

DEATH WISH

BLOOD BOUND SERIES BOOK 12



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Death Wish

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Аннотация

Ren thought he'd caught him a little thief only to find that hidden under layers of boy clothes and dirt was the most desirable temptress he'd ever seen. Realizing that she'd been branded with a demon's mark and seemed to have a death wish, Ren quickly decides that the only way to keep her alive is to not let her out of his sight. If the demons were suicidal enough to think they were going to steal her away from him, he would give them their own death wish.

Getting mixed up with the underground thievery ring run by demons had been easy... it was escaping them once they decided to kill her that Lacey was having trouble with. When her partner dies just to give her a head start, she doesn't let his sacrifice go to waste and runs like a horde of demons are chasing her... which they are. How was she to know that her escape route would lead her straight into the middle of a demon war and into the arms of a sexy stranger that was more powerful than her worse nightmare? Ren thought he'd caught him a little thief only to find that hidden under layers of boy clothes and dirt was the most desirable temptress he'd ever seen. Realizing that she'd been branded with a demon's mark and seemed to have a death wish, Ren quickly decides that the only way to keep her alive is

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Содержание

Chapter 1	6
Chapter 2	20
Chapter 3	32
Chapter 4	49
Chapter 5	66
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	75

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Blood Bound Series Book 12

Amy Blankenship, RK Melton

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Chapter 1

Ren glanced down at the girl in his arms as he made his way through Gypsy's underground living room and past the beaded curtains that surrounded her bedroom.

The main thing that drew his gaze was the thin layer of dirt she'd smudged all over her face like makeup to cover up the fact that she had a smooth unblemished complexion. Unable to stop himself, Ren let his gaze slowly drift back to her perfect lips and then up to the fan of her long dark lashes where they brushed against her cheeks. It would take more than dirt and baggy clothes to hide her softness and beauty from him.

He could feel the thick cloth that she had wrapped so tightly around her chest and it annoyed him. It was no wonder she'd passed out like that upstairs... he doubted she could even breathe properly with those bindings squeezing her breasts so tight. He silently wondered whose bright idea it had been for her to dress up like a boy... hopefully not hers.

Ren stopped beside the bed and leaned over it to place Lacey down on the soft mattress. It was just his luck that the girl chose that exact moment to snap out of her dead faint and wake up fighting him.

The first thing Lacey noticed was the strong arms that were wrapped around her so possessively. Her brain automatically went into overdrive when her paranoid mind sincerely thought

that the dangerous demon that she'd been running from for the last couple weeks had finally caught up with her.

If this was the end of her, then like hell she was going to go down without a fight. Before the darkness even had a chance to clear from her vision, she started throwing punches at the monster holding her.

“Let go of me you black hearted bastard!” Lacey yelled and began kicking her feet to throw the demon off balance.

Caught off guard by her quick awakening, Ren snatched his sunglasses back out of the air where she'd managed to knock them off his face because his hands were full of her. Quickly becoming frustrated, he gritted his teeth and dropped her gracelessly on the mattress.

Not bothering to put the glasses back on just yet, Ren stood to his full height and watched as she bounced once and somehow managed to fold her knees under her in midair so that she landed on them. The movement was fast for a human... very impressive.

Lacey blinked and felt overwhelming relief when her vision finally cleared and she realized it was just Gypsy's heavy handed I want to rock you bodyguard. However, she did frown when her gaze was drawn to his strange eyes. It took less than a heartbeat for her to decide that the color of his irises reminded her of pure mercury with the hint of ice blue around the edges. Oddly enough, they added to his sex appeal since she was damn sure he wasn't blind.

“Oh, it's just you,” she murmured thankfully then mentally

cringed when he lifted one elegant eyebrow at her inquiringly.

“Who did you think it was... the boogeyman?” Ren asked as he slid his dark sunglasses back on. He was still a little stunned that she’d just looked him right in the eyes and not shied away or flinched in fear.

Lacey stared up at him forcing herself to push the scary image of the old demon and his underlings out of her mind. She crossed her arms over her chest and said with as much sarcasm as she could with her heart still racing a mile a minute, “Nah, you’re no boogeyman... just some creep that can’t seem to keep his hands off me.”

Ren half smirked and half glared down at her and retaliated with an equal amount of sarcasm, “You wish.”

“I wish?” Lacey demanded and rose up so that she was kneeling on the mattress.

She straightened her arms down at her sides and balled her fists up while she fought off the slight fear that was still trailing up her spine. She didn’t have time for this. If she didn’t get out of here, there was a chance it would be too late to leave and she was looking directly at the reason for the delay.

“Yeah... you wish,” Ren repeated wondering how such a spitfire of a girl could look so cute dressed as a boy.

“I’ll tell you what I wish... I wish you’d just let me get what I came here for so I can be on my merry little way,” she tossed back at him raising her chin.

“Speaking of that... what exactly were you trying to steal and

who were you stealing it for?" Ren demanded as he leaned down a little closer to intimidate her into answering the one question that was gnawing a hole in his brain. He didn't like the thought of her putting herself in danger by working with demons and resisted the urge to shake some sense into her.

Even though she couldn't see his eyes because of the sunglasses, Lacey could feel his silver glare leveled on her and she had to suppress a shiver. Keeping her wary gaze on him, she scrambled backwards in order to put the bed between them only to blink in surprise when he suddenly vanished from view.

She couldn't control the frightened gasp that escaped her when she felt two hands take hold of her shoulders just as her left hand met thin air instead of the flat surface of the mattress. If he hadn't moved so fast, she would've fallen backwards off the bed and onto the floor.

"How about staying put for a damn minute," Ren said a little more harshly than he'd intended but this girl was going to have to chill out before she hurt herself.

Lacey's breathing sped up and her gaze darted around the room searching for a weapon of some sort. Much to her relief, she noticed quite a few decorating the walls and mentally smirked at her grandpa's knack for thinking ahead. Too bad they were still out of her reach.

The man holding her shoulders had moved too fast to be human... which meant he was a demon. If that was indeed the case, then what the hell was a demon doing inside her

grandfather's secret bomb shelter and why was she alone with him?

She slowly blinked and all thoughts of fighting back left her when the memory smacked her in the face... hard. Grandpa was dead. A sound by the door made her jerk her gaze up and she spotted Gypsy and the other guy that had broken down the front door of the shop come into the bedroom.

Gypsy's shoulders slumped when Lacey's expression slowly turned from sadness to accusing as they stared at each other from across the room.

"Can you get them out of here and give me a moment to think clearly?" Lacey demanded angrily as she fought back the tears that thoughts of never again seeing her grandfather had provoked.

"Need I remind you that you're the one who snuck in here uninvited," Ren shot back wishing there was a demon nearby that could read minds so he could snag that power. He'd give a king's ransom to know what this girl was thinking right now. The last thing he needed was for her to have enough time to come up with a cover story before he could get the truth out of her.

"Ren, please... can you and Nick give us girls some privacy?" Gypsy asked gently, feeling sorry for Lacey. She'd already dealt with her own grief over the death of their grandpa... but here Lacey had just found out.

Ren stared at Gypsy for a moment before looking back down at the girl he still had a hold of. Tightening his grip, he leaned forward until his lips were only a few inches from her ear, "I

won't be far.”

Now Lacey was born at night but she hadn't been born last night and understood the man's underlying threat in his words perfectly.

Gypsy sighed and shook her head before waving both men out of her room. “Go on, I think I can handle it from here.” She blew a strand of dark hair out of her eyes when they stepped out of the sleeping area but stopped just inside her living room to turn around and look at her.

Frowning, she calmly approached the bomb shelter door and pointed out. “No offense to either of you, but I haven't seen my cousin in over a year and I think she has just as many questions as you do... so out.”

Nick placed a hand on Ren's shoulder and gently pushed him toward the door. He quickly removed his hand when Ren shrugged it off and stormed out of the room ahead of him.

Before he followed, Nick turned his head and gave Gypsy a reassuring smile. “We'll be right outside if you need anything. Take your time.”

Ren spun around to contradict the allowance of time but the words died on his lips when he saw that Lacey was now standing right behind Gypsy with a smug smirk on her face like she'd just gotten her way about everything. The little brat was infuriating and on the verge of actually pissing him off... so he decided to play her little game.

Tilting his head down so she could see the silver of his eyes,

Ren returned the smirk with a darker one of his own making her expression slip just a little.

Lacey couldn't believe this guy was actually smirking at her like he knew something she didn't. Well, to hell with that. In retaliation, she reached out and slung the door to the bomb shelter closed hard enough for it to make a very loud bang about a second before she locked it.

'Take that you sexy eighties reject,' She mentally ranted, completely missing the fact that she'd just given him a compliment and an insult in the same sentence.

"Why that little," Ren thundered and reached for the wheel to unlock it but Nick quickly knocked his hand away.

"Oh come on, I doubt she's dangerous," Nick offered trying to get Ren to calm down. "In case you haven't noticed, she's scared half out of her wits right now, not planning to take over the world. Besides, there's only one way out of that bomb shelter and we're standing right here in front of it. Trust me... she's just a girl and not a threat."

"Screw off!" Ren snapped in exasperation. "If she's so damned innocent, then why is she dressed like a boy and trying to break into her grandpa's shop in the middle of the night. Oh, and let's not forget the fact that she went straight for a hidden vault that until yesterday held a slew of very powerful artifacts that any demon would give their Demon Blade to get their hands on? Riddle me that Robin," he finished cockily.

Nick smirked and slowly shook his head, "Oh no... I'm

Batman.”

“Whatever... Robin,” Ren said as he laid his palm against the door and closed his eyes to concentrate.

He frowned when Nick's thoughts, which weren't very nice, suddenly sounded through his mind loud and clear. Ren couldn't help it and began to silently rant at the mind reading power that had failed him just a moment ago when it would have come in handy. Where ever that mindreading demon was... it needed to stand the hell still.

