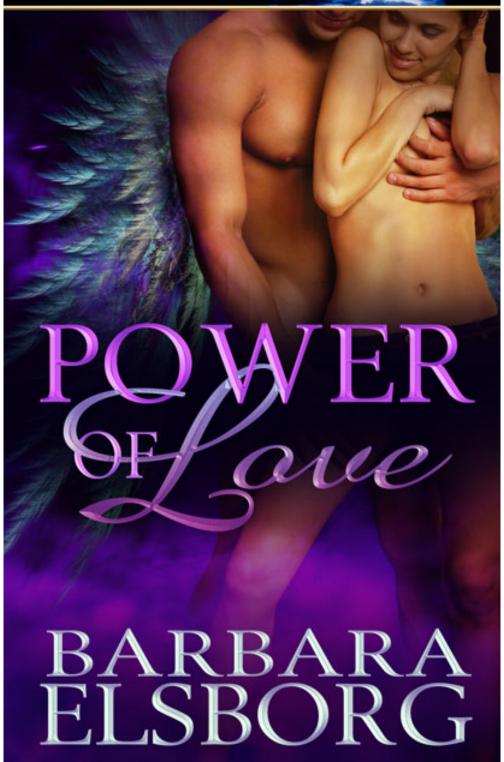
Ellora's Cave TWILIGHT



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Power of Love

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POWER OF LOVE

Barbara Elsborg

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Chapter One

Poppy lay awake but didn't open her eyes. She kept her breathing steady hoping it would fool Joe. She might not be able to see him, but she could feel him watching her. A few more peaceful moments remembering the Joe she loved and not this Joe who hated her, and she'd haul her ass out of bed.

"I know you're awake," Joe said. "Eighty-eight minutes until you're due in at work. Better get a move on."

Poppy had learned it was better to open her eyes straightaway, otherwise he went on and on. Joe stood stark naked, leaning against her chest of drawers. His six-four, strong, muscular body with its loose-limbed grace always made her mouth water. Straight, dark hair flopped over his forehead to tickle his lashes. Joe's deep blue eyes looked like black diamonds at times, especially when he was emotional, and his mouth—well, when he smiled he lit up her world.

Only now he never smiled.

"Isn't it time you got up?" he said. "You're going to be late."

Maybe if she didn't talk to him, he'd leave her alone. Poppy allowed herself the hope, but knew it wouldn't happen and also knew that deep down, she didn't want him to go. Poppy swung her legs out of bed, stood and stretched her arms above her head for a moment before padding out of the bedroom into the bathroom. While she cleaned her teeth, she turned on the shower to let it warm up and collected the dirty washing that hadn't made it into the basket.

"You bought that soap with bits in it I don't like," Joe said from the door.

Poppy spat into the basin. "Sorry."

"I need a new toothbrush. Look at the state of mine."

She picked up his purple toothbrush with its squashed bristles, held it over the waste basket and then returned it to the place next to her blue one. "I'll buy you another."

Poppy stepped under the water, turned the dial from April shower to thunderstorm, and Joe slid in behind her. Nice or nasty Joe? She ignored the scratchy oatmeal soap and squeezed a dollop of blue gel onto her hand from the bottle hanging over the rail. Rubbing her palms together to work up lather, she soaped her shoulders before sliding her hands to her breasts. Joe's hands moved over hers. Poppy sighed and closed her eyes as his fingers trailed down her ribs and her thighs.

She let him begin his magic touch at her toes, taking one at a time, soaping, rubbing, rinsing. Joe's strong hands slid up her calves and Poppy felt a frisson of anticipation between her legs. He worked a few inches at a time, one moment a penetrating massage

with his thumbs, the next a fingertip caress that had her jumping. By the time Joe reached her backside, Poppy had to lean against the tiles to keep upright. His hands cradled her hips and he pressed his mouth between her legs, sweeping his tongue over her folds before he flicked the hard nub of her clit. A single stroke and a gush of cream flooded her pussy. Poppy gasped and slid her fingers down to join his mouth. She missed this Joe, missed the way he could turn her on like a light.

Poppy arched back against the tiles. She came quickly, the orgasm wringing a keening cry from her lungs. As the ecstasy faded and the tremors subsided, Poppy wilted, her head hanging low in sadness, her knees shaking. She needed Joe to hold her and knew he wouldn't. Almost as though he couldn't bear to touch her anymore, he walked away. Poppy cried then, her grief disguised by the deluge of water. The shower was the only place she allowed tears to fall.

By the time Poppy had dressed in her blue skirt and cotton-candy-pink blouse, Joe was dressed too and sat in the kitchen waiting for breakfast. He wore her favorite khaki chinos and a white linen shirt, his long legs sticking out across the tiled floor. For once, Poppy managed not to trip on them.

"I wish you hadn't cut your hair. I liked it long," he said.

Poppy ran her fingers through her short, wet hair. "Sorry." Sometimes she felt it was the only word she ever said. Yet she could never say it often enough.

Joe leaned back in his chair. "I don't like that skirt either. It's too short."

Poppy looked down. The flared, pale blue linen reached her knees. She glanced at Joe and he winked. Her heart swelled at the unexpected show of affection. She smiled, flicked on the kettle, took two slices of bread from the packet and stuck them in the toaster.

"Marmite or marmalade?" she said, daring to hope this might be a normal breakfast.

"I'm amazed you can eat after what happened."

A butcher's cleaver landed on Poppy's heart and began to chop. Deep, even slices, over and over. She took a carton from the fridge and poured orange juice. As she lifted the glass to her mouth, the toast popped up and she jumped, splashing her hand.

Joe sighed. "You have to be the clumsiest person ever."

A tear formed in the corner of her eye and she turned to blink it away before he saw. Poppy never let Joe see her cry.

"What are you up to today?" he asked. "Fucking up any more operations people have spent months working on?"

Poppy flinched. "It was an accident."

Joe sneered. "Still clinging to that? You know damn well it was your fault. If you hadn't gone barreling in, everything would have been fine."

Poppy chewed a corner of her overdone toast. It *was* her fault. It was an accident, but it was her fault. How had she been supposed to know an undercover operation was ongoing in that particular warehouse? Nobody knew. That was the whole bloody point. It was just bad timing.

"I'm really sorry," she whispered.

"If you're that sorry, find a way to put things right," Joe said and walked out of the room.

Poppy dropped the toast back on her plate. There was no way to make things right. Her life was a wreck.

Joe waited by the front door, tapping his watch, reminding her she had to hurry.

"DLR," Joe said. "You have ten minutes. Run."

The Docklands Light Railway was always packed this time in the morning, but the quickest way to get to work. Poppy hurried down Trafalgar Road with Joe at her side. A young woman walking a panting dog ignored her as she rushed past. Joe had always turned heads. Who wouldn't want to take another look at his come-to-bed eyes and his long, muscular body? His craggy face always made her heart leap and her stomach clench with desire. As Poppy reached to tuck in his linen shirt, she felt a surge of love.

"Ever thought of killing yourself?" Joe asked.

She tripped, went over on her ankle and yelped. "No." Poppy had to wait for a moment before she carried on walking.

"Why not?" he asked.

Killing herself would be too easy. This way she suffered more, living with the knowledge that she'd lost the love of the man who meant the world to her.

"Ever considered telling the truth?" Joe asked.

Poppy's heart rate climbed like a rocket. *Please go away*. She'd told the truth. She didn't understand what he meant.

"It might make you feel better."

She didn't miss the sarcasm. Poppy sighed. She had to think of something else. Buying dinner from Marks and Spencer. Eating when she didn't want to. She pressed her Oyster card on the reader at Cutty Sark Station, and walked through to the platform.

"Well?" Joe asked.

Poppy tightened her mouth. Mental pleading for him to leave her alone had never worked. "I have told the truth," she muttered.

"No, you told them what you think is the truth, but it isn't. It all went pear shaped because you cocked up. It was bad enough you came knocking on the door when something was going down, but you could have stayed out of it. You're incapable of doing what you're told. If you'd stayed where you were, where you were supposed to

stay, where I'd told you to stay—handcuffed to that pipe, everything would have worked out fine."

"How could you know that?" she whispered.

"You were wrong, Poppy. You didn't think things through."

"You have to leave me alone," she blurted and immediately wanted the words back. The woman sitting opposite shot her a "why did I sit near a crazy person?" look over the top of her *Metro* newspaper. Poppy turned away. All around her, commuters had mobile phones clamped to their heads, or talked into midair, hands-free sets in their ears. Loud voices told invisible people they were late, going to be late, wouldn't be late. No one spoke to the person next to them. Poppy didn't want to speak to the person sitting next to her. It only made matters worse.

Joe was quiet until the train pulled in at Mudchute. The name had always made them laugh. Poppy hoped Joe would go through his—where are the naked women on the muddy slide?—speech. He didn't.

"I thought you loved me," he said in a whisper.

Poppy fought not to sob out loud. She kept her voice low. "I do love you, but I can't take this anymore."

"You? What the fuck do you matter? I'm the one who suffered, not you. You sit there feeling sorry for yourself, what about me? This is about me, not you. It's like you don't want to accept what happened."

Poppy's fingers twisted together, creasing her skirt, anxiety consuming her like a forest fire, driving her toward complete combustion. "Please, stop it," she begged.

The woman opposite stood up and moved further down the carriage.

Joe remained silent for the rest of the journey but he watched her, never took his gaze away from her. Poppy got off at Heron Quays and changed for the train to Stratford, changed again for Hackney Central. She ran the last hundred yards. Even before she'd grabbed her uniform from the locker and changed, Poppy was late.

She burst through the doors of the squad room and slammed to a halt.

"Afternoon, PC Field."

Poppy flinched when she heard the voice of her boss, Inspector Jeff Garside. He stood next to Poppy's workstation talking to her partner, Graham, who gazed at Jeff adoringly, like a dog waiting for a bone. Balding Graham, who put on weight so steadily, the squad were taking bets on when the baby would pop out, had ass-licking down to a fine art. Graham could do no wrong while Poppy seemed unable to do anything right. She gave up hope of pretending she'd been in for ages and tried to think of a realistic excuse for being late. Poppy put her hat on the desk and smoothed down her uniform—black trousers and white blouse with black epaulettes.

"Sorry I'm late, sir."

"And what was it this time, Poppy?" Jeff asked. "Another dinosaur fall off a lorry? You had to take a roundabout route to shake off someone who was following you? Find another shark's head?"

Poppy squirmed. The dinosaur had been a massive metal sculpture on its way to a museum, and had landed right in front of her bus. The person she'd thought had been following her had really spooked her, only he turned out to be from Lithuania, didn't speak English and wanted to know the way to Buckingham Palace. The shark's head—well, with the threat of terrorist attacks hanging over the city, they were supposed to check all suspicious parcels and when Poppy had seen the leaking, black plastic bag, she'd felt obliged to open it. What a shark's head had been doing outside a chemist's shop remained a mystery to this day and was still the subject of much merriment among the squad. So taking everything into consideration, Poppy thought the excuses were entirely reasonable.

"I_"

Jeff didn't wait for her to speak. "I want you to see Doctor Martell again this afternoon. Two thirty. Scotland Yard. No arguments."

Poppy's heart plummeted to her knees. "Yes, sir."

Jeff started to leave and then turned back. "And no more incidents, Poppy. I'm fed up with the paperwork."

Graham waited until their boss was out of earshot before he started. "Take you longer than usual to get the nipple clamps off this morning?" He roared with laughter.

Poppy shuddered. Graham was lucky she hadn't made an official complaint of sexual harassment. If it hadn't been for the fact that she knew it would cause her as much grief as him, Poppy would have reported him. She guessed the other female police constables felt the same way. Graham operated under the mistaken conviction that everyone thought he was funny. The fact that no one wanted to be his partner had passed over his radar. Poppy was just grateful he still wanted to work with her.

Graham handed her a stab vest and grinned. "Better put it on now. You might trip up on the way out."

Poppy parked the blue-and-yellow-checked car a little way down the road from Wally Haseem's terraced house in Hackney. Graham had spent the entire journey going through the questions they needed to ask and made Poppy repeat them back to him. He tried to pretend he was helping her while the truth was he had a terrible memory and needed to make sure there was nothing he'd forgotten.

She tried to be a good partner because Graham was vindictive enough to mess up her promotion chances. Poppy only had to get through another six months as a uniformed constable and she could apply to be a detective. Although after the disastrous warehouse incident six months ago, Poppy knew her chances of promotion were slim. The fact that Jeff had ordered her back to see the shrink said everything. He didn't think she was doing her job properly.

"Number twelve," Graham said as they walked down the road.

Poppy pulled at the collar of her black protective vest. Its shape left her neck, arms and lower stomach vulnerable, as well as her face and legs. She didn't like wearing a stab vest when they were on a routine enquiry. She felt it was making a comment about the person she was talking to, as if she expected him to attack her.

Graham grinned. "Don't even think about taking it off. You know what the boss said."

"We're only asking this guy about a burned out car."

"But he might get cross and shoot you."

Idiot Graham laughed loudly. At least someone found him funny.

Graham radioed in their position as they walked up the path toward the double-fronted terraced house. Joe stood by the door. Poppy ignored him and rang the bell. The immediate response was a woman's scream coming from somewhere inside. Graham and Poppy exchanged worried glances and she banged on the door.

"Police. Open up," she shouted.

The sounds of a scuffle were quite clear and within that, the noise of a woman crying and a man shouting.

Graham radioed in, while Poppy kept ringing the bell. The screams grew louder.

"You take the left," Graham ordered and with one hard thrust from his steel-toe-capped boot, he kicked open the door.

"Don't fuck this one up," Joe said at her shoulder.

There was no one in the room on the left, but when Poppy turned she saw Graham standing motionless at her back looking into the room opposite.

"Put the knife down, mate," Graham said, his voice calm and measured which told Poppy he was feeling anything but.

She moved to his side in a slow, nonthreatening manner. Joe strolled straight into the room. A wide-eyed young Asian man held a shiny-bladed knife at the neck of a terrified, pregnant woman.

"Keep back," he screamed.

"Wally?" Graham asked.

The man grunted. Poppy thought that was a yes.

"Is this your wife?" she asked.

"She's a fucking whore," Wally shouted.

Poppy flinched as the knife touched the woman's neck. A red bead blossomed and slid over the blade. Blood already trickled from her nose and she sobbed in noisy hiccups.

"Wally, let her go before this gets any worse," Poppy said.

"What the fuck are you two doing here? Who called you? Did she call you?" The man's attention flashed between Graham and Poppy.

Joe stood by the window, his brow furrowed. Graham remained motionless on Poppy's left, his hand resting on the CS canister at his belt.

Poppy took a step toward the woman. "No one called us. We're here about a burned-out car. Routine enquiry. Nothing to be concerned about. Let me take her to the bathroom and get her cleaned up. That blood's going to make a terrible mess of your lovely carpet."

Joe snorted and Graham gave a disgusted sigh. The carpet was a horrible turquoise swirl.

"Have you ever tried to get blood out of a carpet?" Poppy persisted with her distraction. "It's a nightmare. You need cold water otherwise the stain sets. You've already got a bad mark over there by the couch. Looks like coffee. Was it?"

As his attention shifted, Poppy was quick. A kick to Wally's knee and she had the woman shoved out of the way toward the door and Wally on his back. Unfortunately, Poppy also had Wally's knife neatly embedded in the center of her chest.

"Fuck," Graham gasped as he landed on the man. "Are you okay, Poppy?"

She struggled to breathe, but out of fright, not pain. Poppy knew the knife hadn't penetrated the vest. Wearing it had saved her life. She nodded to Graham and he turned his attention to the man underneath him.

"You wanker. You could have killed her."

Poppy felt a flicker of pleasure that Graham cared.

"Have you any idea of the paperwork I'd have to do if she'd died?"

The flicker went out.

Graham read him his rights and cuffed him. Poppy comforted Wally's wife and made her a cup of tea. The next thing she knew, the house was full of uniformed officers brandishing guns. Someone unfastened Poppy's stab vest and lifted it off her shoulders.

Joe stood glaring at her. "What did I say about not fucking things up? Always in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Poppy looked down at her white shirt. Not a mark.

* * * * *

"So how are you?" asked Dr. Martell as Poppy sank deep into the leather chair positioned at a precise forty-five degree angle next to his. Poppy wondered if he measured it. Would the world come to an end if it wasn't in the right spot?

"Poppy?"

Maybe the cleaners weren't allowed to move it. He'd probably ask them a million questions until they wanted to strangle him.

"Poppy? Talk to me."

What did he want her to say? That she was fine? She opened her mouth and closed it again. She'd never be fine. She couldn't stop screaming, yet no one ever heard.

"Poppy. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Poppy said.

"I understand there was another incident this morning. Want to tell me about it?" *No.*

"I think you should talk to me about it."

Not a good idea.

"I don't want to have to tell your boss you —"

"It wasn't my fault." Poppy wanted those words back as soon as they'd come out of her mouth. Now she'd opened the Thames Flood Barrier. *Shut up, shut up, shut up.*

"And you think the other incidents were your fault?"

Poppy chewed her lip. *Don't blab*. She had to be careful what she said. She'd been back at work for three months after the warehouse disaster and this was her fifth "little chat" with the police psychiatrist who clearly thought she was holding out on him.

"It wasn't my fault I fell in the Thames. The guy pushed me. The car accident, well, I had to swerve to avoid the cyclist and the lamppost..."

"Leapt in front of you?"

Her mouth twitched. It had felt like it. One moment there was no lamppost and then the next it was in the middle of her windshield.

The doctor raised his eyebrows. "You wrote off two cars in the space of three weeks."

"Yes," Poppy said and she heard Joe snigger. She had to force herself not to look for him.

"Inspector Garside seems to think you're deliberately putting yourself in harm's way. Are you?"

"The doctor finally got something right. Hallelujah," Joe said.

"Shut up," Poppy snapped.

"What?" The doctor stared at her.

"Not you." She could feel her heartbeat revving up like an overeager motorbike.

"Then who were you talking to, Poppy?" the doctor asked.

"Don't tell him," Joe said. "At the moment, he only *thinks* you're crazy. If you tell him about me, he'll know you are."

Poppy looked at the doctor. He aggravated her by continually using her name but he had to keep this confidential. He was there to help her and she couldn't do this on her own anymore. "I was talking to Joe."

"Idiot," Joe said.

The doctor blinked. "Where is he?"

Poppy looked over her shoulder and gave a little smile. "Standing by the filing cabinet."

"What's he doing?"

Poppy glanced at him again. Joe unzipped his trousers, turned and mooned her, his perfect butt exposed for a few seconds. She smothered a grin.

"He's...he's smiling."

"Poppy, you know Joe's not there. You can't really see him."

Joe stared at her. She *could* see him. His beautiful face, his long lean body, his silky hair, his smile. He was there. Sort of.

"He may seem real to you, but he can't be here."

Poppy shrank in on herself, wishing the chair would swallow her.

"You know why, don't you?"

She swallowed hard. Although it had happened six months ago, it felt like yesterday.

"Tell me why Joe can't be here in this room, Poppy," said the doctor.

Her shoulders slumped. "Because I killed him."

Chapter Two

Joe awoke at sloth speed, facedown and dribbling into his pillow. He slid his cheek a couple of inches onto a dry spot. His eyelids fluttered but stayed closed. Too much effort. His back itched—no, ached. *Shit, it really ached*. Joe gradually became aware something was very wrong with his back. It hurt like he'd been hit with a barstool. What the fuck had happened last night? *Had* he been hit with a barstool? He tried to roll over. Pain shot down the length of his spine, spiraling into his legs and he froze. What the hell had he been doing? Joe pressed his face deeper into the pillow. Damned if he could remember. His head didn't swim, nor did his stomach so this wasn't a hangover.

Memories trickled through the thick sludge in his brain, filtering into pockets of sense. An accident. Yeah, come to think of it, he remembered...falling. Joe lifted his head and blinked. He must have hurt his back. What else? An exploratory hand between his legs ushered a sigh of relief. Backache he could cope with, but not damage to his wedding tackle.

Joe tried to shrug off his duvet and it flopped back in place. He sneezed in the disturbed air and howled at the knifelike pain between his shoulder blades. Howled seven times as he sneezed seven times. What the hell was wrong with him? He wasn't in hospital, this was definitely his room. Joe levered himself out of bed.

His body felt heavy and sluggish and while that wasn't entirely unusual for a guy who liked sleeping, Joe prided himself on the fact that he was physically fit. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. One roll of his shoulders and a flurry of activity erupted behind him. The next moment Joe lay sprawled on the carpet and everything had gone dark. His eyes were open so why had the light dimmed? He forced his dull brain to cooperate. The duvet must have fallen over his head. He reached up and touched a feather. No wonder he'd sneezed. He was allergic to feathers which was why he'd purchased a synthetic-filled duvet. Joe felt the fluttering of alarm.

Every movement slow and careful, Joe got up again. He might not be firing on all cylinders but he knew he wasn't alone. Someone was behind him. Joe tensed. *Fuck, a burglar*. Now his brain worked too fast. Someone had broken into his apartment. Someone was in his bedroom. That someone had fucking knocked him over. That someone was dead.

Joe whipped round and watched in horrified fascination as everything sailed off his bedside table. His Ferrari alarm clock hit the wall with a high pitched whine, followed by a glass of water and his watch. Joe whipped the other way and the music system on his chest of drawers sailed halfway around the room before crash-landing on the carpet. Joe seethed with fury. The fucker was wrecking his room. Where the hell was he? Joe

spun again and three black and white prints of mountain peaks flew off one wall to smash on another.

He yelped. That hurt. Not just the ruined pictures. Him. It had hurt him. Joe glanced down at his naked body, a rapidly diminishing morning woodie and dark gray feathers.

Feathers? "What the fuck?"

Staggering to the wardrobe, he flung open the door to look in the mirror. A pale face stared back, his unruly dark hair wilder than usual. Joe looked down. Jonny and his two pals seemed okay, only now rather timid and retiring. He tried not to look at the other things he could see, but there was no way to ignore them. A fleeting hope a pinch might wake him, dissipated like snow falling in a puddle. This was no dream. Overnight, he'd grown wings. *Fucking hell*.

Joe closed his eyes. He had to be imagining them. No way could this be happening. He lifted one lid and took a quick peek. *Shit*. He stared in disbelief. Long gray wings hung behind him, their tips brushing the floor. Joe reached back and felt where they entered his body around his shoulder blades. It had to be a joke. Someone had stitched him up, super-glued the bloody things in place. The bastards. What the fuck had he been up to last night? Why couldn't he remember?

"So sorry...I'm late," a female panted at his back.

Joe spun around and the woman in front of him ducked as a gray wing whistled inches over her head.

"Careful, Joe. You could take someone's eye out."

Joe tried several times to speak and never managed it. In front of him stood a gorgeous, six-foot Amazon with smooth, chocolate-colored skin and curly black hair. She was dressed in a short, tight red dress and wore shoes with impossible heels. Aware that his mouth was opening and closing like a cartoon clam, Joe snapped his jaw shut.

"I'm Desiree."

The woman smiled, revealing a mouth full of dazzling white teeth. Joe tried to concentrate on her teeth, because he was all too aware of her dazzling huge cleavage. *Wow, what fabulous breasts.* She held out her hand and Joe was reaching to shake it before he came to his senses and dragged his fingers back to safety.

"I know you're a bit confused," Desiree said and twirled one of her curls between her fingers. "I should have been here when you woke. Sorry. I was shopping. There's a sale on in Harrods and I just had to have these shoes. Aren't they adorable?"

She pirouetted and gazed with delight at her footwear.

Adorable? Joe thought. Yes, if she was trying to break her ankles or needed something sharp as a weapon. The words "sharp" and "weapon" broke him out of his trance. He grabbed a pair of boxers from the untidy pile of clean ones on the floor, next to the untidy pile of dirty ones. He felt much braver once they were on.

"What the hell are you doing in my apartment? How do you know my name? And what the fuck are these things on my back?" That was better. Now he was in control.

Desiree giggled as though that was the funniest thing she'd ever heard. Joe glared.

"They. Are. Wings," she said, speaking to him as if he were three.

"Right. So take them off now. The joke's over."

Desiree frowned and wrinkled her lovely forehead. "No, they really are wings. They don't come off."

The woman was certifiable. Joe checked her out with his professional, police-trained eye. No weapons he could see, apart from the shoes. His male eye took over—oh yeah, she had a killer cleavage. His mouth watered. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, near his age. Desiree gave him a broad smile. Joe frowned. Mostly, she seemed normal, but Joe was a policeman. He knew normal could be a stiletto-wielding murderess in her spare time. How the hell had she gotten into his apartment?

Another twinge in his back and he automatically flexed his shoulder blades. The wings unfolded, swept out and stayed there. Joe looked from one side to the other and gasped. How the hell had he done that? Wingtip to wingtip across the room stretched twelve feet of dirty gray feathers.

When Joe realized he could feel the walls as though he touched them with his fingers, he freaked out. He tried to bring the wings in again and found himself shooting straight up. Two collisions with the ceiling later, he tumbled to the floor, accompanied by a shower of plaster dust. Now his head hurt as well as his back. Joe started to raise his hand to his hair and changed his mind. He didn't want any more surprises. Like budding horns. God, maybe a tail.

"Wow, that was impressive." Desiree's eyes opened wide. "I can see you're going to be quick to pick things up."

Joe didn't feel quick at all. He hated not being in control of a situation. He swallowed hard. "I don't understand."

"I think you need to sit down."

Joe didn't like the sound of that. They were the words he used when he had to give someone bad news. He moved carefully over to the bed, had a brief tussle with the wings as he tried to push them out of the way and then sat. Without him doing anything, the wings neatly arranged themselves by his sides. *Bastards*.

Desiree sat next to him and patted him on the knee.

Joe turned to look at her. "Am I dead?"

She screwed up her face, winced, twisted her mouth, sucked her teeth, sighed and then nodded. "Yes."

Joe's head dropped and he groaned.

"How much do you remember?" she asked.

"You mean, do I remember how I died?" Joe furrowed his brow. "I remember falling, but that's all."

"You must have a lot of questions." She nodded in encouragement.

Why me? Joe thought. He was only thirty-four years old. What had been the point of his health insurance? What had been the point of paying all that money into his blood-sucking pension fund? Why me? hovered on his lips but Joe already knew the answer. Why not him? He'd seen enough as a policeman to know that life wasn't fair. Criminals won the lottery and murderers escaped on technicalities.

"Well?" Desiree asked.

"Why don't you have wings?"

"I do. You'll learn how to disguise yours in time. Watch."

Desiree stood and her wings unfurled in graceful swirls behind her, an expanse of brilliant white feathers that looked as soft and delicate as cherry blossom. Joe's fingers reached out and Desiree pulled back.

"We don't like having our wings touched, unless it's done by a lover. Touching mine would feel as though you were stroking my breasts."

Joe sucked in his cheeks and sat on his hands.

"So why are my wings a shade of dirty gray?" He watched in fascination as Desiree absorbed her appendages back into her body, through her dress.

"You're an early angel. A seeker. You have to earn white wings and a place in heaven."

Angel? Heaven? Joe didn't believe in God, let alone life after death. How come this was happening to him? Why couldn't he have stayed dead? His mother had been very religious which had been enough to make Joe the exact opposite. She was the type of woman, who, after pushing open the pearly gates, had probably elbowed Jesus out of the way so she could sit next to God and tell Him to eat his greens. Then a thought struck him. If there was a heaven, there had to be a hell and he sure as shit didn't want to end up there. Joe couldn't cope with a trip to the dentist for a checkup, let alone the concept of everlasting torment. He imagined a line of dentists' chairs and whining drills waiting for him day after day and shuddered.

