GOOD WILL GHOST HUNTING

Demon Seed LESLI RICHARDSON BOOK ONE

Evrical Press, Inc.

Back Cover Copy

Demon love... Will it be hellish or heavenly? Kalyani's about to find out.

Kalyani Martin is a virgin and has every intention of staying that way despite the overwhelming attraction she feels for the co-host of Otherworlds, her new ghost hunting show.

Devastated by the loss of his wife twenty-five years ago, Will Hellenboek is waiting to die. An archdemon, he bides his time co-hosting *Otherworlds* with his cousin, Aidan. His instant attraction to Kalyani is simply unacceptable to him. His only goal in life is his death, not sex. And certainly not love.

Ryan Ausar protects Earth from anything that would usurp man's free will. His job becomes much harder when his strongest archdemon stubbornly refuses to come back to work.

When lives are on the line, Kalyani, Will and Ryan must make the choice to give up what they hold most dear. Can Kalyani turn her back on the known world and find a little heaven on Earth in the arms of an archdemon?

Content Warning (this title contains the following): hot virgin-deflowering sex, hunky demons, a sweet love story, frequent snark, and a dogma-questioning Baptist minister's daughter

Highlight

Kal rode an elevator upstairs, alone, to retrieve one of the cameras when the car stopped with a jolt and the lights went off.

Shoot.

She fought her racing heart. She'd never been scared of the dark before, but she'd left her two-way on the monitor table and her cellphone was clipped to her backpack at base.

Crud.

Five minutes later, the elevator hadn't moved and no emergency lights came on. Kal felt her way around to the panel and tried to remember which button was the emergency button.

Her anxiety ratcheted up when she felt a cool breeze brush against her arm, not like the air conditioner, but something cold and clammy.

Kal started slapping at the buttons, fighting her panic, until she found the one at the bottom that tripped the buzzer. The cool breeze worked its way up her bare arm, across her shoulder, to the back of her neck.

With her heart hammering in her chest, Kal started pounding on the door and screaming for help.

The cold breeze encircled her neck and settled against her other ear. In her mind, as if whispered to her, she heard a soft, "Hello."

Her control snapped.

Demon Seed

by

Lesli Richardson

Good Will Ghost Hunting: Book One

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Dedication

To my husband, for his love, support, and doing dishes. To my son, also for his love and support, and for learning how to use the microwave to cook his own lunch. (Yes, the little things do mean a lot to me!)

Prologue

Perpetually in shade from the massive live oaks, the old cemetery offered cool refuge, even from the scorching April Florida sun. Early on a Wednesday morning he was the only one there.

His feet knew the way without his brain interfering, which was a good thing because his mind had firmly settled in the past, in his memories...

In his prayers for the not too distant future.

Not long, Abby. Not much longer, sweetheart.

Her grave was nestled by itself in a quiet corner under a towering oak, large azalea bushes granting him more privacy. An extra charge he'd gratefully paid. He knelt beside the marker and carefully tucked the small bundle of white roses into the vase by the stone.

Carved from smooth, pale peach granite, unremarkable except for the inscription.

AnnaBelinda Hellenboek — Beloved soul mate.

No date of birth listed, only her date of death nearly twenty-six years earlier.

As always, he lost track of time. He talked to her out loud, reminiscing, remembering, planning. It wouldn't be long before he could join her. No, not long at all.

After two hours he kissed his fingers and touched the cool stone. "I'll try to be here next week but I don't know if I'll be back in time or not. I'll get here as soon as I can, sweetheart. I love you. Always, Abby. Always."

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and slowly returned to his car. Over twenty-five years later and his soul still hurt as bad as it had the day he lost her.

The day she was murdered.

Chapter 1

"Will, is that you?" Aidan yelled from the back room when the front office door opened.

"Yeah." Will dropped the mail on his desk and heavily sat, scrubbed his face with his hands. *How did I let Aidan rope me into this?* It was something Will wondered every day. He still had no answer.

Aidan stuck his head through the doorway. "Where you been?" When Will glared at him, Aidan's face fell. "Sorry, dude. I forgot it's Wednesday." He immediately brightened. "Hey, I got a call from our liaison at the network. They're sending us a new producer, some dude named Cal Martin."

Will groaned. "We don't need a producer. Why won't they leave us alone? We've got it covered." He sorted bills from fan mail into two neat piles.

Aidan walked over and perched on the corner of Will's desk. "Listen, if they're giving us the budget to pay for a producer, accept the gift horse. That means they're pumping money into us. They want us around for a while."

"I don't *want* to be around for a while."

"Dude, listen to yourself. Mr. Doom and Gloom. We could kick *Sci Fi Channel*'s ass to home and back with one hand behind our back." Aidan was convinced he could change Will's mind if given enough time.

Will picked up one of the bills and ripped open the envelope. "We can't do that and you know it."

"Well, we can damn well give them a better show. So what if we can't get as deep as we could?" He ran a hand through his scruffy blond hair. He was overdue for a haircut and it brushed his shoulders, giving him a vaguely surfer dude look.

"Look, I only agreed to this hare-brained scheme because you're my cousin and my friend."

"You love this and you know it." Aidan fingered the tiger's eye amulet hanging from a black satin cord around his neck. "It's in your blood. It's all you know."

Will wouldn't meet Aidan's honey hazel eyes. "I want out. I'm tired, and I'm ready to go."

"I wish you'd come to your senses." Aidan knew time grew short and was desperate to convince Will to change his plans.

"I should have come to my senses years ago. If there was any other way out I'd take it in a heartbeat and you know it." Will dropped several fan letters into the basket beside his desk for their production assistant to take care of. "I hate this. I hate living." He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "So when do we meet this new producer?"

"They're sending him straight over to the shoot tonight after his plane arrives."

"Great. Just in time to screw us up and throw off our whole routine."

They looked up as Gery opened the front door. Aidan went to help as the large man juggled a laptop case and a drink carrier holding four cups of coffee.

"Thanks, man," Gery said. Geryon Arnold was huge, well over six feet tall and broad as a bull. His dark brown eyes and closely cropped black hair endowed him with a military look. Not many people talked back to Gery when he stared them down, but he was under normal circumstances a friendly, if not quiet man. Will had known him for centuries and counted on his strength more times than he cared to remember. Will still counted on Gery, even though Gery still officially worked for The Firm.

Aidan handed Will a cup of coffee, took one for himself, and sat the carrier on Gery's desk. "Where's Purs?" Aidan asked.

Gery shook his head. "He'll be here. He had a hot date last night."

"I wish he would keep it in his pants for once," Will growled.

Aidan laughed. "Dude, you could have all the girls you want." He pointed to Gery's desk, where a plastic crate on the floor next to it overflowed with fan mail. "You probably have twenty marriage proposals and fifteen requests to father children in there. Pick one."

Will glared at him. Aidan dropped it. When his cousin's slate grey eyes turned midnight blue it was time to change the subject, and Aidan damn well knew it.

* * * *

Will grabbed his clipboard and started checking equipment. Their three assistants and four volunteer investigators working on the shoot tonight had day jobs. They'd arrive at the Otherworlds office in north downtown Tampa, which also housed Will's production company, around four. That left plenty of time to caravan everyone over to the University of Tampa and set up the equipment for the shoot.

Aidan had sweet-talked someone in authority into letting them investigate Plant Hall and the Henry B. Plant Museum. Will didn't want to know how Aidan finagled that one. Some mysteries were best left unsolved.

The door to the back room opened. Purson Gibraltar stuck his head in. "Hey, boss. Need help?"

"Nice of you to finally join us."

Smiling, Purson slipped inside and closed the door behind him. "You know what it's like, Will."

"No, I don't."

"Come on. One of these days you'll meet someone and she'll change your mind." At least, he hoped Will would. The other three men didn't want to contemplate losing Will Hellenboek. Not when he'd been their friend and leader for countless years.

Will's knuckles turned white around the FLIR camera case in his hand as he struggled not to throw it at his friend. "I don't want to talk about this, Purs."

Purson shrugged his broad shoulders and fixed his friend with his piercing blue eyes. "Whatever. Aidan said we've got a new producer joining us?"

"Unfortunately." Will handed Purson the clipboard and started sorting through a carton of power cords. "Freaking network wonk. Probably some kid right out of college and wet behind the ears who wants to change the world."

"We should be so lucky."

"I'm not in the mood for your shit today, Purs."

Purson started to playfully bust Will's balls when he remembered it was Wednesday. Will was always in a foul mood on Wednesdays. "Sorry."

* * * *

The others gave Will a wide berth for the rest of the day. The Otherworlds show was in its third season and going gangbusters. The network film crew would show up around three to start filming B-roll and setup shots. Cal Martin's flight was scheduled to arrive at Tampa International at five thirty. He would join them at the University of Tampa campus after arriving.

This wasn't Will's idea. He'd been happy running a small, local production company making commercials, filming Florida-based documentaries, shooting stock footage and syndicated pieces, and other low budget jobs. He still wasn't sure how Aidan had managed to take his hobby and get them involved in...this.

Three ring circus didn't begin to describe what it'd turned into. *Sci Fi Channel* had their own popular show and Otherworlds was the low budget version on the *gO! Network*. "With little gee, and a big OH!" declared the network's slightly stupefying slogan. They built their rep ripping off reality shows from the big cable networks like the *Discovery* and *History Channels*. Their show investigated and debunked not just reports of ghosts, but other myths, including the Swamp Ape and Bermuda Triangle, among others.

While Aidan's idea, Will had been roped into the co-host spot because of his quiet, brooding, serious temperament. Aidan was the playful, funny one, and most likely to claim ghost even when he damn well knew there wasn't. Will played the Professor to Aidan's Gilligan. The public loved it.

No, Will understood exactly why he got involved, because he tried to keep The Firm off Aidan's ass. If Will kept Aidan in line, at least until he could finally leave this freaking earthly plane for good, they'd be less likely to come down on Aidan for using insider knowledge to spice up their show.

Not hard to do when you're an archdemon.

* * * *

Aidan observed Will all afternoon. Typical Wednesday, and Aidan normally wouldn't have scheduled a job but it was the only day he could get the UT officials to agree on. He desperately wished Will would meet someone, but his cousin stubbornly refused all attempts at matchmaking.

Will's slate grey eyes used to be filled with joy. He had a handsome smile that hadn't seen the light of day since...

Aidan clamped down on the thought, unsure if Will could still read him or not. The longer Will's powers atrophied, the closer he got to the day he could leave.

Permanently.

One of the network film crews showed up a little early. Their sound man worked with Aidan, setting up and getting the information for the night's shoot. It kept Aidan busy and distracted. At some point Will slipped out for some peace and quiet before their investigation got underway.

The sound man, Bob, shook his head. "Man, my little sister keeps begging me to bring her to one of the shoots. She's in love with Will."

"So's half of the straight women who watch the network, Bob."

"Why isn't he married?"

One of Will's long-standing ultimatums was that his personal life couldn't be discussed with anyone. Will made it clear from the beginning that if he even heard a thought of one of the men talking about him to anyone, he'd refuse to work on the show anymore. Aidan had to go to The Firm for extra support in that area, warding paparazzi away from Will and keeping his private life private. Unfortunately, that mystique made him even more popular. Will Hellenboek fan sites were cropping up all over the web.

"He's a private man," Aidan told him. "That's all I can say."

Chapter 2

Kalyani Martin nervously tapped her foot and fought the urge to pace back and forth in the departure gate area. This was her first producer gig and she didn't want to mess it up. Bad enough her father fought her tooth and nail when she chose film as her major, followed by two more years of post-grad studies. He'd grumbled and groused when she took the student internship at *gO! Network* but apparently figured it was safe since she hadn't graduated yet.

When she landed the paid administrative assistant job at the network after graduation, her father had been less than enthused but at least placated that she still lived in Columbus, at home, where he could keep his eye—and thumb—firmly on her. When Kal informed her parents she'd accepted a network job assignment to work on a show based in Tampa, he'd gone...

Well, he'd gone batshit, as her friend Becky would say.

Saying her father wasn't the most modern or progressive of men was an understatement of George W. Bushism proportions. Reverend Kenneth Martin, head shepherd of the First Columbus Evangelical Baptist Church of Christ, despaired that not only did his sole child go to Ohio State University—go Bucks!—but she didn't want to get married yet.

Thank goodness Kal's mother finally stood up to him and helped win him over. The full academic scholarship hadn't hurt either.

Kal's announced move to Tampa nearly drove him over the edge. Her father wanted her home, in Columbus, where he could marry her off to Jeff Conrad, the son of his best friend and church deacon, Billy Conrad.

She couldn't stand Jeff Conrad. She didn't know him very well, but he always came off as a standoffish, smarmy jerk. Of course, Kalyani neglected to mention to her parents exactly what her new show was about. It would compound the problem and make her escape from Columbus even more difficult. She'd only told them she'd been assigned as a producer on a documentary show. Otherwise, there would be fireworks.

"Devil's work!" her father would shriek, demanding she drop to her knees and pray.

She wished she was exaggerating, but considering he'd freaked out over her bringing home a Billy Joel CD two years earlier, she knew he would. Thank goodness he couldn't figure out how to unlock her MP3 player.

He'd have a coronary.

Not that Kalyani would ever admit to her father that she'd watched the remake of *Hairspray* at a friend's house one night during a high school sleepover, but he made the Bible-thumping mother in that movie look like a pagan liberal Democrat by comparison.

Another bonus—moving to Tampa meant getting away from home again. Living on campus during college had been heavenly, the freedom blissful. The past six months back home under the same roof as her father had been...

Well, hellish.

When she took the administrative assistant job at the network, it paid more than enough for her to get her own apartment. Between her father's stern lectures and her mother's pleading looks not to leave her alone with him ranting and raving about Kal moving out, Kal gave in and lived at home. She even caught him snooping through her cellphone—which she paid for, not them after she got out of the shower one night. Two days later, when the network asked her to take this job, it seemed like a good omen.

Or divine intervention.

Kal rubbed her palms against her jeans. No denying she felt nervous leaving home for the first time by herself, not counting college, because then she could go home for weekends. Usually she had to. If she didn't put in an appearance at church her father would call out the Ohio National Guard to find her.

Yay! I can sleep late on Sundays!

While she'd admit to breaking out of her shell a little at OSU, she still considered herself a good girl by most standards. She didn't intend to compromise her scruples. The network promised her a chance at bigger, better things down the road. If she wanted to stay on that road, she had to point her car in the direction they dictated, starting with this gig. She resented being forced to take this particular show but if it meant a chance to break into network television she'd willingly do it.

Still, it was easier to keep her father in the dark for a while longer.

At least until after her flight safely landed in Tampa.

She'd never watched the show before the network gave her the first two seasons on DVD. They said they wanted a skeptic in the producer slot, said it gave the show more veracity and authenticity, balanced it out. She had to admit they pegged her dead to rights there. She didn't believe in ghosts except those of the Holy variety. Even then sometimes she had her doubts, although she'd never admit that out loud in front of her father. She absolutely didn't believe in most of the things Will Hellenboek and his crew investigated. Although she gave him credit, he rarely seemed willing to admit a place had supernatural activities, unlike his goofy sidekick.

Hellenboek certainly had devoted legions of admirers. Googling him revealed dozens of fan sites. He was a mysterious man with brooding good looks. Apparently his personal life was a well-guarded secret, which, of course, made him even more popular.

The gate attendant called Kalyani's flight. She slung her laptop case over her shoulder, grabbed her purse and carry-on bag, and stood in line to board. This was the first time she'd ever been to Tampa and only the fifth time she'd ever flown. The network had arranged for a rental car at Tampa International. Hopefully the apartment they leased for her wasn't infested with cockroaches.

Kal said a little prayer as she handed over her boarding pass and waited her turn. This marked the start of a new life, her first true freedom. She would take every opportunity presented to get out on her own, and thank Heaven on her knees if she had to.

* * * *

Will pinched the bridge of his nose and counted to ten. As always, setup resembled controlled chaos, with Aidan twenty places at once and making sure the infrared and other cameras had been properly placed and wired. Purson had to handle one of the unpaid PAs, who insisted on bringing his girlfriend to the shoot. Purson finally convinced the girlfriend to leave with a little of his special brand of persuasion. Will brooked no bending of his "boys only" rule when he worked on a shoot. The four closely knit men knew the real reason. Everyone else assumed Will was either gay or an obnoxious chauvinist pig.

Neither reason true, of course, but Will was more than happy to let the rumors fly if it kept him isolated from anything other than incidental contact with members of the opposite sex.

He damn sure couldn't work with a woman. The crew only welcomed women on shoots when Will wasn't around, usually B-roll retakes or prelim investigations edited into the final cuts to make it look like they'd all been shot at the same time. The public never knew the difference, only the inner sanctum of high ranking production crew was aware of it.

Will glanced at the time, pleasantly surprised to see they were almost an hour ahead of schedule. "We've got time for dinner," he told Aidan. The crew welcomed the break. "So when's this new producer arriving?"

Aidan glanced at his watch. "Flight should have landed by now. Unless he gets lost, probably in the next hour or so. You know traffic's a bitch around TIA with all the construction, especially at rush hour."

* * * *

While Kalyani nervously awaited her luggage, she twisted the small ring on her left hand. She'd shipped most of what few other things she had, and they would arrive in the next day or so. Fortunately the apartment was furnished. Kal had checked three large suitcases of clothes and other things to bring with her. She snagged a cart and struggled with the heavy bags but got everything loaded and located the rental car counter. Twenty minutes later the shuttle bus driver helped her unload at the terminal rental car lot. Sweating in the humid Florida heat, Kal loaded the bags in the trunk, studied her map, and pointed the car toward the interstate.

This wasn't her idea of Florida. Postcard settings of white sandy beaches and sedate, palm tree lined avenues were nowhere to be seen. Neither were acres of lush, green citrus groves or nearly nekkid beach love gods, as pictured on tourist trap postcards. Instead, rush hour traffic and construction felt like being back in Columbus, only with muggy, salt-sweet air as the backdrop.

It took her nearly an hour to crawl through traffic and find her way to the University of Tampa campus. Plant Hall's tall, ornate minarets graced the skyline across the Hillsborough River from downtown Tampa. Kal consulted another map as she parked next to a cargo van which had an Otherworlds magnetic sign stuck to the door.

Kal dug through her purse, located her network ID card lanyard, and strung it around her neck. She'd insisted on Kal instead of Kalyani on the ID and had practiced her stern but not too bitchy mugshot face for hours in her mirror before she'd had it taken. She had no illusions—this was a male dominated profession and she wanted every possible advantage. Cute and perky weren't advantages to getting network producer assignments and having people listen to you on a shoot. Unless you wanted to be fetching coffee or proofing scripts for life.

She pulled her hair into a ponytail and parked a well-worn Brutus Buckeye baseball cap on her head after threading her hair through the opening in the back. Jeans and sneakers, she'd planned ahead although she wondered if she should have gone with shorts in this heat. A tank top under an unbuttoned, long-sleeved chambray shirt, sleeves rolled to her elbows—she looked like serious business for this business. No make-up, she rarely wore it. Kal took one last look at herself in the rear view mirror.

Let's do this.

She took a deep, calming breath and got out, locked the car. Ryan Ausar, the network VP who hired her, warned her that Will Hellenboek ran a tight ship. She would literally be the odd man out with an uphill climb to get Hellenboek to warm up to her working on the show. Heck, if she could finesse her father, she could handle someone like Will Hellenboek. Ausar promised she'd only have to work one year on the show. If she made it through that year they'd promote her to a different show more to her liking.

Sitting in Ausar's office last Monday, Kal had felt like she was dreaming as he smiled at her, those neat green eyes of his barreling through any possible thoughts she had of refusing the job. He also had the coolest British accent. She loved his cologne, she'd have to find out what it was, buy some for her father.

"I think you're perfect for this assignment, love," he'd said, gently touching her shoulder, his gaze holding her captive. "After this year is up, you and I shall sit down, right here. If you wish to change to a different show I will give you your pick. I'll even put it in writing, if you so desire. You've demonstrated a lot of initiative and talent. I wish to have someone like you working at *gO*? *Network* for the long term."

She didn't push her luck, somehow sensing he wasn't lying. Perhaps naive not to get it in writing, but weirdly enough, she trusted him. And *gO! Network* had already built a reputation for doing things differently than other networks.

Kal considered it for the briefest of seconds. A chance to get her own show now, and then her pick of the network line-up in a year?

Heavens, that was a deal she would willingly make.

* * * *

Will sat behind the bank of monitors, double checking the feeds while Aidan wrangled the other crew and investigators. He preferred the technical aspect, content to let Aidan have the spotlight even though Aidan dragged him in front of the cameras more than he wanted. It amazed Will that the harder he tried to melt into the background and let Aidan be the stronger presence on the show, the more popular he himself became, some sort of weird paradox that left him scratching his head. It wasn't quite sundown yet so they couldn't go dark. Aidan took the production crew and investigators on a preliminary tour of the building so they wouldn't be stumbling around later. Some of the museum displays were very fragile and Will preferred not explaining damages to their insurance company.

When Will had checked that all the feeds were active and the camera placements adequate, he leaned back and closed his eyes, tired to the very depths of his soul.

How tired became clearly apparent when the woman's voice startled him. He normally would have heard her footsteps and breathing, yet another welcomed sign he was weakening.

"Hi, I'm looking for Will Hellenboek."

He hoped he hadn't flinched too much. He opened his eyes and turned to face her. The sight made him suck in a deep breath before forcing it out again. Her beautiful, dusty peridot green eyes sliced through him. He briefly struggled to form coherent words.

"Hi. This is a closed shoot, sorry."

She stepped forward. He wished she wouldn't do that. He wanted to take her into his arms and—

"The network sent me. I'm Kal Martin, your new producer."

Her words shocked him out of his transfixed stupor. "I'm sorry?"

She held up her gO! Network photo ID that did in fact identify her as Kal Martin.

Crap.

Without taking his eyes off her, Will reached for a two-way. "Aidan, get your ass back to base."

"What's wrong?"

"Right. Freaking. Now."

A momentary pause followed. "On my way, boss."

Will set the radio on the table. "There's been some misunderstanding. We expected a guy." "Apparently."

* * * *

Kal had been prepared for a chilly reception, but this guy felt like the iceberg that took out the Titanic. More handsome in person, his slate grey eyes bored into her, his sandy brown hair not too short, perfect for running her fingers through, and his strong, unsmiling face looked almost rugged. He had a lithe, naturally muscled body, one that would probably be nice to snuggle against. She blinked. What the heck is wrong with me?

Another man ran in. She immediately recognized him as Aidan Faust, the co-host. His appearance distracted her and gave her a chance to rip her attention away from Hellenboek's stony gaze.

Faust stopped in his tracks. "What—oh, hi. Sorry, this is a closed shoot. I'll have to ask you to leave."

Will sat back, crossed his arms and nodded toward her. "Aidan, meet Kal Martin."

"What?" Aidan looked at her. "No shit?"

"No kidding," she said, crossing her arms, mirroring Hellenboek's chilly pose. "I'm your new producer."

"No," Will said, "you're not. Sorry, but there's been some miscommunication." He stood and glared at Aidan. "Handle this."

Will quickly strode from the room, leaving a nervously smiling Aidan behind. "Um. I'm sorry he's—"

"Rude?"

"Uh, yeah. See, he doesn't work with women. I told the network that."

"That's usually illegal according to the Department of Labor, isn't it?"

"Will tends to work by his own rules."

Dadgum, this was her first producer gig. She wouldn't let some jerk like Will Hellenboek keep her from moving up the network ladder. She had her sights firmly set on bigger, better things. *Discovery Channel*, hopefully, if she played her cards right, then maybe she could parlay that into a job at one of the major networks in their news department. In ten years she pictured herself at the helm of a mainstay like the Today show or Good Morning America.

And Heaven help her father—or Will Hellenboek—if anyone fouled that up for her.

Kal set her jaw into what she hoped portrayed a look of fierce irritation. "I don't care if he makes his own rules. I've been hired to do a job and I'm going to do it. Ryan Ausar warned me this wouldn't be a cakewalk. Believe me, I'm not a pushover no matter what you think."

At the mention of Ausar's name, Aidan's face froze. His voice dropped to a shocked whisper. "Ryan hired you?"

She frowned. "Yeah. Why?"

"Shit. Shit, shit, shit?" He ran a hand through his scruffy hair. "Adelle called me. I thought she hired you."

"No. She just handled the paperwork and made the arrangements. I've been working at headquarters in Columbus. Ausar called me into his office last Monday to give me a shot at my own show. Why?"

"Crap!"

He turned from her and held up a staying hand when she tried to speak. He composed himself and faced her. "Look," he whispered, "I'll handle Will. Please. You'll have to play along for a while, okay? Just whatever you do, don't mention that Ryan had anything to do with you being here. I'm not kidding. Don't even think his name in your head."

She didn't get a crazy guy vibe from him and sensed he was serious. Couldn't hurt to play along. "Why not?"

"Because Will would walk away from the show, and then you and I both would be SOL, if you get my drift. Got it?"

Confused, but strangely unable to resist his amber eyes, she nodded. "Okay."

* * * *

Will found a dark, deserted corridor away from the active investigation area. He squatted, held his head in his hands and tried to slow his heartbeat.

Holy shit.

This was bad news. He couldn't work with her, *especially* with someone like her. It'd felt like his heart squeezed out of his chest when her dusty green eyes met his. Dark honey colored hair and she smelled like jasmine. Just the perfect height and with sweet curves in exactly the right places to put his hands...

Will shook his head to clear it. He'd walk away from the show if Aidan couldn't get rid of her. He'd have to. Spending too much time with her would ruin his plans, that much was obvious.

It wasn't her fault, and he regretted being rude to her. Will thought Aidan had made his position clear to the network. Normally, individual production companies handled shows like this but *gO! Network* had their own way of doing things, providing the film crews and producers. It gave them more control over content. More importantly it meant Will didn't have the authority to order someone off a shoot if assigned by a network wonk.

Aidan had assured Will his talks with the network elicited promises of no women allowed.

Will rested his head against the wall and closed his eyes, his heart finally slowing. He didn't need this tonight. Especially not on a Wednesday.

* * * *

Once he composed himself, Will returned to the base. Kal Martin sat next to Aidan as he explained the technical end of things to her. Will took a deep breath, tried to ignore her scent, and stuck out his hand. "I'm sorry I came off like a jerk."

Kal looked at him with a cold, appraising eye. She nodded, then shook hands with him. Something akin to an electric shock coursed through his body, practically lifting his hair from his scalp.

Wow.

It took him a few breaths to realize he still held her hand and release it. He hadn't had a reaction like this to a woman since—

No. Focus.

Kal hoped her eyes didn't bug out. What the heck was it about this guy? She should be lambasting him for his poor manners, yet she struggled not to drool over him. Shaking his hand felt like getting a shock, started fires burning deep inside her, ignited feelings she'd never experienced before.

"Yeah, okay," she mumbled. "Thanks. I appreciate that." She hoped her tone sounded as chilly as she intended. She had to come off sounding professional and not like she panted over him.

And she was panting over him.

Will ran a hand through his dark hair and she fought the urge to jump up and help him with that personal grooming task. This was *so* not like her!

"Aidan," Will said, "I'm going to run outside for a few minutes." He picked up a two-way radio. "Call me if you need me. I'll help out with the investigation tonight. You stay here at base with...her."

Before Aidan could answer, Will quickly turned and left. Kal couldn't pull her gaze away from the sight of his tight jeans clinging to his firm rear end.

She shook her head. Okay, she needed a cold shower, that's all. There was no way in heck she'd get involved with someone she worked with, especially not a TV personality.

Dang sure not a guy who chased ghosts for a living.

Aidan said something and Kal tried to focus. "Sorry, what?"

He laughed. She'd immediately liked Aidan, felt at ease with him, a total contrast to his brooding cousin. "I asked how many shows you've produced before."

"None. This is my first one. I mean, I've worked on others, but not been in charge."

He almost hid his surprise but she noticed the subtle arch of his eyebrows as he tried to digest that news. "Ah. So we're the lucky ones who get to pop your cherry?"

She blushed. He immediately realized how it sounded. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said it like that. My big mouth gets me in trouble."

She laughed. "No, that's okay. It was funny. I'm just...I'm nervous."

He did a horrible Bogart imitation. "Shtick with me, shweetheart. I'll take care of you."

She laughed again. "Thanks, Aidan."

"Hey, we're on the same team."

Chapter 3

The shoot wrapped around three in the morning. It took over an hour to break down the equipment and pack, and was nearly six o'clock by the time they returned to the office and finished unloading. Aidan waited until everyone cleared out. Once alone, he stepped into the back room, closed his eyes and touched his amulet. He opened his eyes in Ryan's Atlanta condo.

Ryan sat in an overstuffed chair, his long legs crossed. The only lit lamp in the corner cast dim, yellow light across his face. Despite the early morning hour, he sipped a glass of what looked like—

"Merlot, Aidan?" he offered.

Aidan dispensed with the pleasantries. "What the fuck? What's the deal with this girl? You know how Will feels. She's never run a show before, and you're sending her to us?"

As always, Ryan acted so cool ice wouldn't melt in his mouth. "I have my reasons."

"How am I supposed to keep Will on the show if she's around? Even I could feel the attraction between them. And you hired her yourself?"

"I like to handpick my top staff. You should know that after this many years."

Aidan nervously paced, ran a hand through his scruffy hair. "Look, when you cooked up this scheme, I agreed to help by getting Will to work on the show, but I didn't agree to this. I feel bad enough already. I didn't think it would hurt anything. Now you've dumped this girl in his lap? What's the deal?"

"If Will comes to me and asks, I will tell him you had no part in this. All I need you to do is keep Kal and Will working on the show together. I will take care of the rest."

Aidan turned on Ryan. "You owe me an explanation."

Ryan's green eyes darkened. "Regardless of our past, I owe you nothing. As head of The Firm I have a job to do. Without Will Hellenboek's services, I'm unable to properly do that job."

"Can't you just promote another archdemon or something?"

Ryan leaned forward and set his glass on the coffee table, then unfolded his legs and slowly stood. Long and svelte, he moved with the smooth, practiced gait of an ageless predator. "You know very well it doesn't work like that. Again, I must say that I have my reasons. I would never do something without a damn good reason, you should know that by now. As your boss I'm telling you that your job is to keep Kal and Will together, in close proximity, on that show."

"How much does she know?"

"Nothing about The Firm, if that's your point."

"That's my point."

Ryan walked to the floor-to-ceiling windows and stared out over the slowly awakening skyline. "I've told her I'm a network VP, nothing more. She's a total innocent. Just do your job." Without turning, Ryan waved his hand and sent Aidan back to Tampa. Then he stood there and watched the sun rise over Atlanta.

No, Aidan didn't need to know his reasons. Ryan wasn't sure how much power Will still possessed. It was dicey using Aidan and risking Will sensing his thoughts, but Will's loyalty to his cousin made Aidan the only logical choice.

Ryan closed his eyes as dawn's light warmed him through the glass. Will wasn't the only one in pain, but where Will's strength lay in mind and body, his own lay in heart and soul. The greater good must be considered, always.

It was his job.

If others thought of him as a heartless bastard for doing his job, so be it. His pain belonged to him and was no one else's business.

Will Hellenboek had no idea how truly lucky he was.

* * * *

Kal fumbled the key in the lock and stumbled through the door. The apartment turned out to be, thankfully, clean and bug free. A typical executive apartment with tasteful but plain furniture and a basic layout. The complex was neatly landscaped and located in a not too bad part of east Tampa. Better than she could have afforded on her own if she'd had to pay for it with her salary, and it came with all the amenities.

She found the bathroom—also clean—and used it before investigating the single bedroom. Queen sized bed, decent furniture, functional.

Well, that's a good sign.

The network assured her the apartment's rent, utilities, and high-speed internet would be paid, in advance, for a year. That meant since she didn't have to pay for her car or housing, Kal could stash most of each paycheck in savings.

This job was well worth it for that alone, even if it meant putting up with Will Hellenboek's garbage.

What was *with* that guy, anyway? Forget a chip on his shoulder, he hauled a friggin boat anchor's worth of attitude. Handsome or not, he needed to suck it up and learn to get past having a girl as a producer. She didn't see him smile a single time during the shoot. Kal assumed the magic of television and editing made Will look like a serious, brooding guy, but that really was his everyday persona. He was no different off camera than on.

Kal felt too tired to figure it out. She'd been up for over twenty-four hours and still had to find the office later that afternoon. She dragged her suitcases inside, locked the door, and collapsed on the bed.

Two hours later, her cellphone rang, waking her. *Crud.*

"Hello, Mom."

"Did you get there okay? Your father was getting concerned."

"I'm fine, Mom. I was asleep."

"But it's so late in the morning. Are you sick?"

Kal rolled over and stared at the ceiling while trying not to groan. "Mom, I got off the plane and went straight to a shoot. I didn't get home until seven this morning. A lot of the shoots take place overnight, it's how the production schedule is set up. Some of the locations are only available at night. I told you that." She just hadn't told them what the show was about yet.

Chicken.

"Oh. Well, I certainly didn't mean to interrupt your nap."

Kal closed her eyes. *And so it begins.* "Mom, I'm hanging up now. Tell Daddy I'm fine, life is fine, the apartment is fine, my job is fine. I'm *not* calling every day. I told him that when I left. I love you."

"Love you too, honey."

Kal shut the phone off and stared at it. Now wide awake, even as tired as she felt, chances were she wasn't going back to sleep any time soon.

Her parents could make a fortune. The Guilt-O-Matic Alarm Clock. Guaranteed to take your mood or sleep and chuck it right out the window, leaving you wide awake and stewing.

Cripes, I'm a horrible daughter.

The shower felt good. After unpacking, Kal found the apartment complex manager's office and arranged for them to let the shipping company unload her things in the apartment when they arrived. One less thing to worry about. She also got directions to the nearest Starbucks.

An hour later she used her map to locate Will's office. Aidan told her she'd have a desk. While the production staff had been assigned by the network, most of the editing for this particular show happened on-site. That would be another of her eventual duties. It made her a little nervous, but Ryan Ausar assured her it was more a supervisory role than hands-on, at least for now. She could take time to learn before she dove in and started cutting shows together on her own.

There was more to it, a lot of post-production work done at network headquarters once the shows were in the can—sounds, titles, effects. Not her problem. Ausar said he'd handle those details for now.

Will wasn't at the office, thank goodness, but Aidan bounded out of the back room to meet her as soon as she walked through the door. He acted like a young puppy to Will's lumbering old dog attitude, even though the two men appeared close in age, probably late thirties or early forties.

"Hey, you made it in early," Aidan chirruped. "Didn't expect to see you until at least after lunch."

Kal had already decided she would try to act as professional as she could today to get off on the right foot and counteract Will's less than welcoming air. "It's my job. Where should I put my things?" "I've got an extra desk in my office for you. I rearranged this morning to make room." He led the way. She felt touched that he'd made the effort. Again, the polar opposite of his cousin.

The office was large enough they wouldn't trip over each other. "I hope this is okay," he said, pointing to one of the desks.

She nodded, setting her coffee and laptop case on the desk. "It's fine, Aidan. Thank you. It won't bother you having me in here?"

"Not at all. Might be the other way around in a few weeks though." He laughed. "My mouth, you know."

She grinned. Working with Aidan was no big sacrifice. Without feeling a hint of sexual tension from him she knew they'd most likely come to be good friends. Okay, maybe she could be friendly with him, at least. "Should I keep a supply of duct tape handy to shut you up?"

He laughed. "Hmm. You never know, I might like that."

* * * *

Will laid in bed with his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. He should be at the office. Would be, except he knew she would be there. He couldn't be there with her.

Even though he wanted to be.

He forced himself to stay still, to listen. A few years ago, he could hear conversations across the street if he listened hard and quieted his mind. Now it was all he could do to hear more than a normal human.

If he closed his eyes he'd see Abby's face. Worse, he feared he'd see Kal's. Why this woman? Why now? He was so close. Another year or two, possibly three, he could finally break free. All those nights spent with his soul in agonizing misery. Alone.

Lonely.

His every breath since Abby's last marked by pain.

Now it was all in jeopardy.

Fucking Aidan and his stupid show. He knew Aidan didn't want him to die, but dammit, Aidan hadn't suffered through twenty-five-plus years of agony. Every day.

Without her.

Will did eventually close his eyes. Abby's face, the sound of her laugh, even the scent of her hair. All crystal clear in his mind.

His soul ached, throbbed worse than normal.

Will took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind. He saw Kal's face, her golden honey hair and dusty green eyes. He should quit. He should call Aidan right now and tell him he was done with the show and to get the Otherworlds crap out of his office. But if he did that...

He wouldn't see Kal anymore.

Then again, how hard could it be? Keep his distance, let Aidan have his fun. It wouldn't be much longer before he could go. He didn't want Aidan getting himself in trouble with The Firm. No matter what, he owed Aidan that much.

Shit.

Will opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, at the familiar shadows and imperfections. It was going to be a long day.

* * * *

Will still hadn't made an appearance by five o'clock. "When will he come in?" Kal asked.

Aidan's tense body language told her more than she wanted to hear. "He'll probably come in later when it's quiet. He's funny like that sometimes."

Earlier, Kal had spent time talking with Purson and Gery. Both men acted friendly and accommodating. Neither would talk about Will beyond the business end of things.

"You're Will's cousin, aren't you?" she asked.

Aidan nodded. "Yep. Lucky me."

It was a calculated risk, but Kal needed to know. "What did I do to get off on the wrong foot with him?"

"Seriously, it's not your fault. It's really all him. He'll settle down. He's just very set in his ways and it'll take him some time to adjust to having you around."

"How much time?"

He wiggled his lips in a delicious way that would be sexy if it wasn't doofishly funny. "How much time you got?"

By seven o'clock that evening, still no Will. Aidan practically dragged Kal out of the office. "Come on, dinner. My treat."

"You don't have plans?"

"Nope. I never have plans. I have work and home."

He had to be pulling her leg, especially after the rumors she'd heard about him. "A guy like you? You expect me to believe that?"

"You've been cruising TMZ.com about me, haven't you? Hey, I'm a busy guy. Come on, you like Cuban food?"

She'd never had Cuban food and assumed—incorrectly—it was like Mexican food. Aidan took her to a wonderful family restaurant near Ybor City for a meal that left her comfortably stuffed and in possession of a huge take-out carton of leftovers for her lunch the next day. Then back home to her new apartment.

Kal locked the door behind her and looked around. Quiet, peaceful.

Father free.

Despite the aggravation Kal knew Will Hellenboek would invariably cause her, she enjoyed working with Aidan. Not to mention being away from Columbus made it all well worth it.

* * * *

Not wanting to run into her, Will waited to go to the office until Kal and Aidan had left for the day. He should have called Aidan and asked him to get her out of there sooner, but he didn't want to deal with the hassle. As soon as Will stepped through the door, Kal's natural, sweet scent hit him. It was apparently the last of his senses to fade. Following her trail, he closed his eyes and walked through the building.

Still strong in the office she shared with Aidan. Will couldn't help but picture her sitting behind her desk, working, maybe with her hair loose down her back instead of pulled into a—

His eyes snapped open. What in home's name am I doing?

Off limits. Totally off limits.

He felt bad he had to treat her so gruffly.

Okay, rudely. If he didn't, he risked getting involved. He couldn't afford that. Not now. Not when he was so close to his goal.

Not when he was so close to being out of pain for good.

Chapter 4

Kal figured it best to get this call out of the way now before she got busy. "Hi, Mom."

"Kalyani Martin, why haven't you called sooner?"

Kal closed her eyes. "Mom, it's only Friday morning."

"Your father is having a royal fit. You were supposed to call every day."

"I told you I wasn't calling every day. I told Daddy that, too. More than once."

"And he told you that you would."

Kal pinched the bridge of her nose. Which aggravated her more: dealing with Will Hellenboek, or dealing with Kenneth Martin?

At least she could tell Hellenboek to go to hell.

"Mom, I just wanted to say hi."

"Hold on, let me get your father."

"No—"

Too late, she'd set the phone down.

Crumzola.

A moment later, her father picked up the phone. "I hope you're happy with yourself, young lady," he scolded. "Your mother has been beside herself with worry. What happened to calling every day?"

Aw, cheese and rice. Kal suspected her mother was just fine but her father didn't like her not being under his thumb.

"Daddy, I already told you I'm not calling every day. I'm an adult."

"What? You don't want to talk to your parents? Are you too busy for us now, Miss Big Shot TV Producer?"

"That's not the reason and you know it."

"I knew I should have put my foot down about you going to that college. I should have forced you to—"

"Daddy." Kalyani didn't know where the strength in her voice came from. "I am an adult. I have a life to live, a very hectic and unusual schedule, and it's unreasonable to expect me to call every day."

Her father fell silent for a moment, miracle of miracles. But she paid in spades.

"Don't you ever raise your voice to me, young lady!"

"I didn't raise—"

"And now you're talking back to me! You should drop to your knees and pray!"

Kal tried to loosen her grip on the phone before she crushed it. "Daddy, I've got another call coming in. I'm sorry, it's work. I need to go. Love you!" She hung up, her body trembling, hating herself for the lie.

Sorry God. Hope You understand.

Despite how being around Will Hellenboek drove her...well, to hell and back, if she had to choose between Tampa or Columbus, she'd choose Tampa and Will. The lesser of two evils.

Does that make me a horrible daughter?

She loved her father. While she shared some of his beliefs, he came from a different generation. Kal didn't honestly believe people were damned for being of a different faith or for not going to church every Sunday—Heaven help her—or for listening to a group called *Vampire Weekend*.

Kal jumped when the phone rang. Her gut clenched, expecting the caller to be her angry father. It wasn't.

"Hello, Kal. Ryan Ausar. How are things?"

Relieved to be speaking to her boss? She must *really* hate talking to her father. "Hi, Mr. Ausar. Everything's fine. You pegged Will right on the nose. A little shaky at the start but I think I'll win him over, don't worry."

Ausar laughed. *Dadgum*, she loved his British accent. "I'm sure you will. Don't hesitate to call me personally if you need anything, right?"

"Thanks, Mr. Ausar."

"Please, call me Ryan. I insist. I hope we'll be working together for quite some time. You might as well call me Ryan."

She didn't get a flirt vibe from him, so she didn't feel creeped out. "Okay, Ryan. Thanks."

Kal hung up and stared at the phone. She still had a few minutes before she had to leave for the office, so she called Becky.

"Hey, Kalypso Girl! Wassup? How's the Sunshine State?" Becky had an ever-growing number of nicknames for Kal based on her unusual first name.

Kal laughed. Becky couldn't be less like her, yet the two had become fast friends during their years as roommates at OSU. Kal pictured Becky's unruly, curly red hair and freckled face, hazel eyes that always gleamed with mischief.

Geez, if she missed anyone it was her best friend, not her parents.

"I'm settling in."

"Your dad ready to come get you yet?"

"I'm sure he is. They're still mad I'm not calling every day. He's trying to get around the issue by calling me."

"Ah, well, such is the breaks. That's why they invented caller ID. So tell me about the hunkalicious guys." Becky had demanded autographed pictures of Aidan and Will. Especially Will.

"Between you and me," Kal said, "Aidan is a very sweet goofball who really dresses like a dork. Will is—" She paused, sorting her thoughts. "Will's...different."

"Different how, girlfriend? That covers a lot of real estate, you know. You dating him yet?"

Kal laughed. "No, not even close. He's really standoffish. The network warned me he wouldn't like having a woman as his producer, and they weren't lying. I'll win him over. Aidan's a sweetie, though."

"You dating him yet, at least?"

Kal grinned. "No. I can't date either of them. I work with them."

"Yeah, and I can't imagine Daddy Dearest wanting a ghost hunter as a son-in-law."

"Got that right!"

"Well, keep me posted, Kalliope Kid. Ciao!"

Her quick Becky boost left Kal feeling ready to take on the world. Becky was the one who encouraged Kal to pursue the internship at the network in the first place when the ad was posted in the school newspaper. Becky lived her life as a balls-out kind of girl who didn't mind that Kal's background stood in stark contrast to her own. Becky's path meandered through law, and she'd already announced her engagement to her fiancé, the wedding to take place after she graduated from Ohio Northern's law school.

Feeling lighter, Kal headed out the door to meet up with Aidan at the office.

* * * *

Kal tried to be sneaky. She wanted to find out more about Will Hellenboek and figured Aidan was her best resource. Maybe there was some snippet of information she could use to break through Will's chilly façade and coax him into warming up to her.

Later that afternoon, she rode with Aidan as they drove two hours south to an investigation in DeSoto county. Aidan's dark sunglasses hid his eyes. She tried not to study his profile as he drove. At least, not obviously.

"So tell me your secrets," he said, startling her after a long period of comfortable silence between them.

"What secrets? And why should I tell you?"

"You're awfully anxious to get into Will's head." He glanced her way, arched an eyebrow at her. "You've been pumping me for info all day, kiddo."

She blushed. Apparently she wasn't as sneaky as she thought she was. "You would be too, if it meant your first big job depended on it."

He nodded. "I suppose you're right."

They rode in silence for a while. "I have to make this work," she finally admitted. "And if you spill this to anyone, I'll beat you brainless."

"My lips are sealed."

She eventually continued. "If I don't make this work, I can't go back to Columbus with my tail tucked between my legs. My father will never let me out of his sight again until he marries me off."

"Can't you stand up to your father? You are an adult, you know."

"You don't know what it's like being a preacher's daughter."

She twisted the ring on her left hand. While she apparently didn't realize she did it, Aidan noted the action.

"It's like I lose the ability to speak for myself around him," she continued. "He just takes over. Like I can't think straight. I'm ten years old again and being grounded for watching cartoons that weren't 'approved' by him."

Kal let out a frustrated sigh. "I love him and my mom, don't get me wrong. They're good parents. I learned how to work hard and I always felt loved but it's...it's like I've never felt I fit in. Like I'm different, you know?"

Aidan said nothing, but he nodded.

Not fitting in? She has no idea, he thought.

Kal wasn't done blowing off steam. "I mean, not just at school. 'Oh look, it's the preacher's kid.' Even at home. Like there's something else inside me and I can't get to it, you know? A feeling I should be somewhere else. I've always felt like that. But now I've got this job and it's all changed. I feel like I'm supposed to be here."

She twisted the ring harder and he wondered the significance. Not a boyfriend, he already knew that much.

"I have to make it. I *have* to do this. Then I can be on my own for good and I can stay far away from Columbus. For now, at least." Kal looked at him. "Whatever we've got to do to keep me on this show, I'll do it. It's just for a season, not even a full season because some of the episodes are already in the can. Just help me get through this. Help me convince Will not to leave the show, please. I can't lose this job."

Aidan nodded again. "Stick with me. That's the best thing for now. You have secrets, well, you're not alone. Keep your interaction with Will to a minimum, just refer to me, work with me, let me be the go-between. Ryan doesn't have to be any wiser. As long as the show's filmed and you're in charge, that's all Ryan needs to know." He looked at her. "Deal?"

She nodded. "Deal. Thanks, Aidan."

"No problem, sweet cheeks." He grinned. "You don't mind I call you that, right?"

Kal attempted a scowl but her lips betrayed her. He was funny and sweet, and she got a totally different set of vibes from him than she did his yummy cousin. He felt playful and...

Safe.

"No, I don't mind as long as you don't do it in front of the others. Keep it between us. I am supposed to be your boss, sort of."

"Naw, I wouldn't do that to you. If we're going to be partners in crime I should get a little leeway, though. Don't worry, I won't sexually harass you." He paused, then looked at her as he pulled up to a red light. "Unless you want me to." He waggled his eyebrows at her, making her laugh again.

"Your girlfriend won't mind you spending all this time with me?"

Kal almost felt a wall go up against her in his mind, she practically felt his change in demeanor.

"I told you, no girlfriend for moi, sugar plum. Just little ole me. You get me all to yourself. Don't have to share me."

Kal studied him. "What's your secret?"

He waggled his eyebrows at her again. "If I tell you then it's not a secret, is it?"

* * * *

Over the next two weeks, Kal quickly settled into a comfortable routine with Aidan. She usually rode with him to the shoots. Besides sharing an office they ate many—most—meals together. They'd developed an easy rapport, a close relationship she'd never had before with anyone, male or female, and without any sexual tension between them. She didn't even feel this close to Becky, and they'd been best friends for years.

Aidan was like the big brother she'd never had. She couldn't help feeling there was more to him than met the eye. She knew he was single. Even though he had a flirty reputation, she'd never seen him go out socially or even talk to women on the phone except for work. He spent as much time at the office as she did, if not more. He didn't have time for a personal life.

At least they had that much in common. His wardrobe proved to be truly atrocious. Maybe that explained his single status. His fondness for eye-watering Magnum, P.I. tropical shirts, unbuttoned over tank tops, paired with totally clashing socks and shoes, apparently wasn't just part of his shtick. He really did dress like that, all the time.

All the time.

He had an eclectic collection of music, especially Jimmy Buffett and anything slightly resembling off center. While she'd spent her youth and high school days listening to Christian music, when she met and became roommates with Becky at OSU, Kal had been introduced to artists like Aerosmith, Meat Loaf, and Usher. She was willing to give anything a try and picked up even more new favorites from Aidan's extensive assortment.

On location, Aidan acted as a buffer between Kal and Will, frequently shuttling her out a back entrance before Will made it to base. What little contact she did have with Will, she settled for acting cool and aloof. Two could play that game.

Sometimes three or four days would pass before she'd even cross paths with Will in the office. Aidan had warned her that Wednesdays were especially bad, and to make sure to avoid Will at all costs. He wouldn't elaborate except to say that a weekly errand Will made always put him in a foul mood.

"What, he visits a probation officer?" she snarked.

Aidan smiled but shook his head. "Naw, that would be easy."

He didn't elaborate. The shadow that crossed Aidan's face told her the joke had been as much for his own sake as Will's.

Kal spent much of her office time cooped up in the edit room with Aidan, learning various hands-on production skills specific to their show. When Aidan scheduled appearances or scouting runs, locally or out of town, Kal accompanied him.

They settled into a comfortable routine. After a reservation screw-up left them with one hotel room for an out-of-town appearance, Kal realized she didn't mind bunking with Aidan. He was a perfect gentleman in his own playfully perverted way and made sure not to invade her privacy.

I wouldn't mind sharing a room with Will, Kal thought before she could clamp down on it. No, like *that* would ever happen. Hell would freeze over before Will would even ride in a car with her, much less share a hotel room.

