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Sugar & *Spice*



SUGAR & SPICE

Sequel to Brothers of the Night

Audrey Godwin

MENAGE AMOUR



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Sequel to Brothers of the Night

AUDREY GODWIN

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Prologue

His naked body writhed frantically against the cold stone wall, the iron shackles that circled his wrists, wet with his own blood. His terrified eyes darted around the damp space, settling on a woman who lurked silently at the head of the dark cellar stairs. Her slim, delicate body carefully crept toward him, fear and concern etching her face as she guardedly watched him thrash about within the deep shadow that enshrouded him.

His eyes anchored on her, refusing to release her from his narrowed gaze. He silently urged her to move into the light, but she continued to stay safely hidden within the maze of murky light and deep shadow. Who was she?

He must know her, he reasoned with himself, but he couldn't seem to remember. He shook his head to clear his mind, the haziness making it difficult for him to think.

The hell he was cursed with was already upon him.

"Whoever you are," he rasped as he spoke to her, "why am I here? Why are you holding me captive? Release me, please."

She did nothing, said nothing, only stood watching him with stark fear shining in her eyes. Suddenly pain shot through him, a tormented yell ripped from his throat. Sweat streamed down his face, and blood oozed from the scratches and cuts where the rough rock tore at his flesh. His chest heaved with indrawn air as his eyes shifted toward the high window that framed the

wretched moon. He watched with trembling breath as the devilish rays slowly crept along the rough wall toward him.

He turned his head away, refusing to look, but it did no good. He struggled to escape it, to fight against it, but knew if he ran and hid in the darkest corner of the cellar he still wouldn't be safe. Within seconds he felt the waves of evil touch his body with fire, and he could do nothing but let their stinging rays surround him, swallow him like a hungry beast of prey.

The relentless agony!

He longed for death!

And then, like a scalpel in the hands of a demon surgeon, his face slowly mutated into beastly proportions. With each subtle change, the evil inside him grew to savage hunger, a hunger that raged inside his stomach. As it increased, his mouth stretched little by little over teeth that had become long and razor sharp. Saliva oozed from between his animal fangs, his ears coming to a deep point, his forehead steadily protruding while his hairline lowered and disappeared into swelling muscles that knotted on his back. His hair grew down his body, thick and bristly. His lower form took on an animalistic look as his thighs curved, forcing him to crouch, his feet fast becoming clawed and distorted.

His suffering stretched into infinity, torturing him with pain so stark and raw that he felt as if he were going to die. When he knew he could stand no more, *the mutation became complete.*

Now black evil heaved inside him, his form no longer that of a man, but an untamed beast of the wild. Slowly he opened eyes he knew to be red-rimmed and looked out of a different face, a face that was deformed and ugly. His body had grown to mountainous proportions, and his hunger for the blood and flesh of a human body insatiable. His actions were frenzied, his senses hyper. His persona had painfully entered a realm of the paranormal where few men were allowed to travel.

The very air he breathed was flavored with blood, calling to him, making him strain and writhe at the bonds in desperation. No matter how violently he struggled, the steel cords were embedded so deeply into the stone even his massive strength couldn't budge them. A growl, tormented and angry, pushed its way up into his throat while saliva continued to gather in his mouth, then drip from between his sharp teeth. His hunger had grown

so intense, he continued to fight against the shackles, his thirst for blood growing with each second that passed.

He had to get loose.

The minutes that crawled by were agonizingly slow, as slow as the bugs that inched across the stone floor. He watched them for a moment, his eyes shifting to the mice that darted here and there, unafraid while nipping at his hideously mutated feet. He couldn't move, couldn't lean down and grab their squirming bodies, to savor their rodent blood as it filled his mouth. The thought of their torn flesh, their red blood streaming from his wolf-like mouth, excited him. No, it might not be human blood, but he was desperate. Desperate to drink blood, *any blood!*

Hunger tormented him.

His body screamed out with need.

With a mind horribly twisted with evil, he thought of *her*, of the mysterious woman draped in shadows, of the blood that rushed freely through her veins. She was the one who refused to let him run free. But why? How had she done it? How had this woman, this delicate wisp of a woman, managed to shackle him to this icy wall with cords of steel imbedded so deeply into the stone? What kept him from tearing her flesh, drinking her blood?

Did she have some power over him?

Maybe, he thought, but that was *before*. *Before* the moon. *Before* the hunger. *Before* the night became shrouded in darkness.

His head jerked around when he saw her move again.

His eyes immediately anchored on her stirring figure. No longer standing still, she dared to creep down the steep steps, to prowl through the shadows while the harsh light of the moon made her own shadow loom large and monstrous behind her. He watched her furtive movements. Slow, so very slow, she came, one careful step at a time.

Now he knew whose fragrant blood filled the cavernous room. It was hers. Spicy, rich, and it flowed freely through her veins, tempting him. He could feel himself becoming almost dizzy at the possibility of a human kill. He felt another pinch and looked down at the mice still nipping at his heels. The small creatures no longer enticed him. He didn't need them now. He had better prey, *human prey!*

His tongue licked the pungent air. The exotic aroma called to him, beguiled him. The delicious scent caused him to writhe and struggle harder, to pull at the chains while evil boiled inside him, threatening to erupt.

It happened!

Like a mighty explosion, his bonds burst from the wall and he leapt forward. A growling rage erupted from his wolf-like mouth, the hellish sound bouncing from wall to wall of the cavernous dungeon. Like a bad dream, his taloned feet scraped eerily along the cement floor as his lumbering bulk rushed heavily toward her.

* * * *

“Oh, God, no!” the woman screamed, turning abruptly to get back up the steps. She stumbled, twisting her ankle.

Trapped!

She turned toward the horror, hoping he would recognize the sound of her voice. “Cristo! No!” It had no effect on him. She managed to pull herself up and give him a shouting command. “Heel, Cristo! Heel!”

He kept coming.

The *horror* kept coming!

The woman stumbled backward, trying desperately to get away from the snarling beast, the mountainous body, the eyes that held cold death within their sapphire gaze, but it was no use. She knew she would never be able to climb the steep steps, and reached down into her boot.

In her hand, a cold, glittering blade appeared.

Slowly she drew herself up while holding on to the weak rail. Her fear grew, sobs choked her, and tears blinded her. She felt her sanity draining away as she watched his nightmarish bulk move closer and closer. With a trembling hand, she squeezed the knife harder, held it defensively. “Look at me, Cristo,” she shouted desperately, trying one last time to jolt his memory. “It’s me! It’s—”

Before the words were out of her mouth, the creature gave a sudden leap, and she found herself held within his killing grasp. He brutally grabbed at her hair and jerked her head backward, exposing her neck.

“Cristo! Cristo!” she continued to shout, but the beast remained deaf to her cries. While his razor-edged teeth inched closer and closer to her pulsing

throat, she finally squeezed her tearful eyes shut and sank the knife deep into his chest.

* * * *

The beast stopped suddenly and wilted at her feet while a swirl of cold death dimmed his eyes. As he lay wounded and bleeding, the mutation slowly reversed itself.

Then he knew the truth.

During every full moon, this woman brought him into the cellar and shackled him to the wall. No, it wasn't to hurt him, but to protect him. From himself, from killing innocent people, and from gunshots, knives, angry hunters who sought to kill him.

He could feel the life slowly draining out of him as he looked into the loving face of his mother. Seeing her tears and pain, he rasped, "Don't cry, Mother. We both know...it...it's better...this...way."

Seconds later his body slumped, the life his mother held so dear, gone.

* * * *

She fell over him and wailed out her grief for hours, it seemed. When her anguish was at its height, something snapped inside her, loosing a hatred deeper and stronger than anything she'd ever felt. She jerked her head upward and glared into the face of the moon, her seething voice directed to those she couldn't see. "You've taken everything from me and left me with nothing! You took the men I loved when I was only a girl, and then both my sons before they had a chance to live! You call yourself gods, but you lie! You exist on the misery of others, the blood of innocent victims! You're not gods, you're devils, and it's time someone put a stop to your reign of terror!"

Jennifer rose slowly, her petite, delicate body silhouetted against the mysterious silver moon. With a scorching anger boiling up inside her, she thrust a determined fist into the air as she stood over Cristo's body. "I vow by all that is within me that you'll pay! Wherever you are, whoever you are, I *dare* you to come out of your hiding place! I *dare* you to show yourself to me, to face me, to look me in the eye! I'm not afraid of you! I've seen worse

than you! I've seen those I loved turned into monsters, and even been attacked by them, but I survived. You think you can scare me? You're nothing! A stupid race of gods that hide behind curses! You're so pathetic it almost sends me into hysterics! Go ahead, you bastards, send me your worst! Do you hear? Anyone! Your highest, most powerful, and I won't bat an eyelash! Me," Jennifer indicated toward herself, "a woman, a weakling in your eyes. But you did one thing wrong, you stupid, spineless creatures. The hurt you heaped upon me made me strong. So fucking strong I can look you in the eye and make *you* cringe! And then, after you've tasted a humiliating defeat at my hands, I promise you this. You won't get away from me until I've learned just one thing. *Why* you saw fit to make *my* life *a living hell!*"

Chapter One

The next autumn moon cycle

Darkness deeper than death filled the smoky room.

The men who packed themselves into the Rock Candy Club gathered there in excited expectation of a nightly event. The familiar music that pulsed through the air was like a mysterious siren song. It drew them from wherever they were because it meant that *Sugar* was about to take center stage.

A hush descended as the curtain parted.

Slowly, a city street was revealed, lit only by a lone street lamp, the time, darkest midnight. Fog slithered along the curb, then wrapped itself intimately around the base of the pole where a golden light fell down in a perfect circle. High in the dark rafters, a papier-mâché moon shimmered mysteriously.

The thumping music became more intense, telling the onlooker that danger was near, but the stage was vacant. Hearts thrashed, pulses raced. Where was she? Eyes searched for her. Pent-up breath stalled in filled lungs—waiting. Suddenly there came an explosion of music, and Sugar burst into the light, her costume glittering like countless stars in the night.

Her face was beautiful, ageless, *but full of secrets*.

The anguish of her soul shaded the glow of her stormy blue eyes, like clouds passing across the moon.

Her blatant sexual dance began, her body moving sinuously to the music until the moment came when a shimmering light fell from the moon, surrounding her, forcing her to her knees. She fought, she struggled, but was finally compelled to succumb to its rays. While in the heat of struggle, she cleverly passed behind a row of false hedges, did a quick costume change, and emerged as *Spice*, a delectable she-devil who began the mysterious

dance of death. The moment the men saw her, they applauded, but at the same time gasped at her wild beauty. Her red wig and red costume glittered like tiny flames of fire as she played erotic games in and out of the perfect circle of light that fell down over her like rippling honey.

The music stopped, and her dance ended abruptly.

Footsteps!

The club fell in total silence while the sound of the mysterious footsteps grew closer and closer, *and closer*.

At the very height of fearful expectation, the music began again, but the tempo had changed. The soft staccato beat rose like a rumble of thunder as if it were saying, “*Kill! Kill! Kill!*” With a quick movement, Spice slipped into a mysterious shadow and waited. The thumping music rose even higher, charging the air with electricity until the unsuspecting man finally appeared. When the music ultimately hit its orgasmic peak, Spice quickly emerged and brutally attacked him.

No matter how many times the men watched this evil display of lust and violence, their cocks would swell and turn to steel when Spice overpowered the actor and sucked his blood. When the fake kill was complete, she rose slowly and moved over her victim in a sizzling, primal dance of triumph, the music hotter, louder, and sexier than before.

The crowd went wild as she slowly peeled off her costume.

It untied easily, tiny wisps of it drifting toward the stage while her firm, young breasts bounced to the beat of the music. The men looked on in excited, inebriated delight as she wrapped herself around a metal pole and shimmied beneath the glowing moon, oozing sex appeal. As she went into her finale, all that remained of her costume was a tiny thong and a web of spidery material that wrapped snugly around her perfectly shaped legs. The men eagerly pushed forward, rough, brutish hands filling up her thong with bills, hoping it would buy them just one small caress of the perfect body that danced before them.

But Sugar was indifferent to the drooling crowd around her—to their shouts, to their struggle for her attention. Instead, she looked deep into the belly of the club, her eyes searching along the bar, the corners, the hidden nooks, *for only one*.

Her eyes halted the minute she saw him. It was a face she didn’t know, but a face that dominated all the others. A face with lips she would let kiss

her, hands she would let fondle her, a cock she would let fuck her—*just before she killed him!*

* * * *

After changing out of her costume, she walked to the opening that separated the club from the backstage area. With subtle movements she pulled the velvet drape back and peered at him. With his hair attractively disheveled, she could picture him riding his motorcycle by the hour, all in black leather. He looked to be around thirty, deeply tanned, and classically handsome. He had a cleft in his chin and a grin that revealed a set of teeth that glittered and gleamed as brightly as the stars on the Crest toothpaste box. He was a stud in the fullest sense of the word, and she suspected he knew it. She had seen his type before, and they were all as conceited as hell. She would pretend to be uninterested, but if she knew her pretty boys, she would have him in her clutches before she finished her first drink.

Jennifer finally pushed the velvet curtain aside and stepped into the swarming club. She was in no hurry, so she took her time walking toward the bar. Several men pawed at her, but she thoughtlessly pushed them away, her eyes glued to the man who had *Mr. Beautiful* etched on the back of his leather jacket. When she neared the bar, she saw the rest of the motorcycle gang, all dressed up in leather jackets, wild T-shirts, and cocks so big it made her groin ache. She could tell he was the leader. He was the biggest, the baddest, and so cocksure of himself, the easiest.

“Scotch and soda, Charlie,” she called out as she slipped up on the empty barstool beside him.

He cut his eyes around when she sat down. “Well, if it isn’t the cute little she-devil. Quite an act you have there.”

“It pays the rent,” she lied smoothly as she took the frosty drink in her hand.

“And then some, I’ll bet.”

“Look, I’ve done two shows tonight and I’m tired. You mind if we skip the conversation?”

“Whatever you say,” he muttered.

The two of them drifted into a heavy silence, and after a few minutes his eyes slid toward her again. "Look, I don't want to bother you, but you seem like a dame with troubles. Maybe I—"

"Save it, mister. You don't have what I need, so don't even try."

"And what do you need? A million dollars? Someone to kill your boyfriend?" His lids lowered seductively as he looked her over. "A man?"

She snickered into her glass, then turned to look at him with a pair of stormy blue, trouble-filled eyes. "Not even close."

Giving a slight shrug, he looked away. "All right, so have it your way. But remember. If you've got troubles, I've got a great shoulder for crying." He paused for a few moments, then slid his eyes toward her once more. "In case I was interested, which I'm not, what time can you break free of this den of iniquity?"

"Not that it's any business of yours," she held up her glass that was almost empty, "but as soon as I finish this drink, I'm outta here."

"Yeah? How about I give you a ride home?"

The ice in her glass crackled as she finally drained it. "I thought you weren't interested."

He shrugged, giving her one of his million-dollar smiles. "So I lied."

"Sorry," she said with a shake of her head, "I don't ride on motorcycles."

"Yeah? What do you do on them?"

"Not a damned thing. They're for kids and," she hesitated, then looked him square in the eyes, "boobs like you who have a problem with their manhood." She moved to get up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I see—"

His hand reached out and roughly grabbed her arm. "I don't happen to like what you just said. If you want a taste of my *manhood*, I suggest we take a stroll." Still squeezing her arm, he leaned toward her and whispered a vulgar proposition in her ear, then showed her his money.

The fish was caught!

She quickly grabbed it, ruffled the bills with her long nails, then stuffed it down the front of her blouse. They stood and went outside. Jennifer led him furtively through the dappled darkness, not aware of the others who followed. She quickly found a shadow that lay undisturbed against the back wall of the club, and turned. When she saw two other cyclists leering at her, she said, "What's the matter, can't you handle this all by yourself?"

“I believe in sharing.”

“All right, gents, let’s get this party started.”

They drifted into each other’s arms while the other two men closed in on each side. Music from the club played softly in the air. Shoe leather scraped on cracked cement, clothes rustled in the warm night, and then came a soft moan as Jennifer felt her panties being ripped off and a stiff cock pressing against her pussy. She moaned. Lips and rough hands were everywhere. They moved anxiously along her body kneading her breasts and sinfully tweaking her nipples. Small bolts of electricity seared through her while someone played with her clit. She felt herself being forced to the ground to roll around on small rocks and parking lot litter. Her buttocks and pussy were stroked and licked, and a swirling heat began to build, compelling her to move her hips in a loose swing and push. Someone parted her thighs and licked them while flirting with her pussy until her juices burned and dripped. Suddenly a plunge stabbed her so deep, she lost her breath. The hard body that took over was riding her into hell, where the flames of desire leaped and licked. She rode high, but almost as soon as the ride began, he pulled out, and the next rock-hard cock took over. They took her one by one, riding her hard while they pushed her against the ragged ground. At last she could feel it coming and reached for it, her hips frantically pushing and pulling until at last that elusive warmth burst and began to spread. She closed her eyes as her first orgasm whirled wistfully in her groin and then drifted slowly away.

Her eyes opened, and she gazed up at the full moon, at the lying silver disk that was supposed to symbolize love and romance, all those silly emotions that didn’t exist. It brought to mind the four lives that had been cruelly taken from her when they fell victim to its evil rays. Maybe some poor saps could look at it and think of romance, but it had given her nothing but heartaches.

Suddenly it grabbed her, the moon’s wicked stimulus, and the evil mutation began.

She arched her body when she felt it coming. It did no good to resist it; she was firmly in its grasp. Her eyes angled down at the three who took turns thrusting themselves inside her. In only seconds her teeth lengthened into sharp edges, and her hairline slowly began to lower. Her long white-blond hair changed to a bristly red hue, and her act on the stage of the Rock

Candy Club became a horrifying reality. With growing excitement the men were clawing at her, their moans filling the darkness. She could feel the blood-hunger surge within her and lowered her eyes to the inviting flutter of a pulsing artery, to the succulent flesh only inches from her mouth.

It was the reason she was here.

Suddenly her tongue darted out, licking the place where the rushing blood pulsed rapidly, making an intense ripple beneath his swarthy skin. With her sensitive tongue, she could feel its sensuous ebb and flow that reminded her of the ocean that moved restlessly against the coastline. Her body was on fire, caught up in the imagined taste of his spicy essence. And then, when her blood lust was at its most intense, she opened her mouth wide and sank her fangs deep into his neck and ripped violently. He jerked in her arms and then quickly grew limp. As his warm blood surged toward her vicious bite, the two other men looked on in horror.

Suddenly one turned to run, but Spice was on him in a second, her strength incredible as she slammed him to the ground and covered him. He struggled, scratched along the ground for escape, but with a quick yank she grabbed his long hair and pulled his head backward, exposing the throbbing veins in his neck. Just as she was going in for the kill, she let out a blood-curdling roar and then bared her fangs and ripped and tore at his flesh. As his blood rushed into her mouth, she could smell it, taste it, feel herself getting drunk on it. She reveled in the taste of flesh, the draining of his veins, as it slid down her throat and into her ravenous belly.

The kill at last complete, she quickly pulled away, her mouth dripping with blood. With defensive movements, her eyes darted around, searching for the last man who was backing away from the horrible sight. She advanced toward him, but he began babbling and gurgling as he turned, grabbed his cycle, and headed for the open road. A soft snarl erupted from her throat, and she loped off into the darkness.

With her animalistic instincts guiding her, she scurried into the night, the shadows of trees and bushes her cover. The landscape that passed swiftly by her resembled an artist's painting of wet, running colors. The wind rushed into her face as the mutation began to reverse itself. With every turn of a corner, every thrash of her beating heart, her red, bristling hair slowly lost its fiery hue and changed to its white-blond color while it flew wildly in the wind. Her lowered hairline began to move upward, her feral

appearance slowly giving way to the delicate, porcelain beauty she had been born with.

As she continued to run through the countryside, her mind went back to the night Cristo had died, to the night that the curse had mysteriously transferred between them. Even now she could feel the searing cuts of his taloned fingers as they scratched her scalp. It was then, that night, that the big bad moon had taken her captive, *and Sugar and Spice were born!*

Chapter Two

Dead blood.

The greasy smell hit Detective Sage Wilson like a bullet in the belly. He had seen the leavings of murder before, but nothing like this. His morning, and the previous night, had been spent counting up bodies like these two, and it was giving him one hell of a headache. Like any self-respecting cop, he'd denied it, even tried to drown what he knew in shot after shot of rotgut whiskey. But the time finally came when he had to face facts and climb out of his hole and admit that a serial killer was on the loose.

"Let's get to work, men," he said grimly, then noticed something and crouched down. He moved carefully along the ground tracking what looked like fresh animal prints. He looked over at the two men who'd had their throats ripped out. What the hell kind of animal could have done this? His eyes shifted toward the dark woods at the end of the promenade. No animal he knew of would come up out of the woods during the Reef's peak hours. The bright lights, blaring music, and hordes of tourists would have been enough to keep any animal away.

But not this one.

He felt the cool breeze against his skin and knew it was near that time of year again—the time when the woods needed to be cleaned out. Hunters with guns and rifles would comb the woods looking for crazed, rabid wolves that made the area look like a battlefield of blood and ripped-up flesh, both human and animal.

But that was in the woods, not in the friggin' parking lot of the Rock Candy Club.

The animal that would do this wasn't an animal, but a monster. No animal crazed or otherwise, could plan his kill. No animal would have the sense to hide and skulk in the shadows to attack his prey, then leave them like this. He glanced up at a moon that suddenly shimmered as if alive and

felt an involuntary chill dance down his back. It reminded him of the rumors of a werewolf loose in the midst. There'd been sightings reported, but Sage was sure it was nothing more than the drunken fantasies of men that had seen the Sugar and Spice act performed here at the club.

He sensed the spreading of darkness, so his eyes shifted to the promenade and saw that the lights along the Reef were slowly blinking out. In a few more hours, the strip would be dark and haunting.

Then is when the animals would come out.

He saw them frequently, lingering and sniffing along the grounds, looking for half-eaten hot dogs, scattered popcorn bags, and sticky candy wrappers that scooted along the promenade in the breeze. These animals were relatively harmless unless they were threatened. None of them would stay around when a human showed up, and they sure as hell wouldn't rip someone's throat out during the Reef's peak hours.

Sage remembered when Gypsy Reef was nothing more than a place for Gypsies to park their caravans. At night you could see their bright campfires where they read palms and sang their Gypsy melodies. Later the carnivals came. Tents, sideshows, and gaming booths were set up. From there it grew into the most frequented playground along the eastern seaboard. Because of its sudden growth, it had become a hotbed for murder, drunkenness, prostitution, and every other kind of vice he could think of. He hadn't yet spotted any drug trafficking, but that really wasn't his beat. No, his beat was homicide, and Gypsy Reef, like the big city of New York, was quickly becoming known for its bloody slaughters and crime sprees. Tourists from all over the country haunted the Reef. They swarmed into the souvenir shops, the bars, restaurants, gambling casinos, as well as having their bodies painted, pierced, or tattooed.

Occasionally even a Christian crusade would come along and set up a revival tent for all the lost souls that visited the Reef. That reminded him of the church that crouched all alone at the edge of the Reef. Its presence was almost unnoticed as it sat among thick shrubbery and trees that refused to let the rays of the sun or moon invade its shadows. It had a graveyard beside it and a rectory in the back. It was occupied by Father Jonathan Harker, a holy man with a quiet disposition who kept up the building and the grounds as best he could. Sage would see him walking around the outside of the church on occasion, making an inspection of the building. Since his parish was so

small, he served alone, dividing his time between his ministerial duties and keeping the grounds in good shape.

The church and the reverend seemed to fit.

Both were lonely, dark, and deathly quiet.

While Gypsy Reef was closing up, Sage had the bodies carted away, the motorcycles impounded, and then assisted the uniforms in collecting all the evidence they could find. By the time they were through, Sage had found a ripped-up pair of panties and a stiletto heel. He bagged them up as possible evidence. They could belong to anyone since the area behind the club was frequented with couples hiding a liaison or two. It reminded him of a cute chick named Sugar, but it was doubtful it was hers since she was known for being somewhat aloof.

Still, it raised a few questions in his mind.

He saw blood, hair, grit, and gum stuck to the shoe and hoped they gave him something to work with. The throb in his head had finally grown into a migraine. Back at the station, he would take a couple of pills chased down by cold coffee, then map out his strategy for an investigation into—*hell*.

* * * *

She ran, hobbling on one naked foot and one shoe with a broken heel. Blood and tears matted her hair, and dirt smeared her clothes and face. Someone had already found the bodies. Ear-shattering police sirens screeched all around her. They were close. Too close. Fear surged within her. She looked around, desperate to find a secure place, a hole, anywhere she could hide.

She saw a church.

She quickly stumbled toward it, her body half naked, her tattered clothes barely hanging from her body.

A church is the last place they will look, she thought and ran into the foreboding burial ground and hid behind a damaged gravestone.

From where she crouched, her eyes searched for the nearest door or window and found an obscure side entrance only a few feet from where she was. The doorway was dark, hidden by trees and shrubs. The obvious questions hammered through her head. What if it was locked? What if

someone was inside? What if they saw her? She gave a start when another shrill blast erupted, and suddenly it didn't matter.

She had to take the chance.

Moving further into the shadows, she hid until the sirens passed and then quickly pushed herself away from the cross of cracked, rough cement and darted toward the nearby door that opened easily. The darkness inside blinded her, but finally she managed to see a dim outline of another door.

Where does it lead? she wondered as she crept toward it.

Careful not to make any noise, she peered inside and saw that she was on a landing above an area that was wide and cavernous. She stepped in softly and immediately saw some stairs made of old, unpainted wood. When she stepped on them, they emitted a soft creak, and the air smelled musty and damp. The walls were crumbling with age, and the cement floor was riddled with cracks. Finding a corner, she wilted down into it and fell into a fitful sleep where nightmares haunted her.

Once again she relived the awful night in Sangraal's dungeon. The face of her cursed son swam above her in a macabre nightmare, his hulking body coming closer and closer. Whirling all around her were the sounds of angry growling. She felt the heaviness of the brooding darkness, saw vivid splashes of blood. Oh, God! So much blood!

She woke up screaming, and the voices began.

"You killed them, bitch! You killed them all!"

"No!" she screamed.

"You killed them, and now you'll pay!"

The voices whirled; the words stabbed at her heart.

"I didn't...He was coming at me with death in his eyes. He didn't know me...He...he would have killed me!"

"How could you do it? How could you sink a knife into the heart of your own son?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "Please leave me alone. Please!"

"I'm waiting for you in hell, you little hussy! I'm waiting with the ones you killed!"

"No! No! I didn't mean to kill anyone!" she cried while the voices continued to whirl around her head. "Cristo's death wasn't my fault. He was going to kill me...I was frightened...I couldn't let him...I couldn't!"

"You'll pay, you little..."

She had to get away, away from the accusing voices, away from the horror, the guilt. She jumped up and ran, bursting through doors, sliding around corners, but the voices followed her. She held her hands up to her ears, but she could still hear it.

Like the hounds of hell, each accusing word nipped at her heels.

* * * *

A reflection of leaping flames burned in the gaze of Father Jonathan Harker as he stared down into the sea of candles. Swirling colors, blood red, blue, bright orange, melted together, each reflecting on slightly sagging skin and dark hair with a distinguished scattering of gray at the temples. He moved silently about the table as he continued to light the candles. The chapel was long and decorated with plaster saints that stood in small alcoves along the walls. The burgundy pews and dark, shining wood gave it a feeling of warmth. Having finished, he knelt at the altar on one knee, gave the sign of the cross, and then moved to get up. He hesitated, scowling at the pain in the bunched-up muscles of his legs. He was only in his forties, but already his body reminded him that the years were piling up. While he moved to loosen his stiff back, he suddenly stopped and turned his head.

What was that? A scream? No, it couldn't be. The squawk of a bird, that's what it was. With the ocean right outside his door, he heard them all the time, and it never failed to give him a chill, like the crawl of ants on his skin. Dismissing it, he turned back and continued until another sound, louder this time, seemed to make its way up from the basement. It sounded like the scream of a woman, a door slamming, footsteps.

Turning, he hurried down the aisle and into the darkness.

Pushing on the door, he moved out into the foyer, spidery sensations biting his nerve endings, telling him someone was in trouble. He turned into a corridor and went down some steps that led to the basement. He rounded a corner when a burst of lightning illuminated the narrow passage, spotlighting a woman who, at that moment, was racing toward the basement door and out into the night. Although the hallway was dark, he hadn't missed the look in her eyes and the fear that was etched on her face. He rushed after her, calling out to her while holding the side door of the church wide.

He lost her in the darkness.

Beyond him the ocean crashed and ebbed in an echoing, lonely song. A cold breeze blew against him, matching the chill that climbed slowly up his spine. Feeling a deep concern for the woman, he turned and hurried back into the church and up the steps.

He must pray, and pray hard, for the woman, whoever she was.

God would know.

* * * *

Jennifer raced toward Sangraal, trying to put as much distance as she could between the voices and her own conscience. Fear spiraled inside her while she ran, stumbling, rising and stumbling again, the single mile stretching into two, five, or was it ten? Just when she felt she couldn't go another step, at last she saw it, the mansion, dark and sprawling with columns that reached high into the luminous night sky. She managed to drag herself past magnolias and weeping willows until she at last reached the steps of the portico. There she fell, lying exhausted at her front door. It was then that she finally realized that she would never be able to live with what she had become, with the voices and the bloody pictures in her mind.

Like Magda, she would go insane.

With desperation as her guide, she conceived a plan.

The first step was to find the old witch's Book of Shadows. The second was to find just the right spell, and the third was to wait, *for the perfect night*.

* * * *

A storm gathered, the pungent smell of moisture permeated the air, and the trees bowed and shook in the wind. Jennifer knelt between the graves of her two sons, Cristo and Marcus. Clutched in one hand was the antique dagger that had killed Cristo. It had to be that one, the one that killed him would be the one to kill her. She lifted it slowly, laid the sharp edge of the blade across her wrist, and allowed the glittering edge to sink in deep.

Pain, sharp and raw, made her whimper.

The skies rumbled and roared while she watched the blood gush deep and red. In spite of the agony she felt, she brought the trembling knife to her lips and sipped at her own essence and then reached out and allowed the blood to drip over each of her son's graves. Her heart thrashed wildly in her chest, but still she continued.

"My blood pours into these graves," she coughed and gasped for breath, "soaking into the soil like life-giving rain. Soon the end will come, my loves. My blood will reach your bones, and your spirits will rise, and we will walk together once again." With that, she fell across the graves, and waited.

But death would not come.

Jennifer lay motionless. Seconds, minutes, hours passed, but still the breath of life heaved in her lungs. She shivered with the piercing cold, felt the hard ground press against her body, heard the wind's eerie voice as it moaned through the trees.

"Let me die!" she finally shouted up at the horned moon, but no answer came, just a winking of the slice of silver that peeked at her from behind ragged clouds. Finally, when the sky opened up and battered her with wind and rain, she dragged herself up from the graves and trudged toward the mansion. Climbing the steps of the portico, a swirl of blackness overcame her. *She collapsed.*

Chapter Three

On a bloody battlefield between Hell and Neraka

"Judas! Judas! Judas!"

In response to these shouts, a man covered with blood and filled with the arrogance of victory, stood on a small rise looking out over a sea of men. He had been given the honor of being called the Prince of War. He hurled his sword valiantly, plunging it into the hearts of kings and princes, and now that same weapon was held high over his head and dripping with blood as his cry of triumph rang out through the smoky skies. His beautiful blond hair, which was his pride, was full, curled, and equal to a lion's mane as it hung gloriously down his back. To his men he wasn't merely a man, but a god, a god that had led them to victory in a war with the Black Knights of Neraka. With crushing praise, the militia climbed the rise and surrounded their leader, hoisting him high on their shoulders while hailing him as the greatest leader since Satan himself.

* * * *

Judas and his men returned to the Black Heavens riding into the city on hellish creatures with horns and protruding, scissor-sharp teeth. These animals were Satan's own creations, tamed and broken for their use. Upon entering they expected the usual greeting of praises from the gods. Instead they found the city in chaos. Frightened minions scrambled around on quaking streets. Judas knew whatever it was that held the city in its crushing, murderous grip was unlike any enemy he had ever faced. In his hurried attempts to find out what had happened, the ravagers of war and chaos could only shriek out their incoherent answers in terror.

The city sat paralyzed.

The torture wheels creaked to a stop.

Whips that disciplined underlings fell limp and powerless.

Cracks appeared in every cave-like structure, on every rock-hewn path, in every corner of the city.

Judas carefully led his ugly, misshapen creature through the crowds to get to his own lair, where he turned it over to a minion who corralled the creature for him. He found the Royal House still intact and rushed inside to find out what had happened.

“Andor!” Judas shouted.

The warrior turned, a look of worry on his face. “Yes, sire,” he said, bringing a fist in greeting up to his chest.

“Why is the city in chaos? What has happened?”

“Something on Earth, sire. A catastrophe so bad it has shaken our very foundation. I am on my way to the Demon Lord for orders. I suggest you go and rest from your battle. I will do all that is necessary to bring this confusion to an end.”

“Yes, I am tired. Thank you. Please keep me informed.”

The warrior lowered his head and backed away.

* * * *

The moment he saw Andor rushing in, the red-skinned, double-horned creature lunged forward from his flaming throne, his black eyes flashing with anger. “It’s about time you got here, you lazy imbecile. Tell me who has done this thing. What army? I demand to know the name of this band of mercenaries who are *stupid* enough to declare war upon us.”

“It is no army, sire. It seems a woman of Earth—”

“A woman?” the Demon Lord questioned, “A *mere* woman? How can this be?”

“She has performed a very powerful ritual, sire. If you will allow me, I will show it to you on the Wall of Moving Images.”

The two of them walked swiftly to an area where a giant screen stood. Stepping up to the controls, Andor flipped a switch, and a cluster of planets appeared. With a few twists and turns of the knobs, he zeroed in on Earth and zoomed in until they saw Jennifer Duquesne lying on the portico steps of the mansion, awaiting death.

"This woman has seen much misery," the warrior said in hushed tones. "Everyone she has ever loved has died, leaving her lost and alone. The men she loved as well as her two sons were the product of Lupercus. It seems while in his altered state, the last son broke loose from his chains, threatened the woman, and she had to kill him to save her own life. In her grief, she has dared to challenge the source of all her troubles to come forth, but Lupercus, instead of using the wisdom of a god, lashed out in anger and struck her with the terrible curse. When she could stand the guilt and the shedding of blood no longer, she sought to destroy herself, but so far death has eluded her. Having no hope left, she has lost the will to live. If she is to continue in her present state of mind, she will surely die."

"Lupercus!" the Demon Lord growled. "I should have known. Is it her time?"

"No, sire. Not for years yet, and a premature death would mean—"

"Silence, you idiot! I know what it would mean!" He paced a moment, his long fingers anxiously combing through his wild, dark hair.

Andor watched fearfully while the Demon Lord struggled with his thoughts.

"No doubt she will try again. We must stop her before she succeeds."

"But how? There is no one, sire."

"There is one. Judas."

"Your son?" the warrior said with shocked disbelief. "But sire, he has never ventured to the surface. He is Satan's prized warrior. His world is here, his battles are here. Besides, you know how the mortal world is. We have lost countless of his kind to its many enticements. We can't take the chance with someone of his worth. If we were to lose him, Satan would—"

"Don't you think I know that?" the Demon Lord spat. "But we face an even worse catastrophe if she dies. What you see happening on our streets will be nothing. An untimely death will throw the entire earth into chaos. Oceans will overflow their shores, mountains will come tumbling down, winter will turn to summer..." His words faded as a fearful expression etched his face. "The worst part is, the deity of the Dark Heavens will be blamed."

"But, sire, it is Lupercus—"

"It doesn't matter. He is one of us. It was our responsibility to control his madness as we always do, and we failed. The curse on the Gypsy

brothers was supposed to end on January thirty-first, Earth time, but Lupercus, in his demented state, dared to stretch it to the next generation, then to the woman. We must stop him before he turns the whole mortal world into beasts. Our mistake was trusting that stupid, bloodthirsty deity. In any case, the Lords of Darkness will be held accountable. Surely you know what that means. It means that the God of Light and Love will deal with us unkindly to say the least. Need I remind you that He could destroy us with a flick of His wrist? If that happened, our world would be crushed.”

“But to send your son, sire—”

“My son,” the Demon Lord whispered thoughtfully. “How I rue the day the War in Heaven ever started. Satan, who was then the Angel of the Morning, refused to bow down to humans, and with his usual forked tongue, he convinced us he was right. We were all so fucking stupid. We looked on in awe as he gathered up a third of the angels and called it an army.”

He turned and looked at the warrior. “Some army. We weren’t warriors; we were nothing but prissy know-it-alls. Anyway, with Satan as our leader, we went on a rampage that ended with all of us being cast out of heaven.”

His brow furrowed with memories. “We had nowhere else to go and walked the earth with the mortals we were supposed to be serving. Our leader tried to create his own paradise, but by that time his wickedness had become so much a part of him it reflected on everything he made. It seems he could create nothing but monsters and beastly creatures.”

He looked up at the warrior. “Finally, God had his fill. I’ll never forget it. He came swooping down and swept the earth clean of the mess Satan had made, and ultimately we all wound up here. Buried in the center of Earth’s core, a hell he created in the blink of an eye.

“Because of Satan’s contamination, now Earth is a melting pot of both good and evil. We all expected God to destroy it, but instead he created a garden and called it Eden. It was so beautiful it almost hurt your eyes to look at it. The new world grew from the two lovers he magically created, giving them, and every man that came after them a free will to choose who he would follow, be it Satan or be it God.”

“I know the story well. It’s part of the training of underlings.”

With a thoughtful look on his face, the Demon Lord went on. “Did I ever tell you about the women of Earth? They were beautiful, and many of us mated with them. I found Judas’s mother down by a river. She was a

bold, brassy little beauty, the daughter of a formidable old night merchant who sold his stolen wares by the light of the moon. After he died she continued to sell by the roadside using a band of outlaws to steal for her. Her name was Kira, and she was blonde like Judas.”

A small smile played at his lips. “She was dirty-faced, but so very stunning. I knew she was mortal and off-limits, but I didn’t care. I wanted revenge against the Most High God, so I took her that day. She struggled, fought, making my triumph that much sweeter. It didn’t matter that it was against her will, that she was frightened and begged me not to touch her. She was his, symbolic of who I was supposed to bow down to. Hah! Once it was over, I threw my victory in his face.” The smirking smile that played along his lips slowly fell. “Later, of course, he got his revenge. He couldn’t have played a worse trick on me. I certainly didn’t count on having a son by a mortal.”

“It was never told to us how you learned about Judas.”

“When his mother died, murdered by one of her own men, he was literally thrown in my face with a command that I take care of *my seed*. Having no choice, I took him in. After that hundreds were thrust into our midst until the Black Heavens fairly bulged with the snotty little half-breeds. Since then, of course, we’ve lost many to the world above us. They grow up and move on. But not Judas. At least not yet.”

“Judas turned out to be a wonderful warrior. A fitting revenge.”

“Oh, yes,” the Demon Lord said while cutting his deceitful eyes toward the warrior, “but it didn’t end there. The best revenge came later when I named him.”

“*Judas*? Why was that name so special?”

“It was the name of a beloved disciple who betrayed Christ, God’s own Son. Can you see it? *My* son is a constant reminder of *his* son’s downfall. Hah!” A wicked gleam glittered in his eyes. “Yes, Judas’s mere presence taunts him. Every battle Judas wins, every triumph on the battlefield, every shout of praise he receives matches each and every stripe, every cut, every torment his son had to endure that dark day on the cross. Yes, every breath Judas takes is a thorn in his side.”

“But sire, I’ve heard that this disciple was simply playing into God’s hands, that it was planned, that it had to happen that way to redeem—”

"It's a lie! A bloody redemption from a God who loathes violence? It can't be true. I refuse to believe it."

"But sire, they say it took the power of divine bloo—"

"No!" the Demon Lord yelled. "I don't care what *they* say. It's not possible!"

"But how could you have possibly known about all this since it hadn't happened yet?"

"Very simple. God made no secret of it. We all knew there would be a traitor, we just didn't know who. Later, after the fall, the scene played out right here on this Wall of Moving Images. When I saw him hanging from that cross, I plucked his name from that dark-skinned, dark-eyed traitor who put him there, Judas Iscariot. It was a delicious idea, a strike of the final blow." His smirk fell. "But it seems he has trumped me again."

"And how is that, sire?"

"Being a half-breed, only half his soul is black, and he has a free will. Why, he's a candidate for this so-called bloody redemption which I don't believe in. Not for a minute." He was silent for a moment and then turned to the warrior. "But what if it's true? Can you see Judas turning...*decent*?"

"But he seems happy here, sire, among sin and corruption."

"Happy?" The Demon Lord shrugged. "Well, maybe so, but I've seen him dole out compassion many times on his underlings, and it gives me chills. Believe me, I know what kind of chance I'm taking in sending him to a place where compassion is a way of life. Right now he knows only the worst kind of sin, sees it everyday, even participates in it. I only hope it has taken root deep enough and has such a hold on him that he will be anxious to return home."

A glimmer of pride danced in his eyes as he glanced at the warrior. "Are you aware that his beauty is becoming legendary among all in the Black Heavens? No maiden has ever refused his invitation. He spends his days and nights on beds of lust with countless goddesses, has orgies by the hundreds, has planted his seed in everything from queens to underlings. He must have at least a dozen sons running around." He stroked his chin as if in thought. "Yes, I'm sure he *thinks* he's happy, but for how long? Once he sees what's up there, the bright lights, man's wickedness, the multitude of fleshly delights..." He looked at the warrior in amazement. "Andor, sometimes I think Earth is hell, and we are a mere imitation."

“Sire, if you’re worried, what about Tyrannus—”

“Tyrannus wouldn’t last a day.”

“Then put it in Lucifer’s lap.”

“No!” he cried out. “Our leader is not to know of this. I thank all that is evil he is not here to see what has happened. When he returns we must keep it quiet. If he learns of it, we will all be shoveling coals by nightfall. As much as I hate to send Judas, there is no other.” After only seconds, a look of determination etched his face. “Yes,” he said emphatically, “I have made my decision. It must be Judas.”

A silence hung heavy in the high-ceilinged chamber.

Hearing nothing from his warrior, the Demon Lord whirled around. “Why do you not move? What is wrong?”

“Sire, I simply...well... Why not let me send word to pull someone off a mission of less importance and send them? This task is for one of lower rank. Besides, as you said, Judas is...well, he likes women, and they like him. You can certainly see that this one is very beautiful. What if he decides to lay with her? If he leaves a seed on Earth, he might be tempted to stay and nurture it. If Hell were to lose a warrior of his stature—”

A dark cloud of anger covered the Demon Lord’s face, and his eyes shifted to the warrior. “As long as Judas thinks he is immortal, I doubt the problem will arise. I warn you now. Keep your mouth shut, because if he finds out he is mortal, I will blame you. If you want to protect your position, make sure he understands that he must *not* lay with her.” He glared at the warrior, his voice low and raspy. “He will not make the same mistake I did.”

“It seems a little soon to—” his words faded when he saw the Demon Lord quickly lean forward and grab his whip. With one swift movement, he cracked it over the warrior’s head, causing him to fall to his knees.

“You are an impertinent minion. I can see now I have been too lenient with you. Breaking all the rules, I’ve taken you into my confidence, yet from the moment you dared burst into my chamber, you have questioned my every decision. Do you yearn to feel the cut of my whip upon your back? Unlike my son, I do not show compassion.”

The warrior’s face paled as he lowered his battle-scarred head. “I forgot my place, sire. Please forgive me.”

“That’s better,” he hissed as he threw the whip down with a clatter, whirled his glittering cloak, and perched upon his throne. “Be sure to inform

my son that this mission is of the utmost importance, and he will have to leave immediately.” He abruptly threw a sheaf of papers at the warrior’s feet. “This is a dossier on the woman. It will tell Judas everything he needs to know about her.” The Demon Lord’s eyes glittered with flames of fire as he continued in a threatening tone. “One thing more. In spite of your impertinence, I am putting you in charge of his journey. Do your job well, or you will live to regret it. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Now go!” The Demon Lord abruptly turned his back on the warrior, indicating their discussion was over.

“As you wish, sire,” the warrior said, bowing as he left.

* * * *

Judas walked into his lair hungry for both food and sex. With a clap of his hands, he was immediately surrounded by servants who did everything for him. With his clothes at last removed, he lowered himself into a steamy bath and leisurely partook of food and wine while the soft touch of a handmaiden combed his long hair.

“Oh, sire, your hair is so beautiful. Truly, there’s been none so beautiful since Absalom.”

“Absalom?”

“The son of Solomon, the wise—”

While her soft, melodious words fed his ego, Judas picked up a hand mirror nearby and mused over the beauty of his hair and face.

“—judge. One day while riding a horse, he got his hair caught on a low-hanging branch and died.”

Judas choked, the mirror clattered to the table, and he rubbed his neck.

The maiden looked down at him. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Judas said, trying to smile.

The girl gazed into space. “I’ve read about Absalom many times. He was known for the beauty of his hair, but,” she looked down at Judas’s golden tresses, “they couldn’t possibly have been as beautiful as yours.”

“Hersenia,” he said lazily. “This hot water and steam is relaxing me. I think it would be an ideal time for a massage. Do you think you can forget about Absalom for a moment and give me one?”

“Of course, sire,” she said. “Shall I call a servant to help you out of the tub?”

“No, it’s absolutely heavenly in here. Why don’t you join me?”

Her breath caught in her throat. “Really, sire?”

Judas looked at her with mischief dancing in his eyes. “Yes, really.”

“But sire, I would have to remove my...I mean...we would be...naked. Together.”

“Hersenia, let me assure you that I won’t do anything you don’t want me to do. Besides, you have nothing to be shy about. You have a lovely body.”

With a red flush rising in her cheeks, she rose slowly and stepped behind a screen. After removing her clothes, she shyly stepped into the tub, her eyes slowly closing in ecstasy. “Oh my, yes, it is nice, isn’t it?”

The moist heat silently coiled around them, the seductive mist penetrating their skin until their eyes became slumberous and drowsy. “Come, sire,” Hersenia finally said. “Sit here where I can reach my jars of exotic lotions.” The water in the tub lapped lazily while he silently moved toward her. She generously poured the thick exotic oils and lotions into her cupped palms and then began rubbing his shoulders.

“Oh, Hersenia,” Judas said, his words barely audible, “your hands are so gifted. What is that strong fragrance that drifts about us?”

“It is lavender and lotus blossom, sire.”

Judas smiled. “You mean, I’m going to go around today smelling like some exotic flower?”

She giggled. “Don’t worry, sire. It is much loved by the fair maidens in the Black Heavens.”

Judas turned to her, the amorous mist caressing him seductively. “And how about you, my fair maiden? Do you like it?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, finding herself facing Judas and his cock that looked as if it were about to burst. A flush rose to her cheeks, and she tried to turn her eyes away from him.

“What’s wrong, Hersenia?”

“Well...I...I’m sure your paramour will be here presently. Perhaps I should...”

“My paramour be damned,” Judas whispered huskily as he advanced on her. “In case you didn’t know, my weakness is an innocent maiden with the

body of a whore. Like you, Hersenia. Have you had a man yet, or are you still a virgin? I must find out...here...now.”

“Should I get out and pre—”

“No,” he whispered huskily. “We will stay right here, my fresh young maiden. Right here in the tub. In the midst of this lovely fragrance and this hot water and steam. I can think of no better place. Not a bed of silks and satins or even a bed of soft, fragrant rose petals would do as well.” With his hands covered with the fragrant oils, he reached out and caressed her breasts that hung heavy and pendulous before him. “Perhaps I should give you a massage.”

Her breath stalled in her lungs when she felt Judas’s hands touch her shoulders and move quickly down to her breasts. “This can’t be happening,” she whispered as she moved backward, suddenly nervous.

“No, don’t go. Give your body to me now, Hersenia. I’ve just come from fighting my bloodiest battle, and a good, long fuck in a tub of hot water with a beautiful handmaiden is just the cure for my battlefield blues.”

“But...I...I’ve never...”

“I will be gentle,” he said as he moved his hands down to her pussy and sank his fingers into her velvety darkness. “You must trust me.”