Gypsy sighed at Lacey's stubborn streak and turned around to face her cousin. She didn't bother with telling her that both men knew how to unlock the door she'd just slammed in their faces. If she kept antagonizing Ren, then she'd find out soon enough... Gypsy was sure of that.

“What in the world...” Gypsy began only to snap her mouth shut when Lacey suddenly reached out and touched her lips with the tips of her fingers and made a shushing sound.

“Where's our crystal,” Lacey barely whispered before she began walking around the room looking at the vast quantity of crystals Gypsy had on personal display.

Gypsy smiled realizing what Lacey was looking for and approached her computer desk, reaching for the bright ruby quartz crystal sitting there. As children, they'd often used the privacy crystal to tell each other the secrets that they didn't want anyone else hearing... especially the grownups.

The crystal itself had been their secret and given to them by

their grandfather to share. As they grew up, the crystal was set aside because there'd been no use for it. Gypsy didn't know why the crystal continued to stay with her instead of moving on as crystals tended to do... maybe now she'd get her answer.

Ren kept his hand pressed to the door trying to listen through the thick steel. His eyes narrowed when Gypsy's voice was suddenly cut off mid-sentence.

Nick was standing beside him with his ear pressed to the cold steel. He was having a little bit of trouble but could still hear the same things Ren did.

Ren frowned when he heard Lacey ask Gypsy about a crystal just before the room fell into silence except for the sound of their footsteps.

“What's a crystal got to do with anything?” Nick asked.

Ren shot him a look that basically told him to keep silent before closing his eyes and concentrating again.

Gypsy and Lacey sat down on the sofa facing one another with Gypsy holding the crystal out in her hand. Lacey placed her hand in Gypsy's, trapping the crystal between their palms before releasing a heavy sigh.

“Tell me everything I've missed since I've been gone,” Lacey said softly.

Ren was getting frustrated, straining to listen in while attempting to widen his succubus range. Only fragments of their conversation were filtering through now, like a bad radio reception and he suddenly realized he was being blocked by some

kind of magic. The air surrounding him gained a bit of power and his frown deepened just before he sneered at the door.

Nick leaned back from the door in confusion, “I can’t hear a damn thing now.”

“It appears that Gypsy has something in there that can shield a personal conversation,” Ren said and his lips thinned in agitation. “They’re using magic to keep us from hearing them.”

Nick huffed at the big bad Ren being outdone so easily, “You mean to tell me that you, with all of your power can’t break through it?”

Ren’s jaw flexed as he pulled on the power of the crystal and stretched the shield to where he was inside its barrier. “I didn’t say that. It’ll take more than a little girl’s silly game and parlor trick to keep me out.” He leaned a little closer to the door and looked over at Nick with a mischievous smirk, “Wanna hear what they’re saying?”

“What, you think I’m stupid... of course I do,” Nick answered with a sly grin of his own. He was in no way above eavesdropping when it suited him. As a matter of fact, he was usually a pro at it.

Ren motioned him over and placed a hand on the jaguar’s shoulder, squeezing a little too tightly just for fun.

Nick cringed at the hard grip but ignored it as his eyebrows shot up into his hairline when he suddenly heard the women’s voices just as clearly as though he were in the same room with them.

“Nice,” he whispered grudgingly.

Gypsy sat cross-legged on the sofa while she told Lacey everything that had happened, starting with Grandpa's death. It hadn't taken as long as she thought it would to tell the story and she actually leaned forward a bit when she began to tell Lacey about Nick, Ren, and all the mess with Samuel. She blushed when she admitted the fact that she'd had a slight crush on Nick for years.

Outside the door, Nick took a deep satisfied breath hearing Gypsy's confession and glanced toward Ren to see how he was taking it. It was a little disappointing to find the other man unfazed.

"Shut up," Ren frowned wishing Nick would stop thinking so loud at him.

Nick wanted to laugh so bad but held it in also wanting to hear what was going on inside the room.

By the time Gypsy was finished catching her up, Lacey was rubbing her temple with her free hand and her face was in a heavy frown like she had a bad headache.

"All of that and you're still alive? And here grandpa thought that he'd given me the dangerous job. Is there anything else I should know about?" Lacey asked crossing her fingers there wasn't more to tell.

Gypsy thought about it for a moment and then slowly shook her head, "No, I think that pretty much covers all of the important stuff."

"It's a wonder The Witch's Brew is still standing," Lacey

whispered and tightened her grip on her cousin's hand before bringing it up between them. "And you tried to shoot a demon with a wooden bullet," she shook her head in amazement and sympathy. Brave and dumb seemed to be something they both had in common. "I'm so glad that this Michael person had the power to heal you. I'd have died if I'd come home only to find both you and Grandpa... gone."

"I'm fine and you're home now. You are staying... right?" Gypsy asked letting the hope shine in her eyes.

Lacey started to say no but paused, biting her bottom lip as she tried to wrap her mind around something her cousin had said. Raising her chin, she locked her gaze with Gypsy's wondering if she'd just found the safety net she'd been searching for. If it kept the demons from finding her for a little while longer, then she wasn't going to complain.

"Wait a sec... were you serious when you said that demons can't come into this building without your permission?" she asked knowing when something sounded too good to be true... it usually was.

"It's true," Gypsy confirmed with enthusiasm. "We even tested the spell just to make sure that it worked, and well... it works brilliantly." She tried to keep herself from grinning as she remembered Nick and Ren being sucked out of the store.

"Now that is the sweetest thing I've heard in hmmm... about a year," Lacey said truthfully and felt some of the tenseness drain out of her shoulders and back. Maybe if she stayed, she could buy

a little more time before facing the grim reaper. “And you say this was one of the spells that has been in the safe all this time?”

She silently wondered if it had come from the same spell book that she knew held the spell to counteract the power of the demon mark she was now wearing. The way she understood it... by casting a distortion spell over top of her demon mark, it would be near impossible to track her. It wouldn't remove the mark but it was the next best thing.

She needed to find out where they'd taken that book. Her next step would be to locate the most powerful witch's coven in the city and convince them to help her perform the spell. Problem was... someone had moved the damn book.

Gypsy tilted her head to the side in concern when the relief in Lacey's eyes faded back to worry. “Lacey, where have you been for the last year? What happened to keep you from coming home?”

When Lacey didn't answer right away, Gypsy lowered her gaze to where their hands were still locked together around the crystal. “You have to know that Grandpa was worried sick when you vanished. He tried to hide it from me, but you stayed away for so long that he was finally convinced you were never coming back... that something terrible had happened to you.”

Lacey made a slight face knowing Grandpa was the last person responsible for the mess she was in. This one was all on her.

They had always kept Gypsy out of the loop but now that Grandpa was gone, there didn't seem to be anything stopping her

from telling at least part of it. Besides, when her past caught up with her, then at least Gypsy would know what really happened to her and maybe even place a grave marker next to Grandpa in memory.

She felt herself calm as she made up her mind to let her cousin in on the family's extracurricular activities.

“Grandpa always sent you to the auctions and safe places to get the artifacts he wanted for his collection or needed to appease his clientele. That was your job and you were very good at it.” She smiled fondly at her cousin before adding, “But me... I was good at something completely different.”

“What are you getting at?” Gypsy asked with a frown. She had a suspicious feeling that she wasn't going to like whatever it was Lacey was about to tell her.

Lacey shrugged as if it wasn't that big of a deal, “Grandpa sent you after the things that were available and easy to get a hold of... just make a few deals in secret, with the help of a highly sought after trade or huge wad of cash. He sent me after the things that were not so... easy to obtain.”

“Like what?” Gypsy asked.

“Like things people did not want to part with,” Lacey supplied and watched as her cousin's jaw dropped.

Chapter 2

“He sent you to steal things?” Gypsy's voice rose in bewilderment. “I can't believe Grandpa would encourage you to do something so dangerous.”

“How do you think he got into this business in the first place?” Lacey asked with a slight smile.

“I've only heard rumors,” Gypsy whispered more than a little amazed by the confession. Some of the highest ranking people at the underground auctions had been throwing her hints for the last couple years. She'd just nodded politely at them and smiled, then bleached the rumors from her mind not wanting to think too hard on them.

She sighed as she admitted, “I just shrugged it all off thinking they were picking on me because we often got a hold of things the others wanted very badly.”

“They had every right to be jealous. Grandpa was a notorious cat burglar in his prime and he was able to get his hands on a lot of valuable items during those years,” Lacey confirmed with pride in her voice.

“His specialty was supernatural items... old spell books, journals, paintings, and various magical items. Underground rumor mills say that he actually found the Holy Grail and hid it from the man that hired him to find it. I seriously doubt he did, but it only adds to the myth that surrounds Grandpa.”

Gypsy frowned, “How did he stay alive all these years going after such dangerous items?”

Lacey shrugged, “Who knows? Grandpa made a lot of enemies before he retired from his favorite pastime. No one could prove it was him because he had mastered the art of thievery. One of the first things he’d stolen was a cloaking device that rendered him completely undetectable. His shield against most of those enemies who did suspect him was the fact that a lot of the things they thought he might have stolen were powerful enough to be used against them if they retaliated.”

“A cloaking device,” Gypsy repeated with wide eyes. “Like Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak?”

“I don’t know... I never got to see it since it disappeared before either of us was born,” Lacey answered. “I guess someone else was an even better thief than Grandpa.”

“No wonder what’s left of our family moved out of the city and warned us about hanging out with Grandpa. I thought it was just because they assumed that he was a nut for believing in the supernatural and running a store like this.” Gypsy shook her head remembering all of the times she’d stood up for him. She still didn’t regret it though. She had loved him and that was all that mattered to her.

“Oh no,” Lacey contradicted her. “The family has no idea. He wanted it that way. He would always act strange around them on purpose... so that they would label him as a weird outcast and stay far away. He didn’t want to put any of them in danger if

someone did come after him.”

Lacey's lips hinted at a sad frown as she thought back to when she'd first moved in with Grandpa... right here in this store. When she'd been nine years old, her parents had been killed in a freak accident and her grandfather had showed up to claim her within hours. He had no way of knowing if the accident was truly an accident or not and had confessed that secret worry to her after she'd learned the truth about him.

