

**Stephani Hecht**

A man is shown from the back, shirtless, wearing blue jeans. He is looking out over a city skyline at sunset or sunrise. The sky is a mix of orange, red, and purple. The city lights are visible in the background.

**Angelic  
Rapture**

Betrayed and almost murdered by his first true love, Nathaniel wants nothing to do with any female angel. Which is why when Chief 423-1hangel Michael sends him on a mission, Nathaniel is relived to be assigned with the one female he knows he's safe with, Jules. For years, Jules has lived with his family and, while he's grown protective of her, he's never been attracted to her. To him she's just one of the guys, a pal, a fellow angel warrior, certainly not someone he's sexually attracted to.

Forced to leave her family behind in Heaven when the angel warriors rebelled, Jules has always kept her emotions closely guarded. While she has watched all her friends find their mates, she has been happy to be unattached, devoting herself fully to the angel warrior cause. When she finds out she has to go with Nathaniel on a mission, she doesn't even think twice. While many other angels fear him because he's so broody and intense, she knows deep down, he has a soft side.

To their horror, the more time they spend together, the more they find themselves drawn to each other. It couldn't come at a worse time either. They have to fight a demon uprising that could end the world and contend with the third member of their team, a freshly trained angel warrior healer who is terrified of demons and can't even use her weapon without accidentally harming innocents.

Then something happens that threatens not only the future of all humanity, but the angel warriors as well. Will Nathaniel and Jules be able to stop it? Or will they lose everything—even each other and what could have been?

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Angelic Rapture  
Copyright © 2009 Stephani Hecht  
ISBN: 978-1-55487-423-1  
Cover art by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books  
Look for us online at:  
[www.extasybooks.com](http://www.extasybooks.com)

**Angelic Rapture**  
**423-1hangers Series Book Ten**

**By**

**Stephani Hecht**

## Chapter One

The demon had ripped Nathaniel's favorite leather jacket. For that, it was going to die. He just had to catch the little mother fucker first.

The fact that said rip had come from a knife and the blade had also pierced his ribs, didn't matter to Nathaniel. As an 423-1hangel, he was used to battle wounds. Scrapes, lacerations and contusions could be taken care of with a trip to one of the healers. A good leather coat on the other hand was hard to come by.

"I think I see him!" his younger brother, Cam, yelled. Even though it was night, the blond 423-1hangel still wore shades, the streetlight reflecting in the dark lenses as he turned from Nathaniel to look toward the right.

Sure enough, something was moving down the street. It traveled so fast, it was nothing more than a long, black blur. An untrained human eye might have even mistaken it for a vapor trail. Then it stopped moving, pausing for a moment to look back at the angels as it let out a cackle.

Three feet tall and only clothed in a grey loincloth, it looked more like a black-skinned goblin. It even had high pointed ears and an elongated snout. The eyes were what gave it away as a demon. Bright red, they glowed in the darkness, even as it flashed its white teeth in a challenge before it started running again.

"What the fuck kind of demon is that?" Cam asked, cocking his head to the side. They continued to chase after it.

"Beats me. I thought for sure you would know," Nathaniel answered. Since Cam was the leader of the Empath angels and a half-demon, he usually could rattle off a demon's species just by looking at them.

"I saw some pretty messed up things during my captivity in Hell, but that tiny freak beats them all," Cam replied.

Despite them putting some heavy hoof to pavement, the distance between them and the demon continued to stretch with each passing second. Even though the cool night air brushed against his skin, Nathaniel still broke out into a sweat as he pushed himself harder. His lungs heaved and burned with exertion and the wound on his side throbbed with each step.

"You okay?" Cam panted as his nostrils flared. Since his demon-half was incubus and he had to drink angel's blood to keep his sanity, he probably

smelled the instant Nathaniel was wounded. This meant the nagging would start just as soon as the battle was over.

Nathaniel barely suppressed the growl of aggravation. Even though he was the second oldest son in their large family and Cam was the second youngest, the dork was always trying to protect him.

"It's just a scratch," he said, even as he felt the warm blood start to gush faster. The black tee shirt he wore under his once-favorite jacket began to get warm and sticky. "Focus more on getting the demon and less on me. I can handle myself. I was fighting demons while you were still drinking from a sippy cup and eating animal crackers."

"How did you know what I had for snack time today?" Cam cracked, his fangs briefly flashing.

Nathaniel was about to tell him where he could shove his damn cup when the demon ran through a parked car. And by *ran through*—it really ran *through* the car. It never slowed as it hit the driver's side before it reappeared one second later on the passenger side. The crazy thing was that there wasn't a hole or even a dent in the car. The demon paused one second to wave its hand at them.

"Is he giving us the finger?" An angry flush appeared on Cam's cheeks.

"It would appear so." No sooner had those words left Nathaniel's mouth, then a huge explosion ripped through the air as a giant ball of fire shot through the center of the car. They both ducked for cover, shielding their heads with their arms as debris started to rain down.

"That one wasn't me I swear," Cam yelled over the roar.

Until tonight, he'd been the only one Nathaniel had ever seen wield flame like that. "I know it wasn't. We need to catch that thing and somehow get some info on it, because I don't think any angel has encountered this demon before. Michael is going to want to know everything he can about it." Nathaniel went to stand and almost fell back down when his legs buckled. A hard wave of nausea slammed into him as the ground swayed for a few seconds before righting itself. Shit, this wound was a lot worse than even he thought. He wasn't about to give up the chase though. After they had the demon, he would stop to lick his wounds and not one second sooner.

A loud feminine scream echoed down the street, carrying over the crackles of the fire still consuming the car. The hairs on Nathaniel's arms stood on end as he recognized it. Jules!

"What's she doing out tonight?" Cam snarled. "I certainly didn't put her on rotation and if I had, it wouldn't be here in Grand Rapids."

Not only was Jules an empath and under Cam's rule, but since she was a close friend of the family, all the brothers considered her under their protection. Something that she made perfectly clear annoyed her. There was something else special about Jules, too, something that Nathaniel had never dared reveal to anyone. He liked the sexy, blonde empath as more than a friend.

Completely forgetting the wound, Nathaniel started to run full out to where her voice had come from, Cam right by his side. Jules had proved her loyalty to them many times over and for that, Nathaniel would do anything to keep her from harm. If he moved a little faster because of his growing attraction to her, then so be it. Nobody had to know but him.

He could hear the wails of approaching sirens as the human police responded to the explosion, but immediately dismissed them. They didn't have to worry about anyone spotting them since both demons and angels cloaked their presence from human eyes whenever they battled. Both sides didn't want to risk the exposure.

They found her in the middle of a dead end street, surrounded by three large demon assassins that were taller than even Cam and Nathaniel. She seemed dwarfed by the red-skinned monsters. That didn't daunt her though. Her long muscular

body was crouched in a fighting position, a dagger in each hand as she held them off.

Nathaniel already had his long sword in his hand. He tightened his grip and brought it up as they got within striking distance. One of the demons turned to attack him, its black fangs dripping with saliva as it snarled. Once an angel, before it had turned its back on all that was good, it was now a twisted, hideous creature. Nathaniel didn't pity them though, because unlike Cam, they had gone down this path by their own free will.

The demon struck at him with its broadsword, the clang of metal making his ears ring. The impact of the blow jarred his injury, making him grit his teeth in pain, but years of training helped him push past it. Even though the demon was stronger, Nathaniel was quicker and had more skill. It only took him a few minutes to injure it enough where it flashed out, retreating to Hell.

Cam was engaged in his battle at the same time, his maniacal laughter grating on Nathaniel's nerves. While he preferred to get to the heart of the battle and dispatch his enemy quickly and efficiently, his brother liked to play with his prey.

Knowing Cam could handle himself, Nathaniel turned to help Jules. He was pleasantly surprised to see that she was doing quite well. The demon she was fighting was covered in numerous slash

marks and she continued to dance around it with an almost beautiful grace as she sliced at it with her daggers. Finally that demon retreated, too.

She stood there, head down as she caught her breath. Although she had her long blonde hair pulled back in a twisted knot, a lock had come loose and curled around one of her rounded cheeks. Her brown eyes seemed larger than normal as she lifted her head to look back at him. The demon's blood streaked the front of her form fitting, white tee shirt. Each heaving breath she took made her breasts strain against the fabric. His cock grew hard and he found himself licking his lips as he fantasized about exploring every inch of her chest with his mouth.

He gave a slight shake of his head. Where were these thoughts coming from? The stress of the war must finally be getting to him. He'd known Jules for years. She lived in the same house as his family. Not once had he looked at her *that* way until recently and now he couldn't get her out of his fricking mind. He really needed to get a grip and get his brain off his cock.

Yet, as she stood under the weak light coming from the streetlamps, he knew that was going to be easier said than done. The sheen of blood and sweat from the battle shone on her skin. She reminded him of a Pagan warrior, one that was

just begging to be tamed and damned if he didn't want to be the one to do it.

"You're hurt," she exclaimed, breaking the spell.

Nathaniel looked down and saw that even his jeans were soaked in blood now. "It's nothing," he assured, although his voice seemed thick, even to his own ears. He swayed on his feet as the world started to tilt again. Cam, who'd finally dispatched his demon, ran over and put an arm around his waist to steady him.

"Shit, we need to get you back to Derel," Cam said, referring to their healer brother.

"I'm more worried about Jules. She's got demon's blood all over the front of her and I know how sick you empaths get from that." He reached out to point at her and damned if his finger didn't end up poking one of her breasts. She must have stepped closer to help.

Despite being on the verge of passing out, he still felt his face grow warm with embarrassment. Ever so helpful, Cam sorted with laughter, so there was no way they could all just pretend that it had never happened either.

"I'll be fine. The only way I could get poisoned is if I had open wounds on me—and I don't," she assured him as a slight flush spread over her face.

"Yeah, because unlike you, Jules knows how to dodge when a demon comes at her with a knife." Cam gave a low snarky laugh.

Nathaniel decided that brother or not, he was going to beat the s423-1asm out of his ass once and for all. He just needed to stop bleeding out first. He swung his head around to give Cam a dirty look and instantly regretted it when the move made the ground start swaying again. Luckily, the jackass didn't notice because he was too busy glaring at Jules.

"When we get back to the compound, you and I are going to discuss what you were even doing out tonight."

"Maybe I should just stay here while you take Nathaniel back," she suggested with a bright smile. "You know, make sure there aren't any more demon assassins? Help clean up that mess from that fire you started over there."

"Why does everyone automatically assume it was me?" Cam threw his hands up in frustration.

"Well..." Jules hedged, a slightly nervous expression flirting with her face. "Because it usually is."

This time Nathaniel was the one who laughed despite the pain ripping through his side. While someone who didn't know her well would have thought that was an airheaded thing to say, he knew better. The wicked glint in her eyes told him

she'd asked it in hopes of throwing Cam off the topic of her and why she'd been there.

"It was a demon who started the fire," Nathaniel said as he held a hand to his wound. "And I'm not going anywhere until it's found."

"But you're bleeding," Jules enunciated each word like she was talking to an idiot.

Judging by the irritated glance she tossed his way, she thought she was. It made her look all the more sexy, which in turned aggravated him because he still had no clue where these feeling for the empath were coming from. "I don't care if half my limbs are gone. I'm not leaving until I've made that thing pay for ruining my coat." Shrugging off Cam's arm, Nathaniel took a step closer to her.

"Again with the damn coat. He's worse than a woman," Cam muttered. Both Jules and Nathaniel ignored him.

"Well, you're obviously operating on half a brain, does that count?" She cocked a brow as she took a step closer to him, mimicking his earlier movement.

Red, hot desire shot through him. Most females backed down from him and cowered under his glare. Not Jules though, she matched his fury and then some. *Get your mind off your cock and back in your skull. This is Jules you're thinking about, not some real female.*

The problem was as soon as he thought about how she'd looked right after the battle, her face all flush with the excitement of the fight, the way her body had looked so damn lickable, he forgot that she was supposed to be just a friend under his family's protection. He just wanted her to be under *him* period.

"What's wrong with you?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're looking at me like I've grown a demon's tail. Do I have dirt on my face or something?" She brought her hand up to her mouth.

He captured her by the wrist and stopped her. As soon as he touched her, he knew he'd made a colossal mistake. A slow electric sizzle traveled through his body as he felt how soft her skin was—how warm. He tried to keep those thoughts off his face as he gruffly explained, "You have demon's blood on your hands. I was afraid of you getting some of it in your mouth."

"Oh, right. Thank you." She made to pull her hand down and he reluctantly let her go.

"Nathaniel have you been eating stupid pills?" Cam snapped.

Nathaniel tensed. All of his family was physic and Cam had some of the strongest skills. Even though he was throwing up blocks, he had no doubt that the sexual thoughts dancing through

his head were so intense they were still getting by. He breathed a sigh of relief when Cam continued.

“You’re too injured to go chasing after anything. Let me call in Ramiel, Case and Joe. They can track the demon and avenge your shredded wardrobe for you.”

Nathaniel opened his mouth to argue, but then his vision darkened around the edges. He swayed on his feet and this time he couldn’t right himself. Jules’s eyes grew wide and she scrambled to catch him as he passed out cold.

## Chapter Two

As soon as Nathaniel fell into her arms, Jules flashed them back home. What she hadn't counted on was that in her panic, she would have them pop right into the middle of the family room. Even though she was strong, she couldn't hold up his weight and fell flat on her back, him on top of her. To make matters worse, almost every member of the family was there, which meant there were at least twenty witnesses to observe her humiliation.

"A little help here," she gasped out. Nathaniel's head was resting across her chest with his lids closed, showing how far out of it he really was. Damn him for leaving her alone to face this embarrassment. Even as she silently cursed him, she brushed away a lock of his blond hair that had fallen across his forehead. He usually kept it collar length and impeccably groomed and for some odd reason, it bothered her to see it messed up like that.

At first, the family all seemed frozen in shock, then they snapped to it. A couple of the brothers rushed forward to lift Nathaniel's limp form off her while Derel ran forward to assess his injuries.

"Well, that's one way to make an entrance," Tiffany quipped as she waddled forward. More than a little pregnant, she was mated to the youngest brother, Bear. She had also been Jules's best friend for as long as she could remember. Jules got to her feet, wincing as she rubbed her sore butt.

Cam flashed in and jabbed a finger at her. "You, in the kitchen, now!"

Jules cringed under his hard stare. Even with the sunglasses on, she could feel it burning into her. Her heart started to pound as her gut twisted in dread. While she didn't fear that Cam would ever hurt her, she did worry about letting him down. They may be friends, but in the end, he was still the leader of the empathes and she'd taken sacred vows to always obey him and to serve him with honor. She'd rather die than disappoint him or Michael.

Ducking her head, she silently followed him to the kitchen, all the while straining her ears to hear what the others were saying about her less than stellar arrival and Nathaniel. Derel had flashed him to the infirmary and she couldn't help but

worry that his wound was more serious than he'd let on.

"I can explain," she started as soon as they were in the kitchen. There was an island in the middle of the large room and she retreated to the other side, hoping to put some space between her and her leader's fury.

"Yes do, because I can't wait to hear how one of my empath's ended up in a middle of a demon attack when I never put her on duty tonight." Cam took off his glasses, revealing his demon eyes. More beautiful than scary, they were an intense blue color and had a cat-like elongated pupil.

"Before the war, I served with my angel warrior team in Grand Rapids. I was just visiting," she hedged. It wasn't exactly the truth, but it wasn't an out-and-out lie either.

"You want to try again?" Cam's voice grew icy.

She knew she was dangerously treading the line of insubordination. "My brother, Cameron, called and wanted to see me," she admitted as she nervously chewed on her bottom lip.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't he a justice angel?" Cam crossed his arms over his chest as he continued to grill her.

"Yes."

"And aren't we at war with them?"

"Yes, Lordship."

"So why in the hell would you be stupid enough to agree to meet one? All by yourself, without bringing backup or at least letting someone know where you were going?" This time Cam's voice was softer, almost understanding.

That was more her undoing than the anger. Going around the island, she walked over to him and went down on one knee. "Please, forgive me, Lordship. It's just I haven't seen any of my family since we left Heaven and I miss them so terribly, I let it cloud my judgment." Her breath hitched in her chest and she was mortified to realize how close to tears she was.

"Did he show up?"

Even though she fought it, the tears started to fall down her cheeks. "No, just the demons."

"Do you think he sent them after you?" Cam sighed. It was common for the justice angels to use demons for their dirty work.

"I don't know. I would like to think not, but he and my parents have never forgiven me for siding with you and Michael and leaving," she sobbed. Damn it! Why out of all angels did she have to get weepy like this in front of Cam? It didn't help her bruised ego to know that she was an ugly crier, too. Her nose always got red and snotty.

"Jules, stand up," Cam ordered in a gentle voice.

When she did, he continued his lecture, but with a lot less heat than before.

"Did it ever occur to you that you could come to me? I would have found some way to help. I know more than anyone how hard it is for someone to be ripped apart from their family because of this damn war. My own mate, Amadeaha, had to leave everything behind to be with me."

Jules wondered if maybe it would have been easier to be apart from her family if it were because she'd fallen madly in love as Cam's mate had. Probably. While Amadeaha got to snuggle with a hot 423-1hangel every night, all Jules had to cling to were her daggers and angel warrior vows. They made for cold bedmates, too.

"You don't agree with me, do you?" Cam cocked his head to the side.

"Were you reading my mind?" Jules asked sharply.

"No, you've gotten real good at blocking us out, but I can tell just by looking at you that something is nagging you." When she still hedged, he continued, "You have permission to speak freely."

"It's not the same." She looked down at her hands. Despite living in the same house as her Lordship all these years, a whole lifetime's worth of training still made it hard for her to relax

around her leader. "Amadeaha has you and your family to fill the void. I don't."

"Of course you have us, Jules. We all love you." He reached out and lightly punched her shoulder.

"It's. Not. The. Same," she said, slowly enunciating each word. It was so true, too, her chest hurt just thinking about it. All the Lehor brothers saw her as a little pet, a pal, just one of the guys. For once, she would like a male to look at her the same way she'd seen Cam gaze at Amadeaha. More specifically, she would like Nathaniel to look at her that way.

But there was more of a chance of Lucifer commissioning a hockey rink in Hell than that ever happening. The only time Nathaniel had ever directed his gaze her way was to order her around. She could probably prance around in her sexiest G-string and bra set and he'd tell her to move out of the way because she was blocking the TV.

"We consider you one of us," Cam argued, all the anger in his eyes now replaced with concern.

At least she told herself it was concern because she couldn't take pity right now. "But I'm not. Tif is one of you because she's mated to Bear. Heather because she's with Derel. Dina because he's Amadeaha's cousin. I'm nothing, just another stray the Lehor family took in and everyone

knows it." She felt the tears welling up again and furiously blinked them away.

"Where did all this come from? Did someone say or do something to you?" Cam demanded.

"No. I just sometimes feel like I don't belong anywhere. Everywhere I go, I'm the odd one out. When I still lived in Heaven, I was the outcast in my family because I'm the only angel warrior. Plus, a lot of the warriors don't trust me because I come from a family of justice angels. I get sick of being the lone dog all the time."

"Trust me, I know where you're coming from with that one." Cam flashed his demon fangs.

"I guess you do." She laughed softly before sobering again. "I really am sorry for leaving tonight and not telling you."

"I know you are, but that still doesn't mean you're going to get out of being punished." Cam gave her a tight smile.

She inwardly cringed. Her leader had a very imaginative method of doling out discipline. Making empaths run laps until they got sick or scrub the floors of the gym with their toothbrushes. Once, he'd even made her wash a good portion of the vehicles in the angel warriors' parking garage. "What is it going to be this time?"

