

PAINT IT BLACK
Hell on Earth Book One
By
Stacy Phay

Prologue

To the casual observer the room looked like a library, office or den one might find anywhere in the world. Walls covered in mahogany shelves held endless volumes of books and loose papers stacked haphazardly on top, around and underneath each other. Each tome bound in identical crimson leather, as if someone had ordered the world's largest set of encyclopedias, in Latin. Several showed the wear and tear of constant use. Many looked as if they'd never been opened.

In the center of the room sat a large desk, its dark wood covered by documents and books in use or unable to fit on shelves. On each piece of yellowing paper were the endless ramblings of a mind constantly at work, written in what looked like blood, but upon further inspection was dark ink from an inkwell teetering dangerously on the edge of falling on the floor. A trail of scarlet drops could be traced between it and the pages of notes spread out on every inch of the surface.

Under the desk an arbitrarily placed rug with frayed edges and faded coloring appeared to be an afterthought or someone's idea of bringing the room together. At the right angle it made the floor look like lava.

A stone fireplace took over the entire wall across from the red door few were permitted to enter. There was always a fire burning, flames flickering in the darkness of the room dimly lit by three kerosene lamps. One in particular had a specific purpose – to spotlight the room's most important feature – a gumball machine. Its prominent

placement on the mantel blatantly showcasing the lack of candy-coated orbs which had not filled the glass container in some time.

Two oversized leather chairs were placed directly in front of the fireplace, their ruby color made darker by years of smoke and ash permeating the room. The one on the left was conveniently positioned so that it faced the empty dispenser, as if to taunt the chair's frequent occupant.

Azazel was summoned to this the room more often than he was comfortable with. Not that he minded the comfort of the books or the warm glow of the fire. It was the questions he had no answers to that bothered him most. He took to memorizing the space, a tactic he developed over time as he tried to ignore Lucifer shouting epitaphs and insults at him.

Being Lucifer's right-hand man had perks Azazel would never deny. Having the ability to enter the mortal plane at will was among the highlights. The downside was the daily meetings, in which Azazel had the misfortune of reporting he was unable to procure the specific gumballs Lucifer required for his machine, which made the lack of any other good news that much worse.

On this day Azazel stepped into the library, sauntered confidently toward the ruby chairs, plopped down on the soot covered leather and smiled brightly in the direction of the other chair.

Its occupant sat forward, folded his hands together, rested them in his lap. "Azazel, my friend. What brings you here in such a good mood?" Lucifer stared longingly at the black and silver dispenser with the glaringly empty glass globe sitting atop its metal base.

Azazel glanced briefly at the machine. His smile dimmed slightly. He tried to remember it wasn't his fault Lucifer only liked a specific kind of mint which had been in short supply on the mortal plane for several months now. He hoped his news would satisfy Lucifer's desires more than any peppermint gum would. "It seems the mortals have themselves a global pandemic."

"A pandemic? How quaint. Please tell me you do not expect me to be thrilled by that. Bird flu, swine flu, mad cow disease. Ha!" Lucifer waved his hand in Azazel's direction.

Azazel tried not to take the implications personally. Of course he knew better than to bring anything more than temporary setbacks before Lucifer and pose them as opportunities. "They call it Covid-19. It is spreading rapidly. Entire countries have been shut down. They are vulnerable," Azazel implored.

Lucifer's stark features were shadowed despite the roaring flames of the fireplace. His dark eyes reflected the flickering red and orange back at Azazel, who felt a shift in the atmosphere as his master's mood went from contemplative to delightfully pleased.

It was the first time he had witnessed such a change since accepting his position as Lucifer's lifeline between the mortal world and the Underworld. It did not invoke the feeling of hope he had thought it would. Instead, it made him long for the days when Lucifer threw the closest object at his head, called him names he would not repeat in even the most nefarious company, and excused him with the wave of a hand like he was some sort of underling.

Fake News

CHLOE

Chloe stood in the lobby of her apartment building waiting for an elevator that seemed to be taking an unusual amount of time to arrive. She set her carry-on bag onto the tile floor next to her suitcase and rubbed her shoulder where the strap had left a divot in her shirt, and her skin. The elevator bell rang. The doors slid open. Chloe dragged herself and her luggage into the car and pressed her floor number. It had only taken her up three of the twelve floors when the elevator car came to a sudden stop. She reached for the control panel and stabbed her finger against the buttons, any buttons.

No movement. Then everything went black.

“Dammit.” She cursed into the darkness, felt for her phone, opened the screen with the adeptness of someone who was used to checking her devices while she was supposed to be paying attention to something or someone else. Chloe slid her fingers across the screen, found the saved contact for the main lobby, pressed send.

Call failed.

Cursing again, Chloe activated the phone’s flashlight feature, expecting to see her reflection in the steel doors. Instead, she was met by a long, dark hallway she didn’t recognize.

Her jetlag was worse than she thought.

Chloe shined the light down the hall hoping for some clarity on where she might be. A door a few feet ahead caught her attention. It was ordinary, like the ones you see with a welcome mat in front of them. But it was not the door to her apartment. Hers was

white with silver accents. This one was red and black. Lit by one single light. Where the light was coming from was anyone's guess.

Chloe continued to blink, trying to adjust to the darkness. She was hit with a sudden flicker of recognition she couldn't comprehend. At one time she had known where the red door led. A tickle at the back of her mind told her something crucial was on the other side. She willed her tired feet to move her forward.

Her heart raced as she took each step. The itch pushing her forward begged her to quicken her pace. She started to run. Her feet seemed to move on their own. The red door closed in on her at a rapid pace. She was definitely going to hit it, hard. She held up her arms to soften the impact, implored herself to stop moving. Whatever had been pulling at her let go, her outstretched hands gently pressed against the hard wood of the door.

She slid her hand down to the doorknob. The black steel was hot against her skin and did not budge when she turned it left or right. She let go, rubbed her palm against her pants, turned toward the hallway. Toward the elevator, toward her apartment, where she had wine, and a comfortable bed. She was met by nothing but pitch black.

"We're losing her." A deep, smoky voice called out, somewhere close.

"Who's there?" Her own voice echoed back at her.

She returned her attention to the door that lead somewhere she couldn't recall but felt she needed to be. She squeezed her eyes shut and searched her memory for anything resembling a dark hallway or a dark red door. Did she have a key? Wait, where were her keys?

Chloe turned toward the hallway remembering she had left her luggage in the elevator. It was still as pitch black as ever. She held up her phone, certain she'd left the flashlight on. It didn't shine any light on her situation.

She had two choices now. Sprint back down the hallway or figure out how to get through the red door. Something on the other side of it was calling to her, a buzz in the back of her mind, a pull at her soul she could not explain even if she tried.

When she turned to face the door again it was gone. She found herself standing on hard concrete in a dimly lit room. The light hit her eyes like a punch in the face, the cold air burned her nostrils and made her breath visible. She wrapped her arms around her torso, turned in a circle, surveying the space.

The room had stark, blank, white walls with no sign of any doors or windows. She pressed her hand against the wall in front of her, half expecting it to be padded. No. Just your standard fare painted plaster.

"Hello?" Chloe called out. No answer.

This has to be a nightmare, she thought. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping when she opened them she'd find herself in her own bed, or fast asleep in a big silver tube jetting toward her bed or anywhere but this dumb tiny cold room.

Okay Clo. Get a grip. She opened one eye at a time. That had worked, sort of. She was in an entirely different room. The red door with black accents had returned, darker, like it had been damaged by smoke. A flicker of a memory tickled the back of her mind. She shook it off, checked her surroundings.

The walls were covered by bookshelves filled to capacity. The titles appeared to be in a foreign language. Latin, she came to realize as her eyes scanned the space,

burning as they adjusted to being pulled from darkness to light to this sort of faint glow throwing shadows around the room.

It was coming from a fire burning behind her. Another flash of memory. She pushed it away, tried to ignore the smell of smoke invading her senses. The reflection of flames danced against unlit lanterns. Her memories continued to needle their way to the front of her thoughts.

“Chloe.” A voice called out to her. It was monotone, unfamiliar.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” Chloe demanded.

“Hm. Who am I? Depends on who you ask. Bringer of Death. Reaper of Souls. Or, my absolute favorite, ‘Please Not Now I’m Not Ready to Die.’” There was a slight note of humor in his voice. It returned to its monotone seriousness. “I am Azazel.”

The name sounded familiar. From where, she wasn’t sure. This seemed to annoy the man. He made a clicking sound with his teeth then cleared his throat. “We have been looking for you.”

“We who?”

“This is the part where I tell you your soul belongs to Hell and you assure me I’m mistaken because you’re a very good person and anything else I’ve heard is fake news. We’re going to skip all that,” Azazel said. “There will be plenty of time to walk down memory lane when the time comes.”

Chloe had no desire to walk that path. She folded her arms over her chest. “What are you talking about?” She paused. “Am I dead?”

“Not yet. But we can accelerate your descent if you’d like us to,” Azazel quipped.

After a long pause Chloe answered. “No, thank you.”

2***Salvation***

TYLER

In the three years Tyler had been working at Salvation it had never been empty. No matter the hour, no matter the day. Abby was flittering around, wiping down tables she'd cleaned a dozen times. Tyler stood behind the bar polishing the lacquered wood top despite its pristine shine reflecting his concerned scowl back at him.

Joey had given up the prospect of any customers showing up looking for his famous burgers and twice fried wedge cut potatoes. "I'm shutting the kitchen down." He announced around one a.m.

It wasn't just that there was no one at the bar at this late hour. It was that no one had been there at all since Tyler's shift started, at three thirty in the afternoon. The usual buzz of commotion was decidedly missing. That night's randomly selected house band failed to show up, the frequent clients who tipped well despite knowing the drinks were watered down to save money weren't gathered around the long rectangular bar talking nonsense or playing a loud game of pool in the other room.

Abby completed her third round of cleaning tabletops, slowed her flittering down to a stroll, climbed onto one of the stools and threw her towel onto the spot Tyler had just wiped down. He made a face at her. She shrugged, wiped the spot clean.

"I think it's safe to say no one is coming in tonight." Tyler leaned his arms against the bar top.

"You can go." Abby made a face at Tyler, mimicking his earlier gesture. She threw her towel at him, pointed at the spot where his arms had left marks in the bar top.

Tyler considered taking Joey's cue long before Abby suggested it. Something in the depths of his subconscious kept telling him not to go. Maybe it was a hope someone would show up. He told himself it was his duty not to abandon his friend. Despite looking like she could be destroyed by the slightest of touches, Abby handled herself like a hockey enforcer brushes off a hot shot skater who wants to prove he's more than just a set of silky hands and quick feet. Tyler got a kick out of watching her take down men, and women who underestimated her stature. It wasn't a need to protect her keeping him rooted in place. It was something else entirely. Something he couldn't quite explain.

"Got nowhere in particular to be." He half smiled at her, wiped down the bar with an overdramatic sweep of his hand against the towel, turned his attention to making sure every bottle of booze had its label facing forward for easy access.

He showed up at quarter to four. The lone customer. Tyler was immediately annoyed. Not because the man stepped into an empty bar fifteen minutes before closing time. In a dark suit with a pink checkered button-down shirt and a deep blue tie with an expensive looking silver tie bar and a smile that made Tyler's insides do backflips.

Abby returned to her usual bubbly attentive self. "Hi, welcome to Salvation. What can I get for you?" She'd stepped up to the booth where he'd sat down, close to the front door.

"Club soda?"

It was more of a question.

Abby, never one to catch on to nuance, answered honestly "Yes, we have that."

The man walked into a dive bar at a quarter to four and ordered a club soda. Tyler shook his head at her when Abby turned toward him and gave Tyler the customer's order, like he hadn't heard the exchange in the deeply disturbing silence. She stood there waiting, happily humming along to the tinny music playing over the low-quality speakers. Tyler slammed ice into a glass, jerked back on the handle of the club soda tap and stabbed a cocktail stir stick into the bubbly liquid. It was Salvation's signature, a red plastic pitchfork, a requirement in all drinks, even the ones without a trace of alcohol in them.

Tyler handed Abby the drink, spilling a little on the other required drink accompaniment, a napkin emblazoned with the bar's logo – a crude drawing of a man with an angel on one shoulder and a very sharply dressed devil on the other with the words ALL ARE WELCOME stamped on the bottom. Without a word she picked up the glass, grabbed a new napkin and headed back toward the customer's table.

Tyler was about to ask Abby what she thought the man in the expensive suit was doing in their bar at this hour, but he didn't get the chance. They both heard it. The squeak of door hinges from the back room. For a moment Tyler wondered if Joey had sensed the presence of a patron and was eager to serve one of his well-known hamburgers to whoever had shown up at this fine establishment.

There was no customer access through the back. The sign hanging outside the door said so. Well, it said Welcome to Salvation in big red letters with Please Enter Through Front Door printed neatly below it. It was an employee only entrance. As far as Tyler knew, only he, Abby and Joey had keys.

It was four o'clock, on the dot. Closing time. A man Tyler had never seen before stepped into the bar area from the kitchen. He had on a dark suit, similar to the one Mr. Club Soda was wearing, with a little less flash. All black, no tie. He walked with a confident stride, as if he belonged there.

"Who's that?" Tyler asked Abby who had been staring at the man, wide-eyed. He wondered if it was the bar's owner, whom he'd never met. He'd been hired through an employment agency who specialized in good-looking, hard-working bartenders – Tyler had seen some of their pictures – their reputation was impeccable. He tried not to wonder if he was tarnishing it.

The man continued past them and headed toward Mr. Club Soda.

"Abby, Tyler, please, join us." The man's voice was steady, soothing.

Abby didn't hesitate. She followed the stranger to the table and sat down on the booth seat next to Mr. Club Soda. Tyler trusted her. She'd saved him from bar fights and handsy women, not to mention the number of times she'd covered for him when he was late for work or declined to show up, accidentally. He joined them but kept his distance, pulling a chair up just close enough to look like he was at the table but not quite one of their party.

The stranger pulled his chair a little closer to Tyler and took in a deep breath. The air shimmered and changed around him. Tyler shook his head and decided it was just his imagination.

Then, a slow heat began to form in the pit of his stomach, and it wasn't the realization that the man who'd walked in off the street wearing a suit too expensive for

Salvation's dive bar status was not only out of place there, but more good looking than he had a right to be.

"What's going on Gabriel?" Abby broke a long, uncomfortable silence.

The name jolted Tyler. As soon as he heard it the man in black took on a new light. Literally. There was a gentle strength to him. He was tall without being overpowering, he sat up straighter just to prove the point. And more importantly, he glowed. When he looked back at Tyler it felt like the man was looking into his soul.

"Something big is coming. Something bad. It is going to cause chaos. And war."

3

Back in the Saddle

CHLOE

Airports were not among Chloe's favorite places to be, though her job made it impossible to avoid them. Goodwill Ambassador. She took her position seriously, though it wasn't anything more than glad-handing people and touting the wonderful accomplishments of the President. She got to travel the world, meet hundreds of people, eat a lot of food. And talk highly of a man she had grown to admire. Even if the world wasn't exactly sure they were in favor of his particular brand of politics.

Chloe was especially familiar with the airport in her adopted city. Like much of the architecture in DC, its saddle shape made the main terminal stand out. Though its massive windows gave away the building's purpose, its view of the giant steel tubes with wings on full display, Chloe spent most of her time in the shopping area where she could make believe she was at a mall.

The gates seemed strangely quiet. The usual hustle and bustle of constant movement between gates and waiting areas was replaced by pockets of individual travelers quietly staring at their phones or reading newspapers. Some wore paper masks and rubber gloves, as if they were about to perform surgery.

Chloe looked around to make sure she hadn't accidentally ended up in a hospital. She caught a glimpse of a television across the way. Bold black letters across the screen read "World Health Organization Declares Global Health Emergency Amid Growing Number of COVID-19 Cases."

She checked the bottom corner for the logo of the news station reporting such fallacy. News outlets were known to overblow situations to bump up ratings. Nobody at the White House was worried about this virus. Nobody she trusted anyway. Recognizing the red CNN logo, thus proving her point, she returned to the book she had picked up off a shelf, reading the dust jacket for the third time in a row.

She couldn't shake the conversation she'd had with Azazel earlier that evening. The red glow of the library came back into view as she recalled the exchange.

"Do you know the story of Lucifer? Being cast out of Heaven, that whole deal?"

"Of course, I went to bible school," Chloe said.

"Bible school. That's cute." Azazel snorted. "The stories you know are only part of what happened. God sent Lucifer to the mortal plane first. He spent his days wreaking havoc on the land and its people. Fed up with his brother's antics, God put Lucifer in the ultimate time out. Deep underground. For eternity."

Chloe's impatience grew deeper by the minute. Surely Azazel hadn't yanked her away from what was to be her first night in her own bed in over a month to give her a lesson in theology.

"It was all smoke and mirrors. Diversions. Lucifer was building an army. Recruiting lost souls. Influencing anyone who might be angry at God for any reason, of which there are many. By the time God sealed the gates to what you know as Purgatory, Lucifer was not as alone as God had wished."

Chloe stood still, quietly staring at the back of the chair where Azazel's voice had been travelling toward her like some sort of supervillain who refused to show his face. Maybe it was deformed or damaged. She shook off the thought and asked him what this all had to do with her.

"Lucifer is tired of being in the shadows. He's ready to return to the mortal plane and return it to the glory it once held. Unfortunately, he cannot enter your world freely. He has been locked out, so to speak. Contrary to popular belief, there are several gates between Heaven, Hell, and the mortal world. There is only one key." Azazel paused.

Chloe remained quiet for a moment. Then. "Me? I'm the key?"

Azazel laughed. It echoed through the room, causing the fire to jump and flare against the brick hearth.

The dancing flames threatened to pull Chloe out of the moment. She kept herself focused, concentrating on Azazel's shadowy presence, trying not to breathe in the smell of burning embers dangerously on the edge of taking her back to a past she was not ready to revisit.

“Your ego is astounding. This isn’t some weird metaphor where the key isn’t a physical object and it’s really a human who just needed to find the meaning of true love or whatever nonsense you learned watching Hallmark movies.”

Passengers boarding flight 708 from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles may begin boarding at gate 11B.

Chloe nearly missed the announcement over the PA system. The dark wood of the library gave way to bright lights and cold steel. She slung her bag over her shoulder and headed toward the gate with Azazel’s words and the lingering smell of smoke ruminating in her subconscious.

4

Mixed Messages

TYLER

Tyler looked from Abby to Mr. Club Soda and back to Abby, hoping to find them as convinced this man was talking crazy as Tyler was. They kept their eyes on the stranger, waiting for him to say more.

Mr. Club Soda sat up straighter, his eyes lit up, opened wide. “Are you talking about the virus?”

Tyler’s stomach fell. His heart raced. His breathing quickened. He knew what was going on here. They’d found him.

Gabriel kept his eyes fixed on Abby. “We never lost you.”

Kansas. 20 Years Earlier.