It was the theory that her parents might have been murdered over some paranormal trinket that had eventually made her want to seek revenge against anyone hording supernatural items in hopes that she'd run across the one that had killed them. Nothing had ever turned up though and she'd quickly become addicted to the thrill of the job. That... and the money wasn't bad either.

“It was my idea to follow in his footsteps and he was against it from the start,” She reminisced. “But after a while, I wore him down by going out and thieving on my own. I made sure he caught me doing it so that he had no choice but to train me on how to get in and out without being detected. It wasn't his idea but I left him no other choice. It was either let me do it on my own and get myself killed, or teach me all of his tricks and hope for the best.”

“I see,” Gypsy shook her head at her devious cousin and almost felt sorry for her grandfather. “Poor Grandpa didn't have a chance.”

“Yeah well... I got in way over my head with this last job,” Lacey confessed. “It was my fault and Grandpa shouldn't have

blamed himself. He knew I was headstrong and he'd done the best he could."

"Oh no," Gypsy whispered making a face. "You were gone for more than a year. What exactly happened to you?" She reached out and touched Lacey's cheek with the pad of her thumb, wiping away a smudge of the dirt there. "Is that why you're dressed like a dirty boy and sneaking around? Are you running from something... or someone?"

"A little bit of both I'm afraid. I shouldn't even be here right now and the less you know about what's been going on the better." She glanced toward the door knowing she should follow her grandpa's lead and protect the family by keeping her distance. "I was supposed to be in and out of here without anyone noticing, but your guard dog had to go and ruin everything."

Gypsy noticed Lacey starting to fidget and the way she was now looking longingly toward the door like she wanted to leave. Not wanting her to go, Gypsy quickly blurted, "There is a clause in grandpa's will about you... he never gave up on you coming home."

Lacey smiled fondly, "He always did look after us."

Gypsy nodded earnestly, "Yes he did and that's why he left half ownership of the shop to you in his will. The Witch's Brew is half yours and half mine. Even though you weren't around, I still had them fix the deed exactly like Grandpa wanted it. We're business partners now, and we can run this place together if you'll just stay."

“I don’t know,” Lacey whispered. Her days were numbered. Even if she had gotten the spell book and damaged the demon mark... they would still eventually catch up to her and that would be the end. She started to pull her hand away from Gypsy's but her cousin kept a firm hold. “You don’t know what you’re asking. If I stay... it could be dangerous for the both of us... not just me.”

“I have very powerful friends now and they can help you... keep you safe from whomever or whatever it is you’re so scared of,” Gypsy said raising her chin. “After what’s been going on around here... I’m a little tougher than you remember and can handle it.”

Lacey closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The store she’d always loved was half hers... bless Grandpa’s soul. He’d always said that she reminded him of himself when he was younger and had eventually took pride in that instead of thinking it was a bad thing. Of course, she could also remember his long lectures about getting herself killed. Yep... if he could see her now, the first words out of his mouth would be I told you so.

Gypsy could tell she was winning and added, “You can even tell me what you wanted out of the safe, and I’ll ask Ren to return it for you if it’ll help you feel safer.” She’d been so lonely since Lacey had disappeared and Grandpa had passed away. She’d been convinced Lacey was dead and had even mourned her. Seeing her here now... the last thing she wanted was to lose her all over again.

Lacey's mind was going a mile a minute. She wanted to stay so badly, but did she dare underestimate the demons chasing her by letting her guard down? On top of everything else, one of Gypsy's friends was a demon... or a superhuman, or something and it made her a bit jittery. That was when something Gypsy had said made her think and a devious smile spread across her lips.

"Gypsy," she began thoughtfully, "you said the spell you have on the shop... that only the owner can invite people in... right? I'm half owner of the shop, so if I tell someone to leave... they have to leave?"

"That's right, you get to say who can come in and who can't if they are not one hundred percent human," Gypsy confirmed with a quick nod then gasped when Lacey suddenly leaned forward and gave her a tight hug.

"That means I can tell anyone that bothers me to leave including your overbearing bodyguard," Lacey said with a giggle, feeling nervous now that she'd convinced herself that the smartest move she could make was to stay right here where she had a demon shield around her. Maybe she would just become a recluse, or at least have a heads up on when it was time to face her demons.

"Oh please don't evict the boys," Gypsy said and pulled back almost laughing at the disappointed pout on Lacey's face. "If it wasn't for Ren and Nick, I would either be dead or the slave of a demon and you wouldn't have had a shop to come back to. I owe both of them my life. And as far as Ren goes, you can't

use the spell he helped put on this place against him.” She hid a guilty smile knowing she’d already done that once in the name of testing the spell.

Lacey nearly rolled her eyes but nodded to let her cousin know she would behave... as best she could anyway. “Can you at least keep my secret? The less people that know about what I have been doing the better. To be honest, I shouldn’t have even told you. Besides, I’d rather get along with your harem instead of fighting with them.”

Gypsy was about to answer when they heard the large wheel on the door turn, making both girls jump in surprise. She sighed heavily knowing that the boys had either decided that they’d waited long enough, or they had heard everything... she’d rather it be the former.

The girls watched wearily as the thick steel door swung open and Ren stepped in, followed by Nick. Ren didn’t look happy at all, while Nick had an understanding expression on his calm face.

“I’m afraid it’s a little too late for secrets,” Ren stated in satisfaction. “We’ve already heard everything.”

Lacey just stared at him knowing they had only heard what she’d just told Gypsy and... that was just the tip of the iceberg. If they truly knew everything, they would have already tossed her out the door and locked it behind her.

Nick noticed the intense look Ren was giving Lacey and wondered if the idiot was actually going to lay into the girl for being the thief he’d originally accused her of being. In the deepest

part of his mind, he hoped Ren did do something stupid so that the girls could put him out on his ass.

Deciding to wait and see what happened, Nick walked over to stand near the side of the sofa where Gypsy was and watch the show.

Knowing they were busted, Gypsy quickly pulled her hand away from the crystal and cringed when Ren stared down at it with an expression of disappointment. She didn't understand why, but being caught by Ren made her feel like a child and she frowned, scooting across the cushion to get closer to Nick.

"Under ordinary circumstances, a privacy crystal might have worked with your grandpa and your other relatives... but I'm not human," Ren informed them both but his words were meant for Lacey. "And after what I just heard, I think keeping secrets isn't the best idea... in fact, it's a very bad one and you," he added pinning Lacey with a hard stare, "didn't tell nearly half the story."

Lacey pressed her lips together and gave him her most defiant glare, "No one asked you to eavesdrop you little sneak."

Ren was suddenly towering over Lacey, staring down at her with his intense silver eyes and his sunglasses in his fisted hand. How dare she call him little, he was twice her size.

Gypsy jumped up and quickly moved to stand behind Nick when Ren slammed both of his palms against the back of the sofa, caging Lacey against the cushions.

"Start talking," Ren ordered in a harsh voice hoping intimidation was the key to getting the details he wanted.

Now that Gypsy was behind him and couldn't see his expression, Nick's lips spread into a wide grin. He took a step back, bringing his body that much closer to hers, silently letting her know that he would protect her from the big bad out of control Ren. It wasn't his fault Ren was making him look like the good guy.

Lacey glared up at Ren with equal ferocity and slipped something out of her pocket, palming it without anyone noticing. Feeling the thin warm metal against her skin, she surprised everyone when she slammed her palm against Ren's chest and easily shoved him away from her.

"Back off," she insisted calmly.

Ren felt something stinging his skin through his shirt and did indeed take a reluctant step back. His lips thinned knowing she had some kind of enchanted medallion in her hand and with one quick motion he jerked it away from her. When it instantly burned his hand, he slung it across the room.

"Enough with the childish toys?" he growled, silently wishing his hand would stop stinging. Whatever that was... it hadn't liked him very much and the feeling was mutual.

"I don't have to tell you a damn thing," Lacey said keeping her voice unhurried and even as she rose to her feet.

The fact that the medallion had worked so well on him let her know he was powerful. It only reacted to power and usually wouldn't even work on low level demons because they didn't have enough of it. Honestly, she hadn't expected it to work on him...

it was just the only thing she'd had within reaching distance.

"I may be only human but don't make the mistake of underestimating me." Lacey exhaled loudly when Ren took a threatening step toward her. "I don't even know you," she informed him with a raise of her eyebrow.

Ren ran a hand through his bangs in exasperation and silently counted to ten... not that it was helping.

Ignoring Ren, Lacey directed her gaze toward Gypsy. "I'm going to get out of these boy clothes and take a shower. Did Grandpa save any of the clothes I left here?"

Gypsy nodded deciding Lacey had more balls than she remembered, though her cousin had never really been a push over. "They are packed away in the trunk in the closet."

Lacey smiled thankfully, "Good, I'll see you in a few minutes. And you," she continued, sending another glare at Ren and paying him back for the way he'd done her just a few minutes ago, "don't you even think about peeking."

"As if," Ren said insultingly and crossed his arms over his chest as he gave her the once over, "you look like a dirty little street rat."

Lacey let a smirk appear on her face deciding that if she couldn't beat him at the insult game then she would have fun with him, "You know you want to."

"I think you have it backwards," Ren glowered down at her. "You're the one known to pick the lock and slip in where you are uninvited."

Giving up, Lacey threw the silencing crystal still in her hand at him and took off for the shower, slamming the door behind her.

Ren smirked as he caught the crystal in midflight and skillfully pocketed the trinket... they wouldn't be using that little bit of magic again.

"She forgot her clothes," Nick remarked nodding toward the closet Gypsy had indicated.

Within seconds, the door flew open again and Lacey stormed out grumbling under her breath about needing a testosterone free zone. She went straight to the closet and dragged the trunk into view.

Gypsy lifted an eyebrow and fought the grin that tried to appear on her face when Lacey pulled the heavy trunk into the bathroom with her and slammed the door again, never once even looking their way.