She gasped as his fingers found her clit and moved swiftly along the sensitive nub. “Ohhh,” she moaned when the fire of desire climbed until she burst. “Oh, God, Judas,” she screamed as she lifted her legs and clenched his hips between her thighs. She clung, wanting more of this new feeling—these hellish flames that sent her spiraling upward and then exploding again and again.

As she writhed in his arms, Judas had begun growling out his desire while nibbling hungrily on her large, wanton breasts. His excitement soared as her pink, flower-like nipples filled his mouth, causing an electric tingle to spear recklessly throughout his body and finally down to his groin. His cock grew and twitched as if it were looking for a juicy cunt in which to bury itself.

“Oh, Judas, I’m frightened.”

“Don’t be afraid. I will thrust quickly, and if you will relax, the pain will be no worse than a pinprick.”

“Yes,” she said as he pushed her flat against the tub wall and opened her wider. She could feel her desire for Judas overwhelming her fear and urged herself closer to him, inviting Judas’s naughty, wayward cock inside her.

Gently he opened her up and thrust himself in quickly, feeling the soft skin of her maidenhead tear away.

When she felt the pain, she threw her head back with a tiny exclamation of surprise.

A sense of conquest soared through Judas, giving him the same jubilation as it did when he had just won a war. With the fire of success raging through his veins, he thrust his large cock into her depths time and again. Pride whirled within his muscled chest as he rode her upward to victory.

“Oh, Judas! Oh, God, Judas!” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling him closer. Their hips began to grind out a carnal rhythm as he filled her so full she thought she would lose her breath. With a wild motion, he pulled himself in and out, over and over again. She wanted to scream, to scratch, to climb him with her thighs. The water splashed as they slid along the wet wall in a backward and forward motion, each rushing into the flaming world of supreme passion.

Judas reached up and clutched the rim of the tub, holding her captive beneath him. His reckless plunges were wild and forceful, taking each of them upward in an effort to quench the fire inside them. “Let yourself relax, Hersenia,” he said, his words disjointed and his breath heavy, “and ride...oh God...ride with me. I’m not...I’m not hurting you, am I...Hersenia?”

She looked up at him, at his beautiful face, his tumbling hair, at his glowing image of fire and passion, and said, “Oh, no, Judas. I’ve been waiting for such a day as this.”

The fire continued to spread between them until at last each of them shattered with a flaring orgasm. From there they drifted through a sexual euphoria, sharing labored breaths and weak bodies until each could move again.

“My sweet Hersenia,” Judas finally said. “You’ve made my homecoming so very special. Thank you.”

Hersenia basked in his attentions, hoping for some special words of love, but instead she felt an ache in her heart when he said simply, “Hersenia, would you fetch my servant?”

“Of course, my warrior,” she muttered, her voice full of disappointment.

Once Hersenia was gone, Judas rose from his bath, walked into the towel his servant held up for him, and dressed in his finest silk lounge.

Later, after a short nap and a tray of cheese and fruit, he lay with his latest paramour. Full of mischief, he began to drip the juice and flesh of pomegranates over her breasts and then licked it up.

With his mouth and tongue drawing on her skin, a wanton wildness was let loose in her, and she arched her back. “Fuck me, Judas,” she whispered as she carnally splayed her thighs, welcoming him cozily between them. While her passion burned, her pussy parted and dripped with her female juices, waiting for Judas’s wicked conquest of her. Judas was just about to enter her when she opened her slumberous eyes and saw a servant watching from the shadows. “Judas,” she said with a breathy voice. “Do you usually provide an audience for your liaisons?”

“What do you mean?”

“There, in yonder shadow.”

Judas turned his head and saw a young man, not more than twenty, watching. “You there, what is your name?”

“Tyquan, sir,” he said nervously. “I’m so sorry. It’s just...well...I’ve heard so much about your sexual prowess that I just had to see. Your bedroom romps are legendary, you know. Everyone in the Black Heavens talks about them.”

“They do, huh?” Judas looked at him for a moment, then leaned over to his paramour and whispered something.

She moved her head aside and peered past him at the large bulge in Tyquan’s britches. “He is good-looking,” she mumbled. “I can see from here how virile he is.”

“Come, Tyquan. Join us in this...uh...*romp*. Then you can go back and tell everyone about it. You’ll be a big man among your friends.”

Tyquan smiled like the excited young man he was and began stripping right there.

“Oh my,” Alana said when she saw his clothes being cast aside and his cock waving like a flag. “Careful, Judas, he might be stiff...uh...competition.”

“Very funny, Alana.” While Tyquan worked himself into the threesome by shyly taking her feet and licking and kissing them, Judas whispered in

her ear just before his tongue did a sexy dance in it, “What do you know? He has a foot fetish.”

While she was gasping in sweet agony at the sucking of her toes, her soft, petal-like cleft continued to drip its perfume, ready for Judas’s invasion, but a loud banging jolted them both.

“Pay no mind to it, my sweet,” Judas whispered against her soft ivory flesh, “whoever it is will go away.” His rampant cock pulsed with anticipation as it pressed against her fragrant, petal-like folds.

Just as he was about to make a powerful thrust deep into her musky softness, the loud, insistent knock came again, even louder and more urgent. Grumbling obscenities, Judas jumped up from his bed and grabbed a bed cloth. Wrapping it around himself, he rushed to the door, slammed it open, and glared into the eyes of the warrior on the other side.

“Andor!” he shouted. “Do you have any idea what you’ve interrupted?”

“I understand, sire, but I,” the warrior’s eyes shifted, looking beyond Judas and through the archway into his red silken lair. There he saw a stunning creature and a young underling rolling all over the bed, “have been sent by your father. I have papers here stating that you are to leave immediately for Earth.”

“What?” Judas grabbed the orders out of his hand. “Travel to the surface? Whatever for?” After reading the scant information on the document, Judas became even angrier. “You go tell my beloved father that I’m getting sick and tired of cleaning up after that mad wolf-god. Let Lupercus clean up his own messes. I’m the son of a lord, after all, not an errand boy!”

“But sire, her situation was caused by us, and we—”

“Not *us*, you idiot, by Lupercus!”

“Yes, but we will all suffer the consequences if she dies prematurely.”

“She is *not* my responsibility!”

“If I might be so bold, may I remind you, if this problem is not taken care of soon,” the warrior’s eyes again shifted beyond Judas to the woman in his silken lair, “there will likely be no more blissful nights with...” He nodded toward the woman who was now riding the young, blissful Tyquan like a beautiful hellion on a rampaging steed.

Judas turned to see what the warrior’s eyes had found. The duo were stark naked as they fucked each other while the finest and sheerest red cloth

tangled about them. They were plainly unaware of being watched, and the sounds and smells that came from the couple were spicy and sweet. Judas longed to get back to them, but this fool warrior was making too much sense to ignore. Meanwhile, his paramour, the goddess of the sea, storms, tempests, weather, exotic sea races, and jealousy was in the arms of another. Both the men stared, as if mesmerized, at the two as they tumbled around on the finest silk the Black Heavens had to offer. Her hair was a cluster of curls flying around her head in abandon as she continued to fuck and be fucked. The color reminded Judas of a ripe peach, and her eyes were a glittering emerald green, dark and piercing.

“Yes,” he murmured, “I see what you mean.” Turning back, he noticed the rapt attention the warrior still paid to these two, slapped the orders against the warrior’s muscled chest, and pushed him out. “When you get your eyes back in your head, you can tell my father that I will think about it. Now get out!”

“Uh...yes...very good, sire,” the warrior said, then pushed the dossier at him. “You’ll want this.”

Hastily grabbing the thick sheaf of papers from out of the warrior’s hands, he yelled, “And never again come knocking on my door unless you know I’m up and about!”

“As you wish, sire,” the warrior said quickly, just as the door slammed in his face.

With the manuscript in hand, Judas begrudgingly flipped through it, his eyes scanning along the most important facts about this woman called Jennifer Duquesne.

Married at the age of eighteen, she was wild, hard to handle. More out of spite than love, she married a man cursed by the moon.

No, he thought as he continued to read. *There were two men, twins.*

She lost both of them almost immediately, but not before she had become pregnant with twin sons who were forced to exist under the same curse. Upon the death of her last son, she had been wounded, causing the curse to continue its evil bane in her.

In spite of his resentment at being chosen for this mission, Judas felt a certain amount of compassion for her situation. He could understand why she would try to end her life, but still disliked the fact that this was a mission only he could perform. According to the papers he held in his hands, he was

to go and find Lupercus and kill him, for only his death would put an end to the power he had so badly abused. His greed for evil had grown to such heights that he couldn't be trusted anymore. It had caused him to go mad, causing such torment in this mortal that she couldn't face another day knowing what she was. Her suicide attempt had come too close for comfort, and Lupercus had to be dealt with before his madness destroyed hell and all its inhabitants. A scowl appeared on his face when his eyes fell to a handwritten note in purple ink. It implicitly stated that he was forbidden to lay with her.

What imbecile wrote that? he wondered, remembering that it was a well-known fact that immortals are forbidden to lay with mortals. Everyone knew that. Why did they feel it necessary to write it in purple ink and even underline it?

Something wasn't right.

Chapter Four

Back on Earth

The moon shimmered and danced while the white billowing curtains leapt in the wind like white flames of fire in the dark room. During her show at the Rock Candy Club, Sugar chose another victim. Now she lay with him, her hair flung across the pillow, the petals of her throbbing pussy dripping with her juices. It throbbed like a living thing, reaching out, pulsing, aching, anxious to take the man's masterful cock into its warm, slick bed of ecstasy.

"Sugar," the man moaned in her ear, "never in my life have I known sex like this. You've no inhibitions. You're wild. An animal."

"Who told you?" she teased huskily.

With a moan, he pushed his cock forcefully and filled all of her, probing deep into her until she arched passionately. She offered her breasts as she writhed, raking her nails down his arms while clinging to him like a life preserver in a stormy sea. She urged upward, chasing the elusive release, but it wouldn't come. And then when it burst upon her, it wasn't enough! She could feel his cock becoming limp, but she was still hot! Oh, God, he wasn't enough! She needed more. She looked around in the darkness for the other man, but saw no one. She remembered leaving the club with two men. Where was he?

"Where's your friend?" she said almost desperately.

"He's waiting outside."

"Get him in here, quick," she whispered desperately. "I need...I need...more."

"You mean...here...with you?"

"Yes, hurry."

While Logan went to the veranda to signal his friend to come up, Jennifer lay there, her body hot and her pussy dripping and anxious for

more. Her hands stroked her breasts while her body anxiously awaited the hot invasion she longed for. Slowly she began to stroke herself, her hands making their way down her feverish body to her pussy. She lovingly caressed it, longing to sink her fingers inside and put out the fire that raged.

“Logan, hurry,” she begged as she stroked her thighs, her anxious fingers still flirting with her pussy. Each touch and stroke she made pulled a soft moan from her throat until she finally saw them come in. The friend rushed over to her and crouched down beside her.

“My name is Tyler...”

“Shhh,” she said as her hand pressed against his mouth. “That’s all I need to know, Tyler.”

“Logan said you sent for me?” His breathing became labored as he looked down at her exquisite body.

She followed his hungry gaze. “Do you want to fuck me, Tyler?”

“Hell, yes, Sugar. I’ve wanted to fuck you since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

“Do it, Tyler,” she said, pulling at his clothes, anxious to feel his muscled body against hers.

When he was naked, he pulled her roughly, almost violently to him, shattering her calm with the hunger of his kisses. She came alive. She wanted to eat him, to suck on his cock until she drained him of every ounce of his juices, so with a soft moan, she pushed him on his back and grabbed his cock, causing him to gasp. She kissed his chest, his nipples, her lips making a moist trail down his body until she found his cock. She could feel it growing in her hand and getting hard as a rock. When she felt he was ready, she was half ice, half flame.

Hot with life, desire and cold with death.

The throbbing veins on his stiff erection mesmerized her. Entranced, she opened her mouth and extended her tongue to lick each one.

She looked upward as he let out a whimpering moan.

She squeezed, sucked, and caressed, causing his hips to undulate wildly. Bringing him into impossible heights of passion, her hunger grew. Finally, she drew him inside her while she rode above him.

Logan could tell that Tyler couldn’t last much longer, and although he had already had Sugar once, he wanted her again. When Tyler finally pulled away, Logan took his place.

“Put your finger on my clit. Hurry.”

Logan pulled her thighs up and fingered her clit while she moaned and arched her back. While she writhed wildly in his arms, he inserted his cock into the already slick little cunt, and she took her pleasure again and again until she felt the heat begin to spread.

Suddenly she knew.

The time was now. Now while her hair was turning a bristly red, now while her claws were slowly extending, now when she could feel her body flood with unnatural strength, and now, when *Sugar* had stealthily turned to *Spice*.

In full surrender, she gave herself up to the moon’s stinging rays, feeling her blood hunger rise like a pot boiling within her. Anxious to slake her thirst, her eyes lowered, looking for the spot for her feast.

There it was, moving beneath his skin with a compelling rhythm.

Longing filled her as she watched the surface pulse with life. Her tongue darted, licking and sucking, feeling his blood sensuously surge through him. It was like pounding ocean surf as it thrashed beneath her seeking tongue. And then, with her hunger at its most ravenous, her teeth grew into tiny sharp-edged knives in anticipation.

The moment was now!

Now, while he was languishing in the height of passion, *now*, when the glorious urge for completion had been reached, *now* while he was bathed in a red hot glow, *now* while his strength was gone, *now*!

With a bloodcurdling scream, and her blood hunger at his height, she threw herself forward and buried her teeth into his neck—and ripped!

Tyler turned at the sound of the scream and saw his friend being mutilated. “Oh my God,” he yelled and started to run, but *Spice* was quicker than him and pounced on his back like a savage animal.

When her bloody feast was over, she lifted her flesh-ridden face to the moon and howled. The sound that echoed through the black night wasn’t one of triumph, but a long cry of suffering and torment.

* * * *

“Hey! They found another one!” the rookie cop yelled out excitedly while waving a sheet full of scrawled-out information above his head. He

rushed up to Sage, slapped the wrinkled page down, and leaned over his desk. "They say the blood and gore is..."

Sage looked up at him and scowled. "You really enjoy this, don't you?"

"Well," the rookie said, a sheepish look on his face, "I don't really enjoy it, I—"

"Man or woman?"

"Huh?"

"Alonzo," Sage bellowed, slapping at the paper, "you didn't even ask if the victim was a man or a woman? If you're going to answer the damned phone, get all the information, will you?"

"I didn't think it was necessary. I mean, I just assumed it was a man since they've all been men so far."

"It doesn't matter. You always ask. Don't assume anything. Where'd the call come from?" he asked, hurriedly scanning the useless info.

"Blue Flame Motel."

"Blue Flame," he muttered, writing it down. It was the only place he knew of that would rent you a room by the hour instead of by the night. Hell, it was happening again. Bodies were turning up everywhere. Some around the Rock Candy Club, others in seedy motels like the Blue Flame. Perfect place for a sexual liaison to end in murder.

"Did you question the owner? Could he tell you *anything*?"

"He kinda blew me off. Said he doesn't bother with registering anymore. Says people just come and go there. You know, all kinds. Anyway, after a while they all start looking alike to him."

"Not much, is it?" Sage commented as he rose from his chair and grabbed his jacket.

"Sage, can I go with you?"

"You'll just slow me down, kid. Stay here and help answer the phone. I've got a couple of other leads to follow up on."

"Answer the damned phone? That's all I do."

"Hey, your time's coming. Rack up a little more time here at the precinct, and then you'll be ready to go out on calls."

Before the kid could answer, Sage slammed out the door, thoughts of the crime spree whirling around in his brain. He had lied when he said he had other leads. He had nothing but the panties and the stiletto heel he found a couple of weeks ago. Hell, they could belong to anyone. The technician

was no help at all. After examining the shoes, he told Sage that the hair sample he found on it was unusually coarse and so thick in nature that it was more like the bristle of an animal.

Animal, hell, the only redheaded animal he knew was a delectable little she-devil whose act was ripping out men's throats. Being killed by Spice was probably the uppermost fantasy in the mind of any man around here.

And Spice had, *red hair*.

What the hell? It was worth a try.

* * * *

The club was dark when Sage entered. Every man in the place had his eyes riveted toward the stage where a flaming little she-devil danced. He watched for a while, then shuffled around trying to talk to a few of the men. He got nowhere. It was plain where their attention was and had no choice but to settle back and watch the rest of the show.

He squirmed in his seat while his libido did the Watusi. He'd never seen any woman who oozed sex appeal like this one and had to admit that the show she put on could raise the flag of a dead man. But he wasn't dead, and she was doin' one hell of a job on him.

He slipped out to the men's room, but by the time he came out, the show was over. He thought he'd missed her until he happened to see her sitting at the bar.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked as Sage sat down.

"Nothing here, I'm on duty. Just need to talk to the little lady."

Sugar looked around at him. "On duty? At this hour? What the hell are you, a liquor salesman?"

"Very funny," Sage said as he took out his badge and quickly flashed it. "My name is Sage Wilson, Savannah Police Department. I'm down here checking on a serial killer that's been stalking this area."

"Yeah?" Sugar said, suddenly uncomfortable. "What makes you think I would know anything?"

"At this point we're questioning everyone. We found a couple of bodies in the back of the club. They were really messed up. I figure they went out back for air, or a quick liaison, and things got out of hand. I was wondering if you'd spotted anything suspicious. Someone acting a little different."

“What are you looking for? Man, woman?”

“Everything we’ve found so far points to a woman, but the killings are so horrendous, it seems a little hard to believe.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you. I come in, do my act, and leave.”

“You don’t fraternize with the men at all?”

“Fraternize?” Sugar said, then smiled. “Ten dollar word for a cop. No, I don’t...*fraternize*.”

“Sorry if the word is above you—”

A spear of anger surged through her, and she whirled around. “Look, I’m not stupid if that’s what you mean. It’s not something you would normally hear from a cop’s nasty mouth. Does that make it a little clearer?”

“For the record, I’m not a cop. I’m a detective.”

“Oh, a detective. A detective that uses big words. Big words, big egos, big—”

“Yeah, that too.”

“Look, either buy a drink, or get the hell off the barstool. There just might be a customer around here that wants to spend a little money.”

“Money for what, Ms...” He looked at her questioningly.

“My name is Sugar.”

“Sugar what?”

“Sugar period! Sugar and Spice is the name of my act, and everyone calls me Sugar.”

“Then Spice must be the little she-devil who drinks all the blood. Kind of a coincidence, wouldn’t you say, since the area’s being stalked by some mad killer who just might be a woman?”

“Don’t get carried away, Detective. It’s only an act.”

“Yeah? Something tells me the guys around this joint are partial to sweets. Any of ’em ever try and take a lick...Sugar?”

Sugar stood up abruptly and slapped his face. “You bastard! I do a show at eight and eleven, and that’s it. Anyone gets funny ideas, he—”

“He what? Winds up as garbage for the dumpster?”

Sugar angrily whirled around and strode toward the velvet curtain.

Sage watched her hips as they swayed seductively, knowing if she stopped and looked back at him before she passed through, she was his.

She stopped, *and he stayed for the second show.*

Chapter Five

She's not the killer, Sage kept telling himself, so why was I grilling her in the club? Was it a feeling I had? No, it was the brandy.

It was being here with Sugar, *and* the brandy.

He looked around at the sticky little web he had blindly fallen into and saw a room full of shimmering moonlight. It flooded the dark room where candles flitted and sputtered. Beside a pallet was the fruit and cheese tray they had partaken of earlier. Across one wall were large, wide windows so tall they soared up into a vaulted ceiling as far as the eye could see and then entered into a sinister darkness that hung heavy and silent. The window covers were raised with cords that hung down beside them, and even the French doors were open to a serenade of night creatures.

The mysterious night was all around them.

He had come here to prove to himself that she wasn't the killer. That, and to fuck the living hell out of the hottest female along the Reef. Like every other man in the audience tonight, he hungered to be the male whom she attacked. He wanted to feel her mouth sucking at his neck, to feel her teeth raking ever so gently along his skin. Sure, his conscience bothered him a little. He kept telling himself that this was part of his investigation, but he knew the chances of her being guilty were one in a thousand. Hell, he should be out looking for the real killer. He'd tried, he really had, but how could any red-blooded American male resist the blatant, seductive invitation she gave him from the stage? She had singled him out during her last act, and when he asked her with his eyes, she said yes. The music, building to a hellish crescendo, made the electricity sizzle between them.

All he could think of was getting her in bed.

What would they say back at the precinct when he told them he had fucked Sugar? They wouldn't believe him, but here he was, right here in some big studio where the moon bathed the room in silver. It was a romantic

setting, a setting meant for love. He would have her over and over again, on the pallet, on the veranda, beneath the stars, *and in the moonlight*.

* * * *

Sugar felt different tonight. The struggle she usually went through wasn't there. Tonight she hadn't had to pursue her prey. He had come to her. The moment he flashed his badge, she knew what she had to do. She had to get rid of him. He was too close. He was hers now, and she felt somehow peaceful. She couldn't explain it, but knew that this night would be different than any she'd had in a long while.

Now as he stood before her, her eyes glanced upward and saw the full moon high above his left shoulder. It was in full bloom, bleeding, and it meant someone would die.

"Sugar, I wish—"

She immediately put her finger up to his mouth and silenced him. "Shhh," she said and slid her eyes downward. His collar lay open, a loose strand of his long hair hung just over his deliciously pulsing vein. She stepped up to him and kissed his neck.

"God, that feels good," he whispered as his head moved to one side. "Do it to me like you do in your act, Sugar. Pretend to attack me and suck my blood. I want to feel your teeth on my neck. I want you to suck me dry."

"I always aim to please," she whispered huskily as her body slowly began to change. "Ever do any role-playing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll play the werewolf, you be the victim."

"Oh, God, yes," he said.

She could feel the evil filling her up inside and clenched her teeth while she pulled him down on the pallet a little harder than she had intended.

He went down easy, his eyes closed, his arms splayed out like a sacrifice on the altar of Satan. She looked down at him with menacing eyes and spoke with an ominous voice. "I'm attacking my prey. You're frightened, but I've overpowered you, and you can't move."

"Oh, yes, Sugar."

She straddled him and pulled at his shirt, popping his buttons as she brutally grasped it and yanked it apart. She watched him as her hands

caressed his chest. Leaning forward, she licked his hot flesh, allowing her teeth to scratch and tear ever so gently. Moving down to his trousers, she unbuckled his belt and saw his cock, already hard, peeking out as if it were anxious to get started. The sight of it, hard and ready, began a tiny flame of desire in her core. While carefully watching every movement he made, she slowly stretched herself over him, moving her hips and pressing herself to him.

“I’m hungry, for blood,” she whispered, her deep whiskey voice beginning to dip into her throat to resemble a growl. “So very hungry. I’m going to slowly lick your neck, preparing for the kill.”

“Yes, yes. Do it, Sugar.”

Easing down his body, her tongue darted out and began a playful lick along his neck, his chest, his cock. She could taste his essence beneath his skin—in the air.

“What now, Sugar?” he said excitedly.

She knew what he was thinking. In his mind he saw himself as the helpless male on the simulated street corner. Usually her prey struggled, but this kill was almost effortless. She could take her time, enjoy it, so she moved slowly while her tongue made a languorous lick along every inch of his body. She finally reached his cock and saw that it had grown and was full and pulsing. His blood would be so red it would look black. As black as her soul, as black as the night, and as black as her heart. Then, opening her mouth, she slowly began to suck harder and harder. She became more insistent, even rough, as her sharp teeth grazed along his twitching member.

His hips undulated, pushing in and out, the flames of his lust rising higher and higher.

She knew he was coming closer and closer to the edge, so she moved toward his chest, grazing along his rippling muscles as he swam in a red-hot euphoria from which he would never return. Being very careful, she sank him into herself so deep she could almost feel the tip of his cock touch her very core.

Her blood hunger was at its peak, the pull of the moon irresistible. Her gaze was drawn to its irresistible glow. The silver light and shadow played along her wild nocturnal beauty as she made the final change from Sugar to Spice. She was hungry for everything now, for his blood, his flesh, his very soul.

The mutation complete, she rode him with wild abandon.

She saw his eyes open slightly, but knew the dark room hid her secret with shadows that hung like a sinister curtain and veiled her body in silhouette. With a moan his hands came up and grabbed her hips, his cock thrusting into her so hard, she almost screamed. She could sense the barely controlled power that was coiled in his body. He was a volcano about to erupt. Their passion rose so high between them that their senses were spun, the hot tides of orgasm just beyond as they both reached upward, scratching for the ultimate, going higher and higher. They rolled and tumbled in the shadows, first one on top, then the other. Finally Spice opened her mouth and sensuously scraped his neck while whispering in his ear, "You're ready. I'm going to bite you now."

"Oh, God, Sugar! Your teeth...I can feel them. I'm coming! I can't wait! I'm coming!" Suddenly he erupted, and while the sizzling orgasm swirled in his groin, his eyes opened lazily and saw the light of the moon move over the wild-looking creature that sat above him.

He let out a bloodcurdling scream!

The struggle began!

He fought, but she could feel him sinking into death as her teeth began to scratch along his neck, his flesh tearing like ribbons.

Blood flowed!

He was on the brink of death. The raw taste of his flesh made her wild, so she lunged forward, and in one swift motion—*sank her teeth deep into his throat.*

Weak from the aftereffects of his orgasm, his struggle soon ended. His hands that were firm on her hips, fell in death. His body lay quiet and unmoving while his blood swelled into her mouth. She tasted not only his blood, but his lust. She gulped over and over, taking more than she should. It was hard to stop since his blood tasted of honeyed liqueur, his flesh like ripe, succulent fruit. It was almost impossible for Spice to draw away from this fountain of blood, but no sooner than his body was drained, her eyelids began to droop until they slowly closed. As she rolled away from him, she lay there in blissful tranquility while the mutation reversed itself, changing her from the wild beauty of the night into a soft and delicate loveliness.

* * * *

As she slept, black, threatening clouds slowly began to roil, churn, whip, and toss until, at last, a dark, foreboding figure broke through. Black, glossy wings were widespread as he whirled about against the dark skies. Closer he came, sailing on turbulent winds, veering one way and then another as he descended slowly toward the earth. Stealthily he swooped down, circling closer and closer until he perched on the balustrade of the old mansion's veranda.

Through curls of sensual fog he stepped down, careful not to make any noise with his sandaled feet. The moist wind drifted brazenly over him in a movement that felt like gentle foreplay. He was about to enter a bedroom when he saw a bright, glowing, ghost-like figure the color of a tombstone. His appearance was that of a skeletal angel, his wings ribbed with thin, clattering bones. His eye sockets, blazing like red-hot coals taken from the furnaces of hell, were looking out of a skull that sat atop a thin neck. His deathly appearance seemed almost illusory.

"You will come no further, Judas."

"You," Judas hissed. "Let me pass. You have no dominion here."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken. She has called for me, opening the door."

"You're lying. She called for you weeks ago, not now."

"She wasn't ready then. Now she is. Now I can take her with almost no effort."

"I'm here to prevent such a disaster. It is not time, Death, and I assure you, if you try to take her, you will have me to contend with."

"Do not interfere," Death threatened with a deep, penetrating voice.

"Interfere?" Judas said, pushing his way into the bedroom. "I am here at the command of my father, the Demon Lord. You are the trespasser. Retreat, or pay the consequences."

Death silently stepped closer to him, the moonlight revealing more of his pale, death-like image. "An empty threat, Judas."

"Oh? Make one more move and see if it is."

Anger darkened Death's face. "What makes you think you can order me about?" His blazing eyes raked over Judas. "You, with your beauty of body and face, are an arrogant ass who thinks all should bow down to him. Let me assure you, most holy son of Darkness that I am not in that number." With a

sudden movement, Death whipped out a wicked-looking blade that glistened in the cold rays of the moon.

He pointed it at Judas's heart.

"En garde," he said softly with a sardonic twist of his lips. As he glared at Judas, tiny flames of fire licked upward within his eyes.

"What is this?" Judas said, casually knocking the point of blade aside.

"Do you seriously think you can kill me with a flimsy piece of metal?"

"If I do nothing more than draw the blood of one so precious to Satan, I will be satisfied."

"Don't make me laugh," Judas said as he dodged the thrusting blade.

"You cannot harm me—"

"Cease your stupid chatter, my handsome friend, and find a weapon."

Anger prickled at Judas. "You're asking for trouble, don't you know that?"

"Am I? And what kind of trouble can you, a mere mortal—"

"Mortal?" Judas chuckled. "You talk crazy."

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that since your mother was mortal, you are as well? Yes, Judas, you have a soul, black though it may be, and a free choice. You could even stay here, if you chose, and leave the Dark Heavens behind."

"That's ridiculous. You know my reputation. I've survived many wars without so much as a scratch. My father wouldn't have let me take such chances if he knew I was mortal. He would have told me long before now."

"So the great Judas still lives in darkness. Allow me to enlighten you. Do you see this sword? This 'flimsy piece of metal,' as you call it, could pierce your heart, and that would be the end of you. But don't worry, I won't kill you. No, I want you to live so you can see me ease her into hell."

"I don't believe a word. You can stab me until the end of time, but my wounds will heal before you can get your blade back in its sheath."

"Then I'll have to show you," Death threatened, backing Judas into a corner.

"You've always hated me, Death, and I've never known why. Tell me, what is it about me that you can't seem to tolerate?"

"Your beauty is enough to make me hate you," he rasped angrily. "The way you strut around the Black Heavens, the way the maidens swoon over

you. Well, no more. After tonight, when you have met the thrust of my blade, you will be as reviled as I.”

“And just how will you do that?” Judas asked, bravely facing Death with his hands on his hips. He jumped slightly when one quick movement had the glittering metal hovering in front of his eyes. For the first time, doubt began to creep ever so slightly into him, shattering his confidence. As he looked anxiously at the sharp point, his hands dropped from his hips and his heart raced.

Had Death told the truth? Was he about to learn that truth at the sharp point of a dueling blade? Seeing the scowl of anger on Death’s pale face and the blade waving in front of him, Judas began to sweat. His natural defense began to rise, and he said, “I would advise you to get out now, Death, before things get ugly.” Following up his threat with a defensive move, he lifted one hand, and with a mighty wave, hit his enemy with a warning lightning bolt in his bony shoulder. “Get out now, or I will show you what I can really do.”

“Argh!” Death cried out in desperate agony as he grabbed his shoulder. Whirling back around, he eyed Judas with a killer look. “You stupid fool. Take this!” He made a sudden movement faster than the speed of light and thrust the blade forward.

Before Judas knew what was happening, he felt a sharp, stabbing pain tear through his head. Putting his hand up to his face, he felt a wound, bloody and raw. He lowered his hand and looked at the blood as if he couldn’t believe it.

“You bastard!” he yelled. “What have you done?” Just then he heard the cowardly demon’s insane laugh as he disappeared from sight.

Feeling defeated, Judas sank to his knees, wanting to cry like a baby, but instead he lifted his tear-stained face toward the skies and bellowed out, “F-a-a-a-a-ther! Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you let me find out like this?” With a chill racing down his back, he thought of all the bloody battles he had fought and the stupid chances he had taken. He could see himself standing in the middle of countless battlefields daring his enemy to destroy him. Thinking he was immortal, he had taken chance after chance, never knowing he could die. It would have taken only one arrow, one bullet, or one sword to pierce his mortal body, only *one* to destroy him where he stood.

“My God!” he cried into his hands. “Why didn’t you tell me, Father? Why did you...”

And then it came to him.

He remembered his father telling him that his position of lord was a trade, that he had to give up something very precious for his position in the House of Lords. Judas didn’t know then what he meant, but now, my God, he had given his own son! He had literally sacrificed Judas when he was no more than an infant. In return Satan had made him a lord in his kingdom.

Judas clutched his stomach as it roiled.

The truth sickened him.

“Father,” he croaked, his voice sore from yelling, “How could you? How could you give your own son over to Satan to gain power and position in hell? You knew I was mortal, and yet your desire for position eclipsed your love, if indeed you ever had any love for me. Didn’t you think I would find out someday? Did you think I would remain stupid and blind forever?” Anger crept over Judas, slow and dark as he looked up toward the skies. With a growling voice he yelled out, “You may think you have come out of this unscathed, but you will pay for what you’ve done. I don’t know how or when, but it will all come back on you!”

His wrath spent, he slowly rose from his knees and searched the room for a cloth to press against his wound when he saw something lying close by and narrowed his eyes to see in the darkness. As he watched, slowly the clouds that had covered the moon moved away, and the beauty lying on the pallet was gradually revealed. He hadn’t realized anyone else was there, but as he stared at the blood, and her shredded clothes, he knew this must be Jennifer.

She had a wealth of shining white-blond hair that sparkled as if it were enhanced by stars. Her porcelain skin was flawless, marred only by the blood smeared on her face and neck. Her blossom-red lips were lush and inviting. As Judas watched her, he felt a surge of lustful heat stirring inside him.

He pulled his eyes away and looked around the room, really seeing it for the first time. It was a typical studio, being filled with large canvasses, some blank, others with ghostly coal-drawn figures. Many were unfinished, others, at least five deep, leaned against a wall. There were used tubes of paint, palettes, white sheet-like covers thrown haphazardly around the room

covering many of the paintings, protecting them from dust motes in the air. Beside the pallet he saw a large tray laden with cheese, fruit, sautéed mushrooms, raw vegetables, and half a bottle of brandy. The thin mattress she lay on was a bit mussed, as if two people had been making love on it. He looked around. Where was the body? He knew immediately that someone must have removed it, but whom? He shifted his eyes around to see if anyone observed him from some dark corner, but saw no one. He then shifted his eyes and looked down at Jennifer once more. After her kill, her face was sublime, as if she were a sleeping princess in a fairy tale. He longed to touch her softness. Just the idea of what it would be like was enough to make him dizzy. He closed his eyes as he whiffed her enticing fragrance.

His lust grew.

Then he thought of his wound.

His hand flew to his face, finding blood still creeping down his cheek. It felt jagged, as if a taloned hand had swept savagely across his face and scratched it. He looked back down at the sleeping vision and felt another pain, the pain of loss. He couldn't stay. He'd been wounded in battle and would have to leave.

How can I put her out of my mind? he thought as he gazed down at her. *How can I forget about her pale, moon-kissed skin, her lush, begging-to-be-kissed lips?*

He shouldn't feel this way, he couldn't. She was off-limits. Suddenly a thought occurred to him. *He was mortal. Only immortals were not allowed to sleep with humans.*

No. She was a woman of Earth. She wouldn't want him, not if she knew his home was deep in the center of the earth, in a black hole called hell. Regret clutched at his insides. His eyes shifted to her lush lips once more, a longing stirring inside him for just one kiss before he took his leave, before he left her forever.

He slowly leaned forward, his black, glossy wings embracing them both in an intimate cocoon. His eyes closed in passion as his lips lightly touched hers, giving him a jolt.

They were so cold.

Oh, God, she was dead!

"No!" he cried out. "It can't be!"

He turned abruptly when hysterical laughter echoed through the rafters. Death had returned.

“Give her back, you bastard! Release her now, or I will call down all the gods of the black realm upon you!”

A horrible sound like the crackling of ice came out of the night. “Come, Judas. You don’t lust after this one, surely. After all, is she a princess? A goddess? A queen, perhaps? I know you, Judas. You only consort with those of lofty rank. This one may be beautiful, but she is only a human.”

“Give her back, Death, or suffer the consequences.”

“She’s better off dead. This way she will never see your face, never turn away in horror.”

“That doesn’t matter!”

“No? How about when she learns where you come from? Why don’t you have your way with her now? She can’t see you. She’s in the deep sleep of death. I’ll keep her that way until you satisfy the hunger you have in your blood for this one.”

“It’s true I may revile her, but at least I offer her a future. Your best offer is death, a free ticket to a life where her beauty will rot in the ground, along with free passage into a world where there is no redemption.”

“Redemption!” Death said with a harsh laugh. “Redemption is for fools. I do the job I was given to do, and because you are the son of the Demon Lord, there will be no redemption for you either.”

“You are wrong, as usual. No wonder you can’t climb up out of that pit you exist in, Death. My father was good once, and I, through no fault of my own, am a product of a love that—”

“Love?” Death said with a mocking laugh. “Did you say love? You poor simpleton. Do you think your father *loved* your mother? He forced her. Just like you will have to do if you ever have this one. Love,” Death scoffed. “Love indeed! Hear this, and hear it well, Son of Darkness. She will be mine. I will—”

“I will hear no more of your stupid arguments!” Judas growled, then lifted his arms toward the sky and began to chant.

“Gods of da—”

“Stop!” Death yelled, remembering the bolt of lightning to his shoulder. After a slight hesitation, his voice dropped into a raspy tone. “All right, I will release her, but I promise you this will be the last time. Nothing in

heaven or hell will stop me from taking her when she calls again.” Shifting his eyes toward the dormant figure, he lifted both hands and splayed his skinny, taloned fingers while moving them slowly in front of his face.

*“Through time and tide, and thunder roll,
I loose death’s grip upon this soul.
Life comes in where death once reigned
Now death must go and life remain!”*

“There,” he said, looking at Judas with contempt. “She’s back.” His eyes narrowed with an evil glitter. “But mark my words, spawn of sin, she will be back within my grasp one day, and when it happens I will not be so quick to release her again.” With a flamboyant display of magick, Death disappeared, but not before the temperature in the room dropped dramatically, and every surface frosted over with ice.

With life once again flowing through her veins, Jennifer stretched lazily on the pallet, a delicate moan escaping her lips. The sound drew Judas, and he walked closer to her knowing beyond any doubt that there was no way he could leave her now, not with Death hovering so close, looking for an opportunity to take her soul. Reassured that she slept soundly, he backed out of the room, his throbbing head and the blood that covered his face painful reminders of his loss.

As he walked down the stairs, he stopped abruptly and looked around. The air reeked of a stench that smelled like death. Was Death still playing games? No. He knew this smell. It was the foul odor of bestial evil.

It was, *Lupercus!*

Chapter Six

He looked like hell.

Dried blood stained his face, his five o'clock shadow had stretched into two days, and he had nothing to wear but his brief flying suit and a pair of formidable-looking giant wings that stretched up tall and wide along his back. He didn't know when he would need them to make an escape, and his wings were part of his protection, so until he felt more comfortable, they stayed on his back.

He didn't know how he felt about this new world.

Being a stranger in a strange place, he had to assume that everyone was his enemy and couldn't let himself be seen. He hid behind trees and bushes, watching people come and go along Gypsy Reef, while feeling lost and alone. He had nothing, no money, clothes, or food, so he had no choice but to make his home in the woods and eat anything he could find. The woods offered soft grass and leaves where he could lay his head for a few hours, but he was exposed to the cold nights with only his wings for cover. He needed to find a den, a cave, anything that would shield him from the elements.

He was always hungry, a new and strange sensation for him. In hell, everything he needed was provided, but here he had to fight and scratch for everything. It wasn't all bad, though. The stream where he washed was cool, and the winds stretched out a cool hand to stroke his brow, quenching a thirst deep inside his soul. He especially liked the rain, the storms that seemed to frequent this part of the country. The dark clouds reminded him of the Black Heavens, where the gods resided, but those black clouds didn't remain above as these did, they dipped down, their smothering billows surrounding you with heat that singed your skin, and soot that whirled around you like black snow.

Since the woods were dark and gloomy, the daylight didn't bother him, but he knew he couldn't stay hidden forever. One night, while rooting around in several garbage bins, he found a pair of discarded sunglasses that shielded his sensitive eyes from the sun and also hid his scar. He felt better wearing them and could feel his confidence returning. Now, for the first time, he decided to go out among the people. Leaving his wings behind, he walked along the Reef's promenade, enjoying its many unusual sites. He didn't realize that his thick mane of blond hair, deeply tanned skin, and rippling muscles were creating quite a stir among the women until they crowded around him and began to gently tug on him to come and join their beach party. He had always enjoyed the attention of women and was tempted to go with them until he happened to look up and saw a full moon in a dark sky.

Something inside him gave a jolt, and he looked around. Was it night already? The Reef was so lit up he hadn't even noticed the setting of the sun. Where the hell had the time gone? He had to get to Jennifer! Leaving the Reef, he hurriedly made his way toward the mansion, but it was getting late. Was she supposed to dance that night? He couldn't remember. Taking the chance that she would be there, he turned and made his way toward the club. The minutes seemed to fly by, and the moon rose higher and higher. He had to hurry. When he arrived he was stopped by a sign that said, *No shoes, no shirt, no service*. He looked down at his brief flying suit and sandals with straps that wound all the way up to his knees and knew he must look like some mythical creature in a fairy tale. Damn! Why the hell hadn't he thought of clothes? He couldn't worry about it now, so he hurried toward the woods to get his wings and begin searching the strip from the air. Suddenly he saw a helicopter, and a moving figure running along the beach.

* * * *

Spice, covered with the blood of another kill, stumbled along the sandy stretch, frightened and out of breath. She heard a faraway sound, looked up into the sky, and saw a helicopter circling the area.

They had spotted her!

Her eyes darted around. Where would she hide? She tried to run, but the sand was too deep. God, what was she going to do? They were close, so

close they were beginning to bear down on her. And then from somewhere far away, laughter and gay, musical strains grabbed her attention.

Not the Reef, no, not the Reef!

She needed the darkness of the woods, so she turned away from the promenade and tried to run faster, but her steps were slow and awkward in the sinking sand. The helicopter lowered, drawing closer and closer, the sound hurting her ears. She hid her eyes from the giant spotlight that scraped the ground erratically. She tried desperately to hide from it, but it followed her. A flood of fear engulfed her. Her chest heaved. Her eyes watched the monster in the air as she scurried along the shore. Desperate for someplace to hide, she looked out at the ocean wishing she could lose herself in the waves. She fell repeatedly, becoming bogged down again and again in the sand. She needed to get to the woods, to the animal dens and caves where she could hide.

The beast was so close she could feel the hot air of the motor blowing down on her and choked on the oil and gas fumes that gushed toward her. With the putrid breath of the monster breathing down her neck, she couldn't go on much longer, and looked around.

Oh, God! she thought and suddenly stopped. *I'm going the wrong way!*

She turned, but the helicopter swooped down again, blocking her way. She was forced to turn and continue the way she had started. She looked ahead and saw the Reef's promenade. If she went there, she'd have nowhere to hide, but she couldn't stop. She had to try to get lost in the crowd. It was her only chance. Finally her feet met the pavement. The speed of her pace picked up, and she broke through the crowd, looking for somewhere, anywhere, to go. Her eyes anchored on the Rock Candy Club only a few yards away. She had to try to reach it, but when she tried, she found herself surrounded by tourists who blocked her way. The spotlight surrounded her, highlighting her bristly red hair and her mutated face and body.

She lunged forward, trying to get away from the light, but couldn't. She whirled around and around. The sound of the rotors, the angry shouts from the hunters, it all mingled with the crowd. There were screams and murmurs in the crowd. With her heightened senses, she could hear their voices.

"My God," whispered the murmuring accents. "What is it?"

"Some kind of animal," came an awe-filled answer.

She was cornered, trapped.

Sobs choked her. Tears streamed down her face, blinding her. She turned and ran one way, then another, but there was no place she could hide.

With a dramatic sweep of one arm, a uniformed man in the 'copter threw a lasso that fell around her shoulders. Fear renewed itself within her, and she fought like a wild animal. Before she could get out of it, the helicopter rose, tightening the rope around her, and lifted her from the pavement. She struggled, her legs flailing as she squirmed furiously. Finally a car with a screaming siren and squealing tires skidded to a stop. Three men jumped out and advanced on her slowly. Fear rose in her while her heart thrashed in her chest. She watched as the line of men came closer and closer, guns pointed at her, and on their belts hung hatchets and flashlights.

Suddenly a pair of strong arms caught her from behind.

She kicked and growled, her twisted, claw-like talons scratching through the air while the others closed in and held her fast. She struggled, trying to hide her face from the light, but it was too late. She stood exposed in its hated brightness. While she thrashed about, another group of men came forward carrying a crudely built cage. It took several of them, but they managed to throw her in and lock it.

When she was at last contained, the crowd on the promenade applauded and circled the cage. They stared at her while she growled and flailed her taloned hands through the bars. Still under the influence of the moon, she had a wild-woman look about her. Blood smeared her hands, breasts, and face, and her body resembled that of an Amazon warrior, strong and extremely voluptuous. Her wild movements caused her hair to fly around her head, partially hiding her penetrating eyes that glared through the thick, red, bristly strands. She glared at them as they talked about her.

"Look at her eyes," one man whispered. "My God, she has something of a nocturnal look about her, almost as if she were created from the night. I've never seen anything so wild and beautiful."

"You know who she reminds me of?" the other man asked.

"Who?"

"You know the gal that does that act in the Rock Candy Club? You know the one. They bill the act as Sugar and Spice. This thing reminds me of Spice."

“Good grief, Cal, get a grip. This thing, whatever it is, means business. Spice is nothing more than a beautiful little she-devil that can chew me up any day, or night.”

“I agree, but wouldn’t it be interesting if this was one of those situations where *life imitates art*?”

Spice stiffened at the words, icy fear dancing down her spine. They were only guessing now, but soon they would know. She went wild. She grasped the bars of the wooden cage and shook them violently, but they wouldn’t give. The crude, well-built cage was meant only for the temporary capture of an animal. Later they would put her in an iron cage, a jail, and examine her. She would be punched, prodded, and stuck with needles. She had to somehow get out, but knew that only a miracle could save her now. She looked up at the moon. The effects of the rays were beginning to fade, her strength leaving her. In only a matter of minutes, the mutation would reverse itself, and she would be exposed for who she really was.

She couldn’t let that happen.

But how could she stop it?

* * * *

With the crowd’s attention focused on the creature in the cage, no one noticed that the storm, still distant and threatening, had hidden within its turbulent clouds a lone figure. With the exception of his blond hair, his black leather clothing helped blend him into the darkness as he circled above them. Looking for a place to land, his searching eyes anchored on a church that stood adjacent to the Reef’s promenade. The church had a graveyard that stretched long and wide, the haunting sight disturbed only by a pair of angel’s wings, one broken, the other cracked. Their ragged beauty reached upward into the black sky, providing shadows that stretched across the dry grass. Dead leaves littered the ground, and flowers stood in cracked vases, dying on the graves.

The vivid colors of Autumn had painted a lovely picture of death.

He flew past the excited crowd and managed to swoop down and land behind the church. After tugging at his wings and hiding them in the brush, Judas crept out from behind the church and made his way toward the Reef’s promenade. Darting from one gravestone to the next, he finally hid behind

the crumbling angel's wings. After several minutes of watching the spectacle, he planned a very careful strategy. He slowly separated himself from the shadow and crept around the sidelines of the crowd, trying to stay undetected. He saw that the cage hung slightly above the ground, the back of it against a grove of trees. He quickly crept into the trees, getting as close as he dared.

"Jennifer!" he whispered loudly.

In the midst of her threatening growls, Jennifer cocked her head as if she'd heard something.

"Jennifer!" he called out again.

This time her head turned toward the sound, but still saw no one.

"Over here!" Judas called out.

She whirled around quickly and looked down, her eyes anchoring on two glowing green eyes that stared out at her from within a clump of bushes. With a question in her gaze, she cocked her head.

"I'm here to help you," Judas whispered as loudly as he dared.

Her gaze darted around at the crowd of men who had captured her. They were unfurling a rope to wrap around the cage to hoist it up on a truck, so they weren't watching her. She turned back toward the stranger and hissed loudly, "How do you know who I am?"

"It doesn't matter. Just do as I say and you'll be safe."

"But, why would you help me?"

"Later! I'll tell you later! As soon as you get free, run into the woods!" Deciding he needed a diversion, Judas looked up at the lowering sky and began a soft chant.

*Vulcan god of land and sea
Loose thy mystic energies!
Open wide thy doors of blight
And loose a storm upon this night!*

The storm sprang forth like a crouching tiger, and Jennifer was thrown from one side of the cage to the other. A deluge of rain fell quickly, and the people on the promenade began to scatter. With everyone running for cover, Judas hurled a sizzling spear of lightning, stabbing the rope and burning it through. The moment it slammed to the ground, the door flew open and she

tumbled out. Quickly scrambling up, she took only a split second to look around. With a quick movement she jumped into the woods and became lost in the trees. She ran for several minutes until she was grabbed from behind. She screamed.

“Quiet!” Judas hissed as he clamped his hand over her mouth. “Do you want to bring the whole fucking military down on us?”

