

a l i c r o s s



Desolate

book two of Desolation

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by
Ali Cross

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chapter one

I teased the cold in through my fingertips, into my blood stream. Drank it into my soul, letting it fill every crevice of my being. I squeezed my eyes tight, willing myself home to Hell, wishing it were me there and not Michael.

The thought of him broke my concentration and I felt sunlight warming my eyelids. A gut-wrenching sob tore through my chest. I couldn't bear the thought of Michael enduring endless torture at the hands of my father. Couldn't bear the thought that he'd be stripped of his goodness. Stripped of everything that defined him.

The creatures of Hell would see to it.

It should have been me.

Unable to claim the darkness I needed so badly, I let my eyes open. Just Lucy's balcony. Just Earth. Just a life I never wanted. I rolled up the yoga mat and stashed it in a clay pot in the corner.

I stepped into the apartment and slid the glass door closed behind me.

"Mornin' princess." James lay sprawled on the white leather sofa, TV remote in one hand, apple in the other. "Isn't it a little cold for you to be doing that?" He had no idea how his nickname for me cut, how it reminded me—every. single. time.—of the duties Father demanded of me and the choices I'd made. Including the wrong choice.

I shrugged as I passed James on my way to the kitchen. "It helps."

James clicked off The Early Show then rolled off the couch, shuffling into step behind me. "Yeah, you look relaxed as hell."

"Ha." If only he knew just how right he was.

I pulled out the carafe from the coffee maker and poured myself a cup, breathing in the dark, nutty aroma. Yoga and a hot cup of strong coffee—my armor against the coming day. Without them, I didn't think I'd survive in the human world. The wanters and needers defined high school, encapsulated it. Just the thought of it, of them, exhausted me.

James leaned against the opposite counter while I poured, the delicious steam rising into the air like fog.

"Did Mir tell you?" he asked.

I could feel him staring, like an invisible string stretched between us. I resisted meeting his gaze. I hated that James and Miri were a part of the craziness of my life. I constantly worried over Miri's involvement—and now James? I did not want him involved with The Hallowed. How could I protect them? I hadn't even protected the one I love more than my own soul.

I set the carafe down and handed James his cup, watching his hands, not his eyes, and said nothing.

"You can pretend all you want that you've got a heart of stone, but not talking about it isn't going to change anything." He took a sip of his coffee. He screwed his face up and stuck his tongue out several times, making smacking sounds. "Yuck. How

can you drink it like this? It's practically tar." He set his cup on the counter and went about adding sugar and cream. I drank long and deep from mine just the way it was.

"Anyway," James continued, his suitably sweetened cup held in front of him like a gift. "I'm coming. Like it or not." He sipped and sighed. "Mmm, good. Besides, I'm not gonna let my girls hang out with a bunch of old dudes all the time—someone needs to keep those fogies in line."

"Ha. Those old fogies could kick your skinny white behind any ol' day of the week." Longinus, a two-thousand-year-old centurion, was always ready for a fight and Knowles was a demon cast out of Asgard along with my father and everyone else he'd polluted with his mutinous rhetoric. "The only one you could take is Cornelius—and even you wouldn't hurt a priest."

James laughed but when he leaned forward, his ocean blue eyes were dark and serious. Only a couple inches taller than me (he always said good things came in small packages) he speared me with his gaze and I felt trapped.

"You are loved, Des. Whether you like it or not. And sometimes, when people love you, they want to help you. They want to be there for you. It's our right, you know. Let us help. It won't kill you."

He kissed me on the cheek and left the kitchen. "See you after school." A moment later his bedroom door clicked shut.

The clock on the microwave read 7:30. I stared at it until it flicked to 7:31. It seemed my whole life consisted of things I couldn't change, that I couldn't stop—chief among them being people who loved me. I didn't deserve them and they certainly didn't deserve the danger loving me put them in.

Maybe I couldn't change their feelings, or their misguided need to help me, but I couldn't shake the feeling that one day, they would all regret knowing me.

chapter two

Miri didn't show up for homeroom. Right before English, she dove into her chair with seconds to spare, her heavy messenger bag banging noisily against the desk. Miri rattled off a zillion "I'm sorries" the whole time.

"Just take your seat, Miri," Mrs. Park said. I watched as she tried—unsuccessfully—to make her naturally smiling face frown at Miri, but she couldn't pull it off.

"You look terrible," I whispered when Miri leaned over to set her bag on the floor.

"Gee, thanks," she said in a very un-Miri-like manner. I narrowed my eyes and noticed the tell-tale signs of a bad night's sleep. The slightly wrinkled shirt and crumpled plaid skirt told me she'd grabbed them off the floor. The red spots high on her pale cheeks and blood-shot eyes would have once made me think she'd been drinking—but I knew she hadn't had a drink in two months and there were no Shadows clinging to her today.

"You okay?"

