as we were for so long, in fact, the cold in the drywall started to eat itself into my brain. I pleaded, I begged, I screamed, but Devin refused to release me. His breath was like fire in my ear, his body a prison. He was never going to let me go.

Then the images started to come. I was desperate to save my mother, my father, my friends. Scene after scene of my life flashed like lightning in a summer storm and I knew I couldn't sacrifice them. I didn't care about myself, I wanted to die, but I couldn't let my family suffer in my place. They were the innocent. They had loved me like their own.

Drawing what breath I could, I screamed from the pit of my stomach and pushed against the wall with all my might. This last effort created enough space to allow me to turn around. Anger flooded in then and I wanted to kill him. My heart raced, I couldn't seem to draw enough air, and my body tingled with lightning.

Meeting his eyes, I didn't miss the look of surprise that swept across his face. Glad I finally had the advantage, I drew a shaking breath before shoving him with as much strength as I could muster. As my fingertips touched his chest, the air came alive with pin pricks of electricity. Amazingly, Devin flew across the room, pulled by some invisible force, and I was left standing alone in shock. His body hit the opposite wall hard enough to knock my clock off the nail, but he was right back on his feet and hardly fazed at all.

He adjusted his glasses and smoothed his hair. "That was good, but it wasn't good enough."

Recklessly, he charged at me again but this time I was ready. I lunged into a forward roll away from him, and got back on my feet, fast enough to send a roundhouse kick toward his head.

He blocked my foot skilfully, but I nearly missed a low kick from him toward my right shin and stopped it at the last second. In a flurry of movement, he threw a series of punches toward my head, all of which I blocked with my forearms. Unfortunately, as I was backing up I tripped over a book bag. He grabbed the front of my shirt as I collapsed backwards and my hair brushed the wall.

"Careful," he said breathlessly, eyes wide with excitement.

"Thanks," I grunted and wrenched my shirt free of his grip as I jumped back on my feet.

With every inhalation of air my body came more alive. I was electrified, invincible, and going to kick Devin's ass.

For once in my life, I knew exactly what I had to do. This feeling, this invincibility, was who I really was, what I was really meant to be. I grinned

widely, hands clenched at my sides, and nodded toward Devin. “Now you’re in for it.”

He grinned back with the same confidence and gestured toward himself with his fingers. “Bring it.”

And then I attacked him. I punched and kicked and grabbed him in a flood of movements my brain hardly thought about. It was as though these actions were ingrained and had become automatic. Through this flash of movement my body became stronger, faster, more deadly. Devin transformed then in a burst of light that hardly fazed me, and was the angel I had seen behind the school. His hair turned the color of the sun rays and his glasses fell away useless. His torso rippled with muscles and large white wings fanned out from his back. There was no sign of any cuts or scars on his back. As we moved around locked in a battle of punches, he used his wings as a shield several times.

I increased my attack on him and it wasn’t long before I had him pinned on the ground, my knee at his neck.

“Like I said before,” I took a deep shuddering breath and smiled widely, “get out.”

“You did it, Anna,” he choked and grasped my knee at his throat. “You made it back.” At the word ‘back’ his wings trembled and he shoved my leg away.

I was still basking in my victory and hardly noticed the room we were in was completely different. “You doubted me?” I asked, cockiness lacing my words heavily. He moved to get up but I shoved his shoulders back to the floor. “You’re not going anywhere until *I* say.”

He lifted his hands in surrender and laid back down. “Fair enough.”

“How does it feel?” I asked confidently, not wanting to let him get up. “To be beaten by a girl?”

He grinned and looked at my legs straddling his chest. “It feels kind of nice, actually.”

This was not the reaction I was expecting and I jumped up quickly.

“Jerk,” I mumbled under my breath but my embarrassment soon turned to shock and then amazement. As I stood, I realized I was wearing a strange red suit that covered my body completely from neck to toe. The material was textured and looked as though it were covered in tiny scales and I brought my arm up to my face for closer inspection. It reminded me

of snake skin. Flexing my hand in front of my face, I asked, “What am I wearing, Devin? And wh-where are we?”

He stood hesitantly, watching me, and his large white wings opened and closed several times before settling carefully behind his back. “I have no idea where we are. You brought us here. As for the suit. . .” he eyed me approvingly. “That’s something you’ve always worn.”

The skin-tight suit resembled leather except it breathed somehow. It didn’t actually feel like I was wearing anything, actually. I flexed my hand in front of my face again and jumped back when four sharp metal claws sprang from my fingertips.

“Whoa,” Devin cautioned. “Careful with those.”

I was speechless and startled when the claws retracted back into the suit with the ring of metal on metal. My attention was then drawn to the room in which we stood.

The walls appeared to be made from a framed white canvas material, and the floor a thick cream-colored mat. On the far right wall was a set of double, bamboo doors. There was no furniture and, as far as I could tell, no other way out. Devin and I looked at each other at the same time with the identical furrowed brow, and in sync, moved toward the doors.

“What do you think is on the other side of the doors?” he asked speculatively as we moved across the room. The mat rebounded under our feet and reminded me of gymnastics class.

I shrugged. “How should I know?”

Devin grabbed my arm and I looked down at his hand before meeting his eyes. He smiled warmly. Something had changed between us in the last few minutes and he examined my face. “I realize you don’t know, Anna—how could you possibly? But what do you *think* you’re going to see? What makes sense? You brought us here. You control what is behind those doors.”

“Huh?” I crinkled my nose and pulled my arm from his grasp. “What do you mean, *I* control what’s behind those doors?”

He nodded toward the double doors. “I mean: you created this space. Everything that exists here was formed in your mind.”

“But where? Where are we?”

“In another plane of existence.” He gestured with his arms. “You’ve taken us from Earth, from the consciousness of the human mind, and

brought us here. This room might be a safe place you created for yourself. Perhaps it is somewhere you come to relax. Or to train. I don't know."

"But we're not on Earth?"

He shook his head. "No. This place is not physical in the human sense of the word. People, like the ones you called Mom and Dad, could not come here with their physical body." He quirked an eyebrow. "This is what makes you different from them." He smiled and started to reach for me but stopped himself. "Understand?"

"Maybe." Shaking my head, I moved toward the doors. "Let's see what's out here." And I flung the doors wide.

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Chapter Thirteen

As we stepped out onto a large bamboo balcony, I was not prepared for the lush rainforest that stretched as far as my eye could see. A flock of brightly colored birds swooped from behind the pagoda-like building where we stood, and I watched amazed as they moved in unison to a tall tree covered in epiphytes. The air had a sweet, humid scent and I inhaled deeply.

"This is beautiful." The words whispered from my lips. "And strangely familiar."

Devin squinted out over the trees. "It should be familiar. As I said, you created it."

"I created it. . ." I repeated. "But how?"

"It is in your ability, Anna."

I looked down at my hands and turned them over several times, wondering where the long knives were hidden. "And this suit? Who created it?"

"That was created by Him."

"You mean God?"

Devin smiled and lifted his face to the sky. "God our Father, yes."

Gingerly I brought my fingers to my cheek, still nervous of the sharp claws, and was surprised to still be able to feel my skin through the thin red suit. As I touched my hair I was happy it still felt the same, but was surprised to pull a long braid over my shoulder. My color was the same, but the length had changed and the end of my braid almost touched my waist.

Cool.

I looked over at Devin. "This is all so strange. The suit, my hair, these weird abilities. . ." my words trailed off.

He frowned. "Weird? You should be past weird by now."

"Well. . . I'm not."

"You did say it feels familiar, right?"

"Familiar, yes." I startled when a small yellow bird landed on the railing in front of us. The tiny creature peeped softly and then took off in a flurry when I reached out to touch it. "But, I still have no idea why."

He moved closer and stared down at me. His aqua eyes rippled and I was drawn into them. "What do you remember about your true identity?"

Take a few moments and think really hard.”

“N-nothing,” I stuttered without taking the time he suggested and forced myself to look away. His gaze was so penetrating it hurt my heart to look at him. “I remember nothing.”

He laughed and gestured to the open doors. “It sure didn’t *look* like nothing in there. I hate to admit it, Anna, but you kicked my butt.” His eyes twinkled. “I’m very happy you’re back.”

I laughed and waved my hands. “I don’t know how that happened, Devin.” My head ached and I rubbed my forehead roughly, remembering the skilled kicks and punches I somehow knew how to dole out all of a sudden. “This all feels like some strange *déjà vu*. You know? Or like a crazy dream.”

“*Déjà vu*,” he repeated pensively. “A dream?” He paused and stared at me emotionless. “You should feel more at home here than in your former bedroom. It shouldn’t feel like *déjà vu* at all.”

“More comfortable than in my bedroom,” I repeated, and scanned the rainforest in front of me. “No chance of that.” At the mere mention of my room my heart started to race, and I wanted to go back. “I want to get out of here, Devin,” I said pleadingly. The confidence I’d felt was gone. “I want to go home.”

“That place is not your home.” His features darkened. “You are a Keeper of the Gate. You have no home. You are meant to wander here, with me, in the other realm.”

My heart climaxed into a frantic thumping. “I don’t believe you. This is all a trick or something.” As absurd as things were at the moment, deep down I knew my words were even crazier. Everything happening felt right, this place, this time, but my heart didn’t want to believe it. My heart wanted to go home. My heart wanted family.

With his jaw set in a firm line, nostrils flaring, Devin’s anger devoured me. “What have I done wrong, Anna? Why is this so difficult?” Before I could even open my mouth to respond, he took to the sky with a roar and disappeared into the clouds. I was there, alone, with only the squawking of the birds to keep me company.

I lifted a hand to shade my eyes but did not see Devin anywhere in the clouds.

“Devin,” I said to no one in particular. “This isn’t funny.” My breaths started to hitch. “I want to get out of here. Devin?” Within minutes I was flat-out crying. Sobbing is probably a better word to describe it, and I gave in completely to the sorrow when my legs buckled under me. I’m not sure how long I stayed like that, in a sobbing heap on the balcony, but it felt like eons before I was finally able to draw a breath without crying or shuddering.

I wanted to go home. That was the only thing that mattered, the one thing my mind returned to, and soon I was holding my knees to my chest and rocking back and forth. With eyes squeezed tightly, I began the mantra in my mind: ‘I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home.’

The floor under me changed suddenly and I popped my eyes open. I was no longer on the bamboo balcony overlooking the expansive rainforest. Somehow, I sat on the cold stone floor of the library, my library, under the church. I jumped to my feet. I was dressed in regular clothes. I was never so happy to see jeans and a t-shirt in my life.

Like a sprinter, I ran for the door and bolted all the way out of the church. I was going home and there was nothing Devin could do about it. My lungs felt as though they were bleeding from my exertion and a stitch clawed at my side, but I pushed through the pain and continued forward. As I rounded the corner at the end of my street, my feet skidded to a halt in the gravel. There was something going on at my house and cars filled the driveway and curbs on either side. I squinted at a group of people dressed in black as they made their way slowly up my driveway. One woman, who looked like my Aunt Jennie, was wiping her eyes with a tissue as someone walked with his arm across her shoulders.

I frowned. It looked like a funeral. Wait. Two funerals. What did the banner on the front lawn say? ‘Miss You Anna and . . .’ I couldn’t make out the other name because the wind was flapping the sign.

My blood went cold when I heard my name. I knew his voice well by now.

“Anna.”

I spun on the spot. Devin was standing partially concealed in bushes along the sidewalk. He was without his wings and stood hunched over. A fine layer of sweat shimmered on his brow.

“Anna,” he repeated. “This is not where you belong. These people are here to mourn you. To mourn your friend. What they knew of you is gone to them forever. Now please,” he extended a hand toward me, “come with me.”

I looked at him sideways. “What did you say?”

“Come with me,” he repeated, hand held forward.

“No,” I said stubbornly. “These people are here to mourn me and a friend? What did you mean?”

His eyes skirted sideways. “Did I say that?”

“Yes, Devin, you did,” I said sternly. “What friend are you talking about?” My stomach rolled and my last words disappeared. Stacey. He was talking about Stacey.

He shook his head and seemed to be at a loss for words. “I’m sorry,” he said finally. “There was no other way.”

A dry lump rose in my throat and I started to back away from him. “No.” The word wasn’t more than a whisper. “No.” A hot tear started down my cheek. My heart ached. How much more sorrow could I take in one day? “No. This . . . this is not real. How could you do this to Stacey?”

Devin glanced up and down the street and then beckoned to me with his hand. “Come here, Anna. Come back to the church. We can talk there.”

My knees hobbled weakly when my mother appeared from the house. Her arms were draped over Stacey’s mother’s shoulders and their collective sobs were so loud I could hear them from where I stood down the street. I was going to collapse. Soon as the world started to spin, Devin had a strong arm around my waist.

As we moved through the streets I was only half conscious of where we were. Power lines, seagulls, a car horn—it was all there, but my numb brain hardly processed it. The last thing I remembered before falling into a deep sleep was the rough wool blanket on Devin’s cot in the church rubbing against my cheek.

~*~

White petals carried on the wind brushed my cheek and stuck in one of the tears. Sunlight filtered through the dainty white flowers of the Mock Orange tree, as the scent of citrus kissed the air.

“Why are you crying?” The girl seemed to appear out of nowhere.

I sniffed and rubbed the heels of my hands into my eyes. The canopy of brilliant flora whispered in the breeze. “No one wants to be my friend.” The words trembled from my lips.

Stacey smiled, her long braids falling over her shoulders. “I’ll be your friend.” She held her hand out. “Want to skip?”

“Sure.”

~~*

Consciousness crept slowly in as I peeled my eyelids open to a blurry world. It took only a second to remember where I was: Devin’s room in the church. Laying perfectly still on my side, I blinked once, twice and on the third time my vision cleared and I saw Devin kneeling at the table across the room. His bare back bore two large weeping wounds in addition to a crisscross of partially healed cuts. He was praying fervently, I could hear the passion in his voice, and his shoulders trembled. Sweat dripped off his hair and onto the Bible propped up on the table in front of him and I wondered how long he had been like this. I wondered how long I had been here. With no natural light, time did not exist here in the basement of the church.

I didn’t want to move, didn’t want to disturb him, and lay watching guiltily. My eyes were drawn repeatedly to the large wounds on his shoulder blades and I could not begin to fathom how he would have removed his wings. The way they moved, the way they felt, they were probably comparable in function to an arm or leg. Surely he hadn’t cut them off himself. But who would have done it?

“Why does that happen?” I asked, unable to stay quiet.

He jumped at the sound of my voice and looked over his shoulder. “Why does what happen?” he snapped.

“Why . . . why can’t you have your wings while you’re here?”

Silence answered my question and when I didn’t think he was going to answer, he said, “People are not permitted to see me in my celestial form. That is the way it’s always been.”

The answer was plain and simple but I didn’t understand it. “But why not? Can you imagine how many people would believe in Him after seeing you?”

His shoulders slumped and he sighed. “The faithful do not need to see to believe, Anna.” He wiped fingers across his brow and turned back

toward the Bible. "That would break yet another fundamental principle."

I sat up. "Which is?"

"Faith." He kissed the pages of his Bible before struggling to stand and face me. Lacing his fingers, he held them forward as he explained. "Faith is intertwined with free will." Sweat beads rolled down the sides of his face. "You choose what to believe." His eyes glowed and I could see peace in his eyes despite the pain he must have been feeling. "The faithful believe God is good, that he is here for us even in the darkness. They, the faithful, do not need to see me to know I exist just as they do not need to see Heaven to know it is there for them." He touched his chest with trembling fingers. "The faithful do not need to see God to know He loves them."

"So it wouldn't hurt to show them, right? To show them they were right all along."

"Faith cannot be forced, Anna."

Bits of Sunday school classes came to me then. "But there have been miracles. Why do things like that happen if we're supposed to operate only on faith?"

"I think people need to take a closer look at the events they are quick to call miracles." His eyes narrowed. "There is a lot of deception in this world and a lot of people are searching for validation."

We were silent for a very long time, looking at each other from across the room. His previous anger seemed to have fizzled. I wondered what had changed.