Suddenly he felt an elbow in his stomach and all the air knocked out of him. By the time he recovered, she was lost in the trees. Although blinded by the downpour, he finally managed to find her again. This time he whirled her around and gave her a left-handed hook, causing her to sink to the ground. He quickly hoisted her up on his shoulder and started for the edge of the woods where he saw the back of a string of buildings. He ran for them while the wind and rain still caused chaos on the promenade. Hurrying down a narrow alley, he concealed himself in shadows, hid behind trash bins, and crept stealthily along fences until he finally reached the Rock Candy Club. Since the club was open, the back door was unbolted, and he slammed in, finding a forgotten old prop room that was ideal for looking out on to the promenade. After propping her up in a corner, he pushed her wet hair out of her face and gave her cheek a few gentle slaps to bring her around.

She woke up fighting.

He quickly grabbed her hands and clasped them securely by the wrists and held them. “Look, lady, I’m trying to help you, but I can’t if you keep fighting me. If you’ll be still and do as I say, we might get out of here alive. Any sound you make could call all those MPs down on us in a hurry, and I don’t think you want to do that.” He watched her for a moment to make sure his words sunk in and then slowly released her hands. He was rewarded with a stinging slap across his face. With anger boiling over in him, he reached for the hand that hit him and bit it hard.

“Ouch! You bastard!” she yelled and began beating his chest.

“Look,” he said, holding her down. “I know you don’t know what the hell’s going on, but I don’t have time to tell you right now. You’ll just have to trust me, so sit here, and be still.”

She slowly ceased her struggle while watching him with sullen, angry eyes.

When she didn’t move, he turned and crept to the window.

As soon as his back was turned, she jumped up and headed for the door, but he was quicker and caught her around the waist.

Holding her tightly against him, he whispered in her ear, "Look, I don't want to have to tie you up, but I will if you don't do as I say." He slowly released her, watching every move she made with his electric green eyes. While he was hesitantly creeping back toward the window, she reached up to turn on a light.

Seeing the flood of light, he turned quickly and slapped her hand away from the wall. "What the hell is wrong with you? You *want* to get caught? No lights, see!" With a quick movement, he grabbed some masking tape nearby and wound it around her wrists.

"No!" she cried out, struggling.

"If you won't do what I say, then I'll have to force you."

While in the heat of struggle, Jennifer reared back her head and spat on him.

Judas lifted his hand and wiped it off and glared at her. "Why, you little witch!" Suddenly pushing his soiled hand in her face, he said, "How do you like it?"

Jennifer sobbed softly as he continued to secure her hands.

Thinking she had become unusually quiet, his gaze darted up and saw her staring at him, at his face, his hair. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

She said nothing.

"Answer me! What the hell's wrong with you?"

She still said nothing, only glared at him.

"Fine, don't say anything. First female I've ever seen that didn't run off at the mouth."

While keeping an eye on her, he edged slowly back to the window.

* * * *

Jennifer watched him while he crouched on the floor, at his blond hair falling down in thick strands that hid a lot of his face and at the mountain of muscles that rippled as he moved. Her breath stopped when she saw a scar around his eye. It was raw, raw enough to tell her it had been done recently. She could tell it pained him. She could see it in his eyes, his vivid green

eyes that continued to gaze out the window. Who was he? He'd come out of nowhere to help her. Should she trust him enough to put her life in his hands?

Judas heard her struggling and shifted his gaze toward her. Her eyes met his with a look of pain in them. He lowered his eyes to her wrists and saw the red marks. "Would it do any good to ask for your promise to stay quiet?"

She said nothing, only nodded.

Before he could get the masking tape off, a light from the helicopter swept over the building, and he quickly pushed her down and covered her with his body.

When the danger passed, Jennifer felt him slowly lift his head, but he didn't move. Her eyes shifted and she saw him gazing down at her with a hungry look in his eyes.

"It seems the danger is over," she whispered.

"I see you *can* talk."

She began to get nervous. "I think it's all right to move now."

"We need to be careful," he whispered. "We'll give it a few more minutes."

Jennifer knew she was in a helpless position if he decided to rape her. She tensed, wiggling to get from beneath him.

"Be still," he said, his breath labored.

"What are you waiting for? Untie me. The danger is over."

"No," he said staring down into her eyes. "It's only begun."

"What do you mean?" she asked, fear climbing within her.

"Ms. Duquesne, I have an erection."

"You bastard! If you think—"

"Be still, or I will be forced to—"

"To rape me?" she continued for him. "So that's it! You did all this just to fuck the hell out of me!"

"That couldn't be further from the truth, but I'm a man, and being this close to you is simply—" He moaned, feeling her body continue to squirm beneath him. His eyes followed the beautiful lines of her face. He could smell her woman's fragrance, and the pressure of her naked breasts against his chest was driving him crazy. Finally losing it, he suddenly grabbed her in a clinch to keep her still, but it was useless. She became wild in his arms,

causing his erection to rub harder against her. “You little witch, I told you to be...to be still, or I’ll explode all over you.”

Jennifer gasped when she felt the size of his erection. She wanted to fight him. He was a stranger, after all. Still she couldn’t help wondering how it would feel to have something that large plunging in and out of her. The feeling, the fire, swept upward within her. She couldn’t ignore his sinful eyes, his mouth. God, even the scar had a certain excitement, giving his handsome face a bad-boy look that drew her to him. Taking a wild chance, she opened her legs and made a cradle for his hips while her tied hands lay helpless above her head. In no time Judas’s flying suit and Jennifer’s rags lay at their side.

Their hungry lips met, his drugging kisses filling a need in her. His hard body woke something up inside her and sent shivers of delight racing through her. His hands cupped her breasts while he sucked and chewed on them, making a moist trail along her cleavage until he claimed each diamond-hard globe with tantalizing possessiveness. She could feel the sleek caress of his body as his flesh met hers. He opened her up, causing her to gasp when she felt his enormous size slowly fill her. She’d never felt anything like it. But it wasn’t only his size, it was the way he thrust and pulled. She wanted to let every inhibition she had dissolve in her lustful need of his body. Ravenous, she moved her hips in synch with his. She didn’t know if she was in heaven or hell, but she wanted to stay until his possession of her was complete.

“Oh!” she whimpered the instant his lips covered her mouth and kissed her with all the divine ecstasy she could stand. In and out he plunged, pulling cries and moans from her very soul. God, he was good, so very good. Even the palms of his hands were hot as he touched her body with flame! She went with him as he carried her to the very heights, where a heated orgasm swelled. She wanted to eat him, inhale him! She wanted to let herself go, to bite and suck and nip naughtily at his magnificent male chest.

It was as if something became unleashed inside her. She didn’t care anymore. She began to lick and suck, to clench him with her legs, to climb the mountain that was his body, all the while sipping at his delicious male elixir until there was none left.

Their breath mingled, each soul caressing the other while they surged higher and higher into the stratosphere of desire. The further she climbed,

the more she felt like a wanton that would do anything to attain her goal. She hissed out her desire like a cat in heat and moved her hips with wild abandon. His tongue licked every sensitive spot she had, driving her to an urgency she had never known, an urgency to at last reach that gleaming orgasm she knew was just within her reach.

And then at last it happened!

She shattered as never before!

What had this man done to her? For the first time ever, he had done for her what it took at least two men to do before. Where did he come from? What world had he traveled from? He seemed to know every erogenous zone she had and played her like an instrument.

The room was dark, only lit from outside lights, lending an intimate look and feel to the room while he released her and each of them dressed. The room was so quiet she could hear them both breathing in and out and feel the body heat still radiating between them.

“Who are you?” Jennifer whispered, her soft voice sounding like a gun blast in the quiet room.

Judas pulled himself up and returned to the window. “I liked you better when you weren’t talking. Just don’t get too chatty. We’re not out of this yet.”

“Fine,” Jennifer said, feeling rejected. “I’m too cold to talk anyway.”

Turning and looking around, he saw a man’s jacket hanging on a clothes tree in the corner. Getting up, he grabbed it and threw it at her. “Put this on.”

While she tugged it on, he turned his eyes back toward the outside activity, and with somber eyes and a clenched jaw, he said, “Don’t worry about who I am. You’re in trouble. I’m helping you. That’s all you need to know for now.”

“You’re insane! We just made love, and I don’t even know who the hell you are!”

Judas sliced his slumberous gaze toward her. “I’m the man that made you scream.”

“You egotistical moron! You expect me to do everything you say, yet you won’t even tell me who you are? How the hell do I know you’re not some raving lunatic—?”

He reached over and grabbed her arm, turned her around, and looked threateningly into her eyes. “Raving lunatic? Me? I know of only one raving

lunatic around here, and it's not me!" His voice rose into an angry bellow. "How do I know you won't turn into some monster and try to rip my throat out like you do every other man you meet up with? *I'm* the one in danger, here, sister, not you!"

Blood drained from Jennifer's face. "How did you find out—I mean, were you—did you see—"

He let go of her with a jerk. "Maybe I'll tell you someday."

"That's not an answer."

"I saw it in my crystal ball. Now be quiet."

Giving him a sullen look, she watched as he continued to stare out the window. "What's happening out there?"

"The rain has slowed down," he said, looking toward the sky. "They're still in the woods." He shifted his eyes toward her. The rain had washed most of the blood off her, and the large jacket made her look like a waif caught in a storm. He felt a stab of compassion when he saw her trying to wipe it away with hands that were hidden in the sleeves.

What the hell was wrong with him? He wasn't supposed to feel things like that. Compassion, caring, and love were for weak ninnies and God-lovers. That wasn't him. He didn't go in for sunshine and flowers. Death and destruction, that was his thing. Still, he felt bad for treating her like a whore and yelling at her. His resolve to keep her at a distance had all the earmarks of a miserable failure. In spite of what had happened, he had to keep trying. He was used to playing with women, taking what he wanted and leaving them behind, and he wasn't about to change now. After all, he came from a black hole called hell. What woman could live with that?

This was no place for him. Earth was limited. He was used to flying through the vast inner space of the Black Heavens of his home, going from one world to another and fighting battles to keep it reigning supreme. As for the women here, there were none who could equal those that he'd already had. He shifted his gaze toward Jennifer.

Except her, he thought. In hell she would put even a goddess to shame.

He quickly moved his eyes away and looked out the window trying not to think about the beautiful women he'd had every day of his life. They were goddesses, queens, many of them causing every kind of devastation you could possibly think of and enjoying it. Jennifer and her bestial sister were no challenge to him. He saw evil a lot worse than her every day of his life.

He ate it, lived it, breathed it. Yes, evil is what his world was all about. He was used to it, even preferred it.

And why not? After all, *he didn't go in for the holy!*

Chapter Seven

The rain had scattered the tourists and closed the Reef down for the night.

Thunder rolled over the heads of a small group of tourists who were trudging down the deserted beach to their homes or hotel rooms. Early morning gulls and scuttling sand crabs shared a beach full of broken shells, seaweed, and hundreds of footprints that would be wiped clean by the unrepentant storm.

Now it was quiet, and the 'copter full of MPs, gone.

Feeling as if it was safe to leave, Judas looked over at Jennifer and saw her asleep on the floor. Thinking he needed to take her home, he moved along the floor until he was beside her. With a gentle hand, he pushed the hair out of her face and once again marveled at her beauty.

"My best work," came a voice behind him.

Judas whirled around and saw a horrifying creature that passed as human. Thick, dark hair hid a slight protrusion of horns and a devilish widow's peak. His brows arched over eyes that flashed evil. An ugly darkness surrounded him, and his lips took on a sullen, menacing twist.

"What in hell are you doing here?"

"She's my creation. Where else should I be?"

"Loose her, Lupercus. Then go back to hell, where you belong."

His dark eyes flashed like fire. "You're in over your head, Judas. Do you know what it would take to undo this curse? Nothing short of my death, that's what. That's something you, a mere warrior, can never do."

"I've defeated gods before."

"Stupid races!" Lupercus hissed. "None of them with the sense of a moron!"

“There are other ways, Lupercus. Those that are the most stupid are the ones that are the most arrogant. Sound like anyone you know? Be careful you don’t stumble and fall into one of my traps.”

An evil smile crossed Lupercus’s face. “I am aware that you don’t like me, Judas. Possibly because you’ve had to clean up so many of my messes, but I don’t care. I’m here because I refuse to be intimidated, and I’m not leaving.”

“Intimidated? By a woman?”

“She challenged me,” he said childishly. “Tell me how I could turn my back on that. No woman is going to get the best of me. I don’t care who she is, or how beautiful. Besides, I needed someone to pass the curse on to. She was perfect since she’d been wounded.”

“But to turn her into something like this is cruel.”

“Evil is cruel, and that’s what I am. It’s what you are, Judas. Your soul is as black as mine, and to do something to help someone goes against all that we are.”

“I’m not doing this to help anyone but myself and everyone in the Black Heavens. Do you realize that because of you that black hole we call home was almost destroyed?”

“Hell, destroyed?” He gave an evil chuckle. “Please!”

“Hell as we know it, yes. I’m here to try and keep it from becoming a wasteland.”

“Well, you can go back home, pretty boy. I’m here now, and I can clean up my own mess.”

“Pretty boy? Look again,” Judas said as he pulled back his hair. The murky light settled on his face in macabre planes of light and shadow.

“My, my. What happened?”

“Death happened. He challenged me to a duel, but forgot to give me a weapon.”

“But how could something like this happen? Aren’t you—?”

“I learned that I’m half mortal. What a time to find out. My beloved father didn’t think it important enough to tell me.”

“And you’re here giving me grief? Death is your enemy, not me.”

“I wouldn’t invite either of you for a tête-à-tête.”

“That’s rap session.”

“What?”

“Rap session. If you’re going to stay here, at least learn the language.”

“Go to hell. Is that clear enough?”

“I could give you the same advice.”

“I warn you now. I’m going to do everything I can to remove this curse because that is what I’ve been sent here to do. Then, and only then, will I return to hell.”

“Then suffer the consequences. Now that I know you’re mortal, I’ll look forward to taking you back to hell with me...in pieces!”

Lupercus and Judas were in such a hot exchange that neither of them realized Jennifer was awake and listening to every word. She lay there quietly, trying to comprehend the words and phrases she didn’t understand.

Gods.

Half mortal.

Black soul.

Hell, a wasteland?

The words were strange, their meanings foreign to her. Suddenly she remembered the most chilling word of all, *Judas!*

The hated name whirled around in her brain over and over again. It was the name of the stranger who had walked into her life uninvited. The man with the traitor’s name, the man with the enormous cock, the man who had made her scream, the man she had wanted to devour. Who was he? Was he also a traitor? She was desperate to get away, but she was trapped. She couldn’t let them know she had heard them, but couldn’t keep her trembling body still.

“That remains to be seen,” Judas said as the atmosphere took on an otherworldly light. Sporadic bursts of lightning eerily licked the room. Soft rumblings of thunder rolled across the sky, distant, cold, and unfriendly—as if it were traveling through the belly of a giant beast. Each burst of angry thunder sounded farther away, but in an abstract, extraneous way until finally it passed, sinking the room into an unsettling quiet.

Poised on the edge of Judas’s peripheral vision was a slight movement. His head turned quickly toward Jennifer. Had she moved? A feeling of dread washed over him when he realized she was awake. How much had she heard? More importantly, how much had she understood?

“Jennifer?”

He waited as she slowly turned and sat up, her eyes fearful as she looked around the room, but saw no one. The words she finally spoke came out in a breathy whisper. “W-Who are you talking to?”

Judas looked around to see that Lupercus had fled. “I’m surrounded by fucking cowards,” he muttered under his breath.

“You were talking to someone.”

“Uh, no.”

“You were talking to yourself?”

“No, you must have been dreaming. There’s no one here but me.”

“I know what I heard. He called you Judas.”

“Judas, yes, that is my name, but I’m sure I must have mentioned it earlier.”

“No, you didn’t. You think a name like Judas would escape my notice?”

“There’s nothing unusual about it.”

“No, not if you’re an atheist, or a God-hater.”

“What about you?” Judas spat. “Don’t tell me you go to church on Sunday and then kill on Monday?”

“It’s none of your business what I do. Besides, I can’t help it.”

Judas looked at her as she hid her face in her hands. “Look, I’m sorry. There’s no need for us to argue. As for what you heard...it was nothing.”

“All right, just answer me this. Why in hell do you know all about me, but I know nothing about you?”

“Ms. Duquesne, when the time comes, I’ll answer all your questions, but this is not the time. Right now, I need you to trust me.”

“Oh, I see. You scare the living hell out of me, fuck me, but I’m not allowed to ask questions. In other words, we’ll talk about it when *you* damn well feel like it, is that it?”

“I’m sorry if I took advantage of the situation, but I couldn’t help it. It was the...we were...” He looked up at her. “You’re a beautiful woman. What can I say?”

“Typical man.”

“Well, I can hardly help it, anymore than you can help...” He paused, his gaze raking along her perfect body. “Oh, hell, forget it.” He moved to take her arm. “I think we should get you home.”

She pulled away. “I can get myself home. Thanks for what you did, but I can handle it from here.”

“Jennifer, my...”

She looked up at him, her gaze stabbing his. “Jennifer? What happened to *Ms. Duquesne*?”

“I’m sorry. May I call you Jennifer? You can call me Judas.”

“I won’t be calling you anything, you pervert.”

“Fine,” he said, forcing himself to take a civil tone. “My offer of help isn’t just to see you get home okay, it’s to break this awful curse that’s on you. To do that you’ve got to work with me.”

“I don’t need you.”

Judas’s temper finally exploded. “Don’t be so damned stupid! Of course you need me. You can’t do this by yourself! Besides,” he said, indicating toward the window, “they could still be out there, don’t you know that? Alone you’ll be spotted. At least with me I can offer some kind of protection. What does it take to make you trust me? I got you this far. Let me finish what I started.”

“All right,” she hissed, “but that’s it. After that you leave, and we never see each other again.”

* * * *

As they walked, the old mansion on the hill drew nearer. Jennifer remembered the first time she’d seen it. The house and grounds were in ruin, the...

As if on cue, she heard the howling of a dog nearby, and stopped dead still, her head turning sharply toward the bellowing cry. The lonely sound brought back the memory of Lance and Stefan scouring the countryside, and her spine tingled with fear and foreboding. She’d learned a long time ago that a dog was the guardian of the underworld, and when one howled it meant someone from hell was near. The words “Black Heavens” came back to her.

She looked at Judas. “What are the Black Heavens? I heard you and the other man speak of them.”

“Black Heavens? You must be mistaken.”

She whirled on him. “I’m not mistaken!” she shouted and saw a helicopter overhead. “Oh my God, they’re back! Why don’t they give up?” she cried. “Why can’t they leave me alone?”

"Come on, we're almost there."

"I can't. I'm too tired. We...we have to hide."

Instead of trying to find cover, Judas swooped her up in his arms and carried her the rest of the way. He was climbing the steps of the mansion when the door flew open. Judas saw a dark-haired man with dark eyes and a broad face. Lines of strain deepened along his forehead and beneath his eyes. He was dressed in black with his shirt sleeves rolled up above his elbows. His hair was straight and parted on one side, a lock falling forward over one eye. He wore a soiled butcher's apron and held a bloody hatchet in his hand. He looked ready to strike when his eyes swiftly fell to Jennifer, who lay limp and exhausted in Judas's arms.

"Is she hurt?"

"She's all right. I just need to get her inside."

"Hurry," he said, stepping aside. Before he closed the door, he cast a suspicious gaze outside in a quick search. He looked up when he heard a helicopter in the distance and closed the door quickly.

"Her room," Judas said.

The man lifted the hatchet up toward the landing. "Through the west wing, the third door on the left."

Judas hurried up the stairs, his gaze furtively sliding toward the man and his hatchet until Jennifer was safe in her room. He had just laid her down when she began erratically moving her head and mumbling. Judas couldn't understand what she said, but heard the names, *Lance* and *Stefan* mingled with her speech. When he moved to get up, she laid a hand on his arm. "Please don't leave me."

"You're safe now," he assured her.

"Where am I?"

"You're safe at home."

"Thank God," she said and seemed to wilt.

Judas felt a brush of something. He recognized it immediately. It was the second time tonight that he'd felt the forbidden surge of desire so furtively touch him. But that wasn't all. With it came kindness, tenderness, oh, hell, all the signs of *humanity*!

Recognizing the danger, he quickly pulled away and rose from the bed as if it were on fire, his thoughts taking gigantic leaps through his mind. He couldn't let it happen again. He was used to a curtain of coldness and death

that constantly surrounded him, not a blanket of warmth. It wasn't fair to put him through this, to make him struggle with this war going on inside him. He'd never been around anyone like her, in a world where goodness and decency reigned. He detested this job his father had given him to do, and he wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

A warning cloud darkened his features. "Nothing," he muttered, his trembling fingers raked through his hair.

She gazed at him. It was the first time she'd seen him in the light, and she marveled at how handsome he was. "How did that happen?"

"What?" he said, puzzled.

"The scar, around your eye."

"Oh...uh..." he began, quickly lifting a hand and touching his scar. "It's nothing. A fight. That's all."

Jennifer remembered what he'd said earlier about being in a knife fight. "I'm sorry you got hurt."

"Sorry? For me?" he said, again feeling that blasted warmth coming over him. "No need to feel sorry for me. I gave as good as I got," he lied.

"Well," Jennifer said, looking down at herself, "if you'll excuse me, I need to..."

"Wait. I need to know a couple of things." He sat down beside her on the bed, and his words came forth slowly and hesitantly. "Jennifer, is there any way you can resist the rays of the moon?"

"Really, Judas, if you have to ask that question, then you don't understand."

"I understand more than you think, but from the other side."

"There you go talking in riddles again. Like tonight, with that man. I don't know what you're saying half the time. Why don't you tell me something I'll understand? A curse is not something a mere human being can..." Her words stopped suddenly, and her eyes darted toward him full of curiosity. "But you're not human, are you? I saw you pull a storm from out of the sky, for God's sake. I mean, you...you can't be from this world." Suddenly her eyes narrowed on him suspiciously. "Where are you from, Judas? And who are you? Why would you, a stranger—"

"I'm nobody," he said, sorry he had aroused her curiosity again. "Believe me. I just want to help. Why do you have such a hard time accepting that?"

"That's another question you shouldn't have to ask. Look at it from my point of view. You drop out of the sky...literally...and expect me not to ask questions, but to blindly trust you? Well, I'm trying, but it's hard."

"Look, I don't blame you for being confused. All I ask is that you keep the questions at a minimum. At this point it doesn't matter who I am or why I'm doing this."

"Not to you, maybe," she said, the sound of her voice filled with tension. Seeing the look on his face, she relented. "All right, I won't ask any questions...*for now*," she emphasized.

"Good enough," Judas said, then turned to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"You need to get some rest. I'll..."

"I meant to ask, where will you be if I need you? I think, under the circumstances, it would be best if you stayed here. What do you think?"

"Here?" he said, looking around.

"The mansion is large. Even scary at times. It would be nice to have someone here besides me and the staff."

"Speaking of the staff. The man downstairs. He wore an apron, had an ax—"

"You must mean Dirk. Dirk has been with me for several years. He showed up one day after his father died, and stayed."

"Does he know...?"

Jennifer hesitated. "Yes, he knows. Everyone here knows, but they're loyal servants. I pay them very well for that loyalty. Where else could they go and get three times their normal pay for the job they do?" Her eyes filled with remembrance. "I learned that from Lance, my...*late* husband." Looking back at him, she continued. "They know enough not to stir much during the autumn moon cycle, but still manage to tend to my needs well enough. Dirk is different. He doesn't seem to be afraid. He will show you to your room. Just go down and tell him you have been hired."

"No, not *hired*. I'm not part of the staff, I'm—"

"I know, but we have to tell him something. How would it look, my inviting a stranger to stay in the house?"

“Are you kidding? I’ll be in a different room, in a different bed. Aren’t you carrying this southern belle stuff a little too far? I happen to know you’re from the wicked state of California, where the girls are hot and loose.”

She felt insulted. “Now look here, Judas, or whatever the hell your name really is. In spite of what happened tonight, I’m not a whore, and I don’t bring strange men into my house.”

“No?” he said, a heavy dose of sarcasm in his voice. “What about these full moon liaisons? You have a studio here that has blood scattered from one end to the other. Don’t tell me you don’t sleep around.” What the hell was wrong with him? He had no right to accuse her, yet he couldn’t seem to help himself.

“That’s not me. That’s...someone else.”

He tried to stop, but spat out the words impatiently. “Sure, blame it on the alter ego. Look, don’t try and con me, lady. I’ve got a dossier on you that would make the burning of Atlanta look like a Girl Scout campfire.” He knew the problem. Stabs of jealousy were making a pincushion of his insides.

She whirled on him and found she was the victim of his glare. “A dossier? What are you doing with a dossier on me?”

Judas knew he’d said too much. “Never mind, I lied.”

Jennifer looked at him not knowing what to believe. “Stay out of my private business, Judas. I am not what you think I am. I never cheated on my husband, not after I realized this whole thing wasn’t just some wild dream I was having. I had amnesia. When my memory came back...When I came to fully realize that Lance Duquesne was my husband, I was a faithful wife.”

A suggestion of petty jealousy hovered in his eyes. “I wonder what the late Stefan Duquesne would say about that.”

“You men are all alike. I was a child. Two men exactly alike loved me, and I loved them. When I came back to Sangraal, it had been seventeen years since I’d had a man. Seventeen years of thinking my sons were dead, seventeen years of taking care of a man who thought motherhood was an inconvenience, so he told me my boys had died. I suppose there’s nothing wrong with that. The only men in this lousy world that were any good were my two sons.”

“And you killed the youngest.” Judas was sorry the moment he said it.

Pain pierced her heart like a dagger, and she screamed out her torment while the bloody pictures of a dark basement and an antique dagger covered with Cristo's blood filled her memory.

As Judas watched her beat the bed with her small fists, he ran to her and grabbed her. "I'm sorry, Jennifer. I don't know what made me say that." They struggled with each other for several minutes until Judas realized that there was only one way he could stop her. Quickly grabbing her chin, he forcibly turned it toward him and covered her lips with his own. He felt her melt against him, her nails digging into his arms and her hands climbing slowly until they circled his neck. As their passion reached its peak, they began to sink down on the bed while wildly throwing their clothes aside.

With bated breath and frenzied movements, Judas buried his face in the fragrant softness of her breasts, biting and drawing her soft flesh into his mouth. As his passion mounted, he turned her on her back and lifted her beautiful ass. Her long nails scratched the bed while she offered her butt to him, moving it seductively as she presented herself to him. He then rose up on his knees, and as his cock became rock hard, he leaned forward and began to squeeze and kiss the cheeks of her butt. When he couldn't wait another minute, he opened her up and thrust himself in.

"Oh, Judas!" she cried out. "Oh, God!"

His thrusts began, hot and heavy, and in the midst of her moans and screams, Judas emptied himself inside her. He waited for her to climax, but when she didn't, he leaned forward and turned her on her side. In the spoon position, his arms circled her body, his fingers delving deeply into her cunt from behind. With expert movements he played her clit, going ever deeper until he found her G-spot. Suddenly she began to buck wildly and gasped at the ecstasy that burned through her, at last bringing her to a raging hot climax that had her holding on to him until her strength returned.

"God, Judas," she said as she began to breathe easier, "I've never felt anything like it. My God, what do you do for an encore?"

"Anything you want," he whispered seductively in her ear.

Suddenly, for some reason, she looked down at herself, at her nakedness, remembering her wanton behavior, and felt ashamed. She quickly pulled away, lifted the back of her hand, and wiped at her mouth. "You must think...you must think I'm cheap," she whispered.

"No, Jennifer, I don't think you're cheap at all."

“Just for the record, I think we need to keep our mind on business. No more funny business. Don’t you agree?”

He grabbed her and pulled her close. “Tell me that the next time you need to be fucked, Jennifer. Now you’re satisfied, with no hunger to cloud your decisions. But when your body begins to cry out for a cock, remember mine and how good it feels inside you.”

“How dare you speak to me like that!” she shouted and raised her hand to slap him, but he caught it in midair.

“Like what, Jennifer? I only told the truth. You’re a little nympho, Jennifer, and one man alone can’t please you. You blamed the situation at the club on me, but the truth is, I happened to be in the right place at the right time for you to have yourself a little fling. Lucky that I know how to handle a woman like you.”

She jerked her hand out of his. “Well, the *fling* is over.”

“Over, hell! It’s my job to protect you.”

“With your hands all over me? Please leave,” she whispered, with a look on her face that told Judas the minute he closed the door she would cry.

It tore his heart out, but he had to distance himself from her. “I’ll...uh...I’ll go now and talk to Dirk about a room.” His eyes met hers. “That is, if you still want me to stay.”

The cynicism of his remark grated on her. “Of course, I do. That hasn’t changed. I simply want you to do the job you were sent to do and leave my personal business to me.”

Judas felt shut out. Being a stranger in a strange land was a cold, empty feeling. “I understand,” he whispered.

And left.

Chapter Eight

Judas walked down the stairs through frigid shadows that hung and leaned. His cold soul reached out to them as though trying to grasp something it knew, something it understood, something it was familiar with. He welcomed the chill, allowed it to penetrate him as he neared the bottom where he was greeted by a conflicting warmth. The warmth reached out, touching his body, his face, but not his soul.

His black soul. His cold soul. His wicked soul.

He turned toward a wide arch and saw Dirk kneeling before the fireplace, stoking a fire. The moment he entered, Dirk rose from his crouch and turned around, again holding a working utensil that could be used as a weapon.

Judas could almost see him wielding it against him.

"I've been told to ask about a room. It seems I've been invited to stay."

"You'll find one already prepared in the East Wing."

"The East Wing," Judas murmured, then looked upward into a dark corridor. "No, I...you must understand that I can't be that far away from the lady of the house. If you would give me a room closer...next to hers, perhaps?"

"That wing looks out on the beach. If you're a light sleeper, you might want to reconsider and take the one in the East Wing. It's a little quieter."

"A light sleeper? Why—"

"Some people can't sleep that close to the ocean. It can get noisy. Waves crashing, gulls squawking, that kind of thing."

"I have no problem with waves and gulls."

Dirk shrugged. "Suit yourself. You'll find it all made up." He hesitated, letting Judas turn and get a few feet away from him before he added, "The ghosts like fresh sheets."

When Judas heard Dirk's last few words, he stopped abruptly and looked over his shoulder. "Ghosts?"

"Sometimes."

The word was loaded, but instead of taking issue with it, Judas let it rest. The hatchet-faced man was simply using this infantile trick to let Judas know that he was unwelcome here.

He turned to go upstairs.

The eyes that pierced his back were every bit as sharp as a dagger, but Judas was determined not to look back. He proceeded on, making sure his pace was slow and deliberate, until he entered the corridor darkness. Once there, he stopped, turned back, and looked out of the darkness to see Dirk slowly return to the fire and continue stoking it.

What is Dirk's problem? he wondered.

From the moment he'd first seen him, something told him he was trouble. Somehow he knew he'd be taking a chance every time he turned his back on him. Now he was almost tempted to feel his back for blood from Dirk's piercing eyes. What could he be afraid of? It could be anything. Another man in the house stealing his thunder. Maybe he had designs on Jennifer and didn't like the competition. While several possibilities whirled in his mind, he approached Jennifer's room, passed it, and walked to the next room.

The moment he opened the door, all remaining energy seemed to drain from his body, and he couldn't wait to take his flying suit off and get into the shower. The streams in the woods were cold and refreshing, but they couldn't take the place of a hot shower. He languished for long moments beneath the misty darts until he finally felt clean again. As soon as he stepped out, he noticed a bathrobe hanging on a hook and put it on while rifling through drawers and closets, looking for something to wear. He didn't find anything, so he pulled the robe a little tighter around himself.

Since the shower relaxed him to the point of melting his bones, he longed for the bed, but heard the waves crashing against the shore and decided he would take a walk along the veranda. The moment he walked out, he was once again struck by the vastness of the ocean and couldn't deny his admiration of the power that created it. His journey to Earth had shown him many things that amazed him, but the ocean was without a doubt the most amazing. He loved the sea air, inhaling a gust of cool night air that

blew around his head, tangling his wet hair. He stood for several minutes at the baluster, when his attention was taken by the golden light coming from Jennifer's room. He knew he shouldn't, but he simply couldn't resist and walked very silently toward it. With the darkness hiding him, he slipped into a pocket of darkness where his view of the room was uninterrupted and gasped at what he saw.

Jennifer wasn't alone.

She was floating in the arms of two men who Judas immediately recognized. They seemed to have an illusory quality. Real, but not real. Their dark Gypsy bodies as big as life, although Judas knew they were only Jennifer's memories of them, memories she brought to life by clinging to that nostalgic time in her life as she would to a life preserver in a stormy sea.

She lay on the bed wrapped seductively in a sheet while the two men hovered over her, both stroking, rubbing, and kissing her at the same time. Moans of ecstasy rose from her throat as she writhed beneath their touch. Whispers of their names drifted on the night air while each of them ravaged her. All at once, Judas saw a shimmer of the moon, and each of the men began to change before his eyes. In only moments she was surrounded by two man-beasts who were growling as they made wild, passionate love to her.

He was surprised to learn that she wasn't frightened at this change, but it seemed to excite her. With her lovely, curvaceous body free of the sheet, she became wild, handling their cocks and slipping each of them into her cunt for her pleasure, and theirs. The three of them made a hellish silhouette against the rising moon, each of the men growling, licking, and lifting Jennifer in their arms as they continued to pleasure her while she, in turn, pleased them.

In that moment Judas felt a deep sorrow because he knew that Jennifer would never forget a single detail of their faces or bodies. Any man who came into her life would have to battle the memory of these two Gypsy charmers who held all her memories captive, much like they had so long ago.

Just then Judas looked up when he heard her scream of delight.

These two shivers of vivid reflection held her so close, one fucking her until he was spent and then the other continuing this carnal act of love. She took them both in her arms, one on each side, while they rained kisses on

her face and body. Finally, one's raw, sharp-toothed mouth began to nibble a breast, while the other thrust his stiff tongue in her ear. By this time their cocks were full and large again, and Jennifer couldn't keep her hands away. Like a wild woman, she sought after it, plunging it into herself, while the other man-beast entered her from behind. Just when she reached a wildly cataclysmic orgasm, the glittering visions of these two men began to evaporate, once again disappearing into the black stillness of her mind.

She woke to her own wild, echoing cry of delight.

Judas didn't make a sound as he saw her rise and walk into the other room. He then took a few silent steps in and waited and watched, making sure he still lingered in the shadows. Suddenly she walked out, and her eyes turned toward him.

Judas knew he'd been seen, and it sent his pulse to pounding. "Jennifer..."

Her eyes clouded over. She was confused at first and then saw Stefan as he looked the night he came into her room from the veranda. The vision took her breath. He was so handsome, a dark, handsome Gypsy with an earring glittering in the soft light of her room.

"Stefan...my love."

"No, it's..." Judas's words faded as he noticed the look in her eyes. He knew immediately what was happening. She was no longer here with him, but somewhere else, years past, living in a time when the two men she loved were still alive. He remembered that her first introduction to Stefan had been when he walked in on her from the veranda, which must have triggered the memories. The thought brought on a twinge of jealousy, causing him to grit his teeth at the absurdity of it. He'd never been jealous in his life, never had any reason to be since he could have any woman he wanted. It seemed that in the short time he'd known Jennifer, she had triggered a flood of emotions that were new to him, all proving how disgustingly mortal he was.

"Oh, Stefan," she said, taking a deep breath, "you almost scared me to death."

Judas saw her hungry gaze searching his face. He stood very still as she walked into the shadows and reached up and buried her fingers in the magnificent depth of his thick hair. "Did you just get back?" she whispered. "I was worried. You've been gone so long."

Judas felt a chill. He knew that Jennifer was in a dangerous state right now, and since he knew the dialogue, he said his part as he walked slowly in from the veranda. "I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to worry you. I came up the back stairs. I haven't even been to my room yet. As soon as I arrived, I couldn't wait to hold you in my arms."

"Don't go back to your room," she whispered. "Stay with me."

"If anyone...you know who I mean...finds us together—"

"No one is up at this hour, Stefan," she said, reaching for him as he walked closer. "We can lock the door. No one will know."

The moment Judas got close enough for the light in the room to catch the golden glimmer of his blond hair, Jennifer's eyes widened. "Stefan...your hair...your...beautiful dark hair."

"Jennifer, it's..."

"It doesn't matter, Stefan. Come to my bed and love me."

"Jennifer, it's Judas."

"Judas?" she giggled. "Oh, Stefan you're such a tease." She reached up with her hand to stroke his face. "Stefan, I've missed you so. Please love me," she whispered.

Judas knew he was lost. She stood before him naked and asking to be loved. He couldn't refuse, yet how could he do as she asked while she stayed in this dangerous state?

She slowly opened his robe. "Stefan," she said, lifting her hands and pushing it from his naked body.

"Jennifer," he whispered and gathered her to him. Like the Gypsy, he placed his hands on her hips and lifted her up to him, her cunt touching the tip of his cock. The moment their flesh met, it caught fire, causing a firestorm to leap within them. While they gazed into each other's eyes, he lowered her slowly. The moment his cock entered her weeping pussy, her eyes glowed with pure bliss and closed in rapture. He could feel her hot, dripping cunt close about his cock, and at that point didn't care if she thought he was Satan himself, he had to have her completely.

"Oh, Stefan," she rasped with her passion-filled voice.

With slow movements, so as not to jolt her out of her dream world, Judas pressed her to the nearest wall and spread her arms out. With her breasts thrust forward, she looked like the most succulent piece of fruit in God's Garden of Eden, and Judas couldn't keep his hungry mouth from

tasting her one breast and then the other. With a moan, she circled him with her legs as if she wanted to climb him. Judas felt the forbidden flush of desire, and it was unlike anything he'd ever felt. He had to climb up to the summit and thrust over and over again, going deeper and deeper until he felt he had touched her soul.

The stroke of his tongue on her body was slight and painfully teasing as he nibbled her earlobes, her neck, and then her breasts, making a moist path along her body with his lapping tongue. She curved into the lines of his body so perfectly, he felt as if they were two halves making a whole. His hands tingled as they moved gently down the curve of her back, the feel of her perfect body sending jolts through his arms and into his heart. He could feel her move and buck, her movements becoming wanton as they matched his urgency with her own unsated lusty needs.

Hungry for more of him, she took his hands and encouraged him to explore her even more. She pressed his hands to her breasts and then up to her neck, her lips. Judas felt a jolt when she kissed his palms, licked each of his fingers, one by one, and then took them into her mouth to suck.

Oh, God!

If his desire exploded before, it was nothing to what it was doing to him now! He caught her around the back of her neck and cupped her head in his hands. He kissed her so deeply, his reach into her mouth was matched only by his cock that pounded into her. Slowly they began to sink to the floor. Jennifer bucked madly against him, pumping, rolling, gasping for air and almost breathing fire as she moaned over and over again until he knew she had risen to the summit. Together they found the tempo that bound their bodies together and soared to the top.

She gasped in sweet agony, waves of ecstasy surging through her. He was there, on the brink, and clasped her tighter as he buried his face in the soft curve of her neck. He continued to plunge and moan until he shattered and his cock began to spew like a lusty fountain. His release was so deep and complete it made him jerk around like a mad whip crack.

The room became silent, with only the sound of the surf crashing over the shore and then bleeding away over and over again. It sounded like a giant fist pounding against his head. It kept pounding until he realized someone was knocking on his door. He looked down at Jennifer and saw her sleeping, so he picked her up, laid her on her bed, and covered her up. As

quickly as he could, he grabbed his robe, hurried out on the veranda, and quickly stepped into his room.

"Come in," he called out.

When the door opened, Dirk stood on the other side carrying a tray. "I thought you might be hungry, so I fixed you a tray."

"Thanks," Judas said, feeling as if his sin was etched on his forehead. He quickly reached up to smooth his hair.

Dirk set the tray down, then turned toward the door.

"By the way," Judas said as he extended his hand, "I don't think I introduced myself. My name is Judas. I'm here to be of service to..." Realizing that didn't sound quite right, he tried again. "I mean, I'm here to...uh...help."

"Strange name," Dirk interrupted, his face scowling. "You know who Judas was, don't you? He was..."

"Yes, I know. The traitor of Christ."

"Well, traitor, take my advice and go back to where you came from."

"Look, I'm no traitor, and believe me when I say no one wants me out of here more than I do, but I can't."

"Yeah? What's keeping you here? It couldn't be a cute little blonde werewolf, could it?"

"I understand when she's under the influence, she's a redhead."

"Look, don't play games with me. Just so you'll know, my name is Dirk Scarret, and I'll be watching you."

"I'm sure you will," Judas murmured as he wondered about the strange reaction he was getting from Dirk. He couldn't figure out if he was simply being protective of the lady who paid him the generous salary or if the feeling went much deeper. "Look, Dirk, I have no designs on the lady of the house. I'm simply here to help, and you'll have to admit that she needs help. Right?"

"There's only one way you can do that, and that is to put a bullet in her brain."

"My God, kill her?" Judas growled, his anger rising. "That's a little extreme, isn't it? I mean..." He stopped speaking, knowing he couldn't say any more. It would reveal too much. Instead he simply said, "Well, there are other ways, and I...I want to try. If I do, I might need your help. I mean,

we're both working toward the same goal, wouldn't you say? You do want to see her...uh...illness destroyed, don't you?"

"*Illness?*" Dirk snorted. "My mother told me all about this house and the *illness* that has affected those who have lived here. My father was Jenks, the cook's helper. By the time he finally got away from here, he'd seen so much it drove him crazy. He roamed the countryside like a maniac until he raped my mother and left her with child. When she died, I came here to get a look at the legendary mansion and to see what all the talk was about. To me it looked like nothing more than a decrepit old plantation from out of the past, but something drew me. I don't know what it was, but the next thing I knew I was carrying pails of water and peeling potatoes. I had slipped right into the niche my father had left." When Judas didn't respond, he went on. "It's this house, don't you see? It calls people back. If you die, then it captures your children, and their children, with some kind of invisible umbilical cord. She'll never be free, and neither will you if you stay here. The curse on her can never be destroyed...never. She can't be helped, but you can. That's why you need to go now."

So that was it. Dirk wanted to get rid of him all right, but not for the reasons he thought. He was afraid for him to stay, to become buried in this house of shadows where evil lived. It was at that moment that Judas truly realized the extent of the damage Lupercus had done. He hadn't only put a curse on the brothers and all those who came after them, but on those who lived in the house. Yes, there was an umbilical cord, but it was one that could, and would, be broken.

"I understand what you're saying, but I have to try. If I need help, are you willing to assist me?"

"I got nowhere to go."

"Fine. Now, if I could borrow some clothes that would be great. It seems all I have with me is a rather brief flying suit."

Dirk's attention was drawn to the black leather outfit lying on a chair. "Flying suit?"

"Yes, it..." Suddenly Judas knew that he could never explain anything about himself in terms that Dirk would understand. "I know it looks strange, but it serves me well where I come from."

"Yeah?" Dirk said, still looking at the flying suit. "Where is that?"

"I come..." Judas halted his words abruptly, his sudden silence prompting Dirk's eyes to shift toward him. "Remind me to tell you about it someday. In the meantime, how about those clothes?"

"I'll bring some up," Dirk muttered. With that he turned to leave, a look of doubt and suspicion on his face.

When the door closed, Judas sat down and took the cloth from over the food. It looked like something similar to what he'd seen on the serving board in the studio the night he had arrived. Not what he expected, but tasty. While he ate, he faced the night air that blew in through the French doors. The white curtains billowed wildly in the air. To some it might be cold, but to Judas it cooled his flame-licked body and fed his cold soul.

* * * *

Jennifer lunged forward from out of her dream, the place where she felt the arms of her love around her, a place where the mists of time enfolded her. Now, as she sat on her bed facing reality, she shivered. She rose from her bed feeling as if she were floating and walked to the bathroom. Even reality seemed like only a dream, a dream filled with shimmering moons and hunger, it was the hunger that drove her. Afterwards it seemed like a dream she hadn't participated in, but simply watched.

Now as she reached down and swirled the water of her bath, she watched the mist as it rose from the surface. It was here, in her safe place, that the dream would begin to disappear, to break up into tiny molecules of terror. But it would come again, often, but never to stay. And then the dream would begin to unfold into who she really was, *what* she really was. A *thing* that scoured the countryside hungry for blood. When she couldn't stand the torment another moment, she would come back here to this cocoon of warmth that was created by water so hot she would get lost in the steam that drifted and caressed her tenderly. The water would wash away all traces of the curse and leave her with food and wine that would take away the taste of blood from her mouth. She stepped down into the tub and sank into her safe place to relax until the good memories returned, the visits, the sapphire eyes, the swarthy skin. Yes, only they could make her forget about her occasional *descent into hell*.

"Jennifer," came the voice in her head. "*My love, my only love.*"

She opened her eyes, and standing in a mist between memories and reality was a man. A man she knew and loved. The room was dark except for flickering candles and the moon that lent its light through a crystal-clear windowpane. "Lance, where is Stefan?"

Just then she saw him separate, and one became two. She smiled. Both were there for her. Just as they had been so long ago. "Come closer," she whispered and lifted her arms toward them. Suddenly he appeared beside her and swept her legs around him as he pushed her backward against the wall of the tub. His cock pressed into her, and she lost her breath. There it was, so familiar, and yet so new. A tremor heated her thighs and groin as Lance slowly began to turn to a beast, his sharp teeth grazing her breasts and neck. At first the scars were pale, but then they became steadily redder, trickles of blood bursting from each one.

"Oh, God, Lance!" she cried out as her desire rose. Close to her ear, she could hear the savage growls of his love as they erupted from his throat. He changed with each moment that passed, loving her with all the savage intensity of a beast of the night. She longed for it; she hungered for it. She wanted to be consumed by him.

Just then she looked down and saw Stefan sucking her toes and licking her instep. Somehow it seemed such a carnal act that the moment she saw it, a spiral of flames shot up inside her. She lay on her side while both of them hovered over her. One sucking her cunt while the other entered her from the rear. Her breasts burned beneath their touch. Her mouth tingled from their shuddering kisses. When had she begun to love these beasts as much as she loved the men? She didn't know. She only knew she needed what they could give her. The deep, satisfying thrusts they made into her cunt made her feel like a forbidden fruit they were partaking of. No. She wasn't ready to let them go. Not now. Not ever.

And then the tub suddenly became surrounded in flames.

All the carnality of hell seemed to flourish as the two of them furiously fucked her, one after the other. As the three of them rolled and tumbled in the midst of these leaping flames, they brought her to such heights of desire she could only gasp out their names with bated breath. And then suddenly the orgasms began to burst inside her, one after the other for hour upon hour, it seemed until only a mere whisper was left warming her.

And then they were gone.

Like the images that were getting smaller, traveling backward, it seemed, to a place she could not go. At last satisfied, her eyes closed as she nestled into the water, surrendering herself to the warmth and the darkness that surrounded her. But as she lay quiet and undisturbed, another dream slowly emerged from out of that euphoric darkness. It was a dream of blond hair, a kiss from soft, pillowy lips, and the pressure of a muscled body against hers.

She lunged forward, her lids flying open and the water splashing. Something, a form, was etched on the dark screen of her mind. She recognized him immediately as the man with the horrible name and scarred face. The one who rescued her and made love to her.

He was here!

In her home!

Something about him was different. He looked nothing like Stefan or Lance. He had hair of a different color, a scar, a body that resembled a mighty warrior, brave and strong. For some reason she saw him surrounded in roiling black clouds while lightning ripped the sky behind him. The words "Black Heavens" rang in her memory.

The rest of Jennifer's night was spent tossing and turning in her bed. She couldn't get the face she'd seen out of her mind. He was handsome, so very handsome, the scar changing him from a pretty boy to a dangerous enemy with vivid green eyes that penetrated her very soul. She wanted him, but why?

My God, she thought. Was it because of his bruising look?

After all, she had fallen in love with the beasts that Lance and Stefan had become. Finally giving up on getting any sleep, she rose from the bed and raked through her long hair with shaky fingers.

She poured herself several drinks and paced until dawn finally arrived. She quickly turned and pulled the bell cord. In only minutes a knock sounded on her door.

"Come in," she called out impatiently.

"Sorry, ma'am, but your breakfast isn't quite prepared."

"No...I...Dirk, you must tell me. When you talked to our guest last night, did he tell you anything about himself?"

"Well, he told me his name and asked me if I would assist him."

"Assist him? In what?"

“He calls it your...*illness*.”

“My illness?”

