

EDEN



Jamie McGuire

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For Mimi.

Thank you for being there for us in every way you knew how.

For your support, love, and your smiles.

For Beth.

You said I could, and you always have.

Chapter One

Tomorrow

Happily Ever After. That was The End, right? The hard part was over. It was smooth sailing now. I lay in bed next to my handsome, celestial Prince Charming, the tropical breeze blowing through the window screens of our little Caribbean hut, waiting for the sun to rise so I could begin my wedding day.

Funny how Happily Ever After isn't the end after all...at least, not when Hell is trying to kill you.

That trivial little fact was easy to ignore with the light rain tapping the tin roof, and the palm fronds brushing against our casita as the wind gently pushed its way through the trees. The first glimmers of sunlight danced along the ceiling as translucent dashes of warmth. Those shuddering, glowing droplets above me were the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. Jared Ryel was the second. He smiled, waiting for my eyes to focus.

"It's tomorrow," he whispered.

Splatters of pinks and purples had just breached the windows, and the rain had all but left us for the bigger island, reduced to droplets. The fading purple splotches on Jared's forehead, cheek and chin stood out in the early light, and they brought back a flood of memories from the days before.

He and I had already survived the impossible—coming face to face with one of the most frightening beings in Hell and a few hundred of his minions, human and demon alike. Simply celebrating another day would have sufficed. That was the moment realization hit, and Jared's eyes brightened with amusement as my sleepy expression perked.

"It's today?" I said softly. I reached up to touch his skin, and the residual marks from his skirmish with Shax.

Jared pushed himself onto his elbows, and then leaned his head closer to my stomach. "Good morning, little Bean."

"Bean?" I said, one eyebrow shooting up.

"Yes, she's no bigger than a bean. That's what the book says, anyway."

"The book."

Jared reached to the floor, pulling up a thick book, its cover dripping in hideous pastel colors and childish writing.

"I thought I should be prepared for anything that might come up." Jared flipped through the pages and then peered up at me, waiting for approval.

"Is there a chapter on balance-disrupting angel babies?" I said, grinning when Jared's eyebrows pushed together.

He tossed the book to the floor and then playfully situated himself over me, nuzzling my neck.

"Jared!" I squealed, making a poor attempt to push him away. "Stop!"

"I'll stop if you say it," he said, his voice muffled against my skin.

"Say what?" I laughed, wiggling in vain.

Jared lifted his head to look me in the eyes. "Bean," he said, his eyes a soft blue-gray.

I pressed my lips together, forming a hard line, but when he tickled me again, I caved. "Okay!" I pleaded. "Bean!"

A wide grin spread across his face. "I wish I'd known how well this tactic of persuasion works on you three years ago. Life would have been somewhat easier."

I swatted at him, knowing he would duck. "Not fair."

Jared kissed my lips, his warmth soaking into my skin. It didn't seem as warm as usual, but I attributed it to the tropical heat raising my own temperature.

“You know what’s not fair? I don’t get to see you until this afternoon.” He left me alone on the bed pulling a white T-shirt over his head.

“What do you mean?” I said, pushing up on my elbows.

“You’d better get dressed, sweetheart. We’re expecting company in five minutes.”

“Company?”

Jared tossed a tan summer dress to the bed, and I scrambled to put it on, knowing better than anyone that Jared wasn’t mistaken about things like time. I pulled my hair into a messy ponytail, and then stood awkwardly while Jared opened the tin door. A line of villagers made their way to our casita, led by a frazzled-looking Beth. She held a white garment bag, and when her eyes met mine, her smile widened to its limit.

“Beth!” I said, rushing down the steps. Mud squished between my bare toes as I ran to her, enveloping her in my arms. Her auburn hair was damp, plastered to her forehead and cheeks. She was sweaty and red-faced, trying to catch her breath as Chad pulled the garment bag from her fingers.

“She wouldn’t let anyone else carry it,” he said, shaking his head. He held the bag out for Jared, but Beth quickly grabbed it back, smacking his hand away.

“Jared can’t see it!” she said. She held the long bag up, away from the mud, but behind her back to protect it from Jared’s hands.

Jared was amused. “I won’t look, Beth. I’m going to take Chad to the chapel now. You two have the whole day.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised—Jared could arrange anything—but I was speechless. Beth and Chad had arrived just eight hours after us.

“How did you...?” I began.

Jared’s smile widened. “We’ve taken care of everything. I didn’t want you stressed.”

“We...?” I frowned, more confused.

“Mom is waiting for me at the chapel. See you there.” He grinned from ear to ear. I’d never seen him so happy. He leaned down to kiss my cheek, and then gestured for Chad to follow.

“You’ve maneuvered a motorcycle before?”

Chad paused. “Yeah. Why?”

“It’s a bit of a drive.” Jared patted Chad on the shoulder, encouraging him along. Poor Chad seemed totally out of his element. Even though the men weren’t that close, I had full confidence in my husband-to-be to make Chad feel at ease. That responsibility would serve as double duty to soothe Jared’s nerves.

“Wait ‘til you see this dress!” Beth squealed, pulling me inside. She hooked the bag onto a wooden lip above the closet, and then rubbed her sore shoulder. “It was a long, muddy walk.”

“It is,” I nodded. “Would you like me to get some ice for your shoulder?”

Beth’s eyes lit up again. She pulled down the zipper of the garment bag, turning to me.

I blinked in disbelief. “That’s the...um...”

Beth’s eyes were wild with excitement. “The dress from the magazine that you picked out two years ago? Yes!”

“But...how is it here? How did he...?”

Beth couldn’t wait for me to spit out the words. “I have been hanging on to this thing forever! Can you believe it? Lillian brought it to the apartment. She said you had picked it out, and Jared bought it, and they made me bottle this up for two years! It was awful! Why do you think I hounded you about your wedding date all those times?”

“But...why?”

Beth nodded. “I know, right? That’s what I said. His mom said he was excited; he wanted to surprise you, blah, blah, blah. I personally think he just wanted to torture me because it’s been *hell*.”

I couldn't stop staring at the flowing, silky whiteness in front of me. I remembered sitting on a couch in the loft while I healed, thumbing through magazines with Lillian and pausing on a picture unable to turn the page. It was just days after I was discharged from the hospital, the day Claire left to eliminate all the humans that threatened us. A dress identical to the one I showed a partisan interest in almost two years earlier dangled from a hanger just feet from me.

"Beth?" I said, still staring at the dress.

"Yes?"

"You're going to have to take it down a few notches. I'm feeling a little overwhelmed."

Beth's head bobbed quickly, and then she took a seat in the corner. After a deep breath, she began again, "It's beautiful."

I almost asked Beth if she knew why Lillian didn't keep the dress at her house, but it was a foolish question. Beth was safe. No one would blow up her apartment, or bust through her windows in the middle of the night—and it would give Jared an extra ally in vying for a wedding date.

"He's brilliant," I said, in awe.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Beth gripped her knees and bit her lip, struggling with every passing second. "Are you still overwhelmed?"

"I'm feeling better."

She leaned forward in her seat, quickly losing the fight to remain composed. "I brought two bags overflowing with makeup, hairspray and curling irons. I think I have every size known to man. I can make big barrel curls, or little spiral curls. If you don't want curls I brought a flat iron...."

"Beth?"

"Sorry."