My bottom lip started to tremble as I thought of Stacey. I had tried so hard to push memories of her away. "How could he do that to her? How could he take an innocent life?" A tear rolled down my cheek and I dropped my gaze to the floor. I wanted to be angry. I wanted to yell and scream but was too worn down. I'd been beaten, flattened. There was nothing left.

"He does not make these decisions lightly, Anna. Stacey has lost a life here with her parents, but gained another with people who will love her just the same."

"Impossible," I spat, still refusing to look at him. "No one can love you like your parents."

"These people believe they are her parents. She has been deposited into another family, but for them it is as though she has always been there."

And the same for her,” he added quickly. “She will never remember this other time.”

I snorted and shook my head at my feet. “But think of the pain to her parents. Why not erase their memories too? Why not just make them forget or...or make her forget everything I told her? Can’t He do that?” I was rambling. “He would have had to change the memories of the people who have Stacey now, so why not change her memories? Why let her parents suffer?”

“It is not our place to question Him.”

“Why?” I snapped. “Why not? Remember free will, Devin? Why doesn’t that apply now?”

His shoulders slumped forward. “It is done, Anna. Stacey was in danger because of what she knew. She was moved for her own safety.” He ran his fingers through his hair several times and it stuck straight up when he dropped his hands. “Erasing her memories was probably no longer an option. Perhaps she had already been threatened and He had to hide her.” He shook his hands at me in frustration. “I don’t know why He did things this way, Anna, but I trust in Him.”

Silence.

My chin trembled. “I wish I could take it all back.” A tear rolled down my cheek and I focused on the cool trail it left on my skin so I didn’t break down completely. “Why did I have to say anything to her? I never wanted to hurt her, Devin. I really didn’t.”

“I know.” His eyes were kind. “But you cannot change what was done. Forgive yourself. He already has.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive myself.”

Silence.

“I need you, Anna.” His voice was soft, careful. “I need you to accept who you are. Come with me into the astral plane. Take me away from here. Take me back to the rainforest.”

“I don’t know . . . I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“There is nothing holding you here.” His words were pleading. “You know who you are. You know what your true calling is.” Devin extended his hand but I turned away. “Take my hand. Let me help you remember.”

I shook my head and focused on the dusty stone wall behind his cot. “I . . . I can’t. I don’t want to remember.”

He sighed loudly and I heard shuffling noises.

"Then I must show penance. I have failed."

I turned. "What?"

He opened a drawer in the desk and my heart skipped a beat when he pulled out the device with the long metal braids. I had done some research and came to find this was called a cat o' nine tails.

"I cannot stay here unless I show penance. It is you that keeps me grounded."

"You aren't talking about whipping yourself again, are you?"

He kneeled shakily in front of the table and brought the cat o' nine tails up in front of his face. "I do not have a choice." With a grunt he swung the metal braids across his shoulder where they cut deeply into his back.

"Stop!" I yelled.

He swung the opposite way with the same result.

And he continued. Back and forth, across each shoulder until his already injured back was covered in new gaping wounds.

I jumped with every sickening slap of the device. What could I do? How could I stop this? "Stop, Devin! Please!"

He moaned pitifully, "I cannot, Anna. Don't you understand?" He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and looked back at me. "I cannot stay here unless I have shown the proper penance. I chose the wrong path." A new set of wounds ripped open across his back. "Penance," he grunted and swung the metal braids again. "Atonement." Every synonym was followed by another swing of the cat o' nine tails. "Reparation. Amends."

"What can I do?" I yelled desperately. "How can I stop this?" Tears sprayed from my lips. "Stop . . . please! Stop!"

He paused and leaned heavily against the table, the cat o' nine tails hanging over the edge. "Take me away, Anna. Take me to the rainforest. Accept your destiny."

I stood with fists clenched at my sides. He was leaving this up to me. "How?" I asked through shuddering breaths. "How do I do it?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"I can't remember." I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand.

He groaned and resumed the self-flagellation.

“Okay. . .” Although my knees felt weak, I marched over and snatched the cat o’ nine tails from his fist mid-swing. He looked up startled, a lone tear rolling down his cheek. “Give me that thing.” I tossed it across the room and then fell to my knees beside him. “Help me,” I begged, head in my hands. “Please help me remember.”

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Chapter Fourteen

The pressure of the heels of my hands against my eyes felt good. Perhaps this was the last time I would feel rooted to this world. All I had come to believe in, everything I loved was gone. I was not Annalisa Harold, high school student, but some other *thing*. I'd lost my humanity, my family and my world. How is someone supposed to feel after that?

Squeezing my lids tightly, I pressed against my eyes again. Red and purple pulsed in the blackness and it was beautiful to watch.

"I have faith you will remember, Anna."

I nodded without dropping my hands. "Great," I said to the fireworks exploding in my eyes, lids still squeezed shut. "I'm glad you have faith. Now what about me? How am I going to remember?"

"You will. Open your heart."

"I need to remember, I need to remember," I repeated without actually believing the words. I dropped my hands and squinted at the sudden brightness. "But how? How do I do it?"

Devin took my hands in his. "Do you remember how you felt the last time you brought me to the rainforest?"

I nodded and half smiled. "Angry."

"Yes," he shook his head dismissively. "But what else? What other feelings were there?"

I thought back to when Devin had pinned me to the wall. The mere thought of it spiked my heart rate slightly and I pulled away from him. "Excitement, fear. . ." I frowned and searched for the right word. "Passion. . ."

"You need to bring those feelings forward again."

"Easier said than done," I snorted sarcastically and dropped to a sitting position on the floor. "How am I supposed to do that?"

Devin struggled to his feet and walked over to sit on the edge of his cot. His shoulders shook. "I . . . think you already know."

I jumped up and started toward him. "Let me bandage your back."

He held his hand forward. "No. Stop."

I stood frozen in the middle of the room.

He ran a hand across his brow. "If you are unsuccessful, I will need to continue."

"Continue what?"

"The . . . the self-flagellation," he snapped. "What do you think?"

"Oh no!" I crossed my arms hardly phased by his anger. "I'm never going to let that happen again."

He stared at me, the edges of his eyes trembling, and my skin prickled. His voice was calm. "If you truly mean that, then you must remember. You *must* transform. Now! Father James, as well as the second triquetra, have been taken into the underworld and you are the only one capable of bringing them back."

"If I do transform—if I can do it—what do I do afterwards? Wh-what are you expecting from me?"

"You need to get into the Dark City, find Father James and bring him back out through the front gates. He has the key with him and knows of its importance. Unfortunately, he does not know the extent of his ability and believes he is trapped forever. He is being held under the city. In the tunnels. A rogue group of the damned is protecting him."

"The Dark City? You . . . you mean Hell, right?"

Devin nodded.

I laugh-coughed and swallowed. "A rogue group of the damned are protecting him? What exactly does that mean?"

"These are souls looking for mercy." Devin rubbed at a splattering of blood on his arm. "They want out and know you are the one who can do this for them. They are waiting for you to go after James."

A vision of the people trapped in the burning city flamed in my mind and I nearly choked on the memory of sulfur. They had wanted me to rescue them. Had wanted me to free them from an eternity of burning but I couldn't do it. I wanted to take them all.

He looked at me knowingly. "As I've said before, Anna," his voice was careful. "You have the ability to free them from an eternity of suffering. To free them from Hell. It is in your power to show mercy to those who deserve it. The damned know this and await your presence. They know we're going to attempt to free James." He paused then, his expression deathly serious. "This is a great responsibility, wielding the mercy of our Lord. There are few beings in all creation to whom He has entrusted this.

You must be careful not to release someone whose soul is blackened. The blackened ones are those Hell was created for. Those souls must never leave.”

“How did the other ones, you know, the ones that are not blackened, get there, then? If they don’t belong?”

“The Dark King has lured them away from their true path.” His features darkened. “He has tempted them with one of the seven deadly sins.”

“Seven deadly sins?” I asked, though the term was vaguely familiar. “What are those again?”

Devin lowered his voice and moved closer. The words were mere whispers on his lips. “Lust, wrath, greed, sloth, envy, gluttony and . . . and p-pride.” It seemed as though he struggled to say the last one and wiped a sheen of sweat from his brow. “The Dark King has given these vices to humanity so he can tempt them. They are his recruitment tools, so to speak. If a person does not repent their sins before they die their sins become mortal sins and they are condemned straight to Hell. Some people freely choose the path to Hell. The rapists, the murders—all those that engage in mortal sins and do not repent cannot be saved from the fires. Most beings are lured away by his minions in a time of weakness. No matter how you fall onto the dark path, though, you do not realize the seriousness of your choices until you are being sucked into the heart of the city.” Strange, it sounded as though Devin were speaking from experience.

My words weren’t more than a whisper. “So people can be saved?”

He nodded. “There are some whose souls are still salvable. You will know the difference.”

“How?” I licked my lips. “How will I know?”

He leaned toward me again and tapped his finger on his temple. “You will see it in their eyes.” He nodded, his own eyes glimmering magically. “They cannot escape the blackness that is their soul. Make sure you look them straight in the eyes. See who they truly are.”

A shudder of fear travelled up my spine and I tucked my hair behind my ear with clammy fingers. “So . . .so I’m going to walk up to the gates of Hell and stroll in? That sounds too easy.”

“Getting in is the easy part, Anna.” His eyes glinted. “Getting back out is where you’re going to need to use a little imagination. I believe

instinct will guide you.”

“Aren’t you going to come?”

He smiled, his expression humorless. “If I was to pass through the barrier, or even get too close, my soul would be lost forever to the Dark King. He created you . . .” he paused, “and he created *other* beings like you to pass back and forth freely. But you still must be careful. The Dark King will use any means necessary to trap you there.”

“Why? Why am I able to pass through freely? That sounds like a really bad idea. No?” This didn’t make sense. “I’m not saying I could go in there and destroy *Him* or anything . . .” I couldn’t believe I was saying this. “But what if I decided to start sneaking around to do . . . *stuff*?” I searched for the right word. “You know, mess stuff up?”

Devin’s face was impassive. “Stuff? What stuff exactly?”

“I don’t know.” I fought to think of something. “You know. . . What if I started spying on him or something?”

He sighed. “The only reason you can move through the gates freely is because you are already sitting on the line between Heaven and Hell. You were created to be neutral. Your choices are based on what is right and wrong, not what you desire.”

“What?”

“You could go either way, to put it in basic terms. You do what needs to be done. Although history has shown that other beings like you have been lost to the Dark King, the plan for you is, ultimately, neutrality.”

“You said others. Do you mean others like me?”

“Other beings created to pass through the Gates without hindrance.”

“Other Gate Keepers? I thought there were only three?”

Devin cleared his throat. “There *are* only three Keepers. I’m talking about other servants.”

“But why would He do that? Isn’t that asking for trouble?”

Devin smiled. “This might sound cliché, but have you ever heard of the saying, ‘Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer’?”

I nodded.

“Well, it’s like that. Although He, our Lord, would never interfere with free will, He still wants to have the ability to move throughout the Dark City—vicariously, of course—through other beings.”

“So He won’t destroy the Devil. He likes all this drama?”

Devin laughed loudly and then caught himself. “No. He will not destroy Lucifer. Although it *is* in his power to do so. Lucifer was once an angel, Anna. He is as much a child of our Lord as we are.”

I shook my head. “I’m getting really lost here. There’s so much . . .”

I thought back to what we spoke about moments ago. “Okay, you said the Devil was going to come after me once I was inside this City of Fire. Right?”

“I said the Dark King will use any means necessary to trap you there, yes.”

“Any means?” My head was spinning and I sat back down on the cot.

Devin moved in beside me, seemingly unconcerned about the large wounds on his back. “He will attack you physically, but you must also be prepared psychologically. *Any means*, Anna.”

“I don’t think I can do this by myself,” I gulped. I’d assumed all along he would be coming. “I need your help.”

He flinched at my last words and wiped at a line of blood slowly rolling down his arm. “I know you need help. It can’t be me that helps you.”

“Is there someone else?”

He nodded. “The third Keeper of the Gate.”

“The third Keeper of the Gate,” I repeated. “Who is it?”

Devin’s jaw rippled. “Someone I was hoping to never see again.”

“But who is he?”

I nearly jumped out of my skin when a voice rumbled from the shadows across the room. “Anna.” A very large figure moved toward us with determined steps and my breath hitched in my throat. “It has been a very long time, but surely you have not forgotten who I am.” This creature’s eyes glowed a deep azure.

I jumped up with the full intent of running but instead fell flat on my face at his feet. “Erebus?” I blurted and eyed him from toe to head as I picked myself up shakily. Thankfully this was not a creature from the Underworld, but rather a very large man.

The man’s luminous eyes were the same aqua as Devin’s now, but a hundred times more intense and they held mine as I moved back beside Devin. “I am Erebus, Keeper of the Gate. I am the last of my kind who still calls our Lord Father.”

“Ere-who?” I said stupidly and was surprised this man did not have wings. I guess I was expecting all strange men who suddenly appeared in the shadows to have wings.

I eyed him curiously. He was unnaturally tall, perhaps over seven feet, and one of his hands was as large as three of mine. His features were soft, very much like Devin’s, and his hair was the same shade of gold. Devin cut me off as I opened my mouth.

“You are the last, Erebus?” Devin’s skin seemed to pale further and sweat shimmered on his brow. “How can this be? Wh . . . when?”

Erebus stuck his nose in the air. “Shylan finally fell to him after a fortnight in the other realm. I am the last.” His tone sounded sad for a moment but he seemed to quickly recover. “But enough of this banter. Are we ready to go to the City? I presume you are prepared, or you would not have summoned me.”

“A fortnight?” Devin’s face turned ashen. “Why had I not heard about this sooner?”

“Perhaps this is a question I should inquire of you, Devin.” Erebus quirked his head slightly. “Have you been so deeply involved in your task here you have forgotten the other realms?”

The two were quiet—the air, thick with tension—and I took this opportunity to break in. “This Shylan person fell to the Devil?” My voice didn’t sound right and I cringed when all eyes in the room were suddenly on me. “Is that what’s going on?” I asked weakly.

Erebus folded his heavily muscled arms across his bare chest and narrowed his eyes at me. I couldn’t help but notice the very short, very ridiculous, loin cloth he was wearing. Strangely, I wanted to laugh and demand to know why he was wearing it. “That is correct.” His words were tinged with grief, briefly, and I wondered who this Shylan person was. “Shylan has fallen prey to his bait. I am the only one left.”

“And who are you again?”

Erebus certainly did not seem like a very patient guy and I jumped when his voice boomed. “For your *human* ears. . .” Shaking his head in disapproval, he glanced over at Devin. “Which I am very surprised to still find you in.” He returned his penetrating gaze to me. “I am a Watcher from the City of Ice. As a Keeper of the Gate, we will enter the City of Fire together.”

“A who from where for what?”

He frowned in Devin’s direction and gestured to me. “Have you told her nothing?”

“I have told her everything,” he hissed, fists clenched. “Her memories are not as forthcoming as before.”

“Why?” Erebus snapped.

Devin shook his head, exasperated. “I cannot answer that.”

Erebus was suddenly across the room and the air shimmered in his wake. My breath puffed from my lips, as it did on cold days, and I shivered at the ice in the air. “You cannot answer that?” He mocked and shoved Devin. “It is your duty to bring her back to us. Do not tell me you cannot answer that.” His eyes glowed with hatred as he glared over at me, and then back to Devin. “Bring her back.” He bumped into Devin aggressively and it made my heart skip a beat. “Right now. That is what you were created for.”

Devin pushed his glasses on his nose and shoved Erebus back weakly. The large man hardly stumbled. “Stand away from me, brother,” Devin commanded feebly. “Do not talk as though I have no idea of my failings.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I do not know what has gone wrong. Believe me, if I did know we would not be having this conversation.”

This grabbed my interest. Brothers? No wonder they were so similar in appearance. But why such a difference in height? And why did Devin have wings and Erebus did not? Perhaps in the other realm this Erebus guy took on a different form, much like Devin and me. What would he look like? A giant?

“You are getting rusty in your old age,” Erebus persisted. “And weak.” With these last words he shoved Devin again. “Perhaps you prefer it this way. She does not remember who you really are.”