Desiree stared at him, expectation all over her face. What was he supposed to say? Was this like that film that came on without fail every bloody Christmas—*It's a Wonderful Life*? The big difference being Desiree couldn't save him. He was already dead. Her eyes opened wider, waiting for him to ask the obvious question and Joe gave in.

"What do I have to do to earn white wings?"

She beamed. "You have to figure that out for yourself."

Joe stared at her in disbelief. "What? You mean like do a good deed? I was a bloody policeman. Didn't I do enough good deeds? I served the community, put bad guys in prison and protected the innocent. What the hell else was I supposed to have done?"

Desiree smiled, but said nothing.

Joe walked over to the window and looked down onto the street. "Can people see me?"

"Only those like you, other seekers."

All at once, Joe had a thousand questions. "How long since I died? I'm not lying in a hospital having an out-of-body experience, am I? I didn't stare too long at a bright light and rush down a tunnel without checking what was at the far end? I am a bit impetuous." He slumped back on the bed, sat on a wing and yelped.

Desiree shook her head. "No, sorry. You really are dead. It happened six months ago."

"Six months?" Joe leapt to his feet again, tripped on a wing tip and went sprawling. "Ouch," he moaned from the floor, amidst an untidy heap of feathers.

"We kept you asleep for six months while your body healed and your wings grew. You were badly injured, Joe."

No shit, he thought.

"Growing wings is a painful process. Might still be hurting a bit. Once they're fully grown, we let you wake in a familiar environment." Desiree screwed up her face as though she had to concentrate. "Research has shown that 95.4 percent of people feel it makes the whole experience less traumatic. You come around in your own home and become peacefully aware of your new situation." She smiled.

Joe gaped at her. "Well, it didn't fucking work. I'm one of the 4.6 percent who are freaked out. You're looking at a severely traumatized individual. I mean, what did you do, recreate my room and the street up in the sky?"

"No, this is your two-bed apartment in Blackheath, London."

"In six months nobody bought it?" The estate agent had assured Joe it was a good deal when he'd sold it to him. *The bastard*.

"It sold the first day it went on the market. A guy called Alex has moved in with his *girlfriend*. He's a lawyer, she's a chef. Delightful *couple*. They're going to have two kids and a badly behaved dog." Another beam.

The way Desiree stressed the words *girlfriend* and *couple* brought Joe up short for a moment, but didn't send him down another memory path. Instead he thought about the kids, the dog and the words *going to have*.

"You know everything that's going to happen? You knew I was going to die?" He got up gingerly, bracing himself for another mouthful of carpet.

"No, we don't know everything. G likes to keep us on our toes, so there are always surprises. He doesn't have everyone's fate written in some big book."

"G?"

"You know." She looked up. "The big G."

"Oh God, God." Joe's shoulders slumped and one wing jerked back so he was pulled upright.

"You were a surprise. We hadn't expected you. A good surprise though." Desiree looked him up and down and winked. "Nice abs."

Joe tightened his mouth. He was not in the mood to be flirted with, even if she did have stupendous breasts. He swallowed his drool.

"I know it's hard to understand," Desiree said.

Or maybe you're a crap teacher, Joe thought.

"This apartment will be your place until you move on. You'll share it with the new owners, in fact you're sharing it with a previous owner, another seeker like yourself, but while you're in here, none of you, seeker or mortal, are aware of each other. You can see your furniture and possessions, although in reality they're no longer here. They see theirs. Fully fledged angels have a choice over where they reside. They can stay in their seeker home if they wish or go somewhere else. They're invisible even to each other unless they decide otherwise."

Joe's mind whirled. "I thought..."

"Fluffy clouds, halos and harps?"

He didn't say anything.

"I did try to learn to play the harp but it's too hard. Halos are a myth but the fluffy clouds are fun to fly in. We play dodge the planes."

Fun? Joe didn't find anything funny about this.

"Trouble is, we're overcrowded in heaven. Multiple occupancy is G's way of dealing with it. Some very old houses have over twenty stacked inhabitants—angels, seekers and mortals. None of them are aware of each other."

Joe wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. He could be using the bathroom at the same time as someone else. But maybe he didn't have to use the loo now.

"Yes, you still need to use the bathroom," Desiree said and sniggered.

"You can read my mind?"

"No, that's the question everyone asks."

Damn. Joe hated to be predicable.

"So what other benefits do I get when I pass the probationary period, apart from a change in wing color and a possible new address?"

She smiled. "Sex."

Joe gulped. "W...what?"

"Angels have great sex."

A familiar image of a cute face with green eyes, button nose and silky brown hair flashed into Joe's head. *Hot sex*.

"But you can't have sex until you're fully fledged."

The sweet face vanished. There was a long silence before Joe spoke again. "Let's see if I have this right. I have to earn my place as an angel, I have to figure out what I have

to do to earn it and until I do, I can't have sex with anyone." Joe tried to keep the tone of his voice even, despite the fact that he was seriously pissed off.

Desiree looked pleased. "Hey, you've got it. That's exactly right." She jumped up.

He cast her a sly glance. "Can I have sex with myself?"

She giggled. "You won't be able to. You won't be able to get...er..."

Shit! But Joe thought of his earlier erection and wondered if she was wrong.

"Can I fly?" That might be some compensation.

"Only by commercial airline, although I've never seen anyone manage to hit the ceiling before when they first woke. You're going to be a natural." Desiree shook her head in wonder. "The scouts will be fighting over you for the AAA. We have an Annual Aerial Acrobatic competition. Flying lessons start the day your wings turn white." She smiled. "Well, that's about it."

Joe panicked at the thought of her leaving. "How long is this going to take? How do I get dressed?" He glanced over his shoulder. "How do I hide them?"

"Your clothes will fit, don't worry. Your wings sort themselves out. How long? Well, it takes some seekers...er...quite a while to find the right thing to do."

Desiree looked shifty and Joe didn't need his copper's nose to tell him she was hiding something. "How long did it take you?"

"Twelve months." She backed away.

"Twelve months with no sex!" Joe's cock perked up in alarm.

"It'll pass before you know it. Anyway lots of people move to the next level within days."

Desiree's wings unfurled, and she turned and walked through the wall. Joe blinked, tempted to run at the wall himself and see what happened. Instead he ran to the window dragging his wings behind him. He jumped back when her face appeared the other side of the glass and she stuck out her tongue.

"I love doing that," she said with a giggle.

The street was a long way down. Her wings appeared to be vibrating at high speed. Apart from the jiggling boobs, she reminded Joe of an exotic, inflated humming bird.

"Don't worry. You'll find your way," Desiree said through the glass. "I'll be keeping an eye on you for a while to make sure you're okay."

Joe watched as she flew off, her wings glistening in the morning sun.

He carried on watching until the woman was a mere dot in the distance and then not even a dot. Joe slumped onto the bed, remembering at the last minute to move his wings. He struggled to take it all in, wondering even now if he'd gone mad and was lying paralyzed in a coma in some hospital ward. Yet one thought predominated. No sex. When did he last have—? Joe straightened up.

He'd been on duty. He was a DI in the Metropolitan Police. Detective Inspector Joe Dalziel working out of New Scotland Yard and operating undercover in a people-

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trafficking investigation. He'd been on a roof and he'd gone over the edge. All moisture left Joe's mouth. Now he remembered. His girlfriend Poppy had killed him.

Chapter Three

Poppy stared at the piece of card on her desk, ordering her to report to her boss as soon as she got in. Dr. Martell had wasted no time emailing his report. Poppy began flipping Jeff's message in her fingers. She had a sinking feeling that in a few minutes she would be suspended, and neither her boss nor the doctor knew the half of it. Bad enough to have claimed Joe was in the room, but if she'd revealed that for the last six months she'd talked to her dead lover as if he were in her shower, in her bed, in her body, she'd have been out of the force, no question.

When Poppy walked into his office, Jeff had two stab vests lying on his desk, both hers, both with knives sticking out. Joe was nowhere to be seen.

"Even before I had the doctor's email, I should have put you on IS or ISL," Jeff said. "What on earth is the DPP going to say? Do you know the chances of this happening twice?" He gestured at the vests. "I'll have to tweak the PPAF now and the bloody NCRS. TNP is supposed to be straightforward."

Poppy only heard IS—indefinite suspension. It wasn't for nothing that Jeff was known as AM, Acronym Man.

"You're not only a danger to yourself, but to your partner."

True. She'd already killed one policeman. Not that anyone reminded her. They went out of their way to avoid mentioning Joe, tiptoeing around the subject of the warehouse disaster and her three months off work. Their reticence made it even more important for Poppy to keep him alive in her head. She used to have a lot of friends, but not now. When all she seemed able to talk about was Joe, they stopped listening. Her police colleagues were the same. No one wanted to talk to her. The men looked anywhere but her face, and women fled in the opposite direction. It made no difference. Joe was always in her mind. Often by her side. In fact, he rarely left her alone.

I love that.

I hate that.

"Are you listening to me, Poppy? Or planning what you're going to have for dinner."

She tried to look attentive.

"Graham thinks you should be up for a bravery award."

Poppy's jaw dropped, hit the wooden floor and bounced.

"I, on the other hand, am more inclined to think your action was a complete FU. A knife in the chest twice, in the space of two weeks? Are you a bloody magnet for trouble?"

She squirmed.

"Last chance, Poppy. Pull yourself together."
"Yes, sir."

Pulling herself together seemed an impossibility. She was like a broken doll that could never be fixed because pieces were missing. Poppy had thought about quitting the police, but it was all she'd ever wanted to do—be a detective, solve crimes, catch the bad guys and lock them up. The idea that she might be putting others in danger alarmed her, even if it was idiot Graham. She gave herself one week to banish Joe from her head—but only while she was at work. At home she wanted him around, even angry Joe who hated her.

* * * * *

At the end of a long day, Poppy opened her fridge, looked at the contents and closed it again. She didn't want to eat. Weight had fallen off her because eating seemed pointless. She didn't want to do anything, barely wanted to live. She slumped on the couch and imagined Joe sitting on the chair opposite.

"I miss you," she whispered.

She missed the Joe who teased and tickled her, the Joe who rubbed her aching feet when she came in exhausted. He knew exactly how to touch her. He could make her come just by talking dirty to her, telling her how he wanted to fuck her, what he was going to do to her. Poppy missed pressing her mouth against his cheeky smile, stroking his beautiful backside, hearing that sexy groan he gave just before he came. She missed the bad things too, the way he left the lights on everywhere, how he always made her jump when he sneezed because he sounded like a freaked-out elephant, and the way he drove too fast and too close to the car in front, and then drove even faster and closer if she complained.

Poppy didn't miss the scowling Joe, who seemed to come to her more often than the happy one. She was afraid of this angry man who kept reminding her she'd cocked up, who blamed her for his death. But his face was still Joe's even though it was filled with hate

She tucked her feet beneath her and curled into a ball at the corner of the couch. She'd grow old and Joe never would. His face would stay the same forever. Poppy wanted to keep his image in her mind for as long as she could, and that was why she kept talking to him, to keep him part of her life.

Her eyes closed. The day Joe died, she'd thought she'd have done anything to have him back by her side, given anything including her life—which she was aware didn't make sense, but the man she'd conjured up wasn't the Joe she'd lost and Poppy knew if she didn't make him go soon, he would drive her insane, if she wasn't there already.

* * * * *

Joe wanted to see Poppy. In all the bewilderment of the morning, it was the one thought that occupied his mind. He took a deep breath before leaving his apartment, unsure of the world that awaited him. As he closed his door, he saw his nosey neighbor, Mrs. Hanley, stagger down the hallway, struggling with several bags of groceries.

"Need some help?" Joe reached out and his hand went right through her. He yelped and shot back. She was a ghost. Then he remembered he was invisible. And dead. Joe shot her the finger for all the times she'd complained about his noise. Then felt guilty. As he walked down the stairs, he passed a pale-faced, curvy redhead he'd never seen before. *Great tits*, Joe thought. He gave a wolf whistle and reached out for the sheer fun in pushing his fingers through a woman's breasts without her knowing. The next moment, his cheek was stinging. A reminder to be careful. If the wings were hidden, maybe he couldn't tell the living from the dead.

Joe found his motorbike still chained up under the overhang. He stretched out his hand and sighed with relief when the bike remained solid. Was it just people he couldn't touch? He looked at the bike. Unless he could do something with his wings, Joe couldn't see how he could ride it.

He tried thinking them back in. Nothing. Flexing his back. Twisting. Still nothing. He swept the wings up and immediately shot into the air. *Fuck*. Joe panicked, swerved from under the overhang at the last moment to avoid braining himself and continued to ascend. *Jesus, what if he couldn't stop*? Was he about to find out if fluffy clouds were fun? He came level with the second-floor window. It was the redhead's place. Oh, they really were nice tits. She yelled at him and yanked the curtains closed.

It was a miracle he got down in one piece. He managed a clumsy glide into a flowerbed, closing his eyes as a rose bush loomed, and landed on his butt with a thump. As he levered himself upright and relief that he'd broken nothing rushed through his body, his wings began to shrink and Joe exhaled.

Trying not to think about the consequences of the damn things sprouting while he negotiated London traffic, Joe wheeled out his bike. His mouth dropped open when a car appeared in the spot he'd vacated. He pushed the bike back and the car disappeared. He pulled the bike out again and laughed as the dark blue sports car rematerialized. He hadn't got a handle yet on how this worked. Maybe the car belonged to the new owners of his place, or maybe the previous one.

Joe put on his crash helmet out of habit, rather than need. For all he knew, there were angel police on patrol, ready to give him a ticket for not wearing one or slap a fine on him for going into the Congestion Zone without paying. That made him wonder if he was supposed to go to work. He should have asked Desiree. There were a lot of things he should have asked her. Did he need to eat? Probably, if he still needed to use the bathroom. He felt hungry. Where did he get food? How could he get money? Could he even buy anything?

He started the engine and rode out on to the street to be greeted by the blare of a horn as a car swerved to avoid him. Joe presumed it was driven by another seeker. The traffic was horrendous. Joe realized he was looking at mortal traffic mixed with seekers'

vehicles. He couldn't tell which was which until they slowed and one car merged into another. Joe shook his head. Maybe he was very drunk and dreaming all this.

In six months, nothing much seemed to have changed. The water authority was still digging holes in every other road and the weather was crap. But as Joe negotiated his way across Blackheath Common, he realized things *had* changed. Walking on the pavement alongside people who were still alive, were others who were dead, seekers like him and he could tell the difference. A few looked ill, their sallow skin a similar shade to their wings. Even without wings, Joe recognized what were now *his kind*. He could have done with this extra sense a little while ago. His cheek still stung from the slap.

Joe accelerated and overtook a bus. One fleeting bit of good news had occurred to him. He couldn't kill himself when he was already dead.

* * * * *

Joe fingered his key to Poppy's place. He wondered if he was going to get into trouble for barging into her apartment, but he had to see her even if she couldn't see him. It didn't feel like six months had passed, but he assumed Desiree had been telling the truth. What had happened to Poppy? Joe needed to know how she was, if she missed him, if she was with someone else. That brought him up short. What would he do if he walked in and found her in bed fucking another guy? Well, he couldn't *do* anything, but he'd think plenty.

By the time he pushed open the door to her living room, Joe's heart was jumping like a jackrabbit. Poppy lay curled up on the couch. Alone. As Joe stared at her, his throat choked with a lump the size of the Millennium Wheel. His loveable, gorgeous, bright-eyed, sexy, clumsy, stubborn, stupid Poppy. If she'd done as he told her, he would still be alive. They'd be together. Joe wanted to strangle her. He wanted to fuck her. He couldn't even touch her.

"I told you I was sorry. How many times do you want me to say it? It won't change anything."

Joe froze at the sound of Poppy's voice. Who the hell was she talking to? No one else stood in the room and she couldn't see him. Her mobile phone sat blank-faced on the coffee table.

"I know it was my fault you died. But what do you want me to do? Kill myself?" Poppy gulped back a sob.

Joe moved to the other side of the couch. Her huge eyes shimmered with unshed tears as she stared at the empty leather chair by the window. His chair. The one he liked to sit on to watch football because if he stayed on the couch, the little minx kept distracting him by sticking her hand down his pants and squeezing his cock. He always moved back to the couch at half-time to let her try again. Sometimes before half-time. Sometimes he didn't return to the chair. Poppy looked desolate and Joe felt the same.

He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her happy, and he couldn't even touch her. Joe wished he could switch over to the football and hear her yell at him.

"You always want to watch football." She gave a deep sigh.

He recoiled. Football? Why had she said that? Poppy continued to stare at his empty chair. Joe walked over and sat on it.

"For fuck's sake. Have the bloody football on," she shouted and threw the remote.

Poppy never could aim. Thank God she wasn't in the firearms unit. Joe's hand shot out and caught the remote before it hit the window. Poppy didn't move for a moment, her eyes fixed on his hand. She shook her head as though she didn't want to believe what she was seeing, and then stared straight at him.

She was so beautiful and so bloody obstinate. Joe wanted to kiss the dimple in her cheek, lick away the dark shadows from under her eyes, and yell at her for being fucking stupid. But more than anything he wanted to feel her arms holding him, because he was scared shitless and it wasn't a feeling he was used to. He was supposed to be the strong one, the protector, and deep down, Joe knew, in a way, by dying he'd failed her.

Poppy stood up and looked at him. Well, at the chair.

"Forget the football, you can watch *Strictly Ballroom*, if you like," he said, with no expectation she'd hear him. In fact, Joe only said it because he knew she couldn't hear him. He hated the bloody film, but Poppy adored it.

She walked over to the cupboard and took out a DVD with familiar cover. It took a moment to sink in. Had she heard him?

"Poppy?" Joe whispered and stood up.

She turned and looked at him. God, she's looking at me. But Joe still wasn't sure.

"Popcorn or ice cream?" she said.

"Ice cream."

He took a step toward her and she went in the other direction, heading for the kitchen. A moment later, she was back with two bowls of chocolate chip cookie dough ice-cream. She put one on each arm of the couch.

Joe had no idea what was happening. She'd heard him. She'd brought two dishes of ice-cream. She was acting as though things were normal. Maybe he wasn't dead. Maybe they were both dead. Maybe he was having a horrible nightmare. Joe picked up his bowl and, as usual, sorted a spoonful of dough pieces and held it out for Poppy. She took the spoon in her mouth, sucked off the ice-cream and then started to shake.

He moved both bowls to the floor, well out of the way of Poppy's trouble-attracting feet and then froze with his hand hovering over hers. He wasn't sure if he could stand the disappointment of his fingers passing right through her. She wouldn't see or feel him. The Joe she was talking to only existed in her mind. What if he was stuck in limbo because she'd kept him alive in her heart? Was all this her fault?

Joe moved his hand. If he was going to experience the disappointment of not touching her, he wanted to not touch something more worthwhile than her hand—lovely as it was. He brushed his fingers over her lips. Poppy's eyes opened wide. Joe thought his heart was going to explode out of his chest and burst through Poppy's ribs to kiss hers. He'd felt her and she'd felt him. Forget the no sex rule, his heart wasn't the only thing about to explode.

"Joe?"

The wonder in her voice sent him straight into feral lust and rendered him speechless.

"You're not real," she whispered. "You can't be touching me. I mean, I know I've been talking to you and we've been sleeping together and you come with me to work and you've been asking me why I don't kill—"

Miss Blabbermouth stopped speaking when he touched her cheek again with the tip of his finger, then with his palm. Oh God, he could feel her silky, soft skin.

Poppy put her hand over his. "Oh fuck, I can feel you." Her voice was almost inaudible. "You're really here."

Joe pulled her into his arms, hardly able to believe what was happening. It was enough to send him hard in an instant, except he was already hard and had been from the moment he'd seen her. He kissed her cheeks, eyes, nose, chin and at last, her lips. Her beautiful lips. Lips he might never have had the chance to kiss again. That thought clicked a switch in Joe's head. They had to fuck now before he disappeared. Right now. Joe's deft fingers worked on each button of her shirt, bottom to top, and pulled it from her shoulders as she wriggled free.

"Joe," she gasped.

He was afraid to speak. She might disappear. Poppy tugged his T-shirt over his head, her fingers touched the scar left by the bullet and her breath hitched. Their lips still joined, tongues playing catch me, Joe wanted her breasts but worked on her pants. Poppy worked on his. They unpeeled each other like fruit. Speed was all important. Joe was desperate to have her naked body next to his before Desiree realized what he was doing and yanked him back to his new reality.

His cock had tented his boxers into an impressive pyramid. Well, Joe was impressed. Poppy had to hold his dick against his stomach to remove the damn underwear. Her bra flew off with one flick. He'd not lost his touch. Her nipples looked like red, midget, gem candy and just as edible. Joe bent his head to try one and at the same time pulled down her gray boy pants, the ones he hated because they covered too much of her luscious backside. He kicked them under the couch.

Finally, they were naked and Joe estimated it had taken less than ten seconds. She would come in two more and he would be lucky if he lasted another three.

"Ioe."

Every time Poppy groaned his name, Joe felt the pull at his groin. This time her voice drew a pearl of moisture up his shaft to bead on the tip of his cock. When she

lowered her head and licked it away, Joe gripped her shoulders and pulled her up. Poppy would have him off in an instant with her hot mouth and he wanted to be inside her. He might not get a chance to do this again and he wasn't wasting it by coming in her mouth, lovely as it was. He'd had a sudden vision of a heavenly horde rushing in, beating him around the head with their harps before dragging him away, maybe to throw him to the ones with horns, tails and heavy rock guitars.

Her hands stroked his back, caressed his muscles and squeezed his butt, fingers moving in a frantic need to touch every part of him. Joe knew that was how she felt, because he was overwhelmed by the same desperation. When she wasn't whispering his name, her mouth was kissing, nipping, lapping and teasing. Forget the bed. Joe swung her onto the couch, hooked one of her legs over the back, and looking straight into her eyes, he made a long lunge into her—a deep, hard thrust that took him right to her core.

Joe couldn't hold back the cry that burst from his lungs. It was one of relief, pleasure, of complete and utter joy. They were made for each other, her velvety sheath a perfect fit for his cock. Poppy's muscles contracted around him as she came instantly, as he knew she would, writhing beneath him, thrusting her hips into his, biting her bottom lip, clutching his shoulders.

Her clenching muscles almost brought him off too. The effort of not following her into nirvana sent Joe's heart rate into outer space but he knew if he gave her a moment, he'd bring her off again with him. He kept his dick still as Poppy floated back down and when her bright eyes looked at him, then he began to drive into her, pounding slams that shoved her closer and closer to the end of the couch, and him closer and closer to heaven or hell. Joe no longer cared which just so long as he got to come first.

"Poppy." Joe groaned into her hair, his balls drew up and he savored that delectable tightening sensation that swelled in his gut before he came. As her hot pussy gripped him, milked him, the head of his cock pulsed and his balls began to dance. Joe's cock jerked, shooting jets of hot cum into her body. He trembled with the joy of it as Poppy gasped out his name.

For a moment, Joe thought the spasms would never end, then the last contraction gripped and faded, and he was left with a feeling of deep contentment as he slumped over Poppy's lovely body.

It didn't last long because a number of things began to move in a disturbing loop through Joe's mind. He'd never had sex with Poppy before without a condom. He'd just bathed her pussy with his cum. Probably enough to play with a rubber duck in there. Did he need to use a condom now he was dead? He couldn't get her pregnant, surely? God, sex without a condom felt so bloody good. When could he do it again?

Joe rolled so that Poppy lay on top of him. He was still inside her, still semihard, unsure how that was possible. Maybe the thought of no more sex had sent his dick into a feeding frenzy. Joe cradled her to his chest, slid his hands onto her backside and held her tight against him. He exhaled against her throat, and then breathed in her scent,

some lemony essence mixed with that unique Poppy musk that made his heart hum with joy.

His finger slid down the crease of her bottom and he stroked where his cock entered her body. Joe felt like he could come again without even moving. If he just thought about it, thought about how great this felt, how they were a perfect fit, he'd erupt inside her. She'd come too. He knew her body better than any woman he'd fucked and there had been a few. When asked for a list of his hobbies, sex featured at the top. *Had featured*. What had Desiree said? Angels have great sex. Well, that was something to look forward to. Joe ran his fingers down Poppy's spine, tracing the ridges of her vertebrae. So why wasn't he looking forward to it?

She pushed herself up. "Oh God, you didn't use a condom."

Joe decided it was better not to worry her. "I can't get you pregnant." He pulled her closer and kissed her nose. "That felt good, Pop. You feel good. Warm and tight around me, my cock snug in your cream. I can never get enough of you. I shouldn't still be hard but all I can think about is fucking you again."

"I love you," she whispered.

Joe's hands dropped from her back. He pressed his lips together. Why did she have to ruin it?

Poppy lifted her head from Joe's chest to look at him. "Were you badly injured and didn't want me to know? Is that why you can't get me pregnant? Oh God, did you think you'd be paralyzed? Do you think I'd have cared?" Her voice rose and her cheeks tinged with red. "How could you do this? Six months, Joe! All this time I thought you were dead. I've been going crazy. I missed you so much I imagined you with me, telling me to kill myself. And all that time... Which hospital were you in? What the hell was the funeral about? Did you have to pretend you were dead because you'd been working undercover? What's in the frigging urn?" She banged her fists on his chest. "Whose ashes do I have in my bathroom?"

Joe gazed at her in bewilderment and seized on the last thing she'd said. "Why do you have my ashes in the bathroom?"

"Because the shower is the only place I let myself cry. Have I been sobbing over cat litter?" Poppy gulped a mouthful of air. "I thought you were—"

He put his finger against her lips. "Poppy, shhhh. Listen to me. I haven't been hiding anywhere. I wasn't in hospital. I didn't survive the fall. I'm dead."

She stared into his eyes. "No, you're not."

Joe sighed. It went against the grain having to argue that he was bloody dead when he wanted to shout that he was alive, but he had to make her understand.

"I died when I fell, Pop."

She gave a painful laugh that tore at his heart. "I thought I was crazy when I kept seeing you. Now we've fucked and I'm fucked because I can feel you inside me and I know I'm crazy."

"I'm dead, Poppy."

She shook her head. "No. I see you and hear you. I can feel you." Her fingers squeezed his arms, her pussy clenched around his cock. "You can't be dead. You're warm. You smell like Joe. You feel like Joe. You fuck like Joe. You didn't die."

Joe ground his teeth together. Was she trying to deny what she'd done? Did she need to be reminded? "I fell fifty feet from a roof onto concrete. I died instantly."

Poppy ran her hands across his chest, up his neck and cupped his face. "I don't believe you."

Joe eased out from under her and stood up. "Okay, I'll prove it."

He flexed his shoulders. Nothing happened. Joe twisted his elbows, did biceps curls, even tried shaking and flapping his arms, suspecting it looked like some seventies disco dance, but his wings stayed hidden. Poppy gazed up at him, confusion written all over her face. He was relieved she wasn't laughing.

"What are you doing? Some sort of upper body yoga?" she asked.