"You take a Valium. I'll take a shower...wait. Is it ridiculous that I don't know what time my wedding starts?"

"One o'clock. We have plenty of time."

I nodded, grabbing my robe and a towel. I couldn't imagine how difficult the wait must have been for her. It was endearing and disturbing at the same time.

Under the warm stream of the casita's humble shower, it wasn't difficult to let go of any anxiety. Birds sang to each other from the branches of the palm trees, and the sounds of the ocean gave away its close proximity. Feeling stressed in paradise was wonderfully impossible.

"Did you want an up-do? I brought bobby pins just in case!" Beth called.

"Not listening!" I said, massaging shampoo into my hair. I wondered if she was curious about Jared's fading bruises, or if she'd even noticed. Surely Chad would. If they spent the morning together, eventually he would see them. Jared would explain them away, but if Beth asked me about them and I told a different story, it would complicate things. It was easy to convince her that I needed a bodyguard—she'd witnessed my run-in with Mr. Dawson, after all. Unless it was due to training, Jared's bruises were a telltale sign that I had been in danger. Two years of experience told me that. Beth was too preoccupied with wedding details, so I put that worry to the back of the line.

Thinking of Jared's bruises made the rest of his face form in my mind, and suddenly I couldn't get out of the shower fast enough. It made me feel anxious to wait so long before I was allowed to see him again.

I rushed into the casita in my towel, my hair dripping wet, and slipped on the sleeves of my robe.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just going for a walk," I said, slipping on a pair of sandals.

"Oh, no, you're not. We have a day's worth of primping to do in just a few hours! Get your backsides

in this chair, young lady!” Beth said.

“I’ll just be a minute,” I said, waving her away. I swung open the door of the casita to find Bex standing in my way.

“Morning,” he smiled. “Going somewhere?”

“Just for a walk,” I shrugged.

“Don’t you have some girly things to do? You’re getting married in a few hours.”

I frowned. “Are you here to keep me captive?”

Bex mirrored my expression. “No, Paranoid Schizo. Your guardian-slash-almost husband is across the island, and you and your unborn baby are two of Hell’s Most Wanted. I’m here to keep you safe. If you wanna leave, leave. I have to walk with you, though.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling silly. “Okay, then. I want to leave.”

Beth grabbed my wrist, a hair dryer in her other hand. “I jumped on a plane at a moment’s notice, rode a boat across an unknown body of water—in the pouring rain. There is mud caked under my newly painted toenails, and I’m pretty sure a bird crapped in my hair on the walk here. I’ve endured all this to come here and help you get ready for a wedding that I’ve kept a secret for *two years*. You can’t give me a few hours!”

“Okay! You’re right, I’m sorry,” I said. I followed Beth back into the casita, sitting in the chair she’d placed in front of a makeshift salon counter.

“Whoa,” Bex said, sitting on the bed. “Girls are crazy.”

The counter was covered in wires that led to various hot irons, makeup, brushes, curlers, combs and other hair products. The black wires were hooked into an orange extension cord that led outside to the solar-powered generator Jared had rigged outside. The mess of wires were an eyesore, but at least we had power without the annoying drone of a gas-powered generator. Beth brought several lamps to make up for the limited natural light filtering through the windows, and a manicure and pedicure kit. A large camera also sat among the clutter, beside two packages of fresh memory cards for her camera.

“Thank you, Beth,” I said. The planning alone had to have been time-consuming.

“That’s what best friends do.”

After hours of combing, scrubbing, powdering and polishing, I was finally ready to slip on my wedding dress.

“I’ll step outside,” Bex said. “I need some fresh air, anyway.”

“Good idea,” I smiled. “No telling what that much hairspray will do to a young man’s lungs.”

Beth waited for Bex to leave, and then sighed. “We have to wait to put on your dress,” she said, fidgeting.

“You’re joking,” I said. I took a step toward my dress, but Beth ran around me, holding her arms up and out, shielding the dress from my hands.

“I’m not! I’m not joking. We’re waiting.”

I frowned. “You’re losing it, Beth,” I said, sitting in the chair in a huff.

“You look beautiful,” she smiled.

“I’m used to being in the dark for the most part, but on my wedding day, I would like to be in the light. I know.”

“I understand,” Beth said, thick with regret. “It’s just that....”

A small knock at the door immediately changed Beth’s demeanor. “Coming!” she said, relieved.

Cynthia stood in the doorway. As usual, her face was devoid of emotion. “Well?” she called behind her. “Put my things in the adjacent building. Thank you.” Her tone was opposite her words—also as usual.

“Mother,” I said, surprised.

She wore a champagne-colored sheath dress. Even after marching through a tropical rain shower

and the mud in six-inch heels, her dress and matching shoes were immaculate. Her hair was pulled back into its usual tight French bun, making her eyes even more severe when she pulled off her sunglasses and huffed.

“I apologize for my lateness, Nina dear. I had several functions to reschedule, since my presence was demanded at such late notice.”

“Sorry,” Beth and I said at the same time.

“Well,” she sighed. “You are my only daughter. We do what we must.” I smiled, and Cynthia took the few steps to offer a cold embrace. The awkward gesture was the most she could offer; knowing that made me appreciate it more than others might have. She quickly let go, and offered a polite smile. “You look wonderful, dear.”

“Thank you. I was just about to step into my dress....”

“Oh. Well, then, I’ll just step out,” Cynthia said.

I fidgeted. “Would you mind helping?”

Cynthia hesitated. “Er...Isn’t that why Beth is here?”

“No,” Beth smiled. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

Cynthia’s eyes scanned my dress and its yards of white silk, and clouded with tears. “Oh, my,” she whispered, pulling a tissue from her purse.

I was taken aback. Cynthia rarely cried. In fact, she’d only found two occasions in my lifetime for it, and both had more to do with my father.

“It’s okay, Mother,” I said, hesitating to find an appropriate place to comfort her. I settled on her shoulder, patting awkwardly a few times.

She sniffed once, lifting her chin to ward off the uninvited emotion. “It’s just that Silk Charmeuse wrinkles so easily.”

I nodded. “I know.”

After one last dab at her eyes with the tissue, she turned. “Beth best assist you, darling. Call for me when you’re dressed.” She closed the door behind her, and I turned to Beth.

“I’m so sorry,” Beth whispered. “I thought...I waited for her because I thought she’d like to be involved. I should have known better. Now you both just feel awkward.”

“It was worth a try. One never knows with Cynthia. She might have been insulted if I hadn’t asked so you did the right thing.”

“Did I?”

I smiled. “You did. Now help me get this thing on, and let’s not let it wrinkle. I don’t want to upset my mother.”

Beth nodded, and carefully pulled the dress from its hanger. “Neither do I.”

Chapter Two

Promises

“She was right,” Beth said, tears in her eyes. “It does wrinkle easy.”

I nodded, staring at my reflection in the full-length mirror Beth had brought for the occasion. The woman staring back at me was soft and mature, draped in the muted sheen of silk and chiffon. Beth wasn't human after all; only magic could have transformed me into the elegant, graceful creature in the mirror.

Soft, blonde curls caressed my shoulders, and just a hint of blush and pink lip gloss reminded me that I had makeup on at all. Beth had spent hours making sure that I appeared timeless and natural.

Beth clapped her hands together and held them tight to her chest, as impressed at her work as I was. “Jared is going to crap!”

