

# DEMON'S FALL

Margaret Carter

## Chapter One

Malice lurked within the scrawny man's brain. Sensing that malice from his position just inside the door that opened onto the homeless shelter's parking lot, Karl Engel visualized it as a snake. It needed only a light prod to make it inject venom into its host and spur him into action. Applying that prod wasn't Karl's job. Other forces performed that function. His job was to spring to the rescue of the host's intended victim at the strategic moment.

In the shabby reception room of the House of Bread, he held the door for Erin Collier, the potential lady in distress. The other four-to-midnight volunteers had already gone home, leaving Karl to escort Erin, one of two paid staff members on that shift, to her car. At twelve o'clock on a summer night, the lot was empty of people, although music and laughter from a bar in the next block drifted on the humid breeze. Erin brushed a lock of her short, honey-blond hair back from her forehead and smiled up at Karl. Her jasmine perfume teased his nose.

He welcomed that fragrance, mingled with her moist female scent, as one of the compensations of occupying a human body. By the Dark Powers, there were plenty of negatives to offset the few positives! This shell of flesh required nutrition, water and sleep, and it performed distasteful functions such as digestion. Not that he didn't enjoy some kinds of food, such as the steamed blue crabs Erin had taught him to crack for their meat or the homemade fudge she sometimes brought for dessert at the shelter. If only his body didn't have to handle those treats in such a crude way. On the other hand, it responded with a pleasant stirring of the blood to Erin's lushly curved shape. He edged closer to her, letting her aroma and the glow of her aura override one of the negatives, the odor of garbage from the dumpster at the side of the building. He wasn't sure he'd have been able to endure wearing a human body and senses if he hadn't had the power to escape from them by turning ethereal now and then.

His night-adapted eyes caught sight of another figure trudging toward them on the sidewalk, a woman. No, more like a girl, he decided, in her late teens at most. He watched her with mild annoyance, hoping she wouldn't throw off the timing of the planned confrontation. Thin except for her rounded abdomen, she wore jeans, sandals, a ragged sweatshirt voluminously too big for her, and a backpack. Uncombed brown hair straggled to her

shoulders.

She planted herself in front of Karl and Erin. "Do you work here? I need a place to stay."

Erin gave the girl's shoulder a brief pat. "I'm sorry, the shelter's been closed for hours. You come back tomorrow, hon—what's your name?" Her strong alto resonated through Karl's bones like organ music. One of the few pleasures of volunteering at this refuge for outcasts was listening to her lead the "clients", as she called them, in song after dinner each evening.

"Lisa," the girl mumbled. "I'm going to have a baby."

A smile flitted across Erin's lips. "Yes, I see." She dug into the purse slung over her left shoulder and pulled out a handful of twenty-dollar bills. "This should cover a room at the Thrift-Inn. It's just half a mile that way, and the street's well lit." With a wave, she indicated a northward direction past the closed restaurants, strip malls, and car dealers. "Come back tomorrow when I start my shift at four, and we'll see about getting you some help." She pressed her business card into Lisa's hand.

"Uh, sure, thanks." Looking a bit stunned, the girl stuffed the card and money into a pocket and turned to walk up the road.

As soon as Lisa reached the next intersection, Erin said in a low voice, "Maybe I should have offered her a ride. But we're not supposed to get personally involved with the clients."

Slipping his arm around her waist, Karl said, "You don't consider giving her money getting involved? Do you really expect to see her again?" The brush of her hip against his made his loins tighten, a pleasant but unnecessary distraction at the moment.

She raised her chin defiantly and glowered up at him from the foot of difference between their heights. "Yes. I don't share your low opinion of the human race."

With another appreciative sniff of her perfume, he began, "As you've told me many times in—"

Another smell intruded, beer and stale sweat. The thin, unshaven man who'd been lingering in the parking lot sidled up to Karl and Erin as they started toward Erin's car. Karl congratulated himself on timing their exit well. It wouldn't have done for the attack to occur inside the shelter, where someone on the midnight-to-eight shift might have interfered with his heroics.

Erin paused at the sight of the scrawny man, who tried to claim a bed at least four nights a week and had to be turned away an average of half the time. His weathered skin and bird's nest of gray-streaked hair made him look older than his probable fifty years. "Mr. Weiss, you know the rules." Karl read a suppressed sigh of exasperation in her mind. She folded her arms and continued in a sympathetic but firm tone. "You know the shelter closes for the night at nine, and you know you're not allowed if you've been drinking, anyway."

"Aw, come on, Ms. Collier, can't you give me a break for once?"

"You have to give yourself one first. Come back tomorrow afternoon, and we can talk about getting you into rehab again." She kept walking.

Not for the first time, Karl wondered how she could maintain such a good-humored tone. It wasn't faked, either. Underneath the layer of impatience and fatigue, she felt sincere compassion for this worthless specimen. Given permission, Karl would have stopped the man's heartbeat without a second thought. But killing human beings outright was one thing his side wasn't allowed to do, a restriction that baffled him. Didn't millions of them die every year through disease and natural disasters? Who'd miss a few more?

Weiss shuffled in front of them to block the way to the car. "Then gimme money for a

motel, like you did that pregnant kid." His tone shifted from whiny to surly.

"Sorry, I can't do that. It's warm out tonight. You won't freeze. We'll talk tomorrow afternoon."

Karl marveled at the lack of fear in her voice. No wonder he hadn't yet been able to fulfill his mission of persuading her to quit her job on the shelter's staff. She was insane, more so than the rest of these hairless bipeds. At least she had sense enough to realize Weiss, unlike the girl, would squander any cash she gave him on a bottle rather than a room.

When Erin stepped sideways to walk around him, the drunk made a grab for her arm. "Don't blow me off, lady."

Karl's hand lashed out and slammed down on Weiss's forearm in a sharp chopping motion. With a wordless snarl, Weiss stumbled backward. Karl smelled the miasma of demon-spawned anger clouding whatever rational thought processes the man had left. Not true possession, but unnatural influence, as Karl had expected. Weiss pulled out a pocket knife and unfolded it with tremulous fingers.

Erin emitted a spike of fear, quickly suppressed. When Weiss jabbed the blade in the air and snatched at her purse, though, she didn't retreat. Recognizing his chance, Karl leaped between Erin and the attacker. Instead of letting Karl shelter her behind him, to his astonishment, she shoved him out of the way.

"No, he won't hurt me. Mr. Weiss, give me that knife." She held out her hand.

The ploy might have worked if the man's brain hadn't been clogged with more than alcohol. After a shocked pause, he lunged at her again.

This time Karl didn't give her a chance to interfere. He slapped the knife out of Weiss's hand to clatter onto the pavement, knocked him facedown, and knelt on the middle of his back. "Erin, call the police."

"No, Karl." Now her voice trembled, and he scented fear on her skin. "Another arrest on his record won't do him any good. Take the knife and let him go."

"Have you lost your mind? He'll just come after you again." Karl leaned his weight harder on Weiss, who thrashed under him and alternately groaned and cursed.

"He won't do that when he sobers up. Please, I've got more experience with this kind of thing than you have."

