

# CHAPTER 1

William stood at the center of the Heavenly space, his head bowed and his gloved hands clasped before him. He had heard of the Walker Council, of course, but he had never had occasion to stand before them. He had also never imagined that meeting them one day would mean standing trial before them on that day.

He wore his custom spelled armor, yet he felt completely vulnerable. He could call upon his key or his weapon with a thought, yet he felt completely defenseless. Paul had told him a little about the council, that an ancient angel with dark skin seemed their best chance at an ally. Yet when William looked upon the first eight unfamiliar faces, he saw nothing but a bunch of stern and ugly old white guys.

The ninth face was old and ugly and white as well, but it was not unfamiliar. Andre had somehow transmuted from Watcher to angel without a break in consciousness. William wondered if making the rules and breaking them whenever you wanted was the best way to run a governing body. It certainly didn't seem to be the way angels should behave.

"We can read your thoughts, Walker." One of the round-faced, mostly bald men spoke venomously.

*'But are you listening?'* The Walker thought forcefully.

There was a sly smile on one face at that, and William saw friendly laughter behind the angel's eyes. He spoke next.

"We do not take action lightly or often, Walker," he said kindly. "The criticism we receive for our policy of non-interference is rivaled only by the criticism we receive on the rare occasion that we do interfere."

"My criticism never falls on anyone with the courage to stay their path or keep their word," William replied calmly. "There is no honor in breaking one's own code."

The angel seemed unperturbed, but he also seemed the only one.

"I can see why the Walker King chose you," he smiled.

"Calling himself a king does not make a man a king," another angel spat bitterly. "There has not been a Walker King for a great long time, and if Walker Paul was the great Stone Walker, he failed to fulfill his own grand prophecy."

“We found Walker Paul’s soul, then?” The angel with the mirthful eyes turned in his seat to address the speaker.

“Of course not,” the speaker crossed his arms and frowned. “He was destroyed by dragon fire, along with Ximena.”

“You’re sure about that?” The smiling angel was clearly amused with the exchange.

“Of course,” he replied tartly. The other angel was clearly not amused. “We would have found them by now.”

“Did we not seal up the realms in between?” His dark luminous eyes twinkled mischievously, and he looked pointedly at William.

“Is this conversation appropriate during this trial?” Andre spoke up, leaning forward and trying to catch someone’s eye.

“You were told not to speak,” the angel’s merry eyes went cold. “You are too close to this matter, and too new to the Council.”

Andre settled back in his chair and folded his arms sullenly.

“And yet you have a point, Angel Andre.” The two angels were clearly battling for control. Now the dour one was smiling, thin-lipped and humorless. “Walker William is on trial.”

“Can we all just stop using that word?” The jovial angel spread his hands. “We already know the outcome of these proceedings. The only three responsible for the destruction of souls seem to have been destroyed completely themselves. Walker William will not be rehumanized, or punished in any other way. In fact, we—”

“Enough!” The dour angel slammed his soft fist into the soft woven light that made every inanimate shape in the room. “If you suspect that they have not been destroyed, you should not speak so blithely about it.”

“Very well.” The angel with the easy smile folded his hands calmly before him. “I will admit that the evidence points to Ximena and the Walker King being destroyed.”

His dour face was turning red now. “And I am happy to get on with our business with Walker William if you will please stop calling that miscreant a king.”

Walker William cleared his throat.

“I destroyed a soul,” he pointed out. “I killed a dragon.”

“No you didn’t,” Andre sneered. “Walker Paul killed that dragon after it gutted you.”

The dour angel shot Andre an irritated glance.

“Besides—” he began.

“Andre destroyed a soul,” William said calmly, holding the accused’s

gaze. "He murdered Mason."

"As I was saying," the unhappy angel's icy tone cut in, "even if you had killed a dragon, it would have been because you were following orders. That guilt would fall on Walker Paul, as Andre's guilt transfers to the Dragon Queen."

The more pleasant speaker cut in again.

"Now on to more peaceful matters," he said. "Walker William, you no doubt remember Walker John?"

"Of course." William nodded tersely. He saw no need to share his assessment of the man. In getting to know other Walkers, he had learned that the appointed leader had struggled with what little authority he had had. On the other hand, nearly every Walker had treated the self-proclaimed Walker King with a respect that bordered on reverence. He looked from one self-righteous glowing face to the next, thinking how impossible it would be to explain what they did not wish to understand.

The jovial angel was looking less than jovial, and William tried to quiet his whirling mind.

"We are prepared to offer you the position vacated by Walker John," the dour angel said. "You seem to be someone the Walkers are willing to listen to and able to follow."

"They followed me when I followed the Walker King," William cut in. "Why would they follow me if I become your stooge?"

"Just because we can read your thoughts does not mean you need to express them all with such brash disdain," the happy angel didn't look happy at all as he spoke. "Surely you can step back far enough from your imbalanced emotional state to see that we are all just trying to make the best of a bad situation."

William took a deep breath and did not voice his next several thoughts.

"What if I refuse?" he asked.