I laughed. “I knew eventually Oklahoma would break free from the professional East Coast stylist role you've played today!”

Beth gathered the tools she used to transform me, rolling wires and putting the various bags of makeup into the different tubs the villagers had carried to the casita. I stood in place, afraid to move. The realization hit that the church was miles away, across a muddy jungle, and I was wearing white.

I blanched. “Oh, God. Cynthia will stroke out if this dress is soiled before the wedding.”

“If she can get here without a speck, I'm sure she can get you to the church mud-free.”

“You're probably right,” I nodded, trying to relax.

“I wish Kim could be here,” Beth said, shaking her head. “I called her, but she's out of town.”

“I understand. This was very sudden.” I hated lying to Beth, especially while she was being the poster child for a best friend, but I already knew Kim wouldn't be at my wedding. She was two hospital rooms down from Ryan, nursing wounds she'd sustained when Isaac had sent her flying across the cathedral of St. Anne's. It wasn't right that she had saved my life, and instead of being by my side, I was primping in a tropical paradise.

“She did say to tell you to not worry about her. She said she's fine and she wants you to enjoy your day...why would you worry?” Beth said. Her question was a second thought, as if it hadn't crossed her mind until that moment.

“When do I not worry about her?” I said, fidgeting with my dress.

Beth thought for a moment. “True,” she agreed, carrying on with tidying up the room. “Okay, I'm going to grab your mom, and then I'm going to get ready. If you need anything, I'm just a casita away.”

“Beth?” I called.

“Yes?” she said, spinning around.

“Thank you,” I smiled. “For everything.”

Beth returned my smile. “Of course.”

“And Beth?”

“Yes?” she said. She was clearly impatient about getting to her casita.

“Think I could sit for a while?”

“Oh!” Beth said, rushing to fetch me a chair. “Here. This one has a back on it so you can relax. Thirsty?”

“Not at the moment. You are the best maid of honor, ever.”

“I know,” she beamed. She backed out of my room, shutting the door on her wide and excessive proud smile.

With Beth's absence the room became uncomfortably quiet, but I didn't feel alone. I looked down

to my stomach. Bean was invisible, nestled under the fabric of the dress I would wear to marry his father. I placed both of my hands above my bump, and smiled. Would Bean know he or she was a guest at our wedding? The thought of a tiny body inside of me with a fancy dress or tux on made me giggle.

“What’s funny?” Cynthia said as she entered the room. “Certainly not the sight of you. You’re a vision.” I smiled and stood so that she might get a better look. “I’ve arranged for a car. Well, not so much a car as a beat-up truck, but it will get us to the chapel.”

“I wondered how I would get there and keep my dress white.”

Cynthia frowned. “I didn’t say it wouldn’t be difficult. I’ve considered wrapping you in plastic. It will take all of us along with a concentrated effort, but it can be done.”

“Thank you,” I smiled. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Again, a deluge of emotion caught Cynthia off-guard, and she furiously searched through her purse for a tissue. Before the first tear could pour over her lashes, she dabbed it away. “I’ve never,” she said, annoyed. “I hope this doesn’t continue throughout the day.”

I rested in the chair and Cynthia sat on the bed, seeming uncomfortable and out of place, yet she remained cordial and poised. She brought up appropriate subjects such as the weather, and stayed far away from anything that might induce another onslaught of tears. We shared a few polite laughs, and I silently prayed that Beth would return sooner rather than later.

“Ding dong!” Bex said, opening the door. “The truck is less than a mile away. You ready?”

“Something like that,” I sighed.

Beth popped in behind Bex. Her smile lit up the room. She was stunning in her French blue cocktail dress, and for the first time since I’d met her, she actually looked like the former beauty queen that she was. Her lips were stained a wine color, and her short auburn hair was wavy and soft instead of sticking out in every direction. “Oh, good!” Beth squealed as the engine grew louder upon the truck’s approach. “It’s like a Bronco! It has a back seat!”

“That’s nice,” I said, minding my mother’s expression as I gathered my skirt.

The trip from my chair to the door was uneventful, but the preparations for me to step outside into the murky jungle were firmly coordinated by my mother. Cynthia barked orders at Bex, Beth, and the driver. Bex lifted me and held me away from his body—at Cynthia’s request—to keep from wrinkling the dress further. Beth and Cynthia held any protruding pieces out and away as Bex made his way to the truck, and then help spread the fabric while he lowered me to the backseat. Cynthia’s tactics worked. I was seated atop a clean blanket, and my dress remained untouched by the jungle.

Bex led us to the chapel on a dirt bike, while Cynthia commandeered the passenger seat. Bex squeezed against the door to my right to give the dress plenty of room.

“You are all being a little ridiculous about this dress. Once I get out of the truck, the wrinkles will fall,” I said.

“It’s possible. What will you do if mud is splattered on it? Have you found a dry cleaner on the island?” Cynthia asked.

“Good point.”

Within half an hour, the truck was bouncing over familiar cobblestone streets. My heart pounded against my chest when the chapel’s steeple appeared above the palm trees, and I could barely restrain myself from bursting from the truck and running inside when the fountain, and then the wooden double doors came into view. Jared was inside, and the wait had already been an awful test of my patience.

Beth lightly touched the top of my hand, and only then did I realize I was tapping her knee.

“We’re here,” she said, pulling at the door handle.

Bex stood on the walkway with a wide grin on his face. “You look good.”

“Thanks,” I said, touched by his sentiment.

~~“All right, enough chitchat. We’re not in the church, yet,”~~ Cynthia said, orchestrating another transfer. She lifted the hem of one side of my dress while directing Beth to lift the other, and together we climbed the steps.

Inside, Lillian waited. Once recognition hit, her eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands together quickly bringing them to her mouth. “Oh. Oh my goodness,” she said, tears glossing her eyes. “You’re even more beautiful than I imagined.” She looked to Cynthia. “It’s so good to see you,” she said hugging her old friend.

“As it is you,” Cynthia said with a warm but demure smile.

Lillian blotted her eyes with a tissue and shook her head. She looked upon me with pure love and adoration. She had always regarded me with an adulation that I never quite understood, but the look in her eyes was new to me.

“May I seat you?” Bex said to Cynthia, offering his arm.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, walking with Bex into the church.

Lillian watched them disappear behind the door, and then leaned into my ear. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited for this moment. You’ve always been family, Nina. I can’t explain it,” she whispered. A sweet, innocent laugh escaped her throat. “Some nights, after Jack and Cynthia took you home after I’d make you all dinner, I would cry.”

My eyebrows popped up. Lillian was always so candid about her feelings for me. Even so, her words surprised me.

“Gabe used to shake his head. He always thought me to be irrational when it came to you. But each time you left my home, I felt I was letting my daughter go away to live with someone else. I must sound crazy. It sounds silly to say out loud. I...I just wanted to tell you how happy it makes me that after today...I can call you my daughter.”

I hugged her to me. The intensity of emotion in the room was overwhelming. I didn’t hear crazy. Lillian’s words sounded like love.

“No, no, no, no...,” Beth said, pulling a tissue from her purse. “Don’t cry. Your mascara isn’t waterproof, but it’s not magic. It could smudge.” She carefully dabbed under my eyes. “You’re only marrying the man of your dreams soon. What’s to cry about?”

I smiled. “Touché.”