"That's why you jumped in front of a weapon? Your psychology degree makes you invulnerable?" Although the encounter had ended just the way Karl had planned, he couldn't help feeling outraged at the way Erin had thrown herself into danger and still exhibited sympathy for this halfwit who might have sliced up both of them. With a baffled shake of his head, he stood up to let Weiss scramble to his feet. "You heard Ms. Collier. Get moving."

The demonic influence seeped away from Weiss's brain, leaving him muddled and frightened. He flung a confused glance at each of them in turn, then shambled into the darkness. Karl picked up the weapon and folded the blade. He could still hardly believe Erin had tried to shield him as if he were the one in danger.

When she took a step toward him, though, he noticed her legs quivering with the aftershock of the encounter. He dropped the knife into a side pocket, closed the distance between them in a couple of strides, and drew her into his arms. Her head rested on his chest, her cheek pressed to the front of his shirt. The strategic moment had arrived. Surely this time she'd listen to his rationale for resigning from the shelter job, even if he had to seduce her over to his viewpoint, a prospect he anticipated with pleasure as well as curiosity.

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Shaking, Erin wrapped her arms around Karl's waist. His firmly muscled body provided a welcome pillar to lean on. Now that the crisis had ended, belated fear washed over her. Mr. Weiss had never before done anything to hint he was remotely dangerous. She could still hardly believe he'd threatened her. The steady thump of Karl's heart under her ear calmed her own breathing and pulse. One of his hands stroked her hair, while the other traced circles in the middle of her back. She felt his lips brush the top of her head. "Are you all right?" His faintly accented voice rumbled in his chest, creating vibrations that resonated through her bones.

She nodded. His fingers inched under her hair to massage the nape of her neck. Tilting her head back, she searched his face in the light from the streetlamp. His eyes, ice-blue in daylight but heavily shadowed now, scanned her with concern and possibly more. He dropped a light kiss on her forehead. Her breath caught in her throat. His fingers glided around her neck and along her jawline to cup her chin.

When he dipped his head lower to kiss her, she was ready. For over a month he'd shown up to volunteer every night that she was on duty at the shelter. Few people who donated the lavish sums of money Karl contributed would bother to put in so many hours of personal service, too. She'd wondered whether his hovering around her meant anything more than the casual interest of a man new in town, wanting companionship. His mouth exploring hers answered that question. She parted her lips to welcome the dart of his tongue. Warmth radiated from every point where the two of them touched, spreading over her like a silken cloak. Delicious tingles danced from her lips to her nipples and the pit of her stomach. Heat pooled between her legs. She caught herself shifting position to mold her body to Karl's.

His growing erection pressed against her. With a gasp, she opened her mouth wider to thrust her tongue boldly into his. When he copied the gesture, a low growl sounded in his throat. She clutched the back of his shirt and rubbed her breasts against his chest. One of her hands strayed upward to explore his thick, black hair the way she'd secretly wanted to for weeks. It felt like the winter pelt of a furbearing predator. Soft mewling noises escaped from her. She imagined his shaft plunging into her sheath the way his tongue lashed in and out of her mouth.

His hand slid down her back to clutch her bottom. When one finger slipped into the cleft between her buttocks, caressing through her skirt and panties, the zap of lightning to her core jolted her awake from the sensual trance. Good grief, what am I doing? She tore her mouth away from his, shifted her grip to his shoulders, and pushed a few inches back to create a gap between their bodies.

"Erin, please—" Need roughened his voice. His hands roamed up and down her back as if he couldn't get enough of touching her.

It had been so long since any man had hungered for her that she almost weakened again. But she'd known Karl only six weeks. When his fingers spanned her rib cage on each side and his thumbs wandered to the lower curves of her breasts, she grasped his wrists to stop him. Never mind that her nipples peaked in anticipation. "Sorry. I shouldn't have let that happen." She could hardly catch her breath enough to gasp out the words.

Though his eyes still smoldered, he let go of her and took a step backward. "No, I should apologize for taking advantage of the situation. Let me drive you home. Your car will be safe here for one night. I don't think you should be alone."

"Really, I'm okay now." She brushed a lock of hair off her damp forehead. Her hand still trembled, she noted with annoyance.

"Please. I'd lie awake worrying otherwise." He added with a wry smile, "I promise not to force myself on you."

She hoped he couldn't see the blush that heated her face. "Okay, I accept the offer." She had to admit to herself that driving home alone didn't appeal to her. Not only that, she didn't want to separate from him so abruptly.

His fingers rested lightly on her elbow to guide her to his car. He drove a Mercedes two-seater, not a surprise considering what little she knew about him. Buckling herself into the passenger seat, she inhaled the aroma of leather and sighed with pleasure when the air conditioner blasted coolness onto her sweat-dampened arms.

She knew Karl had come originally from somewhere in central Europe, had moved to the United States and made a fortune in some kind of dot-com business, and now lived in affluent leisure with occasional consulting to keep him busy. Whenever she'd probed for more specifics, he'd changed the subject. Not much background information to base a relationship on. For all she knew, he might have made his money in organized crime instead of software. She laughed to herself at that notion. Contrary to the Hollywood image of the mob boss with a heart of gold, she doubted the typical man in that subculture gave five-figure donations to homeless shelters.

As the car pulled onto the nearly deserted street, she gave him directions to her place. "What in hell's name possessed you to jump in front of that knife?" His obvious frustration added an edge to the demand.

"I didn't want him to hurt you."

"Well, we have something in common. I didn't want him to hurt you, either." He shook his head in apparent despair over her recklessness.

"I don't think he would have. I probably could've talked him down. But he doesn't know you. He might have tried to cut your throat." She swallowed a lump of unexpected fear. "I can't believe I just said that. It's not like him. I wonder what came over him."

Karl shrugged. "Drugs, perhaps?"

"As far as I've seen, his drug of choice has always been booze, nothing illegal."

"Whatever the cause, now you understand why I walk you to your car whenever I can. I hate to see you putting your safety at risk. I care about you."

Erin cast a quick glance at him, then turned to the dark side window. Self-consciousness battled with a tinge of wistful pleasure at his claim of caring. He couldn't mean much by that, not on such short acquaintance. "You're exaggerating about the safety thing. I've been doing this for five years."

"Why?"

The vehemence of the single-word question startled her. "What do you mean?"

"I've wondered ever since we met." The car turned off the commercial strip into the tree-shadowed neighborhood where she lived. "You have a doctorate in psychology. You gave up private practice to work at a soup kitchen, with a drastic cut in income."

"Not soup kitchen, interdenominational ministry to the homeless." A tiny smile quirked her lips. She'd corrected him on the "soup kitchen" terminology many times. "I also gave up the hassle of an hour's drive into Washington every day, not to mention the stress of dealing with clients one on one. And I gained the satisfaction of making a real difference."

Karl stopped the car at the curb in front of her house, a two-story fixer-upper in an aging neighborhood ten minutes from the shelter's location. After four years, she still spent part of every weekend on the "fixing" projects that had come with the low mortgage. "I suspect you didn't live here when you worked in the Washington group practice."