She put her elbows on her desk and covered her face with her hands. Then she let them drop and took a long breath in through her nose and out through her mouth—a calming technique she'd learned from me. "Yeah. I'm okay. Just . . ." She glanced up at Mrs. Park who had her back to us while she wrote something on the board. "I had that dream again."

I opened my mouth to respond, but . . . what could I say? My best friend had dreams no human ever should—she didn't deserve to have her mind invaded by Hell night after night. And these latest dreams about a demonic horseman riding into San Francisco to wreak some kind of Hellish violence on the world had been plaguing her for the past few nights. That probably meant something, and it certainly wasn't anything good. Mrs. Park cut off any response I might have given.

"The first day back from Thanksgiving break—that's your deadline." Behind her, she had written *Shakespeare Scenes*. I stared dumbly at the words while the room erupted with whispered conversations. "You're going to pick your teams—two people, one play." Mrs. Park raised her voice to be heard over the noise. "I want you to make a presentation of some sort, based on the play you chose. It can be a critical analysis, a modern resetting of the scene, or you could act it out. Or any combination of these. Or any other representation you can think of—you could choreograph and perform an original dance—"

Marcus, Lost Soul and nerdy band leader said, "Yessss," and a few people laughed.

"—or a sculpture—anything. Just run it by me before you put a lot of work into it so I can make sure it's appropriate." Pretty much everyone laughed this time.

"What's the big deal?" I whispered, hoping Miri could hear me over the din of voices.

"In the three years since Mrs. Park's been giving this assignment, she hasn't

denied any of them—last year, Stan Yehtman posed, practically *nude*, in the courtyard all day. He sat in that thinking-man pose, ya know? He said he was pondering Hamlet’s question *To be or not to be?* It was awesome.” Miri grinned wickedly. “Doesn’t hurt that he’s totally hot. Everyone tries to outdo everyone else—even from past years. Whaddya wanna bet Marcus will do something really crazy?”

I could only imagine.



During our free period, Miri and I sat at a table tucked behind a tall shelf of books in the library. We told Sister Mary Theresa we’d be working on our Shakespeare scene. Instead, we huddled together, our foreheads nearly touching, discussing something the stern nun would definitely not approve of.

“So what happened? Was anything different this time?”

Miri waved her hand, breathless from running from history to meet me. Mr. Sims had kept her afterward to talk about her paper, while I’d hurried on to make sure we got our favorite table.

“Nope; exactly the same.”

My shoulders slumped, and I’m sure my disappointment showed because Miri kneaded her forehead as though lost in deep thought.

When I touched her arm, her eyes met mine and I searched them, trying to discern any details she might have left out. I could embrace my Shadow, force my will on Miri and see her memories, her dreams, but I hated the way it made me feel. Hated the thrill of cold power that rushed through my veins whenever I released the darkness inside of me. Hated the way it left me wanting more.

Miri’s eyes pretty much told me nothing.

“The gray horseman?”

“Yeah.”

“This is the third night in a row, right?”

Miri didn’t respond as she pulled out her notebook and Shakespeare book and put them on the table in front of her. I shifted my papers around, and opened my book to *Hamlet*. If Sister Mary Theresa caught us without any books, she’d kick us out—and it was raining. I so didn’t want to sit in the cemetery (our only other private place) in the rain. I wished we could go to the Situation Room (as Miri affectionately called the room where The Hallowed met), but Father Cornelius told us not to go there during school hours.

“I think it means something,” she said. I only nodded. I knew the dream was a warning, but I was afraid of what.

“Tell me about it—maybe you’ll remember something.” I’d heard it all before, but this dream was too big, too *real*, to keep it to herself—she needed to share it, to get its stink off of her, to share the responsibility of it with another person.

Miri closed her eyes. “Huge horse. The guy with the long gray robe. Big sword—except it’s not a sword exactly, it’s one of those curved ones like sultans have.”

“A scimitar,” I provided.

“Yeah. And . . . dread. I can taste it, like sulphur and sadness.” Miri talked so fast, if I didn’t already have her words memorized I wouldn’t have a clue what she said.

“And then what happened?”

“I don’t know.” She sat back in her chair, her gaze fixed absently on the library stack behind me. The way she stared, unfocused, I knew she saw the dream replaying in her mind. She spun the pencil around and around between her fingers and over her thumb.

I waved my hand in front of her face. When she looked at me, I smiled.

“I can tell there’s something else—what is it?”

She doodled around the edges of her play book. “Even though I’ve seen it before, it’s still terrible. He’s riding on, and I seem to be flying in the air behind him, like I’m trying to catch him, but I can’t.” She hugged herself and rocked forward. “Then he turns his face toward me and it’s like I can’t even breathe, I’m so scared.”

I waited, hoping something else would surface. “Did you get to see his face this time?”

“No. He was still wearing that hood, but it’s like there’s nothing in there—no face at all. It’s so creepy—it was awful.” She struggled to pull herself out of the dream, and then she stopped—her breath, her blinking, everything. She was like that for so long—at least ten seconds—that I started to panic.

“Miri.” I gripped her shoulder.