The music sounded. Beth handed me an exquisite bouquet of pink and white tulips, winked at me, and then slid out of the double doors to take her walk. I stood alone in the vestibule, in my dress holding my favorite flowers—the same Jared presented me on our first date. I was amazed, then, at the coincidence. Now it just made me smile. Why he was ever nervous about whether I would fall in love with him was a mystery. Not only was he the most thoughtful, most selfless and loving person I knew, he was also armed with the knowledge of all my likes and dislikes. He was more armed to win me over more than any man could any woman. The tulips were perfect. Jared had sent me this very bouquet many times over the course of our relationship. It just occurred to me that these flowers had also been sent to me before our relationship; on birthdays, my high school graduation, and I remember feeling comforted by a wreath at my father’s funeral bearing the same flowers. Jared had never mentioned it before, but I knew they were from him. That thought made me smile. He had loved me for a long time, and now I was about to walk down the aisle of our chapel, on our island, to pledge my eternal love to him. Life had never felt so right.

I thought about my father, and wished he were next to me. I imagined him in a smart tuxedo with teary eyes, fawning over my dress and how beautiful and grown up I looked. As a little girl, I imagined him giving me away at my wedding, and now he would have to do it from Heaven.

“I know you can see me, Daddy,” I whispered, closing my eyes.

Suddenly, I was no longer alone. Someone was beside me, with an arm hooked around my elbow.

“Hope you don’t mind a wedding crasher. Jack sent me,” Eli winked and tightened his grip.

“N-No,” I said, shaking my head. “Of course not.”

“I’ve always wanted to do this.” He stretched his neck and shoulders. “Looked like fun.”

“Thank you,” I said, as the wedding march began to play in the chapel.

“Ready, kiddo?”

I smiled, and took a deep breath. “Ready.”

Both doors swept open, held by two young local boys, and our small audience stood.

Eli leaned into my ear. “You are breathtaking, by the way.” He took a step, and I followed his lead.

Together we walked slowly down the aisle.

The sanctuary was a bit dim, with beams of sun breaking through the windows and spotlighting the different faces of our friends and family. The dust motes slowly floated in and out of the sunshine, delicate and graceful. I saw Jared’s Uncle Luke, first. I was surprised to see him, and it must have showed, because he and his wife Maryse chuckled softly at my expression. I was glad to see Chad sitting next to my mother, although it wouldn’t have occurred to her to feel...well, anything...I didn’t want her to be alone. Lillian, Luke and Maryse sat together in the first of the heavy, wooden pews parallel to Cynthia and Chad. Luke whispered something into his sister’s ear, and Lillian nodded, taking a deep, satisfied breath.

And then, I saw him. Jared stood next to Bex at the head of the chapel, at the top of a few steps that lead to the pulpit and the rest of the stage. Eli waited before he took a step, sensing that I had stopped in my tracks. Jared was dressed in a khaki suit with a white-button-up shirt. The top button was undone, and he skipped the tie. He looked perfect, and his bright blue-gray eyes were locked on me over a slightly nervous, beaming smile.

Without thinking, I took a step, now anxious more than ever to be next to him. Eli picked up his pace as my feet insisted on placing the rest of me next to the man I loved more than life itself. My love for Jared surpassed needing normal, enough to conquer fate and beat death. In that moment I couldn’t fathom why I had waited so long, and I wanted to be nowhere else but in that chapel, making the easy promise to love him forever.

The reverend was short, swallowed by his officiant’s gown. His brown skin was dull and wrinkled, but his kind smile brightened his face. He spoke in a thick accent. “Hello, Nina. I’m Father Julian.”

I nodded, my gaze returning to Jared.

“We gather here, in the presence of God and this company, that Jared and Nina be united in holy matrimony. We here to celebrate and share in glorious act that God is about to perform—the act by which He converts their love for one another into holy and sacred state of marriage.

“This relationship is honorable and sacred, established by our Creator for welfare and happiness of humanity, and approved by Apostle Paul as honorable among all men. It is designed to unite two sympathies and hopes into one; and rests upon mutual confidence and devotion of husband and wife. May it be in extreme thoughtfulness and reverence, and in dependence upon divine guidance, that you enter now into this holy relationship.”

Jared didn’t take his eyes from mine. Just a few feet away from him, Father Julian stepped down to meet me. He looked to Eli, and spoke with a thick accent, “Being assured that your love and your choice of each other as lifelong companions are in God’s will and that you have your families’ blessings. I now ask. Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“We do,” Eli said with confidence. He spoke for my father, for Cynthia. He might have even spoken for Gabe, but I felt Heaven was smiling on the moment.

Eli lifted my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles, and then took Jared’s hand, placing his gentle fingers under mine. With a small, tender squeeze, Eli left us alone at the bottom of the steps, disappearing

behind the double doors he had just helped me through.

Jared raised an eyebrow, a permanent smile etched on his face. "That was unexpected."

"Jack sent him," I said, feeling my eyes gloss over.

Jared touched my face once, and then the reverend spoke again. This time his voice blurred into the background as I watched the blues and grays of Jared's eyes shine in ways I'd never seen them. His expression was relaxed and nervous; happy and concerned; every emotion he'd ever felt collided inside of him in a beautiful display of the barely noticeable shifts in the skin around his eyes and mouth. No one could have noticed it but me, and I read each one as he struggled with a lifetime duty, and the relief of hearing me promise myself to him.

"Jared Ryel?" Father Julian said. "Are you ready to enter into this marriage with Nina Grey, believing the love you share and your faith in each other will endure all things?"

"I am," Jared said simply.

"Nina Grey?"

"I am!"

Our small audience laughed at my haste. Jared chuckled as well.

Father Julian regrouped, and then finished his part. "Are you ready to enter into this marriage with Nina Grey, believing the love you share and your faith in each other will endure all things?"

I waited for the minister to correct his mixup, but he never did.

I nodded quickly. "To Jared Ryel. Yes. I'm ready."

Father Julian didn't skip a beat. "Nina, do you take Jared to be your wedded husband? Promise to love him, to honor and cherish him, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, and to be to him all things a good and faithful wife as long as you both shall live?"

"Yes."

Father Julian repeated Jared's vows. The closer he came to the end, the tighter Jared's fingers were around mine. Finally, when it came time for Jared to speak, he didn't hesitate.

"Yes, and after that," Jared said. "For a thousand years, and then a thousand more...I will love you"

A smile stretched across my face. His hands were cupped around mine a bit too tight, and his body leaned into mine eagerly. This was the moment he had waited for, and he seemed to want to take it all in and rush it at the same time so nothing could keep him from it. That moment in time was the light switch in a dark room, the doorway at the end of a scary hallway. It was anything and everything that had ever saved anyone.

Father Julian closed his eyes. "Father in heaven, You ordained marriage for your children, and You gave us love. We present to You Jared and Nina, who come this day to be married. May the covenant of love they make be blessed with true devotion and spiritual commitment. We ask that You, God, will give them the ability to keep the covenant they have made. When selfishness shows itself, grant generosity; when mistrust is a temptation, give moral strength; when there is misunderstanding, give patience and gentleness; if suffering becomes a part of their lives, give them a strong faith and an abiding love. Amen."

I opened my eyes to see Jared looking at me with total love and devotion, more so than I ever saw in the proud eyes of my father.

"What token do you give to perform your vows?"