"Then you will be rehumanized." The dour angel seemed pleased at the prospect. "Your memories of your life as a Walker will be erased and you will live out your mortal life as a normal man."

William felt his eyes go wide. "My memories will be taken?"

"It's a new policy," the dour angel said dismissively.

Andre looked left and right, then decided to venture a comment.

"Also," he said, "your Guide and your Watcher will be relieved of duty and released from their consciousness to properly pursue their after-earth life."

The Walker did not like to make decisions based on the feeling that he had no other choice. He thought of the men and women he had fought

beside and loved; the Walkers he had trained, and the Guide whose touch made his heart sing. William knew he could not allow himself to be swayed by anger, but what about love?

“Walker William.” The angel’s smile was lighting his features again. “If I may...what would Walker Paul want you to do?”

The fluidity within him turned to stone. “What are my duties as a servant to this council?”

“As leader of the Walkers,” the angel’s smile was unperturbed, “you will assist in training new Walkers, you will find new Walkers to replace those we have lost and you will explain the new rules to all of the Walkers. Furthermore, you will assist in rehumanizing the Walkers we have deemed no longer fit for service and finding suitable replacements for them as well.”

“You will also report to the Council daily,” the unhappy angel added with a wry smile.

“Daily?” William frowned.

“We have seen what a Walker can do in a day,” he shot back. “You will report daily.”

The happy angel sighed, allowing his practiced look of infinite patience to fray.

“For now,” he amended.

William addressed him. “What are the new rules?” He wished he had paid attention when the trial had begun; William had assumed that none of this would matter by the time they had tried him, and had not paid attention to their introductions. He didn’t remember any of their names.

“Walkers are once again forbidden from interacting with each other,” he began, then his smile broadened. “Stephan, Walker. My name is Stephan.”

“My job would be a lot easier if I could let Walkers work together, Stephan.” William tried to hide his irritation at feeling so violated.

“The walls between worlds have become dangerously thin due to recent events.” The dour angel refused to be left out of the conversation. “One of those events was the gathering of a Walker army; another was excessive walking between worlds, including unauthorized entry to above and below; still another was the destruction of souls and the misplacement of millions of demons. Every dire consequence the Council is now dealing with would have been prevented by keeping Walkers from gathering. Only the Walker Leader may interact with other Walkers.”

“And only on official Walker business,” Stephan tried to lighten the blow by smiling. It didn’t help.

“Walker movement is restricted as well,” the other angel went on.

“Walkers shall not go above or below the seven layers of reality that make up the Earth dimension.”

William narrowed his eyes. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“Ask your Guide,” Stephan responded. “And let all of the Walkers know: we will be keeping an eye on them, particularly the surviving members of the army.”

“Violations will not be tolerated,” added the dour angel, “and punishment will not be lenient.”

“No need to threaten those who have not yet committed any transgression.” Stephan waved his hand in William’s general direction, and something took shape in his hand. “Take that scroll to the new Queen of Hell. We have not been able to establish a clear line of communication with her as of yet, but she is bound by law to update your key to match your new position.”

William frowned. “By what law?”

The dour angel leaned forward and narrowed his eyes hatefully at the Walker. “By highest law. By Council law.”

“And what if she kills me?”

Stephan shook his head. “It is highly doubtful. We would be obligated by law to bring her to justice.”

William almost laughed. “And who would take her place?”

Now the dour angel looked downright pleased with himself. “The Council would act as Hell’s governing body until Creator appoints a replacement.”

## CHAPTER 2

Cal curbed the wheels of his shiny black Acura and killed the engine. He turned to Sarah.

“I’m sure there’s just some kind of mix-up,” he smiled his charismatic grin.

“Mason has been missing since last night,” Sarah frowned. “He hasn’t returned my calls or yours. I can’t get ahold of Mikie, either. I don’t know why, but I just have a feeling that something is terribly wrong. Call it a woman’s intuition, I just can’t shake it.”

“Why can’t it just be intuition?” Cal let his smile fall as his hand fell on the door handle. “When I figure something out, I don’t say I used ‘men’s logic’. Nor do I think that only women are prone to intuitive impulses.”

Sarah’s eyes were wide and unblinking. “Um....sorry?”

He wouldn’t let it go.

“Besides,” he pressed. “You weren’t using intuition, you were using logic. You can’t get ahold of two guys who are usually at your beck and call, so you’re worried.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Sarah had her fingers on the handle that would let her out of the car.

“Sorry,” Cal relaxed. “Let’s go inside and see if anybody knows anything.” He had driven all the way up here, after all.

“Do you need to do some coke or something?” Sarah asked politely. “Don’t mind me if you don’t have enough to share.”

Cal looked up and down the empty street they were parked on.

“Okay,” he shrugged. “I have plenty, if you want some.”

Sarah sighed. “That would be great. I have a bottle of tequila in my purse. You want a drink?”

“Let me see the bottle,” he said. It was a tall rectangular bottle, and he turned the cap to make sure it was on tight. Then he flipped it over to see how much flat surface was on the bottom. There was enough for the two sizable bumps he shook from the baggie onto the bottle.