She blinked rapidly then shook her head. “I . . . I think I remember something.” Miri dragged her eyes up to mine. “You. I think . . . I think it’s you.”

A chill skipped up my spine. “Me.” Of course it was me—I was desolation, after all. I slumped back in my seat and folded my arms across my chest. The action closed off the world, gating me in.

“Wait, don’t do that.” Miri reached out and pulled one of my hands toward her. I used to think it was weird, when she touched me. Before, in Hell, no one ever dared laid a hand on me—unless of course it was Akaros when we trained together. But I was getting used to this touch. This human connection.

Miri took a breath and closed her eyes in a slow blink. “I think that the person flying behind the horseman, the one trying to reach him and stop him—the one who is always me in the dream—is you.”

My breath whooshed out of my lungs in a rush. I could be the one to fight. I longed for the chance to knock Father down one bad guy at a time. I could deal with this.

But the idea of Miri living in my hell night after night? It killed me.

“I think you need to get ready,” she said. “Something’s coming and I’m pretty sure you’re the only one who can stop it.”

chapter three

“Keep looking at me like that princess, and I might not be so pretty anymore.” James made a flicking gesture over his chest. “I think you’re starting to burn holes in my shirt.”

“Come on,” Miri said, bumping her shoulder against James’.

I blinked hard, realizing James was right. I had been staring. It drove me crazy that he was here. I didn’t know if I could lose anyone else. Everyone I cared about was now officially wrapped up in this mess. I’d already lost Michael and Lucy. And now Father had some other plan to bring death and destruction? I couldn’t even bring myself to consider what might happen. Instead, I moved my glare to the wall above Cornelius’ head and leaned against the closed door.

“Do you have a theory?” Knowles asked. He sat in his customary spot where a tall cabinet cast him in shadows. His voice sounded tired and cranky—pretty much like it always did. But I knew something about him now. Something that made me get up, cross the room, and sit beside him. Knowles may be a demon; maybe one time, long ago, he made the wrong choice, but he’d given his immortal life to correct that wrong. Turns out, we are a lot the same.

Tension skewered my brain and made me do a bad impression of Miri. “Yeah, what’s the plan Corney?”

Miri swallowed a laugh, making a snorting sound instead—a lovely habit she’d picked up from me.

Father Cornelius sighed and slipped his glasses from his nose. He pinned me with his pale blue eyes. It took a lot to get on his nerves, but from the tight wrinkles around his eyes, and his mouth turned downward in a tired frown. He looked like he’d lost all his patience for the day.

I jumped up and moved to the window that sat so high up you couldn’t actually see out of it. Small to begin with, suddenly the room felt suffocating, strangling. A constant whisper of *you don’t belong here* rattled through my brain. I pressed my back to the cold stone wall and crossed my arms. From there I could see everyone—Cornelius sitting at the desk closest to me, Longinus standing (always standing) against the wall on the other side of the window, Knowles in his shadowy corner, and directly across from me James and Miri sat so close together they may as well have been sharing a chair.

“I think we all know what needs to happen now. Something—some demon—is going to attack the Bay area and I’m the only one who can stop it.” I managed to do a decent job at nonchalance, but I knew they wouldn’t buy it. Everyone in the room—even Knowles—seemed to think they knew me better than I knew myself. And, well, maybe they were right. They’d been right about everything so far.

“Desolation,” Knowles said quietly. “You won’t be alone. You don’t ever have to be alone again.”

James chuckled. His eyes were on Miri's hands which he held between his, slowly tracing circles over her palm with his thumb. "She'll never believe you, old man. For Desi, it's action over words, every time.

"Just go do what you need to do, princess." *How did James suddenly get to be in charge?* "And we'll have your back."

"Agreed." Longinus' voice was like a deep rumble that swept across the room.

I ignored him and stared at James. This guy who I'd wanted so badly before. So much that I was willing to crush the spirit of an innocent boy for another kiss from James. So much that I'd tried to push Michael out of my mind for one thoughtless, meaningless encounter with James.

So much that I'd missed what a good friend he was.

Thank the stars I'd figured out that last part before I'd lost him forever.

"When will you go?" Cornelius asked.

I pushed away from the wall and walked to the door. "Tonight." Putting my hand on the doorknob, I waited. But no one responded, no one made the effort to detain me or convince me of another course of action. And even if they had, it wouldn't have made any difference.

I pulled the door open and walked out.

The meetings always ended this way. I arrived alone, I left alone. It was better for me this way. Easier. In the twilight, the sun hung low way out in the ocean and there was the hint of autumn in the California air. I loved this time of night, after school, but before evening mass—I had the cemetery to myself.

Tonight the darkness hung over the cemetery like a thick, wet blanket. No stars. No moon. Even my footsteps on the sidewalk made no sound at all. It reminded me of Hell. Of how all the sound got sucked away there, how everything got sucked away into nothingness.

