



The Devil Inside

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## **Dedication**

This book could not have been written without the loving care of a horde of supporters!

Thanks go to the many people who support me in my writing dreams. Henry and Lana, thank you for enticing, goading and encouraging me – and for helping me to find the title of this book. Dina Hamlin, medium extraordinaire, thank you for your insight into the astral realm. Book Talkers, you are all fantastic women and deserve to have a book dedicated to each and every one of you individually. I better get busy!

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And as always, thank you Steven for inspiring all of the love stories I tell.

## Chapter One

In the dead of night, Paris called to him, the way it always did. Alex took a deep breath and relaxed, his body safely tucked into his futon in a Brooklyn walk up. He let his soul float out of his body, hover near the ceiling, then vaporize through the roof and into the hot July sky.

He knew his parents were long gone. But he still felt compelled to search for them—if not in the actual city of Paris, then in the Paris of his dreams, the place he conjured and controlled. Alex entered the country of his dreams, knowing his Paris to be an illusion, but rushing to dream it into being all the same. If he could conjure an entire city while he slept, why couldn't he summon his parents too?

The astral plane stretched infinitely away from him in all directions, carpeted in thick gray clouds. His parents had died twelve years ago to the day, and Alex allowed himself to drown in the depths of his loneliness and his need for connection. He knew that his negative emotions could attract the wrong kind of creature to him on the astral, but his grief was too potent to restrain.

And as if he'd conjured her, a female entity drew out of the swirling mist. He tried to prepare himself for battle with a creature of the astral. Was she human? Was she a sacred messenger, or one of evil? He didn't know. His parents had died before they could teach him how to tell the difference.

She hovered, waiting for him to speak. He stole a glance at his companion, suspended with him in the ether. She—Alex sensed her femininity rather than visualized it—traveled in a golden haze, a ball of light and color that vibrated with her energy.

He sighed, and then smiled. "Tell me you're a figment of my imagination."

The ball drifted like smoke into a human shape. "A figment? Honey, don't kid yourself. You're too powerful for that."

She spoke the truth, but he didn't want to admit it. He rebelled against the lethal inheritance his parents had left behind...he didn't want to end up dead like them. Better to deny the gift that called to him in his dreams, rather than succumb to it and become a demonic creature like the one that hunted him.

He covered his consternation with a laugh. "But I haven't got any formal training in the astral arts. I don't know how to do much more than make up my own dreams. What kind of power is that?"

The ball laughed, glowed with the celestial light of glory. Alex basked in that light, warmed himself in it. The light glowed pink, then violet. "Sweetie, you're kidding yourself again. It's nothing to be ashamed of—admit it. You have the true power. You have a gift, sexy man."

And the angelic form of a woman fully materialized next to Alex, her face glowing with mirth, so familiar to him that he rubbed his astral eyes in surprise.

"You're...I know you."

"Kindred spirits always know each other."

Alex remembered his manners. "I'm Alex. What can I call you?"

“My name?” The angelic being hesitated, her lush features stilled by momentary concern. “Oh, what the heck. Call me Cybele.”

“Cybele,” he whispered. He studied her light-filled features – the button nose, the soft feathery curls framing her face, her dimples – but he couldn’t place her.

They hovered together on the astral plane, in that ambiguity between heaven and earth. Alex focused his intentions, and together they drew towards the city of Paris, the rooftops trembling slightly in the roiling pink and green mists surrounding it.

“You love this city?” Cybele asked.

“I can’t forget it,” Alex replied.

They alighted by the Eiffel Tower, which loomed menacingly over them. In Alex’s dream Paris, dawn glowed pink through the skeletal joints of the Tower stretching into the sky. Alex walked towards it, and Cybele followed him. She looked like a human woman now, instead of a celestial being trailing glory behind her.

Tension coiled around his shoulders. Any being who could change form completely on the astral plane was not a mortal human soul. He knew that much...his mother had taught him the basics despite his father’s insistence they wait until he was older.

Alex remembered his mother’s face, and a bolt of rage shot through him as he remembered how she died. “You’re a demon,” he whispered.

Cybele stopped short, the morning light flowing through her blond curls and lighting them from behind in a frizzy halo. “A demon?” she said, her voice uncertain, her face a blank.

He drew away from her, his pulse beating like a hammer inside his head.

She shook her head. “You think I came here to – hurt you,” she said, her full lips pursing together. “Alex, I swear to you by all that’s holy I am not a demon. Not the way you mean.”

God, he wanted her. The thought, so unwelcome and absurd, shut down the angry retort that was about to explode from his lips. “But you’re...such a temptation,” he said instead, and his astral body vibrated with his longing for her. “Aren’t you here to tempt me?”

“There’s a bond between us,” she agreed. “I’m being straight with you, Alex. Oh Alex, Alex...how I love your name, Alex,” she said, her husky voice crooning his name like a lullaby, like a spell.

She sighed, smiled a tiny Mona Lisa smile and took a step towards him. “I’m a *dybbuk*.”

“A – what?”

“*Dybbuk*. A kind of astral spirit.”

He smiled but didn’t relax. “A kindred spirit.”

Her own smile widened, and her baby blue eyes sparkled with joy. “Yeah. Think of me that way. Please.”

He rubbed his eyes and considered Cybele standing alone on the cement walkway. “I’m going up,” he said, indicating the tip of the Tower. “Come with me.”

They walked in silence to the lift. A small, round man with a handlebar mustache acknowledged them with a smile, kissed Cybele’s hand until she laughed, and gave them a ride in the tiny elevator to the first level observation deck.

Alex tipped the elevator man, stepped to the edge of the platform, and watched the sun rise over the City of Light.

"This is some dream you conjured. I'm telling you, a rare gift, baby. Earth Paris can't be this beautiful," Cybele said.

"It looks just like this." He hadn't been back since the age of twelve.

The silence of the dawn went unbroken until Cybele snorted in apparent disbelief. "You're stuck in this place," she said, her voice carrying a note of surprise.

Alex swallowed hard. "My parents were murdered in this city," he finally said, as the pain of his loss buried itself like a spike in his heart.

"Do they ever come to visit you here?"

His fingers shook, and he gripped the railing tight enough to still them. "No."

He heard a muffled sound and turned. "You don't have to cry," he said. "It happened a really long time ago. Half my life."

"Yeah...but still, I'm so sorry." She flicked her tears away with the tips of her fingers. "I don't know what's wrong with me! I *never* cry. Never."

"It's not such a bad thing to cry. I wish I could."

"Please. Anybody can see you're made of sterner stuff. You could be a big time necromancer if you got the training."

"A what?"

"A master over life and death. You got what it takes. Trust me." Her voice was soft, so warm, husky and disarming like a kitten's purr. "So of course you never cry! But Alex..." Cybele drew closer, until their shoulders almost touched and her fingers crept next to his along the railing. "You have to laugh! At least, smile! Life's a bowl of cherries, really, truly...you gotta eat 'em all up!"

"Yeah." He let her draw closer, focused until his dream was blinding in its clarity. He reached for her fingers, squeezed them, careful not to crush them too tightly.

The connection between them shook him to the core.

"*Dybbuks* are demons, aren't they?" he whispered.

She smiled at him, and they leaned together, kissing close but still not touching except at the fingertips.

"This one is a kindred spirit," she whispered. "Let's keep it at that."

He smiled again, drunk in the sight of her features like a draught of sweet ambrosia. Her eyes, her husky voice made him want to laugh for joy. "Why haven't we met before?"

"I guess it wasn't meant to be," she said, her voice a little breathless, a Brooklyn accent becoming more pronounced. "But now, Alex, the time has come."

He blinked hard, entranced by her. But still afraid. "The time for what?"

"For you to go free."

He tried swallow but his mouth had gone dry. Alex searched the horizon for a shadow, for the storm he expected to rage over the city. "Cybele," he said, her name engraving itself on his mind. "We can't meet again."

"What? Of course we can, sweetie. Anytime. We have to!"

Alex felt her dismay as a bolt of pain, more than he heard its intonations in her words. He wanted to believe her, but he had to protect her, as well as himself. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips. "I wish we could. But it's too dangerous."

"Hey – dangerous is good." She flashed him a brilliant smile, tinged this time with a bit of carnal wickedness. "I can take care of myself, honey. And I can take care of you, too..."

A sudden siren shrieked through the air, and Paris disappeared.

## Chapter Two

Alex awoke with a jolt, his body covered in a light film of sweat, the alarm clock at his bedside screaming into the darkness of the little room where he slept. His mouth went dry as he remembered the details of his dream and the truth of what he'd said. He thought of Paris and shuddered. Something evil had murdered his parents there a long time ago, and the specter of the city haunted his dreams like an unquiet ghost.

It took him a moment to reorient himself to his waking life. Brooklyn, not Paris. July 2005, not some alternative dream reality. Alone in his bed, not roaming his dreams with some kind of celestial creature...

And what the hell was that? What was she, really? Alex ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep, moaning sigh. He knew what she was. A being that lived on the astral plane, caught between heaven and earth. Her ability to completely change form told him that; no living mortal could completely transform from angel to woman the way she had, so effortlessly. What the hell was wrong with him? With Cybele, he had broken his first and fundamental rule: turn away from mystery, distrust illusion. Safety lay in logic and in structure. And he had touched her, let her make a connection with him. Sure enough, she would be back. Was it safe to meet her again?

He rose out of his bed in the darkness, running away from her beauty and his desire. Mundane life awaited him, and he planned to kill his passions and his power the way he always had – by smothering them with ambition.

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To his dismay, his dream didn't fade in the light of day. For once, his work as a prosecutor couldn't silence the clamor of his inner world. He went through an entire day at court, split in half, reliving his dream even as he argued motions and negotiated plea bargains with impatient defense lawyers.

By the end of the business day, he was forced to admit it was time to bring out the spiritual big guns to cool his fascination for Cybele. He needed his Uncle Danny, a rabbi and Alex's surrogate father. Danny wasn't afraid of confronting death or the supernatural when necessary.

He always met Uncle Danny on Thursdays anyway. They worked together at the soup kitchen in the basement of Danny's temple on the upper west side of Manhattan. Tonight, Alex needed help more than the regular dinner guests did.

He descended the long flight of stone stairs to where his uncle waited. He stood in the doorway and watched Danny bustling about the tiny kitchen in the basement, shirtsleeves rolled up, and he considered walking away. But he needed help too badly, and his uncle was strong enough to believe him.

"What's a *dybbuk*?" he asked Danny without preamble.

Danny's face, red from heat and exertion, faded into a careful blank. In the deep silence that ensued, his uncle wiped his hands on a dishtowel and avoided Alex's gaze.

"And why do you ask?" he finally asked, his baritone voice held for the moment from booming in the close confines of the kitchen.

"I just met one in my dreams. I think. I did some reading, but I'm not sure."

Danny cleared his throat and said nothing, only growing redder.

“So what’s the matter with me?” Alex continued. His pulse throbbed so violently in his temple that he could barely see.

“This is quite complicated,” Danny replied. He shook his head and turned his attention to a vat of baked ziti steaming on the counter in front of them, straight from the oven. A kitchen volunteer poked through the swinging door to check on the status of dinner.

“Tell the diners it’ll be another few minutes.”

“Okay, Rabbi, but please, not too much preaching back here when hungry people are waiting.”

“Tell me, Ruthie – can I help myself?”

“After working here fifteen years, we both know what the answer must be.”

Rabbi and nephew exchanged a smile behind Ruth’s back as she left to talk up the crowd waiting for their ziti. Alex resisted the tension singing through his body. His uncle was a good man, and he loved Alex like a son. So why did Alex have to throw Cybele’s existence in his face? He knew the rabbi couldn’t give him official approval for his activities on the dream plane.

Alex sighed, playing with a piece of crinkled up foil. “Mom taught me a little about the sight. Cybele was right. I have to stop – kidding myself.”

Danny looked up sharply, but kept his silence. The specter of Alex’s parents all but stood between them. But after they had died, Alex wrapped himself in a cloak of silence to make a life for himself, devoid of the magic that had gotten them killed. And Danny had let him withdraw within the silence and offered his love without condition.

Alex took a shaky breath and continued. “Cybele is real. God help me, she is.”

“You know the *dybbuk*’s name? Cybele?”

“Yes.”

“To know a name is to have power.”

“She told me her name when I met her. Maybe it’s not really her name.”

“Even if she just uses it with you, it means she’s given you a piece of herself.” Danny shook his head and sighed, so loud it sounded like a groan. “You got trouble, boychik. You got a demon haunting you, worse than our friends visiting us tonight are haunted.” He pointed at the dining room outside the basement kitchen. Alex peeked through the swinging doors to see the patient, tired people sitting at metal tables, waiting for their dinner. Faces he knew from a decade of Thursdays.

He didn’t want to look with his other sight, the true sight of the inner eye. But he did. He saw the other beings buzzing through the dining room – demons, mostly, lurking behind the mortal humans they tormented, even as they kept looking fearfully over to where they knew the rabbi worked on the ziti. Angels, too, stood guard over their respective mortal charges, crossing their arms and glaring at the demons if they got too close. And ghosts wandered about, floating aimlessly above the diners’ heads, searching for separated soulmates or haunting their enemies from beyond the grave.

It was too much for him to see. He knew Danny could see them too, but his uncle had made his peace with his own inner sight, found a safe haven in the role of a rabbi. Alex forgot to breathe; it had been so long since he’d let himself see them all, superimposed over the mundane reality of the dining room. With a gasp, he closed his eyes and turned away.

When he opened his eyes again, he kept his inner light extinguished. All the unearthly ones were gone. They couldn't touch him, Alex reasoned, if he refused to acknowledge them. The room was only a room again, filled only with hungry mortal men. Alex took deep even breaths, struggled to accept the loneliness that came along with the safety of blindness.

He swung to face his uncle and studied his unreadable expression. Alex knew he wanted him to say something. "Okay. What?"

"You know what Yossele said, when he reached the gates of Heaven?"

Alex sighed and bit back the self-righteous retort on the tip of his tongue. "No, Rabbi," he said, a little too slowly. "Why don't you tell me what Yossele said?"

"He said, 'Heaven is a dream that never ends.'"

Alex felt dizzy. "And what about Gehenna?"

"Gehenna? Hell? Maybe it's knowing about the dream and refusing to dream it."

"So which kind of dream have I found myself in?" Alex couldn't keep the huskiness out of his voice.

"Not all dreams are good. Not all dreams are true."

Alex bit the inside of his cheek, took a deep breath. He moved to the foil tray of food, grabbed a metal serving spoon, and starting dishing out portions on paper plates.

He felt a gentle pressure on his forearm and looked up. Danny looked deeply into his eyes.

"You always were an intense one," Danny said, and he hugged his nephew in a bear's embrace. "You are drawing the attention of this clinging spirit by the brilliance of your soul."

"Clinging spirit."

"Yes. That is what a *dybbuk* is. Not a demon. Not exactly. Most were human once, living mortal people like you, or like our waiting guests. Not happy people. And they died unhappy, unready to go."

"So, ghosts."

"Not exactly. They are spirits of the air, *boychik*. Some of them want to get revenge so they can rest in peace—just like a ghost, yes? But they fly free of a single place or time...they haunt souls, not houses. You see? Other *dybbuks* are evil, pure evil. Just like a demon. But they are air creatures, they cannot harm the flesh. Only the soul."

"So all of them are evil." Alex's heart sank

"No," Danny said slowly, sounding like he didn't want to admit the fact. "A few of them are here to help mortal souls. Just like an angel. You see? The reason *dybbuks* are so dangerous is because they can turn any which way."

"No more dangerous than people, Danny."

"But people don't haunt your dreams."

Alex shrugged again. "My parents do." He kept serving out baked ziti, concentrating on making each portion exactly equal. "Not like ghosts, but the memory of them haunts me. All the time."

The rabbi took a deep breath, like he was gathering his energy for a psychic assault. "You know, Alex. Ever since—your parents..."

"Yeah."

"You've been a little, how should I put this? Cut off."

"I got grief counseling at school, whatever."

“No, I don’t mean that. You can explain your psyche better than any shrink, in the finest, most fluent psychobabble. It’s your soul I’m worried about. Sometimes I think you’ve lost your connection to yourself. Like you broke yourself into a bunch of different pieces so you could keep going. And now I think this is why this—Cybele—is coming to you. Clinging to you.”

Alex waved the back of the spoon at him in a dismissive gesture. “I’m fine. C’mon—I’m a successful lawyer at Justice, and I’m the youngest person ever to co-chair a Special Task Force.”

Danny smiled at him, a slow sly smile that made Alex think he knew more about his job than Alex wanted him to. “Ah, yes. The Religious Extremists Unit. Designed to prosecute religious fanatics like myself.”

“No. Just people who use the cloak of religion to commit crimes.”

“Ah. Like the terrorists? Why don’t you go after the faith healers on TV?”

“Technically they don’t commit fraud. They help lost souls, and they get money from the grateful people as a thank you.”

Danny shook his head and laughed, the boom filling the air and drawing an involuntary smile to Alex’s lips.

“Don’t you admit, Alex, that lost souls are everywhere? You have met one of your own in your dreams.” Danny turned, gazed at the closed door to the dining room as if he could see through it. “You can see them in there, too.”

Alex knew he meant the spirits as well as the diners, but he refused to acknowledge the double meaning of his words. “You’re a rabbi. Lawyers see lawsuits everywhere. Doctors see disease. Rabbis see lost souls.”

“What can I tell you? It’s what I do. I can’t help myself.” Danny sighed, and then got back to attacking the ziti. The serving platter in front of them was now almost completely filled with steaming plates of pasta. “But you don’t want to see. So you get bad dreams. Maybe you should get pills or something.”

“No,” Alex said.

“Why not? It might stop you getting haunted, at least it’s worth a try, no?”

Now that Alex knew, he could no longer deny the truth. “I don’t need the pills. What I think I need is Cybele.”

He squared his shoulders, avoided responding to Danny’s exclamations of surprise, and grabbed the tray of ziti and shoved his way through the swinging double doors. His inner vision flooded through him again, unbidden, more vivid than ever, but despite his fears he kept walking among them, one soul lost in a sea of souls.

## Chapter Three

"We need to nail these people to the wall."

The restaurant was so loud he felt safe enough talking about the pending investigation against the Witnesses. "What's your theory?" he finally asked.

His boss, Ursula Day, attacked her own sandwich with uncharacteristic vigor. She held up a finger as she chewed her steak and cheese. Lost in the cacophony of voices inside the Broadway Diner, Alex stared out the storefront window and studied the famous statue of the bull pawing its foot in the street near the southernmost tip of Manhattan.

Alex nodded as he pretended interest in his lunch. He strained to remember any other time he had seen her eat anything, and failed. They had never gone alone to a lunch meeting, but the REX Unit had met for lunch in the conference room many times for case review, and she'd only played with her food there.

Ursula interrupted his reverie. "We got them for fraud, immigration, and maybe Patriot Act too."

"Really?" Alex tried to keep the skepticism out of his voice and failed. He picked up his pastrami on rye, put it down again.

Ursula stared at him for a long moment, the blood from her steak sandwich dripping steadily from her wrist, down her bare arm, then off the tip of her left elbow.

"You have your doubts, then," she finally said, her voice too calm.

Alex rearranged his unappetizing lunch. "Well, let me deconstruct things here for a moment. What kind of fraud do you envision? What have we got? A random group of fortune tellers, tree huggers, and New Age wackos telling other wackos the end of the world is coming."

"But that's just the beginning. They convince people they are collective victims of a demonic conspiracy. They fleece them out of their life savings in order to get spiritual protection. And then some of the victims *disappear*. Where do you think they've gone off to?"

"They just drifted on to the next thing, Ursula. You don't have any proof of violent crime here."

"Yet. There's much more than meets the eye, Kaplan. And I want you to dig down to the truth. Bedrock level. Get the facts, and the law will follow suit."

Alex sighed. "But how is all of this a federal case, anyway? Seems like local stuff at best. Not our jurisdiction."

Finished with the sandwich, Ursula began devouring her well-done French fries. "You think? Check this out."

Ursula produced a bound report and flipped it open. "COMSTAT report for NYC since January. Look at this."

Alex studied the bar graphs and pie charts in silence. As the import of the numbers sank in, he felt his stomach turn to lead.

"That's quite a spike. But not homicide."

"Yeah. Missing persons. And suicide. Something's going on in this city. I want to find out what it is and stop it. The Witness MO is too much of a coincidence. There has to be correlation."

Alex had to smile. He'd taken this job because it afforded him a chance to work under Ursula Day. Her ambition was powered by what seemed like a sincere desire to transform the world into a less fundamentally unjust place. Since that was why he'd gone to law school himself, Alex figured they'd make a good match.

"I don't see what the Witnesses have to do with the suicide rate." He wasn't letting Ursula off the hook just because he admired her.

She licked the back of her hand and took a long chug of her diet Coke. "I don't know either. But look at the timing. Witnesses start meeting in New York around November. First spike in December. It's been climbing every month. I bet it's going to go through the roof."

"Correlation doesn't equal causation, Ursula. You know that."

"Well, I have a hunch."

Alex's eyes narrowed. "A hunch? You've never based a case on so little before."

She laughed and shook her head, and Alex admired the elegant, TV-ready features, the impeccable makeup and jewelry. Her façade was impregnable, her real self unreachable. Alex wished he could hide himself away as well as Ursula.

"I think this phenomenon has happened before, in other cities," she said. "Paris, for instance."

Alex kept his features carefully neutral. "But I couldn't locate one conviction, not even an indictment. Not of the Witnesses, anyway. It seems more like some kind of a philosophy than an organized group."

"That's because nobody's invested the resources to find out what the game is. You know the rackets like the Travelers, the Rogues. People who are connected internationally and run scams like this. It smells the same to me."

Alex wasn't convinced, but he couldn't say so. Instead, he continued to play devil's advocate, the way he always did. And he smiled to himself when he realized how close to home the pun hit this time. "Well, how do you know they don't really believe?"

"Come on, Alex. You're brilliant. Don't play dumb with me, not even if you're trying to poke holes in my theory. These are immigrants here, a lot of immigrants, many of them illegals. This could involve terrorism. It could involve international money laundering. It smells and you need to find out what's going on."

"Don't we usually get involved much later in an investigation?"

"This time I want you to lay the groundwork, get the legal theories ironed out so the investigators know what to look for."

His hands felt cold. With an effort, he unclenched his teeth and rubbed his fingers together. Clearing his throat, he asked, "Shouldn't they just be looking for the truth?"

Ursula shocked him with hard laughter. "'Tell the truth but tell it slant...'"

Alex had majored in philosophy at Columbia, but with a minor in English Literature. "'Success in circuit lies.'" Alex smiled as he completed the couplet. "Emily Dickenson. She was right, too."

Ursula didn't smile back. "This group smells. I want them taken out. You want to get ahead as a REX prosecutor, you work with me here, Alex. Or you are going to have a problem."

Their eyes met. Alex swallowed the one bite of pastrami he'd finally taken into his mouth, and it lodged like a cannonball in his throat. The symphony of babble in the restaurant roared like a waterfall in his ears.

Ursula was threatening him. But why? Was she excited by the case, or afraid of it? It didn't matter; he couldn't help opposing her. It was against his nature to roll over and ignore the weight of simple logic. "But what's the motive here? The marks aren't shelling out money as far as I can tell. The Witness meetings are free. They don't sell anything at them."

"How do *you* know, Kaplan?" Her voice was cold enough to frost his ears.

He wouldn't tell her that his uncle the rabbi actually attended the New York meetings. He bit his tongue by accident, took a long drink of ice water, and said nothing.

She smiled, evidently amused to have caught him out. "Never, never assume. Never. I want you to go to the next meeting, which happens to be..." She consulted a sheet of paper in the file folder by her plate, and her smile widened. "Ah. Next Monday. Go to the meeting. Act interested. Find out what they would do to 'help' you deal with the problems in your life."

"Won't they spot me a mile away? I'm pretty obviously uncool, let's face it."

"These are public meetings, aren't they? Look, advertisement in the Village Voice." And she shoved a page of the free weekly newspaper at him for him to see the announcement of the meeting.

It was going to be held at the House of Peace. His uncle's temple. Danny hadn't told his nephew how deeply he'd become involved in the Witnesses' work.

He said nothing, stared at the newsprint. And then he furtively glanced around the restaurant in order to make absolutely certain that no one had overheard their conversation.

"You're going to investigate this group," Ursula said, her voice urgent in a way he'd never heard before. "You're going to find out what they're up to. And then we're going to get our investigators in undercover to blow this thing open. These people are going to jail. And you're the one who will put them there."

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Twelve years, twelve demons.

All dead.

Dumond trailed his scaly fingers through the dead rose petals littering the marble mausoleum of Grant's Tomb, in Riverside Park, New York.

And he remembered Paris.

His brother Maland had been the last one to fade away and leave Dumond, the youngest, all alone. Dumond had trailed him as he flickered out, and he demanded answers. But Maland had no answer for what had happened to their lineage, or who had had the effrontery to snuff them all out.

Maland's last words had raised only more questions and an unspoken challenge to avenge them all. "Demonslayers. New York...they were from beyond the sea."

And then Maland had disappeared, cancelled out by the lingering God light the foreigners had brought down upon the demons in their bloody battle by the Seine. Dumond was left behind, possessed by a spirit of revenge so virulent that it invested him with twelvefold power, the power of the lineage the demonslayers had destroyed.