The moment they all heard the shower turn on Gypsy let her light tinkling laughter fill the room. It was going to be so much fun having her cousin back. If nothing else... the girl was entertaining and had been her best friend as far back as she could remember.

"I fail to see why you're so amused," Ren grumbled and stormed out of the apartment, stomping his feet all the way up the stairs. He had no clue how the hell he could be this aggravated and turned on at the same time.

Nick snorted and looked over at Gypsy, "I do believe they were just flirting with each other."

Gypsy nodded liking the idea. Maybe this would be another reason for Lacey to stay. “Well, if she is in trouble... and I suspect she is, who better to protect her than Ren?” she said with a smile.

Nick didn't know whether to be jealous that she thought Ren was a better protector than he was, or to be happy that Gypsy seemed fine with Ren and Lacey's weird attraction to each other. He thought about it for a second then gave in... silently admitting Ren was bigger, stronger, and way more powerful. Too bad the big guy's downfall was the fact he was lacking a few brain cells.

Ren had heard Nick's crack but ignored what he was insinuating. Flirting... there was no way in hell he would ever think about being attracted to that brat. She was sarcastic, devious, and a thief... all minuses in his book. He made it up the stairs and started pacing back and forth in the huge storage area.

“She actually ordered me... ME not to peek,” he ranted in a harsh whisper as he paced.

Chapter 3

Lacey sighed when the hot water sprayed over her body and relished the feeling of finally being completely free of the bindings that she'd had wrapped around her breasts to make herself look like a teenage boy. She had a good notion to burn the stolen clothes she'd been wearing.

She grabbed the scrubby from where it was hanging on the tub faucet and turned the heat up a little more. For her, relaxing was a luxury she'd been unable to partake of since running away from Vincent and the horde of demons that were after her.

Vincent... even the name called up feelings of guilt and she frowned sadly. She'd met him a couple days after she'd gotten a layout of the huge museum Grandpa had sent her to. It just so happened that they had both been sent by different people to steal the same artifact.

Her lips twitched at the funny memory... the look on Vincent's handsome face when he'd caught her breaking into the same secret room he was there to break into. If they had tried to fight over which one of them had gotten there first and who deserved the spoils, they would have alerted the heavily armed guards that were just down the hall and been busted, or worse... shot.

Glaring at each other, it took them about thirty seconds to come to a mutual decision to work together in order to gain the

piece. Though thinking back on it now, she realized that Vincent would have been fine either way... he had only agreed to the tag team because he'd wanted too.

Once they'd made it safely away from the museum, they had suddenly been surrounded by five black eyed shadow demons that had taken up host inside some of the local law enforcement by possessing them.

Standing there in the flashing lights of the cop cars with hands raised and five sets of guns pointed directly at them, she'd thought for sure that they weren't going to make it out of there alive. That was until Vincent had handed one of them the stolen artifact and been handed a huge briefcase of money in return.

Afterward, Vincent had offered to split the money with her and asked her to go into business with him. Without thinking of the consequences, she'd agreed to the partnership deciding that she could get even more things for her grandfather by using Vincent's ties to these new aggressive collectors.

She had been excited about finally having a partner and she'd seen that he could be just as sneaky as she was. It also didn't hurt that he was sexy as hell and had a British accent that made it sound like he was flirting with every sentence.

Lacey shook her head at her naïve thinking as she lathered her hair up with shampoo. She'd agreed to the arrangement out of greed and because he was damn sexy... her only two weaknesses.

After a night and most of the next day of hot as hell, no strings attached sex, Vincent had told her a little bit about the

underground ring he belonged to. It hadn't taken her long to figure out that being partners with him meant she was also partners with an entire network of powerful demons.

Thanks to grandpa, she hadn't been completely clueless about demons but that didn't mean she'd ever danced with one. Though the knowledge of what she was getting herself into had made her nervous, she'd ignored the sixth sense and had been looking forward to the thrill Vincent was offering her.

That evening, he'd taken her to meet the master demon of the underground ring... an old man that looked every bit a hundred and ten years old and went by the name of Masters, which she'd thought funny at the time.

When the old demon had coldly rejected her invite into the underground thievery ring and tried to kill her on the spot, she'd lost all sense of humor. If it hadn't been for Vincent stepping in front of her and taking the bullet meant for her head, she'd be dead right now. She'd thought Vincent was dead when he'd jerked and groaned as the bullet entered him, sending a spray of blood across her face.

That was the first time she'd been clued in that Vincent couldn't be killed... no matter what was done to him. He'd dug the bullet out of his shoulder as he'd argued with the black eyed demon on her behalf, saying he'd wanted a partner for years and he'd chosen her.

Seeing how Vincent was his favorite thief, Masters had reluctantly agreed, but only if he could brand her as one of his

underlings, giving him rights to kill her if she ever got out of line or tried to leave the group.

Vincent had calmly looked over his bleeding shoulder at her and said, "It's either that, or he will never let you leave this room alive. Do you agree to the deal?"

She had been taught by her grandfather not to ever make a deal with a demon but she wasn't stupid enough to disagree with the one in front of her. As she'd looked into his cold black eyes she'd known he would indeed kill her and forget her with the same breath.

Once they'd left Masters' huge estate, she'd turned on Vincent and glared, thinking that he was also a demon... or at least a half breed of some kind and hadn't warned her. She quickly informed the good looking jerk that she was thankful that he'd saved her life in there, but she had a rule about not sleeping with demons.

Vincent had then calmly taken a hold of her shoulders and asked her to look closely at the blood staining his shirt... it was red. Had he been a demon it would have been black. Once she'd calmed down he'd went on to explain his... unusual circumstances. He'd informed her that he was completely human in every sense of the word but somewhere along the way he'd been cursed by the angels.

She wasn't sure what he'd meant by angels since he wouldn't elaborate but the bottom line was Vincent just couldn't die. Correction... he could die but never seemed to stay dead for very long. He'd even unbuttoned his shirt letting her see that the bullet

wound had already stopped bleeding and was healing at a rapid pace.

Lacey empathized with his situation as she'd gotten to know him better, understanding that he'd lived for so long he was bored, fearless, lonely... and very angry that he was still alive while everyone he'd ever cared for was dead.

She and Vincent had made several agreements pertaining to their partnership and friendship. The first one was that she wouldn't try to run away because although he couldn't die, Vincent was pretty sure she could and would once Masters caught up with her. The other agreement was that they would continue their no strings attached relationship which she'd enjoyed immensely.

It wasn't that she didn't love him... she did. But it was more as a best friend, which was a good thing since he claimed to have lost the ability to give his heart away eons ago. For him, falling in love with someone would only lead to heartache as he watched them grow old and die... leaving him behind. She understood completely.

It was during her partnership with Vincent that she learned a couple truths about the greatest thief of their time... her grandfather. He'd gone by the name of Chameleon and never gave any other name. He'd also been so good at the art of deception that he had never failed a single job he'd been hired to do... and no doubt any he'd taken on in secret.

By the way they had described him as a master of disguise and

the fact that he went by Chameleon, she'd known right off the bat it was Grandpa, though she'd never shared that information with anyone, not even Vincent. The most agreed upon theory was that he'd been a shape shifter, which in her opinion was the closest to the truth since no one knew grandpa had the cloaking device.

The demon world was still trying to find him but many believed he was dead. After his final job, which was to steal a soul orb from an original, he'd promptly vanished taking the orb with him. No one had been able to find him since... they'd searched, of that Lacey had no doubt. Little did they know that the soul orb in question was sitting in a concrete safe in the middle of LA surrounded by a demon ward.

Because of that, Lacey knew it would have been dangerous to get in touch with any member of her family for fear the demons would find her grandfather. She'd known better than to contact him herself. He wouldn't have understood and probably come for her, surely getting himself killed in the process.

She'd kept her silence for more than a year, never breathing a word of his whereabouts as she became deeper and deeper entangled in the high-end thievery ring. As soon as she noticed that she was no longer being watched so closely, she started planning her great escape. She'd even warned Vincent that she was going to do it the first chance she had.

He'd reminded her about the mark Masters had placed on her shoulder, but she'd considered what to do about that. She'd ensured him her next stop would be to break into a certain safe

that she knew held a spell book that would help her with the demon mark... she just didn't tell him it was her grandfather's safe. As far as Vincent knew, she didn't even have a grandfather.

The last two missions they'd been sent out on had been so dangerous that she'd nearly gotten herself killed both times and would have if Vincent hadn't been there to take the injuries for her. He'd given himself up so she could get away. Both times he'd been brutally killed and his body dumped only for him to make his way back once he'd woken up healed.

Finally agreeing that it was getting too dangerous for her to stick around, Vincent had offered to help her escape. It just so happened that the next mission landed them right back at the same museum they had met at. The job involved them stealing a device that was said to incapacitate all demons within a hundred yards of it when it was triggered. Perfect.

The plan was that only one of them would return from this job. Their hopes was that when Vincent gave the device to Masters, the demon would be focused on the device that was obviously a weapon against his kind and wouldn't come after her right away, giving her time to get to the spell she needed to counteract the mark Masters had put on her.

They'd easily stolen the object that, to her, looked a lot like a ten sided metal Rubik's Cube that was covered with golden symbols instead of colors. While they were there, they knocked the guards out and had stolen their weapons. Vincent had then turned and given her a cute little 'goodbye dear friend' speech

and a quick kiss on the cheek.

The problem arose as they'd made their way out of the museum only to find Masters and a horde of demons waiting on them. Masters had laughed, saying that the mark he'd given her had given him a warning of what she was planning... right down to the fact that she was the granddaughter of the Chameleon and was running back to him where there was a whole safe of things he was now interested in... including the soul orb.

Masters had then nodded at Vincent, thanking him for keeping her distracted and unaware of the mark's true power.

She had glared up at Vincent accusingly then snatched the device from his hand and prayed she knew what she was doing as she started quickly turning it. She'd been obsessed over a picture of the Cube before coming to the museum to steal it and used that memory to rapidly link the symbols together.

