



**Samael**

Dawn McClure

(c) 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-642-5

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Manufactured in the United States of America

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## Blurb

*Assassinating vampires was all in a day's work ... until she became the hunted.*

Jade is a vampire assassin for the Alliance, a prestigious group of vampires who consider themselves the elite of their species. Facing death on a daily basis is part of her job. Yet when a psychic informs Jade her death is imminent, the thought of death doesn't seem quite so appealing. She changes her fighting tactics in the hope of staying alive despite the dire warning. Her new tactics bring unwanted attention from the human race. Her boss, Ambrose, puts her on probation, and that's not even the worst of it. Ambrose gives Jade four missions to prove she deserves to remain an assassin. He assigns Samael, a demon from the First Angelic Revolt, to report on her progress.

Samael recently quit his job as a Marquis of Hell to take up an offer to become an assassin. He's given the assignment to observe Jade and report on her progress during missions. During their first mission together, Samael can see why Jade has been put on probation. She's a liability to the Alliance. If there's one thing all immortals understand, it's not to bring attention to themselves. But when he finds out why Jade's fighting tactics have changed in the last few months, he may be too late to save the one woman who has captured his heart.

### Gladwin, Michigan

Jade held her cell phone to her ear in one hand, and a live grenade in the other. Getting bitched out by her boss, Ambrose, while trying to take out four vampires was embarrassing. The vampires had excellent hearing, and Ambrose was certainly giving them something to listen to.

“Jade, I’m telling you for the *last* time. Quit bringing attention to yourself when you’re on missions. That stunt you pulled back in New York was completely asinine. What the hell is wrong with you?”

One of the vampires standing in front of her snickered. She held up the grenade, pin extracted and lying on the ground, and waved it around. The vampire’s smirk melted off his handsome face.

The stunt in New York had been a matter of life or death. A vampire had taken hold of her throat while both were on the roof of a tall building. Either the vamp took the nosedive or she did. Luckily her adrenaline kicked in, and she’d hoisted him over her body in a move that would have made the Hulk proud.

Unfortunately humans had been on the ground to see the vamp go splat. It wasn’t the actual death that annoyed Ambrose—that was to be expected. It was the way she did it that annoyed the shit out of him. Her fighting habits had always been a bane to Ambrose, and lately it had become worse. But she was still breathing after seven hundred years as an assassin. She liked her fighting tactics. Life was good.

According to Alexia, a friend and fellow assassin, Jade had to be extra careful. Lexie was endowed with a special gift—she could see the future, though her visions were never very precise. They came at Lexie in bits and pieces. Apparently Lexie’s latest vision involved Jade dying in the field from a severe cut to her throat. Lexie had described the vision in gut-wrenching detail. A lovely visual Jade could have done without.

Jade shook the visual away. She had to defend her actions in New York. “I didn’t have a choice. I had to toss the bastard head first.”

“Off a building with human onlookers?”

“Well, yeah, that’s where we were.”

Ambrose growled. “And where do you think the body went, Jade?”

Okay, so it splattered on the concrete. Jade bit her lip to keep from laughing. If Ambrose had been there, he would have hunted her down and killed her. After tossing the vamp she’d hauled ass off the building and called the guy who took care of bodies in the area. Suffice to say the guy was less than pleased he had to deal with police. “Would you rather the body had been mine?”

“That is not the point, and you damned well know it. Your fighting tactics have to change. The Alliance eliminates rogue vampires *without* bringing attention to ourselves. That’s how our species survives.”

A fact she was well aware of. “I’ve been killing for a long time. I’m just spicing it up a bit.”

“Quit with the damned grenades.”

She answered him with one word. “Oops.” Her grenades were specially made by Jimmy, a genius when it came to weaponry. He tricked the grenades out and made them more explosive than your average grenade. Jimmy was her hero.

“Just what in the hell is *oops* supposed to mean?”