Maybe her infrequent contact with the brooding, mysterious cousin made him more romantically appealing to her. His stony, slate grey eyes pierced through her very soul the few times she talked to him, interactions that left her short of breath, heart racing, and with an uncomfortable dampness between her legs despite her attempts to put on a cool, professional front. Sometimes she'd stare at him from the edit room. If she sat in just the right place and he was at his desk, she could crane her neck and catch a glimpse of the back of his sandy brown hair.

The Great Brooding One, as she referred to Will when alone with Aidan, was an enigma who apparently stubbornly planned to stay that way. She'd spent more than one solitary evening cruising the fan sights, thinking surely one of them would have some personal 411 on Will.

Nothing. Which struck her as odd. Some of the sites were run by paparazzi bulldogs, yet Will Hellenboek had no more than a few bland comments to describe his life, which contributed to wild speculation on the discussion boards.

In contrast, plenty of information could be found readily available about Aidan, even if most of it wasn't accurate. While scores of women swooned over Aidan's bad boy surfer doofus charm, Will was invariably the focus of heart-throbbing, lusty posts by totally lovestruck fans.

Oooh, I'd love him to investigate me...

Maybe Will can help me find my heart, becuz ive lost it to him...

I wish he'd take his shirt off...

Kal had to agree with that last one. While in agreement, she also felt a hint of...

No. She *couldn't* be jealous. That was just plain stupid on a cellular level. Although Will didn't appear to have a relationship going on, he obviously wasn't in interested in her. The female volunteer investigators all dealt with Aidan. Kal never felt any jealousy when Aidan playfully flirted and bantered off-camera with them. But the thought of adoring fans lusting after Will churned her stomach in an uncomfortable way.

More than once she replayed her initial meeting with Will in her mind, the visceral, immediate reaction—attraction—she'd had to him. How she'd never had that reaction before to anyone else in her life.

How pitiful did that make her?

Well, that's why she wore a purity ring, to remind her *not* to have those kinds of feelings for others and to keep her out of trouble, not that she hadn't been tempted a time or two.

Just never to this level. Or by a man who apparently had no interest in helping tempt her.

Kal took comfort in the fact that even though she might lust after Will's firm loins, he apparently didn't feel the same, thus effectively keeping her free from temptation.

Le sigh, as Becky would say.

* * * *

Kal's parents eventually settled for her calling every few days. After they accepted every third day, Kal stretched the time between calls, even sneakily resorting to leaving voice mails on the house phone when she knew her parents wouldn't be home so she could avoid talking to them. She'd sidestepped her father's questions about her new church, unwilling to admit that not only had she not gone, she hadn't even scoped any out. Not that it mattered, because they usually filmed overnight on Fridays and Saturdays, when the volunteer investigators were available to go out. Most of her Sunday mornings consisted of an early post-investigation breakfast with Aidan and the rest of the crew—sans The Great Brooding One—before returning home, dropping into bed and sleeping until early afternoon.

She didn't know her father's opinion of the Otherworlds show because she'd taken the chicken route and told her mother, not him. Whether her mother told him was another matter entirely. Kal would bet money on her mom not having told him simply because he hadn't outright demanded she quit and move home immediately, screaming that she was contributing to the Devil's work.

Yet.

Aidan gave Kal an autographed picture of Will, as well as one of himself, so she could send them to Becky. Aidan was also more than happy to call Becky personally and chat with her for about ten minutes. After Kal took her phone back she'd been amazed to find motor-mouth Becky practically speechless with happy shock.

Will still had his day job, the production company. Apparently, that had paid his bills for quite a few years. Aidan explained that's why the unusual setup regarding editing and post-production with *gO! Network*, because they had the necessary equipment on-site.

Kal didn't question it, usually too busy with her show duties to concern herself with anything outside of the Otherworlds world, so to speak. Ryan frequently checked in with her to see how she fared. When she mentioned it to Becky, her friend snarked he was checking to see if she'd decided to quit yet. Kal got anything but that kind of vibe from him. Whenever she talked to Ryan it was as if he tried to do everything he could to help her succeed. When she offhandedly mentioned she wished she had a more powerful laptop and would have to go shopping for one, not meaning anything by it, a new one appeared at the office the next morning.

"Ask me for what you need, love," he'd said when she called to thank him. "I didn't send you there to fail, I sent you there to do a job. Whatever you need to do that job, it's yours." She didn't take offense to his use of the endearment either, knowing it was probably a British thing. Even though he was cute.

Ack! Surrounded by cute guys. Sweet torture, but she loved it.

Chapter 5

Working with Kal proved to be an exquisitely sweet torture. Will tried to limit his exposure to her because he spent the hours after with his eyes closed, trying to hold on to her scent and the sound of her voice. He'd passed plenty of late night hours standing in the doorway of Aidan and Kal's shared office, his eyes closed, nose to the air.

It wasn't Aidan's fault. Will was thankful his cousin kept her away from him. Under other circumstances, Will might feel jealous at how much time Aidan got to spend with her, but not now, and not with Aidan.

He heard them laughing in their office or in the edit room, muffled by a closed door, and longed to join them.

More than once he'd sat at Abby's grave and talked to her, reminding himself why he couldn't give in. Not this time, not to this woman.

Never.

There were times Aidan took Kal out of town with him. With both of them gone, Will felt like a piece of him had been ripped out.

This is too much.

He *couldn't* feel this way about her, he barely knew her despite the feelings she instilled in him. Why *this* woman, why now?

Will had decided to tough it out, to try to stand it as long as he could. It wouldn't be fair to Aidan to bail on him, and it certainly wasn't Kal's fault, no reason to punish her. She was young and a good person and deserved a chance to have a successful show like this under her belt.

Still, he kept his distance from her as much as possible.

After one particularly bad day, Will forced himself to go home and try to sleep. Always a problematic issue, even on a "good" night.

A good night meant he only awoke once or twice from a nightmare and didn't relive that final day.

This, however, wasn't a good night.

Even knowing it was a dream didn't help. Having lived the events meant he couldn't change the dream, couldn't change the outcome to a happy ending. He still went on assignment with Aidan despite both Aidan and Ryan telling him it wasn't necessary. A routine scouting mission in a near-Earth realm, checking out a few rumors filtering through the grapevine. Will hadn't wanted Aidan going by himself with the reports they'd heard from Bera, and the other guys weren't strong enough to open the barrier alone if something happened.

As always, the sudden horrible, heavy feeling staggered him, forced him to reach out to Aidan. He grabbed his cousin's arm for support.

"What's wrong, Will?" Aidan asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know—"

The pain. The searing agony that drove him to his knees and ripped a primal scream from deep within him.

Aidan looked up, receiving the call even through the barrier. He grabbed Will-

Appearing in his own living room. Ryan cornered, desperate anger on his face and a sword in hand, taking on two...Will wasn't sure what they were but the tall, huge, bulking bi-pedal creatures obviously originated from some off-Earth realm. Two lay dead on the floor already, and from the looks of Ryan's bloody sword he'd been the one who took them out.

When the two remaining creatures realized they no longer held the advantage, one immediately disappeared. The second died on the end of Ryan's sword after making the mistake of taking his eyes off Ryan to look at Will and Aidan. Injured, Ryan slid down the wall and left a bloody smear behind him.

Will's instincts finally kicked in despite his agonizing pain. He rushed to Ryan's side. "Where's Abby?" he gasped.

Ryan squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.

Will immediately screamed her name, calling out to be with her. Aidan, his eyes wide, stared into the kitchen. With his heart a chilly boulder in his chest, Will started for the doorway when Aidan tackled him, forced him to the floor, not letting him see.

"No," Aidan begged. "Don't, Will. Please, don't. You don't want to see. There's nothing you can do." Aidan summoned Purson and Gery, who immediately appeared. After a silent order from Aidan, they pinned a hysterical Will to the floor.

Ryan, tears streaming down his face, dragged himself to his feet, the sword left behind and his left arm hanging limp. He staggered to the kitchen doorway and stared inside, then dropped to his knees.

"I'm sorry, Will," he sobbed. "I tried. I couldn't stop them. I didn't get here in time."

Aidan stood. He walked to the kitchen doorway and bowed his head, eyes closed, tears silently coursing down his cheeks.

They wouldn't let Will see her. Ryan ordered Purson and Gery to take Will to Atlanta and forcibly hold him there while he stayed behind with Aidan. When Ryan and Aidan returned several hours later, both men looking haggard and distraught, Will threw his amulet at Ryan and screamed, begged Ryan to kill him. He didn't want to live without her.

He couldn't. Not without his soul mate.

Aidan took Will to her. Will instinctively knew the high collared robe she wore carefully tucked beneath her chin hid a sight he didn't want to see.

On his knees and sobbing, Will held Abby's hand, kissed it, stroked it, tried to find any sign of her, any thought.

Nothing.

Part of his soul died when they killed her.

Will awoke from his dream with his cheeks wet and feeling the familiar pain in his chest from his aching soul. The intellectual part of him this many years removed could silently thank Ryan for what he did, trying to protect her, and then protecting him from the horrifying last image he would have had of her. He knew Ryan had his own experiences and wanted to spare Will that, at least. But then...

Then it was all Will could do to not throw himself into the grave with her coffin.

As it was, he could remember her laughing, smiling, wrapping her arms around him as she kissed him good-bye before he left with Aidan, just hours before she died.

How she'd said, "I love you."

With all that said and done, Will still hated Ryan for not letting him die, keeping him from joining her, especially since Ryan had personally experienced the kind of agony his soul suffered.

Eventually, Will fitfully slept.

* * * *

The network arranged a huge shoot that would sorely test Kal's patience with Will Hellenboek. The crew packed and drove south and east across the state to Miami Beach, to investigate a famous old hotel that was being renovated. The location's sheer size and notoriety forced Will to go along on the shoot with the other investigators, although he drove his car and didn't follow the crew caravan. Kal, as usual, rode with Aidan. Will arrived and checked in before the rest of them, his room located on a different floor from Kal and Aidan and the other crew.

He'd had the hotel switch his reservation to arrange that. Kal swallowed her pride and anger and tried to let it go. At least he'd shown up.

The next morning, Kal ate breakfast with Aidan, Gery, and Purs to go over their production schedule before meeting with the crew and volunteer investigators. She sensed the men's collective tension. Halfway through their discussion, Kal laid down her notepad and looked at them.

"Okay, boys. Let's have it."

The men exchanged a glance. "Have what?" Aidan asked.

She sat back and crossed her arms. "The Great Brooding One is especially broody this trip. Can one of you please ask him to at least put in an appearance at a production meeting? It'd be nice if I could spend more than five minutes in a room with him." She'd tried being nice, tried being friendly. If Hellenboek wanted to act like a jerk, she'd act like a witch. Obviously the other crew didn't have a problem with her, they had no issues working with her.

Aidan looked nervous. "He's got a couple of other projects in the pipe—"

"No. Please do not make excuses for him, Aidan. Nobody leave, we're not done." She angrily shoved her chair back from the table and stomped across the lobby to the elevators. When she hit the call button she tapped her foot in irritation while she waited. The elevator finally arrived and she rode it to the fifth floor where Will was staying. She'd never directly confronted him like this before. Maybe it was time she did.

Kal quickly oriented herself and found his room. She angrily pounded on his door without saying anything.

Seconds later he threw it open, surprised and startled to see her. Then it looked like a mask dropped over his face to hide his emotions.

"Downstairs, five minutes," she told him. "Production meeting in the restaurant. I won't keep you from whatever your freaking personality problem is for more than thirty minutes, but I need your rear end there to go over production notes. This is a huge shoot. We'll have a lot of crew on location, crowd control issues to deal with, so quit busting my butt and just show the heck up for once and give me a little respect." She turned to go.

"Kal."

The sound of his soft voice startled her. He rarely spoke to her. She stopped but didn't face him. "What is it, Hellenboek?"

He hesitated, then said, "I'm sorry. I'll be right down."

She let out a silent, relieved sigh. "Thank you." She hadn't expected him to agree. In fact, she'd expected him to refuse, get into a fight with her, and force her to call in Ryan Ausar to handle him despite her promise to Aidan not to mention the man's name.

Not exactly the way she'd wanted to handle it.

Maybe she should have been witchy to Will from day one.

True to his word, Will walked into the restaurant a few minutes later. He sat at the far end of the table, as far as he could get away from her, and studied his clasped hands on the table the entire time.

She wasn't sure he was even listening until he softly offered a suggestion on a more efficient way to split up the crew for shooting the B-roll shots.

Startled, Kal nearly tripped over her tongue. "Okay. That's a good idea, Hellenboek. Thank you." Kal had settled for treating him with cool professionalism since nothing else apparently thawed him out.

She felt Aidan practically ready to vibrate out of his chair next to her, the tension radiated off him in nearly visible waves. Over Will's behavior? She suspected so.

When Kal ended the meeting, she didn't look up from her notes as she called out to Will, "We're having another meeting at two, Hellenboek. If you have better things to do and places to be, feel free to blow it off like you normally do. Good grief, I certainly don't want to interrupt your CSI Miami reruns or whatever it is you're doing."

He nodded and left without comment.

Aidan slumped next to her. She looked at him. "Don't say it," she warned him.

"Say what?"

"Whatever the heck you were going to say to me about him. Dang it, I'm the producer, and he can darn well show up every once in a while and give me a little respect. He's acting like we're mortal enemies or something." "No, sugar, that's not it at all—"

"Oh, please. Spare me, Aidan. Do *not* give me the 'it's not you' speech again. If I hear that one more time, I'm going to puke."

Will spent most of the first night avoiding Kal. That meant he spent most of it in front of the camera, a place she knew darn well he hated being.

She derived a little silent satisfaction from his discomfort.

Kal spent most of the evening being cold or downright snotty to Will the few times she saw him. Two could play that game. Aidan ended up helping her at base and with the technical end of things.

That Will was willing to be uncomfortable to avoid her made Kal feel even more determined to find out what the heck was going on with him. She wished he'd at least man up enough to come tell her to her face why he was acting like this. Instead, his quiet, chilly avoidance was even worse than if he'd been obnoxiously confrontational with her.

At one point Aidan went to help check out one area that other investigators reported had activity. As Kal was checking the cameras, she noticed one had somehow moved out of place.

Might as well go fix it myself.

She grabbed a two-way and went upstairs to take care of it. As she walked down the corridor, around the corner she heard Will talking with Aidan.

Shoot. She thought they were one floor down.

She steeled herself, threw back her shoulders, and started down the hall when Will's voice came to her and stopped her in her tracks.

"You know why, Aidan. Drop it."

"You're going to hurt her feelings, dude. There's no reason to treat her the way you've been treating her."

"It's nothing personal! It has nothing to do with her. You know that. Just tell her for me."

"You tell her. You're acting like an asshole, Will. What's she supposed to think? She's a real sweetie, why don't you just be nice to her, huh? Is that too much to ask?"

"Subject closed."

Kal gritted her teeth and rounded the corner. In the corridor, Will looked up, startled. Alone.

That was enough to stop Kal in her tracks. "Where's Aidan?" she asked.

Will looked like he was about to poop a cinder block out his butt. "What?"

She cautiously walked forward, a chill running through her. "Aidan. You know, him, right? Big guy, loud shirts, your flippin' cousin. I heard you talking to him." There was no place Aidan could have gone, no doors, no stairs, nowhere. He'd have to walk past her to get back to the elevators.

Will shook his head. From the guarded look on his face, she knew he was lying. "Just me."

Kal shivered again and ran her hands up and down her arms. Maybe there *was* something supernaturally weird going on in this building. Instead of arguing with Will she shoved past him, adjusted the camera, and angrily stalked back to the elevators.

When Aidan showed up at base twenty minutes later, Kal turned in her chair. "What the heck is going on? I went upstairs to adjust camera five, and I heard you and Will talking. I walked around the corner and it's just Will. Where the heck did you go?"

Aidan's turn to lock down. He slowly shook his head. "No, sugar. I was with Cabrio." He walked over and gently laid one hand on Kal's shoulder as his other reached for something hanging around his neck. It felt like her brain clouded over. "I was with Cabrio," Aidan repeated. "I wasn't talking with Will..."

She felt like she fell into his sweet butterscotch-colored eyes. Five minutes later, Kal startled awake. Apparently she'd nodded off over the monitor bank. That was definitely not like her.

Aidan sat next to her, an amused, albeit slightly forced-looking smile on his face. "You okay, sweet cheeks?"

"Was I asleep?"

He grinned. "Yep. You were mumbling something about a corridor." But his body language changed, relaxed.

Relieved.

Whatever was going on, Kal had too much on her plate to worry about it. Although it was more comforting to think she'd dozed off on the job than to question her sanity. Then again, that answer didn't feel right to her, either.

They prepared to wrap for the night. A private security company would stand guard over their equipment until they returned the next evening to finish the investigation. Kal had switched off the monitors and was going over her notes when she felt more than heard someone walk into the room behind her.

A glance in one of the darkened monitors showed Will's reflection in the doorway. She stiffened. It didn't matter that she apparently dreamed something, it didn't change the fact that he exhibited as much warmth as a block of ice where she was concerned.

"Yes, Hellenboek?" She didn't turn to face him.

In the monitor, she watched as he stepped a little closer, but not by much.

"I... is there anything else tonight?"

Kal took her time responding. "Nope. You can scurry off to your hidey-hole until tomorrow evening. Not that I expect you to show up, but eleven o'clock, lunch, in the hotel restaurant. Production meeting."

"Kal—"

"We're done here tonight, Hellenboek. You can get out of here. I know you're dying to get away from me."

Her eyes flicked to the monitor again. He hesitated, then turned and left without further comment. When he was gone the nervous breath Kal had been holding escaped her in an explosive rush. She could certainly give him a taste of his own medicine.

Although she hated being mean like that. Well, it was her or him, and she wasn't going anywhere. Trying to do things the nice way hadn't gotten her squat.

* * * *

The next afternoon, Will not only showed up for the lunchtime production meeting, but the afternoon one as well.

He didn't speak but at least he was there. Kal softened her attitude toward him slightly, toned back her grouch mode. That made her feel less guilty even if it didn't change his reaction any.

The film crew managed to pick up a few interesting things on tape, as well as two of the volunteer investigators captured EVPs—Electronic Voice Phenomenon. That meant a really good show to cut together. She could splice the plentiful incidental scares in with the captured evidence and have a pretty great episode.

At four in the morning, Kal declared the shoot officially wrapped and ordered everyone to start breaking down and packing equipment. She rode an elevator upstairs, alone, to retrieve one of the cameras when the car stopped with a jolt and the lights went off.

Shoot.

She fought her racing heart. She'd never been scared of the dark before, but she'd left her two-way on the monitor table and her cellphone was clipped to her backpack at base.

Crud.

Five minutes later, the elevator hadn't moved and no emergency lights came on. Kal felt her way around to the panel and tried to remember which button was the emergency button.

Her anxiety ratcheted up when she felt a cool breeze brush against her arm, not like the air conditioner, but something cold and clammy.

Kal started slapping at the buttons, fighting her panic, until she found the one at the bottom that tripped the buzzer. The cool breeze worked its way up her bare arm, across her shoulder, to the back of her neck.

With her heart hammering in her chest, Kal started pounding on the door and screaming for help.

The cold breeze encircled her neck and settled against her other ear. In her mind, as if whispered to her, she heard a soft, "Hello."

Her control snapped.

In the total blackness she started crying, attempted to pry the door open, kicked at it. After another interminable moment she heard Aidan on the other side.

"Kal, honey? Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not freaking okay! Get me the heck out of here right now!"

"I'm working on it."

"There's something in here with me!" She continued screaming and kicking, pounding on the door. The cold feeling slithered down her other arm before wrapping around her legs.

"What?"

"Get me out!"

A moment later, the lights came back on, making Kal scream again. She whirled around, crying, certain she'd see...

What?

She was alone.

A moment later the door opened, the elevator stuck three feet above the floor below her destination. Aidan reached in and pulled her out and into his arms. He was alone.

"You okay, babe?"

She nodded. She tried to quit crying, but now that relief had displaced her fear she clung to him, desperate, emotionally overloaded as the adrenaline crash hit her.

"Shh, it's okay, babe," he softly reassured her. When she recovered, he held her at arm's length. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She wiped her face on her shirt. "I'm sorry, I guess I freaked out."

"What was it?"

She started to say, then paused. "I...guess I just freaked out. Not enough sleep and the total darkness got to me."

He nodded, but looked concerned. "You sure?"

"Yeah." She started to head for the stairs—no way in heck she'd ride that elevator again and stopped. "Crumzola. The camera."

He smiled and held out his hand. "Let's you and me go get it together. We'll walk."

She smiled and let out a relieved breath as she laced her fingers through his. "Thanks, Aidan."

* * * *

Aidan waited until one Sunday evening to talk to Ryan again. He found his boss alone, cooking in his Atlanta condo.

"Expecting company?" Aidan slipped onto one of the barstools at the counter.

Ryan glanced up from the skillet. "Not particularly. To what do I owe this visit?"

Aidan nervously twisted his hands together. "What's going on, Ryan? Why are you so insistent that Kal and Will be together?"

"I have my reasons. You should know that." He glanced at him. "You haven't done a very good job at keeping them together, have you now?"

Aidan wouldn't meet Ryan's gaze. "I don't want Will to bolt."

"You're practically hiding her from him. That's not what I wanted. Even you're smart enough to know that."

"I love her."

Ryan arched an eyebrow at Aidan, who clarified. "Like a sister. Duh." He studied his hands. "She reminds me a lot of Chloe," he quietly added.

Aidan knew he didn't imagine that Ryan's posture changed, stiffened. Yeah, a low blow and a calculated risk, but he had to find out what in home's name Ryan's game was. He also knew he didn't imagine the sudden tension in Ryan's voice.

"That took place many years ago. You know damn well I don't wish to talk about her."

"You're not going to hurt them, are you?"

Ryan glared at Aidan, his green eyes blazing. "Do you *really* need to ask me that? Have we not been through enough together, known each other long enough to answer that question?"

"You know what I mean. Don't give me that self-righteous crap." Aidan composed his thoughts for a moment while he watched Ryan cook. "She's a good person. She's a total, complete innocent. You're not trying to bring her into The Firm, are you?"

Ryan slammed a pot onto the stove and jabbed his wooden spoon in the air at Aidan, spattering béarnaise sauce on the counter in the process. "What did I just tell you, Faust?" Ryan's voice rose, loud and strident. "Do *not* question me or what I must do! I have my reasons. That's all you need to know."

Aidan studied the other man. "You won't tell me what's going on because you don't want Will to find out. Tell me I'm wrong."

Ryan's shoulders slumped. "Drop it, please. Just do as I ask." He waved his hand and Aidan disappeared, sent back to Tampa. Ryan looked at the food, then dumped it in the sink and used the garbage disposal to take care of it.

He'd lost his appetite. Aidan was a man with a good heart. A truly good heart. He was loyal and loving and protective of those he considered friends and family.

Unfortunately, Ryan didn't need a good-hearted man, he needed a well-positioned sneak to push Kal and Will together and get the ball rolling. Aidan had done everything possible except throwing a blanket over Kal and buying her a chastity belt to keep Will away from her.

He sighed. That left him with only one alternative, the one he'd hoped he wouldn't have to resort to. Besides being risky, it would make him even less popular than he already was. Not that popularity was a huge concern of his. Unfortunately, there was no other way.

After washing the dishes, Ryan walked to the living room, sat on the couch and closed his eyes. Once done, he couldn't undo it. He allowed himself no grief, no regret. The past was over, no matter how much he wished he could relive it. Will had to return to The Firm. Despite Ryan's repeated attempts throughout the years, Will had steadfastly refused to rejoin them. Ryan had hoped Will wouldn't force his hand, allowing him the chance to pursue a little happy ever after of his own for a change.

It wasn't to be.

Considering his position, perhaps that was for the best after all. His own happiness was irrelevant. He had a job to do.

Lesli Richardson

Ryan touched his dark red garnet amulet and muttered a low, rumbling incantation dredged from the bowels of his memory. As the dark mist gathered and congealed in front of Ryan, he gave it the information it needed before sending it on its way. Then he stood and walked to the kitchen. There he poured himself three fingers of bourbon, straight, and downed it.

Chapter 6

After several weeks in Tampa, Kal received news that the network had set up a huge out-oftown shoot in Gainesville. Kal had never been there before. They would investigate two locations over several days. She packed for the trip, relieved to know she'd be riding with Aidan. She'd come to look forward to road trips with him, enjoyed the hours spent laughing at his goofy sense of humor and their playful banter.

All in all, in the time she'd been part of the Otherworlds crew she'd spent maybe a total of six hours in close proximity to Will Hellenboek. All of that time with his stony, unsmiling gaze trying to focus anywhere but on her eyes.

The Great Brooding One really was a mystery of epic proportions. Perhaps the show should investigate *him*.

Kal had learned to not ask Aidan too much about Will, because he wouldn't answer and it made him uncomfortable ducking her questions. Instead, she observed. She got good at eavesdropping on their conversations in the office and watching Will's interactions with others in a group. Will never smiled, but no one got the same chilly reception she did.

She was the only girl on the crew.

Come to think of it, the only times she saw Will interact with women were in restaurants or with hotel staff. Even those conversations he kept to clipped, short exchanges, the bare minimum needed to complete a transaction. Oddly enough, fans didn't seem to be an issue. When she went out alone with Aidan—which was most of the time, because he'd apparently adopted her—it wasn't unusual for their meal to be interrupted by a fan looking for an autograph. Will's chilly essence kept fans away, almost to the point they didn't seem to recognize him in public despite his wild popularity. Kal couldn't ever remember seeing a fan approach Will. Aidan, and to a lesser extent Purson and Gery and some of the investigators, were always asked to sign autographs or have pictures taken.

They reached their motel and settled in for the evening. Her room was next to Aidan's. After eating dinner with the crew and other investigators—this time all men—Aidan invited himself over to Kal's room for a few games of poker.

He delighted teaching her the game and she admitted she enjoyed it. They never played for money, although Aidan couldn't help teasing her about one day coaxing her into strip poker.

She got the distinct impression he only teased though, and wasn't seriously flirting.

No surprise, Will didn't eat breakfast with them the next morning. Kal spent the day with Aidan, scouting the locations and taking notes, coordinating with the film crew for B-roll opportunities and setup shots. Lunch time, no Will. Aidan assured her that The Great Brooding One was fine and simply holed up in his room taking care of other business. But from the set of Aidan's jaw and tone of voice, Kal knew he was covering for Will. Again. Most likely Will was staying away because of her.

On the one hand it irritated her and she took it personally. Was she so horrible to work with that he couldn't bear the sight of her? She had no problems with any other crew members or investigators. That left Will as the common denominator.

He'd have to suck it up or he'd have eleven miserable months ahead of him.

Will blew off another pre-production meeting before dinner. Then the crew took an hour of free time before heading to the first location.

Kal rode from the hotel with Aidan. She knew he hadn't told Will she'd be on location tonight —Will thought she'd be working with the second film crew at the other location—and hoped the fireworks would be kept to a minimum.

"I'm sick of this," she groused. "What is his deal, anyway? Just tell me and get it over with," she demanded as a way of breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"What do you mean?"

"You're a terrible liar," she said.

She couldn't read the emotion behind his smile. "So I've been told."

"Then answer my question."

"What question?"

"What is. The deal. With Will?" Not that she expected Aidan's answer to be any different than all the other times she'd asked him this exact same question.

"He's a very private guy, sugar. He'd have my balls if I talk to you about him."

"Why doesn't he want women on the shoots? I deserve an answer."

Aidan nervously shifted behind the wheel. She knew his fidgeting was more than trying to get comfortable. "He just doesn't. It's a personal thing for him."

"He's not gay, is he?"

"Do we really have to have this conversation?"

"Look, I need this job, you want this job, so why don't you work with me instead of against me? Give me something I can use to get into Will's good graces."

Aidan sighed. "It's not you, I've told you that." He was quiet for a long moment. "He doesn't want to get involved with anyone."

Kal processed that for several minutes. "What? How does that in any way relate to us working together? He can't keep his pants zipped around women? He throws himself at them? He's a male nymphomaniac? That makes no sense."

Aidan shook his head. "I can't tell you any more than that, sweet cheeks. Just let me take the lead. You're right that we all have to work together. That means you have to trust me." He turned his gaze on her. "Can you do that?"

Frustrated at Aidan's lack of information, Kal slumped in her seat. "Fine."

* * * *

Will was already inside the building directing setup when they arrived. Aidan took Kal around to a side entrance and kept her presence from Will until they turned a corner and bumped into him while he was adjusting an improperly positioned infrared camera.

Will took a step back. "What is *she* doing here? She's supposed to be at the other location tonight."

Aidan stepped between them. "She's going to hang with me all night. She doesn't want to be here any more than you want her here, so chill out. She's got a contract she has to fulfill or she gets screwed. Calm down, dude. Show a little respect, okay? She's just doing her job. I'll take care of her."

Will's eyes skipped over her face, to the floor, skittered across her again and then to Aidan. Every time Will's gaze met hers, Kal felt sweet, tingly heat build in places she wasn't used to feeling warmth.

"Just see you do, Aidan. We talked about this, dammit." Will glanced at her and dropped his gaze again.

Why the *heck* wouldn't he look at her?

Will took a deep breath. "I told you, Kal, it's nothing personal. I'm sorry. I have my own way of doing things, and the network is sticking their nose in where it doesn't belong. I know it's not your fault. I'm sorry you're caught in the middle of all this."

She'd expected anything but an apology from him. She nodded. "Okay. Thanks." *Well, that could be called progress, I suppose.*

Will turned and quickly strode away as they stared at his back.

Aidan released a long, relieved breath. "See? That wasn't so bad. Come on. Let's scope this place out."

* * * *

Will swore under his breath and walked out to his car. He leaned against it and gulped the night air, tried to get Kal's scent out of his lungs.

What the *fuck* was it about her that did this to him? His cock throbbed inside his jeans, not an unfamiliar sensation over the years, but it wanted to rip free from his body and follow her and do things to her he hadn't done in...

He shook his head as another stabbing bolt of pain pierced his soul. This was *way* more than getting a piece of ass. There was something going on, and that fueled his discomfort even more than the obvious feelings she instilled in him. Her voice drilled straight through his brain, in a good way, staying in his memories and refusing to leave. She smelled sooo damn good, too. Fuck, it felt worse than being in a bakery with chocolate chip cookies in the oven. He wanted to bend her over and...

Will squeezed his eyes shut and tightened his fists until his fingernails dug into his palms. The pain eventually brought his brain and other rebellious parts of his anatomy under control. *Fuck*. She could *not* stay on the shoot tonight, not anywhere close to him. Not in the same room, Christ, not even in the same building. He couldn't handle it. He couldn't stand not burying his face in her hair and holding her body against his.

On the heels of that, the old, familiar pain flared in his soul, agonizing, shredding him from the inside out.

Oh yes. That was enough to help him focus on his purpose again. To be out of pain would be a blessing even if it meant giving up a beauty such as Kal.

After several more minutes, Will's heart finally slowed from a wild gallop to a raging trot and he returned to the base to check the equipment again.

* * * *

Cabrio, one of their long-time volunteer investigators, was a popular guy who usually had a calm, reliable head on his shoulders. He agreed to take on the third floor and didn't mind working alone when the situation called for it. The building was so frigging big, they had to split up or they'd never get it completely covered in the time allotted.

At the far end of the third floor, he set up a folding chair in a room pegged as having activity and sat, listening.

If it wasn't for the fact that his EMF meter wasn't spiking, he'd swear he felt high levels. A creeping feeling washed over him. When he turned his head he swore a shadow slid from his field of vision.

After ten minutes of this he carefully stood and slowly backed out of the room. There was something there, and he had to get one of the other guys up there with the FLIR to take a closer look.

* * * *

Cabrio emphatically pressed the issue back at base. "Aidan, I'm telling you, someone needs to go check that room. Seriously."

Aidan looked at Purs. "What do you think?"

He shrugged. "Gery and I are still working on the other end, we're not done yet and it's after midnight. You and Will should go check it out.

Aidan looked at Kal. "You'll be okay here by yourself?"

"Yeah. Why?" she asked.

Aidan didn't want to admit in front of everyone that Cabrio wasn't the only one seeing shadows. He thought he'd caught a whiff of something earlier, but without any proof he wasn't about to say anything around the volunteers. Not tonight, because whatever it was, it felt...

Wrong.

Cabrio set off to talk to Will.

* * * *

Gery and Purson returned to the far end of the building. Purson looked at Gery. "It's not my imagination, is it?"

Gery agreed. "Something's off around here. You feel it too?"

Purs looked around. "I don't know what it is. It feels different than it did earlier. I just wanted to make sure I wasn't imagining it."

"Not something good?"

Purs shook his head. "No. Not even close."

* * * *

Aidan left the base area to speak to Will. When he did, Kal suddenly felt a warm breeze. That didn't make sense. They'd set up inside a windowless room, a former office from the looks of it.

Despite the heat, she rubbed her arms as gooseflesh prickled her skin. She felt...watched. Stalked.

It was creepy, a feeling she hadn't had on any of the other investigations. Not even the incident in the elevator in Miami felt like this. Tonight it grew progressively worse. In fact, it creeped her out so much she was about to go in search of the others when one of the sound guys walked in. As quickly as it arrived, the feeling disappeared. She chided herself on her nerves.

Probably PWS—putting up with Will's shinola.

* * * *

Will was sorting through equipment in the van when Aidan walked up. Fortunately, Kal was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is she?" Will growled.

"Chill out. I left her at base."

Will fought the urge to grab Aidan and sniff his clothes. Will could even smell Kal on him from being in close proximity to her.

Dammit, this is not good.

"You going up to that third floor room with me?" Will asked. "Cab's about to pop a vein over it. Who knows, maybe you'll find something."

Aidan didn't want to mention his suspicions to Will when he didn't have proof. "Yeah. Ready?"

Will finally located the other EMF meter. "Let's do it."

They joined the camera crew in the lobby and briefly conferred. They followed Will and Aidan up the three flights of stairs to the room. After thirty minutes, neither man felt anything and didn't catch any data on the meters or with the FLIR thermal camera. They eventually returned to the lobby.

Cabrio eagerly waited for them. "Well? Did you find anything?"

Will shook his head. "Nothing"

"I'm telling you, Will, I saw a shadow in there. You know me, dude. You know damn well I don't cry ghost. There's something there."

"Well, it's not there now, Cab. I don't know what to tell you."

Cabrio ran a hand through his scruffy blond hair. "Look, send someone else up, one more person. Just to make sure, someone who hasn't been up there. We've got plenty of time."

Aidan looked at Will and shrugged, mindful of the cameras filming. "Send Kal up. Everyone else is still busy."

Will was also well aware of the cameras. He fought the urge to scowl. "Sure, send her up." Aidan went off to the base camp to get her while Will stepped outside for a moment.

* * * *

"Hey, sweetie, we've got a job for you." Aidan had left the film crew waiting in the lobby. She looked up from the banks of monitors. "What?"

"Go up to that room on the third floor where Cab saw the shadow, where Will and I just were. Take the FLIR and a digital voice recorder, spend some time up there and see if you find anything."

"I'm a producer, not an investigator. I don't have any experience doing that."

"Look," Aidan pointed to the feed on the monitor, "we'll be watching. You don't have to have a crew there, just some B-roll shots on the way up. Humor me, please? It'll shut Cab up and keep you away from Will, which will make him happy. Please?"

Kal rolled her eyes. "Fine, whatever. Show me what to do." Aidan knew she was a skeptic despite her elevator experience in Miami, but she'd been tactful enough not to disparage what they did since her name graced the credits as producer. Likewise, Aidan was tactful enough not to tease her about her beliefs.

At least they look for proof and not just blind faith, she thought before quickly banishing it. Geez, I'm not only a horrible daughter for wanting to escape my parents, now I'm a lousy Baptist, too.

Aidan set her up with a two-way, a digital voice recorder, and the FLIR thermal camera. The camera crew escorted her upstairs, returning once she settled alone in the room. Will returned to sit at the monitor banks with Aidan. Aidan handed him a two-way and Will set his jaw, glowering but not lambasting Aidan because of the cameras filming them.

"Kal, you copy?" Will asked.

On the monitor her eyes looked ghostly in the black and white IR feed. She replied, "Yeah, what do I do?"

"Work the whole room. Slowly sweep the FLIR from side to side, look for any thermal anomalies, keep an eye on it for anything. It's recording, so it'll pick it up and we can review it later. When you finish looping the room, sit down for a few minutes, listen, see if you hear anything. Keep running the digital voice recorder."

"Okay."

They watched Kal on the IR feed as she slowly circled the large room, eventually coming to the folding chair in the center where she sat and made herself comfortable. "Nothing yet, Will," she said.

"That's fine. You can ask questions if you want, see if you pick up any EVPs while you're there."

"Got it."

On the monitor they watched as her head suddenly jerked, looking to the left.

Will's stomach took a dangerous roll, his intuition on high alert. "What is it?" Will asked Kal.

Kal finally shook her head. "Nothing," she replied. "I thought I saw something, but it had to be a trick of the light."

Will glanced at the other monitors and did a quick head count. "There's no one up there but you."

She settled again and they didn't disturb her with the radio. On the monitor they watched as she cocked her head like she listened for something. Will fought a suddenly bad feeling that congealed in his gut and worked its way up his body. On the monitors he located the other investigators on the first floor, and Purs and Gery, both on the second floor and at the far end of the building from Kal's location.

Aidan noticed Will's discomfort. "What's up?" he whispered.

Will shook his head, now intently focused on Kal's video feed.

Kal's head jerked to the right, her eyes narrowing in concentration. She slowly swiveled in the chair and looked behind her. Then her gaze dropped to the FLIR camera monitor in her lap and her eyes widened in horror as her mouth dropped open.

As her lips parted, Will knew she screamed even though the feed was silent. When her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell from her chair, Will bolted for the stairs, taking them two at a time with Aidan and the film crew close on his heels.

He found her sprawled on the floor, unconscious, the FLIR camera and monitor dark beside her. Will scooped her into his arms and pushed past Aidan and the others.

"Secure the equipment," Will barked to Aidan as he rushed downstairs and outside, carrying her.

She'd fainted, he felt that, and something else but he couldn't put his finger on what. Her whole body was bathed in sweat, her shirt soaked through. It wasn't that hot up there either. She felt like she'd just come out of a sauna.

Will sat on the front stoop and cradled her against him, brushed the hair out of her face. "Kal, come on, honey. Wake up." He'd never forgive himself if she was hurt.

A moment later she struggled from unconsciousness, swinging, combative, screaming. He wrapped his arms around her despite the pleasant, throbbing ache in his groin that action triggered. He held her tightly against him as she finally settled, sobbing, clutching Will's body as she realized she was safe in his arms.

"Shh, you're safe. It's okay. Talk to me. What happened?"

Aidan had made it to the front door and the film crew struggled to get past him. Kal wasn't micced, neither was Will. The sound guy was especially desperate to get the boom near them. Will shot Aidan a look and a thought, hoped his cousin could still read him.

Aidan touched his amulet and the film crew happily took his suggestion that nothing was going on and they needed to convene in the base area to check their batteries and equipment.

Will focused on Kal. She still cried but didn't sound as frantic.

"What happened?" he asked.

Kal took a deep breath and sat up. "I don't know. I started hearing something, sort of like... I don't know. Like when a bat flies past you in the dark, like that. That's what I thought it was. Then I thought I saw this dark shadow coming right at me. I looked at the FLIR... I suddenly felt this really... Some sort of hot spot just swept through me. Like I'd stepped into a furnace, then..."

She shuddered. What *had* happened? It didn't make any sense. She'd never felt such evilly dark terror as she did in the second before she passed out, like a huge malevolence had swept over her. Nerves, it had to be.

She realized she still leaned against Will and reluctantly scooched away from him. "I probably just passed out," she mumbled. "I'll be okay. I'm sorry. I should have eaten at our dinner break and I didn't, just had some coffee and a danish. My blood sugar probably went wacky or something."

Will's slate grey eyes were, for once, filled with concern. It touched her to her very core. They sat there for a long moment and she felt helpless to pull her gaze from his.

"You want me to take you to the hospital, get you checked out?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, I'll be okay. I'll take a bottle of cold water if we still have any."

He nodded and immediately stood. His long legs quickly carried him across the parking lot to one of the vans. She tried not to watch the way his firm butt moved inside his jeans. She bet he looked real good without—

Kal closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *No.* She twisted the ring on her left hand, something she frequently did in times like this, times of temptation.

Will was unquestionably a good-looking man—also strictly off-limits. They worked together. He didn't even like her that much. He'd probably like her even less now that she'd passed out on an investigation.

He returned a moment later with two cold bottles of water from the cooler and a package of crackers with peanut butter.

"Here."

She gratefully took them. He sat on the stoop again, not as close, watching her.

"I'm sorry," Kal apologized. She took a long swallow from one of the bottles and ripped into the crackers.

Purson appeared in the doorway behind them. "Aidan said Kal fainted."

Will nodded, not taking his eyes off her. "She's okay now."

Purs walked down the steps and touched her shoulder, then jerked his hand back like he'd been shocked.

Will's heart skipped, not sure if he wanted to know what Purson had sensed. For once Will cursed that his own powers were so weakened he couldn't figure out the strange, tell-tale staccato rhythm coursing through Kal's soul, one he knew hadn't been there before. He should know this, dammit.

Purson's wide eyes shifted from Kal back to him, chilling Will.

"Will, can I talk to you for a minute?" he finally choked out. "I need to ask you a question." Before Will could answer, Purs bolted up the stairs and into the building.

Will glanced at Kal and she nodded. "I'm okay. I want to sit out here for a few minutes and cool off. I feel like I'm burning up." She grabbed the front of her sodden shirt and fanned it, trying to cool off, each flap sending more of her tantalizing scent into the center of Will's very core.

"I'll be right back."

He followed Purson inside and found him talking with Gery. "What was that about?" Will whispered.

Purson looked rattled, something else that scared Will. Purson shook his head. "Man, she is twelve kinds of seriously fucked up, boss. Something's really wrong with her."

"Tell me something I don't know," Will growled.

"Will," Gery said, "something bad happened. We need to get this shoot closed down, right now, and review that footage. I don't know what it was, but I felt a major shift around here about the same time she went down."

Will looked at Purson. "You can't tell what it is?"

"I don't know what's got her. I can't tell yet. It's not like I can sit there and feel her up. It was like sticking my hand on a hot burner when I touched her. All I can tell you is it's not something warm and fuzzy with a liking for kittens and tea parties."

Dammit, if Purs couldn't figure it out, they were screwed. Uncovering hidden secrets was one of his specialties. None of the others could manage it if Purson couldn't. "All right," Will said. "Shut it down, pack up, let's get back to the motel. We were close to done anyway."

He returned to Kal's side. She looked a little better but still paler than he'd like despite the bright patches of color high on her cheeks. "We're done here tonight."

"No, Will. Please, don't shut it down because of me."

"It's okay," he gently reassured her. "We've got enough. Either there is or isn't something, we've got a ton of footage to go through. I was going to call it in another hour anyway, it's after two. Wait here, I'll be right back." He left her on the stoop again and found Aidan. "I'll drive her back to the motel. Do you need me here?"

"No, but get her backpack from base."

"Thanks." Will found it under the table and resisted the urge to hold it to his nose and deeply inhale. He returned to Kal. She'd finished the crackers and her skin tone looked a little better. "Ready?" he asked.

She nodded. He offered her his hand to help her to her feet. After a moment's hesitation, she took it.

It took every ounce of willpower in his body not to pull her into his arms and kiss her.

Kal wordlessly followed him to his Lexus. He held the passenger door open for her and she buckled up. He didn't say anything. For once she didn't get a chilly vibe from him. Just...worry?

"I'm sorry, Will," she said. "I'm sorry I ruined tonight."

He shook his head. "Kal, you didn't ruin it. It's okay, seriously."

Studying his tone, she realized he spoke the truth, wasn't simply trying to comfort her. She didn't know how she knew, she just felt...

Changed.

He was acting different. Warmer. Concerned.

There was also an unfamiliar creeping feeling inside her, something she couldn't put her finger on.

Something dark.

Chapter 7

Aidan, Purs, and Gery set up the equipment in Will's room and started reviewing footage. The IR camera showed a black shape darting in and out of the field when Cab entered the room, but it wasn't there when Will and Aidan checked it out.

When Kal arrived it returned, circling.

Stalking.

Will's jar clenched. "Play the FLIR footage."

Aidan silently nodded and the four gathered around the monitor to watch. Kal carefully swept the room as instructed, nothing appearing. When she sat, something darted into and out of the field again, a bright orange streak that couldn't be accounted for. Then it appeared dead center of the screen, expanding and taking form, rapidly advancing and growing in size and heat signature, finally enveloping her until it disappeared and the screen looked normal again.

"Sync them," Will said. "I want to see the IR and FLIR footage side by side."

Aidan set them up and they watched on the IR as the shadow stalked Kal, staying out of the FLIR field until she sat down. Once she'd settled into the chair the shadow attacked, taking her.

Will closed his eyes and swore. "Where's the digital voice recorder she had running? Cue and sync it, too."

Aidan checked the logs and found the one she'd used, dumped it into his laptop, and put on headphones.

When Aidan's face went white, Will knew he'd found it. Aidan's eyes widened. "Oh, shit," he whispered.

He reset the two video feeds and synced the audio. Clearly distinct, a whooshing noise, closer, a deep, dark hum that chilled all four men.

As the form attacked Kal it spoke, its inhuman voice clearly audible. "You're *perfect*. Remind me to thank him." Followed by Kal's terrified scream.

Will sat back and pinched the bridge of his nose. "What is it?"

Purs, his eyes wide, stared at the frozen image on the FLIR. "I don't know. I was right though. She's possessed. Something's got her."

"Yeah, thanks for the memo. What has her, and how do we get rid of it?"

Purson shook his head. "I told you, I don't know. Whatever it is, it's deep, totally embedded in her soul. It's not your garden variety jackass looking for a few hours of jollies. I've never seen anything like this."

They checked the other feeds, keeping a watchful eye for every time Kal appeared in the picture. Several times early in the evening, when she left base to adjust camera placements or consult with crew, a flickering shadow could be seen in the picture.

"Whatever it is, it wanted Kal." Purs pointed to one frozen frame. "It could have had Cabrio or the other guys or any of us during the evening when we were alone. It specifically stalked Kal and waited until it got her alone long enough it could take her over."

Will couldn't pull his eyes from the screen. "Why? Why her?"

Gery cleared his throat. "She was the only woman on the shoot."

Will shook his head. There was more to it. It really pissed him off that he couldn't figure it out. "I don't think that's why it singled her out. It's like it tracked her all night until it got her alone in that room. It wanted her specifically. What the hell did it mean, 'Remind me to thank him'? Thank who? Like someone tipped it off." He looked at Gery. "Who was on the crew last night?"

"Same old, normal guys. No one new except Kal."

Will scrubbed his face with his hands. He was too tired. Nearly five in the morning and he needed sleep. "All right. Let's get some rest, we'll meet up at two thirty before we go eat. I'll text Kal so I don't wake her."

The others departed and Will sent Kal a quick text message. Whatever this was, he hoped he didn't have to go to The Firm for help. It would drag him back to something he wanted no part of.

After his shower, Will frowned and pulled the front window curtain aside enough to look out. Across the street and halfway down the block from the motel, several police cruisers, an ambulance, and a fire truck were on scene. Lots of activity. Not his business though. He closed the curtain, checked the deadbolt, and tried to sleep.

* * * *

After Will brought Kal back to the motel and walked her to her room, she took a long, cool shower, then pulled on a t-shirt and shorts to sleep in. She felt drained and yet jittery, like she'd had a few triple espressos. She checked her door lock and tuned the TV to *The Weather Channel*, leaving the volume just high enough to cover outside noises.

Will's room was only two doors down. Something about his presence both comforted and confused her. Part of her wanted to go knock on his door and curl up in his bed next to him despite his normally chilly persona. After she fainted, he'd acted totally different around her than he normally did. From the worried, protective look on Will's face when she came to in his arms, she knew for certain his wall was an act.

Why? Kal didn't know, but she really wanted to find out.

Part of her felt afraid to go to Will because random, horrible thoughts crept to mind, violent urges that made her tremble, like something inside her wanted to break free and...

She rolled over with her back to the windows and closed her eyes, made herself breathe slow and deep, hoping to force her body into relaxing. Eventually she slept. She had horrible dreams of a man walking up to her, then he screamed as she grabbed him by the throat and drove her fist into his face again and again with satisfying force.

* * * *

They all gathered for a late lunch in the motel's restaurant. Kal looked like shit. Will and Aidan exchanged concerned looks.

"Are you okay, Kal?" Will asked. Despite his intense desire for her she was still, technically, his responsibility. He had to make sure she was all right. The fact that something had attacked her pissed him off on a fundamentally deep level he was afraid to contemplate beyond general concern.

Deep circles lined her eyes. "I didn't sleep well. I feel like I stayed up all night." She realized what she said. "You know what I mean. It feels like I didn't sleep at all."

Purs drained his coffee while eyeing her over the cup's rim. "Did the sirens wake you up?" She looked at him. "What sirens?"

Gery stiffened, refused to meet Will's gaze. Will realized the other three men knew something he didn't.

Purson set his coffee cup down. "Some guy got the snot beat out of him early this morning, right across the street from the motel." His eyes locked on Will's.

Will's blood ran cold.

Kal was oblivious, nervously twisted the ring on her left hand. "What happened?"

Will watched as Purson's eyes flicked to Kal's hands. Will followed his gaze and noted the scratches and scrapes on her swollen and bruised knuckles.

Her hands weren't like that when he'd brought her back to the motel, he'd swear it. In fact he knew they weren't, because he saw them when he helped her up from the stoop after she fainted.

Aidan rearranged his omelet with his fork. "Some drug dealer or something. Ended up in the hospital, beat up pretty badly according to the news reports."

Will fought for control, not liking the feeling of being odd man out. He knew the other three men silently communicated, and collectively they could hear him even if he couldn't hear them.

"Guys, what. The. Fuck?"

All three men's eyes swiveled to him. They shook their heads a little. Kal still yawned over her food, oblivious. Whatever this was, they knew.

She didn't.

But he would find out pretty damn quick.

It was all Will could do to make it through the meal. At one point Purs got up to use the restroom. He casually laid a hand on Kal's shoulder as he squeezed past her chair to get out of the booth.

He didn't jerk his hand back this time, but the look of shock and concern on his face scared the crap out of Will.

On the way back Purson was very careful not to touch her.

As Will paid the tab, Kal returned to her room to get her laptop. Will stopped the other three men. He confronted them on the sidewalk outside the restaurant.