Cal liked to close his eyes when he snorted coke. There was always a pleasant internal fireworks show when the powder hit his mucous

membrane, even if it was just a little bit. He hated to miss the show, but he did not dare to close his eyes. Not since last night.

When Cal closed his eyes, he saw memories of Mikie. Scenes played out in his head, ordinary moments he had spent watching Mikie play his guitar or talking with the band or snorting Cal's coke. It annoyed him to see the dead man animated behind his closed eyelids, annoyed him so much that it ruined the fireworks.

That wasn't all he saw, though. Sometimes when he closed his eyes, Cal saw Mikie as he had seen him last night. Pale and lifeless and lying in a pool of his own blood, Mikie's eyes stared into nothingness in that picture. When that image appeared to him, it did not annoy Cal. To say it pleased him would be like saying Cal kind of liked his cocaine.

When the image that awaited behind his eyes was the image of Mikie's lifeless corpse, Cal felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth and a primal need tug at the crotch of his pants. The feeling that came with that picture made the fireworks show of cocaine look like a handful of lame sparklers.

So he kept his eyes open while he positioned his snorter tube over the bump, while he pushed one nostril closed with his fingertip, and while he snorted the white powder up his nose. He handed the upturned bottle and the tube to Sarah. She had no problem closing her eyes to do the bump, or to take a long drink of the clear intoxicating liquid. After, she leaned back into the passenger seat and held the bottle out to Cal. It was right side up and uncapped.

It was barely noon, and Cal was not much for drinking even at appropriate hours. Of course, he had snorted a fat line this morning before he even brushed his teeth; but that was different.

"Maybe later," he smiled. "Thanks."

Sarah capped the bottle and it disappeared again into her purse. They were both out of the car and on the sidewalk when they noticed the sign.

It was written in black marker on brown cardboard, in letters that ranged from six inches high to twelve. The sign looked like it had been scrawled by a child or an enraged adult.

It said "Closed until further notice".

Cal looked at all the glass panes on the storefront, trying to see through the cardboard that covered every square inch of transparent surface. He stepped back and looked up.

"The sign is gone," he said.

Sarah stepped back to stand beside him and look up. It was easy to see where the sign had been: four jagged craters of concrete showed where

anchor bolts had held it in place.

Taking two swift steps forward, Sarah was knocking on the glass door before Cal realized she had moved. He couldn't take his eyes off the damaged concrete. His mind wondering what could have torn the sign off like that, he imagined a tractor or heavy crane coming in the night or wee morning hours. It seemed doubtful. Of course, it seemed a lot more likely than a ten or eleven foot monster with supernatural strength ripping the sign from its moorings.

It was only four bolts; why not just unbolt them?

Sarah was rapping loudly on the glass again. Cal tore his eyes from the pitted overhang to step up beside her.

"Looks like nobody's home," he observed.

She looked at him, frowned, then stepped forward and knocked again. A flap of cardboard was pulled aside as she did, and a round red and black eyeball looked out through the hole. It was huge.

"What the hell was that?" Cal whispered.

"What?" Sarah's eyes searched the place where he looked. It was covered cardboard again.

There was the quiet sound of metal grating on metal, then the clicking and clacking of tumblers turning. Whatever was in there was unlocking the door.

Cal edged backward as the door inched open inward, putting Sarah between him and whatever owned that gigantic reptilian eye.

A black fedora appeared, followed by a familiar face. Cal breathed a sigh of relief.

Roche looked up and down the empty street.

"Get in here, you two," he growled.

As soon as they were inside, the club owner locked the door behind them. Cal felt a knot of tension start to form in his belly when the keys turned, felt it tighten further when Roche removed the key from the lock and slipped it in his pocket.

Sarah didn't seem to notice. She was turning a slow wide circle on what used to be the dance floor by night and coffee lounge by day. Now it was gutted and burnt, every surface flattened and blackened by flames. The stage was gone, the floor where it once stood littered with bent and burnt metal. The stale acrid stench of smoke and wet charcoal was thick and cloying as it climbed inside Cal's numbed nostrils.

"Oh my God, Roche," Sarah found her voice somewhere in the wreckage. "What happened?"

“Electrical fire,” Roche said quickly. Too quickly for Cal’s trained ear. People had lied to him far too often.

“Where did it start?” Cal asked, looking up at the remnants of the upper landing. It was nothing but twisted metal charred beyond usability or recognition.

“In an electrical circuit,” the big man growled.

Cal didn’t see any reason to point out that the response neither answered his question nor made real sense. He just shrugged and nodded. Whatever.

“You haven’t by any chance seen or heard from Mason, have you?” Sarah crossed her arms and bit her lip.

“Your guitar wizard?” The club owner shook his big head. “I haven’t seen him since the show ended last night. Great show, by the way.”

“Thanks.” Sarah looked about as enthusiastic accepting the compliment as Roche had been in giving it. “Did you happen to see where Mason went after the show?”

Roche shrugged.

“Last I saw he was headed upstairs, maybe to talk to Kris. Or Paul, he was up there too. I didn’t see him after that, but I was busy closing up.” He shrugged his beefy shoulders once more. “Sorry, kid.”