"I don't know yet. Give me a while to think about it. I need to check on Nathaniel first and make sure he isn't pissing everyone off in the

infirmary. You need to get out of those clothes before you accidentally contaminate yourself or somebody else." He gestured to her blood-splattered top.

She blushed, having totally forgotten about it. Some of it looked fresher and her stomach dropped as she realized it was because she now had Nathaniel's blood smeared there, too. "Is he going to be okay?" She tried hard to keep her voice casual.

"Please," Cam snorted. "He's had way worse and yet he's still around to annoy us. It'll take more than a mini-demon to kill him. The only reason Derel even took him to the infirmary was that he didn't want the kids to get scared. They've already seen enough bloodshed."

"Which means I should hurry up and get out of this." Jules bowed her head before leaving the kitchen. She took the back stairs up to her room, deliberately avoiding the rest of the household. Her feet felt heavy as she walked up the steps, the twin holsters for her daggers slapping against her hips. Pain shot up her tailbone and she was willing to bet there would be a bruise. Great, there was no way she could go to a healer and ask them to heal her butt. Not without having to listen to the snickers for weeks after.

Luck was finally with her and she made it to her small bedroom without running into anyone.

She was pretty sure her grand entrance was the talk of the house and she wasn't in the mood for the ribbing she was sure to get from the others. Once inside, she stripped, threw her clothes into a biohazard bag and headed for the shower.

She turned the water on, making it as hot as possible, hoping to sooth some of the aches from her body. This had to be the worst night of her immortal life. Worse even than the time she'd thrown up all over the 423-1hangel leading her first angel warrior team.

Not only had she been played for a fool by her brother, but she'd let Cam down. Worst of all, she'd made an ass out of herself in front of Nathaniel—again. Something that she'd done so often she'd honed it to a fine art form. It never failed though. All she had to do was take one look at him, the way his muscles rippled as he fought, how his blond hair seemed so silky, right down to his soft blue do-me eyes she was reduced to a puddle of idiot. She just wanted to take him home, feed him freshly baked cookies before tucking him into *her* bed.

The thought of him being hurt still worried her, despite Cam's reassurances. Maybe she should go check up on him, make sure the wound wasn't really that serious. Surely nobody could read anything into that since she had been the one to bring him home. Mind made up, she quickly

washed up, then got out, wrapping a large towel around herself.

When she walked back into her room, she was only mildly surprised to see Tif sitting on the bed waiting for her. The small healer was rubbing her large, pregnant belly as she moved around the bed like she couldn't find a comfortable position. Her long, brown hair was pulled into a set of braids and she was wearing a set of overalls that looked so cute on her that Jules couldn't help but smile.

"You okay?" Tif asked as her gaze carefully studied Jules.

"Just a bruised ego and ass, nothing I can't handle." Jules moved around her room, getting dressed. She wasn't the best housekeeper so she tended to scatter her clothes around. Not that it mattered anyway. The only ones who ever came to her room were Heather, Tif and Megan. Now that they all had mates, they came even less. It had gotten almost to the point where Jules had debated getting a cat, thus fulfilling her role as *the lonely spinster lady*.

"Are you going somewhere?" A small frown played on Tif's lips.

"I was going to run real quick to the infirmary to make sure that Nathaniel is still alive and bitching." She shrugged as she pulled her wet hair into a ponytail.

"I see." Tif started picking up some of the scattered clothes around her and folding them neatly.

The tone in her voice caused Jules to pull up short. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asked sharply, wondering just how much her friend had been noticing. Many people thought Tif was a dumb airhead who was more concerned with lip-gloss and shoes than anything important. Jules knew her better than almost anyone though. Tif was smart. Sharp enough to figure out that Jules felt more than just a friendly kinship to Nathaniel.

"You like him, don't you? And I don't mean in a pal-sy kind of way. You really like-like him." Tif looked up from her folding long enough to shoot a shrewd glance her way.

Jules thought about denying it, then changed her mind. Tif had always been able to see right through her. Besides, maybe if she talked about it, she could finally put this hopeless infatuation behind her. "Yeah, I do." She walked over to the bed and sat next to her friend. Not daring to meet her in the eyes, Jules instead reached out and rubbed Tif's pregnant belly. Frowning, she admitted, "I like him a lot. How much of a dope does that make me?"

"Why him?" A sad sigh passed through Tif's lips.

"Why not? He's good looking and a great fighter."

"So are most of the 423-1hangels in the compound." Tif shook her head as she threw her hands up in exasperation. "Nathaniel may look great in his fighting leathers, but this war has made him hard. I never see him smile anymore and he takes off all the time to go who knows where."

"Well, he's had a lot to deal with over the years," Jules pointed out, immediately rising to his defense. "First, Cam was captured and held captive for months. Then Nathaniel found out his mate, who he'd thought was imprisoned in Hell, was alive and working as a slave trader. It didn't help that when he finally did find the bitch again, she nearly murdered him before Michael intervened and killed her. Plus, every time he turns around, his family is under attack because of who they are."

"Yes, and things are just getting harder for the Lehors. We both know they are going to have to make a lot more sacrifices for us to win the war," Tif said.

"Your mate is a Lehor, too." Jules snapped. "You didn't seem to care about that when it was you and Bear."

"Bear isn't like Nathaniel," Tif countered.

A cold rage slid through Jules's body. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Come on, not to be mean, but you see how he is. He never laughs, never talks to anyone but Cam unless it's to bark an order. It's like he's an angry shell of what he used to be."

"He's not that bad," Jules bit out angrily.

"Most of the younger angel warriors are so terrified of him they run from the training room whenever he enters it."

"Now you're just exaggerating." Even as Jules said that, she couldn't help but admit to herself that there was more than a hint of truthfulness to her friend's claims.

"He made one of the new healers cry yesterday," Tif replied dryly.

"Then that's their fault for not looking at him deeper and seeing what a really great male he is." When Tif opened her mouth to interrupt, Jules held up a hand and continued, "I realize you're just concerned about me and I appreciate that, but really, there's nothing to worry about. Nathaniel never has and never will look at me as anything more than an annoying pest who latched onto his family."

## Chapter Three

Nathaniel knew he was dreaming, yet despite all his efforts, he couldn't force himself awake. He was in some strange dreamland, post-apoplectic world. It reminded him a bit like some of those bad B-movies Bear and Cam liked to watch. The sky was a hazy orange color from a wall of flames that danced all along the horizon. All around him, the land was barren and devoid of anything—no buildings, trees, nothing. The ground below his feet crunched as he stepped on bits of broken glass, mixed in with ash and what once may have been a civilization.

He strained his ears for any sounds to let him know that maybe he wasn't alone, but all he got was a strange howling as the wind blew down the empty landscape. It kicked up some dust and he blinked as the granules got into his eyes. It also brought with it the strong stench of decay that was normally associated with demons. He scanned around once again, wondering if maybe some

were lying in wait to attack, but all he saw was that same vast wasteland, marked by the distant wall of fire.

"Pretty fucked up, huh? I'll bet you think this is just a normal dream, too," Michael said as he flashed in next to Nathaniel.

As usual, the leader of the angel warriors and 423-1hangers was dressed in comfortable jeans and a button up flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He brushed his shaggy, dark blond hair out of his face as his powerful brown-eyed gaze surveyed their surroundings.

"Hey, Uncle Mike," Nathaniel replied, a little surprised to see the leader popping in, now of all times.

"Now I know you think you're dreaming. In all the time that you've known about our relation, you've never once called me Uncle," Michael snorted.

"There's plenty that I'd love to call you, but I hold back because I know it would get me into a shit load of trouble." Nathaniel shot off his best Cam-patented cocky grin.

"This isn't a dream and you know how I'm going to prove that?" Michael challenged, his face an emotionless mask.

"How?" As soon as that word slid past his lips, Michael gave him a sharp jab in the ribs. Tears welled up in Nathaniel's eyes as he double over in

pain. As a warrior, he was used to taking a hit, but nobody delivered them with the same power as Michael.

"You wouldn't feel that if you were just dreaming." Now it was Michael who was tossing the grin around.

Nathaniel took several deep breaths while he for the pain to fade before he straightened up and asked, "So if I'm not asleep, what in the hell is going on?"

"It's a prophecy." Michael sighed heavily, all the humor fleeing his face.

"Bullshit," Nathaniel barked. "I don't have prophetic dreams. That's Bear's specialty." *And he can keep it, too. I don't want any part of the amped-up superpowers some of my brothers and Michael have. I like just being an 423-1hangel.*

"You have never been *just an 423-1hangel* and you've always known that," Michael relied, clearly butting into Nathaniel's thoughts.

"Now you're beginning to sound like my mother," he sneered, annoyed enough to forget that Michael was his leader. Right now, all he saw was a pushy uncle who wanted to force him in a direction he didn't want to go.

"If you don't have any gifts, then how do you explain this?" Michael waved his arm around.

"I don't know. A fluke, maybe a cosmic burp or something. Just zap me home so I can wake up

and get back to work. That's what you really need, my sword. You sure as hell don't need another all-powerful Michael-ette running around. You would think Bear, Cam and Derel would be enough for you."

"There's a reason for you being here now. Look closely, what do you see?" Michael ordered.

"Nothing. Just what could have once been buildings, smoke and fire." He breathed in deep. "I smell demons, but don't see them."

"What would you say if I told you this is what's going to happen to Washington DC?" Michael's eyes grew stormy with anger.

Nathaniel's heart hammered in his chest as he surveyed the landscape for any familiar landmark that would tell him they were indeed in the Nation's Capital. "How do you know that?"

"Before I came here, I had a visit from Nix the Oracle," Michael replied in a tight voice. "She said if you and I don't stop it, a new form of enemy will destroy Earth one city at a time."

"Well, you can go back to Nix and tell her to shove her damn prophecy up that fine ass of hers." Nathaniel turned to glare at Michael, but the Chief Angel was no longer there. "Great," he muttered to himself. "Why can't I come from a normal freaking family?"

The air around him started to shimmer as the landscape started to fade. Gradually, he became

aware of the low familiar hum of voices around him of his fellow angel warriors, the sensation of the cot under his body. Taking in a deep breath, he inhaled the scents that let him know he was in the infirmary—blood from the wounded, antiseptic and...wildflowers? Cracking his lids, he couldn't hold back the pleased grin when he saw the last scent had come from Jules and she was sitting in a chair next to his bed.

Now that was something he could get used to waking up to. As soon as that thought passed through his mind, he shook it off. No sense in wanting something he could never have. Jules's lips curled into the softest of smiles and his heart clenched painfully in longing.

"You're awake," she breathed, sounding relieved.

"Are you okay?" he asked, scanning his gaze over her body for injuries. He was relieved to note that she had changed out of her bloody clothes and was now wearing a pair of black workout pants and tank top. The tight material clung to her breasts, showing the barest outline of her nipples. Despite just having suffered a pretty vicious injury and still being flat on his back, his mouth grew dry as desire shot through his body.

"I'm fine, thanks to you." Jules smiled down at him.

Damned if his stomach didn't do a little flip like some young teen in training. "Did Cam rip you a new one?" He sat up, not wanting her to see him laid up like some nancy. Not that she hadn't seen him hurt before, but for some reason it bothered him now more than ever.

"Not too bad. I've seen him way angrier." She shifted forward in her seat.

He got a tantalizing view of her cleavage. Vivid images flashed through his mind, of him sliding the straps of her top down so he could bare those breasts. Of her softly gasping as he took the time to explore every inch of them with his tongue. Of moving his hand lower, slipping inside her pants so his fingers could stroke her pussy. How long would it take before he had her wet and panting for him?

Maybe she wouldn't pant, but be much louder. Was she a screamer? Right now, he would give up his sword arm to find out. His cock swelled in reaction and he sent out a silent prayer of thanks to all that was holy for the blanket covering him. The last thing he needed was for Jules to know he had a raging hard on for her when all she'd done was come to check up on someone she considered a friend. That's all it was, too. There was no way in hell someone like her would want damaged goods like him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked as she studied him closely. "You were thrashing around a lot in your sleep."

"Yeah, I was just having a weird dream."

Michael flashed in next to the bed. "How many times do I have to tell you, it wasn't just a dream?"

Nathaniel scrambled to get out of bed so he could greet his leader properly, but Michael put a hand on his shoulder.

"Relax. Derel would get aggravated if you got up too soon and ruined all his hard work."

Jules got up from her seat and dropped to one knee, bowing her head to Michael. "I'll take my leave and let you two talk."

"Don't bother," Cam declared as he flashed in, too. "I think you better stay since this concerns you, too. Get back in the chair, I have a feeling you're going to want to be sitting when you hear this one."

Confused, Nathaniel shot his brother a questioning look. Cam gave a slight shake of his head. Even though he didn't have his usual sunglasses on, his gaze still didn't yield any clue as to what was about to go down and that left Nathaniel feeling unbalanced. He usually could read his brother like an open book, even when others couldn't.

"So are you here to tell me that everything I saw is really going to happen?" Nathaniel sat up

and put his feet over the edge of the bed, facing his uncle and brother. The move put Jules behind him, but he was still vividly aware of her presence.

"Yes." Michael slowly nodded, his face sharp with tension.

"What did you see?" Jules asked.

"DC reduced to ashes," Cam replied for him.

Finally some emotion passed over his face. It wasn't much, just a slight tick to his jaw, but it was enough to let Nathaniel know his brother was concerned—big time.

"How?"

Even though her question was directed at Michael, Jules reached out and caressed Nathaniel's shoulder. It took all the control he possessed not to lean back into her touch. "Demons," he answered, looking over his shoulder at her. "I could smell their disgusting scent all over the place."

"Do you think the little fire starter we tangled with could have some buddies?" Cam grabbed a nearby chair and sat down.

"That would make sense. It would take a lot of flame to cause the destruction I saw. More than a regular fire could. It was like an atomic bomb had gone off or something." He glanced up at Michael. "So what's the plan?"

"I want you to go there and look around. See if you can find any more demons like the one you and Cam saw tonight." Michael ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated.

Nathaniel knew why. At this point, the angel warrior ranks were already spread as thin as possible. "How many can you spare?" Nathaniel asked, cutting right to the heart of the problem.

"I can give you an empath and a healer to make up a complete team. We have an angel warrior team already stationed there, but they will be busy doing their own patrols so I don't know how much help they'll be."

Nathaniel blanched. One team for a mission that was of such importance? It wasn't that he faulted the Chief. Not only did they have to keep as many warriors as possible to protect the compound, but they had to man enough teams to cover all the major cities of Earth. To add to it, another large group was going with his older brother, Ramiel, in order to ask the fairies for aid in the ongoing war with the justice angels and demons. "Who's going to be on my team?" He tried hard not to let the panic show on his face.

"Jules is going as your empath," Cam looked at the female as he dropped that bombshell.

A flare of panic went through Nathaniel. Alone with Jules, with just a healer separating them?

"Why her?" His voice was sharper than he intended.

"Because she's one of the few empaths outside of family who you don't scare the piss out of," Cam snapped, blunt as ever.

"Are you sure she's ready for a mission like this?" He knew he was coming off as an ass when he heard her gasp of outrage. Too bad. Not only didn't he trust himself being in a house alone with her, but there was no way in hell he wanted her anywhere near all the trouble that was supposedly coming down.

Cam leaned forward and directed a killing glare at Nathaniel. "Jules is one of my best empaths. Not only is she good at detecting demons, but she can hold her own against anybody in a fight. You should bend over and kiss your ungrateful ass that I'm willing to part with her."

Nathaniel didn't have to be an empath to feel the fury seething from Jules. Even though he couldn't see her face, he knew her eyes were glazing with anger and a flush had come over her cheeks. He instantly regretted causing her any hurt, but not enough to pull back his comments. It was better for both of them that she hated him. "Fine, just make sure she's ready to leave by tomorrow morning. The sooner I get this done, the sooner I can get back to doing my real job."

Nathaniel got up, ignoring the still lingering ache in his side. Refusing to look back at Jules, he left the infirmary.

\* \* \* \*

Jules could feel her face burning in humiliation as she watched Nathaniel leave. Anger quickly followed. How dare he treat her like she was still a young, empath fresh from training? Sure, she may have been young and inexperienced when he'd first met her, but she'd worked hard to prove herself since then and he had no right to dismiss her like he had.

"You slime ball from a slug demon's ass," she hissed under her breath at him. She jumped when Cam laughed. In her anger, she'd almost forgot he and Michael were still there.

"That's a good one. I'll have to remember it," Cam said.

She breathed a sigh of relief, realizing he hadn't taken offense to her insulting his brother.

"On that note, I'm going to go find Raphael to ask for a healer for your team." Michael gave them a wave before he left.

After the Chief left, a heavy silence descended. Jules wondered if she should get up or maybe she should stay in case Cam had finally decided on her punishment. Then she gulped as she realized

this *mission* probably was her punishment. Finally, when she didn't think she could take the silence anymore, he broke it.

"He didn't mean it, you know."

"What? Michael isn't going to get us a healer after all?" She blinked innocently at him.

"And everyone calls me the smartass." Cam chuckled softly. "I meant Nathaniel. He only said that stuff because he tends to be very overprotective of the ones he cares about."

"Please," she scoffed. "He doesn't even know I exist. To him, I'm just Bear and Tif's annoying tagalong friend."

"You're wrong, Jules. He cares about you, a lot." Cam's expression became serious, almost earnest.

"I know." She worked hard not to roll her eyes. "You all think of me as one of the family. I got that when you told me it in the kitchen."

"No, you don't get it," Cam replied fiercely. "Nathaniel *really* cares about you."

Her heart thudded in her chest as the implication of his words hit her like a gunshot. "What are you trying to say? That Nathaniel is attracted to me? That's impossible."

"Why?" Cam's eyes narrowed. "You think he's too dead inside to care anymore?"

"Of course not." She shook her head, worried that Cam thought she was dismissing Nathaniel.

"I just think you're wrong, that's all. He thinks I'm some dork. I'm the last type of female he'd want."

"Trust me. I'm good at picking up when someone is feeling desire toward somebody." He pointed to his fangs.

Jules felt her face getting warm all over again. Of course he would. The incubus part of him was probably really good at sensing stuff like that. "How long?" Her stomach did a weird flip. Could it actually be possible that someone as great as Nathaniel could be interested in her?

"A lot longer than even he realizes."

"No offense, Lordship, but why are you telling me this? Somehow, I don't think he'd appreciate you spilling his secrets."

"That all comes back to your punishment. I need you to watch over him."

"Me? Watch over him?" She let out a harsh laugh. "Nathaniel is the last 423-1hangel who needs protecting. I don't think there's a demon or justice angel out there that could take him."

"That's not what I'm worried about. Look, this next part, I'm saying to you as a friend and not as your leader." He shifted.

For the first time ever since she'd known him, he looked uncomfortable. But then again, Cam was never the sit-down-and-talk-about-your-feelings kind of guy. Even though he was the leader of the empathes and their specialty was

feeling others' emotions, he tended to keep his close to his chest. "Okay, I understand." The bed was separating them and she leaned forward so they could speak in lower tones. She had no desire to be overheard and she knew Cam didn't either. Even though their family was in the public eye way too much, they all tried to protect their privacy fiercely.

Cam took a deep breath, like he was steadying himself before he began. "Ever since I was captured by the demons, Nathaniel hasn't been the same and all the crap that's been thrown at the family over the years has only made it worse. He's built up this hard wall around himself and all he lives for anymore is paying back those who have wronged us. That's the only thing he thinks about anymore and a part of me knows that once he thinks that mission is accomplished, he'll think he doesn't have anything to live for."