Who he really is? Huh?

“I have done all I can to bring her back,” Devin snapped and swung uselessly at his brother. Erebus’s movement were fluid, like the wind, and he easily dodged Devin’s fist. The air in the room grew icy again and I clutched my arms for warmth. “Something has gone wrong this time,” Devin continued as he adjusted his hair and his pride. “I cannot determine what, exactly, that is however.”

Erebus snorted. “Something is definitely wrong, Devin. Perhaps you have finally outlived your usefulness.”

“Do not start with me here,” Devin managed through a clenched jaw. “I do not need your sarcastic remarks or these physical challenges. We can continue this another time.”

Erebus shrugged and looked away dismissively. “You were always the weak one.” He eyed his brother hatefully, but Devin remained silent. “Speechless?” Erebus teased. “Your silence will not protect you. You are accountable to Him, not me, remember? Perhaps you should consider ways to defend your stupidity before you are returned to the City of Fire.”

Returned to the City of Fire?

Devin was as still as a statue, eyes never leaving Erebus’s face, and it was obvious he wasn’t going to let these remarks get to him. I wondered how equally matched they would be once Devin transformed. Strangely, a small part of me wanted Devin to fight back. I hardly knew this Erebus guy, and already I disliked him.

I shuffled uncomfortably as they held stone gazes for a very long time. I pondered saying something about the weather when Erebus spoke. “How does this change the circumstances? What are we to do now?”

“We carry on as we have for an eternity. You bring her to the City. Find Father James. Restore the gates. Our existence will return to how it has been for a millennia.”

Erebus began to pace the room and his head seemed to be mere inches from the ceiling. “I cannot bring her in human form to the City of Fire. That will give us away immediately.”

Devin moved over to the worn desk and opened his bible. He silently read for a few moments and I noticed his arms were trembling. “You will not have to take her in human form,” he said finally. “She has already transformed. It’s going to take some *effort* to get her to change again, but she can do it.”

“Effort?” Erebus frowned. “Explain.”

Devin shoved his hands into his pockets and looked sideways at me before addressing his brother. “She still has the ability to move between forms, but it needs to happen under extreme physical and mental stress. She needs to be motivated.”

I thought back to when Devin had pinned me to the wall in my room and my heart picked up pace. There was no way he was going to do that again. *Not a chance.*

Erebus shrugged. "So be it. She has to change forms under some duress. It doesn't matter to me how it happens." He took a step forward, knuckles cracking loudly, and I froze. "Let's get this over with."

Devin stepped in the path of Erebus, shoulders hunched. He looked like an ant beside a giant.

"No." Devin's voice was firm, although it shook.

Erebus looked down at his brother and snickered. "You said she needed a little motivation." He paused and examined Devin's sweating face. "Do you have a problem with me providing her that assistance?"

Devin straightened his frame, but his shoulders still seemed weighted. "You will not touch her. Ever."

Erebus smiled thinly. "Are you emotionally invested in her?" He shook his head. "Will you not learn from past mistakes?"

Devin stood with his shoulders hunched, eyes darting from me to Erebus nervously. "You know *nothing*, Erebus. My past mistakes are that: my own."

The brothers were silent and I thought about their last words. Emotionally invested in whom? Me? What, if anything, did that mean? I was suddenly very curious about my past with Devin.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when Erebus grabbed Devin's shoulder. Devin tried unsuccessfully to shrink away. "If she has already transformed, as you say, why is she still like this?"

"As I said," Devin pulled away from his grasp and ran the back of his hand across his brow. "Something has gone wrong this time. She did not regain her memories."

Erebus stroked the strong line of his jaw and eyed me suspiciously. "What is wrong with you? Why do you not remember?"

I half smiled and looked sideways. This guy was really beginning to get under my skin and heat flickered in my chest. "There's nothing wrong with me. What's wrong with *you*?"

He ignored me. "These mistakes you talk of, Devin," he gestured to me and I frowned. "The fallout of these mistakes between you two is further reaching than you know." He seemed to ponder these words and then his features brightened. "Perhaps He has done this intentionally." Erebus nodded. "That is it then, Devin. This memory loss has been done

intentionally. Our Lord does not want her to remember the relationship you two had, nor your true past. ”

Devin nodded slowly. “At this point, Erebus, anything is possible.”

“I *am* correct, Devin. You and I both know he did not approve of your relationship. You two nearly collapsed the realms. Erasing her memory was a way to start over.”

I examined Devin’s profile, my cheeks flushed hot.

So we had a relationship?

My heart thumped at this distant memory and I wanted to touch Devin to help the memories return.

“Drop it,” Devin hissed and stepped away as though he could read my thoughts. “If she was meant to forget then we should not be discussing it.”

Erebus laughed and then threw his arms into the air. “Strangely,” his left eyebrow lifted, “you are correct for once. Enough of this banter. We are wasting precious time.” He marched over and took me by the wrist in his crushing grip. “You need to transform so that we can move into the city before the end of day.”

“What happens then? What happens at the end of day?” I asked and struggled to pull my wrist from his grasp.

He leaned down, face inches from mine. I could smell ice on his breath: images of high snow banks and numb fingers flashed. “That is when the demons come out to play.”

Chapter Fifteen

“D-Demons?” Images of the black tar from the alley behind the school flashed and an involuntary shiver ran down my back.

Erebus squeezed my shoulders and his eyes pulsed with the intensity of his words. “Creatures beyond the human imagination are waiting to pass through the gates of Hell. If we do not move to save Father James and the third triquetra, life in this realm will cease to exist.” He suddenly shook me so forcefully that my teeth felt like they were going to come loose. “Now *transform!*”

“Release her, Erebus.” The forceful shaking stopped instantly with Devin’s words, but my head still felt like it was rocking back and forth. “I think I’ve made myself pretty clear. You are *not* to touch her.”

The air in the room seemed stale and I took several breaths in a failed attempt to catch it. What happened in the next few moments rested on my shoulders and I couldn’t very well walk away, that I was certain of. And I sure couldn’t let this Erebus guy do whatever he thought he needed to do to help me transform back into whatever form I was truly meant to be in. I took another long inhalation of air and moved to rest my hand on Devin’s arm. My fingers slipped in a line of blood dripping slowly, rolling downwards.

“Go away, Erebus.” I rubbed my fingers on my jeans. “We will find you when we need you.” My voice sounded much more confident than I was feeling.

Erebus quirked an eyebrow. “Really? And how, exactly, is that going to work? How do you propose to find me?”

“I have everything under control,” Devin interrupted. “This is out of your hands now. You will know when you are needed.”

Erebus laughed. “Really? You have everything under control?”

“I do,” Devin shot back. “I have an idea.”

“An *idea?*” Erebus mimicked and then broke into deep baritone laughter. “The fate of humanity in *all* the realms is at risk, and I am supposed to feel reassured that you have an *idea?*” He stood taller, hands at his sides, and stared at us down his nose.

Devin nodded, “That’s right.”

I was certain Erebus was going to break into another laughing fit and jumped when he boomed, “Very well. You have one hour to carry out this *idea*—although I am quite confident you will fail. I will be waiting at the gate.” He crossed his right arm in front of his chest and looked about to go somewhere. “If I have not heard back from you within that time frame, I *will* have my way with you, Annalisa Harold. And rest assured,” his eyes narrowed and he smiled deeply, “you will *not* enjoy it.” In a blast of ice pellets, he vanished from the room.

I slowly lowered my arm from my face and looked over at Devin. He was staring at my fingers that had somehow come to rest on his arm again. He brought his eyes to mine, his look unreadable. My heart was a beating mess as I fell into his gaze. Despite everything that was happening, I felt peace in his eyes.

I swallowed. “What was our relationship like before?”

Devin frowned, his eyes looking back and forth between mine. “Don’t do this. Not now.”

Far off in the recesses of my mind was a faded, opaque drawer that held the secrets of my time with Devin. “I can see something.” I squinted as though this might help. “Tell me, Devin. Tell me about us. Help me remember.”

In silence, he started to reach for me and I held my breath. His fingers were inches from mine when his features hardened and he made a fist and drew his hand back. “No. Now is not the time to talk about that. There are more pressing matters.”

My cheeks flushed hot and I swallowed, my heart hammering. He was right. What was I thinking? Flustered, I scrambled to compose myself. “Help me, Devin. Help me transform. I have no idea what I need to do here. How do I get to the gate?”

He watched my lips as I spoke. “I . . . I don’t know if my idea is the best thing right now.” He looked away and bit the inside of his cheek. “Perhaps I should have someone else try with you.”

My heart skipped a beat and red-hot anger burned. “You don’t mean Erebus? Right? Did you hear what he said?” I stared as Devin shrank away from my anger. “He said I wasn’t going to enjoy what he had planned. And you know what? He looks like the kind of guy that doesn’t mess around.”

"I really don't think you're going to like my idea any better, but no, I didn't mean Erebus."

"I'll take anything from you over him *any day*." I suddenly wondered what I was agreeing to but pushed the doubt away. "What's your idea? Like I said, anything from you is definitely better than what he has planned for me."

He nodded without making eye contact. "I don't think you're going to be very happy about it."

"I don't care," I gulped and thought of how he had confined me the last time. The last thing I wanted was a repeat of earlier but if I had to choose, I wanted it to be Devin and not Erebus. "You need to do something before he comes back. I'm ready for you this time." I opened my arms to him, fully expecting him to come after me again. "Let's get this over with."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Afraid of? What do you mean?" I stood straight when it was obvious he wasn't going to try and tackle me.

The fine lines around his eyes seemed to deepen. "I mean, I don't think me confining you is going to work again. You're ready this time. The emotion needed to change over will not be there."

"So you pissing me off was not in your plan?"

"No." He shook his head. "It won't work. Perhaps if it was someone else. . ."

"You mean someone like Erebus?"

"No!" His head snapped up. "I said he will not touch you and I meant that. I promise you."

My stomach rolled. "I don't want anyone else," I said weakly. "I want you."

Devin's eyes were cast to the floor and he furiously nibbled on his fingernail.

"Devin?" I insisted. "How are we going to do this?"

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking," he said hastily. "Hold on."

"We don't have much time!" I wrung my hands and paced. "I thought you had a plan. What are we going to do?"

"This might be the only thing," he mumbled to himself.

"What did you say?" I stopped pacing, certain he had spoken.

He cleared his throat and did not look up when he spoke. "I said, this might be the only thing that will work."

"Well. . ." I looked around awkwardly. "What is it?"

"Don't hate me, Anna." His eyes were pleading. "Say you won't hate me."

I frowned. "Hate you? Why would I hate you?"

Without looking up, he closed the distance between us in a flash and I stepped back startled.

His eyes slowly found mine. "This is the only way." He held my gaze for several long seconds, his look unreadable.

"What?" I asked when the silence got uncomfortable.

He slowly ran a finger down my cheek. My heart rate increased with the physical contact. "I am sorry, Anna." Tears trembled on his lids. "The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

"What does that mean?" I asked perplexed. Without answering he took me tightly into his arms, chin resting on the top of my head. I stiffened at first at this sudden closeness, my heart hammering, but warmed quickly and carefully rested my cheek on his bare chest. The feel of his skin against my cheek was familiar and without realizing I was doing it, I kissed him gently on the chest. Like a sudden flash of lightning, when my lips touched his flesh, I wanted to fling my arms around his torso and melt into him. Terrified of hurting his back further, instead of going with my first instinct I brought my arms up and tucked them in-between our chests. He closed his arms more tightly then and rested his cheek on my head. Although a hammering mess, my heart was at peace and I closed my eyes as the heat of his body seeped deeply into mine. This was where I belonged, this was home.

At first, nothing more happened, and I was happy to stay in his arms for an eternity. I was about to allow myself to completely fade into him, when the room disappeared into blackness and my breath was sucked from my lungs.

Chapter Sixteen

My brain screamed for air and I clawed at the blackness as I tumbled downward through whatever vacuum Devin had brought me to. Was he trying to kill me? Was that his brilliant plan? My eyelids were starting to grow heavy, my body tingled with warmth, and when it felt as though I might pass out, life erupted around me in a thunderclap.

I lay face down, cheek pressed into a plush olive green carpet, and all I could do for the first few seconds was to breathe. Suck in, gasp out, suck in, and gasp out. When it finally felt as though I had my breathing under control, I allowed myself to look around. It didn't take long to realize I was in a funeral parlor. Folding wooden chairs were lined up in front of a closed brown casket and I gulped, wondering who was in it.

I looked around for Devin but he was nowhere to be seen. People began to enter the room then, and I backed up awkwardly. Large daisy-like flowers, the petals stained an off-white from years of exposure, littered the wall of the bubbling wallpaper. Perhaps I could blend in with the gaudy flowers.

My mind whirled. *Why had Devin brought me here?*

And then in a sickening wave, my mind started to recognize the people coming into the room. My Aunt Jenny, Jack and April Harvard from across the street, Stacey's twin brothers. One after another they came into the room, but not one person looked in my direction or acknowledged my presence. At one point Stacey's Uncle George seemed to be coming in my direction, but instead of stopping to talk with me, proceeded to sit in one of the chairs in front of me.

Tired of being ignored as the room filled, I leaned over and tapped George gently on the shoulder. Strangely, he didn't respond and absently scratched at his ear. Frowning, I tapped a little harder but with no luck.

"George?" I whispered shakily. "What is going on? Why are all these people here?"

He ignored me. "George?" I insisted, a bit louder with absolutely no reaction from him. "George!" I yelled this time, right into his ear, but again was met with the same reaction: none. My heart rate increased then and I

started making my way around the room, yelling in people's faces as I tried to get their attention.

"Hey! Anyone!" I screamed from the front of the room. "Can anyone hear me?" My frustration turned to tears and I fought to control them. Stupid Devin. Was this his idea of a joke? Was this how he thought he was helping me transform?

Defeated, I moved to the wall when it looked like the funeral for whoever was in the casket was about to begin. My chest heaved with tears of frustration as I watched the mortician unlock the casket and raise the lid. I couldn't have been more surprised to see myself in the coffin, and my breath froze in my chest as I looked at Stacey. Her porcelain complexion was marred by layers of thick makeup and her hair was combed in a bob she would never have worn. I blinked and gasped a breath. The skin on her cheeks was not sitting quite right and although I knew it was Stacey, this body, this shell, was not the little girl that had befriended me on my first day of kindergarten. Stacey was gone. Taken away from her family and friends, all because I couldn't keep my stupid mouth shut. My knees gave away and I collapsed into a heap on the floor. I buried my face in my hands and took great shuddering breaths filled with dust from the worn olive carpet. It was my fault Stacey was gone. Sounds I hadn't noticed before suddenly came alive, and I could hear people sobbing.

Forcing myself up, I sat a dejected mess, tears streaking my cheeks. Stacey's mother and father held each other and wept quietly. My own mother and father were in the row behind them, my mother's eyes rimmed red from crying.

"Why?" I screamed to the ceiling. "Why are you showing me this, Devin?" I drew a shuddering breath and squeezed my eyes, forcing the tears to run down my cheeks. I hated him then. "How could you," I mumbled, my anger short-lived. "I didn't mean to do it," I sobbed to the ceiling. "I didn't want to hurt her. Why are you doing this to me?"

I sobbed uncontrollably for what felt like decades until a shrill scream filled the air. Jolted from the depths of dripping black sadness, I snapped my head in the direction of the warning and was struck dumb as a row of chairs tumbled through the air. People at the back of the room pushed forward and the worn wooden seats came down on their heads with a

sickening *crack*. I strained to look through the mass of bodies. What was going on?

My mother yelled for my father, her voice standing out above the rest, and when I looked in her direction, between the bodies moving, I was horrified to see her fighting with something holding her arm up. She was struggling to pull away from this unseen assailant and I stood to get a better look. My heart stopped at that moment. Forget about those figurative heart stops, my heart actually stopped dead in my chest as my eyes locked with the yellowed ones of the demon tar. The demon shadow from behind the school, the black mass that had nearly killed Devin and me, was now holding my mother's arm. The giant black mass swirled and grew so that it was flush with the ceiling. I was frozen. Absolutely horrified to the roots of my being, I did not know what to do. As people filed through a door at the front of the room in a panic, I stood frozen like a moron, watching this thing consume my mother. She screamed in short staccatos and my father tried to no avail to pull her away.