“He meant—”

“Yes, I know what he meant.”

“That’s about all I could get out of him. He wouldn’t tell me where he was from or much of anything, really.”

“Then I wasn’t dreaming,” she muttered.

“What was that, madam?”

“Oh...nothing. I suppose since we have a guest in the house, the dining room should be prepared for breakfast.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Dirk turned to go, but Jennifer stopped him with her words.

“By the way, where did you put him?”

“He’s occupying the Blue Room.”

She whirled around. “The Blue Room. You mean the one next to mine?”

“Yes, ma’am. He said he wanted to be near you, and it was the only one I had ready in this wing.”

Jennifer rubbed her forehead, then turned to Dirk. “Watch him, Dirk. I don’t trust him. I don’t even know what ever possessed me to ask him to stay.”

“Whatever you say.” Dirk hesitated a moment, then spoke again. “Ma’am if you want, I could ask him to leave.”

“No, I can’t do that,” she said, appearing nervous.

“Has he done anything...said anything...?”

“No, it’s just me. For some reason he makes me uncomfortable. Last night I was so grateful for his help that I offered him a room in the mansion. Today I’m thinking a little more clearly and hope I haven’t made a mistake.” She lifted her eyes to Dirk and smiled. “Well, what’s done is done, and there’s nothing we can do about it now. Just prepare the dining room, please. Oh...Dirk.”

He had turned to leave, but paused and turned back when he heard his name. “Yes, ma’am?”

She wrung her hands. “Have...have you had breakfast?”

“No, ma’am. I don’t usually eat until everyone else is served.”

“I know this is...unusual, but would you take your breakfast with us? As I said, I don’t trust him, and I’d feel better if you were there.”

Dirk shrugged. "Okay, I guess. If you're sure."

She smiled nervously at him. "Don't worry. It'll be okay. You know I don't hold much to tradition anyway."

"Yes, ma'am."

When Dirk had gone, Jennifer's thoughts stretched back to when Lance had first brought her here. She'd been deathly afraid of Jenks. How strange that she had learned to trust his son so completely. He was different from his father, who was just a step above a slobbering idiot. Dirk, on the other hand, had proven himself to be a trustworthy friend, while the young man with blond hair scared her. She didn't know why. Maybe it was because when she thought of him, of how handsome he was, and sexy, she felt hot and bothered. He was definitely a threat to her fantasies of the past. She didn't want anyone disturbing her dreams of Lance and Stefan, of how it used to be before—before—

Her mind flooded with beautiful memories. She wouldn't have it! She didn't care how handsome he was. She wouldn't have this blond, god-like creature taking their place! But when she touched him, when he touched her, his flesh was real, firm, strong. Not a dream or a vision and not a puff of wind. He didn't disappear in a fog of memories. And he was so *different*.

Stefan was dark, he was blond.

Lance's eyes were sapphire, his eyes an electric green.

Her two loves were natives of the south. He was from *HELL!*

* * * *

Judas's eyes flew open with the sudden invasion of blinding light. He could feel the painful rays stab into his eyes as if trying to bore a hole into his brain. The assault caused him to squeeze his eyes closed again and bury his face in his pillow.

Where the hell was all this light coming from?

And then he remembered that he wasn't in the woods. The recollection rushed into his mind with the needle-sharp prickle of a dagger, causing him to open one lid at a time carefully, very carefully.

The French doors were open, giving him a glimpse of a blue sky.

A *bright*, blue sky.

He kept his eyes closed as he reached out and grabbed the bedpost like a drowning man. Slowly he struggled upward to a standing position, and without opening his eyes, he stumbled around until he found the French doors and slammed them closed. He then rushed over to the dresser and blindly scattered the articles on it as he felt around for his sunglasses. Once he found them, he grabbed them as he would a lifesaver and put them on. The darkness soothed him enough to help him find the bathroom and the shower. He knew he must look ridiculous standing beneath the thundering water with his sunglasses on, but it was better than going blind.

This was too much. He was used to swirling black clouds, darkness, a pit, the only light was an occasional burst of flame. He should have known, especially after his stay in the woods, but he was used to doing what he had to do at night and sleeping during the day. Anytime he couldn't, he used his sunglasses religiously. Who knew he would need them when waking up to light that burst in on him like a bullet to the brain?

The shower was like a shot in the arm.

It, and the semi-darkened room, helped him get used to all this ridiculous light. While he was still drying off, he heard a knock at the door, so he wrapped the towel around his hips and opened it. When he saw the look on Dirk's face, he realized what he must look like.

"Sorry, I just got out of the shower."

Making no comment, Dirk said, "Breakfast will be served in the dining room in fifteen minutes."

Judas nodded. "I'll be there."

Dirk turned slightly, and then with a curious look in his eyes, he asked, "What's with the sunglasses?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." He reached up and pulled them off. When Dirk didn't move, he said, "It's just that my eyes are sensitive to the light, but they'll adjust. I'll be right down." He saw Dirk look beyond him into the shadowed room and then back. For a moment the two men stood looking at each other as adversaries. He knew that Dirk didn't understand and would never understand why the normal influx of light was like pounding a spike in his brain, and Judas couldn't explain.

Finally, Dirk said, "The dining room is down the stairs and to your left."

"Thanks. I'll find it."

He watched Dirk walk away, still feeling the chill that radiated from his very soul.

From his soul.

Judas turned the phrase over and over in his mind. He knew about cold souls since he had one himself, but there were other kinds of cold souls, and Dirk had one. Wondering why the man didn't like him, the night before he looked through Jennifer's dossier and found an entry regarding Dirk Scarret. While eating the sparse meal that was brought to him, he learned that Dirk thought of himself as a kind of freak because of his father's history. With no confidence in himself, he stayed where it was familiar, playing the role of a Renfield to Jennifer's Dracula. At other times he stayed hidden in his own dark room unless he was roaming the dark mansion, taking care of odd jobs that needed doing, or cleaning up after her nights of terror. Yes, he was a loyal servant, keeping his mouth shut and protecting her with his life, but it wasn't for the money. No, Dirk, like the fabled Renfield, was mesmerized by the evil, evil that made him a slave. More than a servant, Dirk was a follower with a protective nature which made him suspicious of everyone. Judas had thought it was him he didn't like, but Dirk treated everyone the same. Like a hound from hell, he was on his guard with every new face that came around, but once he learned from his master that they were okay, only then would he retreat back into the darkness of his bell tower, his dungeon, his lair.

Chapter Nine

Dirk was in the dining room, laying out the meal on the sideboard, when he heard voices. He turned and saw Judas and Jennifer enter. Jennifer gave him a knowing glance, which was his cue to take his place at the table. After filling each plate, he slipped in the seat beside her, facing Judas.

Just as he expected, Judas's eyes registered surprise.

"So, Dirk, tell me a little more about yourself," Judas said as he spread his napkin in his lap. "Since you are apparently a part of this household, I should probably get to know you better."

"There's not much to tell," Dirk said as he began eating. "My mother is dead, and I believe you know about my father."

"Well, yes, but where are you from? Where did you go to school? Do you have any hobbies, any interests?"

Dirk looked up from his plate and gave Judas a black look. "Why?"

"Why?" Judas repeated.

"Yes, why? Will my past make any difference to the help you will be giving to the madam? I would suggest all your efforts be focused on her and the plan you have of breaking this curse."

Judas looked at him, a shrewd smile etching his face. "Very well put, Dirk. That statement leads me to believe you might have had something of an education. If that's true, why are you here, in a job far below your capabilities?"

"There's not much to offer in an area so far from the city."

"Then move to the city. You have no reason to stay here, and there must be jobs by the hundreds waiting for a bright young man such as yourself."

"Not as long as the madam needs me." A curtain of anger fell over Dirk's eyes as he stared at Judas. "You seem awfully anxious to get rid of me."

"I don't like to see a life wasted, that's all."

"I don't believe that for a minute. You avoid talking about yourself, so you ask questions rather than answer them. You're the stranger here, yet you pry into things that are none of your business and have nothing to do with the reason you're here. I have told you about myself, yet you tell me nothing of yourself. I find..."

Once Dirk began expounding on Judas's shortcomings, he couldn't seem to stop. He watched as Judas brought his elbows up on the table and listened while a strange smile etched his face. The look made Dirk feel that he had fallen into Judas's trap and ended his tirade on a sudden note. The moment his words stopped, the room settled in an awkward silence.

Dirk's eyes darted defensively between the two of them, at the way they stared at him suspiciously. Knowing he'd said too much, he rose from the table, his breakfast only half eaten. "If you'll excuse me, madam, I'll begin cleaning the kitchen."

* * * *

Jennifer's eyes followed him as he hurried out. "How strange. I've never heard Dirk speak so affluently before. He's always said so very little, answering my questions with little more than a single syllable. He's usually very quiet, spends his time alone, but now..."

"Apparently you don't know him as well as you thought."

She turned her eyes toward Judas. "What do you mean? Are you saying he could be dangerous?"

"No, of course not. In fact, Dirk is a very faithful servant. He just doesn't like other people. He's very protective of you, that's all."

"Are you saying he's in love with me?"

"Not at all. Dirk will never love any woman. Dirk is in love with evil."

"My God," she whispered as her eyes shifted toward the door Dirk had left through. Although it was perfectly natural, the fact that it was still swinging sent a chill down her back.

"Jennifer," Judas said, breaking into her thoughts. "Dirk is right, you know. It's not fair of me to be here without you knowing all about me."

"Oh, God," she whispered.

Judas reached out and took her hands. "I'll try and be as gentle as possible, but you have to try and understand—"

"I don't think I want to hear this," Jennifer said, pulling her hands out of his.

"No, please," he said as he took her hands again and held them with a firm grip. "Jennifer, look at me."

She reluctantly turned her eyes up to his, imagining she could see small lightning bolts in their electric green color.

"The truth is, I'm from a place far away called the Black Heavens."

"That's it," she said. "The night at the club. I heard, you say you came from...oh, God, it can't be."

"Jennifer," Judas whispered, "why would I say it if it weren't true? I'm not crazy. There's a world out there, Jennifer. One that you wouldn't even dream existed, and it's far, far away from here. But it doesn't matter how far away it is because I'd travel any distance to help you."

"Yes, but you must have known about me before you came. Otherwise, why would you?"

"Because one very tragic night you summoned us, and later you tried to take your own life by performing a very powerful ritual. One that shook our world."

"No," she muttered, shaking her head. "You must be mistaken. I didn't summon anyone."

"Jennifer, don't you remember?"

"The night Cristo died? Of course, I remember. My God, how could I forget? But why your world? What did my actions have to do with you and your world?"

Judas had dreaded this question. He knew it was coming and took a deep breath before he responded in a soft, ominous voice. "Because the beast who cast this spell upon you and those you love is part of our world."

Jennifer's head jerked upward immediately, and her eyes widened. "You! You're the one!" As the pain of that night raced through her, she could still hear the words she shouted at the moon—

"I dare you to come out of your hiding place! I dare you to show yourself to me, to face me, to look me in the eye. You're nothing! A stupid race of gods that hide behind curses. Go ahead, you bastards, send me your worst! Do you hear? Anyone! Your highest, most powerful—"

“So you’re the dirty, filthy slime that killed my sons!” she hissed as she jumped up from the table, almost knocking it over. Moving quickly, she lunged forward and grabbed a knife and wielded it toward Judas.

Judas jumped up, defensively lifting his hands in the air against her. “No...I mean, yes, I’m the one they sent, but only to help you fight this thing. I didn’t put the curse on you, or the others.”

“You sick bastard! Do you know what you and those who call themselves gods have caused me? I’ve wept blood over this! I was ready to kill myself, to seek you out myself through death. I was ready to find you even if it meant a trek through hell! You and your world are nothing but despicable filth! Taking lives and playing with them! You’re lower than dirt, you’re slime...you’re...I can’t think of anything as low as what you are!”

“Jennifer, I swear I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Then why you? Why didn’t they send the one who did it?”

“He is here, Jennifer, but we didn’t send him. Your challenge angered him, and now his mission on earth is to destroy me and keep you under his spell.”

Her eyes widened. “Don’t be ridiculous. This is just another one of your lies.”

“I’m not lying.”

“All right. If it’s true, then where is he? *Who* is he?”

“His name is Lupercus,” Judas said. “I don’t know where he is right at this second, but he’s here. Somewhere. His was the other voice you heard at the club. Remember?”

Jennifer hesitated for a moment. She did remember the other voice, the other voice that this bastard said didn’t exist. Now he’s saying it does exist. “Lies!” she shouted. “Nothing but lies! You said there wasn’t anyone else there, and now you say there was. Is this another convenient lie you’re trying to make me believe? You know there’s no such person! You’re the one! Get out! Get out now before I kill you!”

* * * *

Judas felt a sharp pang of fear dance along his spine when she began advancing on him with the knife in her hand. He knew it would be easy to

take her, but he didn't want to hurt her, so he tried to talk her out of it. "Jennifer, you don't want to do this."

Her eyes glittered with anger, and a sinister smile stretched her lips. "Oh, yes I do."

"Jennifer, all I want to do is help you. Why won't you let me?"

"You want to help? Be still so I can bury this blade right in the big middle of your heart...if you've got one!"

"Jennifer, he'll come to you when you least expect it. He'll sneak inside your head, make you do things. Damn it, Jennifer, I know him! God, Jennifer, don't push me out! Let me stay so I can be with you when he—" A whiz of the blade flashed across his eyes, and his words faded.

Determination to kill etched her face, causing him to back away slowly, his hands pushing chairs in front of him to slow her down. But for every one he pushed in her path, she quickly threw them aside, causing them to tumble to the floor. His eyes narrowed on the knife. It reminded him of the one that had cut his face, and the memory was so vivid he could almost feel it again.

God, he thought, when was the last time he'd been afraid?

He didn't remember because he never had. But now when he knew he was mortal and could die, fear was one of the emotions he was becoming familiar with. He watched her, his eyes jumping from her to the blade and back again. It pointed dangerously toward his heart. When the last chair went tumbling down, he found himself vulnerable, no other recourse but to whirl around and run through the kitchen and out the back door.

Once he was a safe distance away, he stopped and looked back. The house looked drab and bulky, slumbering in the early morning mist. Moisture stained the rough gray stones. Judas hugged himself, feeling the chill as it penetrated his clothes. The air felt dead and still, like a crypt.

She was in there alone and Lupercus would find her.

He had to find somewhere to stay, so his eyes shifted, looking down the path. Nothing moved in the early morning mist, and then he remembered the cellar. Judas quickly discounted it, knowing it was the place where Cristo had been killed. Having no other option, he crept around the house, finding a window. Lying down on the ground, he looked in, the darkness so heavy and black he could hardly see. His eyes finally adjusted, and he saw the cavernous room of rough-hewn rock. The shackles that Cristo had managed to wedge from the walls were still lying on the floor. Rats scuttled over

them, the only sign of life in this dungeon of horrors. His eyes raked over every inch, wondering how he could get in when he saw the wooden stairs—and the blood.

Cristo's blood.

Turning away, he thought of the ghosts Dirk had mentioned and was certain Cristo's ghost would fill the cellar with smells and sounds that would make it impossible to stay there. Great. Now he was afraid of ghosts. Being mortal was no fun. Judas pushed himself away from the window and made his way up the path *to the church*.

* * * *

"You're going away for a while, Father, but don't worry. I'll take care of your parish."

Pulled from his prayer by a sinister voice, the priest looked up. He immediately sensed a presence of evil and called out, "Is someone here?" When there was no answer, he gave the sign of the cross and struggled up from his painful position on the floor. He turned to leave, but instead found himself looking into a black void that stretched into infinity. This wasn't his chapel, but some hellish cave-like structure with vaulted ceilings and granite floors.

The feeling of absolute evil washed over him.

A deep hush hung low as he began to walk, his clipped steps echoing across the cavernous space that seemed to go on and on, until he saw a darkened dais on which a bloody sacrificial stone table sat. Flames licked the edges of his vision, where strange shapes and writhing forms blended with shadows in an indistinct and undulating union that was vaguely obscene. The beings were like fallen angels large and small, dark angels with black, glossy wings. Ugly, evil things. He watched them until he finally approached the table, and out of the darkness a man emerged.

"Father Harker, I've been waiting for you." An evil smile stretched the creature's lips. "Thank you for coming."

"The strangest thing. I was in my chapel, and—"

"It doesn't matter, Father. You'll understand everything in due time."

"May I ask who you are?"

"My name is Lupercus."

“Lupercus?” he said thoughtfully. “I’m sorry, the name means nothing to me. Do I know you? Are you a member of my parish?”

“No, you don’t know me, Father, but you know about me, my kind. You see, I am a deity of the underworld. I am a god, Father Harker, a devil, a fiend, an evil spirit such as those that you warn your parish about in those long, boring, dry sermons on Sunday morning. The wicked of this world follow me and are rewarded with the fleshly delights that I provide them. I encourage them to go out and kill, maim and destroy, and fuck each other at every opportunity.” One eye quirked up at the father. “I have many followers. You see me now as a man much like those of your world, but look closely, Father, and you will see me as I really am.”

Father Harker watched closely as the man before him changed. It was subtle at first, and then terror engulfed him when he saw his body convulse, being ripped apart to allow the wolfish face, red-rimmed, elongated eyes, mountainous humps, and taloned fingers push through.

“W-What? Oh my God!” he gasped, and from his throat erupted a terrified scream. He turned to run, but had only gained a few steps when the grotesque things with wings forced him back to the pulpit and held him there. The beast lunged forward and grabbed his priestly collar, cutting off his wind.

“Don’t try that again, Father,” the raspy voice growled, “or I’ll rip your balls off!”

With a strong thrust, Father Harker was brutally pushed backward on the hard floor, his breath returning, rushing forth like a bubbling, gushing spring. He reached up and rubbed his neck while he stared up at the beast, at the evil glare that leapt from his eyes. They were like two daggers pointing at his heart.

“Get your fucking clothes off,” the beast commanded.

He moved slowly, carefully hiding his trembling hands as they pulled at his collar, his coat, and at last his pants. As he stripped he heard what sounded like suppressed laughter and looked toward a shadow full of glowing eyes in the darkness. His dim view told him they were small gargoyle-type creatures that gathered together in a group, waiting for a command from their leader.

“Take him to the Chamber of Lust,” the loud voice echoed through the vast chamber.

The gargoyles, quick to obey, immediately emerged from their shadow and forcibly seized him and dragged him away. The scene around him became illusory, heaving and undulating fiercely as it slowly transformed into a crude cavern of red rock with fissures spewing red gases and smelling of sulphur. He struggled, but his hands were held tight. When the gargoyles finally threw him down, a jolt of fear hit him in the stomach at what he saw around him.

Everywhere he looked he saw garishly painted women. They were crawling on the floor like lustful beasts of prey. Tongues were extended from each tinted mouth, flicking at the smell of sex in the air. They reveled in each other's bodies, fucking, eating pussys and breasts. The room was filled with moans of delight from the insatiable creatures. All were naked as they rolled on the floor satisfying themselves, while filling the room with chilling screams of sexual gratification. The women lifted their breasts, offering them to those nearby. Others reared their bottoms high in the air like bitches in heat.

He heard something close by and jerked his head around. Crawling toward him like a slithering snake was a whore. She watched him with her painted eyes and then reached down and began fondling herself. Her eyes closed in passion, a gurgling moan gushing from her throat.

"Oh, God," Father Harker sobbed. "What is this? Where am I?"

"My name is Liliana," the woman whispered, "and you're in hell."

"No!" Father Harker yelled. He tried to get up, but felt himself pushed backward by the whore's long-nailed hands, her many rings flashing like neon blood in the firelight. He couldn't take his eyes off them as they began a bold caress of his thighs while working up slowly to his crotch. She squeezed and rubbed, her breath becoming labored as her hands crept up, getting closer and closer, stoking the erotic fire that leapt sinfully within his groin. No matter what he did, he couldn't keep his traitorous body from thrashing beneath her hands, his hips from pushing upward, wanting more, or his cock from growing beneath the whore's expert touch.

With a lascivious smile, the whore placed herself between his legs, dug out his stiffened cock, and began to eat it. Against his will his hips gyrated wildly, giving way to the fire burning inside him as the whore sucked him, and then drank his traitorous juices as they fell wantonly into her mouth. After only moments, or was it hours, his passion was at its height, and his

cock erupted, emptying the creamy liquid into the whore's mouth. With a hungry look in her eyes, she lifted her gaze and met his while it dripped over her lips and down her chin.

All at once, there was a crowd around him. Drooling whores with painted eyes, some crawling over the others to get to him. He cried out when at last he was covered with them, their hands doing ungodly things to him, their legs clenching him, while his cock plunged over and over in one and then the other. He became wild with desire as they licked him, ate his cock, his nipples, and his toes. One delicious-looking whore offered him her butt. Unable to refuse, he willingly sodomized her over and over again until he was at last exhausted. In his drowsy state, they sucked his flesh and scratched at his body until, once again, his cock burst in their hands and their mouths.

Now he lay quietly while the sinful picture faded from his mind.

His eyes fluttered open as if waking from a dream. He looked around. The women were gone, and he was chained to a large cement block in the church cellar. He looked down and saw himself dressed in nothing but his underwear, and the horrible truth dawned upon him.

No. It couldn't be. That beast of the underworld, with his elongated eyes and his wide, fanged smile wasn't wearing his holy vestments. It didn't happen. It couldn't have. It was only a dream. It must be.

Even though he kept denying it, he knew the truth.

That *thing* was parading himself as a God-ordained minister, *a holy priest of the church!*

Chapter Ten

The old church that sat at one end of the Gypsy Reef promenade was little more than a pile of old stones. The setting was quaint, an antithesis to its surroundings, and yet it seemed to blend into the natural setting, almost as if it had been there first and nature had molded the seashore around it. The bell tower rose high in the sky, and on a windy night the distant toll could be heard for miles. It was a hollow, lonely sound that unleashed the graveyard ghosts on a chilly night.

While the bell played its haunting lullaby, a lone figure darted across the deserted graveyard, getting lost in the early morning shadows that stretched long and wide over the worn paths between the graves. He might have been mistaken for a graveyard ghost except for the breath of life that escaped from his lungs. It was quick and short, the vaporous mist the color of white ash. It vanished as quickly as it came. With one more mad dash, he slipped into an open door and lost himself in the deep darkness of the church.

* * * *

Lost in thought, Father Jon was eating when a sound stilled his hands and his head turned quickly. His suspicious gaze scanned the dark cellar, darting from one pool of darkness to another. Suddenly his searching gaze stopped at two feral green eyes glowing from within a shadow. His nervous hands dropped the silverware onto his plate, and he quickly scooted behind the cement block to peer out fearfully. "Who are you?" he whispered, his soft, gravelly voice rumbling through the cavernous old chamber.

"I'm hungry," the stranger said, "do you have enough for two?"

Father Jon looked down at his plate and pushed it forward. "Yes, there's plenty here. Come out of the shadows and eat." He waited and watched as the intruder carefully inched his way toward him while staying close to the

floor. Father Jon's breath caught in his lungs. The stranger was large and formidable-looking. His clothes were too small on his muscled body. His shirt had only one button fastened, and his thighs strained against his khaki pant legs. He had on a pair of black sandals that wrapped snugly around his feet. His thick hair was long and unkempt, and his face was hidden behind strands of blond hair. "Tell me who I am sharing my breakfast with."

"My name is Judas."

An icy chill danced down Father Jon's spine when he heard the name. Slowly he pushed the plate a few more inches forward. "You're welcome to anything I have, Judas. Come. Eat."

While still a safe distance away, Judas leaned forward and grabbed a handful of bacon and biscuits and began eating greedily. He couldn't seem to get used to being hungry. Where he came from, the food was plentiful; drink was plentiful. But here, in this world, you had to scratch for what you got. No one treated him special here. Here he was an intruder, a stranger, just another face in the crowd. In his world evil reigned, not like here where both good and evil existed. Here you chose which you wanted to follow and learned to watch and judge, and sometimes you were wrong.

With his mouth full, he eyed the old man cautiously. He had a kind look. Even his voice had a soothing, peaceful quality to it. With the hand holding a biscuit, he indicated toward the large object that held the man prisoner. "Who are you, and what are you doing chained to that thing?"

Father Jon looked down at the metal chains and then back to Judas. "I'm the minister here, but I'm being held captive. Jonathan Harker is my name. My parishioners call me Father Jon." He breathed deeply, remembering. "I was partaking of Christ's sacrament, and...well, the wine must have been drugged. It's rather hard to explain except to say I had...I don't know, a vision, a dream...at least I thought it was a dream. The next thing I knew I was robbed of my clothes and chained to this cement block."

"Your clothes? Is that all he took?"

"I don't know, actually. After that it got rather," he gave Judas an embarrassed look, "well, only parts of the dream were real. Some...well...couldn't have been."

"Why do you think you were dreaming?"

"What would you think if you saw someone turn into," Father Jon shivered at the memory, "some kind of horrible creature before your very

eyes?” Father Jon scowled. “The worst part is I seem to remember seeing him dressed in my holy vestments. It’s simply too fantastic to be real.”

Judas stopped eating, his attention taken by what Father Jon was saying. “Was it a wolf-like creature?”

Father Jon looked up at him, a suspicious look in his eyes. “How did you know?”

“Just a feeling.”

“The whole thing seems rather foolish now. Some kind of hallucination. That’s all it was.”

“Hallucinations don’t chain men to cement blocks.”

“Oh, God,” the Father whispered, lowering his head into his hands.

“Look, Father, don’t lie to yourself.”

“No! He’s not real. I can’t believe...Oh, God, it’s true, isn’t it? Do you realize what this means? It means that this *creature* is loose out there somewhere. Preying on innocent people who don’t know what he is.” He leaned toward Judas. “You seem to know him, who he is, *what* he is.”

Judas’s suspicions of the father melted, and he wiped his greasy hands on his pants and scooted toward him. Picking up his chains and looking at them, he said, “The first thing we need to do is get you out of here.”

“My parishioners,” Father Jon said, his eyes full of worry and fright, “what...what will he do to them? Why is he here? What does he want?”

“Sin, Father. He wants to sin, to spread it, commit it. His mission is to ruin a woman’s life, and he’ll kill anyone that gets in his way.”

“But why? Why would someone...*anyone* want to do that?”

“Because he’s evil, Father.” Judas’s hands stilled for a moment, and he looked up at Father Jon with a grave look. “I don’t know what all you saw, but it wasn’t a dream.”

Father Jon’s eyes widened and filled with terror. “You can’t mean that I took a trip into hell. No. Please. Don’t say that. It *was* a dream. T-The wine, it was drugged, I tell you. I had a drug-induced dream, that’s all.” In desperation the father grabbed at Judas’s sleeve. “Oh, God, please tell me that’s true.”

“I wish I could, Father, but I can’t.” Looking down at the chains, he said, “You’ll have to hold very still while I...” From his eyes was issued a piercing ray that slowly burned through the metal on both hands. The sound of freedom rang clearly as the iron bracelets clanked to the floor.

Father Jon looked down at his wrists that had rubbed raw. "It's a miracle," he said. "A miracle." He looked up at Judas. "Who are you? How can you—"

"We don't have time now, Father. We have to get out of here."

"I can't leave. He'll be back any moment."

The door rattled, and the room fell into silence. Judas quickly scooted back into the shadow, and Father Jon replaced the metal bracelets around his wrists. He pretended to be relaxing against the cement block when the door opened and Lupercus came in. Father Jon's narrowed eyes slid toward the evil creature, watching as he leaned forward and picked up the plate.

Lupercus looked down at the plate that was full of leftover oil and pieces of egg and bacon. "You must have been hungry. It pleases me to see you eat so well."

"Why are you doing this?" Father Jon whispered fearfully. "If you don't want to kill me, what are you going to do with me?"

"Don't bother me with your idiotic questions," Lupercus growled while looking down at him with loathing. "You stupid old cockroach! I would delight in killing you, but you're not important enough to kill. I just want to keep you out of the way until my mission is complete."

"But, why here?"

"Let's just say I like the neighborhood. I have a project here that I'm watching very closely. Your church provides me the perfect hiding place, your clothes the perfect disguise. In this disguise I can get into any home, be free of any suspicion, and everyone trusts me."

"You'll never get away with it. They'll know you're not me."

"I'm not trying to be you. I'll simply tell them you're away on vacation or that you died." He raised an eyebrow. "If it comes to that."

"Can't you put a pallet down here? This floor is cold and hard."

"I know it is, but it's the best I can do. Don't worry, you'll get used to it." He gave a horrible belly laugh and then turned to leave.

The minute Lupercus was gone, Father Jon turned to Judas. "Maybe I'm not very smart, but something tells me you two are cut from the same cloth. Him with his transmutations and you with your laser eyeballs. I want no part of it."

"Yes, we're from the same place, but I'm not here to kill you. He very well might be."

“My God, you’re from h-hell? Are you here to destroy the world? Are you the Antichrist? How long do we have? When is it going to happen? How did you get the scar around your eye?”

“I had a one-handed duel with a coward.”

“Will you please stop talking in circles and give me a straight answer? You want me to trust you, yet you haven’t really told me anything.”

“You want a straight answer? Here it is. I’m an emissary from the Black Heavens.” He nodded toward the Father’s Bible. “In that book, it’s called hell.”

“No,” Father Jon whispered while shaking his head. He stared at Judas as if he were the Devil incarnate, still not believing what he’d heard with his own ears. “No!” he bellowed at last. “I know I preach it, believed it...once. But now...” He looked up at Judas, his eyes full of a lifetime of pain and disappointment. “No! I can’t accept it. It can’t be true.”

“Suit yourself. You wanted the truth. I gave it to you.”

The Father looked down at the Bible and saw a silver cross on the front. He looked up at Judas. “Put your hand on this cross.”

“Why?”

“I want to be able to trust you. This is the only way.”

“Look, Father—”

“Do it!”

Judas looked at the cross and began a slow sweat. Father Jon didn’t realize what touching a cross would do to him, or maybe he did. Even walking on the sanctified ground of the graveyard outside was like stepping on hot coals. He knew that coming into the church was taking a chance, but the trick was to go to the farthest point from the chapel. It had to be the reason Lupercus transported the Father to hell where he could deal with him.

Now, as he looked down at the cross, the beauty and the glitter suddenly seemed as bright at the sun. It flashed, each sharp ray stabbing his eyes until he had to put up his hand to shield his eyes.

“You’re wasting time,” Father Jon said, his teeth clenched in anger.

“All right,” Judas whispered. Looking down at the glittering shape, he gritted his teeth, steeling himself against the pain. With a slight movement, he began to *lower his hand*.

Chapter Eleven

Judas's hand gently touched the Bible, his palm slightly lifted so it wouldn't touch the cross. "There, see?" he said nervously. "Nothing to worry about."

Before Judas knew what was happening, Father Jon slapped his hand down firmly on Judas's, forcing him to make full contact.

"Argh!" Judas yelled and yanked his hand away. Holding it up to his chest, he looked down at it and saw a smoking imprint of the cross perfectly burned into his palm. He looked up at Father Jon, his eyes full of anger. "What the hell are you trying to do to me?"

"You were trying to deceive me. Do you think I'm stupid or something? You're every bit as evil as that devil Lupercus."

"No, I'm not."

"There's the proof right there," he said, pointing to his hand.

"You don't understand." Judas hesitated, and then said, "My soul...half of it is white. Lupercus barely has a soul, and over time it has become as black as death."

"Your soul is pure...I mean, half of it?"

"I'm not sure I'd call it pure, but yes, half of my soul is as...pure, or white...whatever you want to call it, as yours is."

Father Jon leaned closer to Judas and peered at him with a suspicious, angled look. "Is this another lie?"

Judas shook his head. "I'm half mortal."

Father Jon's eyes widened. "How in God's name did that happen?"

"My mother was mortal. She lived here when the angels fell from heaven—"

"Oh, God, here we go again."

"It's true." Judas indicated toward the book again. "You've also read in that book that heaven is broken up into mansions. It's the same in hell, only

we call them levels. Each level has its own unique character. Everything from the lowest to the highest. We have levels of torture for the punishment of our own, training fields for our warriors,” Judas quirked an eyebrow at Father Jon, “and, of course, there’s the famous lake of fire. It’s made up of molten lava. Fire burns on its surface, and gases and fumes rise from it. These raw chemicals work their way up to the surface—”

“The surface? *This* surface?”

“No. The surface of hell. The lake is buried deep in the caverns. These gases and fumes spew out of every crack, out of the fissures in the rocks. Anywhere there’s an opening, you’ll see fire, smoke, and cinders. For sinners on Earth, it is the ultimate punishment. We have storms of ash and soot, and the atmosphere is red and hot, and there’s only one season. The terrain is uneven and mountainous. Do you know there’s not a tree or blade of grass anywhere? The only animals are creations of Satan. The four-legged ones roam the outlands, and the birds fly in the air. They’re nothing like the birds of Earth. They’re hideous reptilians. They screech and perch on anything that juts out of the scorched landscape. They’re used to transport us to war zones. As far as the eye can see, there’s nothing but burned-up cinders, ashes, and soot.”

“What about rain? Everyone needs rain...water.”

“You’re going on the assumption that our world is like yours. Yes, we have rain, crimson rain. It burns like fire if it touches you. Here it’s cold and wet, even soothing. Not so, there. There you hide from it.”

Father Jon gave Judas a wary look. “Where do *you* hide?”

“The Royal House. My father is the Demon Lord. He’s one of the fallen angels—”

Father Jon snorted.

“Look, I’m trying to answer your questions, old man. It looks to me like you could listen to me while I do it. Now, do you want me to continue or not?”

“You might as well. I don’t believe a word of it anyway.”

“Has it occurred to you that you’re the first creature here on Earth to learn the secrets of hell?”

“Who says I want to?”

“Fine! Just because you don’t like what I’m saying is no reason not to believe it.”

"I didn't ask for a bunch of fairy tales. I want the truth."

"It *is* the truth! I wish it weren't. I wish—"

Father Jon waited. "What? You wish what?"

Instead of answering, he continued on in a somber voice that had very little inflection in it. "Time doesn't exist in the Black Heavens. Everything *is*, not *was* or *will be*. We have an invaluable instrument called the Wall of Moving Images that keeps us aware of the happenings on Earth and the passage of time. We can travel to any place on Earth or during any time period that we choose."

Father Jon's eyes raked over Judas's figure. "All right, assuming all this is true, answer me this. Fallen angels have wings. Where are yours?"

"Only the purebloods have wings, and I'm not a fallen angel. I'm mortal, just like you."

"Oh, no. You may be mortal, but you're not like me. *My* hand doesn't burn every time I touch a cross."

"Look, if you don't want to hear this—"

"All right, go ahead, tell me about this fantasy world where you have to earn your wings."

"You're getting us mixed up with heaven. In heaven you earn wings. In hell we earn other things. For instance, my father told me he earned his seat among the gods by deflowering a virgin. It was true, but it wasn't how he earned his place as a lord." Judas looked down sadly. "The truth is, he earned it by sacrificing his only son, me."

"My God, you were a sacrifice? Why weren't you killed?"

"It wasn't that kind of sacrifice. When I came of age, I was trained as an assassin. It was a grueling time, but I learned well. When the time came, I was then sent out in the midst of battles especially to assassinate the leader. That was our strategy. Once the leader is killed, the rest is easy. All that is left is to surround the army and the war is won. I fought war after war undefeated and earned the reputation of Satan's highest ranking warrior." His voice became soft. "All this because I learned how to kill."

"I can believe that," Father Jon muttered.

"Anyway, that virgin was my mother. As the son of a lord, I am privileged, but I can never become a god, nor will I ever grow wings."

"Wings," Father Jon said thoughtfully. "I've always been taught that Hell was underground. If this is true, why do you need wings? Why can't you just crawl up to the surface?"

"Because there's a whole universe down below that's counterfeit to Earth and it's universe. We need wings to be able to travel from one place to the other. Many of our wars take place on neutral territory such as a burned out asteroid."

"What could you possibly have to fight about?"

"Superiority. Since Hell has always been superior, we must constantly defend our place in that evil universe called the Black Heavens."

"Well, if you don't have wings, how did you get here?"

"When I go on a mission, I am outfitted with wings and the powers I will need to fight with."

Father Jon looked at him, the way he was dressed. "You don't seem so prepared to me. Look at your clothes. They don't fit too well, do they? You may have what you need to fight a war, but what about living? I'll bet you don't have a dime on you. It takes money to get along in this world."

"It's my fault. In hell I don't have to ask for anything. It's simply provided. I've never been here, so I guess I didn't plan this mission very well."

Father Jon snickered. "Go back home, sonny boy. Sounds like you've got it made there. I thought hell was some kind of prison, not the kind of paradise where—"

"Paradise? What *paradise* rips backs to ribbons? No. Compared to hell, Earth *is* a paradise. In my world, billows of black clouds surround the city. The skies are always dark. I didn't realize how much I loved the sun until I came here. It almost blinded me at first, but I'm getting used to it. Everything here seems to have been created for man's comfort, whereas hell was created for his torment. Here, the heat is comforting, and the cold that chills you can be very refreshing after you've lived in an atmosphere of ungodly heat like I have. I can sit for hours and watch a sparkling gold fish swimming in a brook or look at a sky full of white clouds. I never knew they existed."

"Sounds like you don't want to go back. How long have you been here? Weeks? Months?"

"A couple of days."

“You’re telling me you learned all this just since yesterday?”

“I’ve studied Earth for years. It was part of my education. In your schools you study other countries, other religions, or other languages. So do we, but for a different purpose.”

“Why?”

“To conquer them. To spread sin, destruction and to cause mayhem. You see, it’s what we do. The gods and goddesses sit in their splendid houses casting spells...” His words faded for a moment, then began again. “It’s something like a chess game. They delight in using their powers to move their pawns around. But all this is done from their royal thrones. As a rule they never leave the Royal House, that is, until Lupercus. Apparently he couldn’t ignore a challenge that came to him on a dark night from a beautiful woman.”

“I understand why Lupercus came, but why you? Who sent you?”

“My father. I didn’t want to come at first, but now...” His eyes lowered, looking thoughtfully at the cross on his hand. “Funny, but I’ve often wondered what the rain would feel like on my skin, how the grass or the sand of a seashore might feel beneath my feet. I’ve even wondered what pain felt like. I’ve heard others talk, and I know some have abandoned our world for this one, but I never knew why. My father thinks it’s the decadence that attracts them, but he’s wrong.” A distant look clouded Judas’s eyes. “No, it’s the feel of wind in your face, the sun on your back, or the smell of a flower...” He smiled and slid his embarrassed eyes toward Father Jon. “Do I sound very idiotic?”

Father Jon smiled at last. “No, not at all. If by some stretch of the imagination all this is true, then it’s my guess that you’re getting to know God.”

The smile fell from Judas’s face. “Getting to know...G-God? What do you mean?”

“Only that God is everywhere. He is in the wind, the water, the flower, the sun. Anyone that loves those things—”

“Who spoke of love? No!” Judas shouted, jumping to his feet. “I have no loyalty to God!”

“Oh, I see, then your loyalty is to Satan. Satan who provides you with a home full of soot and ashes.”

Judas stared at him. “I...I—”

“What?”

“Well, he gave me...”

Father Jon stared at him and waited.

An awkward silence stretched out longer and longer while Judas considered the question.

Finally Father Jon said, “When you think of it, let me know. Meanwhile remember how the wind felt on your face and how good the water was that quenched your thirst. You’ll get your answer.”

Judas stared at the cross etched into his palm. Funny, but it was strangely mesmerizing. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Never in his world could he breathe so easily as he could here in *God’s world*.

“I hesitate to ask you why you came. Being from hell, I’m sure it’s to spread sin and destruction like your cohorts?”

The question lifted Judas from his reverie. “I’m here to help a woman by the name of Jennifer Duquesne. Do you know her?”

“The name...” Suddenly Father Jon remembered the woman that ran out of the church not long ago. “Is she blonde, young, and attractive...?”

“Yes.”

“I might have seen her once.”

“Her life is in danger.”

Father Jon turned his eyes toward Judas. “Danger from what?”

“Lupercus. She’s the *project* he was referring to. He likes playing cat and mouse with her. She’s alone, lonely, and can’t handle what she’s become.”

“Oh? What has she become?”

Judas hesitated. “A werewolf.”

Father Jon’s eyes widened, and his head began shaking. “No!” he rasped. “I don’t believe it! Not any of it, do you hear? You...where you come from, and that...that Lupercus. It’s all...impossible!” Memories of that dark night came back to him. She was frightened, covered with blood. She’d been screaming, crying, and when she ran out, she was frightened out of her wits.

“I understand how you feel, Father, but her husband and her sons before her were stricken with the same curse, and the guilt she feels for all the killing is driving her insane. If she dies, chaos will break out all over. Hell will be destroyed—”

“That’s a good thing! Let hell be destroyed! We’ll all be better off!”

“But if hell is destroyed, Earth will be as well. I’m here to try and stop it, to free her and to give her back her life.”

“All right. Let’s assume for a moment that all you have told me is true. How in blazes can I help? I’m an old man, only the minister of a miserable, broken-down church. And between you and me? I’m not all that religious.”

“I’m not asking for your help, Father. I only want to get you away from Lupercus.”

“But I have nowhere to go.”

Judas looked up at him. “Don’t tell me you’d rather stay here and take your chances with Lupercus. That’s insane. Stupid. It’s sure death. Lupercus isn’t going to let you live.”

“It won’t happen. I know it won’t. I’ve got just enough faith left to know that God will help me.”

“Look, maybe I don’t know much about this God of yours, but it seems to me that He intends for you to do some things yourself. Did He give you two good legs to stand on and enough sense to know when to get the hell out? Get up off your sanctified butt so we can get going.”

The two of them heard a sound and turned just in time to see the door open abruptly. Lupercus stood there, the shadows embracing him like an amorous spirit. From out of the darkness his eyes glittered with evil as he looked at Father Jon’s severed hand bands.

His eyes slid toward Judas. “No doubt your handiwork.”

“I’m getting him out of here, Lupercus. Don’t try and stop me.”

“Judas, my boy, you’re beginning to get in my way.” His eyes shifted to Father Jon. “And you, you’re becoming a liability, one that I will delight in eliminating.”

Judas snickered. “An old man, Lupercus? What victory is there in that?” He turned to Father Jon, who was standing in his underwear cringing. “Look at him. He’s no challenge. Personally I wouldn’t dirty my hands with his blood.”

A look of evil delight shone in Lupercus’s eyes. “I’ve been thinking of putting a curse on him. Just a little one. Think how much fun it would be to see him turn into a werewolf.”

Judas folded his arms in front of him. “You haven’t much imagination, have you, Lupercus?”

Lupercus frowned. “No? What’s your suggestion?”

“My God, man, don’t do anything. He’s not worth the trouble. Save your spells for those that deserve them.”

“Like you, for instance?” the wolf god asked with a cunning look on his face.

“If you think you can,” Judas said, unfolding his arms and putting his hands on his hips.

“Don’t tempt me, Judas.” The words rumbled deep in his throat, and his eyes stared steadily at him.

“I’m here to put your madness to an end. You’ve spread as much evil as you’re going to.”

“Tell me, Judas, why the hell do you care?”

“I don’t know, Lupercus. Maybe the half of my soul that is white is just fucking tired of your creep shows.”

“Oh, yes. I remember now. You’re a half-breed.” Lupercus’s eyes narrowed on Judas. “Well, listen to this, half-breed. It’ll take a lot more power and brains than you’ve got to defeat me. Don’t forget I’m a god, and I’ve got the power of a god.”

“And the brains of a gnat.”

“Why, you...” Lupercus’s lips thinned dangerously as he raised his arm threateningly.

Just as he was getting ready to throw a lightning bolt, Judas lifted the hand that bore the etching of a cross and pushed it in Lupercus’s face. When the wolf god saw it, his eyes widened with fright. He stumbled backward and lifted his arms to hide his eyes as he cried out, “Get it away! Get it away!”

“What’s the matter, Lupercus?” Judas said as he lowered his hand. “That yellow strip down your back giving you trouble?”

Lupercus hesitated for several seconds and then peeked around his arms. “What the hell are you doing with that...thing?”

“What *thing*? What are you talking about?”

“That cross. It’s on your hand!”

Judas looked down at the cross of singed skin and smoke and felt a chill.

My God, that’s the cross that Father Jon had pressed into his palm, he thought and looked up at Lupercus at the fear in his eyes. Thinking back, he remembered how he had immediately lifted his hand and pushed it in

Lupercus's face, but why had he done it? What was it that made him use it almost as a weapon to protect both him and Father Jon? In doing so, he knew he had probably saved the life of both of them.

Finally Lupercus said, "All right, get the hell out. I don't need either of you. The old man was becoming too much trouble anyway. If you want to take care of this decrepit old goat, be my guest." His eyes turned toward Father Jon, who cringed on the sidelines. "But I warn you, old man. If you tell anyone who you really are, I'll kill you. Do you hear? I'll kill you so dead you won't even come back as a ghost."

"If you're through with your stupid threats, we'll leave now," Judas said and took hold of Father's Jon's arm to lead him toward the door.

"I'd be delighted to show you just how stupid my threats are, but for now I will only advise you to stay out of my way."

"Gladly."

He watched as Judas rushed toward the door. "Well, I do believe the great and mighty Judas is at last afraid."

"Me? Afraid of you? Don't be ridiculous. I just can't stand the smell!"

Chapter Twelve

She sat alone, surrounded by blood-splattered leaves.

Piercing cries and frightened squawks filled the mysterious night. She felt life in her hands, a tiny heartbeat as the animal struggled, and afterwards, life fluttering away in her hands.

Struggling, twitching still.

A rat, a mouse, and then something bigger, something that clawed and fought. She'd ravaged animal after animal at the edge of the woods near the cemetery, but her stomach still rumbled and roiled with hunger. Blood, wet and sticky, soaked her clothes and skin while she sat devouring the blood of animals. Through with one, she began again, falling on her knees in her predator's crawl. She sensed life in the shrubbery all around her. Her fingers scratched the soil, dirt caked beneath her bloody fingernails. Like an animal with heightened senses, she sniffed the air. It was full of the essence she loved. She also loved the woods, the snapping of dry twigs, the wind soughing through the tree limbs, the chirping of birds, and the skittering of small animals nearby. Suddenly her sharp predator's eyes saw something, and she sprang forward.

Her fangs sank into the flesh, ripping out its throat.

She felt shivers, the giving up of life.

Nosing into the wound like a starving fiend, she caught the odor of a fresh kill, but the taste would always be inferior. She recalled savoring the live kill of a particular man not long ago, the thick richness of his blood, the peace that came from holding him near, the rush of power, winning the battle without a struggle. He had come passionately before he had died, his large, rough hands stilled in death.

It was a passionate union that had a bloody climax.

Now as the animal's dead body slipped from her hands, she peered down at the small, misshapen bodies. They were ripped apart, bloody,

unrecognizable animals already beginning to rot, already sending out pungent invitations to maggots, ants, worms, and other scavengers. It was only a token sacrifice, a temporary satiation from hunger at best. She touched her cheeks, which were wet with primal blood that dripped from her misshapen face. She looked down at her hands and began to lick the blood and waste away. Looking up, she saw a stream and longed to feel the cool water on her skin. She rose on her padded feet and walked stealthily toward it. She leaned over and splashed the water up to her face to cleanse it. When the blood thinned and fell into the stream, she looked at it wistfully.

If only she could cleanse her soul as easily.

She looked down and noticed how the blood colored the stream, and thought of life, love. A pang of sadness stabbed her. She sank to her knees and cried into her hands. How she longed for a normal life, a pure, beautiful relationship with a man. She knew that the love she made would always be meager, limited to blood and death. She slowly rose and walked into the deepest part of the water until it covered her head. The light of the moon rippled on the water until it broke again, and where Spice had gone down, Sugar emerged.

* * * *

A late-night mist shrouded the trees intimately. Where Judas stood their leafy branches stooped in the shadows, reaching out at abnormal angles. The branches, like moon-cursed beings, seemed to take on a deformed look in the harsh light of the moon. Moving carefully through the thick brush, the grass took on the blackness of the woodland shadows. He stopped when he saw a stream and crouched down beside it. Blood lay at the edge, dripping down into it, the stream's babble sounding like a gurgle of death as it penetrated the silence with its own voice of madness.

He knew she'd been here, but where was she now?

Gazing out into the stream, he saw the water as it lazily slipped over rocks and limbs. In a constant movement, it absorbed the treachery that had defiled it until it ran clear again and tasted as clean and pure as it had before.

