

## The Walk

Charlie wrung his hands together in his lap and looked out the window instead of at the two men that sat across from him. Kyle and Sam, dressed in suits in contrast to Charlie's torn levis and bland T-shirt, sat next to each other on a couch in the living room while Charlie sat in a wing backed chair ready to burst out of it at any given moment. Kyle looked at Charlie's right foot that pattered like a nervous rabbit and his back sat tense and straight as if a 2x4 was strapped to it.

"I can't do this anymore," Charlie sobbed. "Just leave me alone."

"Is that what you want us to do, Charlie? Leave you alone?" Kyle asked with a calm tone.

"Yes,"

Kyle and Sam began to stand up when Charlie stopped them with a hand gesture. Tears streamed down his terrified face. He was lost, alone, confused and didn't know where else to turn.

"No! They're coming! They're going to kill me this time."

Charlie jumped up, ran to the window and peered out.

"Who's coming and why do they want to kill you?" Sam said with an easy tone.

Charlie snapped around with a bloodshot glare.

"You know damn well who's coming. They're not just going to let me off the hook that easy. *They know what I've been doing.*"

"Do you feel guilty?" Kyle asked.

"I've got nothing to hide. Screw them, ya know. They have no idea what I've gone through. What I'm *still* going through."

"Take us back, Charlie, to where it all began. Tell us again who they are, and why they're after you."

Charlie looked out the window again and ran his eyes left to right up and down the street, turned and walked back to the chair and plopped down.

"I'm only talking to you guys because Sienna said you could help. I trust her. She's about the only person I do trust in this world ever since ..." His eyes turned to water and his bottom lip trembled. He composed himself and said, "Anyways, I like her a lot, and ugh, I'm doing this because of her."

His foot stopped beating and his back relaxed slightly as he leaned back in his chair. His eyes went into the past as the words tumbled out his mouth.

"It was two nights ago that I woke up after a heavy night of drinking. I've been doing that a lot; drinking and partying. That's all there is to do in this town. Me and my friends do it a lot, you know, to forget about life. It's what keeps us sane, but lately..." He shook his head. "Lately it's been dangerous.

"We crashed a party, like we do every other night. Just some guy's house we didn't even know. And we were there for one thing only; to get into a fight. It didn't take us long and we busted some heads and we got pretty bruised up too. Cops showed up and we all scattered. I went one way and just ran. After awhile I realized that I was alone, and that's when I saw them. I'd seen them before, but not like this. They watched me. I was in a park, and behind every tree and bush were these tall, dark figures, probing me with red eyes. And even though I couldn't see their faces, I knew they were smiling. And not a happy smile, a menacing smile as if they were going to enjoy hurting me.

"My pace had slowed down because I ran out of breath, but I started to pick it up again to a slow jog just to get out of there. The further I went, the more showed up. I turned a corner and cut through the playground, but they were there too; playing on the swing sets, waiting for me. One of them jumped in front of me and I still can't make out his face, but his eyes...those red glowing eyes dove right into my soul. It was like watching a reflection of my life and all the bad I did inside his eyes.

"I ran again and they chased me. It wasn't long before they grabbed me with their sharp claws and I thought they were going to tear me apart, and they started to drag me. I had to surrender, there were too many of them. My body bumped over rocks and dirt, through thorny bushes and over pavement, they didn't care. I passed out a couple of times, came to and passed out again."

Charlie sunk into the winged back chair, curled his legs up against him and continued his tale.

Kyle and Sam listened as Charlie described their wretched, raw sewage stench, and the demons chuckled and mocked him. He didn't know how long or how far these demon things dragged him, or their purpose, but inside his mind he was sure that he was going to die. That was the last thing he remembered before waking up.

Charlie pulled his eyelids open to rays of blinding light and his head pounded with pain. He lifted his head and realized he'd rested on loose gravel. His whole body had slept on it and he felt the tiny rocks press into his back, side and legs.