Nothing held him in Paris anymore. He followed the trail of his hatred across the ocean, and it led him to the city of New York. He bathed in the languages and the cadences of the city, rested in the cold darkness of the deserted tomb as he grew his strength like a blooming flower of evil. He ventured forth to strike at the mortals he could reach, and felt his power grow within him with every victory against the detested creatures of God's creation. Even at midday, the gloom of Grant's Tomb was nearly absolute. At midnight, Dumond's form was completely blanketed in darkness.

"Start spreading the news..."he hummed, and stretched his legs. He felt the dead marble under him grow hot with his hatred. He knew the demonslayer spawn was here...the boy's living breath had drawn him across the sea. Dumond had caught glimpses, but no more, of that hated mortal on the astral, but he could draw no closer on that plane. Not without knowing his name.

It was time to find the lineage of the demonslayers and wipe it off the face of the earth. He had come to claim his due, and would take the entire city for a blood price. Dumond stood and assumed a human form, one he knew was elegant, even heavenly. His father, Asmodel, had been one of the most glorious angels before he fell.

It was twelve years to the day that the demonslayers had taken his lineage.

The time had come for him to strike.

## Chapter Four

Cybele loved Paris now, loved visiting her honey in his sweet dreams. She leaned closer to Alex, let her breast casually brush against his arm, as they nestled together at their favorite table at Café Momo.

He startled, but didn't lose his train of thought. "So where's the proof God exists? If anybody would know, it's you."

He made her laugh, always, delicious, yummy yummy Alex. If only he would laugh too. She sipped her *café au lait*, nibbled at her chocolate croissant—the best thing about being undead, no astral calories!—and listened to him philosophize, not paying attention to the words, instead drinking in the warm tones of his voice like she sipped the coffee.

"You wanna know what I think?"

"Yeah."

"You're the proof." She held her breath, worried that she'd gone too far for her legalistic barbarian to follow. He grunted in surprise and folded his arms across his chest, for once speechless.

And then his face opened up into a huge smile, bright as a sunrise.

"Flattery will get you anywhere."

"That's what I heard, sweetie. And I'm taking it all the way to the bank!"

She grabbed his hands, yanked him to his feet. How she wanted him. She wanted him so badly, her desire dizzied her, gnawed at her like a ravenous hunger. "I want to show you something," she said.

He allowed himself to be led and left his coffee untouched on the little bistro table set up on the cobblestones outside.

"Everything runs on belief," she said. "The whole universe."

He smiled, motioned for her to go on. She pulled him to the quay over the river, the hulking mass of Notre-Dame crouching between the banks of the Seine. She climbed up onto the railing along the sidewalk.

"A miracle of balance," Alex said, his eyes bright. She loved that smile of his, rare as it was.

"You wanna see miracles? Watch." She let go of his hand, stretched her arms up to the sky. She sent a shimmer through her clothes, turned them iridescent and transparent to tease him.

It worked. He gasped and stepped back, his eyes widening in shock.

"Not bad, right?" She reached up, floated off the banister and hovered in the air above Alex's head. "Oh sweetie, believe." She reached down, her toes pointing into the sky, grabbed his hands again, and hauled him into the air.

He laughed aloud as he floated.

"This is a dream, Cybele."

"Not just a dream, my darling man." They floated higher, like a couple of helium balloons tied together, over the spires of Notre-Dame. Cybele peeked down, and one of the gargoyles nodded at her, gave her a long slow wink. She cuddled close to Alex as they ascended, and he let her. He folded her into his arms and they floated together, caressed by the wind and clouds.

"Why are you here?" he asked, his voice so gentle that she didn't realize it was a dangerous question until she started to answer.

"I'm here because I want to be...I'm supposed to be."

"Says who? Aren't you a *dybbuk*?"

She shouldn't have told him what she was. She sighed, nestled her head against his chest and listened to the sound of his heart beating. "Well...yeah. But my being a *dybbuk* has nothing to do with why I'm here with you."

"So, what kind of *dybbuk* are you—a demon or a ghost? Did you come to destroy me?" He kept his voice casual, but she could hear the fear humming underneath.

She stroked his chest with her fingers, sighed, and felt scribbled over with memories she wished she could erase. "It's a long story, honey. And it hurts too much to tell it. But, no, I'm not here to destroy you. I'm here to set you free. That's what I'm all about."

"Aren't you the one who needs to go free? Aren't you stuck out here, between the worlds?"

"Well...not exactly. I was a girl once, a New York City showgirl. And let's just say life was rough, and my husband at the time was a creep." Her voice shook, and she took a moment to regain her serenity. "I got killed, okay? I wasn't ready to go into the light. Too many loose ends. So I chose freedom. And here I am."

"Freedom is the ultimate magic," she continued. "And we're completely free in this moment. Together." She hugged him close, and imagined his scent, the taste of him in her mouth...

"No," he said. "The past and future won't leave the moment alone. You're stuck here as much as I am. You want something from me. But what?" He shifted uneasily in her arms, and she felt the fear rising up in him again. They floated downwards, balloons leaking belief until they fell to earth.

They stood together by the Seine, his arms wrapped around her. "I'm sorry you went through all that," he said, his voice unbearably sad. "I'm glad you found the freedom you were looking for."

He leaned in and kissed her, searing her with his unbelievable intensity. All of Paris disappeared into that kiss. She wanted him more than anything. But when she opened her eyes, he was gone.

She sighed, feeling the ache of his absence. Lost him again. "A tough case," she whispered, her soul longing for him to come back to her. "I'm going to have to talk to Pox."

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She didn't wait. Before she could stop to think about what she was doing, Cybele headed to the astral seam beyond the outskirts of Manhattan's meatpacking district, where the astral plane and the earth plane touched and merged. She was in New York City again, not in Alex's New York, but hers. The sound of very loud music beat a staccato thumping into the ground. Cybele tiptoed on high heels past mysterious puddles of what looked like shimmering quicksilver as she headed to the rave club perched on the edge of oblivion.

As she entered, she felt rather than saw the hungry stares fixed on her, and even heard a few coppery voices whispering endearments out of the shadows, not over the blasting house music but inside, reaching directly into her mind: "Hey, kewpie doll, come here, this ain't your neighborhood, what made you come in out of the rain..." Invariably, when she turned to look

the whisperer full in the face, he or she withdrew into the shadows, startled to realize Cybele was as undead as them.

Above all of their heads, hovering like a hologram vibrated the single, blood red word:  
*Pox.*

The most famous vampire goth club in New York.

And Pox, the vampiric owner of the club, was Cybele's little sister.

Cybele found her holding court near the edge of the bar, where a hirsute female bartender was serving up gory-looking drinks in small beakers.

"Hey, little girl," Cybele called out over the roaring din.

Pox looked up in surprise at the ancient nickname and shook her head when she saw Cybele standing there. Both of them knew how much Cybele hated the place, choked with vampires and their willing human victims. Not a succubus or *dybbuk* to be found on an ordinary night.

Pox quickly rearranged her features into chiseled blandness and shot Cybele a smile that had frozen the blood of many a human man turned into prey. "What brings you to my hellhole?"

Cybele took a deep breath and pressed forward into danger. "I need a favor."

This time the vampire blinked openly in surprise. "Well, well. Something new in the world, my big sister needs help." She flashed the smile again and leaned against the bar, her legs as long and lean as a shadow dancer. "You know you're going to owe me big time."

Cybele stifled a sigh. "I'll have to take my chances."

"Come into my parlor, then." She moved through the crowd with sinuous ease, her black rubber-encased body sliding past dervish dancers and tongue-wrestling vampires without bumping them. Cybele followed in her wake, catching glimpses of flesh and red eyes and, once, a set of leathery wings before they reached the relative safety of Pox's office.

She closed the door behind them and suddenly the two sisters were enrobed in silence.

"So what gives?" Pox finally asked.

"I need help."

"Yeah, I know. Spit it out."

"I need help seducing a guy."

"And you realize your sister is the queen in that department." Pox crossed the room to a red leather couch in the corner and draped her long, languid body over it.

Cybele hesitated a moment, considering her sister's fetishistic form and her deadly intentions. And then she remembered Alex, his dream body pressed against hers in Paris...this conversation was worth the risk.

"Apparently you're lost in some kind of reverie," Pox observed, dry sarcasm dripping from her voice like poison nectar.

"It's a human man. A mortal soul. He keeps meeting me on the astral plane, and I want him. Bad. Really bad."

"How bad? I want you to tell me." Pox licked her lips and leaned forward.

"He's afraid to let go," Cybele almost whispered, and she felt her thighs getting warm. "I never wanted anything more than to take him for my own."

Pox's eyes narrowed. "And then you're going to destroy him, right? Drink him dry, and then throw away the husk. That's what men deserve."

Cybele sighed. They had covered this tired, stony ground a million times since they had become undead back in the 1920s.

"Men don't all suck, Pox."

"They suck, and so I suck them. Until they're dead. And that's how I make the world a better place."

"You didn't have to become a vampire."

"Well, yeah. It was the best of the bad choices I had at the time, but I'm glad I made it. A lot better than wandering the astral plane, lost and confused, like *some* unquiet spirits I know."

Cybele sighed and held her peace. She didn't blame Pox for being cynical. Pox had warned her not to marry the guy who ended up killing her, but she'd gone ahead and done it. Actually Cybele still felt guilty that the same rotten creep who'd murdered her had the audacity to wipe out Pox too. Only the intervention of the Chief Vampire of Brooklyn had rescued Pox, his human girlfriend, but by then Cybele was way too dead to initiate as a vampire. Especially since her body had ended up tossed into the foundation of the Chrysler Building.

Guilt made her defensive. "I made the best choice I knew, too, little girl. Hey, being a *dybbuk* is great...I get to celebrate my freedom."

Pox sneered and shook her head. "Yeah, with a bunch of loser mortals. That bastard who rubbed you out in 1928 died and went on his merry way, straight to Hell for all eternity I hope. You're still kicking around the mortal plane, slumming it with living humans. What's the point of that?"

Cybele felt her face get hot and her mouth go dry. "Not all those who wander are lost...ever read Tolkien?"

"Read?" Pox snorted in disgust. "Humans make me sick."

Cybele stuck her tongue out at the vampire. "You are what you eat."

"Shut up."

Cybele laughed. "But really. Humans invented fiction, they invented house music too. Face it. You're still human, at least where it counts."

"No. Human beings made me hate them. Don't insult me by lumping me in with them. And remember, sweetheart, they hate us more than we could ever hate them. They can't touch us. But we can destroy them. And they know it."

The room hummed with the throb of the music outside the soundproofed door. Cybele crossed to the desk at the far wall, played with the *athame* that Pox used for a paperweight. "Where did you get this?"

"Don't ask me, human-lover."

Cybele sighed and stretched out her astral body on the black leather armchair tucked in the corner. "So I guess you won't help me with my little Alex problem."

"Alex is that human soul you're besotted with." A statement, not a question. Cybele felt a whisper of unease beginning at the base of her spine.

"Uh huh."

"Where does he live? What does he do?"

"I don't know," she lied and cleared her throat.

Pox's eyes narrowed as she shifted her gaze to stare at the patterned tin ceiling. She arched her back to stretch, and the black rubber squeaked invitingly against the red leather of the couch. "I'll find out for you," she said quietly, her voice suddenly sounding very far away. "This place is even more of a zoo than usual. We've had an invasion of new regulars, demons, zombies. More of a mixed crowd...they get around even more than the vamps do, they travel the daylight. I'll track him down."

"You don't have to do that," Cybele said, keeping her voice casual. "You're swell, little girl, for offering, but that's not what I came to ask. What I actually need to know is how to manifest."

"Fully? But I thought you just said how much you loved being a *dybbuk*."

"Well, yeah...but I want Alex in the flesh."

Pox snickered and rolled her eyes. "Why can't he just work a spell and bring you back to Earth himself?"

Cybele couldn't help allowing herself a fond grin. "He says he's an atheist."

Pox's scratchy laugh filled the shadowy office, and Cybele enjoyed the timbre of her voice, drinking in the warm throaty sound like a fine wine too rarely uncorked.

"He sounds like quite a prize."

"There's something about this guy, Pox," Cybele confessed, remembering him in her arms. "He's dangerous. He's got a demon streak in him, too, somewhere."

"He's undead?" She cocked a thin arched eyebrow in interest.

"Nah. I told you—100% human. But he's haunted. And he's haunted in the most appealing, melancholy, distracting way. He glows in the astral like a supernova."

Pox considered, staring at the ceiling as if it contained the secret to Alex Kaplan, encoded for both of them to decipher. "He's haunted by you," she finally said.

"I never thought of it that way, and that's not what I meant. But, yeah. You could say that...I've been visiting him on the dream plane, because that's where he will let me in. But I want more. I want all of him."

Pox smiled again, as if now she could see Alex spread eagled on the ceiling, ready to be devoured. "I'd say, since you're not a vampire and you can't manifest, just haunt him. Act like a regular ghost, not like a demoness by karma. Some ghosts get the knack pretty good, can materialize almost all the way."

Cybele bit her lip until it hurt. "But not all the way."

"Not without magic. No."

Pox stretched out her arm, and the tips of her fingers brushed through Cybele's body. "See? Even here, in my domain, you're only a semi-manifest. You need a mortal working serious magic to bring you all the way back to earth. So teach him magic."

He'd never go for it. Cybele tried to mask her disappointment. But she could never hide anything from her paranoid, protective little sister.

"So what makes *him* so damn special, anyway?" Pox sat up, her eyes narrowed, starting to glow a soft red.

"Oh. Nothing....I just got the jones for him, you know. I'm a *dybbuk*."

"Yeah. Not a succubus. Lust isn't supposed to be your main game. You don't get extra credit for corrupting his soul."

"*Dybbuks* are free agents, not soul stealers. We can do anything we want to do."

“So you’ve said. But, see, you do agree with me.”

“Oh really? When have we ever agreed on anything?”

“I’ll give you that...but you do have to concede what I said before.”

“Which is what?”

“They can’t touch us, and we can destroy them. That’s what gives us our freedom. And makes them nothing more than lunch.”

Cybele twined a curly lock of hair in her fingers and said nothing. Because she realized as Pox spoke that, for the first time, a human soul *had* touched her. And she wanted him enough to risk going back into mortality to get him.

“And that’s why humans all hate us,” Pox continued, reciting her personal dogma, obviously hoping some of it would rub off on Cybele.

She considered what her sister had said. Rejected it as bullshit. As a matter of fact, if she weren’t a *dybbuk*, she’d swear that she was falling in love with that pretend atheist, Alex Kaplan. And if he turned away from her, she was the one in danger of getting destroyed by a man, again.

## Chapter Five

Ah, the cool of the sanctuary.

Alex fired up his computer, neatened up his already neat office desk, and twirled around in his Aeron chair, waiting for the Internet to connect on a fine and dandy Monday morning. The air conditioner hummed, banishing the disgusting July humidity and the smell of Manhattan. Outside his door, paralegals, law clerks, and secretaries marched back and forth along the long carpeted hallway, all minions eager to do his bidding.

But everything he needed this morning was at his restless fingertips.

He needed to finish his research on the Witnesses before the meeting at the House of Peace. If any evidence existed that they were in fact responsible for hurting people, he needed to get Danny clear before the REX Unit closed in on the NYC Witnesses.

A slight rustling from somewhere behind him startled him. He turned, fear tracing its fingers along the back of his neck. For a moment, he saw a shadow cross behind his bookcase. What undead thing...

But that was absurd. Of course, he'd seen nothing, maybe just a shadow from beyond his office door. Nothing and nobody from his dreams could intrude on his pristine workplace.

He took a deep breath and vowed to quit drinking caffeinated stuff. He squeezed his eyes closed, and then he opened them and turned to the door. Ana Shin, a shiny new law clerk, waited at the threshold of his office, her eyes widening when she saw the expression on his face.

"Uh, sorry, Alex," she said. "Is this a bad time? I just wanted to walk over the motion papers for tomorrow."

"Great, terrific," he said, and then rubbed his eyes to get a moment. "Just toss them on the side table. I'll get to them after lunch...I'm sure they're fine."

"You wanted to file them first thing tomorrow morning."

He gave her a long look and smiled. "Don't worry, Ana. These motions are routine. We can review them after lunchtime, no worries."

Ana's face completely transformed when she smiled, the tension draining out, her almond eyes sparkling with kindness and intelligence. "Thanks. Catch you later."

"Right."

He watched her go. Wished he could stir the desire to follow her out the door, ask her out for coffee after work, or maybe, to be respectful, wait until after she went back to law school in the fall. Ask her out. Fall in love with a regular, terrific woman.

He'd wished for simple love before, more during his years in college than in the Sahara of love the practice of law had turned out to be. But marriage in the suburbs had never been his destiny. Guys who saw dead people tended to have problems dealing with normal, alive people. Most New Yorkers thought mediums and psychics were amusing, but fake. Playing the odds, Ana thought the same way, especially given the fact she clerked at REX. Besides, Alex had enemies somewhere out there that no human woman should get exposed to. That was just the way it was.

He sighed and turned back to the computer screen waiting for him. Paused. And then he slid across the room on the office chair and nudged his office door closed with his foot. Because he didn't want anybody else to see what he needed to see for himself. Research on

religious frauds and hucksters was fine. Internet surfing on Goth websites and emailing groups of shamans exploring demonology was another. He was supposed to debunk and prosecute dangerous religious fraud, not embrace it...

First the Witnesses, he promised. Work first, Cybele later.

He logged in and read the news reports on Westlaw, centering first on the New York dispatches and then widening his search to include North America and Europe. Looking for patterns. Alex felt himself getting sucked into the vortex of research, a light trance of creativity.

As he read, his fingers itched. They played with the lightly starched cuffs of his white linen shirt, the tip of his sober crimson tie. They ached to touch a face he knew was real. A face he could only encounter in his dreams.

The first pop up ad annoyed him in a vague way, like a buzzing fly. He clicked it away without thinking. But then they began to proliferate, and he remembered with a shock that Westlaw, a subscription only database, never had pop ups.

He began to read.

*Paris in Springtime*, the current ad read. *Stroll the Seine, eat a croissant, Fall In Love...*

He clicked it away, his hand trembling so badly that he knocked the mouse off its Crusaders for Justice mousepad and onto the clean, carpeted floor.

The garish, multi-colored pop up ads began to multiply. His hand paused in mid air as it reached for the mouse, floating, almost weightless...

*The Country of Your Dreams...*

*Je t'adore...*

*Come to a Land Where the Natives Can Have Sex in the Sky...*

*Believe...*

*Alex...*

*Alex...*

And suddenly her face appeared, taking up the entire screen, her full, luscious lips parted like a Marilyn Monroe imitation, her eyes sparkling with mischief, her short, curly hair framing her face in a fiery nimbus of soft, flowing tresses of strawberry blonde...

Her hands patted at the surface of the screen, like she was a mermaid trapped inside an electronic fishbowl. Alex heard himself making a strangled little sound of surprise, and his hands, working independently of his locked down brain, reached for her fingers, stroked the screen. He watched his own fingers leaving a trail of electric glitter as they strained to touch her. The screen blurred through the sudden tears that came, unbidden, to his eyes. She wanted to snuff out his soul. But he wanted to have her anyway.

The phone rang, and the sound jolted him like an electroshock treatment. He shuddered, his eyes clamped shut. When he opened them, she was gone. The phone rang and rang, and Alex clasped his head in his hands and listened to the ragged, uneven sound of the breaths he took while he waited for the phone to stop.

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On the other side of the great divide, Cybele watched him from inside the computer. Pick up the phone, Cybele thought at him urgently. Come on. Do it. I want to tell you what you need to do.

But his fear walled him away from her, blinded him, hid her from his sight. She watched him rake his fingers through his thick, short black hair as he pushed violently away from the desk. He paced the tiny room, licking his lips, and the sound of his racing heart filled Cybele's ears until she could hear nothing else. She let him and his world fade away and collected herself on the astral, in the comforting blah of nothingness.

She knew he wanted her, too. She was so close, so tantalizingly close to having him. But once she had him, what next? He was way too dangerous to love and leave.

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Pox was furious. "You did *what*?"

"Hey, don't throw a fit, okay? I just did what you said...haunted him a little."

"During the day? From his fucking *computer*?"

Pox and her crew cleaned the dance hall during the day, when its denizens slept in coffins, in the arms of their undead beloveds – or simply stayed inside, far from the light of the sun. Broken glass glittered like distant stars in the light of the main room as Pox worked with a broom and dustpan.

"You said haunt him. That's all I did." Cybele couldn't help feeling a little defensive.

"Haunt him like a *ghost*, nimrod. Not in the middle of the workday, in his work stuff. You're not usually so heavy handed – are you? I meant keep it up in his dreams, maybe a little bit when he woke up from one, when he was naked in his bed, open. Like that. Not that full frontal bullshit you pulled. No wonder he's terrified."

"He wasn't scared. Not at first."

"You'd make the worst vampire in the entire universe. Don't you know about nuance? Don't you know how to sneak up on your prey? By Lucifer...you'd starve."

Cybele rolled her eyes, glared at the ceiling instead of her sister's face. "I'm sick of nuance, okay? We've been dicking around in his dreams for months already. I want more. That's what I told you when I came by last time."

"You have to accept your limitations," Pox said, crouching over the glass like a cat devouring a broken litter of mice. "You can't manifest. Why can't you get it through your thick head? There's a limit."

"I refuse to accept it."

Pox rose to her full height, her black hair slicked back along the nape of her neck. "You love this guy." She spat the words out like they tasted of gasoline.

"I do not," Cybele retorted. "I lust the guy. He's a demon in human skin. I get off on him, on his mortality, on his vulnerability. I want to take his innocence. And believe me, the guy wants to give it to me. But we just are having some technical difficulties."

Cybele took the broom out of her sister's hand and began attacking the broken glass for her. "And you, little girl, are going to help me."

"Over your lover boy's dead body."

Cybele paused mid-sweep. She knew her sister wasn't speaking metaphorically.

"Not that."

"You want the Cadillac experience, that's what it's going to take. Let me get to him first. One good bite and he'll be as undead as we are. You can have the kid for all eternity, preserved in his current form, only with a couple of fangs attached. What's the problem with that?"

Cybele bit her lip, considered her sister's offer.

"Why are you suddenly being such a good sport?" she finally asked.

"Hey, you talk up this guy like he's the greatest thing to walk the light of day since, I don't know, Rudy Valentino? I want a little taste of him myself."

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The sweat poured off Alex's arms and down the small of his back. The worst part was, the basement of his uncle's temple was fully air conditioned – the brutal unrelenting heat of a July afternoon in New York had nothing to do with the way he felt.

The circle huddled on beat up metal chairs in a corner of the soup kitchen dining area. Their voices echoed along the scruffy white walls, their stories taking on lives of their own and wandering the basement's confines before fading away into the ether.

"I saw one under the subway tracks once," one of the people said. Benno, Alex thought he'd said during the introduction phase of the meeting, when Alex had slunk in late. His acid-washed jeans had two careful ironing creases on the front of the legs, and his tucked in shirt was threadbare but painstakingly cleaned and starched. He kept his fingers laced together on top of his lap, and his eyes had the distracted, rheumy quality of a drug abuser doggedly hanging onto rehab.

The other people nodded, as if seeing a vampire eating a rat under the IRT subway line was an everyday, mundane event. Alex wanted to stand up, yell, "Are you all freaking crazy?" and run out of the room, brilliant career and indictments be damned.

But something else held him. A fear and a longing, mixed together – fear that his desire for Cybele was going to destroy the life he'd created for himself, and a longing for her, longing to hold her in his arms forever. He knew that longing was only a symptom of the disease, but he still embraced the sickness, almost loved it. Perhaps that love of the world's underside bound him together more closely to the other members of the group than Alex wanted to admit.

Where was Danny? Alex had wanted to talk to him before the meeting got started, hopefully to get him on Alex's side before the other people arrived. But his train had inexplicably stalled on its way uptown, and Alex had ended up late, not early.

As Benno the rehab guy spoke, Alex stole a glance at the other people at the meeting. Half of them looked homeless, or formerly homeless. The other half looked like the tie-dyed tree huggers he had mentioned to Ursula earlier in the day. But, reluctantly, he had to admit that none of them looked psychotic, or intent on committing clandestine homicide.

Alex, posing as a member of the public, nodded along with everyone else as Benno finished telling his disturbing story. When he was done, the moderator, a small chubby woman wearing beige polyester slacks and an oversized cross dangling from a silver chain around her neck, stood up, crossed the circle of folding chairs, and hugged the man for a long time in silence.

"Thank you," she said, her accented voice steady, when she had finally released him. "You were very brave to share the truth with us."

"Amen," a caramel-colored woman whispered to Alex's right. "Praise Jesus."

Suddenly, all of the people turned in their chairs, as if on cue, and stared at Alex in silence. Pinned to his seat by their silent gazes, Alex felt new sweat begin to form on his forehead. What had he done to tip off his mission?

He stared back, trying not to look as disturbed as he felt. Great poker face, he thought to himself, but nobody asked for his badge, or screamed for him to get out. He took the visual interrogation in silence.

"Your turn," the moderator finally said, her hazel eyes sparkling from behind her thick eyeglasses. "Could you tell us your name, and why you're here?"

"Alex," he said, before he could think of a clever alias. He turned from one open, patient face to another, and to his horror began forming words aloud, before his brain could stop his heart from speaking.

"I, well, I have these dreams..." he said. He had to stop, to get under control, and to shut himself up, but the moderator took his pause for what it actually was.

"Take your time, Alex," she said, her alto voice gentle. "We have all night to talk. Don't be afraid. You've found a safe place to share."

Safe? He wanted to laugh. There was no 'safe,' not when your own bed wasn't safe. Not when your own parents...