Tyler sat with his feet dangling off the bench of the pew. He bounced his legs up and down watching the laces on his tie up dress shoes bounce around. Pastor Dan

stood at the front delivering his sermon. Tyler did not understand a word of it. Next to him Tyler's mother stared toward the pastor. Her hands placed carefully in her lap, she seemed to hang on his every word. His father sat on the other side of him. He too watched intently as Pastor Dan told stories of people Tyler had never heard of in words he did not comprehend.

In the pew just in front of them Mrs. Bagley coughed. Once, then twice. Her small hat pinned neatly to her silver hair began to shift. Tyler watched it, hoping, praying, it would fall into her lap. At least that would be exciting. As he stared at the hat, slowly creeping its way down Mrs. Bagley's head, a wave of fear washed over him. There was a foul smell in the air. It was sour. Like old milk.

Tyler pulled on the sleeve of his mother's dress. She ignored him. He pulled again. "Mom, it's important, mom." He whispered.

When he got no response, he tried his father. "Dad, I smell something, it's bad, there's, something's dying here!"

He'd said it too loud. People were looking at him. In front of him Mrs. Bagley continued to cough. The smell in the air got stronger. She stood up, apologized for the interruption, and slowly left the church.

The next week Pastor Dan asked the congregation to pray for Mr. Bagley. His wife had died of lung cancer.

Los Angeles. Present Day.

Tyler stood up, ready to make a run for it. He had taken great care to leave no trace of his former life when he began his new one. Still, he always knew there was a possibility someone would come looking for him, or worse someone would recognize

him. "Who are you, really? Did my parents send you?" Tyler backed away from the table. The front door was so close. He could make it out.

"I'm God's messenger," Gabriel said. "He's the only one who can command me."

This set Tyler's anxiety into high gear. The last man who claimed he had been sent by God paraded him in front of churches all over the South and forced him to diagnose whatever ailed the parishioners who weren't afraid to stand before him.

That was after he'd been dragged onto every local news station promising anyone watching he was not possessed by the devil. He had a rare ability everyone should praise, not run away from, Pastor Dan had said. Of course, that only applied to those folks who could pay for their visits.

Tyler was 10. Vulnerable and easily influenced. A fact Pastor Dan took full advantage of. Tyler learned what the word manipulation meant sooner than most kids did. Or should. It wasn't long before he began imagining what life would be like if he could leave Kansas and never speak of his 'God given ability' again.

"The virus will get worse before it gets better," Gabriel shifted Tyler back to the present. "Over the next several days it will become a global pandemic. Countries will continue to shut down. There will be a growing number of casualties."

This seemed to concern Mr. Club Soda who sat forward. "We don't have the resources for a global pandemic."

"Doctor Cramer, I assure you, you have everything you need, it will take time and vigilance," Gabriel said.

Tyler studied Mr. Club Soda a little further. He had smooth skin, a few little lines on his forehead and at the sides of his mouth. His eyes were bright, inviting. Crow's feet

around the edges, he must smile a lot, Tyler thought. His hair was dark, no signs of grey. Maybe he dyed it. Even so. If this man was a doctor, he hadn't been one for long.

"That's not why you're here, is it Gabriel?" Abby broke into Tyler's examination. "God doesn't send an Archangel to the mortal plane with messages concerning matters He feels humans can handle themselves."

Tyler stared at his friend. A wave of confusion washed over him. Abby's mannerisms had suddenly changed from bubbly server whose eagerness to please her customers knew no bounds to a demeanor much like the man she addressed as an Archangel. Before Tyler could make sense of her sudden transformation, Gabriel answered her.

"You are correct, young one, the humans will resolve this pandemic on their own. We are confident in their abilities and will allow them that victory."

Allow us a victory. The sentiment made Tyler's blood boil. God and His minions had been leaving mankind on their own for centuries. Forcing humans to resolve issues big and small, medical and otherwise. As if dying out due to any number of diseases was some sort of gift he was extending. Out of what? Kindness?

Tyler continued to linger by the front door. A force more powerful than his desire for flight kept him from pulling the handle. In front of him the conversation continued.

"It seems Lucifer has decided to use the crisis as an opportunity to refocus his energy on returning to the surface." Gabriel continued in his matter-of-fact tone.

Abby's eyes widened. "Do we think Lucifer is behind the spread of the virus?"

“There has been no indication he has anything to do with the illness itself or the quick pace at which it is taking over the mortal world. He is certainly taking advantage of its effects shutting down previously fortified areas. Which is problematic.”

Tyler stepped forward. Away from the door, away from his freedom. “What. On Earth. Are you two talking about?”

5

Too Good to be True

CHLOE

The airport in Los Angeles was considerably more crowded than Dulles had been. Passengers flying in and out of the city milled around the gates without masks and with less distance between themselves and anyone else. It was business as usual in this part of the country. In the baggage claim area people huddled together urging the conveyor belt to get moving and spit out their luggage so they could be on their way.

Chloe stepped into the cool night air with her rollaway bag trailing behind her and the heavy strap of her carry on digging into her shoulder, again. When Azazel had interrupted her plan to climb into bed with a glass of red wine and stay there until she felt like getting up again, Chloe protested profusely, begging him to let her get one night’s sleep in her own bed before getting on another flight. He refused, insisting it was imperative she get to her destination right away. Azazel had been vague on the details. “Los Angeles” was all he said when Chloe asked.

The new rules LAX had put in place to help its influx of traffic had not seemed to fix the issue. Chloe had seen the signs posted all over the airport. If you are in need of transportation a shuttle will take you to the designated rideshare/taxi holding area. They

appreciate everyone's patience as they transition to the new system and thank you for visiting the City of Angels.

To Chloe's dismay, there was no shuttle in sight. There were, however, tons cars sitting at the curb waiting on friends and family members to emerge from terminal doors. Airport police tried to manage the flow of traffic. A loud female voice continuously reminded people the curb was for immediate loading and unloading. Chaos. Chloe hated airports.

As it turned out one of the cars waiting curbside was for her. Its driver lazily held a sign with Chloe Kostopolous printed neatly in black letters. Chloe approached the man. "That's me."

She expected him to check for ID or confirm she was who she said she was, but he didn't. He took her bag, opened the back door of the black sedan and waited for her to slide onto the leather seat.

It took longer to get out of the airport than it did to get to the hotel. Chloe was surprised to find herself staring at the large glass doors of the Ritz-Carlton Downtown Los Angeles. "Conveniently located." The driver had told her when he pulled up to the valet.

A quick check-in and an uneventful elevator ride later, she was standing in the middle of a large hotel room decorated from floor to ceiling in the richest fabrics and lushest furniture she had ever seen. Too good to be true was beginning to creep into her mind but Chloe let it pass through without further thought. She sat at the edge of the bed and contemplated whether to order that glass of red wine she promised herself or take a shower.

She opted for the shower.

The bathroom was as luxurious as the main room. White marble countertops, tile floors, heated, she found as she played with the different switches and her toes warmed against the cold tile. An oversized bathtub, separate shower. Soft, fluffy white towels and a large robe with the Ritz-Carlton emblem embroidered on it.

On the counter sat bottles of lotions and soaps bearing brand names Chloe wished she could afford. She traveled the world, but never in this kind of luxury, and her salary was adequate, at best. Almost all of her monthly paychecks went to rent, on an apartment she rarely got to enjoy.

She stepped out of the bathroom, relaxed and refreshed. Only when he cleared his throat did she realize she was not alone in the room.

He was lounging on the love seat near a large window, dressed in maroon suit, sipping from one of the small white cups you find by the coffee maker in every hotel room all over the world.

"Hello Chloe." He cooed.

Despite the absence of the ominous villain mixed with boredom tone he'd used in the library she recognized the voice. Azazel. Without the roaring fire, the darkness of the room and the large red chair blocking her view of him, Azazel looked like a regular human male, holding his cup like a British aristocrat in 1952. She was mildly amused and a little disappointed. Then she wondered how he got into her room, and why he felt it proper to make himself comfortable.

"What are you doing in my room?" She snapped at him.

"We've got things to do." Azazel uncrossed his legs and set the cup on the glass table in front of him.

"At this hour? I just got here. I'd like to rest, get over this jet lag." Chloe protested.

"Pfft. You slept for six hours on the plane. Get dressed, unless you'd like to traipse around in your bathrobe. Which is fine. It's a nice robe."

Chloe grabbed the first pieces of clothing she could find in her neatly packed suitcase and headed toward the bathroom. "Fine."

"That's what I thought." Azazel clicked his teeth. The scrape of the mug against the glass table as he picked it back up made Chloe shudder. "Don't take too long." Azazel added before Chloe shut the bathroom door.

6

Jones, Tyler Jones

TYLER

Tyler tried to listen carefully as Gabriel spoke, but his mind kept pushing the words further back into the caves he'd built to hold everything he considered religious bullshit. At the moment the man calling himself God's messenger was saying something about Lucifer attempting to enter the mortal plane again after the location of several parts of a key God had scattered in pieces all around the world had been revealed to him.

"With the mortals having to seek shelter in their own homes, Lucifer's assets have been able to locate pieces in China and Italy. He has not had much luck in Russia or Brazil. His sights are currently set on New York, Georgia, Colorado, Texas and California."

“You sound insane. Do you think we’re in a James Bond movie? Keys? Gates? Assets?” Tyler broke in.

“What does any of this have to do with us?” Doctor Cramer asked.

Gabriel did not answer the doctor. Instead he looked only at Tyler. “Your abilities go beyond what you have suppressed. We have allowed you to live under the radar. In fact, we have helped you hide.” He glanced at Abby who lowered her head, averted her eyes, her gold glow dimmed.

There was entirely too much to unpack in that one statement. His abilities went beyond, what now? And who was Abby, really? Instead of dealing with either of those things Tyler did what he did best. Deflected. “You have used that word twice now. I don’t like it.”

Gabriel paused, tilted his head to one side. The gold of his eyes showed no recognition of what Tyler was referring to.

“Allow.” Doctor Cramer said the word before Tyler could say it himself.

Tyler glanced in the doctor’s direction, at once surprised and impressed by the man’s patience. Tyler was still battling his desire to walk out the front door. “Yes, that one. Thanks doc.”

“Jonathan.”

“Huh?”

“My name.”

“Right. So, Gabe, can I call you Gabe? Probably not. Why don’t you explain to the class what’s going on in terms that don’t make you sound like a pompous asshole.” Tyler said.

Gabriel looked to Abby. An unspoken understanding seemed to occur between the two. They nodded. Abby spoke.

“When Lucifer was sentenced to eternity in Hell, he vowed to find a way back to the mortal plane. A place he believes is his to rule. There are nine gates between the planes, each fortified so that Lucifer cannot enter. Whether by his own guilt or by the hope that Lucifer would change his ways, the gates were fashioned with a lock which can be opened by one master key. Which God broke into twenty-seven pieces and scattered all over the mortal plane.” She looked at Gabriel.

“Lucifer has located enough of the pieces to make God worried,” Gabriel said.

Tyler stared blankly at the both of them. “Located, does not have in his possession?”

Abby opened and closed her mouth once, twice. Gabriel remained silent.

“I’m sorry to ask this again,” Jonathan broke the silence. “What does that have to do with us?”

The next several moments took what little patience Tyler had left and threw it all out the window. It started when Gabriel used the word allow again, this time in reference to Abby, who turned out to be an angel who had the misfortune of being assigned to watch over Tyler as he went about a mundane existence as a bartender at a dive bar. She was only meant to be with him for two years. Tyler didn’t have a moment to process this before Gabriel moved on to the more prevalent revelation.

“Your abilities go well beyond detecting illness. The others have not presented themselves. They were not needed. With Lucifer close to resurfacing on the mortal plane, more of them will come to light,” Gabriel said.

“I have asked if I can stay to help you as they begin to show themselves,” Abby said.

Tyler scowled at her. How was it that he never noticed her angelic features? Light gold eyes, a discernable yet faint glow around her entire body. Maybe it was that he hadn't been looking for them. Or could it be that she's more angel-like because she's in the presence of a higher angel? Either way she was a liar and he didn't like liars.

“I don't mean to be rude.” Jonathan said. “This is all very fascinating. But, so far, I haven't heard anything to indicate why I was asked, no, commanded to attend an important meeting at this bar, in the middle of the night. I'm supposed to be on a flight back to New York.”

Tyler thought he would be the one to lose his shit, but as it turned out, Doctor Jonathan Cramer was well ahead of him. His role, as laid out by Gabriel, boiled down to glorified babysitter. Tyler didn't blame the doctor for storming off. Tyler nearly jumped out of his chair himself, upon hearing that he'd need someone to “help him stay on target.”

Gabriel followed Jonathan into the kitchen, leaving Tyler alone with Abby, who he'd decided he was no longer speaking to. From the back he heard the doctor scream ‘board certified physician’ and ‘years of medical training’ and finally ‘my patients need me!’ Then things went quiet.

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you,” Abby said. “But if I had, would you have believed me? And more importantly, would you have stuck around?”

Tyler thought about this. She had a point about believing her, but she was wrong about him running if he'd known. He didn't tell her that. She didn't deserve to be let off the hook yet.

7

Meeting People

CHLOE

Azazel refused to tell Chloe where they were going. He said they were meeting some people and they needed to hurry, then walked out the door without making sure she had followed him. She couldn't imagine who they would be meeting in the middle of the night. Clandestine meetings at late night hours were never good. She had learned this valuable lesson on several occasions.

Chloe had a hard time keeping up and asked Azazel to slow down three times before she realized he was ignoring her. After power walking five miles, Azazel keeping pace in front of her and showing no signs of slowing down, Chloe once again tried to ask him where they were going. Azazel brushed her off and quickened his pace.

Chloe cursed herself for not bringing comfortable shoes then reminded herself it was Azazel's fault she didn't have enough time to repack her suitcase. She called him several unsavory names under her breath, certain he had gotten far enough ahead of her not to hear them.

At the tenth mile Azazel opened a glass door and disappeared from view.

She had imagined he was taking her to a secret building in some weird out of the way section of Downtown Los Angeles. She pictured a large warehouse with broken windows, cold rusty water dripping from the ceiling, colder concrete floors. Then she

reassessed this as she stared at the back of Azazel's expensive looking suit. After which she hoped for a lush room with comfortable couches and men in smoking jackets.

What she got was an iHop.

The smell of maple syrup and stale coffee overwhelmed her as she opened the door. Memories she had locked away in what she thought were heavily fortified spaces in her subconscious once again threatened to break through their chains.

She shook them off, stepped inside and found Azazel lounging comfortably in a booth toward the back of the very empty pancake house.

It wasn't his shit eating grin or his seemingly impatient huff as she approached the table that made her blood boil. Those were becoming standard fare.

Azazel sat at the biggest table in the place. Alone.

Her feet ached from walking ten miles, at a fast past, in heels. She was tired from two different plane trips in two different countries. Her patience gave way to absolute abhorrence. She stood a foot away from the table, arms folded against her chest. "You. Said. We. Were. Meeting. People."

Azazel pointed to an electronic tablet in front of him. Chloe moved a little closer. On the tiny screen of the tablet, in little boxes, a handful of faces. "People." He said, flashing a grin Chloe would soon find herself despising.

8

Downtown

TYLER

Long after Gabriel had delivered his message and exited Salvation the way he'd entered, through the kitchen where the back door remained locked, Tyler sat quietly

sulking in the back seat of Jonathan's rented sedan as they headed toward Downtown L.A. The sulking a direct result of his being coerced into taking part in a scavenger hunt he wanted no part of orchestrated by a man he no longer believed in.

There were very few cars on the road in either direction. Jonathan rarely hit the brake pedal. The lights seemed to turn green as their car approached. That thing everyone said about the city was true for the first time in the six years Tyler had been living there. "It should take fifteen minutes to get everywhere in LA."

On any other day Tyler would revel in the prospect of moving at a reasonable pace through his adopted city. The tall buildings and infinite sun, even the traffic when it was at its worst, reminded him he wasn't in Kansas anymore.

Today it was just filling him with anxiety. Everything he thought he'd left behind had followed him here. A religious figure imploring him to use his abilities for good. A rescue mission he didn't volunteer to take part in. People with good intentions guiding him to 'do the right thing.'

Every few minutes a monotone computerized voice coming from the GPS app on Abby's phone would give instructions for where to turn. Jonathan kept his eyes on the road, Abby stared at her phone. Tyler continued to stew in his anger. He was, for all intents and purposes, a cliché. You can't outrun your past. It will find a way to come back to haunt you. Fact.

As the GPS lady indicated their destination was just ahead, Tyler wondered out loud: "How are we supposed to figure out if an item is holding a piece of the key inside it?"

Abby glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "They will have a specific energy."

Tyler stared into the mirror, trying to figure out if there was anything in her eyes, her body language, her aura, that would have clued him in to who she really was. He didn't see anything but the young, beautiful girl he'd met on his first day at Salvation. The glow she'd had when in the presence of Gabriel had faded away. He'd have to ask her about that, when he stopped being mad at her for not telling him the truth. If he ever did.

Downtown Los Angeles was quiet. On any given day there was at least some sort of event going on at the Convention Center or Staples Center. And there was always activity at L.A. Live. There were endless restaurants. There was a giant movie theater. Two music venues. A museum. All of which were nearly empty.

Jonathan pulled the car into the underground parking garage at L.A. Live, turned off the engine, then turned to Abby. "Can you be a little more specific?"

"The item will have a low frequency energy that someone looking for it will be attuned to. Someone like me," Abby said.

"Because you're an angel, like Gabriel?" Jonathan asked.

"Yes. No. It's complicated," Abby answered.

Tyler opened the car door and stepped out. "I need a drink, anyone else need a drink?" No one moved. Tyler poked his head back in just in time to hear Jonathan ask...

"Really though, what kind of angel are you? Guardian, fallen...avenging??"

"Disobedient. I didn't agree with their rules. I voiced my displeasure. They sent me here."

Tyler slammed the car door shut and headed toward what he hoped was an elevator. There were only a handful of cars in the grey cement garage. Arrows pointed

to exits and street names he didn't recognize. He was still unsure why he'd agreed to get into the car with those two. Boredom, more than likely.

The elevator lobby had two vending machines. Snacks and sodas. No alcohol.

"Going up?" A voice startled Tyler.

He hadn't noticed the elevator doors open. "Not if I can help it," he said as he stepped in. To his surprise Jonathan and Abby caught up to him.

They rode the elevator in silence.

Tyler hadn't explored Los Angeles the way he'd wanted to when he moved here. Unlike rural Kansas, it was hard to walk to most places in L.A., and public transportation was unreliable though they were building a Metro line he hadn't yet utilized.

He'd had a brief run in with L.A. public transportation shortly after arriving in the city. Despite promising himself he would never step foot on another bus, having spent nearly forty hours on a Greyhound trekking across the US, Tyler made the mistake of taking a long, strange voyage through Santa Monica in rush hour traffic. He didn't mean to go to the city of Santa Monica. He meant to go to West Hollywood. Which is on Santa Monica Boulevard. An honest mistake.

Sure, Santa Monica beach was beautiful. And the pier turned out to be entertaining. He rode the merry-go-round and won two stuffed animals playing carnival games. But it wasn't exactly the excursion he'd had in mind. He'd wanted to meet a man who'd take him home and make him promises he couldn't keep.