"What can I do to stop that?" Her voice quavered slightly. The thought of a world without Nathaniel in it rocked her to the marrow of her bones.

"Give him something to live for, Jules. Normally I would never ask something like that of you, but I know you're the only one that can bring him back to us." Cam lifted his gaze to hers.

His demon eyes were so full of raw emotion it made her breath hitch “How could you possibly know that?” she breathed.

“Because I can also feel how much you care about him.”

## Chapter Four

The next morning, Nathaniel walked into Michael's office and was greeted with the sight of Cam and the leader of the healers, Raphael, deep in a heated argument.

"This is bullshit and you know it," Cam seethed, flashing his fangs right in the healer's face. As usual, Raphael remained as cool and unflappable as always. His green-eyed expression didn't even waver at the threat. Even though it was still early, he had on a pair of brown dress slacks and button up shirt and his raven hair was impeccably groomed.

Cam on the other hand was wearing a pair of sweatpants, a tee shirt that he probably wore to bed last night and his hair was messed up even more than usual. Or maybe it was mussed because he was pulling it out in frustration.

It had been a while since Nathaniel had seen him worked up this much. "Do I even want to know what's going on?" He cocked a brow.

"Raphael just told me who your healer is going to be," Cam announced with false brightness.

Nathaniel's stomach clenched in dread as he got a sneaking sensation he wasn't going to be happy with the newest member of his team. "Who?" he asked. "It's not Megan, is it?" He cringed at the thought of having to serve with Tif's brain-challenged friend.

"No, worse. It's going to be Becca."

"Are you kidding me?" Jules exclaimed from the doorway.

Nathaniel hadn't even noticed she was there until she spoke. She was dressed in another pair of workout pants, but this time she'd paired them with a *Red Wings* hoodie, which just happened to be his favorite hockey team. "Who's Becca?" he asked, trying hard not to devour her with his gaze. While the outfit should have been the most unsexy thing imaginable, on her, it somehow worked. It made him want to peel off the layers to see what was waiting for him underneath.

"She's Tif's younger cousin. Does that tell you enough?" Cam snorted.

"Be nice or I'll tell Bear what you're saying about his mate." Jules pointed a finger at him as she walked into the room and stood next to Nathaniel.

"Worse, she'll tell Tif." Nathaniel smirked. "With her pregnant hormones, she'll rip your

arms off and play the bongo drum on your ass with them."

Cam gave a visible shudder. In the past couple of weeks, their youngest brother's mate had grown a bit...moody as her pregnancy progressed. The real kicker was, since angels were never pregnant for a set amount of time, they had no idea how long they were going to have to endure her new temperament.

"I thought Becca just graduated from angel warrior training," Jules said, her brow creased with worry.

"She did." Cam pierced Raphael with a jaded glare. "Of course, it did take her five tries before she passed her final trials."

"Ouch," Jules muttered.

Nathaniel found himself nodding in agreement. In all angel warrior families, it was considered a great honor to pass the first time and a huge dishonor to fail twice. He didn't think he'd ever heard of it taking someone five attempts. And now he was getting the *joy* of breaking in that very same angel. Sucked to be him.

"I'm not any happier about this than any of you." Raphael sighed heavily. "I honestly don't have anyone else I can send. My ranks have been hit hardest by this war and it doesn't help that the justice angels are capturing my healers and forcing

them into slavery. We're lucky that I can even spare Becca at this point."

Nathaniel felt for the guy. From watching Cam, he knew how heavy the weight of leadership could be sometimes. It seemed to be straining Raphael even more so lately, too. "Don't worry, I'll whip her into shape," he reassured the healer.

"Yeah, don't worry," Jules echoed weakly.

"Five bucks says she shoots you with her bow and arrow and not on purpose," Cam challenged as he held out a hand.

Nathaniel took it and shook it. "You seem to forget you were a mess until your 423-1hangel, Abdiel, trained you," Nathaniel reminded.

"Not even he could help Becca." Cam grinned wickedly, probably assuming the bet was a sure deal for him.

Michael came in at that moment, a small female healer with him. She was tiny and thin, even by healer standards, looking more like a young teen than a warrior. She had mousy brunette hair that hung to her shoulders and her brown eyes were so large in fear, she reminded Nathaniel of a *Power Puff Girl*. A large, frumpy blue sweater and baggy jeans that looked in danger of falling off, dwarfed her body.

Her fingers worried the hem of that butt-ugly sweater so much, he half-expected the thing to unravel. "You must be Becca." He moved forward

to introduce himself. He hadn't thought it was possible, but her eyes got even rounder as she took a step back. Then she darted a fearful look at Cam and let out a stifled gasp as she took another step. Just when he thought for sure the healer was going to rabbit, Jules moved forward.

"Hey, Becca. You remember me? I'm Tif's friend." She reached out and grabbed the healer's hand, making escape impossible.

"Yes, I know all of Tif's friends." Becca looked up at Jules with what could only be described as awe.

After the way she gaped at him like he was a Hound from Hell, Nathaniel didn't know whether to laugh or be insulted.

"Then you must have met her mate, Bear?" Jules prompted patiently.

"Oh, yeah I've seen him plenty of times. He's so nice," Becca said, her gaze growing dreamy.

Behind the females, Nathaniel saw Cam pretending to gag himself by putting his finger down his throat.

"Well, then you must know Nathaniel is Bear's brother," Jules pointed out.

When Becca cast another fearful look his way as she stepped closer to Jules, Nathaniel knew her reasoning hadn't worked.

"I think Bear is nicer looking," the small healer observed as she leveled an oh-my-God-he-looks-

like-a-serial killer look at Nathaniel. Cam coughed loudly to hide the fact he was now laughing.

Nathaniel bit back a grunt of irritation. It was bad enough to have to work with a team member who was green. The fact that she was obviously terrified just made everything so much better. Cue s423-1asm.

"Becca, you will serve Nathaniel with honor," Raphael ordered darkly without one hint of remorse. Then for extra zing, he added, "Do not let me down."

Nathaniel turned to him and mouthed, *Not helping*. Raphael just stared back, his face the same stoic mask. He didn't think he'd be able to elicit a response from the healer leader short of ramming his uptight ass with an alien probe. Nathaniel snorted. Yet everyone acted like *he* was the one with issues. "Don't worry about Becca, because she's going to do just fine," Nathaniel informed Raphael. She would, too, even if he had to train her 24-7.

"I will?" Becca piped up, her mouth forming a circle of surprise.

Cam didn't even bother to hide his laughter and finally, Raphael showed a hint of emotion—by developing a small tick in his right eye.

"Why don't we just get started?" Jules suggested, the corners of her lips twitching.

"I have a house and car already set up for you in DC." Michael handed them all envelopes. "Here's a new identification and credit cards. Even though the city is large, there's only one angel warrior team assigned there. So they're already spread pretty thin as it is, but they know you're coming and are willing to help if necessary. If you need anything important, call me, not Cam."

"Where will he be?" Nathaniel pocketed his envelope.

"He's going with Ramiel to set up negotiations with the fairies. I really don't want any of the leaders to leave right now, what with how shaky everything is. But if I don't send someone in power, the fairies may see it as an insult and shut us down completely."

Nathaniel nodded. That made sense. Since Michael was the leader of both the angel warriors and 423-1hangers, it would be harder for the community to part with him. Given Raphael's history with the fairies, sending him wouldn't be the best of ideas either.

"You two ready?" he asked his new team. He wasn't too heartened to see only Jules nod. She stepped closer to him, her hand brushing against his and his breath caught in his chest as a small fissure of desire slid up his arm. It took all his control not to reach out and link his fingers

through hers, to keep her locked by his side so he could feel the warmth of her body pressed against him.

Giving Michael one last tilt of his head, Nathaniel flashed to his new home. He and Jules reappeared in the middle of a modest but modern kitchen that was all hardwood floors and oak cabinets. It was smaller than the houses that they had lived in as angel warriors before the war. Now, since they were keeping a lower profile, simple two story homes replaced the once grandiose mansions. Not that he minded. He liked the simpler style better. As soon as they both had their grounding, he looked around for Becca.

"Did she flash, too?" Jules asked, a small frown playing on her lips.

"Yes, I felt the pull from her." Even though Nathaniel wasn't an empath, his family's psychic gifts allowed him to sometimes sense where others may be. Sending out his gift, he instantly found her. "I don't fucking believe it."

"What?" Jules gasped.

Nathaniel strode over to the small pantry at the rear of the kitchen and opened the door to find his healer inside, a confused look running across her face.

"Oh, this is where I am," she said in an airy voice as she looked around at the bare shelves.

"I see our first lesson is going to be in how to properly flash around." Nathaniel tried hard not to let his disappointment show. How in the hell was he supposed to work with a healer who couldn't even master the simple skills? The last thing he needed was her getting lost if they had to make a quick retreat. Worse, what if she got so flustered she flashed herself right next to the demons instead of away from them?

"Yes, sir." Her lips trembled slightly.

Nathaniel knew he hadn't done a good job of hiding his emotions. "Michael should have had our bags and stuff already brought here. Why don't you go upstairs, find your room and get situated? We'll start training in a few hours." He hoped by then she would have her bearings enough so she didn't act like she was going to piss kittens every time he looked cross-eyed at her.

"Yes, sir." Becca nodded so hard, a lock of her brown hair fell into her eyes.

"Nathaniel," he prompted.

"Huh?" She gave him a blank stare.

Not an uncommon occurrence he was willing to bet. "Call me Nathaniel." He moved away from the door and she took the opportunity to scramble out and run up the stairs. If she answered him on the way out, he didn't hear it. After she was out of earshot, he turned to Jules. "We are so screwed."

"Don't be so down." She laughed. "We just need to make sure neither one of us gets injured and all will be good."

"Don't worry, Jules, I'll always protect you." The words were out before he could stop them. The smile left her face as she suddenly grew serious.

"Yes, the Lehor brothers have always made sure to watch out for their little pests." Her mouth turned down into a frown.

"Is that honestly how you think I see you?" Didn't she realize how much she meant to the family? To him?

"Don't you?" she challenged.

His feet seemed to move of their own accord and he soon found himself standing just inches from her. "When I look at you, I see a female of worth. One who I feel honored to have at my back when I go into battle. You want to know what else I see?"

"What?" She tilted her head up to look at him.

He became painfully aware of how close her lips were. It would only take the simplest of movements and he'd finally know how she tasted. "I see someone who is way too damn fine looking for her own good. It's a wonder we don't have our hands full keeping the males away from you." His hand itched to reach up and stroke her cheek. The flesh looked so soft, inviting. How long had it

been since he'd felt a loving caress? Damn, had he really ever? Even when he'd been with Belora, she'd been so cold and distant. Just once, he would like to know a gentle touch.

"You're just saying that because you're my friend. Nobody looks at me that way," she replied, her voice just a husky whisper.

The sensual undertone to it had his body tightening with need. It was enough for him to throw caution aside and act on his need. He leaned forward so his lips were just inches from her ear. "Guess what, Jules? I'm looking at you that way, now." When he noticed she was trembling, he asked, "Does that scare you?"

"No, because I'm looking at you that way, too."

Nathaniel closed his eyes against the wave of ball-crunching desire that shot through him. "You have no idea what you're starting here, Jules," he warned in a low voice. Part of him hoped she got the message and ran, the other half hoped to all that was holy she stayed so they could see how this all played out.

"I'm pretty sure I do. I'm a big girl." Despite her brave words, she took in a hitching breath.

"I've vowed to never mark another female. I can't go through that loss again." He felt he owed it to her to let her know all the facts before she went in. Since angels mated for life, if they took

things too far and fucked, they would forever be bonded.

"I never said I wanted your tramp stamp," she replied.

When a male angel found his mate, he would touch the female the first time they made love and leave behind his family symbol on his mate's flesh. Since they resembled tattoos, many angels had dubbed them *tramp stamps* as a joke.

Hearing that she didn't want the Lehor tiger stung at his pride a bit, despite him having brought it up first, but he pushed that aside, knowing it was for the best. "So how far are you willing to let me go?" he crooned as he ran one finger up her cheek.

"A gal's gotta keep some secrets?" she tossed back.

Despite her sexy attitude, he caught the nerves rolling off her. They were so potent he could almost taste it, but he detected arousal, too. "I should stay far away from you. Cam would have my hide if he knew what I was planning on doing to one of his best empaths." Michael would, too, for that matter. They were here to find out the threat to the city, not for Nathaniel to answer the needs of his cock. Still he couldn't make himself step away from her.

"I won't tell if you don't." She inched her mouth closer to him.

They were so near now that their breaths mingled. Her warm body called to him and he answered, wrapping his arms around her waist. "I'm going to kiss you. Is that okay?" he asked. When she licked her lips in anticipation, his cock jerked to attention. Oh the wicked things he would love for that pink tongue of hers to do.

Instead of answering him directly, she lifted her lips up and pressed them against his mouth.

## Chapter Five

Nathaniel moaned at the taste of Jules. Her lips were soft, sweet and inviting. Everything he'd hoped for and more. Tilting his mouth over hers, he took control of the kiss, making sweeping passes with his tongue until she got the hint and opened up for him. As soon as she did, he invaded her mouth. Stroking and nipping, as she gasped in surprise.

"More," she commanded as she threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled.

The pain added to his desire and he growled before giving into her demands. Pinning her against the counter, he started to kiss her even more passionately. Desperately needing more contact, he slid one hand under her top and splayed his fingers against the warm flesh of her waist.

He slid his hand up further and just as he was about to cup one of her full breasts, he heard the softest of whimpers coming from her throat. There

wasn't much fear behind it, but enough that he was forced to break off the kiss and pull back. That didn't mean he was about to let her go completely though, not when his body craved her warmth like a junkie craved their next fix. He slid his hands back to her waist and closed his eyes as he took deep breaths to calm his raging arousal. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to push it that far yet," he apologized gruffly. His engorged cock was pressed against his pants so tight it was a wonder he could talk at all.

"You didn't do anything wrong." She was breathing hard and there was the cutest of flushes on her cheeks. "It's just...I'm not..." she trailed off as the flush grew deeper.

Nathaniel smiled to himself as he realized what she was trying to say. "I thought you'd had boyfriends before?"

"I did, but it's never been this..." again she hedged.

He couldn't resist giving her kiss-swollen lips another peck. "This hot?" he finished.

"Yeah." She reached up and touched her mouth, her eyes slightly glazed over.

"Don't worry, we can take things nice and easy." He leaned down so his lips were by her ear again. "Don't be mistaken though. By the time I'm done teaching you, you're going to know just how far a couple can go without marking the female."

"Oh God," she breathed.

"But first, we need to worry about groceries." He smiled when confusion creased her brow.

"Groceries?"

"Yeah, did you see the pantry? There's nothing to eat in this house. Let's go shopping." He forced himself to move away from her. Retreating to the other side of the room, he leaned against the other counter and crossed his arms over his chest. Maybe if he acted casual enough, she wouldn't notice how much the kiss had affected him, too.

"Okay," she nodded slowly, looking at him uncertainly. "I'll go see if Becca wants to go."

Somehow, he doubted the healer would be up to getting inside a car with him. Not when she could barely stand to be in the same room. As Jules left the kitchen, his cell started to vibrate in his front pocket. Pulling it out, he scowled when he saw it was Cam. Answering it, he drawled, "Miss me already?"

"So much so that Uncle Mike has been beside himself, trying to console me. I've been so lost without you that all I've been able to do is cry and sniff your shirts for comfort."

"Creepy, but I'm sure that's not why you called me," Nathaniel replied, getting right to the point. If he left it up to Cam, there was no telling how long he would babble on.

"Bear's worried about you and Jules."

Guilt instantly slammed into Nathaniel. He knew his family was the nosiest bunch of angels ever created, but not even he would have guessed they would have caught on this quick. "Damn, I just kissed her, that's all," he growled into the phone.

"Already?" Cam's incredulous voice echoed through the line. "Dude, you just left like five minutes ago. That's a record even for me back in my succubus trolling days."

"I didn't know we were keeping track."

"Newsflash...I *always* keep track. But that wasn't what Bear was worried about. Remember why I told you Jules was out by herself last night?" Cam's tone switched to the clipped all business one he used when wearing his empath leader role.

"Yes, her brother was supposed to contact her. Why? Is there something more up?" Worry sliced through Nathaniel and he gripped the phone tighter.

"Not that we're aware of yet, although I have some of my spies checking him out. Seeing what his intentions are. I don't think for one second that those demons were there by accident. What I don't know is if he's the one who sent them or if someone else was behind it. Not only that, but why Jules? Sure, she's close to our family, but

besides that, she's no different than any other empath."

Nathaniel wanted to argue all of the ways he thought she was different, but decided the best course would be to keep his mouth shut after how he'd already blabbed about the kiss. "How about you? Are you concerned, too?" he asked.

"Not about her safety. I know you'll take care of her."

"I'll protect her with my life," he shot off before he could censor the words. Damn, he knew how telling they were and now that they were out, there was no way of pulling them back in. Luckily, Cam let it pass.

"Good to know, but that's not what has me concerned. I talked to her last night and she's all over the place emotionally. I know how hard it is to be separated from your family and I feel for her."

"Why do I feel a *but* coming on?" Nathaniel demanded, feeling overprotective of her. So she was a little upset about her brother siccing some demon assassins on her. Who wouldn't be?

"I sent her on the mission with you so she could refocus and get her grounding back. Maybe if she's on a team again, like before the war, she'll realize that she hasn't abandoned her family by upholding her vows." Cam sighed heavily.

"You talk like you think she'd going to go rogue," Nathaniel snarled. "There's no way she'd ever do that and it's insulting for you to even insinuate that after all the times she's proven her loyalty."

"I know Jules would never turn her back on us. I'm just worried she'll start letting her emotions rule her."

Nathaniel felt his insides curl with dread. Yes, the last thing any warrior could afford to do was let his or her heart rule. It led to sloppy mistakes and could prove fatal. He was proof positive of that. "If you're so worried about Jules, then you should have just left her at the compound where Bear could keep an eye on her," Nathaniel snapped.

"Like I said, she needs a mission to get her mind off all her troubles and this one is perfect. Not only that, but given the healer Raphael stuck you with, you need all the help you can get and Jules is one of the best empaths I have."

Nathaniel couldn't argue with that, despite his biting insults in the infirmary. Aside from Bear and Cam, he couldn't think of anyone sharper than Jules. "Okay, but first sign of trouble and I'm bringing her back. I don't want to see her get hurt."

"Of course not, because then who would you kiss? I'm sure Wacky Winnow would be up for it,

but first you'd have to chip through ten pounds of crazy to get to her." Cam gave a wicked chuckle.

Nathaniel shuddered at the thought. Wacky Winnow was a fairy who lived with the angels and she lived up to her nickname in spades. She would have been the perfect epitome of a crazy cat lady if she actually collected cats. But even that was too normal for WW. No, instead she hoarded rats, her newest obsession. Last he heard, she had a few dozen of the beasties in her quarters. Sad thing was, it was the rats he felt sorry for. "Now that I need therapy for more reasons than one, I'm going to let you go," he said. "Jules and I are getting ready to go to the store and stock up on food."

"Where's your healer?"

"After she flashed herself into the pantry, we sent her up to her room so she could pretend not to be avoiding me," Nathaniel replied, dryly. He winced when Cam's laughter burst through the receiver. Not bothering to say goodbye, he hung up on the dork just as Jules was coming down the stairs.

He knew it wasn't a good sign that his breath caught in his throat at the sight of her, but there was no helping it. How had he managed to fall so hard for her? Until recently, she'd just been a friend and now all he could think about was getting her naked and doing all kinds of illegal

things to those curves of hers. "Is Becca coming?" he asked, hoping to cover his reaction.