He stopped himself. "The dreams, they recur," he continued. "A woman, well, a being, she visits me constantly."

"How do you feel when she comes to you?"

"Feel? At the time, in the dream..." he hesitated. "Wonderful," he continued, heedless of his inner dismay. "I feel like I'm home, like she's a...soulmate." He'd never said the word out loud in his life, and it felt awkward in his mouth.

The moderator nodded for him to go on.

"But she's not benign," he continued, his throat tightening. "She's a...well, I'm Jewish. I've been reading up on this stuff, and well, she's apparently a *dybbuk*." He kept his voice dry.

But the moderator didn't seem in the least horrified. Or even perturbed. "How interesting," she murmured. "Are you a psychic person? Have you had paranormal gifts since childhood, Alex?"

"No," he lied. "No. I thought she was a dream for a long time. But then, she..." He swallowed, deciding he'd gone too far in a room full of very strange strangers.

"Alex?" The woman to his right gently clasped his shoulder in her cool, hard hands.

"I can't talk about any more of this."

"That's all right," the moderator said. "I know just the person to help you with this visitation." And she rose as if to go upstairs, but before she could, heavy footsteps Alex recognized echoed in the almost empty room.

And he appeared before them in the circle, like a conjuration. Danny.

"*Shalom*, welcome everyone," he said, smiling, arms wide like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. But then he saw Alex sitting among the others, and Danny's face fell, with guilt or fear Alex couldn't tell. With a shudder, Alex realized both of them were in a world of trouble.

## Chapter Six

"Give yourself to me..."

Around them, luminous in rose petal light, Paris shimmered, preserved in eternal springtime. Cybele leaned over the wrought iron table and reached across the croissants and café au lait. A soft spring breeze blew through his hair, and Alex looked at her, startled, his lips slightly parted.

"I can't take it anymore, honey," she said, as a smile tickled the corners of her lips. A small flock of pigeons, startled by her sudden movements, wheeled into flight, and they turned golden as they disappeared into the light crowning the top of his head.

"Do you really want all of me?" he finally murmured. "You might be getting more than you bargained for."

Something about the tone of his voice made Cybele hesitate. She studied the curve of his lips, his earnest, tired-looking amber eyes. Maybe he really was a demon, who had been faking her out in a monumental way. But no, she was right in the first place. He was only a young human with haunted eyes, barely twenty-four.

But he was caged in restraint.

"You think too much," she whispered. The bells of Notre Dame rang faintly, too faintly, in the distance. For a moment Cybele worried that his alarm clock was ringing on the other side of the great divide and he was going to tear himself away from her again. But no...for now, they still had Paris. It was time to make the most of it.

Cybele stood up, and her wrought iron chair crashed backwards onto the cobblestones beneath them. She slid along the length of his body, and she could tell from his quickening pulse, the heat radiating from his core, that he wanted to surrender to her. "Sweetheart, I know you want me too. Let go, believe that we can do this. And you'll go free."

Her hands groped at his waist, pulled up his threadbare college tee shirt, and for a moment she had a fleeting sensation of touching the silk pajamas he wore back in his waking world. She touched his nipples and suppressed a laugh as his eyes widened and searched her own.

He gasped, and his hands, seemingly against his will, stroked her thighs. Cybele felt an answering rush of desire flood through her astral body. Her hips fluttered in a circle, and she laughed.

"I'm your dream come true, lover," she said. "I'm the one you've been looking for all your life."

"I haven't been looking," he said. "I've been running away. I don't want you to get hurt, Cybele."

"I've handled worse than you, believe it, baby."

"You don't understand. I'm not the one you should be worrying about."

She didn't flinch because she didn't care anymore about the dangers, the fears that haunted her man on the earth and in his dreams. He shook his head, made a despairing sound between a laugh and a groan. Alex leaned in, and his lips closed over hers. He kissed like a starving man, devouring her, demanding more of her. So often, when she'd seduced a man in his dreams, Cybele had to work to keep him from wandering away into meaningless worries

about baseball, work, wife, or some mundane vice. But this one, this Alex...he only wanted her.

His tongue explored her lips, her tongue, her neck. Her hips started a slow gyrating dance, and she felt him get harder and harder as he strained against her. She forgot she was a species of demoness. She disappeared into the inferno of his desire, the rawness of his need. And it was a golden miracle.

She clamped her legs tighter around him, and the rhythm of their kisses increased. Her breathing returned, ragged, uneven, and she rubbed her breasts against the cotton of his shirt. She focused, and suddenly her clothes vanished and she was stark naked on top of him, dining *al fresco* on delish Alex in a dream café by the Seine.

He paused and took in the sight of her naked, writhing in his hands, in the open Paris air. He took a single wild look around at the city, as the waiter by the door to the bistro across the street nodded knowingly at him and smiled before he leaned back against the doorjamb to watch. The sound of Alex's laugh opened up something in her demon heart, something that had been walled away since she had died back in the 1920s.

"Aren't you afraid of me yet?" he asked.

"Nah. Usually it's the other way around."

"But tell me the truth. You still want my soul...somebody else has sent you, right?"

She bit back words of frustration, told herself that he'd gotten all worked up about something he'd read, some prejudice that got passed on to him. "Nobody sent me. I don't work for the Demon Team or anything. I want to be here." Tracing his lips with the tips of her fingers, she whispered, "But don't worry about it, because I just want to have fun with you. Surrender. Let me drink you all up."

She concentrated, and his clothes disappeared too. They were naked in the warm Parisian spring sun. With one arm, Cybele sent the continental breakfast crashing onto the cobblestones beneath them, and she pulled him on top of her, on top of the table, the linen tablecloth rippling in the breeze. "Take me, sweetie. Go for it."

She was dimly aware of other people strolling by them, people that Alex had created to populate his dream. Never had she met a human man who had the ability to create such a completely formed world of dream without her help. Again, she hesitated—maybe he *was* other than human. At this point, she really didn't care...

He looked down on her in wonder. "You really want me, don't you?" he said.

"Oh, by Asmodeus, I do. You're a pure pleasure, honey."

He shook his head, licked his lips. She was so close to snagging him. She could taste him.

He leaned back, away from her, and shrugged.

"I can't do this," he said, his voice vibrating with a note of apology.

A bolt of desolation shot through her like a spike of lightning. Her fury only aroused her more. "Ah, c'mon, baby," she said, keeping her voice honey-gentle, trying not to scare him. "Don't be a tease." Her desire sent their astral bodies floating into the air. The Seine wound like a gray ribbon below them.

"Holy shit," he muttered, and for a moment seemed to surrender to her and the delight of flight. He cradled her in his arms, seeming to accept without fear the sensation of

weightlessness, and together they floated, their legs clasped together, his cock pressed hard against her thigh.

He squinted against the light embracing them, shook his head again. "I want you, Cybele. But it would destroy us both. No joke. So let me set you free."

She bit his butt as she instantaneously flipped around their position, and she tried to ignore the fear that surged along the underside of her desire. "Why do you think I've come to you? You need to lighten up. You need to have a little decadent fun. So come on. It's just a dream. What's the harm?"

"I can't." Cybele had to admit he was adamant. She let them down to earth across the river, by the Louvre. They stood in the stone courtyard, completely alone.

"Why not? You don't blow off a girl like me without even an explanation."

"Love has consequences."

Her laugh burned with exasperation. "This. Is. A. *Dream*. No consequences. Think of me as a freebie. I'm in your dreams."

"Yeah, right. You're a demon. You're supposed to want my soul. I got the scenario, okay?"

She didn't bother trying to explain the distinction between *dybbuk* and demon to him again—he didn't want to hear her. To cover her confusion, she sat on the ledge of the fountain and trailed her fingers in the cold water.

Alex continued to stand a few feet away, his arms folded, still naked but evidently not ashamed of the fact. "I don't think you understand."

"Why don't you show me the light," she said, torn between lust and sympathy.

"You're pulling me down, I'm pulling you down."

Ow. She didn't expect to hear that from him. Cybele squinted as she looked away into the sky and had to laugh when she saw that Alex had outfitted the fountain with a naked statue of her, complete with sun-dappled water pouring from her stone nipples and from between her chiseled legs. Did he even realize how rich and earthy his imagination was, trapped inside the cage of his intellect?

He was dead wrong. He needed her, even more than she needed him. She watched the water dancing in the sunlight. "How could you say I pull you down? To a kindred spirit, no less. Is this your atheism thing again? If you're an atheist, I'm the Statue of Liberty."

He refused to save face by laughing off his fears. "It's not about the atheism, and you know it." Those amber eyes, so serious.

He paced back and forth, his lithe muscles rippling with tension. Cybele sat on her hands to stop herself from going to him, stroking those sinuous triceps, those amazing glutes...She saw the expression on his face and his fierce features jolted her out of her horny reverie.

He cleared his throat, kept pacing. "Why do you think I keep coming to Paris? Who do you think murdered my parents? Demons, Cybele. They won. They're going to come back to finish the job sooner or later, and the longer I linger here with you, the more vulnerable I get. I don't want you to be here when they come for me."

Cybele's heart ached for him. She stood up, crept closer, but he backed away. She stopped walking, tried to convey her tenderness through her gaze. "Alex, I would never, never hurt you. No demon has dominion over me, so no worries. Listen. I can teach you to

work magic...believing works on every plane of existence. Bring me to you on the earth plane, let me prove to you that I love you."

He let her come to him. She touched his shoulder, and he flinched under her gentle fingertips. "Cause I do love you, Alex. I truly do."

He stroked her cheeks, the back of her neck. "I can't do it, sweetheart." His voice broke over the half-whispered endearment. "It's too far for me to bridge. It's too dangerous."

She swallowed past the lump in her throat, and considered her words. "Alex. Remember this: Love is stronger than fear. Always."

"Love wasn't enough to save my parents. I'm going to have to save myself."

\*\*\*\*\*

That Thursday, Danny ushered Alex into his office instead of the kitchen. "What are you doing, boychik?" he asked. He settled behind his desk as ghostly halos of lamplight stole over the polished mahogany surface. Alex stood by the door, stiff with injured formality, wanting to run away, and at the same time to run into his uncle's arms.

"I can't explain."

"You are going to have to explain. And now."

Danny's voice rang with his authority, on his home turf. Alex had spent some of the most painful times in his childhood here, finding solace and peace only in this place, with this man.

Best defense was a good offense, everybody learned that in law school. "You are messing with a dangerous group of people."

"And why do you believe this group of people is dangerous? What do you know about them?"

"These are Witnesses. You're playing with fire here...we believe they're responsible for some pretty dirty stuff,"

"Oh, really." Danny's voice was dry, amused. "I'd say you were the one playing with fire."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Alex broke their staring contest first and studied his nails with an air of nonchalance. "My office is conducting an investigation. I can't say anything more. I came to the meeting to urge you to withdraw from the activities of this group before it's too late."

Danny choked out a grunt. "Boychik, between your demon and your raging ambition, you are going down in flames."

"I came here to protect you."

Danny leaned back in the chair, and a ghost of a smile flickered across his face. "Alex. My protector."

"You know, Uncle Danny. I'm an adult. You have to stop patronizing me."

The smile fled from his face. "Excuse me?"

"I love you. You are a second father to me. But I have my own life. I'm an adult. I'm not the little boy you adopted ten years ago."

"You will always be that boy, no matter how proud I am of the man you have become. Or how concerned."

"And what's that supposed to mean, Uncle?"

"The *dybbuk*," Danny whispered. "You're seeking her out, aren't you?"

Alex's heart pounded against his chest, and he took Danny's question in silence.

"You don't have to say a word," Danny continued. "You're pale. The spirit world's grabbing at you. You need to strengthen yourself against it, against her, or you'll fade away. And the dark spirits will get you. Study Torah with me...it will protect you."

Alex stood silently, as his head began to pound.

"Will you?" Danny asked.

"Let's keep the focus on the Witnesses," Alex said.

"You're doomed," Danny said, his voice heavy. He waved a giant paw of a hand dismissively in the air. "As for Witnesses, I won't lie to you. You will find nothing at the bottom of your investigations, Alex. Nothing except the truth. You might not like what you find, but that's all there is."

"Okay. But the matter might be taken out of my hands." Alex crossed the room, put his hands on the desk, leaned over to look deeply into Danny's eyes. "I want to protect you, before you become an official target."

Danny's expression softened. "This is tearing you apart, isn't it."

"I want to become the greatest US Attorney since Rudy Giuliani. But I'm not enough of a politician."

Danny smiled, inclined his head. "That is undoubtedly true, my son. But I wasn't talking about the Witnesses. I was talking about the *dybbuk*."

Alex sighed, and looked away. "Cybele."

Danny cleared his throat, and Alex looked back at him. His uncle's face grew tense again. "*Dybbuks* are dangerous, Alex. She's poison to you."

"I've read up on the subject more since we talked about her, Danny. She's not one of the bad ones."

Danny sighed, cracked his knuckles, and shook his head as he stared away into the dark corners of the room. "So she wants you to believe. So she may herself believe. But the most common *dybbuks* are the bad ones. They may be bad from being lost, but that makes them no less dangerous. And you are especially vulnerable."

He stood and crossed the room to the built-in bookcases packed with books, mostly written in Hebrew. He selected a tiny, ancient volume bound in brown leather, the gold leaf on the spine all worn away.

He flipped through the book and read for a long time in silence.

"What is that?" Alex asked.

"*Kabalah*. I am not permitted to show this to you."

"Don't worry, I don't believe in that stuff anyway."

They exchanged a glance, and both of them started laughing when Alex realized how ludicrous his knee-jerk affirmation of nothingness sounded in these circumstances.

"Okay, boychik. Don't believe. Just stand there, while I read up on your dead girlfriend."

\*\*\*\*\*

That night, Alex shut off his computer in his apartment in Brooklyn. He had his uncle's warning. He knew Danny was going to deeply disapprove of what he was about to do. But he was going to do it, and if he survived the night, he planned to tell him about every moment, every word.

Because Alex knew this half-life of skulking and running away had to end. He didn't want to live like this. Not in his dreams. Not in his waking life. And tonight, he was going to end it.

Alex reread the stack of instructions he'd printed off from the Internet sites he'd visited, and one very long email he'd received from a Sufi priest in New Mexico. Nothing left to do now but go to sleep.

He walked to his narrow futon, bent to climb into his bed, rearranged the sheets around him so that he could feel comfortable. The air conditioner hummed soothingly in the window. He clicked off the bedside lamp and immersed himself in darkness.

\*\*\*\*\*

Before Alex, the world of dreams had been Cybele's playground. At night, she flew over New York City, endlessly entertained and delighted by the dreams of sleeping humans. Occasionally, she entered the dream worlds of the people she saw, even stopped to interact with the people who dreamed. But never had she been pulled into someone's dream, like a rip tide pulling her far out to sea, inexorably and against her will.

Alex's dreams shone and vibrated inside of her as she flew, a beacon, a homing device. She'd sworn to herself that she was going to stay away. Both of them needed a break. But she kept pulling closer and closer to the world generated by his mind. By the time she realized he had summoned her, it was too late for her to get away.

She let herself get sucked into his fantasy. Back to the Seine, back to the Louvre. He waited for her by the fountain, dressed all in black, and she felt the pull of desire for him, so fierce and sudden that she knew it was his lust she felt.

"It's you," he said. He didn't sound surprised in the least.

"I tried to stay away," she said by way of apology. "I know I freaked you out the other day. Coming on too strong, so I tried to respect your feelings. But you're the one who pulled me in this time." She smiled, crossed the cobblestones to where he waited for her, leaning against the warm stone of the fountain. Behind them, the water frothed and splashed, and she felt the delicious tickle of cool droplets against the nape of her neck.

Carefully, she leaned in to look deeply into his eyes, so deeply that she could slip inside of his astral body and love him from within.

Circles of amber. The pull of desire led her closer and closer until she entered his form, filling him through all of his extremities, drawing his consciousness outward until he filled her form. They looked at each other, seeing one another through their own eyes and the eyes of their beloved.

She had surprised him, and he was completely open to seeing himself through her eyes. She saw how breathtakingly beautiful she was to him, felt his body harden, felt her own body grow slick and hot. Both of them had double vision, and it was sexy as hell.

Their lips met, crushed together, and they connected deeply, prefiguring the total synchronicity that sex could give them, if only Alex would give in.

"I missed you," she whispered, directly into his mind, as she directed her body to straddle his. She felt her weight on his body and used his hands to cradle her ass.

He groaned directly back into her mind.

"Kiss me," she whispered again, just before all words stopped.

After a long interlude she returned to consciousness. The sun shone hard into their eyes and bathed their bodies in radiating heat. They slowly withdrew like the tides back into their own bodies.

They lay together by the fountain, listening to the birds singing around them, as the faraway sound of a saxophone played out of a bedroom window somewhere.

"I came to find you," Alex said.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, and he let her rest there. Bliss.

"I know, honey. Your wish is my command."

He turned to face her, his dark, sculpted face bathed in sunlight and shadow. "I came to say goodbye."

"But why? You tried to say goodbye last time, and look how long *that* lasted." She tried to keep her voice light and not betray her breaking heart to him.

"You're so very dangerous," Alex said, and he closed his eyes against the Parisian sunlight of his dream.

"Me? Dangerous? Hah...look who's talking." She leaned close again to kiss him, but he stopped her.

"I understand what you are, now," he said. "A lost soul."

"Hey, not all those who wander are lost, you know."

"Tolkien. But he wasn't writing about *dybbuks*."

"I feel what you feel for me. It blows me away."

He shook his head no. "We are going to stop meeting." His voice sounded doubtful, like he didn't want to believe himself. She was so close to having him, at least on the astral...

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a blur at the edge of the scene, detecting it more with her body than her sight. She sat up abruptly. "We're not alone."

"I thought you got off on that. If you want, I can conjure that waiter guy again to watch."

Cybele had to smile at the memory, but the smile faded when she saw a shadow with long, thin legs against the wall across the plaza, slicing the air like a dancer. That shadow wasn't part of Alex's dream. It wasn't part of his psyche. It was something alien, a virus.

They weren't safe, and they would never be safe in Paris again.

It was Pox.

## Chapter Seven

Alex turned, the borders of his dreams fading with his attention. To him, the shadow at the edge of the square looked like a slice out of the air, an anti-bird.

None of the stuff he had read mentioned such a phenomenon. But all the experts said it was important to keep an open mind, to stay receptive to the meaning any particular image or individual might hold.

He couldn't let Cybele distract him from the elements of his recurring dream. The key to his misery lay hidden here, and wanting her only distracted him away from his quest. "This is my lucid dream," he said. "I want you, Cybele. But I want my life back."

She shook her head, bit her juicy lower lip. Her eyes widened, and he could see fear written in her Botticelli features. She glanced away, at the shadow, and he turned to follow her gaze. The shadow grew darker, drew closer.

"That's all so lovely," she said, her voice humming with sarcasm. "But, Alex, you're about to become a zombie. Time to wake up and get away."

"No." He stood up, took in the scene in front of him. He thought about the reading he'd done. He knew what to do.

"I'm having a lucid dream," he said, finally feeling like he was in control of events. "You are part of this dream, whether you like it or not. You are real, independent of this place, but the rest of this scene is mine to control."

She laughed then, tears glinting in her eyes, brightening them even more. "You honestly believe that? But that's complete bullshit."

She grabbed his hand and started running across the square, away from the Louvre, towards the Metro station. Unwillingly, he let her lead him.

"We gotta leave. Like out of town altogether. Trust me – that shadow you saw means business."

He stopped, gently pulled his hands away from her. "No. I'm not running away anymore. I've been running since I was a kid. I'm not going to do it anymore."

Psychologically, it made sense now. The looming shadow coming for him – what else could it represent but a symbol of the demons? This wasn't a real demon. He could control this place, craft it to suit himself. That's what Cybele had implied last time they met, this was what all the experts had told him was the truth. What better place to turn and face the symbol of his fear than here?

Cybele ran her fingers through her hair, and the gold and copper ringlets stood out wildly from her head. "I love it when you talk brave. But this isn't your office, where you get to call the shots. This isn't some kind of video game. This is your soul we're talking about. And you don't get a do-over."

He turned away from her and towards the shadow, determined not to run. The shadow darted back again, across the pavement, wavered, drew together into a cohesive form. He breathed deeply, felt his own astral body grow even more solid, familiar, real.

"I'm ready," he whispered. Cybele pulled on his arm again, but he stood solid.

The shadow solidified more, drew up like a column of buzzing bees. The cone of shadow became a woman, her face an echo of Cybele's.

"Hey, big boy, you look familiar," the shadow murmured. "I've come for you."

"I know." This encounter with his personal darkness was worth two or three decades of therapy. Alex shoved his primal fears way down, where they couldn't get in the way of the final confrontation. If he dealt with this symbolic specter here, he could turn away from this world for good. No demon could touch him then, not if he refused to enter their world through any of his senses. The portals could finally be closed.

The shadow drew closer, the face became clearer. "Good, you'll come without a fight. That's the way." Her face shone, darkly beautiful, shimmering like an image in a scrying bowl.

"This is my dream," he said.

"Yeah, whatever."

"You are part of my dream. Thank you for coming here. What message do you bring to me?"

The shadow paused. "Wha?"

"I read up on this stuff before I showed up tonight. I am ready to hear what you have to say."

The figure smiled, revealing two sharp, gleaming fangs. "Hello, motherfucker."

"No!" Cybele stepped between Alex and the shadow. "Go away, Pox. He's mine."

Cybele turned again to him, and for the first time, he got a glimpse into what substituted for her human soul. Her eyes glowed green, then red. Her face took on a hollowed-out, almost vulpine aspect. "Alex. She wants your soul. She's not a figment of your fucking imagination. Back off and let me deal with her."

The shadowy figure got bigger, grew leathery wings. A rasping whisper shuddered from between the gleaming fangs. "Sis, I've found out quite a bit about your lover boy here—Alex Kaplan. Let me take him..." As the foul wind beat from them and the figure hovered in the air, Alex took a moment to consider.

"Look, the books I read all say that a lucid dream is a message all by itself."

The two demonic beings ignored him, as they began to circle slowly around each other. A low growl escaped Cybele's still-lovely lips.

"I need to get this symbol's name. Treat it with respect. And in return it will treat me with respect, hopefully bring me a message I really need to receive."

She completely ignored him. The shadow faked left, lunged right. For a second, the long fingers reached past Cybele and touched his face, soft and burning, as tantalizing as a flame that danced moths to their dooms. The pads of the fingertips seared his left cheek like soft, delicious fire.

With the touch, Alex realized the limitation of the information he had trusted his life to—it was all completely dangerous bullshit.

"Good God," he whispered. "You're real, too." Just like in every nightmare he'd ever had, Alex's feet rooted to the spot, and he knew he couldn't get away.

So this is how a soul dies, he thought, the victim of hubris and stupid courage. But, before the shadow could reach in to kiss him and suck the soul out of his physical body, Cybele flew up between them, converted to a blur of fire and dragon talons and unholy blue and purple light. The two undead souls whirled together, joined together in a blender of rage and pure energy.

Her attack broke the spell, and Alex turned to run. As he ran, the Louvre dissolved in front of him, the bricks melting like a wet chalk sidewalk painting.

"I love you..." Her whisper sounded directly inside his mind, and he heard it with his heart, not his ears. He turned to reply, but all he saw was a melting canvas of fire...

He woke up in bed, covered with sweat, his heart leaping in his chest like a trapped dove. He was alone. His face burned with the dream slash. The power had cut out, and his apartment was hot as a coffin buried in the heart of an erupting volcano.

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"Back the fuck off!" Cybele hissed.

Her lunge at Pox, coupled with Alex's sudden flight, shattered the fragile reality of Alex's dream. The two sisters were left alone in the astral, floating weightless, trapped in anger and fear. Pox broke the spell, backing off and condensing back into her usual form, out of breath, still an apparition in the astral. "I almost had him."

"I know. What the hell were you doing back there?"

"He's dangerous, sis. He'd be better off dead. As he is, he's too powerful, and too clueless of the fact."

"Who are you to judge, and to decide for me? You never took demonic form on the dream plane before...and you did it for *him*? He's mine. You have the rest of New York to devour."

Pox let a slow sigh hiss out between her fangs. "He's a marked man. You are the only thing I love. I'm not going to watch while you get caught in the crossfire. Been there, done that. You ended up dead last time. This time you could get destroyed completely."

"No demon can have me."

"I wasn't talking about the demon."

Pox's expression caught Cybele's rage up short. She felt her fury begin to cool. "You know I love you, too. But I have to make my own way, and so do you. What you think about my life is your own problem, little girl. And the danger is all on him, obviously." She shuddered, remembering how close he'd come to complete annihilation at the slash of her sister's astral fangs.

Pox folded her long arms across her chest, shook her head no. She started marching away in the swirling clouds of ether, and Cybele trailed behind her, determined to win her sister over. Pox turned and surprised her sister by grabbing her shoulders and kissing her hard, on the forehead, like an evil Glenda. "I'm not going to leave him alone."

Cybele leaned in, rested her forehead against Pox's. "But why? You have so much going on, what do you need one measly human soul for, anyways?"

"I told you, some demon wants Alex for a blood price...he's got a gang and they're trying to take over the city. This demon is quite the nasty news...a lot of mortals are getting messed with. Possessed. Destroyed. My brother vamps warned me...This is going to get ugly. And you need to get with reality."

"Pox." Her voice lowered and she shrank away from her sister's clinging hands. She turned and walked away through the swirling mist, and her sister followed behind like a shadow, her long vampire's face contrite, her eyes limpid with only a hint of menace in them.