Joe slumped on the couch and put his head in his hands. Maybe he'd lost the wings because he'd broken the no-sex rule. Ah well, he'd always wanted to learn to play the guitar. He felt Poppy's hand on his back, rubbing between his shoulder blades. Her fingers dropped down his spine, then slid up to massage his neck. She laid her head against him and her lips replaced her hand. Joe relaxed into her touch.

The next moment, Poppy was under attack by a flock of feathers. Joe managed to avoid sweeping the fruit bowl off the coffee table, but Poppy's crystal snow globe was not so lucky. It hit the wall and broke, splattering glitter in a sparkling monochromatic arc.

"Told you I was dead," he said and started to sneeze.

Chapter Four

Poppy's bewildered brain ached. One moment she'd wallowed in ecstasy, now she trembled in fear. She lay on her back on the floor looking up at Joe. This couldn't be happening. Poppy scrambled to her feet. She'd had a brain fart. The last six months had been so difficult, she'd flipped big time.

"Poppy."

Joe wasn't here. He certainly wasn't here with huge wings growing out of his back. I've lost it. She closed her eyes. Unable to stand the idea she'd never see him again, her imagination had taken things a stage further. Somehow she'd made him real enough to fuck. Poppy could feel the wetness between her thighs. Not him, just her cream. Her brain had taken a gigantic leap over the edge of reality and was flailing around in midair. The best thing to do was not look at him or speak to him because he wasn't there.

Poppy opened her eyes. There was no smoky-eyed guy standing in front of her with gray wings sprouting from his back, wings so huge the light in the room had dimmed. A series of loud sneezes followed that thought.

Oh God, Joe's allergic to feathers.

She'd have a cup of tea. Things always looked better after a cup of tea. Poppy walked into the kitchen, la-la-laaing in her head.

"Say something," Joe said behind her.

Poppy switched on the kettle and used the remote to start the CD player. Katie Melua's mellifluous voice filled the air. Poppy stifled a sob and turned up the volume. Joe was not into Katie Melua. She heard a *tsk*, the music cut off and Poppy flinched. She didn't turn round.

"Poppy. I'm dead, but I'm here. Talk to me."

She put her hands on the counter, leaned against a wall cupboard, and banged her head in rhythm with the words sounding in her brain. *Not here. Not here. Not here.*

Joe pulled her away and turned her round. She closed her eyes. His fingers lifted her chin. "Poppy. Open your eyes."

When she looked at him, Poppy's heart gave such a violent lurch she wondered if she was dying.

"I'm here," he said. "I died, but I'm here."

Poppy took a gulp of air. "I'm sorry. I tried to save you. I couldn't hold on to you."

"I told you to stay where you were, not to come onto the roof. You should have done as you were told."

The bitterness in his voice chilled her. She took a shuddery breath. "I saw the guy going up the stairs behind you. He had a gun in his hand."

Poppy had gone over and over what happened that day. She and Graham had been on a routine foot patrol when a group of kids had come running up to tell them they'd kicked their ball over the security fence of a nearby warehouse.

"Help us get our ball back," asked a boy with traffic-light-red hair. "The guy says he'll let his dog out if we climb over."

"Tough luck, ball retrieval isn't in our list of duties," Graham said. He leaned towards Poppy and added in a quiet voice, "Mind you, I wouldn't mind you retrieving my balls."

"Got a magnifying glass?" she asked and received a glare in return.

The kids wandered away, kicking a stone along the ground. Before Graham could stop her, Poppy marched up to the warehouse and rang the bell.

Joe opened the door. He looked as stunned to see Poppy as she was to see him. She knew he worked undercover, but no more than that. With enough sense not to reveal she knew him, she began to stumble through the reason they were there, when a well-built man with short gray hair appeared behind Joe and asked in a polite voice that she and Graham come in. The next moment, they were surrounded and shoved into an office at gunpoint.

While guns were waved in their direction, an Asian guy confiscated their radios and fastened their wrists to a pipe with their handcuffs. There was a lot of arguing, Joe's voice loud and insistent, but when Poppy saw his face she knew they were in trouble.

The gray-haired guy held a radio at Graham's mouth and a gun at Poppy's head. "Tell them you're taking a break."

While Graham was speaking, Joe spoke to Poppy. "How old are you? Thirty-two? Thirty-five?"

"Forty," Poppy responded. "Too old for you."

She knew Joe well enough to play his game, and hoped if the dispatcher on the other end of the radio had heard, they also knew abbreviated American police codes for *person with gun, major crime alert* and Poppy's reply—*respond quickly*. Before he left the room, Joe whispered to Poppy—"Stay put."

Dislocating her thumbs was her party trick and almost before the door was closed, Poppy squeezed her hand free. Graham told her to stay put too, but she'd ignored him as well. Of course, now she wished she hadn't.

Poppy sat at the kitchen table and watched a winged Joe make her a cup of tea. He stuck the tea bag in cold milk. He still had his bad habits.

"Why did you think Buxton would shoot me?" Joe asked.

"Something was wrong. He overreacted. We'd only come about a football. He could have listened and sent us on our way but he chose not to. Maybe he saw a spark of recognition in my eyes when I looked at you." Poppy swallowed hard. "Or maybe it

was the way he watched you look at me. It was just a gut instinct but I thought he'd guessed you were a cop. I wanted to warn you."

Joe sighed. "It didn't strike you that by eyeing you up, I was staying in role?"

Poppy's shoulders slumped. She didn't think she'd been wrong, but Buxton had never been apprehended. He was thought to have fled the country after Joe had been killed.

"What happened after I left you handcuffed to the pipe?"

"I heard you going up the stairs and followed. Buxton told you to look down onto Regis Street to make sure there were no other cops around and when you leaned over the edge of the roof, he raised his gun. I couldn't just let things happen, so I shouted at him to throw down his weapon."

"Instead, he shot me."

Poppy's mouth was dry, her heart going berserk, jerking around in her chest like her brain had it on strings.

"He hadn't guessed I was a cop," Joe said. "The prick was always flashing his gun, waving it around like his cock. What the hell were you thinking, Poppy?"

"That I couldn't let him kill you, that I'd kill him."

"What with? You didn't have a weapon."

"I had CS gas and my baton."

Joe rolled his eyes. "Nowhere near close enough to use the gas canister and he'd have grabbed the baton out of your hand. You forgot everything you were trained to do. You rushed at him, knocking him into me."

"And you went over the side." Her voice came out in a whisper.

When she'd seen Joe tumble over the edge of the building, for several long moments Poppy's heart ceased beating. It had been as if she'd been caught up in a freeze-frame in a movie. Life simply stopped. Joe was dead and she thought her life was over too, that she might as well throw herself after him. She'd taken the few steps to the edge and caught sight of his white fingers. Joe clung to the concrete rim, his face tight with strain and fear. He'd told her to grab his other arm, the one with the bullet wound.

"I tried, Joe. I tried to pull you up." She gulped huge breaths of air, as she had that terrible afternoon. "Buxton had run off and there wasn't time to get Graham."

"You let me go."

Sadness overwhelmed her as she heard the condemnation in his voice.

"Yes. I let you go."

"And I died."

Poppy shuddered. "I'd have done anything for that not to have happened. I tried, Joe. I'm sorry."

He didn't say anything. After a moment, he leaned over and rested his forehead against hers before sighing and standing upright again.

"So what are you now?" Poppy sipped her tea and stared at his wings.

"Something called a seeker, a sort of probationary angel." Joe gave a little shrug, his wings fluttered and he sneezed.

Poppy jumped. "Bless you."

"Thank you."

An angel. So did that mean Joe was good and by default, she was bad? He was right and she was wrong? He'd go to heaven and she'd go to hell? Maybe she deserved it.

Joe's wings were beautiful. "Can I touch them?"

His mouth twitched and he nodded. Poppy stood and ran her hands lightly over the tightly packed outer feathers. They felt smooth, hard and warm, almost like leather. Joe's breathing had quickened and his cock grew thicker. Poppy slid her fingers underneath the wings and up his back to the point where they entered his body. She knew his body better than her own and touched sinew and muscle she'd never felt before. Joe trembled. His cock was erect now, the head growing dark as it filled with blood.

Poppy looked at his face. Joe stared straight at her, his eyes the color of deep water. She brought her hands down to caress the soft as silk inner feathers, fuzzy interlocking quills that hung like drapes of shimmering gray lace. Poppy lowered her head and put her cheek against the pillowy down, brushed her face along the plumage and Joe gave a deep groan.

He pulled her into his arms, encircling her with his wings, wrapping her in their warmth. Poppy was pinned between the gentle caress of feathers on her back and the pressure of Joe's iron-hard erection against her stomach.

"What does it feel like when I touch them?" she asked.

"I think my happy cock has given you a big enough clue, PC Field. When you touch my wings, it's like you're stroking my dick." Joe nuzzled her hair, and underneath the feathers his hands swept up the sides of her body.

"How do you make them go in and out?" Poppy asked.

He chuckled. "I have no idea. They seem to be deciding to do that on their own at the moment. Desiree said they'd sort themselves out."

"Desiree?"

"She's a sort of celestial guide, though she's been crap so far. She turned up in my apartment this morning while I was trying to work out what the hell was happening."

"Is she ugly?"

"Not as ugly as you," Joe shot back.

Poppy smiled. One of their little word games. Now she had another sort of game in mind and judging by the way his cock was insistently nudging her belly, so did Joe.

"I've missed you, Joe," she whispered. "Did you miss me?"

Poppy wanted that question back as soon as she'd uttered it.

"I've spent the last six months asleep while my body healed and I grew my wings but if I hadn't been sleeping, I know I'd have missed you. You were all I could think about when I came around this morning. Well, that and what the fuck had I grown on my back. I had to come and see you, even though I didn't think I'd be able to touch you. My hand went right through my next-door neighbor."

Poppy frowned. "What were you doing touching your next-door neighbor?" "Copping a feel."

"That would be copping a feel off seventy-five year old Mrs. Hanley with the droopy boobs?"

"She told me she was twenty-seven," Joe said in indignation.

Poppy laughed her way along the silky edge of his collarbone, tasted salt as she worked her way down his chest. She let her tongue play around his quivering bellybutton before she kneeled in front of him and looked up.

"Oh, Pop," he groaned and stroked her cheek. "You look so fucking beautiful like that."

She'd always loved doing this for Joe but there was something different this time. Poppy felt compelled to make him happy, to make him forget—for a little while at least, maybe she could forget too.

As she trailed her fingers over the sensitive skin behind his knees, her wet tongue traced the swollen vein running down the back of his cock. Poppy loved the dark, erotic taste of Joe, loved the sensation of her lips moving on hard muscle covered by silky skin. She rolled her lips over the glistening head before sliding her mouth down to engulf him. When she pulled back up, she gripped him more tightly between her lips so the skin of his cock smoothed out. Her hands slid to his thighs as she feather-kissed the tip of his erection. When she flicked her tongue back and forth across the little slit, Joe's fingers dug into her hair and his breathing grew noisy.

"Oh God, Poppy. That feels good. Keep doing that."

She licked, sucked and used the flat of her tongue to rub over the rosy crest of his dick until he was groaning. At the same time, she caressed the inside of his thighs, thrilling when muscles trembled under her fingers. Joe cantered his hips to press repeatedly into her mouth, and Poppy took as much of him as she could. She trusted Joe not to go too far, push too hard. Taking one hand from his thigh, she grasped the root of his shaft, pumping as she sucked and stared up at him.

Poppy enjoyed making Joe lose control. He was always wired tighter than a violin string and when he broke, it was just as dramatic. His groans sent pulses of desire slamming through her. Twists of pleasure curled in her pussy and radiated out along her limbs. Each time her muscles clenched, a gush of her cream and Joe's seed leaked to her thighs. Poppy reached for his balls with her other hand and teased them with the pads of her fingers then the tips of her nails, never too rough, but firm enough to make Joe gasp even louder. She increased the speed of her hand, working his cock, and as she

felt his balls twitch, Poppy paused, her mouth gripping close to the head of his shaft and her hand squeezing hard and pulling down at the base.

"Poppy! Oh fuck, fuck. You little..."

She didn't move. Joe wouldn't be able to come until she released him. His fingers threaded through her hair and tugged—hard. Poppy flinched and Joe relaxed his grip. They hung in a tormenting limbo of heightening sensation as Poppy kept her fingers clenched around the root of his cock and began to lick him, letting him in and out of her mouth, mixing his pre-cum with her saliva until he was slick, hot and ready to burst.

"Please, Poppy. I...need...oh shit." Joe gasped for air, his breathing ragged and his grip on her hair tightened again.

Poppy let him go and put her hands on his thighs as she lowered her mouth over his cock. Joe's hands slipped to the back of her head as he rocked his hips forward. Poppy looked up and he stared down at her, his face taut with concentration. His hips jerked and she swallowed hard as he shoved forward so that his cock moved even deeper into her mouth, deeper than she'd usually take him.

Joe's fingers shifted to her throat. He stroked her skin and Poppy knew he could feel himself inside her. She swallowed again and his cock rippled. Joe gave a gurgled groan and spurts of warm, creamy cum hit the back of her throat. Poppy thought for a moment she might choke, but he pulled back so she could breathe and swallow and she continued to suckle until the jetting spasms ceased.

He went soft in her mouth before Poppy released him.

"Oh God," Joe groaned.

When everything went dark, Poppy didn't know what had happened for a moment, until she realized Joe had wrapped his wings around her as she knelt at his feet. The soft inner feathers tickled her back. He stroked her hair and face with such gentleness that a lump rose in her throat.

Joe picked her up, carried her to the bed and lay beside her. One wing covered them both as he held her in his arms. She didn't think she'd ever felt so safe and protected.

"I forgive you," Joe whispered.

Poppy tried not to react, not to stiffen, but those three words fell like hammer blows, as if he'd reached into her chest, taken hold of her heart, dragged it out and stomped on it. She rolled over to hide her face in the pillow, unable to breathe. He'd just come in her mouth and now he said he forgave her. It made her feel cheap, as though she'd attempted to put everything right between them through sex. Poppy didn't want his forgiveness. What she wanted was for him to say it wasn't her fault, that it was a series of unfortunate events culminating in a terrible accident, that he loved her.

The world didn't stop turning, though for a moment she wished it had. Poppy managed a shaky inhalation. She no longer had to imagine Joe blaming her. Now she knew he did. His final moments as he fell were not ones in which he realized how much he loved her, but ones where he hated her for letting him go. Poppy knew Joe had

issues with showing affection, but hadn't realized how deep the problem went, that even in the seconds before death it hadn't been love for her in his heart. All those poor people caught up in acts of terrorism, who knew they were going to die thought of their partners, children and parents. Text messages flew from planes about to hit buildings, from buildings about to collapse, from underneath buildings that had collapsed—words of love and sadness for those left behind, not hatred for those who'd killed them. Poppy had done the unforgivable and it didn't matter that it was an accident. She'd loved him and she'd killed him. She bit the inside of her cheeks so hard, she tasted blood.

"Have you hooked up with anyone?" he whispered into her shoulder, his breath raising goose bumps.

That he could even ask showed how little he understood. Everything was ruined. Every memory stained. "No."

He brushed his lips across her nape. "I wouldn't mind, Poppy."

Her world crumbled brick by brick. He hadn't loved her. He didn't love her. Her heart lay in pieces. She was starting a collection of clichés but didn't they just sum up her life? Joe fell asleep and Poppy lay awake wishing she was the one who had died.

Poppy fell in love with Joe the moment she saw him. She'd been attending a training course at Scotland Yard, and he was one of the speakers. Poppy was so mesmerized by the tall, clever detective with the cute smile, black hair and dangerous eyes that she'd spent the whole of his session trying to think of an intelligent question so she could impress him with her brilliance. All the time her heart thumped so fast she doubted she'd be able to speak if he even looked at her. While she phrased and rephrased queries about people trafficking, Joe's area of expertise, suddenly the time was up, the questions over and she hadn't said a flipping thing. He left the lecture room surrounded by a gaggle of adoring women and Poppy knew she'd missed her chance.

As she'd walked past the landmark revolving sign outside the building, she heard someone running behind her.

"Hang on," a voice yelled.

Poppy turned and thought she must be daydreaming. She looked around to see who he was running toward. No one. He was running after her. Poppy waited for him to catch up, her stomach churning.

"You wanted to ask a question," he said.

How did he know? Poppy had come up with two and not been able to decide between them. Now she blurted one out. "Has any investigation been done into links between language schools and people trafficking?"

Joe stared at her for a moment, twisting his mouth as though he were thinking up some complex reply. He scratched his head and then stared straight at her. "You need to ask questions that make me give more than a one word answer but the answer is yes."

Poppy had forgotten what she'd asked.

"I get to ask a question now," he said.

She hoped it wasn't about anything he'd said because she'd not paid proper attention. Much too busy thinking about his lovely face and how she could impress him.

He fixed his dark eyes on hers. "Ever taken your handcuffs home with you?"

"You need to ask a question that makes me give more than a one word answer."

He laughed. "There's only one answer I want to hear. Do you ever take your handcuffs home with you?"

"I can get out of any pair of handcuffs."

He raised his eyebrows. "No problem asking you a question that only requires a one word answer. You're a master at prevarication. Shall I try again? Ever take your handcuffs home with you?"

Poppy thought about just saying yes and then didn't. "Only when I want to show off."

Joe laughed and asked her out.

They'd been seeing each other for almost a year before he died, spending more and more time together. Poppy had allowed herself to hope he might ask her to move in with him but he'd never had the chance. She saw now that it wouldn't have happened. Joe had never said he loved her, and now Poppy knew he never would.

Chapter Five

Poppy stared at Joe as he slept. The mind could play terrible tricks. How could the soft blanket draped over her be an angel's wing? But she could see it and feel it. No matter how impossible all this seemed, Joe lay here next to her and she had to believe there was a reason for that even if it was something else that was her fault. Had she wanted Joe so much that he'd been forced to come back? Common sense told her that couldn't be right. How about all those parents who lost children. They must want them back just as much as Poppy wanted Joe.

He shifted and moments later launched into a series of violent sneezes. With the last explosive outburst, his wing flicked Poppy off the bed. She tumbled onto her butt and groaned in pain.

Joe leaned over and gave her a rueful smile. "Sorry, babe. How come I still have allergies when I'm dead?" He reached down and hauled her back to his side.

"Maybe it's to give dead doctors something to do."

"Funny girl."

Poppy relaxed into his embrace as Joe stroked her with his wing. He drew the tip along the underside of her foot until she wriggled her toes, then around her ankle, up her calf. The caress was so gentle and intimate and so unlike Joe, a wave of affection washed over her.

"Don't stop until I tell you. Sometime next week or the week after," she mumbled.

Joe laughed and ran the wing tip along the crease of her bottom. Poppy almost levitated off the bed.

"Can you feel what you're doing?" she asked.

"God, yes. It's like having another limb, but one that's hypersensitive. If I didn't have you here, I'd be tempted to see if I could give myself a wank. If I used my hands at the same time it would be like having four—"

"And if I joined in."

Joe shuddered and his cock jerked upright.

"Not sure there's room for four hands and two wings," Poppy said.

Joe growled. She smiled and entwined her fingers with his. "I always thought angels had white wings. Why are yours dirty gray? Been bathing in a puddle?"

"Desiree told me I had to earn white ones. I guess only the really good people get those straightaway. I don't know if there are shades of gray, whether they get lighter if I'm on the right track or whether they just start to shine when I do my good deed. I should have asked more questions. Considering I'm a policeman, I didn't get nearly as much information from her as I should have. One thing I do know, until these things change color, I'm trapped."

Poppy's heart lurched and she tried to keep the dismay from her face. *He feels trapped*?

"Apparently some seekers move on quite quickly, while others can take years to figure out what they have to do."

She felt a burst of joy that she might be able to keep Joe that long and then a wash of guilt because it was selfish.

"Maybe this is my fault," Poppy mumbled. "I wanted so much for you to have not died, perhaps I've stopped you going wherever it is you're supposed to go."

They were quiet for a moment. Poppy wanted him to say that he was glad she wanted him that much, but he didn't.

"Did she give you a manual or anything?" Poppy asked. "No copy of *How To Be An Angel For Dummies*?"

"No." Joe chuckled. "You know I wouldn't have read it."

He never read the instructions for anything which was why Poppy had several pieces left over from her flat pack wardrobe, rather too many of which were large screws. Every time she opened the doors, the whole thing wobbled.

"It hasn't fallen apart yet," Joe said.

Poppy felt a pang at how they knew what the other was thinking. She took a deep breath, and a big risk. "Would you like to live here with me while you try to earn your white wings?"

She could almost feel Joe panicking at the thought of losing control over a part of his life. The air around them bristled with nervous tension.

"Desiree said I can carry on living in my apartment."

Poppy hated herself for pushing, but did it anyway. "Someone else owns it now." She'd seen a young couple through the window when she'd found herself sitting outside one night, waiting for Joe to come home, wanting to turn back time.

"I can live there as well. All my stuff is still there, though not in your reality. If you went around you'd see all the new people's crap. I'm sort of superimposed on their existence. We aren't aware of each other. Seekers can see other seekers, but that's all." He sighed. "I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. Should I go to work? Do I need money? What—"

"I'm not a seeker. How come I can see you and feel you?"

Joe stroked her face. "I don't know, but I'm glad you can."

Poppy smiled and melted against him like ice-cream dropped on a hot pavement.

"I should have left a will. I never got round to it. What happened to my millions? More important, who's got my signed *Lord of the Rings* script?"

"Your overdraft and the script went to a relative in Nottingham."

Joe's brow furrowed. "I didn't know I had any relations in Nottingham. Did...didn't you want anything?"

"I wasn't offered anything except for your ashes."

"Ah." He winced.

"They arrived by post. ParcelForce to be exact." Poppy thought that would raise a smile and it did.

"Did you tell the guy what he was delivering?"

"Yes and he dropped you on his toe. Probably broke it."

Joe laughed. "Was there a good turnout at my funeral?"

"I...I didn't go." Poppy waited for Joe to ask why, but although a look of irritated puzzlement crossed his face, he didn't press the point. Typical Joe. Never pushed on the things that mattered.

"What are you going to do with my ashes?"

"I had one idea but I have a feeling you'd block the loo."

He grinned and rolled, holding himself over her. "I'd quite like to be blasted into space. You know how I like exploding."

"Ha ha. So can you fly?" Poppy asked.

"I'm not supposed to be able to, but I've managed it a couple of times by accident. It must be my superior physique and natural athletic ability."

"Or your insane competitive streak."

"Yeah, there is that. I do like to be first at almost everything." He ran a hand over her breast and tweaked a nipple. "Desiree said angels have fantastic sex but seekers aren't able to fuck, not even themselves. You can imagine how that thrilled me. Even if I did sleep through it, six months is the longest I've gone without a shag since I lost my virginity aged thirteen behind a dry stone wall on a geography field trip."

Poppy's heart shrank in anguish. Was that why he wanted to see her? He just wanted to scratch an itch until he could have all the sex he wanted as an angel? She wriggled out from under him and turned on her side, facing the wall. Joe trailed his fingers down her back and when they stopped on her hip, Poppy knew why and tensed.

"Where did that come from?" He touched the puckered scar. "It looks nasty."

"Accident. Caught it on something." Poppy was glad she faced the other way. Joe was good at spotting lies.

"God, you are clumsy, Poppy."

She was, but not that time.

"How long do you think—" Poppy broke off, unable to complete the question.

"I don't know." Joe pulled her onto her back and grinned at her. "But I intend to make the most of you before I get zapped off somewhere."

He bent to kiss her and Poppy slithered from under him and jumped up. "I need the bathroom."

Joe's wings shrank and disappeared as he watched Poppy walk across the room. He might not be the most sensitive guy in the world but he was aware he'd just said or done something to upset her. He'd forgiven her for not doing as he'd told her and for knocking him off the roof. That was the right thing to do, wasn't it? Saying "I forgive you" hadn't given him white wings, but he was glad he'd said it. Joe knew Poppy hadn't meant for it to happen, but if she'd stayed fastened to the pipe, he'd still be alive.

He sucked in his cheeks. The way she'd reacted, as though she was in the right, not him, seemed crazy. And why the fuck hadn't she gone to his funeral? Joe clenched his jaw in annoyance. He hadn't wanted to ask her, he'd hoped she'd tell him. Maybe she'd been too upset. Joe rolled onto his back. He wanted her again. His hand slid down his stomach and he eased the foreskin back over the crest of his cock.

Joe hoped Desiree didn't materialize and tell him he'd committed some unforgivable transgression with Poppy, although in all honesty, he didn't give a fuck. It had been worth it. Sex with Poppy was the best he'd ever had. There was just something about the pair of them that worked perfectly. The first time Joe had seen her, sitting in his training session, with her flushed cheeks and her bright eyes, her lips moving as she tried to work out a worthwhile question to ask, he'd known she was his and that before the day was out he'd have fucked her.

That was what Joe did—fucked, screwed, shagged, banged. He didn't make love. He'd never told a woman he loved her because he knew what she'd do with those three words—eat them, breathe them, live them, wrap them around his neck and use them to strangle him. An admission of love changed the relationship into something Joe didn't want. He cared deeply for Poppy, more deeply than he had for anyone else, but he didn't love her.

Well, he was pretty sure he didn't love her, but then Joe wasn't certain he knew what love was. Mothers were supposed to love their kids but his mother hadn't loved him. She'd had a cold heart, only concerned with how her son appeared to other people. Joe had to be the smartest, fastest and brightest kid on the block. He didn't remember being hugged or kissed or even praised, though he worked hard to please her. All he remembered was her telling him off for being untidy or wicked—as she called it. Her standard punishment was to ignore him—sometimes she didn't speak to him for days. On one occasion she'd walked away in a shopping mall, left a seven-year-old standing alone, because he dared to argue about shoes she wanted and he didn't. Her psychological torment was worse than his father's physical one.

Joe's dad had been a senior police officer who, when he was home and that wasn't often, ruled the house with a loud voice and a narrow cane he kept on a ledge above his study door. He didn't use the cane much, the mere threat of it was enough to scare a young Joe into compliance.

By the time Joe reached his teens and his full height, his innate rebellious streak suppressed for so long, overpowered his wish to be loved. He simply didn't care anymore whether his mother ignored him or his father beat him. Girls liked him and he liked girls. He could lose himself for a while in their bodies and that was all he needed. When he cottoned on to the fact that a couple of dates turned them into limpets, he was more careful. His reputation for shagging anything with a pulse had been unfounded but it was hard to say no when sex was offered.

However, Joe had grown up and grown choosier. The older he got, the more women expected from him and he didn't like to hurt them. Joe never lied to any woman he took to bed, never let her think she was getting more than a good time for a few hours, days, weeks or however long his lust continued. He was never faithful because he didn't expect any relationship would last.

Until Poppy.

Ah, his sweet Poppy. Joe looked toward the bathroom door and wondered how long she was going to stay in there. Poppy Field, with her silly name and hot body, his cute and crazy Poppy turned out to be different to every other woman he'd gone out with. She was clumsy and unpredictable, hot and sexy. She drove him mad with lust. She made him laugh and more important, she showed him how to laugh at himself.

Poppy had never pushed him for commitment, never moaned when he had to break a date. He liked talking to her and liked listening to her. Joe couldn't think of much he enjoyed more than coming back to Poppy's place, eating whatever weird concoction she'd thrown together before fucking her silly. So why had he rejected an offer to live with her while he sorted himself out? What was he so afraid of? Commitment was no longer an issue. They had no future together. Joe felt the lump rise into his throat and swell until he found it hard to breathe. Who was he trying to protect here, Poppy or himself?