"She says she wants to stay and meditate." Jules rolled her eyes.

Nathaniel, on the other hand, was trying his best to hide a smile because now he was going to get to spend even more time alone with her. Which probably wasn't the best thing for them if they really were going to take things nice and easy, but he couldn't help it. The thought of spending some private time with the empath thrilled him in more ways than one. He couldn't wait to learn everything he could about her.

\* \* \* \*

Jules sat in the passenger seat of the big SUV and nervously ran the palms of her hands over her pants. Despite having got very up close and personal with Nathaniel in the kitchen, she'd never been more unsure of herself. While her lips still tingled from the kisses and her body continued to burn with need, she still wondered if it had been just a onetime occurrence and he'd been playing games with her or something.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, looking at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Why now?" she blurted, getting right to the heart of the matter. No sense skirting the issue.

When he didn't answer right away, she slowly shook her head and then started when a horrifying thought occurred to her. "Oh God, you did it out of pity because you noticed how down I've been lately."

"That's not why at all," Nathaniel glanced away from the road long enough to pin her with a heated look.

She shivered at the need she saw stamped there. "Then why? Until today, you never even noticed I had boobs, let alone tried to touch them." She looked down at herself and grimaced as she realized what one of the reasons might be. She was dressed more for training than seduction. Before the war, she'd always worn tight jeans or short skirts. Now it was stupid to fret about fashion when they constantly had to worry about being attacked.

"I've never really looked at you while you were fighting until recently." He gripped the wheel with both hands as he kept his eyes forward.

"So?" And they said females were the confusing ones.

"You looked so fucking hot when you finished off that demon last night, that it's all I've been able to think about since," he admitted in a rough voice. "The way you fight has always impressed me, but lately it's also been making me rock hard."

"Are you serious? I was covered in blood and all sweaty." She wrinkled her nose up in disgust. Surely he was joking.

"What can I say? It works for me." He gave a sheepish shrug.

"You're one sick puppy," she declared.

"So I've been told before."

If she had known that was all it would take to get his attention, she would have made it a point to get into more fights around him. Hell, she may have even yelled a *Yoo-hoo!* a time or two while they had been in battles together to draw attention to herself.

The car moved slowly in the heavy traffic and while she should have felt awkward being alone with him, given the conversation they'd just experienced, she didn't. If anything, she felt totally relaxed for the first time since she could remember. What was even odder, was he seemed to feel the same way, too. Oh yeah, his gaze continued to scope out their surroundings and his body looked ready to spring into action on a moment's notice, but there was something different about him. She just couldn't place her finger on it. "You've been smiling," she accused softly as the reason suddenly came to her.

"Yeah, so? Last time I checked it wasn't outlawed." He flashed a grin.

She let out a gasp of surprise. "You have dimples, just like Bear. I've never noticed that before." She reached over and touched his cheek.

"Great, next you'll be saying that he looks nicer, too," he griped good-naturedly.

"That's okay, I prefer mean grumpy guys instead," she teased back.

"Yet, you called me the sick puppy." They'd finally made it to a large chain grocery store. He pulled in, then found a parking space.

"I wonder how much we should buy?" she mused as they got out and shut the doors.

"I have no idea how long this will take us so we better stock up. I don't suppose you asked Becca what type of things she liked to eat?" he asked, his concern touching her.

"I had her write up a short list before she started meditating to find her Zen," Jules cracked.

They went in and moved quickly through the aisles, filling up the cart. Nathaniel seemed anxious to get back to start training and she was, too. It had been so long since she'd been with a team, it felt good to get back into the familiar groove of working closely with just a couple others. While it had been great living at the compound, sometimes being around so many others was suffocating.

Even though they rushed, that didn't mean Nathaniel didn't take every opportunity he could

to brush up against her. One time he even went so far as to press his chest against her back as he reached over her head to get something off the top shelf. By the time they made it to the register and paid for their purchases, Jules was ready to melt into a puddle on the scuffed grocery store floor.

Just when she thought he couldn't get any sexier, he pulled out a box of cookies and started to eat them as she pushed the cart back to the car. She was about to grumble jokingly about how the big, bad 423-1hangel was leaving all the heavy labor to the empath when he held a cookie out in front of her mouth as an offering.

"Good?" he asked after she had taken a bite, then moaned in pleasure.

"I love chocolate." She reached forward to take another bit, reveling in the way he sucked in breath when her lips briefly came into contact with his fingers. She was still having trouble believing that she was affecting the handsome 423-1hangel so much.

"I have a whole pint of chocolate ice cream that I'd love to lick off your body," he informed her as his blue eyes grew stormy with need.

"Won't it melt?" Her body tingled at the thought of his tongue on her most intimate parts.

"That's the whole idea."

"Well it's a good thing I got stain spray. That stuff is going to be hell to get out of the sheets."

"Just give them to Becca to launder and watch her stammer when you explain how they got so dirty." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

"Did your mother ever tell you that you're a bad influence on others?" She giggled.

"Yes, ever since the day I conned Cam into helping me tie Bear up and then stuffing him in the closet."

"That is so bad."

"We were kids then. It's not like I did it last week or something." Nathaniel protested with an innocence she doubted he'd ever possessed. "Bear's way too scrappy to tie up now, plus he's a biter."

"Here I thought Cam was the only one in your family who does that." She laughed again, loving how she was getting to see a fun playful side of him that had been absent almost for as long as she'd known him.

"Please, Cam bites for nourishment. Bear does it just out of plain old meanness. He may be the smallest in our family, but he got all the ornery when it was passed out." They reached the car and he unlocked the trunk before starting to load the bags in.

"And what about you?" she asked. "What did you get?"

The smile faded from his face and he opened his mouth to say something before he gave a slight

shake of his head. "We should get back. I have a lot of work to do with Becca and it's not going to happen if we stand here all day talking."

His tone, once playful and light, was now flat and clipped again. Her heart sank as Jules realized her question had set something off in him and she had a feeling what it was. Cam had told her that Nathaniel considered himself less of an angel for not protecting his family and if he'd answered her question, she had no doubt it would have been with one word — failure. Because he still hadn't forgiven himself for not protecting them better.

## Chapter Six

Nathaniel considered it a small victory that Becca came down and joined them for dinner. The fact that she refused to even look at him, let alone speak enough words to form a civil conversation, didn't even bother him. Instead, he and Jules filled in the silence as they discussed the creature from the other night. While the healer didn't add to the conversation, she did seem to pay attention.

"So when do we start looking?" Jules asked.

"I think we should go out tonight and do some light patrolling. Ease Becca into it." Nathaniel got up and started to clear away the table.

"I'm ready," Becca said so softly he almost missed it.

"Really?" He fought to keep his voice neutral, not wanting her to think he was looking down on her.

"Yes, just because I'm fresh out of training doesn't mean I don't know how to handle myself

in a demon fight." She tilted her head up proudly. "I was the first one in my family to pass the trials."

*Yeah, and it only took you five times. Everyone give the gal a golf clap,* the inner s423-1astic voice in his head quipped. "Not true, Tif is an angel warrior. Has been for years."

"I meant my immediate family," she corrected, seeming to get bolder with each sentence she spoke to him. "My three brothers were never able to pass. They eventually had to give it up and go into the civilian life."

"Ouch, I'll bet that was hard," Jules said.

"Right before I left, my mother told me it would only be a matter of time before I failed my first mission and washed out, too. Which is why I can't mess this up. I want to prove her wrong and show her that this is what I was made for." She turned pleading eyes onto Nathaniel.

He felt himself starting to warm up to the dipsy healer. Damn it, he'd always been a sucker for lost causes and if he'd ever seen one, it was Becca. "Then we'll have to work hard in training to make sure you can take on whatever comes our way." He walked back to the table and playfully ruffled her hair. This time she didn't shrink away when he came close. She even smiled at him. It was a small, shaky one, but it was a start.

"Why don't we go up and get changed so we're ready to go out?" Jules suggested.

Becca blanched, her gaze darting uncertainly from her to Nathaniel before settling back on Jules again.

"I don't have a set of fighting leathers," the healer confessed, turning ten different shades of red.

"Why not? You should have got them right after you commissioned your weapon," Nathaniel demanded. The leathers were for more than looks. Not only were they specially constructed to move easily with the warriors as they fought, by the thick fabric helped to protect them from blades.

"My family didn't think it was necessary and I haven't had time to get them on my own." She shrugged, looking down at the table. "I can wear my school uniform."

"Not happening, sorry." Nathaniel ran his hand through his hair and realized he was mimicking the same gesture Michael made whenever he was frustrated.

"I have some extra ones that she can borrow until she can get her own," Jules offered.

"Good idea." He smiled at her before glancing back at Becca. "I'll call my sister, Ana, and have her order you a set of your own. Knowing her, you'll have them before tomorrow." Then he was going to have an up close and personal talk with Raphael to ask why he let one of his healers go out

into the field without even having the proper equipment.

"Are you sure? I mean you really don't have to go to all that trouble. I don't mind wearing my school stuff." Becca wrinkled her nose up in a way that made her look even younger.

"You wear that out and the demons will recognize it and know you're new," Nathaniel informed her grimly. Not that they wouldn't be able to figure it out once they saw the way she carried herself.

"Oh, I never thought of that." She swallowed loudly as some of the color leaked from her face. "I have so much to learn."

"That's why Michael and Raphael put you with Nathaniel. He's the best 423-1hangel I know and by the time he's done training you, you'll be able to kick ass." Jules put an arm around Becca's shoulders.

"I'll never be as good as you and Tif."

"You will if you're willing to work your ass off and listen to what I tell you," Nathaniel told her. For the first time, he believed it, too. There was a spark in her eye that he'd missed before. The same one he'd seen in his younger brothers when they'd first graduated. "Did you know that Cam was a complete mess when he first went out into the field?"

"You're just saying that to make me feel better," Becca scoffed.

"It's true." Nathaniel smiled at the memory. "Cam used to get his ass kicked on a regular basis. One time, he even got molested by a female demon and not in a good way."

Her jaw dropped. "But he's so big and scary. I don't see how anything could ever take him down."

"Well, the big and scary he got thanks to his stint in Hell. But even when he was thin and scrawny, he still could take down almost any demon he came across after he got his act together." *Almost being the key word.*

"Can I ask something without you getting mad at me?" She nervously played with the edges of her placemat.

"You want to know how Cam ended up the way he is." It was a statement rather than a question because he could sense her apprehension about the empath leader.

"Yes, but only if you don't mind," she hastened to add.

"When he was in Hell, they injected him with demon's blood. A lot of it, not the little bit that you might get exposed to in a fight. It doesn't mean he's bad though, deep down he's the same guy he's always been."

"That must have been hard for you," Becca observed.

Nathaniel felt like he'd been sucker punched. Never had he expect her to come to that observation and certainly not that quick. "Not nearly as hard as it was for him," he croaked through a dry throat.

"My uncle died when I was still young. He was an angel warrior empath and went down in battle. My mom never recovered. You want to know why I don't have all my equipment? It's because she's pissed that she's having to watch someone else she loves join the fight. When my brothers failed, she was so relieved. I tease and say that I'm the pride of the family because I made it, but that's all a lie. She can't stand the thought of me serving under Michael." She looked up at him, her gaze earnest, understanding and suddenly so damn old it tugged at him. Giving him a bitter smile, she continued, "So you see, I've seen firsthand how hard it is to watch a loved one suffer."

Later on as they patrolled, Nathaniel kept replaying the conversation with Becca over and over in his head. How he'd misjudged her. Sure, she may be green, a little flighty and jumpy, but she was smarter than even she gave herself credit for.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. Wearing a pair of Jules's leather pants and matching top, she looked smaller than ever as the clothes bagged on her, making her look even more of a novice. Her eyes were wide with fear as her gaze shot from side to side, searching for trouble. She was holding her bow way too loose and even from a distance, he could tell she was trembling. She would make a damn fine warrior. He just had to make sure to keep her alive long enough for that to happen.

"I'm picking up demon vibes," Jules announced.

Unlike Becca, she was having no problem filling out her fighting leathers. The black fabric hugged her curves like a lover's caress and he was having trouble focusing on patrolling since all he wanted to do was ogle at her like some lovesick teen. Shaking off his libido, he asked, "How many and where?"

"Just one and it feels small. I'm pretty sure it's one street over." She pointed to the right with one of her daggers.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God," Becca chanted, her skin taking on a pasty pallor.

"It'll be fine," Nathaniel reassured her. "Just stand back and get ready to shoot if necessary. Remember, as a healer, nobody is going to expect

you to get into the thick of things unless absolutely necessary.”

“Right, because if we get hurt, we can’t heal,” she said, seeming to be convincing herself more than him.

They took off running down the street. Turning the corner, he expected to encounter a demon. What he didn’t expect was for that same demon to charge him. It tackled him on the chest and brought him down, his head cracking hard against the street. Before he could recover, three huge Hounds from Hell flashed in.

Once angel animal shifters, Hounds were forever locked into the demon canine form. Furless and black skinned, they looked almost like wingless gargoyles, complete with fangs, pointed ears and glowing red eyes. Jules crouched into a fighting stance as Becca let out a strangled scream.

The small demon on his chest leaned down and hissed into his face. Nathaniel barred his teeth and snarled back before he head butted it so hard that he saw a flash of stars. He’d lost his long sword in the attack so he pulled a dagger out of the waistband of his pants. Bringing it up underhand, he plunged it into the demon’s gut. It let out an ear-splitting howl of pain as it fell off him. Nathaniel sprang to his feet and retrieved his sword. Just in time, too, since one of the Hounds launched itself at him.

This time he was ready for the attack and swung his weapon in a sideways 423-1h, slicing the demon's head off cleanly. Just as he was turning to take on another, a whistling sound distracted him. Before he could glance around to find out what it was, pain exploded in his shoulder as something hit him hard. Falling to his knees, he heard Jules let out a cry of distress.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry," Becca yelled, her now empty bow clutched tightly in her hands.

It was then that Nathaniel realized what had happened. His own healer had accidentally shot him with an arrow. And now he owed Cam five bucks. *Damn it!*

Becca's eyes grew wide in alarm as she quickly loaded up her bow and shot again.

Nathaniel winced, waiting for the next blow, but this time the arrow hit home, driving into the head of a Hound. It let out a howl of pain before it flashed out. Jules finished off the third one before she calmly walked over to the original first demon that started the attack. Not even giving it a sympathetic glance, she stabbed it one last time, adding to the wound Nathaniel had given it earlier. It hissed as it flashed out, too.

"I am so, so, so sorry," Becca stammered as she came over to him.

Jules walked over, too, and knelt down beside him, her hands resting on his arm in a comforting gesture.

"Pull it out," Nathaniel ordered through clenched teeth. Every time he moved, he felt the arrowhead scrape against his bone so he knew it was going to hurt like a son of a bitch, but he also knew it had to come out so she could heal it.

"Okay, no problem. I'll just yank that thing out." Becca reached over to do it.

Nathaniel's gut clenched at how hard she was trembling.

"Why don't I pull it out and you can heal him?" Jules suggested.

Nathaniel almost kissed her for it. "Just try to get it out in one tug." Nathaniel breathed through the pain. He'd been shot many times in his years as an angel warrior, with both arrows and bullets and it never got easier.

Jules nodded before she grabbed the shaft of the arrow with both hands. Using her body weight and warrior strength, she jerked it out.

Fresh pain sliced through his shoulder and for a second, his vision grew hazy. He held in the cry of agony by biting the inside of his cheek so hard he cut into the flesh. As soon as the arrow was out, blood started to flow strongly from the wound, soaking his shoulder. He braced his weight with his good arm as he looked over at Becca.

Her mouth opened and closed a few times before her eyes rolled back into her head.

"She's going down!" Nathaniel yelled, but it was already too late.

She tipped backward and fell to the ground with a *thud* as she fainted.

Nathaniel stared at her and didn't know whether to laugh or cuss. His first mission with his new team and it had gone Fubar before it had even begun. He glanced up at Jules to see how she was taking all this, but she was looking down at her cell as she quickly texted a message. "Who are you contacting?" he snapped as his gut clenched in dread.

"Derel," she answered, confirming his worst fear.

Just when he thought things couldn't have got worse, she had to call his family in. "I'm going to spank you. You do know that I'm never going to hear the end of this now?" He closed his eyes against the dull throb radiating from his wound.

Derel flashed in and fixed them with a droll stare. "This had better be good. I was just sitting down to dinner." He paused, his gaze going from Nathaniel to the bloody arrow in Jules's hand before settling on the still form of Becca. A smile spread out over his face.

"Don't even start." Nathaniel sighed, already knowing it was a lost cause. Sure enough, Derel

started to crack up as he pulled out his camera phone and began to snap pictures.

"I can't wait to send these to everyone we know," the healer crowed as he stepped closer to get a good shot of Nathaniel's wound.

"Just heal me, you ass," Nathaniel hissed, not wishing for the first time that he'd been born an only child.

"Oh, but we have to record this moment for prosperity. Not only did you get shot by your healer, but she passed out at the sight of blood. Classic." Derel crouched down and put his head by Nathaniel. Stretching his arm out, he snapped a picture of them together.

"Damn it, Derel, heal him. He's hurting really bad," Jules seethed as she continued to rub Nathaniel's arm.

"Oh look, she's worried about you." Derel got an evil glint in his eyes. "Not too surprising since I heard you two were swapping spit within minutes of leaving the compound."

"Who told you that?" Jules gasped, her mouth dropping open in shock.

"Cam told Ramiel, who told Nissa, who told Case, who told Joe, who told Cliona, who told Heather, who told me." Derel grinned, seeming very proud of the fact.

"Whatever." Jules shook her head in disgust. "Just hurry up and heal him before he bleeds out."

“You are such a buzzkill, Jules. If I can’t tease my brothers, my main form of entertainment is gone.” Tsking under his breath, Derel got up and walked over to Becca, nudging her with his toe, he ordered, “Wakey, wakey. It’s time to fix what you broke.”

## Chapter Seven

“**W**hy can’t you just heal me?” Nathaniel asked as he forced himself to get up and walk over to Derel.

“Becca not only lost control of her weapon in battle, but she let down her 423-1hangel when he needed healing,” Derel said, all his earlier humor gone. “She’s lucky I don’t call Raphael in on this.”

“Come on, give her a break. This was her first battle,” Nathaniel defended his healer. Normally, he was the last one to cut anyone some slack, but from what he now knew about Becca, she could use it.

“You know I can’t do that. If anything, you should be the one coming down hard on her. What if there had been more demons and you and Jules were killed because your healer let you down? What if she gets herself killed because she can’t even manage her own damn weapon?” Derel relented, his face sharp with anger. Nudging Becca again, he ordered, “Wake up.”

Becca stirred before she sat up with a start. "Oh shit!"

"That's putting it mildly," Derel replied blandly. "Get up. Get your crap together and flash your 423-1hangel home so you can heal him. It's bad enough that you were the one to hurt him in the first place, but leaving him unattended and bleeding is unforgivable."

"Enough," Nathaniel cut in. As it was, Becca looked ready to break down, Derel didn't need to add insult to injury by pointing out each and every one of her mistakes. "Becca is under my command and I'll be the one to handle her discipline. She was only trying to help me from being attacked from behind. We all know how quick Hounds can move. Anyone could have missed and made the same mistake she did tonight."

Becca's gaze widened in shock at him coming to her defense, while Derel just rolled his eyes as he clucked his tongue in disgust. "You've got a soft spot for her and now you're being too easy. You've got to toughen her up, not coddle her."

"Don't worry. I'll be training the hell out of her in the next couple weeks and this isn't going to happen again." Nathaniel leveled a glare at Becca. "Is it?"