He pulled himself up to a sitting position and the world spun. His mouth was cotton and the sickness was a combination of too much whiskey and being drug for miles across rough terrain. *Had that been real*, he asked himself. Those guys or creatures with the red eyes and sharp claws? He'd never had hallucinations from alcohol before. He'd done hard drugs on occasions and had some strange consequences but nothing like this. He'd heard of similar episodes where friends have had a bad acid trip, but he himself had never done acid.

He stood up and looked at his surroundings. He stood on a barren land of earth, weeds and rock. Dead, blackened trees spotted the area as if a fire had scorched the land and left nothing living. There was silence but for the whistle of a slight breeze.

He stared off in the distance and spotted the city in which he lived, standing like a small model miles away. He walked and followed the trail his body left from being dragged. There were

smear marks in the dirt and footprints so it wasn't a hallucination.

Twenty minutes into his walk he spotted another dark figure leaning against a tree with a grin, and in the daylight still too dark to make out his features. The figure didn't move and Charlie walked on. He saw more along the way, but not near as many as the night before and none of them attacked him this time. They didn't move; just watched. It was clear that they left him alone for now, but were far from being done with him. It was easy to read that in their red eyes.

It took almost two hours for Charlie to make it back to his apartment. If he'd had more energy he would have busted through the front door and ran to his room to pack his belongings and leave that damn city. He'd wanted to for so long.

He ran to the sink and gulped down buckets of water to quench his desert thirst, and then went straight to his room. His roommate was passed out on the floor next to his bed in a spray of vomit. The wreak of it turned Charlie's stomach inside out like a taffy machine and he nearly threw up. His hangover was a poisonous illness throughout his body as well as the pulsing pain in his head, and the slightest sound or wrong smell would send him over the edge.

He quickly turned away from Eddie, his roommate, and packed his clothes in a suitcase. He didn't grab everything; didn't have time to. He grabbed what he absolutely needed. He picked up a 4x8 picture on his nightstand of him and Sarah, a girlfriend from his past, and tears came to his eyes.

"It's time to go, Sarah. Just like you said. I'm listening to you for once." His heart ached for her. He gave the picture a kiss and laid it carefully on top of his clothes in his suitcase.

"What the hell are you doin', man?" Eddie rolled onto his side squinting. "Where've you been? Did the cops grab you?"

"No," Charlie turned to him. "No they didn't."

As Eddie's eyes adjusted, he focused on the suitcase in Charlie's hand.

"You going somewhere?"

"Yah. I'm leaving, Eddie."

"On vacation?"

"For good. It's time."

He couldn't tell Eddie about the demons. He'd think he was crazy. There's no way anyone would believe him. Except for Sienna. She was the one person Charlie had told about the demons. He'd seen them before, but only one or two at a time and very infrequent. Sienna believed him. She'd said that there were people that could help him, but he was hesitant.

That's why he had to go to her. If anyone could help him at this point, it was her, because it was clear that he was losing his mind, and only the nurturing love and understanding of Sienna can help pull him back to reality. He hoped.

"Where are you going to go, dude?" Eddie sat up. "There's nowhere to go. What about your job?"

"My job at the deli? I should stay because of my long lasting career at the deli?" Charlie was sarcastic.

"It's a good job. And what about the rent? Who am I gonna find to help me out there?"

"You'll find somebody. Jason's been begging for a new place to crash."

"You can't go, man. There's too much going on. And what about Seth? He's not gonna let you go."

"Why wouldn't Seth let me go?"

"You know he won't. We owe him too much. He's been good to us."

Charlie closed his eyes and sighed. How could he tell Eddie that Seth dragged them all down? They looked up to Seth too much and followed all that man did like he was a god.

"You can't leave me," Eddie said with pain in his voice.

"Come with me,"

"I can't. You know I can't," He looked up at Charlie with an all too familiar lost and scared look in his eyes. The same look Charlie had. It was no use, Charlie knew. Eddie wasn't ready. Not even close. Charlie said a quick goodbye and left. Eddie sunk his head in despair, and then plopped back down to sleep again.