Instead he got cotton candy, a hip-hop CD from a guy who swore it was 'gonna be a big hit once he raised enough money, so could he spare a few dollars to put toward the cause?' and was verbally assaulted for not wanting to join the Jehovah's

Witnesses. It wasn't his fault he answered "No" when the woman asked him if he was a good person.

He'd been to Downtown L.A. twice. Once when he arrived at the bus station in the heart of the city in the middle of the night with the clothes on his back and a new identity. Tyler Jones. Nondescript. Simple enough to get lost with all the other Jones's. Far enough away from the name he was born with for him to start a new life.

Then again when a date assured him seeing *The Exorcist* in 4D would be fun. "The seats move, and they blow air at you, they pump scents into the theater, it's great!" "As long as they don't spit pea soup at us." Tyler had remarked. They didn't go on a second date.

Before today Tyler had been unaware of the existence of the Grammy Museum. It turned out to be quite impressive, although like everything else, it was decidedly empty. The building seemed to take up half of L.A. Live, which went on for several blocks. Large windows showcased giant pictures of famous musicians enticing visitors to come inside. A box office attendant seemed surprised to have customers but happily sold them three tickets.

"Getting any signals?" Jonathan whispered to Abby.

"It's not as simple as walking through the door," she said as they moved further into the building. "I have to be close to the item."

Tyler giggled. Jonathan and Abby stopped, turned around.

"It just occurred to me. All these people stood on a stage and thanked God for their awards. I never understood that. I find it ironic. Don't you?" Tyler said.

"It wasn't originally in a Grammy. The pieces get moved around a lot," Abby explained.

Tyler stared in her direction. "You've done this before?"

"Lucifer tries to enter your world every seven years. We have to take measures to ensure he doesn't succeed," Abby paused. "The task is usually assigned to higher ranking angels. Desperate times, desperate measures, I guess."

A pang of guilt built up in Tyler's throat.

"Over here," Jonathan called out from the Classical Music section.

Without another word, Abby and Tyler joined him at the display. "George Stoli. 31 awards." Jonathan pointed at a large glass bookcase.

"I am going to have to touch them," Abby whispered.

Tyler looked around to see how secure the area was. A single security guard leaned casually against a far wall down the hallway. He hadn't seemed to notice there were people in his section. Or maybe he didn't really care. Tyler shrugged toward Abby.

She stepped forward. An alarm rang out. The guard headed toward them. He was in no hurry.

"I'm sorry," Abby smiled bright and cocked her head to the side.

The guard nodded and motioned for them to move on.

Tyler wasn't a musician. He wasn't interested in becoming one. Yet, there he stood, watching a video presentation on "How to Win a Grammy." He considered moving on to another part of the museum or wandering off to one of the restaurants in the area.

Next to him Abby and Jonathan were getting snippy with each other. He decided that was fun, so he chose to stick around.

"There's no other way?" Jonathan asked, again.

"No," Abby snapped at him. "My abilities are limited. Stop asking."

"I wasn't questioning your abilities, just trying to figure out an alternative."

Jonathan sat down on a bench next to Abby.

"Don't worry," Tyler said without looking at either of them. "I'm devising a plan.

"What kind of plan?" Jonathan asked.

"There are currently two options," Tyler answered. "One where we go in and knock the guard unconscious and another where we find the control room, knock that guard unconscious and turn the alarm off," he said.

"Maybe we should try to move the next piece and return to this one when we can devise a plan that maybe doesn't involve violence," Jonathan suggested.

"Yeah, you go do that, I'll wait here." Tyler waved his hand at them.

"It's better if we stay together," Abby said.

Tyler folded his arms over his chest.

Somewhere between Tyler insisting he was not going to be a part of this madness and his agreement to tag along because he had nothing better to do, Gabriel had given them several instructions. From what Tyler could remember he'd said something about dire consequences should this mission fail, something about a digital map indicating where items were hidden being downloaded to each of their phones, and then he strongly suggested they stick together, no matter what. It was possible Tyler

had been so busy trying to disprove everything Gabriel said he had forgotten to ask why.

Jonathan broke into Tyler's thoughts. "The map says there's another piece a few miles from here. Central Library."

Tyler started to protest. He was having serious regrets about going on a scavenger hunt of this magnitude with a man he'd just met and his best friend who turned out to be his guardian angel. Granted the doctor was gorgeous, which tended to influence Tyler's motivations, and Abby was his only friend. He hated being driven by such stupid needs.

Abby stood up. "Ty. You've been saying you want to explore the city."

This wasn't exactly how Tyler wanted to learn about Los Angeles and its history. There were very few old buildings in the city. Many of the structures downtown had been demolished and rebuilt with modern shapes with strange angles and steel and glass that reflected the L.A. sun constantly.

The Central Library was one of the oldest still in existence. It was a stark contrast to the Grammy Museum in all its straight lines and shiny squareness. Arches and carvings and marble floors reminded Tyler of something out of ancient Greece. Jonathan and Abby checked the directory while Tyler was busy acting like a tourist, taking pictures on his phone, staring up at the colorful tile ceiling.

"This way," Abby whispered next to him.

"Bet ya all these writers dedicated their books to God," Tyler quipped when they reached the 'bullfighting' section.

Abby ran her fingers across the spines of every book in the section. She stopped on one. Tyler looked over her shoulder. *Bullfight* by Yashushi Inoue. She held her hand over the shelf, closed her eyes tight. The air around the shelf shimmered, the book faded into nothing, then slowly returned to form. Abby reached into her pocket, fished out her phone, slid her fingers across the screen, returned the phone to its place and smiled as if everything was normal.

Tyler's phone buzzed. Though he was certain it was Abby's entry into their newly installed map of magical items guarding the mortal plane from certain destruction, he was surprised to find a message on the screen: a book emoji followed by an arrow emoji. Then a second message: a thumbs up emoji.

Tyler stared at Abby, dumbfounded. Despite having just witnessed her standing in front of him making an entire book disappear and reappear, his previous thoughts about this all being an elaborate hoax were starting to feel real.

The angels communicated through emojis. Further proof God's disciples had gone off the reservation.

9

Pancakes

CHLOE

Azazel ordered a stack of pancakes with eggs, over easy, bacon and sausage, black coffee, orange juice and some fruit. Chloe stared at him as he continued to add on to his order and had the good sense to blush when she realized he and the server were both looking back at her, waiting on her to order her own food.

“Wheat toast. And eggs. Scrambled. Please.” She shrugged at Azazel when he gave her a ‘that’s it?’ look.

On the tablet screen 8 people in their own little squares were talking amongst themselves. Chloe had tried to pay attention to what they were saying but realized many of them were speaking in other languages. Every so often words would come through in English. Security. Spread. Virus. Lockdown.

Chloe stared at the screen, glanced at Azazel, happily eating his pancakes, then back at the screen. These people seemed to be taking extreme measures for what she had been told was a simple flu bug, she thought.

“Russian, Italian, Chinese and Portuguese. They all have their translation features activated.” Azazel announced between bites.

“And we don’t have ours activated because?” Chloe asked.

Azazel reached over to the screen, tapped his finger on it. The voices on screen went from their own to that of a computerized woman speaking what an AI would consider English but really just sounded like a series of mispronounced words with the emphasis and pauses in the wrong places.

“Okay you can turn off the translation feature now,” Chloe said after five minutes. She wasn’t able to take in any of the information any better than she had in other languages.

While Azazel enjoyed his many plates of food, Chloe slowly munched on toast and played with her eggs, which were overdone and under seasoned. She sipped her coffee, which wasn’t much better. Every so often she’d catch new words. Keys. Gates. Pieces.

There would be time to ask Azazel what was going on when they walked the ten miles back to the hotel. Chloe's feet throbbed. She was not looking forward to that trek. She considered taking her shoes off and going barefoot, but the idea of walking on the dirty sidewalk made her stomach churn. She'd settle for blisters.

As it turned out, there was no need to worry about blistered feet or dirty sidewalks and she had no chance to ask Azazel what the meeting had been about. As soon as he'd finished his meal Azazel ended the video session, snapped his fingers and teleported he and Chloe right back to Chloe's room at the Ritz.

When she was able to center herself after being jolted out of the hard leather booth seat to the soft mattress of the hotel bed, Chloe steamed "If you were able to zap us from there to here, why didn't you just zap us from here to there?"

Azazel smiled. "I just got these new shoes and I wanted to break them in." He pointed at his feet.

Chloe looked at Azazel's shoes.

"Yeezy's." Azazel said proudly.

"I don't care if they're Louis Vuitton! You dragged me ten miles. For a meeting you didn't even contribute to! Why couldn't we have done that here?!"

"I wanted pancakes."

Chloe stood up and headed toward the bathroom. Her anger growing by the second. She knew better than to do something as stupid as punch Azazel in the face, no matter how much he annoyed her.

She wasn't sure how long she'd sat on the side of the bathtub with her aching feet flat against the cold tile floor. But when she returned to the room Azazel was still sitting in the same chair staring at his well-manicured fingernails.

"Aside from your incessant need to annoy the fuck out of me, and your penchant for pancakes, are you going to tell me what that meeting was about?"

"It was a general check in. We do them daily. Those are your counterparts in China, Russia, Brazil, Texas, Colorado, New York and Georgia. Today's meeting was about Brazil's progress in finding the pieces hidden there. And the growing conspiracy theory that Russia is somehow doing something nefarious to keep the Coronavirus from spreading there."

Chloe was somewhat surprised he'd been honest with her and mildly shocked he was buying the virus nonsense. "It's just the flu."

Azazel smirked at her. "Gosh you're fun. Naïve. But fun."

Chloe rolled her eyes at him, sat down on the edge of the bed, massaged her feet with her fingertips.

"There's one more place we need to go this morning." Azazel announced.

Chloe glared at him. "Please tell me you don't expect me to walk there."

"Are you kidding? These shoes cost \$1,000."

10

The Award Goes To

TYLER

Jonathan pulled the rental sedan onto Figueroa. He and Abby were in a heated discussion about how best to go about locating the exact Grammy in need of replacing, without the guard or the security alarm being an issue.

"I suggested two pretty good options earlier," Tyler said from the back seat.

"We should try to avoid any sort of violence." Jonathan suggested. "The less attention we draw to ourselves the better." He added when Tyler gave him a dirty look.

"I have another idea," Abby said.

The Classical Music area at the Grammy Museum was still empty. The same guard was in the spot he had been in when they'd left. He looked about as bored as a man guarding the classical section of a music museum could look.

Abby sauntered up to him.

"Remember me?" She asked the guard in a sing song voice.

"What's she doing?" Tyler whispered to Jonathan as they waited nearby.

"I think she's, flirting." Jonathan smiled. It lit up his entire face.

Tyler pushed back against the sudden wave of heat radiating from his forehead to his toes and lingering around his midsection.

Whatever Abby was trying to do, it wasn't working on the guard. He remained stoic, bored, unmoved.

"Maybe I should try?" Tyler suggested.

A slight flicker of recognition flashed in Jonathan's eyes. "Getting a vibe?" He raised an eyebrow at him.

"Gaydar isn't real," Tyler retorted.

"Clearly," Jonathan shot back.

Tyler was about to say something in response, but Jonathan's face went pale and he pointed in Abby's direction.

The guard was speaking into his walkie talkie. Tyler tensed up. Violence might be the only option now. He wondered if Jonathan would help, or just stand by as Tyler got his ass kicked. The doctor was well built. Tyler had noticed the biceps bulging through the thin material of the casual shirt Jonathan had changed into. His jeans highlighted muscular thighs that could easily render someone unconscious if he somehow found himself wrestling....

Tyler balled his hands into fists. Both in an attempt to distract himself from further assessing the doctor's capabilities and in preparation for a fight he was certain was about to break out in the quiet setting of the classical music section of an empty museum.

"Frank, can you turn off the alarm in the classical section," the guard said into his walkie.

"10-4." A man, presumably Frank, answered.

Tyler let go of the tension that had crept into his neck and shoulders, unclenched his fists, raised both eyebrows at Jonathan then at Abby.

She shrugged, slid past them, stood at the shelf filled with George Stoli's Grammy awards. She ran her fingers over all 31 gramophone statues, stopping at the last one. She nodded toward Tyler and Jonathan. Tyler glanced at the guard who had turned his attention to his phone, bored already. He nodded at her to let her know the coast was clear.

It was harder to detect than it had been at the library, but Tyler caught just the slightest glimpse of the gold statue disappearing and reappearing.

Abby sauntered toward the guard. "Thank you, Nestor." She smiled at him.

To Tyler, Abby looked absolutely silly. He wasn't immune to the flirtations of the female species. What Abby was doing was, indescribable. Thankfully it was working on the guard who blushed, radioed Frank, gave the all clear.

Next to Tyler Jonathan whispered something about miracles.

Tyler didn't believe in them. He'd seen too much deception in the guise of divinity to be certain it existed. "It's no wonder you're single," he teased Abby as they headed toward the parking garage. "You're a terrible flirt."

"That's not why I'm single," Abby said in her usual matter of fact way. Then added "Also, shut up, it worked." She said with a wry smile.

Salvation was as they'd left it. Quiet. Granted they'd put the closed sign up when they left. They had regulars. People who would have been milling around in the parking lot waiting on the place to open. Hoping the closed sign might be there by mistake. Not today.

Tyler, Jonathan and Abby were the lone souls sitting at the booth by the front door, staring at their phones and arguing over whether they should have just gone to the third location before coming back to the bar.

Tyler was just about to get up and pour himself a drink when the front door opened. A man and a woman entered. Tyler felt Abby sit up straighter, he turned to see what about these two random customers had caught her attention. He was certain he could see flames in the center of her eyes.

"Azazel." Abby said through gritted teeth.

Tyler's long suppressed religious upbringing was resurfacing at a high rate. As soon as he heard the name, he recognized the man's face. A flash of red, a room full of books. A fireplace. Two men. Azazel. And Lucifer? He shook off the vision and returned his attention to Abby who'd stood up to greet them.

"Can I help you?" Abby put on her best 'at your service' voice. Tyler had long admired her ability to shake off the bullshit the men, almost all the men, put her through on a nightly basis.

"This is Chloe." Azazel motioned to his companion. "Chloe this is Abigail. She used to be an angel." He sneered.

"It's Abby. I am still an angel. Which is more than I can say for you, Azazel." She half smiled. "We're closed for the day. Or don't either of you know how to read?"

Tyler was surprised by Abby's display of rudeness toward possible paying customers. But it seemed she knew the man well. He added that to the long list of things he'd ask her about, someday.

"We need to borrow the kitchen for a few, won't be long," Azazel said.

"It's interesting, how little regard you have for the power of angels who are still in His favor." Abby stood in front of him, blocking his way.

"I would have more regard for your angelic powers if they were still relevant, dear." Azazel pushed her aside like she was a feather. He pulled Chloe by the arm, guiding her toward the kitchen.

Tyler watched in wonder as Azazel and Chloe headed toward the kitchen door, Abby following close behind them.

"Come on." Abby motioned for he and Jonathan to follow her.

Having five people in the small kitchen was more than it could handle. They stood in a line like they were waiting to get into a club at nine o'clock on a Saturday night.

Azazel had his hand on the metal handle of the stainless steel industrial sized refrigerator.

His friend stood behind him. By her body language she was not thrilled to be there. She fidgeted, tapped her foot against the tile floor and kept her arms folded firmly across her chest.

Tyler could relate.

A light flashed under the refrigerator. Azazel pulled the door toward him which forced the line of bodies to take a step back.

When it was open the refrigerator did not contain tubs of butter and cartons of milk. Not a single egg or any other food item was to be found.

Instead, a giant black rot iron gate stood before them. A light fog began to seep into the kitchen, making the already sticky floor even more of a mess.

"This is the entrance to Purgatory," Azazel announced, louder than was necessary. "Chloe and I are going to go say hello to a friend." He turned to face Chloe, not making eye contact with the others. "These three are going to watch us step through these gates. And wish they were cool enough to follow." He waved his hand across the gate and the lock slid open. He stepped through. Motioned for Chloe to join him. She moved with less confidence but did as he commanded.

Azazel waved his hand over the gate again. The lock slid back into place and the refrigerator door slammed closed.

Tyler lunged forward and pulled open the door. He found shelves filled with butter, milk, eggs, rotting fruits and vegetables.

11

Purgatory

CHLOE

Purgatory was pretty much what Chloe expected. Dark and foreboding. Cold and unwelcoming. As soon as the gate closed behind them Azazel suggested she remove her shoes. Chloe protested. She could not see the ground under her feet, and he refused to confirm or deny the presence of anything alive or dead on or under its surface. She stepped forward, her feet sinking deep into wet soil, leaving her no choice but to slip out of her expensive heels and leave them behind.

“What about you?” She asked as what she hoped was nothing more than wet dirt squished between her toes. “Didn’t you just say those shoes cost a thousand dollars?”

Azazel shrugged. “Me and Ye are tight. He’ll just give me another pair.”

Chloe shook her head at him. He was beginning to remind her of one of her foster brothers. Elvin. Smart ass to a fault but caring enough to keep Chloe out of trouble. She knew that was where they differed. Should Chloe find herself in need of a helping hand Azazel would be the last person she’d rely on to rescue her.

Azazel led her through rows and rows of burned out trees. “You said there wouldn’t be any more walking.” Chloe huffed as they continued deeper into the darkness. At least she thought they were moving forward. Everything looked the same.

She hoped Azazel knew where he was going, or that this wasn't another way of annoying her. We better not be heading to a pancake house, she thought.

Unlike earlier, Azazel seemed to be making sure he didn't get too far ahead. He continuously checked over his shoulder and slowed his pace to ensure she was right behind him. Just as she was about to tell him she needed to rest, Azazel stopped. It was so sudden she nearly bumped into him. She managed to step to the side and stand just to his left.

Ahead of them black trees gave way to open space. The dark sky shined a crimson red. The ground looked as if it was shimmering gold. Chloe blinked several times, adjusting her eyes to the light and making herself believe what she saw. In the center of the clearing one lone tree sat dormant. Radiating light from each branch, mimicking the red, orange and gold tones surrounding it. Chloe felt the sudden need to rush toward it. She suppressed the desire and glanced toward Azazel.

"I cannot take you any further." He said without looking at her.

Something about the way he spoke made Chloe shudder. His tone had shifted significantly. Gone was any trace of the wry sarcasm bordering on downright boredom. This was a new side of Azazel. He either respected this tree or feared it.

Chloe stepped into the clearing. The ground was solid. She could still feel remnants of the mud between her toes, but it seemed to dry and fall away with every step she took. The tree's orange glow enveloped her as she continued forward. When she was at the enormous trunk she stopped, looked back to make sure Azazel hadn't left her, found him standing in the same spot, relaxed for a moment, then stifled a scream as the tree moved.

The air was still. Not a breeze or gust of wind. As least not one that could shake a tree of this magnitude. Another shift, shimmer in the air, a cyclone of red, orange and green. Then, as quickly as it had begun, it stopped.

The bright red tree with the glowing orange hue and the golden leaves vanished. In its place stood a bright red dragon.