"No, I swear it won't." She shook her head emphatically. "I vow it to you on my honor as an angel warrior."

"Good, now that that's settled can we please get Nathaniel back and heal him?" Jules tightened her grip on him, almost like she worried that he'd be the next one to kiss the pavement.

"Yeah, yeah." Derel rolled his eyes. "She's almost as bossy as Heather." He touched Nathaniel and flashed them both back to the house.

Nathaniel breathed out a sigh of relief when they appeared right next to his bed. Jules and Becca joined them and watched as Derel helped him lie down. Even though he tried to hold it in, a moan of pain slipped out as he shifted around, trying to find the most comfortable position.

"Come on over and heal him," Derel ordered Becca, but his time his tone was much kinder.

"Are you sure?" she hedged, suddenly very timid and shy again under Derel's scrutiny. "I don't want to mess up again."

"You'll do fine. Just make sure you put me out first." Nathaniel forced a smile.

Becca nodded before she laid her palms on his chest and hit him with the healer's sleep. His last thought before he went under was, *Boy, for someone so small, she sure packs a wallop.*

\* \* \* \*

Jules watched Nathaniel's face grow slack as he went into the healer's sleep. Even though his shirt was black, she could still tell it was soaked with blood and she wanted desperately to go over and cut it off him, then clean him up, but held back and let Becca and Derel work.

"Wow, you knocked him out fast. I'm going to call you next time Bear gets too mouthy and you can whammy him." Derel smiled at Becca.

The corners of her mouth twitched like she wanted to respond in kind, but it was clear her nerves wouldn't allow for it. "I really am sorry," she repeated as she shifted her palms so they were hovering over Nathaniel's wound.

"Prove it by fixing your mistake." Derel crossed his arms over his chest and stood back, letting Becca run the show.

The small healer closed her eyes and starting mumbling the chants under her breath as she went into a trance.

"Is he going to be okay?" Jules came up to Derel and spoke in a low tone so Becca didn't overhear.

"Yeah, the arrow just lodged in the wrong spot so it hurt more than usual. If I knew she hadn't done it by accident, I would be tempted to commend her marksmanship."

"You're not really going to show anyone those pictures you took, are you?" Even as she asked the question, she knew it was a lost cause. The Lehors may all love each other with a strong ferocity, but they also loved to rib each other, too.

"Shit, Jules. You honestly don't think I could let an opportunity this golden pass do you?" He pulled out his phone and started punching keys.

"Shouldn't you be watching over Becca to make sure she's doing a good job instead of worrying about humiliating Nathaniel?" She eyed up the phone and weighed her chances of snatching it from him before he did too much damage. He seemed to read her intention because he gave her a sly look as he stepped out of reach.

"Let's see. I have to make sure Cam gets a copy first, seeing as how he won the bet with Nathaniel. Then I need to send it on to Bear since he's kind of related to Becca, thanks to his mating with Tif." He paused and looked at her before giving a slight shake of his head. "Seriously, what kind of names are Becca and Tif? They sound like characters from a teen soap show. It's almost as bad as Jules."

"Careful," Jules gave him a sly smile. "Keep it up and Nathaniel might not be the only brother hurt today."

"That might be scary if I hadn't seen your *Hello Kitty* collection." He flashed a cocky face at her. "Why don't you go get changed? Nathaniel bled

all over you. That makes it twice now. Once more and people are going to start saying you're in love."

"I'll change as soon as I know he's going to be okay." Jules sighed as she peered down at Nathaniel. Becca was still in the trance, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

"Wow, he must be a really good kisser if you're that worried about him."

"I don't know how Heather puts up with you." Jules looked down at her hands and frowned when she saw they were streaked with blood. Nathaniel's blood. She had been in countless battles, fought in the angel rebellion in the streets of Heaven. In that time, she'd seen more than her fair share of blood. Hell, she'd shed a fair portion of it herself. But the thought of Nathaniel wounded at all made her want to cry like some stupid weakling.

"It's not going to be the last time he gets hurt," Derel said softly, a sadness clouding his blue eyes. "Nathaniel has always been reckless in battle and it's just been getting worse. It seems like I'm always having to patch him up lately."

"I know." Jules studied Nathaniel. His face was relaxed, the normal hard lines gone as he slept which made him look vulnerable and yet appealing. Like she got a glimpse of what he

looked like before the war, Belora and all the other bad.

"Jules, be careful," Derel warned, his gaze growing more intense.

"I'm always cautious in battle," she replied, deliberately misunderstanding him.

"You know what I mean. I love Nathaniel, but I can see that he's broken inside. He's not the same anymore and I don't know if we're ever going to get the old him back. I would just hate to see him hurt you."

"How can you talk that way about him?" she demanded, anger racing through her body. "He's your brother."

"And I love you like a sister." Derel came over and put a hand on her shoulder. "It would kill me to see you have your heart broken because you tried to fix somebody who was beyond repair."

Jules locked gazes with him and was shocked to feel tears welling up in her eyes. "I'm not ready to give up on him."

Derel's lips formed a sad smile.

She suddenly saw all the stress that was weighing him down. The stuff he always hid behind his humor.

"I knew you were going to say that. If you need anything and I mean *anything* at all, don't hesitate to call Heather and me. Any time, day or night."

He wrapped his arms around her and brought her in for a hug.

Jules closed her eyes and took comfort in her friend's embrace. Before she'd come to live with the Lehors, she'd never seen so much affection and she had to admit it was nice to be on the receiving end. "Thanks, Derel," she said as she embraced him back.

"Just so you know, regardless of how things work out with Nathaniel, you will always have a place with our family. And it's not because you're some stray we picked up either. We all care about you and consider you one of us. Hell, you even fight dirty like a Lehor brother."

"He's not broken. I'm going to prove it to you." She buried her face deeper in his chest to hide that she was crying. When he let her stay in that position and keep her pride, she could have bowed down to him in gratitude.

"I hope you do, sweetie," he replied softly.

She could have sworn there was a hitch in his voice, too.

After both Derel and Becca had left, Jules still insisted on staying with Nathaniel, leaving only long enough to shower and change her clothes. He was still sleeping, in his bloody clothes and she left him that way for now, not wanting to disturb him until he woke up on his own. Even though

Derel had assured her that Nathaniel was completely healed, she wasn't taking any chances.

What had surprised both her and Derel was how quickly and efficiently Becca had mended the wound. While she lacked in fighting skills, she seemed to excel in the actual healing department, which was a good thing since she had Nathaniel as her 423-1hangel.

"Why do you think you deserve to be punished so much," Jules whispered down to his sleeping form. He was on his stomach, his face toward her. Since he was out, she felt comfortable enough to brush her fingers through his hair. For a guy who was so battle hardened, it sure was soft and silky.

"That feels good," he mumbled, still keeping his lids closed.

"You're awake." She sighed in relief. "I was worried about you."

He opened his eyes and got up into a sitting position as he rotated his arm. "Ah, this was nothing. I've had worse. Although since this is the second time I've woke up from a battle wound to find you by my bedside, maybe I'll get hurt more often." He pulled off his shirt.

She sucked in a breath at the sight of his chest. It was tan and muscular without one ounce of fat. Her fingers itched to explore every inch of exposed flesh. She allowed her gaze to travel

lower, over his taunt abdomen to the area where his pants hid the rest of him from view.

"You keep looking at me like that, sweetie, and I'm going to blush," he teased.

She jumped, realizing that she'd been salivating over him. All that was missing was her tongue hanging out of her mouth as she panted.

"Don't get me wrong," he continued, his gaze raking over her, those blue eyes she saw every night in her dreams becoming stormy with desire. "I'd probably have the same expression on my face if you took off your top."

In response, she stood up and shrugged off her hoodie. Underneath was a tight, form-fitting black top that she knew left little to the imagination. Need flared on Nathaniel's face as he stared at her and she didn't need her empath skills to know there was a rock hard surge of desire rolling from him.

"You keep this up and I'm not going to be the only one in this bed," he promised as he got up on his knees and reached for her.

She let him pull her by the hand, closer to him. "Maybe that's where I want to be," she said, ignoring the butterflies doing the *Hustle* in her stomach. The grin on his face grew wider as he jerked on her hand, making her tumble onto the bed with him. Before she could even get her

bearings, he had her flat on her back, his hard body stretched over her.

She let out a gasp as she felt his hard erection pushing into her core. He leaned down and buried his nose in the crook of her neck, his warm breath cascading against her flesh. She tensed, wondering what he was going to do next, then instantly melted when he started to nuzzle her flesh.

“Are you sure you’re okay enough to be doing this?” she panted, even as she tilted her head to the side to give him better access. The things he could do with his tongue and lips ought to have been outlawed because they made her lose all her inhibitions.

“I’m more than okay for this.” To prove his point, he rolled his hips forward.

His cock rubbed against her clit. She hissed as waves of pleasure rocked through her. Oh God! If it felt this good through the layers of their clothes, how would it feel skin on skin? She gave an internal shake of her head. No, she shouldn’t go there since they had both made it perfectly clear they didn’t want to mate.

Still, that didn’t mean they couldn’t play like he’d suggested earlier and she was going to have fun seeing how far they really could take things. This time it was she who thrust up so their bodies rubbed together in the most delicious way.

"You smell so good," he crooned, right before he gave the side of her neck the gentlest of love bites.

She gasped in response, her hands splaying over the warm skin of his biceps as she held on for a better grip. Then just as suddenly as he'd pulled her down, he jerked back, concern marring his face.

"I'm covered in blood. Are you sure it's all mine?" Still straddling her thighs, he got up on his knees and looked down at his body. He ran his hands over his chest.

She could feel the panic coming from him. "Yes, when Derel was here, he assured us there was no demon's blood on you." She reached out to touch him, but he pulled back.

"Are you sure? I don't want to get you sick or worse. I should go take a shower to get this off me."

A strange tug pulled at her chest to know that he was so concerned about her. Even though she didn't like to admit it, to have someone give a damn felt good. He got up and started for the attached bathroom—one of the luxuries of having the master bedroom of the house. She and Becca had to share. Just as he was reaching the door, he stopped and looked over his shoulder at her.

"Make sure you wait right there for me," he commanded, his heated gaze traveling over her body.

She felt a shiver run up her spine at the pure raw hunger in his expression. It made her feel a little bit like prey being stalked by over two hundred pounds of hard predator. "I promise not to leave," her voice soundly oddly husky and sensual, like she was a seductress for once in her life instead of some wallflower warrior.

"I mean it, Jules. I want to come back out and find you just like that. Laid out on your back and ready for me."

Even though she'd been trained to take commands, usually it grated on her nerves when they were issued in such a hard tone, but mixed in with the heavy desire coming from him, it made moisture pool between her thighs. At this point, she would do anything he asked...wait in the bed, not move, strip down naked. But he just gave her a slow nod before he went into the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

Jules flopped back down onto the bed and let out a pent up breath. Her mind and body were still a mess, thanks to the events in the past few hours. A full day hadn't even passed on this mission and already she knew she would never be the same again. How was it going to be when they had spent days together? Who knew, it could even

be months before they found the fire demons and destroyed them. Could things ever return to normal for them when it was all over? What's more, did she want them to?

Through the door, she could hear the muffled sounds of the shower turning on. The thought of him being in the other room, naked, with only a wall separating them, made her thighs clench in need. She was a virgin and basically, pretty inexperienced, only having had a few encounters with males that had never been satisfactory. Yet, all it took was the barest of touches from Nathaniel and she was on fire.

A small chuckle passed her lips as she wondered what he would do if she decided to disobey his order, moving not to leave, but rather to go join him in the shower. Her mated friends had once told her there was nothing more sexy than getting wet and nasty with the right guy.

But did she dare to strip down and bare herself like that to him? What if he took one look at her and laughed? In the time she'd known him, he hadn't been exactly a Boy Scout. More than once, he'd come back to the Lehor family home, reeking of smoke and females after a night strolling the neutral bars. While angels may have been off bounds, males could be with demons all they wanted without the risk of marking them. To make things even worse, she'd heard that

Nathaniel was like most other guys and would only be with one particular type of demon, succubi.

In her time on Earth, she'd seen more than her share of succubi. Each and every one of them had one thing in common, they were beautiful and curvy with bodies that seemed to look sexy no matter how they moved. She stood up and looked down at her body, comparing it. It was no use, because there was no comparison. Her body was thin, flat and made for fighting. Letting out a snort of disgust, she took one step to the door to leave and then the words Cam had spoke to her echoed in her mind, *You're wrong, Jules. He cares about you, a lot.*

She froze, heart racing, as she debated. Fear and panic gnawed at her insides, but so did arousal and curiosity. Then in a moment of clarity, she knew. If she didn't make herself walk into that bathroom, then she would forever wonder what could have been. Frankly, she was sick of living with regrets, too. They made for damn cold bed partners. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she turned on her heel and made her way to the bathroom.

## Chapter Eight

**S**team billowed out as she opened the door. Walking through it, Jules stepped into the small bathroom. The sound of running water was louder now and she could also detect a whisper of movement behind the blue shower curtain. It parted as Nathaniel peeked out to look at her.

"Somebody is being a naughty angel. I told you not to move," he chided softly. His hair was slicked back and beads of water clung to his face.

"I thought you could use some help washing those hard to reach spots," she ventured as she nervously licked her dry lips. Her heart flipped when she saw his eyes flair in reaction.

"You naked, wet and pressed against me." His lips spread into a wicked smile. "I'd have to be dead to refuse an offer like that."

She put her hands on the hem of her shirt and hesitated as doubt shot through her.

Nathaniel caught on and made a tsking noise as he shook his head. "No backing out now. You offered to let me see every inch of that tight body of yours and you better go through with it."

"Or else what?" she asked, buying for time. Maybe then her hands would stop shaking so much.

"Or else I'll put you in charge of Becca's training. Just a little newsflash, too," his voice lowered into a conspiratorial whisper, "I don't think this is the last time she's going to accidentally shoot one of us."

She giggled and all of her anxiety melted away. Before she could lose her courage again, she quickly lost her clothes, not daring to look back over at him until she was nude. Any fear of him being disappointed in her body ended when she caught the passion blazing in his gaze as he slowly looked his fill. His grip on the shower curtain grew so tight his knuckles blanched.

"Fuck, I'm such an idiot," he breathed.

"How so?" She resisted the urge to act the virgin by covering herself with her hands. Besides, given the way he was looking at her, he really liked what he saw.

"For not realizing that someone as beautiful as you was living under the same roof as me for all those years. Shit, if I had taken the time to notice, there is no way I would have been able to keep my

hands off you all this time.” He pulled the shower curtain open wider. “Get in here now, before I come out to get you and leave puddles all over the place.”

She quickly obeyed, stepping inside, the warm water cascading down her back as she turned to face him. Now that she was finally able to look her fill of his body, she couldn’t hold back the gasp. She’s seen his muscular chest and abdomen before so that wasn’t what shocked her. It wasn’t until her gaze traveled lower to his erection that she got a surprise. Large and hard, it jutted out from his body so she couldn’t mistake he was more than a little turned on right now. Even as she watched, a bead of moisture formed at the tip and glistened. Realizing she had the whole deer in the headlights thing going on, she tore her gaze away and met his eyes.

“Don’t worry, sweetie.” He cupped her chin and tilted her face up for the softest of kisses. “We’ll go slow, and I won’t do anything to you that you don’t want. All you have to do is tell me to stop and I will, with no hard feelings.”

“Kiss me again,” she commanded because whenever he did that, she forgot about all her shortcomings as she lost herself to how good it felt to be touched by him.

“That’s another offer I’ll never refuse.” He lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers.

Unlike the first kiss, this one was harder, more demanding as his tongue swept inside. Jules let out a whimper of pleasure as she thrust her tongue out to meet his. His cock brushed against her belly and instead of scaring her, it only made the hunger in her grow. He made her feel desirable, needed, wanted and it was so good. At that moment, she knew she would do anything to keep him. Even if that meant she had to fight him every step of the way.

\* \* \* \*

Nathaniel pulled Jules's soft, slick body even closer to him, marveling at the way they fit together so perfectly. If he let himself entertain the idea that he was actually worthy of someone like her, he could have sworn that was because they were meant for each other. God, what he wouldn't give to be able to pin her to the wall, slide into her hot body and make her his in every way possible. The urge to mark her was so strong, his hand actually started to tingle a bit. Instead, he settled for lightly brushing the back of his knuckles against her side.

Jules's body shuddered as her kisses grew more frantic. There was an urgent need to them that made him want to wrap his arms around her and never let go. He vowed then and there that he

would destroy anyone or anything that ever caused her harm. So often he'd heard his brothers proclaim that they would die for their mates and right now, he could relate more than ever. Even during that brief time he'd been with Belora, he hadn't felt this protective of someone.

Which is why he should push away and leave right now. Everyone in his life that he'd cared about had been hurt somehow. By being with her, he was putting an even bigger mark on her back. Lucifer, the demons and the justice angels all would love to get their hands on the Lehors and those they cared about. What better way to bring Michael and his family to their knees than to strike at their biggest weakness—their heart.

However, he didn't push her away. Coward that he was, he couldn't deny himself the pleasure of having her in his arms. He tore his lips from her mouth, but it was only so he could start trailing kisses down her neck. She moaned as she 423-  
thed against him, the hard points of her nipples brushing against his chest.

Her breasts were perfect—round and not too big. He slowly drew his hand up to cup one, loving the way she gasped in response. It wasn't a noise of alarm, but rather in surprise and as a result, a thrill went through him, knowing she was reacting that way because no other male had ever touched her as he was. Feathering the pad of his

thumb over her nipple, he smiled when he got another gasp from her. "Do you want me to stop?" he asked as his kisses started to drift lower.

"You do and it'll be me who shoots you next time," she threatened as she clutched his biceps so hard, her nails cut into his skin.

"I always did like your vicious side." Pushing her against the back of the stall, he lowered his head and took one perfect, pink nipple into his mouth. Her reaction was so visceral and pure that it almost made him come right there. Letting out a keening wail, she jerked against him as she grabbed the back of his head. Threading her fingers through his hair, she held him in place, urging him on as he laved and nipped at her flesh. All the while, the water was running over his face. It didn't make for the most comfortable of situations, but he couldn't give a damn. It's not like he could drown since he was immortal. At this point, he was so jacked up that flames could have been licking at his ass and he wouldn't care, so long as he could keep sucking her breasts.

"Don't stop please," she panted.

He almost laughed at her demand. As if there was a chance of that happening. To prove that point, he sucked harder, releasing the nipple from time to time to give it a love bite before taking it back in his mouth. "So sweet," he crooned in between licks. Sliding one hand between them, he

slowly inched his way down, giving her plenty of time to protest. When she didn't, he reached between her thighs and stroked her pussy. "Fuck, Jules, you're so wet."

"Is that a bad thing?" she asked before she let out one long moan.

"No, babe, that's a good thing. It means you like what I'm doing to you." He brushed his fingers over the swollen nub of her clit, reveling in how her juices coated his fingers. Going back to her breast, he started to suck her nipple again while he continued to caress her slick folds. Jules let out a loud cry of pleasure as she tugged his hair so tight pain sliced through his scalp. Sicko that he was, the added pain only made him want her more. She may be a shy virgin now, but he knew under his touch she could become a wildcat in between the sheets. Carefully he slid a finger into her warm sheath, her body closing around him like a glove.

"So good, so tight," he whispered against her flesh as he started to slowly work his finger in and out, mimicking the motion his dick so desperately wanted to make. In the end, he had to settle for adding another finger to the action, her body stretching to accommodate him.

"Nate," she moaned.