Charlie grabbed a Gatorade on the way out and gulped half of it down before he reached his car. Gatorade always helped him when he was hung-over. A million things ran through his mind as he drove to Sienna's house.

He saw a few of the same dark figures. They lurked in allies and loitered in front of stores as he drove down Main street. No one else seemed to notice them. They were invisible to everyone but Charlie.

Charlie looked at the buildings around him where he grew up. It was all he knew. The small Avalon Theater next to the comic book store where he and his friends hung out and watched dollar movies in the summer as kids, and Charlie passed by a neighborhood that once was nothing but dirt hills that they'd ride their bikes on and perform what they thought were stunt shows.

He'd never left this town except once or twice for a vacation, but the thought of leaving this town for good was scary. All of his securities were tied up here. His friends and family, even though he'd estranged himself from them, were hard to leave behind.

But the town turned on him. It wasn't so familiar anymore and that was more terrifying than the thought of leaving it. He was on the brink of change; going into the world of the unknown or staying in a world that he's always known and accept the changes that were inevitable.

Something was after him, and he wasn't sure he was going to survive them.

He parked his car outside of Sienna's apartment building, looked around to be sure there were no demons around, and

stepped outside. The hot sun baked the left side of his face, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen or *felt* the sun. He trotted to the steps that led to the third floor. He took the steps two and sometimes three at a time and then knocked on her door. She was quick to open.

Her face, full of radiance that beamed from her eyes and glowed in her cheeks. Her full lips with that familiar sneaky smile and auburn hair that bounced on her shoulders. She was warmth. She was the lighthouse and he was the ship on a stormy sea. It was like that every time he saw her.

He fell into her arms and buried his face into the crook of her neck where the perfume of her sweet lotion tickled his senses. He broke into tears and then sobs that he didn't see coming, but were right at the surface. She cradled him and whispered into his ear.

"Hush, it's okay. Come inside."

They closed the door and Charlie took in a deep breath to compose himself.

"Charlie?" she smiled with a lighthearted chuckle. "Are you okay?"

"It's getting worse," he choked. "There's more of them and they're going to kill me."

Her eyes filled with concern but stayed firm with faith and hope. "The demons? They made contact?"

"Yes," he nodded and sat down on the couch. "Am I going crazy? Nobody else sees them, right?"

"Wrong. You're not the only one."

"I'm not? How can you be sure?"

"I have some friends. Those people I told you about. They've helped many people who've seen these things. They can help you too."

"No," his voice was adamant and he shook his head. "No, I'm not ready for that."

"Charlie, if they've made contact, you don't have much time," she said with fear in her voice. She was frightened for him now.

"I just gotta get out of this town. I want you to go with me."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I really don't. Just somewhere faraway."

"They can help you, Charlie. They can take you to the place where they won't hurt or hunt you down anymore."

She sat across from him and took his hand in hers and looked into Charlie's eyes with tears of her own rising.

"Charlie, I care a lot about you. I love you."

His face softened and his eyes lit up. They hadn't expressed their love for each other yet, even though it was clear they'd both felt it. He thought of Sarah, and a little guilt came in. She reminded him a lot of her.

"I love you too," he said. He hadn't said those words since Sarah.

"Come with me. Tomorrow we'll both go to them."

"I don't know that I can last the night."

"You can. You stay here with me and you can."

He looked to the ground in hesitation, but he had no reason to say no. He'd run out of excuses.

"Okay. I'll go to them. For you."

"No. You'll go to them for yourself."

Charlie felt reassured for the moment with making that decision. He took a shower and cleaned himself up and together him and Sienna fixed grilled cheese sandwiches and raviolis for lunch.

As the day wore into night anxiety crept back in, and Charlie wanted to claw his skin. He paced back and forth looking

out the window. He hadn't seen any demons all day, but downtown wasn't far and he knew they were there; waiting for him. He turned to Sienna.