My legs came alive then and I bolted from the room. Somehow I pushed past the people trampling each other to get out of the room and stood on the front lawn of the funeral home. Hunched over, breaths coming in short gasps, I struggled with my terror. I wanted to run away forever, wanted to save myself but the other half of me needed to save my mother. The reality of everything surfaced. What was I doing standing out here when my mother needed me? So what that this thing had nearly killed me once before. And so what that I had no idea what it was and how to kill it. I needed to go back. I needed to face this thing. That is why Devin had brought me here.

With determined steps, I pushed my way back into the funeral home and to the viewing room where only my mother, father and the demon were.

"Let her go!" I demanded, hands on my hips.

The black tar had taken on a humanoid shape and its large lolling head turned in my direction when I spoke. Yellowed eyes blinked and its great gaping mouth of dripping fangs widened in what I could only guess was a smile.

"Be gone, girl," it garbled unclearly, and took my mother around the waist. The demon had rendered her unconscious now, my father the same,

on the floor, and the beast was slowly absorbing her. Only her chest and head were visible through its slick black body.

“Stop!” I commanded, my blood pumping hard in my temples. “This is your last warning.”

The beast paused to look over at me. It did not speak this time, but seemed to speed up what it was doing to my mother as her head was the only thing visible. My blood boiled over at that moment and I leapt across the room. With a great scream, I jumped on top of the demon and sank my hands deep into its slimy black head. It shrieked in pain and released my mother. She fell in a heap on the floor, but I hardly noticed as I swung my fists repeatedly into the creature’s head and face. It lurched forward, its giant arms too short to reach me, and tumbled through the chairs and across the room before smashing into the wall. With every sickening slap of my fist, my body came alive. I was in the red suit again and in a skilled leap, did a front flip off the creature and onto the floor in front of it.

I whipped my right arm out and four long claws sliced out of the end of my fingertips. Smiling deeply, I licked my lips. “You had a chance to give up. Now it’s too late.” And with that, I lunged toward the beast. In a fluid motion, I slashed out and caught the demon on the right cheek with all four claws.

With a human scream, it fell backwards and I leapt forward, my legs coming in contact with its chest as it tumbled back. It landed with a sickening thud on the floor, and as I brought my right fist up again to use the claws, Devin’s voice caught me. It wasn’t the beast under my legs, but Devin. Four great gaping wounds poured blood down his cheek.

Chapter Seventeen

I stared in dumbfounded awe as Devin squirmed under me. “Anna!” he screamed, and brought his forearms up to shield his face. “Stop! It’s me.”

Confused, the adrenaline still pumping through my system, I did not lower my arm right away. Seconds ago I had been fighting to protect my mother from the black tar, and now Devin was lodged under my legs in place of the demon.

Devin peeked out from behind the shield of his arms, eyes wide with terror. “Anna! It’s me!”

I blinked several times trying to force my brain to understand what was going on. “Devin? What? What’s going on?”

He lowered his arms further and my eyes were drawn to the deep the cuts on his cheek. “Can you put those *things* away?” he pleaded and gestured to the razor-sharp claws protruding from my fingertips.

I started stupidly at him and then at the hand over my head before somehow willing the claws to retract with a metal ring. My brain was still processing the whole thing. “I thought you were the black tar. What happened?”

I sat back and let Devin scramble out from under me. “I was.” His wings ruffled several times before settling behind him.

“What?” I shook my head.

“I was the black tar.”

“But why?”

He stood and held the large gashes on his cheek as he spoke. “I needed you to believe I was It. We needed the emotions. That is the only way you transform. With strong emotion. Remember?” He looked at the blood dripping off his fingers and gestured at my fingertips. “Those are sharp!” I watched amazed as the gashes on his cheeks slowly faded as they healed.

My heart finally slowed a bit. “So you’re telling me you made all that up to torment me?”

He looked sharply up, brow furrowed. “It was either that or let Erebus have his way with you. It is what you wanted.”

I was stunned and the anger that had ignited my soul ripped apart and died. “But you let me see Stacey in a coffin,” I moaned, and stumbled toward him for support. He caught me in his strong arms. “She was dead, Devin.” My words caught in my throat and I pressed my nose into his chest. “She was dead.” My voice was muffled. “She’s dead because of me. . .” My words trailed off and I allowed myself to sob openly. Once again, the emptiness that my life had become enveloped me.

“But she’s not really dead. He has simply erased her memories and sent her to a new family.”

“She’s dead to me, Devin,” I countered. “And she’s dead to her family.”

Devin squeezed me tightly and I felt the light touch of feathers on my back. “I’m so sorry, Anna.” His voice was laced with tears. “I did not want to cause you such pain. Please forgive me.”

We stayed like this for several long minutes, and I struggled to release the images of Stacey in the coffin. The skin on her cheeks had hung like a worn paper bag, a thick chalky makeup marred her porcelain complexion, and her hair was styled into a bob she would have hated. This was not the vibrant, beautiful Stacey I had grown up with. My sorrow slowly evaporated in the heat of my anger, and I pulled out of Devin’s arms. “You’re *sorry*?” My heart was pumping hard again. “You let me see my best friend’s corpse,” I hissed. “And you also let me see my mother being attacked by the black tar, and now all you can say is you’re *sorry*?” I couldn’t decide if I was angry or totally broken by his betrayal. “You took everything I loved and shoved it in my face right after *stealing it all away from me*.” My bottom lip trembled. “How could you do that? My life is utterly destroyed. You rubbed that in my face.”

Silence.

I could not care less about where we were, and focused only on him. “How could you?” I demanded again. “You have torn away a piece of my soul, Devin. And you know,” I choked. “I don’t think I have many pieces left.”

He struggled to hold my eyes. “I . . . I didn’t know what else to do. It was the only way I thought I could get the necessary emotion from you.”

I nodded and my chest heaved. Hot tears of fury poured down my cheeks, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. “So this is how it’s

going to be?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m just some puppet you can manipulate.” Tears sprayed off my lips and I wiped at them uselessly. “My feelings don’t mean anything to you, do they?”

“Of course they do, Anna.” He moved to touch my arm but I yanked it away from him.

“Don’t touch me!” I warned and stood tall. “Don’t *ever* touch me again. How could you be so heartless and cruel?”

“Anna,” he begged. “Try to understand. If this had failed, Erebus would have been free to do anything to you.”

“Maybe that would have been better.” I snapped back and took a challenging step forward. The ground shifted and crunched under my foot.

Devin’s arms dropped to his sides and he shook his head. “I’m sorry. How could I have been so stupid?” He began to pace and as I followed his form, I became slowly aware of where we were. The air was thick with sulfur, the ground a field of crunchy ash, and far off in the distance, the gates of Hell beckoned with crooked fingers. The cloudless sky looked grey and although I saw light, there was no sun.

“We’re here,” I whispered and walked away from Devin to look out across the charred landscape.

The moment was broken by a sharp *clap*, and I turned to see Erebus slowly materializing from the ash-mottled air. “What a performance that was,” he laughed, and didn’t stop clapping until he was standing with us. Surprisingly, he was exactly as he had been in the basement of the church. There was no transformation. “I have to be honest, brother. I was skeptical.” He batted a piece of smouldering ash away from his face. “Very impressive. Even *I* would have hesitated to use her human memories against her.” He smiled over at me. “Pitiless, heartbreaking,” he shrugged. “Yet brilliant, and very effective.”

Devin had been standing with fists clenched, jaw in a tight line, and as Erebus spoke his chest heaved faster and faster.

“Come now, dear brother.” Erebus clapped Devin on the shoulder. “We do what we need to. Do not feel bad. It does not matter who we crush on the way, as long as we serve our Lord.”

Devin was staring at me, I was beginning to feel uncomfortable in the intensity of his eyes, and I could see the anger slowly boiling up inside him. He wrenched his shoulder out of Erebus's grasp and with a great roar, shoved his brother with both hands. Surprisingly, Erebus flew through the air and landed several hundred feet away.

Devin's chest heaved again, and I held his tear-rimmed gaze uncomfortably. "Everything has been for you, Anna," he choked and his lips trembled. "All for you."

"Yeah, thanks for that," I said sarcastically, but doubted my anger now. Before I could say more, Devin disappeared and was on top of Erebus in a flash of movement I hardly saw. In a flurry of actions the brothers crashed across the ground, and great billows of ash lofted through the air. In human form, Devin had been no match for the larger Erebus. Now, it appeared, he had the upper hand.

My attention was drawn from the two when the sky above the City of Fire brightened and the swirling tornado of clouds seemed to spin faster. "Guys," I gestured toward them without taking my eyes off the city. "Something is happening."

Grunts answered my concerns as the brothers tumbled past me in a flurry of punches, and I repeated: "Guys! Something is happening!"

Once again they ignored me, and with determined steps I marched over and grabbed Devin by the shoulder. "Devin!" I demanded and he froze, shaking fist pulled back over Erebus's welt-covered face. "Something is happening in the City." I gestured again. "Look!"

With a swift grunt, Devin punched Erebus once more in the nose and shrugged out of my grasp before standing. He brushed ash from his jeans and looked in the direction I was pointing. "What is that, Devin?"

He took a deep breath and looked sideways as Erebus pulled himself up. The marks on his face were already healed. "The Dark King is gathering his minions from all the realms." We stood in a line and watched as the black clouds swirling in the center of the city pulsed with firelight. "The last time we saw something like this, He was actually able to take a step through the gates." Devin frowned and wiped a large piece of ash from his cheek. His eyes took on a faraway look. "We nearly lost you that time, Anna. It was only after our Father resurrected one of the Titans that we were able to reseal the gates and bring you back."

I looked up sharply. “That sounds impossible. Crazy. How do I not remember any of that?”

Devin looked sideways at me. “Not impossible, not crazy, highly likely and I wish I knew for certain why you can’t remember. This whole thing is much more serious than we initially thought. It won’t be long before they break the final locks on the gates and Lucifer is free to roam the realms. If we have to bring the Titans into this again, it will be a lasting war. We *must* not let it come to that.”

“What happens if He . . . you know, the . . .the Devil, gets out?” I asked, amid the other questions swirling around. *Titans?*

“He and his demons will have free reign in all the realms. They can imprison whomever they please. It will be a reign of terror not seen for a very long time.”

I gulped and stared out across the field of ash. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It isn’t,” the brothers said together.

I glanced over. “So this is it, then? We—we go? We go in there and find this James guy and get the key?” I fought to control the multitude of emotions pulling me in different directions.

They both looked at me and Devin’s face hardened. “Yes,” Erebus answered. “We go. Now hurry.”

Without another word, he started off across the field.

Rooted beside Devin, I watched Erebus’s retreating form. I hadn’t noticed the sword strapped to his back before.

“Go,” Devin said finally. “Do what you were created for.”

“What happens to you?” I looked at his profile and my heart skipped a beat. I wanted so badly to go home, to forget all this.

He stared out over the city before looking down at me. “I will wait for you as I always have.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat and now fully regretted my anger at him.

“Go,” he urged again before folding his arms across his chest. “You must hurry.”

“Devin,” I took a step toward him. “I’m. . . I’m sorry for what I said. About you being heartless. I know that’s not true.”

He cursed quietly and grabbed me by the arms. “Stop.” His eyes rippled, brows furled heavily. “You do not need to worry about me right now. Life in all the realms is dependent on you finding Father James and resealing the gates. *I* will be okay, but our *existence* may not be if you waste time worrying about me.”

Nodding, I stepped away when he released me. “Okay. . .” I needed to psych myself up. “I get it. I need to go.” I jumped around. “I’m ready for this. . . I’m ready.”

He gestured. “Good, now *go!*”

I stopped moving and let my arms drop. “But we really need to talk when this is all over.”

“About what?”

“About Sylan. About Erebus. About your past. . .” my next words were near whispers. “About *us*.”

He looked at his feet and shook his head but said, “Fine.”

“Fine? What does that mean?”

“It means fine . . . okay . . . whatever.”

“I . . . I want you to tell me everything.” I looked over at him. “You need you to tell me what happened between us.”

He squinted out across the field, wings trembling. “You don’t understand what you’re asking, Anna. Our past was not meant to be. He has decided that.”

“I don’t care.”

A thundering boom from the city made us jump and a thick billow of smoke puffed upwards into the swirling black clouds. Fire light glowed more intensely and Erebus’s disappearing form rippled in the heat snakes.

“I. . .” Devin seemed at a loss for words. “You *should* care, becau—”

I cut him off. “Promise me, Devin. Promise you will tell me about us. About everything. I will not move until you say it.”

He sighed, shoulders slumped. “Fine. . . I *said* fine.”

“Say you promise,” I demanded.

He shook his head and scratched at his ear, eyes cast downwards.

I folded my arms. “Then I don’t move. I want to hear you say it. Say you promise.”

He cursed openly and paced back and forth before finally hissing, “Fine! Fine! Yes, I *promise!*”

“But do you mean it?”

“Of course,” he snapped back. “Now go on! Lives are at risk the longer you wait.”

“You don’t sound very sincere.”

He shook his head and started walking in the opposite direction of the city. “Your stubbornness certainly has not changed. I need a break.”

I blinked and he was gone. Turning back toward the city, I took a long breath and with clenched fists, took off across the field toward the gates.

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Chapter Eighteen

My body was strangely calm as I closed the distance between myself and the City of Fire. Smouldering cinders lofted through the air as I counted my footfalls in the crunchy ash. The suit I wore was thin enough to allow me to feel the heat of the city beyond, but thick enough to protect me from the glowing embers that swirled like snowflakes. In this moment, when I would have guessed I'd be a mess of emotions, I was actually feeling in control, peaceful and still. Erebus stood in the distance and it was several minutes before I stood with him on the bank of a wide winding river. The water moved like black motor oil, and lapped thickly at the shore. My heart stopped in my chest when I noticed ghostly faces trapped under the wavy surface. They called to me, beckoned, and without thinking I crouched down and reached my hand toward them. The water was not wet as I was expecting, but thick like gelatin, the surface impenetrable.

"Do you not remember this place? The River Styx?"

I frowned up at Erebus and rubbed my hand across the surface, amazed. I could feel the faces and heads of the people trapped underneath—strangely, this did not scare me. "I remember hearing about the River Styx in school, but I never thought it was real. Greek mythology was only that: a myth."

Erebus adjusted the sword on his back and lifted an eyebrow at me.

"So the Greeks had it right, then?" I struggled to remember my Greek mythology but could only remember a movie we had to watch in class. "There's more than one God, then? Like Zeus?"

"I am having a difficult time digesting this conversation, Anna." Erebus looked me over from head to toe, nose turned up in disgust. "You truly have forgotten who you are."

I stood and rubbed my hand on my leg and Erebus continued. "Life beyond the physical human world is a great compilation of all the religions humans practice, with Catholicism being the center of it all. Saying the Greeks have it right is as accurate as saying the Jews have it right or the Buddhists or the Muslims. Human life, in any of the realms, is only a first step in an eternity of existence. Life, in all the realms, is a great mixture of

all religions. You progress through the different areas as you pass from each of the realms.”

“Wow,” I said for lack of anything better. “In a way, it all kind of makes sense.”

Erebus nodded. “Indeed.” He lifted his hand to shield his eyes and gestured with the other one. “There comes Charon now.”

“Charon?” I squinted in the direction he was looking, hardly phased that our conversation had taken a complete turn. “Who’s that?”

“The ferry driver.” Erebus pointed out across the water. “We may only cross the river on his vessel.”

I squinted in the direction Erebus indicated but didn’t see anyone. “Why would anyone cross willingly into Hell?”

Erebus looked slowly over at me. “What are we doing at this very moment?”

I smiled weakly. “Oh . . .um . . .yeah. So this is a way for those going willingly?” A memory from one of the few lessons I had on Greek mythology returned. “Hold on,” I massaged my temples. “I thought Charon ferried the souls of the newly dead into the underworld. He was like the gatekeeper of the underworld.”