She came bounding back from the bathroom, her sulk over. That was something else he liked about her. She didn't stay down for long. Poppy launched into her energetic imitation of a kung-fu warrior that always made him laugh, flinging her arms and legs around, speaking her strange version of Japanese before she leaped on the bed, trying to pin him on his back. She always tried, never gave up and never succeeded. And she never complained.

Joe thought about that as they wrestled, getting tangled in the sheets. His mates had always moaned about girlfriends and wives nagging them about something but Poppy never had. All those times he'd let her down when they'd arranged a date and he had to work, she'd never given him grief about it. Joe had never bought her presents or flowers, not even from a service station, not because he didn't think of it, but because he didn't want to be owned by anyone. He chewed his bottom lip. He wished he'd bought her flowers. He could have done that at least. Not saying what time he'd be there, not making too many arrangements in advance was Joe's modus operandi, but he began to see that maybe he hadn't been very fair to Poppy.

He stopped pretending to let her win and pinned her by her shoulders. "Can I stay here with you?"

Joe didn't even get that right. He'd meant to say he'd like to stay with her, but Poppy's face lit up like a summer flower in sunshine, and Joe kissed her. One quick kiss because he wanted to hear what she'd say. He had to drag his lips away.

"Well?" he asked.

"Only if you promise not to wear my underwear...again."

He smiled. "You take all the fun out of it."

"All right, but only the thongs."

Joe laughed.

"Actually, there's a set of your clothes here," she said. "I figured your relative in Nottingham could manage without a few of your things."

"What do you want with my old clothes?"

Poppy blinked. "They...smell of you."

The lump in his throat began to grow again and before his face betrayed him, Joe bent his head to her breast and licked around her nipple. It puckered under his tongue and he sucked until she groaned. His cock throbbed in response. Poppy tasted sweet and Joe couldn't remember whether he'd ever told her how much he liked tasting her, how when he did this, played with her nipple, it sent a shimmering heat rippling though his body to center on his groin.

He thought he could spend hours playing with her breasts. Poppy's weren't huge but they were a perfect fit in his hands, a perfect fit around his cock.

"I like your breasts," Joe said and cursed himself. He had a smoother tongue than that. Why the hell had he blurted out something so banal? It didn't help that he'd deliberately not used the other L word.

"Do you? I never realized." Poppy put on her amazed look and Joe growled.

Giving up on words, he showed her how much he liked them, lightly raking her raspberry nipples with his teeth, pulling with his lips, teasing with his tongue, while the dimpled areolas bloomed in his mouth. Poppy squirmed beneath him as he suckled. She pulled his hair, raked his shoulders, alternately pulling him closer and pushing him away. Joe slipped a hand between her legs and pressed his finger inside her damp folds. A single stroke over the nub of her clit and he was rewarded with a gush of cream. He sighed around her breast. She was always wet, always ready. Joe rubbed her clit, felt it pulse and swell, and Poppy whimpered.

Within seconds her quiet moans had turned to loud groans, Joe's fingers were drenched and his dick was jealous. One finger inside her turned to two. He pressed until his palm was shoved tight against her curls and Poppy lurched beneath him.

"God, Joe. I missed you, I missed this."

Joe's cock jerked in response to her words. Her muscles contracted around his fingers and Poppy unraveled in his arms, her breathy gasps hitting his cheeks. Now Joe

knew he would lose her, he was frantic to keep her. He'd thought it was just sex and now he thought that it wasn't. Every moment he spent with Poppy, he hurt her because he couldn't give her what she wanted, what she deserved. But he couldn't let her go. He'd never been so torn in his life.

Joe slid down her body, leaving a trail of wet kisses. He reached to tease her nipples with his thumbs while he made her belly dance under his mouth. Joe licked her, nipped her, hummed against her and Poppy writhed beneath him. He wedged her thighs apart with his shoulders, inhaled her musky fragrance and took in the mesmerizing sight of her swollen, glistening lips. *Oh Jesus, so pretty*. One slurp with his tongue and his head fogged with desire. Joe brought his hands down to join his tongue and he explored her slippery folds, licking around his fingers as he thrust in and out.

Poppy drummed her heels into his back and gasped his name, pleading with him, cursing him. Joe pulsed his tongue and fingers into her with a rhythm another part of his body was eager to match. Her fingers twisted in his hair, her breathing quickened and her muscles began to clench. Joe kept working her with his tongue while he slid his cream-soaked fingers to her ass. He pressed on the puckered hole as he circled and sucked her clit. The room was filled with the sound of her breathy cries and his slurping tongue. Joe loved doing this, loved making her come undone, time after time, hardly letting her recover before he brought her off again.

He wondered if he'd lived, if he'd ever have had enough of her. They'd had a year together, far longer than he'd spent with anyone before. Sex with Poppy was different. It hadn't trailed off, got boring, become mundane. It had grown more exciting, more mind-shattering. Joe didn't believe in *the one*, couldn't see love at first sight was sensible, but Poppy—

"God, Joe, I love you so much," Poppy gasped and spiraled away under his mouth, her muscles firing explosive bursts.

This time Joe made sure he didn't react to her words. He knew Poppy loved him, but she didn't often say it because she also knew he didn't want to hear it. What she wanted was for him to say the words to her. Maybe he would have done if he'd lived. Maybe he'd have just blurted them out. Now it was too late. Even if Joe did love her, he couldn't have her. She was no longer his to love. When he'd gone, she'd be someone else's. The thought sent him spinning away, off the bed, back up against the wall. He stood panting, his furious purple-headed cock demanding to know what the hell he was playing at. Poppy, her face still flushed from her orgasm, looked up in bewilderment.

Joe opened his mouth. He wanted to tell her how he felt but the words wouldn't come out. *Shit*. She'd think he'd reacted to the L word again and it hadn't been that. Poppy got off the bed. Joe could see her deciding whether she should come to him or not. He didn't know what he wanted. Fuck, yes he did. He wanted her. All he had to do was reach out and pull her into his arms, but he didn't. How would that be fair?

"Joe, what's wrong?"

Barbara Elsborg

"This is all I can give you. Sex. Fucking. There's nothing else," he whispered. His love was no use to her now. He'd waited too long.

Chapter Six

Poppy fled to the living room. He didn't want her. Why the fuck had he come back? She'd tried not to tell him that she loved him but it was hard to keep the words in. Now she'd been hurt all over again and this time it was worse. Poppy grabbed her clothes from the floor and her panties from under the couch and pulled them on.

She'd gone mad. She'd flipped over the edge of the Grand Canyon when Joe had fallen only she was still falling. Joe was dead. Joe couldn't be in her apartment. Joe hadn't made love to her—no, hadn't fucked her. She fastened the snap on her pants, got the buttons done up all wrong on her shirt and didn't care. She had to go out. Not just out. Go away. Run away.

"Poppy."

"Don't talk to me. Please."

She turned and he stood in front of her.

He's not there. He's not there. I can walk through him.

Poppy walked straight into him and Joe wrapped his arms around her, crushed his body to hers.

"Why are you dressed?"

Not talking to me. Not here.

Only she could feel his cock, a thick rock-hard presence between them. Poppy sagged and he loosened his hold.

"Come back to bed," he whispered.

"I don't know what you want."

Joe laughed. "Yeah, you do. You want me as much as I want you. We make each other happy. Don't overanalyze this, Pop."

Sex. Was that all it was? Maybe that was all it could be. Poppy leaned against him. Joe looked pale and lost. How could she resist him? His lips covered the few inches between them and he kissed her with the lightest touch, a feathery caress across the seam of her mouth, urging her to open to him.

"Kiss me."

Hands slid under her bottom and pulled her close.

"Kiss me."

Poppy didn't want to be easy, didn't want to just submit but she was helpless in Joe's embrace. He filled her head, overwhelmed her senses so she could think of nothing but him and what he was doing to her body.

"Kiss me."

His strong arms held her tight and he pressed harder at her mouth, begging her to let him in. A nip, a lick and his tongue glided through to caress hers. Poppy felt like she'd been out in the snow and come into the warm. This was Joe. He'd keep her safe. So what if she was crazy. Who could see her? Poppy kissed him back, nibbled his bottom lip and pulled it into her mouth with a throaty groan.

Joe scooped her up and carried her to the bedroom. He laid her on the bed and pressed his face into the hollow of her throat.

"Don't leave me, Poppy. I need you," he whispered and the vibration and heart in the words cascaded through her body. "I'm not alive without you. You're my anchor. Please don't let me go."

For a long while, they were motionless, welded together, the only sound their labored breathing. Poppy didn't have sex without emotion. For her, the physical part of a relationship developed alongside her feelings. Most women were like that, she thought. They had sex and they fell in love. Often before they had sex. Not guys. They pursued you with words of love until they got what they wanted and then the sex lost its emotion. Joe pretended he didn't love her, that this was merely sex with no strings but Poppy knew deep down in his heart, in some locked up, hidden away, secluded corner, the truth was hiding. Joe did love her, he just didn't know how to tell her.

Poppy knew when he'd done whatever it was that needed to be done to get his wings, she'd lose him again. It wasn't a matter of her holding on to him, but the other way round. Joe moved his head back and looked at Poppy's face. One finger on her cheek wiped a streak of wetness.

"I thought you only cried in the shower."

"Better get me in there quick," she said.

Joe grinned and began to unbutton her shirt. Wasn't that just Joe? Poppy thought. He'd never seen her cry but he didn't even ask her why.

Joe couldn't let Poppy out of his sight. They showered together, fell back into bed together. When she got up to go to the bathroom, he followed. When she wandered into the kitchen, he stayed at her heels. He couldn't stop touching her. He'd never thought of himself as a tactile person but he needed to constantly feel her next to him. When they weren't fucking, he thought about fucking. She never pushed him away, never refused him anything. Sometimes, a part of him wished she would.

She was his drug, his compulsion, his addiction. The more he had, the more he wanted. He knew he was scaring her with his intensity. He was scaring himself but Joe couldn't stop, couldn't imagine what would stop him wanting Poppy.

"Are you hungry?" she whispered.

Oh, yeah, that might make him stop for a bit. Food. "Starving. I can't remember the last time I ate." Joe thought about it. He couldn't.

"Shall I rustle us something up or would you rather have a pizza? I'm not sure I've got much in the fridge."

Joe had already looked. "Pizza. I'll call."

He reached across the bed and snagged her phone. That reminded him he hadn't seen his mobile. Maybe they weren't allowed to seekers.

"Hi, one medium four cheese and one large meat special. Thin base. Delivered," he said.

"Hello, anyone there?"

Joe repeated the order but before he'd finished speaking the connection was broken. About to get uppity, realization sank in. The guy couldn't hear him.

"Ah." He passed the phone to Poppy. "I forgot."

She rolled her eyes. "I suppose that means you can't pay either."

"There's money in my wallet but I can't figure out how this works. If I can't talk to anyone but you, how am I supposed to buy food or..."

Maybe that was the point, Joe thought. He was supposed to rely on Poppy. She was the key to all this. His way of getting his wings. She stood leaning against the wall as she gave the order for the pizza and Joe got to his feet. He hooked an arm around her waist and kissed her shoulder. As the phone went down he pressed his lips against hers. Joe meant it to be a short, sweet kiss but it dropped straight into a frenzied assault on her mouth.

His hands slid under her bottom and he picked her up, wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed her back against the wall. He might be dead, but adrenaline pumped so furiously around his body that Joe could have lifted twice her weight. He plastered himself against her, thrust his tongue into Poppy's mouth and groaned low in his throat.

With considerable effort he dragged his head back and stared at her. "How can you drive me so wild? I only have to look at you to want you. Hell, I only have to think of you to go hard."

Poppy looped her arms around his neck and he shifted his hips so his cock slid between her legs. They both groaned.

"This isn't easy," Poppy whispered. "I'm heavy."

Joe looked deep into her eyes and lifted her so the blunt head of his cock nudged against her folds. Then he kept her there. Poppy wriggled but he wouldn't let her move. The fact that this was killing him and driving his balls beyond despair was beside the point. Poppy kept trying to sink onto him and Joe kept her off.

"Have...I proved...my point?" he gasped the words out and didn't much care for the sly look in Poppy's eyes.

"No, I'm timing you. The record for holding me in this position is twelve minutes. James, I think it was. Or it might have been Pete."

"Fuck that."

Joe slammed her down over his cock as he arched his hips and jerked into her. Poppy cried out. He didn't let her move, pinned her against the wall while their bodies heaved with the force of their breathing. Joe rested his forehead against Poppy's and brought his thumbs up to graze under her breasts.

"Any time you're ready," Poppy said with a groan.

Joe bent his knees to slide his cock in and out of her as slowly as he could, trying to suppress the white-hot need to go fast and hard that swirled inside him. She was so soft, her warm, velvety cream coated his hardness and Joe trembled as he began to pulse inside her with longer, deeper thrusts.

"Oh God, Joe. That's so good. Right there. Oooh."

"Poppy, I...God...I..." His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and he stuttered in speech and for a moment in action.

She dug her fingers into his shoulders. "Don't stop, don't stop."

If he could, Joe would have laughed. Nothing could have stopped him, not even a nuclear explosion. No point stopping for that. In fact that would have been a way to go, fucking himself to oblivion instead of tumbling off a roof.

Poppy's back arched against the wall and he felt her clench around him, a hard pull against his cock that sent a ricochet to his balls.

"Open your eyes. I want to watch you come," Joe gasped.

He rolled his hips, made his cock dance in her pussy and Poppy yipped. With one strong flex of his hips, Joe embedded himself so deep inside her, he thought he might never come out, and for a moment, he didn't want to. His balls tingled and then exploded in an electric firestorm. The contractions of her orgasm intensified his and a burning flash rocketed through his cock, sending phosphoric flames shooting through his body. Almost painful in its intensity, the impact of the orgasm made him hold her too tight, afraid someone or something would tear her away before he could bring himself to let her go.

Another shower and the doorbell rang while they were washing each other. Joe started to get out to answer it and then remembered. Poppy grabbed a robe.

"I'll see if your money disappears."

When he walked into the kitchen and smelled the pizza, his stomach gave a loud rumble.

Poppy laughed. "Five point two on the Richter scale."

Joe yanked the robe from her shoulders. "You aren't allowed clothes. They waste too much time."

"Shall we forget eating then and have a bath together? Want to guess how long I can hold my breath?"

Joe gave her a pained look and stared at the boxes. "Do you think I'll be able to eat?"

Power of Love

"I'll eat yours if you can't." Poppy lifted the lid on the smaller box. "Hey, and your money's good so I gave the guy a huge tip."

Joe rolled his eyes. "How huge?"

Poppy couldn't answer. Her mouth was full of pizza. A moment later, so was Joe's.

"Shall we eat in front of the TV?" Joe asked.

He didn't wait for Poppy to answer but scooped up the boxes and carried them through. She smiled and followed.

"Football on by any chance?" she asked.

"Is there?"

Poppy rolled her eyes. There was always football on. But Joe didn't go and sit in his chair. He sat on the couch. He handed the remote to Poppy and watched her stare at it as though it was a big fat spider.

"Put on what you like," he said.

"Strictly Ballroom?"

He cringed. "If you must."

Poppy clicked onto the football.

Joe beamed. "I'll reward you later."

"You better."

* * * * *

Poppy woke the next morning with Joe's cock thickening between her thighs. She smiled. They were insatiable. Her smile faltered. Poppy was scared of losing him again. She didn't want to leave his side in case he disappeared. Did Joe fear the same? He always had some part of him in contact with her—his fingers touching, an arm, knee or toes—as though that grounded him in her world. She wriggled her backside harder against him and in response he nuzzled into her neck, his fingers tickling her hip before sweeping to her breast.

"Ahem."

Poppy's eyes snapped open at the strange voice. Joe yanked the sheet over them.

"Want to explain what you're doing?"

Poppy lifted her head and saw a beautiful chocolate-skinned woman standing at the end of the bed.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Joe said.

"I'm the one asking the questions. What in G's name do you think you're up to?"

"Having a fuck."

Poppy thought she saw a flash of disappointment cross the woman's face.

"It's my fault," Poppy said. "Don't blame Joe."

The woman gaped at her. "You can see me? Hear me?"

Poppy nodded. Desiree gave a heavy sigh. "It must be because the bond between you is so strong."

Poppy wanted to rejoice at that, instead her heart sank. So it *was* her fault. The pressure of knowing she was responsible for Joe being trapped made her head ache.

"I'm going to have to check up on this. I suggest you spend less time in bed and more time figuring out how to earn your full wings or you could find they're taken away altogether."

"What would happen then?" Poppy asked.

Desiree shuddered, her hair shimmering in its own light.

"You said it can take years," Joe pointed out and stroked Poppy's cheek. "I can't see what's so bad about that."

"Can't you? Have you thought of the implications for Poppy? Tied to a lover no one else can see? And you'll start to feel hungry, Joe. A hunger that can't be satisfied by food. It will grow worse the longer you take to earn your wings. You'll turn as gray as them and eventually you'll fade away. And it's very painful."

Joe stopped stroking Poppy. "You didn't tell me that before."

"I usually don't have to tell anyone the unpleasant part – 93.57 percent of the newly deceased earn their wings within a few days. Those that don't tend to be criminals, extremely immature, obsessive compulsive or Virgos."

"And which were you?" Joe asked.

Desiree shuffled her feet. "Kleptomaniac."

Joe gaped at her. "A shoplifter?"

"It's an illness," Desiree said. "I'm better now."

"I'm a cop and I have a thief as my guide?"

"You're no longer a cop and I'm no longer a thief." Desiree stared straight at him.

"No, you're right," Joe said. "Look, can't you give me a clue about what I should be doing?"

Poppy could tell Joe was worried from the way his fingers squeezed hers under the sheet.

"Maybe it's not something you have to *do*," Desiree said. "I'm going to check up on the fact that you two are still able to – *fuck*."

Poppy didn't miss the emphasis she gave those words, but Joe appeared oblivious. A blink and Desiree had gone.

Joe rolled onto his back and ran his fingers through his hair. "Maybe I have to perform some sort of good deed connected to being a cop. What do you think, Poppy?" He looked at her with a hopeful expression on his face.

"Like stopping a crime before it takes place or saving someone who's about to get run over?"

Joe nodded.

"How would you know it was going to happen? You can't see the future, can you? And you told me you can't touch anyone, only me." She gave a little smile.

Joe dropped his face to her stomach and blew a loud raspberry. Poppy giggled.

He gazed up at her. "But *you* can touch people. I could tell you how to help them. I can get into places you can't. I can warn you what's going down." He looked pleased with himself. "I'll come out on patrol with you."

"Okay."

Since Joe had been on patrol with her every day since she'd been back at work, Poppy thought life would carry on pretty much as normal. She wanted to help him. It was the least she could do, even though by helping him she'd lose him again. But if Joe couldn't be happy with her, then Poppy wanted him to be happy without her.

Chapter Seven

Joe held open the exterior door to Poppy's apartment building, and let her leave first.

"I can take you to work on my bike," he said.

"I don't think so. Look."

Poppy's hand was on his arm. Not on his arm. Somewhere in the middle of his arm. Joe lifted his hand to her face and tried to touch her cheek.

"Oh fuck. I can't feel you. I can see you, but I can't touch you."

The pain that came with that realization froze him where he stood. Poppy gulped and then turned to look at the door they'd come through.

"Back inside," Joe said, thinking the same.

He followed Poppy. He'd held her hand down the stairs, but he was afraid to try again now they were back inside. They stared at each other and then Poppy threw herself at him. Joe caught her, staggered back and knocked his head on the wall. He groaned and then laughed. Poppy closed her eyes with a deep sigh and Joe rubbed his cheek against hers.

"God, I thought I'd lost you again," he whispered.

"Shut up and kiss me."

"You're going to be late."

"I don't care."

"Jeff will skin you alive."

"I don't care."

There was a desperation in her Joe didn't think he'd seen before. Usually he was the aggressor, the one in control, but it felt like Poppy was trying to consume him. Her fingers fumbled with his zipper. Joe slid his hands over her hips. He was hard—again.

"Poppy," he groaned.

His zipper down, Poppy had her hand in his pants. Joe dragged her around the corner and pressed her up against the door to the cleaner's closet. Her fingers were wrapped around his cock, sliding up and down. He really didn't need that. He was already primed. Joe pulled her hand away.

"Sweetheart..."

"Joe, now," she whispered. "Please, I need you to fuck me."

Not that he was arguing but he did wonder what this would look like if he was invisible. Joe lifted Poppy's skirt and pushed aside her panties. He groaned. She was

hot and wet and now Joe couldn't wait either. He bent his knees to angle his dick and one long, hard thrust rocked her off her feet. Joe began pumping hard and fast, the pace growing more frantic until she clenched around him. The pulse drummed in his ears as he tugged her down hard onto his cock and Joe came too. He held her tight in his arms as he jetted into her, pressing his forehead against hers as her spasms milked him dry.

"Fuck, Poppy. How fast was that?" Joe let out a shaky laugh.

Only fast wasn't good. He wanted to drag her back upstairs and never let her leave his side. Every time he touched her he slipped out of control and it scared him. Joe shook with the intensity of his feelings. His heart was pounding hard enough to crack his ribs. He kissed her nose and lifted her down. Poppy straightened her skirt. She slipped his cock back inside his pants and zipped him up.

"Have the day off. You've just whetted my appetite for a day in bed." Joe bent his head and nibbled her earlobe.

Poppy broke away with a groan. "I can't. I've had too much time off."

Joe looked at her, with her shining eyes, swollen lips, and untidy hair, and his stomach clenched as if he anticipated getting thumped. She'd been his and no matter what happened now, he'd lost her. And what did she mean about having too much time off? Joe opened his mouth to ask and she dashed for the door.

"I'll see you at the station. Making out with a dead guy is one reason for being late I'm not going to get away with."

* * * * *

Joe parked right outside Hackney Central Police Station, glancing at the double yellow lines under his bike wheels. Breaking the law wasn't as much fun when no one cared. He wondered if there was an angelic police force, whether he'd be expected to join. Maybe illegal parking would scupper his chances. He grinned.

No problem finding the room holding the ranks of uniformed officers. Joe could hear the racket they made all the way down the corridor. He pushed open the door and walked in. Touching inanimate objects didn't appear to be a problem, but it seemed they only moved in his reality.

There was no sign of Poppy and no one paid any attention to him so Joe assumed there were no other seekers around.

"Parade time," a guy shouted.

Poppy was now late and going to be in trouble. The room bustled with activity as helmets and hats were grabbed and uniforms straightened. Everyone rushed through Joe to get out of the room. A weird mental sensation, but he didn't feel the faintest flicker.

Joe followed the uniforms and watched them line up outside, jostling and joking with each other. Eons ago, he'd been one of them. Joe remembered how glad he'd been when he'd made detective and no longer had to go on parade. Treading the beat as the

lowest-ranking officer was compulsory for every police entrant and Joe thought it was a sound principle, but he hated Poppy doing it, afraid she'd get hurt.

He breathed a sigh of relief when she slipped into place on the front row just as her boss, Jeff Garside, came into the yard from the other direction. Joe walked to Poppy's side. She looked cute in her uniform, very fuckable. He groaned. Could he think of nothing else when he looked at her?

"My cum dripping down your thighs?" he said at her ear.

When Poppy ignored him, Joe's heart began to stutter. He flapped his arms at her side to see if she'd react and suddenly his wings were out and he was airborne. Six feet up and rising. *Shit*! Fifteen feet. He heard Poppy gasp, which was a good thing because now he knew she could see him, but in his shock he stopped moving his wings. *Fucking hell*. The ground was coming up fast and it looked hard. That was definitely bad. Joe's wings retracted. Well of course they did, they weren't stupid, and he fell in a crumpled heap at the Chief Inspector's feet. The impact knocked all the air out of his lungs and Joe gasped.

"Are you all right?"

He looked up. Poppy bent over him, her lovely eyes wide in concern and over her loomed her boss, his narrowed eyes full of incredulity.

"Talk to me. Talk to me," she pleaded.

"Poppy, shut up," Joe said.

He watched the awareness of what she'd done creep over her face.

"Of course I'll talk to you," her boss snapped. "Why wouldn't I be all right, Constable Field?"

There was a long pause. Joe hoped Poppy could come up with something spectacular, because he could think of no reason why she might have launched herself at the feet of her boss in the middle of the morning inspection, asking if he was all right and pleading with him to talk to her.

"A wasp," Poppy said. "I saw it fly up your trouser leg. I was talking to the wasp, trying to get it to come out. I have an affinity with insects."

Joe was impressed. Well, the wasp had been a good idea and then she'd ruined it with the last part. Poppy never did know when to shut up.

The Chief Inspector yelled, "Parade dismissed," and fled inside, presumably to yank off his pants to check he wasn't about to get stung somewhere painful. The sound of barely restrained laughter followed him. Joe sat up.

"Are you okay," Poppy whispered.

"Fine."

"Poppy, get up. He's gone now."

Joe looked at the man standing behind her and took an instant dislike.

"Bzzzzzz. Oh quick, put your hand up my trouser leg. I think there's something dangerous up there."

Joe growled.

Poppy stood. "Don't worry, Graham. Not even a wasp would find anything worth stinging in your pants."

Ah, this was Poppy's partner. Now Joe *really* didn't like him. The jerk pursued her all the way back to the squad room buzzing in her ear. Joe wanted to squash him.

"I'll probably be up for a commendation for that," Poppy said as she walked across to her desk.

Graham snorted in amusement.

"I'm serious. If you ever see a wasp near Jeff, kill it. He's allergic," she said. "Anaphylactic shock. Could be deadly."

Joe watched doubt flicker across Graham's face and then the guy plonked himself down on the chair Joe was already sitting on. Joe emerged through him, spluttering with fury.

"He sat on me," he said in indignation.

Poppy started to laugh and didn't seem able to stop.

"Glad you found it amusing," Jeff said behind her. Poppy shut up and cringed.

"I wasn't laughing at you, sir," she said.

"What were you laughing at?"

"Release of nervous tension. RNT. We all know wasps can kill."

Jeff turned a look of suspicion into a long, deep sigh. "There's been a call about kids teasing a flock of ducks that appear to have mistaken London Fields lido for a pond. The swimmers are not amused. Sounds right up your street, Constable. Try not to let them crap on your uniform. The ducks not the kids."

"Yes, sir."

* * * * *

"Ducks," Graham said in disgust. "I'm beginning to think you're the reason we get all the shit jobs."

Poppy bit her lip. It would never have occurred to Graham that he wasn't trusted with anything important. They were the misfits of the division and Jeff wanted them to stay under the radar.

She glanced at Joe in the rearview mirror. He'd left his bike and come in the squad car. He looked fed up and frustrated. Poppy didn't blame him. Rescuing a few picked-on ducks was hardly the stuff to earn him white wings. Or maybe it was. One feathered friend saving another. Poppy smiled to herself and then sighed. The truth was that a huge amount of her time was spent on paperwork and it was rare that anything exciting happened. When it did, she felt guilty having wished for it.

"Poppy, look out for that cyclist," Graham said. "Damn, you missed him."

Ha, bloody ha, she thought and hoped Graham didn't start on the nipple clamps now Joe was listening.

"So Poppycock, did your boyfriend buy them for you? Do they hurt? Will you show me?"