"I need a drink. Do you got anything?"

She looked at him disappointed and said, "You know I don't"

"I just need some. Just a little to take the edge off." He rubbed the side of his face wanting to peel back the skin from his skull. "Take me to the store just down the street."

"No, Charlie. You're going to do this sober."

"Who are you? Suddenly my mother?" He snapped at her and she flinched.

"Charlie, no - I just know you'll do better without that."

"I'm not going to get drunk! I'm talking about one drink. That's all!"

"That's all it takes, Charlie. Do you want to get better or not?"

"Why, is something wrong with me?"

"When you drink, there is. Please, you've told me several times that you want to stop. Remember what happened two years ago?"

His eyes bulged with rage and he stomped into the living room and with a swipe of his arm knocked the lamp from the end table across the room where it crashed. "One damn drink, Sienna! I'm slowing down. I can't stop all at once."

"And you can't stop at just one. If you want to get out of this town, and you want to get rid of those demons, you have to stay sober. If they come and you're not at all of your wits, you can't fight them off."

Charlie stopped, turned and looked at her. Thoughts raced through his mind. She was right. He knew she was right. He didn't like it, but it was true. He wouldn't stop at just one. He looked at the broken lamp and it sobered his actions. He let out a long breath and softened his gaze on Sienna.

"I'm so sorry. I can't believe I just did that. Was that even me?"

"It wasn't you. Not for that moment."

"Oh hell," he rubbed his face with both hands. "Am I ever going to get better?"

He fell into her arms again.

Charlie stood at the window in the living room while he finished his tale to Kyle and Sam who still sat at the couch attentive.

"I spent the night in her arms. Sometimes holding her, sometimes her holding me, but we were never apart. Three hours of sleep tops. I thought the creatures would attack. I heard them howling in the distance like wolves; calling to me, waiting for me."

Charlie turned and walked back to his winged back chair and plopped down. "She brought me here and I asked her to leave. I wanted - no, I needed to do this alone." He looked at Kyle and Sam. "I want your help. I'm done with booze and I'm done with this place. Nothing good comes from here anymore. Everyone here is a part of this dark world we've created; if that makes sense."

"It does," Kyle said. "And what about Sarah?"

Charlie tensed up defensively. "I don't want to talk about her. Not ready to."

"What about these creatures, Charlie," Sam asked. "Why do you think they're after you? What is it that you've done to make them want to hurt or kill you?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't. I just think that I'm crazy and they're hallucinations."

"You're not crazy, Charlie. Listen to me," Assured, Kyle stared into his eyes. "These demons are very real. And it is at

the point that you will not make it through the day. They are vicious and cunning and plentiful."

"Sienna says I'm not the only one that's dealt with them, and that you've helped others."

"This is true," Kyle said. "We've helped many others. But we can't help, without you helping yourself. We need you to do something."

"Okay,"

"Something very brave, and you must do it alone. No one can do it for you," Sam said.

Charlie nodded.

"You need to make it to the south end of this city on foot. That's where the crossroads meet. We will meet you there to take you."

Charlie's face went white.

"No cars or bikes, you must walk down Main street. You will come across opposition. A lot of it, but trust me, it is nothing, absolutely nothing that you can't overcome. Do you believe in God?" Kyle asked.

"Yes, I suppose."

"Ask for him. Talk to him, either silently in your head or out loud. He will help you. He will always be there. Can you do this?"

Charlie couldn't answer or move for a few moments.

"There is another problem. Seth." He looked at them. "He's not going to let me go. He's helped me and my friends out a lot. I feel like I owe him. And he practically owns this town. Everything in it, he seems to run. The clubs and bars, restaurants, stores and sometimes even the cops."

"Not even he can stop you, Charlie. Not when you make your choice and you stick to it."

"And God," Sam put in. "He won't let you do this alone, but you must ask for His help."