Chloe didn't run. She couldn't explain why, no matter how hard she tried to recall the moment or describe it to anyone else. The creature standing before her was tall and overbearing. Bright red with an orange belly and golden scales. It lowered its head to Chloe's level and smiled. Yes. The dragon smiled.

"Hello, Chloe." It greeted her as if they were old friends.

Chloe took a step back, tilting her head up to get a better look at the creature's face. She'd never met a talking dragon. It fascinated her to no end.

"Thank you. Unfortunately, I will need to be in human form to complete my task today." His deep voice echoed through the clearing.

Chloe swallowed a lump that had formed in her throat. She opened and closed her mouth several times, words failing her. She nodded, as if the dragon had been waiting on her for permission to change forms.

Once again, the air shimmered and swirled mixing the red, orange and gold hues together until it formed a tall human male.

Chloe did her best to mask her disappointment.

"Many who stand before me prefer this form. All of them remain intimidated." His voice was still deep, though it had lost the smoky crackle. There was a tinge of sadness in his statement. "It is interesting. You do not fear me."

Chloe did not understand it either. To be fair, nothing about the last twenty-four hours made any sense.

"I suppose that is true." He said. "I wish I could tell you it will make more sense once you leave here, but I cannot promise such things. We should get down to business. It is not wise to be here longer than necessary."

Chloe looked up at him. He had red hair, light skin. His eyes were bright yellow. His mouth seemed too large for his face. The orange dragon belly had become a very human three-piece suit with gold vein-like accents running through the fabric. A green tie tucked neatly into the vest mimicked a tree branch. Long arms and even longer legs added to the allusion. If he stood with his feet close together you could almost make out the shadow of the tree trunk.

"What are you going to do to me?" Chloe asked in a faint whisper.

"You are not in any danger," he said. "At least not from me."

12

The Omphalos

TYLER

Any concern for the lack of patrons at Salvation Bar and Grill had vanished along with any semblance of calmness Tyler had come to find in there being no one yelling at him for forgetting their order or mixing their drinks wrong.

"There's a gateway to Hell. Inside the refrigerator?" Tyler took a swig of whiskey he'd generously poured into a water stained beer stein.

"Yes." Abby rubbed her temples.

Tyler was about to ask her if she knew who the woman with Azazel was, or more importantly, who they could possibly be going to see in Purgatory. Before he could get the words out Abby's eyes rolled back in her head and she fell to the floor.

Jonathan jumped out of his seat by the door and grabbed for her just in time to keep her head from hitting the concrete.

Tyler froze. He was taking entirely too long to decide if it was better to jump onto the bar top like he was a racecar driver sliding over the hood of a car or get to the center where the bar access panel was already open and less of a risky endeavor. His instinct to panic was thwarted when he remembered there was a doctor in the house.

Jonathan pressed his fingers against Abby's wrist. "No pulse. But I'm not sure if that's bad or if that's just an angel thing. I don't suppose it's something you can just Google."

The doctor felt for injuries, checked Abby's pulse once, twice. Tyler, who had taken the less dangerous route out from behind the bar sat down next to his friend's limp body. She seemed so fragile, laying there, still and seemingly lifeless. He was about to ask what he could do to help when his own body went limp and everything went dark.

Something grabbed him from above. A strong force, like he was being lifted up. Something grabbed him from below. A strong force, like he was being pulled down.

"Not again, please, not this again," Tyler pleaded.

He felt like he was being split in two. He was both ice cold and burning hot. He wondered how long he could take the push and pull, the struggle of forces tearing him apart.

“You’re not dead.” A voice filled Tyler’s subconscious. “You can open your eyes now.”

Tyler didn’t want to open his eyes. He thought for sure he was back in that church, lying on that table. Dying. Dead. Floating up. Tumbling down. Then. Suddenly. Inexplicably. Definitely. Alive.

His mother’s face flashed before him. His father. Then, the man they’d given all their faith to. Pastor Dan.

Tyler was fifteen. Told he was going to Hell for his bad thoughts. His evil desires. His parents begging, desperate for Pastor Dan fix him like he fixed the other sick people. Return him to grace and light.

A jolt of electricity traveled through Tyler’s body, like lightening against a dry, crackling tree. A cold wave washed over him. He clenched his teeth and waited for fire to burn him. The ice to cool him down. Wash. Rinse. Repeat.

“It’s okay Ty, open your eyes, nobody’s going to hurt you.”

A hand on his arm. A soothing voice in his head. Familiar.

Against his better judgement Tyler opened his eyes. He was not in a church in Kansas. There were no electric wires hanging from his limbs, his genitals.

His mother, father, Pastor Dan, nowhere to be found.

The room was stark white. There were two pairs of eyes staring back at him. Gold, bright, angelic. Abby, and Gabriel. Abby had a hold of Tyler’s wrist. A second wave of shock travelled through him.

“Where are we?” Tyler croaked out. “Am I dead?”

Gabriel shifted his weight from side to side. Tyler could swear the angel looked nervous. Abby smiled at Tyler in her usual radiant, innocent, everything is fine way. She was glowing again.

“Not even a little bit.” She said, then looked in Gabriel’s direction. “Gabriel thinks it’s too soon.”

“Too soon for what?” Tyler asked, his voice raw.

“But Azazel’s little show back there,” Abby continued to speak in Gabriel’s direction, ignoring Tyler’s question. “Warrants a little bit of urgency.”

Gabriel stopped moving. “He’s not ready.”

“Hey, you two.” Tyler waved his hands between them. “Why’d you bring me, wherever this place is, if you were going to talk about me like I’m not here? There’s a doctor alone in a bar with what others might mistake as dead bodies.”

That got Abby’s attention. She looked down. “He’s fine, for now.”

Tyler raised an eyebrow at her. “What’s going on here Ab?”

Gabriel turned to face Tyler. His features were strained. There was a beauty to him, Tyler had seen it when he showed up at Salvation, he saw it even more now. But he was conflicted. It was unsettling.

“The war between the forces of Heaven and Hell has been going on for thousands of years,” Gabriel started. “Lucifer has tried, and failed, to enter your world and claim it too many times to count. We have managed to stop him without any mortal involvement.”

“Why? Because Lucifer went against God’s wishes and he might influence humanity to do the same?” Tyler asked.

Abby's gold eyes bored a hole into Tyler's soul. "Lucifer doesn't just want to resurface on the mortal plane and turn humans against God. He wants to destroy you. To spite Him. Contrary to what you believe, God is on the side of humanity and would like to see it continue to exist. Lucifer, on the other hand, feels like you're broken and could use a reboot."

Tyler scoffed. "If God is on our side, he's doing a pretty shitty job of showing it. Have you taken a look around lately, either of you?"

"Your anger is understandable." Gabriel turned his own golden eyes on Tyler. "You feel betrayed. Prayers went unanswered, people you trusted let you down. Even in death you could not find peace."

Tyler stared at him. De ja vu. He'd had the same feeling earlier, with Azazel. A flash of light then a realization. He'd been here before. Nine years ago. Back then, the two people in the room were Gabriel. And God?

"Your soul is, different. Neither Heaven nor Hell can claim it, though we both continue to try. You are going to save the mortal plane." Gabriel paused, then "It is what you were created to do."

Tyler stared at the Archangel trying to make sense of the words.

"When Gabriel said your gifts went well beyond your ability to smell sickness, he wasn't trying to be vague. You are what is known as an Omphalos." Abby added to the confusion.

Tyler could not find his words. He continued to look from Abby to Gabriel and back to Abby hoping one of them said something he understood.

“Literally defined, Omphalos means perfect center,” Abby continued. “In our limited readings...we know you are a weapon created by beings with powers which surpass those of God himself. We do not know any more. We never needed to.”

Tyler was having a hard time believing there was something God found more powerful than himself, though he wondered if he'd sent Lucifer to Hell for saying things of the sort. He was having an even harder time believing he had been created by whoever that entity was.

Gabriel's attention suddenly shifted to his feet. “The doctor is getting restless. Time to return you before he does anything rash.” He snapped his fingers.

A flash of light, a jolt, and Tyler was no longer in the bright white room, but sitting on the cold concrete floor at Salvation. He checked to make sure Abby had joined him back on the mortal plane. Her gold eyes shined back at him.

Next to them, Jonathan screamed. It was primal, like he'd been holding it in for a long time.

"Sorry," Abby said helping the doctor stand. "Gabriel called us." She pointed between herself and Tyler and then toward the ceiling.

"Well, you scared the shit out of me. I thought you were dead, both of you. You didn't have a pulse. We wondered if that mattered. Then suddenly Tyler was out. He had a pulse. I didn't know whether to call 911 or pray, which I haven't done since I was five. Is that going to happen often?" Jonathan barely took a breath.

"I don't think so," Abby answered with a shrug.

Jonathan pressed his fingers against his neck and checked his watch. His chest moved rapidly up and down. His breathing unsteady. “Anything I need to know?”

"I am back to full power." Abby announced proudly. "And, Tyler knows about being the Omphalos."

"Oh," Jonathan said. "That's good?" His voice did a sing song dance as he said the word.

Abby walked toward the bar, grabbed the whiskey Tyler had left, returned to where he remained unmoved on the concrete floor and kneeled down in front of him. "I begged Gabriel to tell you. I promised him you would step up, once you knew how important you are. I put myself on the line for you. Again."

Tyler took the glass out of Abby's hand and drank every last drop. It was then, and only then, he realized the liquid had never done anything but burn his throat.

He stood up. Set the glass down on the bar. Walked slowly but deliberately into the kitchen. Inhaled deeply, regretted it immediately – stale fryer oil, trash that hadn't been taken out in a week. He shook it off. Grabbed for the steel handle on the refrigerator. Pulled the door open toward him.

Dark, ominous, black rot iron gates stood before him. He stepped forward, waved his hand the lock. It stayed in place.

Abby entered the room and stopped just behind him. "In time you'll learn how to open many doors you did not know existed. Right now, your focus should be on keeping this, and the others locked."

"There's a gateway to Hell. Inside the refrigerator." Tyler whispered.

13

It's the Shoes

CHLOE

One would assume standing in front of an eight-foot tall human male who was only recently a large dragon would be mind-blowing. One would be correct. It didn't help that his bright orange suit stood out like a sore thumb in the otherwise dark black dreariness of Purgatory.

Chloe stood as still possible while the man slowly circled her. Every step creating a sort of quake under her bare feet. A shadow fell over her as he moved into her periphery then the brightness returned as they came face to belly once again. She caught a glimpse of black leather peeking out under his tailored pant leg and wondered how he'd gotten shoes in a size big enough to fit his large feet. For a moment her mind flashed to Azazel and his obsession with his sneakers he claimed to have acquired from Kanye West himself.

"They are custom. I had Alexander make them for me." The man looked down at his feet.

"Hamilton?" Chloe wondered out loud. Regretted it immediately.

"McQueen."

She could not see his face but between the tone in his voice and the flush of embarrassment that lit up her cheeks, she was pretty sure he'd scowled. "Ah. That makes more sense," Chloe said.

After several uncomfortable minutes the man stepped forward. "I am going to have to place my hands on you. Is that alright?"

"Okay." She braced for what she thought was going to be the heaviness of his oversized palms on her small frame. There was a light pressure against her forehead, then her heart. He took a step back, folded his arms over his chest, leaned forward so

Chloe could see his face. His smile was soothing and warm. A stark contrast to the overly cocky shit-eating grin Azazel was constantly flashing in her direction.

He glanced over Chloe's shoulder. "You will find Azazel is not so bad once you get to know him."

Her mind flashed to Azazel's change in demeanor as they stopped at the clearing. If by some miracle he could maintain the new attitude and not revert back to his previous antics she might agree. Her instincts told her that was unlikely.

14

Safer at Home?

TYLER

On most days it took Tyler twenty-three minutes to walk from his apartment to Salvation Bar and Grill. He timed it before moving into his new place. He'd thought about buying a car with his savings, but when his living situation went from perfectly suitable to problematic an apartment closer to work seemed more practical. When he sulks about it, Abby reminds him being an adult is hard. And they laugh like it's not the most truthful thing she's ever said.

He typically exited the lobby of his building at 3:07pm every afternoon. Headed up La Tijera, turned left at the alley just before Sepulveda, a few more feet and he was at the back door of the bar. Most days he was on time.

The sun shined brightly in Southern California, as advertised. It took a lot of effort for Tyler to stop, unlock the door and step inside the dingy kitchen. Joey, who'd without fail be standing over the grill flipping burgers angrily, would grunt in Tyler's direction, a greeting Tyler would learn to rely on.

He would much rather stroll slowly down the street watching the cars roll by or imagine what sort of conversations drivers on their cell phones were having while they waited at signals that always seemed to be red. If he kept walking south on Sepulveda he would end up at the beach. It might take several hours but he'd get there. One day he was going to do it. Just pass Salvation and keep walking.

The first time Tyler made the journey from home to work he took in everything. There were apartment buildings lining the street, some were older with flaking paint and red bricks that crumbled if you touched them. Some were built more recently, the paint had signs of wear, but no chipping and the bricks had fallen out of favor for wood slats, most of which were still in good shape. There were a couple buildings in the process of being built. They seemed to be the new modern and monochromatic style Tyler had seen popping up all over the city.

There were cars on both sides of the street, parked closely together against curbs and driving by entirely too fast for an urban setting. Two blocks south the businesses started popping up. A small downtown area filled with mom and pop shops anchored by giant conglomerate stores with even bigger parking lots.

People tended to keep to themselves, except the time Tyler screamed and crouched down when a giant plane flew overhead, lower than he'd expected. Onlookers had the courtesy of not pointing and laughing but a handful of people stopped and stared.

"Airport." A woman said with a smile as wide as her face. She was pointing toward where the plane was headed.

Tyler stood up and nodded, his face several shades redder than it had been in the heat of the afternoon. "Right."

Tyler left Salvation just after four every morning. His walk back to his apartment building was much quieter. There were no cars on the road. There were no planes overhead. It was just Tyler and his inner demons, which were usually on full display despite the continuous drinks his thoughtful and thankful patrons "bought" him through the night.

The mom and pop shops would be closed up for the day, the only light coming from the signs on the conglomerate's buildings and streetlamps that kept the parking lots lit up twenty-four seven. Sometimes he spent the entire journey home reading the signs out loud just to stop his mind from wandering to things he was trying to forget. This was home now.

Tyler lived in one of the in between buildings. Not quite out of date but still not modern enough to be considered new. When he left at three in the afternoon it had a charm to it Tyler found comforting. When he got home at four forty in the morning it was just a building in the middle of other buildings where his bed called to him.

The one-bedroom apartment was more than enough space for Tyler and his limited amount of used furniture either bought off Craig's List or inherited from helpful customers. The meager belongings he'd brought with him from Kansas barely filled the small closet in his bedroom.

It wasn't a fear of laying down roots in Los Angeles that was keeping Tyler from buying more stuff, it was lack of funds. When he'd taken the job at Salvation, Abby

promised he would make much more money off of tips than the measly hourly rate he'd be getting as a paycheck. She was not wrong.

It was the simple route between home and work, the spaciousness of living alone in a one-bedroom apartment and the general lack of stuff that Tyler was craving at the moment. He'd lost track of what day it was. He'd long forgotten it was he himself who'd suggested Abby and Jonathan shelter in place with him.

In truth it had only been three days.

It happened fast. Tyler was standing in front of the industrial sized refrigerator at Salvation, which turned out to sometimes lead to Purgatory. Then he was sitting at the booth table by the front door listening to Abby and Jonathan argue about heading to Long Beach. Their next location – The Queen Mary – needed the most time and effort in the task they had been given, which seemed to be several days before but was really just that morning. Locating pieces of a key that would keep the gates of Hell locked up tight. A task which felt much more imperative to Tyler now, seeing as there was a gateway to Hell in the refrigerator.

Salvation's emptiness was suddenly highlighted by the echoing sounds of three phones blasting an emergency alert message at the same time.

Stay at Home Order for Los Angeles Effective Immediately.

He wasn't sure exactly when the moment had occurred that he'd lost his mind. But somewhere in the madness of contemplating what sheltering in place meant to their mission Tyler suggested they all hunker down at his apartment. The sinking feeling of regret when they agreed it was a good idea was still fresh in the pit of his stomach.

"I'm just saying, that piece of wood was big enough for two of them."

Tyler stared at the doctor. "It's less romantic if they both survive."

Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" blared from the speakers on the TV. Abby sat cross-legged on the floor, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Jonathan made a face. "I didn't say he was gonna live. He'd probably die of hypothermia by the time they were rescued anyway. I just don't see how drowning him is meant to be romantic. She's a murderer."

Tyler was having serious regrets about suggesting they watch a movie to pass the time. He'd only picked *Titanic* because it was over three hours long. Which meant an extended period of not discussing pandemics and missions from God.

"They found love despite their differences. And he was already dead when she released him. Calling her a murderer is just rude."

"You don't know that. He hadn't turned blue. His skin was flush. Very much how a person looks when they're alive."

Tyler stared at Jonathan, searching for any sign the doctor might be joking. There didn't appear to be any indication he was. "It's a movie Jon. It's not supposed to be realistic."

He stood up from the couch and stormed into his bedroom. He hadn't made it very far when something heavy hit him square in the back. The loud clamor of his bedroom door slamming shut echoed through the room.

15

The Comfort of Strangeness

CHLOE

Despite standing in the middle of Purgatory in front of an eight-foot tall human who she'd witnessed transforming from a tree to a dragon to his current state, she felt more relaxed than she had been in the last few days. The tree-dragon-man circled Chloe one more time then leaned forward so they were face to face, his soothing smile making his face light up brighter than his suit jacket.

"You are braver than the others. I can see why he chose you," he said. "You may go now." It wasn't a command or a brush off. Just facts. Their meeting was over.

Chloe stood still for a beat. Her mind raced. What did he mean by others? How many others? Where were they now? She waited for him to answer her unspoken thoughts as he'd done before, but he remained silent.

She contemplated asking the questions aloud, then decided not to prolong her time in Purgatory. With a head nod she slowly turned toward the black trees. She wondered if turning her back was a sign of disrespect. She was well versed in the customs of many different cultures. Chinese, Japanese, Russian. What not to do around shapeshifters in Purgatory wasn't something she'd thought to study up on.

She headed toward the clearing where Azazel had stopped. He wasn't standing there, or at least she didn't see him. Her heart skipped. She had a sinking feeling he'd left her alone in Purgatory.

He moved into view shortly after she contemplated whether she could find her way back to Salvation on her own or if she was going to be stuck in Purgatory with a shapeshifter and countless other things she had not yet seen but was certain were hiding in the trees or under the mud.

Chloe took one more glance over her shoulder hoping to catch a glimpse of the man as he turned into a dragon, or tree. She wondered which form was more comfortable for him. She could see red, orange, dark green, but could not make out the shape of them.

When she reached Azazel he was standing stoically still, staring straight ahead. She stopped and turned to face the direction from which she had just come. Standing tall in the near distance was a giant, foreboding, bright red tree.

“I don’t suppose you can zap us to my hotel room from here?” Chloe asked brightly, attempting to lighten the mood.