Shit! Could he read minds? "Give it up, Graham."

"What's he on about?" Joe perked up on the back seat.

"They weren't mine, now get a life and shut up about it." Poppy pulled into the car park and leaped out of the vehicle before she had to say anything else.

There was a crackle of static from Graham's radio and Poppy breathed a sigh of relief. That was one guy occupied. The other, however, stood in front of her, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

"What was he talking about?" Joe asked.

"A 999 call about youths picking on a kid down towards the lido," Graham said. "If we're quick, we'll catch them."

Poppy set off at a run, Joe by her side and Graham puffing along some way behind.

"Tell me," Joe said.

"Later," Poppy whispered.

"On your left," Joe said in Poppy's ear.

There was an elderly lady waving at them. Poppy veered in her direction.

"You're too late," the woman said when Poppy reached her. "Typical of the police. Never rush anywhere."

Poppy panted noisily. Did she look as though she'd been strolling?

"The little hooligans have gone. They threw his bag in that tree. He's climbed up to get it."

Poppy heard the sound of muffled sobbing. She peered into the foliage and saw a youth in a yellow and black T-shirt lying horizontal, all four limbs wrapped around a branch. He looked like a petrified leopard.

"You can come down now. They've gone," Poppy said.

"I'm stuck."

"Oh shit," Graham said, having puffed up behind her.

"What's your name?" Poppy called.

"Owen."

"Okay, Owen. I'll come and get you," she said.

Graham groaned. "Are you sure?"

"Not a good idea," said Joe. "You should call the Fire Brigade."

"Easy-peasy, Graham," Poppy said. "Give me a leg up to that first branch."

"Have you ever climbed a tree?" Joe asked.

Poppy ignored him. She'd climbed lots of trees, just none in the last twenty years and none in a skirt. It wasn't too difficult. Being tall helped and after a few moments, she balanced on a limb below the boy, her head level with his. Owen was thin and weedy-looking with dark hair and wire glasses, but no scar on his forehead.

"Hey, Owen. So where's your bag?" Poppy asked.

"Up there."

Poppy saw a gray school bag hooked over a branch six feet above his head.

"My science project's in it." He gulped back a sob.

"We'll get you down first and then I'll see about the bag." Poppy climbed a little higher. "Let go with your right hand and take my fingers."

"I can't let go. I'll fall."

"Trust me, I won't let you fall." As Poppy uttered those words, she heard Graham snort and her pulse spiked. Gritting her teeth, she climbed up until she was on the same level as the kid. Poppy wrapped an arm around the trunk and reached out with her other hand.

"Owen, you can do this. You climbed up, you can climb down. Slide your bum along a few feet and grab my hand. Do it a bit at time."

Poppy glanced down. They were about fifteen foot up. Graham waited, ready to break the boy's fall, and Joe stood at his side, his dark eyes fixed on Poppy, anxiety written all over his face.

"Be careful," Graham called.

"I didn't know you cared," Poppy replied.

"I don't but if you rip another uniform, Jeff will kill you and then who'll be my partner?"

Moments later, Owen had one hand in Poppy's and other wrapped around the central trunk. He was so frightened, he was rigid. Poppy kept talking, reassuring him. "You're fine. The hard part's over."

"My bag," Owen wailed as Poppy helped him to a lower branch.

"I'll go back and get it," she said.

* * * * *

Poppy didn't see what was so funny, but four firemen, Graham, seven random civilians, three dogs, two ducks and Joe were creased up laughing. Well, all right, Poppy wasn't sure that the dogs and the ducks were laughing but she suspected they were. She hadn't meant to get stuck. She'd dropped the school bag down and as she turned, a branch skewered her through the back of the stab vest. Owen scampered away, but not before taking a video clip with his mobile. The bloody thing would no doubt be on YouTube tomorrow or one of those funniest home video programs on the TV.

The firemen produced a ladder and then had a long argument about who was going to climb up to free her. They all seemed far too interested in lurking under the tree trying to look up her skirt. Poppy watched in disbelief as they tossed for who went up the ladder. The winner—at least Poppy hoped that was what he thought—climbed up to untangle her. Moments later, her feet were on the ground.

"You can write that one up," Graham said.

* * * * *

While Poppy did her paperwork back at the station, Joe wandered around hoping to pick up a tidbit that might enable him to perform some sort of good deed. Based on the events of that morning, thwarting crimes at Poppy's level of policing seemed unlikely to turn his wings white.

Joe had never met any of the people Poppy worked with, though he did know Jeff Garside and had heard her moan often enough about Graham. He felt guilty he hadn't shown any interest in her colleagues. He hadn't even listened too hard when she'd complained about Graham. He wasn't competition so Joe didn't care. But he was sure she'd never told him what a jerk the guy was. Joe winced. Maybe she had.

While Poppy sat filling in endless forms, including a request for another stab vest, Joe followed her partner to the canteen.

Graham queued for a mug of coffee and a bacon sandwich, and Joe helped himself to the same. He laughed when he saw the sandwich still sitting on the counter after he'd picked it up but the food was solid in his hand. No seeker on the till yelled at him to pay up. That solved the problem of whether he had to pay for anything. No matter what he touched outside of his apartment and Poppy's, in reality it never moved.

Joe joined Graham at a table in the corner, where he sat doodling on a sheet of paper. Joe looked over his shoulder and groaned when he saw what Graham was drawing. The fact that the prick was quite an artist, made matters worse.

Joe stayed on Graham's heels all the way to the men's locker room and watched him fasten the drawing at the end of a line of others which had been taped above the urinals. A row of cartoons showed Poppy in all sorts of trouble. *PC Poppy takes a dip* pictured Poppy floundering in the Thames, the Millennium Wheel in the background. *PC Poppy trying to park* showed her sitting in the ruins of a crumpled police car. *PC Poppy considers new career as knife thrower's assistant*. To Joe's horror, Poppy was pictured twice with a knife sticking out of her stab vest. The latest one was *PC Poppy hunting for nuts*. It was a picture split in two. One half had Poppy up a tree, the other showed her with her hand up the leg of her boss's pants. Joe's jaw tightened. He didn't like her being made fun of.

Graham stood at a urinal and Joe unzipped at the one next to him. He wished he could make his fist connect with Graham's jaw. The guy was a prick. Then again, maybe not. Joe smirked when he saw Graham struggling to find his dick under the rolls of fat. When Joe washed his hands, he was distracted from his plans to get even with

Graham, by the sight of his face in the mirror. Joe turned his head from one side to the other. He looked as gray as a storm cloud.

When Joe found Poppy, she'd been cornered in the corridor by the DI and was screwing her hands together behind her back.

"What did I tell you? No more incidents. If the CSI finds out, he'll be livid. Another PAR to explain. The fire chief plays golf with him, for Christ's sake."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think there would be any need to call the fire brigade. The boy's school bag wasn't much higher, but I got caught in the branches."

Jeff was tight-lipped with fury. "We've had a call from the local news channel. The little bugger's sold the video clip to *Metro London*."

"Oh no." Poppy winced.

"As if it wasn't bad enough having a police constable in my station with the name Poppy Field. Now you're going to be famous for all the wrong bloody reasons."

"Sorry, sir."

Joe's jaw tightened. Poppy couldn't help her name.

"I keep giving you one last chance, Poppy," Jeff said. "I don't know what it is with you. Ever since the...unfortunate incident—well, you seem incapable of spending a single day out of trouble."

Unfortunate – fucking – incident? Joe's jaw ticked.

"Please don't suspend me."

The breath caught in Joe's throat. Suspend her? What the hell for? He clenched his fists.

"When you find trouble, how about trying not to make it any worse."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, I nearly forgot. I had a call this morning from DCS Watson. He wants to see you at Scotland Yard."

Joe's ears pricked up. Detective Chief Superintendent Watson had been his boss.

"As soon as you can get over there, Poppy. Out of uniform."

"Right, sir."

"And Poppy? Don't cock up anything else. Not even your nose."

Chapter Eight

Joe gave a grim smile when he saw the revolving *New Scotland Yard* sign outside the twenty-story building where he used to work. His father had been based here and at one time, Joe had thought he'd rather clean toilets for a living than follow the same road as his father. But his resistance was based more on not doing what his dad wanted than any deep-seated antipathy towards a career in law enforcement. Trite as it sounded, Joe had an inbuilt desire to right wrongs and protect the innocent. He found forensic science fascinating and the criminal mind intriguing. Investigative work came as second nature and the chance to work undercover had come at a time when he was looking for a new challenge.

He parked his bike in the Chief Superintendent's spot and waited for Poppy who was using public transport. When he saw her approaching, she reminded him of a schoolgirl on her way to the headmaster's office, head down, slow steps, grim-faced. Joe had no idea why his ex-boss wanted to see her, but surely it couldn't be anything to worry about. Poppy saw Joe waiting and her face lit up, though only for a moment.

"Don't look so petrified," Joe said, wishing he could give her a hug.

"Are you going to come in with me?"

"Do you want me to?"

Poppy nodded, chewing her nail. He was glad now that he'd decided not to tell her about the cartoons. She was worried enough by this call to the Yard.

"All right. Then afterward, as a treat, we'll go and look at the two hundred and thirty-six truncheons they have on display," Joe said.

Poppy laughed.

"I might even get mine out."

When they reached DCS Watson's office, his secretary said he was going to be busy for an hour, but wanted Poppy to wait.

"There's plenty of reading material," said the short, chubby woman, nodding toward the coffee table.

Joe smiled at the way Poppy's eyes glazed over as she looked at the titles. He didn't fancy an hour studying *The European Agreement concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road* or *The Socio-economic Impact of Urbanization and Mobility of Ethnic Minorities on Homeland Security*. Joe could have stayed with her but she couldn't talk to him and he wanted to look in on his old squad.

"I'll go for a wander. I'll come back," he said and air kissed her cheek.

She gave him a worried smile.

The open plan office he'd shared with the other members of the Serious and Organized Crime Command was just down the corridor from the DCS. Joe hoped there might be something he could get involved with, some place he could go that they couldn't. Then he'd tell Poppy and she could make an anonymous call and a good deed would be done.

Joe felt a lump in his throat when he pushed open the door and walked in. It had been his life and it was over. His partner, Keith Worth, stood by the window talking to a young black guy Joe didn't recognize. Joe started to call Keith and then remembered there was no point.

"Joe?"

For a moment, Joe assumed there was someone with the same name but when he turned, he saw Mal Thomas sitting at a desk in the corner. Mal had died from lung cancer three months before Joe's demise. He looked terrible, his ash-gray face thin and gaunt, his eyes sunken in his skull. Joe walked over.

"Mal. It's great to see—" Joe stopped. "Fuck, no it isn't great and you look like shit." Mal gave a wry smile. Joe sat on the edge of his desk.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Mal said. "I'd have thought you'd have done enough good deeds to get gold-plated wings."

Joe's chest tightened. "Must have been those copies of *Playboy* I nicked when I was in my teens."

Maybe it was. His mother had found them hidden in the cavity at the bottom of his wardrobe. She had the nose of a bloodhound. His father had gone wild with his cane.

"Sorry to hear about what happened to you," Mal said.

Not as sorry as Joe.

"To be honest, I'm bewildered," Joe said. "I keep wondering if I'm lying in a coma, dreaming, but then I wouldn't be dreaming of a sad fuck like you. I take it we're in the same boat. You haven't discovered whatever it is you need to do to get your white wings."

Mal seemed to go even grayer. "No. I come in every day. I'm trying to work out who killed that banker and his daughter. I figure that's my key."

An unsolved double murder eighteen months ago that had shocked all of them by the ferocity of the attack.

"How's Irene?" Joe asked, remembering the name of Mal's wife. "Can she see you?"

Mal's face darkened. "See me? No. Only seekers can see each other. Irene married again last month. The bitch."

Joe winced. He considered pointing out that Irene was young, still had a life, Mal had been a bit of a miserable twat while he was alive, and didn't seem to have changed now he was dead, but he didn't. Joe imagined Poppy with someone else and felt the ache deep in his gut.

"I thought I'd take a look at what Keith's working on, see if I can help," Joe said as Keith walked back to his desk.

Joe didn't intend to go down Mal's route and try to solve an old crime. If he hadn't managed it while he was alive with all the resources available, what hope did he have when the trail was as dead as him?

"Good luck." Mal turned back to his files.

Joe came up behind Keith. His partner's bald spot was worse. Joe wished he could tease him about it. Keith was in his late forties, with three teenage girls, a wife and mistress to support. Well, he had the last time Joe saw him. Joe watched Keith tap in his password—s7xydud7. That was new and nowhere near accurate.

When the black guy sat at the next desk, Joe's desk, he realized he was his replacement.

"Any luck with the two in Exeter Street, Pete?" Keith asked.

"Not yet. Neither of them will press charges."

"I'm fucking sick of these stupid women." Keith shoved his keyboard away. "They're no better than the men who bring them into the country. They must know what they're letting themselves in for. How can they think they'll end up with a well-paid job and a nice house in London when they come from some hick job in Hicksville? It's all a fucking waste of time. Most of them don't want to be helped."

"But we should support the ones that do," said Pete, still young and eager. "That's what we're here for, isn't it? To help those less fortunate members of society."

Abso-fucking-lutely, Joe thought. Good for you, mate.

"If Joe heard you sitting there spouting the party line, he'd be gagging," said Keith, the old and jaded.

Joe stood up straighter. Gagging? But that was what they were there for, to protect people from the criminal minority and to help those who couldn't help themselves. Not just a platitude, but true.

"Do you miss him?" Pete asked.

The legions of hell couldn't have dragged Joe away. Well, maybe a couple of demons might have managed it, but he was intent on hearing what Keith had to say. They'd had a good working relationship. They joked around, but could trust one another. Keith was his mate.

"Not really."

Joe's heart slammed to a halt. The wanker didn't miss him? All those lunches he'd bought, all the times he'd covered for Keith with his wife or his mistress, and the bastard couldn't even miss him a little?

"He was good at his job, don't get me wrong, but he was bit of a smartass, a cold bastard. Always thought he knew best—well, better than anyone else. I never felt he really cared about the people we deal with, only about making the monthly targets, impressing those along the corridor."

Joe glanced at Mal to see if he was listening. He had his head down, but Joe guessed his ears would be flapping like an elephant. It was easy to scoff at figures, but there were targets to achieve and Joe never manipulated the statistics. What right had Keith to claim Joe didn't care about people, when Keith thought the trafficked women were as bad as the guys who trafficked them? Joe had never thought that. The women were being exploited and needed as much help as the police could give them.

"But this job's all about people," Pete said. "Making sure the good guys come out ahead of the bad guys."

You tell him, Joe thought.

"Joe wanted that too, but he didn't always go about it in the right way."

Joe froze, turned into a statue cemented into the floor.

"Terrible tragedy – how he died." Pete shook his head.

"More of one for his girlfriend. She knocked him over the edge, then tried to drag him back and couldn't. He was a dead weight and she had a piece of glass digging into her hip as she clung onto him. Lost a shitload of blood."

Joe's blood drained in sympathy. Oh fuck. Why hadn't she told him?

"She let him go?"

"She had to. He'd have pulled her over. I heard she's back at work, but it must be hard to live with something like that." Keith shrugged.

The phone rang and moments later the two men walked out of the room summoned by the boss. Joe felt like he'd been blown up in an explosion. His head spun and he couldn't see straight. That scar on Poppy's hip, why hadn't she told him how it had happened? Keith's words echoed in his head. How could Joe have expected her to pull him up? She was strong, but not that strong. And she hadn't let him go deliberately. He'd slid out of her grasp. It wasn't her fault.

A cold-hearted smartass. Was that what everyone thought? Joe bit his lip. So much for being an efficient police officer whose figures were the best in the division. His spine stiffened. Cold-hearted? Did they think he didn't care? He fucking did care, he just didn't show it. That was the way he was made, the way his parents had made him. He never showed how much they hurt him because that gave them the power to control him. Better to keep your emotions under check.

Joe sat at Keith's computer. Keith had logged out before he left and Joe tapped in the password. He went through all the current files, skim-reading to see if anything leapt out at him. Nothing did. He hesitated before he clicked on *Operation Bluevitriol*. Not much seemed to have happened in the case that got Joe killed. Buxton had escaped and was still at large, his business in liquidation.

He'd used his transport company to smuggle people from Eastern Europe into the United Kingdom along with legitimate goods. Joe had been gathering useful information before he'd died, details of routes used, names of people involved in the UK. Luckily he'd been able to pass it all on before he'd taken a dive off the roof. Joe

guessed the illegal part of the operation still existed in some form but had gone deeper underground. Probably one of Buxton's two sons bringing the women in now while Buxton sunned himself on some exotic South American beach.

When Keith and Pete came back into the room, Joe closed the file and moved away from the computer. He knew he ought to go and see if Poppy was still waiting, but he wanted to hear if Keith had anything else to say about him.

"Who was that woman you were staring at, outside the DCS's office?" Pete asked.

"She was the one I was telling you about. Joe's bird. I wonder why the hell the boss wants to see her?"

Keith tugged at his ear. Joe had won an imaginary fortune from him in poker on stakeouts. He knew every one of Keith's nervous tics and ear-pulling was at the top. When Keith sat at his computer, all the color leached from his face. He looked almost as bad as Mal. Joe watched carefully.

"What the fuck...?" Keith's hands shook as he tapped the keyboard.

"What?" Pete asked.

Keith looked around.

"Someone's been on my computer."

"Who'd know your password?"

"You might have seen it."

Pete glared. "I've not left your side. Anyway, I don't know your bloody password. Are you sure someone's been on?"

"Yes, I'm fucking sure. It's the file order. I know what I last looked at and it isn't what's showing."

Joe's heart pounded. He wasn't supposed to have any effect on things in this reality so how had that happened?

"What have they read?" Pete asked.

Keith clicked off every screen and jumped up. "Doesn't matter. Forget it. I probably made a mistake. Get on with the paperwork for last night. I need to make a few phone calls."

Joe followed Keith out of the office. It could all have been nothing, but he knew it wasn't. Keith was hiding something.

* * * * *

After Poppy checked twice to make sure there were no celebrity magazines hiding under the heavyweight publications on the coffee table, or anything with pictures, she resorted to counting spots on the carpet, then cracks in the wall. She wished Joe was there, but there was no sign of him. She guessed coming back to the Yard had been hard. It made her feel guiltier for what had happened. Poppy opened her mouth in a

huge yawn just as DCS Watson poked his head around the door to beckon her into his room. *Shit*.

"Constable Field. Come in." He closed the door behind her and pointed to a chair. "How are things?"

"Fine, sir."

The only answer Poppy could give and the only one he wanted to hear. She sat on the edge of the seat and tried to look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. If he knew about her getting stuck up the tree, that was probably what he thought of her.

"There are two reasons I asked you to come here today. The first is rather serious." Poppy slumped in the chair.

"It's come to our attention that Jethro Buxton is planning to return to England to see his dying mother. We're watching out for him at all ports of entry, and we'll keep an eye out to ensure your safety but I wanted to warn you to be vigilant. Your partner, Graham, has been advised too, but if Buxton is apprehended, you'll be the main witness at his trial. You know we want him for Joe's murder. There's a possibility he may decide to do something about that and try to shut you up."

Poppy tried to appear unconcerned when all she wanted to do was hide in the corner and gibber. Joe appeared at her side looking gray and drawn. He dropped into the chair next to her, stretched his long legs out in front of him, and gave her a little smile. Even pale, he was gorgeous. His hard eyes were softened by fringes of dark, thick lashes, his...

"Something you find fascinating about my filing cabinet?" asked the DCS.

Poppy spun around to face him. "Spider. Sorry."

"The other thing I have to tell you is much more pleasant. I have some good news for you." He beamed at her. "You've been recommended for a bravery award."

"W-what?" Poppy's stomach reacted at the same time as her mouth and she swallowed hard. She wondered what the DCS would do if she added a few more spots to his carpet.

"You risked your life attempting to help a fellow police officer. You knew Buxton had a gun and you were unarmed. I know you and Joe were in a relationship, but I feel you—"

Poppy jumped to her feet. "No. I don't want it. I wasn't brave. Joe was brave."

"I've put Joe forward for a posthumous award, but—"

Poppy backed to the door. "I'm sorry, sir, but I really don't want..."

She clamped a hand to her mouth and fled.

Joe caught up with her as she pushed open the door of the Ladies. He followed her inside.

"Go away," Poppy shouted and rushed into a cubicle.

Joe stood by the wash basins and waited. After a few moments, the toilet flushed and Poppy emerged with a white face. Ignoring him, she turned on a cold tap, splashed water into her mouth, and then leaned with her hands gripping the sides of the basin, watching the water swirl down the plug hole. Joe knew he couldn't hold her but he wrapped his arms around her anyway, so she could see he wanted to.

"He's right," Joe said. "You were brave, Poppy. I've been stupid. None of it was your fault."

She shook her head. "You wouldn't be dead if I'd done what you said."

"You were injured yourself."

"It was nothing."

He'd seen the scar and not pushed. Why hadn't he asked her what happened? The knowledge of how much he'd hurt her slammed into Joe like an express train.

"Let's go home. I want to hold you," he whispered.

She pulled a paper towel from the dispenser and wiped her face.

They'd only just stepped out of the Ladies when a man further down the corridor called her.

"Good afternoon, Poppy."

"Hello, Dr. Martell."

"How are you?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Really?" The doctor looked at her over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. "How's Joe? Still around?"

"The thing is," Poppy said, looking straight into the man's face. "I understand now that it was because I wanted to see Joe so much that my brain convinced me he was there."

"Excellent. Show's you're making progress."

Joe wanted to smash the smile off the guy's face.

"Only, now I really can see him," Poppy said and managed the smile removal herself.

"You think he's here?"

"Not think. I know. He's by your side."

The doctor turned.

"Other side," Poppy said.

Joe whipped around to the opposite side and pulled a face at Poppy. She didn't smile. The doctor stared down an empty corridor.

"Maybe I should tell him what you seem unable to say. Joe, leave her alone. Don't you think you've hurt her enough? Let her live her life."

"No," Poppy gasped and stepped forward. "Don't say that. I don't want him to go. I need him."

The doctor stared at her for a moment. "I want you to make an appointment to see me before your scheduled one. First thing Monday morning."

"Yes, sir."

Joe followed Poppy from the building, his mind whirling.

"Too late to go back to work now," Poppy mumbled. "Might as well go home, slit my wrists and stick my head in the oven." She stopped walking and looked at Joe. "Have I gone crazy?"

"No."

"You really are here?" she whispered, looking so lost, Joe found it hard to breathe.

"Yes." He hesitated. "Do you want me to go, Poppy? Maybe I should."

"No." She reached out to grab him and her arm went through his chest. Poppy smiled. "Fancy a Thai takeout? Go get your bike and I'll meet you at the Jade Garden."

I fancy you, Joe thought, and all the way back to Greenwich tried to think how he could make things up to her.

* * * * *

"Hi, not see you long time," the Thai manager said when they walked in. Joe and Poppy had been regulars.

"You want pad thai noodle with prawn, green chicken curry and fried rice?" Poppy smiled. "You remember."

"You two always same. Always smile. Always eat same. You make nice couple. He make you come on own this time? He watching TV, eh?"

And Joe knew that he couldn't do this to Poppy, that maybe the right thing was to leave her alone. He was looking in the wrong place for the path to white wings. There was no case to solve, no criminal wrong to put right. Only his wrong. He'd held Poppy responsible for his death. She'd done her best to save him and he'd failed to see that. Now he did and he had to let her go. But he wanted one last night.

Chapter Nine

The closer they drew to her apartment, the happier Poppy became. Desperate to touch Joe again, she could feel her mood lifting as though she'd been pumped full of helium.

"Food first or frantic sex?" she asked.

Joe tripped on the step.

Poppy grinned. "Oh no, you're lightheaded. You must need food."

"I could wait a few minutes."

She pouted. "I was hoping for longer than that."

Poppy rushed through the outer door of her building and as Joe followed, she turned and reached for him. His fingers wrapped around hers and they both let out a deep sigh. Two feet inside the vestibule and Joe's mouth was on her neck, his hand in the gap between her skirt and blouse, fingertips stroking her bare skin sending sparks to her crotch. Poppy was caught up in an electrical storm—her body hummed for him.

"I was scared I wouldn't be able to touch you," Poppy whispered as she clung to his waist.

"Upstairs, before I commit an act of public indecency and you get charged with having sex with the invisible man." Joe tugged her towards the stairs.

Inside her apartment with the door kicked shut, Poppy only had time to put down the food before Joe was on her. He pressed her into the wall, his hands curling around her hips as his mouth sought hers. Poppy wrapped her arms around him, shuddering with pleasure when she felt the hard ridge of his erection rising between them. His kiss was so long and deep, breathing became a problem and she had to drag her mouth away to gulp air into her lungs. Joe wouldn't let her go. He brought his lips back to hers and kissed her as though it was the last chance he'd have. At that thought, Poppy kissed him more frantically and this time, Joe pulled back.

"God, Poppy, you drive me wild. I wanted to make this last, but you'll be lucky to get a couple of minutes out of me."

As his fingers fumbled with the buttons on her shirt, his relentless heat-seeking lips homed in on hers again. Gentle this time, no soul sucking but teasing exploration followed by slow pulsing. His hands stopped moving as the kiss deepened. Joe gave a deep groan.

They left a trail of clothes all the way to the bedroom, Joe's left sock the last item to hit the floor. As Poppy crawled onto the bed, his hands snagged her waist and tugged her into reverse. His cock nestled between her legs and she arched back, rubbing her slippery cleft up and down his length.

"God, Poppy. I'm on a hair trigger here."

"I need you now, Joe."

Not that he needed the encouragement. In one urgent, powerful thrust, his hands gripping her hips, Joe buried himself inside her.

"Oh, that feels so good," Poppy groaned. "Is that just one finger?"

He shook as he laughed and his cock twitched inside her.

"You're evil," Joe said.

He held her steady and began to pulse. Poppy felt him change. His muscles, already tight, drew tighter. His fingers dug into her hips and his breathing grew ragged. She pushed back to meet his thrusts and they both began panting.

"Poppy, oh Christ."

One more thrust and as his cock jerked and spurted inside her, Poppy's muscles joined the party. She cried out and unraveled like a paper streamer launched into the air. Ribbons of pleasure twisting through her body as she slumped forward.

Joe lay against her back, sliding his hands underneath her to envelop her breasts. She could feel him shaking, his breath little puffs of air on her neck.

"I was going to apologize for that being so fast but it was your fault," he said. "But I really needed to do that and I'm going to need to do it again once I've recovered."

"Can you make it last a bit longer next time? And use your cock."

Joe laughed and collapsed on his side, taking her with him. "I'll make you regret saying that." He pulled out of her and turned her over. "Poppy, you do know how much I..."

Her heart skipped a beat, but Joe went silent. He pressed his face into her neck and nuzzled her. The combination of his soft lips and slightly rough chin sent Poppy soaring back towards paradise. His tongue trailed along her collarbone, licking and teasing before dropping to trace the inner curve of her breast. Poppy quivered like a kitten. Joe cupped her left breast and rubbed the swollen tip with his thumb while his lips teased the other nipple. As she whimpered, he switched and switched again until Poppy writhed beneath him.

His head moved lower, and her skin twitched around her bellybutton with every brush of his lips. When she felt his shoulders shaking, she knew he was laughing. Poppy pushed herself up on her elbows. "What's funny?"