Bex opened his hand, and Jared plucked a white gold band from his brother's palm.

"Nina," Jared said softly. He closed his eyes, thought for a moment, and then looked into my eyes. "What can I say to you that I haven't already said? What can I give you that I haven't already given? Is there anything of me that isn't yours already? My body, my mind, my heart, even my soul. Everything that is me belonged to you long before this, and it shall be yours long after this. I will follow you anywhere and everywhere you lead. I will keep you and anyone created with our love safe"

from all harm. From this day on, I choose you, my beloved, to be my wife. To live with you and laugh with you; to stand by your side, and sleep in your arms; to bring out the best in you always, and, for you, to be the most that I can. I promise to laugh with you in good times, to struggle with you in bad; to wipe your tears with my hands; to comfort you with my words; to mirror you with my soul; and to savor every moment, happy or sad, until the end of our lives and beyond."

A long pause followed Jared's words. No one moved; an awe-inspired silence swept the chapel and everyone took in his breathtaking promise. He took my hand, and slipped the ring onto my finger. It glided over my skin, and rested next to my diamond engagement ring, as if it was returning home.

"D-do you," Father Julian stuttered, "Nina, have a token to perform your vows?"

I turned to Beth, whose mascara streaked her cheeks. She opened her hand to reveal Jared's simple wedding band. I took it from her, and turned to face him.

He grinned, waiting on my promise. I had thought about my vows many times after we decided to write our own. Our relationship had never been traditional, so we chose to make our promise to each other unique to us. I took a deep breath. Nothing I would say would be nearly as articulate and as beautiful as what he had said, but I knew well enough by now that he would love every syllable.

"Jared," I whispered. I held his hand, and then placed the ring around the tip of his finger. "I choose you as my best friend, and my love for life. I promise you my deepest love, my fullest devotion, my most tender care...through the pressures of the present and the uncertainties of the future, I promise to be faithful to you. It wasn't until just now that I recognize that this wasn't coincidence, or a battle. We were always meant for each other. Our love is heaven sent, and I promise to honor that forever and always. From this day forward, you won't walk alone. My heart will be your shelter and my arms will be your home."

The mixed emotions scrolling across Jared's face disappeared; the only one left was happiness. He pushed his ring over his knuckle, and he squeezed my hand.

Father Julian put his hand over ours. "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. Jared and Nina have consented together in holy matrimony, and witnessed the same before God and the congregation, have pledged their love and loyalty to each other, and have declared the same by the joining of hands and the giving of rings. By the authority of the state, I pronounce that they are husband and wife."

A small sigh emanated throughout the chapel, and Jared let out a breath of relief, followed by a small smile.

"Kiss your wife," Father Julian said with a smile.

Jared cupped my cheeks, looked into my eyes, and then pulled me to him, touching his soft lips to mine. He kissed me gently at first, and then wrapped his arms around me, his lips forgetting everything and everything around us. We were married. He was my husband, and I was his wife.

He pulled away. His eyes brimmed with tears, and he looked as overwhelmed with happiness as I felt. I pulled him to me by his shirt to kiss him one last time.

"I now present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Jared Ryel," the minister said loudly.

Jared's smile faded, and he gritted his teeth.

"Not today," he said, closing his eyes.

Chapter Three

Trial

The inside of the chapel darkened. The sunlight coming through the windows dimmed, but it was early afternoon. The air around grew cold and stale. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Fearing the worst, I was desperate for a mundane explanation. “A storm?”

Jared's eyes darkened. “I'm sorry.”

The sound of the tropical winds that regularly blew against the building was noticeably absent, and soon the only light was the dim flickering of a few sconces along the walls of the church. I shot a nervous glance over my shoulder at our friends and family below. They were frozen in time.

I quickly walked down the stairs, with Jared just behind. My movement didn't faze the small crowd, and I gasped, falling to my knees. “Lillian?” I said, reaching out.

Her hands were folded daintily in her lap, a small smile suspended on her face. I stood and took a step to the next pew, realizing in horror that the living statues' eyes were all still fastened to the space where Jared and I once occupied.

“Beth?” I whispered, reaching out to touch her cheek. Her skin was still warm. “She's not breathing,” I said, looking back to my new husband. Bex stood at Jared's side. He frowned before looking to his brother. Only the humans were affected.

“He must have claimed a grievance,” Bex said.

“Shax?” I asked.

Jared shook his head. “Michael...for murdering his son.” He closed his eyes and took my hand, holding it against his chest. “No matter what happens, Nina, stay with Bex,” he said.

“What do you mean? Where are you going?” I said. He took a step toward the double doors of the chapel. With my free hand, I grabbed at the fabric of his jacket. “Jared,” I whispered. His demeanor terrified me.

The double doors opened, and Eli stood in the entrance, his expression blank. “I'm sorry, Jared. They can't wait.”

Jared nodded, and then tilted his head to the side, speaking under his breath. “Don't speak, Nina. Let me handle this.”

I agreed without words. Jared led me through the doors, to the top of the chapel steps. The sky was black, the darkness filtering down to surround our chapel. Several dark forms stood in formation at the bottom of the stairs. Jared continued. With each step closer to the unknown, my heart seemed to be punching through my chest. Finally, I was face to face with Jared's accusers, but they remained a mystery. Their faces were obscured by the hoods of black cloaks. If they were angels, they were much more frightening than any I'd encountered.

Eli stood on the other side of Jared, waiting patiently for something, but I knew better than to ask. After a few moments the black forms parted, and two figures, differing dramatically in size, walked forward. Eli made a subtle motion with his hand, and the air around the small assemblage created its own light, leaving a muted glow. I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, and he winked at me. He was the only one unable to see clearly through the darkness. Eli lit the surroundings solely for mortal human eyes.

His consideration set me somewhat at ease. *He won't let anything happen to us*, I thought.

Any feeling of comfort offered by Eli's small gesture didn't last long. The two forms were not recognizable, and a lump formed in my throat at Claire's nervous expression as she walked alongside Samuel.

“What are you doing here? Where's Ryan?” I asked.

Jared squeezed my hand, and I remembered too late his rule of silence. A man at the front of the opposing group ripped away his hood, revealing his enraged eyes. "You are not allowed to speak here!" he said. His body shook as he spoke.

Samuel and Claire took a defensive stance in front of Jared and me. Jared squeezed my hand again this time in comfort. He brought my fingers to his lips and kissed them. An overwhelming urge to cry overcame me, and although I begged myself not to, my eyes filled with salty tears and dribbled down my cheeks.

Eli casually pushed Samuel and Claire to the side to approach me. "Look what you've done," Eli said, lifting my chin. He used his thumbs to wipe the twin lines of tears. "Upsetting the bride on her wedding day." He turned to the man. "Apologize, Michael, and then mind your manners for the remainder of our time here."

Michael stood tall. "Forgive me," he said, his body rigid with subdued rage.

I nodded once, cowering against Jared.

Samuel took a spot next to Jared, and Claire stood next to me. Eli returned to his position, but this time he stood more central between the two groups. He lowered his head and closed his eyes. The Ry siblings, along with Samuel and the cloaked men, did the same. I followed suit, wondering if I looked ridiculous, or if it was expected. Jared didn't offer a suggestion either way, so the safe option was to imitate the others.