"No, and I like this place just fine compared to the overpriced condo I sold when I took the salary cut." She unbuckled her seat belt and reached for the door latch.

"Allow me." He got out and walked around to open the door for her.

Wow, I can't remember the last time that happened. She thanked him and stepped out. When he took her hand to escort her up the sidewalk, a shiver trickled up her arm.

"Seriously," he said, "why did you take on the task of saving the world one derelict at a time? And why didn't you have Weiss hauled off to jail? It can't be just abstract idealism."

She waited until they stepped onto the porch before she answered. "You're right, it isn't just that. My younger brother died five and a half years ago. Killed himself in a one-car crash while he was drunk." She closed her eyes to blot out the momentary flashback to the night she'd received the phone call about the accident. "With both our parents dead, I tried to take care of him. I failed."

Karl put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her on the forehead with butterfly-wing gentleness. "I'm sorry. But I'm sure you didn't fail him."

She blinked moisture out of her eyes. "You're right, of course. That's what I would tell a client who felt the same way. But it was such a waste. He was a brilliant artist. He had gallery shows, made sales, got some good reviews. He was also an alcoholic, and every time he started getting his life together, he'd go back to drinking and wreck it again. Other people just looked at the multiple DUIs and wrote him off as a loser. They were wrong." Her own vehemence surprised her. She modulated her voice to a calmer tone. "That's why I'm a little more tolerant of people like Mr. Weiss than you are."

"I see your motivation, but I suppose I'll never understand it, not on an emotional level." He drew her closer to him in a side-by-side hug rather than a full frontal embrace. "Surely after five years you've done enough, though? Think of all the good work you could accomplish if you reentered private practice. And you wouldn't have to worry about getting attacked with sharp objects on the street at midnight."

With a humorless laugh, Erin said, "You don't have firsthand experience with the life of a therapist, do you? Dangerous clients pop up in pinstriped suits and high-rise condos, too, not just on the streets."

"But you'd be working in a building with full-time security, no doubt." He cupped her chin to make her look up at his face. His fingers felt hot on her throat, yet the touch made her shiver. "Won't you consider resigning? I'll donate enough to pay a year's salary for two staff positions in place of your one."

Her eyes widened in shock. He couldn't possibly mean that. "Why on earth would you make that offer?"

Karl's thumb stretched to trace the outline of her mouth. She fought the impulse to dart her tongue out and lick the trespassing digit. "I told you, Erin, I care what happens to you. I want you safe and happy. It's not as if I'd miss the money. I have more than I know what to do with."

"I am happy." Only half-aware of what she did, she swayed toward him. Her breasts grazed his chest. The friction on her nipples through the layers of cloth made them harden

and tingle.

“Are you? Completely?” His low voice made her nerves quiver.

She nodded. The question echoed in her head, though. She was happy with her work, despite the low pay, long hours, and constant scrounging for funds and supplies. It satisfied her more than her therapist career ever had. Yet maybe her happiness needed some other element to make it complete. Maybe she needed someone in her life besides friends, co-workers, and clients. It wouldn't hurt to experiment, would it? She turned in his arms to face him directly and press her body to his. Standing on tiptoe, she planted a kiss on the side of his neck. He smelled like spices, cinnamon and nutmeg with a slightly burnt tinge, like no cologne or aftershave she'd ever encountered.

He responded with a startled intake of breath. He leaned over her, his hands splayed across her back to hold her tight against him, and captured her parted lips. With a sigh, she melted into him. His tongue flickered in and out of her mouth, teasing the corners and skimming over her teeth, and she retaliated. She wanted to rub all over him like a kitten, wrap herself around him and draw him inside. She hadn't wanted anything of the kind in so long that she felt dizzy with delight. Her fiancé had broken up with her in the anguish and upheaval after her brother's death. He'd taken a dim view of her “obsession” with helping “losers”, too. Since then, she hadn't risked anything more than friendship with males who crossed her path. I'm alive after all!

That didn't mean she intended to jump into bed with Karl on the first kiss, no matter how yummy he smelled and tasted. For one thing, she knew in the back of her mind that adrenaline fueled the heat sizzling in the pit of her stomach. People often reacted to the aftermath of danger with arousal. The tickle in her nipples and clit and the molten liquid between her thighs didn't justify leaping into a casual fling. Not even if his rigid shaft nudging her lower abdomen assured her that he would join her between the sheets in a heartbeat.

With a sigh, she broke off the kiss, turned her face aside, and wiggled out of his embrace. “Time to say goodnight.”

He clenched his fists at his sides and took a couple of deep, shuddering breaths. “Yes. I know. Listen, Erin, won't you consider what I said? Resigning from the shelter? In fact, I'd rather you didn't even go back tomorrow afternoon. Who knows what Weiss might do next? You said yourself that he acted out of character. Suppose he's becoming unstable?”

Shaking her head, she fumbled in her purse for the house key. “No way, Karl. I'm touched and even sort of flattered that you're so worried about me, really I am. But this is my work. It's my life now. Don't bother trying to talk me out of it. We'd only get into a useless fight.” She squeezed his hand and brushed a light kiss on his chin, too swiftly for him to take advantage of the opening or for her to succumb to the temptation of starting all over. She hurried inside and bolted the door, her head still buzzing with the excitement and strangeness of the past half hour.

She headed straight for the bedroom and peeled off her clothes. The friction of the cloth made her skin itch, her nipples and clit ache. Five years of celibacy could explain the invisible ants using her nerves for a freeway interchange, but physical frustration couldn't account for the temptation to invite Karl into the house, maybe into her bed.

Again she reminded herself how little she knew about him. Rich men seeking charity tax write-offs weren't unusual, but rich men who also stood behind a counter serving dinner to street people were. Boredom? Guilt for some past transgression? Turning on the shower and waiting for the water to heat up, she giggled aloud at that thought. Karl looked less

guilt-ridden than any man she'd ever met. "Arrogant" targeted his description much more accurately. Not to mention slightly weird. Despite his excellent English, he treated ordinary elements of local culture as mysterious novelties. When she'd once invited him to an early dinner at a casual seafood restaurant, for example, he'd acted as if he'd never seen a crab before in his life. Well, granted, lots of newcomers to Maryland had problems with dismembering crabs. But she'd seen him face an Italian sub and a mocha latte with almost the same degree of mixed bewilderment and delight.

Maybe he'd turned the homeless shelter into a full-time avocation to stay near her? That crazy offer to pay for two positions in place of hers certainly hinted at personal interest. With another man, she would have suspected a joke, but Karl had less visible sense of humor than anyone she'd ever met.

Erin stepped into the shower, her skin tingling with more than the spray of hot water. What woman wouldn't feel excited by the idea that a man would go to so much expense and trouble to get acquainted with her? She coated her palms with liquid soap and swirled it over her breasts and stomach, imagining his hands tracing the same path. Crazy woman, building a fantasy out of a couple of kisses. Pathetic. She massaged her mound and inner thighs, while her clit twitched with impatience. Lust was clouding her judgment, she decided. Two mature people didn't find soul-mates in each other so quickly. Well, lust she could fix.