“It would be silly to ask if you had heard from Mikie, wouldn’t it?” Sarah was nervously biting her lip again. Cal found it kind of annoying.

“The no-show king?” Roche shook his head. “I haven’t seen that guy for days.”

They were all quiet then, and Cal and Sarah turned to gaze at the burnt wreckage again. It looked like a bomb had gone off where the coffee bar used to be, the bent stainless steel sink and appliances in pieces and stained black by smoke and fire. The shrapnel described a pretty clear concentric pattern around the scorched floor, which had long gashes cut into it in deep long sets of five. For all the crime dramas his cocaine-fueled mind may have payed way too close attention to, Cal could not for the life of him figure out what had happened here. He was pretty damn sure it wasn’t an electrical fire.

“On a completely unrelated note.” The sound of Roche’s growling voice had a false ring to it. Cal turned to him.

The big man’s beady black eyes were boring into him, and Cal thought of the big reptilian eye he had imagined earlier for some reason.

“The cops were here last night,” Roche growled. “They said there was a report of gunshots, they found blood in the street.”

“Oh my God,” Sarah gasped. “What happened?”

“They didn’t come till we were closed,” he sighed. “They said the caller didn’t want to identify themselves. They called nine-one-one from a payphone and said they heard shots fired a couple hours earlier in front of the Devil’s Brew.” Roche made a sour face when he said the name.

“Unbelievable,” Sarah’s eyes were wide and shocked.

“I know,” Cal quipped. “Where the hell did they find a pay phone in the city?”

The club owner and the pretty singer looked at him darkly.

“You don’t know anything about any shooting, do you, Cokey?” Roche’s eyes seemed to be invading his mind more than awaiting an answer.

Cal knew how to lie.

“Of course not.” He lifted his shirt to show his slim abdomen. “I don’t need a gun. I’m good to my customers and they’re good to me.” He looked around the gutted room. “Do you know anything about the shooting?”

Roche strode to the door, fishing his keys from his pocket as he walked. Unlocking the door, he swung it inward and held it open.

“Get the hell out of here,” he growled.

“I’m sure Cal didn’t mean anything by that.” Sarah was moving toward the door despite her protestations. Cal was already standing outside.

She paused in the doorway. “Will you please call if you hear anything? About Mason or Mikie?”

“Sure, kid.” The big man sounded doubtful.

“I’m really sorry about your club.” She was still standing in the doorway.

“Thanks, kid.”

He was clearly waiting for her to get out of the way so he could close the door. Finally, she stepped one foot into the street. Roche began to close the door on her other foot as it paused in the frame.

“Hey, Roche?” She looked over his broad shoulder to eye the corpse of his business one last time. “Where’s Jessica?”

The big man grimaced.

“That girl never belonged here,” he sighed heavily. “She went home.”

“Home?” Sarah pressed. “Where’s home?”

Roche pushed the door shut, giving Sarah a moment to move her petite sandaled foot before it was smashed. She pulled her foot back and set it on the sidewalk to the clacking sound of the lock.

She was biting her lip in that annoying way and looking up at him uncertainly.

“Where to next?” he asked.

Sarah took her phone out of her purse, tried one number and then another with no results.

“I’m so worried, Cal,” she said needlessly.

“I can see that.”

“Will you stay with me at Mason’s apartment tonight?” She blinked, her eyes going wide. “You can have the bed, I’ll sleep on the couch. I just don’t want to be alone.”

Cal jangled his keys and pretended to consider it. There was no way on Earth he was wrapping himself in sheets that surely stunk of pot and stale cigarette smoke, maybe even Mason and Sarah’s sex.

“I need to get home,” Cal said, unable to think of an excuse as to why. “You’re welcome to crash at my place. I have a spare bedroom.”

She thought about it for a moment, long enough to start listing reasons why she shouldn’t.

“It’s an hour and a half drive one way,” he said. “I can bring you back up tomorrow if you want, although traffic will be shitty on Seventeen in the morning and again in the afternoon.”

“Okay.” Sarah nodded, much to his dismay. “If you’re sure you don’t mind.”

He waved his hand dismissively, and smiled charismatically. “Of course. I never have company.”

*Because I don’t like company,* he thought under the smile.

The Acura chirped as they approached it from opposite sides.

“Hey Cal, check this out.” Sarah was kneeling carefully in her green sundress, looking at the side of his car.

Cal came around to her side of the car and knelt beside her. Together, they looked at the little round hole in the wheel well.

“Is that a bullet hole?” Sarah took a step away from the car.

“Well, hell,” Cal muttered. “I guess I parked in the wrong spot.”

“Are you going to report it?”

“Sarah,” Cal regarded her coldly. “Do you know how I make my money? Besides managing a band that loses members at an average of one per day?”

“Well, you don’t have to be a dick about it,” she huffed.

Cal moved to the driver’s side and opened the door.

“You coming?” He didn’t wait for a response, just got in and closed the door and started the engine.