After a short time, Eli began to speak in his usual soft, matter-of-fact tone. "All praise to the Most High, as this is His court and His kingdom. I will use the common tongue for our Nina, so that she may understand. I, Eliath, angel of the Divine Plan, will act on the Lord Almighty's behalf. My decision is final." He glanced at both Jared and Michael. "Aggression will not be tolerated."

Jared and Michael nodded.

Eli looked to me, and his eyes softened. "Michael has made a claim against Jared for the death of his earthen son, Isaac."

My first inclination was to open my mouth, but after my public reprimand from Michael, I was hesitant.

Eli sensed my fear, and smiled. "Don't be afraid, Nina. You may speak."

"Um...." I looked to Jared, who'd told me just the opposite just a few minutes before. Any caution was absent from his face. "Jared didn't kill Isaac," I said. My voice was soft, but firm. Even if it incriminated myself, I couldn't let Jared take the blame for my actions.

Eli nodded, knowingly and patiently. "The actions leading to Isaac's death are why we're here, Nina. You may enter your argument in a moment. I assure you this will be a fair proceeding."

"Then why do Jared and Claire seem so nervous?" I said, deliberately leaving Bex's name out. "This doesn't feel like a casual inquiry."

"You're right. It's not. The charges against Jared are very serious. A life was lost. Angels are not allowed to kill humans to protect their Taleh. Half-Breeds are exempt from our rules, as they are half-human and allowed free will. However, because Half-Breeds are privy to those rules, it is important that they not take advantage. Do you understand?"

"Y-yes," I said, afraid to say my next words. Eli seemed to have unending patience, but I didn't want to test it. "But...Jared didn't kill Isaac."

Michael's body twitched, and he began to speak in a language so beautiful, I knew it was of Heaven. Eli interrupted.

"English, Michael. It's polite."

Michael sighed with frustration. "Why do you waste your time?" he said to Eli. "We don't explain ourselves to them."

"Patience," Eli said simply. He looked to me, then. "All actions leading to Isaac's death are..."

review. In this case, Jared revealing himself to you plays a part. Typically, we would trace to the beginning, and hold the individual responsible. In this case, the individual would be Jared's father Gabriel, for revealing himself to Lillian Van Buren. That action ultimately resulted in Isaac's death. But, because Gabriel has already been judged for that action, the responsibility falls on Jared."

I frowned, still confused.

Eli smiled in understanding. "Think of the Garden of Eden. Our Lord judges wrongs based on character reactions. It is the way of things."

"You mean he holds grudges," I said.

"No," Eli said with a small chuckle. "No, that is not what I mean. He considers the root of the problem when He makes a decision."

"The sins of the father' type of thing?"

"It's difficult to explain in human terms, Nina. The short answer is yes."

Jared had made his choices, but being blamed for being the product of his parents' love, and for my death for the death of Donovan was unacceptable to me. He was my husband, after all. It was now my duty to protect him, as well. I stood tall. "What about me?"

Jared tensed. "Nina," he chided.

I glanced at Jared, but didn't heed his warning. "On grounds that my father made choices that could have been the cause of everything that's happened, and the fact that I am the one who killed Isaac Taleh...shouldn't I be the one on trial?"

"Yes," Michael growled, low and frightening, through his teeth.

Eli touched my shoulder. "You are, Nina. Every choice you make. His decision for you will be later. Jared is held to a different standard, set apart from Heaven and Earth; rules for his kind that he is not aware of. Now," he smiled with kindness and maybe a bit of amusement, "if you are satisfied, we will continue."

Knowing that even if I did come to understand, I would never agree, I nodded. The expression on Eli's face told me that he was aware of my feelings, and he appreciated that I was willing to let him move forward.

A new level of intensity weighed on everyone—everyone but Eli, who seemed impervious. Michael's chest heaved as he readied himself to make his case and avenge Isaac's death. As Michael took a step forward, his small army lifted the cloaks from their faces. I shouldn't have been, but I was surprised. I expected them all to look like Michael: Dark eyes and hair. Instead they more closely resembled Claire. A few of them looked upon me with curiosity, others with disdain, but mostly they seemed to be there out of duty and not personal reasons. That logic went against why Claire and Samuel appeared so uneasy.

Eli spoke. "Michael...."

"Isaac had no choice!" he said. "He was important. He was given gifts unlike any Half-Breed. The choices of his Taleh do not justify his death!"

Eli nodded. "Jared...."

Jared showed no emotion. "The choices of our Talehs never justify our deaths, but it is the duty and curse that we must accept to be obedient."

Michael shifted his weight. "What do you know about duty, Half-Breed?"

Blood rushed to my cheeks. "How dare you," I seethed.

"Nina," Jared warned.

"Your son—the one with such gifts—was also half human. I suppose since Jared doesn't support his Taleh living a life of crime and serving a demon, he doesn't take his duty seriously?" I said, my temper temporarily removing any thoughts of my own safety.

A deep line formed between Michael's brow, and his eyes glistened with anger. "My son was not a

fortunate as Gabe's. He accepted his fate and made the best of it. We cannot interfere with the free will of humans. It is against His will."

"So is serving the other side," I grumbled.

"Nina!" Jared growled.

Michael jerked forward, and arms burst from the long, black sleeves of cloaks behind him as hands held him at bay. Simultaneously, Samuel angled his body toward Jared in a protective stance. He didn't crouch, as I had seen Claire do so many times before when she protected me. Samuel would not fight his brothers, but he wouldn't allow them to harm us.

Claire leaned against my arm, and whispered in my ear. "Shut up, stupid. You're not helping."

"She should not speak here!" Michael said, jerking away from his allies.

"Enough," Eli said, his voice calm and even. "Nina's fate is affected. She is allowed an argument," he said, looking to me. "Your thoughts have been considered. That will be all."

For the first time, I didn't feel Eli's bias. I nodded quickly, showing my obedience with a small step back.

"Claire..." Eli said, moving the trial forward.

"The truth is, Isaac and Donovan were working with Shax, and they were there to kill Nina, in effect to kill Jared," she said in her no-nonsense way. "Eli, it was going to be Donovan or Nina. Isaac or Jared. If you ask me, the best man won."

Her words stung Michael, but he didn't argue.

Eli's eyes scanned the looming angels behind Michael. "Do any of your supporters wish to enter their opinion?"

Michael shook his head. "It is my claim."

"And what exactly is your claim?" Bex asked.

Michael's eyes narrowed, staring directly at Jared's younger brother. "That he murdered my son."

Claire took a step forward. "Your son murdered Nina's father."

When recognition hit that Claire was speaking of my father, my knees buckled, and Jared tightened his grip to keep me on my feet.

"W-What?" I said, my voice barely a whisper.

Jared leaned into my cheek, his nose grazing my ear. "Donovan shot your father. Isaac was with him."

My eyes widened, focusing on Michael. "You want to blame Gabe and Jared? You come here to interrupt our wedding day, yell at me, accuse us of murder, and your son was an accessory to the cause of all of this?"

Michael's dark eyes darted from me to Eli.

Eli shrugged. "She has a point."

Michael's jaw dropped. "Isaac did not deserve to die. He was a good son. He accepted the curse and honored his duties."

"Michael," Samuel said in his deep, firm voice.

Michael stepped toward Eli. "Gabriel's son should be punished! He allowed his Taleh to kill my son! Rebecca's son!"