"Are you ready to do this?"

Charlie closed his eyes, took in a deep breath and let it back out. He thought of all the hell he'd been through. All of the drunken nights, the fights, the pain, the sadness and all of the ugliness his world had become. Someone once said to him, that once your life becomes more painful than the change, then it will change. He believed he was at that moment.

"Let's do it," he said with a firm nod.

Charlie stood at the edge of town and looked down Main Street like the sheriff in an old western ready to attack it. It was quiet and gray. No sun peaked through the drab clouds. The neon signs that spotted the street further down blinked in the growing darkness like stars, and several people littered the road from vagrants to prostitutes and drug dealers. A breeze blew through his hair and pulled him to walk across the street to the sidewalk in front of Patterson's Drug Store. It had once been an innocent store when he was a child, but when old man Patterson died and the ownership changed, it turned into a hangout for gang members and law breakers of all kinds.

Two young teens dressed in black and chains wrestled each other into the street punching each other in the arm. The taller one pushed the other boy off of him and withdrew a pistol from his pants and shot a bullet into the sky. The bang startled Charlie and caused the other boy to stumble and fall to the ground. The taller boy with the gun laughed at him.

A street cop stood close by sweet talking a prostitute in a short, tight skirt. He craned his head at the shot, shrugged and turned back to the girl.

"Anyways," the cop continued. "We could go back to my placer later."

Not a strange scene for Charlie. Things like that happened all of the time. Not one person in this town was innocent.

Everyone had their sin, their dark self, their vices and their crimes. They may all be different, but in this mixing bowl they blended together, and no one was any better or worse than the other. That included the cops. At times, they were the worst ones because they abused their power.

"I could use a drink," Charlie mumbled to himself. It wasn't that he forgot his promise to cut out alcohol; what he said was true, if only for that day. He was 100% positive that day to never touch the stuff again, because it was poison to his life and everything that he loved, and he'd always known that, even if he didn't admit it. But tomorrow was a whole other day. It was one step at a time baby, and promises only lasted 'til sunset. He just hoped that he'd re-promise himself at regular intervals and stay true to his word.

He walked. His pace was slow at first and then sped up. As he passed by stores and bars and gas stations with several types of people hanging in and around them, they smoked, drank, talked and laughed and he was the observer. He saw the world through different eyes. The truth had been there all along, but he'd always ignored it.

But he was there now, and what he saw was ugly and sad. Sadness because he related to each and every person he passed in one way or another. They each were reflections of himself, and he of them. He saw the scantily clad woman who flirted out loud with a group of guys and knew her true pain. The pain she hid behind her confident facade. A troubled life perhaps, unable to truly trust man because of the abuse she'd had, or maybe a neglected childhood.

He saw the fighter in the bar, angry at the world because he didn't get the attention, love or nurturing when he was young, or maybe he'd been witness to countless violent actions that ended in bloody death. Their true stories, he didn't know, but he knew each person had one, and they let that story define who they are instead of letting their real selves flourish.

He knew because he was guilty of it himself, and perhaps that was the reason Kyle and Sam asked him to take this walk. They knew he'd see the world for what it really was, instead of through watery, drunken eyes.

He was halfway through town and not one sign of a demon. For a moment he thought he was going to get off easy. Maybe there wasn't anything to fear after all.

But that all changed a few blocks down when he spotted one across the street, and the demon spotted Charlie. His grin spread from ear to ear and he trotted across the street and followed Charlie from a distance. Charlie tensed up and tried to keep an eye out for him through his peripherals.

Then another one showed up, and another, and another. Before too long he had a train of them that followed, and they chatted and laughed to each other. He caught his name being thrown around. They mocked him. A few of them even shadowed Charlie's walk, embellishing his saunter to show off to the laughing crowd.

Their stench increased as did their numbers. There were perhaps thirty behind him now and Charlie could hardly breath. *Pray, Charlie, pray!* He heard a voice inside his head and so he did. He mumbled inside his mind over and over again for God to help him.

