**CHAPTER 1**

Raze’s night had been going pretty well, until the woman he’d just spent four hours fucking stumbled across a naked, disemboweled body on his doorstep. Her scream had shattered the serenity of the predawn, forcing him to knock her out before she drew a crowd. Now, as the sun stretched sleepy tendrils of light over the horizon, he stood over the corpse and struggled to contain his roiling fury.

“Dumped on my goddamn porch like trash.” He ran both hands over his shaved head. “Poor bastard.”

“Guesstimate of the time your gift arrived?” Vashti asked, her stiletto-heeled boots tapping out an impatient staccato as she paced. Her crimson hair swayed around her shoulder blades, the vividly-hued tresses the only wash of color against her skintight, all-black jumpsuit. She was a comic book aficionado’s wet dream, with her lush tits and ass offset by a fallen angel’s incomparable beauty. Her appearance was as lethal as the twin katanas she often wore in crisscrossing sheaths on her back, her physical beauty another weapon in the arsenal she used as second-in-command of the entire vampire nation.

“Hell if I know,” he bit out. “There was nothing out of place when I got home at midnight. He was found at four.”

“You didn’t hear anything? Nothing at all?”

Raze scowled. He had a squeaky board on his front porch and everyone knew it. Even if they ruled out the benefit of his vampire hearing, his powerful sense of smell should have picked up on the freshly spilled blood. “No. Christ. If I’d heard anything I would have caught the fuckers.”

Damned if he’d tell her that it hadn’t been possible to hear anything over the woman moaning beneath him and the steady banging of his headboard against the wall as he pounded into her. The smell of hot sex, dripping sweat, and semen filled-latex had saturated the air along with the scent of the blood he’d drunk from her—a lover whose name he couldn’t remember now. It shamed him that the broken body on his doorstop had been lost among the sexual excess.

He stared at his name carved into the corpse’s left biceps and the cattle-branded monogram he recognized as the mark of a vampire known as Grimm. A growl rumbled up from his chest. Even without the mutilation, the victim was Raze’s now. He would stand for the man and the vengeance due him. “I almost wish Grimm was still alive so I could kill him again.”

“You’ve got enough on your plate dealing with his minions,” Syre said, entering the room soundlessly.

Despite the hour, the vampire leader looked flawless. Even in casual dark jeans and a plain T-shirt, there was an elegance to him that was regal and commanding. Raze would brave the pits of hell for Syre if he commanded it. They’d come to earth together, fallen together, lost their wings together. Two hundred of them. And there wasn’t one of the Fallen who wouldn’t give their life for their leader. From the heights of grace as Watchers to the fall that cursed them with vampirism, Syre led them forward with a confidence that inspired them all.

Vash’s pacing came to an abrupt halt. “Do we have any idea how many minions we’re talking about here? How many have you taken out so far, Raze?”

“A dozen pairs, give or take a few. Adrian was on it, too,” he said, referring to the angel who’d severed Syre’s wings. Raze had a lot of reasons to resent Adrian, as well as the Sentinel angels who served under him—the Fallen’s vampiric punishment being the least of it—but there was no denying that when they were aligned and hunting the same prey, Adrian’s involvement

was a benefit. Syre crossed his arms and looked at Vashti, his second-in-command. “Remind me: how long

did Grimm evade our attention?” “Too fucking long. He was in our faces, but I didn’t look deep enough. On the surface, his

theory had merit. Still does. Or maybe it’s wishful thinking. With the number of minions we lose to madness during the Change from fledgling to vampire, I’d like to think there’s some way to cut the waste. He wrapped his dogma up with pseudoscience and I bought it.”

“He was the one pairing fledglings into couples to ease the transition? I remember discussing it with you. He had enough success in the beginning to justify allowing him to proceed, if I recall.”

Raze shot her a chastising glance for being hard on herself. “If you were looking for a ball and chain, and vampirism was one of your requirements in a perfect mate, Grimm was the man to see. He had personality profiles, compatibility charts, etc. All of which he used to weed out the whack jobs so he could pair them with nutcases. I knew his doctrine was dangerous, so when I took him out I hunted down all his disciples, too. Whoever is responsible for this, Grimm didn’t document them the way he did the others.”

“Disciples,” Syre murmured. “Interesting word choice.”

“It’s the right word, trust me. What else would you call the followers of an idiot playacting as a messiah preaching revolt against you?”

Syre ran a hand through his thick black hair, the only sign he gave of any disquiet. “Whoever is responsible, they came directly to you. This is personal.”

“You’re goddamned right it’s personal.” He looked at the body again, knowing it wasn’t merely a taunt but a message. “Help me turn this guy over.”

Syre stepped forward, waving Vash back.