She angled the shower hose at her chest and sprayed each breast in turn. Her nipples pebbled up, welcoming the fine needles of hot water. Her clit pulsed to the frantic strokes of her soap-slicked fingers. She leaned against the tiled wall, head thrown back, panting, while her sheath rippled with the contractions of her climax. After her heartbeat slowed and she caught her breath, she rinsed off, then stepped out to towel herself dry. Her eyes drooped with exhaustion. There, lust all gone. For now. She tried not to hear the voice that whispered another word, loneliness.

## Chapter Two

Karl stalked to his car, threw himself into the driver's seat, and clenched his fingers on the steering wheel. Damn the blasted woman to the deepest abyss! Why wouldn't she pay attention to him?

He took a few long breaths to steady himself before he started the motor and pulled onto the street. He didn't mean that curse, of course. He didn't want to harm Erin in any way. In fact, what he advised was for her own good. He wanted her happy. He wanted more than that, in fact.

Dark Powers, I want her for myself! His pulse pounded in his temples. His own desire appalled him. He'd planned to use passion and physical need to weaken her resistance to his argument, not cloud his own mind. Yet his muscles ached with tension and his penis, engorged with blood, wouldn't let him focus on anything but plunging inside Erin's soft, moist body to relieve the pressure.

Damned inconvenient fleshly impulses. He wasn't an incubus. That role belonged to lower spirits, scarcely sentient, not a tempter of refined intellect like himself. So why did he suddenly feel such urgent need for sexual relief? Since taking on human form, he hadn't experienced sexual intercourse, though he'd anticipated trying the act with Erin if his mission required. His



only release had occurred in sleep, with the humiliating involuntary discharge of excess fluids that his reproductive organs occasionally required. How would it feel to share that experience, fully conscious, with Erin?

He shouldn't be thinking of that scenario. He should be planning the next stage in his strategy, considering how to persuade her to quit the shelter before the critical hour arrived. While he didn't know exactly when that crisis would occur, he knew it would happen soon.

In all honesty, though, he realized he had little hope of undermining her resolution. He'd read her mind while they argued. She had no intention of leaving her current position. Incredibly, she actually enjoyed the work and liked most of the shabby people she interviewed, found beds for, and served meals to.

Not only that, she had risked her life in a harebrained attempt to protect him from Weiss. Karl laughed aloud at the absurdity of it. That fragile human female had tried to protect him, when in fact Weiss's blade couldn't have done him any permanent harm even if it had sliced his jugular. Karl would have needed only to turn ethereal for a minute, and upon reverting to solid form he would have been completely healed.

He sobered instantly when he remembered the alarm he'd read in her mind, the concern for him. She cared about him, enough to forget her own safety.

He shook his head, trying to banish these weakening thoughts. Didn't she care about all those waifs and strays at the shelter, too? The action meant nothing more than her serving soup and bread to the homeless did. Except that her passionate kisses hinted otherwise. She didn't make a habit of flinging herself into men's arms. He'd read that in her mind, too.

A sphere of violet light descended on the car. With a muffled curse and a squeal of tires, he braked and pulled into the parking lot of a closed office building. Why didn't the messenger take the trouble to understand the limitations of flesh and matter?

"Kammael." His true name echoed around the inside of the car and resonated through his bones. He bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"You performed your role and pretended to rescue the woman."

Karl/Kammael nodded. The infernal Powers, of course, watched him constantly. They didn't need to be told the outward result of Weiss's attack. What they wanted was Karl's perception of Erin's reaction. "What of the woman?" the voice asked.

He didn't have to consider the question for long. "I read her mind closely while I tried to persuade her to leave her current position. Her refusal was heartfelt and unambiguous. I conclude there is no reasonable chance of tempting her into that course of action."

A rumble of anger underlay the next words. "Did the attack not frighten her sufficiently?"

"Her devotion overrides any fear she might have."

Tendrils like ebony smoke undulated within the glowing sphere that enveloped him. "Then we must take more direct action. All signs indicate that the critical encounter we must prevent approaches within a few hours. She must be disabled for the duration of the crisis. Soon she will be attacked and injured. Do not protect her this time."

Again he bowed his head, while keeping a tight leash on his thoughts. The Powers must not suspect how he detested this latest decree. "I understand." He kept his eyes down until the violet glow contracted to a point and vanished, leaving bright spots to dazzle his vision.

Only then did he give his thoughts free rein. That conversation had forced the truth on him. He hadn't just "pretended" to rescue Erin. He couldn't stand the thought of her getting

hurt, much less maimed or mutilated. The Powers couldn't kill her, but what they might do short of death sent an icicle stabbing into his heart. Regardless of what punishment he might receive, he couldn't let that happen. He rubbed his eyes as if trying to scrub away the rebellious thoughts. They wouldn't vanish.

He would fail his first mission. Deliberately.

As a young spirit, part of the generation most recently created, he hadn't dwelt long in the celestial realm before a messenger from the infernal lords had lured him into conversation. If "long" meant anything in a dimension where time ran so differently from the hours and days of earthly cycles. He'd been warned about such temptations, of course. The Dark Powers constantly tried to recruit new subjects. Yet their message had made sense to him. Why should the human race—hairless, bipedal mammals with short, violent lives and ridiculous pretensions to intelligence—have a chance to win their way into Paradise? It seemed only rational to join the side that rejected this ludicrous project.

Of course, Karl sometimes missed the realms of light. The infernal dimensions, though, had their own somber beauty. And freedom made up for being exiled, didn't it?

Thinking of Erin's fleshly but quite real beauty and her intelligence and reckless courage shook his certainty. Almost since his first meeting with her, he'd had doubts about the dogma of humanity's utter worthlessness. Now she'd thrown herself in front of a sharp implement for him and had returned his kiss with such enthusiasm that his mouth went dry at the memory, his palms itched to caress her again, and his penis tightened against his abdomen.

Enough! He should be thinking of Erin's safety, not his body's inconvenient appetites. Dark Powers, the attack could happen any time! What if the next threat caught her at home, unprotected?

He spun the car around and turned back the way he'd come. Irrational panic made his heart race. At this hour little traffic blocked his way, so he had no trouble driving to Erin's house twice as fast as legal speed would have allowed. A wry smile twisted his lips at the image of a traffic cop trying to ticket him. He'd have zapped unconscious any policeman who'd dared to pull him over.

He found her place quiet and dark, except for the light over the porch. No sign of danger. Or had she already suffered some injury that required an ambulance to transport her to a hospital? He dashed up to the front door and mentally probed inside. He sagged against the porch rail in relief when he sensed her sleeping mind. He wasn't too late.

After three rings of the doorbell, he heard her footsteps approaching. On the other side of the door, she said in a sleep-slurred voice, "Who's there?"

Glad she had enough caution not to open the door in the middle of the night, he said, "It's I, Karl. Are you all right?"

"What are you talking about? Aside from being dragged out of bed for nothing, I'm fine."

"You're in danger. Please let me in." Just watching the front of the house wouldn't satisfy his need to protect her. He'd feel safe only if he kept her within sight constantly, or at least within earshot.