One by one, the demons started going down in agonizing pain but not Masters... no, that son of a bitch began walking straight toward her with an enraged glint in his eyes.

That's when Vincent had moved. She'd not noticed him taking an ancient blade from the same hidden vault the Cube had been in, but there it was in his hand and he was holding it against the demon's throat. In a movement just as quick, the demon plunged his hand all of the way through Vincent's chest and out his back.

"Run," Vincent growled at her just before his eyes slid shut and the demon's head fell to the ground beside him.

All of the other demons were glaring at her from their prone

positions, so she laid the Cube on the ground at her feet and did exactly what Vincent had told her to do... she ran like hell.

She had no way of knowing if Masters had told anyone what he knew about her and prayed the greedy son of a bitch hadn't shared her secrets in fear that another demon would beat him to the legendary soul orb. Her thoughts kept straying back to Vincent, wondering if he was okay or if he was being tortured for his role in helping her escape.

They couldn't kill him permanently, but she was well aware there were a lot worse things than staying dead... being brutally killed over and over again being one of them.

She glanced back down at her shoulder knowing she had to get that spell and counteract the mark so that Vincent's sacrifice wasn't for nothing. She let the hot water of the shower wash the silent tears from her face as she renewed her determination.

Upstairs, Ren suddenly stopped pacing and looked straight down hearing the water pumping through the system. A devious smirk appeared on his face when he realized that he was standing directly above the bathroom downstairs where Lacey was. His gaze followed the sound over to the wall where the pipes that ran water through the whole place went down to the floor and into the bomb shelter.

She'd been in that shower long enough and he was ready to try again with the interrogation.

Walking over to the pipes, he placed his hand on the one he wanted and closed his eyes, concentrating on the temperature

gauge of the water heater. His lips pulled into a satisfied smile as frost appeared under his fingers on the brass pipe. The scream that rang through the bomb shelter made everyone except Ren jump in surprise.

In the steamy shower, the water had gone from scalding hot to freezing cold in less than a second making Lacey flinch out from under the spraying water. In the process, she slipped on the slick bottom of the tub and stumbled out nearly taking the shower curtain with her.

“Lacey!” Gypsy called out worriedly.

Lacey untangled herself from the shower curtain and pushed it aside thankful it hadn’t been pulled down.

“I’m fine,” Lacey shouted glaring at the shower head. “You need a new water heater... the damn thing just went from hot to arctic cold in less than a second.”

Gypsy frowned on the other side of the door wondering what had made the water do that. She’d taken an hour long shower earlier and the hot water had been just fine.

“I’ll have Ren check it out,” Gypsy called back through the closed door. “He has a way of manipulating machines and making them work even after they’ve stopped operating.”

Lacey turned her head and stared wide eyed at the door hearing Gypsy’s explanation and immediately knew what had happened.

“This means war,” she hissed under her breath then not having a choice, she stepped back into the chilly spray to rinse the rest

of the soap out of her hair.

Ren was upstairs sitting on the floor with his back against the wall and a grin on his face. Moments later he heard footsteps on the stairway and didn't bother to hide his smile when he saw it was Nick.

"I knew it," Nick exclaimed in a loud whisper. "But I have to admit... that was pretty good."

Ren patted the cold pipe beside him, "I do have my moments."

Nick ran a hand through his hair, "I'd be careful around her... Gypsy just told her that you have a way with machines."

Ren's grin widened, "Well, ain't that a damn shame."

"You're having way too much fun," Nick accused.

"Of course I am," Ren agreed. "Now let's go back down and see if I can figure out what's wrong with Gypsy's poor water heater."

Nick snorted and shook his head as Ren wandered back down to the bunker. He was so enjoying the fact that all of Ren's attention seemed to be centered on Lacey now instead of Gypsy.

Ren walked into the living room just in time to hear the shower stop running. He glanced at Gypsy seeing that she was sitting on the sofa with a frown on her face.

"What's wrong?" Ren asked with an innocent expression.

"My water heater has suddenly stopped working," Gypsy explained and glanced at the bathroom door. "Lacey said it turned ice cold like that," she snapped her fingers.

"That must have sucked," Ren said making Nick turn around

to avoid Gypsy seeing the wide grin on his face.

Lacey was shivering by the time she got out of the shower and quickly dried herself off. Wrapping the towel around her, she walked to the mirror over the sink and realized that she did look and feel better now that she wasn't hiding under a layer of dirt and clothing that was way too big.

Taking up Gypsy's hairbrush, she began running it through her long dark hair. Turning around, she continued brushing out her hair while she opened the large trunk... smiling when she saw all the clothes she'd left behind. She fought the urge to reach in and throw everything in the air just so she could roll around on the floor in it. Her things... she had missed them.

Reaching in, she took out an electric purple colored dress and a pair of black sandals and set them on top of the chest along with a matching set of bra and panties. Turning back to the mirror, she finished brushing her hair and put the brush back on the sink. Her head tilted to the side contemplating the small collection of cosmetics Gypsy had and made quick work at applying some and blow drying her hair.

She glanced back up in the mirror only to gasp when she saw the same mark that was on her shoulder now scrawled across it along with a silky black image staring back at her instead of her own reflection. A true scream of terror left her lips when the inky darkness reached through the mirror toward her.

Lacey stumbled backwards and nearly tripped over the trunk in her rush to stay out of its reach. Her back hit the wall of the

bathroom as the overly long arms continued to reach toward her and its creepy looking lips moved in a rhythm that she could tell was some kind of chant.

She jumped when the door to the bathroom suddenly flew inward and Ren was standing in the doorway with Gypsy directly behind him. Lacey looked wide eyed from them back to the mirror and wanted to scream again in frustration when she saw the 3D image of the demon had vanished and a thin layer of ice crystals was now covering the mirror.

Ren's breath froze in his chest as he noticed her transformation from dirty street boy to soft supple skin, clean silky hair and a body that made him wish he'd been the soap. He'd known she was beautiful but again he'd underestimated her. His vision instantly narrowed in on the towel that was partially open and exposing the side of Lacey that was facing him, stopping just short of her nipple and smooth mound.

He quickly forced himself to avert his eyes by following her gaze to the mirror and frowned seeing the layer of ice that had formed there. The mirror chose that exact moment to crack from the cold temperature, the sound echoing ominously in the sudden silence.

Lacey's eyes widened seeing the suspicious look on Ren's face and quickly thought of a way to distract him from the mirror.

“What in the hell do you think you're doing busting through the bathroom door while I'm in here you pervert?” she yelled at him as she righted herself and tried to fix her wayward towel.

“We thought you were in trouble,” Gypsy offered softly from behind him.

Lacey sighed dramatically, “Well, as you can see I’m just fine. Thought I saw something in the mirror is all. Now if you don’t mind,” she slammed the door in Ren’s face again. “Told you that you wouldn’t be able to keep from peeking,” She taunted him through the door.

“If you say so,” Ren shot back narrowing his gaze. “I’m not the one that screamed at my own reflection.”

“Ren,” Gypsy admonished him then snapped her lips shut when she noticed the hard determined look on his face.

Lacey opened her mouth to yell something back but found she’d drawn a complete blank. She’d declared a personal war on him but could never find anything worth saying that would outdo him.

“Damn he’s good,” she whispered then looked nervously back toward the mirror. No longer feeling safe, she quickly started dressing.

Ren smirked when he heard her compliment but it didn’t last long as his thoughts turned back to the mirror and the strange ice formation. He’d made the water in the pipes cold but it would not have affected the mirror or anything else in the bathroom. No... her scream had been as real as the fear he’d seen on her face when he’d first opened the door.

Wanting to give Ren more time alone with Lacey to hopefully flame the spark that he could tell was there, Nick glanced down

at the time on his cell phone then back over at Gypsy, “Are you ready? It’s almost nine o’clock.”

Gypsy's eyes brightened and she smiled up at him, looking forward to her first day back in business. She was a little more than curious on how she was going to pull off inviting her nonhuman customers one at a time into her shop when they came in contact with her barrier. It was also going to be fun when someone she'd known for years tried to come in and couldn't... giving themselves away as a paranormal. If nothing else... today would be very informative.

“Well, this should prove interesting. I’m glad the normal humans can walk in without an invite or I’d have to stand at the door all day like a greeter at Wal-Mart. ‘Good morning, won’t you please come in,’” she giggled as she swept her hand in front of her with the invite making Nick smirk.

Gypsy looked over her shoulder at Ren, “You two play nice now.” She quickly took off up the stairs before Ren could say anything to stop her.

Nick's lips twitched but he didn't say anything either since Ren was now sporting a brooding frown. Shoving his hands deeper into his pockets, he followed Gypsy upstairs so he could put up the Halloween sign that he'd made. Most would think it was just a Halloween decoration but it plainly stated, ‘All Paranormals Must Ask Permission Before Entering’. He intended to put it on the door right at eye level so it wouldn't be missed.

Ren rubbed his chin as he stared thoughtfully at the bathroom

door. He'd been right in thinking Lacey had been wearing a scent masking spritzer when she'd broken in here last night. Now that she'd showered all of it off, he could smell her. That helpful little power was probably coming to him from the love sick kitty that had just followed Gypsy upstairs.

He could smell her fear now, coupled with the sound of her rapid breathing as she rushed to get dressed. She had lied to him again. Whatever she'd seen in that mirror had truly scared her and he was well aware that asking her would do no good. That was when he decided that enough was enough.

Pulling out his cell phone, Ren mentally dialed Storm's number and waited, smiling when it was picked up in the middle of the first ring.

"I'll see if I can snag Zachary for you," Storm said and abruptly hung up before Ren could get a word in edgewise. It didn't even faze him when the other two men immediately appeared in Gypsy's living room with him.

"What the hell Storm," Zachary complained while tucking his unbuttoned shirt back into his unbuttoned pants. He was going to have to have a talk with the Time Walker about winking in and out of his bedroom like that. It was bad enough that Nighthawk had a habit of pulling that little stunt. "I was in the middle of something very important as you could damn well see."