“That is the spin you humans have put on the truth. The souls Lucifer has tagged are sucked down into the center of the City of Fire.” He pointed to the great swirling storm picking up steam. “There is no option, there is no ferry ride,” he smiled. “They may not move to any of the other realms. The River Styx, this river, is here as a barrier between all the realms and Hell. He, the Devil, would gladly take any soul wandering by, so to speak. This river was carved here to prevent that. Think of it as your last chance.”

“So, Hell exists separately from all the other realms?”

Erebus smiled. “Very good, Anna. That is exactly right. Hell is the same to everyone in all the realms on all planes.” He pointed toward the Dark City and I looked up at the swirling mass of clouds in the center. “Every time you see a brightening of the fires, he is imprisoning another soul. They come from all over. All ages, all races, all realms. They are all fuel to his fire.”

Shivering, I moved closer to him. “So it’s easy to get in. How do we get out?” The faces under the gelatinous surface of the river had gathered, clinging tightly to the shore where I stood, and I stepped back.

“Very carefully,” he said matter-of-factly. “You have done it plenty of times before.” He looked disgusted.

“Hey! Well, not remembering isn’t my fault. You said it yourself: He . . . God . . . wants me to forget.” I jumped back when one of the faces under the water bumped my foot.

Erebus gestured at my feet and ignored my comment. “They know what you are, Anna. Already they seek your forgiveness.” His already stern expression deepened. “Remember Devin’s warning: you wield a great power, our Lord’s mercy, and must be careful. The souls of the damned will do all they can to be free of the fires of Hell. You must not release those who are supposed to be there.”

Another explosion thundered and I jumped when the bass reverberated deeply through my chest. I looked at Erebus and the deep lines plastering his forehead made my stomach roll. He glanced over. “He continues to mobilize his forces. They will make an attempt at the gate within the next few days. We must stay focused, find Father James and get out.”

I nodded in agreement and looked back toward the river as a long ebony ferry bumped into the bank. Stumbling backwards, I landed with a grunt in the ash.

Erebus extended his hand. “Careful there.”

I slapped his hand away and jumped to my feet. “The boat appeared from nowhere. I’m fine.”

Charon, the person, or thing, driving the ferry, was shrouded in a heavy black robe and I could just make out pale eyes glinting from inside the deep hood. His thin hand clutched a long rod and a wrought iron lantern mounted on the end creaked with the movement of the waves. He swung his arm wide and said one word in a deep, raspy voice: “Board.”

Erebus stepped onto the platform without hesitation and the ferry dipped precariously to one side. He then tossed a lone gold coin into the air as he passed the shrouded figure and Charon caught this easily out of the air. He tucked the shimmering piece into the folds of his robe, eyes glinting magically from under the blackness of the hood.

Once again he swung his arm wide and again said that one grated word, “Board.”

“Come, Anna,” Erebus beckoned when I didn’t move.

I patted the skin-tight suit I was wearing. “I . . .I don’t have any change.” The statement was so normal it felt completely out of place.

Erebus held another coin in his fingers. “This one is on me, as the humans say.”

Taking a deep breath, I gathered my courage and stepped onto the floating platform. The faces of the damned trapped under the gelatinous waves gathered tightly around the ferry and I had to tear my eyes away from theirs.

Charon pocketed the second coin Erebus tossed into the air and soon we were gliding smoothly across the river. Erebus stood at the far end of the ferry overlooking the water, and I took a moment to examine the large sword strapped to his back. The hilt was t-shaped and the grip looked to be covered in smooth black stones. I wondered what the history of this weapon was and how many times Erebus had actually had to use it.

It wasn’t long before we made it across and soon found ourselves standing in front of the mile-high gates.

I craned my neck backwards looking up, and my blood pumped cold through my veins. This was it. I was about to step through the gates and into Hell.

Looking over at Erebus, I asked, “So how do we get in?”

“The gate right in front of you swings in.” He adjusted the sword on his back. “I will go first.”

Without further hesitation, he pushed the gate inward and with one deep breath, stepped through. The shrillness of his scream was my first indication of a problem—instantly, he was covered head to toe in thin cuts. It was as though he had walked into a million razor blades and before my eyes the skin began to peel away. He screamed in agony, the sounds horrible short staccatos in the heavy air. As I moved closer to the gate, not certain of what I was going to do to help, his body burst into a dark blue flame. Shielding my face with my arm, I took a step backwards and watched helplessly as Erebus burned into a pile of smouldering ash.

I was completely shocked. This was the end of everything. Erebus was the third Keeper of the Gate, and now he was gone. I hadn’t even stepped through the gate myself yet, and already I had failed. Life in all the realms was doomed now.

My knees were weak and I collapsed in a heap, my eyes glued to the smouldering pile that had once been Erebus. I turned and watched as Charon pushed the ferry boat across the river and I wondered how I was going to get back across. What was I going to do now?

A strange cracking sound drew my attention back to the city and I turned to see the pile of ash that was once Erebus cracking and moving. My heart froze in my chest and I crawled closer.

Before my amazed eyes, the pile of ash cracked and crumbled and a large muscled arm pushed up through the middle.

"Erebus?" I breathed and watched in shocked silence as the rest of his body appeared. Completely naked, he stood and then rummaged around in the ash before pulling his sword free. As though it were completely normal, he waved a hand and a cloud of ice pellets circled his body and culminated in another loin cloth and sheath for his sword.

He turned and looked at me over his shoulder. "That is never easy."

I shook my head. "Is . . . Is that going to happen to me?"

He nodded and stepped out of the shell of ash. "It will happen to any being attempting to enter the city. You are no exception." Gesturing toward the city, he smiled. "Come now. Time grows short."

"But why? Why the cutting into a million pieces and then burning to death?" I was stalling, big time.

"Think of it as a rebirth. You are being reborn into servitude to the Dark King. If you were any other being, the flames would suck out your soul."

"Servitude . . . soul . . ." the words faded from my lips.

"But you aren't just any being, Anna. We, the Keepers of the Gate, will experience the physical pain as humans but will always be reborn into our true form. Our Lord has ensured that."

I shook my head. "I still don't understand why anyone would freely chose to come here."

Erebus's face was neutral. "That same question has been pondered for a millennium. Those seduced by the Dark Lord must believe by entering into this place, they face a future better than the one they are currently in." His features darkened. "Little do they know: they have willingly passed into an eternity of suffering."

“Some people must live really bad lives, if this place looks like a better option.” My fingers ached and I realized I was clutching my arms into my chest.

Erebus nodded slowly. “Some do indeed have a lifetime of suffering. But let us not dwell on that right now. Come on, Anna. Time is precious. We need to locate Father James and the third key.”

I stepped away from the gate. “Hold on. Jus . . .just give me a second. Okay?”

Folding his arms, he furrowed his brow. “This is growing tiresome, Anna.”

“I know, I know.” I really *did* get his impatience. “Did it hurt?” I gestured to the pile of ash. “You know . . . when you caught fire?”

“Of course.”

Thanks. You could have lied.”

He half smiled. “Come on, Anna,” I coached myself aloud. “Just do it and get it over with.” Taking a deep breath, I held my arms out in front of me and closed my eyes before moving toward the gate. My fingers were first to pass through the barrier.

Chapter Nineteen

The pain of the razor blades cutting through my flesh was like nothing I had experienced before. Cold blades, invisible to the human eye, cut not only through my skin but deeply into my soul. The icy blades, both hot and cold at the same time, sawed through bone and cartilage and just when the pain became unbearable, it tripled when my flesh ignited with the blue-hot fires of Hell.

Flashes of my life, of all the horrible things I'd done to people over the years, surfaced and I was made to relive the moments in the flames swirling around my body. Except this time it wasn't from my perspective, but that of the other person. The little dark-haired girl in kindergarten whose braids I pulled because I was jealous of her dress. The kid I called ugly. The horrible names I called my mother . . . all of it came rushing back, and I was helpless to stop it. I was a prisoner to the memories. Hot, heavy, crushing. The weight threatened to flatten me into a pulp and I gave in then. I let the sorrow take over. Wallowing in my own self-pity, I could feel my chest opening up, could feel the pain seeping into what was left of my tattered body. My world was black, endless, and all I could think to do was cry.

When the sorrow had pushed me to the brink of sanity, a bright flash of light blinded me. Suddenly I was being pulled toward the light, through the sharp edges, from the shell of my ashes.

The strong hands gripping my arms released and I fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Covering my head with my arms, my eyes still had not adjusted to the light when Erebus spoke.

"Your time spent as a human has amassed a large number of sins the Dark King has drawn power from."

I lowered my arm a fraction and squinted up at him, my breaths coming in short gasps. The air here was thick with sulfur. "Drawn power from?"

Erebus nodded. "He draws power from the sins of humanity in all the realms. Every sin committed makes him stronger. Even the ones people think don't matter."

I sat up finally and realized I was naked. My burning lungs took greater precedence than my modesty, and I focused mainly on breathing in the thick yellow air. “Even small things, like jealousy? He cares . . .about stuff . . . like that?”

Erebus extended his hand. “He cares about them all.”

I shook my head and swatted his hand away. “I . . . can’t breathe . . .why? Why . . .does he care?”

He folded his arms across his chest and stepped back. “You need to bring the suit back. It is the only way you will be able to breathe in this atmosphere.”

“Suit?” I repeated breathlessly. “You . . . mean . . .my . . . red . . . one?”

Erebus nodded before his head snapped to the right. He drew the long sword from his back and held it defensively forward. “Yes. The red suit. Hurry, Anna. They are coming. We must move.”

My breath hitched as I tried to draw in oxygen, but the more I tried to breathe the thinner the air became. “I . . .I . . . can’t breathe.” My body was growing numb and black spots started popping up in my vision. “Help . . . m-me.”

Erebus looked over his shoulder and holstered his sword before walking over. He crouched and caught me in his large arms as I started to topple backwards. His brows furrowed deeply. “Can you not summon the suit?”

“N . . . no.” I barely managed this and drew my final breath as the world disappeared.

Instantly the world snapped back to life with a gust of ice, and I sat bolt upright. I gulped greedily at the fresh air and could think of nothing but breathing. In and out. In and out.

Erebus stood and stepped back as I looked up at him. “Wha . . .what ha . . .happened?” I asked, breathless.

“I helped you.” His eyes skirted sideways. “A little.”

I lifted an arm and examined the red suit. Only now it was lined with strips of blue ice that sparkled magically. “What happened to it? What is this blue stuff?”

Erebus frowned and held his sword forward again. “I needed to use my powers to regain yours. But do not fear, those ice lines will fade in

time.”

For the first time since I’d passed through the gates, I looked at the scene around us. Tall charred buildings leaned brokenly against a red and orange skyline. Ignoring his last comment I said, “We’re in . . .” my words trailed off.

“We’re in, Anna, but the fact that I had to help you is a problem. Can you manage yourself from this point on?”

Shadows began to take form in the alleyways between the buildings and I squinted at them. “A problem?” I took a hesitant step forward and watched as one of the shadows slowly materialized into a thin boy. He reached for me and I was held captive by his eyes. “Why is it a problem?” Without realizing it, I was moving toward the child.

Erebus grabbed my arm tightly and I looked down at his hand. “What?” I asked, and returned my gaze to the child.

Without another word, Erebus wrenched me forcefully away from the gates. Despite my protests, he didn’t stop until we were well away from the child. We stood in a garbage-riddled alleyway. Small fires burned all around. He shoved me so hard then that I stumbled backwards and hit my head against one of the ashen walls.

“Hey!” I yelled, my heart pumping hard. “What was that for?”

“That,” Erebus hissed, “was to hopefully knock some sense into you.”

I stood straight and brushed at my suit. “Sense? What are you talking about?”

Erebus looked ready to explode and marched over to stand within an inch of me. His eyes bore down at me as he asked, “Have you forgotten where we are, Anna? Have you forgotten our purpose?”

I frowned and rubbed my temples. “We’re here to get something . . .” My mind was a fuzzy mess. “To get something . . .” my words faded when I repeated them. What *were* we doing here?

“Something,” he snorted. “*Someone*, Anna. We are here to find Father James and the third key to seal the gates.”

“Oh yes,” I said weakly. “I remember something like that now.” I looked up at him. “Why can’t I remember?”

Erebus looked up and down the alleyway as he spoke. “Perhaps this mental block is further reaching than we had previously thought.”

We both looked up when the sky brightened and the sound of great gears turning screeched through the crackling ash buildings that smouldered around us.

“What was that?” I watched as the sky slowly faded to a deep red again.

“That was the storm at the center of the City. It is drawing in more souls, more sins, for the dark King. It is how he draws his power.”

A shriek filled the thick yellow air and we both turned to see a group of six beings moving toward us from the shadows.

Erebus gestured behind him. “They have found us, Anna.” He cursed. “You have weakened our advantage with these delays. We need to move. *Now!*”

Strangely, instinct seemed to take over at that moment and I scanned the alleyway for an exit. As I turned opposite, in the direction the army of the damned was moving, I noticed that another even larger group had formed at the other end of the alleyway.

“We’re not getting out that way,” I gestured, and Erebus looked over his shoulder.

We looked up at the same and time and my heart fell when I spotted deformed people emerging from the building rooftops and windows. They were crawling on the side of the brick, clawing their way out of the windows, falling from the rooftops.

We were trapped.

“Erebus!” I called in warning. “What are we going to do?”

“Here!” He was moving so quickly I stumbled as I tried to follow him. “Into the sewers.” With a mighty roar, he hauled the cover off the nearest manhole, and without question I jumped into the darkness. Erebus was not far behind, and after quickly replacing the heavy iron cover he landed beside me in the inky black water at the bottom.

“I can’t see anything.” I held my hands forward and dragged my fingers through the steaming-hot sludge on the walls. “Erebus?” My voice was small in the suffocating space. “Where are you?”

There was a loud crackle and slowly the walls of the tunnel came into view. A small glowing blue orb floated several feet away from us and as we moved forward, it retreated. The eerie blue light illuminated about ten feet of tunnel in front of and behind us, and I wondered what lay hidden in the

shadows beyond. The cobbled stone ceiling was inches from the top of Erebus's seven-foot frame, and if I held my arms out straight beside me I could touch the walls easily with both hands. Good thing I wasn't claustrophobic.

"So what do we do now?" I asked, my teeth chattering as I dragged my fingers through the sludge to keep my balance. "We're trapped in the sewer." My voice echoed in the long tunnel. "How does that bring us closer to finding James?"

"I didn't see you coming up with any better ideas," Erebus snorted. "We will continue forward and search for James, as was our initial plan."

I shrugged. "Fine. But you go first."

Erebus shoved past me, and the floating orb kept a perfect three-foot distance between itself and Erebus.

We moved in silence for the next thirty minutes or so and I was greatly surprised that none of the creatures from the surface had followed us. Why wouldn't they have pulled the cover off the sewer and followed us down? What kept them from this place?

As we continued forward, the water in which we waded grew increasingly shallow and it wasn't long before the tunnel was completely dry. Even the sludge on the side of the walls was like chalk, and it crumbled in my fingers.

Erebus stopped dead in his tracks and I nearly plowed right into him.

"What?" I demanded, and jumped when his strong hand covered my mouth.

His lips were at my ear. "Shhhh." With a quick gesture, he extinguished the floating blue orb that had been lighting our way. "There is a light ahead."

I squinted in the direction he had indicated, but could see nothing for the first few minutes. Eventually, a soft orange glow lightly kissed the edges of the tunnel.

Pulling at the hand on my mouth, I spoke from behind it. "What do you think it is?"

Erebus lowered his hand and silently removed the sword on his back. "I don't know. Let's go and find out."

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Chapter Twenty

My heart thumped hard in my chest as we inched our way along the sewer tunnel and I stayed close to Erebus's large frame. He moved cautiously, with stealth, yet I had no doubt he would hardly be a match for whatever waited in the tunnel beyond. I dragged my fingers along the wall as we moved, perhaps to ground myself, and the stones created a beautiful spiral pattern under my fingers. It was as though a million fingers over a million years had worn away the rough edges.

The faint orange glow Erebus had seen at the end of the sewer grew brighter, and for the first time I could faintly hear voices.