Inside, the bolt snicked back. The door opened. Erin faced him with her hands on her hips. "Karl, what on earth is wrong with you? What danger?"

His breath caught in his throat. She wore a sheer, sky-blue nightgown that highlighted the color of her eyes. Though it covered her from neck to ankles, it hid very little. In the dim light of the entryway, every curve of her body showed through the translucent cloth. He could see

the dark peaks of her nipples and the circles of the areolas, and his gaze involuntarily wandered to the dark triangle visible at the base of her abdomen. Her female scent sharpened, and he heard her pulse accelerate. She folded her arms across her breasts.

“Well? What kind of danger, and how do you know?”

He realized in his panic he’d forgotten to contrive a plausible answer to that question. “Mr. Weiss,” he said. “When I left here, he was lurking across the street. I didn’t consciously realize I’d seen him until a few minutes ago.” His fingers grazed her shoulder, evoking a visible shiver. “Let me in.”

“I don’t know – oh!” When he took a step closer, she placed her open palm on his chest to stop him. Yet her eyes widened and softened, and her lips remained parted. He leaned close enough to inhale her mint-scented breath.

It must have been the lure of her suppressed excitement that distracted him from the man running up the sidewalk to the porch. By the time he whirled around to face the intruder, Weiss was charging straight at them. Karl pushed Erin backward, stepped over the threshold, and turned to slam the door. Weiss barreled into it, caught Karl off balance, and shoved it open.

More than natural anger clouded the homeless man’s brain this time, and more than the subtle influence that had fueled his rage for the first attack. Now true possession completely submerged his human thoughts. A low-level demon, which his resentment toward Erin had unconsciously invited, rode him. To Karl’s supernatural vision, the man looked shrouded in oily smoke. He held a gun.

“Bitch,” he growled. “Can’t blow me off like that.” The guttural tone made the words almost unintelligible.

Karl pushed Erin behind him. “Get out of here!” He heard her stumble a few steps backward, but she didn’t retreat any farther. With a muttered curse, he lunged at Weiss. The gun fired.

Karl’s ears rang with the blast. The next instant, he felt a hard punch to his midsection, followed by a fiery pain. He shot me! Instinct took over. He faded to ethereal form, floating bodilessly between Weiss and Erin. But he couldn’t block the attacker from her this way. Within a few seconds, Karl forced his human body to resume its solid shape. The bullet that had hit him clattered to the floor, and the pain vanished. A scream of alarm from Erin pierced his ears. He couldn’t stop to calm her now, though.

He pointed at the gun, which instantly glowed red-hot. Weiss dropped it with a shriek of agony. Next, Karl pointed at the man’s chest. A miniature bolt of lightning struck him in the heart. He crumpled to the floor.

Karl’s own undisciplined human heart was racing. Unholy Powers, did I kill him? He had no idea what would happen to an apprentice tempter who broke the law so gravely. Of course, I suppose I’m not a tempter anymore. I just deliberately sabotaged my own mission. I don’t care. Erin is more important than any of that.

Kneeling, he touched the unconscious man’s neck and listened for sounds of life. He felt a pulse, heard a heartbeat and breath.

Sometime in those few minutes, Erin had left the room and returned. Now she stood beside him, staring down at Weiss. “I’ve just called 911. Is he dead?”

“No.”

“What did you do to him?” Her voice sounded strained, as if she could barely keep from

screaming.

"Hit him lightly, that's all. He must have suffered a heart attack." He suspected medical examination would diagnose just that.

"I'm sure I saw something—like a flash of flame."

"The gun going off again, perhaps."

"It only fired once." Her stubbornness was quickly overriding her fear.

Karl sighed to himself. "Things happened very fast. You could be wrong."

"Maybe." She rubbed her eyes. "I also thought I saw you vanish."

He said with a soft chuckle, hoping she wouldn't notice how forced it was, "The eyes play tricks at moments of stress." He didn't want to have to meddle with her mind to wipe out that impression.

She gave him a hard stare. "Yeah, I guess that's what it was. After all, what else could it be?"

Placing a hand lightly on her shoulder, he said, "You need to sit down. Let's go in the living room and wait for the police."

She glanced down at herself and blushed. "After I put something on."

\* \* \* \* \*

After the paramedics carried Mr. Weiss to the ambulance, and the police finished taking notes and left, too, Erin collapsed onto the couch next to Karl. Before the cops had arrived, she'd had just enough time to don panties under the nightgown and throw on a terrycloth robe over it. Even in all the turmoil, she couldn't help blushing again at the thought of what the police must have imagined. Karl's explanation of what he'd been doing here at three a.m. had sounded pretty lame.

"Are you all right?" He reached for her hand.

When his fingers curled around hers, her heart started racing all over again. She nodded. "What about you? I could have sworn he shot you right in the chest." Already the memory of those hectic moments was muddled. She knew she couldn't have witnessed what she thought she had.

Karl said with a wry smile, "Do you see any blood?" He picked up her hand and pressed it to the front of his shirt, right above the beltline.

Her cheeks burned. Sensing his gaze on the V of her robe, she felt the heat rush down her neck and over her breasts like a forest fire roaring out of control. Sudden awareness of how narrowly she'd escaped death seized her. She couldn't suppress the reckless impulse that followed. "Karl, don't leave yet. I don't want to be alone." She insinuated her fingertips between the bottom buttons of his shirt. Underneath, she touched bare skin that scorched even hotter than her own.

His smile widened to a feral baring of teeth. "Your wish is my command."

"I never heard that line from a man before." She fumbled with his buttons, inching her way up his chest. He hissed between his teeth when her fingernails grazed his skin.

"What kind of men do you listen to, then?" He untied the sash of her robe and eased one sleeve off, then the other, in slow movements that skimmed her shoulders and upper arms. In contrast to the chill of the air-conditioning on suddenly naked flesh, his touch burned. "They should beg to fulfill your desires."

“Not that I’ve noticed lately.” With one finger, he was tracing the neckline of her nightgown. The skin of her throat and chest prickled with chills, even though it flushed hot at the same instant. “My desires—” Before she could give her brain time to catch up and rein in her body’s eagerness, she leaned toward him and pressed her parted lips to his.

He opened his mouth to feed on hers. The nibbles of his teeth and flickers of his tongue ignited sparks of electricity that spiraled outward along her nerves. His hands crept up her arms to her shoulders, his thumbs caressing the outline of her collarbone on either side of the throat.

Her vocal cords vibrated with an involuntary hum. She wanted his lips farther down, on her neck. At once, he nuzzled his way down and dipped his tongue into the sensitive spot at the hollow of her throat. With trembling hands, she folded his shirt open to scrape her nails over his chest. When she pinched his firm nipples, he gasped and bit into her neck.

Not sharp enough to hurt, the pressure of his teeth made her cry out, twine her arms around him, and dig her nails into his shoulders. Her nipples tightened to aching tautness. She squirmed around to press them against his chest. Touch them, please! Before she could draw breath to speak her wish aloud, his hands migrated to her breasts and cupped them in his palms. His thumbs circled her nipples. His mouth traveled from her throat to her lips to catch the moan that escaped her when he lightly touched her nipples and instantly returned to tracing the outlines of the areolas.