"What the fuck is going on?" he growled. "You need to tell me, right now."

The three exchanged knowledgeable looks, then Purs and Gery decided Aidan got to do the honors and stared at him.

Aidan took a deep breath. "I saw Kal returning to her room this morning, right at dawn."

"What? So?"

"She walked over from across the street. About five minutes later, all the sirens and shit happened. She came from there, she had to be involved."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"Will, you saw her hands. She did that, attacked the guy. We know something happened to her, we saw the footage. She's possessed by something."

Will wanted to fight the cold pressure squeezing his balls, but knew Aidan was right. Something was definitely wrong with Kal beyond what they already knew. He looked at Purs. "I saw you check her out again. What is it?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. It's deep, whatever it is. Real deep. Real bad."

"Is that why you wouldn't touch her again?"

Purs looked away. "It's bad. That's all I know. Frankly, unless you order me to do it again, I'd rather not."

They'd already agreed not to tell Kal what they found on the footage and had doctored copies, hiding the original feeds. Aidan substituted an old, useless audio file on the digital voice recorder and Will set Kal up with that to review, knowing it would keep her busy and distracted while they talked.

They weren't supposed to shoot the next location until tomorrow. Tonight was a free night. When they knocked off for dinner a little before dark, Kal looked horrible, dark circles under her eyes, her hands trembling.

"Are you sure you don't want me to take you to the hospital?" Will asked, knowing both her answer and the fact that no normal doctor could help her.

She shook her head. "No. I'll be okay." Her voice sounded weak, not at all like her normal self. "I'll sleep tonight and feel better in the morning." She retreated to her room. Will kept his curtains open so he could see her room door in the L-shaped complex. The men were talking around dark when her door opened and she slowly walked out, barefoot.

Will's heart sank. "Aidan, grab a camera. Come on, guys."

They raced to follow and watched as Kal, in an apparent daze, walked across the street without bothering to check for traffic. Fortunately for her, the street was empty.

She walked three blocks before she encountered two young men, maybe a little younger than her, leaning against a wall in a dark alley around the corner from a seedy liquor store.

"You filming this, Aidan?" Will asked.

"I've got it."

Then Will and the others watched, horrified, as Kal grabbed the first man. With nearly superhuman strength Kal slammed him against the wall. His head struck the façade and he crumpled to the sidewalk, leaving a bloody smear on the brickwork. Then she turned her attention to the other guy, who stared at her in shock. She gripped him by the throat. Will and the others broke into a run as his strangled cry reached them.

Gery pulled her off the guy and she screamed, thrashing, kicking, snarling. He grimaced as he pinned her elbows behind her.

"Jeez, Purs, dammit I need some help here. She's friggin strong."

Purson pulled his bloodstone amulet from under his shirt and held it in front of Kal. When her eyes focused on Purs for the briefest of seconds, he muttered something. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she went limp in Gery's arms.

Will took her from him and tipped his head toward the other guys. "Check them out, make them forget, call the cops if they need medical attention." With Aidan following and still filming, Will raced back to the motel and to his room. Will didn't know how long Kal would be out. He tossed his keys to Aidan. "Get some of those big-ass cable ties out of the van, the ones we use to hang cameras, so we can restrain her."

Aidan put down the camera, which was still recording, and raced to do it. Will checked Kal's pulse. She was unconscious, but for how long? What could possess her and make her attack someone like that? With such vicious strength?

Kal was a sweetheart. Will didn't think she ever swore much less would commit violence.

Aidan returned and they quickly bound her hands. If Will had his amulet, he wouldn't need the others to help, he could manage her himself. Without it...

He tried to shove that thought out of the way. Ryan would just love for him to come crawling back to him and The Firm. Will wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Gery and Purs returned fifteen minutes later. "They'll live," Purs said. "Damn good thing we followed her. She would have killed both of them."

"What do we do now?" Gery asked, looking at her.

"We need handcuffs," Will said. "Those ties won't hold her long, and they'll cut into her skin when she struggles. I don't care what's got her, I don't want her hurt."

Gery looked at Purs, who sighed. "I'll go get some." Purs left. He returned ten minutes later with two pairs and a set of keys.

"Do I even want to know?" Will asked as they replaced the cable ties with the handcuffs, attaching Kal's hands to the headboard.

"I lifted them from one of the cops that responded. Don't worry, I gave him some money so he can buy more. He won't remember what happened."

"You have the touch, Purs," Aidan quipped.

They stood back and watched her, waiting.

* * * *

Kal struggled against the dream. It was horrible, gut-wrenching. The evil coursing through her, demanding she kill, wanting to rip the throats out of the two men and bathe in their blood. The satisfying surge of power as she slammed the first one against the wall, then before she could immobilize the other, someone stopping her—

"No!" she raged, screaming. "No!"

The dream mercifully went black.

* * * *

Kal struggled toward consciousness, a soothing male voice speaking to her. Aidan sat on the edge of the bed. His sweet eyes looked almost amber-colored, focused on her, his hand on the tiger's eye amulet he always wore. She didn't know what he said, couldn't understand the words but it calmed her, and she felt relaxed, relieved.

Until she tried to move her arms.

Kal looked up as she jerked her arms against the handcuffs. For a horrifying moment she thought she was being attacked until she realized she was fully dressed, as were the four men. It effectively wiped all vestiges of sleep from her system.

"What's going on? Let me go!"

Will shook his head. "I'm sorry, Kal, we can't. Not yet. You almost killed those two guys. We've got to figure this out."

Gery towered behind the others. "How long until it takes her again, do you think?"

Aidan looked up. "I don't know. I don't know how long that will hold it back. I wasn't even sure it would work."

"What are you talking about?" Kal yelled, jerking her arms again. "Let me go!"

"Kal," Will tried again, "we can't. Not until we figure out what's wrong with you. You almost killed two guys. You're...you've got some sort of illness. It's making you black out and act violent. We've got to—"

"Let me go!"

Will and Aidan exchanged knowing glances, then Aidan stood. Will looked at Kal. "I'm sorry," he softly apologized. "We'll be back soon."

She opened her mouth to scream at him when both Will and Aidan clasped hands and simply disappeared. Her outrage died in her throat.

Hallucinating. She had to be.

Chapter 8

Will left Purson and Gery guarding Kal. He gripped Aidan's hand and they appeared in Ryan's Atlanta living room. Outside the windows, a game was in progress at Turner Field, brightly lit in the night. Ryan didn't have the curtains drawn against the glare, and in fact had his large flat screen television tuned to the game.

"I wondered when I'd see you two," Ryan said by way of greeting, not shifting his focus from the TV. Bottom of the eighth, the Braves were down by two runs against the Marlins.

Will didn't waste any time. "What happened to her?" he asked. At times like this he wished he still had his powers so he could kick the shit out of Ryan. It'd been three years since he'd last seen or spoke to Ryan. Three years too soon for his liking.

"What happened to whom?" Ryan's attention focused on the Braves' batter stepping up to the plate.

"Kal. What happened to her?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean." He stepped between Ryan and the television. "What the fuck is wrong with Kal? We saw the films. We know she's possessed by something. What took her?"

Ryan waved Will out of the way as he watched the pitch, groaning when the batter hit a foul. "Wraith took her." Ryan's tone sounded as nonchalant as if stating the time.

Aidan's blood ran cold. "What did you say?"

The batter hit another foul, this one bouncing off the dugout roof. "Did you not hear me or not understand me, Aidan? She's possessed by a wraith."

Will shook his head. "That's not possible."

"Why not?"

"Because whatever it is, it's embedded deep in her soul, not on the surface. A wraith can only do that if someone's pure."

Ryan flicked his eyes from the TV only after the batter hit a grounder and was thrown out at first. "Your point is?"

"Ryan, she's what, almost twenty-five? She went to OSU and lived on campus, for chrissake. That's a party school. Seriously, what's going on? I need to help her, and you know damn well what's going on."

Ryan glanced at the TV again, then back to Will. "Read my lips. She. Is. Pure. She's a virgin. Daddy Dearest gave her a purity ring to help keep her honest, and she has been."

Will and Aidan exchanged glances. Will shook his head and forced a smile. "Joke's over. Ha ha, very funny, you had us going. Seriously, what's wrong with her?" He'd drifted in front of the TV. Again, Ryan motioned for him to move. "Look at her left hand. Feel free to ask her about her ring. And quit blocking my—oh! Home run! Yes!" Ryan clapped his hands as the batter ran the bases, scoring for the Braves.

Will grabbed Aidan's arm and they appeared in Will's hotel room.

Kal flinched at their sudden appearance. She shrank away from Will when he reached for her left hand.

"It's okay, Kal," he said. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Yeah, keeping me handcuffed to a bed is so not a comfort in that direction, Hellenboek."

He took her hand, again feeling a tingle of connection with her. He saw the silver ring and really looked at it for the first time. A heart wrapped with a ribbon and overlaid by a cross, inset with a small, pink stone.

"What does this ring signify?" he asked her.

"Why should I tell you anything?"

Aidan stepped forward and bent over the bed, spoke with a soft voice. "Kal, honey, what's the ring for? Please, it's really important."

She studied the men, glanced at Purson and Gery, then glared at Will. She dropped her voice. "It's a purity ring. My father gave it to me when I turned fourteen. I took a vow to remain a virgin until marriage." There, she'd said it. "I don't know what your game is, but you need to end it right the heck now." If Will or the other guys dared give her any hassle about it, she'd show them a really brassed-off woman.

After they took the handcuffs off her, of course.

Will closed his eyes and swore. Aidan put a hand to his forehead and rubbed it.

"Shit," Aidan said. "Bastard was right."

Will gripped Aidan's hand and the men disappeared again.

Kal looked around the room. Surely she was delirious. Despite the restraints the men weren't hurting her, so maybe this *was* for her own good, so she didn't hurt herself and others. Because people didn't just pop in and out of rooms like that. That was an obvious sign of fever or illness, right?

Purson looked concerned. "You okay, Kal?"

"Oh, sure. I love spending my evenings chained to a bed."

Gery laughed. "I'm sorry, sugar. It's the only safe option until they figure out how to fix this. We can't have you prowling the streets and killing people. This way at least you won't tear up the joint. Come dawn, we can let you go again. It's just while the moon's out and it's dark. Whatever's got you is a night creature."

She tipped her head to the video camera. "What's that for?"

"Proof," Purson explained. "You can watch it later and see what happens to you when you black out, and see that we didn't try to ravish you. We promise, we're keeping our hands to ourselves." She felt something shift inside her, like a presence awakening. She wanted to claw their eyes out. With her next thought came a wave of horror over feeling that way in the first place. There was something wrong with her, all right. Something that made PMS feel like a walk in the park.

"What's wrong with me?" she whispered, for the first time really scared—of herself.

Purson shook his head, his face serious. "I don't know for sure. That's what Will and Aidan are doing, talking to someone who probably does know. As you've no doubt guessed by now, there's more than meets the eye to us and this situation. I'm good at finding stuff out but this goes beyond even my considerable abilities and experience."

"Where'd they go? Am I blacking out? Is that why they look like they disappear and reappear?"

The men exchanged a glance. Gery finally spoke. "Sure, that's it, honey. You keep blacking out. Just try to relax. Want me to change the channel? We'll watch whatever you want."

* * * *

Ryan still watched the game. Will stood to the side, clenching his fists.

"All right, so she's a virgin," Will said. "What do we do? Tell me how to get rid of the wraith." He'd dealt with a lot of things before, but it had been centuries since he'd dealt with a wraith. Even that one had been easy to get rid of, like any other possession. Not deep like this.

Ryan glanced at Will, then Aidan. "Full moon's in seven days. If the wraith isn't taken care of by then it takes her over permanently, becomes fully embodied, and at that point there's only one recourse left."

The other two men knew exactly what that one recourse was. Aidan paled. "Dude, quit screwing around. Please tell us how to take care of her and fix this."

The game was in the top of the ninth and the pitcher worked to strike out the second Marlins batter. "I know it's been a while since you've dealt with one," Ryan snarked, "but how much do you gentlemen remember about wraiths?"

So not in the mood for this bullshit. Will didn't say it. Instead he said, "Short version, please."

"A wraith can possess someone of weak spirit, but it can be ousted in various, common ways. Can't get a grip. Wraiths can't latch on to a child because there's no desire, no hormones or sexual tension for them to wrap around, you know that. If a wraith latches on to a pure adult soul, however, someone who has never been intimate, shall we say, it can take over and take permanent form, become embodied. Once it spends a full moon in residence you can't remove it and the person must be killed. As is, it can only take control at night while the moon is out."

Will exchanged a worried look with Aidan. "Okay, so we have seven days to get rid of it. *How* do we get rid of it?"

The second batter struck out and Ryan pumped his fist in the air. When the network went to commercial, Ryan headed for his kitchen and returned with a glass of merlot.

"Want some?" The other men shook their heads. Ryan returned to the couch. "Well, as you are well aware, standard methods don't work when a wraith attaches to a pure soul. You need a lot of power to oust it. What's more, you have to make sure the wraith can't return to the host once it's been booted."

Will thought strangling Ryan looked like a pretty tempting option. "How do we do that?"

Ryan sipped his merlot. "How do you make sure the wraith can't return?"

"All of it. Return, get rid of it, everything."

"The wraith can't return if she's not a virgin, so that part's fairly straightforward, I should think." He glanced at Will. "Or has it been so long you don't remember how *that* works?"

Will lunged. Aidan stepped between them. "Will, settle down." He turned to Ryan. "Don't be a dick. We get it. Just tell us how to get the wraith out of her in the first place."

Ryan set his wine glass on the coffee table. "You'll actually take care of two birds, so to speak. The wraith can be driven out by an archdemon, certainly, but only a powerful one."

"So you're saying we need to get one of the guys to sleep with her?" Will was grateful Aidan said it, because he was too busy trying to not choke Ryan.

Ryan's eyes flicked from the TV, where the Braves had struck out the third batter, back to Aidan. "Not just any of them, Aidan." He looked at Will. "Only a very powerful archdemon can drive the wraith out. He has to be willing to give her his heart, bond with her permanently. Become her soul mate. As a result, obviously, he must be one who doesn't already have a soul mate. If it's not done by the full moon she has to be killed by an archdemon before the wraith can fully take control of her. We can't very well have a permanently embodied wraith running around loose on the planet now, can we?"

Nausea twisted Will's gut, along with something else he didn't want to name but which relentlessly bubbled to the surface—jealousy. He didn't want Kal to die, *couldn't* let her die. Yet the thought of someone else sleeping with her...

"Why does it have to be an archdemon who sleeps with her?" Will asked.

The baseball game kept pulling Ryan's attention from them. It pissed Will off. At least it was almost over.

"Basic physiology. A powerful, unbonded archdemon, one strong enough to drive the wraith from her soul. You have some poor Joe Blow sleep with her, she'll rip his balls off as soon as the wraith breaks through at night, you should know that. Her soul must be bonded to an archdemon. Once she becomes an archdemon's soul mate, the wraith is driven out. Of course, by default it can't return."

"And she's The Firm's newest spousal dependent whether she likes it or not," Aidan snarked. He dropped heavily into one of the matching chairs in front of the sofa. "Yes. The catch is, of course, she has to do this of her own free will. You can't simply drug and date rape her. She must willingly agree to it and be an active participant so she can bond and become a soul mate. That means it has to be someone she wants to sleep with, someone she's attracted to. It has to be someone who's attracted to her, too, obviously. Someone who will take her as a soul mate and love her." He fixed his pointed stare on Will.

Will closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, trying to stave off a tension headache. "So what's the bottom line?" There had to be a way around this, there always was. He just had to let Ryan have his say. Ryan was like his old man in that way, giving the worst case scenario first so when he presented you with the alternative, no matter how unappealing, it looked a lot better than the original idea.

Ryan *couldn't* be saying what he thought he was saying.

"The bottom line, Will?"

Will nodded. "Spit it out and cut the bullshit."

Ryan took his time arranging his long legs. "Either you fuck her, or Aidan kills her."

Aidan leapt to his feet. "What?"

Nonplussed, Ryan turned his gaze to Aidan. "You heard me. Either Will takes her cherry and takes her as a soul mate, or you must kill her. I say you because I know there's no way Will would wield the sword. There's no other way to get rid of the wraith." Ryan casually sipped his merlot.

Nope, this was definitely worse than Will thought. His face reddened with anger. "You can't do that. You can't let that happen! You have the power to fix this."

"No, you have the power to fix this. I can kill her. You can save her."

"I can't sleep with her! I don't love her!" Even as Will said it his body betrayed him. The thought of loving her fiercely battled with the pain in his soul and his years of dedication to Abby.

His dedication to dying to be with her. Or, at the very least, to no longer be in pain without her.

Ryan arched an eyebrow. "Really? Why not? I thought you were rather fond of Kal."

Will wouldn't give Ryan the satisfaction. "I barely know her," Will growled through clenched teeth.

"Ah, Will, but you do. You not only know her, you love her."

Aidan's jaw dropped. "Oh, shit!" he whispered, awestruck. "You're a fucking miserable bastard, you know that?"

Will was too angry for bullshit and turned on his cousin. "What is *your* problem? You know I won't let her die, she's an innocent. This is my problem, not yours."

Aidan, still stunned, slowly shook his head. "Dude, he planned this. You're not getting it." He looked at Will. "You're *really* not getting it. Do the math."

Confusion slowly displaced Will's anger. "What?"

"Will, do the fucking math. What's Kal's birthday?"

Horror replaced confusion. "She was born about nine months after-"

Aidan nodded. "Dude, she's Abby."

Ryan's smile broadened, but for once he said nothing. He took another sip of his merlot.

Will's eyes flashed blue, then black. He let out an enraged scream and lunged at Ryan. Aidan barely managed to catch him and pull him back. Apparently unconcerned, Ryan never moved, continued nursing his merlot.

"I have to admit," Ryan said, "it was rather inspired. Father said he'd never been so proud of me. It marked the moment he decided it was time to turn the reins over to me once and for all, put me totally in charge of The Firm."

Aidan maintained his iron grip on Will. "You fucking bastard!" Will sobbed. "You brought her back? After everything that happened, you brought her back?"

"I would think you'd be happy—"

Will screamed again, lunged, and finally fell to the floor, sobbing, with Aidan holding him. "How could you *do* that? You fucking bastard!"

"Yes, you keep calling me that. Still doesn't bother me. It's my job, you know." He leaned forward, fixing his cold, hard eyes on Will. "It's *your* job too, Will. We need you back. You're the strongest."

Aidan eventually felt it safe to release Will but stayed close, watching his cousin's despair, numb inside, his own conflicted feelings swirling. "That's low, Ryan," Aidan said. "Even for you."

Ryan's green eyes hotly blazed at Aidan, his gaze warning him not to push his luck. "Will is ten times stronger than you and Geryon and Purson combined and you know it." He looked at Will again. "There's rumors of some bad shit coming down, Will. I'm going to need you. I'm sorry I had to resort to this but you've been rather unresponsive to my requests to return over the years. She was my insurance policy that if I had to force you back I could. Planning ahead, as it were. I need you. I never wanted this to happen, but this is your fault, your responsibility. Had you been reasonable and not turned your back on The Firm, I wouldn't have had to do this. It's your *job*. I have to look at the big picture and keep that in mind no matter what you think of me for it, no matter what we've been through together."

Heartbroken, Will looked up at him. Tears streamed down Will's face at the shock of the news. "She's an *innocent*, Ryan. How could you *do* this to her?"

"She's your wife. Was, will be. You get the girl-again. Lovely one she is, too."

"She's a fucking innocent!"

Ryan smirked. "Well, she won't be after you have your way with her, will she?"

Aidan barely managed to hold Will back as he lunged again from the floor. Ryan apparently had more confidence in his handling skills than Aidan did because Ryan never flinched.

"Why can't I do it?" Aidan asked, still struggling to restrain Will. "I don't have a soul mate. I'll do it. Why's it got to be Will?"

"Because he's the only one strong enough and without a soul mate who can do it. Just because his powers are dormant doesn't mean he's not strong." "And I'm sure you planned it that way, too, didn't you?" Will bitterly yelled. He finally quit struggling against Aidan and shook his cousin's arms off.

Ryan shrugged. "It took a little doing." His sly, knowing smile transformed his lips into two harsh, red wounds across his face. "Besides, Aidan, we all know she's not your type. Your heart certainly wouldn't be in it, now, would it?"

Aidan's face flushed deep crimson as he studied the floor. He preferred his personal life be kept personal. The flirty façade he portrayed to the world was what he wanted people to see. Will didn't care, but he hated Ryan even more for putting Aidan through that, for using their shared ancient history against Aidan.

Will closed his eyes and resigned himself to his fate. "You can't tell her she's Abby. I don't want her to know who she was before. It's bad enough you've used her like this."

Ryan considered it, then finally nodded. "Fair enough. I can agree to that. I think it's best she not know, frankly. It might somehow taint the bond with you in this life." He held out an amulet.

Will had last worn it the day Abby was murdered.

Will stared at the amulet and tried not to consider the implications. "And *you* have to tell her what we have to do to get rid of the wraith. You get to prove to her we're not crazy or just trying to fuck with her. You're the boss. You want to mess with people's lives? You get to do your own dirty work."

Ryan nodded again, unsmiling. When he spoke, his voice sounded quiet and serious. "I accept that, too. You're right. I need to be the one to tell her."

With trembling fingers, Will took the amulet without touching Ryan's hand. The cool obsidian immediately turned warm in his palm, the embedded amethyst center winking at him with iridescent purple light. The dark leather cord still felt supple and strong and he slipped it over his head. He felt its power immediately, channeling the long-dormant energy within him and pulling it reluctantly to the surface.

With it, the pain in his soul sharpened, deepened, worse now than it had been in years.

The power wasn't in the amulet itself, rather in its symbolism, rejoining The Firm. But without it, and without a soul mate bound to him, he was unable to tap into the strengths within. All the years of not using his powers and not having any sexual partners had weakened most of his abilities. Archdemons didn't have to have soul mates to survive and maintain their powers. Even if they only occasionally slept with someone, the energy created from one encounter could sustain them for years.

Having a soul mate constantly fed an archdemon's energy, made their powers flourish. Losing a soul mate...

It was worse than hell on earth.

"I'm not doing this willingly," Will hoarsely said.

Ryan nodded. "I know. I don't do this lightly, Will, and I take no joy in it. I'm sorry I had to resort to this to bring you back. I would not have done it if there were any other way. As you'll recall, I have tried many times over the years to talk you into reconsidering."

Will glared at Ryan. "I'm going to kill you one of these days, you son of a bitch." Ryan smiled, sadly and without humor. "I know. It's in your nature."

Chapter 9

They would return in a few hours with Kal. The men couldn't risk moving her until sunrise because of the wraith.

Ryan knew he wouldn't sleep.

While he'd long ago accepted he wasn't well-liked, and had to maintain sometimes unsavory positions because of his responsibilities, he did care what Kal thought of him.

Not that he'd ever admit it to anyone, including her.

She'd never believe he loathed putting her through this. There were so many things he couldn't tell her because Will would have access to her thoughts.

Will could never learn certain truths.

Ever.

And if he had to lie to Will and Aidan to accomplish this, it was something he could live with in the grand scheme of things. What's a little lying when compared to setting up an innocent to be possessed by a wraith so an archdemon would be forced to deflower her?

With a less than steady hand, Ryan poured two fingers of bourbon and returned to his sofa. Not that mixing grape and grain was ever a good idea, but fortunately for him the alcohol didn't affect him the way it might a normal human. It just helped take the edge off for a short time.

No, Will wasn't the only one powerful enough and without a soul mate who could take Kal. Oh, the irony. Will needed a soul mate and didn't want her. Ryan desperately wanted her...and couldn't take her.

He'd kept a strict distance from her in Columbus, interacting with her only enough to ensure she would take the job and move to Tampa. He knew the more time he spent around her, the more difficult it would be for him to let her go. His feelings in the matter had no place or weight.

Will Hellenboek was needed and had to be brought back to The Firm by whatever means necessary.

Ryan spent the night staring at the Atlanta skyline and tried not to think about the past, about the three of them taking on the world, the two men he still loved like brothers even if they couldn't stand him. He didn't allow himself to hate his father for forcing this responsibility on him. He was the only one who could do this job, and he'd come to terms with that ages before.

It was easier to let them think he was a jerk and keep their distance. Then they wouldn't pity him. They'd seen him at his worst, helped him move forward but it didn't change anything. It didn't change the fact that despite all his powers he couldn't save Chloe, and he hadn't been able to protect Abby, either.

* * * *

When Kal opened her eyes she found the four men staring at her, dawn visible around the outer edges of the drawn curtains and her hands free of the restraints. She sat up and rubbed her wrists.

"I'll admit I don't feel very good but what the heck is going on? How dare you handcuff me! Is this some sort of stupid trick to scare me and get me to quit, because if it is, it's not going to work. You just wait until I call my boss and tell him about this. You guys are crazy! Absolutely flippin' crazy!"

All four men shook their heads.

She stood and pushed through them to the bathroom, where she slammed and locked the door behind her. She didn't feel like they'd done anything to her. She was still dressed as she'd been when she went to bed, just her wrists hurt where the handcuffs had chafed them. Faint bruises already shadowed her flesh, but wouldn't she remember struggling against them?

Truth be told, she remembered Will and Aidan apparently disappearing and reappearing a couple of times, Gery and Purs talking to her, and then...nothing.

Well, nothing except for the horrible dreams. She didn't remember how she got into Will's room in the first place. She'd gone to sleep, and then...

Then more horrible dreams.

Kal studied her knuckles. How had she injured them? They hurt like heck, like she'd smacked the dickens out of someone. That couldn't be right, could it?

The men watched as she angrily emerged from the bathroom. "What the heck is going on?"

The other three deferred to Will. He cleared his throat. "We can't leave you alone at night until this situation is taken care of."

Kal glared at him. "What do you mean you can't leave me alone? Why the heck not? If you think I'm letting you handcuff me again, you've got another think coming, Hellenboek."

"Sit down, Kal. You need to watch the footage."

"What footage?"

"What happened to you, and what you've been doing. Why we had to keep you restrained last night."

Reluctantly she sat at the folding table where the computers and monitors were set up. Aidan cued the feeds. They pointed out how the shadow had stalked her all evening. She remembered feeling watched at base. Then they showed her the side by side of the IR and FLIR feeds, synced with the audio.

Her face paled. "What was that?"

"That's what we're trying to tell you." Will looked at her. "There's more. We think you attacked the guy across the street from the motel the other night."

"What?"

"How else do you explain your hands?"

She looked at her hands, ran her thumbs over her battered knuckles. Eventually she shook her head. "I don't know," she softly replied.

"Last night you tried again. Only we were ready and followed you to see what happened." He nodded to Aidan, who played the video. It looked shaky, bouncy, as Aidan and the others raced to catch up with her. When she watched as she attacked the two men, her hands flew to her mouth in stunned shock. Tears filled her eyes.

Everything mirrored her horrible nightmares.

After the video showed her unconscious in Gery's arms, Will nodded to Aidan. "That's enough." Aidan stopped the playback.

They let Kal digest it for several long, silent minutes. "I thought I dreamed all of that."

Her horrified whisper scorched Will's soul. He desperately wanted to hold and comfort her. Damn Ryan, he was right.

He was falling in love with her.

On the heels of that came the revelation that he now knew who the wraith referred to.

Ryan.

Hating himself, but knowing she had to see it, Will turned to Aidan. "Show her more of the video from last night, when we had her back here and the damn thing took control."

Aidan cued and played it. Kal watched herself handcuffed to the bed, Will and Aidan disappearing, reappearing, examining the ring on her hand. Then disappearing again.

That hadn't been her imagination.

Then she watched as her face changed, leering, snarling, and...but that couldn't be her, could

it?

"You fucking sons of bitches! Let me go!"

"Settle down, Kal," Purson said, standing by the end of the bed.

He easily dodged her when she tried to kick him.

"Kal's left the building," Gery quipped.

"You have no idea who you're fucking with, assholes. Let me go or I'll eat your balls for breakfast."

Purson shook his head. "I don't know what you are but we're not letting you have Kal."

"He said I could have her." She lunged against the handcuffs. *"He told me where to find her!"* On the video she listened to herself maniacally laugh. The sound sent shivers through her

core. "She's mine! And you can't fucking stop me. She was given to me! He gave her to me!""I don't care if it's Kal," Gery quipped. "She starts spewing pea soup, I'm outta here, dude."Purson looked at him, smiled, then Kal lunged against the restraints again, shaking the entire

bed. "I'll start with your intestines first, you fat fuckwad."

Kal trembled as she watched the video, her palm pressed against her mouth in shock. Will laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. When she started crying, Will nodded to Aidan, who stopped the playback.

She shook her head in disbelief. "I thought they were horrible dreams. I thought..." She cried.

The men exchanged a silent glance and the other three left the room. Will knelt in front of her and took her hands. "I'm so sorry, Kal," he softly said.

"What is wrong with me?"

The tears in her eyes broke his heart. "It's called a wraith."

"A what?"

"It's...it's hard to explain. It's latched on to your soul."

The rational, logical part of her didn't want to accept the explanation. The part of her that understood something was seriously wrong with her knew he wasn't lying. Especially when it rolled inside her and she had to fight a sudden, nearly overwhelming but fortunately brief urge to claw Will's eyes out. "Why me?"

Still holding her hands, he dropped his gaze. "Because you're a..." He took a deep breath but before he could say it, she did.

"Because I'm a virgin?"

He nodded. "Normally it can't get a grip on an adult like it has on you, it can't make itself at home. You're pure, so it was able to embed itself in your soul."

"How do we get rid of it?"

He wouldn't meet her gaze. Somehow that made her feel worse. "We need to go talk to someone about that. I'll let him explain it."

"What, like a priest or something?"

"No. Not a priest."

"What if we don't do anything? Will it get better?"

He shook his head and slowly tipped his face to look at her, his grey eyes moist. "No. We have to get rid of it by the full moon or else we can't get it out of you. Until we get it out of you, you have to be restrained at night while the moon is up or you'll hurt someone."

She started to argue, then stopped. She'd seen the video. Kal fought her rising bile and hoped she didn't toss her cookies all over Will. The person on the video couldn't be less like herself.

Will continued. "I don't want to do it. I'm so sorry. I don't want to keep you tied up but next time it could be a kid, or a family, not some street thugs. The next time you could kill them. The wraith has to be removed from you. All it does is hurt people, kill people. It's not something you can live happily ever after with. It's pure evil, nothing but primitive, negative energy. If it's not removed from you it's not a matter of if it kills someone, it's a matter of when. I can't let that happen to you, or anyone else."

He wasn't crazy, this much she sensed. With the thought of not doing anything came another sickening roll from inside her gut, and a silent, eager voice hissed, "*Yesss*," in her brain.

"Okay," she whispered. "Let's go talk to this guy."

Will called Aidan back into the room. She noticed the amulet around his neck, really looked at it for the first time. Kal remembered him holding it last night, mumbling something... She'd seen his amulet plenty of times before but never paid it any attention. Now that she thought about it, Gery and Purs each had one. Will didn't used to have one but apparently had acquired one in the past few hours. She'd spotted the leather cord around his neck, under his shirt.

"What are you? All of you?" she asked.

"We'll let him explain." Will offered Kal his hand. She took it, and while the situation wasn't great, she couldn't deny holding on to him felt safe, felt right.

He looked at Aidan. "I still need your help. I'm not up to full strength yet. I can't take us both." They joined hands with Aidan.

"Wait, I need to change clothes," Kal protested.

"Don't worry, we'll be back in a few minutes. Close your eyes," Will said.

She did. She felt the air shift, her ears popped, and she instinctively knew they weren't in the hotel room anymore.

"You can open your eyes," Will told her.

She didn't want to, afraid of what she'd see.

Will's comforting arm encircled her waist. "It's okay," he whispered. She fought the urge to lean into him and settled for holding on to his arm.

They stood in a large, comfortable apartment. Huge floor-to-ceiling windows opened on a city skyline. The city looked familiar but she couldn't place it.

A soft, familiar male voice—British—spoke from behind her. "Hello, Kal."

She wheeled around, her jaw slack. "Ryan?"

* * * *

Gery and Purs settled in to watch the morning news on TV. They didn't want to be part of whatever was going on. From the snippets of thoughts Purs caught from Aidan after the two returned from Ryan's, and from the fact that Will now had his amulet back, Purs had a feeling Will would serve Aidan's nuts to him on a silver platter. It wasn't something he wanted to watch. Although if Will separated Ryan from his gonads he'd pay good money for ringside seats to that steel cage brawl.

They heard a buzzing noise. Kal's cellphone vibrated on the dresser. The screen glowed.

Gery shook his head. "Aw, crap. This can't be good, someone calling her this early in the morning." He pulled himself from his chair and retrieved the phone, glanced at the screen. "It's her parents."

Purson reached for it. "I'll take it." He answered using a faked British accent, sounded professional. "Hello?"

There was hesitation from the other end. A man spoke, defensive, protective. "Who is this?"

"This is Purson Gibraltar, one of the production assistants. Ms. Martin asked me to tend to her phone. Is this Reverend Martin?"

Another pause. "Yes. Is she okay?"

"She's busy in a shoot right now. Can I give her a message when they go on break? Shall I have her call you?"

"How long will they be?"

"I'm not sure. We've had some equipment delays and our schedule got pulled out of whack. I'm sure she'll take a break in the next couple of hours. If it's an emergency I can send one of the crew in to get her."

"No, no emergency. Just tell her I called, please."

"Yes, sir." Purson hung up and put the phone on the table.

"He didn't buy it, did he?" Gery asked.

Purs shook his head, his mouth set in a grim line. "He's going to be trouble for Will. I can feel it. He had a total wall up against me."

"Crap."

* * * *

Reverend Martin hung up and stared at the phone.

"What's the matter, dear?" his wife asked.

He glared. "I don't like this at all."

"What?"

"A production assistant answered her phone. A man. She's on a shoot. Something's fishy."

Laura Martin had a limited amount of reserves when it came to standing up to her husband. She carefully weighed how much of them she should exhaust. "Dear, it's her job. She told us she has an unusual schedule."

"This early in the morning? I don't like it. I want to go down there and bring her home."

Laura dropped the newspaper in her lap. "Kenneth Martin, listen to yourself. She is a grown woman. She must live her life."

"She should be married by now, starting a family. Not flitting around at all hours of the day and night with a bunch of strange men."

"I'm sure they're not strange to her, dear."

The Reverend glared at his wife. "It's nice you can make light of this situation. It's not proper. I would think you'd want her to be conducting herself appropriately." He rubbed his forehead as if staving off a headache.

"You're acting like she's not. I have faith in her to do the right thing. She will never marry that boy, no matter how much you and Billy want her to. Jeff's a nice boy, but I'm not sure he even likes girls, to be quite honest."

It was a calculated risk. Sure enough, her husband's face immediately turned bright red. "How dare you insinuate Jeff is a...a *homosexual*!" He spat the word.

"Well, you must admit, he's never dated."

"If Kalyani would do her Christian duty and go out with him, certainly he would see her as being perfect for—"

"That's more than enough, Kenneth." Laura summoned her strength and stood. "If she doesn't want to date him, then she doesn't want to date him. What Jeff Conrad does with his life is his concern, *not* yours, *not* his father's. I'm sorry, but this is one time I will stand up against you and defy you. When Kalyani meets someone she loves, she will marry him. Until then, I will not stand by and allow you to bully her into a relationship she has repeatedly told you she does not want." She stormed up to their bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Stunned into a silent rage, the Reverend stewed. Spying their computer in the corner he turned it on and got on the internet. Kalyani *would* come home, she *would* marry Jeff Conrad, no matter what his wife thought about it. He'd never had a...homosexual—just the thought made him shudder—in his congregation, and he wasn't about to start now. Not when he'd known the boy his entire life. Especially not when his father was his best friend. None of *his* flock's eternal souls would be lost to such a sin, whether they liked it or not.

He rubbed his head, yet another headache threatening. They occurred more frequently lately, sometimes severe enough to drive him to bed. Whether she liked it or not, Laura would do her wifely duty and support him in this.

Chapter 10

Will felt stunned. Aidan looked sick to his stomach. "You know Ryan?" Will finally asked Kal.

"Duh. He hired me. I told Aidan that. What are we doing here? How did we get here? Where are we?"

Will tried to recover from his shock. "He's not exactly who you think he is," Will explained. "He's had many names throughout the years. I didn't realize he was behind the network or we wouldn't be standing here right now." He glared at Aidan, who reddened and turned away. With his powers returning, Will could now easily tune into Aidan's thoughts.

He'd deal with his cousin later.

"What do you mean he's not who I think he is? He's my boss, one of the network VPs. He personally hired me for the show."

Will took a deep breath to control his rising anger. "Ryan is in charge of The Firm. All of us work for him, for The Firm. I had...retired, but the recent events have forced me back."

Will's gaze firmly held Kal. Part of her wanted to melt into him.

Will continued. "You're going to think we're crazy, and I won't blame you. We're a lot older than you can believe. The names we have now, they're just the latest."

Kal maintained her skepticism despite what she'd seen already. "Ryan Ausar? I'll play along. What kind of name is that?"

"I've had many names," he said. "Ausar is an Egyptian name I've held on to for quite a while. Ryan was given to me by my father when we moved operations to what became the United Kingdom. It's Gaelic, means 'little king.""

Will studied his employer. "Little king, my ass."

"C'mon, Will. Don't bust my balls your first day back." Ryan's handsome, playful smile indicated he didn't mind as long as Will was back to be busting his balls in the first place.

Will, however, appeared far from amused. "Why not? You had no right to bring me back like this. To let this happen to her. You're fucking with people's lives."

He rolled his eyes, then glared at Will. "Not this again. I had every right. You're needed, and I have responsibilities. *You* have responsibilities."

"All I wanted was to be left in peace. You even took the right to die from me, Ryan. You wouldn't release me, wouldn't let anyone help me, you wouldn't help me yourself. All these years, you have no idea what I went through—"

Ryan jabbed a finger at Will. His eyes flashed in anger as his voice dropped to an angry growl. "You damn well know that's not true. Don't you *dare* lecture me about love and loss, Hellenboek." He turned, taking a deep breath to regain control, his voice returning to a semblance of normalcy. "And I *hate* that name of yours, by the way." Kal sensed the non sequitur was deliberate on Ryan's part, to divert the conversation to a less emotionally-charged tangent.

The closest thing Kal had ever seen resembling a smile twitched the corner of Will's mouth. His voice softened. "Abby picked it just to mess with you."

"I know." It almost looked like Ryan's face relaxed. "She told me."

"I'll never understand why she liked you."

"She didn't judge people, Will."

Kal felt something significant had passed between the men and she didn't know enough of their back story to grasp it. Not to mention she was still in too much shock to contemplate it.

The men stood at impasse for a moment before Aidan cleared his throat. "Guys? Can we focus?"

Will pointed at Aidan. "I'll deal with *you* later. You knew he was behind the network all this time and didn't tell me?"

Ryan waved him off. "Aidan didn't know anything about what I had set up. He wasn't involved. He thought I simply wanted a way to keep tabs on you. He had no idea what I had planned."

Kal tried to follow the conversation and felt dizzy. Other questions were now annoyingly forcing their way to the front of her mind. Like where were they, had she blacked out again? She still tried to remember how they'd gotten to the apartment. It was like they...

Like they just appeared there.

"Where are we?" she asked again.

The three men looked at her. Ryan smiled.

Cheezus, he has a cute smile.

"Atlanta. It's my base of operations, so to speak. I'm sorry for the little charade but yes, I am in charge of the network, not just one of the executives. And even more than that. However, we can wait for all of those details. I do not wish to overwhelm you."

"Atlanta?" She looked at them, then realized why the skyline appeared familiar. Turner Field was clearly visible through the windows, she'd seen aerial shots of it on TV. Another wave of dizziness hit her. "But...we were in Gainesville. That's like six hours away! What is going on? What have you done to me? What's happening?"

Will guided her to the couch. "You need to sit down."

He stepped out of the way once she was seated. Ryan took his place.

"You're going to find a lot of what I'm about to say very difficult to believe, but I need you to hear me out." Ryan perched on the coffee table in front of her, held her gaze while fingering the dark red garnet amulet around his neck. "You've been possessed by something called a wraith."

"Will told me. How do we get rid of it?"

Ryan reached out and touched her shoulder, left his hand lightly resting there. Suddenly, Kal felt okay about listening to him.

Maybe he's hypnotized me. She felt a lot like she had that day in his office when he pitched the job to her.

"I need to tell you a little of our history first." Ryan glanced at the other two men. "We're demons. Contrary to popular belief we aren't evil. To be more accurate, we're archdemons. We are in charge of the Underworld, according to mythology, but that really encompasses the planet Earth."

She crossed her arms and smiled. His revelation had stretched her credulity to the breaking point. "Riiight. That's a good one. Can I go now?"

Ryan's face hardened. Kal realized he wasn't bullshitting her. She didn't know how she knew, but it suddenly seemed very important that she listen to what he said. She focused on his intense green eyes.

"Kal," he said, "this is the truth. I have known you for many years, followed your progress and kept tabs on you although you didn't know me. The Firm has been involved in most aspects of your life until now. You are special."

"What's so special about me?" The fact that someone—other than her father—had possibly been pulling strings in her life terrified her.

"That doesn't matter. You are very special. As Will said, he'd retired from The Firm after... an incident. If he chooses to tell you more, that is for him to decide. A series of events were put into place to bring you and Will together. I'm sorry I was forced to do this. Now you are possessed by the wraith and it must be removed from you."

"All right, fine." Kal struggled to focus as the dark heaviness in her soul rolled again. There was definitely something wrong with her and she knew in her heart it started when she fainted on the shoot. She could deal with the other crazy bullpucky later as long as they helped her get rid of this nasty feeling. "What has to be done?"

"Only a powerful archdemon can force the wraith out."

"I said fine. Do it. Whatever." It didn't hurt to play along with them as long as this creepy feeling went away.

"I can't do it."

"Why not?"

His eyes never wavered from Kal's.

Will watched and grudgingly gave Ryan credit for not trying to pass the buck on this one. *Bastard*.

If Ryan heard his thought he gave no indication. His focus never wavered from Kal. "Only a very powerful archdemon can remove a wraith embedded in a pure soul," Ryan continued. "You have a pure soul." Kal thought her father would be happy to hear that—from the head demon dude. *Yeah, right.* "And your point is?"

"Will is the only archdemon powerful enough, and who isn't bonded to a soul mate, who is available to do this."

"You said he's retired."

"He was. He has returned to The Firm so he can do this. Believe me, he hasn't willingly returned. I need him back."

She glanced at Will. He stood looking at the floor, his arms crossed. Not a defensive posture this time, almost like he was hugging himself, trying to comfort himself. Whatever had to happen, he wasn't very happy about it.

And that didn't comfort her.

"Answer me. What has to happen?" Kal asked.

"You have to bond with Will as his soul mate."

The dark, evil feeling rolled in her gut again. "Fine, whatever. Do it." She just wanted it gone.

Ryan shook his head. "You must completely understand what this means. You must sleep with Will and become his soul mate. The two of you would then, from there on, be bonded. Together."

"What, like one person?" Eww!

A hint of a smile from Ryan. "No. I mean a marriage you cannot get annulled, if you wish to look at it in those terms. Till death do you part, literally."

His meaning finally struck. "I've got to sleep with him? As in I've got to have *sex* with him?" Ryan nodded. "That will not only evict the wraith but prevent its return."

Numb, she stood and backed away from the men. She shook her head. "You can't do this to me. There are laws against this kind of thing. It's called rape in most places."

Ryan didn't move from his perch on the coffee table. "No, Kal," he said. "It must be totally consensual on your part. You must willingly ask to be taken as his soul mate."

She glared at them, her mind spinning. "What if I say no?"

Ryan's steady gaze chilled her. "The wraith becomes completely embodied within you at the full moon. That's in a few days. If it's not removed before then... I cannot allow an embodied wraith to roam the planet. It will *not* happen. I would have to choose the only other option, which I'd rather not do. I guarantee that you would not wish me to."

She wouldn't ask. She didn't want to know. It had to be horrible.

Or fatal.

Ryan continued. "There is only one option for you to rid yourself of the wraith, and that's to become Will's soul mate. You don't have to say yes today, you have a few days to ease into the notion. Until you do offer your consent you must be restrained at night from moonrise until dawn so you don't injure anyone. You are capable of killing when the wraith is in control."

Kal looked at her bruised and sore knuckles. To think she'd already hurt three people... Her stomach rolled again. "All right. I get a few days though?" Reason tried to break through, to tell her they were feeding her a line of garbage. Then she looked into Ryan's eyes again and felt the truth of his words. It didn't matter that it didn't make sense, it felt like the truth.

"Yes. Before the full moon. If you have not decided by then, I shall have no alternative." He stood. "In case you wondered, no, Will did not have any knowledge of this. Neither did Aidan. The planning was mine alone, and they were not participants. I do think if you are willing to give this a shot, even though right now it is a rather unsavory situation for you to be in, you will realize it's in everyone's best interests and a not entirely unpleasant outcome."

"You're telling me I've got this horrible monster inside me, I have to sleep with a guy who hates my guts and won't even look at me much less talk to me, and I'm supposed to *thank* you? Are you freaking crazy?"

Will's head snapped up in shock and surprise at her words. *Hate her*? She thought he hated her? A wave of guilt swept through him. No, he didn't hate her. He just wanted to keep his distance from her, not make her think he didn't like her. Now he hated himself—although not as much as he hated Ryan—for making her feel bad. He gave Kal credit, she handled the news better than he expected. Better than he was, that's for damn sure. Ryan had to have used more than a little of his powers on her to keep her calm and accepting of the facts.

"No, not thank me," Ryan said. "I rather expect the three of you will be charter members in the 'We Hate Ryan' club by nightfall. I can accept that. My job is to protect and to serve, and I will use whatever means I have to achieve that. You and I can have further discussions on this topic later, once we're past this and things have settled. My job is to protect this world and I will do that. The lives of billions are more important to me than the lives of one or two here and there."

She shook her fist at Ryan. "If you start quoting *Star Trek* movie lines to me, I'll deck you, you son of a gun!"

Aidan laughed out loud. Even Will felt a smile attempt to conquer his lips.

Ryan did smile, this time in amusement. "Well, I'm more a *Star Wars* man myself, but as you wish, love."

* * * *

They returned to the motel. Kal remained silent for the rest of the day, refused to speak to the men, even Aidan. Aidan stayed with her, keeping an eye on her while the others went to set up for the shoot. As the day lengthened Kal felt tremors upending her soul, fleeting rages, and fought the urge to race out of the room.

Whatever it was, it grew stronger and she couldn't deny it.

By dusk she noted Aidan carefully watching her every move but not speaking.

After one particularly frightening roll of her gut and an almost uncontrollable urge to rip out Aidan's throat with her bare hands, Kal used the bathroom, then returned to the bed and laid down and stretched her arms over her head.

"Go ahead," she whispered, trying not to cry.

He tried to be gentle, tightening the handcuffs only enough that she couldn't get free, not tight enough to hurt her.

He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, Kal. I'm so sorry, sweetie. I never knew anything like this was going to happen."

She took a deep, shuddering breath as the wraith—*might as well admit it*, she thought—tried to take control. "I know. I appreciate it."

As her vision faded she watched Aidan back away from the bed and start the video camera mounted on the tripod so it could film the room.

* * * *

Early grey light streamed through the curtains as Kal opened her eyes. Will leaned over her and unlocked the cuffs. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments before he looked away. A pleasant heat, definitely nothing like the wraith, coursed through her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

They were alone in the room. Kal nodded as she sat up and rubbed her wrists. "Yeah. Where's Aidan?"

"He's eating breakfast with the guys, then he's going to take a nap."

Her stomach rumbled in reply and she realized Aidan wasn't the only hungry one. "How bad?" Did she want to even know?

Will looked away. "It's getting stronger the closer we get to the full moon."

The video camera was still set up. She pushed Will out of the way and found the footage, watched less than a minute before switching it off. She bolted for the bathroom, dropped to her knees in front of the toilet, barely made it before her stomach upended.

She sobbed as each wave hit. The horrible, disgusting taunts coming from her mouth, the sick look on poor Aidan's face as he was forced to endure it...

Another bout of nausea hit her and she felt a comforting hand on her back. Will knelt beside her on the bathroom floor, holding her hair away from her face and saying nothing, but supporting her.

She gripped the toilet, her eyes shut, awaiting the next wave. When it hit he steadied her. Twenty minutes later, when she nodded that she was done, he brought her a wet washcloth to wipe her face, then helped her to her shaky feet.

He'd remained silent but the worry, regret and anguish washing off him was unmistakable.

Kal rinsed her mouth and made it as far as the closest bed before her legs gave out. She heavily sat, Will's strong arm still around her.

As much as she didn't want to give in, she cried in his arms.

* * * *

She finally persuaded Will to leave while she took a shower and changed clothes. He stood guard outside her door with her room key in hand in case she needed him. The others had already finished eating and were packing equipment. They'd leave for Tampa after Aidan had a chance to rest. Ryan handled making the excuses and changing the production schedule without Will or Aidan getting involved.

Will ate alone with Kal and didn't try to break the uneasy silence.

Kal wasn't particularly hungry after viewing the footage but knew she had to eat. She felt drained, beyond exhaustion, more like her energy reserves had been used. Of course they had, the wraith spent hours struggling and thrashing in the bed and the bruises around her wrists wouldn't go away in the next day or two.

And the horrible things she'd said to sweet Aidan...

She closed her eyes and tried not to think about that. "Can I ride back with Aidan?" she asked. Will watched her, then nodded. "If it's okay with him."

Maybe it wouldn't be. "I need to talk to him, I think."

"He knows it wasn't you. He doesn't take it personally. The wraith was in control."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I take it personally. I need to talk to him." She finally had all she could stomach and pushed her plate away. "He's my friend."

Another long silence settled between them. Will eventually broke it. "I don't hate you," he softly said. "I never meant to make you feel like that. I'm sorry."

She nodded but didn't respond.

"I had my reasons..." He stopped, his voice momentarily sounding choked. "Maybe one day it won't hurt so bad to talk about it. But it wasn't you, I swear."

"Thank you." Normally, she would have thrown back her head and thanked God for the revelation. She sensed he was telling the truth, and combined with his reaction when she fainted, she felt vindicated.

All the other events, however, tempered her relief. Especially her anguish at how she'd treated Aidan while under the wraith's control.