"You are. Watching your stomach quiver. It's like that film Alien."

Poppy meshed her fingers in his hair and wrapped her legs around his back. "Well, guess what? When the monster leaps out of me, it's you he's going to eat."

Joe wriggled free, pushed up her knees and nestled between her legs, his tongue running along her folds, sucking up her cream, teasing her clit until Poppy drummed on his back with her heels. She could feel herself coming again, the ripples gaining strength, growing into waves, and she stopped kicking to let the surge sweep over her and carry her away. The sensation of coming was so overwhelming, Poppy lost all sense but that. It was like her world ended just for a moment in a blaze of glorious pleasure. She gave a deep sigh as the last tremor faded away.

"Good?" Joe asked.

"Aarghhh."

Joe spread her legs wider. As he nipped her with his teeth, Poppy's back arched off the bed.

"No...gawwwd," she gasped.

He caught her flailing hands and entwined his fingers with hers. "I've rendered you speechless. My work is done."

When Poppy slid into an exhausted nap, Joe ran her a bath. He was hungry but the food could wait. He tipped in half a bottle of pink gloop he found on the shelf, stared at the pathetic number of bubbles being produced and tipped in the rest under the tap. He stared at the red plastic container that sat on the floor and realized it contained his ashes. Joe wondered what he looked like. He pried off the top. Cat litter. He wished he'd not bothered.

Joe went back into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Poppy, still flushed from fucking, her lips swollen. Probably both set of lips swollen. Joe grinned and the smile slipped from his face. He wanted to give Poppy the world and it was too late. The one thing he could give her was the one thing she wouldn't want. Joe had to let her go. Poppy still had a life to live and it couldn't be with him.

The stab of pain that knowledge brought made Joe's breath lodge in his throat. Poppy had one arm tucked under her pillow, the other curled close to her face and she looked about ten years old. Her fingers were long and delicate, her wrists tiny, her skin soft and smooth. Joe's eyes lingered on the jagged red scar at her hip and he flinched. His weight had pulled her onto the glass. She could have died too.

"What's that noise?" Poppy asked, her eyelids fluttering open.

"Shit."

Joe leapt for the bathroom. The water hadn't reached the top of the tub, but the foam had and oozed over the floor like some pink-tinged fungus. His shoulders slumped.

"Shit. I wanted it to be nice and all I've done is make a mess."

Poppy rested her head against his back. "Doesn't matter. It's the thought that counts."

Joe turned and hugged her. "I've made a mess of everything."

"I can mop up with towels, it's fine, don't worry."

He put his forehead against hers. "I don't mean that. I...I..." Fuck, why couldn't he get the words out? Poppy pulled away and stepped into the foam.

"I'm going to do a reverse Aphrodite."

Joe's jaw twitched. He was allowing Poppy do what she always did when he struggled with his emotions—let him off the hook.

"Not sure you're going to be able to find me in here." She lay down, sent a wave of bubbles pouring over the rim and all but disappeared.

Joe laughed and blew a hole in the foam over her face.

"You get in too," Poppy said.

By the time Joe was in with her and Poppy lay on his chest, the entire bathroom was splattered with flecks of foam. They took turns with the soap, each lathering a limb and the bubbles prickled and popped as they disintegrated around them. Joe washed Poppy's hair and wondered why the hell they'd never done this before. He was as turned-on as Poppy. Like an ecstatic snake, she slithered with delight under his hands. They behaved like two little kids, shaping each others hair into spikes, ridges and curls, and for a while, Joe forgot this couldn't last.

* * * * *

"Why do we have to get dressed to eat?" Poppy grumbled as she pulled on the black dress Joe had taken from her wardrobe.

"Because I want it to be as if we'd gone out to a restaurant. I can't do that with you so this is the next best thing."

"Ah, so it's not because you want me to do a striptease for dessert?"

Joe growled. "Set the table while I reheat the food."

Poppy loved him so much, her heart hurt. They worked side by side, and no more than a few seconds passed before one of them reached to touch the other, a simple fingertip stroke, a caress with a hand, a brush with the side of the body, a bare foot on a calf, a pinched backside.

"Ouch," Joe yelped.

"I can't help it. Your butt just asks for it, pleads for it. It's frustrated under your pants. It's telling me it wants freedom."

"And do you listen to all my body parts?"

"Yes, except your mouth."

Poppy dodged out of his reach. She wanted so much to tell him that she loved him but the look that came over Joe's face when she'd blurted it out twice since he'd come back, trapped the words in her heart. But Joe had changed. He seemed gentler, more aware of her. Poppy caught him looking at her sometimes as though he was seeing her for the first time. Was he falling in love with her?

Joe opened a bottle of white wine, dimmed the lights and pulled out Poppy's chair for her. He'd found two stubby, mismatched emergency candles, stuck them in saucers and lit them. Poppy was astounded. Romance and Joe were not words that went in the same sentence unless there was a *not* in there too. Joe shook out the length of kitchen roll he'd ripped off for a napkin and with a wink, placed it over Poppy's lap.

The Thai food was delicious as usual and as usual, Joe speared one of her prawns each time she had the chopsticks close to her mouth. Poppy was always unwilling to stop what she was doing to stab the thieving bastard because she didn't find eating with chopsticks very easy. By the time she'd achieved the minor miracle of a full load heading towards her mouth, she was salivating.

Joe ate at three times her speed and occasionally offered her a mouthful with his own sticks but Poppy saw the meal as a challenge and liked to empty her plate herself. Joe speared her last prawn as Poppy balanced a swirl of noodles in front of her mouth. He didn't eat it, but waited until she'd finished and offered it to her. As Poppy wrapped her lips around it, she suddenly realized what this evening was about and couldn't swallow.

The effort of not spitting the prawn out made her shake. Finally, it went down. She'd eat no more. Joe wasn't looking at her for the first time, instead he was looking at her for the last. He'd done something to earn his wings and was saying goodbye. Only Joe wouldn't *say* anything. He'd just go. She twirled her chopsticks in the remains of the noodles but never lifted them to her mouth. Joe's dish was empty, hers half-full, just like their lives except Poppy's was empty without Joe.

He reached across the table and took hold of her hand. Poppy wondered what had made that dent in the table.

"Poppy, look at me."

Joe needed to change his shirt. He'd dripped sauce on it. She'd lost count of the number of times he'd had to strip off halfway through a meal so she could put his shirt in cold water. Still, there was the added compensation of having his lovely chest to look at. Those rounded pecs topped by tight copper nipples. She sucked her lip.

"Look at my face, Poppy."

Oh God. When she did, Poppy was lost, swept up in the dark storm clouds of his eyes, tossed in heavy seas, sinking, drowning. Her fist clenched.

"You weren't responsible for what happened to me. I should never have let you think you were. How could you have hauled me back onto the roof? Apart from the fact that you were injured, I weigh a hell of lot more than you. It was an accident, Poppy. You didn't let me go. I slipped from your grasp. I didn't need to forgive you because it was never your fault. You were brave."

"But I knocked -"

His hand tightened around hers. "No buts. You tried to save me. You didn't want to let me go and you've let guilt consume you to the point that you imagined I was still with you. In holding yourself responsible for my death, you bound us together with barbed wire. You want to feel guilty because that makes you hurt more."

She bit the inside of her cheeks so hard, she tasted blood.

"You're punishing yourself for something that isn't your fault. I can't let you do that, Poppy. You're alive. I'm dead. You deserve to be happy. I can't take you out for meals or dance with you in a club. We can never walk hand in hand on a beach. We don't exist outside this apartment. I need to let you go. That's what I have to do to get my white wings. This is our last night and I want it to be perfect."

His words froze the breath in her lungs, stopped her heart, clogged her veins.

"If you're dead, then I want to die too," she whispered.

Joe shook his head. "No, you don't."

If you disappear, I'll kill myself.

"Don't you dare," Joe said. "I know what you're thinking." He released her hand and wiped the tear from under her eye. "You're not in the shower. No crying. Eat while it's still warm."

"I can't," Poppy whispered. "I don't want to waste one minute doing anything other than holding you."

She stood and slipped out of the dress, letting it fall to the floor by her chair. The Adam's apple in Joe's throat moved up and down as he stared at her. Poppy reached to the fastening of her bra and he stopped her.

"No. Come here."

Poppy surrendered into his arms. Joe turned his chair away from the table, pulled her down so she straddled his lap and pressed his lips to hers. One hand held the nape of her neck, the other slid up her back and unsnapped her bra. Poppy lowered her arms and the bra dropped. Pulling her wrists free she let it fall to the floor.

"Oh Poppy, you are so beautiful. Look at these, all hard and ready to go."

He rubbed his fingers over her nipples. Heat spiked through her to leave a tingling in her clit.

"Unfasten my shirt." His voice was rough and ragged.

Poppy's fumbling fingers undid every button, tugged the shirt out of his pants and pushed it off his shoulders to join her bra. Joe pulled her forward to kiss her again, rocking against her, his tongue tracing the outline of her lips before slipping between her teeth. His cock pressed against her belly, straining to escape his pants. Poppy trembled and moaned when Joe's lips swooped to her ear and rimmed the delicate shell before nibbling the lobe. The feel of his breath at that spot turned Poppy's heat up to full power.

She clung to Joe's shoulders as he ran his lips down the column of her neck and along the line of her chin. Tiny kisses, long wet slurps, Poppy loved them all. Loved Joe.

I love you.

She held in her head the words she longed to say, afraid he'd push her away for the third time. He supported her at the waist and tipped her back so he could lick a path to her nipples. Joe sucked one then the other, teasing with his teeth, soothing with the flat of his warm tongue, circling with his soft lips. Poppy reached such a state of bliss she

could no longer focus. Lost in some erotic dream, waves of sensation curled her toes and made her hair prickle. Joe homed in on every erogenous zone north of her waist and her body thrummed with excitement.

Joe pulled her close to his chest, his tight nipples rubbing against her breasts as he brought his mouth down on hers again. His tongue plunged between her lips, and Poppy drank and drank. No one had ever kissed her like Joe. No one ever would. She could come just from his kiss. The very first time they'd joined lips, the day they'd met, she'd unraveled in his arms. They stood in the middle of a restaurant and Joe had laughed in her ear and told her he was going to arrest her for coming without permission.

Joe's fingers slid down her body leaving ripples in their wake. When he touched her panties he laughed into her mouth. "Not ready for me yet?"

Poppy didn't think she'd ever been this drenched. He trailed one finger under the edge of the material along the line of her belly and her pussy muscles clenched hard enough to make her shudder. Poppy's thighs trembled, her breathing reduced to ragged little bursts. That same lovely finger snuck down her groin and pushed the panties aside. Joe stroked the brown curls he'd exposed and then slid his finger over her slick folds before he gently delved inside.

She clenched around him, biting contractions radiating from her core to fling her into a whirlpool of sensation. Poppy sighed into his mouth as she came apart, a long trembling exhale that he swallowed.

"My little firecracker," Joe said with a laugh.

He pulled his finger out of her tight sheath and stroked her wet folds back and forth, side to side, avoiding her clit. Poppy tried to shift on his lap to get him to the right spot, the one that would make her come again. Joe clamped his other hand on her hip to hold her still.

"Wait, sweetheart," he whispered into her mouth.

He pushed more of her panties aside and then there were two fingers inside her and Poppy was making a weird noise. She wanted to move, but Joe wouldn't let her. Each time she hovered on the brink of falling, he pulled back. Frustrated anticipation fed her desire.

Poppy dragged her mouth from his. "How long?" she gasped.

"What? How long is my cock?"

"Stop it."

Joe's fingers stopped moving.

"Not that. Keep doing that. Stop teasing me."

"Never. I'm going to make you come so many times you'll lose count," he whispered. "I'm going to fuck you until you see stars, until you scream my name, so you never forget me."

He didn't need the third finger. Poppy came shuddering and crying as she slumped against him.

Joe caressed from her neck to her waist as she rested her head on his shoulder. He told his cock and balls to stop complaining and show some dignity. Another burst of pre-cum wet his pants. Joe scooped Poppy's cream from between her legs and smeared it over her lips, then he kissed her. Poppy caught his hand, brought it to her mouth and wrapped her lips around each of his fingers in turn, sucking so hard she yanked a groan from his throat and turned up the fire in his balls.

"I want you on the table for dessert," he whispered.

"Move the candles first or I'll be a flambé."

Joe laughed. He stood and sat her on the chair while he cleared the table. He left the candles alight on the counter and shucked off his pants and boxers. He hadn't bothered with socks and shoes. Joe turned from the sink to see her lying on the table, knees raised and legs spread. His eyes glazed over and he had to grab the root of his cock to stop himself spurting. The panties were gone.

"Hey, I wanted to take those off," he said.

"They dissolved."

He dragged the chair to the end of the table and sat staring at her soft, pink folds, all wet and glistening in the candlelight. Joe inhaled her musky scent and yanked down on his balls. *Not yet*. He kissed her toes, swept his lips around her ankle, licking as he went and let his fingers follow the wet trail, up the swell of her calf, lingering over that ultrasensitive spot behind her knee, on along the inside of her quivering thigh until he laid his mouth over her core.

Joe breathed on her pussy and Poppy's back arched. Her fingers grasped the edge of the table and Joe moved his hands over hers, rubbing her taut knuckles with his thumbs. He peeled her right hand free and brought it between her legs, so his mouth and both their hands lay in the same place.

"Bring yourself off, Poppy," he whispered.

He loved watching her do this, sometimes made her do it in public—in a restaurant, in the cinema and the park. Her fingers sank into her folds, twisting below the damp curls of her public hair. The room slipped away. Joe smelt her musk, scented his own arousal. He listened to the sounds of her movements, the soft wetness as she speared herself, the breathy groans from her throat. More cream gushed from her and his cock felt fit to burst. There was no way he could watch this and not come. Joe climbed on the table astride her and lowered his cock to her mouth.

"Suck me," he said, his voice almost breaking.

He cradled the back of her head in his palm as he pressed his cock down. Poppy opened wide and engulfed him. The moment she tightened her lips around him, Joe almost lost it but managed to drag himself back. He was a little afraid he'd fall off the

table and take her with him but now he'd started this, he didn't want to stop. He could feel her arms rubbing his backside as she pleasured herself, feel she was close by the way she gasped around his dick. Joe wanted to fuck her mouth hard but he also wanted this to last. Poppy wrapped her lips around the head of his cock and squeezed and Joe's knees shook. Her mouth was liquid heat, a wet heaven, and in a moment he was going to make it wetter.

Watching himself slide in and out of her mouth mesmerized Joe. She tried to take him deeper and Joe had to lean forward, rest one hand on the back of a chair. Fortunately the chair was up against the wall, otherwise he suspected it would have slid out under the pressure. Poppy's head dropped back over the end of the table and Joe slid deeper into her mouth. She gasped and he tried to pull out, thinking she couldn't breathe but she made a mewling sound and sucked him back.

Poppy stiffened beneath him as she came and swallowed his cock down to his balls. Joe's world winked out and so did his wings. It felt like his back had exploded at the same time as his dick. Poppy's throat vibrated against him and Joe's cum flashed from his balls like bullets. Her hands clasped his backside, one finger pressing against his asshole. Poppy kept him where he was but Joe's knees had locked.

He expected the orgasm to fade but it kept going. Joe pulled back from her mouth so she could breathe and settled his cock between her breasts. Poppy's hands slid to press the creamy mounds around him, massaging his dick and his cum kept firing. What the fuck was happening? Not that he was complaining. Jesus, his balls were ablaze.

Rather than the gripping spasms lessening in intensity, they seemed to be increasing. Joe worried his head might blow off and then his other head did instead. In one final ecstatic burst, he soaked her breasts and neck with his juice and Joe roared her name.

"Poppy!"

His wings launched a frenzied flutter and tipped Joe off the table.

Poppy dropped to his side. "God, Joe, are you okay?"

He pulled her into his arms.

"My angel," she whispered and pressed her lips to his.

Joe tasted himself, tasted her and wrapped his wings around them. Poppy was wrong. She was his angel.

Chapter Ten

Poppy wasn't sure she was still alive. Her ears rang, her eyesight wavered in and out of focus and she shook from head to foot. Joe held her wrapped in his arms and in his wings, his lips pressed against her neck. Good grief, it was hot under all those feathers.

"I'm roasting," she said.

One wing unfurled and then Joe yelped. "Shit, I'm on fire."

Poppy sprang into action. She grabbed a half-drunk glass of water from the counter and tossed it onto the smoldering feathers. The fire went out and Poppy sighed with relief.

"Okay?" she asked.

"Only singed. Jesus what a horrible smell."

The smoke alarm agreed, its loud bleep deafening. Poppy laughed. She grabbed a chair and climbed up to take out the battery but the cover proved impossible to pry off. Joe's wing tip pushed her hand aside and flipped the whole detector off the ceiling. It crashed to the floor and broke into pieces, the battery flying under the stove.

"Joe!"

"What? I stopped it, didn't I?"

The phone rang. Poppy lifted it off the hook and bit her lip.

"Sorry...no, no fire...yes...sorry...toast. No, it won't happen again. Sorry to have disturbed you."

Joe took the phone from her hand and put it down.

"Ooh, you fibber," he said.

"The guy downstairs. I didn't think he'd go for the "my angel just set fire to his wing" so I improvised. Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

"I'm in excruciating agony."

Poppy sighed. "What a pity. No more sex then."

"It's a miracle. I'm better." Joe looked up. "Thanks, G."

She frowned. "I don't think I want to stand next to you."

"Why not?"

"Because when that thunderbolt arrives, I don't want to get caught up in the fireball. Mind you, I've got so much of your cum all over me, I don't think I could catch fire."

Joe growled. Poppy grabbed a fresh cloth from under the sink and wiped her breasts.

"I also can't help but notice your wings are still a dirty shade of pale so you haven't given me enough mind-blowing, orgasmic sex to turn them white." She sighed. "I'm so disappointed."

Joe's growl grew deeper and he took a step nearer.

"Mind you, that last time, Joe, what the hell happened? You seemed to get a second wind or something."

"Poppy."

"I didn't think guys could come and come and —"

"Shut up," he snapped and tossed her over his shoulder. Poppy ran her hands down his feathers and Joe nipped her backside. She squealed and got another nip. He carried her through to the bedroom, dropped her on the bed and stood glaring at her. Poppy tried not to look at his erection and failed.

"You're hard again," she said.

"Oh, really?"

Poppy sniggered. "Er...Joe. Noticed anything different lately?"

"What sort of different?"

"Your cock."

He looked down and gasped. "Fucking hell."

"Not just my imagination then. I mean you were already...er...generously endowed, but—"

"Maybe that's what Desiree meant about angels having fabulous sex. They get enhancements. Bigger, better and longer lasting."

Poppy tried to stop her mouth quivering but Joe saw. He dropped down next to her and kissed her, a long sloppy kiss that he slurped to the end of her nose. "Stop worrying. I don't care about sex with angels, I just care about sex with you."

"Only because you don't have an angel to have sex with. Maybe angels -"

"Poppy, don't."

She shut her mouth.

"Want to go for a ride, test the equipment, see if it's in working order?" He grinned.

"I don't think so."

He bent, pressed his mouth to hers then pulled away. "Say yes."

"No."

Joe fit his mouth over her ear and dipped his tongue inside. "Go on."

He pushed his leg between her thighs and she rubbed her clit against him. He groaned. Poppy whimpered and felt a spurt of dampness leak from her.

"Let me," he whispered.

Not that Poppy had intended to stop him but his gentle kisses gave way to something more raw and primitive. Their hands roamed each others bodies as the kisses grew more passionate. Poppy touched flesh, feathers, ran her fingers along his jaw, up the taut column of his neck until she cupped his face. Joe ground himself into her, his cock rubbing against her soft mound. She breathed in the sexy scent of him. Stronger somehow. She listened to his breathing, deep inhalations as he held himself over her. Poppy looked into his eyes and saw love even if he couldn't say it.

"Fuck me, Joe," she whispered and opened her legs.

He groaned and adjusted his position so he could press the head of his cock against the entrance to her body. Poppy wriggled and trails of pleasure began trickling paths inside her, sending tingles to the tips of her toes.

"I don't want to hurt you," Joe said.

"I'll hurt you if you stop now."

He let out a choked laugh.

Joe pressed the rounded crest of his cock into her, kept pressing and letting her adjust until he was buried to the hilt. His face was taut with concentration. Poppy lifted a hand and pushed his hair from his eyes.

"You feel so good," he whispered. "But you always feel good."

He flexed his hips and began to move. Poppy sighed and wrapped her legs around him under his wings. Joe thrust into her with relentless long strokes, driving her up the bed. Poppy clasped his back, hung on as he powered into her. She came almost at once, flowing on a hot torrent of lava, a molten riptide of lust that swept away everything in its path, destroying her capacity to think, but setting her on fire with pleasure.

Joe moved into a rapid, fast, pulsing movement, the friction winding her again. He changed the angle of his hips and Poppy shuddered with pleasure as her pussy gripped him tightly. Aware in the periphery of her mind that she could no longer feel the bed beneath her, Poppy clung tighter to Joe.

Fuck, they were floating! His wings were out and didn't appear to be moving but maybe that was because they were going so fast. Poppy felt the heat of Joe's cum firing into her and rather than her climax fade, it clicked into a higher gear. Her internal organs played musical chairs as her stomach leapt into her throat, her heart dropped into her stomach and her brain nestled firmly between her legs. There were in the air, hovering over the bed. Poppy was under Joe, over Joe as he spurted again and again and finally, Poppy fell kicking and screaming into the orgasm of her life.

Joe's heartbeat seemed dangerously high. If he hadn't already been dead, he might have thought a cardiac arrest was imminent. He felt like he'd been caught up in a thunderstorm and his groin hit repeatedly by bolts of lightning. He shook with electric passion. They lay now on the bed but he'd flown with Poppy, fucked her as they flew.

He'd known something different was happening this last time. Every lick, suck, caress and thrust of his cock had sent sensation shooting to the end of every feather. The tightening, twisting spasms had built and grown until Joe had exploded into another realm. Not only did he feel different but Joe had felt every nuance of Poppy's pleasure in a way he'd never done before. Touching her, touched him. When she came, he felt every contraction, every vibration in his body. He was in her fucking head. How could that be? This was angel sex? Fuck, Joe wondered how they ever got out of bed. Only it made him sad not happy. He loved sex but if he had the choice between that and Poppy, he knew what he'd choose.

Joe knew he'd found the answer. He'd had to let the dam burst and his soul escape to see how important she was to him. Joe held himself tense, waiting for some triumphant fanfare telling him he'd got it, but nothing happened.

Poppy snuggled back against him and Joe pulled her close, so they spooned together. His wings had gone again and he was relieved. Joe wasn't sure he could cope with sex like that all the time. Maybe not more than a couple of times a night. Not that he'd get chance to do that again with Poppy. That had been his finale.

I'm letting you go. Be happy, Pop. You deserve to be happy.

When Joe woke, he didn't want to open his eyes. Aware Poppy still lay by his side, wrapped in his arms, he smiled. Then he wondered how long she'd be there. What would happen when his wings came out? Would he disappear in a flash? No time to say goodbye? Oh God, he didn't want to leave her. His hand snaked over her hip and pulled her against him. Poppy wriggled her silky backside against his swollen dick and she moaned. Joe ached, but he still wanted her. As he dropped his lips to her neck, he heard a rustling noise on the other side of the room.

"Good morning," said Desiree in a tone of voice that implied it was the worst morning she'd ever had in her life or indeed after her life had ended and in a moment Joe would find that it was certainly the worst morning in his life too.

Joe's erection deflated like a punctured balloon.

"This isn't working," Desiree said.

Poppy's hand slid into his under the covers.

Desiree sighed. "I give up. Are you ready to go?"

Poppy rolled over and wrapped her arms around his neck. "No, he's not."

Joe tensed. This way of leaving her was worse than falling from the warehouse roof. He had to just do it. Prolonging it would only make matters worse. Joe pulled Poppy's arms from his neck. He grabbed a pillow to hide his tackle and leapt from the bed, his heart ready to burst with the unfairness of everything. Joe felt a prickling sensation down his spine and then the room erupted with feathers, a vase of flowers went flying and he was sneezing over and over again.

"Joe," Poppy called.

He turned, caught the lamp on her side of the bed with a wing tip and knocked it over.

"Joe. Look."

Joe didn't dare move. He might decapitate someone. Probably himself.

"Oh dear. What a disappointment," Desiree said.

Poppy bounced on the bed, a broad grin on her face. She clutched the sheet to her chest, but her breasts jiggled underneath and Joe's cock perked up behind the pillow. He was pathetic.

"Your wings are still gray," Poppy yelled. "Gray not white. Look at them."

Joe tried to maneuver without destroying the room. He folded one wing over the other in front of him and dropped the pillow. They didn't look white unless they were white wings he'd made dirty. If so, he'd made a consistent job of mucking them up.

"I thought I'd fathomed out what I had to do," Joe said feeling pleased and disappointed at the same time. So much for his police skills. He was supposed to be good at figuring things out. "I thought I had to recognize that it wasn't Poppy's fault and let her go, but it must be something else."

Desiree stared at him. "You want to keep trying?"

"Do I get a choice?"

She didn't reply. Joe thought about it. She'd told him he had to do this. Seekers have to earn their feathers. Joe didn't give a shit about having white wings but this wasn't about him. It was about Poppy.

"Yes, I want to keep trying," Joe said and gave Desiree a sad smile.

The angel nodded and flew through the wall.

Poppy whistled. "Wow, can you do that? On second thoughts, don't try."

Joe carefully moved onto the bed and lay facedown.

"I wonder what it is you have to do to get white feathers?"

"I was sure I'd got that right, accepting what a dick I'd been."

Poppy stroked his wings from the point they came out of his body as far down as she could reach. Joe's mind turned straight to mush and he purred like a lazy cat. That felt so good. He could lie there for hours and let Poppy stroke him.

She suddenly gasped.

"What?" he asked.

"You look...wrong, Joe."

"Yeah, I don't feel so good. I thought it was hunger, but I'm not so sure now."

"Desiree said you'd become ill the longer you took to find the right thing to do."

There was an ache in his bones he hadn't felt before. Joe wondered how bad things would get.

"I've been thinking, maybe I know what it is." Poppy took a deep breath. "DCS Watson told me yesterday that Buxton is planning to come back to England to see his mother who's dying. He warned me to be on my guard because I'm the only witness to Buxton shooting you. Maybe you're supposed to find Buxton, tell me where he is so I can tell...your...boss." Poppy's voice trailed away.

Joe had sat up and his mouth had fallen open. She put her finger under his chin and pressed up, clashing his teeth together.

"And you were going to tell me this, when?" Joe's wings began to shrink. "You didn't think this was important enough to let me know before now?"

Poppy squirmed.

"The guy's a psycho, Poppy. You need proper protection."

"Your boss said he'd make sure I was okay and they're watching points of entry."

Joe gave a snort of disgust. "Buxton made a bloody living out of sneaking people into the country illegally. I can't think he'll have much problem getting in under the radar. I don't want you to go to work. Call in sick or something."

"Okay."

Joe frowned. "That was much too easy."

"Day off." She grinned.

The irony that Joe now intended to spend his time trying to save her life, when if she died they'd end up together, wasn't lost on him, but saving Poppy seemed so obvious he was certain that was what he needed to do. Maybe that *and* make her want to live after he'd gone.