She didn’t think she could stand the unrelieved tingle another minute. Rub the tips, now! He instantly flicked the tight peaks. How did he know? She didn’t care. Her brain was too fogged with delight at the strumming that made her nerves quiver. Faster! He stroked faster. She swung one leg over his thighs and straddled his lap. He kept kissing her, while his hands never left her breasts. I want it bare—

Stealing tastes of her lips all the time, he slipped her gown over her head and shrugged out of his shirt. The fine hair on his chest teased her nipples. Lick them! He cupped her breasts again and bent to lap one nipple, while his fingers played with the other one. Her head reeled, as if she floated in a steaming whirlpool, anchored only by his mouth and hands and the growing ache between her legs.

She rubbed her pussy on his lap. Through his slacks, she felt the hard ridge of his cock. A gush of liquid dampened her panties. She rocked, growing hotter with every glide of the wet satin over her swollen clit. The pressure built, but she couldn’t find the right angle to relieve it. She moaned and dug her nails harder into Karl’s shoulders.

His hand and mouth reversed position, so that his tongue lapped the right nipple while his fingers serviced the now-wet tip of the left. Meanwhile, his hips pumped in rhythm with her rocking.

“I need—” She leaned back slightly so that her slit pressed against his cock, but her clit was exposed. It felt so ready, tight enough to burst. Unable to make herself speak her need aloud, she clutched his wrist. Do my clit, quick!

He fingered the taut bud. It tingled so fiercely she could scarcely hold still enough to let him to caress it. There, yes, right there, faster, don’t stop!

Somehow, his mouth continued stimulating her breast, and his other hand serviced the exposed nipple. Through his clothes, his shaft pressed into the hollow of her slit, while her clit pulsed with waves of delicious release, and his tongue and fingers flickered in perfect harmony. While the aftershocks convulsed her, he slowed his caresses to a soothing pace and moved up from her breast to kiss her until her breathing slowed enough that she could talk.

The best she could manage, though, was a dazed, "Wow."

He guided her head to his shoulder and stroked her hair. "What is your next command?"

She giggled and nipped the side of his neck. "What about your wishes?" She rubbed her pelvis against his erection.

"You know what I want." Need roughened his voice. "But only if you desire it."

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "We're just getting started. And I'm still not ready to be alone."

In a single, sudden motion, he lifted her off his lap, swung her into his arms, and stood up. Finding herself abruptly suspended several feet above the floor, she gasped and wrapped her arms around his neck. He carried her to the bedroom without asking for directions.

When he placed her in the middle of the rumpled bed, she pulled him on top of her before second thoughts could intrude. "Are you ready?" She unbuckled his belt, popped open the button on his slacks, and unzipped the fly. He hissed aloud as her fingers brushed the hard ridge inside his briefs.

"Oh, yes, I'm ready." He stroked up her inner thigh, skimmed the outer folds of her pussy, and trailed down the inside of her other leg.

She felt hollow, desperate to be filled. With both hands, she shoved his pants down his hips. She bared his cock, captured it, and somehow kept a firm grip on it through most of his hurried undressing.

A growl rumbled in his throat. He thrust into her closed hand, while he kissed her, devouring her moans. She flung her legs wide, her hips involuntarily flexing. What are you waiting for? Come in!

She guided him to her center. The head of his cock slowly parted her slit. It felt so slick, so hot—she'd forgotten how wonderful a man's penis felt inside her. She kneaded his buttocks while he slid into her, inch by inch, driving her to a frenzy with his teasing slowness.

She arched her back to draw him in. Deeper, faster! He plunged to the hilt in her tight, eager sheath. Still darting his tongue into her mouth in sync with the rhythm of his cock, he thrust into her with rising urgency, answering her silent demands with all the force and speed she craved. The hair at the root of his shaft rubbed her clit, and her nipples brushed his chest with each movement. The vibrations radiated through every nerve in her body.

Her clit started to pulse again, and seconds later her canal contracted with breath-stopping ripples. Come on, right now! She locked her legs around his hips. He thrust into her depths, threw his head back, and let out a wordless cry. His whole body quivered with his release. A second wave of ecstasy rushed over her.

At last the waves died away, and he relaxed on top of her, his face buried in her neck. "I've never felt anything like that," he murmured. "Never. Thank you." His voice sounded hoarse, almost as if he were suppressing tears. She stroked his hair in silence until both of them resumed breathing normally.

He lifted his head to gaze into her eyes. "I have to ask again. Will you give up this hazardous work before some other homicidal idiot attacks you?"

Indignation soured the lingering remnants of pleasure. She planted a hand in the middle of his chest and shoved. He rolled off her, onto his side. How could he make that same tired request, after what they'd shared? Didn't he understand her at all? "So that's what the last few minutes were about? Softening me up to let you run my life?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm only worried for your safety. Can't you listen to reasonable advice without hearing it as manipulation?"

"Drop it, why don't you? You already know my answer."

"Because I care about you, damn it! Can't you see that?"

Against her will, the outburst thawed her anger. "You're sweet to worry about me, but it's my life, and I have to make my own decisions."

He shook his head as if her stubbornness baffled him. "Will you at least allow me to watch over you?"

Her fingers strayed to the thick, dark hair she couldn't resist stroking. "Sure, if you can do it without driving me crazy. To start with, I'll allow you to drive me to work tomorrow afternoon, since you left my car stranded there. But right now, you should go home so I can sleep."

"So soon?"

She laughed. "I'm worn out, and I have a feeling sleep would be in short supply with you here. Besides, I haven't had a bedmate in—well, you don't need to know. I want time to get used to the idea, to think it over." He might have flooded her senses with pleasure like no other man, but the innermost door she'd locked after her fiancé's rejection stayed shut. She would have to think longer before she could consider unlocking it.

The disappointment in his eyes almost changed her mind. He didn't press the issue, though. "Very well. Until tomorrow." He raised her hand to his lips and placed a lingering kiss in the palm.

Another first, she thought while she snuggled into the covers after he walked out. She'd never experienced hand kissing before. Who'd have guessed such a simple contact could ignite sparks in her exhausted body?

### Chapter Three

The sky was paling to predawn gray when Karl emerged from the house. Sweet? He didn't know whether to laugh or snarl. Of all the adjectives he might have applied to himself, that was the least likely.

With car keys in hand, he paused to glance at the streak of pink visible through the trees to the east. He smiled at the image of Erin lying in sated sleep, pleased to exhaustion by his touch. He could hardly wait to repeat the experience. Her welcoming warmth had infused him with joy as incandescent as his memories of the heavenly fields.

A peal of thunder burst on his ears. The shockwave that followed slammed him to the ground. At once he recognized the blow as no natural effect. The globe of sickly violet light that enveloped him a second later confirmed that impression.

"Kammael!" The voice pierced through him like a spear of ice.

He levered himself onto hands and knees. "Yes. I disobeyed." He forced out the response in a strangled whisper.

"You betrayed your lords for a short-lived female animal."