They finished breakfast. Kal gathered her things and quietly helped sort and pack equipment. When Aidan emerged from his room two hours later, he wore his dark sunglasses and wouldn't look at her for more than a second or two. They were the last to load up. On the far side of the van, out of eyeshot of the others, Kal grabbed Aidan's arm and waited until he looked at her.

"I'm sorry," she said, fighting the tears. "I know it wasn't me saying that stuff but I feel awful about it."

He shook his head and wrapped his arms around her, sniffling. "Sweet cheeks, you don't have anything to apologize for. If I'd known what Ryan was up to... This is my fault. I'm so sorry, babe. I never knew anything like this was going to happen. I'm so sorry."

They blubbered on each other's shoulders for a good five minutes. She wondered why Ryan didn't use Aidan instead of Will for this purpose. He was obviously willing to be friends with her.

Then again, she didn't feel the aching, visceral attraction for Aidan that she did for Will, and sensed that lack of sexual attraction was mutual. He slipped his sunglasses on top of his head, then cupped her face in his hands and wiped her tears with his thumbs.

"You're a good woman, Kal. Really. Hey, if we're going to be family, does this mean I get to kiss the bride?" His red eyes were still filled with tears.

She smiled. "Sure."

He gently kissed her forehead and hugged her again. "He's a good man, Kal. Will, I mean. And he doesn't hate you, trust me. I thought Ryan just wanted the two of you to get close. I didn't know he was going to pull some shit like this and play dirty. If I'd known that I would have stopped it, I swear."

"I don't think you could have stopped Ryan. Not if my impression of him is correct."

He released her with a final pat on the back. "You may be right about that, girlfriend." He studied her face. "Are we okay? You don't hate me?"

"We're okay, and I definitely don't hate you. Are you going to sit with me tonight?"

"If you want me to."

"Maybe wear headphones so you don't hear what I say."

He grinned. "Sweet cheeks, I don't think you'd say 'shit' if you had a mouth full of it. I knew damn well that was the wraith talking trash, not you. If you really wanted to hurt me you'd have picked on my socks or something."

Today he wore emerald green sport socks—*where the heck did he find those?*—with his yellow sneakers. He really did have atrocious fashion sense.

Bless his heart.

"One of these days you have to let me take you shopping. It's no wonder you're still single. When I'm done with you, I'll have the girls panting after you."

An odd look crossed his face before he laughed. "Let's just worry about getting you back to whatever passes for normal around this loony bin before we get down and dirty about my duds."

* * * *

Aidan and Kal pulled into the office parking lot forty-five minutes after everyone else. They'd stopped for lunch, just the two of them laughing and talking. For a little while she forgot the time. Will's anxious face when they walked into the office brought the situation crashing home again.

"Are you okay?" Will asked her.

Will's concern practically washed off of him. Something about that touched her at her deepest levels. He no longer avoided her gaze, no longer tried to avoid looking at her.

Her heart pleasantly thumped in response.

Aidan tossed the company van keys on Will's desk. "She's fine. Chill, dude. We took a break on the way home. It's been a stressful few days, okay?"

The men exchanged a look she couldn't interpret before Will turned to her. "We need to discuss tonight."

Aidan spoke before she could. "I'll take her to my place. She'll be okay, she can scream her head off." He winked at her. "Neighbors will just think we're into kinky sex."

Aidan could make her laugh, she gave him credit for that. He was so different than Will in that way, so playful and gentle.

Will frowned. "This isn't fun and games. The wraith is dangerous."

Aidan's face hardened. "Dude, I'm not a kid. I can handle her." To Kal, "Unless you want to make alternate arrangements, honey?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head. She still had a couple of days to make up her mind, to get used to the idea. If she had them, she would take them. She also didn't want anyone but Aidan taking care of her and hearing her say those horrible things.

Will capitulated. "Fine. If anything happens to her, I'll hold you responsible."

Aidan's serious tone startled her. "Dude, it's already my fault, isn't it? Trust me, I'll keep her safe."

To have these two men so worried about her, focused on her well-being, it nearly overwhelmed her. She followed Aidan to his house after they stopped by her apartment so she could pick up a few things. She'd been to his place many times before, both for work and fun, and felt at ease there.

He cooked them a light dinner and they watched TV on the couch for a while before she felt the rumblings start in earnest about thirty minutes before dark. Apparently sensing her discomfort, Aidan looked at her with concern.

"You okay, sweet cheeks?"

She shook her head, trying to fight her tears and failing.

He held her. "It's okay, sweetie. Go ahead and cry," he murmured.

Cry? She sobbed. As comforting as Aidan was, part of her wished he was Will. She couldn't quite force herself to make the decision yet. She'd re-watched the video from the first night, when Purs and Gery guarded her. There were ways to trick the mind but between what she felt, what she saw, and from the unaltered time stamp on the film, she knew this was real.

And the scrapes and cuts on her swollen knuckles were still healing. She didn't imagine that.

Part of her wanted to eagerly throw herself in bed with Will Hellenboek. Admittedly from the moment they met. Maybe that scared her and contributed to her reluctance. There was also the little matter of wanting to save herself. Yeah, she admitted it was old fashioned, but it was one of the few beliefs she didn't mind having in common with her parents. Waiting for true love felt right to her. She'd dreamed plenty of nights of her handsome new husband carrying her over the threshold on their wedding night and making love with him until dawn. So what if he'd always had hauntingly familiar green eyes in her dreams?

Apparently this was a type of wedding, but certainly not the one she'd planned.

The wraith churned, evil, stronger. "We need to get me hooked up, Aidan," she whispered.

He kissed the top of her head. His gentle, sweet gesture made her want to cry again. "Okay, babe. You go do what you need to do and I'll meet you in my bedroom. Hey, just think, you're the first girl I've ever tied up in bed."

The laughter was unexpected, but welcomed. She hugged him long and hard. "Thanks, Aidan. I'll cherish the memory. Just promise not to listen to the darn thing when it starts running its mouth, okay?"

"Hey, like I said, you start insulting my wardrobe tonight, you might wake up with a shaved head or something in revenge." He grinned.

"You're not taping it tonight?"

"No, sweet cheeks, not tonight. You know the truth now. I think you know I'm not after your hidden assets. I mean," he quickly added, "I'm sure they're nice and all, but it'd be like wanting to do my little sister, you know? Ick."

She knew. Truth be told, she felt the same way. "I trust you, Aidan." Kal got ready and met him in his bedroom. He'd hooked the handcuffs to his wrought iron headboard and moved an overstuffed chair beside the bed.

"You won't be very comfortable tonight," she said, feeling guilty as she lay down.

He shrugged as he hooked up her right arm. "I'll get some sleep before we go in to the office. How about I take you out for breakfast?"

"That would be—" Kal clenched her teeth as the wraith struggled for freedom, wanting her to sink her teeth into her friend's throat. "Aidan," she whispered, "hurry! Do it now!"

His jaw tightened while he quickly finished securing her. As he backed away from the bed she had just enough time to look at him and say, "I'm sorry, Aidan."

* * * *

Kal opened her eyes as dawn broke a little after six Monday morning. Aidan slumped in his chair, a sheet over him, his head propped on his arm. She was about to call to him when he opened his eyes and stretched.

"Hey, kiddo. You back with me?"

She nodded. "How bad?" she asked. His wan smile told her more than she knew he ever willingly would.

"No fashion insults. Everything's copacetic, baby doll." He freed her. She returned from the bathroom to find him lying in bed and already drifting to sleep.

He patted the mattress. "Mind catching a few zzz's with me?" he sleepily asked.

She slid under the sheet with him. While it didn't feel romantic, it felt right. He curled around her, his arm protectively encircling her waist. He kissed the back of her neck but it didn't feel the least bit romantic.

He felt like a protective big brother.

"Go back to sleep, kiddo," he murmured. "It'll be okay."

Kal quickly fell asleep without the dark dreams of the wraith pulling at her.

* * * *

Will tried not to worry about Kal. Until the wraith was out of her and she was safe, he wouldn't stop worrying.

He couldn't sleep, tried watching TV, thought about calling Aidan to check up on Kal but that would only piss Aidan off.

Aidan would protect her.

Was it worth an eternity in pain to be with Kal? She wasn't Abby anymore, even if it was her soul. Kal was a different person, mind and body, without any of the memories or experiences Abby had.

Will tried not to think about Ryan. What was his game? A normal person would assume this was all, on the face of it, a plan to get him back to The Firm.

Will knew Ryan too well to accept that explanation. For sure, Ryan did want Will back at The Firm. But it couldn't be that cut and dried.

Ryan was smarter than that, smart enough to know Will would question Ryan's motives from the start. Will knew damn well he was not the only archdemon capable of saving Kal.

So what was Ryan's angle?

He wrenched his thoughts back to Kal. It was unfair to her. No matter who she used to be, she was a different person now and deserved better than The Firm in her life. She was beautiful, could have easily found a nice guy, had kids and a normal life, soccer mom bullshit boring and not trying to save the world every time she turned around.

He wouldn't deny he wanted her. He wouldn't deny there were worse choices for a soul mate. He didn't know when—if—he'd be able to tell her he loved her. Would the pain in his soul ever fade enough to allow him to love again?

She deserved better than this.

* * * *

Aidan dreamed of Chloe. It surprised him how, in recent weeks, dreams of her plagued him at night. He'd sometimes go years without dreaming about her. It was as if some part of his mind had recently exploded, releasing memories and playing them over and over again. Teasing her the way big brothers tease beloved baby sisters, singing her lullabies to soothe her to sleep, carefully screening the guys who wanted to court her—all of it. It was a bittersweet experience.

Even a half-assed shrink would probably tell him they'd been triggered by his new relationship with Kal. Chloe was the only sibling he'd really known or been close to, the others much older than himself. Even though Chloe and Aidan were half siblings, sharing the same father and separated by centuries of age, they acted like twins in many ways.

Damn, he missed her.

When she was little, she'd spent many nights in bed with him, snuggled against him to keep the monsters away, as she claimed. With her mother dead and their father rarely around, Aidan had raised her. Then when she grew older she hated sleeping alone. Many mornings Aidan had awakened to find her snuggled tightly against him. Inseparable. That was him and Chloe. She knew his deepest, darkest secrets and didn't care. She was the only one, before her husband, and Will, who'd known.

He wished Will could have known her. But she died before he met Will. He was older than Will, even though in looks he appeared to be a few years younger. Will had grown up in a different part of the world and it wasn't until Chloe's death that Ryan's father brought him and Will together.

He would have loved for Chloe to have met and married Will, but there was no changing the past.

He hadn't agreed with Chloe's choice of a soul mate. She, however, had loved the shit weasel, and that was good enough for Aidan. Admittedly, the man had treated her like a princess and made her happy, so what more could he have asked as her big brother? If her death devastated him, it had torn her husband apart from the inside out, having his soul mate brutally ripped from him. To this day he hadn't taken another soul mate. Aidan sensed he never would. Not that he could blame him, because Aidan had never had a soul mate to begin with.

All things considered, maybe he never would.

Bound by Ryan's father, Will and Aidan teamed together to keep his brother-in-law alive those early months, until he recovered enough from his injuries and his grief to survive. He'd nearly died trying to protect Chloe...

Aidan diverted from that road of memory. Fast forward, he thought. And he did.

As Ryan's father gave Ryan more responsibilities, it was the three of them taking on the world—Aidan, Will, and Ryan. Then Will met Abby, and it was almost like having a sister again. Like now, with Kal.

Ryan never would tell Aidan why he walked away from Will—and as a result from him since Aidan and Will had grown so close—after Will took Abby as his soul mate. Maybe the guy thought it should be a guys only club. Despite being soul brothers, Ryan had turned his back on them without explanation.

Jerk.

Now this.

What a fuck up. He wanted to hate Ryan, especially for this, but how could he? Too much history between them for too many years. While forcing the situation upon them, at least maybe Will could be happy again. He'd hopefully quit wanting to die now.

Maybe Ryan should take a dose of his own medicine.

Aidan's dreams drifted into darkness and, eventually, a deeper, restful sleep.

* * * *

Kal awoke cuddled next to Aidan, startled and disoriented until she realized where she was and who she was with. The clock read seven forty-six, but Kal didn't care. Let them be late to work, Monday or not, it's the least consideration Ryan could give them. She snuggled against Aidan, comforted by his presence. Whatever happened she instinctively knew he wouldn't let her get hurt. If there was another way, Aidan would have dang sure pursued it, wouldn't let her do this if Will would hurt her.

She eventually rolled over to face him. Aidan stirred and looked at the clock. "Hey, sugar plum, you hungry?" He had a handsome face. Despite the romantic movies she'd seen she didn't have any overwhelming urge to lean in and kiss his pouty lips. Like he'd said, it would be like kissing a brother.

Yergh. "You promised me breakfast."

His broad smile could melt hearts, including hers, so why the heck hadn't someone snapped him up yet?

"Anywhere you say. If you want to take a shower, go ahead and use the guest bathroom. I put some towels and stuff in there for you."

"Thanks."

His sweet honey hazel eyes studied her. He softly spoke, his normally playful voice filled with sadness. "Will is a good man. I'm sorry this happened. I mean it, if I'd known—"

She put a finger to his lips. "I know. It's not your fault. I'm not mad at you."

He nodded, still looking at her. "If it's any consolation, I wish my sister could have met and married him. I mean, that was a long time ago and she never knew Will, but my baby sister was my life. If I would have married her off to Will, you know he's good folk."

Kal tried to lighten the mood. "But I'm guessing you probably wouldn't have married her off to Ryan, huh?"

Another of those looks she couldn't comprehend. "He wasn't my first choice, sweetheart."

Chapter 11

Kal picked their favorite restaurant for breakfast. They took their time and didn't arrive at the office until nearly ten. Apparently Aidan had told Will their itinerary because The Great Brooding One wasn't hovering like a nervous hen at their tardy arrival. In fact, he left to run errands soon after they walked into the office. Purs and Gery departed a few minutes later for a "normal" job, meaning something relating to the production company's regular schedule and not the Otherworlds show. Kal wasn't involved in those projects, though. That was Purs and Gery's bailiwick, while Aidan usually assisted her with her Otherworlds duties.

She worked alone in the office with Aidan. He walked over to her desk and held out his hand. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Kal had had enough surprises to last her one thousand lifetimes. "What?"

He patiently kept his hand extended. She finally stood and took it. He reached for the amulet around his neck and closed his eyes. At first she thought maybe she fainted, because the office dissolved around her and she felt the hard floor change to soft grass beneath her feet. They were now standing in a field—

No. A cemetery.

Aidan released her hand and walked down a row, paused to get his bearings. Lots of old, huge live oaks shaded most of this section. He glanced back at her. "Well? Are you coming?"

She looked around and followed him, still trying to accept they weren't in the office anymore. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

His long legs quickly carried him across the grass. She had to jog to catch up and frequently took several steps to match one of his strides. Eventually it became clear they'd landed, or whatever it was called, in a distant section of the cemetery, apparently far away from the entrance to avoid being seen. Their destination was a huge live oak larger than the others, surrounded by giant azalea bushes.

A well-worn path through them led to a small, private, shaded clearing at the base of the tree. When Aidan stepped to the side, Kal saw the marker.

AnnaBelinda Hellenboek — Beloved soul mate.

The date of death a little less than a year before her own birth.

"Who was she?" Kal asked.

Aidan crouched to the side. The fresh, unblemished white roses in the vase hadn't yet wilted in the heat. Aidan made no move to touch them. "Abby." He looked her in the eyes. "Will's wife."

Will's...wife? She didn't even realize he'd been married, much less widowed. It explained a lot. "But—" She looked at the date again. "It's been over twenty-five years!"

Aidan pulled up a blade of grass and worked it through his long fingers. "Yep."

"He doesn't look..." Her knees weakened. Still staring at the gravestone, Kal dropped to the ground. It finally hit her it was ludicrous to argue about how long Will's wife had been dead and how young Will looked. Not when they'd talked about archdemons and wraiths and she'd just been teleported from their office in Tampa to—

"Where are we?"

Aidan finished shredding the blade of grass and started on another. "North of Tampa. Almost to Wesley Chapel. This is where Will comes every Wednesday morning, why he's always in a bad mood that day. He always brings her white roses. They were her favorite."

"Why Wednesdays?"

"It's the day Abby died."

Kal's mind tried to stitch together what she knew, what reality and science and her faith told her was true, and what stared her smack in the face. Then she remembered the comments about Abby that passed between Will and Ryan back in Atlanta. *So that's who she was*.

"How did she die?" she whispered.

Aidan shifted position on the grass, started on another blade. "She was murdered," he quietly said. "There was…trouble. Some people trying to get to Will came looking for him and found her. He wasn't home. They decapitated her."

Kal fought the urge to retch. "That's horrible."

Aidan nodded and looked at the marker. "It killed her immediately. She was the soul mate of the most powerful archdemon in existence. Had they shot or stabbed her, anything like that, we might have been able to save her."

Admittedly, while Kal understood what was going on, she still struggled to wrap her head around the whole "demons good" memo. "I thought demons were supposed to be evil."

"That's because the other side has better PR. To paraphrase one of my favorite songs, religion's controlled by some real whack jobs." Aidan laid back, propped on one elbow. "A lot of different beings get lumped into the demon category. The typical evil bastards that gave us all a bad name are the lowest version. They're not really solid, they're just energy and can manifest a form, but can easily be destroyed. Then you've got things like wraiths that are also mistaken for demons, given the same label."

Kal studied him for a moment. "Let's say for the sake of argument that I do accept this whole crazy situation. What are you, all of you? What do you do?" She caught a whiff of a scent, maybe the flowers, or maybe Aidan was wearing a new cologne. The scent smelled vaguely familiar...

Aidan looked at the grave marker again. "You ever see the movie Men in Black?"

"Yeah."

"Sort of like that, except without the aliens. See, the upstairs folk—and that's also a misnomer—they don't really give a rat's ass what happens here because they don't live here. They poof around as they see fit. They're of the air. They're basically the same thing we are, only they

do their floaty cloud thing. Just like our water counterparts could care less what we do on dry land. Most bad things don't care about what happens in clouds or water, they want to stake out turf here on terra firma. We live here, we give a damn if some evil bad thing decides to go batshit and tear up the joint."

"So Ryan is really the..." She couldn't make herself say it.

"The Devil?"

She nodded.

Aidan grinned. "Well, theologically speaking, I supposed you could call him that. Again, that's just PR on the other side's part. The old myths are closer to the truth. The airheads, they like having people going all goo-goo over them. Like I said, we *live* here. Why would we want to destroy where we live? We're fighting to keep it together. Cold war super secret shit times a bazillion. We can't control the weather or natural disasters like televangelists claim. We don't cause bad things to happen, we try to stop as many of them as we can, what we can. The weather, that kind of stuff is out of our control. We're the peacekeepers, we keep bad nasties out and non-humans from trying to take over the place. We're not evil, obviously. Geez, Ryan does good to put on matching socks in the morning, trust me."

Kal smiled, because Aidan was the last person who should criticize anyone's choice of socks or other clothing considering his horrible taste. That she could still find humor in the situation said something about her, or about Aidan.

"Ryan certainly seemed to plan this well enough."

Aidan shrugged. "Ever hear that saying about a hundred monkeys with typewriters eventually pounding out Macbeth?"

She nodded.

"He's one of those monkeys. 'What's done is done.'" Aidan frowned. "He fricking got lucky for once."

She smiled. She never would have pegged Aidan as a Shakespeare kind of guy. "'Or have we eaten on the insane root, that takes the reason prisoner?'"

He laughed and shook his head. "'Fair is foul, and foul is fair.' We could sit here and do this all day, I bet. Old Billy boy had a way with words." He glanced at his watch. "We need to go. Will might be back and wonder where we went. I don't need him hunting me down and finding us here." He stood and offered a hand, helped her to her feet. "Look, don't tell him I brought you here today."

"Why?"

"Because he's very private about Abby. He doesn't want to talk about her, he doesn't want people butting in. I just wanted you to know he's not bullshitting you. He's as upset about this as you are, if not more."

She bristled and wondered if that was her emotions or the wraith stirring a little early. "Why? Doesn't he want to sleep with me?"

Aidan turned and met her gaze. "No, he doesn't. It's nothing personal, Kal, I keep telling you that. It's not that he doesn't like you, because he does. *This* is why he refused to work with women, kept himself closed off. He didn't want to put himself in a position where he'd meet someone and fall in love. He wanted to die. Another few years without a soul mate, he would have weakened enough, he could have killed himself."

She stopped in her tracks, stunned. Aidan realized she wasn't behind him anymore and turned. "What? What's wrong?"

"Kill himself?" Will had said something about that at Ryan's, hadn't he?

"Yeah, sweet cheeks. Kill himself. His powers were still too strong. Ryan wouldn't release him from our bond, and I was under strict orders from Ryan not to help Will off himself. Not that I would have willingly done that in the first place. The three of us are bound as soul brothers, meaning unless he talked one of the higher-ups into killing him, he really wouldn't be able to find a way to die without us stopping him first. Ryan and I damn sure weren't going to help him off himself. That meant he had to do it himself but he had to wait for his powers to atrophy to weaken the bond. That was his only recourse since Ryan wouldn't release him from our bond. So he's cut himself off from women so he wouldn't be tempted."

"Will loved her that much, he wanted to die?"

"Wants, present tense. *Wants* to die. Losing a soul mate is like losing both your arms but the pain never goes away. He's always in pain. Why do you think he never smiles?"

"He hasn't been with a woman since..."

Aidan shook his head. "No. She is the love of his life, even a quarter century later. He was looking forward to joining her here in a few years. Ryan, the little fucking shit weasel, decided that wasn't in the cards. Not that I want Will to die, because he's my cousin and my soul brother and I love him. But I have to tell you, I don't agree with how Ryan went about it."

"He'd rather die than be with someone else?"

"Well, that choice has been taken from him now, hasn't it? He won't let you die, don't worry. Will returned to The Firm so he could save you."

That filled her with guilt and a sudden, unexpected feeling of pride. She was the one woman Will would change his plans for? A man who could harbor that much devotion for a woman for so many years was a good-hearted man. He had to be. "I don't understand why he couldn't kill himself earlier."

Aidan looked around to make sure they were still alone. "Look, I don't understand it all, that's not my job. I know when an archdemon takes a soul mate, it makes them even more powerful. The amulets we wear, it helps us focus the power. The power is within us but to get as powerful as Will used to be, you have to have a soul mate. It's not just bullshit that when two people make love, they also make magic. There's a universal power when two people make love, especially when they're *in* love with each other. Will couldn't be with anyone because even if you're not soul mates with someone, having sex with them, if you're an archdemon, it still gives you a power boost."

Aidan ran a hand through his hair. "Will wanted to die. He had to go without a soul mate and go without being with anyone else, let his powers weaken and atrophy enough he would be fully human and then he could kill himself. If he hadn't been bound to me and Ryan as a soul brother, he probably could have done it when she died. Another few years alone would have done it. Because you're a virgin, the wraith has attached to your soul and Will's the only one with a soul strong enough, and without a soul mate, who can get rid of the wraith. Ryan the shit weasel did his homework when he set this all up."

He shook his head at her. "I mean, honestly, I love you, sweetie, but didn't you ever stop to do the math? Ryan planned this from before you were born. Get real. A girl six months out of film school gets her own network show? A top rated show? C'mon."

He smiled and hugged her. "No offense, I'm not saying you're not good, because you are, but real life doesn't work that easy. Ryan needed you, specifically, to bring Will back to The Firm. You have a pure soul. You'll bring Will's powers back to full strength. You'll become Will's soul mate when he makes love to you and gets rid of the wraith, and you'll live happily ever after in love with each other."

The idea of making love to Will wasn't an altogether unpleasant one. She had wanted to be married when she first did it, but considering the circumstances, there were worse—

"Wait a minute. I'm not in love with him. How can I be his soul mate if I'm not in love with him?"

Aidan shook his head. "Doesn't matter. You will be."

She sensed he knew more than he let on. "What's going on?"

Aidan looked at the ground. "Ryan did his homework. You'll be bound to Will, he'll be obligated to The Firm, and Ryan gets his head archdemon back to fight the bad nasties. Anything else, you need to talk to Will or Ryan. I've said too much already. Not that I use them as often as I'd like, but I'm rather partial to my nuts being attached to my body." He reached for her hand. "Come on, kiddo. Back to the salt mines."

Chapter 12

The enormity of the situation hit Kal as she sat alone in the edit room and tried to focus on the footage she needed to work with. Why was she waiting? She had this evil darn thing stuck inside her, and she would probably kill someone if it wasn't removed. It's not like they asked her to sleep with half the Chinese army, just one very sweet, sad, hunky man.

A man she'd immediately felt attracted to from day one. A man who obviously had a lot of pain he took great efforts to hide from the world.

Kal didn't care what Ryan said about how permanent it was supposed to be, that pushed the envelope of her credulity.

Okay, yeah, that makes sense. You'll believe popping in and out of places, wraiths, and archdemons, but not that you'll be in love with Will forever automatically once you do the horizontal bop?

Kal shook her head. This was too much. As she felt the wraith stir a little she knew waiting was stupid. She didn't want to spend another night in handcuffs, she wanted to spend it in Will's arms.

There. She'd admitted it, and no holy bolt of righteous justice from Heaven struck her dead. Not like she'd go scream from the rooftops that she wanted to have pre-marital sex, but admitting it to herself was the first step, right? All she had to do now was spend the next couple of hours talking herself into it.

Will brooded at his desk after returning to the office. Aidan caught Kal's attention, and they ducked out the back door for lunch at a nearby diner. She welcomed the distraction she knew Aidan would provide. Her father certainly wouldn't approve of her having lunch with Aidan alone—or all the other time she spent alone with him—but she was happy to have a friend she knew she could count on.

* * * *

Will watched them leave. Part of him wanted to follow them, join them. How many times had he and Abby had lunch with Aidan or any of the guys?

He tried not to think about that, the throbbing ache in his soul even worse than normal over the memory.

How long until she agreed to this? Maybe he should call Ryan, ask him to take her if he agreed to willingly return to The Firm. Then he could cross off-Earth to Tavares and find something there bad-assed enough to kill him and put him out of his misery.

Will leaned back in his chair and contemplated it. He could get himself offed, Ryan could have a soul mate again. Everyone happy.

Well, not everyone.

No, Ryan wouldn't agree to that. Even though Will saw the look in Ryan's eye when they were at his Atlanta condo with Kal. Maybe Kal was Ryan's insurance policy to get Will back under his thumb, but that wasn't all. Ryan had been without a soul mate a lot longer than Will had. How had Ryan survived the pain all these years?

Will decided maybe he didn't want to think about it.

Could he not disappoint Kal? That was his other worry. He didn't want to screw up and make her miserable for eternity.

Will tried to focus on his work and push other thoughts out of his mind, including the throbbing, persistent pain in his soul.

* * * *

Sitting in their usual booth by the front window, Kal noticed a man in tight jeans walk past on the sidewalk outside. Her eyes couldn't help but follow.

"He's cute," she murmured.

"Yeah," Aidan breathlessly replied.

It took Kal's brain a moment to catch up with her ears. She looked at Aidan. His horrified expression told her all she needed to know and she realized what a naive idiot she must look like to all of them.

He immediately tried to backpedal and sat back, his face red. "Um, I mean, yeah, of course you'd think he's cute, he's got a nice body—uh, I mean you're a hot blooded woman, of course you'd notice..." Realizing it was useless, he closed his eyes. "Shit," he whispered.

Everything clicked into place. She smiled, then reached out and touched his hand. "It's okay," she said, comforting him.

He shook his head. "Me and my friggin big mouth. I told you it'd get me in trouble."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He looked at her. "Yeah, sure, no problemo. The Baptist minister's daughter is going to cozy up to the token closet queer on the crew. Riiight. I'm not always the brightest bulb, but give me a little more credit than that, Kal."

"If you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly the closed-minded bigot you've suddenly stereotyped me as. Give *me* a little more credit. I thought we were friends."

He sighed and nodded. "Touché. You're right, hon. I'm sorry." He looked out the window again, to where the guy had turned the corner. "He had a nice tight ass, didn't he?"

"Don't push it."

"Right." He looked at his food. "Don't go making hairdresser, fashion or Broadway show jokes, okay?"

She grinned. "You're the last person I'd accuse of having good fashion sense."

He smiled, then realized what she meant. "Hey!" he indignantly exclaimed.

They had a good lunch. It allowed her an hour of not thinking about wraiths, archdemons, or losing her virginity to Will Hellenboek. Aidan's playful, funny sense of humor kept her laughing the entire time. When they finished eating and walked back to the office, Aidan hooked his arm through hers.

"We okay, sweet cheeks?"

She nodded, resting her head on his shoulder. "Yeah, we're okay. But I'm gonna nominate you for that show where they remake your wardrobe. You definitely aren't a stereotypical gay guy. No wonder women love you, you dress like a Salvation Army reject. Your straight guy image is firmly intact."

He looked at his loud tropical shirt, today red and blue macaws on a screaming yellow and green floral background, unbuttoned over his purple tank top and khaki shorts. "It's my image. I'm the doofus, Will's the brain." He thought about it. "That guy who's the co-host of that show. What's his name, Clinton? He is pretty hot. If you want to nominate me, it wouldn't hurt my feelings."

* * * *

Kal somehow spent the afternoon working, pulling her mind off the decision looming over her head.

Not that it did any good.

Kal knew Will was the only other person in the office. The others would return later, closer to nightfall, to help guard her until she went home with Aidan if she didn't agree to do this tonight.

She closed her eyes and prayed. Deep inside her she felt the wraith flex its mental talons. Kal knew she had to get it out of her once and for all. It felt like pure evil, an abomination.

It was impossible to deny what had happened. She couldn't believe it or wrap her head around it, but it obviously happened. Denial was never one of her weaknesses. When presented with evidence, she could believe.

Maybe that's why she proved to be such a sucky Baptist. It required too much faith and not nearly enough tangible proof for her tastes.

Will was cute. Okay, he more than cute, he was handsome. Under any other circumstances she would be flattered to have a relationship with him. Under any other circumstances, she would willingly date him and be open to seeing where a relationship would lead.

Yet these weren't any other circumstances. Will didn't really want to sleep with her, even though he had to and was willing to do it to save her life.

Something in her heart longed to soothe Will's soul. She wanted to hold him and stroke his hair and take his pain away. A man as sweet and obviously devoted as him deserved happiness. Deserved love.

But not be forced into it.

Her mind spun. While she'd be the first to admit—outside her father's hearing, of course that she believed there was more to life and death and the universe than what she read in the Bible, this was beyond the pale. Not just her private world being rocked on its axis but her theological one as well, and the fact that demons not only existed, they were the *good* guys.

Her parents would never believe it. Not that she could tell them.

She twisted the ring on her hand. When her father put it there he'd said the only man who had the right to take it off her was the man who married her and put his own ring in its place. Over the years there'd been temptation to be sure, but the ring had served as a reminder that she deserved the best, deserved the right to wait for the one man who would cherish her and who would hold her heart safe forever.

Maybe she'd found him.

Taking a deep breath, Kal slipped the ring off her hand and put it in her change purse. She'd find a better home for it later but it no longer had a place in her life.

The world didn't stop spinning, lightning didn't strike her dead.

Her father didn't call.

She found Will in the edit room and closed the door behind her, sat in a nearby chair, and waited for him to finish. He turned to face her.

Her voice a whisper, she forced herself not to close her eyes. "Okay."

He didn't make her say it again or ask her what she meant. He nodded, his eyes dropping to the floor. "Okay."

"Tonight?" she asked.

He nodded. "Okay."

They hadn't told her what would happen if the wraith wasn't out of her by the full moon, but from Ryan's words she had a feeling she didn't want to know. Even now, as the afternoon lengthened, she felt it roll inside her again, testing its power. A sudden wave of intense hatred rippled through her. She gripped the arms of her chair and waited for the feeling to pass, tried to force it back down inside her.

Will watched her, sensing something going on within her. "Are you okay?" he asked. The genuine concern in his voice made her want to cry.

She nodded. "Yeah. It's just really nasty, that's all."

"I'm so sorry, Kal."

"I know. It's not your fault."

When the guys showed up later, Will pulled them aside and they left without further discussion. At five o'clock, Will left the edit room. "Can I take you out to dinner?" he quietly asked her.

Her stomach was bound in knots she knew weren't entirely due to the wraith's presence. "Do we have time?"

He nodded. "Moon's not due up until almost nine."

"Okay."

He held the car door for her and she realized the few times she'd rode with him he did that. Things like holding doors, waiting until she sat to sit. Will was a gentleman.

He was a gentle man.

He took her to the small, family-owned Cuban restaurant near Ybor City that the crew frequented. "Did you want something to drink, wine or sangria or something?" he asked her.

She forced a wan smile and shook her head. "I don't drink. Just iced tea, please."

He nodded and looked at the waitress. "Two, please."

They made uncomfortable small talk, discussed the show, and by the time their entrees arrived she almost felt normal. Except for the wraith occasionally struggling inside her and the knowledge that in a few hours she wouldn't be a virgin anymore. She still couldn't quite accept she would be bonded to Will permanently. She'd have to research it.

One thing at a time. She didn't want to commit to being with someone for eternity if she wasn't sure she loved him, even though her heart rapidly headed in that direction where Will Hellenboek was concerned. Even if Aidan hadn't weighed in with his opinion, now knowing what she knew about Will's past cemented in her mind and heart that he was a good man, a loving man. A man in pain who had been through more in his life than she could ever possibly imagine.

They discussed any and everything except the steaming pile of doo-doo they were immersed in. She couldn't stand it anymore.

"What happens after...after tonight. What's next?"

He wouldn't meet her eyes. "That's up to you." His gaze briefly flicked to hers, then back to the table. "Whatever you want to do." He fidgeted with his napkin.

"Aren't there rules or something? I got the impression from what Ryan said that we'll be pretty much stuck together." She regretted the word as soon as she used it. Will winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

He lifted his gaze to hers. "It's okay. You have no reason to apologize. You're the one dragged into this." She once again sensed his deep sadness.

"You don't want to do this either, do you?" She already knew the answer but she needed to talk about this.

He shook his head. "It's nothing personal. I just had plans, that's all. I thought I was finished with The Firm for good."

"Why did you want to die?" she quietly asked.

He looked at his hands. She had to concentrate to hear his soft reply. "Losing a soul mate isn't like losing a wife or husband. They're part of you, part of your soul." He took a long, shuddering breath. "It's not just emotional pain. It's physical. It's an agonizing, physical pain that doesn't go away. I don't know how others have dealt with it. I didn't know if I would have been with her again, but I was ready to be out of pain."

He frowned. "What's worse is Ryan knowing how much I hurt and still not letting me go. He had no right to force me to stay here considering he's been through it. Maybe he's a better fucking man than I am, I don't know." He took a sip of his drink. "All I know is that I don't remember what it's like to not feel pain," he quietly said. "And now…I guess I'd better get used to it since I'm going to be here for a long time."

Maybe time to redirect the conversation a little. "Why is it called The Firm?"

He shrugged. "It's just what we call it. It's always been called some variation of that."

"There's a lot I've got to learn, isn't there?"

He nodded. "Don't try to absorb it all at once."

A silence settled over them and she felt the need to break it. "What have you done for them? What was your job?"

"Lots of things. Whatever was called for. Mostly I was a Protector. Taking care of innocents, going into combat as needed when something broke through. There's a lot of things humans don't know about, shouldn't know about. It makes life simpler for everyone if we quietly take care of things and life goes on."

"I don't think I can kill. Not even something evil."

He shook his head. "You'll never be asked to do that. Ryan will only use you as a go-between. He'll never knowingly put you in harm's way." He looked at her. "It's okay. I know Aidan told you a little about Abby."

"Did..." She couldn't speak Abby's name. It didn't feel right, like it would disrespect the memory of the woman Will loved for so long, even decades after her death. "Did she fight?"

He looked sad, wistful. "Yes. A long time ago. Not in modern times. She came from a totally different time. For all intents and purposes, it was a different world. She came from a warrior people, their survival depended on everyone's ability to fight. The irony is back then, women were much stronger than today in many ways, allowed more freedoms. They could hold their own, they had to. Men couldn't spend their time protecting them, they had to protect the villages and hunt. Women had to be able to fight."

He looked lost in thought, lost in the past as he studied his hands again.

A question Kal couldn't contain passed her lips, unstoppable. "How many women have you been with in your life?" she whispered.

He didn't look at her. "One."

She thought her heart would stop. "One?"

Eventually he lifted his head. She wasn't sure, but she thought his eyes looked moist. "She was the only woman I've ever been with. The only one I'd ever wanted to be with."

Kal struggled to process that. Here was a man, God only—literally—knew how old he was, and he had only been with one woman in his life, ever? Even after his wife died so many years earlier?

Despite her mind struggling to accept everything, Kal's heart and soul slipped further and irretrievably toward love.

* * * *

Dinner lasted as long as it safely could before Will silently signaled for their check. Every action telegraphed his reluctance as clearly as if he'd spoken. It made Kal feel both better and worse, that he was willing to do this for her, yet he was being forced to do this for her.

Before he started the car he sat for a moment, staring out the windshield, then turned to her. "I mean it," he softly said. "It's not that I don't like you. I never meant to make you feel like I hated you but I..." He closed his eyes and softly swore. "I had plans. A plan. I'm sorry Ryan dragged you into this. I'm sorry he screwed with you and manipulated you into doing this. This isn't fair to you. I'm so sorry."

She hesitantly touched his hand. "Will, this isn't your fault. I don't blame you."

"Thank you." He gently squeezed her hand before starting the car and backing out of the parking lot.

She'd never been to Will's condo. She knew he lived a few miles from her, in a private, upscale gated condo community requiring a security code for entrance. She attempted more small talk to fill the silence. "Bet it helps keep the paparazzi away."

"They stay away regardless. They have to."

He didn't elaborate but she suspected she'd learn what he meant soon enough. *Well, if teleportation wasn't an issue, what the heck, let's go ahead and believe in some sort of force field, too.* Her grasp on sanity was loosened enough it couldn't hurt to fling it into the wind without regard to reality, right?

Reality didn't look so certain anymore, either.

They parked in front of a one story condo that was part of a duplex. He walked around to open her door for her, again reminding her that he was a good guy despite the whole crazy situation.

Kal took a deep, nervous breath and followed Will to his front door.

Chapter 13

Will unlocked the front door and walked in. He left the lights off and dropped his keys on a table in the foyer. Kal made no move to follow.

He glanced over his shoulder. "You don't have to stand out there."

"It's dark in there. Mind putting on a light?"

"Oh, sorry." He snapped on a lamp and continued into the condo. "I'm used to it."

"Yeah." She closed the front door behind her and stood in the foyer.

He walked into the kitchen and turned on the light. She heard the fridge open and close. The condo looked tidy and sparse. Comfortable leather sofa, a coffee table, two matching chairs. End tables on either side of the sofa. Not much in the way of decoration, just a few framed pictures on top of a small, half-full bookcase. Cream tile floors and white walls. It could have been a hotel room. In fact, she'd stayed in hotel rooms with more personality than Will's home. It looked more like a short-term rental apartment, one a tourist would lease for a few weeks, than a permanent residence.

Her own apartment had been better decorated when she arrived.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked, assuming he must have recently moved.

"Fifteen years." He appeared in the kitchen doorway and wouldn't meet her gaze. He took a sip from a glass of ice water in his hand.

She finally spoke. "What do we do now?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what you want me to tell you." He wouldn't look at her, his slate grey eyes studying the floor. His expression screamed reluctance. She felt on edge, between her nerves and the wraith struggling for control.

She set her purse on the same table he'd placed his keys. "I'm not exactly the expert here."

His jaw clenched and she considered apologizing for the bite in her tone. Every movement, the set of his body, spoke volumes. He didn't want to do this either.

She wasn't sure if that made her feel better or worse.

His eyes briefly lifted to her face, then away again. "Would you like something to drink—" "I already told you, I don't drink."

She heard his deep intake of breath, as if trying to stop an impending comment. "I have water, iced tea, or orange juice. Or I can make you hot tea or coffee."

"Oh. Sorry."

He fell silent for a moment. "Well?"

She shivered. "Well, what?"

"Would you like something to drink?"

Another pang of guilt pricked her. She wasn't making this any easier on either of them. "Oh. Sorry. Yes, water's fine. Thank you."

He returned to the kitchen and she heard him drop ice into a glass, the tap briefly run. He returned and stopped halfway across the living room, another glass in his outstretched hand. "Here."

She finally stepped across the dim room and took it from him, her fingers brushing his as she took the glass. Only then did his gaze rise to meet hers for the most fleeting of moments. She again felt that electric tingle of their first meeting.

This wouldn't be bad. He was cute, he was sweet. He wasn't a jerk, they'd just gotten off on the wrong foot. If she'd known about his history she would have cut him a lot more slack early on.

She took a long swallow from the glass. "Thank you."

He nodded and returned to the kitchen. "Feel free to help yourself to anything in the fridge or cabinets—"

"Like a knife to slit my throat?" She'd meant it as a snarky quip to break the tension, like she would normally joke around with Aidan, but realized after she'd said it how it sounded. Through the pass-through counter she watched Will freeze. She immediately regretted her words. "Will, I'm—"

"No. It's okay," he softly said.

It wasn't okay. Kal couldn't see his face but she knew he struggled with this as much as she did.

The pictures on the bookcase caught her eye and she walked over. The largest on the top showed Will with a woman. The picture appeared old, not recent.

And he wore a broad, beaming smile.

Will was still in the kitchen. Kal picked up the picture frame and studied it in the dim light. He looked the same, unaged. They stood together, arms around each other, leaning against the Bayshore Drive balustrade. Tampa General Hospital was clearly visible in the background across the channel but it looked nothing like it did now. There was no denying the picture must be at least several decades old. The woman stood a little shorter than him, with her long red hair pulled back in a ponytail. Their passionate gazes leapt from the picture. This couple was obviously deeply in love with each other—

The frame jerked out of her hands. "Don't touch that. Please." He carefully, lovingly set it back in its place. Kal hadn't had time to feel startled by his stealthy approach, much less his rude manners.

"Sorry."

He stared at the picture, caressed the glass, and finally glanced her way before his gaze once again dropped to the floor. "I'm sorry if I scared you. I just...I don't like people touching that."

The other pictures were of her as well, some even older than that one, two more with him in them. One of him and her in front of an antique car. From their clothes and the sepia tone of the photo, Kal had a feeling the car had been new when the photo was taken.

"Was she your wife?"

Kal watched his jaw work, the muscles in his neck tightened. He nodded.

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "You didn't know. I'm just...touchy."

"Aidan said she was murdered."

His shoulders slumped. He nodded, then turned away and returned to the kitchen.

Kal closed her eyes and silently swore. She already felt the wraith stirring deep within her, trying to fully awaken, the jittery buzz that would soon turn into an undeniable, uncontrollable craving. If Will Hellenboek was the only one who could take that away, she should treat him a little more kindly.

Kal followed him to the kitchen and stood in the doorway. "I'm sorry, Will," she said. "Maybe if we go lie down and talk for a little while, it might help both of us."

He still didn't meet her gaze. He nodded, and she followed him to the bedroom. He walked to the bedside table and turned on a lamp. This room was as sparse as the rest of the condo, with a few pictures of Will and his wife on the dresser. Kal sat at the end of the bed and looked at him.

"Do you have a radio or something?" she asked, keeping her voice soft so he wouldn't hear the shrill edge of her stress and the wraith fighting for control. She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and tried to ignore the evil presence inside her. She kicked her shoes off.

He reached for the bedside clock radio, fumbled, found a classical station.

"That's fine," she said. The lamp was bright though. "Can we turn off the lamp, maybe turn on the bathroom light or something?"

He nodded again and turned it off. In the dark he walked to the bathroom, turned that light on and pulled the door nearly shut. Then he returned to the bed and stood, looking at her. Even in the dim light she saw his grey eyes glisten.

He looked near tears.

Kal patted the mattress next to her. "Please?"

He removed his shoes and sat without a word, his elbows on his knees, head hung, hands clasped. When she put her arm around him he finally sobbed, his head in his hands, crying. Kal hated Ryan with a desperate passion, not just for what he'd done to her but for what he was putting Will through.

After a moment he put his arms around her and hugged her. They sat like that for many long, quiet minutes. Kal realized it felt right. It felt like she belonged there, with him. She closed her eyes and inhaled his scent, felt the warmth of his throat against her forehead as she nuzzled her face against his shoulder.

He pressed his lips to the top of her head. "I promise I'll take care of you, Kal. I'll keep you safe. I swear it." He squeezed her tighter and she felt the truth to his words through her very core.

"I know."

"I'm not upset because of you. I hope that doesn't sound wrong, but it's not about you." "I know." He cried again. She sat with him, wishing she could take his pain away, feeling guilty that he would spend eternity in agony because of her. After a few minutes he released her and wiped his face with his hands. He took a moment to compose himself.

"I'm sorry, Will," she said.

He shook his head. "Why are you apologizing?"

"I feel like this is my fault."

He finally met her gaze. "It's not your fault." He took a deep shuddering breath. "I'm going to kill Ryan one of these days. Fucking bastard, messing with people just to get what he wants." He caressed her cheek, tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm so sorry, Kal. If I'd known, I never would have sent you up there alone. I never would have put you in harm's way."

"Shh." She caught his hand and nuzzled it. His palm felt warm and soft. Kal closed her eyes and tried to relax. He wouldn't hurt her. She kissed his palm and released him, scooted back on the bed before lying down.

He looked at her. When she patted the mattress he slowly moved to lie next to her.

On their sides they faced each other. She looked into his eyes and wished she could see past his well-constructed, stony façade, see the man AnnaBelinda could make smile.

He found her hand and brought it up to his mouth, gently kissed it, feathered his lips across her healing knuckles with the lightest of touches. She shivered and snuggled closer, their legs touching. Heat radiated through their clothes, washing through her, pulling her closer, stirring the wraith.

"Please, Will," she whispered. "It's getting stronger."

"You can feel it?"

She nodded.

He closed his eyes and touched his forehead to hers, deeply inhaled her scent. "I'm sorry I can't tell you I love you tonight, Kal."

"I know. It's okay."

"No, it's not okay. You deserve better than this."

"Will, please. This isn't your fault. Just...please. I want this thing out of me."

She felt his breath first, warm and sweet across her flesh. Then his lips brushed hers and electricity shot through her again. She'd kissed before but the tender warmth of his reluctant gesture contained more heat than anything she'd ever experienced.

Nothing had prepared her for this. Maybe Ryan had done her a favor. If Will could elicit this much passion with such a chaste move, what else was in store for her this evening?

He pulled away and looked at her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "That was nice." If only she could make him smile.

Kal caressed his cheek and leaned in for another kiss, as electrifying as the first, which left her gasping for breath.

Will put his arms around her and drew her close, gently tasting and exploring her lips. One arm cradled her to him, his other lightly rested on her waist. As her passion grew she twined her fingers in his hair and pulled his mouth firmly against hers. At first he resisted slightly, his entire body stiffening. Then he relaxed and she felt his body mold against hers.

He even tasted good.

She hooked her leg around his, felt the heat from his body slowly work through her flesh. Instinctively she wanted to become a part of him, wanted him to be part of her.

When she tried to work on his shirt buttons he gently rolled her onto her back and kissed her, working his lips down her chin, trailing lightly to the base of her throat where he paused. "Don't hesitate to tell me to stop if something—"

"Will," she gasped, "believe me, I don't want you to stop!"

He carefully released her top button, kissed her bared flesh, repeating until her shirt lay open and loose.

She closed her eyes and kept one hand on the back of his head, her eyes closed, nearly breathless from his caresses. Was it always this good for people or was he just particularly skilled?

Using the lightest of touches he laid his palm against her belly. "You're beautiful," he whispered.

She opened her eyes and found his cold, slate grey gaze had changed to a warmer, deeper blue, noticeable even in the dim light. "You don't have to tell me things to—"

He laid a gentle finger on her lips and shook his head. "I mean that. You are beautiful. I've always thought you were beautiful. From the moment I first met you I was attracted to you."

A warm fire spread through her. Maybe he couldn't love her tonight, but he had noticed her. That was progress, right?

He kissed her again. This time his tongue lightly traced her lips. Hers parted, allowing him entrance and she softly moaned. While he kissed her his hand found and opened the hook on the front of her bra and she felt the material part, a cool draft brushing her flesh.

Finally breaking their kiss, he bent his lips to the soft swell of her breasts, gently kissing between them, making no move to either side. His breath stirred her, warming her. When his hand settled once again over her navel she grabbed him and tugged it north, placing it over her left breast.

He gasped. For the first time she felt a solid bulge against her thigh. It hadn't occurred to her before that he wasn't hard, but now that he was she realized how large he must be.

His thumb rubbed her nipple and it hardened and peaked, pebbling beneath his warm fingers, sending shockwaves through her, making her belly contract in a hot and pleasant way.

"Yesss," she hissed into his mouth, hungry, eager.

He sat up and she moaned with disappointment, then realized he was only changing position. He knelt over her, kissed the soft plain of her belly, worked his way north and replaced his fingers with his mouth as his other hand teased her neglected nipple into a similar state.

Kal's body arched into him. God, he could do this to her and they were still half-dressed?

He alternated, taking her other nipple into his mouth and swirling his tongue around it, drawing another needy moan from her.

It felt like hours he did that, from one breast to the other and back again, making no move to undress or move further south. Not that she was complaining.

When she whimpered with need he met her gaze. This time his eyes looked black and smoldering, steamy.

She nodded. He pulled her into a sitting position, cradled her while she eagerly kissed his neck. Skimming his hands up her back, he slowly worked her shirt and bra off until she was totally bare from the waist up. With her neck tantalizingly accessible he kissed her flesh, trailing gentle, nipping bites from her shoulder to her ear and back again.

Clutching him tightly she dug her fingers into his back through his shirt. Suddenly, spending eternity with this man looked like a pretty dang good idea. Maybe she should send Ryan a thank you card?

Kal sat back and kissed Will. Her fingers fumbled but eventually found his shirt buttons. His chest was lightly dusted with fine hair and when she slid his shirt off his shoulders, she ran her hands across him, relishing the feel, her hand brushing against his amulet. Will's body felt firm and solid but in the dim light she touched a few irregular bumps she instinctively knew if she traced with her fingers would turn out to be scars.

"Will, I don't know what is supposed to happen later." She took a deep breath. "I know I was sort of witchy to you sometimes. Now I know why you were the way you were, but I'm still sorry I wasn't nicer. I have always been attracted to you. Really. From when we met that first night."