I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and held my breath, listening. When I heard the leaves rustle in the slight breeze, and the distant wail of a siren somewhere down in the valley, my breath whooshed out along with some of the tension. Hell wasn't here.

I stopped in the usual place, with its memories of whispered belonging and hopeful kisses. The place that tore my heart right out of my chest. The cherubic angel welcomed me, his praying hands seeming to hold all my hopes and dreams between them. I traced my fingertips over the back of one pudgy stone hand before sitting on the bench directly across from the statue.

I closed my eyes and sought the memories that stung like ice against my heart—the memories that meant everything to me. I relished every one of those frost-cold bites, because each of them represented love. The love I'd had. The love I'd lost.

Michael.

Well, not lost so much as betrayed. Because of me, Michael had been cursed with an eternity in Hell—a place in utter opposition to everything that defined him. Where he was golden, Hell was shadows. Where he was Gardian, a warrior of Asgard, Hell was populated with demons—those very souls Michael had helped to banish from our eternal home. Where Michael had chosen loyalty to the rule of Asgard and the right of all Gardians to Ascension, Loki, my father, stood against all of those things. And Father would stop at nothing to crush him, to rid Michael of his goodness.

Just like he'd done with me.

A whisper of thought crossed my mind. *But look where you are, baby. Look what you've done.* I looked up into the starless sky, but I knew I wouldn't see Lucy there. It wasn't actually her speaking in my mind—not this time, anyway. I'd gotten really good at channeling her when I felt most alone.

Lucy would be all about hope. She wouldn't want me to give up on Michael, but to hope for—to *plan* for—the day when he would return. *Hope isn't just wishing, she'd say. It's all about the action, baby. Believe it. Live it. That's how you make your dreams come true.*

Of course, Lucy'd been a glorified prostitute who died at the hands of a very bad man, so maybe she wasn't the best person to take life advice from.

I hated myself for thinking that—Lucy'd been the first person to love me, to teach me how to open my heart to the goodness in other people. To the goodness in myself. It still didn't come easily to me, but for Lucy's sake I tried. Every day I tried.

So I closed my eyes and allowed myself to remember Michael. The touch of his hand against my own. The feel of his lips on mine. The way he always smelled of oranges and happiness.

"I miss you," I whispered to the stone angel. And with the words I pushed out the hope, pushed it away from me. It cost too much to keep.

Beyond my closed eyelids I sensed the day growing darker. With a sigh I stood. I gazed into the angel's eyes, one stony heart to another, before I nodded my head and walked toward the far reaches of the cemetery where a copse of trees would shield me from view.

In the safety of their shadows, I closed my eyes, thought of Michael, and Became.

chapter four

Clouds overtook the sky in thick, cloying darkness. I embraced my Shadow and allowed the freezing gifts of Hell to invade my soul. I welcomed the cold—despite everything I’d learned about myself, despite the undeniable warmth that clung to me like fine flakes of gold, the cold still felt most like me. My dark, feathered wings beat against the night sky with a steady reassurance. As black as the night around me, I felt free.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as I flew along the coast. I took up a post far atop the Golden Gate Bridge and sat, my knees pulled to my chest, and waited. Tugging Aaron’s coat tight around me I inhaled deeply, but the scent of him—cinnamon hots and kohl—was fading. The long black trench coat that was synonymous with Aaron smelled more and more like me, making me feel like I’d lost Aaron twice.

I closed my eyes and sought to see with my mind’s eye. To know when, or if, Hell would arrive. But I found nothing. At one point I jerked my head up, thinking I’d heard something—but nothing seemed amiss. Still, I stayed more vigilant after that.

Sometime around three o’clock in the morning, I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I didn’t need to look at the caller ID to know who it would be. I put the phone to my ear.

“Time to come home, princess.” James’ voice rasped into the phone, thick and laden with sleep. He probably set his alarm so he could check on me.

“I can’t,” I said in a whisper, even though no one could possibly hear me from up here. “I haven’t found it yet.”

“Mir told me to tell you she’s certain the horseman comes in the middle of the night—like around midnight. She thinks that if it’s closer to morning, he definitely won’t come.”

I looked into the cloud-filled sky that was as dark as it had been before. “Still looks like the middle of the night to me.”

“Just come home. I’ll leave the balcony door unlocked.”

Of course he would, because James was like that. When I sighed, long and low, a whole dissertation on loss and loneliness, James said, “See you in a few.”

I got to my feet slowly, not even wavering a little bit on my tiny perch. I stretched, working the kinks out of my back while the wind buffeted me. It scraped over my body and I imagined the grabbing hands in Hell. The desperate needing hands that never found what they were seeking.

These fingers were just the wind, I reminded myself.

I spread my wings and flew home.

Alighting on the balcony, I eased open the door. My Shadow faded away as I crossed the threshold of my home—the place that used to be Lucy’s and now belonged to me and James. Without James, I wouldn’t have been allowed to stay here—not

without an adult as my guardian. But James, though only eighteen, qualified and his healthy bank account (padded by years of doing Daniel's dirty work) made it possible for both of us to get out of his step-dad's house. And since Daniel worked for Hell, it got both of us out from under Father's direct influence.