"I'd do it again. You are no longer my lords." For the first time, he clearly realized his defense of Erin entailed just that decision. "Go ahead and destroy me."

The voice carried a hint of a sneer. "You should know we cannot destroy an immortal

spirit. Worse punishment awaits you. You have cast your lot with the human race. Share it completely."

Agony seared through his blood. Doubled over with cramps, with iron bands squeezing his ribs, he couldn't even draw breath to scream. He lay curled on the sidewalk, convulsing, blinded by pain. His brain shut down.

When consciousness returned, the pain had faded to a pervasive ache of weariness. The unnatural light had vanished. The gray sky and the nearly empty street indicated that only a few minutes had passed. Karl dragged himself to his feet and looked at the space where his car had been parked. It was gone.

He staggered to the nearest street light and leaned against it. Had the infernal messenger's decree meant what it sounded like? Karl closed his eyes and visualized his flesh melting, vaporizing, healing the bruises and fatigue while he floated in incorporeal bliss.

Nothing happened. I'm human. Permanently. He bowed his aching head on the lamppost.

All right. Billions of people lived out human lives in reasonable contentment. With a healthy body, he was better off than most of them. Except that the disappearance of the car probably meant he'd been stripped of his condo and bank accounts, too. He'd have to become one of Erin's charity cases.

Erin. Could he face her again? Becoming fully human left him free to love her like an ordinary man, but only if he could endure lying to her for the rest of their lives. Love? Where did that come from? And even if he could experience human love, what kind of life could he offer her? He'd lost all the trappings of his fabricated identity. Or almost all, he realized when he fumbled in his pockets. He still had a wallet containing a driver's license and cash, but no credit cards. He laughed bitterly. Maybe he had enough money to rent a room at the Thrift-Inn while planning his future, if he wanted a future at all.

A rush of wind drove the self-pity out of his mind. With it, golden light flooded his vision. A different voice rang in his ears like a crystal chime.

"Greetings, Kammael. It has been too long, cousin."

To his surprise, he recognized that voice. The Celestial Powers had sent a friend to deliver his doom. "Israfil? What do you mean by 'too long'? In the realm of Light, all times are one."

"Nevertheless, I have missed your company since you joined the resistance."

"Kind of you to say so. Go on, strike me dead and get it over with. At least I know you'll make it quick."

The glow rippled with amusement. "I have not been sent to destroy you. I bring an invitation. You have an opportunity to win your way back to the Light."

"They would let me return? After what I've done?" The memory of the celestial fields sent a pang of longing through him. Home!

"If you prove your repentance by completing the rescue of Erin Collier."

"You mean she isn't safe yet?" Fear clutched his heart. If another maniac with a blade or gun attacked her, how could Karl defend her now that he'd been reduced to feeble human abilities?

"She must meet that young woman at the shelter this very afternoon, or it will be too late. That meeting was the event the infernal Powers intended you to block."

"The pregnant girl? Why?"



"She carries a child destined to be a great warrior for the Light. Without Erin Collier's guidance, she will get no proper care, and both she and the infant will die in childbirth."

Anger simmered in Karl's chest. "All this, trying to terrify Erin or possibly maim her, was just to keep her away from the shelter today?"

A chime of affirmation emanated from the light. "The infernal Powers have become desperate. They are prepared to bend the rules and launch unnatural forces against her."

"I'll do anything to keep her safe. But how can I?" He spread his fingers and stared down at his now-mortal flesh-and-bone hands.

"That, you must discover for yourself," said Israfel. "For my part, I have permission to make an exception to the rules and transport you to her side. The time is now."

The golden glow expanded to a sphere of blinding whiteness. When Karl's vision cleared, he no longer stood on the sidewalk. The walls of Erin's bedroom surrounded him.

He rose from a crouch to fully upright and turned to face her. She sat up, letting the sheet slide down to reveal her naked breasts, and rubbed her eyes. In the predawn shadows, he could make out her puzzled frown. "Karl? What are you doing back already? And how did you get in here?"

"There's another danger. I have to protect you."

"Again? That's getting habit-forming, isn't it?" she said with a lazy smile. Abruptly, her face blanked to a wide-eyed stare. She pointed, mouth open in a stunned "oh".

He wheeled around. Between him and the door, a cloud of oily smoke materialized. It coalesced into an outline the size of a man and the shape of a hunchbacked wolf with jaws like a crocodile's and eyes like red-hot coals. Karl watched it round out to three dimensions, growing more solid by the second. He could strike no blow against it until it became corporeal, but it couldn't inflict any harm before then, either. He stepped closer, determined to block it from reaching Erin, though he expected to get torn to shreds in the process.

Behind him, she found her voice. "What is that?" she spoke quietly, as if she thought she might be dreaming.

He surveyed its maw bristling with fangs and the six-inch talons on its paws. "It's a damned hellhound," he said with perfect accuracy. His heart pounded and his breath labored as if he'd run a mile.

The thing lunged. Karl threw himself at it. Slammed to the floor, he grabbed the hellhound's pointed ears and struggled to hold its jaws away from his face. Its weight crushed the air from his lungs. The blow to his head from the impact, even with a carpet cushioning the hardwood, made his ears ring and his vision go gray. The creature raked him with one of its paws. The claws ripped his shirt and scored a deep gash over his ribs. He let out an involuntary scream at the pain and felt blood flow down his side.

"Erin!" he cried. "Run! Around me—or out the window if you have to." The hellhound's strength made his arms quake with the strain of holding it off. His only advantage was that these creatures normally couldn't stay physical for long, but could he immobilize it until it reached that limit?

He pretended to relax for a second, meanwhile listening for Erin. He heard the rustle of the covers as she stood up, but she didn't move otherwise. Why didn't she escape while she had some remote chance? Throwing his weight sideways, he rolled the hellhound off him and pinned it under his body. It writhed and bayed, a keening wail that hurt Karl's ears. Despite his best effort, it squirmed onto its back and clawed him again, this time in the center of his

chest. Fresh blood gushed. The burn of the laceration, though, hardly registered next to the vise that seemed to squeeze his lungs. And his grip on the thing's head was growing weaker. His arms and fingers cramped.

He caught a glimpse of Erin circling as if she planned to join the fight. "What are you doing? Go!" The wheeze in his voice alarmed him.

Still naked, she reached behind her to pull open a nightstand drawer. She plucked out a piece of jewelry, a necklace glinting silver. Karl glanced at it swinging from her right hand. A cross.

Useless against an intelligent spirit such as he'd been, as if they were vampires in a horror movie, but this low brute was another matter. She didn't dare get close enough to wield the symbol, though.

She didn't know that. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her bend within reach of the hellhound's talons. "No, Erin, get away!"

One hind leg lashed out to claw her ankle. With a shriek, she crumpled to her knees. Karl tightened his clutch on the thing's ears and dragged its head, just turning in her direction, back toward him. Its canines sank into his throat.

Again he screamed. For an instant the pain blotted out everything else. He fought to hang onto consciousness. Then he saw Erin stab the cross into one of the beast's eyes. It emitted a howl of agony and the eye burst into flame. Karl dug his fingers into the coarse hair on either side of the thing's head, gathered all the strength he had left, and twisted its neck. Its limbs spasmed and went limp. Not trusting this sign of helplessness, he wrenched its head halfway around. It stopped moving altogether.