He studied her face and nodded. "Me too."

Kal touched his face and leaned in for another kiss. "I just didn't want you to think... I mean, I know we have to do this but..." She closed her eyes. "I didn't want you to think I was forced to like you. Because I already do like you, and I have been attracted to you. I just...I was mad at the network for forcing me to work on your show."

Did the edge of his mouth slightly curl? "Thank you."

Dang it, she wanted to make him smile. "So that's okay, right? That we at least like each other?"

He nodded but his mouth had settled back to its standard unexpressive line.

She held his palm to her cheek and kissed it, then carefully sucked each finger, swirling her tongue around the digits and enjoying his soft gasp of surprise.

He swept her into his arms and kissed her, long and deep, then lowered her to the bed. When he broke their kiss his lips blazed a trail down her chest, between her breasts, to the waistband of her jeans.

Kal relaxed and tangled her fingers in his hair, gently urged him south. The wraith had stirred again, a little stronger, and she didn't want to be anywhere but here with Will, in his arms. Like him? Heck, that was a lie.

She loved him.

Now that Kal knew a few of the secrets behind Will Hellenboek's wall, she wanted to love him for eternity and try to at least ease his pain, even if she couldn't take it away. She couldn't admit it to him now, it would heap more guilt on him. Wouldn't it?

She'd felt the first stirrings at the cemetery, while staring at Abby's grave. And at their dinner tonight, after getting over the hurdle of agreeing to do this, she could really look at him, see him for who he was. He was a man forced into a situation he couldn't control. Despite his own pain he wanted to minimize hers. Was willing to stay in pain to save her life. A man who hadn't been able to move past his decades of grief. If he could love his wife this many years later, stay devoted to her when he had every reason to move on despite his pain, he was a man worth loving.

A man worth giving herself to.

He unfastened her jeans and kissed lower. When he slipped his fingers around her waistband, she lifted her hips so he could slide her jeans down her legs, leaving her only in her panties.

Will caressed her thighs, his hands scorching hot against her flesh. She wanted those hands where no man had been before. Kal sat up and grabbed him, kissed him hard. She rolled him onto his back and straddled him. His hard bulge pressed through his slacks against her cotton-clad bottom, his hands splayed on her hips.

She ground against him. "Can you read my mind?"

"Probably after. Once we're soul mates."

She kissed him again and closed her eyes. "I've never been with a guy before, Will. Ever."

When she looked she spotted the hint of a smile again. "I know, sweetie. That's why we're

___"

She shook her head. "I mean, all I've ever done is kissed. Ever."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

If she couldn't say it to him, who *could* she say it to? "Will," she whispered, "I've never..." He spared her. "You've *never* had an orgasm?"

She shook her head and felt the heat of blush in her face. "Remember, Ryan planned well. I was raised to be a good girl."

A definite curl to his lips. "I thought preacher's daughters were supposed to be pretty wild." She shrugged.

He flipped her onto her back, surprising her with his strength. "How much time do we have?" She shivered. "It's trying."

Will nodded. "Okay." He kissed her. "I want you to enjoy this." He resumed his southerly trek, carefully slid her panties down her hips. When his tongue gently parted her warm folds at the apex of her thighs, she shivered again.

"Yes!" she gasped.

He looked at her. His lips were definitely curled.

She smiled.

"What?" he asked.

"You're smiling. I've never seen you smile before."

He bent to her mound again, slowly tracing her contours with his lips and tongue. She spread her legs wider for him, wanting him inside her.

Cramping waves of need and pleasure, triggered by every gentle touch of his tongue, drove her to a frenzy. Now she understood the big deal about sex. If she'd ever felt like this before meeting Will there's no way she would have stopped. No one had ever told her it felt this good!

A warm, gentle heat built between her legs, gaining strength and power until she felt the explosion rip through her lower belly. Eyes squeezed tightly shut, Kal moaned, loudly, trying to push against him, not wanting it to stop.

He seemed to know her body better than she did. He stayed with her as wave after wave pulsed through her, sensing just when to ease off.

Gasping, she shivered as the air conditioner kicked on and chilled her slightly because of the fine sheen of moisture covering her skin. He moved to lie next to her and she pressed against him, closing her eyes as he folded her against his chest.

"Wow," she whispered.

He kissed the top of her head. "How was that? Good?"

She nodded against him. "Yeah, that was fantastic, but what about you?"

"We'll get there. I want you to feel good."

"That was way beyond good."

Was that a soft chuckle? Startled, she tipped her head back and looked at him. "You *are* smiling!" It wasn't much but his lips had definitely curled.

His eyes searched hers. "You sounded like you were enjoying yourself."

The wraith stirred again but she felt stronger and pushed it down. "I want to hear *you* enjoy yourself."

Clouds drifted through his gaze. "I think we have a little more time. Besides, I have to..." He didn't finish.

"It has to be that moment, right?"

He nodded.

She smiled. "That doesn't have to be the only time, though, right? After that first time?"

Definitely a smile. He shook his head. "Not if you don't want it to be the only time."

Her hand trailed down his abs to the front of his slacks, which definitely felt full. She kissed him and fumbled for his belt. He reached down and helped her, not breaking their kiss. When his slacks opened she slipped her hand inside and felt him, hard and throbbing and very large, inside his briefs.

She must have gasped because he nuzzled her ear. "I'll be gentle. I promise."

"I know." She wrapped her fingers around his shaft, stroked the smooth skin. In response his hips bucked against her touch.

She wanted to taste him, at least. Pulling free of his lips, she rolled him onto his back and knelt over him, slid his slacks and briefs off. She'd seen pictures, of course, but never the real thing. Gently kissing the tip, she wrapped a hand around his stiff shaft before glancing up at him.

Dark, smoldering passion met her heated gaze. He nodded. "It's okay. Go ahead."

Closing her eyes again she carefully put her lips around the tip. That time he did groan. Then his fingers gently tangled in her hair and something about the gesture made her sex throb in response. This would be inside her very soon. She couldn't wait.

She couldn't fit him very far into her mouth, so she concentrated on licking him, hoping she did it right. From the way his hips jerked in response to her actions she suspected she did. He even tasted good, a slightly salty tang that wasn't at all disgusting, as she'd heard other girls say. She now suspected those girls had never really had a man. How could anyone hate this!

His cock throbbed and swelled and after a few minutes he gently pushed her away.

"That's enough," he hoarsely said.

She didn't think it was enough but she let him roll her over onto her back. He lowered his mouth to her mound again. Knowing what to expect this time she let herself go, giving in to his ministrations. When her climax hit she threw her head back and cried out, moaning his name.

Refusing to be denied, the wraith stirred again, stronger, pushing.

Will sat up. "Is it trying to break through?" he asked.

Kal nodded.

He knelt between her legs, gently spread them wider, kissed the base of her throat. Her fingers wrapped around his arms, pulling him to her.

His large, engorged head gently nudged against her ready entrance. She held her breath.

He touched his forehead to hers. "Just relax," he whispered.

She nodded and wrapped her arms around him.

He carefully and slowly pressed forward. She tried to thrust against him but he resisted her attempts to take him in too soon. He stretched her in a pleasurable way. When he met resistance he stopped and kissed her again.

He raised his head and met her eyes. "I'm sorry, Kal," he whispered.

She shook her head. "Don't be. Seriously."

Will smiled again, not as large and bright as in the pictures but it gave her hope.

"You deserve better than this life," he softly said.

"You're a good man. Maybe one day you can love me half as much as you loved her. If so, I'm a very lucky woman."

He closed his eyes. "You have to ask me to make you my soul mate," he softly said.

She wrapped her legs around him and kissed him. She whispered in his ear, "Go ahead. I want to be your soul mate." Even as she spoke the words she knew it was the truth.

She wanted to spend her life with this man.

He buried his face against her shoulder. He withdrew slightly, then thrust his hips forward. She felt a jolt of pain that faded to mild discomfort, then was replaced by pleasure as he filled her to her very depths, his shaft hard and hot and feeling better than anything she ever imagined.

Clutching him, she tried to wiggle her hips against him, but he held still.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"That wasn't all, was it?" she gasped.

Her heart soared when he chuckled and kissed her neck. "No. I don't want to hurt you."

"How about I tell you if it hurts, otherwise, you don't stop."

He laughed! He raised his head and she met his eyes and saw he was near tears again. "You're really okay?" he asked.

She eagerly nodded. "Yeah. Real good."

He slowly stroked, taking his time. Her hands traveled down his back and grabbed his hips, trying to pull him deeper. She felt his tight muscles working beneath her palms and she figured out how to roll her hips against his.

Refusing to be rushed, Will continued his slow, deep strokes, kissing her, his tongue working in time with his thrusts. After a few minutes he carefully pushed deep and stilled his motions. He sat up.

"What?" she asked.

He smiled again. "One more," he said. He shifted his weight and slipped a hand between their bodies, his thumb finding her swollen, sensitive nub.

She moaned. "Oh, that feels good!"

"It's supposed to."

"You have a very handsome smile, Will."

"I haven't had a reason to smile for a long time."

"I know." It was hard to talk between his fingers on her and the wraith struggling to break free, and she finally couldn't hold the words back. "I love you, Will."

He stopped, watching her. "You don't have to say—"

"I mean it." She swallowed, trying to moisten her dry mouth. "I want to be the one that makes you smile again. I wasn't going to say it because I didn't want you feeling guilty. But I don't know what happens...after. I want you to know how I feel now, so you know I'm not being forced to feel this way about you."

He studied her, and after a long while his fingers resumed their gentle, teasing strokes. "You don't hate me for this?"

She vigorously shook her head. "No. Right now I'm not sure I hate Ryan that much anymore."

He laughed. "I'm not sure I share your view on that last point." He nuzzled her nose. "He put you through hell, Kal. Put you at risk. I don't know if I can forgive him for that."

The tingling sensation swelled inside her again, centered under his fingers on her nub, quickly spreading throughout her body. Impaled on his hard shaft, filled with him, it felt even better than before. It felt right.

"Tell me when you're close," he whispered.

His eyes locked her to him. She whimpered as the sensation built. He slowly resumed his strokes inside her as his fingers teased her toward the edge. She wanted, needed this.

The wraith struggled for dominance, fighting through her need. "Hurry, Will," she whispered. "It's trying."

His fingers carefully caressed her. After feeling like she hovered on the edge forever he whispered, "Come for me, sweetheart."

The passionate explosion tore through her, ripping the breath from her lungs. He waited only a moment before driving his hips hard against her. With an ever increasing tempo he took her as she wrapped her arms around him and met each thrust with her hips, finally finding an intimate rhythm with him.

He dropped his head to her shoulder again and buried his face against her neck. Holding him tightly she whispered, "Please make me yours. I want you to do it."

Will took three more hard thrusts. With a loud cry he shuddered, buried inside her. That's when she felt it—a deep, warm, pleasant burning sensation within her belly. Suddenly the wraith ripped free, agonizingly painful.

Frightened, she closed her eyes. Will rolled to his side, taking her with him and holding her tightly against his chest, gently murmuring to her.

The wraith felt like it was playing pinball inside her body, bouncing around her very soul. Kal felt Will's soul inside her. She held on to him, hoping the agony would stop soon and yet not wanting to ever separate from Will again.

"It's okay," he whispered, his lips pressed to her ear. "Just hang on. It'll be over in a minute."

The wraith struggled, mental claws ripping and tearing, struggling to hang on to her. She sobbed against Will's shoulder, trusting him, knowing she loved him even as she felt a soft, velvety mental caress.

"It's okay." But Will's gentle voice whispered in her brain, not her ear.

His soul reached out to hers, going deep inside her. Finally the wraith was loose and free and Kal screamed as it fought its way out of her.

Weak and gasping, she went limp against Will and sobbed, barely aware of him pulling the sheet over them.

"It's gone," he said, kissing her damp forehead. "It's okay. It's gone."

He was right. Her soul felt lighter. The invading presence had left.

"It won't come back?"

He kissed her forehead again. "No. It can't."

She sank into him, relieved, nuzzling as close as possible. "Please don't let me go."

He held her tightly against him. "I won't."

Chapter 14

From the moment Will's release started he felt it—a fuzzy, dull roar that rolled through him, quickly becoming clearer, until he felt her very heartbeat in his soul. Damn, it had been so long.

Then, with a final, explosive burst of agony, the pain he'd lived with for over twenty-five years was suddenly gone. The sudden relief nearly took his breath away. He still felt a slight, dull ache, but that was nothing compared to the torment he'd felt since Abby's death. He'd had no idea that would happen, never realized the pain would disappear when he took Kal as his soul mate.

Will felt the wraith ripping through Kal, trying to maintain its grip on her. Will carefully worked his way into her soul and kicked the wraith's funky ass to the curb.

When she shivered against him he knew he was lost to her. He also knew yes, she had some feelings for him, that instant attraction before they bonded, but it didn't assuage his guilt. She was a good person, deserved a normal life, not an eternity roaming the planet trying to stay alive. He couldn't tell her he loved her yet. He would take his revenge on Ryan for doing this to her. But he would die to protect her and prayed one day he'd be worthy enough to deserve what she would hopefully come to feel for him.

Wicked smart, too. He'd sensed that from the first moment he met her. She wanted him to know her true feelings. Brilliant girl. Had she not opened up to him before they bonded he might never have believed she could truly, willingly love him, regardless of who she was before. Just because her soul had been Abby didn't mean she would automatically love him in this life. Now he knew it was possible.

Inhaling deeply, her sweet, unique scent, mixed with the musky aroma of their lovemaking captured his soul. It had been so long.

So, so long.

He'd never wanted another soul mate. He'd wanted to die and join Abby and be free for the first time in his long existence. To be released from the pain he'd felt since her death. He didn't ever want to put another innocent at risk. While he despised Ryan's trickery, he reluctantly admitted Kal was far from the worst choice.

And she had been Abby, even though he could never tell her that. He had her back, in a way. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"What?"

"It's like you're holding your breath."

He realized that's what he'd been doing, waiting for a new blast of pain to hit him. It'd been so long since he hadn't been in pain he'd forgotten what it felt like. He nuzzled her again. "My pain's gone."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Mostly. It's not like it was. Bearable now."

She tightly hugged him. "That's a good thing, right?"

He kissed her. "A really good thing. I just didn't know that was going to happen." He still felt a little overwhelmed by the sensation of being relatively pain-free.

Kal gasped. "I'm not on the Pill!"

He nuzzled the top of her head and relished the lightness in his soul. Kal's hair felt silky soft against his flesh. How had he not noticed how soft it felt earlier? "It's okay. That can't happen tonight."

"Do I even want to know why?"

"Does it matter?"

She sighed. "I guess not." She looked at him, meeting his eyes. "Do I need to get on the Pill?" "You don't have to keep sleeping with me." But dammit, he sure hoped she'd want to.

She kissed him, hard. When she finally released him after his soft member started throbbing

and stiffening inside her, she whispered, "I know I don't have to. I want to."

He frowned, studying her. She wasn't just saying that. "You're not..."

"I don't know why you guys think you can force a woman to love someone just because you say it's how the ritual or whatever happens." Her teasing, playful smile couldn't be denied a reply. He rolled her onto her back, now fully erect inside her.

"I don't understand. I thought you'd automatically feel—"

She wrapped her arms around him as he thrust. "Does it matter?"

"I guess not." He kissed her again.

"I keep telling you men you can't force a woman to love someone."

A man spoke, shattering their peace. "Well, isn't that a pleasant sight."

At the sound of Ryan's voice, Kal screamed. Will pressed her against the mattress, tried to shield her body with his as he fumbled for the sheet to cover them. "What the fuck, Ryan?"

Ryan leaned against the bedroom doorway, his arms crossed, a smile on his face. "That wasn't so bad now, was it?"

"Get out of my house!" Will roared. Kal kept her arms tightly wrapped around Will and tried to peek over his shoulder.

"I just wanted to make sure all was well," Ryan said, winking at her. "Or if I had to dispatch our unwilling Aidan to finish the job."

"Ryan, get. The fuck. Out!"

"Oh, you don't mean that, do you? Such a poor host you are."

Will pushed himself up, his eyes turned black, and Kal knew she didn't imagine that the amulet around his neck briefly flared with color. "Out!"

Ryan smiled. "I'll talk to you later, then." With that he touched his amulet and disappeared from the room.

Will stood, touched his amulet and closed his eyes. When he muttered something under his breath, Kal felt the air shift, expand, contract, then her ears popped.

"What was that?"

He opened his eyes and got back into bed. "Sort of like a force field. People can't just pop in here again like that. They have to knock on the front door like anyone else."

"Did you lock the front door?"

"Damn." He got out of bed and left the room, returning a moment later and settling under the covers with her again. "Okay, let's try this again."

She cuddled against him, her hand resting on his chest. This wasn't bad at all. She could easily get used to having him in bed with her all the time.

Kal thought maybe he'd fallen asleep when he spoke, startling her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." She was still dealing with everything and didn't want to commit to more than that. "Are you ?"

"Yeah. Let's go take a bath. It'll relax you."

"Okay."

He had a large sunken tub in addition to the separate shower. The bathroom light was harsh and he disappeared and returned with a pack of emergency candles and a lighter. "From my hurricane kit. Sorry it's not more romantic."

She smiled. "It's fine."

He lit the candles and turned off the light and they settled into the warm water. Kal rested against Will's chest, his arms around her. In the light she'd seen his chest and her earlier suspicions were correct. While handsome, his flesh was also crossed by scars that bore mute testimony to previous encounters totally incongruous to the night they now shared.

Will kissed her neck behind her ear. This felt right, being with him. For the first time in her life Kal realized she felt like she was exactly where she belonged.

"I'm sure you have questions," he softly said, his chin resting comfortably on the top of her head.

"You won't blow up if you enter a church, will you?"

He laughed, the sound warming her heart. She could make him smile and laugh.

"No, I've been in plenty of churches over the years. Weddings, funerals, bat mitzvahs. I won't melt into a puddle."

"My parents will insist on a church wedding."

"Okay."

She looked at him. "Just like that?"

He nodded. "Just like that."

"You've got to propose first."

He studied her face. "Tonight?"

"Not tonight. Although we are sort of doing it backwards, having the wedding night before the wedding." She sighed and settled against him again. "We're going to have to ease my parents into this. Thank God they're in Ohio and not down here. We won't have to pretend. I can tell them we're dating and in a couple of months tell them to set a date."

"Tell me about your ring. You're not wearing it."

"Do we have to talk about that?"

"No."

He didn't push. She realized he was serious, that they didn't have to talk about it. He'd contently sit there with her.

That made her want to talk about it. "My father gave it to me when I turned fourteen. It was a big deal, they did this huge thing in the church. It was supposed to help me stay pure until I met Mr. Right, instead of settling for Mr. Right Now."

"Your father put it on you?"

"Yeah, it was like a wedding ceremony. I wasn't the only one, there were five other girls, their dads did them too." She realized how that sounded after the words left her mouth.

Will said it first, trying to mask his amused snort. "Tell me that's not creepy on about twenty different levels."

She laughed. "Yeah, they meant well. I look back on it now and see it, though. It kind of worked to Ryan's advantage, didn't it?"

Will nodded. "I suppose."

"You've only been with two women, ever?"

His lips traced feather-light circles across the nape of her neck. "Ever. Abby, and now you. That also works to Ryan's advantage, because it made me a lot stronger than other archdemons over the years."

"So archdemons don't have to have a soul mate to survive?"

"No. I didn't want to be with anyone but her until..." He didn't finish and she pulled his arms tighter around her.

"Will your pain come back?"

"I don't know. I hope not." He searched his soul. Yes, a small pocket of grief, anger, and agony still resided deep within him. But it felt like a stubbed toe in comparison to what felt like a double amputation without anesthesia before. "I didn't know it would go away." Then a flash of realization hit him and he clamped down on it, hoping Kal didn't sense his suspicion. Maybe it wasn't simply because he'd taken a new soul mate. Maybe it's because of who she used to be.

"So that's good?"

"Very good."

"Thank you for not letting Ryan kill me."

"I couldn't let that happen, Kal. Never. No matter what." He didn't give voice to his suspicion that Ryan knew with certainty Will would never let Kal die. Part of him hated Ryan for forcing him to make that choice, to live, and yet...

He also wondered if he had steadfastly refused, if Ryan would have taken her instead. He knew damn well Ryan lied about being the only one strong enough and without a soul mate.

He also knew damn well Ryan, albeit a perennial asshole, would never let an innocent die if he had the power to stop it.

"You gave up your plans for me," she said.

He nuzzled her hair. *Jesus*, she smelled good. "Like I told you, I felt something different for you from the moment we met. I didn't understand why at first. Now I do."

Will wouldn't give Ryan the satisfaction of knowing it but yes, he loved her. Maybe his feelings weren't as deep and passionate for her as they'd been for Abby. Will knew it wouldn't take long for him to feel like that about Kal. Especially knowing what he knew about her. "You're not allowed to die on me, Kal. I can't go through that again."

She turned to look at him, noted his teasing half smile despite his serious tone. "How long will I live?"

He shrugged. "Abby was human, if that's what you mean."

The smile slowly creased her face. She felt it touch the darkest places in her soul. "I get to stay looking this age for..."

He smiled in reply. "Yeah. Not a bad deal, huh?"

She laughed and rested her head against his broad chest. "So I can play the 'forever twentynine' game forever."

"Well, twenty-five, in your case."

"You never answered my question about the Pill."

"No, you don't have to go on it."

Sudden sadness pierced her heart. He immediately felt it and clarified. "Yes, we can have kids, as long as you're able to have children. It's a long story. We don't need to go into it right now."

"Did you and Abby have any children?"

Now it was her turn to feel his sadness. The heaviness suddenly weighing down his soul brought tears to her eyes.

"No," he whispered. "She couldn't have children. We wanted them, and we tried for...we tried for a long time. Just because there are supernatural perks of the job doesn't mean laws of nature aren't still enforced in some regards."

"So you do want kids?"

He nodded and kissed her neck. She couldn't think straight when he did that. "One day. Not right now. We need to spend time, a lot of time, not just getting to know each other but getting you adjusted to what's happened. There's no rush."

No, there was no rush. Especially considering he wasn't even able to tell her he loved her yet.

"You don't know my mother. She'll be knitting baby booties and sending me Babies-R-Us ad fliers." Another thought. "Is Aidan your only living relative?"

"Only close relative. We have an extended family throughout The Firm. We're all related in some way. Distantly, at least. As far as what most people would consider family, Aidan is it, all I have." In the distant past he would have mentioned Ryan, too. But not tonight.

She turned to face him, straddled his lap. He stiffened between her legs. He might have been less than willing at first, but like her had apparently quickly warmed to the idea of being soul mates. She leaned forward and kissed him, let him take over her lips while she shifted in his lap and impaled herself on his shaft.

He slipped deep inside her, his hands settling on her hips. No, there were far worse things to spend her life doing than making love to Will Hellenboek.

Like putting up with her father.

Kal rested her head on Will's shoulder as his arms encircled her. She closed her eyes and sighed as he gently thrust, slow languid strokes meant more to tease than to bring release for either. She felt safe in his arms.

His fingers caressed her back as they sank a little lower in the warm water. "I feel like an idiot," she whispered.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know anything."

"I don't understand."

"About...about sex. I don't even talk dirty."

His warm, rumbling chuckle melted her insides and set her muscles spasming between her legs.

"You could have fooled me. You're amazing."

"You haven't had sex in twenty-five years. Maybe you've forgotten how it's supposed to be."

"No." He kissed the top of her head. "You really are amazing. As for the talking dirty..." He nuzzled her behind the ear. "I'll be more than happy to teach you that." His voice sounded much deeper, huskier, full of barely restrained passion.

"Yeah?"

His lips nibbled along her shoulder. "Yeah."

"Like what?" she gasped. Nothing that came out of this man's seductive mouth could be wrong, ever.

"Hmm. How about," he playfully nipped her earlobe, making her shiver, "I want to take you back to bed, run my hands over your body, and make you come again."

She had to remember to breathe. "That doesn't sound very dirty." But it sure as heck sounded like a lot of fun!

"I want to ease you into it. Just like I want to ease my cock into that sweet mouth of yours and watch as you swallow me."

Kal gasped. "Okay, that sounded dirty. Good kind of dirty."

He laughed again and hugged her tightly to him. "Kal, sweetheart, why don't we go back to bed and I'll show you all the good kinds of dirty you want."

This man was so different from the sullen, withdrawn man she'd dealt with for the past several weeks. She definitely wouldn't call him The Great Brooding One anymore.

"Okay," she eagerly squeaked.

* * * *

Will successfully masked his amused smile when Kal tried to talk dirty. It was unbearably uncomfortable in a hysterically funny way, like listening to Winnie the Pooh narrate *The Story of O*. "Sweetheart, you don't need to do that if you don't want to."

"But I enjoy listening to you do it."

"Then I'll keep doing it." He nuzzled her neck as her hands gripped his shoulders. "It doesn't mean you have to do it if you're not comfortable with it."

"I'm not very good at it, am I?"

He couldn't help it. He laughed as he rolled to his side and laced his fingers through hers. "You're still new at this. Give it some time. Just do what feels right."

She nodded, staring into his eyes. "You feel right."

"Then by all means, do me."

Kal grinned. "See? You're a natural."

"I've had a lot more practice." He glanced at the clock. It was nearly two AM and they'd made love for hours since leaving the tub. "Let's get some sleep." He kissed her shoulder and pulled her to him. Her body perfectly fit against his. As he drew the sheet over them he felt peace settle in his soul and knew for the first time in over twenty-five years he wouldn't have nightmares.

* * * *

Kal was still firmly nestled against Will as daylight glowed behind the drawn blinds. Deep in sleep, her breathing slow and steady, he didn't dare enter her mind and risk waking her. She'd found her own calm slumber and after the recent events they'd both desperately needed sleep.

Under his palm her heart beat steady and strong, in time with his, real and willing. There was so much he had to teach her. So much he took for granted for eons, then tried to forget once he lost Abby.

How much would she instinctively remember?

He *would* keep her safe. He wouldn't make the same mistakes he made before. He wouldn't get arrogant and assume she was invincible simply because she was his soul mate. He wouldn't let her out of his sight or range of sense except for assignments, would keep her safe. Fuck Ryan, he'd help protect her. Ryan owed him that. As much as Will hated Ryan, part of him thanked him and wished he could reach out to his soul brother and tell him that.

Too many years, too much time. The distance too deep to ever be bridged in that way. It was Ryan's fault anyway for turning his back on them when Will took Abby as his soul mate. No friend should ever do that, especially without explanation. Not after what they'd been through, what he'd helped Ryan through.

Not when they were soul brothers.

Kal murmured in her sleep, instinctively snuggling closer to him. He stiffened in response.

He closed his eyes and deeply inhaled her scent. No more lonely nights. No more hours staring at the ceiling, in pain, alone. No more looking across a bar at a lone woman and wondering what her lips would feel like...

No more pain. Not like before, at least. All things considered, he might as well be pain-free.

Will laid awake for an hour next to Kal when she stirred. Her dusty green eyes fluttered open, briefly startled, then a content smile caressed her face.

"Good morning," she said.

He kissed her. "Good morning."

"Fuck me," she whispered.

He grinned, rolled on top of her, slipped inside her. "See? Was that so hard?"

"No, but you certainly are."

He dropped his head to her shoulder and laughed. It felt good to do that, to laugh. Something he hadn't done at all in the past couple of decades. "What am I going to do with you?"

She snuggled closer. "I can think of a lot of things."

* * * *

Kal noticed he didn't take the amulet off for his shower, just turned it around so it draped down his back, out of his way. "So how does it work?"

He shrugged. "I don't know exactly."

"Why is Aidan's made out of tiger's eye?"

"I don't know. Everyone has their own. The Firm hands them out. This is what I was given. I never thought to ask why they're different."

"How do you do the disappearing thing? Can I do that?"

"With an amulet, maybe. Some soul mates learn how to do it but most can't unless they're descended from a demon line. With one of us you can. It would take a lot of time to learn regardless. You probably won't get an amulet of your own anyway. Most human soul mates don't."

"So I have to be with one of you to do the disappearing trick?"

He smiled. "I don't know if you'll ever be able to disappear alone. You can travel when you're with one of us. I'm not strong enough to travel with both of us yet, though. A few days or weeks, I'll be able to. You can call me to you if we're not together, I can come to you."

"How do I do that?"

"You think about me and say, 'Will, appareo.""

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. Obviously how you say it will give whoever you're calling a clue as to whether or not you're in trouble or just need one of us. You should be able to call Aidan too, now that you're my soul mate. You two are so close anyway, and he's my blood relation and soul brother. Maybe the other guys. Abby learned how to call Purs and Gery."

"Ryan?"

Will frowned. "Yeah, even him. Especially him. I hate to tell you this, but you'll be dealing with him a lot. He'll give me assignments through you."

Reality calling. She shivered. Assignments, that sounded potentially dangerous. "Why?"

"Do you really want me decking him all the time? He'd probably resent it." His face softened. "Abby actually liked him. She was more charitable toward him than I could be."

"What happened between you and Ryan?"

Will stepped away from her, under the spray. She felt his mood shift and darken. "Doesn't matter. It was too many ages ago to think about."

Despite her intense curiosity on the matter she wanted to change the subject. She'd seen more than enough of Will's sullen mood to last her a century. She could pursue this at another time.

"What else can I do?"

He sighed. "There's a lot of stuff. We don't need to go through that now. Besides, I'm not sure what you'll be able to do, exactly. Some if it might not come out until later, once we've been together for a while. Once I've regained all my powers."

In the light of day the flip side of the coin clearly revealed itself. Kal understood with the blessing of having Will Hellenboek as her husband for eternity came the reality that she was now beholden to...well, the Devil. She'd be the first to admit she wasn't as convinced as her father about the existence of a literal lake of fire, but confirmation of that fact still took some getting used to.

"Do we have to go into work today?"

"Not if you don't want to. I think it's safe to say our employer won't give us a hassle about taking a few days off," Will snarked.

"He should give us a raise, too."

"I know you give me a raise."

She playfully shoved him. "See? You're horrible. And I mean that in a good way."

"I would hope so."

After their shower, Will cooked Kal breakfast and they fell into bed again. She couldn't keep her hands off him. What straight, single woman *could* keep her hands off him? He was gorgeous. Despite the scars, his handsome body irresistibly called to her. The imperfections only served to accentuate his naturally muscled physique, a man strong enough to wrap his arms around her and make her feel safe. A man who could sweep her off her feet and carry her to safety.

Or to his bed.

Another discovery that pleased her was she didn't want him to keep his hands off her, either. Every stroke of his fingers elicited pleasure, his lips and tongue nearly drove her mad with need. Not waiting until after their marriage vows to give herself to this man didn't weigh heavily on her conscious.

Leaving her breathless yet again, Will propped himself on one elbow and kissed her fingers before folding her hand against his chest. He wore a playful smile.

"Don't you ever get tired?" she asked, feeling his still semi-erect shaft press against her thigh.

"What do you mean?" Kal felt the blush warm her face. His smile broadened. "Gods, you're so cute," he murmured, kissing her. "It's hard to explain."

"You've been hard, all right."

"See? You're getting the hang of it." He kissed her hand again, slowly sucking her index finger between his lips and laving his tongue over it.

Dang that felt *goood*.

"We're newly bonded," he said. "Don't you think it's funny you're still as energetic as I am?" She hadn't considered it and he noticed her frown. "Sorry, I..." He closed his eyes and sighed. "I don't understand all of it. I just know in the early days there's a lot of energy transference, and we're...eager."

"We make magic."

He met her eyes and nodded. "We do. It is a kind of magic. Not the best word, it's all energy. Magic sounds a lot more romantic than comparing it to jump-starting your car."

"When will you go on assignments?"

"Do we have to talk about this now?"

Kal wasn't letting this drop. "What kind of assignments?"

"Whatever needs doing."

"Dangerous?" His hesitation chilled her. "I don't want to be the one sending you somewhere dangerous."

"You wouldn't be."

"You know what I mean. Relaying the message is the same thing." She fell silent for a long moment. "How did Abby get past that?" Kal wasn't sure how much he'd want to talk about Abby, but his reply surprised her.

"It was different back then, when she grew up." Will considered his answer. "Fight or die was a way of life. Now, the worst of the worst know they can't fuck with us here and get away with it. Usually they try penny ante shit, like wanting to steal people over to other realms for slaves. Or some peon asswipe thinks he'll score points by trying to take us on over here and Ryan sends them back with their limbs in separate bags from their head. Ryan's not stupid. Despite our differences, I'll admit he's smart and careful. He doesn't take chances. He wants the best possible outcome. If he thinks a mission is dangerous he'll send more than one person to get the job done."

"What happens if you get hurt?"

He nuzzled her neck. "You won't let this drop, will you?"

"Nope. Quit trying to distract me."

His fingers laced through hers. "You're my soul mate. Part of that is when an archdemon has a soul mate, they can heal themselves more quickly and completely and we have extra protection. It's part of the power. If you were hurt, the same thing can happen depending on the circumstances. I'm not like Superman, none of us are. We can regenerate ourselves to a certain extent, depending on the injury."

A horrible thought crossed her mind. "What about Aidan? He doesn't have a soul mate. He's never had one."

Another sad look. "No, he's never met someone that struck a chord in his soul in that way. He's no angel—haha—but he can heal himself. Not as quickly, of course, as an archdemon with a soul mate. And he's bound as a soul brother to me and Ryan anyway. That's almost as good."

"Why would we be able to have a baby if you're an archdemon?"

"My body is mostly like a human's. I don't know all of the lost history, or even a part of it. I'm not sure if any one person does. The creation myths are partially right when they talk about everyone coming from the same thing. It's a type of evolution, humans and archdemons were once one and the same until the Universe did its thing."

"You're a human 2.0 version."

He rolled his eyes but smiled. "More like a negative 2.0, because archdemons are older than humans. Humans are the new version, the genetics diluted through the eons as demi-gods and archdemons interbred with other beings."

"What's this going to do to me?"

With the lightest of touches, he trailed a finger between her breasts and gently rolled her right nipple, turning it into a hard pebble. "Are you sure you want to talk?"

"You're distracting me again."

"Is it working?" He lowered his mouth to her other breast and gently bit down, light suction making her moan and pulling a flash of heat from inside her body before settling it deep within her lower belly.

Instinctively her hand went to the back of his head, her fingers twined in his hair. "Yeah. I still want to know, though."

He laughed. "Later," he mumbled around her breast. "Right now I want to see how loud I can make you scream my name."

* * * *

He took her for a late lunch in Ybor City. Later, Kal and Will stopped by the office. A concerned look on his face, Aidan leaned back in his chair when they stood in his office doorway. "Everything okay?"

Will protectively draped his arm around Kal's shoulder. Instinctively, she leaned into him. "Yeah," Will said, looking at Kal. "Everything's good."

She nodded, trying not to lose herself in his steady gaze.

Aidan relaxed and broadly smiled, obviously relieved. "You guys coming in tomorrow?" Tomorrow was Wednesday. Kal didn't say anything, waiting for Will to answer.

His eyes never drifted from hers. "Yeah, we'll be here."

* * * *

Kal wondered if Will would go to the cemetery but decided not to ask him. He spent the night at her apartment. In the morning after breakfast, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her in a way that made her want to up and die right there because it felt so perfect.

"Do you mind going ahead alone?" he asked.

She shook her head. If he wanted to tell her, he would.

"I know Aidan took you there. It's okay. I'm not upset. You should know about my past."

"I don't mind if you go see her. It doesn't bother me."

He hugged her tightly. Before she could see if he was crying, he kissed the top of her head. "I'll see you in a while at the office," he said, his voice sounding tight. Then he was gone. The air shifted and popped at his departure. She assumed it had something to do with the air displacement.

Will appeared at the office about an hour after she arrived. He looked like he'd been crying. She dragged him into the edit room and locked the door, curling up in his lap with her arms around him while he buried his head against her shoulder. Kal didn't break the silence. He didn't cry but she felt he was close to it.

After twenty minutes he lifted his head from her shoulder and looked at her. "This has nothing to do with you. You understand that, right?"

"You were together a lot of years. I think it would bother me more if you were pretty blasé about it."

They shared a comfortable silence. They sat there for another ten minutes with Kal enjoying the feel of one of Will's hands on her thigh, the other gently stroking her back.

He let out a long, deep sigh and relaxed. She knew he felt at least a little better.

"Why do you even work?" she asked, trying to distract him.

"Something to do. Photography, and then videography fascinated me. Aidan pulled me into doing the show. I didn't know Ryan was behind that. It's just fun, a way to stay fairly normal."

"Isn't it risky, being in such a high-profile profession?"

"Not really. In a few years the show would end or be passed on to other people and Aidan and I would fade from the spotlight." His face clouded. "Of course, I wasn't planning on being around that long."

"How long have you known Purson and Gery?"

He shrugged. A strand of hair had escaped her ponytail holder. He brushed it from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "A long time. We've always been a good team, work well together."

"What happens to me? How will I change?"

He kissed her, tasting her, savoring her. "Because I'm so strong and you're my soul mate, you'll pick up a few powers incidentally. Longevity, of course. Healing. You can read my thoughts, and a few other people but not all of them. I honestly can't tell you what you'll be able to do because I don't know. Most likely basic things, heightened senses—sight, scent, hearing. Might feel like you have more energy, better reflexes."

Her hand slipped between his legs. "Reflexes like that?"

He hardened in response. "Yeah," he hoarsely whispered. "Like that." He smiled.

* * * *

They did a lot of talking in between hot sessions in bed. Plenty of talking while in bed, too. They loved to cuddle, each absorbing the feel of the other. Kal knew she had an eternity to get to know Will, but she craved to understand him the way he seemed to understand her.

"You told Ryan that Abby picked the name Hellenboek just to make him mad," she noted.

Will smiled, a wistful look on his face. "Not mad, really. Just to irritate him. She had a playful streak."

"How often did you change names?"

He shrugged. "Not very often. Just depended on where we lived and the times. That last one was…" He thought about it. "We were in Great Britain back then. Several hundred years ago."

"How did she pick her new name?"

"I picked it. It described her perfectly. And she picked mine."

"At least she didn't name you something like Biff."

He laughed. "No."

"What did her name mean?"

"AnnaBelinda means beautiful. Just like yours is Sanskrit for beautiful."

"No freaking way. You speak Sanskrit? That's sort of creepy."

"I speak a lot of languages."

"How many?"

He smiled. "All of them."

Before she could utter her shocked disbelief, he clarified. "It's a mental thing, another one of the powers we've got."

"Bet you'd be handy at the UN."

Chapter 15

Kal found adjusting to life with Will quite easy. Having an eternally sexy stud muffin i sn't so bad.

If she could get past the mood swings. Kal tried to hide it from Will but she still sometimes resented the manner in which Ryan handled things. She'd want to kill Ryan over how he manipulated them, would feel like ripping his head off. Then, after a particularly hot session in bed with Will, she'd want to thank Ryan and send the jerk flowers.

Mind trip didn't come close to describing it. She wondered if it was a side effect of whatever happened between Will and her. She didn't know how much to ask Will either, not wanting to hurt his feelings or make him feel guilty. This wasn't his fault, and not an ounce of her anger was at him.

Will sat on the bed next to her one morning. They were at his condo, and he'd already stripped for the shower. She fought the urge to drop her head to his lap and suck him. Whatever magic passed between them was strong and deep. Did normal people feel like this when they were in love? The inability to keep their hands off each other?

Another mood swing struck. Kal internally raged again that Ryan had taken that knowledge from her and denied her those experiences. She'd never have the thrill of a first date with Will, of feeling that zing of attraction that took its natural course through subtle discovery, working their way through the stages of courtship until that magic night when he proposed, the sweet agony of counting down the days until they could...

Well, okay, she'd had that zing of attraction. In a thermonuclear way. It would be a damnable lie of campaign-promise proportions to say she wasn't attracted to Will at first sight. Not that she was complaining about her eternal stud muffin, but she would have preferred a choice in the matter. Or at least the illusion of one.

She studied the amulet around Will's neck. She'd love to give Ryan a freaking piece of her mind. Heck, she'd love to punch him in the nose. Poor Will. No, he wouldn't die now, but his choice had been taken from him, too.

At least Will was out of pain. Aidan told her he'd seen Will smile and heard him laugh more in the past several days than he had in the past two and a half decades.

Then again, maybe she'd hug Ryan the next time she saw him. He saved Will's life and brought her a man who could not only make her happy, but who would never betray her. And she'd been able to at least alleviate the worst of the pain in Will's soul.

Forcing herself not to kiss Will's chest, she stroked it instead. Her fingers traced the amulet. "How was it created?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It was given to me years ago."

"How many years?"

"I don't know. Eons."

Kal's fingers slipped from the amulet to his chest and traced some of the twisted scars crossing his flesh. "How old are you?"

"I don't know. I quit counting."

"And Abby..."

He nodded. Kal still had trouble wrapping her head around the fact that she wouldn't age. Then again, eternity with this man would still feel short.

"How many years?"

"I don't know. In some ways it felt like we were always together." Will looked away, unable to meet her gaze any longer. "I remember when I met her but I couldn't tell you how long ago it was." He didn't want to think about that, didn't want to risk revealing anything to Kal. He was still trying to cope with his powers returning and was afraid to think about Abby for fear of Kal learning—

"Hundreds of years?"

He shook his head.

"Thousands?" she whispered.

He shrugged. "Let's just say there wasn't an accurate calendar when I met her."

Her pendulum of emotion for Ryan immediately swung back to hatred. She loved Will, yes, but the fact that Ryan put him through this emotional agony just to get him back under his thumb made her hate Ryan with a desperate passion. Even if she benefitted by getting to love Will for eternity.

"We need to take our shower and get to the office," she said. He stood and she hesitated, an idea forming. "I'll be there in a minute, I need more coffee. Can I look at that for a minute, hold it?" She pointed to the amulet.

He studied her. "Why?"

"If we're going to be together that long, I'd at least like a closer look at it."

He eventually slipped it over his head, handed it to her, then headed for the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

"I'll be right in," she called. When she heard the shower start, she slipped the leather cord over her neck and closed her eyes, gripped the amulet in her hand.

If a goofball like Aidan could do it without screwing it up and turning his skin inside out, how hard could it be?

Something instinctive took over, a surge of power as the amulet warmed in her hand. Kal envisioned Ryan's face and sent her mind on ahead.

Take me to Ryan.

The world shifted and loosened around her, much like it had when they went to Ryan's condo and when Aidan took her to the cemetery.

Kal opened her eyes.

* * * *

Will stepped under the spray once the water warmed. That's when he felt the air pop. "Kal?"

He stepped out again and looked into the bedroom. No Kal. "Kal? Where are you?" He couldn't feel her but he didn't know if that was because his powers weren't back up to full strength or because she was gone.

Dammit, I never should have let her hold the amulet!

Will wrapped a towel around his waist and dripped water through the bedroom to the kitchen. Kal was nowhere to be seen.

Panicking, he screamed, "Aidan, appareo!"

His cousin immediately materialized. Dressed only in Scooby Doo boxers, with toothbrush in hand and a foaming mouth, he wore a frantic look. "What?"

Before Aidan could ask anything else, Will grabbed Aidan's amulet, held on, and closed his eyes. "*Reperio meus alius dimidium*." Normally he wouldn't need Aidan to go to her, even without an amulet, but he wasn't back to full strength yet.

They appeared in Ryan's Atlanta condo.

Ryan was laughing, holding his hands up, defending himself from Kal's enraged attack. She slapped at him like a kid in a playground, screaming practically random, nonsensical epithets in her fury. For a fleetingly brief moment the thought *she hits like a girl* struggled to escape Will's lips with an accompanying burst of laughter, but he clamped down on it.

Then reality struck home—she had no idea who she was fucking with. Lucky for her Ryan only looked amused, not upset.

Losing his towel in the process, Will ran across the room and grabbed her, pulled her away from Ryan. She kicked and screamed at Ryan even as Will kept a tight grip around her waist. *Damn*, she was strong.

Then, finally, a coherent sentence of words strung together in the proper order erupted from her mouth like a spewing volcano. "I'm going to fucking kill you, you motherfucking, cocksucking, son of a bitch dickhead!" she shrieked.

That almost shocked Will into releasing her. He struggled to spin her around and face him, trying to calm her down.

Ryan laughed loud and hearty. "That's a live one you have there, Will. Looks like she's starting to get the hang of things. Well done, Kal. Certainly in possession of a colorful vocabulary now. She'll give you a run for your money over the years, no doubt."

"Shut the fuck up, Ryan." Will grabbed her by the shoulders, gently shook her. "Kal, what do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to fucking kill that shithead bastard, that's what I'm going to do! I'm going to rip his balls off!"

She lunged for Ryan again. Will tackled her, bringing her to the floor as Ryan laughed. "How dare he do this!" she screamed. "He took my life from me and stuck me in this mess, the cocksucker screwed with you, he's a fucking asshole! I'm going to let some hot air out of that motherfucking head of his!"

She'd gone from Winnie the Pooh to checking off most of George Carlin's list of words you couldn't say. Will hooked his legs around hers, trying to hold her as she thrashed in his arms.

"Kal," he whispered in her ear, "babe, let it go. Please. Don't give him the satisfaction."

She finally relaxed against him, breathing heavy, then sobbing and turning to bury her face against him as the stress melted from her and her adrenaline crash hit.

Ryan lounged against the counter. He started to say something but Aidan, his mouth still covered with toothpaste, pointed his toothbrush at him. "I wouldn't if I were you. Quit while you're ahead, dude."

Ryan smirked and sauntered out of the room.

Kal finally sniffled and sat up. She realized Will was wet and naked, and Aidan less than decent and looking like a rabid dog. If she wasn't so upset she'd laugh at Aidan and boink Will silly. "I'm sorry."

Aidan tossed Will the towel from where it had fallen. He tucked it around his hips. "I need that back, Kal," Will said quietly, pointing to the amulet. "You can't do that. Especially can't go after Ryan like that. He's giving you a lot of leeway but he could kill you, literally, with a blink of his eye."

He took my life from me, she'd said. She wasn't dealing with this nearly as well as she pretended, wasn't nearly as happy with him as she claimed to be.

The bottom line? She was forced to be with him. He couldn't blame her for being upset. She got the short end of the stick in this deal, without a doubt.

Kal returned the amulet and Will looked up at Aidan. "Thank you. I'm sorry I yanked you away like that."

He nodded. "It's okay. Want me to hang?"

"No, I've got it from here. Thanks."

Aidan disappeared. Will looked at Kal, caressed her cheek, wished he could turn back time and walk away from the show so the wraith never attacked her. This was unfair to her, no matter what he felt for her now.

"I'm sorry, Kal," he whispered. "I'm so sorry you've been dragged into this." He wrapped his arms around her, holding her, his chin resting on her head. "Send us home, Ryan," he called out. "I'm not strong enough to do two by myself yet."

Ryan heard, from wherever he was. They reappeared in Will's bedroom. He held her for another moment, then kissed her on the top of her head and untangled himself from her. He left her sitting on the bed while he returned to the shower. The whole incident had taken minutes. As his pulse settled into a normal rhythm, Will realized she was a lot stronger than he first realized. She'd managed to not only materialize alone with the amulet, without any instructions on how to do it, but also accurately appeared in Ryan's apartment.

Amazing. Abby couldn't even do that. She could call other archdemons to her, even ones she wasn't close to, sometimes summon them to take her to wherever they were, but never materialize without help. What she could do had taken her centuries to master.

On the heels of his amazement, the realization that Kal felt truly miserable. Whatever should have happened when they bonded, she was still upset and unhappy.

With him.

The bathroom door opened. "Will, can I come in?" Her voice sounded quiet and sad. "Yeah."

He felt the cool draft and heard the door shut again. A moment later she stepped into the shower with him and wrapped her arms around him from behind, rested her head against his back.

He felt her lips against his skin. "I'm sorry," she said.

He patted her hands. "It's okay."

They stood like that for several minutes before she spoke again. "I'm not miserable with you."

"You don't have to lie to me."

"I'm not lying. I didn't realize until after I said all that how it must have sounded to you. I felt really dang mad at Ryan and wanted to give him a piece of my mind. It's just that I finally realized my whole life has been under his control. Everything."

"I know you're forced to be with me. I understand you're upset. I'm sorry. I wish I could give that all back to you."

"No, it's *not* that." She made him turn and face her. "I *do* love you, and not because of what he's done. It's just..." She fought for the words. "It *pisses* me off that I didn't have free choice in the matter. You know like when your parents are right about something and you know it but you still don't want to admit it? Like that." She stroked his cheek. "I still love you. I think I felt it when we first met. Seriously. I probably would have ended up with you anyway, even if he hadn't engineered this. It would have taken a lot longer and our first date wouldn't have been me losing my virginity, but it would have happened eventually."

He wished he could believe her. He wanted to. Without a doubt she believed it, but how much of that were her true feelings and how much was what happened?

Considering what he knew he felt for her, did it really matter?

"I thought I finally got to live my own life when I took this job," she continued. "I thought I was escaping my parents. Now it turns out I wasn't escaping them, I just ran deeper into a net I didn't even know was there. It's an adjustment I need to make. It's not your fault, and I'm *not* miserable with you."

She kissed him. Her bare flesh pressed against his and he couldn't help but harden in response.

His hands skimmed down her back to her hips. He pulled her against him. His lips worked from her jaw down her neck, gently nipping her shoulder, making her pleasantly shiver in response.

Her hips shifted a little and he slid inside her. She was wet and ready and he backed her against the shower wall, slowly thrusting, trying to remember what he'd been so upset about a few minutes earlier. Making love to her tended to push all other thoughts, all cares away.

His love for her.

Will couldn't deny it any longer. He'd tried denial from the moment they'd met and whatever bullshit Ryan pulled didn't make it any less true. He closed his eyes.

Her hands stroked his back as she softly whispered in his ear. "You feel so good."

He knew she wouldn't climax like this but her voice and her body drew his release from him faster than he imagined possible. He pulled her hips tightly against his, trembling, moaning.

"I love you, Kal," he breathed. "I *do* love you. I loved you from the first moment I saw you but I didn't want to admit it. I never thought I could feel this way again about anyone after I hurt so much when I lost her."

She desperately clutched him, sobbing. With his arms wrapped tightly around her they sank to the shower floor and he held her under the spray, rocking her, soothing her.

"Please don't ever leave me, Will."

"Never." He buried his face against her neck and hoped she couldn't tell his tears from the warm spray.

Chapter 16

After Kal's little field trip, Will decided they both needed an extra day alone together. He called Aidan, who juggled the schedule to accommodate them.