The other door opened, the dome light came on, and her summery scent filled the car. She began to buckle her seat belt, stopped mid-motion with the belt between her breasts.

“Cal,” she said quietly, “did you have any involvement with the shooting Roche talked about?”

“Apparently,” Cal snapped. “My car was caught in the crossfire, and now I have to fix it or cover it up. Does that count as involvement?”

Sarah pulled the tequila from her purse as he moved the car into the street. She gulped at it thirstily, then held it out to him.

What the hell. Cal took the bottle and tilted it as he drove. Maybe it would make him stop wondering what her face would look like if he smashed it against the dashboard.

The tequila burned his mouth when he drank it, burned his throat when he swallowed it, and burned his belly as he took another mouthful. He handed the bottle back to Sarah, noting that it had not burned away his morbid curiosity.

“An hour and a half?” Sarah hit the bottle again before stowing it. “Do you usually go that long without...y’know...”

She sniffled meaningfully.

“No,” he laughed. “I do usually wait until I get on the freeway. Being a cokehead is not nearly as easy as being a pothead on the road.”

Sarah laughed with him.

“Mason seems to think his car won’t work unless he’s smoking weed.” She paused for thought. “I have a little, if you want some.”

Cal made a face. “No thanks. You can if you want, just blow it out the window. No cigarettes, please.”

“I don’t smoke,” Sarah responded with a shrug. “I take a drag every now and then, but I don’t smoke.”

She dug around her purse and came up with a little black cloth bag. Sarah untied the strings and widened the mouth of the bag with her careful worrying fingers. Soon she was packing a little bowl in a little glass pipe riddled with resin.

“Want some?” She was holding it out, along with a lighter. Cal could smell the fresh green scent. He didn’t answer for a moment, savoring the aroma before it became a burnt smoky stench.

“No thanks,” he said finally.

Sarah hit the little pipe, coughing at the end and spewing smoke all over the cab of the car.

Sighing, Cal rolled down her window from his control panel.

She puffed away at the weed pipe until they were on 280 and moving at the sixty-five miles an hour he had programmed into his cruise control.

“Let me know what I can do,” Sarah said, putting the pipe and the little plastic baggie into the black stow. The cloth bag disappeared into her purse, and the air cleared at last.

Cal glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"I take my job as passenger very seriously," she smiled. "I am here to deejay or pass the bottle or whatever the honored driver might need."

"Okay." Cal shrugged. "There's a CD case under your seat. If you flip it open, you will not find a CD inside. Rather, you will find a razor blade, a plastic straw cut to size, and a little bag of coke. Please cut us a couple of fat lines."

She reached under her seat with a giggle. When she set the case on her lap, half on her dress and half on her bare leg, she nudged him with her elbow.

"Great White, huh?"

Cal nodded. "My brother had to watch me a lot when I was a kid. To him, watching me meant buying an extra concert ticket or sneaking me into a show. I usually hated it, the muddled ugly sounds that a lot of people call a rock show. Great White was just different. They sounded clean and crisp, and I liked them. I don't have many CD's, but I have most of theirs. All the early stuff, with Jack Russell and his incredible voice."

"I'm familiar," Sarah was chopping up two decent lines. "White boy blues, that's what I always called them. They were pretty huge for a while, back in the day."

"Do you mind if my line is not fat?" Sarah seemed intimidated by the neatly cut rails.

He shook his head again. "Slide it over to my side, or just do how much you want."

"Nope, driver first." Sarah busied herself making her line into a thin skiff and his into a wide ridge. Cal glanced down at her lap, then back at the road. That was better.

She held the scarred plastic surface in front of her. "Is that too much?"

"No." Cal didn't bother to look over.

Then she was holding it in front of him and putting the plastic straw close to his nose with her other hand.

"I got it." Cal grasped the wheel at twelve o' clock, took the straw with his free hand. Balancing it out, he snorted half the line up one nostril and the rest up the other. That was nice; it was usually difficult to do while driving.

"Well thanks, Sarah," he said affably. "Aren't you nice to have around?"

She giggled as she tooted the little line she had cut for herself. Before he knew it she was proffering the open bottle of tequila again.

Cal wondered while he drank if the bottle would break if he bashed it

against her skull, or if the thick glass would hold up to a good pummeling.

He handed the bottle back. "Thanks."

"Want to listen to some music? Some Great White, maybe?" It looked like she was digging in her purse for the pot pipe again.

"Nah," he said. She was looking for the pot pipe. Cal cracked her window as she packed the bowl. "Damn girl, you know how to party."

A dark cloud passed over her face. "I'm so worried. I just want to feel numb."

"About Mason?"

She took a hit before she answered, held it in while she spoke.

"Totally. He's not just missing, Cal." She blew the smoke onto the dash, and it filled the cab of the car for a few seconds before escaping out the open window. "He was with another girl last night."

Cal raised his eyebrows and glanced at her. "Define 'with'."

Sarah blew another cloud of smoke at the dashboard. "He got a blowjob in the alley behind the bar from some slut."

He resisted the urge to laugh. Barely.

"You saw him?" he asked.