She rolled her shoulders, trying to ease the tension currently building. The cold Michigan air had invaded her bones hours ago. Night had fallen hours ago, and the woods surrounding them were pitch black. Her long, black leather jacket wasn’t made for temps as low as these, but she needed freedom of movement. A parka just wouldn’t do in her line of work. “Well ... it’s like this. I’m in an area that doesn’t boast of any houses nearby, so I—”

Three of the vampires turned and bolted down the abandoned dirt road, leaving the other to stand dumbfounded. There was no way in hell she was going to chase after them. She’d never

get all three. She might get one, but the others would keep running—and running after them held no appeal after her earlier chase. There was a reason they were out in the middle of nowhere—their defense seemed to be running.

Besides, getting close to her kills was something she avoided at all costs now that Lexie had shared her vision.

“Hold on a sec, Ambrose.”

She whipped her arm back and let the grenade fly. Seconds went by and she held her breath, thanking the strength she had from being a vampire. Without it the grenade would never have gone as far.

The sound of the grenade going off was deafening. It would be heard for miles. *Oops.* Placing a hand on the hilt of her sword she waited to see if she would need it. There were times her job could get messy, and she accepted that. She just didn’t want to deal with it tonight.

*Please, don’t let me need my sword.*

Once the smoke cleared and the flesh settled she did a little end-zone dance. And off with their heads!

You couldn’t decapitate what wasn’t in one piece. Her aim had been right-on. Three down, one to go. Mission almost accomplished. She’d have to remember to call the guy in charge of bodies in the area.

The remaining vampire was clearly terrified—whether it was her dancing or his imminent death she couldn’t guess. Probably the former.

“Jade!”

She brought the phone back to her ear. “Can I call you back? I’m kinda busy.”

“Was that another damned *grenade*?”

She hung up on him. The last vampire hauled ass in a different direction than his buddies took. As if that would save him. True, she was fresh out of grenades—*mental note to self, buy more off Jimmy*—but she still had her sword.

As she started running after the vampire she thought about Ambrose, and what he would do to her when he got a hold of her. She’d admit she might be a live wire, but she was an assassin in the Alliance. What did Ambrose expect?

The three vamps she just incinerated, along with their cowardly pal, had been killing innocent humans for blood. There was no reason for a vamp to kill a human. A pint or two of blood was enough to last a vampire for weeks if that vampire happened to be young—months if the vampire was older. Some vampires enjoyed the feeling of taking blood—it caused some to become addicted. Feeding could be extremely sensual for both parties.

The vampires she was sent in to kill normally ran when they found out an Alliance member had come to take them out of commission. It hadn’t always been that way. Back in the old days, circa 1700, vamps fought to the death. They would face off with her and fight back, death be damned. Lexie had just spoken about this a few months ago. The job of an assassin was hard, but when you’d been doing it for nearly seven hundred years it became redundant.

Secretly, Jade couldn’t have been happier the vamps were cowardly, though she would never admit that to anyone—especially Lexie.

Jade caught up with the vamp and unsheathed her sword. Her hands shook as she drew near, her breathing labored. The sound of steel made the prick fall to the ground, his arms quickly covering his head.

Could she kill him when he looked like that? Cowering like an innocent about to be slaughtered by the evil vampire with a sword? Hell yes, she could.

She sucked in her breath, raised her sword and—

Headlights hit both of them, and she froze, her sword up in the air, looking like Xena, Warrior Woman on crack.

*Shit.*

She lowered her sword and moved to the side of the road in a nonchalant manner, keeping an eye on the vamp who remained lying on the ground. The car came close to hitting him, yet

the vamp hadn't moved an inch. Who in the hell would be out in the middle of nowhere at this time of night? What was it, two in the morning? She pushed her jacket back on her arm and checked her watch. No. Three in the morning.

Then the telltale lights came on. Flashing red illumination over the sparse area, it highlighted the emblem on the side of the blue and yellow-trimmed car.

Michigan State Police.

A short, dumpy-looking police officer bounded out of the car before it came to a complete stop. The look on his face would have been comical if she hadn't found herself staring down the barrel of a forty-five. Digging bullets out of flesh hurt like a bitch. Hopefully the cop wasn't trigger-happy.