“Sorry love. Gonna have to walk back the way we came.”

With a deep sigh Chloe stepped forward, bracing for the mud squishing through her toes. They walked in silence for several minutes before she finally broke down and asked “What was that all about?”

Azazel remained quiet as they made their way through the maze of black trees. Chloe figured he was going to ignore her like he often did. Then he answered. “Alexis,” he started, paused, “the dragon, is the guardian of all knowledge. A neutral party in the fight between...us and them.”

The dragon has a name, Chloe thought. Of course he does.

“It’s important he is familiar with you, and you him, as he will be useful in the coming days. He has information you will need to continue your task.” He smiled. The gesture gave her none of the comfort she’d felt just moments ago when the shapeshifter had done the same. Azazel added “It will please you to know our time together will come to an end once I have returned you to the mortal plane.”

Chloe flashed a quick, embarrassed smile then decided it was his own fault for listening in on her thoughts.

16

Look for the Helpers

TYLER

Tyler turned the doorknob back and forth a number of times. It moved freely, like a doorknob typically does. It was the door itself that was refusing to work. Something was preventing it from swinging toward him like it was meant to. No matter how hard he pulled Tyler could not get the thing open. He checked the hinges. They seemed to be their usual hinge-y selves. He could see the light coming from the living room through the door jam. Nothing seemed to be sealing it shut. Except.

“Abby. Open the damn door!” Tyler screamed for the seventeenth time.

“Not until the two of you learn how to get along. I don’t care how you do it. Fight to the death. Have angry sex. Just figure it out. I’m sick of you both!” Her voice came through the wood of the door, loud and clear.

“You’ve seen way too many movies.” Tyler yelled back at her. “Real life doesn’t work that way!”

Real life. Tyler wasn’t sure that’s what this was anymore. It was a simulation. A test. He was stuck in limbo. He hadn’t made it past fifteen after all.

“Ouch.” Jonathan’s voice startled Tyler.

He turned away from the door and toward the doctor. Jonathan was rubbing his left shoulder which had just collided with Tyler’s back. Abby must have used her full

angel power to throw the man into the bedroom after Tyler had stormed off toward it. He wondered how long it would take for his back to stop aching from the impact.

He looked past Jonathan and wondered if laying down on his soft bed would help. It was the one piece of furniture he bought brand new, feeling it worth the extra hours at the bar to avoid having to sleep on someone else's used mattress, anymore.

The only positive light in the darkness that had fallen on Tyler's world had been the discovery that angels don't sleep. His offer to give up his bedroom to Abby was appreciated but unnecessary. He did feel a little guilty making Jonathan sleep on the couch. Not enough to extend the same offer, however.

Jonathan's tall, well-built frame came back into focus as Tyler shifted his gaze from the bed to the man. Tyler could not deny the prospect of sleeping with Jonathan wasn't appealing. As he contemplated the idea their excursion to the Grammy museum what seemed a lifetime ago floated back into Tyler's consciousness.

"Seeing as you have a strict rule against violence. I say we go right to angry sex." Tyler said in what he hoped was a teasing yet seductive tone.

To Tyler's surprise, Jonathan didn't shoot down the idea outright. "The exercise would be nice. The endorphin release would be beneficial."

Tyler shook his head. "If that's your idea of a come on it needs work."

Jonathan didn't answer him. He stared at the closed door behind Tyler.

"Ah, maybe I've hit on a touchy subject," Tyler said under his breath. He stretched his arms, twisted his torso, trying to stop his back from throbbing.

"Do you want me to take a look?" Jonathan asked, rubbing his own shoulder.

Tyler stopped stretching. “Don’t do that. Don’t talk to me like I’m a patient coming to you for medical advice.”

“I don’t know how to talk to you in a way that doesn’t result in a fight,” Jonathan said. “I’d much rather be back in New York helping people who are happy to receive my care. But I’m not.” He continued. “I’m in a city I don’t belong in quarantined with people I just met.”

Tyler contemplated Jonathan’s words. He hadn’t considered how this situation was affecting the doctor. “I’m sorry.” He slid down onto the floor and leaned his head against the magically locked door. He looked up at Jonathan. “What were you doing in L.A., before you had no other choice?”

Jonathan joined Tyler on the floor. He sat in the Lotus position, as if he were about to meditate. Legs crossed. Arms rested against his knees. “I was giving a lecture, at UCLA. I graduated med school in under six years. Began practicing Neurology, my specialized field, within a year. It’s not out of the ordinary but happens rarely enough to be written about in medical journals. My story caught the attention of faculties around the country, I give motivational speeches to first year med students. After my speech I usually hang around for a bit, give students, and faculty, a chance to ask questions. Time got away from me. I pushed my flight to the red eye. When I got in my car to head toward what I figured was a long night of eating crappy airport food and listening to audiobooks while I waited for my flight, I got a text message from an unknown number. I couldn’t tell you why I showed up at the bar like it said to, but I did. You know the rest.”

Tyler sat forward. He picked at an errant string on his pant leg. He looked up at Jonathan who sat quietly in front of him. "You must be regretting that decision now. Seeing as all it got you was stuck here with me."

Jonathan smiled at him. "I don't do regret. At least I try not to. You're not making it easy."

Tyler nodded. "I know using childhood trauma as an excuse for bad behavior is a copout on many levels." He paused. "This entire situation. Gabriel and Lucifer and gates between here and Hell and being an Omphalos, whatever that means. I feel like I'm a kid again, being forced to do things I don't want to do."

"Abby and I are here to help with all that. But we can't do anything for you if you won't let us," Jonathan said.

"You say you don't do regret. Well. Regret and I are on intimate terms. I was ten years old when I first sat in a confession booth and revealed my biggest secrets to Pastor Dan, who I had been told I could trust with absolute certainty. He rewarded me by exploiting my 'ability' for his own profit. I'm not saying this is the same, but isn't it though?"

Jonathan bit his lower lip, then answered. "I won't pretend to know what you went through and I won't speak for anyone else. I became a doctor to help people. There are plenty of doctors, and people of faith out there who are all about lining their pockets. I am not one of them."

Tyler stood up. He held his hand out to Jonathan to help him up from the floor. Jonathan stood without taking Tyler's hand. Tyler's stomach fell for a moment, until Jonathan stepped forward and placed his hand gently around Tyler's wrist. Jonathan's

soft fingers against Tyler's skin brought everything inside him to life. Jonathan lifted Tyler's hand and placed it against his chest. Tyler was suddenly aware of Jonathan's steady breathing and consistent heartbeat.

Everything he had done to block out his ability suddenly faded away. Tyler was alert and aware of how close the two of them stood. It both terrified and tantalized him.

He hadn't really thought about how Jonathan's natural essence would smell to him. He had only ever smelled clean soap with a hint of Tom Ford's Tobacco Vanilla. He figured having to be in close proximity to people throughout the day kept the doctor from going overboard on the cologne. He braced for the impact of what he might find when he allowed himself to search for what was underneath.

Tyler continued to breathe in and out as the two of them stood close together. His hand remained lightly pressed against Jonathan's chest. He could feel the steady rhythm of Jonathan's heart thumping against his fingers. Jonathan's light touch as he held Tyler's wrist continued to send shockwaves through his body. He took in one long breath and sought out what he had been avoiding since he left Kansas.

Either he had pushed his ability down so far it could not be retrieved, or Jonathan's aura had no scent.

Tyler's instinct was to believe the latter.

17

Peppermint v. Wintergreen

CHLOE

Despite herself, Chloe felt a pang of sadness as the dark trees began to give way to the light of the rot iron gate marking the impending end of her time with Azazel. She chalked it up to being unsure of how to proceed on her own.

“Is anyone going to tell me what my next steps are?” Chloe asked when they were at the gate.

Azazel waved his hand over the lock, it slid open as it had when they entered Purgatory through the refrigerator at a dive bar called Salvation. Chloe wondered if the bar’s owner knew his kitchen had a portal to the Underworld in it when he bought the place and had a sense of humor about it, or if it was all a big coincidence.

Chloe stepped through the gate and into the tiny kitchen. It was quiet, dark, deserted. And smelled like stale oil and burger juice. She swallowed hard and tried not to breath in too many of the rank fumes.

Azazel followed Chloe into the kitchen shutting steel door behind him. He seemed disappointed to find the place empty.

“A few things you need to know. First. Time works differently in Purgatory. Each hour you spend there amounts to one full day here. Second. Now that you’ve met the dragon, you will be able to walk through this gate on your own. And third. Lucifer believes you are an important figure in his plan to return to this world.”

Chloe stared at Azazel, she opened and closed her mouth, regretting her intake of air as she wondered which of these pieces of news she should address first. She went with the easiest. “Why would I want, or need, to go back to Purgatory?”

“Alexis has a plethora of useful information, if you know how to ask for it properly,” Azazel said. “Although they will deny it, the engineers at Amazon named their

system after him. Sadly, calling on Alexa will not help you the way the dragon will, and you cannot simply call out his name and hope he'll answer. To speak to the dragon, you must enter Purgatory. It is a risky endeavor, losing days at a time. Choose your questions wisely and do not linger."

Before Chloe could ask her next question, Azazel snapped his fingers and teleported the two of them into her hotel room. The movement was just as disorienting as it had been the first time. She sat down on the bed to steady herself.

"Azazel." She called his name before he could snap himself away. "The dragon. Alexis." She corrected herself. "Said something about 'others.'"

Azazel paused. "Lucifer found some sort of prophecy involving a woman who will lead his army into battle. Personally, I think it's a load of crap. But nobody asked me. He's been looking for you for a very long time." His voice trailed off.

Chloe contemplated pushing the matter further. Clearly Azazel was not her biggest fan.

"Well. This is where I leave you. Lucifer is waiting for an update and I have other things to attend to." He flashed his usual wry smile and added "One bit of advice. It has to be Peppermint. He hates Wintergreen. Toodles." He snapped his fingers and was gone.

With more questions than answers, and mud-soaked feet, she padded off to the bathroom for a shower.

Chloe was standing in a stream of hot water, watching the black dirt mix with the lush soap she had lathered all over her body. Her mind wandered to her time in Purgatory. The dragon. Azazel. The prophecy. Peppermint versus Wintergreen.

She reached for the bottle of shampoo and was struck with the worst headache she'd ever felt in her life. She dropped the bottle and fell to her knees, grabbed at her head, tried not to drown in the flow of water washing over her.

Then, as quickly as the throbbing pain overtook her, it let go.

"I suppose we should talk." A deep voice echoed around her.

Chloe knew as soon as she heard it. The voice belonged to Lucifer. It sounded like he was in the room with her.

"Do you people have any concept of privacy?" Chloe stood up, turned the water off, wiped the condensation off the glass shower door. Saw nothing but steamed up mirrors and marble tiles. "Hello?"

"I assure you your privacy is not in jeopardy, my child. I cannot see you," Lucifer said.

Despite the assurance, she quickly wrapped a towel around her body. "What is it you would like to talk about, Lucifer?"

"I hear you did well today," he said. "Azazel tells me the dragon was impressed. I had no doubt he would be. Despite my brother's misgivings. Prophecies and predictions are not his cup of tea. He deals more in certainties."

"He mentioned something about that," Chloe said.

"Yes, I'm sure he did."

Chloe sensed a tinge of admiration in Lucifer's voice as he spoke about Azazel. It was both soothing and a little disorienting to think he had a sentimental side. She let down her guard, momentarily. "He doesn't seem to like me much."

“No, I don’t suppose he does. Azazel has been by my side for a very long time. When he came to me, he was young, ambitious. Time has worn him down. It does not help that I have sent him on these missions before. Many times, to be truthful. None of them have turned out to be what I was looking for. But you. I am certain of.”

“Why?” Chloe asked.

“I can feel it, in your blood. You are not like the others. Everyone has at least a modicum of fear in them. Not you. There is nothing but fire in your veins. When you are faced with a challenge you do not back down, you wake up.”

It was true. Chloe didn’t have an ounce of anxiety, fear or concern in her body. When she fell off her bike at age five, she didn’t cry. She got back up, wiped the dirt from her hands and knees and tried again. When she was placed in foster care at age ten, she didn’t cower in the corner like most kids her age, praying someone would adopt them. She jumped out of a plane at twenty-three and found the entire experience boring.

She was fearless. Most would say it was a fault. She considered it a blessing.

It made her good at her job. When she had everything from bricks to shoes to rotten food thrown at her head, she simply ducked out of the way, then had to be restrained from rushing into the crowd and throwing fists at the people who’d dared to dishonor her and her boss in such a way. When she was threatened at gunpoint, she talked her way out of being shot by promising the man she’d get him what he wanted, then laughed as he called her names while being handcuffed and thrown in the back of a cop car.

“That is why you will succeed where the others did not.”

Chloe dressed quickly. Her suitcase hadn't been emptied from her last diplomatic excursion. It held pant suits and high heels, makeup and expensive hair tools. At some point she was going to have to get to a mall and buy a few pieces of active wear and comfortable shoes. She mourned her favorite pair of heels she'd left stuck in the black mud of Purgatory. Maybe Azazel would get her some Yeezy's. She chuckled to herself and wondered if he was still listening to her thoughts.

When the elevator bell dinged and the doors slid open Chloe peeked inside with a small amount of trepidation. She checked her surroundings to make sure this elevator was the standard fare, rather than a doorway to another world. Not that the one at her apartment building looked any different when she'd stepped into it.

Feeling fairly certain it was going to actually take her to the lobby of the Ritz-Carlton Downtown and not to a library somewhere in Hell, Chloe let go of the 'door open' button and pressed the one for the lobby.

She stepped off the elevator at her intended destination and was struck by how quiet it was. She rounded the corner into the larger lobby area with the giant gold chandeliers and the dark brown and gold marble floors.

The front desk clerk seemed to be stunned by Chloe's being there. "Oh," she said, holding her hand to her chest as if Chloe had given her a heart attack.

"Hi." Chloe smiled at her. "I need car service."

The clerk stared at Chloe as if she had asked for something completely outrageous. "Ma'am," she said. "The only guest services we are offering at this time are food and beverages from our restaurants."

It was Chloe's turn to stare. She folded her arms against her chest. "Excuse me?" She checked to see if the clerk had a name tag. "Melanie." She added with more snark than she meant to.

"The city is in a lockdown, Ma'am." Melanie said slowly. She reached for a sheet of paper in front of her, pushed it toward Chloe.

Chloe dropped her arms to her side. A wave of remembrance washed over her. Global health crisis. Then, Azazel's warning. It's been three days since she arrived here. How had the city gone from bustling to completely shut down in such a short time? She glanced at the sheet Melanie had slid toward her.

*GLOBAL PANDEMIC PROTOCOLS: The Ritz-Carlton will continue to serve our guests on premises with limited amenities. Our restaurants will remain open to serve you. All other services will be suspended until further notice. While we encourage you to remain in your rooms as we honor the shelter in place mandate, you are free to exit the premises at your own risk. We ask that you follow proper protocol. Wash your hands, touch as little as possible in public areas, respect your fellow citizens. If you are in need of medical help, please call *123. As we deal with these unprecedented times, we thank you for your patience.*

The sound of Chloe's high heeled shoes against the marble floors echoed loudly through the emptiness of the lobby as she headed toward the giant glass doors leading to the outside world. She walked past the empty valet station, found the closest main street, took note of the lack of cars on the road, opened her Uber app and hoped they were still in service. To her relief, they were.

A Glitch in the System

TYLER

Although Jonathan had let go of his wrist, Tyler did not move his hand away from the doctor's chest. Jonathan's heart thumped against his fingers. Tyler searched for even a hint of scent that wasn't soap and cologne or lingering toothpaste on the doctor's breath.

Nothing.

Tyler wondered if the glitch was in his own system, or Jonathan's. He dropped his hand to his side. He regretted it immediately. It felt as if he severed a connection between them. He had a sudden need to feel Jonathan's heart against his palm again.

He didn't get the chance. Behind him the door to his bedroom flew open. Tyler was about to give Abby a hard time for interrupting. But something in Jonathan's eyes made Tyler spin around to see what the doctor was looking at.

The living room area of Tyler's apartment looked like a tornado hit it. The couch, coffee table, chairs, bookshelf. All on their sides. Their contents spread all over the room.

Tyler stood in the doorway of his bedroom stunned into silence. His mind raced with questions. Who, or what, did this, and how did it happen right outside his door without he or Jonathan hearing it?

The front door of his apartment was wide open. Against the doorframe, a black handprint. That's when he smelled it. Sulfur. Something had been there, something not quite human. He ran through the room, out his front door and into the hallway. He was

confronted by more sulfur. The musty carpet smell was decidedly missing. As was Abby.

Tyler tracked the sulfur smell until he couldn't find it anymore. He stopped short when he saw it. A dent in the plaster on the wall next to the door marked Emergency Exit Only. The one that lead outside. As he got closer he could make out the indentation of a body in the plaster wall. He could only assume it belonged to Abby. She must have put up a fight. Good girl, he thought.

A noise behind him made Tyler reel around, his arms shot up, his palms facing toward the threat. He felt a slow heat flow through his blood, heading toward the center of his hands. His vision went blurry. His mind swam with a mixture of confusion and rage.

"Tyler, it's me." Jonathan's voice echoed through the hallway. "Tyler." Closer.

Tyler dropped his arms, rubbed his hands against his pant legs to stop the throbbing and heat. His vision slowly came back to him until he was staring into Jonathan's ice blue eyes.

"Are you alright?" Jonathan went into doctor mode. His eyes scanned Tyler from head to toe, likely checking for injuries.

Tyler hoped the intense heat he'd felt only moments ago wasn't obvious on the surface, and that he hadn't suddenly sprouted horns. Jonathan didn't seem to be alarmed by Tyler's appearance.

"She's gone." Was all Tyler could think to say.

CHLOE

To her amazement the Uber driver did as Chloe asked. He waited with the car running in front of the apartment building where he'd dropped her off. She wondered if he was regretting that decision as he watched her drag a small but heavy body toward his vehicle.

"What's wrong with her?" He jumped out of the driver's seat but did not offer to help Chloe as she navigated the challenge of controlling a body other than her own while willing her own to open the rear passenger door.

"She had too much to drink." Chloe hoped he believed that this small, unassuming young woman had consumed enough alcohol to have passed out at nine in the morning on a Sunday. "Last night." She added to make it seem more believable.

"If she vomits on my back seat you pay triple." The driver warned.

Chloe sat the body upright, pulled the seat belt over its torso making sure it clicked into place, then ran around to the other side. When she had slid into her own seat and secured her own seatbelt in place, she gave the driver the address to her next destination.

He stared into the rearview mirror. She thought he was going to refuse to take her anywhere else. Instead he shook his head, punched the address into his Uber app, put the car in drive and pulled away from the curb.

It was then Chloe realized what the driver had been contemplating. *Beginning route to One One Two Six Queens Highway, Long Beach. Total distance, 22 miles.* A computerized voice announced through the car's speakers. She understood his hesitation. Travelling over twenty miles in the backseat of a stranger's car with a body

she was only partially certain was still alive was a prospect she herself wasn't exactly keen on either.