He looked forward and realized he was almost at the crossroads. Excitement tingled but he knew he wasn't out of the woods yet. At any moment, these things with claws could attack him like the other night.

"Charlie,"

The voice shot out in the night and caught him by surprise. He turned to the familiar voice. In the shadows between two buildings, a puff of smoke blew out as the man exhaled his cigarette smoke. Seth stepped into the light next to Charlie who'd stopped in his tracks.

Dressed in a smooth, tailored black suit and silver tie, Seth dropped his cigarette and put it out beneath the heel of his alligator skin boot. His face, clean and handsome, and his slick backed hair was long almost to his shoulders except for a rebel bang that bounced in front of his eyes. Those blue eyes and charming smile; who could resist him?

"Where're you going, Charlie boy?" That's what he always called him.

"Just to the crossroads. Meeting with some friends." Nervous, he looked behind him and saw that the demons stood back at ease.

"Friends? What kind of friends?"

"Just friends - you know - nothing special."

"You look like you're hiding something from me." His eyes dove into him. "You don't have to lie, Charlie boy, I'm not going to hurt you. We're friends." He smiled and put his arm around his shoulders. "Jeeze what's got you all so tense?"

Charlie let out a sigh and sunk his head. "Seth, I don't know what's going on, but...he turned his eyes to the demons and Seth followed his gaze and let out a nonchalant chuckle.

"Them? You're worried about them? I can handle them," his face went serious and he turned to the demons and said with a malevolent voice, "Back off," and they did. "Follow me,"

With his arm still around Charlie he led him into the alley next to the entrance of one of his most popular clubs. The neon sign outside of it glowed in the darkness and music and the sound of crowds escaped the front door.

"Charlie boy, I know what you're running away from. They're new to town and they're stirring up trouble with everyone."

"You mean those things?"

"Yah, those things. Thing is, this is my town, right?"

Charlie nodded.

"And I ain't gonna let those sniveling pieces of low life shit get to my people." His smile was gone again and he meant business. "This is our home. We have to protect our homeland, or who else will, am I right?"

He nodded.

"Charlie boy, you and I go way back. I grew up with your dad, remember? I was there when he passed away and your were just sixteen. Too young to lose a father, and I was there for you, wasn't I?" Charlie nodded again. "I took you in, 'cause I promised your daddy I would. Hell, you're a son to me."

Tears welled up in his eyes. Charlie didn't think Seth could ever cry. He'd never seen him, and it got to him.

"I would never let anyone hurt you. Especially not them."

"You mean, they don't work for you?"

"Work for me? Haven't you listened to anything I said? *They* work for the enemy. They always have. They want what I got. They're jealous. And I worked too damn hard to get where I am. I didn't just land here. Hell, it's like I've been around for centuries."

He was comforting. He had a way with words and it got to Charlie.

"Let's go inside for a minute and get out of this cold. It's starting to get chilly."

"No thanks, I really have got somewhere to go."

"More important than I am to you? Charlie boy, it's only for a moment. Get a drink and take a load off for a minute and you'll be on your way. How's Eddie doin'?"

"Well, you know Eddie. Too busy partying and hasn't found a job yet."

"Job? The only job he could hold is something that started at 1pm 'cause you can't wake him up before noon."

They both laughed.

"How 'bout that new girl of yours? You getting some good action?"

Charlie shook his head in disgust at his crass talk about her and said, "It's not like that, Seth. She's real good to me. Good for me."

"Good for you? Yah, good as long as you do what she says."

"What?"

"You know, change. Become what *she* wants you to become. Give up everything in your life that you enjoy so she can have her boy toy. I'm sorry to tell ya kid, but I seen 'em a hundred times. They get their hooks in you and before you know it, you're not yourself anymore."