Where had the poison gone?

Now as he looked down into the cold water and swished it around with his fingers, he wondered where to look next. She hadn't been at the mansion

when he and Father Jon had arrived. He had intended to appeal to her to at least allow the Father to stay there, but he searched every room, and she wasn't there. Hoping it would be okay, he did the best he could to make the Father comfortable, then set out to find her. He knew that since the moon was full, she'd be out searching the countryside for prey.

The woods were the last place he looked and was just about to give up when he saw something, someone at a far distance, no bigger than a dot moving along the path.

A woman.

Her hair shone white in the moon's brightness, her shredded clothes barely covering her. He watched as she drew near. He could tell from the blood that covered her that the night had been filled with death. She looked weak. A stab of panic clutched at his stomach. He had to help her. Moving quickly, he thrashed through the brush until he was on the path, running toward her. He ran as fast as he could, but just before he reached her, she sank to her knees and crawled along the ground until she at last gave up. Kneeling beside her, he pulled her into his arms and gathered her close. Blood soaked her clothes and her skin, but Judas could tell it wasn't human carnage. He felt a stab of relief and held her tight against his chest. Unbidden, warmth gathered in his chest and wetness around his eyes. Surprised, he reached up and felt his face, pulled his hand back, and looked at it.

My God, he thought, it was a tear.

This was the first time he had ever been moved to tears, and he looked down at Jennifer as if she were the enemy.

No! he thought as he pushed her away and ran. *Let her find her own way home.*

He reached a tree and stopped. He stood there a moment, getting his breath. After a few seconds passed, he looked back. He could feel so many emotions whirling around inside him, emotions that were new to him. Finally, not being able to stand seeing her lie there helpless, he went back and stood, looking down at her, trying to remain aloof, trying to be logical instead of emotional.

She is alone, he reasoned with himself. In the dark. Someone, anyone, could come along and find her.

While maintaining a steely manner, he picked her up in his arms. How could it have happened? He came from hell! He thrived on wickedness! He was, no! He *is* a demon who delights in causing chaos and war! The only emotions felt in the Black Heavens were those of a low, evil, lascivious nature. Why suddenly had he felt the warmth of compassion for a woman he didn't know when she had chosen not to kill human prey, prey that would clearly be her choice.

Why the hell did he care?

Judas stumbled back to the mansion while his eyes focused on the woman who was beginning to mean too much to him. Her clothes, torn and bloodstained, fluttered in the breeze, her mouth smudged with lost life. He watched as her lips formed his name. How many times? He didn't know since so many newfound emotions roiled in his chest. Although he had fought against it, he had to face the fact that he was different. He didn't belong in the Black Heavens, but he didn't belong on Earth. Where did he belong? Why was he moved so deeply simply because Jennifer, even in her bestial state, had human feelings, feelings she'd never had before? Was she growing stronger? Beginning to resist the curse instead of giving in to it? Knowing she was fighting it with all her might, he felt a soft, warm feeling gather in his chest, and his hand beneath her body became a lover's touch. He knew he would protect her with his life, if necessary. With a full heart, his stumbling steps became a little more sure until he, at last, laid her gently on her bed and then sat down beside her moon-ravaged body.

Judas worked quickly, trying to make her as comfortable as he could, and then turned to leave. But just as he reached the door, he heard a woman's voice and turned back. "I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't mean..." His words faded when he found that she hadn't spoke, but was still fast asleep. His gaze became guarded as he glanced around the room, but all was steeped in silence. "Is someone here?" he called out, but no one answered. And then suddenly a stream of words began to flutter around in his mind like a flock of birds. He recognized the voice immediately and jerked his head back toward Jennifer.

"...handsome, so very handsome..."

"...pretty boy..."

"...dangerous enemy with vivid green eyes..."

"...his bruising look..."

As the words slowly faded away, he realized he was reading her mind. It was just one of the powers he had been outfitted with, but he had forgotten about it, until now. He knew she must have had these feelings sometime in the last few days. Otherwise he would not have been able to pull them into his own mind.

She began to struggle, and his eyes lowered to her clothes. He knew she must be uncomfortable since they were ripped up and blood splattered, so he walked to her bed and gently began to loose them, revealing her beautifully round breasts and soft, curving figure marred only by traces of blood. He looked up and saw an old-fashioned decorative bowl on a table nearby, took it to the bathroom, and filled it with hot water. He quickly grabbed a washcloth, threw it in the water, and carried it back to the bed. With slow, deliberate movements, he began to softly caress her face with the cloth, working diligently down her body until the blood began to slowly color the water in the bowl. At one point, as he was dousing the cloth in the water, he looked back at her and found her staring at him with questions in her eyes.

"I found you on the path at the edge of the woods and brought you back," he explained, but she remained silent, still staring. "I figured it was better if I found you than someone else. I—"

His words faded when he noticed her blatant sexual stare as her gaze traveled down his body. He quickly looked down at himself and asked, "Do I have a bruising look?"

Her gaze quickly jumped from his body to his face. "A what?"

"A bruising look...whatever that is."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"No, of course not," he replied, expecting such an answer. "Ms. Duquesne, just so you know, let me remind you that I'm a creature of hell. My powers are many, and they include reading minds."

"Well, read this, you bastard," she said as she stared intently at him.

"My, my, I haven't heard language like that since—"

"You're such a phony. You couldn't read someone's mind if the words were two inches high and printed in a newspaper."

He sighed as he looked at her cold, angry face. Why did she hate him so? He was used to women loving him, following him around, hanging on his every word. What made this one different? He apparently needed to charm her, but how? He'd never had to do it before. Did he even know how?

“Stop staring! What the hell are you thinking, anyway?”

“About fantasies. I have a really good one. Do you have a favorite fantasy?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. I’d love to see you hung from the nearest tree and sold for spit!”

He chuckled. “Yes, well, my fantasy isn’t quite so harsh. It’s about this cold, angry pain in the ass, and this beautiful blond...”

“I see,” she began. “And you expect me to play the beautiful blonde—”

“Oh, no. I’m the beautiful blond.” As he watched for her reaction, he couldn’t keep his twitching lips from spreading in an amused grin.

She tried to stay angry, but it was too funny, so she finally giggled. “I guess I have been a pain in the ass, haven’t I?”

He grinned. “No more than usual.”

Her hand came up and caressed his face. “You are beautiful, did you know that?”

“Well, I prefer handsome, but if it’ll...”

His words were stopped by her thumb that was rubbing the pillowy softness of his lips. “Shhh,” she said, “you talk too much.”

“What would you rather me do?” he whispered as his hand softly sneaked upward along the fullness of her breast until he found her nipple.

Instead of pushing his hand away, her eyes closed at the softly climbing desire she had begun to feel. “Make love to me, Judas, as only you can.”

“Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Oh, yesss,” she whispered as she covered his hand with her own and pressed his palm to her breast.

While she basked in his fiery touch, Judas’s electric green eyes looked deeply into her psyche. In each sexual encounter, he noticed there was always more than one man, even when she took on the persona of Spice. “Would you like a threesome?”

She thought of Lance and Stefan. So much alike it was as if they were the same man. Finally, her eyes met his. “Only if there’s another one of you around.”

“I think that can be arranged,” he said, so he snapped his finger, and a second incarnation of himself appeared.

“Oh, my God,” she gasped, looking from one to the other. “I was joking, yet there are two of you here!”

“Two devils for the price of one. No waiting.”

She felt a twinge of déjà vu creep into her core as she sat up and swung her legs off the bed. She slowly rose and walked to where Judas 2 was standing and looked closely at him. A chill crept up her spine when he looked at her with a flicker of fire in his green eyes. She could feel a raw, primal hunger radiate from him, a hunger that was capable of turning her into a complete wanton hussy.

Judas walked up behind her as she was still looking him over. “He’s alive,” she whispered, “like you. You’re the very image of each other.”

“Jennifer, it’s me.”

“But—”

While putting his arms around her from behind, she turned to him, and along with his hot breath on her face, Jennifer saw the same flicker of fire in his eyes, the same raw, primal hunger that she saw before.

“Do you think you can take us both?”

A shameless zeal flooded her. “Yes,” she whispered. “Oh, yes!” She wanted to devour him as he softly took her lips and then moved his open mouth to her eyes and then down to her neck. “Fuck me hard, Judas, and long. Push yourself inside me, and give me a taste of your cock I’ll never forget. Show me what it’s like to be fucked by a demon from hell. Make me scream again, Judas!” She moaned as his love became frenzied, as his large hands pressed and kneaded her butt while pulling her to him. He moved his hips slowly, causing his growing cock to rub against her. Finally, he leaned her backward, his mouth and tongue sucking on her breasts like a starving man. She felt the electricity of his touch as he stroked her with flames of fire. Her pulse quickened, and her heart thumped erratically. She lifted her leg and anchored it around his waist as the other Judas moved in from behind. She gasped when she felt his hands circle around her and press his fingers into her cunt.

“Oh, God, Judas!” she cried as she involuntarily moved her hips to the same carnal rhythm. She could feel him first on her clit, then moving in deeper. He found her G-spot, sending a spasm of rapturous vibrations exploding inside her.

Minutes later she found herself in a haze, being lifted, and then writhing in tangled sheets while one Judas licked and kissed her feet, while the other lay over her and lifted her legs to drape his shoulders. While exposed to

him, her cunt dripped its juices in anticipation of the fierce invasion of a cock so large and so strong she was covered with erotic chill bumps. The flames of hell leaped to new heights while he thrust his pulsing cock in and out, up and down, deep, so deep, the mattress bounced, and she moaned out her raging desire. There wasn't an erogenous zone on her that wasn't being handled by a master, causing her to lose her breath.

These two devils sent a hurricane of hot wind whirling through her as she lasciviously lay back and let them play her like an instrument. She was impelled to push toward him, silently urging him to ravage her until she could take no more. As he continued to plunge, he spread her legs even wider and handled her clit while reaching even farther to the mouth of her vagina and rubbing hard. The feeling was explosive! She couldn't be still. Her hips were loose and did an unholy bump and grind, while her cunt embraced his fingers tightly. With his expert ministrations, he dragged the music of hot, erotic desire from deep inside her, making her move her body like a loose dancer. And then the ultimate happened. She lost her breath when she at last shattered like a broken mirror. The feeling was so explosive, she almost lost consciousness.

When the act was at last complete, she lay in Judas's arms smiling. She was deliciously sore and satisfied, as never before.

* * * *

Just before retiring for the night, Father Jon sat on the bed with his head in his hands, guilty tears trickling down his face. Today he'd been called an old man, and he was. The years had crept by before he realized it, and with all that had happened to him, he felt as if he'd just hit bottom. Lifting his head, he gazed into a distant past. He saw himself with his collar on. It was a holy vestment that he had no right wearing. How much longer could he go on fooling people? His faith had fled a long time ago. These past few years had been more habit than faith. Evening prayers, the lighting of candles, he knew how to go through the motions. He knew all the right words, how to put on the mask of a gentle smile, say the words of assurance as if he were reading it from a script. Yes, he'd learned quickly how to tell them what they wanted to hear.

But none of it was real.

It was easy to fool them, so he continued year after year. He walked the same grounds, said the same words, all the time growing older and older. Why hadn't he quit the church long ago and made a life for himself? Why had he stayed buried at St. Mary's? The answer was easy. The rectory was comfortable, and it was a niche he fit into easily.

But no more.

He had made up his mind that if he lived through this ordeal, he would set his life straight. Without a sound he slipped to his knees and said what might be his last prayer, the prayer of forgiveness, a prayer of good-bye to a higher power that deserved far better than him.

Slowly his thoughts became feathered, and sleep overtook him.

As the hands of the large grandfather clock slowly ticked the night away, the sun finally crept silently above the horizon, turning the deep purple of the night to a lovely shade of pink and orange. The mansion loomed tall and mysterious, shrouded in early morning shadows, its rural hush nudged awake by the ghostly sounds of urban life nearby.

This is what Father Jon heard when he opened his eyes, that, and the lingering dirge of a bad dream even though he couldn't remember what it was. He looked around, finding himself still kneeling beside a dark wooden sleigh bed.

He had fallen asleep while praying.

Moving his eyes upward, he saw the untouched lacy pillow slips, clean, fragrant sheets, and an English rose comforter. It took him a moment to move himself, each and every joint crying out in pain. While in a groggy state, he raked his fingers through his hair and tried to wake up. Managing to get to his feet, he turned toward the sound of large trucks, motorcycles, and revved-up engines already on the highway at this time of morning and squinted into the light. He recognized the sounds of the city, so close and yet so far from the rustic setting of Halfmoon Landing.

His gaze lifted, looking at the spacious room. He vaguely remembered when he and Judas had arrived the night before. He knew a little about architecture and knew that whoever built the looming mansion had taken its style from the romantics of the past. It had curlicues of gingerbread decorations strung out along the exterior, and a veranda that ran all around the house on the second floor. The thick velvet curtains that covered the windows and the cold, thick silence told him that this was a house of secrets.

Gleaming wood and the red wine color scheme throughout gave no hint that light ever shined through. A faded tapestry, a sun-bleached drape, or a carpet that showed wear might have told him there was life here, but he saw nothing dingy with wear and no footprints or dust to mar the perfect interior. This wasn't a house that was lived in, but one that simply surrounded a handful of lives, which fate or the gods had brought together for their evil purposes. The only sign of life was the mistress of the mansion, who managed to add a little beauty wherever she could with flowery, feminine touches here and there.

It seemed lonely, with no close neighbors. It stood near a ridge, the path from the mansion going downhill toward the church and the Reef. A decrepit old cottage that was once slave quarters stood on one side, and a graveyard guarded by stone soldiers on the other. The house was surrounded by ghosts of the past, and a carriage house with the same design as the house was out back, neglected. The wind blew through it, echoing through cracks and crevices.

He knew now what his dream had been about.

The wind that blew through those crevices made a sinister music all through the night, coloring his dreams and giving him pictures of spider webs that hung in the corners and bugs that crawled along the walls. The darkness that existed past the entrance seemed to heave with life.

With this chilling picture still in his mind, he slowly rose from his bed and dressed in the clothes Judas provided him the night before. He looked up, startled, when a knock sounded on his door. He was just punching his shirt down into his pants when he called out, "Come in!"

The door opened slowly. It was Dirk. "Father Jon Harker?"

A stab of pain pierced him like a knife in his chest when he heard the familiar address. "Yes."

"Well, sir, breakfast is being served in the dining room. May I tell the mistress you will be taking your meal with the others?"

"Yes, thank you. I'll be down presently."

As soon as the door closed, Father Jon stepped over to the mirror and quickly combed his hair and rubbed the bristles of his five o'clock shadow. God, how he needed a shave. He felt lost without his toiletries. He certainly hoped the lady of the house understood the reason for his shabby

appearance. Quickly throwing the brush down, he rushed out and down the stairs and took a couple of wrong turns before he found the dining room.

"Please forgive me," he said as he walked in, a little out of breath. "I got lost."

"Didn't Dirk direct you?" Jennifer asked, looking up at him.

"No, but I..." His words quickly faded when he saw Jennifer. A picture of her running through the dimly lit corridor of the church flashed in his mind. There, her beautiful face was covered by the rouged horror that haunted her, but now, with her porcelain beauty free of the taint of the full moon, he was rendered speechless. Her smooth white-blonde hair was gathered at her nape and twisted into a smooth, sophisticated chignon. Long, shining tendrils fell temptingly down over her smooth cheeks, giving her a seductive look. Behind those tendrils were her eyes, her stormy blue eyes, so beautiful, yet so disturbed. He could sense that she'd seen a lot in her life, done a lot, and yet innocence shone from her face that reminded him of an angel. "I'm sure it was an oversight, no harm done."

"Thank you for being so understanding, uh..."

"Jon Harker...Fa...uh...you can just call me Jon."

Father Jon cut his eyes toward Judas, their eyes meeting with a knowing look between them.

"My name is Jennifer Duquesne. Mister...uh...Judas here has told me a little about your situation, so please feel free to stay if you like."

"Yes, thank you for your hospitality." He rubbed his jaw. "I'm so sorry I have to come to the table looking so bad, but my razor—"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I think I can find something you can use." Looking up, she said, "Dirk, you may serve now." With a glance around the table, she said, "I hope you gentlemen are hungry."

The meal progressed in silence, with the usual clatter of dishes and silverware. Finally Father Jon looked over at Jennifer. "Wonderful coffee."

Jennifer returned his look with a smile. "Thank you. That's what Dirk does best. He makes wonderful cof—" The coffee cup slipped from Jennifer's hand and crashed to the floor. Trembling, she looked around, trying to keep composure with a twitching smile. "I'm sorry, I..." She clutched her stomach.

"Jennifer, what's wrong?" Judas asked, panic in his voice.

"N-Nothing," she whispered.

She was locking him out! He could tell that a twisting pain was tearing at her insides, and she still refused to trust him.

She finally lifted her eyes to those around her. "If...If you'll excuse me, I need..." She didn't have time to finish her sentence before she jumped up and ran out of the dining room.

Judas looked over at Father Jon. "I think I know what it is. I'm going after her. Maybe I can help."

"Can I do anything?" the Father asked.

"She needs blood. The blood of animals can keep her going only so long. Last night instead of human prey, she stalked the animals in the forest. I found her out on the path between the church and the mansion. She could hardly make it back, so I carried her home."

Father Jon's eyes registered fear. "Then what I saw in the church...what you said...it's all true...She's...my God, I can hardly believe such a thing."

"I know. Stay here. I'll be back as soon as I can."

He turned and ran out, but Jennifer was already out of the mansion and running along the edge of the woods facing the exit off the highway. He knew immediately where she was going and followed the road all the way down to the sign that read *Gypsy Reef Exit*. About half a mile from there was a mortuary. It was still early, and no one was around. She managed to break the window of the embalming room and climb in. By the time he got there, she was drinking the blood of cadavers after it had flowed from the gutters around the embalming table and into the pails.

"Jennifer!"

She jerked her head around when she heard him call her, but it was too late. Fingers of liquid warmth had already begun twisting through her. She was so engorged with blood, she became dizzy and fainted with ecstasy.

Judas quickly picked her up and headed back. He was careful to keep out of sight as much as possible as he walked along the edge of the trees. The brush thrashed loudly as freeway traffic zoomed by. If anyone looked his way, he knew the shadowy rustic surroundings might make someone mistake him for some grisly monster carrying a dead woman in his arms.

Later, when Jennifer woke up, Judas sat in a chair watching her. She sat up quickly, anger surging through her. "What are you, my nursemaid? This is the second time I've found you here watching me like I'm a freak at a circus! Don't you have anything to do, somewhere to go?"

"I'd love to be somewhere else, but as long as you pull stunts like this one, I can't."

"You make it sound like I..." She pushed herself forward, pleading. "Don't you understand? I can't help what I do!"

"Of course you can. I didn't think so until last night, but you chose not to kill then, and today, instead of ripping someone's throat out, you satisfied yourself on the blood of corpses."

Jennifer remembered parts of the ordeal, even though she tried to push it out of her mind. How long could she keep hunting up substitutes for what she really wanted? She remembered the blood, the lifeless bodies, and she remembered being put to bed.

And wasn't there, no, it couldn't have been.

Two Judas's?

Ridiculous!

It must have been all in her mind. After all, there were times she thought she saw Lance and Stefan. Oh, God, on top of everything else, she was losing her mind. Suddenly a distorted picture of Magda filtered through her mind, making her feel she was heading for madness.

With a note of embarrassment in her voice, she said, "I'm sure you can see that I'm perfectly all right. Would you please leave me to get cleaned up?"

Judas slowly rose from his chair and turned toward the door. "If you need me, I'm in the next room."

Jennifer watched him as he left. She didn't know how to feel about Judas's presence in her life. For the most part, he was in her way, keeping her from doing what she wanted to do. When he wasn't questioning her, he seemed to be waiting for something, or someone. Every day he spent hours roaming the veranda as if he were looking for someone to come walking down the path from the direction of the Reef. Time passed slowly, putting everyone's nerves on edge, but still he waited, and waited, and waited!

Chapter Thirteen

“Who the hell is he?” Jennifer yelled at Judas when she finally got him alone. He introduces himself as Jon Harker, but now I find out from Dirk that he’s the minister at St. Mary’s.”

“Look, he didn’t tell you because Lupercus threatened to kill him if he did. No one is supposed to know he’s a minister. I don’t know how Dirk found out.”

“I’m beginning to wonder if there is anyone called Lupercus. Is this more lies you’re telling me? If he does exist, then where the hell is he?”

“He’s hiding right now. Trust me, he’ll come out when he feels the time is right, and he’ll be parading around in Father Jon’s clothes.”

“You mean he’ll be dressed as a minister?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t believe it. You’re lying through your teeth!”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“I don’t know, I just...Look, I don’t want two strange men in my house. The only reason I said you could come back was because of him.” She indicated toward Father Jon’s room. “You know, like a chaperone.”

“A chaperone?” He snickered. “I think it’s a little late for that.”

“Smart aleck,” she said softly. “If I find out you’ve lied about any of this...” Her words faded when she noticed his scar. “Would you like me to get you something to wear over your eye?”

“My eye?”

“The scar. I thought you might want something to hide it. It looks painful.”

Judas looked at her with anger so thick and so hot that he could have set fire to anything he touched. “Hell, no!” he yelled. “If you don’t like looking at it, turn your fucking head!”

“Jeez, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Let it rest. I don’t need your sympathy; my eye is fine.” With a sharp turn, he stalked toward the door and slammed out. Once in the hallway, he stopped abruptly. He knew he hadn’t any reason to blow his top. He was sensitive about his face. Now that his beauty was marred, he had no confidence, and it was one hell of a time to lose it, now that he faced maybe the most important battle of his life.

Just then the door opened and Jennifer rushed out. She stopped abruptly when she found him just outside her door. “Gosh, I’m really sorry. I didn’t know...” Suddenly she found herself in his arms, her words being shut off by his hungry lips. His kiss was punishing and angry, and yet it sent the pit of her stomach into a wild swirl, reminding her of the night of the last full moon. It seemed real, but since Judas never brought it up, she assumed it had all been an erotic dream.

But this is real, she thought as she felt herself being pressed against the corridor wall. With both arms, she embraced him as he quickly reached down and brutally ripped at her panties. With her dripping pussy open to him, he hurriedly thrust himself in and began a mad plunge.

“T-The corridor,” she whispered. “Some...”

“There’s no one here.”

“Oh, God,” she mumbled as she melted against him, anxiously receiving him into her cunt, his magnificent cock rubbing in and out, lifting her higher and higher. She knew Dirk, or even Jon Harker, could be along any moment, but she couldn’t have stopped Judas if an audience of a thousand had gathered around to watch. Instead she clung to him, her legs climbing, her cunt hot and wanting more. She cried out when he suddenly pushed in deeper, causing her hips to move faster, looser, her proper good-girl nature becoming loose and wanton. In a moment’s time, with this demon in her arms, she became the whore she fought against. And then suddenly a beautiful, warm orgasm blossomed throughout her, causing her to shift her head back and enjoy it while Judas moaned out his release.

While she was still being held against the wall and fucked like a prostitute, she realized that she really was a whore. The fight she fought was the fight any normal woman would fight, but with the curse of the full moon on her, it wasn’t her fight any longer. Now lust was always whirling inside her body, and as long as this curse was part of her, her desire for sex and blood would drive her into the arms of countless men.

The thought sent a spurt of anger through her, and she jerked out of his arms, ran back into her room, and then whirled back around. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" She looked at him with anger flashing in her eyes. "If you think you can come into my home and...and take anything you want, anytime you want, the answer is no. I've had my loves, and you and," she indicated toward the other room, "that...that fake *minister* in there can't measure up in any way, so don't even try!"

Judas was confused. She'd just been in his arms, eating him up, but now she acted as if she was taken against her will. Where Jennifer was concerned, Judas felt as if he walked on moving ground. He was no longer sure of himself and felt like he would topple over at any moment. The one woman he wanted above all others practically raped him one moment and spat in his face the next. He looked at her with flame-ridden eyes that glowed. "I notice you didn't call for your chaperone!"

Jennifer's eyes widened in anger at his remark. She reached out and grabbed the first thing she saw and threw it. "Why you..."

Judas ducked this way and that until he made it to the door, slammed it open, and ran through it. What the hell was he doing? He had run like a coward. A man who had been through as many wars as he, running from a woman's wrath. Standing with his back to the shaking door, and listening as the bric-a-brac pounded against it, he had time to think.

It was simple, he told himself. A war was more civilized, lines of defense drawn, attacks planned. A man knew what to expect in a war. But a woman, well, there was no way to know what she was thinking, especially when she was angry. If you were smart, you ran like a madman and hid until she was sane again. Yes, that was the answer. Run and hide. Any man, brave or scared would run.

He was just about to hastily take shelter in his room when his back stiffened. What the hell was he doing standing out here cowering like a henpecked husband? Suddenly his backbone felt like steel, and he whirled around. Grabbing the doorknob, he flung it open just in time to see a flower vase coming toward him at breakneck speed. He hadn't had time to duck, so it landed in the middle of his forehead.

He fell backwards, *the first time he had been wounded in battle.*

The next thing he knew, he was in bed, with Jennifer applying a wet cloth to his head. "What the hell happened?" he asked while frowning from the pain.

"I guess I sort of...hit you," she said with an apologetic look on her face.

"Oh, yeah," he muttered while turning accusing eyes toward her.

"Hey, I didn't ask you to open that door. Don't you have any sense?"

"Look, don't blame me for this. You know what you are? A baby having a temper tantrum. I'm lucky I'm still alive. Don't you know any better than to throw things at people?"

She jumped up and threw the cloth down on his chest. "Then stay out. Nobody invited you in here anyway." She walked around, angrily knocking broken pieces of bric-a-brac out of her path. "I'd appreciate it if you'd leave. I have to get ready and go down to the club. I'm dancing tonight."

Judas jumped up from the bed and rushed to her. "Don't dance tonight," he whispered close to her ear, his hands lightly gripping her upper arms.

She turned and looked up at him as if he'd lost his mind. "I have to dance. I have a job, for God's sake."

"Don't go. Not ever. They can get someone else."

She gazed up at him. "Why?"

"Hell, Jennifer, you know why."

"Maybe I don't. Why don't you tell me?"

"Because..." He turned quickly and ran his fingers through his hair. "Just don't."

"Because if I do, the night might wind up in a bloodbath? Is that what you're thinking?"

He whirled around. "That's only one reason. The men out front, any one of them could be him. While you're alone in your dressing room, you'll be vulnerable. He'll find a way backstage, and you won't know who he is."

She gave him a hostile glare. "No one comes backstage unless I invite them. The club has rules, and they enforce them very well. I'll be safe there, so there's no need to worry."

"Then I'll go with you...stay with you. He won't come around with me there." He circled her waist with his arms and pulled her close.

She jerked away from him. "Are you kidding? I don't need a babysitter, and I don't need your help, got that? I don't need any man. Not anymore. I

told you before. I've had my loves, and that was enough for me. From now on I'm my own woman. I do what I want, I come and go as I please, and there's no man around to tell me I can't."

"Jennifer, I'm simply trying to keep you from being killed. If they catch you this time, there'll be no more cages, no more questions. They'll shoot you on sight like they would any wild animal. You can control your urges, I know it. You did the last time, and you can again."

Jennifer was quiet for a moment while her thoughts went back to the night in the woods. It was true. She had purposely sought out wildlife that night. The thought of killing human prey had weighed on her mind so heavily that her conscience wouldn't let her do it, not again. She couldn't stand the thought of spilling the blood of another human being. She knew it was also wrong to kill the animals in the woods, but what was she to do when she hungered for blood and flesh? It was sad, but true. Someone, *something*, had to die to keep her alive.

Maybe he could help me, she thought. If by some miracle he could, it would free her of this curse once and for all, and she could live a normal life. She thought back to Lance and Stefan, who forever searched for normalcy in their lives. Lance had reached out to her, hoping she might be what he needed to make his life what it should be, but the curse was bigger than his love for her, bigger than Lance, bigger than the wise old doctor, bigger than anything. It compelled them night after night to do as it bade. She remembered seeing Magda walking between the two wolf-like men, leading them like hounds of hell to the front gate where she released them, turning them out on an unsuspecting public to stalk and kill until the moon released them. Yes, it was bigger than the whole Duquesne family, and it might be bigger than Judas, but she had to try. She turned to look at him.

"Judas, I can't let those at the club down. Don't you see? It would put them on the spot if I didn't show up. Come with me, but only to watch the show. When it's over we can come home together. You'll be with me during the time it really counts. Agreed?"

"All right," he said as the steel in his backbone turned to melted butter. Now he knew he was mortal. A woman, with her feminine wiles and soft voice, had just wrapped him around her little finger.

* * * *

The chilled sea wind rolled in off the ocean smelling of salt and dead fish. It ruffled the man's hair as he stood just inside a shadow between two gaming booths. He stared narrow-eyed at the front of the Rock Candy Club, thinking. Things were beginning to go wrong. Jennifer was getting stronger. During the last full moon, she had willfully chosen the wildlife in the woods to human prey. Not even Lance Duquesne had done this. Lupercus had never seen a will as strong as Jennifer's, and if he didn't do something quick, it would grow stronger than the curse itself. He gritted his teeth angrily. He knew Judas was to blame for this, him and that stupid priest he should have killed long ago. One of them was with her constantly. Approaching her at the club was his only chance. Here she was alone. His plan would work; he knew it. All he had to do was get in. He eyed the club closely, looking at the stage door in the alley. That was his way in. He'd been watching for an hour and found that to be the door the performers used. Some old geezer unlocked it before everyone arrived and then locked it back up when everyone went home.

Perfect.

The Reef was crowded, making it hard for him to watch the club without stretching his neck. He had begun to think she might not show up, but the crowd cleared just in time for him to see her walk down the alley and approach the backstage entrance. He lifted the collar of his raincoat against the chilly wind, ran across the promenade, and disappeared into the alleyway. He hesitated for a moment and looked around to make sure no one had seen him before he climbed the few steps to the door. Just as he expected, the knob turned without any trouble, and he slipped inside. An old scarred up greeting booth of some kind stood between the occasional visitor and the rest of the club, but no one was there. He was in luck. Apparently the old geezer had gone to the men's room. He rushed past it, and began to immediately search for Jennifer's dressing room. Again luck seemed to be with him when he found all the doors had the dancers' names on them.

He tapped lightly.

"Come in," a voice called out.

He entered quietly and saw her sitting at her dressing table. "Good evening, Ms. Duquesne. I'm Father Russell Cameron from St. Mary's."

The voice. It was the same voice she'd heard the night she and Judas hid in the club, a voice that sounded like an echo from an empty tomb. Her eyes shifted upward. A warning bell immediately went off inside her. Her eyes raked down his dark clothes and backward collar. Laying her lipstick tube down slowly, she stared at him through the mirror. He was tall, almost as large in stature as Judas, and seemed to fill up the small room. A chill crept along her spine when she realized that he stood between her and the door. Judas's words from only hours before echoed through her mind.

"...parading around in Father Jon's clothes."

"...he threatened to kill him if he told who he was."

"Who let you in?" she said, turning abruptly and rising from her chair. "No one's supposed to be back here before the show."

"The door was open. I simply walked in. Have I broken some rule?"

"I'm afraid so. You'll have to leave immediately."

"Surely you have time for the Lord. I only want to give you a blessing."

"A blessing?" She cast him an incredulous look. "On the kind of act I do?"

"The blessing is for you, not your act."

She felt uncomfortable beneath his stare. His eyes appeared illuminated, like lightning that flashed during a dark winter storm. He had hair the color of gloom, with brows that were deeply arched. His face had a bold look to it, but his mouth was thin and squeezed into a twisted line of hate. Not knowing what else to do, she stiffly indicated to a chair, wishing that Judas was here. "I've had everything from unfaithful husbands to gang leaders in my dressing room, but never a priest. You can imagine what they wanted. Either their wives didn't understand them or they wanted to make me a star." Her laugh fluttered away in anxiety. "Believe me, I've heard it all."

"I'm sure you have."

She cut her eyes toward him. "So what's your story?"

"I was hoping—"

"Of course," she interrupted. "You must be taking donations for some charity. Sure, put me down—"

"Ms.—"

"That's not it, huh? Mmmm, a man like you...you must be looking for a few souls to save, right? Well, I'm sorry, but you're wasting your time,

Father. Why don't you just go out in front and enjoy the show? A lot of souls out there need saving. Not me, though."

He didn't move, only stared at her.

Needing to do something to get away from those dark, piercing eyes, she rose from her chair and slipped behind a dressing screen. "You'll understand if I get ready. My act goes on in a little while."

He sat quietly, his eyes raking across the small room that was cluttered with clothes.

Sometime later she stepped from behind the screen in a scandalously brief costume studded with stars that twinkled with each move she made. The costume adhered to her body like a second skin. She leaned over the dresser and picked up the powder duster and stroked her face while cutting her eyes over at him.

"Ms. Duquesne," he finally said, "I haven't come to save you. I've come to help you."

Her fear suddenly fled when she heard those words. How many times had she heard them now? A million? And there they were again. She'd had enough and threw her powder duster down with a loud clatter and whirled on him.

"Why does everyone in this town want to help me all of a sudden? What the hell do I look like, a charity case? By the way, how do you know my name?"

"I made a few inquiries."

"Look...Father, or whoever the hell you are, I'm fine. What I need, you can't provide, so if you don't leave now, I'll have to call security and have your ass thrown out with the rest of the trash."

Just then someone gave a short knock on her door. "Five minutes, Jen."

"Say, Roy," she called out, "is Bruno around?"

"Yeah, he's out front right now. Want me to get him?"

"So what's it going to be? The stage door, which is how you got in here, or the club bouncer? Keep in mind he's a big bastard."

"I'm sorry I bothered you," he said softly and turned to walk toward the door to leave.

"It's okay, Roy, I can handle it."

He turned to her and said with a gentle voice, “Ms. Duquesne, would you let me pray for you? If you would permit this, I would feel my visit had not been in vain.”

“No!” she said emphatically and moved back from his advancing steps. “Don’t you lay a hand—Roy!” she yelled, but got no response. While backing away, she bumped first against her chair and then her dressing table before the fragrance of his blood assaulted her, fogging her mind.

She closed her eyes in rapture as she fell helplessly into his trap.

“Remember the taste?” he whispered. “Have you forgotten the magnificence of human prey? The strength it gives you, my pretty one? The satisfaction. Yessss,” he hissed. “I see the memory of it in your eyes.” His eyes shifted to his wrist. With a swift movement, he sliced it with a long talon, and blood slowly seeped out, the crimson drips deliciously red and pungent. To tempt her further, he dipped a finger into it and spread the blatant rouged essence across her lips. “Go ahead, replenish yourself with my blood.”

She closed her eyes, licking her lips. “Mmmm, more” she said salaciously, her voice a husky plea.

“Yes, there’ll be more,” he whispered. “It’s what you want. What you’ve always wanted.”

“Please,” she whispered, “I must have more.”

He squeezed his wrist and watched as the blood dripped down upon her face. One drop touched her upper lip while another smeared her cheek, and another she caught with her tongue. She reached out, grabbing at his elusive wrist, following it as he pulled it away.

“Not too much, my pet. I don’t want to spoil you. I’ve only whetted your appetite.” His evil, cunning eyes shifted toward the door, and he let them linger for a quick second before they shifted back to her. “Go now and dance, *the dance of the wolf!*”

Chapter Fourteen

The dance of the wolf.

The dance of the wolf.

The dance of the wolf!

The words whirled over and over in her mind as she walked in a mental fog to the stage area and then stopped. She stood quietly for a moment while she put her hand up to her forehead and closed her eyes.

A man walked up and lightly touched her shoulder. “Hey, babe, are you okay?”

With dazed eyes she looked up at Casey Wilson, the walk-on they used for her to attack. “Oh...no, just a little dizzy. I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re not feeling well, we can cancel this, you know...put something else on.” He shrugged. “A lot of men will be disappointed, but—”

She smiled softly. “You know what they say, the show must go on. Besides, I can’t disappoint those sick perverts out there.” She grinned at him teasingly. “Or the one behind the scenes.”

He returned the smile. “Hey, that’s my best role.”

“You just make sure you come in on cue.”

He winked. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Slipping through the curtain, she waited in the shadows, listening. On the expected downbeat, she leapt onto the stage and began her act. Everything was going great until she felt something, a stinging sensation much like what she felt when she was summoned by the moon. She turned and looked up at the round, mysterious papier-mâché object. She watched it, danced to it as if she worshipped it. It shimmered before her eyes. Was it her imagination? It had to be. It was time for her struggle, so she began. In only moments she realized she wasn’t acting, the pain was piercing, and she was about to mutate. She felt her inhibitions draining away as the rays

intensified. The power was so strong it felt like electricity stabbing at her through the empty air. A ravenous hunger built inside her, pulling her toward a spicy fragrance she knew to be human blood. She turned toward the audience and danced along the edge of the stage. She leaned out dangerously, her arms grabbing at the men who dared to step up to the footlights.

She knew her moves were new, blatantly sexy, but she couldn't stop. She saw the excitement in their faces, heard the roar that sounded throughout the club as she came down off the stage and stalked through the crowd, looking for one, only one. Thinking she was playing with them, the men laughed as she grabbed at them in a threatening way, one and then another. Raucous laughter and wolf whistles broke out.

"Take me, Sugar! Take me!" some called out while they teasingly evaded her reach.

The room began to reel as the excitement increased. The mutation was progressing. Finally, she turned and ran upon the stage and slipped back behind the shrubs and bushes. She leaned against a wall, the mutation grabbing her, refusing to let go. Why was this happening to her? The evening was too young, but she couldn't stop it. The power of the moon's rays sizzled throughout her body, and she had no choice but to obey. Her hair was becoming red and bristly, her body growing into a voluptuous Amazon, her clothes shredding.

And then it happened.

Spice roared to life.

Evil such as she'd never known filled her.

She burst out of her hiding place, and a gasp sounded all over the club. She looked down at the men, her eyes raking across each one. She was no longer particular about her prey. Any one of them would do. She licked the air, tasting the delicious essence of hundreds of lusty men. From out of the gloom of the stage, she heard footsteps and whirled around. A man suddenly appeared, walked to the lamppost, and stopped, looking around. He lingered for a moment as if he waited for someone. Finally, impatient, he began to pace as he looked down at his watch. She crept along the simulated bushes, drawing closer and closer, the men in the audience yelling, whistling with each roll of the drum. The cymbals crashed, a violent roar came out of her mouth, and she pounced on him.

At that moment Spice looked down into the eyes of Casey Wilson and saw lust turn to panic. With a vicious growl, she bit down into his flesh, tasting his metallic blood as it bubbled to the surface. She was so hungry, and it had been so long since she'd had human prey, that even when the blood lessened, she squeezed the wound, forcing more blood out.

She couldn't get enough.

The crowd turned wild.

When she heard her name bellowed out above the roar of the crowd, she looked up, and there stood Judas just beyond the footlights staring at her. Seeing him knocked her out of her euphoria and made her realize where she was. She looked around, her eyes wild with fear. She looked down at the blood that pooled around the body and the blood that dripped from her shredded costume. She felt her bloody face, and suddenly it wasn't an innocent street scene with actors acting out their parts anymore. Now the blinding lights not only exposed her mutated flesh, it exposed her guilt.

Jumping down off the stage, she fought her way through the men, slammed out of the club, and ran. The darkness of the woods called to her, but something inside her made her run the other way, toward the cemetery, toward the church, and toward the only man who could give her what she hungered for. As she neared it, the deep shadows of night leaned long and low across the trails between the graves. The tombstones and mausoleums took on the eerie complexion of a haunted night as she hid there, watching.

Subtle movement near the fence caught her attention.

Who could it be? It was late for anyone to be in the cemetery since most people avoided the reminder of death at this hour.

Suddenly, movement again.

Whoever it was seemed to be heading away from the old part of the cemetery to the new. She heard footsteps crunching on dirt and pebbles, scraping on cement.

There it was again.

Patches of moonlight caught the backward collar.

It was him!

She crouched down behind a tombstone still watching while he moved around something that looked like a hill of fresh dirt. Her attention was suddenly taken by something blowing in the wind. As she loped toward it, she saw that it was a piece of material. A shroud had been pulled off a dead

body and lay loose. She grabbed it and put it up to her nose. The odor of decay, blood, earth, and age clung to the threads. Her tongue licked at it, tasting flavors of flesh and blood.

Hunger spiked in her body, blood hunger. She sucked the cloth until the metallic taste of blood ran across her tongue. Human blood. Blood of the dead. She dropped to her knees before the grave that someone had invaded and began digging. Her talons performed the work of claws, working quickly on the freshly dug grave. When she reached the coffin, long ribbons of drool fell from her mouth. The corpse seemed fresh, not more than a day old.

Never embalmed, thought Spice.

Strange. Why was the body of a middle-aged, plump man still full of blood? What, or who, had ripped the protective shroud from around the body? Spice leaned closer to the blood feast and climbed down into the grave and clawed at the man's flesh. Her fangs pierced veins, and her tongue lapped at the river of blood that spread across the corpse. Mouthfuls of flesh were swallowed with the liquid until her eyes began to droop with the warmth of satisfaction. After minutes, maybe hours, of scratching and tearing at the body, she fell back, the corpse mutilated beyond recognition.

"Do you like the meal I prepared for you?"

Spice jerked around, her eyes falling on the face she'd seen earlier in her dressing room. Then he looked holy. Now he looked at her with a devilish leer.

"I took him from the coroner at the local funeral parlor and brought him here. Just died. Hadn't even been embalmed yet." His devilish leer quickly turned somber, flames of fire leaping from his eyes. "Now that you know who your master is, you will do as I command. Do you understand? You summoned me. Remember? After you killed your own son, stabbing him in the heart."

Spice slowly came out of her mutation, and everything he said brought the horrible memories back to her. She could see herself crouching over the body of Cristo, lifting her fist and raging at the gods.

"Go ahead, you bastards, send me your worst! Do you hear? Anyone! Your highest, most powerful..."

"Well, here I am, my dear. All the way from the Black Heavens, another name for...hell."

Fully changed, Jennifer turned to him slowly, anger surging so high in her that she choked on it. She gasped and growled as she rose from the hole and began advancing on Lupercus. “You fucking bastard! You killed the men in my life, and then you killed my sons!” She continued to advance on him, her snarling voice digging deep into her throat. “I’ll rip your balls off, do you hear? I’ll cut you up and serve you for dinner! You made me this way, and you’ll pay for it! When the next full moon comes around, I’ll come looking for you! I’ll rip you to shreds! Do you understand me? I’ll tear out your throat and drink *your* blood!”

“Kill me?” Lupercus churned out a sinister chuckle. “I’m afraid you can’t. You see, I’m immortal. I will live forever. If you harm one hair on my head, I will simply retire for a short time and come back stronger than ever.”

“I don’t believe you,” she hissed.

“No?” His eyes lowered to his arm as he extended it toward her. “I believe you remember the cut on my wrist earlier? The one you drank from? Look at it now.”

Jennifer lowered her gaze to the place where the wound should have been and saw evidence of a slight tear instead of a painful, throbbing cut. She quickly reached out and grabbed at the other one. The wrist was perfect. No cut, no blood. Her eyes shifted back up to his dark face, her eyes digging into his.

As Lupercus read the question in Jennifer’s eyes, he knew he no longer had anything to hide and began changing into whom he really was. Now he stood before her in flowing, godly raiment, his skin turning to a red, blood-like blush, and his horns growing to a grand proportion. His dark widow’s peak lowered while his dark mane blew in the wind, making him resemble a wild man. His fingers stretched into talons, and his teeth sharpened to canine length. A pointed nose and chin gave him a devilish look, and a blood-red mouth twisted into a snake-like leer.

His evil had deformed him.

“This is who I am, Jennifer, the God of Evil. I lust after it like a human lusts for sex. To me, a tearing of flesh is foreplay, a stabbing is a kiss, and it all leads to death...an orgasm. I live in the shadows of dark graves. I’m the blood-sucking vampire, the flesh-tearing werewolf, and the insane grave robber. I live in the sinister darkness at the top of the stairs, behind old portraits. I am the dangerous spider that builds the web and then traps the fly

in it. I am the darkness beneath creaking furniture, the monster in the closet, and the venom in a snake. I cause chaos around the world. I am the bomb that wipes out villages, killing innocent women and children. I am famine, plague, and disease. I am a simple lie or the foulest of murderers. I lie in wait, driving a husband to the brink until he kills his family, or the teenager who defies his parents and takes his friends on a wild ride in his father's car and all end up dead. I am a devil that sits on a child's shoulder and tells him to steal from his mother's purse. You see, Jennifer, I cannot help who I am any more than you can help who you are. And now, *you are mine!*"

Her anger slowly melted away and turned to fear. She'd never seen anything like him and cringed as he loomed tall above the grave like an evil giant. She'd sworn a vow to beat him, but how could she? If he was human, or if he were like other men, it would be different, but he wasn't. He was from Hell, an evil god that would go on living forever. Tears of defeat slowly coursed down her cheeks. What would she do? If she'd only listened to—

Judas!

He was her only hope now. Where was he?

"He's gone," Lupercus said, reading her mind. "Gone back to hell, where he belongs."

"You're lying! He wouldn't leave, he—"

"Why wouldn't he? You've constantly pushed him away. I guess he decided to take your advice."

Fear clutched Jennifer's spine. She knew Lupercus might be right when she remembered seeing him tonight staring at her from the audience. She would never forget the look on his face as long as she lived. Yes, he was gone. At that moment he'd given up on her. And why not? She never followed his advice. She always pushed him away, telling him she didn't need his help. And now, when she needed him more than ever—

Oh, Judas, where are you?

Chapter Fifteen

“It’s Judas!” came one breathy, feminine voice.

Hearing the name, gloriously permed heads of every color popped out of their apartments at the same time. Leaving their attendants bewildered, they rushed out, dressed only in flowing night clothes and robes.

“I thought he was on a mission.”

“Look,” one of the women said, “something is different. He...Is that a mustache?”

“I love it!” came another voice. “It gives him a look of delicious maturity, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, but there’s...” Suddenly a collective gasp was heard.

“It’s a scar,” they exclaimed in unity. “There! Around his eye!”

One of the women smiled. “Yessss,” she hissed. “It adds boldness to his features, don’t you think? Turns that *pretty boy* look of his into one of sexy, bad boy rebellion.” She cocked her head as she looked at him. “Does he seem bigger, or is that just my imagination?”

* * * *

Soft feminine hands of every kind eagerly reached out and caressed his arms and shoulders as he passed, but he impatiently shook them off. He was no longer interested. When he compared even the most beautiful to Jennifer, not one could measure up.

No, it wasn’t love.

He didn’t know love, how it felt. To know love, you would have to know God, and he knew only evil, Satan’s evil, Satan’s lust, Satan’s lascivious fucking parties that lasted for days. He was well versed in all things erotic, orgies that included every position imaginable, tying up,

strapping down, domination, submission, spanking, yes, he knew all that, *but not love.*

No, he didn't want Jennifer's love, her body would do.

He stopped at a doorway guarded by hellish creatures clad in helmets and uniforms, each with their spears crossed in front of the doorway to secure the entrance. He conversed with each one, making a quiet demand that he be granted access to the Royal Hall on business. Finally the creatures pulled their spears back, leaving the way into the chamber wide open.

He stepped inside, his eyes raking over everyone present for his father's face. He saw him leaning over a table full of maps, charts, and books and informed the gatekeeper who he was and who he was here to see. In only seconds a strong voice announced his presence, and the huddle his father was in broke up.

"Judas! What is this? Have you already taken care of the problem on Earth?"

"No, Father," Judas replied, "and I will not until I get the help I need."

"Help? I don't..." His father's words faded when he saw Judas's scar. "Judas, you've been—"

Judas's face turned dark with rage. "Yes, Father, I've been injured. Unusual for someone who's supposed to be immortal, wouldn't you say?" His gaze dug deep into his father's guilty eyes, waiting for an explanation. "Well? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you? Tell you what, my son?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about. My mortality. Why didn't you tell me I was mortal? It may not have been important to you, but for me, it means my life. I've fought many battles for the Black Heavens, Father, and you knew that in any one I could have been slain, yet you let me go, never telling me the truth. Why?"

"Is that why you came back?" his father said angrily. "To confront me with this foolish question?"

"Foolish? Is that what it is to you?"

"Judas, there was no need to tell you. The gods provided you with powers, and you used them admirably."