It was a nickname he hadn't heard in years. Somehow though, coming from her, it fit. She

rolled her hips against his hand, soft mewling cries erupting from her parted lips. Her long curly hair was plastered against her face and her cheeks were flush with passion. Never had he seen anyone more beautiful.

"That's it, baby. Ride it out. Come for me." Leaving her breast, he moved his mouth up to capture her lips into a punishing kiss, swallowing her screams of pleasure. Her pussy clamped down on his fingers as she climaxed and he savored every second of it, knowing he was the first male ever to give her this kind of passion. Even when she did leave him, and he had no doubt she eventually would, he could hold onto that little piece of her.

God, he did want to keep her though. For the first time since Belora's betrayal, he actually had the desire to hold someone for longer than a quick fuck. He wanted to take Jules to his bed and wake up with her in his arms every morning. To have her as his and his alone.

Terrified to realize just how much she was coming to mean to him, he slid his fingers out of her and went to push her away. Then she started to kiss him back in earnest and every bit of his resolve shattered. Death itself couldn't make him stop touching her right now. Especially when her fingers trailed down his chest, then abdomen before they circled around his cock. When he

hissed in pleasure, she jerked her hand back, eyes wide in alarm.

"I didn't hurt you did I?" she asked, a blush coming to her face.

"No, just the opposite. It felt damn good." He brushed some wet strands of hair off her cheeks and kissed her. Her brow still creased in concern.

"Are you sure? I was told I wasn't good at this kind of thing."

An unwanted surge of jealousy raced through him at the thought of her even thinking of other males, let alone touching them. Knowing he had no right to feel it, he tucked that emotion away. Taking her hand, he gently led it back to his cock. "You're doing great. Trust me."

He was rewarded when she began to stroke his shaft, hesitantly at first, then more sure as she seemed to get more comfortable touching him. Bracing his hands against the stall on either side of her head, he let the water beat on his back as he got lost in the sensation of her caress.

"Whoever said you didn't know what you're doing is an idiot because I'm in heaven here." A long growl rumbled in his chest as he fought to keep control and not shoot off too soon. It was hard though, her gentle touch was more intense than any action he'd ever got from any sex demon.

"You're not just saying that to make me feel better?" she asked as she continued to run her fingers up and down his cock.

He couldn't hold back any longer and started to thrust his hips back and forth so his erection slid in and out of her hand. "No, the only way this could be better is if I were inside that sweet pussy of yours. Plunging into you until you were screaming my name," he stunned himself by admitting. She let out a soft sigh of surprise, but didn't stop and he thanked all that was holy for that.

"Are you trying to shock me with your dirty talk?" A hint of a smile played on her kiss-swollen lips.

"No, I mean it. If I could take a mate, it would be you." Afraid of what her response may be, he captured her lips in a kiss. When she responded by sucking in his tongue as she continued to pump her hand on his cock, that was his undoing. Letting out a muffled roar, he came, shooting off all over her hand and stomach.

She didn't seem to mind though, still kissing him with the same passion as she milked every last drop out of him. It wasn't until the last shudder went through his body that she pulled her hand away and gave his bottom lip one last love nip.

There was an awkward silence between them as he took a washcloth and washed both of them up. Jules kept her gaze cast down, even as he made gentle swipes on her stomach. His chest clenched as he wondered what was going on in her mind. Finally, when he couldn't stand it anymore, he cupped her chin and forced her to look up. "Are you having regrets?" His voice sounded strangely tight.

"No, and that is what worries me so much."

*Yeah, that makes two of us.* Instead, he decided to play the coward by changing the subject. "I should probably go talk to Becca."

"I guess so. She was pretty upset by what happened." Jules nodded.

There was no missing the disappointment in her eyes and it hit him like a brick. "Derel didn't start yelling at her again, did he?" He groaned when he realized that he was actually feeling protective over his dip of a healer.

Jules seemed to come to the same conclusion as she let out a small chuckle. "What were you going to do if he made her cry? Go beat him up?" she challenged. "No, if anything he was nicer to her. He even commended her on her healing skills, saying it's one of the best jobs he'd ever seen."

He ignored her as he reached around and turned off the water. The move made him brush against her side and he sucked in a breath as fresh

desire shot through his body. Damn, even though he'd just come, he already wanted her again. "Nobody disciplines my team but me." He stepped out and got two towels, handing one to her.

"That's bull and you know it." She wrapped the towel around her body.

He instantly regretted losing the view.

"Admit it. You have a soft spot for her."

He just grunted in response because there was no way in hell he was going there. He'd rather be taken to the pits of Hell and tortured than admit that the airhead healer had actually wormed her way into his heart and now he felt a big brother protection over her.

"Leave it." He smiled to show he was kidding before he walked out of the bathroom and started rummaging around in his suitcase for fresh clothes. There were dressers, but he hadn't taken the time to unpack yet. After a few minutes, Jules came into the bedroom and he was sorely disappointed to see she'd gotten dressed.

"We need to get moving," he said, slipping back into 423-1hangel mode. "We have no idea how much time we have and still have no clue as to where or how those damn fire munchkins are going to attack."

"Do you think they're on their own or working for someone else?" Jules picked up his brush and started to work it through her hair.

It felt good to see her using something of his. "There has to be some bigger brains behind the scenes. The one Cam and I fought wasn't exactly a nominee for Mensa." He walked over, took the brush from her and took over the job of brushing her hair.

"Then we just have to figure out who has the most to gain if the human governments crumble." She closed her eyes and let out a pleased humming sound before asking, "Could it be Lucifer or one of his demon generals?"

"Maybe, but I don't think so." He caught a tangle and gently worked it out with short even strokes before continuing. "Last time we talked to Uncle Lucy, he was planning on keeping a low profile. I think he's biding his time, seeing how this war plays out, before he makes his next move."

"I hate it when you guys call him Uncle." She wrinkled her nose.

He could tell it was out of concern and not disgust. "Why not? Since he is the brother to our mother and Michael, he's related to us, like it or not." He set down the brush and waited for her to turn around to face him.

"I don't care, he doesn't deserve to claim you," she replied fiercely as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Yeah, well, we don't always get to pick and choose our family." As soon as those words dumped out of his stupid pie hole, he wanted them back. Given how her brother had very likely set her up to be attacked, it was the last thing she needed to hear. "Crap, Jules. I'm sorry." Thanks to his damn gifts, he could sense the hurt coming from her as surely as if he had been an empath and he hated himself for being the one to cause it. Pulling her into a tight embrace, he placed a kiss on the top of her head. "What's your brother's name?" he asked, feeling like a heel for not already knowing the answer after knowing her for so long.

"Cameron." She snuggled into his chest.

He loved that he was able to give her some comfort. "He doesn't deserve you either. If I ever run into him, I'll make sure I get that point across." He would, too, as painfully as possible.

"I hate to even suggest this, given who my family is, but do you think justice angels might somehow be behind the fire demons?" She nervously bit her bottom lip so hard that the skin turned white.

"Why would they do that?" Nathaniel shook his head even as unease made the bile churn in his

stomach. “Even though they haven’t taken the warrior vows like us, justice angels are bound by the same laws that say we must protect humans at all costs.”

“War has a funny way of corrupting morals. What better way for them to discredit Michael than to have the human race fall under his watch. Up until now, those in the upper realms of Heaven have been sitting this fight out. If the warriors fail in their most sacred mission, they could very well take the side of the justice angels and then come down on us—hard.”

Nathaniel couldn’t find a reasonable argument to that one because suddenly it made damn good sense. They already knew how low the justice angels were willing to sink. Their leader, Jehel, sentenced his own son, Dina, to death just for not embracing their cause. The only reason why the empath lived was because Derel had healed him and the Lehors had taken the poor guy in.

If the justice angels had indeed gone this far, then that would mean there was no going back to the way things were, ever. Now, Michael would be forced not only to defeat them, but destroy all of them as the ultimate punishment for attacking humans. Which meant Jules’s entire family was now facing a death sentence, and judging by the desperate way she clung to him, she’d come to that same conclusion.

## Chapter Nine

He held her for what seemed like forever, trying to offer her what little comfort he had to give. Even though he never heard any sobs coming from her, the wet spot he felt forming on his shirt let him know she was crying. It killed him, knowing she was in such emotional pain and there was nothing he could do to stop it. “We don’t even know for sure whether or not we’re right about this,” he finally went with as he ran his hand in lazy circles on her back.

She stepped back and wiped her eyes, giving him a watery smile. “You’re right. It’s stupid of me to fall apart like this when we haven’t even seen one of those damn demons in DC.”

“Come on, let’s go talk to Becca and then we can regroup and decide what our next move is going to be.” He softly caressed her cheek. Now that he knew how soft her skin was, he couldn’t seem to stop touching it.

"Yes, let's go put her out of her misery. I feel bad for making her wait this long."

Nathaniel didn't suffer from the same guilt. While he had gone out of his way to protect his healer from Derel and Raphael's wrath, she still needed to learn some hard lessons if she was ever going to have a chance to survive in the field.

Taking Jules's hand, he led her down the hall to the healer's room. Once they got to the closed door, he paused to knock. "You in there, Becca? I need to talk to you."

"Yes," her warbling voice drifted through the wood.

Nathaniel let go of Jules's hand so he could run his fingers through his hair in frustration. This mission was going to be hard enough as it was and now he had to deal with some healer that was by all intent purposes, still an emotional teen. He didn't know if maybe his best option wouldn't be to sit on the bed and join her in her cry fest.

Then he opened the door and all his anger evaporated. Becca was sitting in the middle of the bed, clad in a pair of sweats and a huge sweatshirt that had some human movie star on it. Her hair was hanging around her pale, small face in wet clumps and her eyes were red from balling.

Shit, what were they thinking, sending a kid like her into battle? He, Michael and Raphael should be taken out and whipped for even forcing

someone as green as her into a mission this dangerous. Is this what they had come to—throwing inexperienced warriors to the Hounds?

The answer was a clear and resounding yes. Raphael may be a prick, but he was right about one thing. Thanks to losses, both to death and capture, the warriors' ranks were at their thinnest ever. Five years ago, Michael would have never even considered allowing someone with Becca's skills to step foot on a team, let alone one that was going to see so much action. Now Nathaniel was going to have to use every skill he'd learned and picked up to bring Becca up to standard.

"Are you going to send me home?" she asked, her bottom lip quivering.

"Do you want to go home?" he countered as he walked in and sat down in a chair.

Jules followed, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"No. I know I may be a sucky warrior, but I took the same vows as everyone else and I want to see them through." She tilted her chin up slightly.

In that moment, Nathaniel finally saw a sliver of hope for her. "That's the answer I needed to hear."

"Does that mean you're not mad at me for shooting you?" She cast him a nervous glance.

"Wounds I can deal with. I'm more upset that you lost your cool in battle. You need to learn how to control your fears. If the demons even catch a

hint that you're afraid of them, they'll use that against you and take you down quicker than you can take in a breath to scream for help. I've seen it happen too many times to allow the same fate to visit one of my team mates." He made sure his voice was hard, commanding, so she knew he meant business.

"Okay, I won't let it happen again, I promise."

He believed her—almost. Leaning forward in the chair, he locked gazes with her. "If it helps, Derel did say you have fantastic healing skills. Now, we just need to get your fighting up to that level and you'll be ready."

"When do we start?" Becca asked with an enthusiasm that made him smile.

"Right now. Get your bow, go out in the backyard and shoot at the target until it feels like your arms are going to fall off. Then I want you to take a five minute break and start all over again," he ordered, knowing from the determined glint in her eyes she would actually do it.

"What are you going to be doing?"

"Jules and I have a little errand to run. We'll be back in a few hours to check and see how you're doing and if you have any problems, you know how to reach us." The little mission he had planned was way too dangerous to be taking a novice out on. It would be better to go one warrior short.

"Where are we going?" Jules's eyes narrowed in suspicion like she already had an inkling and didn't like it.

"I'm going to invite an old, long lost family member to have a chat." His gut clenched in dread as he thought about that prospect. Not that he was a coward or anything. Never once had he turned his back on a battle or shown any fear. But then again, this was a whole different matter. After all, it wasn't every day that an angel went out looking to have a meet and greet with Satan.

"You don't have to do this," Jules repeated for what had to be the millionth time as they walked down the dark city streets.

"Do you have a better idea how to get to the bottom of the fire demons?" he challenged, never taking his gaze off their surroundings. Unfortunately, all was quiet. Damn it. The one time he needed a demon looking for trouble and they had all called it a night. He was going to have a talk with Uncle Lucy about how lax his followers were getting.

Jules jerked her head to the side. "I sense a demon."

"How far away?" Nathaniel barked, gripping the hilt of his long sword tighter.

"Close, really close." She lifted her face to the air. "It's scared though."

"Of us?"

"How should I know?" She shrugged. "I just sense what their feeling, not why. You're the telepath. Tell me."

"Oh no." He shook his head. "That kind of stuff is what Bear and Cam are good at. Me, I still count on my sword and fists."

"Only because you refuse to try," she replied, sounding like his sister, Ana.

"Maybe not all of the Lehors want to be superheroes," he shot back, feeling the all too familiar resentment that came when someone tried to make him embrace his gifts. He'd made it this far in life without any special gimmicks so why change it up now?

"Fine, have it your way." Jules's eyes flashed with anger. "When we get to the demon, you can pin him down and just beat him until he tells you."

"Remind me again why I didn't leave you back home with Becca?" He took a step toward her. She matched his aggression and then some, taking two steps toward him and stabbing her finger into his chest.

"Because if you didn't have my empath skills here to sniff out the demons, then you may have had to actually face your fears and use your gifts," she replied with heavy, mocking sweetness.

Nathaniel curled his lip into a snarl even as his cock cheered her on. His little angel had a fire to her and he couldn't wait to sample it again. At that moment, he was torn between going after the demon or flashing her back to bed so he could slowly strip her leathers off and taste every inch of exposed skin until she was begging for release. "Let's just go get the demon or are we going to stay around and talk for so long that it dies from natural causes before we can question it?" He matched her saccharine-laced tone.

"That won't be necessary because it's coming this way. It probably got so sick of waiting for the big, bad 423-1hangel to come slay it that it decided to take matters into its own hands."

Sure enough, a small demon was walking up the middle of the street. Dressed in torn blue jeans and a leather vest that was left open so its scrawny green chest was exposed, it looked more like a scout than a fighter. Even the way it held its weapon, a short sword, loosely in its clawed hand, showed a lack of battle skills. It took a step forward, but Nathaniel held up one finger, telling it to wait.

The demon halted in its tracks, a look of utter confusion creasing its distorted face.

"And maybe the demon is coming to surrender because it's sick of listening to you screech." He gave a humorless laugh.

Her jaw dropped in outrage for one second before she recovered and snapped it shut. "I don't screech," she hissed as she clutched her daggers tight.

He wondered briefly if she was considering using them against him. "You sure were doing plenty of it in the shower." He knew he'd gone too far when she lifted up one of her daggers and brought her hand back. He flinched, but at the last second, she pivoted and sent it flying at the demon.

It howled in pain as the blade landed in its foot. Dropping the gun it'd brought out to shoot them with, the demon started hopping on one foot.

She spun back on Nathaniel and pointed her other dagger at him. "You almost got us shot."

"Not true. I knew the entire time he had a gun," he bold-faced lied. Normally he might have felt guilty about it, but right now, he was too pissed to care.

"Oh, your pants are so on fire," she accused.

"Are you fucking with me? Who uses that phrase anymore?"

"I use it and with the way you're acting, there is no way in hell I'm ever going to fuck you now." She pivoted and launched her other blade at the demon who had taken out another gun.

Nathaniel had to give the bastard points for its tenacity.

This time the demon collapsed to the ground and started to roll around as it let out yelping cries of pain. "Just kill me now so I don't have to keep listening to you two," the demon yelled.

Nathaniel started as he realized that he'd just been having a heated argument in front of an audience. Not only that, but he'd let the demon get the draw on him not once, but twice. Something that would never have happened if he didn't have his damn head in his pants. Giving Jules one last aggravated look, he stalked over to the demon and jerked it up to its feet. It howled anew at the movement, but he blocked it out. Besides, for him a demon hurting was a good thing. "You and I need to have a chat," he announced cheerily.

"Great." The demon rolled its black eyes, "Just what I was hoping for, more talking. What do you need? Some love advice on how to deal with your girlfriend?"

Nathaniel brought back his fist and punched the demon in the middle of its squat nose.

"Dude!" the demon screamed. "Whatever did I do to you?"

"Besides trying to shoot us twice?"

"Oh, come on. You're not going to hold that against me, are you? I was going to make them knee shots," the demon babbled around the blood running into his mouth.

"You have got to be kidding me," Jules exclaimed, her face tight with fury. "Let me stab him again."

"No!" The demon thrashed against Nathaniel's hold, but didn't get very far.

"Today is your lucky day," he told the creature.

"It is?" The demon's disbelief echoed through the night air.

"Yes, because I'm going to let you live. All you have to do for me is one little favor."

"What? You guys want a threesome?" The demon waggled the area on its forehead that may have once held eyebrows. "Okay, but if you want to get out the ropes and whips, it's going to cost you extra."

"Eww, are you trying to make me kill you?" Jules snapped as she reached down with both hands and, in one fluid motion, yanked her daggers free, making the demon scream again. She wiped them clean on the demon's jeans.

Nathaniel felt a glow of pride go through him as always when he got to see her mean streak. "No, you don't get to touch the female. In fact, you don't even get to think of her," Nathaniel said in a cool, deadly voice.

"So sorry. Please forgive me, 423-1hangel." The demon tipped his head in an awkward bow. "What can I do to be of service to you?"

"I need you to go to Lucifer and tell him that I want a personal meeting with him," Nathaniel choked out past a dry throat.

"Are you crazed?" The demon gapped. "Lucifer doesn't make appointments with just anyone, especially angel warriors."

"Tell him..." he swallowed hard, unable to continue for a second. "Tell him one of his nephews wishes to speak to him about a personal matter."

The demon let out a strangled cry and even began to shake in fear as he looked at Nathaniel like he was some evil spawn. "I'll go tell him right now."

"Thank you," Nathaniel said, but he may have well saved his breath because the demon had already flashed out. He sighed heavily, wondering why it bothered him so much that the demon had acted so bat-shit scared as soon as it'd found out his relationship to the Lucifer. Maybe it was because deep down, Nathaniel knew it was only a sampling of how some of the warrior society felt. He was more than aware of the whispers that went on behind their backs. "I want you to go back home with Becca," he ordered Jules.

"I'm staying," she argued, planting her feet shoulder width apart and crossing her arms over her chest.

"Damn it, Jules. This isn't a normal battle," Nathaniel snarled, fear for her making him angry. "This is fucking Lucifer we're talking about. He's not going to go easy just because I'm his nephew. He almost killed my mother and she's his youngest sister. If he didn't have any tender feelings for her, he's sure as hell not going to have them for me."

"I'm not leaving you!" she shouted back.

For the first time, he saw the terror in her eyes. Striding over to her, he cupped her by the nape of her neck and leaned down so their foreheads pressed together. "Please, babe. I couldn't stand it if he got you, too."

"And I can't stand leaving you to face him alone," she replied brokenly.

"And I can't stand listening to the drabble any longer," an all too-familiar, sly voice declared from behind him.

Spinning around, Nathaniel pulled his sword up and faced his uncle. Even though he'd seen Lucifer before, his appearance still took Nathaniel aback. Short by angel or demon standards, his entire girth seemed to be overwhelmed by his mane of bushy brown hair. Even though he was the king of demons, he still maintained his angelic beauty, unless one looked really close at his gaze. The cold, hard, evil lurking in his eyes was the thing nightmares were made of. Pain, anger,

agony, solitude, despair, fear, hatred, madness, all were present in his gaze. Nathaniel felt that if he looked too long, he would get sucked in and lost in those emotions.