She nodded, putting the lighter's flame to the stinky weed.

"Did he see you?"

Sarah shook her head and exhaled, filling the car with white-blue smoke again.

"Are you guys supposed to be exclusive?" Cal opened her window a little wider.

"We're in a committed relationship, Cal," she said sarcastically.

"Does he know that?" Cal pressed. "Is he clear on all the rules he is supposed to be following? Sarah, is it possible that Mason is just spending time with someone else?"

"Mason needs me," Sarah retorted. She didn't sound so sure.

"A week ago he didn't need you," Cal shrugged. "A week ago he didn't even know you existed."

"So you think he's with that girl?"

"Nope." He shrugged again. "I think he's not taking our calls. I think I'll wait until he turns up to find out what's up. I think imagining what he might be doing is a waste of time."

Sarah sparked the flame and hit the pipe, filled the cab with smoke again.

"I think he's with that girl," she said.

"I understand why you're worried about Mason, sort of," Cal said. "But

why Mikie?” Maybe talking about the guy he had successfully killed would take his mind off killing the girl beside him.

Sarah exchanged the pipe for the bottle again.

“Mikie is a recovered addict,” she said soberly, taking a long draught.

He took the tequila from her and had a swallow. “Recovered from what? Every time I saw him he was drinking and smoking weed.”

“Oh, he can handle beer and pot alright.” Sarah had another sip from the bottle before capping it. “Just not the hard stuff. He was strung out on heroin for about a year. I’ve been worried about him ever since the other night when you gave him that coke.”

“How long was he clean?” Cal was not enjoying the death mask behind his eyes nearly so much now.

Sarah frowned. “About a month.”

He frowned back. “Why didn’t anyone say something?”

## CHAPTER 3

He shouldn't still be here.

Kris sat in the easy chair in William's living room, wondering what was going to happen to him. William's new Walker, Chase, was sitting nearby on the sofa with Daemon. They were talking excitedly, the unusual demon explaining things only Guides knew to the unlikely Walker. Chase seemed far more interested in the unseen worlds than most Walkers, and Kris had tuned the elementary conversation out quite a while ago.

Paul was gone, Brenna was gone and then reborn as Ximena and now she was gone too. William had survived, but there was no way of knowing if he would see another day as a Walker. Even Matt was gone, either killed in battle or lost in Hell. There were so many uncertainties, Kris clung to the one certainty he felt to his dead bones.

He shouldn't still be here.

Vanessa was busying herself about the house, using her newfound ability to touch on mundane housework. She seemed as calm and collected as usual, except for the worried furtive glances she shot at Daemon and Chase from time to time. They were too engrossed in conversation to notice.

She wouldn't even look at Kris. The Guide didn't blame her. He shouldn't still be here.

The angels had received some special dispensation to freeze time and extract the Walker army and the horde of demons from Hell. Jessica had shown up after the freeze, free to move about as she pleased. In the time it had taken to extract the Walker army, half had been torched by her fire.

The demon horde had been left behind when the mission went wrong; and now Jessica was the Queen of Hell, and Hell was overrun with demons. It was all Kris knew for sure, because he had seen it with his own frozen eyes. Well, he did know one other thing for sure.

He shouldn't still be here.

When a Walker died or was rehumanized, their Guide and Watcher passed naturally into the next life, usually as an angel in the lower levels of Heaven. The Walkers who were able to bear the burden of immortality for long centuries surely had Watchers and Guides that came into being

in the higher realms. It gave Kris no comfort to think that many of the Walkers they had lost had been ancient, and would go on to becoming angels themselves.

Daemon shouldn't be here either. He claimed that when he had stepped into the dragon fire, he had appeared at Chase's side. Kris had no reason to suspect he wasn't telling the truth, but it still felt wrong.

The front door opening seemed a surprise to everyone but Chase, who was still more startled when someone suddenly materialized from thin air than he was when they used a door.

They all turned at the sound, and William walked into the room to find eight immortal eyes on him.

Vanessa crossed the room to take his motorcycle helmet and leather jacket from his hands and drop them unceremoniously to the floor. The helmet rolled to a thunk against a wall as she threw her arms about his shoulders.

"What happened?" Vanessa asked.

She stepped back as the others came forward, and they formed a semi-circle around William.

"Well, I'm not dead." William stated the obvious and stepped into the room. The semi-circle moved with him.

"Kris," the Walker looked at him, "you are to remain a Guide if you so choose. I have many keys to find Walkers for, and you may select the Walker you would like to Guide from those that will be made."

The Guide felt like a balloon with a fast leak. He deflated under the news, letting his sagging shoulders be his reply.

William gave him a smile. He looked around like he was checking to see if anyone outside the group could hear, then leaned in conspiratorially toward Kris.

"Or," William murmured, "you can help Vanessa Guide me until some of my current tasks have been completed."

The Guide sighed with relief. He could read between the lines; William didn't think Paul was gone, and he wanted Kris to help find him.

"Are you the new king?" Kris was surprised to hear hope in his voice.

"No." William leaned back and away from them.