"This won't take but a minute," Ren said and smiled deviously knowing exactly what Zachary had been in the middle of. He knew Storm's sense of humor well enough to know that the way

the Time Walker saw it... timing was everything.

He took his sunglasses off and slid them into his pocket knowing that for a moment he would have to look Lacey directly in the eyes while using the Phoenix's power.

Chapter 4

Lacey finished getting dressed, avoiding the mirror as much as possible as she silently ranted to herself. Why the hell did that guy insist on coming to her rescue... she was just fine thank you very much. Sure, she'd had her moments of being scared out of her wits but nothing she couldn't handle. Her irritation drained out of her knowing now that the demons had found her she wouldn't be alive long enough to get even with him.

She closed the trunk and shoved it in the corner before skirting the wall so she could stay out of the mirror's reflection on her way toward the door.

Ren's smile became downright wicked when the doorknob began to turn and he teleported directly in front of the bathroom door. He didn't let her take more than one step before quickly reaching out and palming her forehead, simultaneously cradling the back of her head with his other hand to keep her still.

Tilting her head up, he leaned forward and locked his mercury gaze with hers.

Lacey parted her lips to yell at him but her voice suddenly failed her when she saw dark flames erupt in his beautiful silver eyes. In an instant, detailed flashes of the past year began to race through her mind so fast that she could hardly keep up with them. The flood of emotions that followed the visions overwhelmed her.

Scared of what was happening, she tried to pull out of Ren's tight hold, but with her mind going into overload her body went numb and she couldn't move.

Ren held Lacey still as a multitude of memories flooded his mind letting him see everything and even experience some of the emotions that went along with them. It was pure stubbornness that kept him from falling to his knees from the impact. He took it all in, from the moment she had met Vincent up until the vision of the creature reaching through the bathroom mirror for her.

He breathed heavily through his nose seeing the intimate moments between Vincent and her and felt a near blinding jealousy tinged with hatred for the man that had gotten her in this dangerous situation. How dare he touch her so gently after showing such disregard for her life?

Having seen enough, Ren released her with a harsh growl which was immediately followed by a loud crack that echoed in the quiet room. His head snapped to the side when her palm struck the side of his face and he knew he deserved that, but there was no way in hell he would ever apologize for the invasion.

"How dare you do that to me you jerk," Lacey quietly raged. Seeing the dark flames slowly vanish from his silver eyes, she knew without a doubt that he'd watched the memories along with her. "Who the hell do you think you are invading my private thoughts like that?"

"Yeah, that's the reaction I normally get too," Zachary managed with a wide smirk on his face.

Lacey peeked around Ren to see who'd spoken but only caught a fleeting glimpse of two other men as they vanished into thin air.

"Why?" Lacey demanded, completely dismissing the fact that she'd just seen someone teleport out of there like they'd been beamed up to the mother ship. That didn't rattle her half as much as the fact that the man in front of her had just stolen all of her secrets. "And you have the nerve to call me a thief?"

Ren looked down at her with a stoic expression, "You wouldn't have told me anything otherwise, and if you remember correctly... I was nice enough to ask several times. You left me no choice but to call on a very powerful friend to help me get the answers I needed. It's a good thing I did too, because you're in a hell of a lot of trouble."

"The trouble is mine to deal with, not yours," Lacey countered.

Ren leaned closer to her and smirked when she backed up against the door frame. "For your information, not everyone around here is a bad guy and might even be able to help you out of this mess your in." He raised a dark eyebrow before slipping his sunglasses back on.

"I'm sorry if I'm a little skittish about trusting people right now... especially another demon," Lacey said wishing he would take the sunglasses back off. "Surely you can understand why."

"I'll let you in on one of my secrets if it will make you feel better," Ren offered quietly. "I am human, but I have the ability to... copy... take on the traits of other paranormals as long as

they're inside my succubus range.”

Lacey frowned, “Succubus? I thought a succubus was female... in fact I know they're female. Wouldn't that make you an incubus?”

Ren shook his head, “I'm not a real succubus, that's just what we've always called it considering I seem to suck any power out of thin air when around anyone that has enough power for me to do so. And it's not by choice either... it happens whether I want it to or not. If I'm around more than one paranormal, then I get more than one type of power.”

“So you are a thief,” Lacey pointed out with a satisfied smile.

Ren's smile matched hers as he quickly corrected her assumption, “I can't take their power away from them but I can match them equally, which comes in very handy when I find myself fighting one.”

“If you don't know what you really are, then how do you know that you're not a demon or at least a half breed?” she asked curious now.

“Because demon blood is black,” Ren said remembering the way Vincent had earned her trust. He glanced down at the sharp looking letter opener on Gypsy's computer desk. Picking it up, he sliced it across his palm and let her see the crimson color that had time to bead up on the wound seconds before it began to heal.

Lacey's stomach muscles clenched when he hissed softly from the self-inflicted wound. She quickly looked up at his face feeling guilt wash over her for causing him to do it just to prove to her

that he wasn't lying. In a way, he reminded her of Vincent... human yet not.

"As you can see... I bleed just fine and it's red." Ren tossed the opener back on the desk. "I am completely human as long as there are only humans nearby... but as it just so happens, there is a demon war going on here in L.A. This place is teeming with demons and other paranormals at the moment. I even know of a couple Gods that are hanging around. My powers tend to change as they all move in and out of my range."

"Why are you telling me this?" Lacey asked knowing that was something he should always keep secret... she would have.

"Think of it as a penance for forcing the truth from you by snatching it out of your memories. I'm sorry it came to that," Ren said honestly. "I have my moments of being a right bastard but know this... I will do my best to protect you if you let me. That means the next time something comes at you from a mirror, you don't lie about it... you scream for me."

Lacey blinked when he said 'scream for me' and her mind hit to gutter. "You can't read my thoughts right now can you?" she quickly asked feeling heat rush up into her cheeks.

Ren frowned and tried to hear what she was thinking but all he was getting was silence... then it dawned on him that she had more than one mark on her body. He had seen it when she'd almost lost her towel in the bathroom. It made him wonder what other secrets she was hiding.

"The small symbol that is tattooed just under your left breast is

actually a barrier that keeps others from reading your thoughts,” he said now knowing why he could hear Nick without trying but couldn’t hear her even when he had been concentrating so hard.

Lacey could feel the heat rise into her cheeks as she stared up at him unable to decide if she was turned on or pissed off. It didn’t take a genius to figure out just what his attention had been on when he’d first barged into the bathroom. She could have sworn she saw the silver of his eyes glowing through his sunglasses and glanced away as her heartbeat sped up.

“Well... glad to hear that the tattoo actually works,” she managed with a straight face before spinning around to retrieve the trunk out of the bathroom. She would be dead soon but her clothes still needed to be hung up and besides, she couldn’t just stand there and stare at him all day... it was turning her on.

Not hearing anything else, Nick moved away from the top of the stairway where he’d been eavesdropping and walked out into the main part of the shop. He grinned and gave Gypsy a thumb’s up, making the young woman smile fondly at him.

He glanced around the room counting how many customers were browsing. So far there were five and she hadn’t had to invite any of them in. He kept his eyes on the leader of the local Wicca group as she approached Gypsy wanting to know if the shipment she’d ordered last week had arrived.

Gypsy ducked into the back room and he started to follow her in case any of it was heavy but paused when the bell above the door jingled. His sixth sense was way higher than a normal

human's and Nick had to suppress his growl as he turned to see the demons just beyond the doorway.

They both looked like they were ex-military with their buzz cuts and hard expressions, but he'd become a pro at spotting demons recently. Like soulless vampires, their scent always gave them away.

A very handsome young man stepped between them and into the store before pausing. He looked over his shoulder at his two companions that were still standing just outside the threshold and wanted to laugh when he noticed them looking down at the floor directly in front of them in agitation.

When they both looked up at him accusingly, he just smirked and shrugged his shoulders, "Sorry chaps." He could tell they knew he wasn't the least bit sorry judging by the way they were glaring at him but he didn't rightly care what they thought. "Looks like I get to do this solo after all."

Dismissing them, he turned and let his gaze search the store for the old codger or the granddaughter he had come here to see.

Nick stood to his full height and slipped his hand into the deep pocket of his trench coat where the lining of the pocket was cut out, giving him easy access to other things sewn into the leather. He had a small arsenal of weapons that he wouldn't hesitate to use, quiet things he could use on an enemy without gaining the attention of the other customers.

He followed the man as he walked toward the counter and noted how he wasn't looking at anything else in the store. Nick

had a feeling the stranger wasn't here as a shopper and his demon guard dogs that were now watching him through the window was not a good sign for Gypsy's first day back in business.

The stranger gazed curiously at Gypsy as she came out of the back room with a box and went to the other counter where a woman was waiting on her.

Nick moved, placing himself between Gypsy and the strange man watching her. "Can I help you?"

The man gave him the once over with a bored expression. He hated to tell the shop's bouncer, but he wasn't that easily intimidated. Reaching into the inner pocket of his jacket, he removed a formal looking envelope. "I am only a messenger and mean no harm. I have an invitation for the proprietor of this establishment."

Nick reached for the envelope but the man pulled it away, placing it back inside his jacket.

"It's for the owner's eyes only," the stranger informed him with a British accent and the raise of an elegant eyebrow.

Nick inhaled deeply but only found the scent of a human. He turned around and leaned against the counter staring back out at the two demons who were watching the stranger with dark brooding eyes.

"You keep very odd company for a human," Nick commented not expecting an answer and he didn't get one.

Gypsy looked toward the window and saw the two men staring into the shop instead of entering. She immediately glanced

around for Nick, finding him with a man she'd never seen before.

The man had black silky hair that sported a slight wave to it and barely reached his shoulders and a thick gold loop earring in one ear. His tanned cheeks were bare but he had a closely shaven mustache and designer beard that was only as wide as the mustache so that it framed a set of perfect lips. The perfection didn't end there as she noticed long dark eyelashes that framed dark brown eyes that were the persona of bedroom eyes.