“Naughty, naughty, Nate. What would Michael say if he knew you’d asked to talk to me?” Lucifer tsked as he slowly walked closer.

It wasn’t lost on Nathaniel that the fallen angel didn’t have a weapon. It was an intentional insult—his way of saying he didn’t see him or Jules as a real threat. Seeing the triumphant smirk playing across Lucifer’s lips, Nathaniel tried to flash away only to find that he couldn’t because his demon uncle had locked them down. It was then he realized that he’d made a colossal mistake in asking for this meeting. One that could not only mean his death, but Jules’s, too.

## Chapter Ten

“**R**elax, nephew,” Lucifer said, that snide smile never leaving his face. “I’m not going to kill you. Yet.”

“Good to know. Just let me send my empath away so we can talk in private,” Nathaniel replied, trying to hide the fact that his heart was hammering so hard in fear his chest actually hurt. How could he have been such an idiot to think this was actually a good plan and how could he have been so reckless as to drag Jules into it? He should be stripped of his sword and flogged for his stupidity.

“Oh no, your female stays.” Lucifer raked Jules with a glance much like a jungle cat would a wounded gazelle.

Protective rage overtook reason and Nathaniel let out a primal growl as he put his body in front of Jules, shielding her from Lucifer’s view. “She’s not mine so leave her out of this.”

The fallen angel threw his head back and laughed. It wasn't a normal chuckle, but rather an almost demented cackle that made the hairs on Nathaniel's arms stand up. A heavy wind picked up, making dirt and debris whip around them right before a wall of pure evil slammed into him. It felt cloying and sticky, like a thick tar. It even had a fetid, ripe scent to it. Behind him, he could hear Jules retching and he knew that with her empath senses, she was getting the vibes a hundred times worse than he was.

He yelled, the sound lost in the vortex of evil. If he didn't do something soon, Jules would overload and go into a catatonic state. It was a danger all empaths faced if they overloaded on evil. It was what Lucifer had done to his mother. For years, she and their father had been in a vegetative state because of it. Nathaniel couldn't let the same thing happen to Jules.

Letting out a primal roar, he did something he swore he never would—called on his gifts. Digging deep, he manifested a psychic shield. Once he had it formed, he pushed harder, making an invisible bubble that surrounded him and Jules, protecting them from the evil.

It worked. She let out a gasp, but it was more a cleansing breath than anything and he could see the color return to her face. Despite his earlier claim that she wasn't his, Nathaniel pulled Jules

tight to his chest, clutching her in a protective embrace.

"I'm okay. I fine," she repeated several times as she held him back. She was trembling.

He was, too. "I'm so sorry. I thought I could protect you and I failed. I should have known better," he replied, aware that he was babbling, too, but unable to stop himself. It wasn't out of fear of his own safety. A long time ago, he'd resigned himself to the fact that he would one day fall in battle. Losing Jules was one thing he wasn't ready to accept though.

"You could never fail me, Nate. I'm a warrior and this is what I vowed to do."

Her use of that stupid nickname made him hurt even more because it brought home how much they really meant to one another. "I love you," he confessed raggedly, sickened with himself that he'd realized it too late.

"I love you, too." She tilted her head up.

He took the offering, capturing her lips in one last passionate kiss. She returned it with the same desperation he was feeling, her tongue slipping out to stroke the inside of his mouth. Around them, the evil continued to swirl and beat against the shield. Nathaniel fought to keep it up, all the while savoring the taste of his Jules. And she *was* his. Damn fool that he was, he'd only recognized that now. He vowed right then and there that if

they somehow managed to get out of this alive, he would do something about that.

"Wow, you two are beginning to make me blush," Lucifer crooned as he drew back his attack.

Nathaniel released Jules, but didn't drop the shield, not trusting that another blast wouldn't be coming. "Okay, you showed us that you have the power here and we're at your mercy. Are you happy?" Nathaniel snapped.

"You know you've always held a special place in my heart," Lucifer said, ignoring the question. "Do you want to know why?"

"Not really, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me anyway."

"Because you've always been the one closest to turning." Lucifer stepped closer until he was right at the barrier of the shield. "Even before I took your first mate, even before I captured Cam and had my fun with him. You can use your excuse of needing revenge all you want, but we both know deep down, there has always been a black mark on your heart."

"Shut up," Jules bit out. "Nathaniel is a true 423-1hangel and he'd never turn his back on his vows."

"Even if it was to save you?" Lucifer challenged. "Somehow I doubt he would be able to give you up for anything."

"Look, *Uncle*," Nathaniel almost choked on the word, "that's not why I called you here."

"I know it isn't. You want to know if I sent the fire demons." Lucifer smiled.

Nathaniel felt his skin crawl as he realized the fallen angel had just read his mind. "Did you?"

"No, they aren't even true demons, but something that was created by someone that isn't my kind or angel."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Nathaniel shook his head.

"Tell Michael that sometimes it pays to look into who are the enemies of his allies."

"Is there any specific reason why you're speaking in riddles?" When he heard Jules gasp, Nathaniel realized that hadn't been the smartest thing to say. Not that it mattered what kind of attitude he copped. There was no doubt in his mind that Lucifer had already decided what their fate was going to be.

"Because it's so much fun watching you idiotic 423-1hangels running around in circles while you try to figure it out." Lucifer conjured fangs in his mouth and snapped them. "Get this straight. I have no love for humans and live to see them suffer. However, I'm not behind the future attack of their city. It's too 423-1haic, too barbaric. I have so many more imaginative ways of making them suffer. Ways that are much more entertaining.

Besides, with this war you angels are having, I don't have to do anything. At this rate, you will destroy each other and the humans without me or my demons lifting a finger. Then I can come in and take what was always rightfully mine in the first place."

"You know that whole I-should-rule-everything-because-I-was-the-first-one dance is getting old. You should really try something new," Nathaniel drawled. He swallowed a grunt of pain when Jules gave him a hard jab to the ribs.

Lucifer let out a loud roar that made the ground shake beneath their feet.

Okay, maybe that last comment hadn't been too bright. Nathaniel gripped his sword tight with one hand and used the other to hold onto Jules's arm. When he finished having his fit, the fallen angel turned his vengeful glare back to Nathaniel.

"One day you will come to me, wanting to join my side and I'm going to have fun making you grovel." With those parting words, Lucifer flashed out.

As soon as he knew it was safe, Nathaniel dropped the shield and turned to face Jules. "You should have left as soon as I told you instead of staying around and arguing with me." He was torn between kissing her or grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking some damn sense into her.

Just the thought of how close he'd come to losing her made him weak in the knees.

"The sooner you learn that I'm never going to leave you alone in a fight, the more aggravation you're going to save yourself," Jules seethed.

Nathaniel was stunned to see that she was pissed. Her eyes were bright with fury. There was a flush around her face and her entire body was tense like she was two seconds from attacking him. "You're mad at me?" He knew he was asking the obvious, but didn't have any clue what he'd done wrong. She was the one who'd disobeyed a direct order. He knew he was on the right track though when she let out a small snarl and shoved him on the chest.

"What was your first clue, you pigheaded, suicidal, moron." She punctuated each insult with another shove.

Finally having enough of her punishment, he grabbed her by the wrists and pulled her close. "Enough," he said calmly, even though inside, he was raging with desire. The sight of her hot and worked up, had his cock so hard it could have drilled holes in cement.

"I'll tell you when it's over," she spat, struggling against him.

He jerked her even closer so she could feel his erection pressing against her.

All the anger drained from her face as her mouth formed a silent O.

"You better hope we can flash away now." He leaned closer so his breath fanned against her cheek. A triumphant thrill went through him when he saw her shiver in response.

"Why is that?" she asked breathlessly.

"Because if not, then I'm going to fuck you right here in this street. While I would love for our first time to be in a bed, I can't wait one more second to be buried inside that tight pussy of yours."

"But I thought you said we weren't going to take things that far," she protested in a near squeak.

"That was before."

"Before what?"

"Before I realized you're mine."

\* \* \* \*

Jules stilled, too shocked to even breathe, let alone move as that one word echoed in her head. *Mine*. There was no mistaking that he meant it, too. The savage ownership in the expression on his hard face screamed it. Her heart raced in excitement even as desire made her body clench with need.

"Tell me, Jules. Tell me you want it, too," Nathaniel urged, almost desperately, as he fanned his thumb along her bottom lip.

Jules felt her breath quicken as she realized this was a life-altering decision. No matter what she said, things would never be the same again, for either one of them. In the end, she went with her heart because there was no way she could deny it. "Yes, Nathaniel. I want to be yours." She reached up to cup his cheek.

He swooped down to capture her lips in a passionate kiss, at the same time flashing them back to his bedroom. Never breaking away, he slid her jacket off her shoulders and tossed it to the side before walking her backward to the bed. When they reached the edge of the mattress, she waited for him to lower her down.

He pulled back and looked at her. "Are you sure?" he asked in a strained voice. "Because I'm not exactly a prize."

In response, Jules took off her shirt, then reached behind to unclasp her bra. Shrugging it off, she smiled at him. "Does this answer your question?"

His eyes flared with passion as he undid the scabbard for his sword, then tossed that and the weapon onto a nearby chair. "Fuck, Jules, you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I don't deserve you, but damned if I can stop myself from claiming you."

"Are you kidding me? You do deserve this and so much more." She stepped closer to him and slid

off his coat. Thanks to all the weapons in the pockets, it fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

He reached around her waist and undid the straps that held her daggers in place. She had another knife tucked into the waistband of her pants and he got rid of that, too. Her fingers itching to touch his bare skin, she tugged on the hem of his shirt until he got the hint and discarded it for her. As soon as it was off, she caressed his warm chest before trailing her fingers down his ripped stomach. He grabbed her wrist to stop her.

"I love it when you touch me like that, but I need you in the bed. Now," he commanded in a thick voice.

She nodded.

He slowly lowered her onto the bed, stretching his hard body on top of her. "I meant it. I really do love you." He gave her a look so tender, a tear actually slipped from the corner of her eye.

"I love you, too." She did, too, always had from the moment she first saw him when he was just an angel and not a friend. Once she got to know him and saw how wonderful he was inside and out, her love had only grown for him.

He started kissing her again, first her lips before he started to trail his lips down her jaw, neck and then chest. This time he only stayed at her breasts a few minutes before he moved lower, stopping to swirl his tongue around her navel. Shivers raced

down her body as his tongue and lips touched areas that had never been touched intimately by anyone else but him. Then when he undid her pants and slid them down her legs, she almost came off the bed.

"Easy, babe, I've got you," he soothed as he ran his hands along the insides of her thighs, spreading her legs out. He was kneeling so low on her body now, his face was right above her core. The only thing separating his mouth from her flesh was the thin fabric of her panties.

"It's just so much," she moaned, even as she arched her hips up, not even sure what she was asking for. He slowly peeled off her panties, leaving her totally exposed to him. She only felt a moment of shyness before he started to stroke her pussy, then pleasure took over all other emotions.

"I've wanted to taste you for so long," he breathed, before he replaced his fingers with his mouth.

Jules screamed in pleasure as her hands shot down and fisted in his hair. He had no mercy on her, working her with his lips, teeth and tongue until she was sweaty and writhing in passion. It wasn't until he'd worked three orgasms from her that he finally pulled back and took off the rest of his clothes so all of his glorious body was exposed to her. Positioning himself between her thighs, he gazed down at her.

"Forever," he vowed.

Since he seemed to need to hear it, she repeated, "Forever." That seemed to be enough because he thrust forward, his cock filling her completely. She let out a keening cry and he stilled, concern marring his face.

"I didn't hurt you, did I? I'm trying to be careful, but you're so damn tight."

"No." She shook her head. "It feels so good, don't stop."

Thankfully, that seemed to placate him because he pulled back and thrust into her again. He was so large that her body seemed stretched to the breaking point, but it was a good burning pain and she never wanted it to end. Bracing his hands on either side of her head, he started to move in and out of her in short even strokes.

His eyes were closed, a look of bliss made his features so soft. Jules had never seen anything more beautiful in her life. A lock of his blond hair was out of place, falling against his forehead and she reached up to brush it back into place. As soon as her fingers touched his sweaty skin, his lids snapped open and she found herself locked in his intense blue-eyed gaze.

"Mine," he nearly snarled as he moved one hand to her ribs.

Pleasure ripped through her body as he started to move faster, harder, his hips nearly slamming

into her as he claimed her. Jules let out a strangled cry of pleasure, biting her lip to keep from screaming too loud. The last thing she wanted was Becca to think they were under attack or something. It was hard though because the sensations were so intense, especially when she felt the palm of Nathaniel's hand grow warm against her body.

He was doing it. Marking hers as his mate. There was no going back now for they would be bonded for life, unable to live without each other. Every male that would come into contact with her would instantly be able to sense she carried Nathaniel's mark and that she was his. A fleeting moment of panic went through her.

He seemed to sense that because he said, "It's okay, babe. I will always love you and nothing can ever change that."

"And I'll never leave you," she replied, because she knew that's what he needed to hear. She wanted him to know that she could never betray him like Belora had, that only death could separate them. Since she had no words that seemed fitting, she wrapped her legs around his waist and brought him in even tighter.

The movement made his cock bury deeper into her pussy and they both moaned in unison. With each stroke, she could feel the pressure inside build a little more until he gave one last thrust and

she went over the edge, a hard orgasm shooting through her.

Nathaniel quickly swooped down and captured her mouth in a kiss, swallowing her screams. At the same time, she could feel him tense up as he came, too, his moan of release muffled against her lips.

After it was over, he rolled off her, but quickly wrapped his arms around her waist and brought her closer, her back tucked tight to his chest. She was content to stay there for a few minutes until her curiosity won out, then wiggled free.

“Leaving already?” he chuckled lightly.

“No, but I want to see your mark.”

“It’s the same as my brothers. Haven’t you already seen it on Heather or Tif?”

“Of course, but this is different because it’s yours and it’s on me,” she replied, wondering how it was the guys sometimes didn’t get the little things in life. Looking down, she saw the mark imprinted on her skin, right below her ribs on the left side. It was a tiger, its bright orange and black stripes vivid against her flesh. The feline’s mouth was open in a roar and it was standing over a long sword. “It’s so beautiful,” she breathed as she lightly touched it.

“Please,” he snorted as he threw an arm over his eyes. “It looks like a sappy eighties oil painting. The only thing that would have been

worse was if our family mark had been the *Hang in There Kitty* slogan."

"Stop it. It's perfect and I love it." She lightly slapped his arm.

He lifted it so he could peer at her. "What? *The Hang in There Kitty*? Okay, if you like it that much, I'm sure we can find a tattoo artist willing to put it on you." He grinned, showing off his dimples.

Her heart pounded with love. "I can't believe that my uber serious 423-1hangel is actually joking around," she teased. He shocked her even further when he tackled her, pinning her down on the bed while he delivered a thorough tickling that left her gasping for breath. Just as suddenly, he stopped and looked down at her with passion infused eyes. "You can't possibly be ready for another round?" she breathed even as she felt herself grow wet in anticipation.

"Does this answer your question?" He rolled his hips forward.

She felt the unmistakable bulge of his erection. "Already?" She gasped as he grabbed her and rolled them over so she was on top of him, straddling his waist

"That's the wonderful thing about being with an 423-1hangel, my little mate." Lifting her up by the hips, he slowly lowered her onto his cock. "We never tire out."

## Chapter Eleven

The next morning, Nathaniel reluctantly left the bed and the warmth of Jules's arms to go searching for Becca. While he would have loved nothing more than to spend the entire day making love to his mate, duty and real life called and he knew he couldn't shirk his responsibilities any longer.

He found her in the backyard, practicing with her bow and arrow. For privacy sake, the entire yard was enclosed in tall wooden fence so they could train. Before the war, they had simply constructed gyms in their homes, but now that they had to live in smaller digs, that didn't work anymore.

Truthfully, Nathaniel liked the new arrangement better since it brought him back to his angel training days. They had always fought and took their lessons outdoors when they had been still going to school in Heaven. To him, it made more sense since a warrior had to live by his

wits and raw skill instead of fancy equipment or comfort.

Becca was shooting at a large, round target erected across the yard.

He was dismayed to see more arrows sticking in the ground and fence than her mark. As he stood and observed her shooting for a while, the problem immediately became obvious. "Where in the hell did you get that damn bow?" he demanded.

"Why?" she frowned as she looked down at the weapon.

Even from the distance, he could see her hands still trembled from exertion and sweat plastered her hair to her face. "Because the draw is way too heavy for you. You can barely pull it back, let alone hold it long enough to aim at what you're shooting at." He felt angry at whoever crafted the weapon for her and mostly he was pissed at himself for not noticing sooner. As 423-1hangel, it was his duty to make sure his team was ready to defend themselves and he'd failed Becca miserably.

"I'm sorry." She blushed. "I didn't have anyone to help me commission my weapon since my parents refused to help so I just went to the cheapest weapons maker."

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry. I should have realized the problem before I even took you

out into battle. You could have been killed because of my ineptness and it's inexcusable." He walked over to her and took the offending weapon from her hand. As he studied it, his anger only grew. It had to be the worst piece of shit equipment he'd ever seen. "Who made this?"

"Livinus." She nibbled on her bottom lip as she turned even redder.

"Next time I see him, I'm going to have a little talk with him and let him know how I feel about him sending my healer into the field with this sorry excuse for a weapon," he snarled, resisting the urge to take the bow and break it in half.

"Do you mean a real talk or a Lehor Brother talk where you use your fists?" She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, I would prefer you hurt him just a little bit if my bow is as bad as you say it is." Just a hint of an evil smile slid through before she ducked her head.

"For you, I'll hurt him a lot," he promised with a chuckle.

"Cool. When?"

He laughed at her eagerness. This mess of a healer was really beginning to grow on him and truthfully, he was beginning to see some promise in her. Given a few months of him training her, she might even make a damn good warrior. "How

about now? I have to go to the compound to talk to Michael. While I'm there, I'll check to see if your leathers are done and order you a new bow, too. The only thing this one is good for is kindling."

"Okay, I'll stay here and practice with some of the daggers and stuff. Is Jules going to go with you?"

"No, she's still in bed."

A knowing look came over the healer's face. "Really? Because she wasn't in her room when I went in to ask her something earlier."

Now, he was the one who blushed. "That's because she's sleeping in my room."

"Oh, okay." She shrugged as she went over and picked up some throwing daggers from a nearby bench.

"You don't act surprised," he couldn't resist pointing out.

"Because I'm not." She walked back over in front of the target and threw one of the daggers at it. The blade spun and landed several feet shy of its mark.

"Was I that obvious?" he cringed, wondering just who else may have noticed.

She turned to give him a *duh* look. "Yeah." She tossed another dagger, this one made it to the target, but it bounced harmlessly off and hit the ground with a mocking *thunk!*

"You're doing that all wrong." Nathaniel walked over and took a dagger from her. Taking aim, he threw it and it landed neatly in the center of the target.

"I'm never going to get this stuff." She sighed heavily.

"Of course you will. I'll make sure of it." He ruffled the top of her head. "I have a few minutes to kill before I need to meet Michael. Why don't we start working now?"

A couple of hours later, Nathaniel was at the compound and waiting for the Chief. He was still holding Becca's POS—piece of shit—bow in his hands and he was deciding between using the string to garrote Livinus or just shoving the whole thing up the pitiful excuse for a weapon maker's ass.