"Powers that I can put on or take off like armor. Did they cover me? No. I stood out on countless battlefields exposed to all kinds of danger. Yes, I had powers, but they couldn't stop a siege of arrows upon my body. My

God, I wasn't even given a warrior's armor or a shield for my own protection. I shudder when I think of the chances I took."

He looked at Judas with shifting, guilty eyes. "It is your mortality that makes you talk like this. The mind of a mortal works differently than a dev...one of us. I ask you again, why are you here?"

"I've returned to engage some troops."

"Troops to protect a woman from one insane god?"

"Father, it isn't as simple as that, and you know it. He's like a child with a toy. He knows I have no powers to fight him with and flaunts it in my face. These so-called *powers* you've equipped me with are useless against a god. And now that I know I'm mortal, I could never equal him in battle. That's why I need help."

"I'm afraid it's impossible. There are none available."

Judas felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. For the first time in his life he felt vulnerable, alone, expected to fight a battle without weapons. "What can you do? Can you at least tell me something, anything, that will give me an advantage over him?"

The Demon Lord thought for a moment as he stroked his chin with his taloned fingers. Finally he looked up at Judas. "I know nothing. You will have to take your chances with him."

Harz, the goddess who teaches the act of poisoning, jumped to her feet and ran to him. "Tell him!"

"I can't!" the Demon Lord hissed.

"You must! You're leaving him without any defense."

"Father," Judas said, "what is this? Why won't you help me? Do you know something you aren't telling me?"

"No. What I know is kept between the gods and the lords. It is information that has never left this chamber, and it never will."

"Do you want him killed?" Harz cried. "If you don't tell him, I will!"

Judas turned to his father. "You have information that will help me, yet you won't tell me? Why? If it will help me defeat him, Father, I must know what it is."

"I said no!"

Judas looked at his father, pain gripping his chest. "Then say good-bye to me now, Father, because I will die if I have to face Lupercus without a defense."

“You still have your powers, do you not?”

“Yes, I still—”

“That is sufficient.”

“My God, you don’t care! I could go out there and get myself killed, and you don’t care. Why, Father? I know love is—”

“Shhhh!” his father said, looking around to see if anyone had heard. The Demon Lord’s flaming eyes stared at Judas. “Love? What is love? You know what I taught you. Love is for the weak, the spineless. It’s an emotion that is not part of this world. The only love you will see here is the love of our own flesh. We indulge it every chance we get. For hunger we gorge ourselves, for sex we choose only the most beautiful, and for entertainment we watch underlings die in games of chance, where the only winner is the one who can outmaneuver the other. I knew what sending you to Earth would do to you, but I had no choice. As long as you were here, you had scales over your eyes.” He lifted a hand dramatically. “Now...behold! The blind can see! I knew it would happen one day.” He turned his back on his son abruptly. “Go! Go back to the world you really belong to. The world where the wind is sweet, the rain as fresh as if it had come from heaven’s own mountain steams. I should have never taken you out of it.”

“Come with me, Father. You were good at one time. Come with me and enjoy that cool breeze. Step in the cold, fresh water of a babbling brook and feel the push of the water as it rolls across your feet. Here is only burnt-out cinders, black winds, heat from the constant flames, soot storms—”

The Demon Lord turned abruptly, evil mixed with anger on his face. “I made my choice a long time ago. One day I will become the Lord of the Realm, and,” he saw the sorrowful look in Judas’s eyes, “being a lord here is better than being nothing somewhere else. Just go, Son...and don’t come back.”

“Yes, Father,” Judas whispered, a lump in his throat. “One more thing. I need currency. Not being familiar with Earth, I neglected to take any with me. I wear someone else’s clothes, eat other people’s food. I need enough to get by until I can...” Judas was going to say “return,” but the word got stuck in his throat because he knew he never would. He would either be dead or wandering all alone in a world of strangers.

“Stop by Earth’s coin exchange, and tell them I sent you.”

Judas made no reply, but turned abruptly and was striding out quickly when he felt a tug on his arm. He turned and saw Harz. She grabbed him as if to embrace him, but instead, she put her bold red mouth up to his ear and whispered something.

He grabbed the tops of her arms. "Are you sure?"

"I am certain, Judas. It is so, I promise you."

"Thank you, Harz. This is exactly what I need." He leaned down and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Before he turned to leave, he looked up at his father, who cast sad eyes upon him.

Without a word, he turned to go.

* * * *

He flew recklessly through the gray, billowing clouds that whirled thickly around him, finally bursting through the invisible veil that separated the Black Heavens from the thick crust of the earth. He looked upward as he entered the black tunnel and saw many dark miles stretched out before him. He could just barely see the glittering sky above, peppered with twinkling stars that were like jewels against a black velvet sky. He flew toward them. When suddenly he burst free, he slowed himself down and turned, seeing a shining Atlantic that looked as if it were hiding the dazzling sun beneath its watery depth. Without wasting a moment, he streaked forward, away from the dense Amazon forest that surrounded the volcanic pit from which he had erupted. With an excited heart, he flew quickly through the cold nighttime skies until he saw the Atlantic Coast, and home.

Never to leave again!

Thoughts of never seeing his father again caused a pain to rip across his chest. The harsh ache caused his body to buckle and thrash wildly, until he lost control of his wings.

He began to fall.

Like a giant bird, he soared downward.

Turning, twisting.

The wind pushing at his back.

He passed through a thick mass of thunderclouds, and the sky became black. Lightning from an electrical storm sizzled through the sky, missing him by mere inches. Thunder cracked and shook the atmosphere around

him. He continued to fall, his body turning, his arms and legs flailing. His wings were ripped from his back, and rain fell in sheets, soaking his body.

Everything went black.

Moments, maybe hours, of agonizing darkness finally gave way to a constant chirping. His eyes opened slowly, and he looked around. He'd landed in a bed of bushes, a nest of birds on the ground beside him. How had he managed to survive that fall? Was someone watching over him? His father, perhaps? Remembering their last encounter, he knew the answer.

The empty void inside him that his father once filled caused tears to fall from his eyes. He lowered his head in his hands as he agonized.

Who was he? What was he?

The Father of this world wouldn't want him. His own father didn't want him. Where *was* his world? *Where* did he belong? He remembered the last moments his eyes had met with his father's.

He had said good-bye in that look.

He looked up into the sky and saw nothing but dark, threatening clouds. Even though a splattering of rain fell on his face, he knew the drops that drizzled down his face weren't all rain, but tears.

He rose slowly and began walking along the leaf-strewn path, trying to orient himself as he looked for a way out of the woods. Hanging from the limbs of a tree, he saw his battered wings. He had just begun to remove them when he heard a chirp nearby. He looked down and saw a nest of baby birds lying on the wet, soaked ground. Judas looked up at the limb that had held their nest, seeing it broken. Like him they had fallen, and like him, they had no one. He stared at them, anger building inside him. Why should he care? They were only birds, no feelings, no thoughts, nothing. He brought one foot forward and lifted it. He was just about to bring it down and crush the birds when suddenly it stopped and hovered there. Everything within him wanted to lift the birds and place their nest back in the tree, but he knew if he could kill them, it would be a vile act that would show everyone he was evil, not fit for this world, not fit for any world except the Black Heavens.

And he could go back home.

His foot shook. He gritted his teeth. *Do it*, he told himself. *It would only take a quick movement to put these birds out of their misery.*

He tried again, and again!

He couldn't! He couldn't kill them!

For anyone else, his father, for instance, it would be easy. He'd seen his father kill many times, the blood of his victim a medal of honor as he strode victorious back into the Realms of Royalty. He'd remembered the days of his early youth, the days his father had lectured him about being too soft. Now he knew it was true. He was soft. He didn't belong in a place like the Black Heavens, and now as he looked at the birds, he felt the familiar compassion he always felt for those that needed help or were in pain. Slowly he pulled his foot back and crouched down to the birds and lifted them gently. He looked at them for a moment. This was a miracle of life you would never see in the Black Heavens. Even though this storm was one of great magnitude, and even though these little birds might be insignificant to some, to him they were a blessing.

He looked around at the storm. In the Black Heavens, the only rain they had was crimson rain or falling soot, and the only rivers and lakes were made of sulphur. Their mountains were burned-out cinders, their deserts burning ashes where a man could sink into oblivion. They choked on smoke, walked on ground that was black and hot. His world was bleak, the skies a reflection of the eternal fire that burned in the middle, their flames leaping up to haunt those who walked above. Was it any wonder that he was amazed by a small nest of birds, a skittering squirrel, a wiggling fish? Moving slowly, he lifted the nest and placed it securely in the crook of a new, sturdy, low-hanging branch. Just then he saw the mother bird flying home, carrying a worm in her beak. He was watching her feed them when he saw a light in the distance.

It was the mansion.

It looked warm, inviting, like a port in the storm. He turned quickly and stumbled toward it, but winced at the aches and pains in his body. He noticed his flying suit was ripped and torn, and bloody scratches covered his arms and legs. He reached down and slid his finger across a cut and looked at the blood, mesmerized. It made him recall the blood that flowed from the scar around his eyes.

This is the proof, he thought as he looked at the blood. This was mortality smeared on his fingertips. There would be no instant, miraculous healing for him. If he was cut deeply enough, he would die. It was a strange new truth to him, but instead of hating the fact of his mortality, he came to accept it. After all, look at what he had. Blue skies instead of red, beautiful

mountains and valleys instead of a bleak, ruined terrain. Green grass and flowers instead of a dark, ugly, burned-out cinder. Yes, it was a beautiful world. A world full of mortals *like him*.

* * * *

A dark figure streaked through the night seeking something, anything, he could use to do battle with a werewolf. Since he didn't have any wolfsbane or garlic like they showed in the old movies he'd seen, he could only think of one thing, which is what brought him out on this dark night to sneak into his own church to get to the wine cellar. He wasn't sure if what he had in mind would work, but he had no choice but to try. Grabbing a bottle from a filled rack, he held it tightly and began to pray, even though he doubted that he still had God on his side.

The bottle burst!

Father Jon felt a cut on his thumb and cried, "Ouch!" He looked down at the spilled wine and glass shards. "What the hell...?" He reached up to get another, only to have it burst as well. Father Jon looked around. "What the hell is happening?"

"The faithful pray on bleeding knees."

"What?" Father Jon said, looking around to see who had spoken. He saw no one in the webbed darkness. The atmosphere was close and quiet, dust motes floating heavily in the air.

"Bleeding knees."

The words reminded him of how his knees had begun to hurt when he knelt before God on many occasions. He had gone through quite a struggle to renew his faith, but it never happened, so he finally gave up and turned degenerate. Now he was back, asking God to help him. What gall he had. Why would God help him, a corrupt priest? He timidly reached up and took another bottle of wine, almost expecting it to burst as well, but as he moved it downward with hands that shook, the wine bottle managed to stay in one piece. Once he could pray and be sure that his prayers brought sanctification, but not now.

"Bleeding knees."

He looked over at a chipped, old figure of Christ on the cross and suddenly knew what the words meant. He slowly sank to his knees, wincing

while the pain bled through his muscles and tendons, and began his prayer of consecration.

“*Sanctus, pleni sunt caeli et terra...*” He paused for a moment, but nothing happened, so he continued.

Chapter Sixteen

Lazy peals of thunder raced across the sky, the rumbling sound reminiscent of a hungry cat stalking his prey. The clouds were black and swollen with rain, but becoming ragged and frayed at the edges as they stretched across the sky. Far into the distance, beyond the winding, snake-like highway, was the hard, gray skyline of Savannah, with spiked skyscrapers made of glass and steel reaching up into a hazy, rain-soaked sky.

The high winds blew through the French doors of Jennifer's bedroom, whipping the curtains wildly, but Jennifer was indifferent to it since she was caught deep in a spell cast by Lupercus. She sat in a chair facing him, staring steadily into his sinister eyes. Although the wind had finally brought the lashing rain, she was in a fog and heard only his voice. His suggestions dug deep into her psyche, and she felt what he wanted her to feel.

When he said "eat," she was hungry.

If he said "water," she was thirsty.

If he said "fuck," she felt a whirling warmth gather in her groin.

Lupercus leaned forward, his lips touching her ear as obscenities flowed from his evil, twisted mouth.

"Yesssss," she hissed, moving her body lasciviously. She arched herself while inching her fingers up her body and burying them deep within her thick, disheveled hair. Wanton lust swirled inside her as she watched delicious pictures of whorish sex blaze through her mind.

Lupercus's passion mounted as he watched her sexually explicit movements and pulled her closer, his whispered words tickling her ears. "You're almost ready, my beauty. You have a beautiful erotic flush spreading across your breasts. When it turns to flame, I will give you to the lusts of hell." He watched her movements, his eyes drinking in her beauty until at last it was time.

“Now,” he whispered huskily, “now is the time.”

He knew she would be as willing and as good as any of hell’s most obscene temple whores. Yes, this beautiful creature would do anything he wanted her to. He could feel the lust of hell burning in his veins as he cast his eyes downward and reached for her lusty breasts. He cupped each of them firmly and tweaked her nipples until his breathing was heavy and labored.

“Now that Judas is gone, I can make you mine as you should be. I can own you, body and soul, without that miserable bastard interfering.”

Like the hungriest whore of hell, she moaned, reaching out to him for something, anything, and grabbed his hands and brought them up to her bold red lips. Her mouth opened wide, sucking, and biting, her tongue making lewd, suggestive movements in the center of his palm.

“Oh, how anxious you are, my pet. Would you like to be fucked?” His eyes turned hot and salacious as they looked at her, twinkling with delight. “Of course you would,” he added with a guttural moan. “Well, you shall have your wish, my pet.” He snapped his fingers, and suddenly two fallen angels appeared. They were tall, husky, their chests a broad expanse of rippling muscles. “She’s ready,” he whispered, “and she’s hot enough to burn the covers of the bed. Have your fill of her, but leave some for me.”

The two angels, stunning in looks, walked toward her, one kneeling before her while the other massaged her breasts from behind. With his expert touch, the angel that crouched on his knees began kissing her all the way up her leg, every inch so slow, so focused. He nibbled, licked, and bit, almost devouring her as he made his way up her beautiful leg. When he reached the groove behind her knee, she gasped and lost her breath. He lingered for a moment, and then began kissing his way up again until he reached her inner thighs. Jennifer’s desire was such that she felt herself drifting away and leaned her head backward as if she was lost in a trance. With her body limp, the angels then lifted her from the chair and took her to the open French doors. There, among the high winds and plummeting rain, they hoisted her high into the wet atmosphere as if sacrificing her to Satan. As if in answer to this ritual, immediately a bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, its point descending toward the earth, where a sizzle and scorching pops lit up the skies.

They brought her beautiful body back to the bed, laid her down, and began to stroke her almost lovingly. After several moments of their sinful ministrations, she awoke with the blond angel beside her. With languorous movements, she reached out and caressed his balls and made a gentle fist around the base of his erection. After rubbing his cock for several minutes, she then turned over and covered him with her entire body. With a smile, she lifted herself, and with one nipple, she trailed the length of his lush mouth, tempting him to open it and take her in. She probed and probed his mouth, trailing her nipple back and forth, feeling it harden as his cock hardened. Her breath became labored, her clit dripping and pulsing with life, wanting, begging to be fucked. Just then the other angel straddled her legs, lifted her butt, and parted her. With a swift movement, he thrust himself in, and she shivered, the invasion taking her breath. Her desire was so intensified, she had to push against him.

Deeper, he must go deeper.

Meanwhile, the first angel had practically devoured her breasts while Jennifer continued to fuck him with her hand. Cries of delight and moans of pleasure escaped their lips. As she enjoyed the ecstasy of an orgasm whirling through her groin, she saw the two angels turn and begin to fuck each other. They embraced, one climbing on top of the other, and both rubbing their cocks together until a penetration had to take place. While in the missionary position, the first angel then plunged his cock deep within the other angel's ass, and the two moaned and shook together, their hips moving in synch. After cries of joy burst from their lips, both turned toward Jennifer.

Jennifer grasped the headboard with outstretched arms and began to shake. The last angel was inside her now, his rampant cock pushing in and out with ferocious movement, giving her such a primal climax she thought she might die with pleasure, until Lupercus stood by the bed and shoed them away.

“Oh, God, not now!” she cried.

“Did you like sucking him, my pretty?”

“I liked sucking him. I liked him sucking me. I also liked...”

“That’s good,” he said as he lay down beside her and pulled her over him. His breath became heavy as he reached down for his cock and allowed

it to stand tall and proud between them. He reached out and placed her hands on it.

“Ohhh,” she moaned, treating it as if it were a rare jewel.

“What do you want to do with it, my sweet?”

Without answering, she moved backward and buried her face between his legs.

“That’s right,” he said, “worship me with your mouth.”

Mesmerized by this swollen part of him, she could resist no longer and fed it to herself.

The moment she took it into her mouth, Lupercus moaned. “Oh, yes, suck and lick to your heart’s content, my succulent little whore.” After feeling the caresses her flicking tongue made, he grabbed her head full of white-blonde hair and held it firm as he pushed in and out of her bold red mouth. The silky warmth of her mouth and the red lipstick that rubbed off on him lifted his excitement until he finally spewed his seed into her mouth. He slowly came out of his euphoria and looked down at her with eyes that had sharpened. “You will be changing soon. You know where he is. You must go to him and drink his blood.”

Upon his dark command, she rose from the floor slowly and began to walk stiffly down the semi-darkened hallway, her eyes looking straight ahead of her. Heavy silence permeated the long, eerie corridor. No sound, nothing, no one about on this moon-cursed night but those with evil on their minds.

And then she saw it, the door.

It was open slightly, a golden light falling lazily into the hall. She walked until she stood at the threshold. She saw him looking down at his hand. When he raised his thumb to his mouth, she sucked in her breath and licked her lips. The air carried the ripe scent of human blood coming from an open wound.

He looked around when he heard a sharp intake of air and saw her watching him. Putting his bleeding thumb behind him, he said, “Jennifer. Come in.” With the other hand, he reached for the bottle of wine, poured her a glass, and passed it to her. “I’m having a glass of wine. I hope you’ll join me. You do drink wine, don’t you?”

Looking down at the glass in her hand, she turned it slightly. The light shining through it reflected a red hue making her think of blood. "Yes, I drink...wine."

Father Jon smiled. "I love wine myself and drink it every chance I get."

"It looks like...blood." The words coming from her were strangely seductive.

* * * *

He watched her closely as she drank the liquid down.

As soon as she replaced the glass, she reached for his wounded thumb, dazzled by the sinfully rouged sight. "You've cut yourself." Hunger, stark and vivid, glittered in her eyes as she lifted it and slowly drew it across her lips.

A shiver of panic stabbed him, and he quickly pulled it away. "Yes, It happened earlier."

"No! Don't!" she said, grabbing it back and bringing it up to her lips once again. Her tongue automatically flicked out to savor it before she opened her lips and took his thumb inside her mouth and sucked it erotically. The sucking motion caused the cut to reopen, and the sweet metallic taste of blood raked across her sensitive taste buds and seeped sweetly down her throat.

Her eyes turned upward and saw his slumberous eyes become full of languid desire as he watched her. She could almost read his mind. In his eyes, his thumb in her mouth became his cock, and the sexiness of her bloody lips sucking it made his groin burn. She knew man was a rough, brutal, primal animal, and an erotic picture where blood and sex played a part would get them every time.

"I've got something that tastes even better," he whispered, his mouth so close to her his breath moved the tendrils of her hair.

"Really?" she whispered, looking up at him, her lids low and sleepy.

Father Jon slowly withdrew his thumb and looked down at it. Blood dribbled out of the cut. "I guess this is what they call 'kinky,'" he whispered huskily.

"I guess it is," she said with a slow smile. She lowered her mouth onto the cut once again and let her tongue sweep away the bubble of blood. The

odor of his rich burgundy essence drove her passionately into his arms. Her hand reached into his crotch, awakening Father Jon's awareness, and he immediately pulled away.

"Slow down. I'm a fuckin' priest. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Does it mean anything to you?" she whispered as her hand circled his cock and began to rub hard.

"It should, but..."

She watched his eyes close as the illicit thrill blazed in his groin.

"Hell, Jennifer, I've wanted you since the first time I saw you. I know I'm weak, but I thought you'd have more sense."

"I tried, but," she gazed through the French doors and saw the full moon breaking through the dark clouds and beginning a cursed shimmer, "it seems I can't resist you."

"An old dog like me? What could I possibly have that you would want?"

"Don't you know?" she whispered as her eyes furtively slipped down to his neck and saw his blood pulsing to a primal beat. The sight caused a lusty, immoral heat to flood her groin. The beast inside her began to stir at the sight of his blood, so warm and alive. Losing what reserve she had, she reached around his neck and brought his lips down to hers, covering them hungrily with her own. "Oh, Jon," she whispered into his mouth, "Oh, God, Jon, fuck me!"

It was all Father Jon needed to lose it all, his self-control and every ounce of willpower he had. Suddenly his priesthood meant nothing. He could feel the fires of hell lapping at his heels as he grabbed her, his hot, seeking hands moving down her back until he was squeezing her butt and pulling her against his pulsing, throbbing cock. A quick movement had her against the wall, her arms splayed out with his hands pushing hers upward. She was beautiful with her eyes closed in passion, her moist, shining lips open and waiting for his, her hair disheveled. She was the picture of sin, like the woman caught in adultery hanging on the cross. God, how he'd always wanted to fuck that bitch. Now, with his favorite fantasy whirling around in his brain, his hips pushed against her, his bloated cock getting harder and harder as it pounded against her hot, dripping cunt. As he rubbed his cock against her, he could feel it sinking beyond her soft cleft, discovering she had no panties on. This discovery caused his body to vibrate with liquid fire.

He felt a bursting sensation building and quickly lifted her and brought her down on him. A black heart full of lust pushed a dirty, shameful moan from his throat. It was pure bliss, heaven. “Oh, God, Jennifer,” he finally managed to rasp, “it’s been so damned long.”

Their bodies slowly slid along the wall, the two of them moving in a frenzy of heat and passion. They finally landed on the bed, where Jennifer clenched her legs almost as if she wanted to climb him. He’d never known such passion. Her heartbeat throbbed in his ears as he thrust himself in and out of her. He felt his inhibitions flee as his pulses leaped, caught fire. His hips became loose as he worked feverishly toward orgasm. And then it happened. The peak of pleasure came too soon. Already he was spewing years of bottled-up seed into her that had been withheld for so long.

It wasn’t enough. He wanted more of her.

But she had gone limp in his arms.

The power of the wine had finally conquered her.

Now she lay sprawled across the bed, her glorious white-blonde hair scattered over the pillows. He moved away from her feeling sadness overtake him because he knew he had sinned beyond redemption. Not only was he guilty of a loss of faith, but a mouth that overflowed with obscenities and now fucking a woman when he was supposed to be helping her. He was weak, allowing his desires to get out of hand. This liaison wasn’t supposed to happen. He was to simply feed her the wine and watch it do its work. But she had tempted him beyond his endurance, and now the room was a mess of blankets and clothes strewn about because they’d fucked with a reckless abandon.

The worst part was, Judas had trusted him to keep an eye on her while he was away, and he had betrayed that trust. He lowered his head in his hands, thinking about what he had done—about how he had put his own perverted needs above hers. She could never have a normal life because of what she was. She would never lie with any man just because she was attracted to him physically. Her blatant seductions would be all about blood, and no man would ever survive an encounter with her. He looked at the glass she had drunk from and realized he had just observed a miracle. The wine had been blessed, as if it were to be used in the holy sacrament, and entered her body as the blood of Christ.

Had he ever believed it actually turned to the blood of Christ?

Did anyone?
Someone did.
God.

Chapter Seventeen

Gently lifting her limp body, he took her to his bed, where he began to remove her clothes, leaving her dressed only in a black lace bustier and a black slip that rode seductively up her thighs. On her feet were black stiletto heels with straps that wrapped around her legs several times. That night she'd been dressed for seduction, coming to him to satisfy herself with blood and sex. He looked at her porcelain beauty and knew there was no way in hell he could have resisted her.

And now, oh, God, he was a weak man.

After taking off her heels, he reached up under her slip for the garter snap to release her hose and found himself caressing her thighs and her forbidden pussy. As if they had a mind of their own, his trembling fingers gently slid inside her. The warm, velvety feel made his cock push forward, stiff and ready. She looked like a succulent whore, her cunt naked and ready for penetration.

"God forgive me," he rasped as he slowly lifted her legs. He looked into the carnal darkness between her legs and moved slowly to mount her. Laying his body over hers, he manipulated his cock and pressed it against her pussy. Gently at first, but when an electric thrill pierced downward toward his groin, when a swirl of forbidden, raw, lust began to rage inside him like a small storm, he felt a hunger he had never known before. It flared, time and again, engulfing his groin in a hellish heat of carnal lust. He knew he was a dead man, his faith flying out the window as he plunged over and over, in and out, hard and fast. His hands cupped her butt and pulled her against him, and he went wild. The bed squeaked, the storm outside began again, the wind blowing into the room, and wrapping their bodies in a cold cocoon. But still he fucked, and fucked, the raging storm orchestrating every sinful movement. His mouth opened wide and devoured her breasts like a starving man, his teeth making telltale passion marks. He couldn't stop. He

was so hungry. Had the world ended at that moment, had Christ come down from heaven just then, he couldn't have stopped!

And then his wild actions had been rewarded.

The fiery burst came, showering him with the most earth-shattering orgasm he had ever had. He was lying on top of her, unable to move, when suddenly his eyes caught a glimmer of light and he turned toward it. Through the French doors, he saw the ocean with a glistening path of night light stretching far into the horizon. But there was something else, his own image in a mirror with his two hands reaching beneath her slip. The wicked light played along the planes of his face, making him look like a sex fiend ravaging a young woman.

God, how had he come to this?

He jumped up and ran out of the mansion, feeling an evil kinship with the night. A stiff breeze was blowing with a distant growl of thunder and the wet smell of rain. Heavy, ragged clouds lay darkly across the moon. Waves beat restlessly against the beach as though shuddering from the power of the storm. Feeling the surf pool around his feet, he fell to his knees and lowered his head in his arms.

He travailed before God, confessed his sin with tears and remorse, and waited, but there was nothing. No sign of forgiveness, not for him. Feeling as if God had abandoned him to a life of debauchery, he rose slowly and trudged toward the water. It was the only answer. He stumbled heavily through the sand until he felt the water reach his ankles, his knees, his hips. The waves whipped at him, knocked him over, consistently throwing him back on the shore. He tried, over and over again, *but death wouldn't take him.*

* * * *

Judas was stumbling up the portico steps when he saw someone lying on the beach. He felt a chill dance up his spine when he recognized it as Father Jon. He turned quickly and ran toward him, stumbling in the deep sand. As he ran, his silhouette resembled that of a giant bird, the wind fluttering through his ragged wings and the tangled strands of his hair.

He crouched down beside Father Jon, checking his vital signs while the midnight fog softly brushed his naked cheek, coiled around his sandaled feet, and kissed the muscled hardness of his legs.

Father Jon opened his eyes to a huge disarray of hair that billowed out like a lion's mane. "My God, what—"

"It's me, Judas. Are you all right?"

"What the hell is that you're wearing?" Father Jon asked as he lifted himself up.

"It's what's left of my flying suit and wings. A little ripped and torn, but that's another story.

Father Jon sat up wiping the sand off him. "You look kind of beat up. I hope the other guy looks worse."

"It wasn't a fight. It was...well, never mind. How's Jennifer? Is everything okay here?" Judas frowned when Father Jon didn't answer. "Is something wrong?" Judas asked, becoming alarmed.

Instead of answering, Father Jon lowered his head. "She's fine, but it's certainly not due to my expert care." He looked up at Judas, his eyes shimmering with tears. "You should never have left me in charge of someone like her. I made a fucking mess of everything."

"Like her?" Judas repeated. "What do you mean...*like her*?"

"I'm only human, Judas. I—"

Judas glared at him, suspecting the worst. "My God, she isn't dead, is she?"

"No," Father Jon said, shaking his head, "she's alive, but she might be better off dead. Since you've been gone, there's not a moment she isn't on the prowl for blood. It's not the full moons now. It's Lupercus. He's controlling her, and...well, he sent her to me last night. I knew what was going on and was waiting for her. I thought I was so damned clever, too damned *holy* to be seduced, you know? I did one thing right, though, I fed her some wine from the church, sanctified, and all that, but..." He hesitated as he looked up at Judas. "The wine worked, but I...I fucked the hell out of her, twice." He broke, tears flooding his eyes. "You put me in charge of Jennifer because you thought I was honorable, responsible. You thought a man of the cloth could be trusted, right?" He sniffed, and wiped his hand across his nose. "Wrong!"

“You bloody bastard!” Judas hissed. “Whoever it was that said you were a man of God was a liar! If this is any example of what a priest is supposed to act like, you’re no different than the evil place I come from! What kind of god is it that has men like you running his business?”

“No!” Father Jon yelled. “No, it’s not His fault. I’m weak. God is love, peace, all the good things of this earth. But evil comes in and tries to destroy all that He does. You must believe that! It was evil that drove me to do what I did.” He rose up on his knees and, in desperation, began to stumble toward Judas. “Don’t let any evil that I’ve done influence you.” He couldn’t meet Judas’s eyes, so he turned away, feeling lower than a snake. “I’m weak, and I’m sorry. Hate me, revile me. I deserve it, but don’t blame God.”

“You seem loyal to this God of yours.”

“Yes well, I may not be much good, but He’s not to blame. I guess He just made a poor choice in me.”

“If God is so good, then why is this blasted world reeking of sin? Why isn’t it some kind of utopia where all is perfect?”

Father Jon turned back to Judas, his eyes blazing. “Compared to that stinking world you come from, it is.”

“My world may not be perfect, but at least we’re honest. When we sin, we call it sin. We don’t put on holy clothes and parade around like—”

“Apparently you do. Don’t forget about Lupercus.”

“Lupercus is a bad example. There’s no rhyme or reason to his killing. He doesn’t stop to consider the outcome. All he knows is evil. He lives and breathes it.”

“Do you honestly believe that Lupercus is the only one in hell who loves evil? Judas, wake up for God’s sake. You come from hell, the ultimate place of evil. Think of all you’ve seen there. Hell is crawling with it. Infested.”

A strange feeling came over Judas. “Then, what’s wrong with me? Why do I hate evil?”

The look in Father Jon’s eyes softened. “Somehow you got misplaced, that’s all. You don’t belong in that world. You belong in this one. Jesus once said—”

Something leaped inside Judas. “Jesus?”

“You’ve heard of Him. He’s God’s Son.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of him,” he whispered as his father’s words rang in his ears. He bragged about his son like other fathers did, but it wasn’t about his prowess with women or his triumphs on the battlefield. No. It was his unique name. If he’d heard the words once, he’d heard them a thousand times.

“It was the name of a beloved disciple who betrayed Christ, God’s own son.” He remembered the uproarious laughter of his father and the others. *“Can you see it? My own son a constant reminder of his son’s downfall! Hah! Why, Judas’s very existence is a thorn in his side. When he thinks of Judas, he is reminded of every bloody stripe on his flesh, every cut, and every torment Jesus had to endure that dark day on the cross. My son is his namesake...a namesake of the one who did it to him! Judas Iscariot!”*

His voice rang with pride when he told the story. Ugly pride, not love. Judas wondered, wasn’t a father supposed to love his son? Instead Judas had been raised by his father’s harlots. He had become a man at an early age, having been taught sin at its most decadent by these women. He had all the sex he wanted, but no love. What did it feel like to love? What did it feel like to receive love? Would he ever know?

“Jesus was—”

“No! I don’t want to know about Jesus. Nothing!”

“I only wanted to—”

Judas whirled around and grabbed Father Jon by the front of his shirt. “I said nothing! Do you understand?”

“Why?” he asked, struggling to get out of Judas’s grip. “Afraid to learn the truth about how he died on the cross? How his death stuck it to Satan, forever crippling him?”

“Shut up! I know all the truth I want to know.”

“You know nothing but lies!” Father Jon shouted. “Satan lost. Did you know that? He lost paradise! He lost that utopia you’re always talking about. He rose up against God, and now you live on a burned-out cinder!”

“I’m warning you!” Judas said as he advanced on Father Jon. “Say one more word—”

“They’re doomed!” Father Jon said as he backed away. “No hope of redemption for any of them!”

“I don’t care! Do you hear me? I know all I want to about your God. Both he and his son were fools!”

“Fools?” Father Jon shouted angrily. “Can a *fool* make a blind man see? Can a *fool* heal the lame? Can a *fool* raise the dead? No, he wasn’t a *fool*.” Father Jon indicated toward the ocean. “Can you imagine anyone parting these waters? He did it to the Red Sea, and with nothing more than a mighty gust of wind.”

“You lie!”

“No, Judas,” he yelled, “it’s not a lie. It’s true. All of it!”

“If he is as mighty as you say, why has he left the other worlds out there alone?”

“Who says he has? Who’s to say that God hasn’t sent his son to every one of them?”

“Another lie! If He had, my world—”

“Your world is hell! The ruler of hell made the choice for all of you a long time ago! The only time Jesus ever entered hell was after he arose. That day he broke down the gates of hell and took the keys away from Satan and set the captives free!”

“That isn’t fair! There are those...he forgot!”

“He didn’t forget them. He—”

“—abandoned them,” Judas said softly. “Just like he abandoned me.”

“He abandoned them because they’re lost, Judas, but not you. I don’t believe it for a minute. He would give every man a chance, even you,” he whispered.

“No!” Judas yelled. “If he has abandoned them, then he has abandoned me!”

“Judas, he loves you. He brought you here, didn’t he? To his world?”

“It’s a lie! If my own father didn’t love me, why should he?”

“Because that’s what God is, love. You see, God can’t help being what he is anymore than you can help being what you are, or I being...” A sob welled up in his throat, and the tears began to fall again as he sank back down on the sand.

Judas felt a stab of compassion and knelt beside Father Jon. “You don’t have to worry. Your God has forgiven you.”

Father Jon looked up at him. “Forgiven...me?”

“Of course. If what you say is true, you cannot help being what you are, a dirty old man.”

Father Jon laughed softly, and then looked steadily into Judas's eyes. "You are also forgiven, my son." He gave a small shrug and then said sadly, "Oh, I know I've sinned, but if there is any power left in me as a priest of the church, then I would like to welcome you into God's world and proclaim you as one of his sheep." He reached down and scooped up a handful of water and drizzled it down on Judas's head.

"Is that all there is to it?" Judas said with a mixture of doubt and tears shining in his eyes.

"Judas, think back. Do you remember the first time you began to love this world? The soft breezes, the sunrises, the tiny birds, the trees, grass, flowers—"

"Every day was a new discovery for me," Judas said wistfully. "So different from my own world. Yes, I do remember."

"That's when you began to love him. You can't love those things without loving him. He created this world for those he loves and gave it to them. That includes you, Judas."

"He didn't give it to me," Judas said bitterly. "You forget. I came from a burned-out cinder."

"You were only a visitor, Judas. This is your true home. As a babe you were taken out of this world and placed in the arms of a devil. That's why you love it here. It's your home. You've simply come back home."

The truth of these words jolted him.

"You love him, Judas, admit it. You have a father now. A real father. A father of love. Believe me, he would have never turned his back on you."

"No!" Judas insisted. He tried with all his heart to deny it. He lowered his head and began to rock back and forth shouting, "No, no, no!"

"Then go back to that burned-out cinder and live with a creature who—"

"Shut up!" Judas yelled and jumped on Father Jon, his large hands about his throat, squeezing.

"Judas," Father Jon rasped out as he struggled. "You're..."

Judas suddenly realized what he was doing and let go. "Oh, no," he agonized. "I would have killed you."

Father Jon pulled away quickly and coughed, trying to get his breath. "But you didn't, Judas," he rasped. "You couldn't because there's no evil in you."

"Please forgive me."

“Don’t ask me. Ask Him. Ask your father.”

A lonely echo of lapping waves sounded as Judas looked up at the dark, cloudy sky. “If it were only true,” Judas whispered as all resistance left him. “I want him to be my Father, but...I mean...how will I know...?”

Before his words were said, he was caught up in a power so strong that every empty space within him was filled with something so indescribably beautiful his eyes closed in rapture. When his eyes opened again, he saw a ray of light from heaven break through those foreboding black clouds and surround him with a warmth that melted the chill and washed his black soul clean.

Was it simply the end of a storm, *or the beginning of his salvation?*

Chapter Eighteen

The Black Heavens

The rumble began low, almost like a whisper.

Finally, little by little, it grew, infusing fear into those who inhabited the burned-out little city because they knew what it was.

It was Satan's anger. An anger that was so evil it had taken the form of a beast. A beast that was created out of fire, brimstone, sizzling hot rocks, and fiery ash. The whirl of hot wind was like a blistering tornado as it skulked down the narrow streets and alleyways like an animal of prey. Snarls from deep within were heard as it grabbed at tall structures with a gigantic hand and heaved them to the ground. It whistled down alleyways, whipped around buildings, lifting objects into the air and throwing them for great distances.

When Satan's anger had reached its peak, it erupted, exploding into the atmosphere in the form of a huge firestorm. While balls of fire fell to the ground like autumn leaves, the population screamed and ran, scattering into their dens and watching fearfully through cracks in doors and windows.

The burned-out cinder quaked!

Fissures in the rock moved and widened, exposing leaping flames.

Hapless wanderers grabbed at the sides of the holes they found themselves falling into. They scratched wildly to get out, while their voices rose in terror. From down beneath the surface, a voice was heard. A voice so terrible it sounded like the explosion of many bombs as it echoed along the wreckage in the streets.

"He belongs to me-e-e-e-e!"

The Demon Lord cowered before Satan, who sat on his throne glaring at him. "But sire, I had no one else to send!"

Satan jumped up from his throne and leaned toward him, his glaring, burning eyes stabbing at him unmercifully. “You bumbling idiot! There was no reason to send anyone! With something of this magnitude, you should have waited until I returned! How dare you take things into your own hands? How dare you touch my top-ranking warrior and make him do a job that any minion could have done?”

The Demon Lord stood shaking in his boots realizing now what a stupid move it was on his part to try to score points with Satan. Andor had tried to tell him, but his pride had made him deaf to his words. Now it might cost him everything. He had intended to tell him, of course, but not until after the job was done to perfection. He had the loyalty of those around him, but it had never occurred to him that Satan’s right-hand man would open his big mouth and tell him everything. Now, instead of smiles and accolades, the big man was looking down at him as if he were a Christian he was itching to feed to the lions.

“Because of your stupidity, I have lost an important emissary, and you, a son!”

“Lost?” the Demon Lord squeaked out. “You mean...dead?”

“Worse than dead!” Satan shouted as he whirled on his heels, his red cape flying out around him. “He has been redeemed! His black soul has been washed clean...*in blood*.” Satan cocked his head and cast him a smirking look. “Need I tell you *whose*?”

“Blood...you mean...it was pure? But he was a man who lived on Earth. There were women...Mary Magdalene, the most vile whore of his time, was thrown in his path. Even the women taken in adultery...my God, there were *hundreds*. How is it possible? His blood had to be corrupted!”

“As pure as a newborn babe,” Satan growled, throwing his hands into the air. “And now he has Judas!” His evil face crumpled up in agony as he lamented his loss. “Judas, hell’s bravest, most capable war hero lost to us, unfit for Hades!” His evil eyes shifted and burned into the Demon Lord. “And it’s *your* fault!”

“But sire, if Lupercus had not...”

“Don’t try and blame Lupercus. You know him as well as I. He’s devious, sneaky, and has to be watched constantly. If you’d done your job with him, there would have been no need to send Judas, and he would still be in our ranks. As it is you have cost me my most valuable warrior. Your

job was to control that mad wolf god, not let him run wild. If you're not completely stupid, you might have expected something like this. Now that he's out from under the control of the gods, nothing can stop him. If I know Lupercus, he'll keep that moon-cursed woman under his control until she either goes insane or dies. Since it's not her time that would mean absolute chaos. There's only one answer. Lupercus must die!"

"Die? But your ma—"

"Yes, die! If only he'd used his evil the way it was intended, he'd be one of hell's most valuable demons. Instead he uses it only for himself, for his delight and his pleasure. Well, I'm tired of it. Death is the only answer and Judas will kill him!"

"Judas? But sire, Judas is no longer ours."

"Silence!" he shouted and then began mumbling to himself as he paced. "Yes, death is the answer. Lupercus I can afford to lose, but not a man like Judas. I must get him back at any cost. I don't care if he's a half-breed, has been redeemed, and has a soul as pure a baby's. I'll get him back!" He stroked his chin. "Perhaps if I... Yes, that might work."

"But his name," the Demon Lord said, grabbing at the same old tired excuse he'd been using for years. "I would have never thought God would have taken him into his good graces with a name like, *Judas*. It would remind him of that dark day, of the beatings, the cat-o-nine-tails..."

"You blazing idiot! Do you think God cares what his name is? And that dark day you so stupidly refer to was his triumph, not mine. It was a trick. We played right into his hands. He *wanted* to be led to the cross...to die...to shed that pure, lamb-like blood for the salvation of the world. Don't you understand? It was the only way. He *used* Judas Iscariot, and he used my stupidity. I thought I was killing him, ridding the world of good once and for all. When darkness fell on the face of the earth, I knew I had won, but I was wrong. Oh, he made use of those three days before he arose. He not only invaded hell and set my captives free, he took the keys to hell and still has them!" His face crumpled in sorrow. "Oh, God! What a crushing defeat it was!" Suddenly he whirled around as if he couldn't stand to look at the Demon Lord one more moment. "We were a joke then, and we're an even bigger joke today."

The Demon Lord looked up timidly thinking Satan was finished with him, when suddenly he whirled around, his red-rimmed gaze stabbing into his own.

“And do you know why?” he said softly, and then roared out, “Because of you!” His face was livid with rage. “Do you have *any* idea what you've done? I'll tell you what you've done! You *gave* Judas to him! You *pushed* him out the door! You *insisted* that he go! You *presented* him as a gift to the enemy!” Suddenly his voice lowered to a soft threat. “If I don't get Judas back, I swear by all that is vile, ugly, wicked, and evil, someone will pay!”

“I d-don't know what to say. I knew sending him was a risk, but one I was willing to take. After all, my loyalty is to you, your highness—” The Demon Lord sank to his knees and bowed his head. “—even over my own son.”

“You make me sick with your groveling. The only good thing that came out of you being a lord was Judas, but now that he's gone, I'm going to remedy that situation right now.” He rushed down the few steps of the dais, and with a brutal hand, he ripped the decorated cloak from his shoulders and flung it to the floor. “From this moment on, you are stripped of your rank!” He pushed his ugly face into that of the Demon Lord, forcing him to back away as he continued. “You will move from your luxury apartment in the Royal Palace and live in the dungeon! Those on the street will eat better than you, and you will sleep on the floor. Your only company will be mice, snakes, and bugs. Your royal vestments will be replaced by a rough, itchy, lice-infested potato sack, and your only pastime will be counting the flies that buzz around your head!”

“No!” he said, covering his head as if his words were painful darts. “Please, your majesty. What can I do?”

Satan backed away, a plan lurking in his evil mind as he watched the Demon Lord beg.

“Tell me, my king! I'll do anything to keep my place as Lord. I'll kill, destroy, commit the most heinous of sins to correct this awful mistake!” Again he lowered his head before Satan. “You have but to command me.”

Satan's flashing eyes looked down at the pitiful hulk who groveled on the floor before him, and allowed his lips to twist into an evil smile. “Anything?”

“Yes, sire, anything.”

“Would you kill women, children, innocent newborns and drink their blood? Would you blow up cities full of unsuspecting people, cut the hearts out of priests and nuns? Would you burn churches to the ground, rape virgins—?”

“I would do anything! Name it! I’ll do it now.”

Satan’s red lips stretched in satisfaction as his eyes danced with fire. “Too bad, because I want none of those things.” With a quick movement, he brutally grabbed at the Demon Lord’s wealth of hair and yanked his head back so he could glare into his eyes. “I – want – his – HEAD!”

“No, no. Surely, you don’t mean—”

“Oh, but I do! I’m getting tired of Lupercus and the trouble he causes. I want to get rid of him once and for all.”

“But sire, I haven’t been to battle in—”

“Not you, you pitiful excuse for a lord. I want Judas. He’s the only one that can do the job the way it should be done. You will send a messenger to Earth to tell Judas of your plight. Tell him the only way to help you is to deliver to me the head of that mad wolf god, Lupercus. If you can accomplish this, only then will I restore you to your former position.”

“But if Judas is...uh...redeemed, as you say, what...what if he won’t? I understand this...this *ruler* teaches against any kind of killing in his tablets.”

“That’s just it. He will have to purposely go against this *ruler*, as you call him, and he will if he has any feeling for his father.” Satan eyed the Demon Lord closely and added with a taunting voice as he buried his taloned fingers into his hair once again and yanked his head backward, “If not, then you should try and find a dark corner and pray. Perhaps your son’s God will take pity on you and send one of his angels to storm the gates of hell to free you from your misery.” Satan released his head of hair, causing it to abruptly fall forward. “It will take only one heinous sin to color Judas’s soul black again. And who knows? Maybe hell will receive Judas back into its ranks after all.”

Satan laughed, his laugh building to an awful crescendo as it traveled down the corridors of hell and out into the small city. With the sound whirling around him, the Demon Lord rose slowly and turned to slink out of the vast chamber while dragging his ripped-up cloak behind him.

* * * *

Back on Earth

*Fury! Wild unquenchable fury!
Darkness! Sinking back into the pit!
Fingers reaching for him, and then sinking back into the night!
But he knew they would come again.
And the smoke, the fire, the—*

Judas lunged forward, coughing. He looked around wildly, realizing he'd been dreaming. Dreaming of hell, of the smoke, the fire, the gagging atmosphere. He never knew how much he hated it until he managed to climb up out of it. Now, for some reason, he lived in fear of having to go back, of having to live there again.

He wouldn't! He couldn't! He'd die first!

He slung his feet over the bed and jumped up. Without hesitating he ran out the door and into the woods. Before he knew it, he was at his favorite place. Its beauty filled him with such tranquility he was at last able to breathe again, to think straight. He looked around at what to him looked like paradise. He'd found it one day while exploring the woods. When he first saw the profound size of the waterfall, it took his breath away. Only the vastness of the ocean could compare to how he felt when he looked at it. He'd never seen anything so beautiful or so big that it sent chills along his arms. It roared. The water thundered down the side of a hill and emptied into the clearest and most beautiful lake he had ever seen.

Being sure no one was about, he pulled off his clothes to go swimming in the nude. He loved the feel of water on his body, and as he played like a child in its depth, he smiled while watching the sparkling fish streak from one place to the other.

Judas escaped into the woods so often that the animals had come to trust him. He gradually began to feed them from his hand and talked to them as if they were friends. He knew why others couldn't appreciate it as much as he did, and he really couldn't blame them. They didn't grow up around burning lava lakes and mountains of burnt cinders and valleys full of burning ash as he had. He took a deep breath and smiled. So clean. So cool.

Suddenly he smelled cinders.

His lazy eyes flew open. He looked around. The woods became alive. The ground vibrated. The water in the lake shivered, causing tiny waves to slide across the surface, and the rocks and pebbles on the ground trembled.

He knew the feeling all too well.

Someone had just entered the earth's atmosphere, someone from the Black Heavens. He knew it would take only seconds for this person to appear, so he waited until the tremble of the earth subsided and a shimmering vision of a doorway came into view. Flames leaped out of it, and after several chilling seconds, Judas saw someone step forward. Putting his hand up to his eyes to shield the brightness of the flames, he gasped when he saw *his father*.

Judas's eyes widened in surprise. "Father!" he shouted, grabbing up his shirt and tying it around his waist to hide his nakedness. "What in thunderation are you doing here?"

"Judas!" he gasped out. "Thank all that is evil I found you. Satan knows everything...about Lupercus's fleeing, even your change in loyalties, and he blames it all on me. He's on a wild rampage, Judas. If you don't do as he asks—"

"What are you talking about?" Judas said, his mind whirling as he tried to take it all in.

"I'm saying that this is no longer a battle to help the moon-cursed maiden. You must kill Lupercus and make Satan a present of his head."

"Father, you know I can't do that. I know Lupercus must die to remove the curse, but there are other ways. My God, to cut off his head, it...it's too ghastly! Satan can get his trophy somewhere else."

"You have to, Judas. I've been stripped of my rank, and I'll only be reinstated as a lord if you do this."