"I think you're right, Poppy. I'm supposed to look after you, only outside this apartment I'm invisible and helpless."

"You're probably invisible and helpless inside the apartment too. Well, to anyone but me," she added when he glared.

"I have to go out for a couple of hours," Joe said. "I want you to stay in bed and think about how I'm going to ravish you when I get back."

"I don't want to stay in bed. Can I do the laundry and think about it?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"And clean the bathroom?"

"Poppy!"

Joe had a plan though it wasn't much of one. Unearth Keith, because something wasn't right there. Blame a gut feeling, sixth sense, or intuition but Keith had been more than puzzled when he'd seen the Buxton file had been opened on his computer. He'd been scared. The phone call Joe had heard Keith make afterward had been brief. Only one word had been spoken, "Act." Joe had dismissed it at the time but now had a horrible suspicion that Poppy was involved.

Power of Love

As he rode his bike away from Poppy's building, Joe saw a blue BMW parked at the curb with two guys sitting in it. They looked so much like bored cops on surveillance that Joe laughed. At least Poppy had someone else looking out for her.

Chapter Eleven

Poppy had tried not to mind when Joe went on about finding the way to get his white feathers. She understood that while he didn't want to go, he couldn't stay. His skin had turned a dusty gray and Poppy hadn't missed the shadows that frequently crossed his face.

Joe was in pain.

She'd been disappointed when he said he was going out and hadn't told her where. She could have gone with him. But as much as he had to let her go, she understood she had to do the same for him.

Sleep dragged her under. Sunk in a deep dream involving her, Joe's cock and a bowl of cherries, Poppy struggled to suppress the accompanying buzzing. Bloody wasps. She surfaced to the realization that someone was at her door. Poppy glanced at the clock. Just after ten. Joe had been gone for two hours. Slipping a T-shirt over her head, she padded to the intercom.

"Yes?"

"Delivery of flowers for Miss Field."

Poppy's mouth curled into a smile. She pressed the door release and waited. Joe had never sent her flowers before. What sort? Maybe roses. A knock came at the door behind her and Poppy pulled it open.

Oh God. I am so stupid.

Joe hadn't changed that much. He hadn't thought of flowers. Poppy faced two big guys wearing dark clothes and no box of chocolates in sight. Only a gun. Before she could even think of doing anything, they were in the apartment. One wrapped beefy arms around her and the other held a gun to her head. The cold metal pressed so hard into her temple Poppy was forced to turn her head into the guy's shoulder.

She didn't fight. No point. The arms were as solid steel as the gun. She waited, the police side of her brain gathering and processing information, the girly side wishing she was wearing underwear and had been to the loo because she was fairly certain they wouldn't let her take a bathroom break.

"Cup of tea?" Poppy asked.

The guy holding the gun snorted. "Get dressed."

The arms released her. Not panicking was important. Breathing was important too, and Poppy gulped air into her lungs. Both guys followed her into the bedroom. As she fumbled her way into her clothes, showing not an inch more flesh than she needed, she tried to come up with a plan. "How to get away from two big guys and a gun." Poppy

fastened her shoes. She'd come up with a great title, but the flood of brilliant ideas didn't follow.

A little flame in her heart flickered for a moment. Maybe she wasn't meant to get away. Maybe she was supposed to die so she could be with Joe. A slow smile built into a grin.

"What is it with you, you crazy bitch?" the guy with the gun said. "This isn't funny."

"Sorry."

"Why aren't you frightened?"

"You're not very scary." Poppy hoped they didn't notice her wobbling knees. "You remind me of oversized teddy bears."

"We're fucking hit men," said the guy with the solid steel arms.

"Ruthless," added the guy with the gun.

"Well, you look cuddly," Poppy said, not meaning a word of it.

"We're not."

Then Poppy discovered they were right. They weren't cuddly at all.

* * * * *

Joe found no one in the squad room. No one alive anyway, only a gaunt Mal who looked as pale as the paperwork he ploughed through.

"Has Keith been in?" Joe asked.

"Not today."

Joe perched on the edge of Mal's desk. "I think I've worked out what it is I have to do."

Mal looked up. For a moment, Joe thought he saw envy in his face, but then Mal slipped back to his dour blankness.

"I have to save Poppy from Buxton," Joe said. "Maybe you don't—"

"They talk about it in here every now and again. Bit of a scuffle on the roof of a warehouse, you were shot and fell. Your girlfriend tried to pull you back, but almost ended up going over with you. Did you let go of her?"

That would have been the right thing to do, but that hadn't been what Joe had done. He gulped.

"It was an accident, Mal. I've told Poppy that."

"Told her?" Mal's eyes looked as though they were going to pop out of his head. "You can talk to her? Bloody hell, I wondered why you'd gone gray so fast. How's the pain? Bad?"

Joe nodded. He felt like there was something alive inside him, moving through his body, squeezing his organs.

Mal stared straight at him. "If you avoid interaction with the living, this gray limbo can go on for a long time without intense pain and fading. Section Forty-Three in the manual."

"There's a fucking manual?"

Mal nodded. "Your deterioration has speeded up because you're messing around with Poppy."

Joe groaned. Something else Desiree had neglected to tell him. Why hadn't she given him the manual? He sighed. Joe knew why. He wouldn't have read it.

"You might end up failing if you run out of time," Mal said.

"Failing? What happens then?"

Mal shuddered. Joe had to stop himself rubbing his head to check for emerging horns.

"I did hear one thing." Mal pushed back on his swivel chair. "Does Poppy live in Greenwich?"

Joe stood up. "Why?"

"Keith was talking to someone on his mobile last night. He thought he was on his own. Well, he was." Mal chuckled. "She live on Branton Road?"

"Shit." Joe's fingers curled into his palms.

"After you died, Keith let the case go. The word was that Buxton had gone abroad. The file's still active, just about, but I've never seen anyone doing much."

Joe stared at Mal and saw what he was telling him beyond the words.

"I don't know anything for sure," Mal said. "But Keith's bought a new car, some fancy convertible. He said an aunt had died. She hadn't."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"It's not that easy. I can't leave notes or tell anyone. Anyway, it's your case, Joe. It's been waiting for you."

"How can I protect her?" Joe whispered, half to himself.

"You probably can't."

Joe pretended he hadn't heard that.

Joe got back to Greenwich in record time. It was a good thing he couldn't be killed because he didn't stop for red lights and rode straight through three buses, two black cabs and an ice-cream van. He arrived in time to see long, slender legs struggling as they were bundled into the back of the BMW Joe had thought was there to protect her. He was a fucking idiot. His heart pounded as he followed the vehicle to the main road. A few seconds later, and he'd have lost her.

He stayed on the car's bumper, relieved he didn't have to hide what he was doing. Not having to concentrate on remaining unobserved gave him chance to think. Joe couldn't touch anyone, couldn't drag Poppy to safety. He couldn't call for help. The

only thing he could do was be with her and talk to her, maybe help her talk her way out of trouble. Joe's mouth was so dry he couldn't swallow. He had to come up with something because Poppy wouldn't talk herself out of trouble, but deeper into it.

After a few miles Joe knew where they were heading. Back to Hackney, to the place where he'd died. As soon as the car pulled up, Poppy came out fighting and Joe felt proud of her and scared for her at the same time. She was a ball of fury, arms flailing, feet kicking and even though Joe knew he couldn't do anything, he flung himself in and fell straight through the mêlée. Poppy froze when she saw him. Joe lay on his back, one of Poppy's assailant's feet planted in his chest. He gave her a little smile.

The guy stepped out of Joe, grabbed Poppy's wrists and yanked them behind her back. "Stupid bitch."

She was dragged into the warehouse and Joe scrambled after her. Jethro Buxton waited inside.

"You'd better not have marked her," Buxton said.

"Gave her a little tap on the head to shut her up," said the guy holding Poppy.

Joe aimed a futile kick at the guy's balls. Poppy snorted.

Buxton stepped right up to her. "What the fuck is so funny?"

Poppy looked straight at him. "Joe kicked one of your goons in the nuts."

"Poppy, keep quiet," Joe said.

"Joe Dalziel?" Buxton gaped at her. "Are you crazy? He's dead."

"Yes, but he's here. He's an angel."

Buxton roared with laughter. "Oh, this is great. This is perfect. You're fucking crazy. No jury would have believed you anyway."

"You tried to kill him," Poppy said.

Buxton sneered at her. "And you did kill him, sweetheart. You pushed him off the roof. Saved me having to do it."

"Joe knows it wasn't my fault."

Poppy turned from Buxton to look at him. Joe saw in her eyes how much she loved him and he thought maybe the old chestnut about hearts breaking was true. The pain in his chest was crippling him.

Buxton nodded at his men. "Take her up to the roof."

Poppy gave Joe a little smile but he could see her teeth chattering with fear. He raced up ahead, trying to think if there was anything he could do to stop them. They all moved through him, including Poppy, and stepped out into the sunshine.

"Poppy," Joe whispered.

"It's okay," she said.

"No, it fucking isn't okay. This isn't supposed to happen. I can't let you die." Joe felt frantic. Adrenaline powered through him as his mind raced to find a solution. "Poppy, tell him that you'll work for him from inside the police."

They dragged her towards the edge, her heels leaving lines in the roof gravel.

"Tell him," Joe screamed.

"How about I work for you?" Poppy gasped. "I could tell you if the police were planning a raid."

"And how would you manage that, PC Plod? The Met keep you informed of their operations, do they?" Buxton chortled. "You're of no use to me alive. Much more use dead."

Joe knew at that moment it was over. There was nothing he could do. Buxton was going to kill her and Joe would have to watch.

Buxton strolled in a circle around Poppy and the men holding her. "Very sad," he said. "I know you've been seeing the shrink, though I hadn't actually thought you were imagining Joe was still with you. What's wrong? Can't get over the fact that you shoved your boyfriend off the roof—this very roof?" He peered over the side. "Long way down. Seems fitting that you kill yourself at the same spot. Sorry about this. Nothing personal."

Joe bellowed with rage and frustration.

Poppy couldn't believe how calm she felt. She'd been scared to the point that she'd have collapsed it they hadn't been holding her but now she felt quite serene. Joe was a whirling dervish, racing around the roof, lashing out and connecting with nothing. Her heart pounded, but Poppy didn't feel as though she teetered on the point of death. As long as she could keep delaying things, there was always a chance.

"How's your mum?" she asked Buxton.

The man raised his eyebrows. "Very sick."

"I'm sorry to hear that. My mum died five years ago after a long illness. I still miss her."

"Not for much longer," Buxton said and winked.

Poppy shuddered. He nodded at the guys holding her and they pulled her closer to the edge. Joe was going frantic. Poppy felt bad for him.

"Do you mind telling me one thing?" she asked Buxton.

"What?"

"How long has Joe's partner—Keith Worth—how long has he been working for you? Since before Joe went undercover?"

That stopped Joe moving. He stared at Buxton.

"Not going to do any harm to tell you now. I know how coppers' minds work and I don't mind satisfying your curiosity since you're not going to be telling anyone else. Worth came to see me with an offer I couldn't refuse. For a handful of filthy lucre he told me they planned to put an undercover cop in my organization. Well worth the money. I always thought Keith was well named." Buxton laughed.

Poppy didn't. Joe still hadn't moved.

"When we came to get the kids' ball, what made you shoot Joe?" she asked.

"What I saw in his eyes for a fleeting moment – recognition, annoyance, affection."

Now Joe's face held despair, bleak with helplessness. Poppy wished she could hug him.

"Can I jump?" she asked. "Not be pushed. I've always wondered what it would be like to fly. Might as well have a second or two of that."

Buxton glanced at his watch. "Yeah, okay but don't take all day about it."

The men let go of her and Poppy shook her arms before walking to the edge. She looked down. Shit, it was a long way. And there were no police cars in sight. She'd had her mobile phone on all the way here in the car, and it was in her pocket now, still transmitting, but it looked like it hadn't worked. There was no one racing to the rescue. Poor Joe was going to have to go through what she went through.

Poppy turned to face Buxton. "I'm going to run along the edge and then jump, okay?"

"Don't make a fucking song and dance about it. Just do it."

Poppy turned to Joe and tried to give him her "don't worry, everything will be all right" smile. It didn't work. He looked like he was going to throw up.

"No." His voice was almost inaudible.

Poppy leaned forward and kissed where his lips should be. "I love you." She had to say it that third time, even if Joe couldn't bring himself to say the same to her. She waited for a couple of seconds, but Joe didn't speak. His mouth opened but nothing came out. Poppy's heart clenched in pain.

"It's okay," she said. "It doesn't matter that you can't say it. I know you love me." That had to be enough. "Bye, Joe."

Poppy turned and ran down the edge of the roof, sprinting as fast as she could and then leapt on to the ledge before launching herself off the side.

Chapter Twelve

Joe's wings shot out in an instant and he flew after her, diving straight over the lip of the building, instinctively drawing back his feathers to drop faster and he saw at once what she was doing. Poppy had flung herself towards an old fire escape that sat at the far end of the roof. Joe swooped down, knowing he couldn't catch her and hating himself for not telling her that he loved her.

For a long moment, Joe was sure Poppy wouldn't make it, that she'd fall short and plummet to the ground, but one beautiful hand snatched life from death, and grabbed a rail. He gasped as she swung out and then crashed back into the stairs with a bone-jarring thump.

"Pull yourself up," Joe shouted, flapping his wings in an attempt to maintain a hover. He shot up and down like a yoyo.

He could see her trying, but her fingers were slipping on the flaking metal.

"Don't you dare fall," he yelled.

Poppy's other hand reached up to grip one of the stair treads and her fingers sank into holes in the metal design. Joe breathed a sigh of relief. With two hands anchored she stood a better chance.

"Swing yourself up," he said.

Joe spun around when he heard a noise at his ear. He looked up. The bastards were firing at her.

"Poppy, hurry."

Joe knew it would do no good, but he still positioned himself between her and the bullets. "Poppy, pull yourself up. Do it." He sighed when her leg looped over a strut. Another two bullets pinged off the metal and then several police cars pulled into the yard below. Poppy scrambled through on to the stairs and lay facedown. Joe could see her shaking. Then he realized it wasn't Poppy shaking, but the whole decrepit fire escape. The thing only reached halfway down the building. She had to climb up.

"Poppy you have to get off this, now."

"I can't move."

She had every finger wrapped so tightly around the rusting metal, her hands looked skeletal. Her eyes were closed. Down below Joe saw officers apprehend two men, neither of whom were Buxton.

"Poppy, shout and tell them there were three guys," Joe said. "Buxton's going to get away. Tell them he's armed."

"Are you okay?" someone called to her from the ground.

"There's a third man," Poppy yelled. "He has a gun."

The structure she sprawled on shifted and Poppy whimpered.

"Hang on, we've called the fire brigade."

"Oh fuck, not again," she groaned.

Joe's eyes were fixed on the rattling brackets holding the steps into the side of the building. Even Poppy's breathing seemed to disturb them. It swayed ominously.

"Poppy, you have to get off this bloody thing now. You can't wait for the fire brigade. Don't go down. You have to go up."

"I'm too scared to move."

"You can do this. Two flights of steps and you're back on the roof."

She opened her eyes. Joe hovered as close as he could get.

"Do it for me. I don't want you to die."

He gave her a little smile and kept beating his wings. Joe was tiring now. There was more to this than mere flapping.

"If I die, I can be with you," she whispered.

"If you wanted to die you wouldn't have leaped for this fire escape."

"Ha, got me there."

There was a shout from below and Joe looked down to see Buxton in handcuffs. He turned back to Poppy.

"Anyway, who says we'd end up together? Maybe I'd have my white wings and you'd be stuck with gray ones. It could take you years to find out how to earn yours. You know how easily you're distracted. Now get off this fucking fire escape right now."

There was a loud creak and Poppy shot up the steps. The structure teetered away from the wall of the warehouse and she jumped. Joe landed at her side as Poppy fell in a crumpled heap on the roof. They stared at each other while the sound of metal creaking and groaning, then falling and crashing filled the air. Followed by silence.

"What do you mean I'm easily distracted?" asked Poppy.

"There's a spider on your neck."

Poppy screeched and scrambled backwards. When Joe began to laugh, she glared at him. Then her face fell.

"What's the matter?" he asked as he stood up.

"Your wings."

Joe shook the roof gravel off his feathers. "What about them? Hey, did you see me fly? Hovering! I bet no one else could do that in the first week."

"They're still gray."

He looked down. "So they are. I guess that means getting Buxton into custody and saving your life weren't the keys either."

But Joe wondered if he'd finally figured out what was.

Joe smiled as Poppy struggled to convince the detective in charge of the operation she didn't need to go to hospital. She was shaken and had a few scrapes from the gravel but Joe knew she didn't want to be apart from him. She couldn't get out of going to make a statement at the police station. Although the incident had led to the capture of a wanted felon, the celebration was muted. The fact that a fellow officer had been working for the other side left a poisonous taste in everyone's mouth. They told Poppy that Keith had been arrested. It had been about money. It always was, Joe thought.

He supposed everyone had their price but Joe's was a damn sight higher than a man's life. He hoped forgiving Keith wasn't his way to white wings because the bastard didn't deserve it and wasn't going to get it. Joe was incandescent that his partner, a man he considered a mate, had not only got him killed but fucked up Poppy's life as well. How ever many years in jail he got, it would never be enough.

Joe was desperate to give Poppy a hug, but he didn't distract her while she was giving her statement, tempted as he was. When she was sent home in a squad car, Joe went with her.

"Where's your bike?" Poppy whispered.

Joe shrugged. He wouldn't need it anymore. This would be their last night.

The second they walked into her building, Joe pulled her into his arms and held her. Those moments when he'd thought she was going to die had been the worst in his life. Joe had a taste of what Poppy had gone through when he'd slipped from her grasp. Even if her dying meant they could be together, he couldn't and wouldn't wish that for her. He cupped her face and gave her the sweetest, gentlest kiss. Every chance to touch her was a precious gift. He saw now how much he'd taken her for granted, but he was pissed off he'd had to die in order to realize that.

Joe traced her features with his fingers and lips. "My beautiful Poppy," he whispered.

"My gorgeous Joe."

"When you jumped off that roof, I couldn't breathe."

"Sorry."

He pressed his forehead against hers. "I'm the one who's sorry."

She tugged him to the stairs.

"I was a crap boyfriend. I never brought you flowers, never did anything romantic."

"You aren't crap. You're funny and kind. You don't mind when I do stupid things and you always eat my cooking. You let me watch *Strictly Ballroom* that time when Chelsea were playing Manchester United on the other channel and you always stand up for me."

Joe glared. "You didn't tell me Chelsea was on the other side."

"Ha ha." Poppy stuck out her tongue.

Joe raised his eyebrows. "If I'd been a good boyfriend I'd have done nice things for you. The best I managed was a day at the races and you hated it."

"Those whips. The poor horses." Poppy shuddered.

"I wouldn't even take you shopping. I made you sit through hours of sports on TV and I ate your chocolates. I don't know why you put up with me."

Poppy opened the door of her apartment and pushed him inside. She put her mouth to his ear. "Because you're hung like a cobra."

Joe laughed, pulled her through to the bedroom and down onto the bed. He wrapped Poppy in his arms. He wanted to find the perfect moment to tell her what he should have said a long time ago. Only had a sneaking suspicion that when he got the words out, he might disappear. Joe pressed his face into her hair. He could say it when he made her come or when she made him come. Maybe say it afterward while they lay in each other's arms. It had to be special, just the right moment.

Poppy nestled closer. "You flew, Joe! When I wasn't petrified out of my skull, I was seriously impressed. Was it hard? Do you think you could flutter a bit in here?"

"Maybe if we empty the room of everything breakable."

Poppy grinned. "It would be an interesting insurance claim. Room wrecked by an angel."

He looked at her and Joe realized he didn't need to wait, because when he told Poppy he loved her—that would *be* the perfect moment. He trailed his fingers down her arm, took hold of her hand and let the words form in his head.

"I love you," she whispered.

Joe's throat tightened. She'd beaten him to it. Now he didn't want to say it because it would look as though he'd parroted it back. To make matters worse, he saw in her face she had no expectation of hearing him say it to her. She stared at him with her heart in her eyes and Joe wondered how he could have been so blind.

"I should have cherished the fact that you love me, been honored that you thought I was worth it." He gave a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry."

"I've always loved you, Joe. I know it makes you uncomfortable. You thought you didn't want to be loved. It was easier to do without it because then you couldn't be hurt if it was taken away. It only made me love you more. My poor damaged Joe."

Was it that simple? Joe wondered. "It would be easy to blame my parents. I tried hard to make them love me. I did everything they asked but it made no difference to the way they treated me, although greater success brought more praise. Everything was conditional."

"So you stopped looking for love."

"I decided I didn't need it. Whatever *it* was. I was scared of letting love in and the longer I kept it out, the more scared I became. It meant releasing control and you know what I'm like about letting go. I have to be in charge of everything. My parents should

have showed me how to love and they didn't. But it's not all their fault. The crazy thing is I had the best teacher in the world right in front of me and didn't see it."

Poppy smiled.

"I suppose I was looking for an explosion," Joe said. "I thought when I fell in love, my world would rock—and it did, but I didn't see it. When my hands slipped off the roof, in those seconds before I died, *then* my world rocked because I'd lost you. I fell and thought—I've lost Poppy. Even then I didn't see it, not the thing I'd really lost. Not just you but your love for me."

Joe gripped her fingers.

"I don't know why I was given a chance to put things right. God knows I probably didn't deserve it, but it's the best thing that has ever happened to me. There are three words I should have said a long time ago, three words that would have made us both happy. I wasted too much time waiting to fall in love. I realized that this afternoon when I saw you clinging to the fire escape. There was no moment I was going to look back on and say—that was the point I fell in love with Poppy, because I've always loved you. And I'm a fool because I should have seen it the instant I saw you mumbling that question you wanted to ask at the training session. Though when I heard it, I did wonder why it had taken you the whole session to work it out."

She frowned. "I had two questions."

"So what was the other?"

"Why are such a large proportion of sex-trafficking victims found in massage parlors in South Wales?"

Joe chuckled. "Ah, a question that required more than yes or no. I love you, Poppy."

He held his breath and her eyes widened.

"Say it again," she whispered.

"I love you. I love you. I should have told you a long time ago."

Poppy tapped her finger on her jaw. "It's such a pity. I've gone right off you."

"Fibber."

Poppy narrowed her eyes. "Show me how much you love me." She gasped as Joe pinned her down on the bed. "Now I think about it, if you love me you'd do the washing up, clean the bathroom, tackle the ironing, cook dinner, take the rubbish down to the bin, wash the kitchen floor—"

Joe silenced her with a kiss. He traced her lips with his tongue and she sighed into his mouth. The feel of her warm breath made his cock twitch in blissful anticipation. Joe's pulse pounded in his head and his body thrummed with need. He wanted this to be the best night of their lives because it was all he could give her. His fingers unbuttoned her pants, pulled down the zipper and slipped inside her underwear to stroke the slick wetness of her cleft. One finger, then two and Poppy arched her hips into his hand.

"I want to make love to you all night," he whispered. "I want you on your bed with your legs spread and I'm going to suck your clit until you scream. I'm going to drive my cock inside you over and over and fill you with my cum. No one will ever love you like I do, Poppy."

She gulped. "I know."

"I want you to remember me and this night forever."

She clutched him. "Joe—"

"There's something you have to do for me."

"Don't."

He put his finger over her lips. "You have to go on without me."

Poppy whimpered.

"You understand what I'm telling you?"

She shook her head from side to side.

Joe sighed. "I know, babe, but there's no choice in this. No other way. Tonight we're going to pretend this is the beginning, not the end. No pleading with me to stay. No talk of joining me. We're going to fuck ourselves stupid and then let each other go."

He kissed the tear from her cheek. "Stop it. I don't want to put you in the shower yet. Not on the schedule for another hour."

"Is there time in the schedule for me to do things to you?" Poppy asked.

Joe raised his eyebrows. "I'll make time."

Chapter Thirteen

"My turn first," Joe said and pressed into her carefully with the length of his fingers.

Poppy moaned. "I'm not going to argue."

He laughed and planted a soft kiss on her lips. She was so cute, releasing breathy groans as he petted and massaged her wet folds. Poppy gripped his shirt, then his head, then his back and finally jerked up to slam her mouth against his as he felt her muscles contract around his fingers.

"You're such a live wire," he whispered. Joe could feel the current running straight to his cock, leaving it quivering in his pants. He blew on her face. "Miss Speedy."

Poppy chortled. "Let me touch you and I'll show you speedy."

He pulled back as she reached for him. "Hands off. I've only just started playing with you. Don't distract me."

Joe dropped to the foot of the bed, tugged on the legs of her pants and Poppy slid down with them. He yanked her legs in the air and wrestled her out of her black chinos, then kept her legs up as he knelt on the bed. Joe leaned against her, pushed her knees toward her chest and stroked her soaking panties.

"Oh you feel good," Joe whispered.

Poppy unfastened her blouse, slipped one hand inside and fondled her breast. "Um, yes I do."

Joe chuckled. "I want to do that."

"Help yourself."

Joe released her legs and crawled to her side. Poppy slithered out of her shirt and lay back in her white cotton underwear. Joe was so turned-on, he was steaming. Forget lace and silk, Poppy looked good enough to eat in anything. Right now, she reminded him of a school girl and those years of horny teenage fumbling behind the school cricket pavilion.

He tried to suppress the thought that this was the last time he would do this and reached to unclip her bra. Joe used his teeth to pull down the straps and Poppy ran her fingers through his hair. Bra discarded, Joe's gaze fell on the creamy mounds under Poppy's hands. He forgot to blink as she fondled herself, teasing those darker circles and the hard nipples, until he had to cough to hide the whimper coming from his lips. Joe stared and kept staring.

"Stop looking and start touching." Poppy's fingers began to work at the buttons of his shirt.

Joe let her pull it from his shoulders before he lowered his head to her breasts. For a moment, he lay there, content to hear her heart hammering under his ear, knowing she wanted him as much as he wanted her. His fingers reached for hers and he squeezed her hand. Joe's chest hurt, ached enough to worry him if he hadn't known what was wrong. It was the knowledge that just as he'd found Poppy, he'd lost her.

"Don't fall asleep. I'm ready for more." Poppy twisted his hair in her fingers and rubbed his scalp.

Joe let Poppy push him onto his back and straddle him, her breasts hanging tantalizingly close to his mouth. One flick with his tongue and he caught a nipple. When she tried to pull away, Joe held her tight and sucked. He swore he lost brain cells when he did this. The taste of her, the sensation of suckling flipped a switch in his head. He swapped from one breast to the other, not wanting one to feel left out. Her nipples tightened into little pebbles and Joe let himself think about how great it would have been to see their baby feeding here, before he banished the thought.

Poppy slithered down his chest, over his legs until her face rested on his crotch. His cock was raring to go, a hard bulge in his pants, pushing against his zipper, begging to be let out. Poppy trailed a finger down the ridge of his erection and Joe knew she was going to torture him.

She mouthed his cock through the material and his fists clenched at his sides. When she rubbed him with her cheek, his dick purred like a cat being stroked. He could hear her deep inhalations as she breathed against him and every warm blast of air tightened his quivering balls. Joe's cock made a desperate attempt for freedom. It felt hard enough to break steel. The zipper stood no chance. Joe groaned. Maybe he did need a little help.