"Tell me what in the hell you were thinking?" Michael barked as he walked into his office and slammed the door shut.

Nathaniel pulled back, not sure how to take his uncle's attitude. The last thing he expected was to be met with anger. "You want to clue me into what you're talking about, Chief?"

"Did you or did you not have a private meeting with Lucifer?" Michael thundered.

Nathaniel flinched. It'd been a while since he'd seen his leader this mad. "Yes, I had to find out

who was behind the fire demons and I figured the best way to find out if it was Lucifer was to ask him personally. What's the big deal? It's not like we haven't dealt with him before. He did help us defeat Moloch as I seem to recall."

"That was different." Michael threw his arms up in frustration.

Nathaniel actually took a step back from the anger rolling off the guy. "How?" As soon as he heard the growl building up in the Chief's chest, he knew that had not been the right thing to say.

"You were alone and without backup. Lucifer would love nothing more than to get his hands on one of his angel nephews and you're damn lucky to be standing here now."

"I can handle myself." Nathaniel fought to keep his voice respectful even as he argued. "Besides, it's Bear or Cam he wants, not me."

"Newsflash, jackass. He wants all of you, even the ones who refuse to embrace and use their gifts," Michael snapped, a tick developing in his jaw.

Nathaniel was a little impressed because he'd only seen the Chief react that way to Cam before. It also let him know it was time to back down and do a little groveling. "I'm sorry, Chief." He got down on one knee and formally bowed, lowering his head. There were several tense moments of heavy silence and he wondered if Michael was

going to respond. Then he heard his uncle sigh before he put a hand on Nathaniel's shoulder.

"Damn it. Get up," Michael commanded, his tone much softer.

Nathaniel obeyed, scrambling to his feet.

The Chief confessed in a broken whisper, "I'm sorry I got so angry at you. Sometimes it's hard for me to separate the fact that you're not only my nephew, but one of my 423-1hangel, too. Why don't you tell me everything that happened last night?"

Recovering from his shock, Nathaniel relayed all the events, making sure not to leave out anything about his encounter with Lucifer. A thrill of happiness went through him when Michael smiled in pride as he told him about forming a psychic shield. It felt good to impress his uncle for something other than being good with fists and blades. Nathaniel finished off by delivering Lucifer's final cryptic message. "What did he mean, *enemies of our allies*?" Nathaniel asked, still as confused as ever.

"It means I was an idiot for not realizing what the fire demons were before now," Michael bit out as he ran his hands through his hair.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

"They're not demons at all. They're fucking elves," Michael snarled.

Nathaniel was surprised by his language.

"Elves?" he echoed, confused. He'd seen plenty of elves ever since they had agreed to fight on the warrior's side in the war. A couple of battalions even lived at the compound since Raphael's younger cousin was half elf. The kid was royalty or something in their world and they were there as his own form of Special Service men. None of them looked like the creature he'd encountered that night with Cam though.

"There are four different types of elves. Kind of like there are different types of angels. Unlike us, they are divided by elements rather than skills. You have Earth, Water and Air elves who live pretty much in harmony. The Earth elves are the ones who are living here and helping us out," Michael explained.

"Let me guess, the fourth type is Fire." Suddenly, everything clicked into place. Well, except for the fact that thing he saw still didn't look like any elf he'd seen. Normally, they were all tall, regal and beautiful with slanted eyes and pointed ears. None of them looked like a bald rat with a dental problem.

"You got it and now it looks like we've got one hell of a problem since we have no fucking clue as to how to fight them."

"Can't we just ask the elves who are living here?" Nathaniel suggested.

"That might work, but if they don't feel like helping us we're screwed."

"Why wouldn't they help?" Nathaniel shook his head, confused. "Just tell them what's going to happen if they don't. How many lives are going to be lost."

"Unfortunately, that might make them less likely to aid us. All elves, be they Earth, Fire, Air or Water have one thing in common—they hate humans with a vengeance."

"Why?" The whole idea of hating mankind seemed so evil and repulsive to Nathaniel that he was having trouble wrapping his mind around it. The elves he'd met had been arrogant, sure, but actually wish ill toward humans was something else.

"Before humans, the elves and fairies had all of Earth to themselves. As man grew, multiplied and took over, the elves grew to see them as a pestilence that had stolen their lands and homes," Michael spat out, seeming to be just as disgusted as Nathaniel was.

"So how do we convince them to help us now?" Nathaniel was starting to feel very bleak about their hopes of succeeding. The memory of his prophecy came back to him. Of the city reduced to rubble and ash. All those lives lost if he failed.

"Leave that to me. Since elves raised me, I know some of the inner workings of their politics

and I may have a trick or two up my sleeve that will make them more amicable. Go back to your team and continue with the patrols. Look for anything out of the ordinary."

"Will do." Nathaniel nodded before he tossed the bow to his uncle.

Michael caught it neatly with one hand and looked down at it in confusion. "What is this piece of crap?" His brow creased in disgust.

"It's the weapon my healer was using. That's why she shot me, not because of her lack of skill. I would appreciate it if you let the others know that, too. Becca may be green, but she's not that bad."

"Sure, I'll spread the word. I'll also make sure to get her a proper bow and send it to you." Michael slowly shook his head in disbelief as he studied the shoddy workmanship of the weapon.

"I also had to get her some fighting leathers. The kid tried to go out in her school uniform."

"Shit," Michael cursed under his breath. "I had no idea or I would have done something about it. Can you make sure she's in top fighting form so she doesn't go out and get herself killed or do I need to replace her?"

"Don't worry about Becca, I'll make sure she's a top notch warrior by the time this mission is done."

"Good. Oh, and one more thing before you leave." A ghost of a smile came to Michael's troubled face.

"Yes, Chief?"

"Tell Jules I said welcome to the family."

Nathaniel started to ask his uncle how he even knew about the mating, but held back. Actually, given how nosey his family was, he felt kind of shocked it had taken them this long. "Does everyone know?"

"What do you think?" Michael drawled. "Bear told all of us the minute we got up this morning."

"How are they taking it?"

"Mostly good. Some were shocked, others seemed to be expecting it. Personally, I think she's good for you and I'm happy."

"She *is* good for me," Nathaniel agreed with a grunt even though he felt warm inside just thinking about her. A soft knock on the door interrupted them before Ana stuck her head inside.

The oldest of the Lehors and the only sister, she was tall and willowy with the same blue eyes and blonde hair as her brothers. Strong willed and smart, she had taken on the task of raising her siblings while their parents had been in a catatonic state. She was carrying a large shopping bag in her hands, which she passed off to Nathaniel.

"Hey, you." She smiled warmly. "Here are the leathers you asked me to get. Since Becca is about the same size Tif used to be, we went by her old her measurements."

"Thanks, sis." He tensed, waiting for what he knew was coming next. Sure enough, Ana did a little bounce on the balls of her feet before she threw her arms around his chest.

"I heard you have a new mate. Congrats," she gushed.

"You can congratulate me when I get this mission finished and manage to get her home safe," he replied as he hugged her back.

"You'll do great. I just have one question for you." She pulled away and looked up at him.

"Just one? That's a new record for you," he teased.

"Are you happy?" she asked very seriously, her gaze earnest.

"Yes, for the first time in a while, I am."

"On my God." She sighed, an expression of pure awe on her face. "You look it. I've been waiting for so long to see you at peace. Next time I run into Jules, I think I'll kiss her for this." Throwing her arms around him again, she whispered, "Welcome home."

"Thanks, Ana Bana," he replied, using their childhood nickname for her. "I'm glad to be back."

## Chapter Twelve

Over the next few weeks, Nathaniel started Becca's training while his team continued to patrol every night. Each evening, the result was the same—they didn't find a damn thing. No murmurs of trouble amongst the demons, no unexplained fires and certainly no evil elves either. It was to the point where he wanted to pound the walls in frustration.

The worst thing was, he knew for sure the attack would happen since he'd had that damn dream three more times. The only difference from the original dream was Michael wasn't there. Instead, Nathaniel was alone as he ran through that desolate wasteland. Every time, he'd been looking for Jules and had been unable to find her as he frantically shouted her name.

He didn't have to be Freud to read the meaning behind that either since he was well aware his biggest fear was losing her. More than once, he'd thought about sending her back, but knew he

couldn't do that to her. She may be his mate and precious to him, but she was also an angel warrior and he'd never dishonor her by replacing her.

He was in the backyard, watching Becca work with her new bow when Jules came out. Her face was pinched and pale with worry and she was holding her cell phone so tightly in one hand, her knuckles were turning white. Leaving Becca to her practicing, he walked over to meet Jules halfway. "What is it?" he asked as he reached over and put an arm around her shoulders for comfort.

"I just got a text."

Her voice was as shaky as the rest of her body, which he could feel trembling under his touch. "From who, babe?"

"My brother, Cameron." She looked down at the screen of her phone again, almost as if she still couldn't believe it herself.

"Can I read it?" he asked as he reached out for the cell.

She nodded, handing it to him.

Glancing down at the screen, he frowned.

*Jules, you need to get out of DC right away. The attack is going down tonight and there is no way you or your warrior friends can stop it. Please, get yourself to safety. I know you don't believe it, but I do love you and I'm worried—Cameron.*

"Do you think he's telling the truth this time?" Nathaniel felt his heart begin to race in anticipation.

"Yes, I do. I know you think he tried to set me up that night I was attacked by the demon assassins, but I never truly believed that he could do that to me. We may not be as close as your family is, but we still care about each other and even though he is mad I left Heaven, he would never try to harm me," she replied earnestly.

Nathaniel still had his doubts, but one glance at the stubborn set of her chin convinced him he wouldn't be able to sway her. Finally, he gave in and nodded, "Okay, I'll call Michael and see if he can scramble up some extra muscle for tonight."

Dusk was just settling when Nathaniel and his team flashed into the center of the city. He immediately threw out his psychic shields to see if any demons were in the area, but all was clear—for now. A part of him knew the calm wasn't going to last. Despite his earlier doubt, he had a gut feeling that Cameron's warning rang true and tonight they were finally going to have their showdown.

"How many warriors did Michael say he was sending?" Jules asked as they all got their weapons out and ready.

"He didn't give me too many specifics. I know a large group had to go with Ramiel and Nissa to meet with the fairies, plus they have to leave some at our compound to keep it fortified," Nathaniel said as he watched Becca get her bow armed. Ever since she got the new weapon, she'd been improving more each day. While he still wasn't comfortable taking her into a battle like this, he knew she was a whole hell of a lot more prepared than before.

"I'll be okay," she muttered, never looking up.

"Of course you will be," he replied.

"Good, then you can stop giving me that worried look. I promise not to shoot you again unless you really tick me off and then I'll make sure it's just a flesh wound." She finally glanced up at him, but it was to grin.

"When did you become such a smartass?"

"Since I realized you weren't as scary as you looked," she shot back.

"Does this mean I look nicer than Bear now?" He chuckled.

"You wish."

They were still laughing when Michael flashed in with a large group of Earth elves. More than taken aback by their appearance, he looked into the crowd to see if there were any angels mixed in, but didn't find a single one aside from the Chief. "Calling in the reserves, Michael?" Nathaniel

quipped as he continued to scan the crowd. Not one of the elves so much as cracked a smile as they stood in a tight, stoic formation. They were all dressed in various different colors of fighting leathers, but unlike the angel ones, the material on the elves' outfits seemed like they would be softer to the touch.

"The elves have been kind enough to help us with the attack and since they seem to know our foe better than anyone, I gladly took them up on their offer," Michael said.

Nathaniel nodded to the elves. "Thank you, since we've never fought this type of creature, we could use all the help we can get."

"From what Michael has explained to us, this is no ordinary Fire elf, but rather a mutation of sorts," a dark-haired elf in the front of the pack said.

"Have you ever seen anything like them before?" Jules asked.

"Yes, and we've managed to defeat them before. Like any creature, immortal or not, they can be killed. It's just a little harder to get the task done." A cold smile spread out over the elf's face and several of his companions mimicked the gesture.

Nathaniel felt a shiver slide down his spine that had nothing to do with the cool weather.

"When will we know the attack is going to happen?" Becca wondered while she stepped closer to Nathaniel as if seeking his protection.

"It's already started, little one," the elf answered, giving another one of those smiles.

Becca started to take another step closer, but seemed to catch herself and stopped, straightening up her spine and tilting her chin up defiantly.

Nathaniel was about to ask where when a low rumble made the ground shake under their feet. Turning in the direction of where the sound was, he could see an orange hue that let him know a fire was going. "Well at least we know your brother was telling the truth," he said to Jules. "Let's just hope he's not setting another trap for us."

They all flashed over to where the fire was. The area was already smoky and thick with the vapor trail-like streaks of the Fire elves. Becca took careful aim with her bow and announced, "I've got it!"

Several of the elves looked dubious until she released her arrow. It sang through the air before it caught one of the black streaks. The smudge stopped moving and became one of those mini-uglies as it halted, an arrow sticking in its head. It let out a keening cry as it tipped to the side and started twitching.

Nathaniel was proud and impressed with her excellent marksmanship, but she'd only taken down one of the bastards and there were dozens, if not hundreds more to deal with. Already more small fires were breaking out and he knew it would only be a matter of time before the Fire demons built up the flames until DC looked like it had in his dreams.

"We can do this," Jules yelled over the crackle of flames.

He nodded once to her before he let out a battle roar and launched himself into battle. Jules did the same thing, sticking close to his side.

The buggers were fast and at first, his sword met with air more than it did flesh. Desperate and frustrated, he finally opened up his gifts all the way and sent out his mental touch. He reached into the creatures' minds, shuddering at the pure evil he found lurking in their heads, but he was also able to sense where they would be running next. He listened to that and, anticipating their next move, swung his sword in the direction they were moving. A thrill went through him when it worked. In fact, it was so effective that a couple of the Fire elves actually decapitated themselves as they ran into the edge of his blade.

Jules worked with him, finishing off the creatures that he'd just wounded. All around him, the elves were engaged in their own battles, the

soldiers moving with a fluid grace as they coolly dispatched their enemy.

It never seemed to end as wave after wave of the monsters continued to descend on them. A slow burn started to work its way up his arms and into his shoulders from swinging his sword so much, yet he didn't dare let up, even for a second. He knew that if he did, the Fire elves would get the upper hand and then the human loss would be devastating.

Firefighters and police had shown up to battle the blazes already set, but their human eyes couldn't see any of the fighting because the angels had cloaked it. Their presence did help though because they controlled the fires enough so all the warriors and elves had to worry about were the creatures.

Becca got knocked to the ground so hard her bow fell from her hands.

Nathaniel fought to get over to her, but before he could, an elf came over and helped her to her feet. The male even bent over and retrieved her weapon for her.

Becca nodded her thanks before she started fighting again.

"I think they're slowing down," Jules exclaimed.

Nathaniel saw she was right. The invasion had dwindled until no new creatures popped up. The

elves and warriors fought for several long moments more to finish off the stragglers. Once they killed the last of fire starters, Nathaniel paused to catch his breath.

He jumped in surprise when the normally reserved elves all broke out into a loud cheer. The one who'd helped Becca earlier even went back over to her and picked her up, spinning her around in celebration.

He glanced over at Jules to see how she was reacting to all the hoopla and felt his breath catch in his throat. She was sweaty and flushed from the battle, but her lips were turned up into a huge smile, her eyes dancing with amusement as she watched the elves. His body grew tight as he had a great idea of just how he would like to celebrate their victory. Walking over to her, he grabbed her hand.

"Let's go home, babe," he said, giving her a heated gaze so she would know exactly what he had in mind. He knew he was successful when she let out a small gasp and her brown eyes grew even darker with desire.

"Shouldn't we wrap things up here first?" she asked huskily.

"Let Michael and Becca deal with it." Not giving her time to argue, he flashed them back to their bedroom.

"Are you sure Michael isn't going to get mad at us?" Her brow wrinkled in concern.

He bent down to kiss away as he slid her jacket off her shoulders. "Right not I don't give a damn," he declared before he caught her lips in a demanding kiss. She returned it with the same passion before they broke apart and started to pull each other's clothes off until he was naked and she was only in her bra and panties.

He only took a second to admire the way the black lace of her undergarments looked so sweet against her pale skin before he undid the bra so he could get to her breasts. Once they were bare, he paid them each equal attention, sucking her nipples until they were a deep rosy color and she was panting with need.

Giving one of her nipples one last lick, he lowered her back onto the mattress and then used his teeth to peel her panties down her mile long legs. Once the garment was off, he kissed his way back up so he could feast on her pussy.

He moaned in pleasure as her sweet tasting juices coated his tongue and slid down his throat. His angel tasted better than anything on Heaven or Earth and he could eat her out all night long and never get his fill. Wanting more, he speared his tongue inside her tight sheath, holding her tightly by the hips to keep her in place when she screamed in pleasure and 423-1hed against the

mattress. Nathaniel worked her with his tongue and lips, making her scream a few more times before he pulled back and ordered, thickly, "Get on your hands and knees."

She let out a little whimper of arousal as she moved to obey.

The sight of her ass tilted up, waiting for him was so erotic that he had to pinch the base of his cock to stop himself from shooting off before he even got inside her. "Damn, your ass is so beautiful," he moaned as he reached down and ran his tongue along the slope of one side. "So soft and round, just waiting for me to fuck."

Her pussy was swollen and slick thanks to his mouth. He slid two fingers up her vagina, closing his eyes in pleasure when he felt more of her juices run down his hand. He thrust his digits in and out of her, getting them good and wet before he pulled them out and moved up to the tight opening of her ass.

She wiggled against him, urging him on and he took the hint, slowly easing first one, then two fingers up her virgin hole. At the same time, he came up behind her and plunged his cock into her pussy.

She shrieked in pleasure from the double penetration.

"Is it good?" he crooned as he began to time his thrusts with the pumps of his fingers.

"Yes," she hissed as she thrust her ass back against him. "So much. So tight, but I like it too much for you stop. More, please. I need it harder."

Since he lived to please her, he obeyed, slamming so hard into her she almost lost her balance. It took only a few more strokes before he felt her pussy clamp down on his cock as she came. He looked down at her, the way her face was flushed with passion, how her pussy stretched around his glistening cock and the way her ass sucked in his fingers and he lost it, too. Throwing his head back, he groaned out her name as he let his release wash over him. His dick pulsed inside her warm body as he shot off wave after wave of semen. It seemed to go on forever, before he was finally spent and able to pull out.

Once he was done, he rolled off her and went to his side. Reaching out, he grabbed her and pulled her body into his most favored position, her back tucked to his chest and her rounded ass pressed against his cock.

"I love you," she whispered as she played with his fingers.

"I love you, too, so much that sometimes it actually hurts." He gave her a tight squeeze.

"So now that we won the battle tonight, does that mean we have to go back to the compound?"

she asked, almost sounding disappointed that they were going to have to leave their love nest.

"I don't think we've seen the last of the Fire elves so it's probably best we stay in DC for a while longer. Do you mind?" He got up on one elbow so he could see her face.

"Nate, I would go anywhere so long as I get to have you by my side," she replied.

Her look was so full of tenderness and love, he felt humbled. "I know that, now. Just like I know you'll never leave me." He ran the back of his knuckles down her soft cheek.

So many things were still in limbo. They didn't know if Jules's brother was working for or against them. Nor did they know who was behind the Fire elves. The war was getting more brutal because now the humans were getting dragged into it. Everyday brought new and more deadly enemies. Yet, he had never been more at peace because he had Jules by his side now. As he felt the love they had for one another wash over him, he had his first glimmer of hope for the future.

## **About the Author**

Stephani Hecht is a happily married mother of two. You can usually find her snuggled up to her laptop, creating her next book.