"It's not my fault, Father. You made a mistake, a bad one, and Satan found out. Did you think he wouldn't? Why do you keep so many secrets? You even kept the truth of my birth from me. I cringe when I think of the countless battles I fought and the chances I took. And you. You never batted an eyelash. Did you care, Father? Did it bother you that your only son, your only *mortal* son could have died any moment at the hands of the enemy? No! You had what you wanted, so to hell with me!"

The Demon Lord fell to his knees before Judas, bowed his head, and cried. "I beg you, my son. I know I've done wrong, but don't let this terrible thing come upon me. If you care at all for me, do as Satan asks."

"Why should I? You've taught me all my life to hate, not to love. To harden my heart against any kind of compassion. You made me ashamed when I felt it. You even refused to help me the last time I was there. I found my help from others. You wouldn't lift a finger to help me. Not a finger!"

"It's true, I know." He looked up at Judas, tears shining in his eyes. "But I'm begging you, son. Here you have found your life. Do not take mine from me."

Judas knew he was trapped. Restless, he began pacing and raking his fingers through his hair as he recalled his life before. Now he became almost sick when he thought of all the killings, the slaughters he had seen, even commanded. The blood he shed in those days could have easily filled a river. Blood, to Satan, was sacred. Important documents were signed in blood, and the blood of witches and warlocks were kept in vials. Sacrificial blood was drunk like wine, and it was said that the blood of hardened criminals who died of execution possessed enough power to raise the dead. He had told himself many times that the fighting he did was to protect his home, to defend his world against the enemy who threatened. But did he really believe it? He wasn't sure anymore. The more horrible the battle, the more lives that were taken, the more he was decorated when he returned home. A big parade was always planned for his triumphant drive along the winding streets of hell. Hails and accolades flew around him, and admirers ran alongside reaching out to touch him.

Inside he was still that same man today. He hadn't changed really. The only difference was, today he fought a different battle. Bloody killings reviled him. Now he wanted peace, and if he battled at all, it was to right any wrong done to him or someone else.

Judas stood tormented, knowing he didn't have a choice.

He finally whispered, "All right, Father. Go back and tell Satan he will have the head of Lupercus."

"Thank you, my son," the Demon Lord whispered, his relief shown in the flood of tears that blinded his eyes and the sobs that shook his shoulders.

"But this is it," Judas continued. "It's my last battle for the rulers of the Black Heavens. I will not be called on to be your butcher again. I'm not

stupid. I know what Satan's plan is and am well aware that I may lose my place in God's kingdom, but if I have to wander in limbo the rest of my life, I will not return. I'm closing the door between us this night."

"Then let me tell you one last thing, and listen well, my son. Before I left, I found that since Lupercus's death has been ordered, he has been stripped of his powers. You will no longer be battling a god, but a man. A half-breed like yourself."

"So what Harz told me was true."

"Yes."

"Why are you telling me this now? Why not then, when I asked you?"

"When you are in the camp of the enemy, there are many eyes and ears. I couldn't take the chance. I am glad you escaped. I know now that the war in heaven was wrong, and it was wrong to go against the god of this world, but what's done is done. Now I must live with my mistake."

Just then a small creature from the woods approached him as he had Judas many times, catching the Demon Lord's attention. The tiniest smile played along his lips as he lifted a hand to pet him, but he stopped quickly when he realized what he was doing. Sadness clouded his eyes as he reluctantly turned away from the animal and got to his feet.

Emotion tightened his throat as he said to Judas, "I must go." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he began to slowly back away, his figure becoming surrounded by a fire that reached for him all the way from hell. As he disappeared into it, a hollow echo sounded in the darkness.

"Good-bye, my son. Be happy."

Chapter Nineteen

Jennifer slowly awoke. What had happened? She remembered a man, no, two. She looked down at herself and saw a crimson stain on her naked skin. *Blood*, she thought and reached down and touched it. She brought it up to her lips and tasted it.

Wine.

Yes, wine. She remembered now.

For days, or had it been weeks, she had constantly been on the prowl for blood. Everything she saw was distorted, as if she saw it out of someone else's eyes, having someone else's consciousness, a wolf's perhaps. Everything she looked at seemed to stretch and bend. Shadows that appeared on the walls were like objects of horror, growing, stretching, breathing, and whispering.

There were times when she found herself crawling on the floor, feeling a strange desire to run through the woods, to howl. And then a moment would come when everything would become normal. She recognized those around her. The food smelled good, not like raw blood, but spiced and hot. For a moment she wanted it, but then the moon would appear through a window, and its shimmer would hypnotize her. Her fangs would grow and drip with saliva. She would begin to hunger for blood, any blood, animals, humans. At times like these she was only one step away from becoming completely bestial.

She must not let it happen, but how could she stop it?

She remembered seeing someone in these dreams, someone who fed her through his veins. He was a devil, a devil in a white collar. She could hear his voice in the back of her subconscious.

"You are like a small babe suckling at its mother's breasts."

She remembered seeing his thick veins throbbing with blood as they leaked through the opening he had created in his wrist. The truth flooded

through her. She no longer prowled only during full moons, now she was constantly hungry for prey, and this man, this white collar had been controlling her.

She jumped up from the bed knowing that all too soon she would turn into a wolf again. She must find Judas, and then remembered that this devil said he had left. No! It couldn't be true! He had promised to help her, and she needed him. She ran down the hall to his room, but he wasn't there. She turned when she heard something downstairs and ran toward the stairway.

"Judas!" she called out when she saw him coming through the front door. "Thank God it's you! I was told you were gone!"

"Jennifer! What's wrong?"

"Help me! Please help me! Something's happened. I'm..." Just then she saw the moon shimmering outside a window. "No, it's too late!" She tried to get past him and head for the front door, but before she could get out, Judas grabbed her and held her struggling body. He looked around and saw a tie holding the drape back and grabbed it. She struggled as he dragged her to one of the decorative columns in the foyer. With the voice of a demon, she threatened him and struggled wildly as he tied her to it. First a snarl and then a growl dug deeper and deeper into her throat while the light of the moon pierced her body with its hellish rays. She knew her mutation into Spice was only minutes away. Then a voice she remembered boomed from the doorway.

"Judas! What are you doing here? I thought you were gone from here for good."

Judas whirled around. "No, not for good, Lupercus. When I saw what happened at the club, I knew you had come out of hiding and had to act quickly. When I returned, I learned that she no longer goes from moon to moon, but almost every waking minute she is stalking prey. I demand that you release her or I will kill you."

"Kill me? Judas, there is much wrong with what you say. Number one, we both know that I am a god and far above your warrior capabilities. Number two, I am immortal." He shook his head. "I must say I'm disappointed in you, Judas. It's not like you to forget so easily."

"As usual you underestimate me, Lupercus. Perhaps you'll allow me to tell you why."

Lupercus threw back his head and laughed. “You’re very amusing, Judas. A little strange, but amusing.” He quirked his eye at him and continued. “All right, what is this bit of news you have to tell me?”

Judas cut his eyes toward Jennifer, who growled and struggled against her tight bonds.

Listen to me, Jennifer, he thought, willing his words to enter her mind. Hear me! Let what I say sink into your psyche!

He could tell she was resisting the moon’s rays with everything in her. He had to hurry before she stumbled over the edge and changed into her bestial sister. He turned his eyes back to Lupercus.

“Lupercus, did you ever think that the very thing you care about the most might be the thing that kills you?” He nodded toward her. “What if she turns on you? What if some night, beneath the shimmering moon, you become her prey?”

“We seem to be going around in circles, Judas. As I said before, I’m immortal and cannot die. Besides, she couldn’t get along without me. I protect her. She hears my voice and obeys.”

“She’s full of evil, Lupercus, and evil is your master. You love it, bow down to it. You are driven by it. Mark my word. It will defeat you in the end. And it will be a merciless ending.”

“You speak the words of a fool! My reign will never end.”

“Be warned. The clock is ticking, and I’m afraid you are in for a rude awakening.”

Lupercus frowned. “Why is your mouth filled with such stupidity?”

“When I returned to the Black Heavens, I learned something about you that even you don’t know.”

Lupercus laughed. “How could you possibly know anything about—?”

“You’re mortal, Lupercus,” Judas said quickly, “mortal like me.” He turned his head and looked at Jennifer, wondering if she had heard, and more, if she had understood.

Lupercus boiled with rage. “I don’t know who told you this abominable lie, but you really shouldn’t be so gullible.”

“It’s not a lie. I found out from two different sources.”

Lupercus was so enraged he couldn’t speak. Finally, he said with a deadly voice, “You dare to tell me...a god...that I am a mortal being? Why,

I'll destroy you. I have been a god of the Black Heavens for as long as I can remember."

"You're a half-breed, Lupercus. Like me, you bleed."

"Of course I bleed. Everyone does."

"No, Lupercus, gods don't bleed. Any wounds they receive heal up immediately. My father is only a lord, and he never bleeds."

"You lie."

"Put it to the test. Scratch yourself."

Lupercus thought of the many times he had scratched his wrist for Jennifer to feed from. It was never much of a wound in the beginning, and in a matter of minutes the blood stopped. Now, he lifted his wrist and scowled when he saw a nasty raw scar. He called it a feeding scar. "I don't have to put it to a test. You're a liar. If I were mortal, how could I have become a god?"

"You had become a danger to the Black Heavens. Still little more than a child, the evil in you had begun to grow, and you were put under a strict set of rules. When you grew into a man, you became rebellious and slowly turned into an arrogant monster, spreading evil everywhere without considering the danger you were causing to our world. Making you a god seemed the easiest way to keep a rein on you, so they elevated you. Not because of any wisdom you possessed, but because of your madness. Those around you were supposed to keep an eye on you, but they failed."

"What a bunch of rubbish. Hell is full of evil. Why pick on me?"

"Yes, evil is a way of life in the Black Heavens, but even evil has to be contained until it can be used at the right time, the right way. Used the wrong way, it can kill even the one who causes it, become chaotic, spread disaster with no rhyme or reason."

"But my powers. I have powers beyond the imagination. No one can defeat me. Not even you."

"You were outfitted with powers as a soldier is outfitted with weapons and armor. They are not yours, Lupercus. They belong to the gods."

"This cannot be. You lie. My powers are legendary. They're..." His words faded as a look of pure hatred settled in his eyes. "You have been a thorn in my side for long enough. I don't know if what you are saying is true, but I have one thing you will never have, and that is Jennifer." His

voice softened with evil. "Since I am so unwelcome in the Black Heavens, I will stay in this world. The powers I have will—"

"You have no powers, Lupercus. They're gone."

"It's not true," he whispered. "It can't—" He looked down at his hands and then at Judas.

"Go ahead, try and throw a lightning bolt at me. Call down fire from the sky. Direct the winds. Make the elements obey you." Judas paused. "You can't, and you know you can't because you've already tried."

"I thought it was the atmosphere here," Lupercus said softly. "I thought all the good in the air was making me weak. I thought..." His evil gaze cut toward Judas. "All right," he said, "maybe my powers are gone, but even without them I know enough of the Gods' secret incantations to control her. And who knows, after her will be another, and another...and another!"

"You're willing to become a runaway god to serve this evil master? Tell me, Lupercus, why her? I've seen you play with many in your reign as the Wolf God. What's so special about this one?"

"Look at her," Lupercus said as he turned to her. His eyes raked over her lasciviously. "She's a glorious creature, don't you agree? In her evil she's beautiful and wild. Darkness radiates from her now, and her eyes are constantly filled with a predatory gleam. I can hardly believe I created her. She's mine to command, to do with as I see fit." Angling his evil gaze toward Judas, he went on. "After a bloody kill, when the evil inside her has been satisfied, she becomes soft, like a kitten. Ready, you know? The blood on her body is like a vintage wine. I lick it off her, driving her insane with desire." Lupercus glared at Judas as he delivered the final blow. "Perhaps she will even bear me a son, a half-breed like you. Look at her. She couldn't have anything but a beautiful child, even more beautiful than you. Her two sons—"

With an anguished cry, Judas yelled, "You bastard! Release her! Release her from your prison of blood! Your hell!"

"Judas, don't be so dense. Why would I release her when she fills my needs so well? No, I will release her only when I have grown tired of her. Perhaps when she grows into an old hag, which will be many years from now." He cast Judas a black-layered look. "Even without my powers, I can still defeat you, Judas, so I warn you now. You and that degenerate priest

stay out of my way, or you will both meet your doom sooner than you expected. You can do nothing to save her, nothing at all.”

* * * *

Lupercus talked freely with Judas because he thought Jennifer had fully mutated and was beyond understanding anything except bestial things.

To hunt, to prowl, and to tear at human flesh.

But he was wrong.

She understood every word.

She watched both of them, listened, learned. Yes, she already knew that Lupercus was a devil in a priest's collar, a god gone mad, but now she knew something else.

He was mortal.

Her mind went back to the night of Cristo's death, when she had bellowed at the moon, at whatever and whomever was responsible for her misery. He had heard her and come. Not to hear her pleas or release her from her torment, but to draw her even deeper into his evil, twisted moon games.

By the time she had learned who he was, she was under his power and could do nothing but obey him. She had come to depend on him for blood. He treated her like an addict, kept her coming back by allowing her to drink from his wrist. Not a lot, just enough to make her follow him like an animal follows his master. But the worst was when he whispered vile things in her ear, causing her to go into a wanton, whorish rage.

And then he took her.

Savagely and without restraint.

As he lapped up the blood on her neck and breasts, he whispered vile things into her ears, later going on to her breasts and neck. His words were flavored with mumbled obscenities and promises that one day she would be free.

It was all lies! The bastard had no intention of freeing her. He wanted to keep her just as she was. His soft, soothing words had been for nothing, his promises of release, empty.

Well, she had also made a promise *on the night of Cristo's death!*

Now she looked up at the moon, resisting it, hating it, seeing his vile face etched on it, hearing another empty promise whispered to her from that cold, death-like surface.

It, *he*, couldn't have her tonight.

No, she had to stay focused.

She tried to think abstract thoughts, thoughts like, *how many fathoms, no leagues—*

She frowned and then asked herself simply, *how deep is the ocean, how high is the sky, how many balls of string would it take to circle the earth ten times? How much blood would it take to fill— No!* she told herself. *Don't think about blood, about killing, about the warm, spiced taste of—*

Suddenly the moon's rays grabbed her, forcing her to look up at it.

No, she argued, *you bastard—bitch—*

Oh, God, another question. Is the moon male or female? She'd always heard that Lady Luna was the goddess of the moon. She shifted her eyes toward Lupercus. How did it all work? Did everything have both gods and goddesses controlling them?

She pictured the goddess in her mind. White, sparkling, and beautiful while lying in the hook of a quarter moon and looking down upon the earth. *Help me, Lady Luna*, she cried inside herself. *Free me from this monster who calls himself a god!* She struggled, the prayer being said over and over again to keep her mind off—

No! She must resist!

At last she felt herself wilting down the column, her eyes closing in sleep. Now only one thought filled her mind. *She had done it! She had managed not to mutate!*

She opened her eyes just wide enough to see Lupercus looking at her with an evil smile twitching at his snake-like lips. She smiled back as if the two of them were the greatest of friends. He didn't know that her smile was as false as his priest's collar. He also didn't know that tomorrow night *he wouldn't be smiling!*

* * * *

Lupercus saw Jennifer's smile and tried to rush past Judas to release her, but Judas jumped into his path. "Leave her alone."

Lupercus glared into Judas's eyes. "You almost had me believing those ridiculous lies of yours. She's mine, and she will remain mine. If you want proof that I am a god, then be at the far end of Gypsy Reef tomorrow night at midnight. I'll put on a show you won't forget, and the finale will be your death. The Reef is the perfect place. That way I can dispose of your body with a simple splash of water."

"I'll be there."

Lupercus's eyes narrowed with a sinister twinkle. "How does it feel to know you are going to die in twenty-four hours?"

"You tell me."

Lupercus's smile fell from his face, and with a whirl, he turned and hurried out the door, saying simply, "Tomorrow night."

Chapter Twenty

The next night

The rays of the large silver moon painted the hardwood floor of the studio with sparkling moonlight. Like a carefree child, Jennifer stood within the moon's glow and giggled as she whirled around and around. Happiness she hadn't felt in a long time flowed through her. She opened her Chinese silk robe to the breeze and felt it tickle her skin as it slipped from her shoulders and draped her arms. She breathed deeply at the fragrant night air. It was warm for this time of year.

Perfect for a bloody rendezvous.

The moon shadows played naughty little games along the soft lines of her naked body as she looked at herself in the antique wall mirror. Surrounded by a roomful of votive candles, the undulating flames revealed how pale her face appeared beneath the carefully applied makeup. The milky whiteness of her neck spilled down across her shoulders and continued down her bare chest until it was shaded between her alluring breasts. The nipples of each one swirled into a pink bud.

Tonight she felt at one with the cold moon, the predatory gleam, the killing rays, and the power that changed her into a prowling animal. She'd fought it in the past, but not tonight. Tonight she welcomed it. Tonight, she would succumb to its powers without a struggle. And then suddenly her eyes shifted, and everything that was beautiful turned ugly.

She saw a lone figure walking along the beach road that was otherwise deserted, and for just one moment, a second, a stab of alarm quickened inside her. Ghostly sounds of faraway traffic intruded upon the silence of the haunted landing, and the vaporous headlights that swept through the fog-shrouded trees gave the night an eerie look and feel.

The setting was perfect, *but was she ready for it?*

She walked to the snack board that lay beside a pallet she had laid out. Wine, cheese, fruit, and mushrooms sautéed to perfection. She picked one up to taste it and closed her eyes. Perfect.

She stiffened.

She knew the moment he entered the dark house and headed up the stairway. She could feel the throbbing in the air, smell the dampness of cemeteries or basement dirt. The smell followed him. She never knew what it was before, but for some reason, tonight she knew. He smelled of death, of the grave.

The night was windy, and it seemed to follow in his wake, flowing over the banisters and crisscrossing his path. She fidgeted nervously. Was she foolishly taking on more than she could handle? Had his powers truly left him, or would even the elements bow down to him?

Almost as if a warning voice had whispered in her head, she looked and he was there, filling the doorway with his evil. Never flinching, she remained graceful in her stance, her breasts spilling out of the silky robe. Although misgivings whirled within her, she silently lifted her hand and held it out to him in invitation. She was determined not to be weak and forced herself to maintain a single-minded determination that appeared to him as an innocent, childlike stubbornness.

He walked in slowly. "Hello, Jennifer," he said as his eyes raked over her. He immediately rolled up his sleeve to feed her.

"No, not tonight," she whispered. "Tonight I have something for you."

He looked down at the serving board on the floor, at the pallet where they would make love, and at something else. Ties, velvet ties, and a blindfold. "What are these?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's a surprise," she said, excitement in her voice.

"Are they for me or you?"

"For you, my love."

Uncertainty crept into his expression. "I don't like surprises, Jennifer."

"It'll be fun, don't you think? A pleasant diversion."

He gave her the kind of look that told her she was a child playing at a game she didn't understand. "Jennifer, if you don't know what you're doing, this could be dangerous."

"Oh, Lupercus, don't be such an old fuddy-duddy. It'll be fun. I've always wanted to try it."

“Put them away. I’m not in the mood for games.”

She contained her shock. “What...Why?”

“Do what I tell you,” he dictated, his voice as hard as steel. “Put them away.”

Her heart pounded. “My God, I think you’re afraid.”

“I’m not afraid, but neither am I a fool!” he shouted. “The moon is full and climbing. Control in the wrong hands could be deadly, especially since Spice will be making an appearance. Do you think for one moment she would hesitate to kill me?”

“Kill?” she said with a nervous chuckle. “Lupercus, it’s a game. You’re my guardian, my keeper. I couldn’t survive without you. Do you think I’m fool enough to kill my protector?”

“When you’re like that, you don’t know what you’re doing. Besides,” he continued nervously, “it’s not up for discussion. Now put the damned things away.”

Composure was a fragile shell around her. Her eyes nervously slid to the ties and blindfold. He wasn’t going to cooperate. What would she do? After giving it only a moment’s consideration, she had only one alternative, his ego. Like any man, it was fragile, but with Lupercus that was true at least ten times over. She also knew that in addition to being egotistical, he was a male chauvinist. It would make her job easy. “I understand your fear—”

“I’m not afraid!” he bellowed, his loud words echoing a ghostly ring in the silence.

“What else am I to think?” she said almost timidly, her gaze angling up at him. “Unless, of course, you’re having some other kind of...problem?”

His eyes widened as he jerked his head around and looked at her. “Are you referring to—”

“It’s all right...I mean...it happens.”

A swift shadow of anger swept across his face. “I am *not* impotent!”

“Then you must be afraid. There’s no other explanation.”

His eyes blazed. “Of what? A *woman*?”

“What else could it be? Surely you can’t think I could ever be a threat to you. Even as Spice I’m not your equal. You know that.” She could see him begin to swell up with pride, so in soothing tones she continued to feed his ego. “Now tell me,” she crooned. “What could a weak little woman like me do to a great big man like you? I mean...I’m just a puny little female with

hardly a brain in my head. Surely you can see that, can't you?" She cut her cunning gaze toward him to see if he bought it.

"It's true, of course," he said arrogantly and began nodding his head. "All right, we'll do this, but only on one condition. The moment you feel yourself changing, I want them off."

"Of course, Lupercus. If that's what you want, then there's no problem."

She struggled to remain casual, not allowing him to see or guess at the excitement building inside her. She had conceived her plan to kill Lupercus the night before when Judas very shrewdly gave away his secret. It was the answer she had been looking for, and even now the words rang in her ears.

"You're not a god...You're mortal...You bleed. Your powers are gone...taken away by the gods that gave them to you. Don't you see? You wore it like armor, and now it's gone. Without it you're as vulnerable to her as any man would be. What if she turns on you? It's not unheard of, you know. What if some night, beneath the shimmering moon, you become her prey?"

With a hidden smile, she sat beside him, responding to him as he gently pushed her backward on the pallet, his hands and lips raking over her.

"Oh, Jennifer, you and I were meant for each other. Together forever beneath the moon. Think of all the years ahead of us..."

There they were, the words that sentenced her to a lifetime of pure hell. His words created a storm of anger inside her, but instead of giving in to it, she fought for a calm, steady voice. "Yes, I know, love, but let's not talk of that now." Careful not to make any sudden movement, she stealthily reached for the ties. "Lift your hands."

"Jennifer, why do we have to do this...?"

"You promised," she said, looking at him with what she hoped was hurt in her eyes.

He sighed and lifted his hands, letting her tie them to a sturdy pipe that led up to a sink she had in the studio for cleaning brushes and washing paint from her hands.

Next came the blindfold.

"Jennifer, I really think—"

"Shhh!" she said as she tied it over his eyes. Once she was done, she straddled him. With angry hands, she grabbed and tore at his shirt, popping the buttons, and jerking at his belt.

“You’re so rough,” he said. “I like it.”

“Do you?” she answered as she traced her fingers along his muscled body. “You look wonderful without your clothes on.”

Lupercus smiled. “Yes, well I keep myself in shape.”

“Time to begin,” Jennifer whispered as she stoked the gently growing fire with her fingers and her lips.

As the seconds passed, he began to writhe and moan with the involuntary tremors of arousal. “Jennifer,” he rasped, the sound of desire in his voice. “I must touch you.”

“Not yet,” she whispered in his ear. “I want you wild with desire.” Lifting herself upward, she touched his mouth with her own, lightly.

He responded like a man starving for water. “What are you doing to me, Jennifer? I must have you. Loose me from these ties so I can ravage you.”

“Soon,” she answered as she studied his lean, dark-skinned face, hating every line. Her eyes shifted toward the moon. It wouldn’t be long now. The moon was arching high in the sky, its magic budding and building. She leaned over him and whispered in his ear, “Do you really want to fuck me, Lupercus?”

“More than anything.”

“More than drinking blood?” she said, her voice suddenly laced with acid. “More than chewing the guts out of a human body?”

He drew in a sharp breath. “What? You sound...Jennifer, I demand you release me this instant.”

“Dream on, you bastard!” she growled and then lifted a hand and slapped him hard.

The stinging slap spiked Lupercus’s anger. “What in blazes—?”

“Just part of the game, Lupercus,” she said softly, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “By the way, do you remember a long time ago when you used an old witch to put your curse on two small babies? Twins actually. Lance and Stefan Duquesne. My, what a triumph that must have been for you.”

She felt Lupercus stiffen slightly.

“The curse was active for only a few months out of the year. During the autumn moon cycle, I believe. What a small world it is, Lupercus. These were the men I loved.” With that her fingers lowered until she found his nipple and pinched it!

“Ouch!”

“Can’t you feel your desire mounting? Wonderful game, isn’t it?”

“You tricked me, you little witch! Untie me now!”

“Shut up, you sick bastard, and get educated. I even became pregnant and bore another set of twins. Twins that later became stricken with the same curse.” Putting her fingers on his other nipple, she caressed it gently as she said, “They were my sons, Lupercus. *My sons!*” With the last two words, she gripped his nipple and pinched, her sharp fingernails bringing blood. She continued in a sickeningly sweet voice. “Enjoying our game, Lupercus?”

“Oh, God, the pain! What the hell are you doing to me?”

Ignoring his words, she continued. “On the night of my last son’s death, I challenged you. Remember? I *dared* you to come out where I could confront you.” She chuckled. “Oh, you came all right, but coward that you are you came in the humble clothes of a priest. You didn’t even have the nerve to face me as yourself. You’re not a man, Lupercus, you’re a filthy, lily-livered, mud-crawling snake! A rebel god without anything to command.”

“Rebel god? How did you know—?”

“Last night, Lupercus, when you thought I was out of my mind, I was listening. I know everything.”

“No,” he wailed and then called out, “Sataaaan! Save me!”

She leaned her lips close to his ears. “And then, to top it all, when my sons died from your miserable curse, you didn’t even have the balls to stop. You kept on going and put your curse on me.”

“I couldn’t stop! It’s what I do, don’t you understand?”

“I understand only one thing, you bastard. I want you dead!”

“And who’s going to kill me, Jennifer?” he gasped out. “Not you, not a woman who needs me to do everything for her! You can’t kill me...You can’t! I’ll get free, and when I do—”

“You’ll do what? What can you do to me that you haven’t already done? You turned those I loved into animals, and then after putting a knife in my hand and turning my son on me, you chose me to play your demented moon games. Well, tonight it ends. Do you understand? I may die doing it, but one thing I know. You will pay for what you’ve done to me and those I love. You’re going to die, Lupercus. Die!”

"I can't die, you bitch. I'm a god! I have powers. You kill me, and I will simply replicate as all gods do. And then I'll return for you."

"Powers? Where are they, Lupercus? Where are those powers you keep spouting about? They're gone. Do you know why? Because you don't deserve them. You've been stripped of your position, your powers, and your rank. You're nothing. An impotent little man that doesn't even know how to set himself free of a simple knot."

Lupercus tugged at the ties, struggled to get free, but he was helpless.

"Your love of evil has defeated you, Lupercus. You're not even worthy to kiss the feet of that backslidden priest whose identity you stole. I'm tired of it all, Lupercus. I'm tired of turning into an animal during every full moon. I'm tired of killing innocent people. I won't be your toy anymore, Lupercus." While speaking, she furtively reached over and grabbed a whip and lifted herself from straddling his body as she unfurled it. "Now the *real* fun begins," she murmured as she backed away, giving herself more room.

Everything was silent. Lupercus knew he was about to die, and sheer black fright flooded him. "Someone help!" he sobbed like the coward he was, his gravelly voice growing louder and louder. "Satan! I command all the powers of darkness to come!" He waited, but there was no response. Not a rumble in the sky or a whirl of the wind. Instead the cool night air reeked of his own foul odor, a sickly, deathly odor of rotting souls sizzling in the depths of hell.

He heard a sharp crack over his head and looked up.

"Jennifer, where are you? What is that?" he said, turning his head, trying to see. Without warning the next crack stung his body. "Argh!"

"What's wrong?" Jennifer said with false concern. "Doesn't our little game amuse you?" Lifting her hand again, the dangerous leather circled her head, and then with a flick of her wrist, it came zooming toward him! "This is for Lance!" she cried out as the stiff, sharp leather cut deep into his flesh.

"And Stefan!"—*crack*—

"Marcus!"—*crack*—

"Cristo!"—*crack*—

"And this is for me, and all the people who died needlessly at your hands!"—*crack*—

She didn't stop, but was wild with delight as the whip continued its punishment. By the time she got through, blood and flesh dripped from the leather.

"Satan!" Lupercus gurgled out over and over again while the stripes on his body burned like fire. But it wouldn't stop. It kept coming again and again.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

"Save me! I've...I've served you for years. I pray you will grant me my p-powers once again."

Jennifer laughed loud and long. "He's deserted you, Lupercus. Your god has deserted you."

"No! He wouldn't! Satan is king. Satan is all-powerful. All glory and honor to..." His words faded, nothing but weak, powerless syllables echoing in the darkness. He waited for the familiar burst of energy in the atmosphere, but it didn't come.

Lupercus struggled beneath the lashes while sour, salty sweat mixed with blood dripped down his face to his lips, trickling into his open mouth. With labored breath, and a hoarse voice, he continued to call out to Satan, but nothing happened. The night remained silent as the moon glittered against his flesh, against the bloody scars that crisscrossed over his chest, ribs, abdomen, and legs.

Suddenly the wicked snap of the whip stopped when Jennifer's body gave a jerk. She turned and looked at the moon. It shimmered in the sky, and her lush red lips twisted up in an evil smirk. It was the first and only time that she was happy to feel that sharp tingle that burned along her spine. The pain was excruciating, but she didn't care. She could feel her bones melting and reshaping, her fangs slanting downward, their sharp points hungry for blood. Her hair sprung up, red and wild. Her hairline lowered toward her nose, and as she entered the last phase of her change into Spice, her ears came to a point, and a soft snarl that began as a rumble came bursting into the dark, eerie night as a roar.

Dropping the whip, Spice advanced on her last victim, her eyes anchored on the swollen veins running down the inside of his forearms.

The juicy fullness of these vessels seduced her.

She sank to the floor and moved toward them, inching forward, her mouth open wide, her fangs dripping with saliva.

“No! No!” he cried out when he felt her talons scratching him. “Get back, you beast! I’ll kill you! I’ll—”

She pounced on him and tore wildly at his flesh.

It lasted only seconds.

Death came, the curse lifted.

Now she tasted only sour, bitter blood.

“Argh!” She pulled back and heaved, blood rushed up from her stomach, and spilled over the snack tray and pallet.

She turned away, repelled. She no longer wanted his blood, or the flesh that hung from his dead body. Instead she wanted to run, to get away from the carnage that sickened her. As if answering a call, she turned and looked out the window and toward the woods where she knew a clear, clean body of cleansing water would be waiting.

Chapter Twenty-One

Exhausted, he rolled on to his back breathing deeply. Sweat collected on his forehead, and a tired smile etched his face. Dirk always slept deeply after masturbating.

The deep, dark sleep of sinners.

But tonight sleep wouldn't come. Not yet. His body wanted more. His lazy eyes shifted to a wall full of glamorous pictures that he knew would make him hard again. Some were photographs, but most were posters of some of the most beautiful women in the world. He had even pilfered some of Jennifer from the Rock Candy Club. The one he liked best was the cardboard cutout that stood in front of the club. He got brave one night and snatched it while her show was going on. Now his hungry eyes slid toward it. He liked it more than all the others because it was life-size. In it she leaned forward, her cleavage exposed, her eyes slumberous and her bold, red mouth pursed. He could easily imagine her licking his cock while in costume. The picture sent a lustful fire blazing a scorching trail through him until he found himself stiff again. He turned and rolled over on a body pillow stained with his own juices. A smothered moan cried out into the night while his hips gyrated to a primal beat. In his fevered tossing and turning, the top sheet and blanket fell to the floor. After several minutes he felt relief once again, but was too sated to retrieve them. He would get them later when the sensual glow wore off. Right now he was flushed and still hungry for a sizzling hot cunt to bury his cock into. He again raked his eyes over the lush bodies of the images on his wall and imagined them offering themselves to him. With a moan he felt himself go stiff again, grabbed his cock, and rolled onto a puddle of his own juices and rode the pillow again. When he finally felt sated enough to sleep, he languidly reached out his hand to retrieve the covers, but it was useless. He was too relaxed to get out

of the bed and get them, so he lay quietly with his eyes closed and watched obscene images of tits and ass tempt him once more.

Dirk's world was small, his wicked fantasies nurtured by the evil that existed in the old mansion. In his own small room he had created his own evil, his own lustful, immoral atmosphere. It didn't matter to him that no woman would look twice at a monster like him. He had his dreams. He liked sex in the dark, where all kinds of debauchery could happen. It couldn't get too bizarre for him. In his mind he could make these women do anything he wanted, and he wanted them every night. When the light in his room went out, he entered into the most hellacious orgy he could imagine. These beauties would step down off the wall and cover him with a multitude of deep, wet kisses. The hands that stroked him were smooth, their bodies even smoother. He lay spread-eagle while first one and then the other sucked his cock, or sat on him and buried him deep into her cunt. The others stroked his body, fucked him with her tongue inside his ear while the other hung her breasts down over his face, allowing him to lick and suck them like fruit on a tree. This wild orgy didn't end until he had fucked every one of their smooth little asses over and over again.

Now, still drowning in his fantasies, he felt a chill in the air and decided to get out of bed to get the covers. After grabbing them, he was making his way back to the bed when a sharp, intense pain doubled him over.

It felt strange, like a phantom pain, ghostly, and yet it crashed against him like a wave. It radiated from his pelvis upward, causing him to stagger and drop the bedclothes. His body gave a jerk, and he felt something release him. It was a strange sensation. Like a puppet, he felt the strings that supported him break. Disoriented, he couldn't think, but saw a whirl of dark evil wind gathering itself from every nook and cranny of the mansion and make a giant swoosh out the windows.

What had happened?

And then suddenly, he knew.

The evil had gone.

Without it he felt weak, dizzy, unbalanced. It was his only connection to this house, and now it was gone. He knew instinctively that somehow the curse had lifted, taking all existing evil with it. His home as he knew it, the ultimate evil, the shadows and the ghosts, had been cruelly snatched away from him. He panicked. What would he do? He couldn't exist in an

atmosphere without evil. He would die! He had to find somewhere to serve the master of his soul.

Dirk left that night, never to be seen again except during full moons in the church graveyard. Becoming a drooling ghoul, he lived in a dilapidated old mausoleum where he slept with the dead. He continued his dreams of beautiful young women and periodically robbed the graveyard of female cadavers. Dirk was happy here because he had at last found his paradise, a paradise filled with women who wouldn't look at him with horror.

Like his father, he had gone mad.

* * * *

Jennifer stood on the veranda with her eyes closed and deeply inhaled the sweet, lemony scent of magnolias. It had been such a long time since she'd smelled them, smelled anything but blood and raw carnage. She turned when Judas rushed in.

"What's wrong?"

"I've been to the landing. He didn't show up."

"He's dead," Jennifer said in a soft voice.

"I knew it," he said. "How did it go?"

"He didn't make it easy for me, but thanks to his tremendous ego, I managed to talk him into a game of submission and tied him up." She shivered when a chill raced down her spine. "I never want to go through anything like that again as long as I live."

"I need to find him," Judas said. "Where is he?"

"I left him in the studio after...Judas, would you," her hesitation spoke volumes, "remove...?"

"Right away. In the meantime you need to get some rest."

"Yes, I will. The first real rest I've had in years."

Jennifer looked up at him, her gaze as soft as a caress. "Judas, I'm sorry for not trusting you when we first met. Anyone else would have given up a long time ago. It couldn't have been easy chasing after me and trying to outwit Lupercus at the same time." She reached up and gave him a soft peck on the lips.

He could feel her warm, fragrant breath on his face and couldn't let it end, so he gathered her close and moved his hungry mouth over hers.

Although the touch of his lips was gentle, the moment they touched, she felt sparks of electricity fly. She expected velvety warmth, liquid sweetness, an ordinary touching of the lips but not the fire that burned her all the way down to her soul. She felt herself being lifted and placed on the baluster where she lifted her legs to circle Judas's hips. The wind blew against them as he leaned her backward slightly. The position was a dangerous one since the baluster was the only thing that supported her, but she had learned to trust Judas, and lay confident in his strong arms until she felt his wicked invasion into her cunt. She gasped as he pushed in and out of her, and tiny sounds of whimpers escaped her throat as she slowly began to grind her hips into his. As the passion intensified, she clawed at his back. The two of them trembled together in the cool night air until suddenly the terrible hunger between them exploded into a fiery ecstasy, and an explosion of lust shattered between them, bringing each of them to a raging climax.

Judas released her reluctantly, sliding her down from the balustrade, and then walked to the door. Before he walked through it, he stopped and looked back to see her lift her hand slowly to touch her mouth. He had surprised her with his act of love on the balcony and expected her to wipe it off in anger, but her trembling hand hovered, not moving.

Her lips and body were deliciously bruised by the hot pressure of his love. Her first inclination was to resist the feeling, wipe all traces of his lips from hers, but somehow she couldn't, no, she didn't want to. While her hand hovered there, the cold breath of an ocean breeze replaced his fiery kiss with a frigid caress. Was it a warning? Was he too dangerous to allow into her life, her bed, to stay?

"It's going to be cold tonight," she whispered.

"I'll close..."

"No," she answered abruptly and watched as he turned to face her. She felt a burst of desire, a shower of heat that engulfed the pit of her stomach when she saw his frank eyes look her over seductively. Standing there in the moonlight, he looked dangerous, simply too beautiful to be real. She was reluctant to invite him to stay. She'd just gotten free of one devil. Was he another one? It had only been carnal need up to now, but was it suicide to love him? Was she utterly mad to submit herself, body and soul, to him?

“What are you?” she whispered. “*Who* are you? I know where you come from, and still I want you. Am I mad? Is it sheer suicide to give myself to...?”

“Jennifer, I’m more devil than saint simply because I’ve led a very different life than you. I served a being that was...*is* the very embodiment of evil. He’s not simply some comical character in a fairy tale. He’s very real. In that world, evil is a religion. It’s called hell, Jennifer, and it’s your worst nightmare. Love is a foreign word there, and because it is, it’s an emotion I’ve never felt. Raw lust is so strong that you can smell it in the air. Sex can’t even be called sex because it is so depraved, that depravity being as normal as eating and sleeping. No taboos exist. The more deviant it is, the more it is accepted.” He hesitated, looking closely at her as he advanced toward her. “If it makes you feel any better, I never did fit into that world. Here is where I belong. Knowing who I am and where I come from, you’ll have to make up your own mind. I already know what I want.”

As she looked up into eyes that burned with a green, hellish glow, she could see the danger that lurked within their depth, but still she couldn’t say no, even if it was only the excitement of being with a demon. She had told him she wasn’t cheap, but now with his hands on her, with his lips whispering seductively into her hair, yes, she felt like a wanton willing to let him love her, like the devil he was.

Judas pressed his lips to her face while murmuring words of endearment. “I’m drawn to your purity, your innocence—”

She reached up and put her soft hand on his lips to stop his flow of words. “No, Judas. I’m not pure, not—”

“Of course you are,” he said, pulling her hand away. “Compared to the women I’ve had, you’re as pure as a virgin.”

His words thrilled her. “Then let me be your virgin, Judas.”

“You must be sure, because once we make this commitment—”

“Yes, my demon lover, I am sure.”

He took her face in his hands and covered it with kisses. He wondered if she remembered the other times they’d been together. The night they hid in the club, it was a quick, need-filling act that could be called nothing but two frightened people who had no one but each other. The next was a sham. Posing as the man she loved, he took advantage of her when she was weak

and a little out of her mind. The last time she was influenced by the moon, and tonight on the balcony, that was two people out of control.

But now both knew what they were doing.

With anxious hands, he pulled at her blouse, the buttons giving way to his fumbling fingers. While he undressed her, she groped at his shirt, pulling it away from his mountainous shoulders. She gasped when she saw his chest. His muscles rippled like an erotic stream. She began to lick and kiss each and every ripple, to smooth them beneath her hands. She looked down at his body. Was he different from men of Earth? Being from hell, was he larger, harder, maybe? She could see that he was perfect in every way, his legs and chest so pleasing to her eyes. Her fingers pushed his hair back, and her searching eyes saw the scar. She smoothed it with her fingers. It was an imperfection that gave his handsome face a tougher, bolder, bad-boy look that stirred the wanton lust in her.

Closing her eyes, she gloried in the touch of his fingers on her flesh, his lips on her neck, the naked skin of his body against hers. She could feel every hill and valley of his hard body as he reached down and clasped her buttocks, pulling her closer. She had an irresistible desire to climb him and lifted her right leg seductively, opening herself to him. His head lowered slowly, his lips making a moist trail downward from her breasts, each eager bite devouring her like a hungry man dining on her delicious, fragrant flesh.

Now he knelt before her.

Jennifer was giddy with excitement. She sank her fingers deep into the wealth of his hair, desire for him skyrocketing through her like fire. Her legs ached to wind around him, but he held her hips close as he continued to suckle her soft flesh like a starving man.

Finally Judas lifted her and carried her to the bed, his lips continuing to savor every inch of her body until he came to her soft pussy that by this time wept with desire. With anxious fingers he opened her, her fragrance as soft and moist as a spring rain.

She cried out when his tongue entered her pussy and quickly found her clit. Her passion mounted, and her hands grabbed his head and pushed him in deeper and deeper. Feeling herself climbing higher and higher, she arched her back while grinding her hips loosely. She cried out as the fiery heat of release exploded throughout her body in a series of orgasms. But it didn't stop. The fire continued to leap higher and higher, causing her body to

writhe, wanting more. Finally, her hands reached up and squeezed the pillows. She was wild. She couldn't be still. Her head turned back and forth, hair flying around her head.

Sexual frenzy possessed her.

Suddenly flames she knew must have come from the very bowels of hell surrounded her, licking her breasts and her pussy until she wanted to scream, but when she felt his sweet heaviness upon her, she saw it was Judas's flame-like tongue making every lick and bite feel like a sweet invasion into her very soul.

She writhed, her beautiful body moving beneath him like the tail of a tornado. As soon as she exploded, she was ready again, pushing Judas back on the bed and mounting him. Judas let her ride his erection while he reached up and positioned her hips on him so his cock rubbed her clit right into a hellish paradise.

Electrified pleasure exploded inside her, forcing out a scream that broke through the silence. She leaned forward, her tongue devouring Judas hungrily. He flipped her over. She loved to feel his weight on top of her and clasped his buttocks pulling him in deeper, her hard nipples rubbing against his strong chest. His teeth nipped at her flesh until he finally thrust his tongue into her ear and felt her buck wildly. She screamed out his name as he pumped into her with such fury, her cunt grasped his cock as she came over and over again. With the ferocity of a wanton of hell, she raked his back with her nails.

The bed rocked, and moans and cries of passion filled the room. The fires of Judas's hellish passion thrust Jennifer into a different realm, a realm of fire and brimstone. She saw it, felt it, clung to Judas's muscular body as he rode her, the rhythm of their bodies in perfect synch. Where was she? The touch of his body became hot, his cock so long and hard she could feel it penetrate her very soul! She could feel herself teetering on the edge of a passion she had never known! Was it in her mind, or was it real? Judas pulled her up into a sitting position with her legs around his waist, his cock buried deep inside her weeping cunt. Her scratching hands dug deep into his thick hair, pressing his face to her breasts. Jennifer could feel his tongue licking, sucking and flicking her stiff globes. His hands squeezed her throbbing breasts while he continued to plunge into her, sending her into an even higher frenzy of passion where she felt herself spinning upward into a

red haze of wicked lust. She closed her eyes, her moans rising high in her throat until they burst forth.

Their bodies bucked, she screamed.

They rolled, and she surrendered to the dizzying heat, the passion.

They were heading toward an orgasm of such spectacular depth Jennifer thought she might die. Still they sucked, and fed on each other's flesh with hungry tongues.

"Jennifer," he whispered, "are you ready?"

"Yes, Judas, oh, God, yes!"

With strong hands at her back, he pressed her to him hard and plunged once, twice, three times before she fell on him, the victim of a gigantic shatter. With a grunt and a groan, Judas spewed forth a creamy substance that was so hot it almost blazed.

* * * *

In the early hours of dawn, Judas woke, remembering what he had to do. Moving quickly he got up, put on his clothes, and moved toward the desk and pulled out a sheet of paper, a pen, and an envelope. He sat in the dark, his pen making a scratching sound as he scribbled out a message.

My dearest Jennifer,

If I am not here when you awake, then chances are I will never see you again. No matter what happens, I will always remember you the way we were last night, and if by some miracle I am able to hold you in my arms again, I promise you that I will never leave again.

Judas

Quickly folding the sheet and stuffing it into an envelope, he laid it on his pillow beside Jennifer while his eyes embraced her. He wanted so to kiss her, to love her tenderly, but he didn't dare take the time. Instead he turned and quietly slipped out into the corridor, where his own words came whirling into his thoughts.

“You’re a half-breed like me...no longer a god...powers put on like armor.”

Their mad dizzying swirl almost made him light-headed as he hurried down the hallway. He remembered the moment he arrived at the landing for their confrontation. It was dark, cold, and private. The perfect place for a war between two of hell’s inhabitants. He waited, but Lupercus never showed up, so he came back to the mansion knowing that Jennifer must have made him her last full-moon kill. Even though it had all happened as he had hoped, it seemed too good to be true. Evil had a way of replicating itself. It would be just like Lupercus to be waiting in the studio with a smirk twisting his thin lips.

Hit by the biting odor of blood, he stopped.

The studio.

He rushed down the hall and turned into the doorway. What would he find? His heart thrashed wildly as his eyes penetrated the shadows. In a far corner he saw the pallet, the snack tray, and a discarded purple raiment saturated with blood. He made his way toward it cautiously and looked down.

Lupercus lay in a pool of blood and ripped flesh.

Judas couldn’t help but feel proud of Jennifer’s strength. Lupercus had underestimated her simply because she was a woman and ended up paying with his life.

He quickly turned and walked toward the door, down the stairs, turned, and continued down the hall where he found the back door of the mansion. It took only minutes to stumble on what he was looking for. Now, as he once again stood over Lupercus’s body, he steeled himself for the task and then lifted the ax and brought it down.

Whack!

Bits of flesh flew, what blood was left splattered, bones made a sickening cracking sound, and the head, now severed from the body, bounced sickeningly and rolled away.

* * * *

Judas stood tall and foreboding in his battle dress of armor, spear, and warrior braids. As he waited, the familiar hot, stinging wind of hell whipped around his shoulders.

“The Circle is waiting, my brother.”

Judas’s eyes glared at the chiseled face of the Gatekeeper. “I am not your brother, so do not address me as such!”

“But I *am* your brother. Illegitimate and unrecognized though I may be, I have your blood flowing through my veins.”

“You lie!” Judas spat. “If you were my father’s son, you would live in the royal palace.”

“No, my brother. My mother lives. I have been assigned to this lowly place because she is only a servant. Your...*our* father felt the need for a woman, and he took her and then threw her away. I was the result of a lewd sexual encounter that *your* father seems to be expert at. Like you, I am strong and fierce. When you are gone, I will take your place in his heart and on the battlefield. I will be the leader of the wars. I will be the triumphant one who is hailed with accolades along the streets of hell. Not you, my brother. No. You choose to step out of this royal house and go to a place where you are nothing but a face in a crowd. I am the loyal one. I will stay and fill your shoes. See if I don’t! I’ll—”

“Take it with my blessing,” Judas spat as his eyes raked down his robed shape. His hair was curly and dark, as his father’s, his manly physique large and sturdy beneath the loose robe. He had a square chin and a wide mouth, and the tensing of his jaw reflected a deep frustration. Judas could see a slight resemblance to his father, who wore the same look many times. “What is your name?”

“Tyrannus.”

“Well, Tyrannus, you say you’re my brother. It’s possible, I suppose. It’s also possible that you are only one of many. But I’m not gone yet, and as long as I am here, you will show the proper deference to my position. Now move away, and do not address me again in any way except that of royalty. Is that clear?”

His marble-like lips thinned in anger, and his face hardened into a mask of stone. “I must first ask what you have in the bag.”

“It is a gift for Satan.”

The bitter youth reluctantly bowed his head, his voice a deep and angry rasp. "The Old Ones await within...Sir Judas."

Judas walked in and approached the Dias where the Circle sat. They were called the Old Ones because they roamed the earth in the beginning, and his father was among them. He then glanced at other robed figures placed at strategic places in the room. Their heads were respectfully bowed. They schooled their features into somber lines. No one was allowed to smile or show any kind of joy or happiness, not that anyone would in this place.