Seth saw the change in Charlie's eyes, the sudden distrust, offense and disgust at him and realized that he, Seth, can make mistakes from time to time. He'd said the wrong thing. The one thing that backfired on him, and he knew at that moment, that Charlie had fallen for this girl. There was no turning back now, Seth had to jump all in.

"Let me guess, you're in love. Hey, that's great I'm glad for you. Really I am. I didn't mean to offend you. Just answer me this, what in the last twenty-four hours has she asked you to give up? Second question, was it before or after she said 'I love you'?"

Charlie took two steps back shaking his head. Seth didn't get through to him on this point. His loyalty and love for Sienna was too strong.

"What does she think about Sarah? Have you told her about Sarah yet? Have you told her that she's next in line for the same fate that was hers?"

"Shut up, Seth. Stop while you can."

"Or what, Charlie boy?" He spat and his face grew darker, his eyes turned shades of gray, his teeth seemed to turn dirtier and scars popped up on his face. "What are you going to do to me?"

"It's you. It's been you all along. I didn't realize it until now, but it's always been you. Sixteen, that's how old I was when my dad died and that's also when my life took a detour. That was the year of my first drink."

"And that's my fault?"

"No, I take credit for my own actions, but you were there to nudge me; to lead me down those dark paths. I didn't think they were dark at the time, but looking back, they were dark times."

"Boy that slut's really got to you, hasn't she?" Seth saw no point in keeping the gloves on. "How long do you think you'll last, Charlie boy? If I were a betting man, and I am, I give you 'til the entrance to this alley."

Charlie turned and saw hundreds of demons behind him crowding the entrance ready to pounce on him. He'd been set up. Seth had pulled him into the alley and trapped him. He snapped around to Seth in anger.

"They work for you!"

Seth laughed. "They are me," his voice was lead and dropped to the bottom of Charlie's stomach.

Charlie closed his eyes and said a short prayer. *Heavenly Father give me strength.*

He turned and charged the team of dark, slobbering creatures and dove straight into the midst of them punching and kicking. Nails scratched his arms and dug into his shoulder blades and he cried out. The beasts were hungry and he saw flashes of sharp teeth and claws as they fought over him like a raw piece of meat thrown to a pack of starved hyenas.

Charlie continued to push, punch and elbow. He felt his blows crash and sometimes they knocked a demon over, but there was always another one behind him. He continued to pray in silence but nothing happened. He got pulled to the ground. This time he wouldn't make it. Then he cried out loud.

"God help me, please. Please dear Lord, hear me. Sarah help me!"

When all hope was nearly lost and his life about to close, a silent light shown and blinded him. It grew all about him, encircled him but more important, pushed out the demons. Like an explosion with no sound or fire, just bright light in which only the sun could make, the force of it threw his assailants off of

him. They flew in all directions toppling head over foot and the ones that weren't thrown, ran off until there were no demons in sight.

Charlie peered through the light for the source that burned his pupils and saw for a brief moment, Sarah. Her face smiling and then was gone. The light disappeared as quick as it appeared and Charlie sat alone on the pavement.

The streets were silent. He turned to the alley and Seth was gone too. Even Seth, the one who owned the town and ran everything, was gone.

"Sarah," he mumbled to himself and cried.

Charlie reached the crossroads with a new sense of hope and faith. Those things he thought that were unbeatable, like Seth and the demons, really weren't. You just had to be on the right team.

Kyle and Sam waited with warm smiles. Sam held a bouquet of flowers that Charlie found odd.

"You made it," Kyle said. "I knew you would."

"Yah, I didn't know if I would for a moment there. I thought I was a gonner."

"Well we didn't."

Charlie looked around. "So...Where do we go from here?"

"First," Kyle said. "There's one more thing that needs closure before we move on."

Charlie looked beyond Kyle and asked himself why he didn't know it from the moment Kyle asked him to walk to the crossroads. It hadn't dawned on him that he really meant for Charlie to reach the cemetery. Now he knew what the flowers were for. Sam held them out to him.