I grabbed his large bicep and he looked back at me over his shoulder, frowning. "What is it?"

"I hear voices," I whispered.

Erebus nodded. "I do as well."

"Well, should we be going this way?"

"Are you suggesting we turn back?"

I didn't really know what I wanted to do. "Ummm . . . I don't know. Should we?"

Erebus stopped and turned fully toward me. "Do you propose we stay hidden in the sewers of Hell for an eternity, or shall we attempt to find Father James and the final triquetra?"

I folded my arms. "Well, when you say it like that . . ."

His eyebrows crept together and he started forward again. "We cannot afford to waste more time. Come on. Perhaps whoever is ahead can point us in the direction of James."

"You're just going to stroll up to a group of people in Hell and ask where Father James is?" I pointed at the inky blackness behind us. "Don't you remember what just happened back there?" I didn't wait for him to answer. "Those zombie *things* didn't look like they were coming to shake our hands and give us directions."

Erebus sighed loudly. "It is the ones hiding in the tunnels we want. They are different from the ones in the city."

"How? How are they different?"

He started to move forward again. "They aren't as hungry."

I stood rooted. “Hungry for what?”
“Flesh.”

Throwing my arms in the air, I started forward again and mentally prepared myself for what we might find at the end of the long tunnel. My memories of the damned were limited, but I distinctly remembered burnt limbs, blistered skin that seemed to melt off bones and agonizing cries for mercy. I did not want to see, or hear, this again. Just the *thought* of it sent a sharp pain through my chest and it felt like I was going to be sick.

I was counting my footfalls now, reminding myself to breathe, as the tunnel turned right and the orange glow intensified. The voices became clearer and when we started to actually see our shadows from the light, Erebus held his arm back and stopped me. Without saying a word he gestured to crouch down as we approached what looked like the final bend in the tunnel.

I did as he suggested and uncomfortably followed his hunched-over form. We stepped out of the tunnel onto a platform twenty or more feet off the ground, overlooking a large cement and brick room. A dozen or more tunnel holes, at various heights, were scattered around the cavernous space and I assumed this was the end of all the tunnels. At the far end of the large room, the water all ran into another much larger tunnel. Perhaps this water was going to the river Styx? From this height I could not see any faces under the surface, and I shuddered at what might be found below.

Beneath us, six beings crowded around a fire in a large metal barrel, oblivious to our arrival.

“Why do they have a fire?” I hissed. “Isn’t it hot enough in here?”

Erebus shook his hand to quiet me and I shrugged. Peering around him, I squinted until I could distinguish between two men and what appeared to be a small female child. The other three beings were hulking, troll-like creatures with arms that hung nearly to the floor. Instinctively, I moved from the mouth of the tunnel and pressed up against the side.

“Erebus!” I gestured frantically, my breaths coming in short gasps. “They’re going to see you!”

“Do not be worried about that,” he boomed and the group around the barrel stopped talking and looked up at us. Erebus gestured, “Come now, and let us go down and talk with them. This is just what we need to find Father James.”

He looked about to jump off the platform when I lunged forward and grabbed his arm. He stopped mid-lunge and looked over at me. "What is it?"

I stared at him, wide-eyed. "What are you doing?"

He gestured with his chin. "I am going down."

"You're just going to jump?" I looked at the fast flowing water many feet below us. "Into the water?"

He nodded. "Of course."

"But how do you know it's safe? What if it's only two inches deep? What if it's filled with—with acid or heads or something?" This was Hell, after all.

Pulling free of my grasp, he adjusted the sword on his back. "The acid would not harm me, or you for that matter." He paused. "Well, at least not permanently. As for the depth, look at the mouth of the tunnel the water flows into. The space between the top of the water and the tunnel is at least ten feet. The bottom would mirror that." He half smiled. "And I've been here a few times in the last thousand years." Without another word, he stepped off the edge and cut neatly into the river below. I stared in silence as he disappeared below the slick waves, only to appear unscathed seconds later. At least the surface was not gelatinous like the River Styx.

I took a deep breath, eyed the group of beings as they neared Erebus, and without thinking did as he did and stepped off the side of the tunnel. I hit the water feet first and went so far down that I actually touched the bottom. Propelled by the icy grip of the waves, I pushed off the bottom and shot back up toward the surface. My breath begged to be released and just when my lungs started aching for air, I burst through the surface.

Erebus was already standing on the large cement platform and I swam quickly over to him. As I pulled myself up, a small girl came running up to offer me a thin hand. Her presence surprised me and I didn't take the outstretched limb as I stared up into her face. Although she wasn't identical to Stacey as a small girl, she had the same long braids and crooked smile. "No," I said quickly and pulled myself up. Strangely, my body was instantly dry, even right down to the thick red braid hanging down my back.

Erebus was the first to speak. "We have come to retrieve a live human you may have in your possession. In the name of our Lord, I demand you hand him over to us."

Two of the humans were male, and the larger of the two stepped forward. His clothing was soot covered, and two arm-length wounds on his legs smouldered like a dying log in a hot fire. His cheeks were sunken, eyes the color of tar, and blackened teeth poked out from behind cracked lips. “No one makes demands around here but Eric,” he spit.

Erebus stood fast, a giant in front of the two men. “Who is this Eric you speak of? Where can I find him?”

Laughter echoed in the large space, as the man who had spoken met our gaze again. “You don’t have to look far.”

Erebus’s eyes narrowed at the man who had spoken. “Eric,” he paused. “I demand you bring Father James to us.”

“Didn’t you hear me right the first time?” he hissed. “No one makes demands around here except me. Isn’t that right, boys?”

The three huge, troll-like creatures lumbered forward, their great arms hanging nearly to the floor, and nodded till their jowls shook. Erebus had his sword unsheathed and held it forward before I could blink. The three large creatures stopped their approach and held hulking hands up in surrender.

“I am going to repeat my request,” Erebus swung his sword skillfully around and the creatures stepped further back. “If you do not comply I will find another, more motivating way, to extract the information. Now I demand you return the human, James, to us.”

Ignoring this, the man who had spoken looked me over from head toe and licked at his lips with a swollen purple tongue. “So, you’re the Misericordia.” He rubbed at the stubble on his cheeks with the backs of his fingers. “We’ve been waiting a very long time for you.”

I glanced over at Erebus, suddenly very unsure of myself. “The miseri-what?”

The man laughed gratingly and looked over at Erebus, perhaps thinking I was joking. When neither of us responded, his face grew serious again. “The Misericordia,” he repeated. “The one who shows mercy. You are going to take one of us out of here with you.”

A conversation I’d had with Devin returned. I had nearly forgotten about this. Devin had said I was able to show mercy to the damned. Our God had given me the ability to free one soul from the clutches of the Dark

King. But what was his warning again? I wracked my brain, but was distracted when Erebus spoke.

“We will not even entertain the thought of a deal until we know for certain you have James.”

The first man who had spoken, who I assumed was the leader Eric, said a few quick words to the three large troll-like creatures, and they lumbered away down a tunnel in the far wall. They shoved each other as they went and one crashed into the wall before disappearing into the darkness. The two remaining men moved to the furthest possible spot on the cement pad, leaving Erebus and me virtually alone.

We stood there uncomfortably and the child that had first approached me in the water grinned and wiggled her fingers. I couldn't help the smile that crept to my lips as memories of my childhood came flooding back. The dankness of the sewer was suddenly replaced with the lush greenery of my grandparents' farm, and the smell of flowers and ripe apple replaced the sulfur. Pink petals lofted through the air as Stacey and I ran through the grove of crab apple trees at the back of the yard and tears of laughter poured down my cheeks. Stacey turned to me then and held her hands out. “Anna!” she yelled musically. “Help me!”

I reached for Stacey but her fingers were just out of reach. “I'm coming, Stacey! Stay there! I'm coming!”

She smiled and spun on the spot, her long dress billowing out around her.

My trance was broken by a firm hand on my shoulder. “Do not get too close, Anna.” Erebus nearly lifted me off my feet.

I shrugged out of his grip but took a step back as he suggested. The image of my grandparents' farm had faded completely, the sweet scents gone from the air. My focus was on the child again. “What do you have against this child, Erebus? What could she have possibly done to deserve a condemnation to Hell for an eternity?”

Erebus stared at the remaining humans far off in the corner and held his scowl as he spoke to me. “I am sure there is a very good reason she is here.”

“But what is it? Aren't all children considered innocent?”

“I have no idea why she is here, Anna. And no, not all children are considered innocent. Sins stem from intent as well as action. There are

many possibilities for this child in the mortal sin category. It is not your job to ask why. It is your job to choose one worthy of redemption and move on. It will be just as you did for Devin and all the others.”

“As I did for Devin?” I was struck dumb by his last sentence, my body numb. “What do you mean?”

Erebus cursed himself and we both watched as the child took off in a fit of giggles. “I did not intend to mention that.”

“Are you saying I freed Devin from this place? From Hell? But, he’s an angel. How would that work?”

Erebus’s jaw was a tight line. “I am not saying anything further about it. This is not an appropriate time for this discussion.”

Although I knew he was right, I couldn’t help myself. “Was Devin in here, Erebus? Why?”

“Anna,” he hissed. “Enough!”

I wiped a thin layer of sweat from my forehead and lowered my voice. “Tell me, yes or no. Was he here?”

“No,” Erebus too wiped at his brow with the back of his hand. “I will say nothing more. Wait until we are out of the city.”

Many uncomfortable minutes passed and I glared at him. Should I press the matter, or wait until we were out of the city as he suggested? A long line of sweat dripped down the side of my face and I looked over at Erebus. His forehead was covered in sweat beads and he too seemed to be feeling the change in temperature.

“It’s getting hotter,” I stated.

Erebus nodded. “You are correct.”

The men leaning on the wall far off in the corner folded their arms and smiled knowingly.

I frowned at them and inched closer to Erebus. Sweat beads formed at my hairline and I had to resist scratching at a line of sweat dripping down my cheek.

The men smiled even wider, and as the temperature continued to soar, began to laugh.

I pulled at the collar of my suit and suddenly had the overwhelming urge to take it off. My breath felt hot as it passed through my lips, and I was sweating so much now the beads dripped off my forehead and into my eyes. The large room seemed to change from a cold cement color to a hot orange

and the air rippled with the heat. I staggered forward and fell onto one knee, pulling at the suit again as I could no longer resist the desire to remove it. Forgetting where I was, I started trying to get the suit off. It seemed to be stuck to my skin and the harder I fought to take it off, the tighter it clung. I was suffocating again, but this time the heat was going to kill me.

The men across the room laughed loudly as I pulled on the suit and it was only Erebus's strong hand on my shoulder that grounded me.

"You cannot take that suit off here, Anna."

"Why not?" I grunted and tore desperately at the sleeve. "I can't take this heat. Help . . . me . . . help me get it off!"

Erebus cursed openly and picked me up. He held me in front of him, his grip like stone, and I struggled uselessly to get away. Erebus began reciting words in some strange dialect, and I froze as the words were strangely familiar. But where had I heard them before? The room grew icy then, and the sudden shift in temperature was like a slap in the face. I greedily inhaled the cool, crisp air. Erebus had somehow saved me again.

My words puffed from my lips in the sub-zero temperature. "What happened?" There was a haze of some sort around us, and I could no longer clearly see the two men.

"I have encased us in an ice bubble." Erebus held me fast in his arms. "If you remove that suit while we are in the City of Fire, you will suffocate and burn to death. Have you already forgotten what happened when we first entered the city? Do you not remember the suffocating heat? You will die without the suit. *Do not* take it off."

I nodded dumbly and took several long inhalations before feeling like myself again. "The heat of the room was unbearable. I thought I was going to suffocate again."

"The heat is real, Anna, but the sensation of suffocation is a trick. He wants you to take the suit off so he can trap you here. You must have faith the suit will protect you, just as you must have faith in God's plan for you. Believe in our Lord and all he has provided. That in itself will be enough to release you from the fire." Erebus did not look happy, his brows seemingly stuck together in a frown. "Your presence is causing more work than it's preventing, Anna. It is as though you have never encountered this before, when in fact you have traversed this City alone on more than one occasion."

I considered his words and turned to stare at the frozen sweat beads on his forehead when he released me. Strangely, I understood what he was saying. “I have no memory of it—”

He cut me off. “Apparently, yes.”

I continued. “But I understand what you’re saying.” I held my hands out in front of me. “I think I’m beginning to understand how all this works.” I turned my hands over several times, and with one thought brought the razor blades from my fingertips with a metal on metal zing. As the thought occurred, a cool air passed through my body. It was the same sensation I’d felt when reciting the prayer to Devin the first time he’d turned into an angel. The Lord’s presence was within me. The blue fire of his love was all I needed to move forward. I licked my dry lips. “I . . . I need to believe in myself, because in turn I am believing in Him. I need to believe in my purpose. In . . . in his plan for me.” I lifted my head and held Erebus’s penetrating gaze. “I . . . I think I get it now.” My heart began to race as I saw my path. “I know what I have to do!”

With a yell, I raised my right hand and ripped through the frozen wall. Great sheets of three-inch thick ice shattered and then quickly melted on the steaming cement floor. The men standing at the back of the room looked shocked, and frantically looked for an escape route, as I walked toward them. With renewed confidence I marched over and, with a scream, sliced the red-hot barrel of smouldering ash in half. Hot coals spilled out on the floor and the top section flew through the air before tumbling into the fast moving water behind us. It hissed violently for several seconds before disappearing below the surface.

I smiled widely at the two men and took one long, deep breath of the hot dry air. “Enough of these games.” I stepped over the bed of coals leisurely, and with one thought retracted the blades at my fingertips. “We need Father James here, right now.” For every step I took forward, they pressed harder against the wall. “If you do not produce Father James in a very short amount of time, I’m going to start cutting some *other* things.” I made a great production of looking around the mostly barren room. “And considering there aren’t many things in here for me to cut, I would be worried if I were you.”

Erebus appeared beside me then, sword held defensively forward. “Welcome back.”

The men had pressed flat against the wall by this point and in unison, looked up when the sound of stone on stone came from one of the tunnels.

"They've opened a grate," said the man called Eric as he pushed the other man toward the tunnel the trolls had disappeared into. "You better get out of here," he said to us. "Before they get here."

I frowned in the direction of the tunnel as a mass of voices filled the air. "Who is it?"

"The living dead from the City above," Eric's voice echoed as he paused at the mouth of the tunnel. "They can only quell the burning with the flesh of the newly dead. They seek us. We must flee."

I looked over at Erebus, perplexed as the two men disappeared from sight. "The newly dead? What does he mean?"

Erebus nodded. "He means those that have recently crossed over. The souls living in the city above the tunnels have been here for a very long time. The longer they have been here, the more consumed by the fire they become."

I shuddered at the thought of this and startled when a loud groan came from the tunnel we had emerged from. Then, like the ricochet of gunfire, each of the other holes came alive with grating sounds and moans. It was as though all the tunnels were filling with the dead from the city above, and I looked all around, unable to determine which tunnel they would appear from first.

Erebus followed my gaze and then gestured toward the tunnel the two men had disappeared into, suggesting we should follow. "These old souls find temporary relief from fire in the flesh of the newly dead. We, unfortunately, fall into that group because we have willingly passed over."

"You mean," I gulped, "they want to eat our flesh?"

He nodded. "They will feast on any flesh they can." He gestured toward the tunnel Eric and his man had disappeared into. "These rogue groups are hiding in the tunnels to get away from the souls above. They will spend an eternity waiting for you. Waiting for you to free them."

I tore my eyes away and followed Erebus as he darted for the tunnel. We slipped quickly into the darkened passageway, and he hurriedly summoned the floating blue orb to light our way.

"So they hide here in the tunnels waiting for a chance to get out?" My voice wavered as I ran beside Erebus. "Waiting for me to take one of them

out before they are eaten by the ‘living dead’ zombies?”

Erebus glanced over, his face an eerie shade of blue. “That is the only hope they have. They have an eternity to wait. An eternity to be slowly consumed by the fire.”

“An eternity,” I echoed. “Well, they sure were lucky to find James, knowing I would be coming after him.”