The driver took his eyes off her, put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb, still tentative. Whatever was holding him back seemed to lift itself from his consciousness as he pulled onto the 405 freeway at full speed.

Chloe's previous experience with Los Angeles had been several years ago when the President was still campaigning for the election he would eventually win, to everyone's surprise, including his own. She was an intern then, on her first campaign trail. Young, ambitious. Willing to do whatever was asked of her. She flew on a red eye flight, took a cab to a shitty hotel in a sketchy part of town and spent a lot of time in mind numbingly slow traffic, running inane errands for her boss between events.

That was before she had moved up to her current position of Goodwill Ambassador. It was also before the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic and the world had shut down. Chloe still wondered if it was all a hoax. She thought about calling her friends at the White House. She wondered if they'd noticed she hadn't returned from her latest philanthropic mission. It was probably better they think she was still away rather than having to explain where she really was and what she was doing there.

The angel remained still in the seat next to Chloe. The Uber driver glanced in his rearview mirror several times, likely checking to see if there was going to be an incident in the back seat of his car. Because Chloe had selected 'quiet mode' on the app he was keeping his thoughts to himself. His eyes were saying plenty, however. Chloe tried to ignore his disapproving stares.

He complied with the request for no conversation until the GPS app's computerized voice filled the car with the announcement: *In one mile you will reach your destination.*

"You know the Queen Mary is closed, right?"

For a moment Chloe thought he meant it was closed at this hour, then she realized he meant because of the pandemic. "Yes." She lied.

Without any further conversation the driver stopped at the locked gates of the dock where the Queen Mary sat in all its enormousness. He watched as Chloe dragged the body out of the car, once again not offering any help. As soon as they were clear of the vehicle the driver sped away, tires screeching against the asphalt.

When she was certain he was out of sight, Chloe reached behind the angel's back and carefully removed the knife she had inserted just over the left shoulder blade, where, to Chloe's relief, a currently invisible wing met the angel's shoulder. As soon as the knife had been extracted the angel was awake, alert, and ready to fight. Her freed wings came back into view, lashing out at Chloe, who jumped back to avoid their sharp tips.

Chloe held the knife out in front of her. The angel's deep red blood dripped from the hilt to the handle and onto Chloe's hand. It burned. She fought to hold onto the handle. She stole a quick glance to see if her hand had caught fire.

"Don't make me stab you again." Chloe threatened through gritted teeth.

The angel let out a guttural growl, spread her large wings out behind her, lunged forward toward Chloe. Chloe slashed the knife into the air in front of her. The blood continued to burn against her skin. She kept herself steady. "Seriously?"

The angel took a step back and folded her wings behind her. She kept her gold eyes fixed on Chloe. “Where. Are. We?”

Chloe pointed toward the Queen Mary with her free hand. She kept the knife pointed in front of her, she wasn’t sure if the angel had simply missed the massive ship or if she trying to distract Chloe to free the knife and make her escape. Either way Chloe wasn’t taking chances. Her skin burned. Her hand was going numb. She stayed on mission.

“The final piece of the key is on that ship. You’re going to help me get it.”

The angel cocked her head to the side, folded her arms against her chest. “How do you know the key is on the ship?”

Chloe smiled. “You told me. Well...” she took a device out of her back pocket “your phone did.”

The angel lunged forward “Give me that!”

“No.” Chloe stepped back, dropped the phone onto the asphalt, stomped on it several times to ensure it was dead. “Your friends are looking for you. They’ll track you here. We’ll be long gone by then.” She waved the knife in the angel’s direction then at the ship. “Take me to the item.”

20

Ford vs. Ferrari

TYLER

The smell of sulfur had faded into a distant memory, but Abby’s absence was felt more than Tyler had imagined it could. He had rubbed his hands against his jeans so many times they were numb. It was better than them being on fire, he thought.

His apartment was a mess. Jonathan had put the bookshelf against the wall and was haphazardly placing books and knick-knacks on the shelves. He helped Tyler turn the couch upright, then went back to picking up random items that had been overturned all over the room.

Tyler hadn't prayed for anything since he was twelve. That was around the time he'd stopped believing God was listening and flat out gave up talking to Him. He sat at the edge of the couch, closed his eyes, and hoped beyond all hope someone was listening today.

He sent a silent but urgent plea to Gabriel, calling the Archangel's name several times to make sure he got the message. Tyler braced himself for several scenarios, except the one that occurred. He held his center in case Gabriel tried to pull him upward while Lucifer tried to pull him down. He prepared himself for the prospect of being ignored entirely. He did not give any thought to the Archangel materializing out of thin air in the middle of his disaster of a living room.

Gabriel's presence only added to the disarray. He had been wildly out of place in a dive bar like Salvation. He was downright alien here. Tyler thought the angel was surveying the room, judging its size and uncleanness.

He turned to Tyler. "What happened?" His deep voice bounced off the low ceiling.

Tyler stood up. "Abby's gone."

Gabriel cocked his head to one side. Tyler had seen Abby do the same on many occasions. When she was confused or when she was trying not to tell Tyler he was an idiot. "Yes, I see that, what happened?"

“Oh.” Tyler felt dumb. “Someone, or something took her.”

“What did they look like?” Gabriel asked.

Tyler blushed, looked over at Jonathan who had stopped trying to clean up. “We. Didn’t see. We were in the bedroom. Abby locked us in there.” He stammered.

“Whatever it was, smelled like sulfur.” He added.

Gabriel stared straight ahead. He remained motionless for what seemed to be an eternity. “Queen Mary. Looking for the final item. I suggest you hurry.” He said the words and disappeared as quickly as he’d appeared.

Jonathan’s rental sedan lurched forward as he pushed his foot down on the gas pedal. Tyler held tight to the seat belt strap over his chest but did not ask the doctor to slow down. There was never a moment when he would have thought he’d be happy they were in the middle of a pandemic, except this one, in which the worst freeway in Southern California was completely empty for what was probably the only time since it had been built. The freeway was so infamous for its unbearable traffic it was a consistent gripe for anyone and everyone who frequented Salvation, which happened to be located within a few short miles of several of the freeway’s onramps.

“It just seems to me that if he knows where Abby is, he could go get her himself.” Tyler mused. “Why is it always up to us to do the work for them?”

Jonathan kept his concentration on the road. Which was probably for the best.

They made it from Westchester to Long Beach in fifteen minutes. Jonathan drove through the empty parking lot with as much abandon as he had the empty freeway. The brakes screeched and burned as he slammed his foot down on them to avoid a light

pole. "Easy there, lead foot, this is a Ford, not a Ferrari." Tyler teased as he opened the door.

Next to them the gate that lead to the dock where The Queen Mary sat in its quietly dormant state in the dark, calm waters had been forced open.

There was no sign of Abby anywhere. Gabriel had left Tyler's apartment in such a hurry Tyler hadn't had the chance to ask him who'd taken her and what they were up against when they found whoever it was. He was about to complain to Jonathan about it when the doctor pointed. Tyler followed his finger to the top of the giant ship.

He caught a glimpse of what Jonathan had pointed at just as a gust of wind brought with it the smell of sulfur. Tyler didn't hesitate. He broke out in a full sprint.

"Tyler, wait!" Jonathan yelled after him.

21

Best Laid Plans

CHLOE

There were too many spaces to check. There was too much room to cover. The angel was of no use. Well, aside from the ability to break open locks with her bare hands, but Chloe could have figure out how to get through the gate and doors herself. Her feet hurt and she was no closer to the locating the piece of the key than she had been before she knew anything about it.

"You people." The angel had stared incredulously at Chloe when they'd stepped onto ship. "I'm not a genie, I can't just conjure up an item because you wish me to. I don't know where it's hidden any more than you do."

Chloe didn't believe her. "There's no way they'd send you in blind." She pressed the blade of the stolen kitchen knife into the angel's side but did not try to puncture skin.

The angel took a step back, her gold eyes flickered in the darkness. "You can press that pointy thing into me all you want, doesn't change the fact that I don't know where the item is. I suggest we start at the top and make our way down. Unless you'd like to stand here arguing and let my friends catch up with us."

"Fine. Stairs are that way." Chloe pointed toward the sign.

There had been no lights on when they'd arrived, and Chloe didn't want to risk calling attention to herself and her unwilling partner in crime any more than she had when the angel used brute strength to pry open the door to this massive ship. She opted to pretend the ancient boat had no electricity, which meant she could avoid the rickety looking elevator too.

They'd reached the top level when she heard the sounds she'd been hoping to avoid. In the distance, sirens blared. Then, the unmistakable yell of a male voice calling out to the angel. Abby. Right, that was her name. Chloe had forgotten. She pushed Abby forward, ducking behind one of the giant smokestacks.

She pointed the knife at Abby's neck. "Alert anyone to our location and I'll slice your throat."

In the morning light things seemed to be brighter and more in focus. Chloe's hand ached where the angel's blood was drying against her skin. Her arm shook as her muscles begged her to put her arm down and give them a break. She did not comply.

"I know it hurts," Abby whispered. "My blood on your skin. Burns, doesn't it? You don't know why though, do you? I'm surprised Azazel didn't tell you."

Chloe glanced at her bloody hand then back at the angel.

Abby's gold eyes gleamed in the light. "There's something different about you. You've known it your whole life. Something not quite human, something off." Her gaze softened.

Chloe felt a tinge of sadness wash over her. She shook it off. "I don't know what you're talking about, my hand is fine."

To prove her point, Chloe continued to hold the blade to the angel's neck. The sirens were distant, the man's voice had been closer than she was comfortable with. It sounded like it was coming from the dock. She should have barred the door. To be fair, she thought she'd have the item in her hands and be on her way back to the Ritz by now.

"If you had to guess, where do you suppose the item is hidden?" Chloe figured the angel would lie to her, but she asked anyway.

Abby tilted her head to the side, like a bird listening to the call of its mate or a dog who heard its master's voice but couldn't tell where it was coming from.

The sirens were getting closer, and a second voice was calling out to the angel. Maybe the authorities will get to them first, Chloe thought.

She wasn't leaving without the piece of the key. She pushed Abby away from the smokestack, out into the open. They headed toward the stairs, moved down to the next floor.

"Did you do any research into this ship before you hatched this idiotic and incompetent plan?" Abby asked as they walked down a long hallway.

In truth, she hadn't done anything except look up its address. "Yes," she answered.

Abby stopped in front of her. She turned to face Chloe. "Between the hotel, the museum, the community rooms, the thousands of nooks and crannies, the item could be anywhere on this ship. My friends will catch up to us, and we'll all be captured by the authorities long before we find it."

Chloe's original plan had been to track the angel down, force her to tell Chloe where the piece of the key was hidden, retrieve it and be in bed by noon. It was Abby who'd thrown chaos into the plan. Chloe's appearance at Tyler's apartment had taken the angel by surprise. She unfurled her wings, a tussle ensued.

Forces Chloe couldn't see or comprehend guided her movements, kept her safe from the sharp ends, told her to find a knife, showed her where to place it to render the angel unconscious. A new thought occurred to her. "If you don't know where the key is, how were you planning on finding it?"

"Floor by floor, just like we're going to have to do," Abby said. "Except we'd be going about it quietly, without all the lock breaking and kidnapping."

Chloe imagined what Azazel would be saying to her right about now. Nothing good, she suspected. For a brief moment she wondered if it would have been better had he stuck around. No. You've got this, she told herself. Then to Abby "Let's go then."

They were on the B deck, one of the two floors with staterooms. According to the sign in the stairwell.

She stayed close behind as the angel placed a hand against the door of every room lining the long, dark hallway. Chloe was certain Abby was stalling, allowing her

friends to catch up to them, she pushed the thought aside and implored her to keep walking.

When they'd reached the end of one corridor and entered an entirely new one, with the same busy carpeting, wood walls and gold handrails, Chloe, exasperated, "Are you seriously going to touch everything on the ship?"

The angel turned to face Chloe, no discernable expression on her face. "Would you like me to break into every single room and have a look around? It might give us a better chance of finding the item but will guarantee we get caught."

22

Don't Panic

TYLER

Jonathan caught up to him just as Tyler reached the door. "Cops are coming," he said between breaths.

Tyler heard the sirens approaching but ignored the implications of what they meant. When he saw the broken lock and the door ajar, he figured some kind of alarm had alerted the police. "All the more reason we need to get to her," he said.

The first door led them into a short hallway with glass boxes displaying relics of years past. A second set of doors led to a large lobby. Though it was mid-morning the ship was dark, its deep colored woods and gold accents making the expansive space seem ominous. Without the benefit of hotel guests and museum visitors milling about, the creaking and crackling sounds of the ancient vessel echoed through the room. Tyler understood how the boat got its reputation for being haunted. Though the idea of

staying overnight on a floating ghost magnet did not appeal to him. He wasn't even sure he was happy being there now.

"Can you smell them?" Jonathan whispered next to him.

Tyler took in a deep breath. The faint smell of sulfur hung in the air. "Barely," he said, ushering Jonathan toward a set of stairs he hoped lead to the upper decks where he'd seen Abby and her unknown captor.

"The ship is huge. They could be anywhere," Jonathan said with a tinge of panic.

"One might say it's Titanic." Tyler tried to lighten the mood. "If the ship goes down, I'll totally let you share my piece of wood."

Jonathan cracked a smile. "Thanks. I promise not to assume you're dead and push you into the ocean."

Tyler turned his attention back to the sulfur smell, hoping it would guide him. It was the second time that day he'd sought out someone's scent. Although the first felt like a lifetime ago. He and Jonathan standing face to face in his bedroom. Jonathan's steady heartbeat under his fingers. His own heart beating rapidly against his chest as he dropped his defenses for the first time since stepping onto a Greyhound in the middle of Kansas in the dead of night.

He had spent years training himself to ignore people's inner essence unless he was being forced to find it. Then, when he turned eighteen, he ran away from home so no one could ask him to do it again.

It was surprising how easy his ability had come back to him. Over the years he'd been tempted to test the theory it had gone away entirely, but he never let himself go

past the thought, the hope, if he was being honest. What if he'd let himself seek out someone's aura and he couldn't put the genie back in the bottle?

He was grateful now, that it hadn't gone away. And that whoever had taken Abby had a strong aura. He was still unsure what it meant that Jonathan didn't have one at all. He glanced over his shoulder, making sure the doctor was close behind.

Tyler turned toward the stairs, climbed up one step and stopped. A wave of panic washed over him. Flashes of memories that were not his own invaded his mind. Voices he did not recognize spoke to him in languages he did not understand.

He reached his hand out to the doctor, placing his palm flat against his chest, just over his heart. Although it was beating faster now, the mere presence of the rhythm against his fingers soothed Tyler enough to bring himself back from the brink of madness.

Jonathan wrapped his fingers around Tyler's wrist, as he had earlier. Only this time the doctor was checking his pulse. "Are you okay?" He whispered.

Tyler nodded yes, though he didn't feel quite right. Gabriel's words came back to him like a wave crashing over a ship lost at sea. His new abilities were certainly finding a way to appear at inopportune times.

Jonathan knitted his eyebrows together. "What happened?"

Tyler hadn't moved his hand away from the doctor's chest. He focused on the steady heartbeat, the heat of Jonathan's skin coming through his t-shirt. "I don't know."

He knew Jonathan deserved a better explanation. Tyler wasn't going to be able to give it to him. The air was suddenly filled with two new scents. Close. "We have to move. The cops are on the ship."

23***More Human Than Human***

CHLOE

Floor by floor Chloe grew more impatient and less certain she was leaving the ship with the piece of the key and not in handcuffs. The corridors with their wood paneling and busy carpeting were all blending together in a maze of sameness and confusion. Abby touched every wall, door, and metal pipe, leaving faint fingerprints in the shiny lacquer. Each time the angel shook her head 'no' to indicate she had not felt the item's presence Chloe stifled the urge to stab her with the small kitchen knife she was gripping so tight her fingers were numb.

As they continued down hallways and staircases Chloe couldn't get the words 'not quite human' and 'known it your whole life' out of her head. How dare the angel make such assumptions. Chloe was absolutely human and to accuse her of being anything else was rude, and uncalled for.

She was about to make the argument that Azazel hadn't said anything to her because there was nothing to tell when her head went fuzzy. There was a heavy thrumming in her temples. Her eyes went blurry. She held on to the banister and willed herself to continue down the short hallway. They made it to the top of the stairway when she finally relented and fell to her knees.

In front of her Abby turned around in time to ensure Chloe didn't fall down the stairs. Behind her she heard footsteps followed by faint whispers.

"What's wrong with her?" "I don't know, I think she passed out." "We have to get out of here, the cops are coming" "I know I was waiting for you to catch up."

Chloe felt the familiar jolt of being transported from one place to another then everything went black.

24

I'll Be Back

TYLER

A minute ago they were at the edge of a stairwell on The Queen Mary, the next they were in the tiny kitchen at Salvation. Three of them crowded together, standing over a fourth who had passed out on the ship right before Abby suggested Tyler hold onto Jonathan. She snapped her fingers and bam.

Tyler wasn't aware the ship had been swaying under him as they made their way through it, but the jolt of being in one place and then another so quickly mixed with the strong smell of sulfur and being back on solid ground was threatening to pull him down next to the aura permeating his senses.

Abby was kneeling on the tile floor next to the culprit. She said the woman's name once, twice. "Chloe, where'd you go Chloe. Hey, demon girl, time to wake up now."

Chloe's eyes flew open. Wide. They grew wider as she took in her surroundings. "You could have teleported us anywhere, you chose to bring us to this dump?" She quipped as she sat up. She tried to stand, faltered, reached out to steady herself against a steel shelf.

"I think you meant to say 'Thank you for saving me from falling down a flight of stairs. I'm so happy I wasn't arrested. I'm sorry for stabbing and kidnapping you.'" Abby stood up. "You guys ok?"

Tyler was still holding Jonathan's hand. The doctor didn't seem to be in a hurry to let go any more than Tyler was. He was leaning against the refrigerator, his head pressed against the steel door. Tyler did not like him being so close to the gateway to Hell but by the look on Jonathan's face, the cold metal box was the only thing holding him upright. "Maybe a warning next time?" Tyler suggested.

"Thank you for keeping us from being arrested." Jonathan's voice quivered but his smile lit up his face, its color slowly returning. He gave Tyler's hand a squeeze before letting go and stepping away from the refrigerator.

He approached Chloe who had managed to stand but was still unsteady. "I'm a doctor," he said with his hands up to indicate he meant no harm. "You okay?"

Just as Jonathan got closer to her Chloe's eyes rolled back and she was falling to the floor. Jonathan softened the fall, kneeled down and began checking her vitals. Tyler wondered if the doctor was getting tired of people losing consciousness around him or if it was something he was used to.

He couldn't help but admire Jonathan's need to help the sick, even if the patient was the enemy. The kindness of his companions made Tyler feel guilty. He would have left Chloe behind, let the woman who kidnapped his best friend break her neck falling down a flight of stairs, or rot in jail, whichever was worse. He shook off the thought and followed Abby out of the kitchen. "Why *did* you bring us here, Abs?"

"I had to think fast, I'm sorry," she said, defensive.