She had no doubt that he could probably seduce any female that crossed his path without much effort at all. Yeah, the guy was drop dead gorgeous and if the last couple days had taught her anything, it was that normal humans never ever looked that good. That knowledge made her nervous as she tried to hurry and ring up the woman's purchase.

Becoming frustrated, Gypsy glanced across the counter at the pretty girl who always spent so much money in her shop then sighed thankfully when she was handed a large wad of cash and told to keep the change.

"Thank you," Gypsy smiled and then noticed there was a list of pricey, hard to find items written on a piece of paper among the cash. She glanced back up at the other female realizing the young woman must know about the sudden influx of demons to be making such strange requests but she didn't have time to discuss it right now.

"I'll give you a call when the items come in," Gypsy nodded as if she'd simply ordered a box of chocolates.

As the customer walked away with her box of questionable items, Gypsy glanced back toward Nick seeing the two men now facing each other and by the looks of it they were sizing each other up.

“Can I help you?” Gypsy asked coming up on the other side of the counter.

The stranger turned away from Nick and smiled, “I sure hope so. By chance, is the old codger that runs this store here today?”

Gypsy's polite smile faltered but she had answered this question more than once since taking the store over. “I'm sorry, but he passed away a little over a month ago.” She watched as a quiet sadness crept into the man's eyes and it put her more at ease. With that kind of reaction, surely he wasn't here to cause any trouble.

“Then maybe his granddaughter is available?” the man asked calmly.

“I am his granddaughter. Is there something I can help you with?” Gypsy asked politely.

The man frowned slightly in confusion but quickly covered it up with a polite smile, “Maybe. I was told to give this to the owner.” He slid the envelope halfway out of his pocket so that she could see the edge of it. With Mr. Quick Draw beside them he didn't trust that it wouldn't be snatched away.

“I am part owner,” Gypsy said with pride now that Lacey was back.

The man looked like he was contemplating something but

finally set the envelope on the glass surface and pushed it toward her.

Before Gypsy could even reach for it, Nick intercepted the envelope with lightening quick reflexes and opened the back flap. He scanned the thick gold leaf piece of paper before looking up at the stranger again. The man just stared back at him as if he were bored.

Gypsy frowned at Nick's over protectiveness but something about the stony expression on his face kept her from demanding the envelope. With the way things were going around here, for all she knew it was a death threat, though she had to admit she was curious as hell.

Nick stepped around to the other side of the counter where Gypsy was and removed the 9mm from under his shirt. He kept the gun low so that no one else in the room could see the exchange behind the counter except for the man standing directly on the other side of it. The man's heartbeat was steady as was his breathing so Nick figured he wasn't much of a threat, but he wanted Gypsy to have her guard up just in case.

"I'll be right back. Don't invite anyone in to the shop while I'm gone and shoot him if he gets too close," Nick's voice held a hint of warning as he locked eyes with the other man.

"What," Gypsy asked in a shocked whisper and looked up at Nick as if he'd lost his mind. "What does that letter say?"

"It's just an invitation, but I have a feeling it will be of interest to Ren. I'll fill you in as soon as he's seen it," Nick answered and

headed towards the back room.

Gypsy swung her gaze back to the man in front of her inquiringly and softly demanded, “What kind of invitation?”

She held the gun behind the counter but kept it leveled on him. She couldn't help but blush knowing that if she pulled the trigger right now, the bullet would hit him in a place no man wanted to be injured. Hopefully, he would take that into consideration and not try anything stupid.

“To a bleedin' important auction,” the man answered with a sexy smile.

Gypsy's eyes lit up hearing the word auction but then frowned wondering why Nick thought Ren would want to see an invite to an auction even if it was for one that was of the underground type. This wasn't the first time she'd received an invite via messenger.

“How important?” she asked completely intrigued.

“If I may ask you a question first,” the man inquired. “Are you by chance related to Lacey?”

Gypsy's lips parted as she instinctively tightened her grip on the gun and took a step back, now understanding why Nick had taken the invite to Ren.

“Who are you?” she asked apprehensively.

The man's lips hinted at a smile, but he didn't answer.

Ren looked toward the open bunker doorway when he heard Nick's footsteps nearly running down the stairs. He watched as the jaguar leapt the last few steps clutching an envelope in his hands and cocked an eyebrow moving to meet Nick in the

doorway.

“Don’t ask questions, just read,” Nick said hurriedly as he handed the envelope over to Ren.

Ren opened it and took out the invitation, reading over it thoroughly. The muscles in his jaw flexed as he fought the urge to crumple the paper in his fist. His body relaxed when he suddenly changed his mind and glanced over his shoulder at Lacey who was watching them closely.

“It appears we’re going to an auction,” Ren informed her.

“An auction,” Lacey repeated as she leaned back on the sofa and pretended to think about it for about two seconds before turning him down. “I’m not in the mood so no thanks.”

“You don’t have much of a choice,” Ren stated looking back at the invitation. “It seems the main item on the auction block is a marked soul and the opening bid for that marked soul is a soul orb. The auction is taking place tonight at midnight... right down the road from here.”

He could already smell her fear spiking but he had no intentions of putting her at risk. Her part in the thievery ring would end tonight... he would make sure of that.

Lacey felt like she was walking on legs made of rubber as she approached Ren and took the paper he was offering her. Her gaze was immediately drawn to the symbol at the bottom where a signature would normally be and her heart sank into the pit of her stomach with dread. She quickly lifted her gaze and skimmed the words.

“Well to hell with that. If I don’t leave this building, then they will be missing their main item and their little auction is going to be a flop,” Lacey said handing the paper back to Ren. “You see that seal at the bottom? That’s the seal of the ring I worked for. If I go to this auction... they will kill me.”

“Lacey,” Ren said calmly, knowing she was scared silly at the moment. “If they’re this close, then they already know where you are. You can’t hide in here forever. Besides, it seems that we have something they want.”

“Yeah... me,” Lacey said not bothering to hide the fear in her voice as she glared up at him. “I already know they’re going to kill me but that doesn’t mean I have to make it easy for them.”

Nick turned and started back up the stairs not wanting to leave Gypsy alone for too long with the stranger. Without looking back he told them, “When you decide what you’re going to do, there’s a British guy upstairs waiting on the reply and two demons waiting on him outside the shop.”

Ren lowered his gaze to Lacey when he heard her heartbeat suddenly start racing and she took off up the stairs behind Nick. His expression and thoughts darkened. That stranger had better not be the British bastard who had gotten her into all of this trouble in the first place.

Lacey rounded the corner into the main room only seconds after Nick did. Her lips parted seeing Vincent calmly standing there looking at Gypsy from across the counter. Her gaze lowered seeing the gun in Gypsy's hand and she wanted to snicker at the

uselessness of the threat but refrained knowing she would be the only one to get the joke.

Vincent turned his head and locked his gaze on the girl he'd been looking for. "There's the lass now," He breathed realizing he'd missed her more than he'd meant too.

In seconds, Lacey had her arms wrapped around Vincent's waist and her face pressed into his chest.

He returned her hug and refrained from looking back at the demons outside knowing they had already seen her, though he did turn her so that he was blocking their bloody view.

Gypsy blinked at the affectionate reunion and lowered the gun thankfully. He couldn't be all bad if the way his eyes had softened the second he'd seen Lacey was any indication. She handed the gun back to Nick when he joined her behind the counter. A customer chose that moment to come up and ask her a question and she looked at Nick not sure if she should leave just yet.

"I can hear Ren coming so you can relax, we will take care of this," Nick said, assuring her that it was alright if she needed to go about her business.

Nodding, Gypsy slid past Nick and gave Ren a wide breadth when she noticed the furious look on his face as he came out of the back room. She watched as he shot the demons a dark glare before dismissing them completely and turning his attention to the counter.

"Go keep an eye on who Gypsy invites in this place. Leave this one to me," Ren demanded coming up behind Nick.

Nick felt a cold shiver race up his spine and quickly headed toward the front of the store. Even the jaguar within him was glad that he wasn't the one with his arms around Lacey right now. Ren had played dirty when it came to competition over Gypsy, but he had a feeling that had been nothing compared to the hell this British guy was in for.

Vincent glanced up seeing the intimidating looking man coming toward them with brisk, angry strides. The first thing he noticed was the way the man wasn't really looking at him... he was looking down at Lacey's back where his arms were wrapped securely around her.

He may not have any supernatural powers, but after living for so many centuries, he could spot a jealous man a mile away. Vincent inwardly smirked wondering what Lacey thought about the relationship... if there even was one. For the last year, he'd been the only man to touch her and they hadn't been separated long enough for her to just give herself away to another lover. She was way too picky for that.

With an annoyed smile pulling at his lips, Vincent tightened his hold just a touch to see if the other man would object. After all... his favorite hobby was pissing people off.

He knew his little partner in crime well enough to know that her idea of obsession and possession was reserved only for the trinkets they were in the habit of stealing... not the opposite sex. That was one of the things he liked about her, the fact that they both favored the no strings attached clause.

Knowing he couldn't just jerk her away from the other man, Ren forced himself to stop less than two feet behind Lacey, which was snatching distance if the need arose. He already disliked this idiot but was smart enough to restrain his impulse to strangle Vincent so that he could hear why the man had brought demons here.

Ren slid his right hand into his trench coat in order to hide the fact that it was fisted so hard he could feel his fingernails biting into his palm painfully. If Vincent thought he was taking Lacey back to that demonized circus they called a thievery ring then he'd damn well give the punk something much more painful to think about.

Chapter 5

“I was so worried about you,” Lacey murmured into Vincent’s shirt trying unsuccessfully to hold back the grateful tears from seeing him in one piece. The nightmares she’d had of him being buried alive somewhere or worse lost their power over her as she clung to him... her friend that had died so many times. Her heart had stopped that night and the memory still had the power to make her shudder.

She balled the material of his shirt up in her fist, “Masters... that damn bastard’s hand went all of the way through you. How did you get away?”