"Give me that," he gasped. When he held out his hand, Erin dropped the cross into it. He shoved the necklace between the creature's gaping jaws and down its throat. An odor of burning hair and flesh tainted the air.

Karl rolled off the slowly charring corpse of the hellhound. Erin knelt beside him, her leg bleeding. She didn't seem to notice the wound. With harsh sobs, she pulled his head onto her knees.

The room lit up with the same golden glow he had seen outside only a few minutes earlier. Israfel's voice reverberated like organ music. "Well done, cousin. You have completed your penance."

Karl felt healing warmth spread over his chest. "No, take care of her first."

He heard Erin draw an astonished breath when the claw mark on her leg vanished. Again the glow enveloped him. The pain evaporated and his wounds closed. A tendril of illumination touched the hellhound, which disappeared in a crimson flash.

Stunned, Erin stared into his eyes. "I'm not dreaming. That thing was real. And you're not human."

"I am now." He sat up, and they gazed at each other, not touching, within the sphere of golden light.

Israfel said, "No longer, Kammael. The infernal Powers have overstepped their bounds. They will not be allowed to interfere further. This woman will complete her task, thanks to you. You have earned your welcome into the celestial realm. Say your farewell."

He summoned up a mental image of the fields of eternal light, a memory growing dimmer the longer he wore flesh. He had it on good authority that human beings, too, could eventually enter that realm. Meanwhile, earthly life, despite all its flaws, offered joys. "I want to stay this

way," he said. "Human."

The golden sphere contracted thoughtfully. "You know, you will suffer pain and disease. You will grow old and pass through death. And she might refuse you. You might live out your human span alone."

Erin's enraptured gaze gave no clue to her thoughts, and he couldn't read her mind any longer. "I'll risk it."

"Very well. You have your wish." He thought he heard amused affection in Israfel's tone. "Shall I erase her memory of these events?"

"No, if it's allowed, let her remember. Please."

"Let it be so." The light extinguished itself.

Erin stared at him blankly for another minute. Then she leaned forward into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her, and they knelt there, with his lips brushing the top of her head and her breath warm on his neck. He felt her tears trickle onto his skin.

"What are you? Were, I mean." she said. "A demon?"

"We preferred to call ourselves the resistance."

"Then everything that happened was a setup. You were trying to tempt me away from my job. My destiny, I guess."

"Only the first time." His chest ached. He wished he could read the mood behind her words. "After that, I wanted to protect you. I refused to complete my assignment."

"And when we made love? That was part of the temptation?"

"No, it was real. I won't blame you if you can't believe that, but everything I said about caring for you was real. I just didn't know it at first."

"I believe you. Come on, hold me." She stood up, clasped his hand and led him to the bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Erin's head spun as they moved from the floor to the bed, with Karl's hand gripping hers so tightly her fingers went numb. Had she dreamed the last few minutes? No, the pain of that beast's fangs had felt too real, and so had the healing light that had bathed her. So Karl's inhuman origin must also be true, along with his choice of humanity. The apprehension in his eyes confirmed the sincerity of that choice.

She helped him out of his ruined shirt. They sat side by side, her legs tucked under her, her head on his shoulder. "You can never go back, can you?" she whispered.

"I don't want to. I have to stay near you, even if it's only to watch from a distance." His breath stirred her hair.

With a shiver, she snuggled closer to his side. "It won't be from a distance, not if I can help it." She wanted to climb all over him, wrap around him, draw him in. Strange as it seemed to feel aroused after such terror and wonder, she sensed heat spreading from his flesh to hers and uncoiling through her veins and muscles like a living creature. The locked door at her center opened. She lay back on the pillow, tugging him with her.

"Stay," she breathed into the hollow of his throat.

He hid his face against her breast. "I don't have money anymore. My background was faked. The Dark Powers obliterated it."

"They didn't obliterate your mind, did they? If you still have the knowledge they put into your brain when you took human form, you can manage. I'll help."

He looked up at her, his eyes bleak. "I won't let myself be a burden on you—"

She cut him off. "Don't think that way. We'll work it out together. Later." She ran her hand down to his waistband.

"I don't expect anything from you," he began, leaning on one elbow to gaze into her eyes.

She silenced him with a hand over his mouth. "I want you. Unless you're not up for it." Her eyes strayed to his crotch, where she glimpsed a bulge.

His tongue flicked her palm. "I'm definitely up," he said in a tone of mild surprise. "But Erin, I may not be able to satisfy you anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Before, I was watching your emotions and sensations, reading your thoughts."

"You what?" She started to sit up.

His hand on her shoulder restrained her. "I knew exactly what kind of touching you needed. Now I won't be able to sense your desires."

A laugh bubbled up. She tamed it before it could escalate to hysterics. "How do you think ordinary men and women figure it out?" With his help, she unfastened his slacks. While he finished undressing, she stripped off her gown. A minute later, they lay side by side, naked.

She fingered his throat and the bearded roughness of his jawline. "That thing almost killed you. We almost lost our chance at love."

He drew a harsh breath. "Love?"

"That's what it's usually called when people risk their lives for each other."

A visible tremor racked him. "I do love you. And I want you." He glanced down at his erection. "My body wants yours."

A contraction rippled through her sheath. The yearning in his eyes and the tension she saw in the muscles of his arms and legs made her long to relieve him. "That's mutual." She squeezed his shoulder and skimmed down his side to the hipbone.

Draping an arm over her, he inched closer. "It feels so strange to be encased in flesh. Yet wonderful, too." His hand traced a spiral on her back and came to rest just below her waist.

Impatient, she clasped his buttocks to mold her lower body to his. His penis and testicles teased her mound. She flexed her hips to rub up and down his hardness. A moan escaped him, a sound she echoed.

"What shall I do now?" he murmured hoarsely.

"Touch my nipples like before."

With one hand, he fingered each nipple in turn, quickly coaxing them to peaks. His other hand clutched her bottom to hold her against him. She felt dizzy with need and so wet she couldn't stop squirming.

"Are you ready?" he asked, still strumming her nipples in turn with frantic speed.

"Oh, yes!"

"Good," he growled. "I can't wait much longer. My—cock needs to enter your pussy."

"Do it!" She rolled onto her back, still clasping him.

"Last time," he said hoarsely, "you wanted your clitoris caressed."

"Not now! Just come in!"

She spread her legs, and he plunged inside.

"I want to please you—" He pulled almost out, then slid in, inch by inch.

"You are." She wrapped her legs around him and forced him deeper. They found the rhythm together, each stroke heating her clit and vagina closer to the explosive point. She felt his cock growing harder, larger, filling her and pulsing with imminent release. She screamed when the convulsions seized her, and his climax instantly followed.

Long minutes later, he stirred and brushed a light kiss on her cheek.

"You see," she murmured, "being human and ordinary isn't so bad."

"I can live with it," he said, guiding her head onto his chest where she could hear his heartbeat, "if I have you to show me the way."

"Always."

The End