"Cybele."

If Pox wanted a confrontation, that's what she was going to get. Cybele stopped, snapped her fingers. A table and two chairs appeared, hard chairs, the chairs of an interrogation, not a cozy get-together. Cybele sat down, waited for Pox to sit on the splintery wooden chair across from her. With a sigh, Pox surveyed the scene, accepted it, and sat.

Cybele cleared her throat. "I want to make sure you're listening. Alex. Is mine. Back off."

Pox reached across the table for Cybele's hands, but she refused to take them. "Sis. You and I go back for all eternity. You go with him, you'll be making enemies a hell of a lot worse than me. Aren't you afraid of the blood demon?"

"Well, yeah. But he knows I'm a free agent as well as you do. He doesn't own me. Nobody does. I gave up all that owning shit when I became a *dybbuk* in the first place."

"So now you're going to throw your freedom away for a human man? *Again?*"

That last comment hurt.

"I know." Cybele looked deeply into her sister's eyes, trying to will her into understanding. "I don't have a choice anymore. Once I've had him, I'll figure out how to get myself free again. But, Pox...until you back off and let me do what I have to do, I'm not your sister anymore."

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Pox's warnings echoed through Cybele's mind as she wandered in ghost form through the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a sleepy Friday afternoon.

Beware the blood demon, Pox had said. Cybele knew well that a demon beset by a lust for revenge was a hell of a lot more dangerous than any vampire, even her own sister. Even more than the Chief Vampire of Brooklyn, a two-thousand year old bloodsucking avatar of evil. Actually, the Chief was a pretty honorable guy for a prince of darkness...respect the inherent DisOrder of things and his primacy within the chaos, and an undead flapper girl like herself could keep plying her seductive trade in peace. A demon intent on challenging that primacy could make things dangerous in New York for the living and the undead.

But even the blood demon wasn't her biggest problem. A certain human mortal named Alex Kaplan claimed that honor at the moment. She floated through the Medieval wing of the museum, trying like hell to forget him. Told herself that she could keep the portal to the spirit world closed by staying away from him, moving on, going free.

She knew it was hopeless. She smelled the medieval dust clinging to the ancient suits of armor, the tapestries, the battleaxes, and her limbs ached to wrap themselves around Alex, surround him. Claim him, forever.

An astral wind ruffled through her hair, and she shivered in the middle of an eyeball-meltingly humid July afternoon. She saw the darting shadows of a flock of demons collecting around her like a clot of possessed starlings.

It was the blood demon. She knew it the moment she saw him, her energy recoiling from his. He fixed his slimy green gaze on her, a low growl curdling in his throat. She met his eyes and kept her own gaze level, as her thoughts strayed to how calmly Alex had faced the prospects of demonic annihilation. She gave no fealty to him or his kind, and she was already dead, the outcome of her soul out of the divine game. He could torment her, but couldn't destroy her outright unless she wanted him to.

If he snuffed out Alex's soul, she'd want him to.

He considered her, and then rejected her as evidently beneath his notice. He wanted a human mortal's blood...she knew that was why he'd come here. After another moment more of his posturing, he made an obscene gesture, shifted into the shadows, and disappeared into the musty silence.

Only after he left did Cybele let herself take a shaky breath. She thought of another warning Pox had given her – that the seams holding the world of day separate from the spirit realm were unraveling. “Stop loving that human,” she said as they'd finally parted ways in the ether. “You're part of the problem.”

This flock of demons was evidence that Pox was right. They swarmed around her, melted into the artifacts surrounding her. Cybele watched as the few mortals checking out the damp gloom of the medieval world began rubbing their arms and whispering to each other. One or two of the more sensitive ones grew a little green. And the only child there, an astute five year old girl, started screaming, and her parents rolled her away in a battered stroller, looking more relieved to leave than embarrassed.

The girl's tantrum cleared the area. Good. Because Cybele, to her dawning horror, realized that she was on the side of the humans. And bad shit was about to go down.

A solitary man hovered near the unicorn tapestry near the emergency exit, swathed in shadows. He picked at the frayed edges of his laundered one too many times tee shirt. The front said I ♥ NY, but the red heart was faded and cracked, and the black letters had blurred to a smudgy gray.

He wandered nearer to the tapestry. Cybele sensed rather than saw the presence drawing him in. And then the creature haunting him revealed itself.

The blond maiden in the tapestry stirred, came to life, and I ♥ NY gaped in open mouthed rapture as he watched her stretch. He drew even closer, leaned in to get an intimate look.

The tapestry maiden caught him staring, smiled. She stretched her arms wide to him and leaned out of the tapestry altogether to draw him into her. The man laughed and shook his head, and Cybele fought the urge to get involved...only the knowledge that she was no match for a gang of demons stopped her from stepping in to save the man.

He reached to caress the maiden's silken face, the streaming knotted blond curls. Their eyes gazed deep, and Cybele recognized the soul-lock she'd used herself on Alex.

Their lips touched, ever so lightly.

And the maiden, in a flash of electricity and a shudder of smoke, transformed into her essential form. Her caressing fingers became iron talons; they closed over his shoulders and yanked him headlong into the tapestry.

Before Cybele could stop a thing, he was gone. Lost.

She hated feeling so responsible, so moral. Who needed *that* crap? She'd suffered too much from notions of propriety as a human woman, and overcompensated once she got free of her crummy mortal life. She'd started out in her existence as a *dybbuk* by haunting her murdering husband, plaguing his dreams, tormenting his days. She'd seen the look of relief on his face when the bootleggers rubbed him out. She knew she'd robbed him first of the desire to live. At the time, she'd noted his misery with triumph.

But now something had snapped in her. She might as well fade from the earth entirely and just go to hell or heaven or whatever in between awaited her for her many sins. But what

she wanted, more than heaven, was Alex. She wanted his body. His soul. His everything. *Dybbuks* didn't love people. But she loved him.

If she did love him, she couldn't have him, not after what she'd just seen. She knew her presence attracted and exposed him to demons, like the ones who snagged I ♥ NY. She'd never done the right thing before, knew better than to presume to know what the right thing actually was. But Alex had ruined her for evil.

## Chapter Eight

The circle of people sat in Alex's living room, the AC cranked blessedly high. The people sat in chairs or on the spotless red Ikea rug, and none of them said a word, only looked at Alex like he was still speaking. They considered what he'd just told them in complete silence.

He scanned their faces, and then continued. "You can't meet publicly anymore," Alex finished. "I'm going to get fired over this, sooner rather than later if my boss finds out about this meeting. And probably worse...I'm facing obstruction charges if she's in a head chopping mood."

"You're in danger on so many fronts," Sister Mary Agnes noted sadly, more to herself than to anybody else.

"No more than many of you," he replied. He scanned the group again, his unease growing like a shadow.

"Where's Benno?"

"We don't know," the Sister said, her voice trembling. "He's gone. We reported him missing, but the police said that an adult man has a right to go missing if that's what he wants to do."

"You know where he went," Danny said, his face quiet.

Alex refused to speculate. He didn't even want to consider the details. "But maybe, with some help, we can find him?"

Shirley shrugged, her shoulders more eloquent than words could be. Alex remembered her describing herself last time as a "voodoo queen from the East Village." Yeah. Whatever.

Shirley's voice was steady, and for a voodoo queen she sounded remarkably sane and confident. "I am a medium. I've talked with spirits, and they've told me that he's not in a place where they or anybody else can reach him. He's not dead, but he's in a psychic vacuum. Unbelievable. They say the demons want a blood revenge. New York is getting very unsafe for spiritual sensitives."

Alex paced around his living room, resisting the reality of her words. The demons had come, but to his waking world of law and justice, among mortal human beings who couldn't see them directly. All his carefully-constructed defenses had turned out to be nothing more than elaborate illusions.

"So you're saying give up? I refuse to accept that," Alex shot back.

"Some would say you're part of the problem," said a small, caramel-colored lady, the same one who had patted Alex's shoulder and praised Jesus at the last meeting.

"You mean Cybele."

"Of course I mean that demoness. You are trucking with evil spirits, encouraging them, doing who knows what with them. You got the devil inside you, boy! No wonder they're getting bolder – people like you encourage them!"

The silence indicted him, damned him. "I'm here," he finally said. "I am taking a huge professional and personal risk to warn you about the real dangers you are facing. If something illegal is going on here, now's the time to come forward. If it's true that undead spirits are abducting New Yorkers, we – I – have to accept that reality, and find a way to stop it."

"Maybe Cybele herself could help us," Shirley said, so quietly that her observation hung in the air like a subtle fragrance.

Danny shook his head, pulled at his beard. "No. Alex is in too much danger to search for her. And besides, Cybele is a magnet for evil...perhaps she means well," he conceded, with a nod in Alex's direction, "but the beings around her surely don't."

"I'll look for her," Alex said. "I keep reading up on spirituality, astral travel, stuff like that. I keep up with my exercises – I'm getting better at this. I'll find her eventually."

"Alex, you are a brave man," Shirley said. "I don't know if you understand the dangers. But I can see you get the gravity of this quest. We have to find a way to stop the demonswarm."

Alex kept pacing, fiddling with the stack of mail on the kitchen table. Sister Mary Agnes shot her sweet, myopic smile at him, and he smiled back, grateful for her, for all of the Witnesses. They served as a buffer between Alex and his uncle's dismay. He shot a furtive glance in his uncle's direction. Danny's lips pressed tightly together, as if he were locking down an explosion of paternal rage.

"Don't do it," said Caramel, speaking Danny's mind for him. "You are crazy. You go out there, no support, no beliefs, no nothing. You ain't coming back then."

Alex smiled at her, feeling a great weight dropping from him as he spoke. "The demon is coming for me, you know. And I'm the blood price he wants. So maybe I don't want to come back."

The roar of consternation that arose in his apartment drowned out any more discussion, but Alex felt relieved to admit the truth. He'd meet the demon head on, and the city would be safer even if he failed.

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*I am going to find you.*

Alex stretched out on his futon, feeling the extreme calm of disaster. He didn't think he was spiritually adept enough to avoid the demons gunning for him, or to beat them on their own turf. But without Cybele's help, his boss was going to break up the Witnesses, and New York was going to get buried in a demon avalanche.

He counted backwards from ten, beginning the guided meditation. Soon he found himself back in Paris, along the Seine, near the Shakespeare book shop, the little birch tree in the courtyard dancing in the spring breeze.

He looked around him, defenseless, open, as ready as he'd ever be.

Emptiness.

"Cybele!" he called. Her name echoed in the empty city, traveled along the river and faded away unanswered.

"Cybele," he whispered, searching for her with his inner senses. She wasn't in Paris. She wasn't anywhere he could find her.

He heard a low growl, turned.

A three headed mutt squatted at the entrance of the bookstore, drooling red, smiling and panting with its three mouths, looking hungry.

"Welcome to Paris," Alex said. "Like to share your name?"

"Cerberus, asshole," the dog growled. The head in the center whined, licked its fangs.

“Okay. What can I do for you?” He kept his mind open, accepted the fear blowing through him like a relentless wind.

“I got a message for you. Surrender now, and you die painless.” Hey, at least it didn’t play coy. “Your nemesis sent me.”

“You work for him?”

The center head whined, while the other two heads looked away, apparently abashed at the question.

“Not by choice, okay buddy? You got some enemy, fella...”

“What’s his name?”

The beast howled with laughter. “Hey, if I knew that, I wouldn’t be standing here delivering messages like Western Union. He’s new in town. He keeps his name for himself and gets old dogs like me to do his bidding through conjuration. Don’t mess with him.”

“Sorry, C, don’t really have a choice, he’s messing with me. He’ll have to come for me himself. I’m not going without a fight.”

The dog wagged its thick shaggy tail, apparently pleased that Alex had refused him. The head on the right yawned – and he abruptly disappeared, no fading or shimmering.

Alex took a deep breath, and he realized only after Cerberus’s passing how sure he’d been that he’d be the next human Witness to disappear for all eternity. And then he realized with a shock that now he considered himself a Witness too...

He whistled a shaky little tune as he left the bookstore behind and started walking towards the Moroccan restaurants in the Latin Quarter. He could get some Turkish coffee while he figured out where to find Cybele.

When he turned onto Rue de Roi he saw her, the shadow woman who’d driven Cybele away from him.

“Hello, demoness,” he said.

“Vampire. But why split hairs,” the female figure replied. The shadow shimmered, then suddenly her figure stood before him, as sharply defined and apparently solid as Cybele had been.

“Vampire? Why don’t you just suck my blood in New York?”

“Good question...pretty smart for an atheist.” Her voice went husky with sarcasm.

“So what’s the answer? And by the way, what should I call you?”

“Pox. That’s what I go by. And the reason I don’t drink your blood is because Cybele asked me not to.” She sounded tired, discouraged, and Alex perversely felt sorry for her.

“You know Cybele?”

The vampire surprised him with her laughter. “She *is* my sister.”

Alex almost vaporized with the shock of the news. “No way.”

“Way. You think she’s a cute little flapper girl. And so she is. But she’ll drink your soul like a glass of bootleg gin if you don’t watch it. I have another solution for your consideration.”

“Give you my soul, right? Let me ask you something...do you get in trouble or something if you don’t make a quota?”

Pox laughed again, a throaty, delicious sound. “No. It doesn’t really work like that. It’s just that stalking humans is what I do, it’s what I am. If I can’t do it, it frustrates me no

end." She licked her lips, drew closer. "Especially when the quarry is particularly... appealing."

Alex looked behind him, in the doorways of the fuzzy storefronts on either side of them. "You mean me? Most human females would beg to differ."

"Most human females are idiots, at least the ones your age or younger. Clearly you lack experience. But that only makes you more intriguing to somebody as jaded as myself." She drew closer, then smiled, fangs bared.

"You know only you can give it to me." Pox smiled again, more broadly.

Alex marveled that the sight of vampire fangs aroused nothing more than curiosity in him. Now that he intended to meet the blood demon face to face, the sight of fangs downright paled in comparison. "Did you promise her not to take my soul?" Alex asked.

"You'd be surprised, Alex. People come to me for so many reasons. Passion. Curiosity. Loneliness." Her voice drew him closer, like a Siren luring men onto the rocks.

"But what do you have to offer in exchange for a soul? You only get one soul, right?"

"Immortality," she whispered. "Wouldn't you like to live forever? Especially if there's nothing for you after death?"

Alex swallowed, intrigued. "But wouldn't you say there's something happening after death? Aren't you the proof of that?"

She laughed again, shrugged. "Am I? To each according to their beliefs. Look at it this way: you can escape your enemy, get the girl, and live forever. What's the minus in this equation?"

"The proof."

"Why don't I give you something beyond any proof—the chance to live forever. You could meet Cybele anywhere, anyplace."

"Not during the day. Not in regular daily life. Hey, what you're talking about is making me a vampire. Right? You do that, I'll never see the light of an ordinary day again. And Cybele's a *dybbuk*...she can't walk around manifested in New York either."

For the first time, Pox hesitated. "Yeah. I'll give you that. But what's so freaking great about daily life? Your dirty little secret, Alex...you love this dream world more than your own."

Alex swallowed again. Her insight into him drove a stake into his astral heart.

He sighed with resignation. "But this is my world. As much as New York City is yours." Alex felt the determination grow in him like a power unleashed. "I have to fight my own fight. Do it my way."

"You're a fool. You'll be dead within the week."

He ignored her prediction. "Please tell Cybele I need to see her. I need her help."

"You're choosing death, human. Pointless, confusing, and bloody death."

"It is my choice. You aren't the one to choose for me, Pox," he said. He felt himself growing in his dream, standing like a huge statue straddling the street with his suddenly enormous feet. "Begone. I keep my soul for my own. I have nothing more to say to you. Walk in peace, but leave my dream now."

Pox opened her mouth to protest, but Alex focused his intention and in a flash of magenta light, she disappeared.

Alex was safe. But he was completely alone. Paris was deserted. And Cybele was nowhere to be found.

A listless wind whispered through his hair as he stood. He had survived the night. But his mission to find Cybele had failed. Alex was going to have to do something much more dramatic than fend off evil creatures in his dreams. He was going to have to bring Cybele to his own turf. Cybele was right. Somehow he'd have to find a spellcaster to help him work magic.

"I'm getting the hang of this," he whispered, triumph bleeding through his pall of despair. "I'm going to find you, Cybele. Draw you to me. And then we're going to get this mess straightened out."

## Chapter Nine

Like water, evil flows through the paths of least resistance. Dumond drank deep of the souls of New York, fought often, killed when he could. The fear and hatred he created stoked the fires of his engine of revenge, and he walked the streets, invisible to the weak, a vision of destruction to those few who could see him in his true form.

He searched for his chief enemy. The boy. Alex Kaplan. The one the killers had spawned. This much information he had been able to extract from his human victims, the weak ones he had seduced and waylaid. One by one, the lost ones came to him. The boy had a powerful protector, the rabbi a bane against all demonkind. He could not launch a full frontal assault without the boy's own consent.

The mold and rot of indirect attack would have to do.

Dumond walked through the Wall Street district, arrayed in his finest. How he loved to walk the streets of this sleepless, restless city, in the naked daylight, fully visualized, a lure for the innocent and unwary...

As he walked, human women surreptitiously appraised the contours of his sinuous, golden body. A few had the effrontery to smile, and one supremely foolish girl had the audacity to stop him.

"Hey gorgeous. You got a girlfriend?" Her New York accent, hard and strident, made him pause.

He smiled at her, and her face lit up in his reflected glow. "Surely you are not free, *demoiselle*, a beautiful creature like yourself." He put a lilt in his voice, allowed the merest hint of a Parisian accent suggest itself to her.

She smiled back, secure in her arrogance. "Most men can't handle a woman who makes as much as I do."

"Oh, I can handle you, *mon amour*. You tell me, I will be there..." He kept his voice gentle, inserted a note of wistful longing.

But the girl was too bright. She hesitated, and a flicker of fear passed across her features.

"Do...do I know you?"

"You approached me, *mon amour*. I surely hope you do..."

He let her take a peek at his true manifestation and she turned and fled with a delicious little shriek. If he hadn't been on a mission, he would have loved to do that girl to death.

But revenge called, and he was too possessed by it to be deterred.

The light glowed pink in the city streets. Dawn had barely come, and the city was kissed with morning light. The business day had not yet come to defile the purity of the morning.

He entered the Justice annex, entered the REX unit offices, and faded into semi-manifestation. Only those with strong intuition could see him now. He would have to fully manifest to make his attack, but could travel unseen until he connected with his prey.

He padded down the carpeted hallway, the office all but deserted before the day began. Only one soul labored in solitude, the one he sought to undermine.

He knocked on the closed wooden door at the end of the hallway.

Waited.

Was rewarded.

"Come in," snapped the voice of Ursula Day from behind the door. "And it better be damned important."

"Oh, it is, *ma chere*," Dumond replied, fully manifesting as he walked through the door and shut it gently behind him.

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The text on his computer swam before him, meaningless bytes of incomprehensible data. Alex re-read the printout of the case on his desk, gave up, rubbed his eyes and nibbled on a thumbnail.

He pretended to work industriously, to run on the treadmill of ambition. But all along, he knew that his job, his life, wasn't going to stay the same. He considered how to sell his career as dearly as he could. Could he go above Ursula's head to pull the plug on the Witnesses case? Too soon...even another year of meritorious service could have served to overrule her, but he was too new, without allies at the upper levels of the administrative machine.

He'd have to confront her openly, and if that meant he quit over the investigation, that's what he would have to do. If he had to blow the whistle on an unethical investigation, so be it.

He turned again to the computer screen, hoping it was still haunted. But he didn't see even a shadow of Cybele's face. He touched the screen, and no magic glitter appeared. He felt his heart swim with love and realized with a start that his overactive brain had not a thing to do with what was happening to him. He didn't know how to deal with the emotions overtaking him, but he'd have to learn as he went along.

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By the end of the day, he could stand it no longer. He had to convince Ursula to drop the Witnesses case if he could. Once Danny was safe, he could come to grips with his passion for Cybele. Ursula's door was closed, and he heard the murmurings of a secretive telephone conversation bubbling on within the inner sanctum. He waited, leaning his forehead against the cool, blond wood.

"Alex?"

He jumped, feeling guilty, and saw Ana standing behind him.

"Hi. I've made a career out of startling you," she said.

"You could start in worse places," he said.

"Ursula's on the phone with some guy from the New York Times," Ana offered, her face open, untroubled.

For some reason, Alex felt the skin on his arms go goose-pimpled with the news. "The Times?"

"Yeah, pretty cool...I think it's something about your investigation. She was looking for you before, actually."

"Of course. That's why I'm standing here. You know I'm psychic, right?" he said, his heart sinking.

"Yeah. Seems to be a prerequisite for this job. That's why I'm going to end up at a tax firm somewhere."

"I dunno. Sneaking up behind people, under the radar screen, seems like a good talent to have around here...you could work that up into a strong power. Invisible secret agent, you know..."

She smiled right at him, and he smiled back. He chewed his cheek and was forced to admit that there was no spark there, none whatsoever. He wanted to want her, so much.

She winked at him, backed away. "She's off the phone now," she said. "You better go in that lion's den alone. I can't help you in there."

As she walked away, he watched her get smaller as she disappeared down the hall. *There's more to that intern than meets the eye*, he thought to himself, so vividly that for a minute he thought Cybele was whispering in his ear.

"Come in," he heard, muffled from inside the office. Apparently, all the lawyers of REX Unit had developed psychic abilities.

He took a deep breath and pushed the door open. Ursula Day sat behind the desk, a huge smile pasted on her face. Her hair looked wild and unkempt, like she'd just humped the reporter on the desk instead of giving him a background interview over the phone.

"Hey, Alex," she said, slightly breathless. "I got great news for you."

"Oh, yeah," he said. "What's that?" A part of him sat back, isolated from the situation, listening, and that amused remnant reflected how normal he sounded, how well he could skate on the surface of banality when the world was on fire below the surface.

"I just got off the phone with a guy from the Times. He's on the Witnesses beat. There's been a lot of crap going on, and he got wind that we're taking a look at people of interest. He wanted to know what we were doing. I gave him some background stuff, some teasers. He'll be back for more." She leaned back, her eyes blazing. "So what more have you got? You never told me what you got from that meeting at your uncle's place."

"At my...oh Jesus."

"Ah, you take the name of a popular deity in vain." She smiled even more broadly, her eyes a little unfocused. "Think I didn't know about your dear old Uncle Danny? Ah, boychik, I know a lot more about you than you think. You think too much, actually."

He looked at her, his skin crawling. He fought a hard battle to keep his face bland and unreadable, found it hard to believe that he won. "I see how you got to be the boss," he finally said, his voice smooth. "You have all the information at your fingertips."

"Oh. *Yeah.*" She leaned back, licked her lips. "I'm hungry. Really, really hungry. Wanna do lunch?"

Alex considered her offer as his guts did the hula dance. Food was the absolutely last thing he wanted right now, but he needed to find out what else she already knew.

"Sure," he said. "I really need to talk to you about this case. And my uncle."

"Pull up a chair," she said, and the door closed behind him. He whirled to see it slam, and he realized that nobody was there to push it closed.

"We can eat right here," she said. She whipped out a greasy-looking paper bag. "You like roast beef? Have some."

"No thanks, I can eat later."

"Have some diet coke at least."

He accepted a warm can without comment, noting how hot to the touch her fingertips felt, how the can retained hot spots from where she'd grabbed it.

“What happened to your face?” she asked, startling him out of his reverie.

“Shaving injury,” he recited, glad he’d remembered his alibi.

“Never saw a razor burn like that before,” she shot back, her eyes narrowed, an unreadable sparkle smoldering in the irises. Before he could attempt an answer, the roast beef distracted her, and she dug in greedily. Alex turned away and sat down on the metal chair across the desk from her.

“The case is shit,” he said. Best defense a good offense.

“Oh no,” she said, her voice surprisingly uninflected. “We’re going to get those people. It’s not just me anymore, now we got the reporters on our side too.”

“But there’s nothing there.”

“Hey, another guy just disappeared. That’s something. Maybe your uncle could help us out with where he’s wandered off to.”

Alex felt his face get hot, and he played with the can of diet Coke, breaking off the metal tab and sticking it on the end of his fingers. “Uncle Danny was with me. He had nothing to do with it. And the Witnesses are legit. Maybe deluded, but harmless.”

“Hey, Kaplan—maybe you need an alibi as much as your uncle does,” she said. He shot her a glance, but saw the smirk on her face—as far as he could tell, she was joking.

“Is my uncle a target?” he asked. “The FBI visited him right after the last meeting.”

“No target,” she said. “Not yet. You’ll hand over somebody on the Witnesses, or he’s the one who’s going to take the fall. He’s the biggest name involved, all the other people are total nobodies.”

She attacked the sandwich like it was a small, living animal, and Alex watched her eat with a horrified fascination. Something is very wrong, he almost said aloud. He watched her snarf the sandwich and realized finally who she had been reminding him of.

The vampire assassin in his dreams. If Cybele hadn’t intervened, he’d be dead or possessed. Ursula didn’t have a Cybele protecting her. His fussy, brilliant boss was gone, and he wasn’t sure who had stayed behind and claimed the old homestead of her body.

He took a slow sip of warm diet Coke, his gorge rising. Suddenly, he understood Danny’s demands for him to get some intervention. He was such toast. His boss was possessed.

## Chapter Ten

"So how do you work a spell?" Alex asked. He leaned against the counter, smelled the sweet fragrance of sage, felt stupid standing there in his business suit while tattooed college kids bought candles and books on spells of seduction.