"Thank you for getting us out of there." Tyler hoped she heard his words as they were meant. Genuine and true. "Teleportation. Maybe that'll be one of my abilities someday. That would be cool."

Abby smiled. "Your abilities will be so much cooler."

Tyler returned Abby's smile. The nerve endings in his hands seemed to wake up and remind him of the incident in the hallway, in which he nearly caused unknown amounts of damage to his apartment building, and Jonathan. He decided now was not the time to bring it up. A wave of fear washed over him. "She can't shelter in place with us."

Abby looked past Tyler, toward the kitchen. "I know where the item is, I can take us back to the ship, move the piece, bring us back here. Jonathan can keep an eye on Chloe, we'll figure out what to do with her after that."

"Aren't we supposed to stay together?" Tyler reminded her. "What if she wakes up?"

"We can't leave her here alone and we can't bring her with us. It'll be fine. If Gabriel has a problem, we'll tell him we were social distancing," Abby said with a shrug.

Tyler faltered. He didn't like the idea of leaving Jonathan behind. But the prospect of completing their mission was enticing. "We can't just leave without telling him."

Jonathan was not thrilled by the prospect of being left at Salvation with Chloe, even in her incapacitated state. Tyler could tell the doctor was trying hard not to say the word babysit but he was definitely hinting that watching over Chloe wasn't what he was meant to be doing. "I should be going with you."

"We won't be gone long, I promise." Tyler said. "Someone should be here when she wakes up, yeah?"

Whether Jonathan was getting the signals Tyler tried to convey about the importance of the errand or if he just relented, he agreed to stay behind.

“To take care of my patient,” Jonathan said, flashing his warm smile.

25

On Purpose

CHLOE

Chloe was surprised to find herself in the small, dirty kitchen at the dive bar with the gate to Purgatory in the refrigerator, surrounded by the angel and her friends who had been hunting her down. She thought for sure the angel would leave her passed out on the ship. It’s what Chloe would have done.

Abby had done Chloe a bigger favor than simply rescuing her from serious injury and the threat of cops slowly closing in on her. Whether the angel knew it or not, she’d brought Chloe closer to answers she desperately needed.

She pretended not to hear the words, but she definitely did. The angel flat out called her demon. Not even trying to dance around it like she had on the ship when she suggested there was something different about her. Azazel was right. Chloe needed to speak to the dragon.

She tried to get up off the sticky floor and found it more difficult than it should have been. Her head ached. Her vision blurred. She pressed against the floor again, forcing herself into a standing position. That was a mistake. “I’m a doctor.” She heard the words, barely comprehended them, blacked out.

Chloe didn't know how long she was out, but when she finally regained consciousness the doctor determined she had fainted from a combination of over-exertion and stress. He recommended fluids and rest.

Chloe considered arguing the diagnosis, but decided his assessment was likely truer than not. She'd only been in Los Angeles a few hours, give or take the few days she lost in the Underworld. In that time she'd followed a fallen angel ten miles through Downtown LA to eat a piece of toast, trekked another several miles through the mud and muck of Purgatory to meet a dragon, committed several crimes while traipsing around a giant boat with an angel she'd fought with and kidnapped. What had her life become?

"I need a drink," Chloe said out loud. "Can you get me a vodka soda or something like that? I'll meet you out there."

"I'll help you into the other room, more comfortable places to sit in there." He offered.

Chloe feigned dizziness, insisted she would join him as soon as she felt she could stand. He took another long pause before turning toward the door and exiting the room.

As soon as he was out of sight Chloe stood, placed her palm against the steel door of the refrigerator, pictured the dark trees of Purgatory. She said a silent prayer as she pulled on the handle.

She was relieved to find the black rot iron gate appear in front of her. She waved a hand over the lock, mimicking what Azazel had done. The click of it releasing echoed through the tiny room. Behind her the creak of the kitchen door swinging open

threatened to thwart her plan. She quickly stepped through the gate, waved her hand and watched as the light coming from the kitchen went dark.

26

Did You Try Unplugging It?

TYLER

Maybe teleportation wasn't one of the abilities Tyler hoped he'd have one day after all. The sensation of being in one place then suddenly in another made him dizzy and nauseous, like he'd been on a tilt-o-wheel at a carnival operated by a pimply faced teenager whose job it was to make sure everyone went home with vomit on their clothes. Even with fair warning, the jolt disoriented him. He wondered if he'd ever get used to it.

They materialized at the end of a hallway, just before the exit door leading to what Tyler assumed was the top deck. He and Jonathan never made it that far up. All he'd seen were the dark wood walls and busy carpeting which repeated itself, floor after floor. He leaned against the wall to steady himself.

Abby looked to be heading toward the door to the outside but stopped just before she got there. Pulling himself together, Tyler pushed his body away from the wall and stumbled ahead to see what she was staring at.

In a nook carved into the wall sitting on a wooden pedestal, a large gold globe like object. At first glance Tyler thought it was a diver's helmet. According to the plaque on the wall it was a giant compass used to navigate the ship to its various destinations, before they had electronic panels. The oversized orb was shiny but rusting in some areas and it was slowly disappearing from sight as Abby held her hand over it.

Tyler wondered if the cops were still searching for intruders and told himself it was totally sane to return to the scene of a crime so quickly after escaping it. A quick inhale of breath didn't yield any results, other than the musty smell of the old ship. If they were on the boat, they weren't nearby.

It took Tyler a minute to realize he'd smelled nothing but the scent of carpet too many people had walked on, old wood, and dust. Abby had no detectable essence.

His mind swam. Did that mean Jonathan was an angel? Was Abby masking her aura for his benefit? Were they both doing that?

The oversized compass was slowly returning to full form, taking much longer to do so than Tyler was comfortable with. Granted, the thing was considerably larger, denser and heavier than the Grammy and the book combined. Abby seemed to be struggling to get it back from wherever she'd sent it.

With his thoughts distracted Tyler didn't catch the change in the air until it was too late. "Freeze!" A voice called out.

"Get us out of here." Tyler implored.

"I can't." Abby whispered. "My energy is tapped. It needs to reset."

27

Back So Soon

CHLOE

It all looked the same. The black trees, the black mud, the black sky. Chloe hoped she was going the right way. She hadn't given much thought to paying attention when Azazel led her through Purgatory the first time. She wasn't aware she'd be back at all, let alone this soon.

At each clearing Chloe peered past the grouping of black trees hoping to see the bright red one lighting up the sky around it. Once again she wondered what her life had become. Hiking through the Underworld, actively hunting for a magical tree, hoping it will transform into a giant dragon and give her answers to questions she never imagined asking.

As her mind continued to focus on a single word – demon – something vibrated against her thigh. Once she assured herself it wasn't an otherworldly creature nestling up to her leg, Chloe pulled a cell phone from her pants pocket. On the screen, a group text from Tyler. The message: emojis. A compass and an arrow. She stared at the screen, scrolled through other messages. No wonder the angel left her cell phone unlocked. Who had time to decipher a series of silly emojis? Chloe pocketed the phone and decided to deal with that mess later.

She was several miles in and losing all hope when the red-orange tree appeared like a beacon of light in a dark place growing ever darker the further Chloe travelled into it. Her thoughts about being stuck in Purgatory forever had gone from disturbing to strategical as she devised a plan to become the leader of the Underworld demons. Then the sky turned crimson and she'd never been so happy to see a tree in her life.

Now that Chloe had reached her destination, she was unsure if she wanted to continue. She had been smart enough to take off her shoes just as she stepped through the gate. The mud between her toes was already drying. The air was lighter, airier, the tree was in the beginning stages of movement.

"Alexis." She called out, tentative, quiet. The tree moved. Chloe put up her hands, "Whatever form you're comfortable with." She said, louder.

It turned out he was more comfortable as a dragon. At least one of her questions had a simple answer. Alexis lowered his head toward Chloe. It was larger than her, which wasn't saying much, she wasn't a tall person to begin with. His bright yellow eyes were warm and welcoming. A strange sight for such an overpowering creature.

"Ah. Chloe. I did not expect to see you so soon."

She didn't expect to be back so soon either, she thought. Recent events had pushed her to seek answers only the dragon could answer, and Abby's teleportation trick pretty much brought Chloe to the doorstep of Purgatory expediting the process.

"What am I doing here?" She asked.

The dragon blinked several times. "I cannot tell you what you are doing here if you do not know yourself."

For a moment Chloe didn't understand what he meant, then. "The angel. When we fought, I knew exactly what to do. Where to wound her so that it wouldn't kill her but render her unconscious. Her blood, when it touched me, burned my skin. Then she called me..."

"Demon?" Alexis finished her thought for her.

28

And Plugging it Back In?

TYLER

He had never been in handcuffs before. Not even for fun. They were cold against his skin and cutting into his wrists. As the two Long Beach Police Department officers led them off the Queen Mary, sometimes taking wrong turns down long corridors, Tyler wondered two things simultaneously. Would Abby be smart enough not to use her angel

powers if they came back any time soon? And for that matter, where were his supposed new abilities? How was his heightened sense of smell, currently overwhelming him with musty boat air and two sets of stale cologne and body odor, going to get them out of this mess?

After several failed attempts in which they argued about whose fault it was they were lost on the giant boat, the officers finally found the exit. They paused as they reached the door, which had been forced off its hinges.

“You’re a lot stronger than you look.” The officer holding Tyler’s arm said into his ear as they stepped through the opening. Despite the medical grade mask muffling the words, he heard them perfectly.

He didn’t know whether to be offended on his own behalf, or Abby’s. He started to respond but thought better of it. Making the situation worse with sarcastic remarks would not be wise. Maybe miracles happened after all.

They reached the gate with its chain lock broken off. Tyler waited for his officer to make more comments. As soon as they were on the other side of the fence a dispatcher’s voice boomed through the walkie talkies on both officer’s shoulders. “Please be advised, large crowd gathered at 3rd and Magnolia. Support needed. All units respond. Code 3.”

Abby’s officer stopped, turned to face his partner. “What do we do, cut them loose?”

Tyler was forcefully turned so that he and his officer were face to face. “Property damage. Trespassing. You should be spending at least a night in jail and paying a

heavy fine. You're lucky this pandemic has us stretched thin. Go home. Don't come back."

His arms fell to his side as the handcuffs were removed from his wrists. He rubbed his fingers over them and waited for Abby to be released. The same thought seemed to occur to all of them as soon as the cuffs were in their pockets and the officers were on their way. Tyler was about to ask how they were going to get home, Abby placed one hand on his shoulder and held the other up with her fingers pressed together, ready to snap them back to Salvation. Tyler stared at her, silently begging her to wait until the officers were out of sight.

"Wait." Tyler's officer said as they both turned around. "How did you get here? Where's your vehicle?"

Tyler opened and closed his mouth several times.

"We took the bus," Abby said next to him.

The officer shook his head. "Get in the car, we'll drop you off at a bus stop."

Sitting in the back seat of a police cruiser was not any more fun than being in handcuffs. He and Abby stayed silent for the short drive from the docks to a bus stop several blocks away. During the entire ride the police radio barked out orders. From what Tyler could decipher, a group had gathered in front of the courthouse in Downtown Long Beach. Most of the announcements were in code. The officers spoke in hushed tones. Tyler caught a few words. Demonstrators. Barricades. Crowd control.

He couldn't imagine what people would be demonstrating over, but in these weird times it could be anything. Whatever it was, he thanked them for the distraction. The

patrol car sped off, leaving he and Abby alone at a random bus stop. As soon as the car had turned the corner Abby snapped her fingers.

Tyler could tell something was wrong the moment they arrived back at Salvation. Not just because it remained quiet and empty, that was the new normal. Jonathan had not left the kitchen, or at least it seemed that way. It was Tyler's realization he could not smell sulfur in the air that concerned him most.

He motioned for Abby to follow as headed toward the kitchen door, suddenly struck with the guilt of leaving Jonathan alone with Chloe who Abby had to referred to as 'demon girl.' Tyler would never forgive himself if something happened to the doctor.

They found Jonathan standing at the refrigerator with the door open, as if he were searching for a midnight snack and couldn't decide what to eat. Tyler let go of a breath he didn't know he was holding, relieved to find Jonathan in one piece.

There was no sign of Chloe. Tyler's heart sank with the realization she had likely escaped through the Hell gate.

"Hi honey, we're home." Tyler tried to keep his voice light.

Jonathan spun around. "I'm sorry. She woke up, asked for a drink, I came back and she was gone. Took me a while to remember...I thought maybe if I stood here long enough, she'd come back through. I mean, she'll come back the same way she went in, right?"

Abby moved to stand next to him. "More than likely. But time slows down in Purgatory. You could be standing here for days."

CHLOE

Georgia. 20 Years Earlier.

Chloe sat on the edge of her bed letting her feet dangle over the side. She stared at her bare toes, caked in dried blood. She wiggled them back and forth, recited the rhyme her mother had taught her. *This little piggy went to market. Why did the piggy go to market? Chloe had asked. To buy some milk.* Her mother had answered in her kind, gentle voice.

“Can you tell me what happened?” A woman in grey sat down next to Chloe, tried to use her mother’s soothing tone, it wasn’t the same.

The house was alive with activity. There were sirens. Voices yelling at the front door. A loud crash. Men, women, rushing through her house. Her bedroom door opened slowly, a man, dressed in dark blue, something black pointed toward her. “Clear!” He yelled behind him, lowered the black object, approached. Saw the blood on Chloe’s feet. “Medic!” He yelled, waited. More adults. More activity.

“I spilled the milk.” Chloe whispered.

“It’s ok, this isn’t your fault.” The lady said.

Chloe kept her eyes forward. Oh, but it is, she thought.

Her mother and the man who was not her father but was trying very hard to be were in the kitchen joyfully making breakfast and singing along to a song Chloe didn’t recognize. She sat at the kitchen table, watching as the man wrapped his arms around his mother’s waist and kissed her neck.

Chloe did not like that. It made her feel uncomfortable. She knocked over her glass of milk to get their attention. They did not notice. The milk spread over the table,

made its way toward the edge, dripped onto the floor. Her mother didn't look at her, neither did the man.

She must be trapped, Chloe thought, seeing the man's arm wrap further around her mother's waist. She had never ignored Chloe before. What to do. Break something. Chloe pressed her tiny finger against the glass laying on its side, residual milk still puddled around and inside it. The cylinder rolled off the table and fell to the ground.

There was a crash, the glass shattered into several pieces. Her mother and the man holding her against her will turned toward the table, saw the milk spread over it, the glass in pieces on the floor.

"Oh, Chloe, what happened?" The kind voice, loving smile, caring eyes, were now focused on Chloe. "Grab me the broom out of the hall closet." She pressed her hand against the man's arm.

The man did as her mother asked. Now that he was out of the room Chloe felt immediate relief. She smiled brightly at her mother. "I'm sorry, it just fell."

Her mother leaned over the table, gently placed her lips against Chloe's forehead. "It's okay, just stay there. You don't want to cut your little piggies."

He returned with the broom and a vacuum cleaner. Chloe glared at him. Her mother stood up. "She did it on purpose, you know that right?" The man said as he handed her the broom.

"It was an accident, Walt." Her mother defended her.

His eyes were on Chloe as her mother continued to clean up the mess. Chloe saw sadness in them. There was insecurity in his demeanor. Anxious energy in his body language. Chloe felt a rush of energy.

"I'm just saying, I know kids." He insisted.

Her mother stopped sweeping the tiny shards of glass into a pile. She leaned against the broom. "Accidents happen. Glasses break. We clean them up and move on." She smiled, though it was not her usual kind bright expression.

"Always defending her," Walt whispered under his breath.

All the kindness left her mother's face. "She's five years old Walt."

"She's a brat, Anna. You're teaching her bad habits." Walt raised his voice.

The air around them shimmered. Chloe closed her eyes, the voices got louder, heavier, angrier. They had energy, spark. Her heart raced. Without a thought Chloe jumped off the chair, ran toward her bedroom, through the pile of broken glass.

Her head buzzed. Her feet stung. She left red footprints on the kitchen floor, the carpeting in the hallway, the pink unicorn rug by her bed.

She stared at the door. Waiting for her mother to rescue her, fix things.

The voices on the other side of the door echoed through the house. Chloe could hear them moving from the kitchen to the living room to the hallway. A rustling noise in her mother's bedroom. Then.

Her mother screamed. A sharp, loud crack. A thud against the floor. A second loud crack. Another thud.

30

Strange Things are Afoot

TYLER

It took several attempts to convince Jonathan he did not need to stand in front of the refrigerator in order to catch Chloe on her way back to the mortal plane. They finally

got him to move into the main room where their booth by the front door waited, empty just like everything else in the place was. Tyler agreed to hang out there for one day. If she didn't show up by then, they head back to his apartment and check back each day after that.

"Can I borrow your phone?" Abby asked as they sat down. "I have to let Gabriel know the Queen Mary piece was moved." She added.

"Where's your phone?" Tyler asked handing his to her.

Abby pointed toward the back room. "She smashed it." Her fingers slid across the screen and she quickly handed it back to him.

More emojis. Tyler suppressed a smile. After a long silence a thought occurred to him. "Wasn't that the last piece? Are we done with the mission?"

The sound of the refrigerator door closing in the back room followed by the kitchen door hinges squeaking jolted them into action. All three stood at once. Tyler readied himself to tackle Chloe should the demon girl try to escape again. Next to him Abby held her arms up, her hands balled into fists. Jonathan stood behind them in his own defensive stance.

"At ease kids." A deep, smoky voice echoed through the room. "I come in peace."

Abby moved slightly. A whooshing sound next to him caught Tyler's attention. Wings. Tyler tried to keep his focus on the intruder in front of him, but he couldn't take his eyes off of the vastness, the color, the sharp contrast of bright light in the dark room. They looked like hard steel. He expected to see himself reflected in them. She brushed one against his shoulder. A gentle nudge. Soft, like a pillow filled with feathers. He tore his eyes away.

Azazel continued to take slow strides toward them, held up his hands.

“You have some nerve showing up here again, Azazel. Do not come any closer.”

Abby commanded.

“Believe me, this is not how I planned on spending my day today.” Azazel shot back at her but stopped as she’d asked.

“Please allow me to show you several exits, including the one from which you came.” Tyler put on his best club bouncer trying to get rid of trouble voice.

“You might want to hear what I have say first.” Azazel’s cocky smile faded.

Tyler doubted there was anything useful about Azazel but something in his demeanor made Abby flinch. She folded her wings behind her but did not break from her defensive stance. She tensed up when he reached into his pocket.

“I believe this belongs to you.” Azazel held a cell phone out in front of him.

Abby’s eyes flickered.

“Yes, clever girl that Chloe.” He sounded almost disappointed. “Very proud of herself, she was. I wonder, how long will it be before they discover the truth.” He motioned toward Tyler.

Abby stepped forward, took her phone from Azazel. He made no move to attack her. The wry smile on his face faltered. Then returned.

“What truth?” Tyler asked.

A long silence. Or at least the appearance of one. From the intense stare down it seemed Abby and Azazel were having a very heated conversation amongst themselves. Abby’s gold eyes flickered and flared. She tilted her head to the side. Azazel raised his eyebrows at her.