It was a gruesome task. The smell emanating from the open body cavity would torture a human; for a vampire, it was pure hell. They got as far as getting the corpse onto its side. Then the loosened entrails slid out with a soft sucking sound, and they both leaped back and away. Raze had eviscerated his own share of enemies, but this man was a victim, and that made all the difference.

“Do you guys need a hand?” Vash asked, stepping up to them.

“No.” Raze had seen the tattoo on the corpse’s shoulder blade. Unlike Grimm’s brand, the ink was a mark the man had voluntarily applied as a show of loyalty, affection, and team spirit.

“The Cubs,” he muttered. “Guess I’m heading to Chicago.”

**CHAPTER 2**

Raze hit the ground running in the Windy City. Within an hour of his plane landing, he’d swept through the building that had once housed Grimm’s operation (presently a printing shop) and checked his way through a quarter of the list of Grimm’s known haunts. Then, impatient, he took a chance and headed to Wrigley Field.

Although the ballpark was dark and quiet for the night, Raze knew wrong when he came across it and he damn well felt it as he drove by. Parking a few streets away, he slid out from behind the wheel and opened the back door of his rental to grab his blades. He strapped them on with the efficiency of long practice: daggers on each thigh and two katanas crisscrossing his back. Then he darted over on foot, moving so quickly the mortal eye couldn’t catch him.

As he approached, he picked up the faint sound of a melodious male voice coming from the field, followed by a chorus of murmurs in reply—sounds too slight for anything but a vampire’s hearing to catch. Grimm had been big on staging, too, which made Raze wonder just how closely this protégé had been to Grimm and how long he or she had been working in the shadows.

He rounded the back of the ballpark and climbed up the rear of the bleachers. Pulling his head up over the top, he looked down at the darkened field below. A lone man stood before a group of approximately two hundred robed and kneeling minions. Segmented into pairs with the men in black and the women in red, they formed a perfect pattern of stripes in the center of the field.

Raze listened to a couple lines of bullshit about the supremacy of the vampire nation, then he tuned it out and focused on the leader. The man was tall and lean, dark-haired and dressed in a three-piece suit. He had a mesmerizing cadence to his speech, a lulling sonorousness that was evident even though Raze had stopped picking out the words.

He debated his next step, knowing this was an elaborate trap for him, one that would be designed with the expectation that he wouldn’t come alone. Which was why he’d done exactly

that. But he could still take them by surprise. Pulling out his phone, he jumped the hoops necessary to reach Adrian. “Mitchell,” the Sentinel leader answered. “It’s Raze. I’ve got a situation you’ll be interested in.” “Where are you?” “Chicago.” “Yes, that is interesting. So am I.” Raze stilled, his hackles rising at the softness of Adrian’s tone. “That’s not a coincidence.” “No, it’s not. Location?” He wasn’t surprised that the angel was so far from his home base in Anaheim, California.

That was Adrian’s way. While Syre was cerebral in his leadership, using Raze and Salem to investigate and Vashti as his iron fist, Adrian was the opposite. The Sentinel leader left the administrative duties to others so he could remain a hands-on hunter in the field. A vampire hunter and goaler—those roles being the sole purpose of his existence.

Raze gave his location, then pointed out, “I wouldn’t have called you if I just needed a hand or two. If you’re going to send a couple lycans and call it a night, don’t bother.”

“Don’t tell me how to respond to a request for a favor.” The lack of inflection in the angel’s voice was more disconcerting than an outright threat would have been.

“If you’d let us establish some cabals and covens in the major cities, I wouldn’t need to call

you at all.” The Sentinels used their lycans to keep vampires contained in rural, lower population areas. They said the policy was to protect mortals, but the side effect was the hindering of the Fallen’s ability to police their own minions. And every transgression was another mark against them, another smudge barring them from any possibility of redemption.

“How many more rogue minions would there be if vampires were allowed access to such a smorgasbord of food? The spread would become uncontainable. It’s already out of control as it is or you wouldn’t be calling me.”

The line died, leaving Raze cursing at his cell phone. One of these days, he and the angel were going to have it out. But not tonight.

As the couples swayed like hypnotized king cobras, Raze leaped over onto the uppermost bench, then started taking the stairs down, applauding as he went. “Man, you’ve really got your delivery down. I mean, I could almost buy it... if I was a whacked out moron.”

The man lifted his head and looked at Raze, his eyes glowing in the darkness. “Raze, how nice of you to join us. We’ve been expecting you. You are, after all, the guest of honor.”

Although the distance between them was great, neither of them needed to raise their voices to be heard. “I’d say I was more of a bouncer. One who’s going to bounce all your nutty asses into Hell.”

“Where are your friends? Surely you didn’t come to such an occasion alone?”