Hearing the slight tremor in her voice, Vincent dismissed the enraged man behind her and gave up his antagonizing hug so that he could palm her upper arms. He gently pushed her back and gazed down at her wet cheeks. Damn it... he’d told her to never worry about him... much less cry.

He hardened his voice, “You’re forgetting love... I enjoy it. All of it. Dying is nothing more than a game to me.” Her stupid tears had the power to hurt him worse than a hand through his heart. “So save your infernal tears for something that’s worth it,” he snapped knowing that was the fastest way to dry her eyes... piss her off.

Lacey glared up at Vincent. He’d just done that on purpose. “Whatever dumb ass, just tell me what the hell happened,” she

said playing his standoffish game.

“That’s better,” Vincent smirked at her temper. It was actually endearing. “By the time I revived, I was back at Masters’ estate surrounded by a lot of pissed off demons who were having a blast as they took turns killing me with wounds that would quickly heal so that they could have the pleasure of doing it again and again. Monotonous bastards.”

Lacey sucked in a sharp breath and her eyes widened as she stared up at him. Her imagination went into overdrive as a myriad of random ways the demons could kill him trailed across her vision like a horror movie.

Seeing her eyes shine with new tears Vincent quickly added, “They weren’t the only ones having fun at the party and they didn’t even beat my record of deaths within a forty-eight hour period because they wouldn’t shut up long enough.”

“It was my fault. I’m sorry... so sorry. I should’ve taken your body with me somehow,” Lacey said wishing she could turn back time. “You sacrificed yourself to save me again, and I... I just left you lying there. Some partner I turned out to be.”

“You were doing exactly what I told you to do,” Vincent corrected bluntly.

He reached out and patted her on the top of her head like a good little puppy just because he knew she hated it. When she angrily knocked his arm away he was again satisfied that she wasn't going to break down in front of him. He'd crossed over enough of his own lines during the past year for her and didn't

think he could handle seeing her cry right now without giving his true feelings away.

“But you must have gotten away from them or you wouldn’t be in LA... right?” Lacey asked searching his eyes. “You can leave them now and stay here with me... where it’s safe.”

“Wishful thinking dove,” Vincent tilted his head toward the front of the shop to draw her attention to his obsessed black eyed fans that were even now watching every move he made. “My escort is waiting on me to bring them your answer.”

Lacey barely spared an annoyed glance toward the two men just beyond the glass before shrugging fearlessly. “They can’t come in The Witch’s Brew. Demons are not allowed in here without mine or my cousin’s permission, so they can stand out there and rot for all I care.”

“If only it were that easy,” Vincent said shaking his head at his fearless little partner. It really was a shame that he’d rubbed off on her so much. Self-preservation was actually a good thing to have... if getting killed was the last thing you would ever do.

Deciding to pull her back out of fairytale land, Vincent narrowed his eyes showing her his displeasure, “Since it seems that you have forgotten one important detail, I’ll remind you the true reality of the situation. The demons in our little ring have a fetish for mortal weapons and with the underground trading, have gotten themselves quite a spiffy collection. They don’t need to come in to get me or you. They can just shoot us through the bloody window seeing as how both of them are armed.”

Lacey slowly glanced back toward the window wondering why they hadn't raised their guns and shot at her yet. Maybe they were behaving since the street behind them was full of traffic and there were so many shoppers walking from store to store. Yeah... way too many witnesses.

She recognized both demons because they had been with Masters the night she'd used the cube on them so she could escape. Vincent was right about their fetish for guns... they had even stolen state of the art weaponry for the monsters. The main reason the demons used guns instead of ripping people apart was so that they blended in with other murdering humans instead of outing their race.

"Well they can't shoot what they can't see," she pointed out and grabbed Vincent's hand trying to pull him toward the back room with her. She frowned and glared up at him when he refused to budge.

Vincent jerked her forward before she could back up against the steaming volcano that was standing right behind her... the little idiot.

"If they wanted, they could blow this shop to hell and back and we both know it," He said calmly. He had made a game out of getting himself killed but she needed to start using her head before she lost it. The thought irritated him and it showed in his voice, "Stop and think before I wind up having to bury you too."

"Damn it," Lacey jerked her hand away from his with a frustrated sound. She was going to have to break him from

throwing that up in her face every time he didn't approve of her actions. "Why do you surround yourself with monsters when you are nothing like them?" she hissed already knowing the answer and it was a stupid reason as far as she was concerned. "They can die just as quickly as we can. You proved that when you took Masters' head off."

"Don't worry about me love," Vincent instructed knowing she would not be able to run or hide from this. "I'm here to help you and you need to pay attention. The new demon that stepped in to take Masters' place wants to make a deal with you."

"A deal... do they really think I'm stupid enough to make that mistake again?" Lacey made a face. "Not happening."

"Hear me out," Vincent said running his hand through his bangs to push them out of his eyes. "Tonight at the auction, they will offer up the claim they have on your soul and give you your freedom in exchange for the soul orb that your grandfather stole so long ago. You do have access to it... don't you?"

Ren's frown deepened as he remembered holding the strange soul orb in his palm and seeing the swirl of the entity trapped inside. He hadn't felt any power coming from the soul... only massive power coming from the orb itself. Whatever was inside of it was very well protected and confined for a good reason no doubt. The fact that the demons wanted it didn't sit well with him at all.

Lacey gazed up at Vincent with an unhappy frown as it dawned on her that he was forfeiting himself to save her ass again.

“This was your idea... wasn’t it? Because you know that once a deal is struck with the demons, they will abide by it and leave me alone.”

“Don’t paint me as a hero just yet love,” Vincent said still damning himself for breaking the one rule he had about letting people get under his skin. “I only suggested it because they were torturing the hell out of me and I wanted them to bloody well stop.”

Lacey balled up her fist and hit him hard in the chest not caring if it hurt her more than it did him. Seriously... he could be such a jerk, always pretending he didn’t feel the pain of dying when she had seen the agonized look on his face too many times to believe that nonsense.

“Are you trying to make me cry?” she accused.

Vincent’s shoulders sagged realizing he probably shouldn’t have admitted that little fact. She should be angry at him for putting her in danger in the first place instead of worrying about his pain tolerance. It didn’t matter how much it hurt if the pain didn’t mean a damn thing.

He should have known better than to give into his loneliness even for a minute... dragging her into this mess like a selfish bastard just because he was bored. It was amazing that he’d protected her this long but if she would just listen to him than he could finally cut her loose from it all.

“Look, I don’t know what this soul orb is, but the fact that they want it bad enough to not only let you live but to give you a clean

break to boot... well, the soul orb probably isn't a bleedin' nice thing," he admitted then gave her a stubborn look. "But if it will keep you from sinking six feet under, then I say give the damn trinket to them."

She growled at him wondering if he would ever stop using her mortality against her. At the moment, she didn't give a damn about the legendary demon that her grandfather had said was trapped within the soul orb like a genie in a bottle. Since her grandfather had never figured out how to open it, and he had tried, then it was no more than a pretty little paperweight to her.

Swinging around to go hunt down Ren, she nearly jumped out of her skin finding him less than a foot behind her. Something about the death glare he was giving Vincent made her put a tad more distance between her and her friend. She slid out from between them and leaned back against the counter. Great, Ren looked like he wanted to kill and Vincent always claimed to have a death wish... they should get along just fine.

Lacey took a deep breath to steady her nerves and squared her shoulders. "Since you seem to have a dislike for thieves, then I assume you didn't steal the soul orb but simply moved it to a safer place like Gypsy assured me... right?"

"Right," Ren agreed without missing a beat. He wanted her to come to him for help because the man on the other side of her would surely be the death of her. Though, watching the way Vincent handled the little hot head had actually given him a few pointers on how to deal with her himself.

He restrained from rubbing his temple. Using Zachary's power on her had him all messed up in the head and it was confusing the hell out of him. He felt like he was the one that had known her for the last year... made love to her... protected her... died for her. At least he still had enough sense to blame all of the bad things on the other man.

“Then you shouldn't have a problem retrieving it for me... correct?” Lacey asked testing his honesty.

Knowing it would save her life, Ren had every intention of using the soul orb for the trade. Instead of announcing that fact in front of Vincent the demon informant, he replied evasively, “I'll have to talk to a certain God about it... but I might be able to arrange it.” He smirked inwardly when Vincent raised an eyebrow at the God remark. “But the demons have to agree to you having your own escort to the auction because you won't be going alone.”

Lacey felt hope bloom in her chest suddenly remembering what Ren had said about sucking in the powers of everyone around him and being able to utilize it. She could only imagine how powerful he would become if he walked into a room full of demons and other paranormals. Brilliant idea... the demons wouldn't know what hit them until it was all over and they would have no choice but to agree to add Vincent's name to the list of the free.

Ren stared down at her when she slowly gifted him with the most amazing smile he'd ever seen. It was at that moment that

he knew he was in big trouble.

Now that she had her confidence up, Lacey stepped closer to Vincent and stared up at him defiantly. “Then you tell those bastards this. I will agree to their deal on one condition. The deal has to include not only mine... but your soul and freedom as well.”

“Do you have a death wish?” Ren asked suddenly wanting to shake some sense into that pretty head of hers.

“I agree with your new friend,” Vincent said earning him a shocked look from Ren. “I wouldn’t rock that boat love... not when you’re the one sitting in it. We are going to be surrounded by demons tonight at the auction because there are many things up for grabs... not just you.”

Vincent took a deep breath before continuing, “This isn’t like the small auctions they held this past year... think on a much grander scale and then replace the balding billionaires with beautiful demons and you’re getting close to the real picture.”

“Beautiful demons,” Lacey cocked an eyebrow as Masters withered face flashed in her mind.

He shook his head at her naivety. “Nine times out of ten, the most beautiful demon in the room will be the most powerful one. It would be wise to remember that since only the most powerful are invited tonight.”

Ren didn’t bother suppressing the urge to rub his temple this time. Whoever was in charge of this ring needed their head examined. “Amateurs,” he growled keeping his voice low.

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