He spoke softly, his voice being carried like an echo around the cavernous chamber. "I request audience."

"Of course, Judas," Satan said, his deep voice like grains of sand grating against each other.

"A present, Lucifer," Judas said while retrieving the head of Lupercus from the bag and holding it up by the hair.

A gasp sounded throughout the chamber, but Satan looked beyond the severed head and narrowed his eyes on Judas. "You dare to call me by my given name?"

"For you I have faced many enemies on many battlefields, and won. Would you now repay me by taking my life simply because I call you by your given name? If you do kill me, it will not be for that. It will be for my change of loyalties. It will be for leaving Hades behind me. It will be for so many reasons, but not for calling the Master of Hell by his given name. That will only be an excuse."

Satan's voice boomed. "Do you think I need an excuse for killing you?"

"No, not you, but remember who you will have to answer to when you do."

Satan's face became etched in anger. "And now you dare to throw a threat in my face?"

"Tell me it isn't true!"

Satan was silent, his stare into Judas's eyes fiery and wicked.

Judas indicated toward the head. "Since I have done as you commanded, you are now bound to restore my father's place among the lords." With that he thrust his hand forward and released the head, causing it to make a bloody trail as it rolled toward the feet of Satan. Candle flames flickered, the sputtering light painting the gaunt features with horror and causing a nightmarish flash to leap out of the sunken eyes as they stared out at them.

"If you leave, your powers will be taken from you and your wings confiscated."

"Yes, I know."

"How, then, will you get back?"

"Do you intend to keep me here as a prisoner, or will you allow me to use the services of Divinian?" A heavy silence seemed to stretch into infinity. At last Judas spoke again. "Will you add broken promises to your tower of sins?"

"I invented *sins*," Satan spat as his eyes bored into Judas. "And I am the Father of Lies!"

"Yes, a worthy occupation. You should be proud."

Judas's sarcastic words caused Satan's teeth to grate against each other. Instead of answering Judas, a silence hung heavy in the spacious chamber while Satan's evil thoughts formed a plan. He finally spoke. "You may as well go. With your heart elsewhere, you will be no more use to me here. You may use Divinian."

"Thank you."

"Thank you? *Thank you?*" Satan repeated. "You're thanking me nicely like some well-mannered little boy who attends Sunday school? What a waste of your talents, Judas! This God of yours will have you spouting proverbs in no time. He requires his followers to love each other! Bah! Such a word leaves a bad taste in my mouth. How can that compare to the lustful nights you'll have here with the most beautiful women—"

"I don't want any woman but Jennifer."

"Jennifer? The one who is moon-cursed?"

"No longer. She has been released from the curse."

"Have you lain with her?"

"Yes...even though I knew it was against the rules."

"What do you mean, *against the rules*? Only the immortal race is forbidden. Why did you think you couldn't?"

"Maybe because I thought *I* was immortal!" he shouted as his face clouded with anger and his eyes sought out his father.

Gathering his voluminous raiment around himself, the Demon Lord rose and rushed to the edge of the dais. "My son, I only wanted to make sure you did not make the same mistake I did."

"Now you are calling me a mistake, Father?"

“Judas, please understand. Your mind had to be on the task at hand.”

“I understand only one thing. You’ve been lying to me since the day I was born!” His eyes narrowed to slits as he shifted them back toward Satan. “You have what you asked for, so I tell you now, do not call for me again. I am through fighting your battles. I will not be back. I am going where the air is cool and sweet, not filled with soot and the hot touch of crimson showers.” Without waiting to be dismissed, he turned sharply and made his way toward the arched doorway and the Gatekeeper who called himself brother. “Call for Divinian,” he ordered.

Within minutes the great fallen angel was there. He was a striking sight. He was large and tall, and his wingspread was twice that of Judas’s. Before he and Judas left, Satan called him to the side and gave him instructions. Judas noticed that, as they spoke, each of them looked over at him and then back again quickly. It left him with an uneasy feeling. What were the two of them cooking up? He decided that as long as it didn’t affect him returning to Earth he didn’t care, so he turned away, letting their discussion go on.

While Judas paced restlessly, the discussion finally broke up, and both he and Divinian left. Out in the courtyard of the royal palace, Judas climbed on Divinian’s back and felt the two of them being lifted higher and higher until they at last reached the dark galaxies of the Black Heavens. Even though they passed many remarkable sights, Judas kept his eyes forward, but when they came to the place where the invisible veil separated Earth’s crust from the Black Heavens, Judas couldn’t resist looking back. There through the mist, he saw the circle that resembled a black bubble-like cave that formed the Black Heavens. Leaping flames and lava grew smaller and smaller until the cave shrank away, and what he had known as his home for so long vanished before his eyes. The tunnel appeared, and he felt Divinian continue upward, sliding smoothly into an endless night where the wind grew cool. As he flew higher and higher, even the beauty of the stars couldn’t smother the haunted sound of the plaintive cries of lost souls and dying children.

At last Divinian landed on a high spot that few people knew about. It jutted out over the ocean and was called the Devil’s Doorway. It was a place where brutal, gusting winds blew from all directions. As Judas climbed down from Divinian’s broad back, he bade him good-bye, noticing that Divinian hesitated to leave. Giving his strange actions little thought, Judas

turned away, hurriedly left the high spot, and walked toward the mansion. As he walked, he tried to keep a feeling called pride from entering into his heart, but it was hard. How could he not be proud? He had beaten Satan! He had risked death just like he did on the battlefields of the Black Heavens, and the enemy, Satan, had backed down!

But why?

No one had ever defeated Satan, except God, of course. And then it occurred to him that it must have been because he threatened him with God's wrath. Yes, that must have been it. Now he was here, back in the world where God ruled, and he was here to stay. Surely it was some kind of victory.

Hurrying, he sprinted up the steps of the mansion's portico and opened the door. It creaked, and Judas frowned. Had it ever done that before? He looked around. Something wasn't quite right. Did the mansion seem older? Decrepit even? He turned and looked out toward the ocean. It still raged as before, but the highway, my God, it was wider, busier, and had twists and turns he had never seen before! He looked down the path toward Gypsy Reef and saw the church in the distance. He ran toward it, hurrying through the stone jungle of gravestones and mausoleums. His eyes widened when he saw a familiar name and felt a sudden jolt in the stomach.

Father Jonathan Harker's gravestone!

When had this happened? He looked toward the church and saw that nothing had changed, only a few windows had been boarded up. It didn't surprise Judas. He knew the church was poor and might not have the funds to fix those things. Curious, he crept toward a window and looked into the darkness. He gasped when he saw a chapel full of cobwebs, threadbare pews, and faded carpet.

Judas knew something was wrong.

Leaving the church he walked toward the Reef's promenade. New businesses seemed to have sprung up overnight, while others were gone. Where was the Rock Candy Club? In its place was a casino with moving lights as bright as day.

A warning signal went off in his head.

He ran back to the mansion and broke open the front door. He ran up to the landing and down the hall to Jennifer's room. When he burst in, his hands grasping each side of the frame, he saw a room that had been changed

up from how he remembered it. Furniture had been moved slightly to make space for, what was it? Realization dawned, and his eyes widened in shock. Pushing himself away from the door frame, he rushed forward and looked down. He gasped.

It was Jennifer! Her face filled with wrinkles, her hair white with age, and she was lying in a coffin!

Dead!

His face crumpled in tears. Desperate, he began to search the room for some kind of clue as to what had happened and saw a calendar on the bedside table.

The year was 2048!

Jennifer was seventy-six years old, and dead!

A feeling of loss settled on him when he realized the truth. It was a trick of Satan! He should have realized something like this would happen. No one ever beat Satan, no one! In order to get his sick revenge, he had viciously instructed Divinian to deliver him to a world forty years into the future!

Chapter Twenty-Two

Waves, cold and black, lashed at the shore. The minister's words of comfort became lost in the whipping wind, but Judas, who stood silently beneath a tree, wasn't here for words. He didn't know why he was here. Because he couldn't let her go, because he couldn't believe what had happened, because he knew this whole thing had to be some kind of cruel joke. He agonized. She can't be dead! She can't! When he left her she was young, beautiful, in the prime of her life, and now she was gone. Dear God, how could he live without her? Why had God, in all His wisdom and mercy, allowed this awful thing to happen? He looked up and saw several people staring curiously at him. Had he cried out in his misery? Had he begged God to give her back to him? He lowered his head, discouraging anyone from speaking to him.

Finally, when the minister was saying the last amens, Judas turned and crept silently away and went to the stream in the woods that he loved so much. It had always been his place of solace, and it was the place he wanted to say his last good-byes. There, while kneeling at the great waterfall, he mumbled gently to Jennifer and told her how much he loved her. Her beautiful face hovered in his memory, and it seemed only hours ago that he held her in his arms. Finally with the tears of loss flowing down his cheeks, he turned back and once again walked toward the mansion. As soon as he had reached it, he found something new had been added. Someone had stabbed a *For Sale* sign deeply into the heart of the earth. The sight devastated him. It felt as if the stake had been cruelly stabbed into his own heart.

For the first time in his life, Judas was helpless. No powers, no wings, and no idea how to get back to Jennifer. He looked up at the blank windows of the mansion and saw a kind of death within, but what Judas didn't see was a slight movement of the curtain at an upstairs window. To him the

structure seemed like an empty shell, a skeleton of bones and mortar. Still he felt drawn to the house and began to slowly amble up the walk. Somehow he wanted to be a part of it again, to touch those things that were hers, to be where she had been the night he left, to remember their night of love and hold it close to his heart. To his surprise, when he turned the knob, it opened easily, and he soundlessly slipped in.

It felt strange inside, cold, empty, like a corpse. The life she brought to the house had died with her. He knew he no longer belonged there, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. Night after night he roamed the dark rooms like a ghost. More than the blood, the torment and the unhappiness he knew had been part of the house, he thought of the good times. He could still see her smile, hear her gentle words and the ring of her laughter as it lifted on the gentle breeze that swept down from the rafters.

As each day turned to darkness, he went to a pallet he had made for himself and lay down, his eyes closing slowly. Within only moments he was lifted and ushered into a dreamless sleep. It was then, when the mansion was dark and empty, when whispers of a chilling wind sounded in the rafters that the ghost came out of the shadows and whispered in his ear. A quiet voice, a raspy voice that droned on and on, night after night after night.

One evening when he was in the study, he remembered something about a Book of Shadows. It had belonged to the former mistress of the mansion, Magda Duquesne. How did he know that? He turned and looked at the bar, at the shelves where bottles, glasses, and an ice chest were kept. There was a hidden drawer that few people knew about, and it was where the book could be found, but somehow he knew it wasn't there. Still, he hurried over to it and pulled the drawer open. As he expected, it was empty. Where could it be, and why was that book so important to him? He looked up. Of course, it was packed away in the attic with most of the other things.

Turning on his heels, Judas ran upstairs and looked around. There had to be a stairwell, but he couldn't seem to find it. Suddenly he heard a noise and looked toward it. There he spied an old stairwell pushed into a corner at one end of the landing as if it were trying to hide. He turned toward it and followed it upward, finding a collection of limp, swaying cobwebs that dangled eerily from out of the darkness. Ignoring the evidence of age, he grasped the dusty banister and put his foot on the first step. As he climbed, a

serenade of ghostly-sounding creaks accompanied each step he took until he finally arrived at the attic door.

Judas spent hours, it seemed, looking for a book that meant nothing to him. Still, he needed to find it. He rummaged around in an old trunk with many of Jennifer's things that yesterday were new and beautiful, but today were worn and old. Forty years of his life had been cruelly stolen in a single night.

He saw it.

The Book of Shadows.

Grabbing it, he flipped through the pages, taking note of how old and yellowed they were. What would he find there? A spell, a potion he could use to somehow get back to her? He knew he was blindly grasping, but if his powers were gone, he had to find some way, *any* way, to make contact with the gods. The only sound in the room came from the pages crackling in his hands as he turned them, slow, fast, paper scraping against paper. His fumbling, impatient fingers made tears and rips as they traced down page after page of spells, magic potions, and names of moon cycles and dates.

The book was a big disappointment.

He found silly little rituals, spells, and even recipes for everything from prosperity to love potions. He was almost ready to give up when somewhere in the far reaches of his mind he heard the voice again and saw a picture of himself dressed as one of hell's warriors. How many times had he used powerful incantations, spells, and magick that would make this book look like a lot of pretentious hogwash?

And then it hit him.

They might have taken his powers, but they hadn't taken his memory.

Now he was filled with hope.

He looked down at the book written for the novice, for bored housewives, for *humans*. No wonder it sounded so amateurish to him. The book in the hands of a practicing witch might work, but not on a grand scale as he was used to. What would happen if he simply searched his memory for the right spell and tried it? Sure he might fail, but there was every chance that he would open hell's doors and bring Divinian to him.

He was about to slam the book closed when a picture fell out of it. He gasped when he saw a beautiful image of Jennifer as she had looked when he left her. She was so beautiful with a few silky tendrils of her hair blowing

across her face. When he saw the hot, sultry gaze she playfully gave the camera, he felt a dread tear into his gut. Dear God, how he missed her. After taking a few moments to drink in her beauty for possibly the last time, he took the picture and put it in his pocket, knowing that if all the armies of hell came against him for it, they would have to snatch it from his dead hands, because he would die before he would give it up.

Now, more determined than ever to find a way back to her, he went to work looking for the items he would need. As if by magic, there lay a feathered quill. What luck. He dipped it into his own blood and wrote the angel's name on a sheet of paper and then cut out each letter and placed them in a container. Now he scrambled around looking for a calendar to see when the next new moon would be. At the witching hour, he had to go to a high, windy spot and throw the cut-out letters into the wind while turning in each direction and reciting the incantation.

Would it work?

Yes! Again the answer came from inside his head, and somehow he knew it to be true. Without his powers, all he had left to him was the language of the gods, and he spoke that fluently. It was a language more powerful than any witch's prayer, more commanding than any wizard's magick, more controlling than even the gods. If it worked the way he expected, he would send a jolt into hell that couldn't be ignored.

* * * *

The days dragged by, but the nights were endless.

And then on the night of the new moon, Judas began his vigil.

He stood high on the peak that was the Devil's Doorway, where he could feel the sea spray, hear the thunder of the waves below, and feel the darkness of the night hugging him close like an amorous lover. As he threw the pieces of inscribed paper into the wind, Judas turned in each direction, the echo of the message urgent and distant as he lifted his voice.

Oh, power of the North,

Oh, power of the South,

Oh, power of the East,

Oh, power of the West,

I am searching for Divinian, the mighty archangel of hell. If he is within your realm, please send him to me now!

His words echoed mightily, lifting ever upward, and sailed into the four corners of the world while a scattering of confetti flew all around him, the tiny pieces swirling and climbing high into the atmosphere. The incantation was repeated over and over again, Judas's voice filling the tunnels of time until early morning.

When it was over, Judas walked back to the mansion, tired and exhausted. He lay on the makeshift pallet, listening to the voice of the high wind speak in shrilling tones as it carried his summons to the four corners of the world. His heavy eyelids slowly closed, the powerful, whipping wind rocking the old house as if it were a cradle.

The next morning spacious solitude met him in every room, and he had three days of it staring him in the face. He had to get out. He drank in taverns, ate in cafés, bought interesting little trinkets on Gypsy Reef that ended up in trash cans, and told lies to women who were interested.

The three days crawled by until finally it was over.

The next morning, while darkness still covered the earth, Judas climbed up to the Devil's Doorway slowly. A single step up, and then another. Higher, higher still, slipping on rocks and pebbles as he continued to climb. At last at the top, he stood silent and still, watching as the blue velvet of the sky slowly lightened to an orange glow on the horizon. With every passing second, the rays pierced the sky until the sun peeped out in one blinding moment. As usual Judas had to hide his eyes from the sun's brightness, but when he finally took his hands away, there stood Divinian.

He was a glorious sight.

His naked body stood against the horizon while bright streaks shot out from behind him as if they radiated from his body. He stood curled and resting, his head bowed and his eyes closed in sleep. This amazing picture reminded Judas of an artist's rendering he'd seen somewhere of a fallen angel at rest.

"Divinian," Judas whispered in amazement.

Slowly Divinian lifted his head. "Who calls me?"

"I do," Judas said, stepping forward.

Divinian looked around. "Where am I?"

“At the top of Devil’s Doorway, where the four winds blow. It’s the place you dropped me off a few nights ago.”

“Why am I here?”

“I summoned you.”

Divinian’s gaze came back and rested on Judas. “What do you want of me?”

“You know what I want, Divinian,” he said angrily. “I want to go back where I belong, not here, not forty years in the future.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I only followed his instructions.”

“They were *his* instructions, not mine.”

Divinian was silent for a moment and then looked at Judas. “You know I cannot do this.”

“Why? Because Satan won’t like it? What about me? I’m stranded here. Back there I have a life. Friends I want to be with again. I feel incomplete, empty. I also have a woman, Divinian, a woman I...” He was going to say *love*, but couldn’t, so he turned away, tears filling his eyes. “She...she died just days before I arrived here.” He turned back, the tears in his eyes glittering in the early morning light. “Satan knew this! He wanted to hurt me, Divinian. He thought it would make me return.”

“Then do it. Come back to hell. Satan will forgive you.”

“And what makes you think I would forgive him? No, Divinian, I’ll never go back there. Look around. Isn’t the air just a little sweeter here? Can’t you breathe just a little deeper? Isn’t the terrain beautiful? Look at that sparkling ocean. What do you have back there but searing heat, lava lakes, soot storms, and crimson rain? Is it any wonder that I don’t want to go back?”

Divinian looked around at the beautiful earth. “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t stay.”

“Why?”

“Do you have to ask? Look at me, Judas. Back in hell I’m the highest-ranking angel in the order, but here I’m only a freak. My wings don’t strap on as yours did; they’re permanent, and my height...” He paused for a moment, regret showing on his face, and then continued. “No, I’m afraid I couldn’t even consider it. Hell is my domain. It’s the only place I fit in.”

“Well, I don’t. I belong to this world, and I’m staying even if I have to remain in this time zone. If you refuse to take me back, you can tell Satan

for me that it didn't work. This is my home, and here is where I intend to stay."

"You're never going back, you say?"

Judas looked at Divinian curiously. "No, why?"

"Satan is your enemy. You'll never see him or speak to him again?"

"Never."

"Your woman...does she let you love her well? Is she warm, beautiful, and does her hair glisten as if the stars are hidden within her tresses?"

Judas cut his eyes toward Divinian. "Do you have a woman, Divinian?"

"Me? No...I mean, once, but," his sad eyes moved toward Judas, "it was a long time ago. Look, I probably shouldn't do this, but if it's true that you have severed all ties to Satan, then maybe I could take you back to her without him knowing."

Judas's eyes widened. "I swear by all that is holy—"

"Holy?" Divinian repeated, an eyebrow raised.

"Yes, holy."

"I see," Divinian said softly. "If that's the way it is, I'm sure you won't be seeing Satan again." An easy smile lit up Divinian's face as he said, "Come. I will see you safely home."

"No tricks? I mean, I won't wind up in hell again, will I?"

"No, of course not. Now, if you will climb on, I believe the headwind into 2008 is just about right."

Before taking off Judas looked back, and in the far-off distance he could see Halfmoon Landing in the solemn early morning mist. The church bells had begun tolling out the hour, and although he couldn't see them from where he was, he knew that in the graveyard beside the church two graves lay silent and still. Knowing that brought an ache to his heart. Age had crept upon the distressingly beautiful mansion and the old church, and he was thankful to be leaving. There was nothing left for him here.

He was going back to Jennifer.

* * * *

The winds swirled with fury as Divinian shot upwards into the stratosphere to begin his search for the murky mists of the past. When he found it, he leveled off and headed into the mists of time that were riddled

by bolts of lightning. Surging ahead, they finally entered the Time Tunnel, where his body zoomed so fast it could only be discerned as a streak of color to the naked eye. They immediately began to hear voices rise and fall from one year to the next. Divinian was flying along just fine when he looked up ahead and saw something that caused fear such as he'd never known to rise up in him. Rainstorms, wind, and thunder began buffeting them about, almost shaking them out of the sky. He tried to slow down, to find a path around what he saw, but he was traveling so fast, and his massive wingspread was so wide, he couldn't make a sharp turn without putting both him and Judas in danger. His huge wingspread caused a roiling in the atmosphere so powerful that it sounded on Earth like a sonic boom. He finally realized he could do nothing but face the horror he saw before him.

* * * *

The darkness in Jennifer's bedroom slowly gave way to dawn, and her eyes flew open. Something had woken her. An airplane? A clap of thunder? She looked toward the open French doors, and fear slowly crept up her spine. She jumped up and ran out onto the veranda. The moment she looked up, a flash sizzled across the sky, and everything in the house shook. What was happening? She went back in and was hurriedly slipping into the robe of her negligee when she began to look around, wondering where Judas was. Just then she saw something on the pillow next to hers. With a dark, foreboding prickling along her neck, she moved toward it and snatched it up. Her fingers moved quickly as she tore it open and read.

My dearest Jennifer...

Her eyes moved over the paper rapidly, her eyes filling with tears. The crumpled paper fell from her hand as she wilted down on the side of her bed. She'd lost him. She knew it. With his electric green eyes and body of steel, with his words that had made her believe that he cared, it simply couldn't be. Not Judas. She wouldn't let herself believe that all he wanted was one night of sex. One night of the most satisfying, untamed sex she'd ever known. His words had sounded sincere, his eyes soft and warm. How could she have been fooled so badly? He had done what he came to do, hadn't he? Why shouldn't he leave? Only a man like Lupercus— No! She couldn't, *wouldn't* compare him with Lupercus. But then again, he came

from the same place. Maybe he was just a little smoother, a little more devious.

Yes! A devil is a devil no matter how charming he is!

Pulling herself up, the note fell to the floor as she moved silently out of the room. The corridor was dark, untouched by morning sun, yet she could see, even though the doors of the other bedrooms were closed. She was reminded of the long expanse of windows in the studio and knew that's where the light must be coming from. She moved soundlessly down the stairs and turned toward the kitchen. What she needed was a cup of coffee, strong and black, the kind that was so thick it flowed like molasses.

Maybe that would mend her broken heart.

Too bad it didn't help.

While sitting over her coffee, she thought of Judas, of the way he'd loved her, so wild and free, *as if he knew he would never see her again*. And now, this morning, the sky was all but on fire. Somehow she knew it had something to do with him. She'd seen him fly, saw how the elements responded to his commands. Had he really left her? Gone back to *that place*?

Not being able to hold it back, she lowered her head and cried.

She knew now that she loved him, but how could she? How could she love a man who came from the same horrible place Lupercus had? What an insane, colossal joke! But he wasn't like the others. He had helped her. He didn't belong there. He belonged here with her.

Would she ever see him again? Or was it her fate to live her whole life with a broken heart? Every man she'd ever known had broken her heart one way or another. Why should Judas be any different?

* * * *

Slowly time passed, and Jennifer somehow managed to live her life, but she never stopped looking. She knew she shouldn't, but her eyes automatically searched the faces of every man at the club, of every man on Gypsy Reef. Her breath would catch at every blond head she saw in a crowd, every pair of green eyes that looked her way, every soft, smooth voice she heard, only to be disappointed.

Days turned slowly into years, and still Judas didn't return.

Chapter Twenty-Three

2045...40...35...30...20...15...

The years passed, one by one, while Divinian looked ahead at a solid wall of flame. There was no way through it or around it, and Divinian was forced to reduce his speed. While they kept their eyes on this fiery furnace, both saw Satan step forth from the midst of it. Fissures of lightning splintered the skies, blasts of thunder split the clouds, fireballs and waves of heat burst forth, caressing Satan's body with tongues of flame.

"This is as far as you go, my wayward angel."

"Oh no, he found out!" Divinian shouted.

"Of course I found out. You must think I'm an imbecile. I know everything that goes on in my realm and much beyond it. And now, you will both pay for your disobedience with your lives." Satan lifted a hand that sizzled and popped with power. He pointed it toward Divinian, and his wings were ripped from his back.

"Argh!" the angel yelled as his body began to fall.

While Judas held on to him desperately, he yelled, "God! If you are truly the God of this earth as I've been told, and if my soul, and others are sheltered in Your care, help us! We are falling... fallin... fall..."

Judas's voice faded as they fell toward a ring of flames that extended downward into a tunnel of fire that Satan had prepared for them. The closer they came to it, the more their skin sizzled and burned. Just when Judas began to think all was lost, they were surrounded by a frigid brilliance, and their screaming minds were swamped with peace. Mile after mile they fell, plunging toward Earth as the flames hungrily leapt out at them. When they at last made their way through it, they were met with a clear sky and a large bird that sailed toward them. It quickly flew beneath them and carried them to the earth and set them down. As soon as his cargo was safe on the ground,

the mighty bird flew swiftly upward until he was high enough to change from a bird to that of a large white angel.

“Did you see that?” Judas said and looked around to see Divinian staring upward in amazement. Judas’s eyes widened. The man standing before him was absent of wings and stood no taller than himself. He ran over and looked Divinian over, turning him one way and then the other. “Divinian, look at yourself.”

Divinian looked down at his naked figure. He felt around on himself trying to find what was left of his wings. “There’s nothing there. Look at me. I’m no taller than you.”

“Do you realize what this means? Satan did you a favor by stripping you of your wings.”

“But I was tall, large.”

“You were that way because Satan created a race of giants, and you were an offspring. As long as you served Satan, you were deformed, but now that you no longer serve him, you’re normal.”

A wide smile appeared on Divinian’s face. “Then I can stay.” He looked around at the beauty that was Earth and then back at Judas. “I can, can’t I?”

Judas smiled. “I’m afraid you’ll have to. With no wings, you have no way of leaving. But don’t worry. It’ll be a wonderful home for you. Come with me, and I’ll show you around myself.”

“Let’s hurry before Satan gets wise.”

Judas looked down at his nude body, and a small smile twitched along his lips. “I’m afraid not.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re naked.”

Divinian looked down at himself and then at Judas. “It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“Maybe not,” Judas replied, “but the people here wear clothes. No naked angels on Earth.”

“But I have no clothes. What’ll we do?”

“I’ll think of something,” Judas said as he looked around at the trees and brush, looking for something to cover Divinian. He grabbed at something similar to a string of fig leaves and gave them to Divinian. “Here, wrap this around you.” He then looked down the path toward the church, the only place he knew that might have what they needed. He wasn’t sure how Father

Jon would receive him. Would he even remember? Because of Satan's interference, he knew they were way off their destination, but he wasn't sure how many years it was. He looked longingly toward the mansion, not really knowing what kind of welcome he'd get after all this time. Would Jennifer have another man in her life, maybe even be married? The thought weighed heavy on his heart. With sadness in his voice, he said to Divinian, "We need to get to the church." He looked up at the sky. "It's still early, so no one will be out and about, but just to be safe, keep those leaves secure."

The two men crept along the edge of the woods until Judas saw the old church looming in the distance. "We're almost there," he said to Divinian, anxiety growing within him to see his old friend. "A few more steps and we can..."

He suddenly remembered the gravestone he'd seen and looked curiously toward the cemetery. When he'd seen the stone before, it had looked old even then. He was so overwrought he hadn't noticed the dates, so he didn't know when Father Jon had died.

"You stay here," he said to Divinian and quickly darted out of the woods and ran toward the cemetery. Crouching in the early morning mist, he hurried to the area where he had seen the grave, and nothing was there, nothing but grass and dirt, no grave. With a wave of his arm, he signaled for Divinian to follow him.

* * * *

Father Jon looked down at the bottle of Sprite clutched tightly in his hand and thought again of his ordeal five years ago. It was the only thing he allowed himself to drink now. No more wine. He still believed it had been drugged or that he'd simply had too much. His memories of Lupercus were large and vivid, but had he ever known anyone named Judas? The name alone made him sound dreamlike, illusory. Since he'd returned to the church, to familiar surroundings, the whole experience seemed like a dream. With affection, he remembered not the man, but the dream of a blond-haired, he wasn't sure what. Was it a demon or an angel who had touched the cross on his Bible and got burned, a demon or angel who had entered into the faith one night on a dark beach?

No, it was too ridiculous to be real. All of it, especially his trip to hell.

He lifted up the bottle, looked at it, and took another swig. He should have known that one day the wine he loved so much would send him off on a tangent unlike any he'd ever experienced. Well, it was over now, and he could continue pretending that he was holy while saying evening prayers, lighting candles, and watching over a parish that thought he could walk on water.

He shivered, knowing that if the whole thing wasn't some imaginary journey from out of a wine bottle, then it must be real. Not merely a place you go to when you die, but another world, a world as real this one. And if hell was real, then so was heaven. He'd always seen heaven as some pie-in-the-sky, happy-ever-after place, but now he knew that it, too, was a very real world.

He thought again of Judas.

Even though he professed to be from hell, he saw in him a certain innocence he wished he still had. He snorted at the memory. That alone would tell him that the whole thing was nothing more than a wisp of smoke, here one day, gone the next. When you think about it, how could a man from hell appreciate the earth the way he did? It wasn't possible. He couldn't forget the look in Judas's eyes when he talked about this world, and it humbled him to see him appreciate the things he himself had taken for granted.

One thing bothered him.

If Judas hadn't been real, then why did he keep looking for him in every face he saw? Why did he hope and pray that one day, suddenly a sob escaped his throat and he knew. If he didn't come back, it was because *he was dead*.

Just then his head turned sharply at a series of sounds. The scraping of a door, footsteps, whispers, and then a voice calling out.

"Father Jon, where are you?"

He scowled, lifted the Sprite, and looked at the liquid contents as if he thought the voice might be coming from inside the bottle.

"Father Jon!"

He turned toward the sound. "My God, could it be...?" He jumped up and hurried to the front door of the rectory. When he saw who was calling him, his breath caught in his throat. "Judas! My God, it's Judas!" With a

smile on his face, he ran out, his arms lifted in welcome. "Judas, where the hell have you been?"

"I knocked, but no one answered."

"I was in the back. Trying to get my ass in gear on a bottle of Sprite." He ran and opened the door wide. "Come on in."

"First, tell me what day...year is it?"

"Five years to the day since you left. What the hell happened to you? I had given you up for dead."

"Oh, God, five years," he said with dread in his heart. "What about Jennifer? Is she...I mean...?"

"She's fine. Still dancing at the club."

"Did you and she ever—"

"God no. I got out of there as quick as I could. I didn't say a word. I was too embarrassed to face her after what I did. I came back here and almost never see her."

"What about...I mean, is she," Judas could hardly get the word out, "married?"

Father Jon smiled. "No, she isn't, and I'm sure she would love to see you."

"I don't know about that. Just before I left, we were...I mean, we had become close. She probably thinks I ran out on her."

"Where have you been all this time?"

"Trying to get back here mostly. The night Lupercus died, I still had one more job to do before I could put my past behind me. I wrote Jennifer a note hoping she'd never have to read it, but the mission was a dangerous one, and she needed to know that I might not make it. As it happened, I had to practically fight a war to get back."

"What about this date thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, when you asked me what day and year it was. What's that all about?"

"Let's just say that on my way back I got stuck forty years in the future. Divinian here," he reached in back of him and brought the dazed young man forward, "assisted me in getting back and ended up being stripped of his wings."

"Wings?"

“He’s Satan’s archangel,” Judas said as an afterthought.

“Satan’s archangel,” Father Jon repeated and then snorted. He suddenly remembered Judas’s irritating habit of blurting out impossibilities as if they were everyday occurrences and expecting him to believe them.

“Well, he *was* Satan’s archangel...until he got kicked out of hell.”

“Why do you do that?”

“What?”

“You come in here telling me you have Satan’s archangel with you and expect me to believe it. Judas, my God! You’ve asked me to believe a lot of things, but this is a little too ridiculous even for you.”

“But he *is* Satan’s archangel! Jeez! Why would I lie?”

Father Jon shook his head and rolled his eyes. “All right, he’s Satan’s archangel. Whatever you say. So what happened to his clothes?”

“They don’t wear any. Clothes slow them down.” Seeing the disbelief on Father Jon’s face, he went on. “You see, in hell archangels are equal to large, beautiful statues. They occupy the four corners of hell to protect it. The only time they become animated is when they detect danger or are summoned to do a job.”

“Don’t they ever get time to sleep?”

“Sure. During their *down* times they sleep. It’ll be a new experience for Divinian to wear clothes, but he’ll learn. Here he’s a man just like the rest of us.”

Father Jon couldn’t resist a chuckle.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Uh...nothing. Yeah, I can probably find something for him. How about you? That’s kind of skimpy.”

“It’s my flying suit. Yes, I do need something if you have it.”

“Let me look. You’ll also need a couple of jackets. The morning air can be a bit brisk.”

“I love it!” Judas said with a big smile on his face.

“You might not love it so much if you and that,” he cleared his throat emphatically, “*archangel* there get your asses frozen off.”

* * * *

After a whole day of showing Divinian around, of strolling back and forth along the Reef's promenade watching sideshows and listening to the colorful barker's endless spiel about the unbelievable spectacles inside their tents, the three of them now sat at a table in front of a hot dog stand. During the whole thing, Divinian's innocent eyes were open wide, and questions spilled out of his mouth that Father Jon answered.

But Judas was deep in thought about Jennifer.

The loud, raucous laugh of the fat lady, the ear-popping music that accompanied the exotic dancers, and even the amateur show where some young boy tortured the strings of his violin as he drew the bow back and forth across them, were just sounds in the background.

He wanted to see Jennifer, but was afraid of what she might say. My God, he'd never been afraid in his life. He'd battled some of the most vile creatures to ever crawl out of a hole and had never been afraid. Now he found himself shaking all over, afraid of a few words that could cut him deeper than the sharpest sword he'd ever come up against. After all this time, what would he say to her? What would she say to him? He could have left Divinian with Father Jon and went to see her at the mansion this morning, but he just couldn't face her and hear the words that would break his heart. As long as he stayed away, things were the same, there was hope. But if he faced her and she didn't feel the same, it might destroy him.

Father Jon noticed how preoccupied Judas was. "Why the hell don't you go see Jennifer?"

Pulled from his thoughts, Judas looked up at Father Jon. "I hate to say it, but I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Five years is a long time. What if she doesn't feel the same?"

"Well, you'll never know sitting here." He indicated toward the Rock Candy Club. "She's dancing tonight."

Judas looked up in surprise. "She is?"

"Got a new act. Get this," he said, gouging Judas with his elbow. "She dances the dance of the Spider and the Fly." He looked down at his watch. "Starts in about a half hour."

"Look," Judas said, "if I do talk to her, I don't want an audience. Give me a few minutes before you and Divinian come in."

“Sure. We’ll stay here for a while, look at the posters, watch the crowds. See you inside later.”

Judas nodded, stood up, and with halting steps made his way to the door and slipped in. The club was dark except for the stage where a string of dancers kicked their feet up in time to the music. He walked up to the bar.

“What can I get you?”

Judas thought quickly. He knew if he didn’t buy a drink he might be asked to make room at the bar for someone else. After making a mental note of how much money he had that Father Jon loaned him for essentials, he looked at the prices and ordered wine.

“White...red...?”

“What about...?”

“Maybe you’d like a little cheese with your *whine*.”

Judas turned to see a troublemaker rear back and laugh at his own stupid joke, and turned to the bartender. “What’s his problem?”

“Jake’s drunk. Just ignore him. He’s got the mistaken notion that wine is a sissy drink.”

“Hey, Gertrude, is that curl in your hair natural, or do you roll it up every night so it’ll fall down real pretty over your big, broad shoulders?”

Judas’s teeth clenched in anger.

Not getting the expected rise out of Judas he had hoped for, the troublemaker looked over at his friend and said, “Hey, Clyde. Look at the color of this guy’s hair. Even my sister—”

Judas turned and grabbed the man at the collar. “Look, you bastard, I’ve had enough of your mouth. You either shut up or I’ll use that bald head of yours for a bowling ball.”

A big guffaw sounded from the sidelines, putting a frown on the troublemaker’s face. His hands came up and wrenched Judas’s hands off him. He was just about to take a swing at him when Judas finally lost control and slapped the man off the stool with the back of his hand.

The man looked up at Judas with blood in his eyes. “Why, you bastard! I’ll mop the floor with you. I’ll...”

The bouncer was there before he could get the words out and seized the troublemaker with a heavy hand. He dragged him, kicking and fighting, toward the door. “I’ve told you a hundred times, you bastard, but you just

don't listen. Every time you come in here you cause trouble. This is the last time, see. You're banned from the club."

"But he hit me!"

"Yeah? You were askin' for it, creep. If it'd been me, I would've killed you. You show up here again and I'll call the fuckin' cops."

When Judas turned back to his drink, his eyes caught Jennifer watching him from across the room. She was staring at him, her face as hard as granite, her eyes shooting flames.

"Jennifer!" he called out and began chasing her when she turned and hurried backstage.

"Jennifer," he called again and managed to reach out and grab her arm.

She stopped dead in her tracks, her heart thrashing in her chest. She looked down at his hand and closed her eyes. It was strong, yet gentle. She loved the feel, even if it was only a touch of his hand.

"Jennifer, we need to talk."

"I'm sorry, but customers are not allowed past the velvet curtain. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a show to do." Her voice was ice cold, her face somber.

He pulled her against him, his lips speaking into her soft, silky hair. "Stop treating me like one of those slobbering men out there. You have to listen to me. I didn't stay away because I wanted to. I told you I would come back, and I tried. I ran into a lot of things you wouldn't begin to understand."

"Why don't you try me?" she said with a challenge in her eyes.

"All right, try this on for size. I went forty years into the future, faced a wall of flames, fell out of the sky, and was caught by..." His words suddenly stopped when he understood how absurd he must sound to her. "Forget it."

"Caught by what?" Jennifer said sarcastically. "I suppose some giant hand reached out and saved you. My, how dramatic."

"I could tell you stories, Jennifer..." Again he lost his nerve. "What the hell can I say to make you believe me?"

"Do you blame me? It sounds like some twisted fairy tale."

"Jennifer," he said, turning her around and gripping the tops of her arms, "every word is true. I tried to get back to you, but before I knew what was happening, I was involved in a war."

“Why did you go back in the first place? Why didn’t you just stay with me?”

“When I went back, I had one more job to do before I could put my past behind me. It’s done now, and like my note said, I will never leave again, I promise.”

“But five years, Judas!”

“For you, but to me it’s like yesterday. Jennifer, I was dropped off forty years in the future and left there. Abandoned. I spent every minute trying to figure out how to get back to you, and because I went against the ruler of hell...”

“You mean...Satan?”

“Yes. I risked my life, Jennifer, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“You spent five years trying to fig...”

“No, not five years. It was more like a few days. It was just that when I finally managed to travel the distance between that time and this, I fell five years short. During the journey we were ambushed by Satan and almost killed.”

“We?”

“I brought Divinian with me.”

“Who is he?”

“Oh, God,” Judas mumbled and took a deep breath knowing she would never believe him if he told her. He looked at her, at her questioning eyes that begged him to tell her the truth.

Losing his courage, he said, “Just a fr—” Judas’s words stopped. “Hell, I can’t lie to you. In hell, Divinian is an archangel. He was my escort back here. Satan ambushed us both, and we were almost killed. Divinian lost his wings, and by the time we got back to Earth, we were five years short of our goal.” He looked at her, at her disbelieving eyes, and prayed. Oh, how he prayed that she would believe him.

She only stared at him with those hurt, disappointed, stormy blue eyes before she turned from him. “I have to change,” she said. “You’ll have to leave.”

“Jennifer...”

The door closed. It was a blank wall, a barrier, a message that told him she thought he was full of it. Standing there he bowed his head, his face in

his hands, and as his tears fell profusely between his fingers, his shoulders shook.

Jennifer stood on the other side of the door and heard his sobs. Her heart melted. She wanted to open it, to go into his arms and say all was forgiven, but pride stood in her way. She didn't doubt Judas had told her the truth about where he was from. She'd seen and heard enough proof of it when she was dealing with Lupercus. She'd seen both do things that a mere mortal could never do, and yet for some reason she couldn't open the door and receive him into her arms. It had been five years, after all. Had he really gone through what he said he did? He'd told her the truth about everything else. Why wouldn't this be true as well? She went through hell herself when he didn't come back. She'd waited, dreamed of him, seen him in every fair-haired man she met. His magnificent image was a fixture in her mind that she couldn't forget.

And now he was back telling her the biggest lie, no, it wasn't a lie. It had to be the truth. Judas didn't lie, not to her. He'd had a lie on his lips but couldn't say it. The bottom line was, she trusted him and whoever he was and wherever he came from didn't matter.

She loved him.

* * * *

He'd tried. He'd told her the truth, and she still didn't believe him. Who would? Nobody sane, that's for sure. He turned and walked slowly toward the velvet curtain. Just before pulling it back to go into the club, he wiped the tears away. He was on his way out the front when the music began. He turned, seeing the curtain slowly open, revealing a shadowy stage filled with sparkling spiderwebs. He was transfixed. The web that stretched from ceiling to floor glittered and gleamed like jewels in the night. In a costume of dark netting, she seductively crawled along the web, keeping her eye on a particularly handsome fly caught in it. After pretending to tie him up, she finally swung on a single silky thread and lowered herself to the black, shiny stage.

The sexy music thumped temptingly as she danced.

Her hips swayed rhythmically as she kept time to the beat. Her lush, curvaceous body was the stuff dreams were made of. Her movements were

as smooth as liquid as she turned one way and then another. By the time her dance was almost over, the men who watched began gathering at the stage. She danced at the edge, only webs covering her body. They hung from her arms and hands as she danced, swinging and swaying to the music while her costume fluttered gently.

Making a most seductive spider, she allowed the men to touch her and insert bills into her G-string. As usual, she held the audience spellbound. They reached for her, but she was elusive, her spidery costume tickling faces, hands, and arms. During the finale she danced down the steps and began a suggestive dance through the audience, enticing many men with her spidery costume.

Then she paused in front of Judas.

Slowly she extended her arm, covered in the glittering, silky, feather-like strands, and temptingly stroked them over his face and arms. He didn't respond, didn't smile, and his eyes were as cold as a snowy winter ground. Knowing she'd hurt him deeply, she continued to gyrate before him while wielding the silky spun web to touch him enticingly. When the music reached the last few strains, she moved away from him and made the circuit again as if looking for a victim. Finally making her choice, she turned back to Judas and moved her red-nailed fingers across her eyes seductively. Moving in for the kill, she began to pull the silky web from a secret place in her costume and circled him slowly. When she had her victim all wrapped up, she gently drew him to her and began to devour him with her lips.

With her lips touching Judas's, her eyes shifted, and she saw two dark figures in a shadowy corner. She recognized them as the ghosts of her lost loves, Lance and Stefan. She pulled away from Judas, waiting for the familiar pain of loss that always followed, but felt nothing. As they stood dark and handsome, for the first time she felt no desire to go to them, to invite them into her dreams. She realized that they were a love she'd had, but was now long past. Now when she dreamed, it was of Judas. Now it was his lips she wanted on hers. Now it was his hands, his body, and his love ever after that she wanted. After realizing this, she saw the two images fading and heard a distant, echoing voice.

Good-bye, my love. Be happy.

The images were gone never to return.

It was then that Jennifer realized she'd been released from another spell, one that was every bit as powerful as the one cast by the moon. Her eyes shifted to Judas, loving every line of his face.

"What are you looking at?"

"The man I love," she whispered.

Oh no! Judas thought. *It was the word! She said it! She'd said the word!*

Skyrockets immediately went off in his head. His feet suddenly felt light, and his heart sang. Could it be? Prickles of fear crawled along his spine, fear of a sickness he'd never had. If it was only some other kind of sickness. Broken bones can mend, damaged organs can be repaired, loss of blood can be replaced, but there would be no healing for the wound Jennifer had inflicted on him with those few words. He knew now it had begun the moment he met her and had spread slow and deadly.

Judas looked at her loveliness, the perfection in every move she made. It was a strange sensation that had been taboo in hell, and now he knew how it felt. Happiness he never knew existed made his heart as light as a feather. A warm feeling came over him when he merely thought of her. Food was unimportant, drink even less. This sensation made him light on his feet, his heart soar, and his future as bright as a diamond's glitter. Yes, he had the sickness all right and contemplated the severity of it, of that dreadful disease these humans call *love*!

Epilogue

2048

An old man with white hair and aching joints leaned heavily on a cane, standing at the gravesite of his wife. His grief at her passing was like a blade in his heart. Listening to the comforting words of the minister, his fading vision could just make out someone standing beneath a tree. He noticed that the young man observed the ceremony with the utmost regard until the last prayer was said and then turned, his head still bowed in reverence as he left.

The old man knew what he was feeling.

To the others, the strange young man was an intruder, an unwelcome guest who had no right to be there, but not to Judas. He knew that the young man had as much right to be there as he did *because it was him*.

He knew what was going through his mind. An empty house. A *For Sale* sign sticking up in the front yard. No one around. No servants, and most of all no one that looked anything like himself. He didn't know, *couldn't* know, that the old man was expecting him, or that it was he that walked the dark corridors like a ghost. He couldn't possibly know that he watched the young man from the shadowy corners, that the answers he was looking for were whispered in his ear at night as he slept, and pushed in his path for him to find. Yes, it was the old man's voice he heard inside his head, the old man's clues that guided him.

"It'll be okay, boy," he whispered as his watery old eyes watched the young man climb on Divinian's back and shoot up into the clouds to find the woman he left behind. After gazing at the disappearing figure longingly for a moment, he turned, and with slow, fumbling movements, he shuffled off to his own future, a future without her.

How would he do it? How would he live each day without her by his side? One day faded into the next, one night into another. Was it his

imagination, or had the stars lost their glow, the wind its sweetness? The thrill of the cool, clear water on his feet was gone, and the ocean seemed suddenly smaller. Had the world he loved so much been wrapped up in her, in his love for her? How could he exist another moment if she wasn't there? He had fought Satan himself to get back to her, but this time he couldn't follow her, couldn't battle his way into her life again. He simply had to wait, dying a little each day until he could hold her in his arms once again.

* * * *

Six Months Later

The old man sat in a chair in the study reading when slowly his eyes closed, and the book fell to the floor beside his feet. It was a little after three when he heard a voice call him.

"Judas! Judas!"

His eyes opened, and there stood Jennifer.

"Come, Judas, it's time to go."

"Jennifer, where...how...?"

"Hurry, my love. We must go now."

He couldn't believe she was actually there, as young and fresh as a spring day and every bit as beautiful as he remembered. When she held out her hand to him, he took it, his young, handsome spirit rising and going with her while his old, wrinkled physical body still sat limply in the chair. Looking as they did when they first fell in love, they both, hand in hand, turned and began to walk into the sky. Clouds parted, a curtain of stars separated, and the beautiful City of Blazing Glory opened its gates and let them in.

As much as Judas loved the world he had lived in for forty years, he loved the next one even more because here he knew he would live not a day, a year, or even a lifetime with the woman he loved, *but an eternity*.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audrey Godwin is quickly rising into the ranks of hottest erotica writer around today. She slowly evolved from the mundane boy meets girl plotline, to the sexy bad boys who leave a trail of erotic fire wherever they go. Her passion is the big, swarthy type that fits into the gothic scene which she has brought into the twenty-first century. These alpha males might be vampires, werewolves, spirit beings, or they may be completely normal. But one thing they all are is, sexy as hell.

It all started when she began reading. She read good books, bad books, so-so books, and those that had no business being published. So, deciding she could do at least as well, she put down her latest novel, and decided to write. Even though she tried to focus on her heroines, she somehow couldn't keep from wrapping her whole story around the gorgeous guys. Finally, she gave in to it and prowled the streets of her imagination in search of her next super idea and gorgeous hunk. Somewhere along the way she was discovered on the internet by a publisher that fully embraced her style of writing, and introduced her to erotic e-publishing. What came from it was a series of books that slowly became published, giving her the feeling of at last achieving her goal.

Audrey has had her days in the sun, when she was the life of the party, a laugh a minute kind of gal, and outrageously cool, but sadly, that's all over now. Today she's one of those boring x-civil service workers that has a penchant for bookstores and sappy love songs. She prefers quiet dinners with friends over maddening crowds. Her favorite pastime is writing a truly exciting suspense or horror novel with strong, stand-alone characters, and an exciting, anything-can-happen plotline. After several years, her love of writing hasn't left her, so look for more of her dark romance novels that will give you a chill one minute and a hot flash the next.



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