Father could still talk to me if he wanted to—if he really wanted to, he could have me killed or dragged back down to Hell. The fact that he allowed me to go about my life without any word from him only added to my unease. In the two months since he'd taken Michael, I'd heard nothing. Father always had a plan, and I usually had a part to play. I shut the door and locked it before creeping across the living room and into the hallway. James' bedroom door stood open a crack—his way of saying, *Stop in, tell me you're home*. As bad as any normal girl's human father and I loved him for it.

"I'm home," I whispered into the darkness of his room.

"Good. Sweet dreams, princess," James mumbled into his pillow.

I closed his door and headed for my room and another restless sleep filled with dead friends and lost love.

chapter five

“Anything?” Miri asked, sliding into the seat across from me. We’d opted for lunch in the library, even though it wasn’t really allowed. Rain poured from the sky so the cemetery was out of the question again, and the cafeteria . . . Let’s just say a buzzing lunch room wasn’t the best place to discuss the coming Apocalypse. Plus, I still hadn’t gotten used to the press of noise and need that always surrounded a large group of humans, particularly teenagers.

I shook my head sharply, unwrapping the veggie pita James had made me for lunch. His studies to be a chef at the culinary institute in Desert Peak were a definite plus considering I didn’t know the first thing about food preparation. Or pretty much anything else about human life.

“Des.”

I took a bite and I’m pretty sure my eyes rolled back in my head. “Mmm,” I mumbled around a mouthful of the most delicious sandwich I’d ever had.

“Sheesh. He’s my boyfriend—how come you get all the good stuff?” Miri pulled out a peanut butter and jam sandwich from her skull-and-crossbone lunchbox. “At least it would be nice to have something new once in a while.”

“I’ll be sure to let James know,” I said with a laugh. “Anyway, I stayed out till three and there was nothing . . . not even—”

“Well, it’s coming. You’re going out again tonight, right?”

I stopped, my sandwich poised halfway to my mouth. I set it back down. “The dream again?”

“Again.” She peeled the crust off her sandwich which Connie—her housekeeper/maid/surrogate mom—always left on no matter how often Miri asked her not to.

“The same?”

“The—”

A loud crash from the front of the library startled me and I jumped, the slim blade I kept in a holster around my upper thigh now in my hand before I’d finished standing and turning.

A group of teens who called themselves The Chosen were closing in on Sister Mary Theresa, the potted fern she fussed over a tangle of green, dirt and pottery on the floor. The normally fierce nun shrank against the counter, trying to get as far away as possible from the evil that confronted her—because these kids and the demon who led them *were* evil.

I slipped my blade back into place.

“Try not to hurt anyone,” Miri said, her voice thick with grim acceptance. I’m sure my face looked like a thundercloud. I was tired of these wannabes. They had no idea what horror awaited them in Hell. *Perhaps I should send them there.*

I knew they were innocent—relatively. The true fault lay with Eleon, the demon

masquerading as their leader. A handsome teenage boy, Eleon twisted the truth until the humans practically begged for eternity in the cold wasteland of Hell.

I marched to the front desk. Eleon turned slowly, his gaze easily finding mine past his crowd of groupies. In a flash I understood—he knew I was here. Knew I’d come to check out the disturbance. All of this—maybe even his entire little gang—was designed to get my attention. He smiled, his eyes cold, and radiated with want. I didn’t bother to smile back. I would never give him what he wanted—a coup. Eleon belonged to a very tiny faction in Hell that wanted to unseat Father and place someone—maybe me—in his place. And if I became the queen of Hell, maybe Eleon could be my second. Whatever he might think, it would never happen.

His eyes on me, his lips twisted into a feral grin, he hissed at Sister Mary Theresa. The nun turned an even paler shade of white. Eleon whipped around, his mild Catholic school uniform somehow adding to his aristocratic air as he strode away. Each of his followers hissed or growled at the shaking nun as they followed dutifully behind their leader. His little display did nothing to impress me.

I stepped past them and reached out to touch the sister’s arm, or do something that normal people did in such situations to offer comfort. My hand hung in midair for a moment before I dropped it to the counter. I wasn’t much for giving comfort.

“Are you all right?”

At first she didn’t respond. With one hand gripping the edge of the counter, and the other pressed to her chest, she gasped for breath. But I was wrong to think she would let me help her. Soon enough she turned hard eyes on me and though her voice shook, it lacked nothing in authority.

“I thank you for your concern Miss Black—but I would appreciate it if you would go back to your table.” She turned to step around the counter before adding, “And you and Miss Carr had best get some work done, I’ll not have the two of you gossiping when you should be studying.”

“Yes, Sister,” I said with well-practiced humility. I didn’t like the woman, but I understood her need for authority when she had just been cut down in front and all the students in the library. They had been smart enough to turn their faces back to their books—I was the only one foolish enough to let her know I’d seen her at her weakest. I walked back to my table where Miri stood, her arms wrapped around her waist.