Shirley the voodoo queen smiled back at him from across the counter. "It's not hard, really. It's like the thing you did with the dreams."

"Not too bad for an atheist, huh." Alex had to fish for a compliment, at least a little...he couldn't believe he'd pulled it off, himself.

"A regular *tour de force*, Alex. But let's be real here. You are so not an atheist. That's a pose, a defense. Listen to me...it might have worked for you once. But in your current crappy situation, refusing to believe will get you killed."

"A demon can't touch you. If you won't see him, how can he hurt you?"

"You'd think that getting cut off would protect you, right?" She shuffled through a wicker basket filled with magical paraphernalia. "But denial is the most dangerous and primitive coping mechanism. Your enemy would use your own unbelief to trick you into suicide or worse."

"Worse?"

"Don't ask. Yeah."

"Worse than suicide. Great." Alex looked at the ritual objects in front of him, lost in thought.

"This isn't Jewish stuff," he said.

Shirley smiled, then laughed. "See, what you really are is a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. And that's a terrific thing to be."

She laid the ritual blade of an *athame* reverentially on the counter. "No, rabbis aren't too keen on the magic-working aspects of my religion. My belief system exists alongside monotheistic beliefs, don't worry. It's not either/or, I mean you won't be converting yourself or anything by using this stuff."

"I don't care about that," Alex said.

"Yeah, right." Shirley's smile got wider, and she suddenly laughed again, for pure joy it seemed to him.

"I was born Jewish, too, you know," she said.

"How can anybody be a Jewish voodoo queen?"

"Easy. Here I am. Like I said, I don't see it as a mutually exclusive condition. Whatever." She handed the *athame*, the candles, the dried sage bundles, and the goblet to him. "Now, you're going to manifest her, right? That's why we're talking about all this."

"Yes. But..." Alex hesitated, tasting fear like ashes in his mouth.

"It's okay," Shirley said. "She'll be okay. Out of the comfort zone doesn't mean wrong."

"But isn't this dangerous? Can't demons get at me for working magic?"

"Nah. Not really. This is your birthright, Alex. You have a gift for this. Use it for the good."

Alex considered walking away and leaving the tools of her craft behind him. He had always been taught that spellcasting was an abomination. And yet, King Solomon himself had captured a demon and had made him serve the king's will.

Shirley waited for him, until he nodded for her to continue. "You understand the ritual? The greeting of the elements? This is baseline Wiccan stuff...you can work this ritual from within your own belief system. Voodoo would take you more time, plus you'd need a community to support you when the spirits started showing up and filling you. I think you have more of a chance using the basic Wiccan tools."

"Yeah." Alex considered the objects of the spellcast gathered together in his fingers. It was all he had to work with right now. Once he found Cybele, he knew she would help him prepare for spiritual battle.

"So good luck, Alex. Remember, midnight. Sky clad. Sure you don't want a backup priestess on hand?"

"No. I have to do this myself. The demon is looking for me."

"You sure?"

He closed his eyes, opened them again. "We have a bond...I knew from the day my parents died that I was a marked man. Believe me, the less people exposed to this evil, the better."

Shirley nodded, apparently understanding the situation much better than Alex ever would. "Go in peace, my brother. May you be safe from all harm. I won't be with you in the physical, but I'll have your back spiritually. I've turned many a curse in my time."

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Alex could not remember a summer so humid and miserable in New York. The city baked like a bagel forgotten on the sidewalk. Even with the AC, his Brooklyn walk up sweated in the heat like a malfunctioning sauna.

So it felt good to be naked, Alex told himself. His hair, still damp from a long, cold shower, felt sleek and cool against his scalp. He kept thinking that his boss would fire him on the spot if she saw him as he was, naked, surrounded by the technology of magic.

But his boss wasn't here. And he reminded himself that the best part of her was already gone forever.

He laid out his tools inside the circle he'd created out of red rope. Set the gifts to the directions: East, South, West, North. The ice in the glass to the north slowly melted, and for a moment he was sorely tempted to drink it.

But no. No necromancer worth his salt messed with his own incantations, just because he didn't really believe in it.

He sighed, shook his head at his own illogic as he continued to set up. How could he even pretend to not believe? After Cybele? How could he pretend that his mind was the beginning and the end of his universe? It didn't help him stay in control. It was just another kind of denial...and Shirley was right. Nothing was more dangerous.

The circle was assembled. He stood in the center, closed his eyes. Breathed deeply. The sage burning in the south cleansed the circle, made it sacred space.

He began reciting the incantation he'd written for the occasion:

East, South, West and North

Time for you to issue forth  
The beauteous creature of my desiring  
Manifest her now for my delighting  
Ten, nine, eight...

As he traced the circle with his outswept hands, the border of the field began to tremble. He felt the surge of his own power, finally released, and he was astounded by its humming dominance, the almost sentient grace of it.

The shape of a creature began to formulate, like the transporter in Star Trek. Was it Cybele? Or somebody—something—else? Alex held his breath, and then muttered the rest of the spell into the air, shaping the cone of power with his fingers. Somewhere far away, a church bell rang the bells for midnight.

The shape shimmered, but didn't materialize.

Alex, in a moment of inspiration, stepped out of the circle, walked counterclockwise to the window, and flicked open the Venetian blinds. Silvery moonlight flooded the circle with its cold, almost liquid light.

The figure, infused with moonlight, glimmered, and strawberry blond curls suddenly streamed out into the light. A round face with bow lips soon followed.

It was Cybele.

## Chapter Eleven

She couldn't believe it. Her mouth open, she took in the red rope circle, the magical paraphernalia, the curling sage smoke. And Alex in the middle of all of it, naked as the day he was born, smelling musky and cucumber delicious.

Cybele raised her fingers, looked at them in wonder. Faintly, she felt her own pulse coursing through the fingertips, saw her skin glowing pink. She stroked her belly, reveling in the sensation of solidity, presence.

And then the reality of what was happening hit her in the face.

"I'm mortal again. Jesus, Alex. I'm a human woman. Fuck."

She glared at him, expecting to shoot sparks, or at least to float a couple of inches off the ground. But no. She was human flesh now, mortal, tied to the earth.

It felt divine. But she would die all over again rather than admit it.

Alex's face glowed with apparent pride. "Not too bad for my first spell. We have until sunrise."

"You don't understand how rude this is," she said, crossing her arms against her breasts, registering how soft and perky and yummy they felt against her forearms. "You can't just manifest somebody against their will. It's *so* rude."

"I'm sorry, Cybele," he whispered, his voice husky. "It's just..."

"What?"

"You are so beautiful in the moonlight."

"That was a cliché when I was a little girl, Alex."

"But it's nothing but the truth."

As he drew closer and she felt glorious goose pimples jump up on her arms and butt, she realized that she was as naked as he was. He stroked her arms with his fingers, his eyes staring insistently into hers.

"You wanted me to give myself to you," he said. "Here I am. Take me."

She felt them breathing together in the little, sweaty room. The sage smoke twirled into the air around them, sweetening the very oxygen they both breathed.

Sex on the astral was great, but she'd forgotten how incredibly strong bodily sensations on Earth could be. They breathed together, hardly touching each other, staring deeply into each other's eyes. They didn't have access to any of the fancy tricks Cybele used in the astral, but they didn't need them. They had their lives, the raw eloquence of their living bodies.

With a supreme effort, Cybele closed her eyes against him and his carnal seduction. "We can't do this."

"Yes we can."

"There's no half way, Alex. You let go with me, no matter what form I take, you'll see the demons, angels and everybody else. Believe in me, believe in all."

Alex paused. "To have you, I'll take everything."

"But I don't want you snuffed by a demon...I'm poison to you, aren't I, baby? I better leave."

Alex laughed. "Walk out naked in Williamsburg at midnight? Not a great idea."

He stepped out of the circle altogether, and she risked peeking at him.

By Lucifer, he was gorgeous. His lithe, sculpted body, the sweat gleaming on his spare chest and on his hollowed cheeks, the salt and pepper hair slicked back against his skull. She was glad he backed off, because she couldn't resist him any more.

He smiled at her, and she felt her knees get weak. "I can't believe you're here. Real."

Cybele took a deep breath, felt a sheen of sweat form across the bridge of her nose. "Of course I'm real, sweetie. I was real before. Like love—you can't see it, but it runs the universe."

Alex sighed, drew closer, like a moth drawn to the light. "If that's true, how can demons get to people? Kill them?"

His voice was a whisper, a caress. Cybele took a single step towards him and savored the glorious sensation of gravity pulling down against the soles of her feet.

"We have to get them first," he continued. "You have to help me stop them."

Cybele fought against the lump in her throat. "How can I? I'm just a girl, in love with a boy..."

How wonderful to be mortal, how horrible. She shook her head, kept her voice gentle. "I can't do it. And who says I'd even want to? You know, before the so called Enlightenment, people saw spirits all the time, related to them, lived with them. This separation of the worlds is the problem."

She took a deep shuddering breath, surrendered to the soft tears caressing her cheeks, dripping onto her chest. "You think the federal agents are the problem. I think it's the Witnesses who are causing the most trouble. Let them get locked up. Let the barriers between the worlds fall. And then maybe, finally, you and I can figure out why the hell we can't get away from each other, in this world or the astral."

"That can't be true," he said. "Most of the demons are evil. People can't withstand them."

"Mortals are evil too," she shot back. "People have to handle it. The world would be a better place, believe me. Oh Alex," she said, drawing closer to him. "I want you so bad. Bad enough to give up my freedom."

"Doesn't that scare you?"

"The thought of you getting hurt scares me more." She drew closer, and he let her come near. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too." He stepped into the circle and slowly lowered his lips onto hers."

With a sigh, she surrendered to sensation. Such a relief to feel instead of think.

"Unbelievable," she whispered, the words sounding odd in the air between them. "I forgot how much..."

"Shh..." Alex smoothed her lips with the blunt tips of his fingers. "Let it go. Feel it."

He kissed her again, and Cybele let the questions drift away, insubstantial as old cobwebs. Their kisses grew hotter, more insistent, and Cybele felt a shivering wave of heat caress her bare limbs like an extra set of hands.

They sank to the floor together, the sweet sage smoke filling her nostrils, healing her of her fears.

His hands, soft as feathers, began stroking her sides, her back...she'd forgotten how much she loved a good back rub. All these years she'd played at the game of seduction, and this young mortal wanted only to please her, to satisfy her.

She sighed with release as his fingers slid forward and spread her legs open. She arched her back along the floor, glorying in the rough rub of the rug under her butt.

"You're going to get a wicked rug burn, sliding around like that," Alex said. He reached for his cotton robe crumpled on the bed, laid it out for her with a flourish. He gathered her up in his sleek arms and laid her out on the soft terrycloth, so gently that tears pooled in her eyes, unwelcome and unbidden.

"I'm so scared," she said.

Alex paused in his ministrations. "Scared? Of me? You gotta be kidding."

"No. Being alive is so scary..."

"Why?"

"Because...because everything alive dies." Her emotions, bottled up for nearly a century, finally bubbled to the surface and her human tears stung and burned as they strayed down her cheeks. "I don't want to die."

He smiled, his eyes still tired and sad, but the curve of her lips still sent her crazy with desire, overruling her fear.

"The body dies. Love is eternal," he said. "You're the one who taught me that."

He leaned over and kissed her tears away. He nestled his body on top of hers, and the skin to skin contact melted her brain, sent her fears fleeing from the inferno of her desire for him. She stared into his eyes, and he met her gaze, not hiding from her grief or her passion. She couldn't read his mind, disappear whenever she chose, or send their bodies flying over the eternal Paris sky.

All she had was the pure reality of his living body covering hers. And it was better than the best damn dream she'd ever had.

She closed her eyes, and the sensations of her body heightened. His hands started traveling over her body again, sending her over the edge to orgasm so quickly she didn't feel it coming until it was too late.

She surrendered to the storm blowing through her and floated in the silence that stole into her body afterwards. She capitulated to the pleasure, and kept her eyes closed as she moaned in contentment. "You sure you haven't done this before? Like, a lot?"

He laughed and she opened her eyes. "Not on the earth plane, Cybele, not in this lifetime. I've never let myself go with anybody else. Until my parents died, I had my little girlfriends, whatever. But I never let myself go, after. My parents loved each other and they got fried trying to save each other. To me, love equaled death. But now, it's like that poem, you know it? — 'Death shall have no dominion.'"

He laughed again and pressed his body against her. His cock, rock hard, pressed against her thigh.

"I want you," he said. "But...protection. Don't you think..."

"Don't worry, baby," she said. "Any soul wanting in on a lifetime on Earth better have more sense than to go picking me as their mama. Besides, when I go back, any soul gravitating our way would get released back into the universe. Just like if I—died."

She stumbled over the word, hating to even say it, but Alex laughed again.

"But you're here tonight. My sweetheart. My..." For the first time, he hesitated.

"My soulmate," he said, the smile gone from his face.

And their lovemaking started again, in earnest. He covered her body in kisses, bathed her in caresses, anointed her with his embrace. Once or twice she reached up to take over the way she always did in her work, but Alex didn't let her.

"Surrender to me," he whispered, and that did it. She stretched out and let him take her, first with his mouth, and then with his throbbing cock. He moved delicately at first, testing, making sure she was ready for him. Cybele gloried in his masterful self control...and then he threw his restraint into the wind.

He thrust all the way into her, and she felt a humming beginning to emanate from her core. The entire world started vibrating, and she disappeared into the undertow of a massive orgasm, screaming with ecstasy, gone, gone, gone...

She came back to herself, and Alex waited for her, his cock buried to the hilt in the center of her.

"Ready?"

"Oh yeah...do it, lover..."

And he went crazy, thrusting in and out strong and hard, the way Cybele loved sex best, fast and unrelenting and full out. He went as long as he could, and they both felt the volcano of his orgasm building.

His gaze locked onto hers as the sweat dripped down his nose and splashed onto her forehead, as both their bodies grew slick with sweat. His gaze locked with hers, and they came together, staring deeply into each other, completely connected.

Her tears caught her by surprise, bursting out like a thunderstorm on a cloudless summer day.

"I love you, I love you," she said, her voice breaking, as Alex held her to his heart, still inside her, still caressing her skin with his own. "I love you..." Alex didn't try to hush her or to stop her tears, just smoothed them away as they fell.

## Chapter Twelve

Alex came back to himself, and the demons of his waking life settled onto his shoulders again.

Now he'd done it. Cybele feared death more than anything, more than demons, more even than love. And he'd exposed her to death, brought her back to life and back inside death's crosshairs.

Nice. What an asshole he was.

Cybele raised her body up to rest on her left elbow as she traced the curve of his shoulder. His skin warmed to her touch even as his brain rebelled against her scent, her devastating seduction.

"Alex. I love you when you're angry." Her voice sounded husky from her tears.

"Not angry. Sorry."

She smiled, evidently not perturbed by his ugly mood in the least. "You're disgusted. You don't like living on the edge. But, baby, that's where you've always lived. And now, I'll live there with you."

He sighed, sat up. Her limbs, bathed in silver moonlight, were more sharply etched than in any of their communal dreams, and the imperfections of her flesh endeared her to him, bound him more closely to her than her dream super-reality ever had.

"It's boiling in here...I gotta get out and breathe some fresh air," he muttered, refusing to acknowledge the truth of what she'd said.

"Sure. But we have to find something for me to wear first. I can't project a wardrobe now any more than you can." Her face glowed with pleasure, and Alex stroked her cheek with his fingertips, allowing himself to really feel her, revel in the living warmth of her skin. With a shock, he realized that she trusted him to protect her while she remained in human form. He'd die to protect her – from demons, muggers or death itself.

"Okay, though it's a shame to cover up your body." He got out of the circle, stretched, scratched his stomach and enjoyed the mundane sensation of standing alone. "I have about a million black tee shirts. But that's not enough."

"It'll do," she said, her eyes catching the pale light and reflecting it back at him. She sprung to her feet, her breasts jiggling heavily, looking so human, so warm and supple that Alex couldn't help staring.

She basked in his attention, smiled when he finally tore his gaze away to her face. "This is easier than you want to believe, sweetie."

"Just because I lust after you doesn't make this right."

She rolled her eyes, snorted. Sidled close up to him and gathered his cock and balls into her hot, dry fingers. A groan escaped his lips before he could stop himself.

"Your body betrays you," she whispered into the shell of his ear. An unnatural shiver traveled from the base of his spine between his shoulder blades and up the back of his neck.

"I don't need magic, Alex," she whispered. "I have you. I want to stay."

"No." He pulled away, clasped her fingers in his own. God help him, they were human, real, alive fingers. Now that he had her, he deplored the thought of losing her. Death would take her away from him sooner or later if she stayed...probably much sooner, if she was around when his nemesis came for him.

"This is wrong," he said. "You need to go back."

She sighed. "Oh, I will. Your spell isn't strong enough to make me a permanent manifest. I can come back every full moon that you call me." She took a step towards him, and he backed away.

"I know you're trying to protect me," she said. Her voice broke. "You can, and you will."

As she turned for his closet, Alex swept her up into his arms. He kissed the back of her neck, and his hips pressed against her springy, round butt. "Forget what I said...don't ever leave. I don't care how wrong this is."

She turned her head back to face him. "Where did you get the idea this is so wrong? Thousands of people consort with the undead. It's common."

Alex blinked his eyes hard, trying to wrap his mind around what she'd just said. "Common? How could something this volatile be common?"

"C'mon...you know the answer." She pointed at his mahogany bookcases, filled with leather bound legal treatises and Clive Barker novels. "It's hidden in all those books, the poems you keep quoting all the time, stories. It's all hidden in plain sight, honey. The way it's always been."

"So why isn't the universe totally screwed up?"

"It kinda is. But not totally. Because even the supernatural operates under the cosmic law. There are rules, like rules of physics. Wanna come see?"

He pressed her closer. "Okay. Later."

She laughed and turned to face him.

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A very long time later, they came back to earth, wrapped around each other, sighing and breathing in time with each other. Cybele smelled him, breathed in the husky scent of his neck, his armpits. She loved the weight of him against her, and the soft sounds of the New York night outside.

"Still want to get away?"

"Yeah." His answer surprised her. She listened to the steady throb of his heartbeat, and realized that his brain had a stronger hold on his heart than she'd wanted to believe.

She sat up, took a shuddery, sated breath. "Okay. Let me show you *my* New York."

After digging through the closets and dresser drawers, they ventured out the front door and into the relentless heat. Cybele wore a black tee shirt and a pair of red silk boxers, while Alex had insisted on putting on a cream silk button down shirt with matching black silk pajama pants. The thin silver chain he wore drew her attention to his warm, living neck, and she regretted taking him into danger when his aura thundered "brand new ex-virgin" and his face glowed with sexual release. Forget the demons, the vampires were going to swarm around him like mosquitoes.

The red flip flops on her feet slapped against the pavement, and a hot, lifeless breeze ruffled the curls at the back of her neck. "I want to take you to Manhattan. How can we get there quick?"

He shot her an unreadable glance. "Guess flying there is out of the question."

"Unless you've got some pretty powerful spells in reserve, yeah. Maybe a hack?"

"You mean a cab?" He smiled at her. "We can catch one near the hospital."

They passed the Catholic girls school slumbering in the coffin of the night and caught a yellow cab coming out of the ER across the street.

Cybele leaned forward to speak through the tiny hole in the bulletproof glass separating them from the driver. She gave him the address for Pox's club. He looked at them through the glass of the rearview mirror, and Cybele could see his eyes widening and beads of sweat forming on his nose.

"I don't go out that way, lady," he said, in heavily-accented English. "I take you Tenth Avenue, no more west."

She shrugged, not surprised. "You're a good cabbie. You know the neighborhood. Get us as close as you can."

The man stared at her through the mirror, considering her. A moment after she was convinced he was going to kick them out, he stepped on the gas and drove away too quickly, down the empty avenue towards the Williamsburg Bridge.

She smiled a private smile at Alex, slid her fingers along his legs, reveling in the sensation of silk and flesh underneath. "Still wanna go out, right?"

"You got my curiosity going."

"Didn't curiosity kill the cat?"

"Yeah. But finding out brought him back." He leaned back, closed his eyes, took a long deep breath and smiled. "I want to find out. And then I'll be ready to go home and love you some more."

"By then, the sun will be up, and I'll be gone." Their gaze drew them kissing close, and she closed the gap and caressed his lips with her own.

They kissed slowly, without urgency, enjoying the sensation of delight without need. The wind whipped through the open windows of the cab as balalaika music played on the static filled radio.

She felt the sun coming for her. Still over the horizon, but huge, hot, lumbering. Every touch, every scent, every sound, she snatched away from the moment and tucked into her now-beating heart.

A furious low sound like a swarm of bees interrupted her carnal pleasures. She pulled her lips away from his bare chest and turned to peek out the window on his side.

The cab stopped dead in the middle of the street.

"Get out now." The cabbie's voice shook with effort as he turned to face them in the back seat. "Get out of my goddamn cab, or I throw you out."

Alex pushed between her and the sweaty face of the cabbie. "Hey buddy, back it up," he said, his voice calm, his eyes slashing like razor blades. "It's all good. Here's your fare." He shoved a roll of greenbacks through the small hole cut in the bulletproof glass.

The cabbie backed away from the money balled up in Alex's fingers as if he had pulled a gun. He took a shaky breath, snatched the cash out of Alex's hand like he was stealing it from the devil. "Just get out."

The roar got louder. Cybele pulled on Alex's sleeve, and without another word they slipped out of the cab. Tires squealing, it made a 180 and tore back east along 14<sup>th</sup> street.

"What's wrong with him?" Alex asked.

Cybele smiled at him, even as the distant roar got louder. "Maybe somebody just walked over his grave." She winked and he laughed, the beloved sound soothing her jangled nerves.

She hung onto his arm, feeling the pavement so hot and real under the thin rubber of the flip flops. The humming roar got louder and louder as they made their way west.

They passed through a plume of steam billowing up through a hot manhole cover, and then Cybele saw the source of the noise.

She stopped, her heart shuddering in her chest. Her tongue, so happy and satisfied before, went dry in her mouth.

"Now you're spooked..." Alex's voice trailed off when he saw her expression. "Let's get out of here."

"Too late."

The roar took her newly-discovered breath away. She finally understood the noise...it was the hugest crowd of undead spirits she had ever seen anywhere collected together. They pressed forward towards the rave club a block away, snarling and clawing to enter. The mob kept spilling backwards, melting back into the night, right in front of them.

"I'm in deep shit," Alex said, his voice surprisingly calm considering their circumstances. "These people...aren't people."

Cybele sighed, feeling more stupid than she had for many, many decades. "Nope. Not mostly. What you see is a hodge-podge...fallen angels, demons, vampires, some werepeople, a couple of nice little *dybbuks* like myself. And a few dozen ordinary ghosts. Oh...and some human groupies thrown in for variety."

"Great," he said. "I don't feel like such a freak, knowing I'm not the only human."

"With this crowd, you might feel more at home with the demons."

He sighed, drew her closer to him. "You think my demon is here?"

Cybele started shaking. "There's a good chance. Oh, baby, I'm so sorry for taking you here! I thought it would be the safest place for you."

"Here? You must be joking."

"It's a vampire club...the vamps would've let you alone. I would've made sure."

He kissed the top of her head, and involuntarily she relaxed against the strong suppleness of his shoulder. He chuckled. "Who knew that a weeknight would be so popular amongst the undead. Makes sense...probably Friday night is for the bridge and tunnel crowd."

She snorted, recognizing the false bravado in his lame little joke. "Alex, I didn't realize this many undead spirits collected in the whole city of New York. My sister warned me things were getting out of hand. I had no idea it was this bad."

She turned to face him, to apologize again, but he shushed her quiet. He licked his lips, rubbed at the bridge of his nose with the fingers of his left hand. His right hand squeezed her rib cage, right underneath her braless breast. "So the Witnesses are onto something after all. Hmm?"

She laughed. "Hey, don't cross-examine me, lawyer boy. Maybe their poking around has got the hornet's nest all stirred up instead."

He laughed back at her, and she was totally gone, head over heels for him. How she loved a guy with balls. He pulled her body up close against the length of his chest. "What

was that you were saying about curiosity and the cat?" He kissed her lightly on the lips and then shrugged his shoulders, in a gesture more eloquent than words.

They walked in tandem towards the fringe of the crowd, to the light of the open door, glowing like a red maw across the street.

"No admittance," growled the bouncer. He crossed his meaty forearms across the vast expanse of his stomach, and Cybele shot Alex a sidelong glance. He didn't even break a sweat, and she leaned against him, amazed at his lack of fear. No daytime dwelling human should stand at the door of a hellhole like Pox without a second thought.

He was either the most magnificently courageous man she had ever known, or Alex Kaplan was destined to die, and tonight.

"Special party tonight?" he asked, his voice husky but conversational.

"Invitation only," the humanoid tank snarled in reply.

The crowd rose up behind them, and Cybele felt the muscles in her shoulders pull together in a tight knot at the back of her neck. The animal part of her waited for the predator to pounce.

"Fuck invitations!" somebody yelled, and the crowd pushed them forward, almost onto the toes of the bouncer, who clearly was not amused by the violation of his personal space. The arms unfurled like lobster claws, hands held wide. A low growl escaped from deep inside the bouncer's chest.

Before Cybele could react, the door swung open more widely, and her eyes widened in surprise as her gaze met Pox's.

Pox didn't waste her time with recriminations or ruminations. "Fuck. Get in here, both of you," she said, and she grabbed them both roughly by the arms and yanked them into the glowing red light of the entranceway. As she dragged them down the hallway, the door slammed behind them.