"According to most of the angels, there never was a Walker King; at least not recently," he told them. "I am to lead the Walkers as Walker John did, individually and separately."

"Walkers can't gather again?" Vanessa folded her hands together in the sleeves of her robe with a teenaged grimace.

“It was helping Walkers, spending time together.” She was clearly not pleased in her compassion. “I saw so many men and women relieve years of mental burdens just talking to each other. Fighting together made many Walkers forever friends.”

“I know,” the Walker responded plaintively. “The Council says it was thinning the walls between dimensions. That, along with excessive walking between worlds.”

“What?” Kris sputtered. “Walkers can’t walk between worlds anymore?”

William focused his attention on the new Walker and his unlikely Guide.

“Chase,” he said, folding his arms before him. “Show me your key.”

Daemon nodded encouragingly when Chase glanced to him. The new Walker held out his hand so the old Walker could see the open watch face.

“Can you feel the countdown?” William’s arms were still crossed, his tone brusque.

He couldn’t expect the Walker to be tuned in to the key enough to feel the countdown happening within him. Kris knew it had taken William years to even notice the organic second heartbeat that every Walker had inside. The Guide barely had time to wonder why William had asked when he saw the new Walker nod.

“Yeah, sure,” Chase said. “We have about seven minutes.”

Daemon edged forward. “He didn’t want armor. Or a weapon.”

## CHAPTER 4

“I have found them, my queen.” A hunched form approached the grand dragon throne, swathed in a dark and tattered robe. Her hood was pulled over her head, and her voice was a crackling ancient wheeze. The eyes that peered from the cowled shadows were dark and milky. Violet fire danced in that darkness, irises alive with an eerie glow punctuated by wide dark slits for pupils.

Curled up in a scaled ball on the throne, the dragon lifted her head from the coil of her body.

“Show me,” she hissed.

A dragon must spend a good many years in its reptilian body, practicing to make words sound spoken rather than hissed. The throat is different, the mouth and nose all literally a completely different animal. Although her age showed in her scant seventeen foot length and her graveled papery voice, Jessica had remained in dragon form since transforming in Roche’s coffee shop. All day she sat on her throne and issued orders and proclamations in that lizardly voice.

It may have been traumatizing beyond hope of recovery for a human to behold the new Dragon Queen in Hell, her raspy reptilian voice hissing the words that were bringing the dark realm to an even darker place. The devils and dragons bore up under it, and soon her callous reign became routine. Among the first of her proclamations was the promise of a life of ease to whomever found the souls of the Walker King and his bitch quisling.

“My Queen.” The huddled form produced a crystal ball from the folds of her robe. A perfect clear orb, it was but the size of one of her gnarled fists.

Her bent fingers uncurled slowly, as much as they could, and the quartz sphere grew as they did. In the space of a breath, the crystal ball was the size of the woman’s head. The weight of it bowed her withered arms.

Growing larger was not the only power that the quartz sphere possessed. As Jessica’s reptilian head snaked closer, she could make out shadows and shapes moving amidst the crystal clarity. Coming closer still, she could hear sounds that grew louder the more intently she listened. They were the same sounds she would hear if she left this room and ventured out to the layered

surfaces of the dark underworld. Countless fires crackled and popped, an interminable percussion section that never played the same beat twice. Wretched screams and piteous moans that could have belonged to demons or devils or dragons filled the air, as off-time with the beat as they were off-key with each other. Altogether it made for a hellish song that chilled the new queen to her dark dragon bones every time she heard it.

Her reptilian nose nearly touching the smooth crystal surface, Jessica's crimson slitted eyes narrowed as a shape shifted in the shadows and another moan rose above the others. Naked and trembling, the shape slowly rose from lifeless puddle of flesh to the shakily standing form of a human man. Another low moan, one of confusion, escaped his lips as he stood.

"Paul." The Dragon Queen's voice was an angry hiss, and the robed hag drew back.

"Closer!" Jessica raged at the woman. She couldn't understand why they couldn't use a giant flatscreen instead of this technological relic. In her short time on Earth, Jessica had seen humans take leaps and bounds in industrial ingenuity with a speed that rivaled any civilization that had risen before. She had gone for the Renaissance, and to continually secure the contract that had been drawn up to keep her mother both in power and in check.

First she had missed one; now she missed the other.

Arriving too late had broken her heart twice already. The new queen was not going to let it happen a third time. She gazed at the image and tuned in to the sound.

*How can they not even have internet?* she thought to herself for the thousandth time, then perished the thought.

"Mmmo," Paul's voice was low and unintelligible, but it was still Paul's. The shifting shades of dark red on the dragon's scales was from the candles that guttered nearby. The queen was as still as her own captive breath as she watched.

"Maul." It was almost a word this time, and Jessica's eyes widened as he turned and seemed to look right at her. He looked like Paul in every way, standing there naked and peering into the shadows. Yet his stance was not Paul's; the lost and wild look in his eyes belonged to an animal, and the way he stood looked like he either expected or craved violence. He continued to stretch and flex his muscles, as if his own naked sinewed body was unfamiliar to him.