I expected her to be relieved. Glad I’d managed to keep it together and act relatively human—not always an easy task for me.

Instead her expression darkened as she stared at something behind me. I thought she must be watching Sister Mary Theresa, but when the hair on the back of my neck stood up, I knew it was more than that. I looked behind me and my stomach sank. A few of The Chosen had stayed behind and were walking toward me. I sighed. This happened far too often of late and I never knew how to handle it.

I sat down and focused on my book, hoping the wannabes would keep walking. But hope hadn’t worked out too well for me so far. I hadn’t even had time to read the first line of *Hamlet* when the leader of the little group slithered up to my table.

She leaned her elbows on the surface—her legs spread wide, almost in the splits. She tapped her black fingernails on the sides of her unnaturally white face and pursed her black lips. She stared at me while her friends struck poses of calculated fierceness—none of which impressed me. When the girl in front of me smiled, I noticed her

incisors were sharpened to a lethal point. She flicked her tongue against the tip of one tooth.

“Hey,” she said at last. I said nothing. I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms. I knew better than to look away though—it could be dangerous to let these people think they intimidated me in any way.

“So, Desolation,” Vamp-Girl said. The way she said my name made it sound like a badge of honor, but I despised everything it stood for. “Eleon keeps saying he’s going to initiate us, but he never does. I think we’re ready—” She leaned closer. “At least, I’m ready.” She smiled like we were co-conspirators, two thieves conniving in the dark. But I wanted nothing to do with her or her type.

Her focus swung to Miri, sized her up and dismissed her. She knew I had the power to give her what she wanted. I could see her thinking, weighing her options. She lowered her eyes, her bearing suddenly meek.

“I was wondering—” she hesitated. Humility obviously not a practiced state of mind for her. In a rush she said, “I was wondering if you could help me find a demon—someone who would initiate me.” She dared a glance, then hurriedly lowered her eyes again when she caught the loathing emanating from mine.

She probably thought the look was for her, when really it was for my dad and all the darkness he encouraged in humans. This girl might not be as innocent as most, but she was a child of Asgard. She could still choose.

In an instant I made up my mind and leaned forward so quickly, Vamp-Girl jumped and nearly fell onto her butt. Her friends laughed at her unease, willing to change sides if theirs lost favor.

“Listen,” I said quietly, my voice almost a growl. “Cut it out, okay? Just give it all up. Eleon is no good. *Lucifer* is no good. They’re no good for you.”

I’d taken the wrong approach, because Vamp-Girl stood up tall, so I was the one made low before her.

“I am worthy,” she said loudly. Before I could correct her, explain that she had more worth as a human than she’d ever have serving Father, she turned and stormed out of the library, her entourage falling in step behind her.

I slumped into my seat, a loud sigh seeping out through the corners of my mouth.

“Ugh,” Miri said. “I hate those kids.”

It surprised me to hear Miri make such a judgmental statement. Usually she seemed to like everyone—at least she always gave people the benefit of the doubt.

“It’s not their fault,” I said. “It’s Eleon. He’s seduced them, promised them an eternity of whatever they desire. He’s doing his job.” My job—the one Father sent me to Earth to do.

We sat in silence for a while and I tried to quell the nausea in my gut. Eleon and his *chosen* were another example of how blatant Father’s recruitment efforts had become. His minions barely even tried to keep a low-profile anymore. I could sense the darkness gathering and feel the building tension in the demons who clustered around St. Mary’s like it was the mecca for all things evil.

According to Miri, Eleon used to keep to himself. Sure, the school slackers had made him their ring-leader, but he didn’t go around promoting the cause of Hell like he did now. And there hadn’t been this freaky vamp-club.

I sighed again.

“What’s wrong?” Miri picked at her lunch, not really eating any of it.

“It’s just . . . Sometimes I wonder why I’m here. I’m not making things any better, and if I went away—I don’t know where, just away—then maybe Father would leave too. Maybe people wouldn’t be . . .” I looked at the door the vamps had taken.

Miri touched my arm. “It’s not your fault.” I gave her a look that said *Oh really?* “Hey, at least here there’s Longinus and Knowles—at least we know something. Cornelius is like a walking encyclopedia of all things Lucifer and knows more than anyone—well, except for you, of course.”

Miri picked up her sandwich and took a big bite. “Thing is,” she said around her food, “if I’m understanding anything at all about the dream, the Apocalypse is coming no matter what you do. But with you, at least we stand half a chance of surviving.”

Half a chance. That pretty much summed it up. But . . . half a chance was better than no chance at all.

I rubbed at the goose bumps that rose on my arms and Miri smiled sympathetically.

“You know I don’t really hate those kids, right? It’s this thing they’re in to. I hate the vampire bit. It’s creepy. And they kind of scare me.”

I laughed, but it came out more like a bitter-sounding snort. “They kind of scare me too.” And I didn’t say it only to make Miri feel better, either.