## Chapter Thirteen

Ursula Day stood at the bar, sandwiched between two horny vampires, and Dumond lusted for the sensations of human touch. He'd disguised his human host well before he took her into the vampire fleshpit all undead creatures of New York knew as Pox. She wore a shredded up suit, cut apart until there was little left to the imagination. Some blue-red lipstick and a pair of fishnets from Duane Reade, and Ursula was good to go.

The city was boiling over with demon activity. In a bold power play, Dumond had extinguished the ancient earth spirit residing under the foundations of the city. The resulting power vacuum had sucked in other ambitious demons like himself, hungry for human souls and for supremacy.

With power came discord. The other demons fought his ascent but they could not deter him. His greatest danger was the immediacy and potency of human form, soul made flesh. He breathed air through Ursula's nostrils, arched her back to feel the vampire's hands stroking her ass. Humans had been vouchsafed such a rare gift, life on the earth plane...and most of them were nothing more than ungrateful little fucks.

Dumond forced himself to stay in control. The real Ursula Day struggled against him, but he easily locked her away in a compartment of her brain, accessible for when he needed to extract data from her: hopes, dreams, terrors.

He knew Alex had some link to this place. He could sense his presence, but while in Ursula's body he couldn't send his sight out in search of him. As Ursula, he had studied Alex from the safety of her body, keeping the evidence of the full possession as hidden as he could, though Ursula's unceasing battle to escape was making it impossible to hide the truth. He sniffed the air, sensing the power of his enemy, but not yet ready to strike.

He knew he and his demonslayer were drawing each other closer to the final confrontation...Alex's hatred and fear fueled his own. They were destined to join in battle soon, and Dumond wanted it to be on his terms.

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"You could have gotten killed out there, you dumb hick," Pox hissed, as she shoved her sister into the black armchair by her desk in the office sanctum sanctorum. Cybele had never been so thrilled to see a piece of furniture, never in eternity.

"But I..."

"But you nothing. Look at you! You're manifested in human form, nimrod. By human magic, not divine decree. You can't haunt a frickin demon. You die now, that hell spawn will make damn sure you go all the way gone. Into another incarnation entirely. So bye bye, Cybele, hello tree moss. Or lichen. Or maybe, if we're all lucky, you come back as a toad."

Cybele took a shaky breath, let it out slowly. She regarded Pox with a new respect. Her paranoid cynicism had its basis in street reality, her grim disdain only a cover for sisterly protectiveness.

"So why are you here, again?" Pox asked, wiggling an eyebrow at Alex. Cybele held her breath.

"It's my fault," Alex said. "I wanted to get out, she wanted to stay home." He hesitated, and then his face brightened. "You're the vampire from Paris. And Cybele's sister...cool."

Her eyes narrowed. "So you took her out slumming, right. I could swear I've seen you slinking around here before."

"No." His expression stayed steady, calm, and only a slight knitting together of the eyebrows betrayed his consternation to Cybele. "No. I can see why you think that I'm a demon groupie. I'm not like that."

"I've been looking into your pedigree, Alex Kaplan," Pox said. Did Cybele imagine that her sister was avoiding her gaze?

"My pedigree? I'm no purebred, if that's what you mean."

"Depends on what your frame is, human. Your parents were really famous in their day. Demonslayers." She spat the word out with contempt, and only Cybele could hear the fear thrumming underneath her sister's flamelicked surface.

"Let's not talk about my parents right now," he muttered, clasping Cybele's hands between his own. The strong, blunt fingers trembled slightly against hers, and she felt the pulse alive against his wrist.

"What better time than now?" Pox asked, smiling across the room at them both. Cybele noticed she kept her lips closed...how sporting of her.

She had to keep them focused on the matter at hand. Cybele cleared her throat, and the two combatants paused in their verbal sparring. "You know the blood demon has to be in that mob somewhere. He's here...can't you sense it?" She leaned closer to whisper. "Hey, little girl, we have to get Alex out of here."

Pox smiled again, at Cybele this time, and then she turned her gaze to Alex, appraising his still, pensive features. "You're probably right about the demon. But you're wrong about him." She flipped the back of her hand at Alex, her face an unreadable mask. "Your little virgin knows his way around, better than you realize."

She nodded at him, in a gesture of respect Cybele had never seen her extend to any male member of the human race. "You picked yourself a pretty tough ass Prince Charming, whether you realize it or not." She smiled again, flashing a full shot of her blood-drinking equipment. "That doesn't make him immortal. Or undead. I'll help you guys this time, but only because this situation amuses me."

Cybele tried in vain to restrain her frustration. "This isn't a game. I love him, okay?"

Pox's smile faded. "Maybe I should throw him to the mob, then."

Before Cybele could stop him, Alex drew closer to her sister. "Maybe you should. But I say, live and let live." He held out a hand to Pox before Cybele could grab him away.

Pox grabbed his fingers, and instead of shaking his hand she yanked him close to her, out of Cybele's suddenly nerveless arms. She saw her little sister's fangs close in on the fine tracery of blood vessels at Alex's wrist.

"No!" Cybele screamed. She knew she now had no power to stop the bloodfeed.

She jumped ahead to put herself between them, but before she could reach her sister, an unseen force flung Pox against the desk behind them. With a screech, she landed on the floor, and Cybele could hear the sharp thud and the sudden scabbling of her sister's body as she tried to scramble back onto to her stilettoed feet.

"Alex..." she whispered, frightened of him. He stood before her, his back to her, raising his hands palms outward against the power of Pox.

"There shall no evil befall thee, for he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways..." he muttered, Cybele's mind translating from the Hebrew to the English. Pox crouched, seemingly pinned to the ground, her voice snarling out as if some unseen being clutched at her throat.

"You son of a bitch. Uncle. Uncle!"

Cybele could feel the force field release, snapping like a rubber band. The vampire staggered to her feet, rubbing her throat and growling something unintelligible under her breath.

"Okay, you get to live," she said.

"You do, too," Alex replied.

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The three of them took the tunnel through the basement and out to the service entrance, and the air was so close and heavy Cybele's human lungs felt like they were going to collapse.

"Your enemy's getting stronger," Pox said, a little out of breath.

Cybele felt the authority in Alex's fingers as he held her hand. For the first time, she feared the force in him. Their lovemaking had unleashed his power, and it was a beautiful and terrible thing to behold. She shot her sister a glance. "How do you know? Alex's adversary isn't going after you."

"The demons are taking over my club. Even the bouncers can't get them to leave. I expect a hellacious rumble in here before the night is out. Over turf.

"The veil between the worlds grows thin," Pox continued, her voice a near whisper as they drew closer to the metal service door leading to the alleyway. "The spirits sense it, it draws them to the light. And we bottom feeders catch the lost ones, get stronger. It's like the perfect ghost storm."

Alex gathered Cybele close to him, and she listened to his heart pounding. He nodded. "Yeah. That's what my uncle is worried about."

"Well, maybe his amateur friends are making it worse," Pox shot back. "They end up as fodder for demons that only strengthen themselves on human fear and hatred. You need to knock some sense into them, mortal. Or all hell is going to break loose."

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Alex and Cybele shot into the alleyway at top speed, the door slamming behind them, sealing Pox inside.

Cybele sniffed the air, studied the shimmering stars overhead, and Alex felt his heart swell with desire and grief. In life, in imperfection, she glowed under the night sky in full flower. How could he capture that wildness and force it to walk on the ground of everyday life? Bringing her to mortal life was a mistake...a wonderful, delicious mistake.

Before he could find the strength to set her free, she drew him close, the brick alleyway surrounding them in shadow.

"Kiss me," she whispered. "Before I disappear. The sky's fading, and I am too."

He grabbed her close and folded her against his heart. Immediately, he sensed her meaning...her arms, still soft and warm, felt like they were bathed in air. Soon, the air would overtake the flesh and she would be lost to the ether. Until he summoned her back at the next full moon...they both knew she'd be back, as long as he was alive to summon her. They had to follow this passion, no matter where it led.

His lips crushed against hers, and he grabbed her close, striving to remember every lingering moment they could steal. His desire for her thundered through him, never to be satisfied, and he kissed her again and again, until they were both breathless and she was laughing under his caresses.

"Whoa tiger," she murmured, her voice a low throaty growl. "I'm going to have to fly, but don't forget me, sweetheart. Stay safe. Don't play with fire, okay? Call to me again. I'll be waiting in your dreams. And you can bring me back at the next full moon...if it's still safe enough to do it."

"Safe?" Alex slowed down his caresses long enough to hold her at arm's length and search her eyes for her meaning. "I don't want to put you in danger, honey," he said, stumbling over the endearment he'd never said aloud before.

"I'm not the one in danger," she whispered. She leaned in, wrapped his head in a garland of trailing, sparkling vapor, and kissed him with the last of her corporeality.

She disappeared, the final traces of her lingering on his tongue, a delicate flavor that dissolved with the sunrise. Alex watched her go. And felt his resolve harden into a determination to unleash his full power.

## Chapter Fourteen

Alex kept a spare suit at the office. Easier to stay in Manhattan than to schlep back to Brooklyn to wash up and change. On such small decisions does the fate of the universe depend. For want of a nail...

After a good half an hour hike eastward, Alex made it to the entrance for the Number 1 train downtown. He descended down a deep flight of cement stairs, almost welcoming the smells of urine, skunked beer, and nasty MTA-issued disinfectant.

He barely took in the sight of the station as he entered it with a swipe of his Metrocard. The platform glowed in the eerie glow of the florescent lights, no other humans to be seen. He stood next to a broken garbage can, staring into the middle distance at nothing.

"What am I?" he muttered to himself. *What have I become?* A low rumbling from down the tunnel seemed to answer his dark thoughts, drawing light from a subway train screaming from the darkness into the silent station and flying past him on some unknown mission. He watched the out of service train hurtling past him, wondering if Cybele could see him right now, or if she was consigned to some unreachable place on the astral plane.

A low scrabbling sent a shiver down his shoulders and into his fingers. He sidled towards the edge of the platform, careful to keep his toes behind the yellow line. Far below him, cavorting on the tracks, two rats played with something that looked like a giant bagel. He watched them tussle over it, their growls rising into the heavy silence.

Abruptly their growls turned into full throated shrieks as they fled under the tracks. Alex felt the footsteps rather than heard them. Something vibrated the air in the station at a frequency lower than audible sound.

A creature waded through the air, along the third rail, a swarming clot of energy. It looked like a cluster of static electricity, formed into a male shape that shuffled along the energy plane formed by the electrical track.

"Holy shit," Alex whispered. He'd never heard of such a thing, let alone seen it walking free, escaped from a crazy man's worst nightmare.

He stepped back from the edge of the platform, and he forced himself to take slow, steady breaths. He felt his power coalesce within his core, ready to shoot outward in protection.

The creature had reached the section of track directly across from him, and it stopped. The head turned in his direction, and words issued directly from what passed for its mind into Alex's brain.

"I have come, in the name of that which will destroy you," the thing whispered.

Behind him, replicating along the humming metal, additional static men began forming and growing.

Alex stood his ground. "You can't have me," he whispered back, soul to undead soul, as Cybele had taught him.

The leader of the creatures recoiled from the menace of his thought, shielding its blurred face as if Alex had thrown a blow.

"You can't have me," Alex repeated. "None of you can have me. I won't let you."

"You want to. Like attracts like."

The words hummed in his head, and Alex took another step back. What had he become? Why did he attract every wretched lost spirit and evil undead soul to him?

The creatures closed in, and the leader reached with buzzing crackling hands onto the edge of the subway platform and hauled himself up to face him. As he approached Alex, he began to take on his face, his shape, his essential form. An anti-Alex.

Alex backed up against the white tiled wall, feeling the clammy coldness against the back of his arms and his neck. He wanted to succumb. He wanted so much to give himself to them, to disappear. Because then he'd never have to admit how much of him was bound up within them, how strong his evil impulses remained – all of his choices derived from that side of him, his selfish decisions, his fearful plans, the ambitions he pursued with the best of intentions.

Alex knew he was toast. He did the only thing he could think of that was left for him to do. He started to pray.

Before, he'd held off Pox with a fragment of the Psalms his mother had once taught him, a verbal amulet. But this was different. Alex spoke to the divine order, not some guy with a white beard meting out justice, but the flow of energy that connected and brought concord to the universe. He could feel the white light enter his body, feel the whisper of unseen presences gather around him like an invisible heavenly posse.

The two armies took each other's measure. The anti-Alex hesitated.

"Amen," Alex whispered. Swept into a roaring wind, the army of electricity vanished along the tracks, as if Alex had snuffed them out with the prayer's final word.

All of them were gone. Alex leaned against the wall, shielding his face with his hands. He wanted to throw up, but he wanted even more to stay ready. Sex with Cybele had unleashed his power. There was no way he could deny it, ever again.

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Alex didn't go to work. He went uptown to Danny's apartment instead and let himself in with his spare key. Danny was awake, barely, and still in bed.

"Why did my parents have to die?" His voice shook, but it felt good to confront the truth.

Alex watched Danny polish his glasses on the edge of his tee shirt.

"You love the *dybbuk*, don't you."

"Don't change the subject."

Danny sighed and leaned back on the unmade bed. "You know, son, I'm an old man. I live alone, my Zelda is dead. You're too much for me first thing in the morning."

"Why did my parents die? It's a simple question."

Danny closed his eyes, took a deep breath. "It was an accident," he said, his eyes still closed.

"I know. But why did the accident happen?"

"Why does anything happen?"

"Stop the pious bullshit, Danny!"

"Don't take that tone with me. You don't know what you're dealing with"

"Yes I do. The same 'accident' is about to happen to me. So give me something to protect myself with. The truth."

"They're dead. What more truth do you need?"

"Who were they? What killed them?" Alex leaned over the edge of the bed, grabbed Danny's shoulders. "You promised when they died that you'd never lie to me, you'd always tell me straight. You lied all these years, lied to my face." Alex's voice broke.

"I didn't lie," Danny whispered. "I told you as much as you could handle."

"It wasn't enough."

"They were demon hunters."

"I know, dammit. What got them?"

Danny coughed and cleared his throat. "They were trying to save a lost soul, send it back to heaven. A circle of demons surrounded them, and they were alone. They destroyed a lot of demons...but at least one of them got away, obviously." Danny cleared his throat again as he got up and reached for his cotton bathrobe on a hook on the back of the bathroom door.

Alex paced the room in frustration. Danny, the man he'd always revered for having all the answers, knew even less than he did. "Why didn't you save them?"

"I wasn't there. I only know what happened through vision. Your parents were as simple as children. They wouldn't listen to me." Danny threw the robe around his shoulders. "Just like you won't."

"So why couldn't they vanquish them? Isn't the light stronger than the darkness?"

"They weren't really demonslayers. They were more like spirit rescuers, going to where lost souls hid and trying to help them find their way."

"Why didn't they tell me how much danger they were in?"

"You were still just a boy. You were too vulnerable. The last conversation I had with the two of them, they wanted to teach you everything they knew. I told them no, not until after you became a bar mitzvah." Danny's shrug was more eloquent than any words. After his parents had died, Alex had refused to study for his bar mitzvah, had never been confirmed as a Jewish adult man.

"I'm still vulnerable, then," Alex said.

"Oh yes."

"So how can I beat these demons off, when my parents couldn't?"

Danny groaned and scrubbed his beard with his fingers. "I don't know. The evil impulse in you saves you...your parents were too saintly. Maybe you just have a gift for withstanding the devil."

## Chapter Fifteen

Alex felt like bees were humming an atonal harmony in his head. He walked along Broadway in a funk, a profound fuzzy haze. When he got to the Justice annex, he took the elevator to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor. He did register the fact that the cute thing who worked as a receptionist for the magazine publisher on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor got off the elevator as soon as he got on. Could she see the changes written on his face?

The elevator door opened to complete and utter pandemonium. No receptionist was in sight, and Alex watched secretaries, interns, and even other attorneys scurrying through the warren of hallways like terrified rats.

He saw Ana approach, but before he could catch her, she brushed by him and disappeared.

He walked to his office, the buzzing growing even louder. Could he be trapped in some kind of bent dream, even weirder than his dreams usually were?

No such luck. He came upon his office, trashed, computer on a metal dolly, his secretary seeing his face and wilting.

"Oh, Alex, I'm so sorry," she began, but he stopped her with a gesture.

"What the hell is going on here today?"

"Didn't you hear? Code Red."

"Shit. Qaeda?"

The secretary's expression rippled with an emotion Alex couldn't identify. "No. You better go talk to Ursula."

He watched her wheel his trusty computer away. With a sudden sinking certainty he knew he was about to meet his nemesis face to face. He could all but smell its presence smoking through the chaos, and he knew the blood demon was the one with Ursula, in Ursula. The pieces suddenly fell into place. He was as ready as he'd ever be.

He walked into her office without knocking. "Good...it's you," Ursula said. "Have a seat. Or not. I don't have time to deal with divas today."

"What's up, chief?" He kept his voice bland. Watching for signs.

"What's up, tiger, is I've conducted a purge of this department. No more pussies. No more Bible-thumping assholes. No more whiny Buddhists. Fuck that shit. We're cleaning house today, buddy boy."

The room smelled wrong, like a fire had scorched the walls and then moldy water had put the fire out. Every hair on his forearms stood on end, and he felt the short hairs at the back of his neck bristling at her voice. She smiled at him, even more broadly. He smiled at her, his body screaming danger.

And then her eyes glowed blood red. Uh oh.

"The secretary said you called a Code." Alex's voice was a little too quiet, but otherwise he managed to keep it from wavering.

"Oh yes. We're being infiltrated by Godlings, from within. Time to clean the house. Those fucking Witnesses are going to feel the pain first. But I gotta get my shock troops in place before we take it to the streets. We're going to take these people out. Right?"

"Whatever you say, Boss."

"Oh yeah." Ursula smiled, as a film of green-looking sweat coated her nose and chin. "You're on board, right, my friend?"

"What?"

"You got a demon girlfriend. You probably hate your uncle's guts for what he's doing to you guys. Get rid of the old fart."

He leaned against the door jamb, and he took a slow, unsteady breath. Alex swayed on his feet, but he needed to stay upright. His life depended on it.

"Are you giving me an offer I can't refuse?" He tried to keep a bantering tone in his voice, but he failed. The subject of Danny was sacred ground, and the demon in his boss was trampling on it.

"Power," Ursula whispered, her face aglow with a red light. "Absolute, eternal power. Over life, death, and the universe. You can have that power, Alex. Just shake my hand to seal the deal, and we're all set. Otherwise, you are owed to me."

Alex didn't budge from his post. "You have to leave my uncle alone. You're telling me if I surrender to you, he gets to live?"

Ursula's face cracked open with a hideous grimace of a smile. "Sure, Alex. Pas de problem. Embrace your power. Fuck that old fart. He lied to you about me, about everything. So now we're a team."

"No."

A low growl escaped from between her still-human lips. "You wanna be dead like your mommy, punk? No? Then you take orders like a man."

"Am I just a man?" Alex stood straight, took a deep breath.

Ursula's features froze. For a too long moment they stared at each other, neither one willing to break the other's gaze by looking away.

"Aleph, Bet, Gimel..." Alex whispered, as he raised his palms towards the ceiling. He knew he could hold the demon off for at least the short term. But he didn't know yet how to make it leave Ursula and New York altogether. Not without learning his adversary's name.

"*Stop it!*" Ursula bellowed, as she shielded her face with her forearms. "Shut up. Stop that bullshit."

A wind started to blow through the room. "Get out," a disembodied voice shuddered through the air. "Get out of here. Or die."

Alex did not stay to confront the army of demons standing not quite invisible behind Ursula Day's desk. If he ended up surviving the demonstorm himself, then he'd try to save her. If there was anybody left in there to save.

Ana was waiting for him when he got back to his office. He quickly assessed her for signs of demonic oppression or worse, but her almond eyes were clear, even calm.

"Are you okay?" she asked. Her voice was calm too.

Alex allowed himself a single shaky breath to relax. "Depends how you define okay. I'm alive. I'm not a demon croissant. I'm getting out of here. I'm definitely fired."

"I guess you could do a lot worse," she said. "You look weird. Like your aura is on fire. Freaky."

He raked his fingers through his hair. "You're a cool customer. I'm scared...aren't you? And did you just say you saw my aura?" He swallowed and licked his paper-dry lips. Comprehension dawned. "You're a demonslayer too, aren't you."

"Yeah," she said. "Undercover assignment. But now my cover is blown so I'm out of here."

He regarded her with growing wonder. "Undercover? From where? What are you?" he finally whispered.

She laughed, the sound hard and mirthless. "Oh, nobody. Just a lawyer. Just like you. You better get out of here...Ursula is gunning for you. I augmented your power and helped you hold her off as long as I could." She winked at him and wiggled her fingers in farewell. "So long, Alex. Stay safe."

He was too thunderstruck to remember to thank her for saving his butt. "But what about you? Are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah. But the rest of the city? I dunno." Her face grew serious. "You've got to expel that demon."

"You know everything?"

She shrugged again. "Enough to stay safe. Go. Take care." Without waiting for his reply, she turned and left him.

He watched her go. So much for nice and normal...and he'd thought he was such a great judge of character.

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Demons don't cry.

They don't. But Cybele couldn't stop the tears from falling, as she stood on the opposite side of the great divide from her beloved demonslayer.

Demons take what they want. They are self, born to consume and destroy only. They worship only chaos.

Cybele had never wanted to become that kind of demon. But by loving Alex, she risked bringing all that chaos down onto his head, damning him to hell for the sin of loving her back.

She turned away from the fading sight of him walking east and willed herself away, far away. She couldn't stand being apart from him. Their stolen moments, in all their rare and perfect glory, only made the pain of the inevitable separation much worse.

But she couldn't have him anymore. She'd gotten her wish. He'd given himself to her. And it had destroyed both of them. Too late to go back and pretend her love for Alex had never happened.

Cybele loathed death, resisted it with every particle of her being. But now that Alex had turned to face the demons, they could find him easily. They'd come straight for him, attracted to his power, just like she'd come to him in Paris.

A flickering break in the gray mist surrounding her caught Cybele's attention. She focused her perceptions on the flutter, and realized it was a lost soul, banging around the astral like a pigeon in a hurricane.

She floated closer to him, knowing the soul was male, not quite alive, not quite dead. She'd never seen anything like it before.

Slowly, recognition dawned. The man in the tapestry. She remembered the shriek of fear that had echoed in her mind when the maiden had taken him.

"Help me," his soul whispered.

"You're lost," she said, surprised at the surge of gentleness she felt washing over her. Her own pain spoke to his. "It's okay. I can help you find your way back."

"I'm scared," he said. "They. They want me."

"I'll help you," she said, and reached out her hand. When she touched the flicker of light, it began to glow steadily until it stretched out into the form of a man. The legend from his tee shirt—I ♥ NY—glowed orange, an artifact of his life. Her fingers held him steady, and she breathed alongside him until his astral body reformulated.

"Hey look!" she said, surprised by joy. A thin silver cord ran like a kite string through the mist, down towards the earth.

"What's that?" The voice sounded more like a man now, husky and a little nasal.

"Your silver cord. Connects your soul to your body. You still have a body, bub! You're still alive!"

"I am? Awright."

"C'mon. Stay close to me. Keep breathing. Now tell yourself, this is only a dream. I can choose to go back."

For a moment, the man's fear washed over her like an unexpected storm surge.

"But I'm lost! That demon will grab me again!"

"Hold steady. No demon is gonna touch you. Tell me your name."

"Benno."

"Benno baby, I got your back. Let's head on down."

Slowly, they descended together, and as they drew closer, Cybele heard Benno's heart beating, the sound like the roaring of the tides in her ears.

"We're almost there."

"Are you an angel or something?"

"Something." Cybele laughed, the grief pouring out of her like blood from a mortal wound. "Not an angel. But something."

"But saving people is obviously what you do." His voice shook, and his ghost face shone with gratitude.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "It is now."

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"This isn't the same," Alex whispered.

They floated together, two balls of pure energy. Cybele had gone to him when he finally dropped off to sleep and led him to the safest place she could find, the patch of air over the House of Peace. Danny's watchful army of angels protected the place, and she figured their protectiveness would encompass them too.

"I saw what happened at your office. With your...boss. That was a super close call. You realize that, don't you?"

He wouldn't look at her, and she wasn't surprised. The mist of the astral surrounded them, wrapped around them like a blanket. She drew him closer to her and encircled him in light, a soul hug.

"You need to understand," she said.

"I'm the one who draws the evil, right?" His voice vibrated with sadness. "Like attracts like."

She struggled with her frustration, bit back the words of anger she knew were useless. Instead she nudged him forward, keeping him as protected as she could.

"C'mon. I'd rather talk to you about all this in Paris."

"Is it safe?"

"I'll watch out for us."

He followed her willingly enough as she led him to the country of his dreams. The mist swirled into patterns, colors, glowed with energy, and suddenly the city coalesced around them.

She breathed a sigh of relief and manifested into human astral form. She concentrated and Alex appeared, depression blurring the edges of his features. His aura glowed with the light she kept trained around him.

"You don't draw spirits to you because you're weak or evil, sweetie. You've got the most powerful gift of any mortal that I've ever seen. But you don't know how to use it. And you need to bring God into the equation."

"But I use the Psalms, the prayers..."

"Yeah, I know, baby, and it saved you. But Alex? They're just words. It's your own fear that draws the lower vibrations. You need to accept the Light. You did it on the subway platform. Let it flow through you, around you. Let it shine forth from you."