They spent most of the morning in bed, just cuddling, touching and holding each other, her warm, soft, willing flesh pressed against his. If he could spend the rest of his life like that, with the heat of her body warming him, he would never ask for anything more.

After lunch they went for a walk and she discovered another answer to a puzzling question. "I still don't understand why no one ever bothers you. It's like they don't even know where you live."

"They don't."

When she stopped in her tracks, he stopped with her. He had to stop or let go of her hand, and he damn sure didn't want to do that.

"What do you mean they don't? Those paparazzi guys are crazy persistent."

He shrugged. "Ryan takes care of it. He set up a barrier. People can find out where I live, sure, but unless it's someone who belongs here or who I want to find me, it's like they totally forget why they're here when they get here. That's why no one bothers me when I'm out, either."

"Why can people pop in and out of his apartment? If he's the big cheese, you'd think he'd want a doorman or something."

"Same thing. Think of it as a spam filter. Only the people he wants to come in are able to get there. Sort of like a selective barrier, like the one I put up the other night after Ryan left."

"And he can call you like I can call you?"

"Oh yeah. Unfortunately."

Ironically, Will heard the call the next evening while Kal napped and he lay in bed with her watching *MSNBC*. He resisted for several minutes. Ryan persisted. Will appeared in the Atlanta condo.

"What do you want?" Will growled.

A woman's perfume assaulted his nose. "Well, hello, Will. Long time, no see." He'd know that damn voice anywhere.

"Bera." Will turned on Ryan. "You brought me here for her?"

"Why don't you like me, Will?" Bera purred.

"Because you're a conniving, cheating, back-stabbing bitch."

"Can't you say one nice thing about me?"

"Nice perfume."

"See?" She smiled. "Was that so hard?"

"Too bad you marinate in it."

She scowled, turned to Ryan for support.

None came. Ryan smirked. "I've repeatedly told you in the past you use far too much."

Bera looked like a cougar on the prowl, and not the four legged kind. Penny red hair carefully coiffed and her make-up perfect, her lacquered red nails would scare the crap out of Freddy Krueger and drive nightmares of Elm Street out of any rational person's mind. Today she looked executively terrifying in a Vera Wang suit and three-inch Manolo peep toe pumps.

"You know, you could have taken me as a soul mate, Will. I was available and certainly willing."

"You have to have a soul first, Bera," Ryan snarked.

"Can we get to the point?" Will impatiently asked. "I'm busy." Well, that was a lie but he preferred curling up in bed with Kal to talking with the Incredible Bitch and Boy Blunder.

"Too busy to get some information?" Bera asked.

"What information?"

Ryan nodded to her. "Apparently our prowling prima donna spent a little time off the reservation, as it were. She's brought back some interesting news. When she recounted her adventures I thought you should hear this directly from the viper's mouth."

Bera looked like she didn't know whether to be more indignant at Ryan or Will. "All right, fine," she spat. She looked at Will. "The last guy, the one who escaped? He took a long walk off a short pier. They killed him when he returned to his dimension. They came over from Tavares."

Will froze. Bera didn't need to clarify who she meant by "the last guy."

"Killed by who?"

She examined her nails. "I don't know. I couldn't find that out. Whoever paid them wasn't happy to find out his money was wasted. They were hired hacks. You were the target, not Abby. When they failed, the only one who made it back alive got whacked. Apparently they don't work on the demerit system over there, and failure really isn't an option for those dipshits."

"Why did they want me? Why come across and start trouble?"

"I don't know. I'm not even sure if you were supposed to be killed or just taken. I got the fuck outta Dodge before they could kill me once it got out I wasn't a local. It was only sheer bad luck I got over there in the first place. Last time I go drinking with a selkie. Those things are fricking crazy."

"You'd do well to remember that," Ryan said.

"That's all you've got?" Will asked.

"It's more than you had before. Now you know where they came across from." Bera smiled. "What's it worth to you?"

Ryan waved his hand and sent her away before Will could bury his foot ankle-deep in the middle of her ass. He looked at Will. "Well?"

Will felt like he'd been kicked in the gut. "Why tell me this?" he hoarsely asked. "Why now? We can't go after Abby's killers, they're all dead anyway."

Ryan's voice hardened. "Because I just found out a few minutes ago when Bera showed up looking for sympathy. Despite our differences, the person or persons who hired those animals are still out there. I want these bastards as much as you do, perhaps more. They took one of our own from us. That cannot and will not go unanswered. I want them, I want whoever's behind it, and I want to send a message to them that they will not fuck with us here without experiencing serious repercussions. I think we can agree on that, can we not?"

Will set his jaw and finally turned to Ryan, met his gaze, grudgingly nodded. "Yeah. We can agree on that."

Ryan's face softened. "How is Kal holding up?"

"She's adjusting." He hesitated. "Promise me, swear to me on the waters of Styx that you'll protect her."

Ryan nodded. "I swear it, you know I do." He sat and stared at Will. "How are you sleeping now?" Ryan softly asked. "Are the dreams better?"

What little "moment" they'd shared was gone. Will's face hardened. Ryan had no right to ask him those questions considering how he'd abandoned him and Aidan. "Are we done?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Ryan nodded. Will disappeared.

Ryan closed his eyes and took a deep breath, held it, blew it out. Bera was insufferable but Will had to hear that information. He owed him that much.

Owed Abby that much.

A bottle of merlot called to him and he poured a glass. He walked into the bedroom, thinking he would take a shower and go to bed early and catch up on some well needed rest when he passed the carved wooden box on his dresser. He set the glass down and opened the box, as he had so many times before. Usually he simply stared at it, because the pain in his soul bloomed even worse when he touched it. This time he reached inside.

The dark red garnet amulet appeared almost black in the dim light, its unusual shape as familiar to him as his own hand. He gently withdrew it and held it, staring at it.

Why torture myself?

He couldn't help it.

Created from the same larger stone, when he fit the amulet against the one hanging from his own neck, the two matched perfectly. He closed his eyes and conjured her face. She was always there in his mind, even this many ages later. Every night he dreamed of her, alive—and in death.

Every second of every day he ached for her.

After a few minutes he couldn't stand the deep throbbing pain in his soul. Ryan carefully replaced the amulet in its box, caressed the lid as he closed it.

No, regardless of what Will Hellenboek thought he had suffered, he truly knew *nothing* of pain and loss and sacrifice. Not by a long shot.

And hopefully, for the better good of the status quo, Will never would.

* * * *

Of course Bera returned the next morning.

Ryan scrambled eggs in a cast iron skillet. Bera's perfume assaulted him as soon as she appeared. He didn't look at her.

"Bera, did you ever stop to think perhaps you wear too much of that crap?"

She slid onto one of the barstools in front of the counter and watched him cook. She fingered the rose quartz amulet around her neck, her blouse open to the third button, ample breasts nearly spilling out. "I like it. It's expensive."

"Yet another good reason to use much less than you do."

"You demon men are far too sensitive. Can I have some eggs? You always cook them so goo—"

"No."

His curt answer apparently surprised her, because she frowned. "What's the matter, sunshine? Why are you so grumpy?"

"What do you want from me?"

"Maybe I want to spend a little quality time with you, Ryan. Ever think about that? It's been a while."

"No."

His lack of further conversation forced her to forge on. "You know, I've been thinking, you and I are both alone, and it's not like I'm some weakling that can't keep myself safe—"

"No." He didn't bother looking up from the skillet. "I will never take you as a soul mate, Bera. If you want a shag I'll give you that if I'm in the mood to do so, but as I've told you before, you will *never* be my soul mate."

Ryan knew without looking that her brow had furrowed and she was working up a relatively impressive pout of prepubescent proportions. "Maybe I won't let you fuck me anymore."

"Fine with me. Frankly, I've had much better. You're nothing special to me, Bera. Quite the contrary."

He'd never been so blunt with her before. He was sick of her and extending civility to a half-Tanuki troublemaker wasn't on his morning's itinerary. Maybe he *should* be rude to her, she'd leave him the home alone for good.

She'd obviously expected a different response. Her human lovers craved her, begging and pleading. Between her half-demon nature and her shape-shifting capabilities she could literally be any man's wet dream.

Or nightmare.

Ryan wasn't human, and he was the only archdemon who would bother putting his dick in her as a diversion. If he could catch STDs he wouldn't touch her with a stolen penis, much less his own. His response must have shocked her, because it took her a moment to rethink her approach and change tactics. "You know, I could be a very valuable asset to have on your side."

"You are already 'on my side' as it were. Not that I want you here. How valuable would you be to the 'other side' if I took that amulet away from you, hmm?"

Her hand immediately flew to her amulet, her eyes wide with shock. "You wouldn't!"

He lifted his gaze to hers, kept his face stern and his voice soft. Much more thoughtprovoking that way. "Try me."

Her mascara-coated eyes narrowed. "You can't do that."

"Again-try me."

Apparently she didn't want to try him, because she sat back and re-evaluated him. "Well, looks like someone got up on the wrong side of the bed."

He ignored her comment. "I wish to impart some not-so-friendly advice to you, Bera. Scratch that. It's not advice, it's a command. Do not approach Will or Kal. They are officially off-limits to you."

"Kal? Is that her name? What kind of name is that for a girl? Or did Aidan finally rub off on—"

"We're done, Bera." Ryan fought the urge to backhand her with the full, heated skillet. Wouldn't kill her, but she'd have to trowel on more make-up than usual until her bruises healed. He flicked his fingers at her as if he was thumping a bug, then let out a deep sigh when all that remained was the lingering scent of her horrifically awful perfume.

The time had come for him to push a little harder where she was concerned.

Ryan plated his eggs, ate, then took a little trip. When he returned his mood had lifted considerably. He whistled as he washed dishes and cleaned out the skillet. Stronger in his position now, he felt confident he could control Bera and her antics, especially with the weight of his father firmly behind him. His father was the only other one who knew the full story and had finally accepted that Ryan needed the ability to bring Bera in line as warranted.

Or the ability to dispose of her for good, if she got in the way.

She was useful in an increasingly limited fashion. Ryan suspected she had on more than one occasion played Mata Hari. He was already cultivating alternate contacts that would soon make Bera obsolete.

He couldn't wait to see the shocked look on her face when he ripped that amulet from her neck and permanently banished her off-Earth to Tavares.

Chapter 17

The first week would have been funny if Kal had watched it in a movie. Maybe an X-rated Cary Grant farcical comedy. The handsome hero and the uncertain if not ungross heroine boink like bunnies until the cows come home. A sultry look leading to a steamy, moaning encounter in a car, a closet, a restaurant bathroom—twice in one meal—and, of course, the office.

Will would have her ass prints permanently embossed on his desk if they kept it up at this rate.

Aidan, with Gery and Purson's help, ran interference more than once on shoots as he recognized "the look" when Will and Kal disappeared to a relatively unoccupied and fairly remote dark corner to have at it.

"I'm gonna start throwing cold water on you two," Aidan groused one night when they returned from a quick rendezvous in one of the vans. "Get a room, for Christ's sake."

Will smiled. "Somebody's jealous."

"Fuck you, Will," he said, but he smiled.

Will wasn't strong enough to disappear with Kal yet. He longed for the day when he returned to full strength and could show her things she never dreamed. Admitting to her out loud that he really did love her was the hardest part. Now he felt like he couldn't stop saying it, wanted to spend hours holding her, murmuring it against every inch of her flesh until she truly understood the way he felt about her.

He knew it wasn't simply due to being bonded to her, not with the way he'd felt about her from the first moment they'd met.

The same way he'd felt when he'd first met Abby.

* * * *

Almost two weeks following their first night together, Kal worked alone in the office after lunch when she felt the air shift and pop. Assuming it was one of the boys, she didn't call out from the edit room.

Then she smelled the perfume.

Turning, Kal spotted a woman standing in the doorway. The woman smiled, but it wasn't a friendly *how ya doin*' hello. It was more like a crocodile's *oh goodie lunch is served* leer.

"Well, hello there. You must be Kal."

Stunned, Kal couldn't think straight. This had to be a demon, because the woman had popped in. "Who are you?"

"My name is Bera." She stepped inside the door. Kal didn't want her that close but there was no escape. The woman reminded her of Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*, only a meaner version.

Much meaner.

"I'm an old friend of Will's," the woman said in a way that made Kal squirm and recoil as if something slimy had crawled across her foot. "I heard he wasn't solo anymore and wanted to come introduce myself, meet the *girl* who'd stolen his heart." She said "girl" as if she meant "child," or maybe, "interloping whore."

Bullpucky. This woman was trouble and she dang sure wasn't a friend of Will's.

The woman took another step and Kal didn't wait. She immediately called out, "Will, Ryan, *appareo.*" *Let's see how well it works*.

Bera barely had time to frown before both men simultaneously appeared in the edit room, standing between her and Bera. Alarmed, they looked at Kal, then glared at each other. Kal pointed behind them and they swiveled and immediately closed ranks, firmly shoulder to shoulder, a solid wall of man separating her from Bera.

Between the two of them, not a bad-looking wall of man, either. It was the first time she'd ever seen them stand that close for that long. At least something made them drop their differences for thirty seconds.

She allowed herself the briefest feeling of pride that that something was her.

"Bera, what the fuck are you doing here?" Will growled.

"I second that," Ryan said. "I'll add an, I told you to stay the fuck away from her."

For once the men were in obvious agreement about something, unified to protect Kal from this woman. If Ryan had ordered her to stay away, she had to be bad news. But if Ryan couldn't keep her away when he could keep the paparazzi away from Will, who the heck was she?

Bera took a step back, no longer as certain of herself as she was a moment earlier before Kal called in the cavalry.

"I just wanted to say hi and introduce myself. There's no need to get all pissy about it."

"Bera," Ryan said, "you don't ever do anything just because." Ryan's tone of voice would have scared the crap out of Kal had it been directed at her. Used protectively it actually soothed and calmed her. That he would defend her meant he couldn't be as big a jerk as everyone thought, right?

Even though he had dragged her into this mess and it was his fault in the first place.

Will's deep growl did more than calm and soothe Kal. It started fires burning deep inside her belly. As soon as they had the office to themselves again, she was giving that man a welldeserved blow job.

Kal, focus, she thought. Deal with bad woman in office first, sex with hunky love muffin later. Bad woman now, blow job later.

That didn't stop her sex from throbbing in an achingly comfortable way.

"You boys need to calm down," Bera said, her voice definitely anxious. "Why do you assume I had ulterior motives?"

The men unintentionally spoke as one. "You always have ulterior motives."

Ryan and Will stepped forward, forcing Bera out of the edit room and into the hall. Kal stood to follow. Without looking at Kal, Ryan held out his arm.

"Stay there, Kal."

She gasped. That was Ryan's voice in her head, right?

"Yes, love, I can talk to you this way. Perk of the rank, you know."

Bera's perfume lingered in the air, sickeningly strong. *Hope we have some Lysol spray to get rid of* that *nasty funk*, Kal thought.

Ryan's angry voice brought Kal's mind back to clear, sharp focus. "Bera, listen to me, and hear me well. If Kal ever tells me you've come near her again, if you harass her, if you forward her funny emails, if you watch her name roll through the closing credits of the Otherworlds show, I will take actions against you that, believe me, you'd rather not contemplate. It will make your drunken selkie binge vacation seem like a luxurious Caribbean spa cruise by comparison. You do not talk to her, you do not stop by to say hi, you do not call to offer fashion tips. Nothing. Do you understand me? Have I made my position crystal clear? You no longer have guaranteed safe passage, woman, and this is your only warning on the matter. Next time, I will take action."

If Kal stood on tip-toe she could see between the men's heads. Bera had gone sheet white under her pounds of make-up. Whatever Ryan's implied threat meant—Kal thought a selkie was a shaggy dog, she'd have to ask Will about that later—it was serious.

Bera gulped and nodded.

Ryan waved his hand and Bera disappeared.

Both men relaxed, deflated was more like it, as their tension released with Bera's departure. Will walked into the edit room, followed by Ryan.

Will clasped Kal's hands to his chest. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, now delayed-reaction scared that the threat was gone and her heart had started pumping again. The men had obviously been freaked.

"Did she touch you?" Ryan asked.

She shook her head. "No, she never got closer than the door. I'm sorry I called both of you. She just appeared out of nowhere and I got a really bad feeling about her."

Ryan gently touched her shoulder. The world calmed, everything suddenly copacetic. "It's okay, Kal," he murmured. "You absolutely did the right thing to call both of us. It is far better for you to err on the side of caution should you ever feel the need to reach out." He gently squeezed before releasing her. It was as if all her tension had drained away.

Ryan and Will exchanged a quick look and perhaps a silent communication Kal wasn't privy to. "Thanks, Ryan," Will said. His voice sounded full of genuine gratitude, surprising Kal to hear him speak to Ryan like that.

The other man nodded, then flashed Kal a quick smile before disappearing.

The adrenaline crash hit despite her sudden calm. Kal's knees unhinged and she dropped into her chair. "What the heck was all that about?" she whispered. "Who was that woman? Why did the two of you freak out when you saw her?"

Will sat in the other chair and took her hands again. "Bera is a troublemaker. I mean, in the literal sense of the word. Her father was an archdemon, her mother was a Tanuki."

"A...what?" Something with a name as stupid as that couldn't be dangerous, could it?

"It's a really, really long story." A wry smile twisted his face. "I'd actually get perverse satisfaction watching Ryan try to explain the intricacies of the situation to you." His face turned serious again. "Bera, being half demon, got privileges. Not Ryan's idea, his old man approved it. Ryan's been looking for a way to get rid of her permanently for a long time. I don't know what her major malfunction is. Maybe she has her sights set on one day clawing her way to the top regardless of how she has to do it. Not that she has the slightest chance of doing it."

"How? I don't think Ryan's going to retire any time soon."

"For starters, she wants to get pregnant. Because of her Tanuki blood, Bera apparently needs either a Tanuki or an archdemon willing to do the deed. She must not have received the memo that most of us aren't dumb enough to allow her to dip her nasty French manicured toe into the archdemon gene pool."

A wave of irrational and totally righteous jealousy swept through Kal. "Well, she can't...*fucking* have you! You're mine!" She took a deep breath. "Goddammit!"

Will fought—and failed—to contain his laughter. Even Kal realized how out of place the words sounded coming from her mouth. She let Will envelop her in his arms.

"Sweetheart, she doesn't have a chance. Ryan would host the Winter Olympics in Atlanta in the middle of July before Bera ever had a chance with me. I've been dodging her ever since..." He didn't finish the thought, but Kal knew what he'd meant to say.

"Ever since Abby died?" she softly asked.

He nodded and kissed the top of her head before releasing her. "Yeah."

A chilly shiver swept through Kal. "Would she try to kill me?"

Will shook his head. "She's dumb, but she's not that dumb. If I didn't get to her first, Ryan would destroy her and she knows it. She wouldn't try violence, she'd try trickery."

"Then why were you afraid she'd touched me?"

"She can shape-shift, but to mimic someone else she has to touch them. She can only imitate people weaker than her in powers."

Kal shivered. "Can't she change into someone I don't know and touch me like that?"

"No. She has to be in her basic form, which was pretty much what you saw."

"I still don't see what..." She closed her eyes. "If she looked like me, she might try to fool you or cause trouble."

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Maybe we need a code word so you can verify it's me."

He leaned in and kissed her, his tongue gently tracing the seam of her lips, parting them with a feather-light touch. She softly moaned as heat built into white hot desire between her legs. That's right, she was going to give him a blow job, wasn't she? Then he smiled and sat back in his own chair, leaving Kal panting. "Trust me," he said. "I'll always know it's you."

"How?" she managed to gasp.

His eyes traveled over every nook and cranny of her face and body. Then he leaned in and closed his eyes, deeply inhaled. "Because," he whispered, his voice husky with desire, "you're my soul mate. I would know you anywhere. I would immediately know if it wasn't you. There is no other in my heart, there cannot ever be as long as you are alive."

He opened his eyes and held her gaze, caressed her cheek with his palm. "You are my life. You are my breath. You are part of me, forever. An archdemon can always tell his soul mate, just as you would always be able to tell if it was really me or not."

Kal forced herself to breathe because the impact of his words had temporarily taken away her ability to automatically force air in and out of her lungs.

"Lock the door," she raggedly whispered as she ripped her shirt off over her head and dropped it to the floor.

He shook his head and smiled, crooked his finger at her. She flew to him, sitting in his lap with her arms around him—

And they appeared in his bedroom.

"There, that's better, isn't it?" He definitely thought it was better, because he hadn't been sure he'd be able to take both of them. His powers were returning to full strength.

She smiled as he laid her on the bed and worked down her stomach with his lips, his sights firmly set on divesting her of her shorts.

"Yeah, but my shirt's on the floor in the office. If Aidan sees that, won't he worry?"

Will sighed and sat back on his knees, popped out, then popped back with her shirt. He dropped it over her face with a playful smile. "There. Better?"

She pulled it out of the way and grinned. "Yeah."

He leaned forward and kissed the flat plain of her belly, trailing kisses to the waistband of her shorts. "I distinctly heard someone thinking about giving me a blow job a few minutes ago."

She blushed. "You heard that, huh?"

He unbuttoned her shorts. "Something like that I couldn't help but hear, babe." He climbed up her body and kissed her lips again, hungry, possessive. "Do you still want to?"

Temporarily unable to use her vowels she nodded, eager. He rolled onto his back, his arms crossed behind his head.

Kal swung over him, straddling him, unbuttoning his shirt. "Too bad that witch scared me. If I'd known her game I would have given her a piece of my mind and—"

Will grabbed her wrists, shaking his head. "No," he firmly said. "Don't *ever* take her on. Or anyone else like her who might show up. Ryan was right. If you come across someone like that, no matter where you are, public or private, summon us. Me, Ryan or both of us like you did. Even Aidan. Promise me, Kal."

She nodded. He wasn't hurting her, but he frightened her. "Why are you so scared of her?"

"I'm not scared of her." He relaxed his grip and kissed her wrists before releasing them. "I'm scared of someone hurting you."

"You're not going to keep me chained in the house, are you?"

He stroked her thighs, slipped his fingers under the hem of her shorts. "Not unless it's to the bed and you've asked me to do it."

Kal rolled her eyes and laughed. "Been there, done that, didn't get a lot out of it."

"That's because I wasn't torturing you with my tongue between your legs while you were tied up."

She gasped as her heart galloped, out of control, wanting him. Then she realized what he'd done. "Quit changing the subject. You were scared. So was Ryan."

"Of course I was scared. I heard your tone of voice. You were scared, that scared me." His brow furrowed. "I'm sure it bothered Ryan, too."

"What about chaining me up to keep me safe?"

His handsome smile could thaw the coldest heart. "I can sense you, feel you. I can tell basically where you are or if you're safe. I don't spy on you, if that's what you're wondering. I can't read your thoughts from a distance unless you actively speak out to me. If you tell me you don't want me to look in on you like that, I won't. But if you ask that, and I try to call you on your cell and can't get in touch with you, or if you're not with Aidan or one of the guys, don't be upset with me if I peek."

Kal stroked his face. "I wouldn't be upset. I think that makes me feel safer." She had a thought. "Can the others do that too? Track me?"

"Aidan should be able to, to a certain extent. Ryan can, obviously. As you saw, you can summon him." He touched her hand again, waiting until she met his gaze. His voice dropped, low, serious. "Kal, please. I mean it. I would rather there be a thousand false alarms than you not summon us. Even if you feel silly doing it, call us. I guarantee Ryan and Aidan would agree with me."

She opened his shirt and kissed his chest, laying her cheek against his warm flesh. She wanted to take her time and dang it, she would. "I think it was sweet the way the two of you didn't try to kill each other and stood up for me like that."

She caught a hint of a thought before Will clamped down on it. She met his gaze. "Are you guys ever going to kiss and make up for whatever it was that happened between you?"

"Should I summon him here right now to talk about it? Because you know—"

"No! No. Just a suggestion." It was hard to unfasten his slacks when he was...well, hard and filling them out so well. She managed it though, running her lips over him after sliding his pants and briefs off.

His sharp intake of breath told her more than any words could.

Cupping his heavy sac in her hand, she flicked her tongue over his shaft. It throbbed in time with his pulse, jumping every time she fluttered her lips around the tip.

"Do it, baby," he gasped. "Don't torture me."

"I like to torture you."

He groaned as she wrapped one hand around the base and guided him to her lips, sliding her tongue around the tip and lightly sucking on the head. He lifted his head and his eyes, smoldering dark and stormy with his hunger for her, looked nearly black. His fingers tangled in and gently fisted her hair as he tipped his hips toward her.

"Please, baby. Don't make me beg-ah!"

She took him in as far as she could, waiting an agonizingly long moment before she moved up his shaft again. Her tongue firmly laved him as she worked her fingers around his smooth flesh. She suspected she wasn't very good at this yet but she was good enough to make him squirm, and getting better all the time. Every moan she drew from him sent fire deep into her core. She knew when it was her turn he'd find her fully wet and ready for whatever he planned.

Her every intention had been to bring him across and taste him, but he carefully pulled her off and rolled her onto her back, sinking deep inside her. Both of them moaned. He held still for only a moment before taking long, slow, deep strokes she felt through her very soul.

"You're all mine, sweetheart," he whispered. "And I'm all yours. You have no idea what you do to me."

He kissed her, holding his hips still to cool down for a moment. Then he slipped his hand between them and stroked her sensitive nub with his thumb.

Moaning, Kal threw her head back and closed her eyes. This was good. This was *sooo* good. *He* was good.

And he was all hers.

It didn't take him long to make her come. When he knew she'd fully made it he thrust hard, making the bed shudder as his hips pistoned into her. "You're mine," he said. "Forever."

She shivered again as she grabbed his arms and held on. "Forever, Will."

He cried out and she felt his release. Holding himself still deep inside her, he eventually lowered himself to the bed, kissed her throat, gathered her into his arms.

"I don't want to go back to work," he mumbled. "Let's just stay here for the rest of the day." Content, she nuzzled against him. "Okay."

* * * *

It was good they had friends in high places—how ironic—because their work schedule went to...ugh...hell.

Maybe *that* explained why so many people complained about Atlanta's airport.

Kal knew Becky could make a bazillion funny jokes about the situation, if only she could tell her.

But she couldn't tell her. If Kal did tell her, Becky wouldn't believe her anyway. Worse, her friend might think Kal had lost her mind and tell her parents.

Yikes.

No, Kal kept her talks with Becky short and sweet, but she did admit she had gone out on a couple of dates.

Okay, God would forgive her that fib. Well, maybe it wasn't a fib. Lots of people who were "just dating" had bouncing, hot, lung-sucking sex, didn't they?

Chapter 18

Two days later, Kal was alone in the office again. While she didn't know the specifics she understood arrangements had been made. Now, only those who belonged there could pop in and out of the office, keeping Kal safe in that regard, at least.

Working in her office, compiling the next remote location shoot schedule and arrangements, Kal felt the air shift and caught a subtle, familiar whiff of a man's cologne. She turned. Ryan leaned against the office wall, his arms crossed, watching her.

"What are you doing here?" Kal asked.

"I wish to have a quick chat with you. Alone."

"Why?" She wasn't sure if Will would want her talking to Ryan alone. Then again, he had interceded on her behalf with Bera. Will obviously trusted Ryan with her despite whatever differences they had.

Dealing with Ryan was such a dang mixed bag. On the one hand she wanted to hate him on general principle, because this was all his fault. On the other she wanted to hug him, thank him, and call him her friend.

Could she do that and not betray Will's feelings in the process? Wasn't she obligated to keep her distance from Ryan if Will couldn't stand him?

He pushed off the wall and seated himself in Aidan's chair, positioned it in front of her desk. The playful smile he'd worn in Atlanta the day she materialized in his apartment was gone. This Ryan meant business. She fought the urge to shiver.

Apparently sensing her apprehension, his face and voice softened. "No, Kal, I just wish to talk. As you know, I am not Will's fondest friend. I know I'm not yours either but I hope we can discuss this without you trying to feed my scrotum to me." He sat quietly for a moment while composing his thoughts. "I'm sorry you are being put through this. I'm sure your own father would tell you that sometimes the greater good must come first."

Anger took over. "Don't you dare talk about my parents!"

"Kal, please. Let me finish." He took another breath. "There are a few things you need to know, to put all this in perspective. Perhaps that will help you understand why I was forced to do what I did. Believe it or not, I take no joy or pleasure over dragging you into this life. Will is The Firm's strongest archdemon and he is needed. Without him I cannot do my job."

"Not that I'm complaining—" She thought about that. "No, I am complaining. Why me? Why him? Couldn't you get another one to do whatever it is you need done?"

Ryan shook his head. "Will's power isn't simply that he is the strongest archdemon. Abby was Will's one and only, until you. The one and only love of his life. In all ways."

"I know that. He told me."

"No, she was truly his one and only. Ever. His only love, in heart, mind, body and soul. And he was hers. For ages they were bonded. His strength came in no small part from that bond, the years and depth and purity of it. The undiluted nature of his soul is what gives him his power, and the pure bond he had with her—and with you—is what will return him to full strength and even, dare I say, beyond."

Kal froze, trying to comprehend what Ryan was saying. "Why couldn't you get someone else to take his place? What about you?"

He studied his fingernails. "I'm older than Will. Much older. I too have loved and lost. I chose not to take another soul mate, although unlike Will I did not choose to remain chaste. I retained my power but it's not in me to find another soul mate. Especially not now with my... responsibilities. It would make me more of a liability, put me in a vulnerable position."

He met her gaze. "Our kind can and do live and function fine without a soul mate. Look at our boys here in the office, or even Bera, as another example, but they don't have a fraction of the power Will has. Had. Shall have again with you in his life. The surface has barely been scratched, you know. As the two of you bond more deeply you will see things beyond your wildest imagination."

Ryan leaned forward, his voice dropping further. Kal had a feeling there was a lot more he wasn't telling her that she didn't necessarily want to know. "He needs you to feed his power. His love for you—"

"He doesn't love me. Not really. He thinks he has to say it." She wasn't sure she believed that, though. It sure felt like he loved her.

Ryan shook his head. "You're wrong, love, and you know it. He loves you, deeply, truly. Right now he's still adjusting. And you love him. Admit it, in the depths of your soul, you feel it, felt it when you first met. You're not 'just saying it' when you say it to him, are you? You love him, too."

She reluctantly nodded.

"I didn't engineer that. I couldn't. Yes, you were my insurance policy to bring him back but I couldn't guarantee you'd love each other." Ryan hoped Kal wasn't powerful enough yet to sense his lie. "I knew once you two met that the love was there between you. I hoped nature would take its course. Unfortunately the two of you proved rather stubborn and needed a swift kick in the arse to figure it out. There is a greater good to serve. I must see to that greater good. I'm sorry, but if it means I have to manipulate a few individual lives to accomplish that greater good then yes, I will. Without apologies."

He leaned back. "And you are as powerful as he is."

"I'm no demon."

"No. You are half his soul. He feeds you as much as you feed him. You complete each other. There is an ancient myth that humans used to have two faces, four arms, and four legs. They angered the gods, and then they were split in two. In some people this is more truth than myth."

He stood. "You can call me all the names you wish, that's fine, I certainly don't blame you. One day, perhaps, Will might even kill me. I can accept that as long as the greater good is served by it. I regret you have to go through this. As I have said, I must serve the larger picture."

Kill him? Something about the thought of that rolled her stomach in a dangerous way. She might bounce around emotionally between hating Ryan and liking him, but no matter what she'd never allow Will to kill him if she had anything to say about it.

With an urgent need to change the conversation's direction, Kal settled in her chair and studied Ryan. She had so many questions for him, so many things to reconcile in her mind. "If you're so dang powerful, why can't you stop things like hurricanes? Genocide?"

"Because man has free will and the ability to stop or change the impact of those things. We are in charge of making sure mankind is free to choose their path. We are not FEMA. We are not the UN. We make sure the world spins, the sun comes up, the moon goes down. We do this by making sure that what is supposed to be here, in this plane, stays here, and that things that don't belong here aren't allowed to run amok. With the many varied species on Earth, our job is also to make sure none of them try to usurp humanity's free will and either take over or eradicate them. Aidan wasn't wrong when he said we're like the *Men In Black*. Our job is to level the playing field, preserve the status quo, allow mankind the opportunity to continue their quest for free will."

"I didn't have free will in this. I never have. You engineered it so I'd meet Will."

Ryan smiled, but it looked full of deep sadness. "You always had free will. You could have stood up to your parents years ago, or not felt the need to make it on your own. You could have given your virginity to that moron you went to senior prom with. You could have done a lot of things, including chosen to not become Will's soul mate. I simply paved the way for certain choices to be easier for you to make than others but they were always *your* choices to make. Whether you choose to believe it or not, I didn't have to force the two of you to fall in love. You fell in love at first sight. That's why he reacted so strongly. Had he not, I wouldn't have let things continue, never would have forced the issue."

Kal had a flash of insight and asked without thinking. "How did she die? Your soul mate?"

Ryan's body stiffened and his jaw tightened. Kal suspected she was looking at the real man, not the façade he put up for the rest of the world. "I couldn't protect her," he quietly said. "I thought I could. I tried to protect Abby, but I didn't get to her in time." He looked at Kal. "That's between the two of us. You and I shall have many long talks throughout the years. Just as I'll respect your confidences, you should extend me the same consideration."

She studied him. "She was murdered?"

He eventually nodded.

"Will said he was in agony after Abby died. It mostly went away when we got together. But you...does that mean you're in pain, too?"

"There are many kinds of pain."

Kal felt a flash of anger over his evasion. "Answer my question."

After another long moment, he nodded. "Yes. Losing a soul mate is the worst kind of physical pain you can ever imagine. Especially when they are violently ripped from you."

"Then why didn't you take another one if it would help ease that pain?"

"It's not as simple as taking another soul mate," he quietly explained. "It's very complicated. I do not wish to discuss that."

For a long moment she chewed on a thought before giving voice to it. "Why do you act like an asshole when you obviously aren't?"

He smiled. A genuine, sweet smile, not his usual businesslike mask. "I have a job to do. Again, this is a confidence between us. I hope you'll respect that."

"Thank you for coming when I called. With that woman."

He leaned over her desk and she wanted to fall into his beautiful green eyes. "Kal," he whispered, "I will *always* come when you call me. I swear it. No matter what. If there is breath in my body, I will come when you call me. Whether it's for saving you from danger or helping you with a flat tire or changing out a light bulb you can't reach." He smiled. "Never hesitate to call me, love. Even if you just need someone to talk with. You let me be the judge of whether it was necessary after the fact, right? But you *always* call me if you need me."

She fell quiet for a moment. "What is your secret? Why aren't you and Will and Aidan friends anymore?"

"I think that's something you don't need to worry about, dear." He disappeared before she could ask anything else. She shivered, gooseflesh rippling her arms, only a faint hint of his pleasant cologne hanging in the air before that, too, faded.

She realized Ryan was far more complex than she imagined. She wondered why he chose to open up to her the way he had.

Suspicious, uh, yeah . He's the fricking head archdemon, the Devil. Duh. Yet she suspected there was more. Worse, if Ryan needed someone of Will's strength back on the team, what was coming down the pike?

And how had Ryan known Aidan mentioned Men in Black to her at the cemetery?

Moments later she'd managed to force her mind back to work when the air shifted again. Aidan appeared, looking concerned.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He lifted his nose to the air and cautiously sniffed. After Bera's surprise visit, Aidan was even more protective of Kal than usual. "You okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I thought someone was here with you."

"Ryan stopped by."

An immediate wall went up in Aidan's mind, she felt it. Dang it, she *would* figure this out, what was going on between the three guys, whether they liked it or not.

"What did he want?"

"Just a quick chat to see if I was okay. Seriously. It's fine."

His protective air comforted and annoyed her a little at the same time. *Anxious big brother*. That's how she thought of him.

Aidan finally relaxed. "We'll be done in a few. Want to go to lunch?"

"Okay."

He popped out and again she tried to work. They'd explained to her that it wasn't practical for them to do the disappearing act all the time, especially around lots of people. Hard to explain. Cars were normal, obviously. With the secret out, it wasn't unusual for the guys to pop back to the office for needed items if they were on a job. She'd gotten used to it. Twenty minutes later, she'd nearly finished when Aidan reappeared.

"I'm done."

"Who's bringing the van back?"

"Purs and Gery are stopping on the way, we'll meet them. You got your car here?"

She tossed him the keys. Will was meeting with a client in St. Petersburg and wouldn't return until later. She sent him a text message so he wouldn't worry about her and while nothing about her situation was normal, it felt normal going to lunch with Aidan and the guys.

Just the recently deflowered virgin and some bazillion year-old archdemons chowing down at Chili's.

In the passenger seat of her car, she laughed.

Aidan looked at her. "What's so funny, sweet cheeks?"

She shook her head. "No one would ever believe this."

"I hope not. The Firm works hard so humans won't suspect the world is anything other than they believe it to be. Everyone's better off that way."

"How dangerous does it get? Tell me the truth, Aidan."

She'd almost derailed his composure by switching tracks like that. "Ryan's careful," he finally answered. "Most of what we do now is just information gathering, or flexing a little muscle to keep something in line. He's a *walk softly-big stick* kind of guy, trust me."

"Didn't used to be like that?"

"No. Not by a long shot. Used to be a *beat the living shit out of everyone and send back one half-dead witness with the bodies as a warning* kind of guy." He looked at her and grinned. "He's mellowed a lot."

"Then why does he need Will back if everything's so hunky dory?"

Aidan didn't answer. He didn't have the answer, and it was a question he'd wondered himself for a while. "Don't stress it. I don't have an answer for you. Ryan has to deal with the big picture and long term, not just the here and now. He might be setting up his chess pieces today for something a thousand years in the future, kiddo." He looked at her. "He won't send Will out to be killed. He's never done that. His old man was more of a slash and burn kind of guy, but even in the crazy days Ryan's always been one to hedge his bets. He hates to lose or lose any personnel or have collateral damage, especially on our side. He takes it very personally."

Maybe she didn't want to know the answer to this. "What happened to him?"

"Who?"

"Ryan's father. How did Ryan take control of The Firm?"

"Oh, Ryan's pretty much been running things for a long time now. His old man didn't officially hand the reins over until..." He didn't finish that sentence. "He finally retired. I think Ryan pointed out to him that it was a long overdue change."

"Retired? Is that a euphemism for Ryan killing him to take over?" Kal *so* didn't want to hear this, but she had to ask.

Aidan snorted, amused. "Ryan? Kill Hades? Not quite."

Now she was confused. Hades was a real person, not just another name for Hell? "Then where is he?"

"I told you, he's retired. Hades has a house down on Boca Grande—Gasparilla Island—in Lee County. About two hours south of here. He loves to fish for tarpon, bought a boat, the whole nine yards."

She sat back, stunned into silence. What shocked her more, that she landed a TV producer gig on a popular television show six months after graduation? That she managed to escape her parents and live in Tampa? That she was now a deflowered virgin and a hunkalicious demon's soul mate for eternity? That the admittedly good-looking British guy who she thought was her boss turned out to actually be the Devil? That Hell was based in Atlanta?

Or that Hades was a real person playing beach bum on Gasparilla Island? It was a draw.

* * * *

Mentally and emotionally drained, Ryan returned to his apartment after his talk with Kal. He needed to get his head on straight. Maybe it was time for *him* to think about leaving this life for good. With Will back and quickly returning to full strength, it wouldn't take much to goad Will into killing him.

Will would probably welcome the opportunity.

Ryan stared out the windows over Atlanta and felt the air shift behind him.

"Hello, Bera."

"I can't sneak up on you, can I?"

"Perhaps if you used a little less perfume."

"You wear cologne."

"Yes, I wear it. I don't bathe in it." Ryan turned, his eyes blazing. "If you *ever* repeat your little stunt of the other day, I mean it, I will take you out permanently. You cannot trade on the status of either your father or mine. I have latitude from the Dodekatheon in these matters that no longer guarantees your safe passage."

Bera nodded, no longer as sure of herself as she had been when she first appeared.

"What did you want?" he asked.

She smiled and walked toward him, slowly, seductively unbuttoning her blouse. "What do you think I want, Ryan? It's been a while."

Ah yes, obviously she was back to sucking up, in a manner of speaking.

He'd definitely make her suck something.

Apparently now that Bera had returned from her sojourn, she wanted a little familiarity. Ryan knew what she really wanted but there was no way he would give her that. Well, he didn't mind making the aggravating bitch jump through a few hoops. She used people all the time, perhaps a little instant karma, turning things around on her.

In the grand scheme of things he almost preferred she'd go away and stay away for good. Bera was a troublemaker. If it wasn't for the fact that she was an associate member of The Firm by her father's bloodline and Dodek decree, Ryan would have eliminated her centuries earlier. He wasn't really in the mood to deal with her today. Then again, maybe it would help take his mind of other matters.

Off other people.

"Then get your clothes off and get your arse into bed if that's what you're looking for. You know where it's at." He headed for the kitchen.

A frown crossed Bera's face. "Your foreplay is a little lacking this afternoon, sunshine."

"You wish to get fucked or not? Don't try my patience, woman. This is an offer with a very short expiration date. I'm not putting up with your bullshit today, so don't bother."

She unbuttoned her blouse, all pretense of seduction out the window. "Someone's in a foul mood." She walked into the bedroom.

He considered pouring himself a merlot, then spotted the bottle of bourbon and splashed three fingers over ice, downed half in a burning gulp. Bera liked it hard and rough—harder and rougher than any human lover could give her. He was certainly in a foul enough mood to give her that this afternoon.

Anything to distract him.

Anything to take his mind off her.

He took the glass and walked to the bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt as he went. "I'd better find your bare arse in the air waiting for me."

Chapter 19

Kal hummed while she cooked. Emotionally she felt better than she had in days. When she'd awoke that morning she'd also felt mentally clearer, as if filled with energy.

Okay, so maybe Will was right.

She smiled. Only three weeks with Will and it was hard to remember what life had been like without him. He was hers. *All* hers. She wanted to cook dinner for him at her place tonight, sort of like a real date. Bless his heart, he'd willingly gone along with it. And he was willing to let her set the pace easing her parents into—

The doorbell rang.

Kal frowned and wiped her hands. It obviously wasn't Will, he'd pop in. When she looked through the peephole her stomach nearly hit the floor. Her mother stood on the front step.

Kal unlocked the door and threw it open, her heart racing. "What are you doing here?"

Laura Martin smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Your father wouldn't let me call ahead. He wanted to surprise you."

Oh, thank goodness I was dressed! Kal nodded, the blood draining from her face. "I'm surprised all right. Where is he?"

"He's parking the car. He'll be right here."

Kal felt the air in the apartment shift.

Oh no! "Come on in, Mom. I've got dinner on the stove. I'll be right back."

Before her mother could say anything, Kal raced to the bedroom. Will turned, smiling, then noticed her horrified look.

"What's wrong?"

"Shh!" She closed the bedroom door, locking it behind her. "My parents are here! They just showed up from Ohio!"

"What?"

"Shh!" Kal closed her eyes and tried to breathe. "You have to go!"

"What about dinner?"

"They can't come in and find you in my bedroom!"

"Kal, you're a grown woman."

"My father is a Baptist minister, lest you forget. Please, Will, go!"

Smiling, he pulled her to him and kissed her. For the briefest of seconds she forgot her mother and father had the nerve to show up unannounced.

"You have to go!" she gasped when he released her.

"How will you explain cooking dinner for two?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Argh! All right, fine, but come in the front door. Give me about twenty minutes, okay?"

He stroked her cheek. "Fifteen."

Her body tingled, wanting him. She wondered if she'd ever find the courage to stand up to her father.

Will disappeared and she took a deep breath, walked into the living room-

And nearly choked at the sight of her father carrying luggage.

"What are you doing, Daddy?"

"I'm bringing in our bags. What, no hug?"

Kal remembered dinner cooking on the stove, but her mother was already seasoning it. "Mom, no, please don't—"

"Kal, we are staying two weeks." Her father put the bags down. "I took the time off. I want to make sure you're okay and hopefully talk you into coming home with us. I really wish you'd give up this nonsense."

"You can't stay here."

"What? Of course we can. Don't you want us here?"

Not really. "Daddy, I only have one bedroom."

"You can sleep on the couch. You do have a couch, don't you? Your mother has been so worried about you."

Kal shoved aside her wraith-worthy surge of rage. "Daddy, I have to work. I cannot spend two weeks babysitting you. I have a job and responsibilities."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Sweetheart, you have a responsibility to your family. Jeff was asking—"

Kal broke free and threw her hands in the air. "I am not, repeat *not*, interested in Jeff! I am not, will not be, never have been. So stop it."

"Who were you cooking for, sweetheart?" her mother asked.

Kal wished she'd let Will stay and take care of them. It would mean angering her parents, but in thirty seconds they had transformed her from peaceful and strong to ripping her hair out crazy. Her own personal friggin Kryptonite.

"I have a date tonight."

Her father frowned. "You're letting a man into your apartment, alone?"

"No. I thought I'd invite the film crew in to document it. Of course alone!"

Her mother gasped. "Kalyani Martin, that's no way to talk to your father. I raised you better than that."

Cripes, now her mother was against her. She couldn't afford to alienate her right now. *Time to toss it back at 'em*.

"How could the two of you just show up without calling?"

Her father glowered, his fire and brimstone look. "We thought you'd be happy to see us."

"I've only been here two months. Yes, I'm happy to see you, but the problem is—" *Ding dong*.

So much for fifteen minutes. She walked to the door. "I have a life, Daddy. Not to mention a very irregular schedule. You might have been sitting outside my door for two or three days if I'd been out of town on a shoot."

Will looked handsome in a charcoal grey suit, white shirt, and a blue tie that made his eyes look like sun-bleached granite. *Day-um*, he looked good. He'd been wearing khakis earlier. He looked like an executive for a Fortune 500 company.

"Hi, Kal," he smiled. "I'm sorry I'm a little early." "No, I'm not," he mentally added.

She fought to contain her grin and failed. "That's all right." "Thank you for coming back sooner."

"You like?"

"I love."

He kissed her hand and winked. Then Kal remembered her parents in the apartment. Knowing they were watching and listening, she said, "Um, there's been a slight change of plans. My parents unexpectedly arrived from out of town."

She led him inside.

Her father glared. *Oh, boy.* "Will Hellenboek, this is my father, Reverend Kenneth Martin, and my mother, Laura Martin."

Her mother looked like she was in love. Her father-well, fortunately, he wasn't armed.

Maybe she should have patted him down and checked their luggage for weapons.

Will smiled and extended his hand. "Reverend Martin, it's an honor to meet you, sir. Kal has told us a lot about you."

Her father finally shook hands. "Funny, she hasn't said much to us about you."

Kal realized she wasn't wearing the purity ring. She panicked, hid her hands behind her. "Oh, no!"

"What?"

"The ring! He'll notice!"

Kal watched the corner of Will's mouth twitch in an amused smirk as he extended his hand to her mom. Kal suddenly felt something on her finger behind her back.

"*Better*?" "Mrs. Martin, it's a pleasure to meet you." Her mother looked like the pleasure was distinctly hers.

"Nice to meet you too, Mr. Hellenboek."

"Please, call me Will."

Kal sighed as she felt the purity ring. "*Oh thank goodness!*" She didn't even remember for sure where it had been in her bedroom. "*I love you!*"

"Lucky for you, babe, I can multi-task." "When did you get into town?" Will asked.

Her father still glowered. "We drove here straight from the airport. We didn't expect to find our daughter entertaining some man in her home."

"Daddy!"

"Kalyani Martin, I raised you to respect your parents and do your Christian duty. Being here a few weeks seems to have turned you into a different person. You withhold information from me, you're having men over when you're home alone." He turned to Will. "She has a boyfriend at *home*, in Ohio. We've come to take her home."

Kal gritted her teeth. "This is my home. Jeff is not my boyfriend. He's not even my friend, I barely know him. You love him so much, you date him!"

"Reverend Martin," Will quickly interceded, "I'm sorry if I've given you the wrong impression. We weren't going to be here alone all evening." Will smiled. Kal was almost positive her mother let out a content sigh.

Kal snapped her head to look at Will. "We weren't?"

"Aidan and Gery are supposed to meet here with us in an hour. Or did you forget the production meeting?"

The fact that he could remain so calm and think clearly under pressure only intensified her feelings for him. If she couldn't get him alone and boink him silly in the next twenty minutes, she'd lose her mind. "I did forget. I thought we were meeting them at Gery's later." *Okay, under the circumstances, God will certainly forgive me that fib.*

"Then why is the table only set for two?" Her father still glared, but his tone didn't sound as certain.

Will eased a step closer to Laura, his eyes on her. "Because I made the mistake of teasing Kal the other day. I bet her she couldn't cook better than me. I cooked dinner the other night for a staff production meeting. She was reciprocating."

"Dang, you're goood." "That's right. Aidan and Gery had dinner plans already."

Laura was totally enamored with Will. She stared at him with wide eyes. "Kenneth, I think we should leave them alone."

Her father's turn to be startled. "What? Are you crazy? We just got here. I didn't travel all this way to—"

Laura mooned over Will. "Kenneth, they don't have enough to feed us. She's right, we shouldn't have come without letting her know first so she could tell us her schedule. We can go to a restaurant and let them work. This is her job, dear. Goodness knows, you ran her out of your study plenty of times when she was a child so you could work on a sermon."

Kal smirked. "Got that right."

Before her father could protest, Will turned to him. "We should be done by eight thirty, if that's not too late? Or I can call the others and reschedule."

Laura took over. "No! Don't do that, we don't want her to get in trouble. Take all the time you need." She hugged Kal and grabbed her husband's hand. "Come on. We'll go out to eat. We'll be back no sooner than nine."

Her father looked like he wanted to protest, but Kal's mother dragged him out the front door. Kal watched the door shut behind them, collapsed in a chair, and bawled like a baby.

Will held her. "It's okay. Family can make you feel crazy."

"Crazy? I left crazy in the dust ten minutes ago. I cannot *believe* they'd do this! Wait, it's my father. I *can* believe it. I just never thought he'd stoop to something like this. I swear, I honestly think he's lost his mind over the past few years. His behavior is just totally going downhill. I couldn't write a book about this and have people believe it. He's nuts!"

Will squeezed her shoulder, then walked to the kitchen and shut off the stove. "Dinner smells good."

She walked over to him, wrapped her arms around him. "Not as good as you."

He moved the food off the burners and turned to face her, his arms around her. "In the grand scheme of things, it's no big deal. I'll wait until they go to sleep to come over."

Horrified, she frantically shook her head. "No, you can't! I can't risk them finding you here. They're sleeping in my bedroom."