The dim chime of the bell sounded from the hallway. “Oh shoot,” Miri said. “Time to go.”

“So much for lunch.” I wrapped my delicious sandwich and sadly chucked it into the garbage can by the door.

“Consider it a well-meaning attempt to keep me from being too depressed that I was eating PB&J for the zillionth time while you ate one of my boyfriend’s delicious concoctions.”

“Ha,” I said, letting her link her arm in mine and walk me through the door.

chapter six

During our free period, Miri and I opted for study hall, despite the fact that not much studying ever got done there. But Miri said we needed a place where we could talk about the Shakespeare assignment, and since it still poured buckets outside, the study hall was our only choice. Neither of us were in a hurry to face Sister Mary Theresa, either.

The room looked like the reception hall after Sunday mass (Miri'd taken me a few times since I moved into Lucy's place). A table at the front of the room should have held a plate of cookies. Poor Sister Margarite made bigger and bigger batches trying to accommodate our ravenous desire for her delicious double-chocolate-chip creations—never knowing that Marcus took them all and mainly threw them at the jocks while they walked down the hall.

Noisy talkers doing anything but studying, sat at the plain, round tables with uncomfortable plastic chairs.

Miri and I grabbed two chairs from a table where a couple (I couldn't tell who) were mauling each other and contaminating the space around them in at least a three-foot radius. We set our chairs as far away from them as we could.

I didn't like school—it seemed I wasn't alone in that. But it gave me something to do, filled my time with something other than the constant guilt and self-loathing that occupied my mind 99% of the rest of the time. Plus, I understood school. Understood what the teachers wanted from me—and I could provide it. School was pretty much the only thing I could control in my life, and that was a good thing.

“We have got to get some work done on our scene,” Miri said, pulling out her book of plays, a notebook and pen. I knew she'd do the note-taking, so I took out my silver Sharpie, put my ankle on my knee and went to work embellishing my new black Chucks.

My old ones—the ones Aaron had doodled on—were still in my room in Hell. Sneakers or boots were not exactly dress code but since being exiled to this human life I decided I could only concede so much. The staff seemed to have gotten the memo that they shouldn't push me on it. Maybe Knowles, maybe Cornelius, had said something to the Dean, I didn't know. And I didn't care.

“Should we act out a scene? Or should we paint or something? I mean—we're pretty good at painting.” Miri laughed, high and fluty. I gave her a half-smile and accompanying eye roll. By “painting” she meant the extreme makeover we gave her bedroom from depths-of-Hell black to normal-girl pale green.

“Oh! Or we could make a modern version of the story. But I guess we should figure out which play we're going to do, huh? I was thinking maybe King Lear—that could be funny. Or we could do . . .”

The smell of Sharpie takes me back to another day, almost a year ago now. Aaron and I hide under the bleachers during lunch, chocolate bars and a shared Coke our

meal. Instead of my own hands, I see Aaron's, his knuckles tattooed with Celtic knots.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask, tracing my finger over his skin. Aaron stops, frozen in place until I remove my finger. It must bug him, freak him out or something. "Forget it."

It feels like forever in which we do nothing. Neither of us move or speak. I'm not even sure we are breathing.

Finally Aaron sighs, like a long, low whistle, and resumes his drawing. After a minute he says, "I don't know." He draws an intricate knot that looks a lot like the crosses on his hands. I figure he isn't going to say anything more, so it surprises me when he clears his throat.

"See, there's this thing. You're gonna think I'm a total freak." He looks up, startled at his own words, an apology already on his lips—and we both bust up laughing. Everyone calls Aaron a freak—and since I hang around him, everyone calls me a freak, too. If this is what it means to be one, then I like it.

Time seems to stand still around us, and it's like I'm standing outside of myself, watching the scene instead of living it. I've never laughed before. Never felt the sensation that starts in my head and moves all the way into my stomach. Even my feet feel different.

I am different.

Our eyes meet, our laughter trickling away. Aaron leans forward and I hold my breath. I don't know what he's doing, but I see something new in his eyes. Something like hope. My mind races—I can't be responsible for his hope. I am desolation—not hope. I jerk back, knocking the Sharpie out of Aaron's hand with my foot.

"Oh! Sorry," I say, though I'm not sorry at all. I lean over to grab the pen at the same moment Aaron does and our heads thwack together with an audible thunk.

"Shit," Aaron says, slapping his hand to his head.

Belatedly I remember I'm supposed to be human and that the head-bonk should have hurt me too. "Ow," I add and wrack my brain for something. Something to say or do to make things better. "What's the thing?" I practically shout in my effort to get it out, to fill up the heavy air between us with something other than this awkward silence.

"Thing?" For a moment, Aaron's expression is blank before his eyes light up with understanding. "Oh. The thing." He reaches over and pulls my foot back toward him, then holds out his hand for the Sharpie. I put it in his palm, careful not to let our fingers touch. I suspect I've given him the wrong impression about our friendship, and I'm unsure of how to change it. But not touching him seems like a good idea.