Eli looked to the ground in thought. "Rebecca was unhappy with Isaac's choices, was she not?"

Michael's eyes flickered to each of us. "I demand Jared be punished for taking Isaac's life."

Samuel spoke again. "Michael..."

"Jared should be killed, and leave his Taleh to the savages," Michael said, pointing to Jared.

"Michael..." Samuel repeated, this time with a low growl.

"An eye for an eye, Eli! I demand it!" Michael said, his fists balled at his sides.

"MICHAEL!" Samuel boomed. The earth trembled when he spoke, and my hands flew to my ears.

Eli watched the interaction between Samuel and Michael for a moment, and then spoke. "Okay. A right. I've heard enough from each side. Only one argument remains."

We all looked to one another, wondering who was left.

"My apologies," a warm voice spoke. It was a voice I hadn't heard in a long time. A voice from my childhood.

Jared's hand was still in mine, and the moment the voice could be heard, his hand went limp. "Dad?" he said.

I turned, seeing Gabe Ryel at the top of the chapel's rock steps. He looked exactly as I remembered him: tall, his blond hair and piercing, ice-blue eyes glowing even from several feet away. A flash of light broke from the crowd and up the steps, and in the next moment, Claire was in her father's arms sobbing uncontrollably. She pressed her cheek against his chest, whispering something I couldn't understand. Gabe bowed his head, spoke something back, and then he kissed his daughter's forehead. They descended the stairs together, and approached Bex.

Gabe offered a small smile to his youngest son, who fell against him with a clap.

My mouth fell open, and I immediately searched Jared's face for a reaction. There was none.

Gabe's expression turned remorseful. "I'm sorry for your son, Michael. You and I are in unique positions...to know love for a child. You and I agree that if we could change the outcome, we would make it so."

Eli reached out to Gabe. "It's important to remember that it is in the height of adversity that we must come together. Michael, you've lost your son. Your widow has now lost her husband and her son. It is unfortunate."

Michael bowed his head.

Gabe approached Michael, pulling him into his arms. "We need you on our side, Brother."

Michael shrugged out of his grasp.

"Eli?" Michael pleaded.

Eli offered a small, comforting smile. "You already know the answer."

Michael shot an accusing glare at Jared.

Jared's brows pulled in. "I didn't want Isaac to die, Michael. I swear to you, I wish it hadn't happened."

"Very well, then." He gestured to the cloaked angels, and they all disappeared into the darkness.

Eli clapped his hands together, lacing his fingers together. "Impeccable timing, as always, Gabriel."

Gabe nodded. His eyes paused on me for a moment before fixing on Jared. "This isn't your fault, Jared."

Jared didn't speak. His face tense, his dark eyes meeting the eyes of his father, he was paralyzed. The scene brought back memories of the moment I saw my father for the last time, and I ached for Jared. He would have to say goodbye a second time.

"Jared," Gabe began, "it's not your fault. You've done everything right."

Jared's head dipped slightly as he attempted a nod.

"Son..." Gabe cupped both of his hands on Jared's shoulders. "I'm proud of you."

Jared choked, and his body gave way, allowing him to fall against his father. I covered my mouth, unaccustomed to seeing Jared relinquish control of his emotions. They embraced, and Jared's knuckles turned white as he held Gabe in his arms. When Gabe released him, Jared used his thumb and index finger to make a quick swipe of his wet eyes.

"It's good to see you again, Dad," Jared said with a weak smile.

Gabe beamed. "You've done well, Son. You've done well."

"I've tried," Jared said, relieved at his father's words. He took my hand, then. "You remember Nina."

Gabe leaned down and kissed my hairline. "Of course."

~~Eli walked up the steps, watching with amusement as Claire and Bex crowded their father~~
"Gabriel...."

"I know," he said, seeming a bit sad. "One more thing," he said. He wrapped his arms around Bex and Claire again, and then followed Eli through the double wooden doors, down the aisle of the chapel. Lillian was still frozen. The same sweet, small smile on her face hadn't moved a centimeter.

Gabriel kneeled before her. He noticed her folded hands in her lap, and tenderly covered hers with his. "She is as beautiful as the day I first saw her," he smiled. With two fingers, he brushed her cheekbone, and then leaned in to kiss her lips. His mouth lingered on hers for a few moments, and he closed his eyes, taking in his last moment with his wife.

Claire wiped a stray tear from her cheek, but her cheeks were glistening with preceding tears.
"Eli..."

"I'm sorry, no," Eli said.

"We're already pushing the rules allowing Nina to be animated, not to mention allowing me to be here at all," Gabriel said. His eyes didn't stray from Lillian's delicate face.

"Not unlike hacking into dreams to get your point across...." Eli said, looking away in dramatic fashion.

"The dreams," I said. The moment I spoke, I wished I hadn't. Bothering Gabe while he spent his last moments with his wife was ridiculously selfish. Regardless, Gabe touched Lillian's lips to his once more, and then stood to face me.

"Yes, the dreams," Gabe sighed.

I hesitated, and then decided to ask, anyway. "Why did you come to me in the dream if there was nothing in the book to help us?"

Gabe looked to the floor, and then to Jared. "At first, we were hoping you wouldn't go right along with the prophecy and get pregnant the first chance that presented itself."

A flush of red lit my cheeks, and Jared cleared his throat. "That's not exactly how it happened, Dad."

Gabe gave a quick nod. "You have the book?"

"Yes," Jared said.

"Now that you have it, it's safe to say that it would behoove you to help the Pollocks replace it. Or less thing to worry about, wouldn't you agree?"

Jared frowned. "But...if it puts us in danger, why did you take it from the Pollocks to begin with?"

"Answers. Jack knew the moment she was born she was in danger of being the woman in the prophecy. When you fell in love with her, Son, we knew it was a matter of when, not if. We were fighting time and fate...an impossible task. Still, Jack loved his daughter, and he wanted to do everything in his power to try to keep her from that path. We knew there was a chance the book could help us find a loophole, so we took it."

In frustration, Jared shifted his weight. "But...by the time you came to Nina in the dreams, you knew there was no loophole. Why did you put her through that? Why the theatrics? Do you have any idea what she's been through? What I went through?"

"To get your attention. We were desperate to find a way to stop you from commencing the prophecy."

"By then it was too late," Bex inserted.

"Obviously," Claire grumbled.

Gabe shook his head. "Not quite. She still had time."

I looked around the room. "Where is Samuel?"

Claire shoved her hands into her jacket pockets. She wore sweats, her gathered gray pants pushed u

to just below her knees, and a matching hooded jacket over a ratty white tank top. She had been summoned unexpectedly. “Babysitting Ryan until I get back. Now that the trial is over, he’s vulnerable.”

“Is he okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “Kim goes home tomorrow. Father Francis is in stable condition, but he will be in traction for a while.”

Bex frowned. “That should have never happened. Clergy should have more protection than that.”

“Father Francis’ guardian is an Arch, Bex. His hands were tied when Donovan attacked him,” Claire explained.

“So what now?” Jared asked Gabe.

“Shax still wants his book. Hell doesn’t want the child to be born. Things are stacking against you, Jared,” Gabe said. “One thing at a time.”

“One thing at a time,” Jared repeated, letting his father’s advice sink in.