He took the flowers and walked past them and into the cemetery about a quarter of the way through until he came to her grave. He knelt before his Sarah and her polished headstone. He

reached out and touched her name with his fingertips and started to cry.

His head sunk and shoulders dropped as the cries turned to sobs. Kyle and Sam stayed back to let him grieve.

Charlie placed the flowers against her headstone, kissed the tips of his fingers, and then placed the kiss on her headstone.

"Hey girl," he spoke softly. "I saw you today. Like always you saved me. I miss you so much. I love you and always will."

Kyle and Sam approached and stopped a few feet behind him. Charlie spoke to them without turning around.

"It was my fault. Two years ago I killed her. Stupidity. I drove and way too drunk. The worst of it was, she tried to get me to pull over, but I convinced her I was fine. And why not, I'd done it so many times before and made it home alive."

"It's time to let it go," Kyle said. "You've punished yourself and held onto that guilt for too long."

"I know. The drinking, the violence, the drugs, all of it. You don't know what it's like living with that kind of guilt. She was everything to me. She was my reason for living and I threw it away."

"It's not doing anyone any good to self destruct. She's forgiven you, now you must forgive yourself."

"Why do I get the feeling that's not everything?"

Sam stepped in, "There's one more thing you need to see." He nodded to his left and Charlie walked in his direction. He stopped in front of another headstone and looked down at it. He cocked his head in confusion.

"There must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake," Kyle said.

"But this headstone...has my name on it." His eyes widened with fear. "And the date of death is November 5<sup>th</sup>. The same as Sarah's."

"She's not the only one that died that night."

Charlie's knees gave out and he fell before his gravestone. "But...it can't be. I've been living, I - I'm still in this town. The same friends, my job...I don't understand. This isn't heaven."

Kyle and Sam were silent. Charlie trembled and his face drained white and he turned to them. "I'm - I'm in *Hell*?"

"No," Kyle answered fast. "You are in between. You're in the afterlife. In a world that's familiar to you...one that you've created. Charlie, this is the hell you've created for yourself out of guilt. Those demons were drawn to you because of the choices you made, and they were sent to drag you down to Hell."

"And Seth?"

"Seth is the leader of those demons. He feeds on the souls in your world and they give him power."

"And you're here to take me...?"

"To a better place," Sam said.

"You were never alone here you know," Kyle said. "There was someone who never gave up on you."

Sienna stepped forward from behind them. Again, she was warmth and radiant with love and hope, and un-judging.

"Sienna," Charlie said with tears in his eyes.

"Not quite," Kyle said.

Charlie blinked. He couldn't believe his eyes. Why hadn't he seen it before? Her face transformed slightly. Other than that, her build and stature stayed about the same. It wasn't Sienna after all, it was Sarah.

"Sarah," Charlie choked and jumped up and ran to her. Sarah's grin was as wide as the world and as welcoming as the new day. They wrapped each other in a tight embrace for several minutes before covering each other's face with kisses as if to test if all this was real.

"You never gave up on me?" Charlie said.

"No, silly, I could never do that."

"You lived here for two years in this hell hole, just to save me?"

"Yah, and you owe me a lot of backrubs for that."

"A lifetime. I'm so sorry." His eyes said more than his words did for the accident he caused that took her life.

"I know. I've heard you a thousand times or more. Every time you think it or say it out loud, I hear."

She chuckled and it was good to hear that laugh. It was more delightful than any meal, any drink or all the money in the world. The heart of this woman before him that withstood the evils and pain of the dark world that he was lost in, just to find him in hopes to bring him back, was beyond words.

They were soul mates and had been from the moment they met. He knew it, and what was best was they didn't have to speak it to know it. The souls inside them knew they'd met their mates, and fortunately their bodies had listened.

"Are you ready," she smiled at him.

"Ready for what?"

"For forever, of course."

"Yah, I can't wait."

They took each other's hands, turned to Kyle and Sam and followed them down the road away from the town and to whatever may come.