"If you don't let him out, the button's going to pop off and you know how much you hate..."

Joe stopped. Poppy wasn't going to mumble and grumble about sewing his buttons back on. Not anymore.

She unbuttoned and unzipped him and Joe released a long sigh of relief. He laid his fingers on her shoulder blades and with the lightest touch, stroked her silky skin, tracing the angles of her bones. When Poppy took the head of his dick in her mouth and sucked him through his boxers, Joe gritted his teeth. The feeling of the wet material rubbing against him, combined with the pressure of her lips, had him accelerating when he needed to slow down. Poppy tugged at the waistband of his boxers and licked his cock like a melting ice pop, swift fast swipes with her tongue before she dragged off his clothes and dumped them on the floor.

Poppy leaned on his lower legs and sighed. "You're so beautiful."

Joe pushed himself up on his elbows and looked down.

"Rosy red." She ran her finger in a circle over a large bead of pre-cum, smearing it around his flared crest before standing up at the end of the bed and giving her finger a long, slow lick.

Oh Christ. Joe clamped down on the tremors building in his spine. His cock looked ready to explode with fury at having been kept waiting so long with no warm nest to settle in.

Poppy shimmied out of her pants and stretched like a cat, all long limbs and supple grace and Joe's breath hitched. He pushed himself up higher so he could see better.

She grinned. "I wish I had a pole to twirl around."

"How about a lap instead." Damn, had he croaked that out?

Poppy climbed onto the bed and turned so she faced Joe's feet. One evil look over her shoulder and she lowered her body to his. As she wrapped her lips around the tip of his cock, Joe bent his head and flicked her clit with his tongue. His hands slid between their bodies to cup her breasts. One touch of her nipples and his cock jerked in her mouth. She twisted, turned, pressed with her lips and tongue until Joe could hardly stand it. Impossible to concentrate on what he was doing when she was intent on driving him insane.

Still, he made the effort. Joe swirled his tongue over her clit, drinking the cream that poured out of her and then, in an alternating rhythm, he speared his tongue into her cunt as she sucked his cock. Joe was desperate to come, desperate not to come. Poppy came anyway, bursting on his lips, her mouth clenching around his dick as the orgasm seized her and dragged her mind on a one way path to bliss.

Joe was only an instant behind. Poppy did something weird with her tongue, massaged his sac, and the sensation dragged the cum from his balls. He gasped against her pussy and buried his face in her folds as he spurted into her. His hips rocked and twitched to conclusion and Joe pulled her up to lie at his side. He wiped his fingers over Poppy's lips, still sticky with his juice. She took his hand and pulled on each of his fingers one by one as if she were sucking the slenderest of cocks and Joe's heart started to spin in his chest.

"I love you," he whispered.

Poppy let his pinky slip free and smiled. "And I love you."

Joe brushed a curl of damp hair from her eyes. "You'll be careful, won't you, Pop? Don't go jumping off any buildings, no climbing trees—particularly in a skirt when firemen are standing underneath, and no getting in the way of knife-wielding idiots. I worried about you all the time."

"I know, but I'm a copper, danger is my middle name."

"No it isn't." His brow furrowed. "Do you have a middle name? Your parents didn't call you Plowed or Corn?"

Poppy gave him a shifty look and changed the subject.

"Do you know what your surname means?"

"Dalziel. I always thought it meant—I dare."

"It also means little field."

Joe laughed. "Is that right? So what's your middle name?"

She sighed.

"Do I have to tickle it out of you?"

Poppy tapped her chin. "You could smack it out of me."

Joe shook his head. "That won't work. You like me smacking you."

He began to tickle under her arms and Poppy tried to squirm away. Once Joe caught her foot, he'd knew he'd won. A feather touch on her sole and Poppy shrieked. "Iona."

Joe tried hard to keep a straight face as he tugged her back to his chest. "Poppy Iona Field."

"Actually, it's Iona Poppy Field. Laugh and I'll hurt you."

Joe did the best he could but it was a losing battle. He laughed so hard he started to cry and once he'd begun to cry he couldn't stop. Tears rolled down his face and he gulped air into his lungs. "Oh God, I love you. I don't want to leave you."

He landed kisses all over Poppy's face, then swung her on top of him and thrust up between her legs. She clamped around him as he pushed in and out of her, wet thighs slapping together, chests heaving as he rocked his hips faster and harder. Her hands crept to his and their fingers linked as they bucked and pumped wildly against each other. Joe slammed against her clit, shifted his hips to get the perfect angle, and Poppy arched her back and yelled out her release in a long vibrating scream.

"Oh Joe, Joe, Joe."

He was close but not there. She was still shuddering as he flipped her on to her back, pushed her knees to her chest and sank inside her. Joe was aware of something happening at his back, his damn wings coming out and then the tips moved to where their bodies joined and he was fucking her with his wings too. *Shit*. Caressing himself and Poppy at the same time and Joe was suddenly deeper and Poppy was letting out these little screams. *Fuck*. He felt it all over his body, the rising tide of release heightened by the feathers.

Joe banged into Poppy, grunting and growling, slamming into her while she yelled his name. He thought his head was going to explode and then the ball of sensation left his brain, rippled down his spine, circled his stomach and seized his balls. Finally, his cock had what it wanted and Joe gave Poppy everything he had. He felt every pulse of his seed surging into her. Joe wanted to be part of her forever.

Bodies tangled, they collapsed on the damp sheet, folded themselves and Joe's wings into each other's embrace and held tight. Joe couldn't let her go. He brought her fingers to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

"I love you," he whispered. "A million times I love you."

"I love you even though you've worn me out. Did I feel feathers?"

"Might have done."

"I'm so tired."

"Close your eyes and sleep then."

Panic flared in her eyes. "No. I don't want to sleep."

They lay with their heads on one pillow, mouths so close they breathed each other's air.

"We're so sweaty," she muttered. "We need a shower."

Joe's wings folded so fast he almost knocked Poppy off the bed. She reached over to feel between his shoulder blades.

"Maybe you're not supposed to wet them," she said.

"More like there's no room for you, me and wings in your shower."

Poppy pushed herself up and pulled at his hand. "Let's check."

She hugged Joe under the torrent of water as he tipped his face to the flow. Poppy slid down his body to his feet and soaped every toe, running her hands along his instep, through the hairs on his lower legs, up his strong muscular thighs and got snagged on his butt. Poppy loved Joe's backside, so tight and trim and just delicious. She pushed him face first into the tiles and elbowed his knees apart. When her mouth touched the back of his balls Joe clenched, groaned and then relaxed again. The naughtiness turned her on, the forbidden pleasure in licking his butt making her toes curl. Poppy's thumbs caressed his hipbones as she buried her face deeper in the cleft of his backside. The muscles of his thighs tensed as she teased her way to his anus.

"Poppy, what the...oh God."

Her tongue circled, licked and pressed until she slid a little way inside. Even above the falling water, she could hear Joe gasping and groaning. When his knees began to shake, Poppy replaced her tongue with her finger, gave an insistent nudge and slid up to her knuckle. She stood and reached for Joe's cock with her other hand, squeezing and pumping and slipped another finger into his ass, curling both to reach his prostate.

"Oh fuck, fuck, Poppy. How come you try this just when we have to part? Oh God, Jesus Christ, fuck."

He came in her hand, hips jerking so violently her fingers slipped out of his backside. She loved the feel of his cock, the way it stiffened and pulsed as his cum spurted. Poppy was amazed he had any left. Maybe it had something to do with angels having great sex. She sighed and pressed her forehead against his back. No point thinking about that.

Poppy was dimly aware of Joe lifting her, wrapping her in a towel and carrying her to bed. He dried her body, kissing each place after he'd wiped the water away. Determined not to close her eyes, not to look at the clock, Poppy stared at Joe's dark eyes. Towel tossed to the floor, Joe wrapped her in his arms.

"Did I freak you out?" she asked.

"I'm utterly traumatized."

"What else haven't we done yet?" she whispered.

"Oh God, Poppy." He kissed her forehead.

"All the things I wanted to do with you aren't going to happen now. No holidays in the sun, no skiing, no—all we have is this and I want to do everything."

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"Whatever you like."
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"I'll go and get the horny guy from downstairs and we can have a threesome."

Joe glared. "Whatever you like except that."

"How about the woman from upstairs?"

He stayed quiet but the corner of his mouth twitched.

Poppy laughed. "I'm so tired. I have to close my eyes." She bit back a sob. "I don't want to."

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Joe kissed her nose. "How about if I stay awake and let you sleep for half an hour."
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"Promise not to go."

"Promise."

"Swear."

"I swear."

Joe watched her while she slept and fell more in love with her as each minute passed. The pain of having to leave behind his reason for existing bit deep into his heart. Joe felt fortunate he'd had this chance to say goodbye, to set things right between them. When Desiree had appeared and he'd thought—why me? now he was glad it had been him. If he'd gone on in the same way, he'd have lost Poppy anyway.

She opened her bright eyes, gasped and smiled. Joe's mouth watered and his dick went stone-hard in an instant. Poppy leaned forward and gave him a long, wet, openmouthed kiss and Joe tugged her against him. He lifted her thigh over his leg and slid into her. One slow push until he was buried inside her and they were sighing. Joe wanted to make this slow, to sustain the rapture, elongate the sensations, make this perfect for Poppy because he'd never touch her again.

No choice over coming for Poppy, as Joe drew back and thrust, she came, wringing his cock with the intensity of her orgasm, tempting Joe to ride the wave with her, yet he hung back, paddled for calmer waters while Poppy tossed in the wild surf beneath him. Joe gritted his teeth and forced himself to wait. When the simmering around his cock died away, he pulled out.

"Ooh God," Poppy groaned. "What the hell are you doing? You're going to kill me."

A bad part of Joe's brain considered that. If he fucked her to death, would he get to keep her in the afterlife? Or would that be enough to send him to hell? Her hands were reaching for him. One squeeze from Poppy's fingers and he'd spurt all over her stomach. Joe turned her round, pressed his stomach to her back and eased into her.

He pushed, every nerve in his cock ultra-receptive so the sensations echoed throughout his body. Joe wasn't just making love with his dick but with all of him. Poppy cried and panted beneath him, her hands fisting the sheets.

"Joe. Joe."

She kept repeating his name and though Joe thought he was as deep as he could get, her voice pulled him deeper. He couldn't stop. No point having harsh words with his reproductive organs because they weren't listening. His body was out of his control, driving into her, Poppy's hot, wet sheath gripping him. He was coming. He could feel it in the tips of his toes, shimmers of pleasure rising inexorably to his groin.

"Poppy, come with me," he gasped.

He was asking for more than sex. Joe wanted Poppy with him forever and ever, but sex was all he could have. Any moment, he was going to combust—*slam*, ignite—*slam*, detonate—*slam*. Then he did. Joe saw stars explode, felt every pulsing jet of his seed spurt into Poppy as she spasmed around him.

As soon as Joe could move, he pulled out of her and eased her legs straight. Poppy reached out to wrap her arms around him. He pressed his face into her hair. He wanted to tell her to never let him go but that was the one thing she had to do. Joe ran his hand down Poppy's cheek and watched her eyes close. Maybe telling her that he loved her wasn't his most important gift. Joe wanted Poppy to remember him, but he didn't want her to give up on life while she clung to his memory. Joe wanted her to be happy, to enjoy every moment of every day, even if it meant doing that with someone else.

I set you free. My love. My life. Remember me but don't be sad.

He kissed each cheek, her nose, her forehead and her lips.

"I love you, Poppy. Be happy."

* * * * *

Poppy stretched in bed, moved her limbs like a wriggling starfish and didn't come into contact with Joe. Her eyes flashed open. She didn't call him because she knew he'd gone. Poppy turned her head and her cheek hit something. She pushed herself up and stared. On Joe's pillow lay a single white feather. Poppy picked it up and kissed it with trembling lips. Joe had gone, not just from the bed, but from her life. When he'd told her he loved her, he'd earned his white wings. Forget hiding in the shower, Poppy curled in a ball and let the tears fall.

Chapter Fourteen

Poppy sat on the train, staring through the rain splattered window as the countryside flashed by. Life couldn't be much shittier. Joe had been gone for ten days. He hadn't even made an appearance as a self-induced, bad-tempered hallucination though he'd lurked in her dreams. Poppy had got on with her life, gone to work, eaten, gone to bed, but something had died inside her, a spark extinguished, her heart empty. She'd accepted Joe wasn't coming back but found it hard to accept life without him.

It was difficult not to be sad. She wanted to remember all the good things and feel happy, not live her life remembering what she'd lost, but she missed him so much. The white feather brought comfort. When she touched it, warmth seeped into her because she thought about how much Joe had loved her, how he'd finally let the words out of his heart. Poppy kept the feather with her. Always.

When she'd found the typed letter in her mail box three days ago, she hadn't been sure of the best thing to do. Joe's relative had written asking her to bring Joe's ashes to Nottingham on Saturday afternoon. There was no phone number to call and talk to him and Poppy couldn't decipher the signature. His writing was awful. The guy was probably a doctor. He didn't know Joe because she remembered Joe saying he didn't think he had any relations in Nottingham. Poppy wondered what interest the man had in Joe's ashes. She considered lying, saying she'd already disposed of them, but curiosity about the guy pulled her north. Did he look like Joe? Graham? Godzilla?

Poppy stepped out of the train station into a wet city, clutching the bag containing the red plastic urn and wondering if she could persuade him to let her help scatter the remains. She'd already decided what she'd like to do with them since she couldn't afford to send Joe into space. Poppy wanted to sprinkle tiny bits of him in unusual places—drop a handful of Joe through the railings at Buckingham Palace, a bit more of him between the goal posts at Chelsea football stadium, a spoonful in the grounds of the Tower of London, from which Joe would never get out, Poppy thought with a smile, and maybe shoot him out of a cannon which would be the nearest she'd get to sending him into space. This dark horse of a relation would probably want to dump him in a boring graveyard.

She followed the instructions in the guy's letter and walked from the station to Maid Marian Way, not caring that the rain soaked her. She pressed the buzzer at the entrance of the block before she could change her mind, and the door swung open.

Poppy stared at her reflection in the polished walls of the elevator as she went up to the fifth floor. Drowned rat about covered it. She dragged her fingers through her hair and it made not a jot of difference. Maybe she was going to have the ashes snatched from her and the door slammed in her face. She might not even get a cup of tea. Poppy clutched the bag tighter.

Her finger hovered over the bell outside his apartment. Music played inside. She listened and then gave a snort of laughter. It was the tune from *Strictly Ballroom*—"Time After Time", a song about being lost, being found, falling and being caught. She could hear the occupier of the apartment singing along. She already knew this guy was nothing like Joe. He'd have died rather than listen to this.

Poppy waited until the song ended and then pressed the buzzer. "Come in," shouted a muffled voice from inside.

She pushed open the door. The smell of new paint hit her at once. New oatmeal carpet too, with balls of fluff dotting the surface. Cardboard boxes littered the hall, some open, some taped shut.

"I'm in here," the voice called.

Reluctant to dirty the carpet, Poppy slipped off her sodden coat and shoes, left them in a neat pile on the mat, picked up her bag and followed the voice. She didn't know why her heart had begun to pound, but it had, a fast and furious tattoo in her head and her throat. She turned a corner and went into a lounge. A tall man stood with his back to the window. Slim hips, dark hair, familiar sexy smile. No gray face.

Poppy gasped and blinked. She shook so hard, she dropped the bag. The urn fell open and the contents spilled on the floor. Poppy stared at the cascade of multicolored jelly beans. Blinked and they were still there. She felt her pocket, slipped a finger inside. The feather wasn't there. She checked every pocket. Nothing. Poppy still stared at the urn.

"Hello." Oh God, his voice.

She dragged her gaze from the scattered candy and was rewarded by a slow smile. Poppy opened her mouth and then shut it again.

"Find me a butterscotch one," he said. "And don't try to palm me off with pineapple."

Poppy bent down and her trembling fingers selected a yellow jelly bean. He stood with his mouth open and she threw it. The candy sailed miles to the side, right out of the window.

"You missed," he said.

"That's okay. It was banana flavored."

He grinned. Poppy looked around the room. *His* couch, *his* TV, *his* collection of DVDs, *his* revolting mini-fridge, *his* dried up plant that he refused to accept was dead. She gulped back a whimper. *Oh God*. Her knees began to shake. "Pick a man's name. Any name you like."

He'd moved. He stood right next to her. *His* smell. Poppy felt her pocket again. Still no feather.

"I'm waiting."

Stunned and stuttering, she blurted out, "What? I don't know. Lestat?"

"I'm not going to be called Lestat. Try again."

"Rumpelstiltskin?"

"No. Third time lucky."

"Greg?"

He wrinkled his brow. "Greg it is." A smile lit up his face. "Hi there. I'm Greg, Joe's long-lost twin." He reached out to shake her hand.

Poppy couldn't move. Her head threatened to explode. Was she going mad? She took a step back. "I don't understand," she whispered. "You're Joe and you're not Joe? These are all Joe's things. Joe didn't have a twin."

He looked up at the ceiling and glared. "See, Desiree. I told you." He looked back at Poppy. "It's okay, Pop. They let me come back. I'm alive again. I'm not a seeker, not an angel. I'm—"

"Joe." The word burst out of her mouth.

Joe reached out and his hands curled her to him, pulling her into his arms. Poppy couldn't breathe. Maybe *she* was the dead one. Maybe everything after she'd thrown herself off the roof was a dream.

"Poppy, breathe," he said.

She was lying in the hospital in a coma, imagining all this because it couldn't possibly be true.

"Breathe or I'll tickle you."

She took a huge gulp and pressed her face to his chest. "Joe," she whispered, her hands roaming his back, keeping him near.

"Greg, not Joe. Now you've chosen my name, G's going to fix history and all the records and create a Greg in the mind and memory of everyone who matters."

"No. I want you to be Joe," Poppy said.

"Right. Well, I think I'll leave you to argue with G about that."

She let him keep holding her for a moment, then pulled back, felt for his hand and wrapped her fingers around his.

"Come with me." Poppy tugged him out of the apartment, over to the lift.

"Where are we going? We're not wearing shoes."

Poppy clutched his hand tighter and once they reached the ground floor, she rushed through the main doors out onto the street.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," she shouted. "I can feel you."

She clutched his strong hand in hers and his thumb brushed her palm. Poppy caught hold of his other hand and pulled him from under the overhang into the rain, spinning in a circle. She held her head up to the gray sky and let the rain hit her face, cold, refreshing, renewing.

A middle-aged man went past, gawping at them, holding up the collar of his coat against the downpour.

Poppy jumped in front of him. "Excuse me. Can you see us?"

"Yes, get out of my bloody way."

"Poppy." Joe tugged at her but she held her ground, moved and blocked the man's path.

"Would you touch him, please?"

The guy stopped and looked at her. "I'd rather touch you."

"You don't fancy me?" Joe stepped forward.

The man bolted.

"Come back and touch him," Poppy yelled.

"Poppy, he could see me. He didn't need to touch me. Thank God he didn't want to. I just -"

She flung herself into his arms and kissed him. Poppy pressed her lips against Joe's and he sighed into her mouth.

"Poppy, oh fuck I can't believe it."

Her tongue tickled the inside of his mouth and he groaned as he pulled her tighter against his hips. Poppy wanted to crawl inside him. Every cell in her body throbbed with need for him, her head ached, her heart hurt, her hands tingled. Joe held her closer, wrapping an arm across her back.

"You take my breath away," he said. "I love you so much, I can't breathe."

Poppy struggled to control her breathing as they stood staring into each other's eyes with the rain beating at their faces. It really was Joe.

"I'm wet," Poppy whispered.

Joe's mouth twitched. "Wet and hot, I'm surprised you're not steaming."

Poppy looked at the door of the building. "We should go back inside."

"I can't move. Not for a minute. I'd get arrested."

She laughed.

"More to the point," he said at her ear, "if you move, if you even so much as breathe on me, I'm going to disgrace myself. Let me just hold you."

They stood in the pouring rain for several minutes, forehead to forehead, arms around each other, not moving, not speaking, just being together in each other's arms right where they belonged.

Joe gave a heavy sigh. "Right. We can go in now."

"Umm, I think you still have a little problem."

"I know I do, and not so much of the little. I've decided there's only one way to deal with it."

He took hold of her hand and pulled her back into the building. "I've something to show you."

Poppy grinned. "I've already seen it."

Joe rolled his eyes, but when the doors of the elevator closed, he had a thought. He flicked the *hold* switch between floors and gave Poppy a cheeky grin.

"Want to see it again?"

He'd barely finished the last word before Poppy had his zipper down, his cock out and her lips wrapped around it. Joe slumped back against the wall and groaned.

"Oh Jesus, Pop. I missed this. I missed you." Joe groaned as she dipped her tongue into the slit on his crown, dipped and dipped until he wanted to grab her ears and push her head down. Her fingers caressed his balls, stroked the strip of flesh beyond and Joe did an honest-to-god gurgle. Long, slow sweeps of her tongue down his length and he was ready to explode.

He jerked her to her feet, backed her to the wall, pushed up her skirt, pulled aside her panties and thrust inside her. Their bodies heaved and then she melded into him, her legs around his waist as he drove into her with fast upward strokes, each one sending a wave of pure ecstasy shooting down his spine. Poppy yelled as she came. Joe caught her cry with his mouth and let her catch his bellow.

She collapsed against his chest and Joe held her as his cock shuddered inside her, the tight tremors fading to faint flutters. He kissed her softly. "Miss me?"

They jumped when the alarm on the elevator began to sound. Joe lifted her down, straightened her up and tucked himself away.

"Do I look okay?" Poppy asked.

He took in the flushed cheeks, the swollen lips and the glazed look in her eyes.

"Nicely fucked," he said.

She hit him.

Back in his apartment, Joe stood Poppy in front of a closed door. "You need to take a look in there. Try not to scream."

Her shoulders reversed into his chest.

"Tell me you don't have a pet snake," Poppy said.

Joe bit back his laugh and urged her forward. "You already met my spitting cobra."

"Does this have something to do with you appearing in Nottingham?" She turned to face him. "How long have you been here? What happened after you got your white feathers? Did you meet the big guy?"

Joe wasn't sure how to explain any of it, but he tried. "I woke up here this morning. This time Desiree wasn't late, she was waiting. She said there had been a mistake and I had another chance. I'd died before my time. I was supposed to survive the fall, but because I believed it was all your fault and you'd let me go, I didn't fight to live. I was

made a seeker while G decided what to do." Joe opened his arms. "Now He has. There was no relative in Nottingham. They decided a twin would work. My wings were removed while I slept and I was told I could start my life again in another city. Not sure why they picked Nottingham, but I've always fancied myself as Robin Hood. I have a job with the police, my life back and you back." His pulse surged. "Now open the door."

Poppy turned the handle and pushed. Joe guessed it took a moment for her brain to register what she saw. He caught her as her knees buckled. All her things were there, her clothes, books, CDs and – much to his disappointment – all her girly DVDs.

"I guess they want us to live together," Joe said. "If that's all right with you." He winced. Christ, couldn't he do any better than that?

"Is that what you want?"

The uncertainty in her voice hit him hard. He'd fucked up everything so far in their relationship but he wasn't going to lose her now. Joe pressed his face into her hair. "How can you even ask? This is exactly what I want, only if you say no, then all of this is for nothing. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, looking after you, loving you. I love you so much, Poppy. I should have told you a long while ago that you're my life. Without you, I'm nothing."

He kissed her but kept it short. She still hadn't seen what he needed her to, something that had sent his stomach into freefall and it was still bouncing.

"What about my job? What about—"

"Everything is sorted. Wollaton police station expects you on Monday. A transfer from London. I'm going to be at HQ in Arnold." Joe clutched her. "We've been given a new start, Poppy. I don't know how, but somehow everything is right again."

She stiffened. "What...what's that?"

At last.

"A present from G," Joe said. Please let it be okay. Please.

In the corner by the window was a baby's crib. A huge wooden structure, painted yellow with mobiles hanging over it at either end. One with dangling angels playing harps and the other with fluffy clouds and rainbows.

"You want to start a family?" Poppy whispered.

Joe slid his hand over her stomach. "We already have."

He felt the breath lurch out of her lungs and he steadied her against him.

"I'm going to have a baby?" she whispered. "Oh fuck. But you said—"

"I was wrong."

"Can I have that in writing?"

"Poppy?" Joe swallowed hard. "I'm happy. Aren't you happy too?"

"Happy? But I thought you—"

"I've changed. I know it's hard to believe and I still won't let you get rid of my collection of marbles so don't ask, but I've done what I should have done a long while ago. I've grown up."

"Pregnant?" she whispered.

He knew this was a lot to take in. "Desiree said they were in a panic when they realized I was different to most seekers, somehow still partly alive. I wasn't supposed to be able to make love, let alone have lively sperm. Apparently I was super-fertile." He grinned and Poppy rolled her eyes, then glared. "G had to break the normal rules of life and death because getting you pregnant was some kind of miracle."

He hoped she thought it was only he wasn't sure what she was thinking. He'd spent the whole of their time together trying to persuade himself Poppy would be no different to the others, trying to deny what he felt for her. He didn't deserve her but Joe intended to spend the rest of his newly gotten life trying to be a better man—one who did deserve her.

"Pregnant," she murmured.

At least she sounded as though she believed it now. "Are you okay?"

"I feel sick."

"That's normal. I've been reading—"

"Reading?"

"Don't sound so surprised. I do know how to read. I want to do everything right."

She gave him a little smile and the weight lifted from his heart.

"Apparently this only happens once every five hundred years or so. G had to look up how He handled the situation last time and decide whether to make me a full angel or return me to life. Guess He thought I'd be more trouble up there than down here."

"Thank God," Poppy whispered. "I mean, thank you God."

"I got the feeling G isn't too sure how this will turn out." Joe patted her stomach.

Poppy gulped. "You mean, if the baby will have horns and a tail, or wings and a halo?"

Joe smiled. "It doesn't matter, because we'll love them whatever they're like."

Poppy was quiet for a moment. "Them?"

He cleared his throat. "Twins. After all, turns out I'm a twin."

Joe caught her as she fell. He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

"Wet clothes, off now." He began to strip her.

"Twins?" Poppy said.

"Apparently, it runs in the family."

"That's not funny, Joe."

He pulled off his wet shirt, jeans and pants and tossed everything into the bath. When he came back, Poppy lay where he'd left her. He pulled the duvet over them and wrapped his arms around her.

"We'll be fine," he said and kissed her wet hair. "I've got you and you've got me and we'll never let each other go. I'll even stay in the delivery room with you. Everything's going to be great."

"Easy for you to say, you don't have to give birth. Though I'm looking forward to being waited on hand and foot for the next nine months."

Joe grinned before he dipped his head under the duvet. "Where shall I start? Hand or foot?"

The End

About the Author

Barbara Elsborg lives in West Yorkshire in the north of England. She always wanted to be a spy, but having confessed to everyone without them even resorting to torture, she decided it was not for her. Vulcanology scorched her feet. A morbid fear of sharks put paid to marine biology. So instead, she spent several years successfully selling cyanide.

After dragging up two rotten, ungrateful children and frustrating her sexy, devoted, wonderful husband (who can now stop twisting her arm), she finally has time to conduct an affair with an electrifying, plugged-in male—her laptop.

Her books feature quirky heroines and bad boys, and she hopes they are as much fun to read as they are to write.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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