Gabe hugged his children one more time, and then made his way toward the door. “It’s a long time between now and the time she delivers the baby, Jared. We’ll keep an ear to the ground, but be on alert. Heaven won’t step in until you give them a reason.”

“You mean start a war,” Jared said.

“Figure out a reason, Son.” In that instant, Gabriel was gone.

“Huh,” Bex puffed. “Weird.”

Claire’s shoulders dropped. “He’s never coming back, is he?”

“Probably not,” Jared said with a small, apologetic smile on his face.

Claire sat on the closest pew, beside her mother. She leaned against Lillian’s shoulder and closed her eyes, pushing the remaining tears down her face. “I’m so sorry you couldn’t see him,” Claire whispered.

“She’ll know,” Bex said. “She always knows.”

The windows began to brighten, and light danced down the walls as if the sun were rising.

Eli smiled, kissing me lightly on the cheek. “Congratulations, kiddo. On both counts. See you soon.”

“How soon?”

He smiled. “It’s as I said before. When there is only one question left to ask.”

“But...what does that mean? What is the question?” I asked, but I was talking to empty space. Eli was gone.

Claire stood, taking a deep breath. “I have to get back,” she said, looking behind her. Samuel stood at the door with an outstretched hand reaching in her direction. “You look beautiful,” she said to me with a small smile. In no hurry, Claire ambled down the aisle. Once her hand touched Samuel’s, she was gone as well.

Bex laughed once and shook his head. “That’s so cool.”

Chapter Four

Little Heaven

Jared took my hand and led me to our former spots at the front of the church. Bex took a position beside his brother. We watched each other as the sun grew brighter, slowly brightening the faces of our audience. From the corner of my eye, I saw movement, and Father Julian shifted his weight, signaling their awakening.

The minister smiled, gesturing for us to turn. We faced our friends and family, and Father Julian placed his hands on each of our shoulders. “I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Jared Ryel.”

Every face in the room beamed, and applause filled the room. Even with the frightening events just moments before, joy consumed me. Jared’s hand enveloped mine, and we walked the few steps to the aisle, and then made our way outside. It was surreal to return to the scene of Jared’s trial, this time in the sunshine where birds sang, happily riding the bobbing branches that swayed with the breeze. The plaza at the bottom of the chapel’s steps where Michael and his small army had stood not ten minutes before now bathed in the warmth of the sun, waiting for our friends to occupy its smooth, rocky surface. The fountain gushing, the road peppered with townspeople—I felt a bit sick at the sight of it.

“You okay?” Jared said, stopping to smile as Beth took our picture.

“Yeah...yeah, I just feel...confused.”

“Changing planes is unnatural and unsettling for humans, which is why they typically don’t allow it.”

“That explains a lot,” I said, stopping to pose for more pictures as Lillian, Cynthia, Chad, and Jared’s Uncle Luke and Aunt Maryse filed out of the chapel. “Does it...,” I smiled again, “affect the baby?”

“No,” Jared answered, kissing my forehead.

“How do you know?” I said, leaning into his kiss.

He looked down to me and touched my cheek. “Otherwise Eli wouldn’t have done it.”

“Oh,” I said, my eyes wandering until I found Lillian. “Of course.”

Lillian hugged her son, and then me. Her sweet, energetic smile lit up the island. I watched and waited, wondering if she realized she’d been in Gabriel’s presence just moments before.

“What is it?” she said, half curious, half amused.

“Nothing,” I smiled. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

“Not as much as I,” she winked.

Jared and I traded glances, wondering if she’d just given us a clue.

“Cynthia!” Beth called. “Stand beside Nina and I’ll take a picture of the couple with their mothers.”

Cynthia fidgeted with her hair, and then took her place beside me, poised and proper. I hooked my arm around her waist, and she stiffened when I pulled her closer.

“Smile!” Beth said, snapping a picture.

A few of the locals gathered on the street, their warm, smiling faces interlacing with the familiar faces of our friends and family. They began clapping and singing, and then one of the grandmothers waved us with her hands, encouraging us to walk. Jared tugged on my hand, and we walked to the street. I laughed with surprise and excitement when I realized they were following us, their hands clapping to the beat of their happy song. Our guests’ white faces were littered among the brown, sun-kissed skin of the townspeople. They followed us to a makeshift downtown, where a small group of men played music.

“You did this?” I asked Jared.

He smiled, amazed. “No. This one I didn’t do.”

We laughed together, amazed at the random celebration that grew around us. Jared pulled me to the center of the street, where we danced to the strumming guitars and hand-tapped percussion. Chad and Beth joined us, as did Luke and Maryse. Bex pulled his mother into the dirt street as well. If I didn't know better, I would have felt badly for Cynthia, but I knew she preferred to stand away from the nonsense. Perfectly still.

The afternoon sun was warm, and my wedding dress wasn't built to breathe in the Caribbean humidity. Jared sensed my dilemma and nodded, providing me a seat in the shade. An elderly woman brought me a fan with a smile of understanding. The band played on, and the townsfolk and our guests danced into the evening, long after the makeshift street lamps and hanging lights turned on to flicker and twinkle against the night.

"How do you feel?" Jared asked, handing me another glass of water.

"Good," I smiled, taking a sip. "I feel good."

"Feel like dancing?" he said. Jared gestured to the band, and it slowed the beat.

I eagerly let my husband take me by the hand to the middle of the celebration. I wrapped my arm around his neck and pressed my cheek against his chest. His heavenly scent took me away from trials and the war we would create to stay alive. It was then that I realized his skin wasn't the feverish temperature it usually was.

"What is it?" Jared asked.

"You don't feel as hot."

"It's probably because you're overheating in that dress. I should have arranged for something you could change into."

"I'm fine." I smiled. "Quit fussing."

Jared rested his jaw against my hair, and we moved slowly to the music. A slight breeze moved through the trees that lined the small cobblestone street in the center of the town. I sunk into Jared's chest and let his arms totally engulf me. I had never been in more danger, and yet I had never felt so safe. The tribulations that we would face upon our return to Providence suddenly seemed so small in comparison to that moment.

I looked up to Jared, and noticed his content smile. "Was it exactly what you hoped it would be?"

"Something like that," he cooed. "Everything and more."

My head felt heavy, and I rested it against my husband's shoulder. My eyes swept across the landscape, seeing Beth and Chad dancing. They weren't talking, but smiling as they shared a sweet moment. It reminded me of the first time Jared and I had experienced Little Corn, and it was heartwarming to see the island make Beth and Chad feel the same way.

As the sun set, the villagers lit the primitive lamps that bordered the sidewalk. Jared and I stood with Bex, listening to Cynthia and Lillian discuss how beautiful the ceremony had been. I waited for some indication that Lillian knew of Gabe's presence, but if she knew, she wasn't letting on.

"Well, daughter," Cynthia said, dabbing her forehead with a handkerchief, "I have an early appointment that Jared promised I would make. I best be off."

"Thank you for coming, Mother," I said, leaning in to hug her. Her embrace was more than the usual awkward squeeze. She held me to her, and whispered in my ear.

"Be safe, dearest. I love you."

Cynthia turned on her heels and walked quickly to a waiting pickup truck. She didn't look back as the truck slowly faded into the dark jungle. I waited until I could no longer hear the engine, and then turned to Jared.

He offered a half smile. "She loves you."

"I heard," I said, stunned. "I mean, of course she does. She's just never...she'll make her appointment?"

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