I'm intensely aware of my ankle on his knee, but I leave it there because I like the contact. I am forever, always, selfish.

"Yeah. The thing. What is it?"

Aaron laughs, sort of, and flicks the rod in his lower lip with his tongue. He goes back to drawing, leaning down and paying extra attention. I can't see his face behind the curtain of black hair that hides him from view.

"See, I started having these dreams—wild dreams with crazy creatures and bad dudes and . . . Have you ever seen Nosferatu?" He doesn't look up, but he pauses, waiting for my answer which I don't give. Of course I've seen it—Father takes great enjoyment from the dark tales humans tell.

“Well, anyway, these dreams have demons and all kinds of scary crap in them. And I’m not talking Bram Stoker’s vampires either. These aren’t Count Dracula types. These are bad-as-all-get-out, straight-from-the-fires-of-hell evil things.” I shiver and he rubs my leg, but withdraws his hand like I’ve burned him, though I know I’m as cold as they come. “Sorry,” he says, and I hear the tiny tink-tink sound his lip stud makes when it clatters against his teeth.

“Anyway, I don’t need to tell you all that crap, I guess. Thing is, I had these funky dreams and they totally freaked me out. But every time I had one, when I woke up, I’d have these images in my head. Knots and crosses—I looked them up, and they’re all Celtic things. Like from thousands of years ago. When I look at them, and especially when I draw them, I feel safer.”

Silently, he adds another knot spiraling out from the Converse logo on the ankle of my shoe. I don’t want him to stop talking. At first I was afraid of what he’d say—that he’d say he’d seen me in his dreams as this horrible awful, black-as-night creature—but now I need to know more. I want to feel safe too.

“Keep going.” I hope he knows I don’t mean the drawing—though I don’t want him to stop that, either.

“Anyway, it’s weird, like I said. Maybe I really am a freak.”

“But what about the designs—the tattoos on your hands?”

He sighs, and I know the sound. It isn’t frustration or anger; it’s hope. Hope that I really want to know. Hope that he hasn’t scared me away. He has no idea how much neither of those fears are true.

“I fell asleep one night with my sketchbook. And I had the same dream—or at least, I started to. But then it was like the monsters couldn’t cut through, like they were stuck behind a glass wall or something. At first I didn’t know what the deal was, but when I slept over at a friend’s house one night, it was the whole carnival of freakiness all over again.”

He finishes the design on my left shoe and pulls my other foot onto his lap. “So I started keeping the drawings on me all the time—and I felt better.” He shrugs. “I got my first tattoo right after that and while the bad guys still show up in my dreams, it’s better than before. And the more knots I have, the safer I feel.” He looks up at me, then and wiggles his fingers, each one decorated with a protective tattoo. “So that’s why I’ve got these babies.” His dark brown eyes glint with a hint of humor—something foreign in Aaron’s eyes. “And others too.”

His face flames red and he drops his gaze. I can hear his lip ring clicking against his teeth even over the scritch of the pen on my shoe.

“Earth to Desi. Come in, Desi.”

“What?” I struggled to bring Miri into focus, and had to look around to get my bearings. Study hall, rain pounding the windows, kids talking (or other stuff). Not the gym, not the past. Not with Aaron.

“Where the heck were you? You missed my brilliant ideas.”

I blew out a breath. “Sorry. What’d I miss?”

“You okay? Was it . . . like . . .” She waved her hand in the air.

“No, it wasn’t Father. It was just . . .” I put the cap back on the pen. “Just a memory.”

Miri watched me, reading me as well as any demon could. She nodded. “Well, as I

was having this awesome conversation with myself, I found the perfect scene for us to do.”

She paused for dramatic effect.

“Ophelia’s mad scene.” She threw her hands up in the air in a *ta da!* sort of way. “You know. From Hamlet?”

Yeah, I knew the scene. Knew it really well. I’d actually met Ophelia—and so had Shakespeare. She was this totally beautiful girl who Shakespeare loved madly. Except Ophelia was, well, crazy. Seriously. And she wasn’t nice. What Shakespeare ever saw in her, I had no idea because Ophelia was one of the cruelest people I’d ever met in Hell. Shakespeare thought she’d committed suicide, but her death had only been made to look that way.

In reality, she’d been murdered by the father of a young boy Ophelia had abducted and . . . done stuff to. Like I said. Seriously messed up.

I shivered involuntarily and Miri said, “Yeah, it’s so creepy. That’s why I think it’d be perfect.”

“Well, which one? The bawdy singing and dancing scene or the one where she hands out flowers?”

Miri looked at me as if I were stupid for having to ask.

“Then a modern retelling for sure.” I threw my arms out to the side. ““You promised me to wed. So would I have done, by yonder sun. And thou hadst not come to my bed,”” I added in a sing-song voice. And then I realized the entire room was dead silent. Because everyone was watching me.

“Whoa,” Miri said.

I covered my face with my hands.