His eyes stayed on the shadows, wild and watchful, and after a few moments Jessica saw why. They came alive around him, a half-dozen demons

that were all taller and wider than the trembling wild thing. Talons and teeth were not the only weapons they had, and Jessica wondered where demons had secured swords as two of them advanced with gleaming curved blades.

The thing that looked like Paul dove at the bare feet of the monster closest him, not quite dodging fast enough under the swing of the demon's sword. A gash appeared on his bare shoulder, splashing blood on the demon as they went down together. Human stood over demon then, the hard-won sword in his hand.

Watching intently, Jessica noted with satisfaction that the man was still bleeding. It did not matter when he beheaded the prone demon and disarmed another; what mattered was that he did it ever-so-slowly, like a normal human should. There was no sign of supernatural speed or strength, and the beast that looked like Paul was still bleeding and already beginning to wane. Holding just one sword aloft was too much the task, and the tip dipped to the charred rock floor as his fate loomed ever closer.

Another figure stepped from the shadows, and Jessica's eyes danced with furious flames.

"Ximena!" she hissed, the name escaping her lips before she could recall it. Jessica continued watching the scene, oblivious to the stir caused in the throne room by the sound of that name.

Lost in the scene, the Dragon Queen watched Ximena and Paul battling the demons together. The taut grimace that had appeared when Ximena did turned to a wicked slow half-smile as they fought. The duo looked like two ordinary humans who knew as well as their onlooker that every swing of the sword only staved off the inevitable.

Jessica's smile grew as another group of demons emerged from the smoky shadows before the first had been properly dispatched. It turned to a grin as the two humans looked at each other, him baffled and terrified and her swathed in a sad resignation.

Ximena's voice sounded above the dreadful song that played eternally in the desolate landscape.

"Paul," she said, looking in the wild thing's eyes.

His blue eyes widened in wonder, and another unintelligible moan came from his lips.

"Paul," she said again, eyeing the demons as they gathered. "I love you."

They were upon them then, Jessica wondering how that voice could sound so much like the great Ximena and ordinary little Brenna all at the same time as flesh was rent from bone and life was plucked from them both. She watched Ximena bleed, again pleased at the red color as it flowed.

Neither of them healed as they were torn limb from limb, and the light fled both of their eyes long before the demons stopped flaying their flesh with long talons and sharp swords and chomping canines. For as long as it took for the slaving monsters to consume every bit of what had once been her two friends, Jessica watched and smiled.

When it was over, her laughter filled the room. It was dark and reptilian and humorless, the sound of the bitterness that consumed her. She eyed the room and its unfamiliar occupants suspiciously, swinging her long toothy snout in a slow semi-circle. All of them had voiced some doubt or glanced some uncertainty her way since she had taken the throne, but for the twin sentinel guards at the door and the three others that attended her constant court.

Those were the three she regarded with the most suspicion.

First was the devil girl with the bright orange slitted eyes who always smiled sweetly when the queen looked her way. She was just a devil, but Jessica couldn't pry into the lowest devil's thoughts like her mother had been able to. All she could see was the smile, and every time she saw it she trusted the pretty devil a bit less. Everyone had presented themselves to her, but Jessica could not remember most of their names any more than she could read their thoughts. That was not the case with her second problem.

Royal dragons are educated, and Jessica had received her own royal education in Hell. Laurentis had been an old dragon when Jessica first fought her way free of her leathery shell, and she had heard stories of his glory and his viciousness to accompany every history lesson on Hell's waves of war. He had always fought for the queen, a lethal shadow beside her that lived for the loyal pleasure of bringing her enemies to the ground and tearing them asunder. She didn't know what role he had played in her mother's rule; she had not lived under it for long. Jessica hoped that his honesty in revealing his true name and his habit of never speaking against her bode well; why tell her his name if he meant to betray?

The new queen was young, but she hadn't hatched yesterday. Jessica knew that the ancient dragon's mind was surely as complicated as the layered tunnels of Hell, and as unfathomable. Still, she couldn't help but think of an adage that she had heard many times growing up in the luminous wonder that Hell had once been.

Be wary of the devil whose lips would drip with lies; be warier still the devil who speaks truth and holds your eyes.

The words resounded in her head every time he gave her a solemn respectful nod across the royal room. Jessica had considered ordering his

death or exile, but she didn't know if the remains of her mother's army would or could carry out the order. If the ancient dragon resisted, it could decimate what few forces and what little power she actually had. Humans and Earth had been the sources of her continued learning for the last few centuries, and she had picked up a thing or two living in the short-sighted realm. The first was that the mortal heart could neither contain nor understand the meaning of its own love; the second was another old saying, this one learned under blue sky.

Since Jessica had no friends to keep close, she did what she had to do and kept her enemies closer.

That thought brought her eyes and her attention to rest on her third source of suspicion. There was no mistaking that one's intentions, the first human she had ever seen in the lower realms. He lay there sweating profusely, his skin flushed to match the devils that surrounded him. Had they food or water for him, he would have refused it. Matt lay on the floor, in chains, awaiting death like a child waiting for the ice cream truck.