Erebus frowned and the blue light cast strange gargoyle-like shadows on his face. “I think it was more than luck, Anna. The leader, the man that calls himself Eric, is more than what he appears to be. I believe he somehow arranged to have James taken.”

“Arranged? How?”

“There is an ancient creature created with only one purpose: to seek out the Keepers of the Gate and destroy them. I think you may have had an encounter with the creature not too long ago.”

My blood went cold as I recalled the black tar behind the school the day Devin had saved me. “The black tar. . .” I whispered, stopping dead in my tracks. “Did it take Father James?”

Erebus nodded and gestured we should pick up the pace. We started forward again as he spoke. “Instead of destroying him as it should have, it brought him here to the City of Fire. This Eric was somehow responsible for the creature escaping. I am almost certain of it.”

“Why didn’t Eric escape instead of releasing this creature? That doesn’t make sense. If all he wants to do is escape, why not just leave with the creature?”

“I believe Eric found a way to release the creature, the black tar as you call it, but could not leave the City.”

“But why didn’t the creature come after me first? Why did it go after James at all?”

“No one knew where you were, Anna, up until a few days ago. They must have located James first. This Eric is a smart one. He knew how to flush you out. If the creature had killed James, as intended, he would’ve had no leverage.” He wiped at his forehead. “I believe Eric will be the top contender in vying for your mercy.”

“Should I free him?” I was beginning to feel lost in the significance of this task.

“That is not for me to decide, Anna. It is on you.”

Something occurred to me as I thought of Eric. “If the black tar is one of the Devil’s creations, how can Eric control it? Why would it listen to him?”

Erebus’s forward momentum slowed and then he stopped full out. “There is only one being who can control such a creature.”

“Who?”

“The Dark King.”

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Chapter Twenty-One

I paced back and forth in the filthy tunnel, trying to keep my racing heart under control. In front of us were two men and three giant troll creatures who were supposedly holding Father James captive. Behind us was a group of hell zombies. Either way we went, we were in for some big trouble. And to top it all off, we may have just had an encounter with the Devil himself. I massaged my temples. “So you’re telling me this Eric guy could be the actual Devil?”

Erebus nodded his head, but doubt plastered his usual stoic expression. “Generally, I would be able to pick something like that up right away, but this time I had no indication he might actually be the Dark King.” His frown deepened. “We may be walking right into a trap if it is him.”

We stood in silence for several seconds and faint sounds from behind started reaching my ear. My imagination envisioned hundreds of hell zombies pouring from the tunnels and into the large room. They all had one purpose, one focus: consuming our flesh.

“What are we going to do, Erebus?” I jumped up and down, eager to move. “I can’t stand here any longer!”

He pointed his sword forward. “We keep moving in this direction. Quickly.”

He took off in a jog, which ended up being a run for me considering the length of his legs, and we ran blindly like this through the twisting tunnels. At first I thought it was just my imagination that the tunnel was getting smaller, until I noticed Erebus crouching.

“The walls are closing in,” I stated in a panic. “There has to be another tunnel that branches off somewhere.”

Sure enough, around the next bend we came to another a large opening in the wall that led to a different tunnel. A cement ramp, identical in shape to the mouth of this new passage, lay at the opening. I bounded up it gratefully and nearly tripped on two identical rectangular cuts made in the stone.

“Quickly.” Erebus gestured further in and I ran past him.

I continued running forward and slowed when I noticed he wasn’t with me. Turning, I saw Erebus sheath the sword on his back and squat at

the base of the ramp. He slid his hands into the two rectangular cuts in the stone and with a great roar pulled up on the massive stone. This was not a ramp but a door that would seal the tunnel.

I ran over to Erebus and stood helplessly as he strained to lift the car-sized stone. Veins bugled in his neck and I stared in awe as the stone dislodged from the floor with a heavy clunk and slowly started moving upwards. I struggled to think of some way to help him but knew there wasn't anything I could do. He yelled again and heaved backwards. The fallen door lifted further and loose stone and sludge dripped from the sides. Silently, I urged him to pull faster as the voices from the tunnel grew louder. The dead were nearly on top of us and Erebus had only pulled the stone half the way up.

I clasped my hands together and bounced up and down on my toes. "Come on! Pull faster. *Harder!*"

His arms trembled at the effort and another long roar escaped his lips as he heaved backwards again. The stone was about three-quarters of the way up when the sound of voices crescendoed into a deafening wail of a thousand. A bloodied, smouldering, hand reached through the opening at the top of the stone and was soon followed by others. Ten, twenty, forty, the number of hands reaching for us through the opening doubled every second and Erebus struggled to hold the massive stone.

My heart dropped when the wall began to fall—Erebus was losing his hold. The weight of the bodies on top was too much for him.

"You can do it!" I cheered, although I was terrified. "*Come on!*"

But he couldn't, and I watched horrified as the stone slowly inched downward again. His face looked about ready to explode as he struggled to hold it.

I was nearly knocked off my feet when someone shoved past me then, and I caught myself on the wall. One of the troll creatures we had met earlier, in the large room, was pulling on the stone door and I pressed against the wall as another one appeared. Together, the three of them pulled up on the heavy stone and it thumped nosily in place.

The three collapsed to the floor and I allowed myself to do the same. There were no words for several long minutes until one of the trolls spoke first.

"How do we know they cannot open it from the other side?"

I was surprised at how audible and intelligent the creature sounded.

Erebus ran the back of his hand across his forehead. "We do not know if the door can be opened from the other side, so I suggest we move on before they figure out a way to pull it away."

Without another word, the four of us rose and Erebus and I followed the two troll creatures along the tunnel. I wanted to stop everything, wanted to yell for everyone to stop and explain what was going on, but would not risk it.

"Where are you leading us?" My voice wavered as I ran.

"We are going to take you to James," the taller of the two creatures said.

I folded my arms and slid to a halt in the mucky tunnel. "How do we know we can trust you?"

The great hairy eyebrows on the creature crept slowly together. "What choice do you have?"

As I opened my mouth to respond, the young girl with the long braids appeared from another tunnel. She smiled widely at me, looking almost identical to Stacey, and extended her hand. "Come," she beckoned with one word. Foolishly, I forgot everything and stepped toward her. "Come with me, Anna."

I crouched down so I was eye-level with the child. "Why do you want me to come with you?"

The child's eyes skirted behind me. "He needs you."

I frowned, "Who?"

Erebus's baritone voice startled me. "Shoo, pest!" he bellowed. "We do not have time for the likes of you."

"Erebus!" I scolded without looking up at him. "She's just a little girl."

"You need to look into this creature's eyes, Anna. That is no child."

I glanced at him over my shoulder. "I have," I lied. "She needs our help." I stood. "You want to trust these trolls over a child?"

Erebus smashed his fist into the wall and marched over to me. He stood his full seven feet and I looked up at him, a challenge in my eyes.

"Look into the creature's eyes, Anna."

"I did," I countered.

“If you had, you would have seen the darkness.” Erebus lunged at the girl and took her squirming arms in his great fists. He held her in front of me. “Look!” he demanded and I leaned back as the girl’s feet kicked viciously.

The girl was fighting so intensely, her eyes were squeezed shut and my heart nearly broke when she broke into a fit of tears.

“Erebus!” I yelled. “Let go of Stacey!” I said the name before fully realizing it.

With a struggle, Erebus did the opposite of my request and held the child against him. “Look into its eyes!” he bellowed and struggled to contain the girl.

I stood stunned and watched as this little girl, no older than perhaps six or seven, fought so viciously that Erebus had a hard time holding on to her. This man, this giant man who managed to lift a three-ton stone on his own, was having a hard time holding on to this little girl.

The realization hit me then. This was a trick. This child was not who she appeared to be. My heart wanted this to be Stacey. Logically, though, I knew it couldn’t be.

As though reading my thoughts, the girl in Erebus’s arms transformed into a bald canine creature and snapped at my face. Erebus threw the animal into the tunnel it had appeared from and unsheathed his sword. “Return from where you came!” he demanded. The creature snapped at us again with razor-sharp fangs and scratched at a gaping wound on its hind that smouldered with red-hot fire before running up the side of the tunnel and disappearing into the darkness.

I looked at Erebus in shock. “That was crazy!”

Erebus sheathed his sword on his back before examining a long gouge on his arm. “This is just the beginning, Anna. You need to trust your instincts in here. Do not be so easily swayed by his tricks.”

Nodding, I ran a hand across my forehead. “I sure am failing at this.”

Erebus gestured down the tunnel to where the three troll creatures stood watching us. “You will only fail if you allow yourself. Now let’s go, before we have a bigger problem.”

He was about to move past me when I grabbed his arm. The long cut on his forearm from the dog creature appeared to be smouldering. “Look at your arm. Are you going to be okay?”

Pulling free from my grasp, he leaned in so our faces weren't more than two inches apart. His words were slow, meaningful. "I . . . am . . . fine. Now *move!*"

With that, he took off in a run down the tunnel and I had no choice but to follow him.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

We ran blindly through the sewers under the city with only the blue light of the orb to light our way. I wasn't sure we were ever going to come to the end, when we rounded a corner to where Eric and the others stood in front of a dead end.

I froze in my tracks. "You led us to a dead end?" My voice squeaked. "We're trapped!"

Eric shook his head and laughed at me. "Things are not always as they appear in here, Misericordia."

My dislike for this Eric guy smouldered. "I have a name, you know. It's Anna."

He smiled widely, his black eyes bottomless. "You are known only as Misericordia. Everything else does not matter."

Anger flamed and I had him pinned to the wall, the razors from my fingertips inches from his face, faster than I could think about it. "Call me *Anna*." I shoved him hard. "Got it?"

He smiled, less confident, and eyed the others behind me before answering. "Yeah, sure, whatever. Anna." He laughed, but I could see his hatred.

"That's better," I said, shoving him one more time before retracting the blades.

"Why have you led us to a dead end?" Erebus voiced. "Where is Father James?"

Eric straightened his filthy clothing once I released him. "This looks like a dead end, but there is actually a door here. Boys?" He gestured to the troll creatures, who moved over to the wall as he stood back. After only a few moments of grunting, the large stone that looked like a solid wall slid open to reveal a set of stone steps leading downwards.

Great, I thought. More steps, leading downwards.

I couldn't help but be reminded of my library in the church.

"Where does this go?" I asked as I eyed the disappearing stairs.

"It leads to the last safe haven for the newly dead." Eric started down the steps and the three troll creatures gestured that we should follow. "Come now. We must close the wall before the others get here."

Erebus and I looked at each other briefly and moved toward the stairs at the same time. Without looking backwards, I knew the trolls were closing the stone wall by the sound of stone on stone. Whether we liked it or not, we were trapped here.

"This is not an entrance I have used before," Erebus voiced. "How many entrances are there?"

"Four, I believe," replied the tallest troll. "This one is rarely used, as it requires some muscle to open."

We continued downwards. The trek seemed to be endless. "How is this place here?" I asked.

Eric answered. "Many eons ago, a group of the damned dug it out." He held up his hands and I noticed his palm bore a large patch of smouldering coals. "With their bare hands, they crafted these walls, these stairs, so that the newly dead had a safe haven."

I eyed him suspiciously. "How do you determine who the newly dead are? How do we know you won't try to eat our flesh?"

Eric smiled but did not look over at me. "The craving for flesh will become too great. Once one is unable to resist the urge to feast on the flesh of another, they are forcefully banned to the city above. If I wanted to eat you," he grinned widely, "there would be nothing I could do to resist the urge."

Ignoring him, I asked, "Don't they remember where this place is? What's stopping them from just pulling the wall away and coming after you?"

It was the largest of the troll creatures that answered. "Once they have made the transformation to living dead, any connection they had to life, namely their memory, is completely erased. They cease to think of anything but the need for flesh."

I shuddered. "That is terrifying."

Eric laughed. "Welcome to Hell!"

We continued down the stone steps for what seemed like a millennium and the clash of metal on metal sounded far off in the distance. I focused on this sound to keep myself moving, reminded of clock gears. My grandfather and I had taken apart a large grandfather clock many years before, and I was fascinated by the whirr and buzz of the mechanisms inside. This sound, this deep chest thumping sound emanating every ten

minutes or more from the rock, was similar—only on a much larger scale. The further down we went, the louder the gear sound became until it was almost deafening. My mind pulled many terrifying images forward of what the sound could be when we finally reached a small landing that overlooked a massive cave with a deep precipice. Hot lava flowed in a mile wide river hundreds of feet below, and I brought a hand up to shield my face from the heat of it.

“Where to now?” I yelled over the noise of the molten rock and the sound of great gears turning from somewhere above.

“Up!” Eric yelled back and gestured. I spun on the spot to see a set of steps carved into the face of the rock.

Like a line of ants against the massive wall, we climbed straight up the side of the cliff. I didn’t dare look down, keeping my eyes instead on the feet of the smelly troll climbing above me. The further up the rock we went, the less confident I felt that we were ever going to get out.

We were coming closer to a ledge and I nearly jumped out of my skin when a cool slick hand grabbed my wrist and yanked me over the side. I landed with a grunt on my feet beside the troll that had been in front of me. Initially, I was going to confront the creature for grabbing me, but I stood in complete awe at the scene in front of me. Before us sprawled a giant cavern, more than a mile wide and high, and in the center was a massive gear shaft that disappeared into the rock above. It spun slowly, noisily, as two great gears rotated at the bottom. I presumed somehow the whole thing was powered by the molten lava rushing below, but did not understand why it stopped when it did.

I squinted at the size of the machinery and directed my next question at no one in particular. “If the lava is moving the gears, how does it stop like that?”

Eric stood beside me, hands on his hips. “The lava is not turning the shaft, Misericordia. The souls the Dark King imprisoned are sucked down into the center of the city right into the top of this machine. The dead power it. They power all of Hell.”

Erebus stood beside me and looked as intently as I at the great machine. “We must tread lightly in this area. Quickly,” he gestured to another set of stone steps carved into the wall, “into the hidden city.”

Without question, I took off in a run after Erebus and with renewed terror in my soul, followed him up yet another sheer rock wall.

When we finally came to a stop, I was shocked by the city that lay before me. Shanty houses, made from any material imaginable, were propped along the rock walls at impossible angles. And there were thousands of them spread across an area larger than ten football fields.

“Wow,” I breathed as the others stood with me, “this is amazing.”

Eric squinted at me and rubbed his hand on his pants where long black lines of coal smeared the already stained material. “Father James is this way.”

I looked up at Erebus and he nodded before following close behind Eric.

We weaved our way through the tight alleyways of the city and several times I wasn’t sure Erebus was going to fit through the tight spaces. People and creatures of every description imaginable peered out from the crumbling houses and I could feel their smouldering black eyes on me. They all wanted one thing. They all wanted to be freed from Hell before they became like the living dead in the city above.

Eric led us to an open area in the center of the city outlined by a neat swirl of bricks that started in the center and grew out from there. In the middle of this swirl was a thin man with only his head and arms visible through a charred black gallows.

“Father James?” I looked up at Erebus and he nodded.

I stepped forward to go to him when Eric held his arm up to block me. “Not so fast.” He licked his cracked lips. “You need to guarantee you are going to take one of us out of here.”

I looked around at the growing number of people lining the edge of the swirling bricks and wondered how I was going to decide. “But how?” I looked up at Erebus for answers but he folded his arms and stared forward.

“It is your choice, Anna. I can be of no service to you in this matter.”

Eric gestured. “The souls you see lining this area are the oldest. They are days away from permanently losing their memories to become one of the living dead. Now, make your choice. We have provided James for you. Release one of us from this place before it is too late.” Eric took his place along the edge of the bricks and stared stone-faced forward.

Glancing up at Erebus again, I realized he wasn't going to be much help and examined the hundreds of faces staring at me.

How could I decide?

I started walking along the outside of the circle and took several moments to look into the face of each one of the creatures. Many of them were human but the majority were beings I had never laid eyes on except for, perhaps, in nightmares. Of course I was first drawn to the humans, but as I strolled leisurely around, came to realize I could see each of their sins in their eyes. Mortal sins, the gravest of them all, showed in the souls of most here. I wanted to run screaming, wanted to flee this place of seething evil and hatred, but knew I had to make a choice in exchange for James.