"Isn't it dangerous for us to meet like this on the astral? Didn't I let loose a demon shitstorm by working magic in the first place?"

She had to laugh, he was so serious, so earnest, so wrong. "Baby, the astral is kinda dangerous, lots of lost souls floating around out here. But this is *my* bad cosmic neighborhood. I know my way around. The demon shitstorm's been going on since the dawn of creation...most people just don't realize it. Yeah, actions have consequences, working magic without having a clue probably brought a lot of attention on you, but we can deal with it."

She took a deep breath, steadied herself. Drew closer to him, rested her head on his shoulders. "I want you so bad," she whispered.

"I'm no good for you," he said, his voice roughened with misery. He refused to meet her gaze, even as he stroked her arms and pulled her closer.

"Stop that," she said. "I can teach you how to protect yourself. But you gotta stop feeling so sorry for yourself first."

The steel in her tone made him look up. She welcomed that flare of anger, that flash of his characteristic fire.

"I'm thinking of your safety." His voice shook.

"And I'm telling you, you need to learn how to channel the light. Let it through you, accept it, and nothing bad can touch your soul."

"My parents were saints, and something sure touched them."

"Listen, honey...I wasn't there. Neither were you...we don't know what really happened. They maybe leaned too hard on the words, the way you do, and didn't know how to channel the light. No matter how good they were, if they were running around unprotected, something wicked could trick them into making a mistake."

She sighed and looked deeply into his eyes. "How did your parents die?"

"They drowned." He kept his voice steady, but Cybele wanted to cry when she saw the contrast between his dry, detached tone and the anguish radiating from his eyes.

She held back her tears. He needed her to be strong, to do the right thing by him. "Like I said, I wasn't there, but I'm going to give you a guess as to what happened."

"What does it matter? The demons murdered them...probably enjoyed doing it."

"I bet you the police said it was a freak accident. Am I right?"

"Of course. They couldn't explain it."

"Your parents got tricked. Alex? This is really important. It's so easy to get lost. I bet your parents were trying to save somebody stranded out here. A demon got malicious, fooled them, and they didn't stay grounded. They put themselves too far out to save the lost soul, and they couldn't get clear of the demons in time. But Alex..."

He wouldn't answer her. She stroked his short black hair, admired the flecks of gray already salted through at the temples. "When they died," she continued, "an army of angels took them up to heaven. *Together*. They're not suffering, they've moved on. It's you who won't let go. Honey, if they could reach you and help you, they would. But you gotta help yourself."

"Help myself? I thought you said I had to let go of myself."

"You need to forgive God for taking your parents away."

He took a sharp intake of breath, like her words had stabbed him. "Forgive," he said, and laughed, the sound so sad that Cybele closed her eyes against it.

She couldn't let her emotions soften the blow of her lesson in metaphysics. "Listen. Your mind can stay mad. Let that maniac brain list out all the reasons God is guilty. But your heart...baby, let your heart shine. You don't need to understand. Just let it happen."

She touched his chest, sent warmth and light shooting into his heart. She felt his body relax under her touch.

"How can you heal me? Aren't you violating the code of demons or something by doing that?" The roughness in his voice was smoothed away.

"Nah. Not really. I'm not a demoness, really, not any more than you're an atheist. More like a lost soul."

"I thought not all those who wander are lost."

She smiled and drew him closer. "Wasn't until I found you that I realized how lost I'd been."

Their lips met, and their kiss mingled love and passion. She sought solace in his embrace, and found safety, joy and peace in the midst of danger and evil. They rested in that kiss, and they found all the unspoken answers they needed.

Their lips drew apart, but that kiss didn't end. The mark of it was imprinted forever.

"You're perfect," she whispered. "You've got nothing to fear from nobody. I've got your back from this moment on, honey. If you can't call the light in to you, I'll just keep on sending it."

"Let me make love to you."

"Your wish is my command, baby..."

He led her and she followed. They paused in front of the fountain at Place St. Michel. The water bubbled down as pigeons cooed from behind the stone dragons.

"Come with me, sweetie," she said. "I want to show you something. I have a home here now, my first one since I became a *dybbuk*. Come see."

He wrinkled his nose and smiled, looking intrigued. Good, anything but the sadness that dogged him. She led him to the bookstore by the river, through the stacks of books to a back stairway. The guy with a goatee working at the register silently waved in greeting.

She led Alex upstairs, to an alcove filled with poetry books. A narrow bed nestled in the middle of a bay of built-in bookcases. "I've been reading up. Yeats. Shakespeare. Wow. No matter what happens, I can call this place home."

He sighed with evident delight and led her to the bed. She wanted him to remember this place. Remember her fondly...because this was the end. She would protect him from a distance from now on, and he could go back to living.

They sank down into the clean white sheets and found a safe haven from the scary, demon-filled world. Maybe the little room was just an illusion, but their love was true.

## Chapter Sixteen

Club Pox was full to bursting. Cybele hovered over a barstool, sucked dry an astral lichido martini, and watched the undead cavorting with the living in broad daylight. Amazing – she'd never seen anything like it.

"Why the long face, big sis?" Pox murmured, as she poured her a second martini. Cybele watched the pink liquid pour through the material into the spiritual world. Wild. She was way too miserable to really appreciate how miraculous that was...even the lichee nuts reappeared in her astral glass.

She tried to smile at Pox but failed. "You know why. And you know I've got a pretty bad broken heart when I come to a dive like this to drown my sorrows."

Pox smirked, evidently not taking offense. "Poor baby. Drinks are on the house. Get smashed and trashed. And then maybe I could hook you up with one of my homie vamps. They can't suck a semi-manifest's blood, but you guys could still get it on big time."

Cybele shrugged. "I don't even feel like doing it with anybody."

"This is serious."

"Tell me about it. I knew from the first minute I ever saw him, his dreams. Nobody like Alex Kaplan."

"Speak of the devil."

Cybele turned, and gasped. It was if Cybele had conjured him with her words.

"I don't get this," Alex said, as he looked around at the club, writhing with limbs and throbbing with music. "I couldn't find you in my dreams, so I just took a cab here. How could we meet like this on Earth?" He reached out to caress her face, but his fingers passed through her. She could almost feel him...

"Astral seam," Pox's voice violated her reverie, brisk and professional. "There are a few power centers where under certain circumstances the undead can almost fully manifest and interact with the living. Stonehenge. Roswell, New Mexico. And here, too. Actually, New York City is uniquely vulnerable to demon infiltration. Especially now, in the demonstorm...you don't see a party like this every day."

"Go away!" Cybele and Alex said it in unison.

"Pox," Cybele said in the sudden tension that followed. "Please, give us a moment alone."

Pox bared her fangs at Alex, but otherwise held her peace. She cleared the bar in front of Alex, swiped at the wood with a damp, grimy bar cloth. Then walked away without another word.

"She really likes you," Cybele said, smiling at the sight of her sister's slender back receding from view.

"Likes me? I'd hate to see her hating me."

"Oh, she started out hating you. But you won her over. How could she resist you?" She turned to face him, her heart twisting in her chest.

"It's time I finally said goodbye, Alex," she said, the music hiding the quaver in her voice.

"Why?"

"I never meant to disrupt your karma. I never wanted to corrupt your soul. I don't want to mess with your life anymore. And the demons..."

"They were gunning for me anyway."

Cybele took a shaky breath, fought the tears that pressed against the backs of her eyes. "I'm afraid I'll damn you to hell."

"I don't care. I love you. You're my soulmate. I'll deal with the consequences as they come."

The tears came. She couldn't hold them back anymore, and her heart melted in a river of love and fear pouring through her.

"Oh, sweetie," she said, her arms trembling as she twined them through him, aching to really feel him again. "That's the most wonderful thing. I love you. I always have. And I always will."

"That's why I'm here, why I've been looking for you so hard."

She looked into his eyes, and he smiled back at her, completely unleashed, glorious, unafraid, released. The sight of his soul unbound took her breath away.

He went down onto one knee. "I've made up my mind. I want us to get married."

"Married?"

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Alex's Paris hovered on the edge of night. He held his breath as he held Cybele's hand and looked around the deserted train station.

"You think he's coming?" he whispered.

"Oh, yeah," Cybele replied, her voice echoing amongst the ornate arches and over the platform. "He might be late. But Pox is bringing him round."

"You think we're safe here?" he asked Cybele.

"Probably safer than your sleeping body is, back in Brooklyn."

"I will fear no evil..."

"Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death," a thin, reedy voice whispered, "I will come in service of true love."

The rabbi had made it. Alex was surprised to see him adorned in track pants and running shoes.

"The day I died, I got hit by a city bus near Central Park," the rabbi said, evidently interpreting the puzzlement in Alex's expression. "This was my outfit the day I met my end."

"Why don't you wear something else?" Pox snapped from behind him, clearly irritated by the little spirit, almost beyond all endurance.

The man shrugged, and for a moment his face grew somber. "I wouldn't know what else to wear."

"Why not?" Cybele asked, her face creased in genuine wonderment.

Alex studied her face, her eyes. His astral being vibrated with desire for his intended bride. He adored her; her wickedness, her naïveté, her lost souled-ness. All of her.

"I'll tell you why he's so indecisive. Because he was a rabbi addicted to ham sandwiches and pork rinds, that's why," Pox spat in reply. "He doesn't want to meet his Maker dressed like a liar."

"Better not to meet up with Him at all." The little man's face sagged with grief, an elemental exile.

Cybele drew close to him and patted his hand. "Hey, maybe it's not the time, sweetie. But the future has a way of taking care of itself. You might find the way...you never know. Isn't marrying a nice couple like us the ultimate good deed? This might be your ticket right here, hon."

The rabbi's eyes filled with iridescent tears. "You know, you might be right. Maybe marrying you is the good deed that sets me free."

"Or the wicked thing that finally sends you straight to Hell." Pox laughed aloud, with a spider's delight at the rabbi's dilemma. His face purpled, and he gulped and wiped the dome of his shiny, bald head.

"Oh, Jesus," he muttered.

"What, you believe in him too?" Pox's voice dripped with sarcasm. "You said you'll go through with it. So get on with it, scum. *Now.*"

He muttered something unintelligible, and a prayer book appeared in his trembling fingers. The rabbi fumbled for a moment and almost dropped the little leather volume, but then he seemed to steady himself.

"Did you bring the *ketubah*?" the rabbi asked, turning to Alex.

He bit back an inappropriate curse word and sighed. "The wedding contract. No. And besides, would an astral *ketubah* hold up?"

"In the Heavenly court, oh yes it would," the rabbi said, his voice projecting true confidence for the first time since he'd arrived.

"Okay," Alex said. He closed his eyes to imagine the most beautiful, the most luminous and breathtaking calligraphied *ketubah* for his demon bride.

It surpassed even his imagination in its multicolored manifestation, fueled no doubt by the ardor of his passion. The paper, a creamy, gold flecked lavender, curled at the edges in his fingers, and the letters blazed orange hot Hebrew on the page, inscribed in molten holy fire.

He held the *ketubah* up to the rabbi for inspection, as Pox discreetly averted her eyes from the Hebrew lettering.

"Beautiful," the rabbi murmured, stating the obvious, his voice quiet with awe. "Absolutely breathtaking. But we have a problem. We need two witnesses. I'm one."

"And I'm the other," Pox said, her voice brooking no opposition or argument.

The rabbi shrugged, avoiding the vampire's deadly glare. "The witness needs to be a Jewish man."

Alex ran out of patience. "For crissakes, Rabbi, you're Reform, aren't you?"

"Well...yes."

"So improvise! God can be our witness, and Pox here can sign for Him."

"None of that lawyer bullshit, human. I sign for myself or I'm outta here."

Alex restrained himself. The situation was becoming too absurd to bear with a straight face, and too desperate to prolong. Time was running out. He could sense the moon's set in Brooklyn, the almost imperceptible lightening of the night sky over New York City.

"Quit stalling," he said to the rabbi. "Pox will sign. You do the rest, Rabbi...I will hold you harmless. Does that help?"

The rabbi shot Alex a knowing, cynical look. "Why is that not reassuring?" Then he shrugged and sighed. Evidently he'd destroyed his life and soul with that little, responsibility-denying gesture.

“Okay. Your Jewish name?” He pointed at Alex.

“Aaron.”

“And you, miss?”

She smiled at Alex, so dazzling and perfect in her beauty that he swayed on his feet, intoxicated and vanquished by her.

“Esther...Star.”

“Very nice, my dear. Please sign.” He patted the track jacket and evidently found an astral pen there, nestled somewhere inside. Alex signed his name in English, and handed the pen to his bride. She sighed, looked at him for a long moment and nibbled the pen cap.

She capped the pen, rolled it between her palms. “You sure you wanna do this, honey? Isn’t this going to screw you up beyond redemption?”

“Sweetheart. I was screwed up before I met you. You are my redemption. If that isn’t the definition of a soulmate...”

The luminous sparkle of her laughter distracted him from his grim and irrelevant thoughts of Armageddon.

“Oh, Alex. I just love you so much. I don’t know what kind of cosmic laws we’re breaking. What kind of trouble a love like this is gonna cause.”

Alex shrugged, the gesture somehow meaning the opposite thing than it had on the shoulders of the ghost rabbi. “Guess we’ll find out. Until then, we’ll love each other like crazy. Isn’t that the whole point of why we’re here?”

The tears glistened in her eyes, made them sparkly like icicles on a completely clear January morning.

“Let’s do it then.” She signed her name in Hebrew with a great flourish, and the letters burned like black fire.

Before the rabbi could say another word, Alex leaned forward, grabbed Cybele by the shoulders, and immersed himself in the most glorious kiss he had ever experienced. They had once exchanged astral bodies in a playful way. But now their consciousnesses merged. A symphony rose to a glorious, crashing crescendo.

He cradled her body close, felt the sigh of her breath moving alongside him. With supreme reluctance, he allowed the kiss to fade away. He drew back to gaze on his beloved’s face.

She gazed back at him, a faint shimmer of fear coming between them like a physical presence.

“I love you, too, Alex. Even unto destruction.”

A shudder passed through him, and he felt her, all too fragile, grow tense in his arms. “Destruction...promise me that no matter what happens you stay clear of the adversary. He’s not coming after you.”

“I dunno. He’ll be gunning for me now, too, don’t you think? I got that creepy chill you’re supposed to get when somebody walks over your grave.” She laughed at the irony of what she’d said, but the mirth was dutiful, not real. “Since my body got buried in the foundation of the Chrysler Building, my grave gets walked on a gazillion times a day. Should be used to it by now.”

She shivered again in his arms. "Maybe just a premonition," she whispered, her gaze fixed on something an impossible distance away. But then her face brightened, and she grew radiant again, as if her moment of weakness had never happened.

"Forget my drama, baby," she said. "You're worth going mortal for. Anything."

As they stared into each other's souls, Alex dimly registered the sound of the rabbi's rapid recitation of the marriage ceremony, gabbled in rapid-fire Hebrew, all but unintelligible.

Before he could ask a question, the rabbi stopped and cleared his throat.

"That's it, then," he said, his arms crossed against his chest, clutching his prayer book like an airplane flotation device. "Go ahead, kiss each other again. It's official. Husband and wife. May the Almighty have mercy on me."

This time, when Cybele leaned forward and kissed him, the effect was completely different.

Electrifying.

Mind blowing.

Life changing.

She blew through him like an implacable wind, destroying any vestige of doubt or pettiness. He was her man now. No going back.

She released him, and her smile was pure *dybbuk*.

"Smash the glass, lover."

He looked down and there it was...the wineglass wrapped in a white linen napkin. Without thinking, he crushed the glass under his foot, a remembrance of the destruction of the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem, to remember the bitter with the sweet.

He felt a hard tap on his shoulder.

Pox stood before him, her face an unreadable enigma.

"*Mazel tov*," she said, her voice flat. "Welcome to the family, human."

Her face was completely closed to him, but her vampire eyes brimmed with very human-looking tears.

## Chapter Seventeen

*That smell.*

Pox blinked hard for a minute and sniffed, ever so slightly. *Dybbuks* didn't have the psychic nose, and sure as hell a human like Alex, even a demonlayer and a sensitive, didn't have it like she did.

The nose knows.

"Gotta go," she blurted, her mouth on auto. She kissed her finally happy big sis, hugged her new brother, distrustful of the loving warmth emanating from her own cold, undead heart. How she hated feeling gratitude.

A creature very like herself was watching them. She could smell it. Not on the astral plane; from somewhere else, away. But the being wasn't exactly thrilled by the proceedings.

The creature watched them like prey.

"Have a fab honeymoon. You got like two hours before Cybele fades out and you go back to being unemployed and broke, bro. Get that train down there outta town. Get way outta town."

Cybele's eyelashes fluttered. Good, she heard the steel in Pox's voice, realized that not all was dandy in her honeymoon world. She also knew better than to make Pox spell it all out for her. Pox felt like she was getting eaten by fire ants. She turned, sniffed again, and shifted into bat form. Better. Sniffed yet again. The thing's consciousness was inching closer. She had to move fast.

Her hairy little body shot out over the Parisian night, and she felt the joy of slicing her wings through the air in flight. In bat form, she could traverse the astral entirely, fly through both space and time.

She was little and vulnerable. But completely and deliciously free.

New York City glittered far below her, the City of Alex's day, present time from his limited, mortal perspective.

A sudden hot dry wind buffeted her, sent her spiraling out of control. Only her surrender to the air current saved her from a fatal stall. She blinked in surprise at the flock of demons circling the city, all but blotting out the starlight and the cold silver of the moon. She'd never seen a place on Earth so thick with the undead – the air was infested with them.

A sudden gasp of recognition and fear assaulted her. She, who knew nothing of fear except how to inflict it on mortals. So that's what Cybele hesitated over, she realized, inside the safety of her own mind. A marriage of demon and mortal...she'd never heard the like, not since early in the creation of the world. Yeah, human women getting knocked up by incubi, yadayada. But never a ceremony conducted in the light of the Big Guy, seeking His sanction.

And look at this. Alex's nemesis chose this moment to strike. It couldn't be a coincidence. For the first time in any of her many manifestations, Pox realized with a shudder that she was operating way out of her league.

She needed back up. Immediately.

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Revenge tasted sweeter than mortal life and the pleasures of the flesh. Ursula pounded against Dumond's usurping power, but her soul seemed no more substantial than a moth

drawn fatally to the light. He batted her consciousness back as he moved her body up the stairs of Alex's apartment building.

He'd tried to corrupt the boy, hoped his sexual adventures with the little *dybbuk* would have softened him up. Alas, she was the wrong kind of demon for his purposes. He couldn't snuff her out, but Alex was vulnerable in human form. Dumond couldn't crush his soul, but he could use Ursula's body to inflict serious damage, maybe even fatal damage, to Alex's body before he was through. It was clear that besides the transient physical enjoyment, possessing Ursula held no more advantages for him.

He picked the lock easily, reached in with Ursula's nimble little hand and slid the chain off the door. He slipped inside, saw Alex deep in the dream state, no doubt cavorting with his little piece of demon ass. For a moment, he saw a flicker of Alex's dream, of Paris in all its ornate glory, and Dumond hesitated, afraid of the demonslayer's power. He whispered an incantation in French, and Alex sighed, slipped into a deeper sleep. Trapped inside his ecstasy, all unknowing, Alex had exposed his body to attack.

He crept close, inside Ursula's body, enjoying the clean smells of young male human and the sacred herbs of magicmaking. He let himself hover, savoring the silence, knowing this scene of beauty and of peace was ready for him to consume and destroy. Time to send this young man's soul to the next life, unfulfilled on this plane—the vampire noticing him right now didn't have the strength to stop him. It was a petty revenge, but when he owned the city, his destruction could take on a grander form.

But first Alex Kaplan had to die.

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Pox circled over Williamsburg, smelling the hot, fermenting city, her exquisite nose attuned to that menacing, growing stench that was itself attuned to her.

She took a breath, considered a detour over Manhattan to summon her unholy employees. But she had no more time to dick around. Instead, she dive bombed the brownstone where Alex lived, swooped to his bedroom window, opened just a crack by the fire escape. Slid her mouse-body through the crack, quick as a shadow.

In a flicker, she materialized in vampire form. Saw her fatal mistake. Alex stirred slightly in his sleep, his eyeballs shooting back and forth like mad inside his closed eyelids. Hovering over him, a vulture about to rip open his throat, stood his boss, the ambitious and once-telegenic Ursula Day.

Pox knew her. Day was a secret regular at Pox's club in the city. A snarl rumbled in Pox's throat. Undercover, my ass.

"Hey bitch," Pox said, her voice casual. "The boy is mine. Back off."

A low growl escaped Day's throat as she looked up. All traces of the urbanity and wit had vanished. What remained in their place made the tough old vamp take a step backwards.

The voice was male, not female. "He is mine. Then you are mine. Then the city."

"Fuck that. *Nobody* messes with my town."

The creature flung itself at Pox, the carefully-aerobicized body now hepped up on demonic steroids. The two of them grappled on the floor, simultaneously fighting in the physical and the astral. And behind them gathered demon armies, preparing to join the battle at a word from their respective leaders.

Pox bared her fangs as she tried to reach the Ursula thing's neck. The demon bent Pox's head back and smashed her against the hard wood floor, and for a moment Pox saw stars, so thick she thought she'd been knocked out of her physical body altogether.

She rallied, shoved the demon against the wall with a sharp thwack. Pinned it there. Leaned to within an inch of the creature's face.

"Exit the human," Pox snarled at the undead spirit inhabiting Day's body. "Face dissolution if you don't."

The creature hawked a huge gob of spit in her eyes, but Pox refused to flinch.

"You fight your own, traitor," the demon hissed. "You damn to hell a being like yourself, and for what? The deceiver is deceived. You fucking pawn. You sister loves him...not you."

Pox hesitated, and that micromoment of indecision was all that the demon needed to gain the upper hand.

With a surge of strength fueled by Pox's own bitterness and doubt, the demon pinned her to the floor and straddled her with the legs of its human host. As Pox strained against the body lock with her own superhuman strength, she could hear the tendons in the human host's legs snapping like overtightened guitar strings.

The human possessed by her opponent had taken immense physical punishment, but Pox knew the demon didn't care. She knew from her own experience how much the demon enjoyed tormenting the captured mortal before discarding her.

"Now you die an eternal death," the demon hissed. "By the name of my father Asmodel, and my twelve brothers of Notre Dis, I condemn you..."

She fought for breath. "Alex! Help!" Her screams emerged as a whistling groan. As her consciousness faded, Pox catalogued the names in her merciless mind.

"Alex..." She sent him a psychic scream, and his body stirred on the bed.

"Dumond," she whispered in triumph, tasting her own blood on her lips as the demon pummeled her face. "I know you. I have your name. I remember you and your lineage."

She felt a rustling next to her as Alex leapt out of bed to join her. "Do it, Alex...Dumond. Dumond." She relentlessly whispered the demon's name into his soul, and sensed rather than saw him raising himself to full height, the terrible God light of his power searing the room.

"Dumond!" he roared, and the demon shrieked, sending a bolt of pain shearing through her mind. The light began to burn in the room, intense and pure agony. Alex began reciting the invocation of the Almighty, and the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm. Pox felt her face beginning to shrivel in the light, and she saw the words hovering in the air, glowing like the Ineffable Name, as Alex said them, louder and louder as the demon lost its grip on her throat.

Dumond let loose a hoarse, indelible scream and fled its human host. But the angel summoned by the holy words had no mercy and it snuffed out the demon's soul.

Pox felt her eyes boiling in her head, but before she lost consciousness, she turned to the broken human crumpled next to her on the floor.

"Thank you," Ursula Day whispered.

And then she died.

"You're welcome," Pox said to the human soul as it ascended. And then she was gone, too.

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Blood was spattered over him, his bedsheets. The ceiling. How could he have slept through any of this?

A bundle of clothes on the floor caught his attention in the corner. He didn't want to look. But he had to. The bodily remains of his boss and his sister in law huddled in a heap, covered in gore. The police were surely on their way – he was a goner.

The light grew brighter and brighter. Alex sat perfectly still, numbed with awe.

The angel manifested, growing clearer and brighter in the light.

"You've come for me," Alex whispered. "God's will be done." And he steeled himself against the final cut.

The angel shocked him with her laughter. "Not yet. No rest for the weary or the wicked. I'm here to make this place clean. And to bring you a message."

Alex rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

"Okay," he finally ventured. "I'm all ears." His voice sounded so strange to his own ears. So empty. Yet so normal.

"The message is this. Serve your Maker. All of this mess has a purpose."

She opened her arms wide, as if she gathered the entire room into her embrace. Every foul, unclean remnant in the room wavered, then vanished.

"How can I serve God when I sin?"

The angel looked surprised. "Hello...you're one of us. The sinning part comes with the human territory. Don't sweat it. Serve Him in your sin, with your sin."

"What? You need to be more specific."

"I can't. I'm here to remind you that God might need your wickedness more than your virtue. So serve Him, with the devil inside as well as with the angel. Do a good job."

"But how can I know what He wants me to do?"

The angel made an indelicate snort. "Just do the best you can. A lot depends on you."

In a flash the angel, Pox, Ursula Day's remains, and every trace of supernatural presences disappeared. Alex sat on the edge of the bed.

What should he do now?

He smiled as he embraced the answer. Rejoin his bride.

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"His name was Dumond. The light burned him away," Alex said.

He cradled his bride in his arms as the train pulled out of the station. They were the only creatures aboard.

Alex concentrated, and the wedding suite car became still more ornate.

She trembled under his fingers. "So we're free?" She tucked her head under his chin, in a gesture so trusting and gentle it made Alex want to weep.