Tyler dropped his defensive stance and turned toward Jonathan. The doctor was calm, poised, ready to fight if it came to that. Tyler smiled at him. "I'm going home. You're welcome to join me. If Chloe comes back these two can deal with her." He headed toward the front door, turned the knob, pulled. It did not open. He spun around to throw a few choice words in Abby's direction.

Gabriel strolled in through the kitchen door, confident as ever. "You were supposed to keep her on the mortal plane. No problem, you said. I got this, you insisted."

The room went still as everyone in it realized Gabriel was speaking to Azazel as if they were old friends and not mortal enemies.

31

The Roof is on Fire

CHLOE

Florida. 15 Years Earlier.

A sharp crack made Chloe sit up so quickly she almost hit her head on the wood slats of the top bunk. She sat still in the darkness, staring at the closed door, listening, waiting for the sound to ring out again.

The bunk shook. She tilted her head up, started at the slats, waited. A loud exhale above her. Then, steady breathing. In, out. In, out.

Outside, laughter, loud voices. Another crack, quieter. More laughter, the clank of glass on glass. Her pulse quickened. Her heart raced.

She slid off the bed slowly, moving just enough to push off the side without shaking the bunk. She paused, made sure the others were sleeping. No movement from

the bunks. Each one occupied, as was the single bed by the door. Seven kids, including herself, asleep as they were meant to be. Except Chloe.

The first time she heard the cracking sounds she followed them to the enclosed patio where her foster father and three men she didn't know were standing around the big table with the green top. She hid under the cutout in the wall. Watched intently.

They used long wood sticks to make the balls fall into holes cut into the table. Drank dark liquid from glass bottles. Argued loudly. Threw punches at each other.

"Get out of my house, cheating bastard!" Her foster father yelled.

Chloe forced herself back to bed before he discovered she had been watching. The rush she felt as the men grew more agitated kept her awake at night. She wanted to feel it again. Every night she fought sleep, listening for the cracking sound.

Her heart beat rapidly. Her pajamas clung to her small frame. Her feet pressed against the hard wood floor, taking each step with a slow determination.

Must not be heard. Must not be seen.

The punishment for being out of bed for any reason was severe. Though she did not speak from experience, she had seen the marks on the backs of her foster siblings enough to know she didn't want to suffer the same fate.

Chloe reached the half wall, peered over the opening. The same four men were once again holding long wood sticks. One was leaning over the table, he slid the stick against the edge, pushed the white ball toward another ball with a red stripe on it. The crack of them hitting together was followed by a loud cheer from one of the other men.

This continued for a while. She grew impatient. Slid down the wall. Contemplated going back to bed.

The air around her shimmered. Heat rose from her tummy to her ears. The men began to argue. She could not hear the words. There was a drumming sound. It grew louder. The men's voices raised. She stood slowly, carefully. Her foster father pushed one of the men against the wall. The others grabbed at him.

A small table fell to its side. Plates, bottles, shattered against the tile floor.

It was instant. The curtains, the man who'd been pushed against them, her foster father, all consumed by flames. Screams. Different than the rest.

Chloe ran toward the bedroom, stopping before she reached the door. Chaos continued from the other side of the house. Careful not to wake anyone she climbed back into her bunk and closed her eyes.

Elvin's voice rang out into the darkness. "Everyone up!"

At first, she ignored her foster brother's command, then. "All of you, now, Chloe, Anthony, get outside now!"

Smoke filled her lungs as she and her siblings ran toward the front door. She coughed, stumbled. Elvin grabbed her from behind, carried her out the back door, toward the water, set her on the fishing dock.

Flames shot toward the sky. Travelled through the house. Turned the pale-yellow paint black. Her foster mother screamed and cried.

The drumming in Chloe's ears returned at full force until it was the only thing she could hear.

32

Incompetence Personified

TYLER

For the first time since Gabriel's initial appearance at Salvation, Tyler was thankful the bar was empty. There were several moments in which he wondered if it was safe for he and Jonathan to be there.

Upon discovering Azazel and Gabriel had been working together for several years, Abby threatened to burn the entire bar down if they didn't have a perfectly solid reason for doing so.

As he sat across from them, Tyler was transported back to his childhood. The more time he spent with Pastor Dan the more he noticed certain habits. Quoting bible verses at random was one of them. His favorite was in Corinthians. "Bad company ruins good morals."

At ten Tyler was apt to believe the definition of good and bad based on what his mom and dad, or the preacher, told him to believe. It wasn't long before Pastor Dan was tagging on caveats to his quotes to justify being in the company of individuals one might deem questionable.

By age twelve Tyler figured out one's interpretation of good or bad was based on opinion rather than cold hard facts. And bible quotes were really great for the bottom of drink cups or tattoos but didn't mean much in the grand scheme of things.

Looking at each of them Tyler couldn't discern which he considered the bad one. They were similar in build, though Azazel's features were much lighter. His white blond hair and pale skin contrasted against Gabriel's tan skin and dark hair. It was in their eyes one might find themselves struck with the urge to discriminate. Gabriel's shined bright gold. Azazel's were a deep dark grey. It was the mere fact each of them had defied the people who trusted them that gave Tyler the most pause.

“You are incompetence personified.” Gabriel stood up.

“Maybe if God had spent more time doing his job and less time obsessing over Lucifer we wouldn’t be in this situation.” Azazel retorted.

“I thought we agreed, God’s obsession with Lucifer is precisely why we are in this situation.” The archangel stepped forward. Tyler thought he was going to wring Azazel’s neck. Instead, he grabbed the back of the chair next to the fallen angel. The wood creaked under his fingers.

Abby paced the room, fluttering her outstretched wings in the stale air. Tyler felt as if he were watching a tennis match. Looking from Abby to Gabriel to Azazel and back again, wondering which one would cause the most damage, and if the two to one ratio would be any kind of factor, should there be a showdown.

Gabriel stood up and sat down a number of times while Azazel stared at his long fingers as if the entire situation was boring him.

Tyler would have thought it might be himself who lost control, when the truth of the odd partnership between God’s messenger and Lucifer’s right-hand man was revealed. But he had long given up being surprised by having the reality of things be the exact opposite of everything he was told.

The least shocking revelation came when Gabriel admitted the concept of gate keys hidden all over the world was not only a fallacy but one he created and helped spread through Heaven, Hell and the mortal plane. It gave Tyler a sense of relief to find Abby was only learning the truth of it herself. Though he had always suspected the act of chasing gate keys a fruitless venture, it was nice to know his guardian angel hadn’t

been perpetuating the lie, dragging them all over the city knowing it was a load of crap. Small mercies, he thought.

What Tyler wasn't prepared for was the reason behind the deception and the odd manner in which he and Azazel became arch-frenemies.

33

Devil Inside

CHLOE

Virginia. 10 Years Earlier.

Chloe sat on the diving board letting her feet dangle over the side. Her toes skimmed across the light blue water making it ripple and dance. She stared down at the red paint peeling from her toenails, paying little to no attention to the splashing, screaming and laughter coming from the shallow end.

Her new temporary family was tolerable, and she had her own room for the first time since going into the system. Her placement counselor said she was lucky to have been taken in at all this time. The closer kids get to eighteen the less likely anyone wants them. Something about it being more rewarding raising a child from infancy or some crap. Chloe was pretty sure her counselor hated her job, or Chloe.

In some ways Chloe didn't blame her. Trouble seemed to follow her everywhere she went. From Georgia to Florida and now to Virginia. This was her fourth foster home in five years. She couldn't understand why they didn't just let her live on her own. She was fifteen now. And if she was old enough to babysit these kids, who she'd known for a total of two weeks, she was old enough to take care of herself.

With a deep sigh Chloe pushed herself back off the board. Her wet feet against the concrete made her toes tingle. It had been an unusually hot day and despite the sun setting behind the two-story house it was still warm enough for the droplets rolling from her legs to evaporate as she headed toward the other end of the pool to deliver the bad news.

“Time to go inside.” Chloe announced.

She was met with groans and cries of protest but the three of them did as she asked, although not in the way she hoped. Dylan, the oldest at age nine, waited until his brother, the youngest of the three, was on the top step before pulling on the leg of his shorts, bringing them down to his ankles, rendering him naked. That threw Mia into a laughing fit, causing her to flop back into the water before Alex pushed her up onto the steps where Chloe helped her out of the pool.

The pushing, shoving, screaming and laughter continued as they gathered their towels and made their way into the living room, past the couches no one was allowed to sit on, down the hallway to their bathroom, through their showers and into the kitchen.

Dinner was a little quieter, though there were occasional slaps, tickles and screams between bites of mac ‘n cheese and day-old pizza.

Figuring it would be more of a struggle than it was worth, Chloe sat the kids in front of the television in the den rather than having them help her clean up after dinner. She took her time loading the dishwasher, fork by fork, plate by plate, glass by glass. Food and television time seemed to have a calming effect on the kids, to her relief.

“One more episode,” Max insisted.

“Nope, up, time for bed,” Chloe commanded. “Your brother and sister are already out for the count. Time you were too.”

With the three kids safely in their beds, Chloe brushed her teeth, washed her face and climbed into bed. Her own bed. The room was decorated entirely too girly for Chloe’s taste, but she wouldn’t trade it for another night in a room filled with several other kids for anything.

The alarm tone indicating the front door was opening woke Chloe from a restless sleep. She sat up, stared at her bedroom door, waited for pending doom she was imagining coming her way. Her heart rate slowed when she realized the beeping had stopped. The clicking of shoe heels on the marble floor in the foyer turned to light whispers.

Janice and Hank spoke in hushed tones as they made their way up the staircase and down the hallway into their bedroom. As soon as the door to their master bedroom was closed the voices raised.

“Not again, please not this again.” Chloe whispered in the darkness. The air around her shimmered and her body ached to follow the voices as they continued to get louder.

The door to the Pettyman’s bathroom slammed shut making Chloe jump. She stayed rooted in place, unwilling to let her overwhelming desire to be closer to what was happening down the hall. She was not going to give in this time.a

34

Jezebeth

GABRIEL

25 Years Earlier

To the casual observer the room looked like a library, office or den one might find anywhere in the world. Walls covered in mahogany shelves held endless volumes of books and loose papers stacked haphazardly on top, around and underneath each other. Each tome bound in identical crimson leather, as if someone had ordered the world's largest set of encyclopedias, in Latin. Several showed the wear and tear of constant use. Many looked as if they'd never been opened.

In the center of the room sat a large desk, its dark wood covered by documents and books in use or unable to fit on shelves. On each piece of yellowing paper were the endless ramblings of a mind constantly at work, written in what looked like blood, but upon further inspection was dark ink from an inkwell teetering dangerously on the edge of falling on the floor. A trail of scarlet drops could be traced between it and the pages of notes spread out on every inch of the surface.

Under the desk an arbitrarily placed rug with frayed edges and faded coloring appeared to be an afterthought or someone's idea of bringing the room together.

A pane of glass took up the entire wall across from a door few were permitted to enter. The window overlooked a large courtyard which lead to what was known to mankind as Heaven.

Two oversized cloth chairs were placed directly in front of the window, their color faded by years of light permeating the room. They were each conveniently placed so that the occupants could sit facing each other but never miss the activity outside the window. Off in the corner, behind the frequently occupied left side chair, a large domed object filled to the brim showcased the continuous presence of white candy-coated orbs.

Gabriel sat in the chair facing the oversized gumball machine often. Being God's messenger had perks he would never deny. Having the ability to enter the mortal plane at will was among the highlights. The downside was knowing most of his messages went unheard on both planes.

Today's visit brought with it a sense of trepidation. Father had sent for him. "Father has asked for you. Come at once." The youngling had said. Gabriel hurried down the long hallway, his mind racing with thoughts both catastrophic and mundane. The man had never once called on him, let alone with urgency. What was different about today?

Gabriel knocked gently before entering the room to find the chair he considered his occupied by someone he did not know. He felt a pang of something he would later discover was jealousy as his father leaned forward, listening intently to the stranger like he did when Gabriel brought him the news of the week. He cleared his throat to let them know he was present.

"My son, join us." God stood, motioning for Gabriel take his seat.

Gabriel cocked his head to the side, confused by his father's offer. "Thank you." He moved closer, stood between both chairs. His father sat back down.

"Jezebeth has come to us looking for guidance." He spoke in the young woman's direction.

The name sparked several memories Gabriel was rather reluctant to revisit. The young woman's features distorted as his recognition came into full view. He tried to remain calm, steady, as the image of a grinning Jezebeth standing with her hand on Lucifer's shoulder invaded his mind.

There must be good reason for a demon the likes of Jezebeth to be in God's library. Though he couldn't imagine what that reason would be. Well, he imagined it had to do with lies, deception and no good. He shook off the thoughts.

She turned to him. Her eyes were a dark, smoky, grey. Her cheeks stained with tears. Gabriel felt a pang of something he knew well. Empathy.

"Tell Gabriel what you have told me." God encouraged her to speak.

Jezebeth nodded, swallowed hard. "I need safe passage to the mortal plane. I am in fear for my life, and the life of my baby." She placed a hand on her belly, barely showing signs of a growing life within. As she did, Gabriel detected a new presence, confirming the demon was speaking the truth, at least about being with child.

"The child is Lucifer's." God announced without prompting.

Gabriel understood everything and nothing all at once.

35

Mission Accomplished

AZAZEL

5 Years Later

Azazel refused to accept being defeated by small white candy-coated orbs. But there he was, standing in the aisle of a dark, deserted warehouse, staring at the empty shelf marked Peppermint Gumballs. He leaned down to check the shelf once again, hoping even just one piece had fallen out of a box. He found nothing.

What he would tell Lucifer about the missing gumballs was still a mystery. He knew he couldn't avoid the conversation forever. With a huff, he resigned himself to

reality and prepared for the tongue lashing he'd surely endure, returning to the Underworld empty handed, again.

A sound in the distance caught his attention. The warehouse had long been empty. Azazel waited for every last worker to exit the facility before teleporting himself inside. It only took one incident for him to remedy that mistake. He was still traumatized by the blood-curdling scream the janitor let out when Azazel appeared out of thin air. While he didn't blame the man for such a reaction, it was a little over the top brandishing a wet mop in his direction and threatening to call the police.

The sound echoed through the darkness once again. Azazel paused, realizing he recognized it. From days long past. Wings. Not the kind attached to small, harmless creatures who flutter around trees and empty warehouses looking for food. No, these were the large variety. Attached to angels.

Whether out of curiosity or the hope that an encounter with an angel was less painful than facing Lucifer sans peppermint gumballs, Azazel stayed rooted in place. If nothing else at least he could distract Lucifer by telling tales of battling an unsuspecting angel in the candy aisle of the one hundred and seventy fifth warehouse he had visited that night.

In retrospect, he was equal parts mystified and annoyed by his own decision-making in that fateful moment. He was not prepared to find the wings attached to an Archangel. He was even less prepared for it to be Gabriel.

Azazel held up his hands. "The shelf was empty when I got here."

Gabriel cocked his head to one side. Glanced at the empty shelf to Azazel's left. His gold eyes flickered. "I can help you with that."

There are moments in Azazel's storied life in which he was certain he was doing the right thing. This was not one of them. But desperation had long taken over and he would do anything in his power to enter Lucifer's library and be able to fill the long empty gumball machine. He longed for the days when he entered the room to speak with Lucifer without being met by disapproval and disappointment.

This would come at a steep price. One involving life-changing secrets and world-altering consequences. The ask seemed simple enough. Watch over a young child. Make sure she remained safe. Never speak of her existence to anyone other than the Archangel. In exchange, he would be supplied with Peppermint Gumballs. Gabriel's only other ask was to never question where they were coming from.

Done and done.

36

There's a Gateway to Hell Inside the Refrigerator

TYLER

It is customary for angels of every variety to stay out of the way unless it is essential to make themselves known. That is what Gabriel and Azazel both said upon being asked the underlying question of how they had gotten here, to this point in time, with Chloe seemingly lost in the depths of Purgatory. As for why it had to be Tyler who accompanied Azazel into the Underworld to fetch her, neither could give any reasoning beyond one simple word: fate.

At first, Tyler outright refused the request. "I've done my job. It isn't my fault you made up the whole thing about the keys."

Gabriel's gold eyes flared. He looked from Azazel to Tyler to Azazel, then rested firmly on Tyler. "It would be in your best interest to accompany Azazel into Purgatory."

Azazel shifted in his seat catching Tyler's attention.

"Lucifer discovered a prophecy, many years ago, in which a young woman is said to lead his army in battle against the mortal plane. As with many prophecies and predictions it was both vague with details and easily mistranslated. Lucifer believes the leader of his army is a random mortal soul. What he missed was the line which reads 'a female child of the light,' or in simpler terms – Lucifer's daughter."

Abby stopped pacing. She turned to Tyler, her features golden, bright, glowing. "As your guardian angel it is my duty to keep you safe. I would not encourage you to follow Azazel into Purgatory unless it was absolutely necessary. The fate of the mortal plane rests on keeping Chloe out of Lucifer's grasp," she said. "In other words, Ty. This is what you were meant for." She paused. "Sorry, that was very dramatic. If it helps sway you any, might I suggest you go with Azazel for the simple fact there is a being who lives there who can tell you more about being the Omphalos than any of us will ever be able to."

Jonathan leaned casually against the pool table, his ice blue eyes fixed on Tyler. In any other place and time Tyler would do something ridiculous. He didn't like being stared at. But Jonathan's gaze was not one of judgement. Tyler wondered how anyone could sit in an examining room, look into those eyes, and discuss their foot fungus or the mucus building in their nose.

He shook off the thought, stepped forward, closed the space between them. "I'd like it if you were here when I get back." He knew it wasn't fair to want, let alone ask

Jonathan to wait for him on the mortal plane while Tyler trudged through Purgatory to rescue Chloe, the fear demon.

He fought the urge to break their eye contact. "I know it would be easy to get on a plane back to New York, once I'm on the other side of that door. I'm asking you not to."

The doctor shifted his weight, tilted his head to the side, his lips curled into a half smile. For a moment it seemed like he was about to speak.

Tyler's resolve shattered like glass. He leaned forward, pressed his lips against Jonathan's. A moment of hesitation, a pang of guilt, then, Jonathan's lips parted, invited more.

Azazel held the refrigerator door open. The fog permeated the kitchen as the black gates stared Tyler down as if to remind him he could not open them any more now than he could a few days ago. Azazel waved his hand over the lock, pushed the gate open and motioned for Tyler to step inside.

Tyler turned to take one last look at the people he was leaving behind, the tiny kitchen looked even smaller as the vastness of the Underworld lay behind him. Jonathan stepped forward, took Tyler's hand in his, squeezed it gently.

"I'll be here when you get back."

Tyler smiled, nodded, took a step toward the gate. The stale air shifted. The click of the lock mirrored the click of recognition as Tyler realized the change. Jonathan's aura had somehow found its way to the surface. "I have to go back," Tyler insisted.

Azazel pushed him forward. "C'mon Tyler. Things to do. People to save."

Tyler stared at the gate, torn between saving one man and saving many.

To be continued...