I stopped in front of a hunched-over humanoid being with thick grey skin similar to that of an elephant. Its long dark hair hung in ringlets around its muscled shoulders and great gaping wounds along most of its arms smoked and crackled like a dying fire. The sight of it nearly made me sick and I stood straight trying to push the nausea down. "Look at me," I demanded as Devin's words suddenly returned. *There are some whose souls are still salvable. You will know the difference. You will see it in their eyes.*

"I need to see your eyes."

The timid creature slowly raised its head and I was nearly knocked over at the sight of four identical eyes peering at me from behind thick black lashes. I took a moment to compose myself and stepped closer to the creature. My stomach was a knotted mess and sweat prickled my armpits, but as I stared into the blackness of this creature's eyes I began to catch glimpses of its soul.

Flashes of this being's life zoomed like lightning through my mind, and I knew she was the one I was going to take with me. I could see the repentance in her soul. Could see she was gravely sorry for her sins.

"This one," I said as I stepped back. "She will come with us."

Erebus stepped onto the bricks and gestured to James. "Now, release James. We must go."

Eric stepped forward, hand held out. "Can you not take another with you?" He gestured to the throng of beings standing silently around us. "Surely there are more who deserve your mercy."

"It is the mercy of our Lord," I corrected as I moved toward James. "I cannot change His will." My heart bled for most of them but I knew my

words were true. Even if I wanted to release them all, the Lord would be the final judge. “If He believes you have repented, He will release you.”

I made it over to James and stood back as Erebus unsheathed his sword. “Now, release Father James,” he bellowed. “Or I will destroy this gallows to free him.”

There was some bickering among the crowd but soon a soot-covered woman appeared with a large key. Without looking at us, she unlocked both of James’s hands and he stood slowly up. Rubbing his wrists, he smoothed his jet black hair before moving unsteadily toward me.

“James?” I asked even though I already knew the answer to that question.

He nodded. “Anna. It is good to see you again.” Rubbing at a long line of soot on his cheek, he patted my arm and nodded at Erebus. “I was beginning to think you two were going to leave me here this time.”

Erebus spoke. “No chance of that.”

“Very good, then.” James brushed off his ash-mottled clothing and gestured in no particular direction. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?”

I looked at Erebus and the four-eyed creature standing behind me. “How, exactly, *do* we get out of here?”

Erebus’s eyes locked with Eric’s. “He is going to lead us out.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The crowd gathered to watch what transpired with Father James slowly dispersed, and soon it was Erebus, me, Father James, the four-eyed creature and Eric. The three troll-like creatures, who had also stood in the circle, were nowhere to be seen.

Eric laughed loudly. “You think I’m just going to guide you out of here when she didn’t even pick me?” His laughter crescendoed. “I’m weeks away from transforming into one of the living dead. Do you think I’m going to do anything more for you, knowing she isn’t going to rescue me?” He shoved the timid creature that cowered behind me and it cried out in fear. I nearly fell over when Erebus was suddenly between Eric and the creature, sword held defensively forward.

“Do not touch her,” he growled at Eric and swung his sword, threatening.

Gathering myself, I looked over at Erebus in confusion before speaking to Eric again. “I have made my decision,” I spat and the razor-sharp blades at my fingertips appeared with a metal on metal *zing*. I held them in front of my face in warning. “Now guide us out of here, or I’m going to start cutting those coals out of your leg.”

Eric growled, challenging me, but finally turned and walked away. “Find your own way out,” he yelled over his shoulder and disappeared behind the tightly packed buildings.

Father James clasped his hands together and wrung them nervously. “Now what are we going to do?”

We looked around the crowded area and the apparent path Eric had led us through to get to the spot was no longer so apparent. It didn’t look like there was anywhere to squeeze myself through, let alone someone the size of Erebus or the gray creature.

“I can show you out.” I wasn’t certain at first who had spoken, and it took a second to realize it was the being standing with us.

I looked at Erebus and James as I spoke with the hunched over creature. “Did you say you were going to lead us out?” I bent so my face was close to her. “Can you get us out of here?”

The creature nodded. "I can get you to the room with the machine. From there, I do not know where to go."

Erebus nodded. "We know where to go from there. Come on," Erebus gestured impatiently and moved so that he was very close to the creature. "Let's go."

"Your arm."

We all stopped and turned to see the creature looking intently at the cut in Erebus's arm. "I will have to tend to that for you."

"Hold on." I lifted my hand to halt everyone and gestured to the creature with us. "What is your name?"

The creature shifted nervously and slowly lifted its face to me. All four eyes blinked at once, and it stood its full six feet. It smiled up at Erebus with thick scarlet lips before turning toward me. "I am Shylan."

I looked up at Erebus in confusion, remnants of a conversation about *Shylan* surfacing. I opened my mouth to question him, but he spoke first. "I will explain everything once we get out."

With that said, we followed Shylan through the city and quickly made it to the machine in the centre of the city. The giant gears thundered as we ran past and the ground shook under foot as it began to turn. Another soul was being taken by the Devil. Another soul was powering the machine.

We scrambled down the side of the rock face, and I lost my grip once nearly falling but was caught at the last moment by Shylan.

"Thanks," I said breathlessly when she smiled.

"It is the least I can do."

Soon the four of us stood on the ledge overlooking the fast flowing river of lava, and I wondered what our next step would be. Surely we would not go out the way we came.

"Where do we go from here?" I asked as I scanned the wall leading down to the lava. "Back up the stairs?"

I turned to see Erebus sitting cross-legged on the ground. His face was in deep concentration, his hands clasped tightly in prayer.

"What is he doing?" I asked quietly as I came up beside James.

James frowned. "Are you kidding? Are you really asking me that?"

I didn't push the matter further, but instead watched as three lines of glowing ice began to grow from Erebus and along the floor toward us. Immediately, James stepped on one of the lines and I watched amazed as

the ice crawled slowly up his leg. He cringed in pain and cried out. I stepped back and watched in shock as Shylan did the same.

Erebus opened an eye and without moving, whispered to me. “Anna. Get onto one of the lines. It is our only way out of here.” I was frozen watching the glowing ice slowly consuming James and Shylan, and the look of sheer agony on their faces terrified me.

“Is it going to hurt?” I asked stupidly.

The corner of Erebus’s mouth twitched in what I assumed was amusement. “Of course.”

I took a deep breath and without thinking about it, stepped onto the last line of blue ice. The cold was so intense it felt as though my body were on fire. Although I wanted to step away, I remained stuck where I was. I fought against the suffocating cold but was paralyzed as it consumed me. My last memory before falling into unconsciousness was of sliding off the side of the cliff into the flowing mass of molten lava.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The world came back to life with a *pop*, and I opened my eyes to see a bamboo ceiling overhead. I lay where I was for a long time, digesting what had happened and wondered if any of it had actually occurred. Could it all have been some crazy dream? Was I only now waking from a night of rest in my room? I rubbed my hands along the floor under me and the surface was smooth, cool, like cushioned leather. This was a completely new place, yet somehow totally familiar to me.

I sat up finally and looked out through the open door across from me. The lush rainforest beckoned with a steady downpour of rain and my arms prickled with goose bumps. I walked slowly over to the balcony and with one thought, halted the rain before standing in the glorious rays of the sun. A flock of brightly colored birds swept across the sky, and with a thought I brought them all to land on the railing of the balcony. I extended my hand, and without question one of the tiny creatures peeped cautiously before landing softly on my arm. Its dry feet were hot against my skin, and I cringed when its sharp claws dug into my bare arm. I hefted the small bird into the sky and I watched with a smile as they all took off in a mass of squawking and flapping. I wasn't in the red suit any longer, but instead a pair of loose-fitting white jogging pants and a white tank top. With a thought I was in the suit again, and with yet another desire, was standing in the jogging pantsuit again. The sun broke free of the clouds and a glorious ray beat down on my head. I lifted my face to the hot sun and basked in the warmth of life.

"And you doubted who you were."

A voice startled me from my trance and I spun around to see Devin standing in the middle of the room behind me.

"Devin!" I said elated, and ran to where he stood. I stopped just in front of him. "Devin," I repeated. "I did it!"

He smiled down, hands shoved deeply into the pockets of his pants. "I never doubted you, Anna. Do you remember everything that happened?"

I nodded. "The city, the underground tunnels, the giant machine, Shylan, resealing the gates. . ." I took a deep breath. "I remember it all!"

"And what sort of memories do you have from before you were with your parents?"

I searched my mind for remnants of a time before but could not get past the haze in my brain. "None, and there are still many blank places."

His smile faltered.

"But you promised to tell me everything, remember?" I clasped my hands. "You said you'd fill in the blanks. Right?"

“Indeed I did.” He ran a finger down my cheek before turning to walk out across the balcony. I followed close behind.

We stood in silence together at the railing overlooking the rainforest below and I waited.

The sun slid back and forth behind the fluffy white clouds and just when I thought he wasn’t going to say anything, he finally spoke. “Have you considered that He may not want you to know about the past?”

I nodded. “I’ve considered that, but figured He would have erased your memories as well if He didn’t want me to find out about it.”

Devin looked down at me and gripped the bamboo tightly. “I thought this was going to be my fresh start with you. I thought I was finally going to get a chance to start over.”

Erebus had already hinted at Devin’s past, but I didn’t want Devin to know. “What is it that’s so bad you don’t want to share with me?”

Looking away, he began pacing back and forth across the balcony. “I was human once, Anna. I lived on Earth, but not in the same plane you know.” He searched my face for understanding. “The two planes are very similar in that they *are* Earth, but my Earth is thousands of years ahead of yours, technology-wise. Does that make sense?”

This actually shocked me quite a bit. The rain started again and we darted inside and stood in front of each other in the middle of the room.

“You were human?” I wiped rain from my face and smoothed my hair. “But how? I thought you were an angel?”

He nodded. “I am, in the technical sense if you count the wings. But I don’t have the same privileges or abilities true angels have. I haven’t always been this way. He, our Lord, changed me into this.” He lifted his arms and his wings fanned out.

I shook my head. “Why would he do that? What are you trying to tell me?”

He began pacing again and I stood back and watched him. Back and forth, and back and forth. It was starting to make me dizzy.

“Devin,” I pleaded finally. “Just say it. What could be that bad?”

“Okay,” he nodded, and paced a few more times before finally stopping in front of me. “So much for a clean slate.”

I waited.

“In my human form, many thousands of years ago, I was a pretty awful person.” He paused and I nodded to encourage him. “Do you remember our discussion about the seven deadly sins?”

I nodded and frowned. “What are they again?”

Devin leaned in close and whispered as though the mere mention would summon the Dark King. "Lust, wrath, greed, sloth, envy, gluttony and . . . and p . . . pride."

"You had a hard time saying 'pride' last time too. Why?"

He was pacing again. "I'm getting to that. Hold on, hold on."

I flopped down on the comfortable white mat and watched as he paced back and forth. "Do you want to sit?" I asked finally. "All this pacing is making me nervous."

Stopping, he looked down at me. "Sure," he said and flopped down heavily.

We sat across from each other. "Well," I urged. "You can tell me anything, you know."

He nodded and blurted, "You rescued me from Hell, Anna. I was condemned to spend the rest of eternity suffering in the fire." His eyes reddened and filled with tears. "You saved me," he choked out, and angrily wiped a lone tear as it ran down his cheek.

"You?" I said shocked that Erebus had indeed been telling me the truth. "What did you do?" I placed my hand on his knee. "What could you have possibly done?"

He stabbed at his eyes with his fingers and quickly wiped the tears away before making eye contact again. "I was young, no older than twenty-three, and thought I was better than anyone. I loved myself so much that I lost sight of His love." He paused and seemed to collect his thoughts. "This narcissistic self-love created the most horrible bully you will ever come to know. I was heartless, Anna." His lips trembled and he took several deep breaths before continuing. "You called it, remember?"

I thought back to the moment when I had seen Stacey in the coffin and remembered my words. I had called him heartless for making me see her like that. Little did I know how deeply my words cut him.

Without giving me time to respond, he continued. "People hated me, I hated people. I had no appreciation for the life I had."

"Yeah, but that happens to everyone . . . sometimes." I wracked my brain trying to think of a specific example of this but couldn't.

He shook his head. "No it doesn't, Anna. Not like this. I was a horrible bully who pushed someone to suicide. . ." his sentence trailed off and the only sound was of the rain cascading down the roof.

"Suicide?" I repeated gently. "Really?"

He nodded. "And that's not even the worst part."

I held my breath, not certain how this could get any worse.

"I didn't care when I found out she had killed herself." His eyes took on a faraway look, as though he were actually there again. "I didn't . . . even . . . care. I remember the feeling so vividly."

He looked me straight in the eyes. "That is the person you pulled from the fire, Anna. And for that, I am in servitude to you, to Him, for the rest of eternity."

I was floored by this revelation and took a few moments to digest it. "But you were sorry in the long run, though. Right? That's why I picked you from the mass of souls in the hidden city." Although I didn't remember the moment of actually picking Devin, it was the only thing that made sense. "You said it yourself, Devin. I can see a person's soul through their eyes." I leaned in close to him, my face inches from his. "And I can see you, Devin," I whispered and gazed deeply into his eyes. "I know you're a good person. *He* knows you're a good person. He had forgiven you."

He held my gaze and blinked a tear down his cheek. His voice cracked as he said, "I have never stopped asking how He forgave me. How?" He blinked out another tear and his wings trembled. "I do not deserve this. Even if I finally repented my sin. I know it's not right for me to question Him, but if it were me I don't know if I would do the same."

"Well...you're not Him and neither am I," I smiled. "I think you've said this to me before." I paused trying to think of the right words. "We just need to trust in Him. Right? Have faith in the choices He makes."

He nodded and his lips trembled before he dropped his face into his hands. His sorrow pained me and I couldn't resist the urge to touch him. Without hesitation, I placed my hands under his chin and urged his face up. Slowly, reluctantly, he lifted his face to mine. His aqua eyes were bottomless and it felt like I was going to fall in to them. Trembling, I ran my fingers gently down each of his cheeks as I wiped the tears away. He closed his eyes in response to my touch and I continued to explore his face. His eyebrows, his forehead, the bridge of his nose and finally his lips. I let my fingers linger there for a moment before pulling them away.

"And what about the relationship we had?" My words weren't more than a whisper as he opened his eyes. "What happened between us, Devin?"

He licked his lips and looked down at mine. "My time with you was the most peaceful period of my existence." He lifted his eyes to mine again. "My human life was filled with misery and pain," lost in these words his eyes slowly drifted away from mine. He nibbled his bottom lip before his eyes slowly returned. "The suffering I endured at the hand of another created the horrible person I became. Although now I see the fault in my action, at the time it only seemed logical that I should make others hurt like I did." He smiled but the corners of his

mouth trembled. “The Lord does not create evil people, Anna.” His words were shuddering wisps. “People do.” A fat tear rolled down his cheek and he dropped his gaze to the floor. “You ease my suffering, Anna, and I . . . I love you for that.”

My heart was a dripping mess. “I’m so sorry, Devin. I’m sorry for your suffering, I’m sorry for not remembering who I am ... I’m sorry for everything.” Tears rimmed my lids and I blinked them away.

He nodded and ran a hand through his hair before lifting his face to mine. “Perhaps this is His way of reminding me. It has been far too long since I have truly reflected on my past. He wanted you to forget so I could remember.”

I reached over and put my hand on his cheek. He covered my hand with his and gently pulled it away so he could kiss me softly on the wrist.

“So our relationship. . . ” I wasn’t exactly sure how I wanted to ask about us, and my sentence trailed off. The heat from his lips on my skin tingled and I realized I wanted more.

Dropping my hand carefully in his lap, he wiped the last of his tears away and cleared his throat before leaning forward to wrap his hand under my hair at my neck. I was startled by his sudden closeness and my breath caught. The heat from his body was suffocating.

“What . . . what about us, Devin.” My heart pounded with every word spoken against his lips.

“As I’ve said before,” his lips brushed mine. “I think it’ll be easier to show you.” With those words, he finally leaned in and kissed me gently on the lips.

The End

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