“Yeah, it’s just me. I tried to round up more of a party, but everyone said it’d be a dud. They were right.” Although he kept his descent easy and casual, Raze was hyperaware of new participants to the game as black-clad minions crawled toward him like ants. “Who are you?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

“Nope. You don’t ring any bells.” He could tell being forgotten really chafed and that made him smile. In the back of his mind, he considered the possibility that Adrian might leave him hanging in the wind—the Sentinel hadn’t actually agreed to show up. But Raze had no choice but to proceed as if reinforcements were on the way. “Why don’t you enlighten me?”

“That’s my goal.” The man walked closer, his arms extended in dramatic fashion. “The Fallen are so busy wishing to be the angels you once were that you never enjoy being what you are.”

Raze pulled one katana out of its sheath, the moonlight glinting off the silver-plated blade. “The only thing I don’t like about what I am now is how much time I have to waste hunting dickheads like you.”

“Ah... you’d prefer to continue your quest to fuck everything willing to sate your lust. Of all the Fallen, you’re one of the most pitiable. At least the others fell for love. You fell only because you can’t keep you dick out of warm, wet holes.”

Pivoting, Raze sliced the head off the minion who’d attempted to come at him from behind. He took out two more who lunged from the sides, his speed and strength fueled by the bitter truth that had been thrown in his face. Grimm’s eternal love bullshit was why Raze had volunteered to hunt him down to begin with. The twisting of love to achieve an even more twisted end stirred violence and fury inside him. He’d watched his fellow Watchers give up their wings for it, and Grimm’s doctrine made a mockery of that terrible, heartrending sacrifice.

“See how he slays the bravest of us?” the idiot prophet asked his minions. “His own people. Weakening us from within. This is who we’ve elected to follow and yet they lead us nowhere! We remain in the shadows, hidden from the world, while—”

“Are you going to shut him up,” Adrian asked, landing gracefully on a bench and swatting away the incoming surge of minions with an impatient swat of his massive wings, “or is that

what you needed me for?” The vampires on the field had staggered to their feet when Adrian appeared and now they

scrambled in every direction. It was a natural, instinctive urge to run from an apex predator, but the Sentinel leader himself inspired a unique awe and fear. Like Syre, Adrian had been blessed by the Creator, gifted with a face and form that was the height of angelic perfection. The thirty- foot expanse of his alabaster wings glimmered in the moonlight, the pure pristine white of the feathers framed by crimson tips, as if he’d trailed the edges through freshly spilled blood. That band of red was a vivid reminder of what he was—a weapon tasked with punishing the Fallen and containing their minions.

“He’s mine.” Raze raced down the steps and vaulted onto the field at the same moment a dozen lycans in lupine form hit the grass, converging on the panicked mass. He went after the leader, who surprisingly stood his ground and faced off with a pistol in hand.

“I could change your life, Raze.” “Gimme your name.” “Does it matter?” Raze shrugged and twirled his blade with practiced ease. “Always good to have a name to

go with a kill.” The man smiled. “You won’t kill me. You need me to tell you if there are more of us, and if

so, how many more and where they are. And I won’t kill you because I need you, too. If you’d think outside the box, you’d realize that you could be the cornerstone of massive, sweeping advancement. You could have the mate you deserve. You could—”

“You don’t know what I deserve.”

“Don’t make me hurt you, Raze.” He looked over Raze’s shoulder and his smile widened. “You surprised me by bringing in the Sentinels and their dogs, but we had to get rid of them at some point. Now is as good a time as any.”

Using the man’s distraction, Raze whipped out the blade strapped to his left thigh and threw it, striking the prophet in the throat. The gun discharged. Pain ripped through Raze along with the bullet that shot clear through his shoulder and out the other side. The wound healed almost instantly, proving the man’s words to be true: he didn’t want Raze dead or he’d have used a silver-laced bullet.

Behind him, the field erupted with the sounds of gunfire and the yelps of wounded lycans. Raze dropped to the ground. As the robe-clad minions utilized the weapons they’d hidden beneath their robes, his mind quickly assessed his options. Adrian and a female Sentinel took to the field, their wings deflecting bullets and slashing like blades. Screams rent the air. Bodies were severed into pieces.

Most minions never knew what it was like to face a Sentinel. They could never prepare for the lethality of those magnificent wings that sliced like blades and were impervious to all mortal implements of destruction. Unique to each angel, the patterns and colors said much about the angel’s soul if you knew how to read them, and their average thirty-foot span meant it was nearly impossible to get close enough to inflict any damage.

Raze took out a minion with his other knife, then crawled to the body of the prophet and took his gun. Lying on his back, he emptied the clip into the converging mass of robe-clad figures, slowing them down so that he could join the fray with his swords. Leaping to his feet, he did just that, cutting a swathe through the chaos.

Blood spurted and flowed like a river, soaking the grass and splattering Raze until he dripped with it. It was over in moments, leaving a battlefield upon which two Sentinels stood