"Why not tell them to go to a hotel?"

"They're my parents. I can't. You don't understand."

"Then you come over to my place."

She glared at him like he'd suddenly turned stupid. "Will, how would I explain it? We're under a forced fast for the duration unless we can sneak quickies." His amused looked irritated her. "What?"

"Forced fast?""

"Yeah. I mean, two weeks, we can survive that long not sleeping together." She tried for what she hoped was a seductive tone and knew she missed it by a country mile. "Just think how good it'll be when they leave."

"Wouldn't want to make Jeff jealous," Will teased. She shoved him. He laughed. "He really wants you to marry that bozo, doesn't he? I thought you were exaggerating."

She rolled her eyes and dished out their salads. "You have *no* idea. I never even dated him. I barely know him. I think he's a standoffish jerk."

Will hooked an arm around her waist from behind and brushed his lips against the nape of her neck, below her ear. "Let's leave dinner for later."

Closing her eyes, she fought the urge to rip his clothes off. Wait, *why* was she fighting the urge?

She turned and kissed him as he backed her toward the bedroom. She stopped him. "No, wait. Not there."

"Why not?"

"My parents are sleeping in there tonight."

God bless him, he humored her. "Lock your door and bring your cellphone."

She reluctantly stepped away from him and did as he said. Then, as he gathered her into his arms and kissed her, the world shifted and they were in Will's bedroom.

She could get used to this.

She slipped off the purity ring and laid it next to her phone on the dresser. "We won't get many chances like this for a couple of weeks," she whispered, unbuttoning his shirt after he shrugged off his suit jacket.

"Why not?"

"Parents. Surprise visit. In my apartment. Two weeks. Did you *not* just get that memo?" Thank goodness Aidan had suggested keeping it for appearance sake in case her parents wanted to visit! She wasn't technically living with Will yet, even though that's where she spent every night, usually at his place.

Will flashed her a knowing smile. "Kal, you don't understand. You won't go that long. Not right now."

Desire shifted into annoyance. "What do you mean I won't go that long?"

"I'm not trying to sound like an asshole, but it's all part of it. In the early days, it's like a craving."

"I do not *have* to have sex with you. I can go two weeks." She stepped away from him. With the current tone and tenor of conversation, she wasn't having sex with him right now, either. "Besides, you said that first night I didn't have to."

"You didn't, not if it was a shallow bond. We've bonded pretty deeply though, and gone well past that point. If it had just been that one time, you wouldn't feel like that. I feel it too, don't worry. But I've had years of experience. I can control it better than you."

"Oh, this is *so* not going to be one of those 'because I'm older than you' conversations, is it? I'll be honest with you, you try that nonsense on me and it's a deal breaker, buddy."

He pulled her to him and kissed her, his tongue tracing her lips. In betrayal they opened to him and she moaned when he pressed hard against her.

Kal lost herself in their kiss until she remembered she was irritated. Pulling away, she held her hands up in front of her. "No, we need to settle this first. Quit distracting me."

"Distracting you?"

"Yeah. I can go two weeks without sleeping with you, Will Hellenboek."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Yeah, really. Believe it or not."

He smiled and crossed his arms. "Okay."

His sudden capitulation confused her. "What?"

He shrugged, sending her heart into flutters. "Okay. If you say you can, I believe you." "What's the catch?"

He shook his head. "No catch."

"That was too easy."

Will draped his shirt over his jacket so it wouldn't wrinkle. Her body tried to bully her mind into kissing his chest. "What was too easy?" he asked.

"You just giving in like that."

"Kal, we don't have a lot of time before your parents come back from dinner. I'd rather spend it with my tongue buried between your legs, not having an argument. We've got more than enough time to have plenty of arguments later." He kicked off his shoes.

Her heart pounded, her sex suddenly flooded and throbbing with need. "What?" she squeaked.

He smiled, his grey eyes subtly darker, almost a deep, smoky blue. "What?"

"What did you say?"

He was down to his delicious briefs, his large erection clearly outlined by the white material. "I said—" he stepped over to her, "—that instead of arguing, I would rather spend our time with my tongue buried between your legs." He trailed one finger along her chin. "I want to make you come at least twice before—"

He couldn't continue because she jumped him, wrapped her legs around his waist, and jammed her tongue down his throat.

Chuckling, he carried her to his bed and quickly helped her shed her clothes and his briefs and proceeded to show her what he meant.

She tangled her fingers in his hair as he trailed kisses down her stomach to her mound. "What were you going to say?" she gasped.

He lifted his head. "You mean before you tackled me?"

"Yeah."

He smiled. Damn she loved his smile.

"I was going to say I want to make you come at least twice before I slide my cock inside you and slowly fuck you for the next hour or so."

She groaned, bucking her hips against him, trying to get him to shut up and *do* it. Who knew talking dirty could be this much fun!

"Yes!" she hissed.

He dipped his head and trailed his tongue from her ready entrance up to her throbbing clit, drawing slow, sensuous circles. "Is that something you might enjoy?"

"Shut up and *do* it, Will!"

He chuckled again. She closed her eyes, grinding her hips against his mouth as he took her over and quickly brought her release.

"That's one," he whispered, moving up her body so he could suckle her tightly pebbled nipples. She squirmed beneath his hands, all thoughts of her parents safely locked away. All that mattered was Will's hands and mouth and the feel of his stiff member rubbing against her leg as he had her begging for release again.

"An hour, huh?" she gasped.

"Mmm hmm. At least." He glanced at the bedside clock. "Maybe longer, if you want."

She moaned. "Yeah."

He pushed one, then two fingers inside her, slowly stroking her as he lightly flicked her clit with his tongue. Beyond comprehensible speech, Kal made weak mewing sounds as he brought her close and kept her on the edge. After several tormented minutes she briefly regained her use of consonant blends.

"Please!"

"Please what, sweetheart?" He licked her again, slipping a third finger into her tight entrance. "Tell me what you want. I want to hear you say it."

She gasped. "Make me come! Please!"

"And then what?" His lips gently tugged on her clit, drawing a loud moan from her.

"Then fuck me, baby."

"Very good," he purred. He gave her release and stayed with her, drawing it out until he knew she couldn't take the sensation any longer. He slid up the bed and held her cradled to him as her breathing settled and her heart quit racing. "I love you, Kal," he whispered. "I love being able to do that to you."

Kal lifted her head and kissed him, then she rolled on top of him. "I love you, too." She impaled herself on his shaft, both moaning as she pressed until his full length was buried deep inside her. She sat up, and with his hands splayed on her hips she started a slow, rolling rhythm, watching his face as she did. She loved that she did this to him, could make him feel like this. No matter the circumstances that brought them together, they *were* together and darn it, they were *good* together.

Real good.

She leaned forward and kissed him, slowly, deeply, exploring with her tongue while he was buried deep inside her. "An hour?"

"Mmm hmm."

"I can go two weeks without sleeping with you. I just don't want to."

He flipped her onto her back, hooked his arms under her thighs and lifted her legs. With each stroke he went deeper, stretching her, making her gasp. "If you say so, sweetheart. I won't argue."

"Why not?"

He slowed his strokes, drawing a frustrated moan from her, then one of pleasure as his thumb stroked her swollen nub. "Maybe I need to make you come a third time and shut you up. I'd rather fuck than fight. If there's one thing I've learned throughout all my years, it's far better to give in and have fun than to be right all the time." "Now who's running off at the mouth?" She twisted her hips, grinding against his pelvis. He'd nearly brought her over until a thought hit her like a bucket of icy Ohio lake water. "Wait. You think you're right and you're just giving in to shut me up? You don't think I can go two weeks?"

Will's amused snort irritated her. "You won't let this drop, will you?"

Now fully out of the mood, Kal sat up on her elbows. "No, I won't. I can go two weeks."

Will smiled. "Well, considering you've left me hard and horny, can we postpone this difference of opinion until later?"

She loved his smile, he was so cute...Wait, getting distracted again.

She untangled her legs and scooched back. Which left her agonizingly empty and his stiff, throbbing cock bobbing in the air.

God, I'd love to suck that...

Distracted again. She sat cross-legged on his bed, her arms crossed in front of her and tried to focus on his nose instead of his eyes or that sweet hunk of muscle standing straight out between his legs. "Two weeks. I can do that. Can you?"

"That's not fair, Kal." His stiff member twitched as if in protest. "I just got you off twice and you're going to leave me hanging?"

But he wasn't upset, she could tell from his playful tone of voice and the gleam in his eyes. He was amused.

That ticked her off.

She forced a frown. "Well?"

He sat back on his heels. "I don't want to make that bet, Kal. I love you. I don't want to go two weeks without making love to you. This is stupid."

He regretted the word as soon as he used it. Her eyes narrowed. "Stupid? You think I'm stupid?"

"No! Christ." He rubbed his face. "No, Kal, I don't think you're stupid." She was already climbing off the bed and reaching for her clothes.

"I don't care that we're spending eternity together, Hellenboek. I don't care if Ryan's unwritten big book of stupid-ass rules says we uncontrollably lust after each other. I've got free will, and I can darn—*damn*—sure keep my pants zipped." She wrenched up the zipper on her jeans.

He knew it would make the situation worse but he couldn't help laughing.

"What?"

"Big book of stupid-ass rules? You're starting to swear, sweetheart. I think it's cute."

She yanked on her shirt, grabbed her phone, slipped the ring on her hand and flipped Will a bird on the second try after using the wrong fingers the first time. "Two weeks, Hellenboek. If I could do it for over twenty-five years, I can do it for two darn—*damn*—weeks." She crossed her arms. "Send me home."

"Kal, sweetheart, please, don't leave like this."

"Send. Me. Home. Now." She thought about it and added, "Asshat."

He didn't send her soon enough for her to miss his amused laughter trailing after her.

Chapter 20

Kal angrily cleaned up their uneaten dinner, slamming pots and pans and cabinet doors as she did. Then she curled on the couch in front of the TV. As the evening wore on and her parents' return drew closer, the worse she felt. She shouldn't have bit Will's head off like that. And she'd left him hanging after he'd been so good to her.

She closed her eyes and summoned her outrage. No, dang it, they'd have to learn she wasn't going to play by Ryan's rules, whether they liked it or not.

Kal knew her outrage was that her parents had the gall to show up, unannounced, and she didn't have the guts to tell them to go to a hotel. Her ire wasn't at Will, it was at them.

Groaning, she fell over on her side and whacked herself in the head with a throw pillow. "Cripes!" she yelled at the empty room. "I'm such a wet noodle!"

The right thing would be to call out to Will, apologize, and kiss and make up. Well, more than kiss, because truth be told she'd been pretty close and still felt a persistent throbbing in her nether regions.

No! By gumb, she would hold on to her righteous indignation a little longer.

At least until tomorrow.

Kal clutched the pillow to her. It smelled a little like Will from all the time they'd spent curled up here together, the times he'd...

Argh! So not helping!

Her parents returned after nine. Kal knew her mother probably had to chew each bite of her dinner a thousand times, drink twenty glasses of water, and make a dozen trips to the bathroom to delay their return that long. Her father walked in and suspiciously looked around.

"Everyone's gone, Daddy."

Satisfied, he nodded. He turned to her and caught her hands. "Come home, Kalyani. Jeff makes good money."

"Kenneth!" Her mother's forceful outburst startled Kal. "Lay off her."

He looked at her, shocked. He tried to regain control of the situation. "I am your husband!"

"Yes, you are. And she's my daughter. She's got a good job, and she's an adult. I never should have let you do this. You are not going to spend our visit haranguing her to come home. I won't allow it."

Kal didn't know whether her jaw should be on the floor or if she should wear an ear to ear grin. She'd never heard her mother stand up to her father like that before.

Her father finally regained his use of speech. "How dare you!"

Her mother stepped forward, nose to nose with her father. "I like the man. I think he's very nice."

"He hunts ghosts! He does the Devil's work!"

Kal had to hide her laughter behind a coughing fit. They had no idea.

Her mother still had some gumption left in her. "He's a TV show host. Frankly, from what I've seen of his show, he does more debunking than anything. I might be a little upset if she was involved with that other guy, what's his name, Aidan. He's handsome, but he looks like a flake."

Kal faked another sudden coughing fit. Again, they had no idea.

Her father's turn to be shocked. "You watch it? How can you dare watch that...filth! I forbid it!"

"Because our daughter is the producer, that's why. You won't forbid me to do anything, Kenneth Martin. I know which foot you put in your pants first every morning, and let me tell you something else—" she stepped forward, forcing her husband back a step, "—you will quit harassing Kal about Jeff and coming home. She doesn't want to come home, she doesn't want Jeff. Drop it."

Nope, definitely jaw on the floor time. Both Kal and her father were shocked into silence. Her father recovered first. He turned on her and glared as he rubbed his forehead.

"Well, I hope you're happy, young lady. You've managed to turn my own wife against me and set her feet on the Devil's path! You're getting a real kick out of defying us, aren't you? I swear, you'd think you hate us to defy us like this."

With the focus back on her, Kal couldn't take it. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I'd love to stay and listen to this, but I can't. I've got to go to work, we're shooting tonight. Closed set, sorry, you can't come." God would *definitely* forgive her that lie, for sure. It was lie or commit murder, no matter how justifiable. She grabbed her purse, keys, and cell before he could argue. "I'll see you in the morning, maybe before noon but no promises." She stormed out the door and to her car, driving away before he could run after her.

Her cell rang almost immediately, her father's number. She shut it off.

Around the corner from her apartment complex, a large shopping center lay deserted at that time of night. Kal pulled in and, with her head resting on the steering wheel, she sobbed.

She couldn't call out to Will. Not after she'd made such an ass of herself.

And she couldn't bear the thought of spending the night working alone at the office. It was tempting to call out to Ryan, but for some reason that didn't feel quite right either. Not as upset as she felt.

She closed her eyes. "Aidan, please, appareo," she whispered.

He instantly appeared in the passenger seat. He wore a concerned look. When he saw she'd been crying he opened his arms. "Aw, sweetie. Come here."

She fell against him and sobbed. He stroked her back and let her get it out of her system. After fifteen minutes of bawling like a baby she sat up and wiped her eyes. "Thanks, Aidan. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

He squeezed her hand. "No, sweet cheeks. I was just watching Stargate reruns." At least this time he was dressed in more than his boxers. "Want to tell me what happened?"

With her breath still hitching in her throat, Kal managed to sob out the story to him, crying again at the end. He opened his door, got out, and walked around to the driver side.

"C'mon—out. Switch. You're in no shape to drive, sweetie. I'll take us back to my place and we'll drown our sorrows in a couple of pints of Cherry Garcia ice cream."

No urging for her to call out to Will, no comments about her parents. Just comfort.

"I wish you weren't gay sometimes."

He laughed as he adjusted the seat so his knees weren't jammed against the steering wheel. "Why's that, babe? If I wasn't gay we couldn't critique guys together at lunch now, could we?" He looked at her. "You certainly wouldn't be comfortable curling up on the couch with me and crying on my shoulder."

"Maybe we'd be hooked up."

He laughed, shaking his head. "Naw, you'd be trying to toss out all my shirts, honey. I love you to death, but I couldn't have you doing that now, could I?"

She laughed again even though she still sniffled. They rode to his house in silence. As promised, they curled on the couch together under a blanket with pints of ice cream and two spoons in front of the TV. She didn't see him grab his cellphone when he excused himself to the bathroom.

He took a deep breath, turned on the sink so the sound would help mask his voice, and called Ryan.

"And to what do I owe this unexpected call?"

"Cut the crap," Aidan whispered. "I need a favor."

Ryan hesitated. "What?"

"Call Will, tell him Kal's safe at my place and to not show up."

"Why are you phoning me?"

"Because I don't know if Kal can hear my thoughts," he whispered, hoping she couldn't hear his voice from the bathroom.

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

"Because if I call him he'll show up. If he shows up in my house, even if he doesn't talk to her, she'll feel him appear and it'll really piss her off. She had a fight with her parents and a fight with Will tonight and she's pretty upset. She needs some time to chill. I just don't want him worried about her. We're wiping out my ice cream reserves and watching TV."

Ryan sighed. "Fine. I won't tell him where she is though, because trust me, if he feels she's that upset he will show up. You should know that."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

When Aidan hung up he touched his amulet and muttered a spell, hopefully locking them in. Will was so much stronger than him, he didn't know if it would keep his cousin out any more than a 'do not disturb' sign on a hotel door. Aidan shut off the sink and rejoined Kal on the couch. They'd polished off the Cherry Garcia and were working on his last pint of Chunky Monkey. He'd have to make another ice cream run at this rate.

"You okay, sweet cheeks?" She didn't look okay, but she nodded.

"I'll be all right."

"Not to sound like an asshole, but why not let Will handle your parents?"

She shook her head. "I can't let him fight this battle for me. It's not fair to him."

"Unfair would be making him do something he didn't want to do. Believe me, a chance to stand up for you, he'd jump at it."

"If I can't stand up to my father how am I supposed to survive against whatever gets tossed at us?"

"Sweetie, you won't ever be put in the line of fire, trust me. You don't have to stand up to anyone you don't want to. You've got all of us ready to fight for you, even the shit weasel."

She smiled. Despite everything, she'd decided she liked Ryan. He was a lot deeper than he let on. While she didn't agree with his methods, she could agree with his rationale that he had a job to do and had to protect those he was responsible for. And she respected him for it. She wouldn't ever admit it to Aidan or the others, though.

And if it wasn't for Ryan, she wouldn't have Will.

* * * *

Will felt the call. At first he fought it, then gave in and appeared in Ryan's Atlanta living room. Ryan looked like he'd been sleeping, his hair mussed, wearing pajama pants and nothing else.

"What do you want?" Will growled. He was in a foul mood from his fight with Kal and now he wasn't even sure where she'd disappeared to. She'd been home, then when he checked later she was gone. Not just from home, but totally off his radar. He could sense she was safe, but not where she was. He didn't know if it meant he was having some sort of power fluctuation or something else that he didn't want to contemplate. It would take him a few more weeks at least to completely return to his previous strength, and it worried him that he couldn't pinpoint her location. As pissed as she was, he didn't dare show up at her apartment. She wasn't answering her cellphone either. His only comfort was he knew she wasn't in trouble, that much he could sense. Wherever she was, she was safe.

"Calm down, Will. I've been asked to pass a message."

"From who?"

"Whom. None of your business. Kal's fine, she's safe."

Will fought the urge to choke the information out of Ryan. "Where is she? Who's she with?"

"If I tell you that you'll go charging in there and make matters worse, trust me. She needs time to decompress. Apparently she had a rather large row with her parents, and then on top of whatever lover's squabble the two of you had she didn't feel she could call you."

Guilt overwhelmed him. She couldn't call me? "Who'd she call?"

"Doesn't matter. No, it wasn't me, I'm simply the messenger. She's safe, and she'll stay safe until the two of you settle this one way or another. Not that I imagine there will be more than one way to settle it, but whatever it is, it'll work out. The party in question asked me to let you know she's safe and secure."

"Is she with Aidan?"

He shook his head. "I'm not saying where she's at."

"Swear to me she's safe."

Ryan nodded, suddenly wide awake. "I swear to you she's safe, and I swear to you she'll stay safe. You have my word."

Will slumped on Ryan's couch. "Okay. Thank you."

"Go home. Try calling her in the morning. Apologize for whatever happened and kiss and make up." He witnessed Will's sorrow and choked back his own emotions. When Ryan next spoke, he kept his voice low and soft to mask his feelings. "I'll make sure she's taken care of, Will. I promise. Let her have this time to de-stress a little. She's overwhelmed. Frankly, I'm surprised she's gone this long without some sort of breakdown. Go home."

Will nodded and disappeared.

Ryan sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair. Obviously he wasn't getting any sleep tonight. He changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, then made a quick stop at the local grocery store. He sensed Aidan's barrier and while he knew he could bypass it, that would be rude.

He knocked.

A startled Aidan opened the door. Ryan walked in and held up the plastic grocery bag. "Is this where the pity party's being held? I brought chocolate chip cookie dough, pistachio, and butter pecan. Where's the spoons?"

They'd been Abby's three favorite flavors. If Aidan remembered, he didn't let on.

Kal's startled look transformed to a broad beaming smile. Ryan stilled the lurch his heart took. That look had been for *him* and no one else.

He would cherish the image of her smile forever.

Okay, maybe it had been for the ice cream more than anything, but still...

Will, you're a truly blessed bastard and you have no idea, Ryan thought. You're lucky I'm a company man.

"Thanks, Ryan," Kal said as she gave him a one-armed hug so she wouldn't drop her spoon. She scooted over to give Ryan room to sit.

Ryan settled next to Kal on the couch while Aidan brought another spoon. The three watched TV until she fell into an ice cream stupor-induced sleep after midnight, snuggled against Ryan, with her feet in Aidan's lap.

Aidan carefully extricated himself and put what little was left of the ice cream in the freezer, then returned to the couch.

Aidan didn't want to wake Kal and assumed she couldn't hear their thoughts while she was sleeping. "Why are you here, Ryan? Did you talk to Will?"

"I did. And no, I didn't tell him she's with you. I swore to him she'd stay safe."

"You don't trust me to take care of her?"

"Of course I do, but you have to sleep sometime. If anything happened to her he'd kill you and me both, you know that." They watched Kal sleep between them. "What happened, Aidan?" Aidan related as much of the story as he knew. Ryan sighed. "Well, she's right that she has to learn to stand on her own feet in some matters. The stronger she can be in that way, the more it will help her in life."

She rolled over in their laps, onto her side, her face snuggled against Ryan's stomach.

Aidan felt a wall go up in Ryan's mind. He looked at the man. Ryan's hand hovered inches over her head, not touching, as if he wanted to stroke her hair.

Aidan's mind flashed back to a night when Chloe was alive and he'd once watched this almost identical tableaux play out, then slammed the door on his memory. No. Not now. He couldn't think of her now, it was too painful.

Ryan's eyes bored into his. "Never tell her, Aidan. She must never know she was Abby."

Aidan nodded, understanding. He'd quit trying to figure Ryan out centuries ago. He knew from their long history together that there was more to the asshole than met the eye, even if Aidan usually thought he *was* an asshole.

I'll never understand what Chloe saw in him, Aidan thought, then pushed that memory back in its closet, too. It did no good going there, especially now. Then again, from the way Ryan had tried gently coaxing Kal out of her funk, maybe that was one of the things Chloe had seen in him.

Kal started to dream and softly moaned, murmuring.

Ryan studied her face. "Aidan, remove the barrier."

"What?"

"Do it! Now!"

He did. Just then in her sleep, Kal cried out, "Will, appareo!"

Will immediately appeared in the living room and both men frantically waved at him, warning him to stay silent.

He glared at Ryan. When Will realized Kal was asleep, his face softened. The other two men witnessed his obvious anguish.

"She's dreaming, Will," Aidan said. "She talked in her sleep. We didn't want you waking her."

He nodded. "Thank you." He looked at Ryan. "What are you doing here?"

"I swore I'd keep her safe. You should know by now that I always keep my word."

Will sat cross-legged on the floor. "Thank you. Both of you."

By two in the morning, all three men were yawning. Ryan crooked his finger at Will. "*Come here. Stand behind me, your hand on my shoulder. I don't wish to wake her.*"

Will didn't want to touch the other man, but he did as Ryan instructed. He felt the shift and found himself sitting on the couch where Ryan had been, with Kal nestled in his lap.

Ryan patted his shoulder. "In the morning she might be pissed off because you're here, much of that due to an ice cream hangover. She ate enough to put an elephant into a diabetic coma. Take her out, get her a good breakfast, some protein. And quit pissing her off." He disappeared before Will could zing him back.

Aidan looked at Will. "I'm going to bed. Don't kill each other."

"Thanks."

"You're not mad at me for calling Ryan?"

Will stroked Kal's hair and shook his head. "No. You guys were right, she needed to decompress. I pissed her off. I need to remember she's still got a lot of adjusting to do. I'm her first relationship. I settled back into my normal patterns with her and..." He sighed. "I have to remember she's not Abby. Not anymore. She's a lot like her, she really is. But she's different. I need to remember that. I can't tease her the same way, I can't be who I was because she's not who she was."

Aidan carefully slid Kal's feet from his lap. "Good night, Will."

Chapter 21

Kal dreamed. She dreamed of strange lands and unusual people.

First she dreamed of Aidan, of looking up at him as if a child, feeling him lift and toss her into the air before catching her and swinging her around, smiling, playful and happy, feeling safe and secure with him, loved and protected. Then time folded and shifted, and she dreamed of Ryan.

The dreams were disjointed and odd, disturbing in that she felt ripped away, unwillingly pulled from him, as if she'd loved him.

Then there was Will. The world had changed yet again, different people and places and times, but still disjointed. Before the dream could go too far, she was ripped away again.

Then she dreamed of walking into Plant Hall a few weeks ago and seeing Will for the first time, his slate grey eyes...

Kal opened her eyes and realized she was lying in Will's lap, purple dawn light visible outside Aidan's living room windows.

She closed her eyes, certain she was still in the dream and not wanting to wake up and discover she was alone on Aidan's couch. A deep breath, and Will's warm, familiar scent came to her.

Her eyes popped open. No, she was still nestled in Will's lap. His eyes were closed and she fought the urge to be mad at Aidan for calling him. When Will spoke, it startled her.

"He didn't call me."

"I thought you were asleep."

Will shrugged his shoulders, winced, stretched his neck. She heard several audible pops. "No. I dozed a little while."

She hoped he couldn't read her thoughts, that she fell asleep in Ryan's lap, and the dreams she'd had. "How'd you know where I was?"

"Aidan called Ryan, who called me. They didn't tell me where you were. You were dreaming and called out to me in your sleep and I heard you. I'm sorry, Kal. Before I say the wrong thing again, I want you to know I'm sorry. I really am. I don't think you're stupid, and if you want to wait two weeks, we will. Somehow."

She wrapped her arms around him, hungrily kissed him. "I'm sorry. I'm mad at myself that I can't stand up to my parents. I shouldn't have taken it out on you." Her hunger for him burned deep inside her. Heck with it, she couldn't go two weeks without him. She wanted him.

His hands slipped under her shirt and she pressed into him.

"Aw, geez, get a room. You're worse than a couple of friggin alley cats." Aidan stood in the kitchen doorway. He wore a pair of yellow SpongeBob SquarePants boxer shorts and his hair was a mess, but he smiled. Will looked at her and grinned. The world shifted and then they were in Will's bed.

"That's better," she said. She rolled on top of him and lifted his shirt, kissed his warm flesh. "This time, you get to come first. I owe you one, big time."

"You don't owe me anything, sweetheart. I love you."

She worked her way down his body, unfastening his shorts and pulling them and his briefs off. "No, you're wrong. I do owe you for being so patient." He was already hard and she swiped her tongue over the tip of his stiff shaft, enjoying his moan as he jumped at the sensation. She'd discovered what to do to make his body meld to her hands in the same way hers did to his.

Kal shed her clothes and spent several long minutes teasing him with her mouth, wiggling her body against his, keeping him on the brink until he couldn't control himself. He flipped her over and slipped inside, thrusting deeply, kissing her. His tongue flicked hers in time with his strokes and she tightly wrapped her arms around him.

"Come for me, Will," she whispered in his ear.

He moaned. With one last deep thrust he climaxed, his lips pressed against the side of her neck. When he caught his breath he kissed her. "That was very sexy, sweetheart. See? You can talk dirty."

"I didn't think that was very dirty."

"It's the context. A nursery rhyme can be pornographic if said with the right inflection. Look how Marilyn Monroe sang *Happy Birthday* to JFK." He worked his way down Kal's body and in a few minutes she cried out as his tongue stroked her to climax.

He held her and pulled the sheet over them. "Let's take a quick nap and then I'll take you out to breakfast, all right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you with your parents."

She stroked his chest, her fingers tracing his scars. "I have to do this. I have to learn to stand up to them."

They dozed. A little after nine they got up to take a shower. Before heading to the bathroom she made the mistake of checking her phone. Her father had left seven voice mails throughout the night.

She groaned. "I'd better do this now and get it over with." She sat on the bed and dialed her father's phone. Will sat behind her and started nibbling the nape of her neck. She smiled, closed her eyes and tried to concentrate.

Her father answered on the second ring. "Kalyani? Where are you?"

"I told you, I had to work."

"Your mother has been beside—"

"You listen to me, Daddy." Will's arms encircled Kal's waist. She felt his strength flow throughout her being. "I love you, but if you want to stay down here you need to go to a hotel. I can't have you hounding me at my job. I am a producer of a show that shoots at night, regardless of your feelings about it. It's not like I'm shooting porn."

Her father gasped. "How dare you!"

"How dare *you*? Listen to me, I love you, but get it through your thick skull that I am not, repeat *not* marrying Jeff! I am not coming home to Columbus. Maybe not next year, maybe not ever if I stay with this show. It's very popular and the network might extend my contract." Another fib that would hopefully be overlooked in the grand scheme of things. Then again, if Ryan had his way, he could make it perfectly true for her and it wouldn't be a lie at all.

"You are putting yourself on a path to Hell, missy! I cannot believe you'd talk to your own father this way! You should drop to your knees and—"

"Believe it, Daddy." Heaven help her, the only person she wanted to drop to her knees for was Will Hellenboek. "I'll be home in a couple of hours. I can help you find a hotel then. I will not have you ruining my career over your prejudices. Maybe the best thing is for me to be on this show so others can learn from my example and be saved, did you ever think about that? You said God doesn't make mistakes, and He obviously wanted me on this show."

She hated twisting things around on him like that, and she normally didn't play the proselytizing card, but she was sick of her father's crud.

She'd stunned him into silence. Either that or he just dropped dead from a coronary.

Her mother took the phone. She sounded cheery and chipper. "Good morning, sweetheart. How are you? How's work?"

Kal took a deep breath. "I'm fine, Mom. Did Daddy just pop a vein?"

"He'll survive. I'm sure we can find a good hotel nearby. It'll be too stressful on you if we're staying here."

"Thank you, Mom. It'd be different if I had a larger place and a spare bedroom. I'm sorry, but if Daddy had told me he was doing this I would have told him not to."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry I let him drag me into it."

Her father shouted something in the background. Kal's mother pulled the phone away from her mouth. "Kenneth, will you *please* shut up!"

Kal successfully suppressed her snort while Will quietly laughed against the back of her neck, his whole body shaking with the effort of remaining silent.

Her mom's voice dropped to a whisper. "By the way, sweetheart, that young man we met last night, Will. Are you two seeing a lot of each other?"

That was mom code for, "When's the wedding?" *How much to tell her?* With Will's comforting presence the truth was suddenly a relief.

Well, at least the partial truth. "Yes, we're dating. Don't tell Daddy."

"Tell him?" she whispered. "Are you crazy? Of course not. I really like him, if that means anything."

Kal swung from amused to wanting to sob and hug her mom. "It means a lot to me. Thanks, Mom."

"I'll handle your father, don't worry. Love you. See you in a while."

Kal hung up and stared at the phone. Will gently took it from her and wrapped his arms around her while she sobbed against him for several long minutes. When she sat up and wiped her face she looked at him. "What did you do to mojo my mother?"

Darn that playful smile of his. "I didn't do anything, honest. If she likes me, then she really does like me. If I was going to mojo anyone, as you called it, I would have done it to your father. Besides, I don't have a lot of power in that area. Purson's good, and Aidan's better. Ryan's the best. Maybe we should sic him on your dad."

"True." She caressed Will's stubbly cheek, then snorted. "That would be ironic. She really likes you. That's a first. The other times I dated, she was picking the guys apart before I'd had the front door closed behind them when they brought me home. You're the first she's ever really liked."

* * * *

They managed to shower without making love. Kal sighed as she looked at her clothes laid out on Will's bed. "I wish I had clean clothes."

"What do you want?"

"Clean jeans, underwear, bra, shirt. Why?"

He closed his eyes, as if mentally looking for something. Then she swore he disappeared for the briefest of seconds and the air popped. The requested clothes were in his hands.

"How about these?"

She took the clothes. "You went to my apartment?"

"I'm not strong enough to bring things to me from elsewhere yet. I used to be able to do that, probably will be again now that I can transport two of us together. I had to appear in your apartment to get them. Don't worry, they didn't see me."

"What else can you do?" Ryan's admonishment that she would see things beyond her wildest imagination came back to haunt her. If this was no big deal to Will, what else could he do?

He shrugged. "We'll see. I don't know if I'll get all my strengths back. My powers had atrophied quite a bit."

She kissed him. Not a deep, fuck me silly kiss, but a sweet thank you kiss. "When we get past this craziness, can we back up a few steps?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I want to get to know you. I want you to get to know me. I don't mean in the Biblical sense, because we've pretty much got that part covered."

"We did skip the whole dating stage, didn't we?"

"Yeah." She fought the urge to get lost in his eyes. "I mean, we can still come home and boink each other blind later. I want to get to know who you are now that Ryan's not looking over our shoulders all the time to see if we've hooked up yet."

"Do you really still want to go two weeks?"

She shook her head. "Heck, no."

He looked relieved. "Good. Because I wasn't sure how to accomplish that. I'm sorry we fought. I wasn't trying to be an asshole. Do you forgive me?"

Kal wrapped her arms around him again. "Only if you'll forgive me for blowing up like a crazy woman. I'm sorry. It's just..." *No, don't want to cry again.* "He's always had this effect on me. It's going to take me a while to quit feeling guilty when I stand up to him."

Will's strong arms made her forget her crazy father, forget the whole world outside of her soul mate's warmth. "We'll figure it out as we go, babe," he assured her. "We've got each other, and that's all that matters."

* * * *

They popped over to Aidan's to get her car. Will drove them to the restaurant and Kal took her time eating. She didn't want to return to her apartment alone, but knew she had to do this by herself or she'd spend the rest of her parents' lives avoiding them and hating them for what they did to her.

Correction, not them, her father.

All she'd ever wanted was a normal dad, one who'd listen to her, support her. She knew her father loved her, but even among preachers he was anything but normal. At least she could think about this now without worrying she'd be struck dead by lightning.

Will let her talk.

"I used to think he was smart, right? When I was really young. My daddy was the preacher, all these people looked up to him, he was their leader. I thought that was important stuff, you know? Then as I got older I wasn't sure. I couldn't say anything and I felt like this horrible person. Who was I to question my father's beliefs?" Kal picked at her omelet. "Fortunately, Mom wouldn't let him put me in private school. I got to be a little normal in some ways at least."

"Then what happened?"

She laughed. "Inherit the Wind happened. Sophomore English reading in high school."

Will smiled. "I love that play. Always have." He stopped short of mentioning how he, Abby and Aidan had sat in the gallery and watched the real Scopes Monkey Trial play out, amused by all the fuss.

"Yeah, well, it really made me think. I was always one of those thinking kind of kids. I was smart enough to keep most of my thoughts to myself. I mean, really, dinosaurs were real, they existed, and not just a few thousand years ago. My dad insisted the scientists were wrong, that they got the carbon dating stuff screwed up, or they were deliberately lying to lead people to 'the Devil's path.'" She used finger quotes around the last three words, then laughed again. "Right to Ryan's door. Sheesh, who knew?"

Unable to eat anything else, Kal pushed her plate away. "I just wanted a normal dad," she softly said. "I wanted a normal dad who would do things besides go to church with me on Sundays and not yell at me for daring to voice a remotely independent thought that didn't gel with what the Bible said. You know how they say teenagers think their parents are so stupid, then the older they get, the smarter their parents seem? Well, my Mom became brilliant. Unfortunately, I saw my dad in a true light. He's a small-minded, bigoted man who hides behind his dogma because he's afraid of being proven wrong. He won't ever change his thinking. He's inflexible and..."

She sighed again. "I love him. If you ask me if I honestly like him? The answer's no, I don't. I can't stand him. There's part of me who seriously wonders if he's not got early dementia or something because he's been acting especially whacky lately."

Will knew how hard this was for her to talk about. He suspected he was the first she'd ever told. "Love him for who he is, Kal, not who you want him to be. You can love him and not like the things he does."

Now uncomfortable, she tried to turn it around on him. "Then why don't you and Aidan get along with Ryan anymore?"

His face hardened. "That's different, and quit distracting me."

"That's my line."

"We'll be together for eternity. We share." He winked.

* * * *

Will let Kal drive from the restaurant. At her apartment complex she parked several spots down from her door, out of sight.

He leaned over and kissed her. "If you need me, call me. Don't let him drive you to tears."

"Thank you." He disappeared and she felt the little tug on her heart that always occurred when he left.

Love.

Madly, deeply, truly, completely.

Her father pounced as soon as she opened the door. "Where have you been, young lady?"

"Shut up." Kal hardened her gaze and her heart. She wouldn't let him do this to her. "I love you, Daddy, but I'm not playing this game with you anymore. I hope your luggage is packed because you're going to a hotel right now. We can have dinner tonight, and maybe tomorrow afternoon I can show you around town. I have to work, I have a production schedule to stick to, and I'm *not* quitting. Suck it up."

Did she actually say that to her *father*? She must have, because his mouth gaped while his face turned beet red.

Her mother appeared behind him. "Oh, there you are sweetheart. How was work?"

Still stunned into an enraged silence, her father turned as if he couldn't believe his wife wasn't backing him up.

"It was fine, Mom, but I'm tired and I really need to get some sleep."

She smiled. "We're all packed."

Her father found his voice. "We are not—"

Laura cut him off. "Yes we are, Kenneth. I told you that this morning when you woke up ranting and raving. We're not imposing on her. It's your own fault you did this, so I don't want to hear any more out of you." She hugged Kal. "Dinner tonight sounds wonderful. Can that nice young man join us?"

Kal smiled. She'd actually enjoy seeing her father attempt to spar with Will. "I think he can juggle his schedule. I'll buy dinner." With her father muttering dangerously in the background, but no longer openly yelling, Kal logged on to the internet and printed information about a nearby hotel she knew was in a good neighborhood and of decent quality.

She handed the paperwork to her mother. "If you can't get a room here, let me know and I'll find you someplace else. We'll pick you up around seven."

"That's fine." Laura hugged her daughter, her lips near her ear. "Good for you for standing up to him, sweetie. That was wonderful."

Kal hugged her tighter and fought the urge to cry. "Thanks, Mom."

Her father wouldn't speak to her, wouldn't even look at her. Kal strangled her guilty urge to apologize into submission. Once they left, her mother driving their rental car, Kal turned and locked the door behind her. Then she slid down it, sobbing, her arms wrapped around her.

"Will, appareo."

He appeared, knelt in front of her, his arms open and waiting. And there he sat with her on the floor until she cried herself out of tears.

Chapter 22

After Kal gathered her things, Will transported them to his apartment. She spent the afternoon napping in his arms while he watched TV. He didn't speak, didn't feel the need to fill the space between them with meaningless words. He knew that when she needed to talk, she would.

They took a long bath together, cuddling but without making love, before leaving to pick up her parents in Will's Lexus.

Will looked good in his pressed khaki slacks and dress shirt with tie. "How much do you want to say about us?" he asked.

"Dating, for now. If he's stupid enough to ask if we've slept together I'll pop him in the nose, I swear I will." Was she really talking about her father like this?

Maybe it was about time she did.

Her parents waited in the lobby. Her mother immediately stood and hugged Kal, a broad, beaming smile on her face. "He's very handsome," she whispered in Kal's ear. Then her mom hugged Will and whispered something to him that made him smile.

Her father begrudgingly stood and nodded to them, said nothing, sullenly glared.

The three of them didn't let her father dampen the mood. While Kal and her mom sat in the back seat, her father sat up front with Will and didn't speak. Will and the women kept up a lively, fun conversation. It wasn't until they arrived at the restaurant and were seated at a table that Reverend Martin spoke.

"I'll have you know, I don't approve of this."

Kal forced her face to remain neutral. She sensed he'd attack if she gave any ground. "Approve of what, Daddy? Did you want to go to another restaurant?"

Laura laughed, but her husband wasn't amused. "You know what I mean, young lady. You're dating this man and we know nothing about him."

Will nodded. "That's fair. What did you wish to know about me, Reverend Martin? I'll be happy to answer any of your questions."

Her father looked startled, like he'd expected a hostile response and not tacit agreement to his position. "What are your intentions with my daughter?"

"Our daughter, Kenneth," her mother corrected, shooting her husband a stern look. Now that she'd discovered her backbone it apparently wasn't returning to the closet anytime soon.

"Our daughter," he corrected himself.

Will exchanged a quick look with Kal. "We haven't discussed the future yet, if that's what you mean. Right now we've only been dating for a little while. I think we need to get to know each other better before we discuss taking things to the next level."

Kal saw her father's eyes home in on her purity ring. "And what do you mean by that?" her father asked.

Will shrugged and put down his napkin before folding his arms on the table in front of him. Then he turned the full force of his gaze on her father. "I only have your daughter's best interests at heart. I do not believe in rushing a relationship for instant gratification. I prefer to wait and know that one day, when the time is right, the woman I marry is the one I have decided to fully devote my heart and soul to."

That answer surprised her father. Her mother watched the exchange like a tennis match and Kal didn't try to distract Will.

"Why aren't you married?" her father asked. "You expect me to believe you don't want to have relations right now with my daughter? You're obviously older than her."

Uh oh. He'd stepped in a trap Will had apparently hoped he'd trip.

Will's face hardened. "I'm widowed, Reverend Martin. As I'm sure you yourself are aware, when you're married to someone you give your heart and soul to that person. Kal is the first woman I've met since losing my wife that I've wanted to get close to, who I've even considered dating. I'm very patient. I'm willing to wait and see how the future unfolds. I believe true love is well worth that."

Her father's face flushed, this time in embarrassment. "I—I didn't know you were widowed. I'm sorry. Kal never told us."

"You never asked, Daddy," Kal said, wading into the fray to help with the kill now that the quarry had been weakened and brought down. "You assumed the worst instead of trusting me. You always assume the worst."

Will pressed the advantage. "She was brutally murdered, Reverend Martin. I spent several years emotionally unable to picture myself with anyone else and refused to consider another relationship."

Her father had turned from sunburned pink to beet red. "How long were you married?"

Will took a sip of tea. Only Kal knew how truly difficult this was for him. She loved him even more for it. "Not nearly as many years as I wish we'd been," he sadly replied.

* * * *

Miracle of miracles, her father remained relatively quiet for the rest of their meal. Kenneth Martin hated the taste of crow, hot or cold, and it took him a while to choke it down. Laura Martin more than made up for her husband's silence and even seemed to enjoy it.

Kal knew she certainly did.

By the time they drove them back to their hotel, Kal knew her mother was nearly as in love with Will as she was. As Kal hugged her parents good-bye her mom whispered to her again. "Don't let him get away, honey. Please. He's very sweet, and I think he really likes you."

"Don't worry. I won't."

Her mom hugged Will and her father reluctantly shook hands with him. Back in Will's car, Kal hugged him. "Thank you. You were fantastic. I know how hard that was for you."

"Babe, I would do anything for you, no matter what, to make life easier for you. You're all I care about. Never forget that."

"What did my mom say to you when we picked them up?"

He smiled, his eyes playfully twinkling. "She told me she really likes me and she hoped your father wouldn't scare me off."

* * * *

Kenneth Martin was nobody's fool. He hadn't expected the revelation of Hellenboek's widower status, but he knew very well that man had anything but the best intentions for his little girl. She was special, he'd always known that even if he didn't really believe his wife's assertions as to how special she was from her very conception.

He would not sit by and let this man, no matter how sad his story, ruin his daughter and taint her Heavenly future. She would marry Jeff and save that boy's soul, pull him from the sin he suspected called him. With his very own wife smitten with this...this...

He didn't know what to call Hellenboek. He could practically smell brimstone on him, his visceral reaction to him was so strong. He'd probably had a long line of jezebels in his past and was itching to make his daughter the next in his stable of concubines.

He rubbed his head and tried to ignore their dinner prattle. It took every ounce of his being to remain silent during their meal. The pain in his head hit him more frequently. He'd had the headaches off and on for several years, but for the past several months they came almost daily. Both his parents had suffered from migraines and he hoped it wasn't the start of that phase of his life.

He really needed to get his eyes checked, probably needed new glasses. Should have gotten bifocals several years ago when they were first suggested. And now this stress wasn't helping. Yet another reason to hate this Hellenboek fellow.

* * * *

Kal called Becky a few days later and decided if she couldn't confess a little she'd explode. When she finished relating parts of her tale to her friend, Becky took several minutes to quit laughing.

"You really stood up to your old man? Seriously?"

"Yeah, I know. The things we do for love, right?"

Becky gasped. "You said the L word!"

"That's right. I did."

Kal could hear Becky's grin. "You're not as good a girl as your mommy and daddy think you are, are you?"

If Kal knew Becky, her friend already knew that answer. "Well, I didn't tell my parents everything, if that's what you mean." Okay, that *was* the truth.

"Oh please, girlfriend, tell me he's as hunky in real life as he is on TV."

"He is."

Becky squealed. "Girl, I'm so happy for you! You sound like a different person, really. You don't sound like a terrified mouse anymore. When do I get to meet The Great Brooding One?"

Kal had shared her old nickname for Will with Becky before the change in situation. "Well, he's not so brooding anymore, to be honest. He has a fantastically sexy smile."

"Sexy? Did I really hear you use that word? Good lord, I think hell just froze over."

Kal struggled to keep her laughter in check and couldn't. "Keep it under your hat, you're the first to know. Yes, we are getting married. No, we haven't set a date yet, and we haven't told my parents. I'm still trying to get them used to the idea of me seriously dating."

"Dang, girl, you think I'm stupid or something? How's your boss feel about the two of you hooking up?"

Again Kal failed to hold back all of her giggles. "He knows, and he's okay with it. He's happy for us. He actually hoped we'd really hit it off."

* * * *

It was a scorching hot Sunday afternoon. While it didn't take Kal long to find the cemetery by car, it took her a while to orient herself inside. When she came with Aidan they'd appeared on the far back side, away from the entrance.

Then she spotted the large oak tree and slowly made her way to it. She'd brought a dozen white roses with her and wanted some private time alone to pay her own respects to Abby. Will had loved Abby for so many long, lonely years. In a way Kal felt guilty that she was taking his love from her.

As she approached the large azalea bushes, Kal thought she heard a man's low, murmuring voice. She stopped, listening.

If she didn't know any better, she'd swear it was...

She rushed forward, trying to be quiet. When she made it to the clearing all she saw were branches moving as if someone had just brushed against them.

As if someone had just disappeared.

A dozen fresh, white roses had been tucked into the vase next to the gravestone. There was no way they could be left over from Will's Wednesday visit, they looked unblemished. She touched one and found it still felt chilly, as if straight from a florist's cooler not too long before.

Then she thought back to her earlier visit here with Aidan. If Will came on Wednesdays, the roses in the vase should have been brown and dead. She came here with Aidan on a Monday, and the roses had been fresh, meaning...

Meaning another regular visitor besides Will.

She closed her eyes and sent out her thoughts. No, Will was still at home, she sensed it. She didn't want to call to him, didn't want to call his attention to her exact location. He thought she was at the office and going shopping. Well, she did both, just left out this errand and knew he wouldn't pry about how she spent the rest of her time. He had relaxed about that, knowing that Ryan swore to keep tabs on her too.

Kal dropped to her knees and stared at the roses. Closing her eyes, she sniffed the air as the trace of a familiar cologne wafted to her.

Well, what do you know about that?

She took one of the white roses she'd brought and added it to the ones already there. After she spent time contemplating not only what she'd come to do, but her near encounter and new suspicions, she stood, brushed herself off, and looked at the gravestone.

"I hope Will still comes to see you, Abby. I really do. I want him to. Wherever you are now, know that if it wasn't for what Ryan did to all of us, Will would still be ready to be with you. I'm sorry I've taken him from you. I do love him, I swear. I promise I'll take good care of him."

She departed the clearing. On her way out she stopped by a random grave, that of a child, and left the rest of the roses she'd brought there.

* * * *

Before driving home, Kal stopped by the mall and went to the perfume counter at one of the upscale department stores. The clerk was helpful and Kal spent twenty minutes there before she found what she wanted.

They gift wrapped it for her and she had it shipped. She wondered what he'd think when he got it.

Or if it would bring her any answers.

Chapter 23

Will took her request for normalcy to heart. They dated.

They spent every night together, but they dated. She learned he loved thoughtful movies of any genre and the sight of her in pair of tight jeans could drive him to literal distraction. He learned how to make the perfect cup of coffee for her, and that just the feel of his breath on the nape of her neck melted her faster than a snowball in Ryan's oven.

He taught her things about her own body she never dreamed, pleasure and passion she didn't think people could survive. And she learned how much he enjoyed it when she did something as simple as give him a back rub.

She hadn't spoken to her father since their visit. She talked to her mother every few days. Her mom's implied tone behind every conversation was, "Please give me a date to plan your wedding!"

It was welcomed relief.

They spent most nights at Will's house, returning to her apartment in the morning to eat breakfast and shower. She'd grown to love the special mode of transportation and sometimes resented having to drive, especially in rush hour traffic.

"You'll get used to it," Will joked. "It's still new to you."

She still had lunch with Aidan, sometimes alone, sometimes with Will or the other men joining them. Now that her life had settled into some semblance of normal with Will, part of her longed to bring some happiness to Aidan's soul. She wished she knew someone she could fix him up with. He gently brushed off her suggestions that he needed to get out more and meet people.

"You've got to understand," Aidan said one day at lunch after shooting down yet another of Kal's ideas, "I grew up in a totally different time. Yeah, I've seen a lot, and yes, I've had some... relationships. Back then I had to literally hide not just what I was, but what I felt. I got used to wrapping myself up in my work. One day I'll meet someone and it'll be fine. Until then, I'm okay with it."

"You're alone. I feel bad for you."

"Quit the pity shit, sweet cheeks. I'm not alone. I've got you and Will and the guys. We're busy. Life is good. I'm not doing what he did and hiding from it. When I meet someone, I'll meet them. It'll happen when it happens." He reached across the table and patted her hands, gave them a quick squeeze. "I appreciate it, honey. I really do. Don't worry about me. Enjoy what you've got."

When they walked back to the office Kal found an envelope propped against her laptop. Will wasn't there but he'd known about her lunch with Aidan.

She opened it and found a small card in Will's neat script.

Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight? Someplace special? If so, just text yes to me. Wear something nice and I'll pick you up at your apartment at seven.

A thrill ran through her. He hadn't mentioned anything about this. What did he have up his sleeve?

Whatever it was, she loved it. She felt anxious, like it was hard to breathe, and her hands trembled as she texted him.

Yes.

A moment later, his reply.