"Who knows? Nobody ever sent me the memo about this. All I know is, we're soulmates. Some luck we have. But it's what we've got."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, I believe. We have to make the most of this situation."

She hugged him tight, and he let her cry as the motion of the train rocked them back and forth. He watched Paris fade into countryside in the blur outside his window, and then he reached up and pulled the window shade down.

"Tell me why you're crying."

"You know what we're up against. The demon's done. But we're still between Heaven, Hell, Earth, and a rock."

"What did you tell me that time in Paris? That loving you had no consequences?"

"Hey, I lied."

Alex laughed and drew her closer, tipped her face up to his with his fingertips.

"I'm glad there are consequences. Loving you changed everything."

"Aren't you scared of death? Of getting destroyed? You're working magic, frying demons...the Angel of Death is going to get you for this."

"I did what I had to do."

He kissed her to silence her fear and surround her with his love. They blended together, the thumping of the train's wheels a syncopated counterpart to the steady note of their kiss.

He let the kiss float away, and her eyes slowly opened, so iridescently beautiful he never wanted to stop looking into them. "I'll love you no matter where I end up. Here, earth, hell, heaven."

"But don't you want a normal life?"

"What's normal, Cybele? All I want is you."

He kissed her forehead, her ears, her neck, her shoulders. She relaxed with a shuddering sigh, and he kept kissing his way down through sheer clouds of chiffon that melted away as he touched them.

Her breasts, so round and high, lured him. He sucked on one nipple then the other, feeling them pebbling under his tongue. He kissed his way down her stomach, the train rocking more and more wildly, like its motion was generated by the gyrations of Cybele's hips.

He wrapped his arms around her legs, concentrated his attention on her sex. Sweet nectar dripped from her. He opened her with his fingers, kissed her until she screamed with pleasure. The train bucked like a horse, the sound of its whistle slicing through the night.

He rose up and without hesitating plunged all the way into her. He surrendered to the annihilating pleasure of having her, his beloved, his only one.

He let the train rock them together until they both came, an explosion like a supernova, the birth of a star. They rocked together in an ecstasy of completion, until the morning came and tore him away from her.

Bit by bit, the pieces of his consciousness reconstituted themselves. He came back to her arms, their union. The half-light of the morning pierced his closed eyelids.

He woke up in his bed, in his empty, immaculate room. And knew that he'd never be alone again.

## Chapter Eighteen

"I can't go on like this much longer," Alex said. They curled up together in Cybele's little bed in the alcove of books, nestled away from the angels and demons swirling around in the astral, outside the circle of their love.

"You look pale. Skinny too," Cybele said. Alex admired her body as she fussed over him, poking him in the ribs and pinching his cheeks. Trouble only served to make Cybele's beauty more glorious. She glowed where his fingers strayed over her bare skin and her eyes shone lustrous and warm as she met his gaze.

"I'm fading away," he said, cheerfully enough, but she frowned. "I'm still alive, still in my body, but I'm like a walking ghost. I forget to eat, to drink water, forget to check traffic before I wander into the street. I understand what happened to my parents now. They forgot they had a physical body, and they got lost. I'm getting lost, Cybele, lost between the worlds."

Cybele blinked her long eyelashes as he talked. He didn't want to hurt her or leave her. But he knew that he couldn't continue this life without ending up dead.

"So what are we going to do?" Cybele finally said.

"I don't know. We've got to be together forever. But we're going to have to pick. One place or another. No in-between."

"Alex..." her voice held a note of warning in it. "If you die, you either go to the light or you become like me."

"Yeah...so?"

"I'm—lost. You'll be stuck too. And I don't want to do that to you."

"Then come to me."

"To earth?" Her voice squeaked.

"Yeah. I'll figure out a way to bring you back for good somehow."

"Okay..." Her voice shook. With fear? Love? Maybe a potent combination. "But then if I live, I'll eventually die. And, Jesus, Alex, I'm so scared to die."

"Why?"

"Because...I'm going straight to hell."

"What? I won't let you."

"I'm so scared..." Tears pooled in her eyes, and Alex decided to drop it. He'd rather fade away than break her heart as a mortal woman.

She shook her head no, apparently reading his mind.

"No, honey," she said, a sob catching in her throat. "You're right. You're disappearing this way...it's unnatural what we're doing. I'll come to you, we'll have a great life. I'll deal with hell later. We're meant to be together, and at the end, when we die, you'll go up right away and I wouldn't hold you back at that point. This is better."

He soothed her with a kiss, even as uneasiness continued to grow in him. He knew they had to do something. But making her come back to earth still seemed like too much for him to ask.

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The two weeks of darkness before the waxing of the full moon passed in something like an unearthly dream. Alex spent more time on the astral than he did functioning on Earth. He

went through the motions of his life, filing for unemployment, sitting in Starbucks and circling want ads, then forgetting the paper when he left. His uncle haunted him without mercy, force feeding him blintzes and pastrami all the while ordering him to come back to earth.

"Something's horribly wrong with you," Danny said. They sat on the steps of Low Library at Columbia University and fed the pigeons on a cloudy Thursday afternoon. The full moon was due on Friday night, on the advent of the Jewish Sabbath.

"The demon's destroyed. His name was Dumond, the last of his kind," Alex said, his voice dead even to his own ears. The Quad looked gray, the summer students milling around under their backpacks looked like specters.

"Dumond's not your problem any more. You're oppressed by the *dybbuk*," Danny said, his voice shaking.

Alex roused himself to look into his uncle's face. Should he tell him? Could he handle it? Somehow, he didn't think he'd welcome Cybele into the family with open arms. They'd have to make a new life somewhere else.

"I asked you to meet me here so I could say goodbye," was all he said.

Danny's face got a little red, but he said nothing. Nothingness suited Alex just fine...he bided his time, feeding the birds their stale crumbs, and he muttered the spell of binding under his breath.

"Alex," Danny said. He touched Alex's hand, but he felt no connection to his uncle at all. "You need to come back to the world. I won't let the other world take you. Not this way."

Alex didn't answer. In his impatience for his lover, the world seemed very far away. Emotionally, he no longer operated on the earthly plane at all. He waited in an agony of frustration for the full moon to rise so she could come to him at last.

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Alex considered his setup. Rope circle, check. Sage bundles. Check. Spellcasting water in scrying bowl, check. A trembling seized him from the core and worked his way out to his skin.

Could it work again? He had to have her. Once she returned, they could make a plan to somehow make the change permanent. Nothing else mattered.

He stepped into the center of the circle, whistled a shaky little tune under his breath. A pathetic remnant of his former self hovered over his shoulder and surveyed the scene with dismay. "But you're a secular humanist!" its tiny voice wailed in despair.

Alex's laughter filled the air and broke the tension like summer thunder.

"Some atheist," he said, and laughed again.

He took off his white cotton robe, tossed it on the bed in the corner. He lifted up his arms in invocation, fixed a glorious image of Cybele in his mind...and all hell broke loose.

Alex heard the key turn in the lock and paused, speared by a sense of doomed certainty. His uncle piled through the door, followed by Sister Mary Agnes and a small mob of New York Witnesses. Alex lowered his arms, dismayed beyond words.

"We came just in time!" Danny yelled, his eyes alight with triumph. He pulled Alex out of the circle and stuffed him back into his cotton robe.

"It's Shabbat," Alex managed to say. "How could you travel?"

"You saved my life..." Danny buried him in a bear hug and Alex felt the tears leaking from his own eyes, desperate as he was to stay under control. "I came to save yours. You're too young to die."

"Stop it, Danny. It's not my life that needs saving. It's Cybele's."

"You can't save her, boychik."

"But I love her."

Alex felt his uncle's body stiffen. "This is the end," he told his nephew, his voice slow and quiet. "We're going to set her free and save you. I thought your slaying the demon would bring you to your senses. We are all in your debt for what you did. But your girlfriend is sucking the life force out of you. She needs to go to the place where she belongs."

"You can't hurt her. I won't let you."

"We can help her find peace. Don't you understand? That's why she haunts you... she needs our help. That's what your parents died for. You'll pick up where they left off. I'll help you."

Before Alex could protest, Danny took out a piece of gray chalk from his pants pocket and carefully drew a large chalk circle on the floor, encircling Alex's shrine to love and desiring. Encaging it. Disempowering it.

Taking care to stand outside, Danny began reciting the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm in a mighty booming voice—his rabbi voice. The other Witnesses linked hands and added their voices to his.

"Cybele," Danny whispered.

And in a shower of golden light, she appeared. Insubstantial and iridescent at first, she smiled at Alex, only had eyes for him, and her face wavered, then strengthened and brightened.

Beamed up. Cybele stood before them, in the flesh, naked as a nymphette.

"I know her...she's the one who saved me," Benno said.

Alex smiled back at Cybele, his soul leaping at the sight of her. There stood his soulmate. It didn't matter what his uncle thought, or the City of New York, or even the Creator of this unsavory mess otherwise known as Alex's life.

He was made to love this woman. And he always would, even if he were damned to hell for it.

"Hey, darling," he said. He held out his hands to her, and she reached for him...

"Stay back!" Danny commanded, and the smile fled from her face when she realized she was trapped inside the chalk circle he had constructed.

"My dear," he said, his voice conversational, almost gentle but firm. "It is time we dealt with this matter and resolve it for once and for all."

She shocked Alex with the beatific gentleness of her smile, more angelic than the wicked demoness he knew and loved. "Oh, Uncle Danny, how wonderful to meet you. You are so right. Let's fix everything, finally."

Danny avoided her gaze. He tossed her a tee shirt from the back of Alex's desk chair.

"Put this on, Cybele," he said.

She complied, smiled again at Alex, reassured him with her lack of fear. She had supreme faith in his ability to protect them both from demon, unbelief, or crusading uncles.

“Cybele, you will never come back to New York again. You may choose, my dear...I can help you meet your destiny with courage and honor. Or I can banish you from the earthly plane. Whichever you choose, your career as a *dybbuk* has ended.”

Tears glistened in her eyes, but she didn't flinch. “You're right, Uncle Danny. I'm done with that stuff forever.”

“I'm not your uncle, my dear.”

“But you are,” she said. She flashed Danny a smile that pierced through Alex's heart. “Didn't Alex get a chance to tell you?”

Danny turned to Alex, his face crumpling, the tears streaming down his ample cheeks. “Tell me you didn't. You can't marry an untethered soul.”

Alex sighed and leapt into the abyss. “I did it already. Whatever else she is, she's also my soulmate.”

Danny shook his head. “No. It cannot be.” His mighty voice shook, hoarse and wobbly.

Alex hugged his uncle, murmuring in his ear, “She and I were meant to be.” As he drew away, he felt his destiny as Alex Kaplan tilting and shifting onto another plane of existence. He'd saved his uncle from the FBI and the demons...nothing else held him to this lonely Brooklyn apartment and his monastic life as a crusader for justice.

“She's not a lost soul. Neither am I...not any more. Her life on earth was done a long time ago...I see my mistake now. But I still love my wife. She can't come to me. So I'll give myself to her.”

And before Danny could stop him, Alex stepped into the circle, wrapped his arms around his beautiful bride, and disappeared into a widening cylinder of golden light.

## Chapter Nineteen

Danny never wanted to sit *shiva* again. He was not such an old man, but he had buried most of the contemporaries in his family...not a long-lived bunch. That was terrible enough, and he never stopped grieving his wife's passing, blessed be she of God's memory.

But this. Danny's role was to serve others. With the luxury of hindsight, he understood that Alex had saved himself as well as Cybele by going through the chalk circle to reunite with his bride. The bitter truth that Alex's sacrifice was the right thing to do shook Danny's faith, almost toppled it.

He put the teapot on to boil, even though the temperature outside still hovered in the 90s. He was an old man...fighting the devil, and losing the fight because you're wrong, will take the heart out of a person, no matter how good his intention.

He shuffled back into the living room, where the History Channel poured out its litany of human misery, mercifully muted into silence.

The sight of the figure resting in his wing backed chair struck him like a mortal blow.

"What are you?" he said, his voice hoarse from tears shed and unshed.

"Your evil-in-law, old man."

The creature's voice was wizened, diminished, but filled with venom, nevertheless. Despair as much as curiosity drew him closer to where the figure sat, no more substantial than a spider's shadow.

He studied the creature's face. A burned, crackled ruin, smelling of smoke and charred flesh. The thing had eyes, and as he met its gaze, he could see the intelligence and vitality trapped inside. He surprised them both with a booming laugh—his old laugh, the laugh he missed more than anything else from the man he used to be.

"What happened to you?"

Pox groaned, waved a charred hand. "Never mind." She'd slipped pretty fucking far to need help again from a human man—a rabbi for chrissakes.

He looked at her, his eyes ringed with weariness. "Are you here to tempt me?"

Pox gazed back at Alex's uncle with resignation and scorn.

"Am I so very tempting?" She sighed again from behind the mask of her ruined face, fought off the talons and teeth of her cynicism. "No," she said, forcing her voice gentle. "Your baby sent me over with a message for you."

"Alex?" Now she could see the pain etching itself like acid into his own careworn, stubbly face. "You spoke to Alex?"

"Yes," she said, forcing herself to stay patient. "He wants you to know he's safe, he's protected...he's happy. He made the right choice."

His tears fell softly over his beard, though his expression didn't change. And something hard and dead in Pox's heart shifted, painfully brought to life again.

"He also wanted me to look you up. To—get help."

"You need my help?"

"Well. Yeah. I got fried while fighting off a demon. And now look at me."

Danny stroked his beard with one enormous hand, and she watched him, alert to any hostile movements or face-melting invocations of the Almighty. "You were fighting Dumond," he said.

"That was his name. Yeah."

He paused. "No demon did that to you. The Light burned you."

Pox let go a single sigh of deepest relief. Maybe Alex was right about this guy. "Alex said I could trust you."

"You can trust me, but can I help you? Dunno." With a groan, he shuffled across the room to where a spectacularly ugly chartreuse sofa huddled in the corner. He took his time settling into it, and then he regarded her with a look that curdled her blood.

The rabbi pitied her.

"I better go," she whispered, but Danny held up a hand and she stilled.

"I can help you," he said. "I can heal you. But you have to swear not to hurt me, Alex, or any other human."

"Alex isn't a mortal human any more, old man."

She meant to wound the rabbi, and knew she had succeeded from the way he pressed his lips together and looked away.

But he refused to bend, damn him. "For Alex's sake, I'll help you. But you must swear to keep your word."

She shrugged, wincing in pain as her shoulder skin crackled and peeled. "What choice do I have? I couldn't get within 50 feet of a human looking like this. I'm starving into nothingness."

"Promise."

"All right already."

"Swear."

"I swear. No hurting humans." She smiled, relieved that the sight of her fangs didn't seem to scare him away either. "How bout this? I'll pinkie swear."

"You're a Brooklyn girl." Though he was surprised, his outburst was a statement, not a question.

"Of course."

"Well, for a Brooklyn girl, and a relative by marriage to boot, what else can I do?" He rose up, walked with more energy this time across the room, and without a hint of hesitation held out his left pinkie.

Vulnerable, grieving, but brave. Human beings had the potential for such magnificence. Alex was magnificent. And this man had achieved it, too. He was magnificent. Alex was right.

She held out her scarred blackened hand, and hooked her charred pinkie around his. The touch jolted her like an ancient, all but forgotten medicine.

He could heal her. It would just take patience, pain and time. And she'd be back in business.

"Pinkie swear, chickie. No harming humans."

Well, not *quite* back in business.

## Chapter Twenty

"So where do you go when you dream?" Alex asked.

She shot him a glance, but his expression remained innocent. "I don't dream," she said, with a sigh she tried to keep to herself. "*Dybbuks* don't dream. We rest, we'll even sleep for a change of pace. But no dreams."

"Is it that you're living a dream that never ends? Or do you refuse to dream at all?"

"Now that's just too philosophical for me, baby."

"I'm not trying to be cosmic. I'm just thinking of something my uncle once said."

She studied him carefully, searching for any sign of regret for the leap he'd taken into the abyss for her. She couldn't find the slightest hint of it.

"Well," he said, the corner of his mouth curling up in a deliciously wicked way. "What would you dream, if you could dream?"

They floated together, in a froth of gray ether. Pure astral plane; pure consciousness. Astral bodies connected to nothing; completely free. Except now Cybele could see, glowing like a sterling silver filament, a ray of light connecting them at the heart. Whom God has brought together, may no being put asunder.....

"I don't need a dream," she said, her heart warm with sincerity. "You made my dreams real by existing."

His smile broadened, and he gathered her in his arms. She imagined the musky autumnal smell he'd radiated in corporeal form, missed it, but loved having Alex with her so much more.

"C'mon," he teased. "Gag me with a spoon. Love is grand, but don't be such a stick in the mud. Any dream. Anywhere. Anyplace."

Her eyes widened as she beheld her beloved, unleashed, completely free. The sight dazzled her.

"Well for starters...geeze. Let's think. Okay. Pirate ship. Ravish me, varmint."

"Isn't varmint from the Old West?"

"Ooh! That too! And for old time's sake, a speakeasy in New York! With gangsters! Yeah baby!"

The sound of Alex's baritone laughter cushioned her in soft waves of love.

"Ahoy, matey," he whispered.

And she felt the sea roiling beneath them, rocking them in time, as they lay tangled in coils of splintery hemp. She heard a band of sea dogs singing ribald chanteys, somewhere far away.

She opened her eyes to see Alex arrayed in tight breeches with brass buttons, no shirt, a hoop earring in his left ear, and she laughed for pure joy.

"Ay, wench," he murmured. "The finest prize I've seized in all my years on the high seas, captain of the HMS Cybele."

She couldn't stop laughing, he looked so ridiculous, and his pirate's accent was so horrible.

"Stop!" she finally choked out between bursts of laughter, snorting with her efforts to stay composed. "Maybe the pirate ship idea wasn't the finest."

He grew serious, though his eyes still sparkled with mischief. "Your wish is my command. Your dream is mine to make so. Let me be your genie."

He lowered his face to hers and kissed her, slowly at first, and then he built the kiss to explosive heat. She felt her desire for him swell up inside of her, pulsate like a sped up pulse. Her life force. Existing in the air, not on Earth. But no less vital for that.

Their kiss finally broke, and she returned to the moment, the pirate's sea all around them.

"The speakeasy," she said, her voice growing serious. "Take me back to where it all started for me...and make it better."

He kissed her, starting with her eyes, covering with kisses light and sweet as puffs of scented air.

"I can do that," he said, his voice quiet.

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Alex focused his intention, and they found themselves in a cellar lit with flickering exposed bulbs and candles burning inside of beer bottles. He was new at drawing on the memories of a lover to heighten a dream state...that was a *dybbuk's* trick. And he wasn't a *dybbuk*.

He didn't know what he was.

His hesitation made the scene waver for a moment, but he shifted his focus back to Cybele, probing for memories, and her receptive soul eagerly responded.

"Ooh, you're good, husband," she whispered, looking around at the scene in awe. She closed her eyes, and a blue beaded dress shimmered around her as it coalesced into view.

"Hey Marty," Alex said to the gent behind the bar, drawing his bride closer in to his side. For her benefit, he manifested in a bold pinstriped zoot suit, the kind Chicago gangsters wore.

Marty nodded at him, taking in his clothes, the cute showgirl, and his low key greeting in a single glance. "The regular, boss?" he asked.

"Two of them, pal," Alex replied. Marty winked at Cybele and poured two short glasses of scotch and ice.

"You hit the jackpot, Blondie," Marty said, his voice warm. "You know who this fella is?"

"Yeah," she said. "My husband." She beamed at the barkeep, the tears sparkling in her eyes, dazzling like diamonds.

"Hey now! Well, he's a lucky man. And congratulations to the loveboids! This round is on me," and he pushed the glasses forward.

"No you don't Marty," Alex protested, as he held out a tenner.

"Put your money away, boss. Drink up. You got the prettiest gal in town, so celebrate."

"To you then Marty," Cybele said, lifting her glass.

"No, sweetheart," Marty said. "To you and your handsome boyo, too. Does my rotten heart good to see you with this lover boy, instead of that no good rat you was hanging onto last time I seen ya."

Alex cleared his throat and tossed back the entire glass in a single shot. The scotch burned its way through his body, and he leaned forward.

"You got a room?" he whispered to the barkeep, and shot him a significant glance.

"Hey. For Cybele, pal, ya got it."

Marty leaned across the bar and bussed Alex's girl on the cheek like a doting uncle. "Been a long time since I saw this little lady around. And I never seen her shining like a star, not like this. You saved her, buddy," Marty said, his eyes growing serious. "You saved this gal from a fate worse than death."

Alex tried to swallow the lump stuck in his throat. "You're real, aren't you?"

Marty gave him a long, slow wink. "Sure as there's a sun in the sky, boyo."

This was getting too serious. Alex's squeezed the guy's shoulder and patted him a little too hard. Tough guy love.

"Hey, she's a great girl. The best." Alex squeezed her close, and she sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder, so trusting and so sexy at the same time that Alex considered taking her on the bar, Marty or no Marty.

The barkeep caught the look in Alex's eye and roared with approving laughter. "Now, man, I got a room for ya! Keep your trousers on, ya young buck! This way."

He took a key from the bundle of them on his belt, and motioned them behind the bar, and they followed him to the back of the room. He unlocked a small, recessed wooden door, and they followed him into a small room that smelled of tar and new wine.

Alex slipped him a \$100 bill, and the barkeep's eyes widened in appreciation.

"Here ya go. Stay as long as you like," Marty said.

"Here?" Alex said. "I was thinking something a little more fancy."

"No," Cybele said, her eyes shining. "This is perfect. Marty remembers...this is where that lousy rat told me my number was up."

"This is where we keep the best stuff," Marty continued, leaving Cybele's comment unremarked-upon. "Now if a little moonbeam was to drink up a bottle or two of the French champagne, that's just the cost of doin' business. But no more, or you'll get the bootleggers onto ya. Don't want that."

Marty bowed and backed out of the room, his meaty face glowing with an unholy joy. "Night, loveboids," he said. "I gotta lock the door, but you can always use the window to get out if you need. Don't hold back...make all the noise ya want. Give the sad sacks up front something to dream about."

And the barkeep left with a flourish. They were alone, the room dim, lighted only by a single, swinging, bulb. Alex found a thick cotton horse blanket on the floor by the window...evidently other lovebirds had nested here before. He laid it out on the ground and pulled Cybele onto his lap.

"I missed you," he said.

"You'll never miss me again, not if I have any say in it." She studied his face, his short strong fingers. She had come so close to losing him the thought of it made her sick.

"You don't understand. I mean I missed you in 1928. I've missed you for a longer time than either of us knew at first." His husky voice wavered with grief and joy mixed together.

"How could you miss me when you didn't exist on earth yet?"

"But I did." He shook his head, held her closer within the circle of his arms. "I know this place as well as you do. Marty knew me as well as he knew you. This presentiment of

me...is me." He fingered his suit lapel, and cleared his throat. "I was here when you were here. I was looking for you."

His word stopped her cold. "Omigosh. You really are my soulmate." Her heart started pounding.

"Yeah. No wonder Pox thought I looked familiar. I am. I was. I worked for Meyer Lansky's gang on the Lower East Side. I had a thing for showgirls. I was looking for you, but God help me, I didn't find you in time. That creep got you first...and he took you away from me.

"I'm glad he got blown away," he continued. "He brought his death on himself, sweetheart. You need to forgive yourself for haunting him. Let him rot in Hell...he's been haunting you back for nearly a hundred years already. Enough."

She hugged him close, trying hard to accept the past...the miracle of Alex was that he loved her both wounded and whole. And the power of his belief made it possible for her to let the past and her fears go. "I can do it, Alex," she whispered. "With you, I can do anything."

He attacked her with kisses, electrifying her with the force of his passion.

"I remember now," he whispered into her ear. "How much I wanted you...how empty life was without you in it. I died wanting you...and knowing I'd never found you."

He kissed her breasts her face her arms and Cybele felt the crackle of electric heat building up between them, ready to explode.

"Isn't this a crazy way for two newlyweds to start out? Dead, undead, whatever?"

"I don't care." The vibrato in his voice connected to her solar plexus, and she squeezed him tight against her. "I'll take what we have, any way we can have it."

Cybele had to laugh. Even in joy, Alex was so frickin serious and earnest. "Hey, we might not be in heaven, but close enough, right?"

"I know what we are now."

"Yeah? Really, what? Because I sure know I'm not a *dybbuk* any more."

"We're angels of the earth. You be my angel, and I'll always be yours."

After this, their words stopped for an ecstatic eternity. They finally had the chance to love each other without the threat of immediate separation, and they made the most of it. They sucked and kissed and groped and bit and giggled and screamed and climbed into ecstasy and ignited. They did it again and again, until the room full of wine and gin vibrated with their earthquake.

Finally, regretfully, they floated back down into a liquid pool of satisfaction melted together on the floor.

"Okay, soulmate. Now that we're free, now that we're earth angels, I got one word for you that'll solve all our problems," Alex said.

"Tell me." She stretched against the length of his body like a dozing cat.

"Don't freak out."

"The word is love, right?"

"No." He hesitated, and then surprised her with a booming laugh.

"Reincarnation."

Cybele let the word hover in the air between them, then surprised herself by laughing back, not afraid anymore, not afraid to die or to live.

"You're with me then?" Alex said. "I think it's time for us to ascend. Together."

She shifted to stare directly into his startling amber eyes. “Okay, Alex, I’m game. But not yet...not until we’ve made love a thousand times.”

Alex kissed her so hard she almost melted back into oblivion.