;)

Was this how people felt when dating?

She hoped it was. She really liked it.

* * * *

Kal nervously paced. When Will rang her doorbell she practically levitated to open it.

Her heart nearly stopped. He looked good. *Real* good. He'd dressed up for her, a suit and tie and his handsome smile melted her heart.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

She nodded, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Forget dinner, she wanted to drag him inside and-

"Kal," he whispered, his hands on her hips. "Dinner. Our date."

She sighed. "I did want normal, didn't I?"

His lips curled in the half smile that made her want to spend her life on her knees in front of him. "Yes, you did."

"Okay," she squeaked.

She found her purse and keys and he held the car door for her. He drove across the Howard Frankland Bridge to Clearwater Beach and they ate at a place on the Gulf. She couldn't remember what they talked about at dinner. He wouldn't reply to her mental comments, pretended not to hear her, kept it all normal.

She didn't know if she loved him for it or if it aggravated her. He was doing what she asked, though, she gave him credit for that.

After dinner she kicked off her heels and they walked the beach toward the fishing pier. With her arm looped through his, she looked up at the nearly full moon and felt a peace she'd never known.

Like she finally felt complete.

"What?" he asked.

She stopped and stared out over the water, the waves glowing a soft white under the moon. "I don't want to ever forget this night. It's perfect. We won't get many of these kinds of nights, will we? Once Ryan starts using you again?"

He gathered her into his arms. "We'll get enough. Some better than others, some not so much." His eyes lingered over her face. "You're beautiful, Kal. Truly beautiful. I do love you."

"Not just because you're stuck with me?"

"No. Not because I'm stuck with you. Because you're a beautiful, loving, kind woman who's opened your heart and soul to me." He released her and dropped to one knee, slipped something on her left hand. "Marry me, Kalyani. Please?"

It took a moment for his words to register in her brain. "What?"

"Will you please marry me? Be my wife?"

She knew he didn't have to do this, they'd be together anyway. She dang sure wasn't going anywhere but he was trying to be normal for her.

She nodded, blinking away happy tears. "Yes!"

He stood and pulled her to him again, the force of his kiss making her want to go home and...

Sand beneath their feet was replaced by a carpeted floor, the moonlit beach by flickering candlelight. She looked around. They were in a hotel room, an expensive suite.

"You know how to make an impression, mister."

"I want you to be happy. I want to make you happy. I want to try to make it up to you for being dragged into all of this."

She rested her head against his chest, closed her eyes and breathed in his scent. "You *do* make me happy, Will Hellenboek. I'll settle for being able to make you smile."

He gently touched her chin and tipped her face to his. His eyes searched hers and a smile transformed his face into a sweet, sultry sight.

She laid her palm against his cheek. "You have a very handsome smile," she whispered, kissing him.

"You're the first person to make me smile in over twenty-five years."

"Then I guess Ryan was right about one thing."

"What?"

"Apparently I've got a lot of power of my own."

Will chuckled and scooped her into his arms, carried her to the bed where he gently laid her on it. "You own me," he said. "Whatever you want, I'll give it to you."

"I just want you."

His strong hands scorched her flesh as they gently removed her clothes. His lips sent liquid, molten need coursing through her from her heart to her sex, melding her to him. She kissed every inch of his flesh as she helped him undress, and when he was as naked as she was she knelt over him.

She trailed kisses from the base of his throat down his chest, her tongue lightly tracing every scar in her path. His stiff erection brushed against her and she fought the urge to rush. There'd been too much rushing in their relationship. She wanted to take her time and spend all night loving him.

She sighed when she reached his abdomen, where a fine line of hair grew from his navel to the short curly nest between his legs. Even the very scent of him stoked fires deep within her. Who cared why, whether it was love or lust or manufactured need, he was hers and she wanted him.

Forever.

He moaned, his fingers gently fisting in her hair, nudging her south.

She chuckled and teased him with her tongue. "Are you in a hurry, sir?"

"Yes," he gasped.

Kal grinned. "You'll have to be patient." She gently blew hot breath along his sac and he moaned again, his fingers firm against her scalp.

"Please."

"Please, what? You'll have to tell me what you want, sir."

He laughed, lifting his head to look at her. His grey eyes looked dark and smoky, almost black. "Please make me come, sweetheart. Please wrap those sweet lips of yours around my cock and suck it into that delicious, hot mouth of yours. I want to feel your tongue stroking me."

She gasped, an explosion ripping through her. "Okay," she squeaked, diving to the task. Obviously she would have to get a lot better at this game. His husky, passionate voice never failed to unhinge her reserve to vamp it up for him.

He groaned as she did, the deep, rumbling sound vibrating through her body. She could do this all night, tasting him, keeping him hard and pulsating against her tongue, his smooth flesh slipping between her lips.

Always a quick study, she'd learned to read his body, how to tell when he was close, how to back off and slow down to keep him simmering and not bring him over. After many long, steamy minutes of this, he begged.

"Please, babe."

"Please what?"

"I want you to swallow me."

"That's more like it." She firmly stroked him with her hand, her lips still around the head. When she felt his body tense she prepared, his cries mixing with her happy giggles as he climaxed. After suckling every drop from him she gently kissed his softening member and rested her cheek against his hip. He stroked her hair.

"That's so good," he whispered. "You're so good."

"Just imagine how good I'll be in a few thousand years with a lot more practice."

He laughed and grabbed her wrists, pulled her up to him. He kissed her and rolled over on top of her. "My turn," he growled, a playful smile on his face. He licked and kissed his way down her body, spending long minutes nibbling on her breasts, his hands hot against her flesh as he teased and taunted her into nearly mindless need.

Will lowered his head to her mound and slowly traced every curve and line with his tongue. Only after he had her gasping and bucking her hips did he slip two fingers inside her and gently stroked, his tongue flicking her swollen nub in time with his movements.

Eternity. Making her feel this good for eternity. This was his heaven.

Perhaps he *would* thank Ryan one of these days.

He kept her on the edge for several long minutes, pausing only to lift his head and look at her passion-filled face, her eyes closed, hands tightly gripping the sheets. "You're going to scream for me, aren't you sweetheart?"

She nodded. He smiled, resuming his slow, languid strokes with his tongue before bringing her close again. "Scream for me," he murmured, then carried her over into her release.

Her whole body tensed as a long, low cry erupted from her. "Yesss, Will! Don't stop!"

He sucked her clit and she cried out, her muscles clamping down on his fingers, every inch of her flesh vibrating under his touch. When he eased up she gasped, trembling. He'd already hardened again. He kissed his way to her lips and slipped inside her, rolling to his side, holding her against him as he slowly rocked his hips against hers.

"I love you, Kal," he whispered against her damp forehead, kissing her, holding her tightly as he closed his eyes, his release close.

She wrapped one leg around him, pressed against him, still barely able to move. "Love me, Will. Do it."

It felt like his heart would explode for her, what he felt, what she did to him. He came, holding her, falling asleep with her tucked safely in his arms.

Chapter 24

Only Ryan, Aidan and the boys knew of their engagement. Kal and Will didn't want word getting out too soon and causing her problems with her parents. She loved Will for going the extra mile and proposing the way he had.

Wishing and hoping wasn't going to get her parents told, however. Kal refused to let anyone do that dirty work for her. When Ryan and the network set up some location shoots in Ohio, she made arrangements for her and Will to have dinner at her parents' house.

Hopefully her father's rage had cooled down to nothing more than seething hatred.

Even if she had a choice in the matter she would never give up Will Hellenboek. Their time together only proved to her that she was the luckiest woman in the world. In their spare time he doted on her, focused on her, made her feel secure and loved in a way she'd never known.

She suspected no other man could have ever made her feel that way.

There was too much equipment to risk shipping it to Ohio from Florida. Will was more than happy to drive, caravanning with the crew and investigators—including a few women—in several vans. They stopped for the night in Tennessee. The next morning, Aidan politely knocked on Will and Kal's door at eight when the two hadn't come to the hotel restaurant for breakfast and a pre-production meeting.

"What?" Will yelled from inside.

"Are you two joining us, or should we just go ahead?"

He heard Kal's amused giggle, then a playful squeal.

"We'll be down shortly," Will called through the door.

Aidan smiled. All was well. "Alrighty, then, dude."

Will and Kal appeared thirty minutes later, freshly showered and both smiling, holding hands.

Aidan sipped his second cup of coffee and tried to hide his amused smirk. "You two need to start getting up earlier."

Kal caught the barb and laughed. Will groaned and slid into the booth beside her. Purs and Gery shook their heads.

"He's gonna be insufferable, you realize that, Ger?" Purson said.

"Yeah. I'd forgotten how disgusting he was like this."

"Like what?" Kal asked.

Aidan waited until she started sipping her coffee. He made moonie eyes across the table at her. "Will's in luuuurrvv with Kaaaalllll."

Kal laughed and choked, spraying her coffee across the table.

* * * *

Her mother fixed a huge spread and welcomed Kal and Will for dinner two nights later. At the last minute Kal almost begged Aidan to come, and even considered asking Ryan to attend but finally decided against it. She'd have to grow a spine at some point and face her father head-on again, like it or not. She couldn't ask the men to fight these particular battles for her.

Her father's chilly, sullen manner went ignored by the other three. At the end of dinner, Kal looked at Will, who nodded.

Focused on her mother, AKA the coalition forces, Kal took a deep, steadying breath.

"Mom, Dad, we have an announcement to make." She held up her hand and her father's eyes widened. Kal had shelved the purity ring when her parents left Tampa after their visit. Since the proposal she'd worn the beautiful engagement ring Will gave her. Before they arrived at her parents' home, Will fetched the purity ring for Kal, stalling her father's outrage for a few hours. Will switched the rings out for her and replaced the purity ring with the engagement ring while she held her hand under the table.

"Will's asked me to marry him."

Her mother squealed. "Congratulations! I didn't even notice the ring, let me see!" Her mother grabbed her hand and practically dragged Kal across the table to her while she examined it.

The Reverend glared at Will. "Don't you think it would have been respectful to come to us first and ask our permission to marry her?"

"Daddy!" Well, Kal had expected something like this out of him. Frankly, she'd expected him to start in sooner.

Will spoke up. "Reverend Martin, I love Kal very much. While I'm sorry I didn't ask your opinion first, from our last encounter I assumed your answer would be a resounding no. I'm marrying your daughter, not you. I would like to have your blessing, but the only opinion I truly give weight to is Kal's."

"You're right that my answer is no. Kalyani, I forbid this marriage!"

"Shut up, Kenneth," her mother said absently while still examining Kal's ring. "You're going to hush and congratulate them." She finally released Kal's hand and smiled at Will. "Congratulations, Will. I'm sure the two of you will be very happy. Welcome to the family." She leaned over, hugged him and kissed him on the cheek.

Her father's face reddened. He'd been stunned into silence by his wife's insolence. "How dare you talk back to me in my own home!" he eventually sputtered.

She looked at him. "No, it's about time I talked back to you. I've put up with you for a lot of years, Kenneth Martin. I've let you get away with a lot of things I don't agree with. Things are going to change around here for the better. You can like it or lump it. I told you that when we got back from Tampa. Our daughter is successful and has a good man who wants to marry her. I would think you'd be happy." Laura looked at Kal. "Do you have a date set yet?"

"No. I wanted to talk to you about that."

"There is no talking about dates, because I won't allow this marriage to happen!"

"Shut up, Daddy," Kal said. Kal felt a second of guilt for that, but when her father threw his napkin to the table and stormed up the stairs the other three breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now," Laura said, "how about some angel food cake and strawberries for dessert?"

* * * *

Kal barely contained herself until they returned to the hotel. As soon as Will had the door closed and locked behind them she threw herself at him, moaning as he cupped her ass and pulled her hips tightly against his hard erection.

"I thought about pulling you into their bathroom after dinner and then bringing us back here for a quickie," he admitted.

The thought made her cringe—and gasp with need. How could something so naughty be so dang sexy at the same time?

"I might have let you."

"Really?" He grinned. "Hmm. Maybe I'll do it next time."

* * * *

The next night the investigators and crew converged on the first location, an old warehouse building being converted to loft apartments and reported to have activity. Kal had learned early on that the boys could tell if there was real activity or not just by being there, but they put on a good show for the audience and clueless investigators. This place did have some residual energy, albeit not intelligent or even reliable in how often it appeared. Whether or not they captured any evidence remained to be seen.

Kal sometimes could feel it too, she discovered. One of the many changes she sensed taking her over since she'd become Will's soul mate.

Aidan looked up when two men walked in, one younger and another old enough to be the man's father. The older man looked pissed and radiated an angry, outraged air.

Aidan put out a silent call. "Purs, Gery, I need you. Now." "Can I help you, gentlemen?"

The older man looked formidable. It wasn't until he opened his mouth that Aidan recognized him from dealing with him on the phone. The younger guy...he wasn't bad looking. A little shorter than himself, nice build, dark blond hair and cute blue eyes. When he turned to look around, Aidan got a prime peek at how well the guy filled out his slacks, front and back.

Veerrry nice.

"I'm looking for Kalyani Martin. My name is Reverend Martin. Her father." He might as well have said her jailer or parole officer for the chill in his voice.

Aidan flashed the younger guy a smile. He smiled back. *Oh, yeeeaaahh.* "Sure, I'll go get her." *Yuuummm.* "Wait here." Gery and Purs walked in. "*Keep them here.*"

Aidan found Will and Kal at the base going over feeds and camera placements. "Want good news, or bad news?"

Will closed his eyes. "Bad news."

"Kal's dad just showed up on set."

"Aw, crap," she said, not even reddening. She was getting better at swearing without feeling guilty or embarrassed.

Will, however, looked relieved. If that was their worst catastrophe, he could deal with it. "What's the good news?"

"He's got a cutie with him."

Kal led the way and stopped, in shock, when she saw Jeff Conrad standing behind her father. Will and Aidan nearly plowed into her. Will gently nudged her out of the way so they could pass.

"Daddy, what are you doing here?"

"Jeff wanted to say hi to you, didn't you, Jeff?" Reverend Martin grabbed Jeff's arm and pulled him in front of him.

If this was on TV, Kal would laugh. Unfortunately it was Kal's reality and she didn't know if she should laugh or cry. Her father obviously wasn't giving in.

Jeff's eyes had settled on Aidan. Will did his best to hide his amusement.

"She said he's an asshole, Aidan," Will silently told him. "Better watch it."

"I'll watch that tight ass of his as much as I want, trust me."

Jeff looked like he'd rather talk to Aidan than Kal. His eyes never left Aidan's honey hazel gaze. "Hi, Kal. Long time, no see."

Kal, sensing something going on, finally tuned into Will's thoughts. She bit off her amused laugh. "Hi, Jeff. This is my fiancé, Will Hellenboek."

Jeff shook hands with Will, but he still stared at Aidan with a cross between adoration and lust.

Reverend Martin either didn't realize his plans had gone horribly awry or was doing his best to ignore the fact.

"Nice to meet you, Will," Jeff said. "Congratulations. Love the show. Watch it all the time."

Will took the initiative. "Well then, you no doubt recognize my cousin and co-host, Aidan Faust."

Jeff's face lit up as he shook with Aidan, perhaps holding on a little longer than necessary, as if reluctant to release Aidan's hand. "Nice to meet you. You're amazing! I think your shirts are so neat!"

Aidan seemed equally enamored of Jeff. "Thank you. At least someone appreciates my fashion sense. Want to see the equipment? I'd be happy to give you a private tour."

"That'd be great!" The two quickly left—Kal would use the word "scampered"—and that's when Reverend Martin realized what happens to the best laid plans of mice and men when those men and mice *really* want to get laid.

He glared at Kal. "I hope you're happy," he hissed. "His eternal soul is damned because of you!"

Will stepped forward, crossed his arms and glared. This time, Kal was more than happy to let Will fight the battle for her. "Do you have a problem with my cousin, Reverend? Because I can assure you, he's a fine man."

Purs and Gery stood to the side, watching but not getting involved in this family squabble unless asked to intercede.

The Reverend turned his angry gaze to Will and jabbed his finger at him. "This is all your fault. She was a good girl until she met you. You've ruined her, and now that poor boy will end up in Hell because of you and your cousin!"

Kal felt the air shift in the next room. Then she picked up a hint of a familiar scent. Ryan walked in, carrying a clipboard as if he belonged on set. "Kal, I've checked all the upstairs camera positions like you asked. Ah, hello, and who are you?"

He knew dang well who the Reverend was. Kal stifled another amused laugh. Will might dislike Ryan, and she loved Will with all her heart, but she couldn't bring herself to hold a grudge against Ryan. Especially not now. She honestly considered him her friend. If he had acted the same way with Abby that he did with her, she could understand why they'd gotten along so well even if no one else did.

Reverend Martin directed his ire at Ryan. "I am Kalyani's father. I'm here to take her home where she belongs." He rubbed his forehead as if he had a headache. Kal noticed him doing it at dinner the night before and meant to ask her mom about it.

Ryan consulted his clipboard. "Well, I think you must have received crossed signals, sir, because we're not done shooting until at least four tomorrow morning. I would suggest not coming back until six because we have a post-production meeting after we wrap the shoot."

Kal nearly blew her composure when she exchanged a brief glance with Will. Despite everything, he was desperately trying not to laugh at Ryan's handling of the situation.

Reverend Martin got in Ryan's face. Kal fought the urge to suggest he not do that. "I'm taking her home, right now. She's going to marry Jeff and not this...person who's led her astray. I forbid it!"

Will's arm encircled her waist as Ryan reached out and gently gripped her father's shoulder. A brief frown creased Ryan's face, then his normal pleasant expression returned. "I'm sure you don't mean that," Ryan calmly said in a soft voice.

Had Will not held Kal, she would have cried out a warning to her father.

Will silently spoke to her. "He won't hurt him, Kal. Trust me. You know he won't."

She nodded, worried, watching.

Her father's eyes clouded, suddenly confused. "Don't mean what?"

"I think you meant to ask if Jeff could stay and watch the shoot, didn't you?"

Her father nodded, still confused. "Yes. Can Jeff stay and watch the shoot?"

Ryan, still holding his shoulder, nodded. "Of course Jeff can stay and watch the shoot. We'd be honored to have him here. We'll make sure we get him home safely in the morning. You know, Reverend Martin, you're a very lucky man to have Will Hellenboek as your son-in-law."

"I am?"

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"Why, of course you are. He obviously cherishes Kal very much." Ryan's voice dropped even lower. "He would die to protect her. He will never betray her. He loves her with all his soul, and she loves him. You cannot ask for more than that as a father, can you?"

Fighting her tears, Kal tightly gripped Will's arm.

Her father slowly shook his head. "No. I can't ask for more than that."

Ryan wasn't quite through. "I think you should go home and get a good night's sleep, sir. You'll feel great in the morning, very happy for all that's happened, won't you? Like a huge weight has lifted from your soul."

He nodded. "Very happy."

"Excellent." Ryan released him. Her father swayed a little on his feet and looked bewildered. Seizing the advantage, Kal stepped forward and hugged her father, kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you for giving us your blessing, Daddy. It means the world to us."

"What? Oh, yes. Blessings. He loves you."

She nodded, trying not to cry. "Yes, he does love me. And I love him."

Her father finally looked at Will. "You'll protect and love her?" He still didn't sound normal. Ryan watched from a few feet away, not interfering.

Will nodded. "With my life, Reverend Martin. You have my word." He looked into Kal's eyes. "She's my soul mate."

Reverend Martin nodded. "That's nice, very sweet thing to say. That's good. Okay. I need to go home and go to bed. I'll feel good in the morning. Good night."

"Good night, Daddy."

She waited until her father left, then flung her arms around a very surprised Ryan. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear.

He hugged her back. "Quite all right, love. And thank you for the cologne, it was correct, although I'm not sure how you knew." He hesitantly patted her on the back before stepping away. He looked at Will. "You can handle the evening from here?"

With begrudging respect, Will nodded. "Thanks, Ryan."

Ryan disappeared. Purs shook his head. "Never thought the bastard had a generous bone in his body. Maybe I should play Powerball tonight? It didn't get a little chilly around here, did it? Did Atlanta just freeze over?"

Will had his doubts as to the generosity of Ryan's actions but it didn't matter. Kal was happy, and Aidan had possibly met a new love. He wouldn't question it.

At least, not tonight.

* * * *

Alone at base without the film crew in sight, Will nuzzled Kal's neck. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I guess I always suspected Jeff wasn't like the other boys." She smiled, then it faded. "My father will be beside himself if whatever Ryan did to him wears off."

"I think this falls under the heading of 'humorous irony.""

"I'd be willing to bet my father flunked irony in school. He probably didn't even take humorous as an elective course."

"I thought you said Jeff was a smarmy jerk."

"I thought you said Ryan was a smarmy jerk."

"Point taken."

"Besides, I'm sure I didn't come off as the homecoming queen to Jeff, either. I resented my father's attempts to match-make as much as Jeff probably did. Neither of us saw the other in the best light."

* * * *

Will was alone upstairs checking a stubborn IR camera that kept shutting down when he felt the air pop.

He didn't look up from where he squatted next to the chair the camera was taped to. "Hi, Ryan."

"Keep that off for a moment, Will."

Will turned. "Why?"

"I don't want Kal to see us talking."

"So you've been frigging with it?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I needed to talk to you alone for a moment and I didn't wish to risk her sensing me converse with you."

Will sighed. "Before we do, thank you for earlier. Seriously, no ball busting or sarcasm intended. I appreciate you doing that for her. And for Aidan."

Ryan nodded. "I hope you still feel that way in a few minutes. You're not going to like this next part."

"Not when you talk like that, I'm not."

When they finished their chat, Will hung his head. "Shit."

"I'm sorry, Will. I figured you'd want to know."

He nodded. "Yeah. Dammit. It's going to tear her up."

"I wouldn't tell her if I were you. There's nothing to be done at this point. Perhaps a few years ago, maybe. Not now. It's too progressed."

"How soon?"

Ryan shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe a year, but don't look too much past that. I would suggest setting a date sooner rather than later. I'll arrange for her to spend a lot of days in Columbus at the network as an excuse, that way she can spend time with her parents. I'll provide her a car to use while up here." He extended his hand to Will to help him up from the floor. The other man

finally took it. "I'll help you get her back and forth, she can travel through my office, be home every night with you. That way she can plan her wedding with her mother and spend time with them both."

"I don't understand you, Ryan. Just when I get to the point I want to turn your teeth into a pair of maracas, you go and do something nice. Twice in one night, that's like a record for you." Will smiled, softening his sarcasm.

Ryan smiled in return. "I know. I'm complicated." He disappeared. The IR camera gave them no further trouble that night.

Apparently Kal never suspected Will held new knowledge.

* * * *

Kal softly laughed as she stared at one of the monitors. She wasn't micced, but Will was. *"What is it?"* he silently asked.

Aware of the camera crew filming, Kal barely nodded toward the bank of monitors. "*Number five*."

Will looked. He softly laughed. "That's a good sight."

On the monitor, they watched Aidan and Jeff standing alone in one of the upstairs rooms. Aidan had given Jeff an EMF meter and was explaining it to him. He'd casually slung one arm across Jeff's shoulders as he leaned in close and pointed to the meter, explaining it.

Jeff was eagerly listening to Aidan, leaning into the taller man.

"They look good together," Kal silently said to Will.

Will nodded, still watching the screen. "Real good."

Fifteen minutes later, Cabrio's voice came over the two-way. "Kal?"

She grabbed it, found him on monitor eight. "Yeah, what's up."

"Anything showing on our feed?"

He was upstairs with another investigator. "No, why?"

"I think I caught something on the FLIR."

Kal glanced at Will. Mindful of the cameras, he subtly nodded.

"Good job," she told Cabrio. "Bring it down and let's take a look at it."

Sure enough, when they replayed the footage, an apparition clearly manifested for a few seconds on the FLIR camera.

"Okay," Kal said. "Let's get another crew up there, start filming, do some EVPs and EMFs and hopefully catch something." She looked at Will, who wore a broad smile. "Unless you want to do something different?"

He winked. "Nope, that sounds good to me."

Chapter 25

Days bled into weeks. The show grew in popularity as people speculated about if, when, and where Kal and Will would marry. The date had already been set but only her mother and the guys knew. They wanted everything prepared in secret to keep craziness to a minimum.

Rumors buzzed through the blogosphere that Aidan might be batting for the other team when he was frequently spotted out with Jeff—who'd moved to Tampa and come to work for the Otherworlds show. It spiked their ratings among curious viewers who wouldn't normally watch, and sparked vigorous fan site debates amongst straight women and enamored gay men.

A good kind of crazy enveloped them, with Kal's father suddenly eerily quiet on the issue of her personal life. Her mother, happily confused by his change of heart, didn't question it. He even decided to retire.

She started sending Kal emails with links to crochet patterns for baby clothes, asking if she liked them.

No, her mother wasn't very good at subtle hints. Kal didn't have the heart to tell her it was too hot in Florida for a majority of the outfits her mother wanted to make her future grandchild that hadn't even been considered, much less conceived yet.

Despite the quieting on the Ohio front, Kal felt more at home in Tampa with Will, Aidan, and the rest of the gang. With all secrets out in the open, they now included Kal in most things. She worried about the other men when they were sent on assignments for The Firm, even though they mostly consisted of routine diplomatic excursions with negligible risk. Ryan hadn't contacted her to send Will out yet, a fact she felt immensely grateful for.

They kept Jeff in the dark for now. Aidan hinted to Kal that he might have serious feelings for her former romantic nemesis. Kal didn't pry, sensed Aidan and Jeff hadn't become intimate yet. From the look in Jeff's eyes when Aidan walked into a room, Kal knew it was simply a matter of time before the men took things further.

Editing the show wasn't one of her favorite jobs but it had to be done and she had a talented eye for it. When not on shoots she worked in the edit room combing through footage, either alone or with Aidan.

Tonight, she worked alone. Kal closed her eyes for a moment. The only one in the office, she still had three hours of footage to go through and not nearly enough sleep to do it. When Kal felt the air shift she waited for a moment before speaking to the person she knew stood in the doorway.

"Hello, Ryan."

His soft chuckle stirred something unfamiliar and not entirely unpleasant within her. "Hello, Kal. How've you been, love?"

Although they had talked on the phone many times, she hadn't seen Ryan since that night at the Ohio location shoot when he took care of her father a few weeks earlier. She'd been to Ohio a few times but Will or Aidan had taken her.

Even Will's attitude toward Ryan had changed, softened a little. While she easily called him friend, something deep inside niggled at her, an almost uncomfortable familiar feeling she didn't want to contemplate. He was a handsome man. While he'd never been inappropriate with her she sensed something from him that resonated deep in her soul.

Something she knew she should never explore, and never would.

Kal opened her eyes and swiveled her chair to look at Ryan. He stood in the edit room doorway, lounging against the frame, his arms casually crossed.

"You don't seem surprised I knew it was you," she said.

He finally broke his pose. He took the other chair and kept a reasonable, yet familiar distance. "Should I be surprised? Someone of your strength should easily detect me, of all people. Congratulations, by the way."

Ryan looked like an ordinary man. At ease in a chambray shirt and khaki slacks, he could be a young software programmer or a lawyer on casual Friday, not the son of Hades and head executive of the Underworld.

"Thank you. I've meant to ask you how you just happened to show up at the Ohio shoot when my dad arrived."

He shrugged. "I promised Will I'd keep an eye on you. Your stress levels shot through the roof. I don't spy on you, if that's your concern. I just tend to keep an ear to the ground, as it were. If something doesn't feel right to me, I check it out."

"I appreciate that." And she truly did. It comforted her to know he looked out for her. "I have a favor to ask." She managed to shock him with her request but he nodded.

"I'd be honored. Has Will agreed to this?"

"Yep."

Ryan leaned back in his chair and smiled. "The Baptist preacher's daughter married by the Devil to an archdemon in a church. I have to admit, it's got flair."

She grinned. "I thought you'd appreciate that." Her curiosity got the better of her. "Why Atlanta?"

"Why do you think they call it Hotlanta? Oh, and I've got a matter to discuss with you." He outlined his plan for her to regularly "commute" between Columbus and Tampa, both for work and to allow her more time with her parents so she could plan the wedding.

Despite her conflicted feelings for Ryan, Kal wanted to sit there and talk with him for hours. Then she remembered the whiff of a thought she'd picked up from Will. "Tell me why you and Will and Aidan aren't friends anymore." If she'd startled Ryan before, then this took him by total surprise, something she didn't think possible. He tried to hide it but the slight catch in his breath betrayed him despite his playful, distracting smile.

"Long, dead history, love." He met her eyes. "Best left to the ages, isn't it? I think it should be enough we're back on speaking terms, right?"

"But you and Abby used to talk all the time."

His sad look stirred something deep inside her. The son of a gun had a heart. Too bad she was the only one who got to see it.

"Quite frequently. She acted as our liaison. She was an exceptional woman, a perfect complement for Will. Any man would be lucky to have someone such as her for their soul mate." He studied the carpet pattern.

"Why the cologne?"

He wistfully smiled. "She gave it to me the Christmas before she died. She liked it. So did I."

"How long have you been bringing flowers to her grave?" Kal whispered. "And why?"

She realized she had caught Ryan in a truly vulnerable place. She leaned over and grabbed his arm before he could think about disappearing. "Tell me—the truth."

He wouldn't meet her eyes. "Again, some things are best left lost to time." His voice sounded strained.

A horrifying question she didn't really want answered escaped her lips. "Were you sleeping with her?"

His eyes snapped to hers. His tone hardened. "For one, Abby was completely and utterly devoted to Will. They had a pure bond, unbroken and untainted until her death. She died for him, protected him, refused to divulge where he was and wouldn't call him to her because she rightfully feared for him. He doesn't know that, by the way, and he shouldn't. For another, I would never, regardless of what you or anyone else may think of me, *ever* do something like that. I have loved and lost and choose to keep that part of my soul private from others. It is one of the few things I can truly call mine in this existence."

He twisted his arm free from her grasp but didn't disappear. She realized when he rubbed his wrist how hard she'd gripped him. "I will give you a lot of latitude in this organization because of who you are and who you are bonded to," he said. "I am very fond of you, but don't you *ever* dare disparage her memory again by suggesting she was anything other than a wonderful woman."

From the way his eyes burned she knew she'd hit a nerve. For the first time she feared Ryan, saw a glimpse of what he was capable of.

Worse, she'd hurt his feelings. "I'm sorry. I needed to ask. I needed to know."

He nodded. His expression and voice softened. "That's a rather sensitive subject for me, love. One I'd appreciate not revisiting."

"Wait..." Kal studied him as another thought slammed home. "How do you know Abby didn't call Will to her before she died? Will never told me that."

"You don't need to—"

Kal's horrified whisper thundered in her ears, or maybe that was her heart galloping with the truth of the sudden revelation. "Abby called *you* to help her. That's what you meant, that you failed to protect her, that you didn't get to her in time. She called you that day because she was afraid Will would be killed and she thought you could help her."

She saw the thought before Ryan could clamp down on it. Her breath caught in her throat. "They killed her when you appeared instead of Will. You couldn't save her because she wasn't your soul mate."

"Not in that life." He squeezed his eyes shut as if wishing he could recall the words to his lips.

"You loved her." Kal traded on her status and prayed she was right, and that Ryan just wanted to protect his private pain. She hated to pry but she had to know, had to have answers to her questions. "Abby was Will's soul mate. How could you fall in love with her?"

He took a deep, shuddering breath, as if to regain control. "Your parents' views are but a fraction of reality, as you are learning. We live one existence through many lives. Some of us live long lives, some of us live many short ones. All of us, not just archdemons. There is no Heaven, no Hell, as you know it. There is energy and life and death and renewal. Quantum physics, laws of thermodynamics. Conservation of energy, you cannot create or destroy it—"

"It only changes forms," she finished.

He nodded.

Kal tried to impart meaning to his words. Ryan would never come out and say it.

She gasped as the puzzle pieces snapped into place. "In her former life, Abby was…" Kal found she couldn't say it. It explained so much, including why Ryan distanced himself from Will and Aidan so long ago. Stunned, she whispered, "That's why you could never take another soul mate…all these years?"

Ryan met her gaze. Kal knew she didn't imagine the tears in his eyes, the ancient pain etched in his face.

His voice sounded choked when he finally spoke. "Again, this is one of the things that should remain lost to time. It is my private pain. I do not wish to share it. You can—and should—keep your suppositions to yourself, love." He disappeared. Kal made no attempt to summon him back to her.

He imparted her with two brief snippets of silent knowledge as he left. One, Abby never knew, never suspected who she'd been in her previous life, and neither did Will or Aidan.

And two, for reasons he didn't specify, Ryan wanted it kept that way. Kal closed her eyes and cried.

About Lesli Richardson

http://www.lyricalpress.com/lesli_richardson

Lesli Richardson is a snarky, stubborn, Taurus writer. She's a native Floridian and life-long resident of the state (making her an endangered species). As of this writing, she has never seen "real" snow. "Writer" isn't what she does—it's what she is. She put pen to paper as a child and has been scribbling ever since. (Just try to stop her, go ahead, we dare you.)

Because of her love for her home state, it often plays a silent character in her writings. Preferring to listen to the little voices in her head, you will rarely find her outlining her fiction. Definitely a "pantster" kind of plotter. She will follow the characters and the stories they wish to tell rather than forcing them into whatever plotline she might wish they'd agree to. This can sometimes produce results that surprise the hell out of her.

She lives in southwest Florida with her husband, son, and a houseful of neurotic, misfit animals of various species. Rumor has it she's been known to write *ahem* racier bestsellers under the pen name Tymber Dalton. (Please don't tell her mother.)

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About The Good Will Ghost Hunting Series

Book I: Demon Seed Book II: Hell's Bells Book III: Hell Hath No Fury Book IV: Road to Hell Book V: Hell on Earth Book VI: Between Hell and Heaven

Also by Lesli Richardson

excerpt from OUT OF THE DARKNESS By Lesli Richardson * * * *

It was ten when Sami returned home.

We really need some outdoor lighting.

Normally Sami wasn't skittish but she couldn't help rushing inside and locking the door behind her. Once she had all the lights on and the curtains closed against the night, she turned on the TV and returned to Evelyn's last journal.

The journal entries grew shorter and more sporadic. Evelyn kept them hidden and wrote quickly. George spent hours locked in the basement. She was not allowed down there.

The few times she felt safe writing at any length, her focus was on the children—and George's drinking. Evelyn wasn't sure where he was getting the whiskey because she wasn't buying it and she hadn't seen any evidence of it in the house. But she smelled it on his breath and saw it in his actions. She surmised he must have it hidden in the basement. Yet the few times she snuck down there, she saw nothing but spare furniture and the bookcase.

It was a mystery to her.

By early June he was drinking heavily. Occasionally she saw him with a bottle. Whiskey of course, but she was still unsure where he hid his stash. She thought about spying on him to figure it out so she could destroy them even though she knew that would incur his wrath.

And he was changing.

He grew more vicious. She taught the children to hide when their father yelled, partially to protect them from his temper, and partially so they couldn't witness what she did to distract him.

As June slipped into July, she grew more fearful even as her entries grew shorter and more furtive.

I swear tonight he had a reddish glow in his eyes. It is as if he is transforming into something from the very bowels of Hell. I don't know how to get away from him. I might have to do something desperate while he is asleep one night.

I fear for the children...

Sami's gut knotted. Evelyn's fear leapt off the page.

Her final entry was dated July 22.

He is sick. I do not know what is wrong with him. He claims he has stomach pain, constantly rubbing his right side. Last night he accused me of poisoning him even though I've been trying to get him to see a doctor for days. I begged him to let me hitch the team and drive him into town but he refused. He growled at me—I know it sounds insane, but it was a growl. Perhaps the whiskey, perhaps his pain. I wish I had the constitution of a murderess, I would have poisoned him for all his years of terror. But I cannot claim that, despite my most fervent desires to be free.

I am scared he will do something violent. He told me things were going to change around here very soon. I do not know what he meant by that but despite the heat, his words chilled my very soul.

Blank pages followed.

Where have I heard that before? Sami thought as she yawned. She rubbed her eyes—it was nearly midnight.

Sami froze at the noise upstairs. It sounded like a footstep.

After several minutes and no other sounds, she grabbed her cell phone and a butcher knife from the kitchen and slowly climbed the stairs. Rational thought told her no one was up there.

And every horror movie she'd ever seen ran through her mind. How many times had she yelled at the screen for the heroine not to go up there?

But she'd feel stupid if she called the cops over a settling house.

Famous Writer's Wife Calls Cops for Nothing. Yeah, she could see that headline on TMZ.com.

She punched 911 into the keypad and waited. At the top of the stairs a chill caressed her, probably the air conditioner kicking on.

Nothing.

She checked the bedrooms, the closets.

Alone.

Settling. Old houses settle. They creak, they groan. They make noises.

Although she wasn't sure she believed it.

Yawning, she cleared 911 from the phone and turned, coming face to face with a woman at the top of the stairs. Petite, auburn hair, sad-eyed and careworn, dressed in old fashioned clothes. Sami barely had time to let out a scream before the woman vanished into thin air...

* * * *

The property looked different. The barn was little more than a rustic wooden shed, not the modern sheet-metal building standing in her yard. The barbed-wire perimeter fence was gone. Only the corral, larger than its current size, was fenced in, with newly-hewn posts and boards.

A matching pair of bays whinnied over the fence. Three skinny milk cows grazed in the far corner of the corral, while a couple of free-roaming pigs rooted near the fence line. Chickens pecked in the yard.

An old—make that new—buckboard was parked near the barn.

Sami turned. There was a storm coming. Lighting flashed overhead, followed almost immediately by a crack of thunder that shook the ground and made her jump.

She looked at the house. In the turret window, an auburn-haired woman furtively glanced out. She seemed to be doing something. Writing, perhaps?

She heard a noise in the barn. A man, his back to her and bent over something, muttered darkly. She couldn't hear everything but recognized the voice.

"Damn bitch...poisoning me...she's gonna pay."

He stood, grabbing his right side and moaning in pain. Sami didn't have time to move, but he didn't appear to see her as he stumbled past her toward the house.

He was the spitting image of Steve. Same height, same weight, and if it wasn't for the age and stubble on his face, he could be his twin.

The woman in the turret instantly disappeared from the window. A moment later she met him at the front door and tried to help him inside...

* * * *

Sami came to lying on the hall floor at the top of the stairs. It was a miracle she didn't tumble down them. Her cell phone lay by her side. She'd been unconscious for over fifteen minutes.

Her right hand hurt, her palm bleeding where the knife sliced her.

Counting herself doubly-lucky she hadn't landed on it and skewered herself, she picked it up with her left hand and carefully made her way down to the kitchen.

The knife clattered in the sink and she rinsed the blood off her palm. The cut had almost stopped bleeding and wasn't too deep. She poured peroxide on it, wincing in pain, and wrapped it with gauze.

What the hell happened? She figured she fainted but the dream was so vivid—

The woman!

The woman in the turret window was the same one she saw at the top of the stairs.

The folder lay on the coffee table. Sami used her left hand to open it and rifle the contents.

The article with a picture of a mother and her two children.

Evelyn Simpson. Even in black and white there was no disputing the sad, mournful eyes staring back at her.

excerpt from THE RELUCTANT DOM By Lesli Richardson, writing as Tymber Dalton * * * *

CHAPTER 1

"I made her three promises when we got married, Seth. I would never lie to her. I would always take care of her. I would protect her, never let anyone hurt her ever again."

Seth watched his friend swirl the bourbon and ice in his drink. Kaden had laid his glasses on the table and his face looked haggard and worn. There was something deeply wrong with his friend tonight. They'd known each other over forty years, since they were babies and their moms were best friends, and this was plain...

Wrong.

Kaden met his friend's concerned gaze. "I love her, Seth. She's my life. What am I going to do?"

"What are you talking about, dude? You're freaking me out."

Kaden sat back in his chair. "I went to the doctor today."

Seth felt a mental chill. "Are you gonna make me beat it out of you or what?"

Kaden took another drink. This was their weekly boys night out but Seth knew this was nothing like any other night. "I'm dying," Kaden whispered.

This had to be a horrible practical joke. Kaden was always looking for a way to get one up on Seth and sucker him in. "Dude, that's *not* funny. You don't fucking joke about something like that."

"Do I look like I'm laughing?"

Seth studied him, a cold, hard rock of emotion settling in his stomach. "What the fuck?"

"I've got cancer. Best guess is a year or so."

"Well you need to go get a second opinion! Maybe the doctor's wrong. They can be wrong, you know."

Kaden looked at his glass again. "This was my third opinion. Pancreatic cancer. Inoperable."

Numb shock engulfed Seth. This man was his brother in everything except name and blood. There were a few years they were separated by distance while Seth was in the Army, and even then they'd emailed and talked on the phone as much as possible. Other than that, they'd been close.

"They've got medicine, radiation, chemo. There's got to be something."

"No. I refuse to spend the time I've got left like that. They said it'll only buy me a few months, if I'm lucky. I'd rather not spend it puking my guts up."

"But there's got to be something—"

Kaden shook his head. "I refuse to go out like my dad did. I go out on my terms." He took another sip of his drink.

What do you say in a situation like that?

Seth shook his head. "Fuck." He took a swig of beer. "How's Leah holding up?" he quietly asked.

"I haven't told her yet."

He stared at his friend in disbelief. "What do you mean you haven't told her?"

"I wanted to make sure before I did. I saw the first two doctors last week. They all agree on the diagnosis—and the prognosis."

Poor Leah. They'd been married nearly twenty years. Seth was overseas in the Army when Kaden met and married her in the span of three months. Seth had immediately liked her when he returned home and got to meet her. She was good for Kade.

Seth was lost in a swirl of emotions. Kaden had to repeat his question. "How's the apartment hunting going?"

What the fuck? Kade had just dropped the bomb that he was dying, and now he was asking about that?

Seth numbly shook his head while still trying to process Kaden's news. "I'm still looking. It's hard since I'm in school and shit. I'm sick of living at Ben's place, need to get back out on my own." Seth's older brother had insisted on him staying with them during Seth's divorce.

"So you're finally free of the bitch? I knew the papers had to be coming soon."

"Paperwork came through last week. I'm officially divorced. Only took two years and losing my fucking ass." He looked at Kaden and refocused on the discussion at hand. "Quit changing the fucking subject!"

Kaden knowingly smiled. "I wasn't."

"You were."

Kaden sat back. "We need to have a talk."

"Fuck that. You need to get your ass home and tell Leah."

Kaden's grey eyes settled on his. "I need to talk to you first," he said, his voice dropping to a soft, steady tone. "Seriously."

Seth took a deep breath. "Okay, what?"

"I want you to move in with us."

Seth blinked. "What?"

"We've got plenty of room."

"What?" He'd wake up any minute from this nightmare. Or whacked out dream, or whatever the fuck it was. This could not be real, couldn't be happening.

Kaden leaned forward and dropped his voice even further. "I need you to hear me out, without interruption. I don't want you to give me a yes or no tonight, okay? Can you do that for me?"

Seth slowly nodded.

Kaden's eyes never left his. "I need to tell you a few things about myself. About Leah. I need you to listen so you understand where I'm coming from, because this is hard enough for me to talk about without justifying myself to my best friend, okay? Promise?"

Seth nodded again. Kaden was the "still waters run deep" poster boy. They were close, but while Seth could dump everything on the table, Kaden played everything close to the vest, he always had. Maybe that's why he'd been happily married for nearly two decades and Seth was on his third ex-wife.

Kaden clasped his hands together. "You know I love Leah. She's my fucking life. I have never cheated on her, and she's never cheated on me."

Seth nodded. He knew. He'd seen and envied their obvious love and passion for years. Any moron could see how devoted they were to each other.

Lucky bastard.

"There's a few things I've never told you. About Leah's past. About how we met. Some of that doesn't need to be told tonight, you'll learn about it soon enough. Suffice it to say she was a fucking mess when we met. I probably saved her life. She had a horrible life before we got together."

Kade took a deep breath. "Leah's not just my wife, Seth. She's my slave. I'm her Master, her Dom."

Okay, he was *definitely* being played. Seth fought and lost the battle against his grin, relief flooding in. "You're fucking with me. Goddammit, you got me again, you son of a bitch! You really fucking had me scared there for a minute, dude. That was *so* not funny." That explained everything. Kaden had managed to pull the ultimate *Punked* job on him. Relief started to displace his fear.

Kaden's eyes, his serious gaze, never changed. "I'm not fucking with you," he softly said. "I need you to hear me out. You promised."

The hard, cold rock in Seth's stomach rolled over. He swallowed hard and nodded as his momentary relief retreated.

Kaden continued. Seth saw something for the first time in his life that nearly horrified him— Tears in Kaden's eyes.

"We've been into it since a little after we met. It wasn't something we planned. It just happened. I didn't set out wanting to do it but she needed it. It helped her heal. I know that sounds weird but trust me, it did. If you'd seen her before..." He paused, took another drink. "If you'd known her when I first met her, you'd know what I was talking about.

"I promised her I would protect her and take care of her. That's what I've always done. I don't have a lot of time to put things in order because even though they found it relatively early, this form of cancer is aggressive and moves fast. I need to know that when I'm gone, there's going to be someone I trust with her life to step into my shoes and take over and keep those promises for me." That's when his eyes did tear up and he angrily brushed them away. "I need to know that

she's safe. I want to be sure she won't kill herself or go looking for what she needs and end up with some asshole who will abuse her."

Seth felt numb and wondered when the hell he'd wake up. This could *not* be real. His brain was not accepting that this was really happening. He knew his voice sounded soft and weak, emotional shock creeping in. "What are you asking me, dude?"

"I want you to come over for dinner tomorrow night. Don't call Leah, just show up at seven. I need to talk to her and break the news to her and tell her what I want to do. I don't want your answer tonight. I want you to seriously think about this. I want you to move in with us. You can go to school and finish your degree and I'll teach you what you need to know to take care of her." Kaden reached out and grabbed Seth's arm, his grip almost painfully firm. "Please. I need you to seriously think about this for me."

This was too much for Seth to process at one time. "You're dropping the bomb on me that you're dying, and now you're asking me to, what, fucking beat your wife for you after you die? Are you *shitting* me?" Not only couldn't he grasp that Kaden was dying, he couldn't process that his respectable, successful, soft-spoken and kind-hearted friend of forty years had a secret life Seth knew nothing about.

Kaden vigorously shook his head. "It's not like that at all. There's a lot of stuff I can't tell you unless you promise to help us because it's personal between me and Leah. And there's some stuff you won't understand unless you see it in person. It's not like the bullshit you see on the Internet. I mean, yeah, some people are into that, but it's not like that for us. We're twenty-four/ seven. We live this. We're happy living like this."

Kaden took a deep breath. "Leah's healed because of it. But she needs things, Seth. She's always going to need certain things. I'm worried that when I'm gone, if she goes looking to others who don't know her, who don't care about her, it'll hurt her and put her back in that bad place emotionally where she could have died. If she doesn't kill herself to start with."

Kaden released Seth's arm. "I'm also a teacher. Those weekend seminars we go to? I do a lot of instructional stuff. I teach Shibari."

Alternate dimension. That was it. He'd fallen through a fucking wormhole. "Shi-what?"

"Shibari. Japanese rope bondage." Kaden took another drink. "And a few whip classes. Please. Come to dinner tomorrow night. I can explain it better then. Show you. I've never asked you for anything before, man. I *need* you. *We* need you. Please."

Seth felt a wave of guilt. No, Kaden had never asked him for anything before. Ever. Kaden, however, had yanked his ass out of the fire more times than he cared to remember.

He thought about it for a long moment. "Okay. I'll come to dinner, but I can't promise you I'll tell you yes. I don't even know what you want me to do." Hell, he couldn't even promise he'd be sober after this bombshell.

Hope lit Kade's face. "That's all I'm asking for, just to hear me out."

"You don't know Leah will go for this."

"She will. Trust me, she will."

excerpt from DOMME BY DEFAULT By Lesli Richardson Writing as Tymber Dalton * * * *

I found myself standing outside the adult store, remembering a completely polar opposite set of circumstances that brought me here the last time.

Nicely Naughty was actually a better class of adult establishment than you saw in many places. It fulfilled the apparently legislative requirements of being a minimum distance from churches and schools, was painted purple and pink on the outside, used lots of neon, and located slap next door to a tattoo parlor.

I stood beside my car, staring. I didn't want to do this. But I thought of the man waiting for me at home, eagerly anticipating my return, the hope in his eyes and his bare ass in the air...

I closed my eyes, fighting tears.

I didn't want to do this.

I remembered when he held my hand, strong, comforting—and more than just a wee bit seductively—as we walked in together the last time. During a particularly hot night of pillow talk we'd jokingly decided to buy a vibrator. Not that I needed one, because he was the Man With the Golden Tongue as far as I was concerned.

We'd walked in, me with my face beet red, trying to meld into his body I pressed so close as the friendly and oddly chipper young salesgirl showed us to the wall of vibrating wonder. We'd left with a fairly plain, tame purple one that only resembled a real-life penis in that it was slightly phallic shaped.

I stared at the front windows as I recalled his voice that night. "That vibrator won't buy itself."

Now, here I was. Alone.

I didn't want to do this.

I got back into my car and sat with my forehead resting against the steering wheel. If I returned home empty-handed with a lame excuse, could I face the crushing disappointment in his eyes? He would nod and look away and be a good sport about it. Like always, he would know I was lying. He would spare me from telling the truth.

He would be a good husband for me.

I cried. I didn't want to do this.

And he did.

Little girls dream of white knights and superheroes who keep them safe and sane and secure. They dream of being protected and cherished. Unless they are into a little kink, they don't dream of whips and handcuffs and anal plugs.

Unless it's their guy wielding them.

They certainly don't usually dream of being the one holding them, using them on the man they cherish.

I sat back and wiped my face and thought about the series of IMs I'd exchanged with a friend of mine who I knew was into "the lifestyle" over several days as I tried to come to terms with this.

Get what you want to get him. It 's your call. You 're in charge.

But I didn't "want" to get him one. *He* wanted it. He'd finally found a deep inner well of courage to quietly admit this to me.

I'd done a little online research with wide-eyed terror. Ironically, I didn't feel I could buy something like this sight unseen for fear of it being too big.

Tony's ever-helpful advice?

Get him a small and a medium, tell him to go play with them. Don't forget the lube.

I swallowed hard and looked at the store and thought about my sweet husband's face, the eager anticipation in his eyes when I'd told him I was going shopping...for him.

The hope.

The love.

I didn't want to do this.

But as I stepped out of the car, I knew that's exactly why I had to.

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