"Drop your weapon! Hands in the air!"

*Fucking great.* She did as he asked, letting her ancient sword fall to the ground. Ambrose was going to shit his pants when he found out about this fiasco. It wasn't really her fault this time. Well ... maybe. The police officer probably heard the grenade go off.

"On the ground!"

She laid herself flat on the ground, face in the dirt. Turning her head she caught the vampire's eerie smile as he sat in the car's headlights.

He sneered. "Bitch."

He pushed himself off the ground and ran away from the scene. *Perfect.* Not only had she botched this mission, she had also done the one thing that was sure to get Ambrose's undies in a bunch—getting caught doing her job with humans around.

Some days it just wasn't worth getting out of bed. This seemed to be one of those days.

"Put your hands where I can see them!"

She obeyed the officer's command as he called for backup. She doubted he planned to run after the vampire without proper reinforcements.

She had to think of a way out of this mess. She could use her superior strength on the officer, but then she would be breaking the "not-in-front-of-humans" rule. As if she hadn't done a great job of that so far. The morphing power she contained wouldn't help her in this situation. In fact, morphing only came in handy one or two times out of ten. She could morph into the form of the police officer, but giving a man of the law a heart attack wasn't high on her to-do list.

The officer cuffed her, pushing her face into the ground, and she coughed up dirt. *Nice.* Only one thing could make this better.

"You're under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say—"

And there it was.

\* \* \* \*

"Assault with a deadly weapon. Failure to produce I.D. Assaulting an officer?" Samael whistled as he leaned against the bars of the jail cell. "You have anything to say in your defense?"

It took Jade a second to find her voice. "I have the right to remain silent."

She'd been given one call, and against her better judgment, she'd called Ambrose. He'd been pissed, but he would get her out of jail without repercussions with the human law. That he had sent Samael ... unbelievable.

To say she and Samael didn't get along was an understatement. He was a demon from the First Angelic Revolt, the fall incited by Lucifer. From what she had heard, Samael had let go of his job as a Marquis of Hell. Having commanded thirty legions of demons, he thought he was the big man on campus in everything he did. The rumor circulated that on his first day in the Alliance he'd assassinated over ten vamps single-handedly, which ended his training mighty quick. With only a week of training under his belt, he'd been given assignments to complete on his own.

He annoyed the shit out of her.

He also made her heart beat a little faster whenever she saw him.

Samael had a sleeve of tattoos on his right arm, which he proudly displayed wearing a tight

black T-shirt. The black was built, as most were, but Samael actually worked out in the gym. He aided his naturally built body by lifting weights every other day. When he stayed at the Alliance headquarters in Northern Scotland, he lived in the gym.

Not that she noticed.

She waved a hand at the security cameras set up all over the jail. "Did you take care of the cameras, or are we going to be on the next episode of *Cops*?"

"I took care of the cameras, as well as the body parts you left lying in the middle of the country road. I tracked down the vampire you let get away, and I finished the job for you." He leaned against the bars that separated them, a stern expression on his face. "Discipline, Jade. Discipline and restraint go hand in hand. You would do well to learn these traits in your training and use them in the field. You could avoid mistakes like this in the future."

She imagined ripping his throat out with her fangs. "Are you going to de-materialize us or prattle off like the ass-kisser you are?" He knew when to command, and he also knew when to kiss some serious booty. The brownnoser.

His light green eyes took on an unnatural illumination. "It'll cost you."

She ignored the rush of heat his words brought. The last time she'd allowed herself to be taken by his looks she'd been embarrassed for days. "If you think I'm going to sleep with you, *forget it*. I do have some standards when it comes to the men I take to bed."

He could never guess how much she wanted him. A kind word had rarely passed between them—unless it had been spoken by him. He had been trying to get her into bed since the moment they'd met on the training mat. She'd kept her distance. While most women salivated at the mere mention of Samael's name, she wanted no part of him.

Sex with no strings attached was one thing. Sex with Samael would be something else entirely. She wasn't ready to settle with anyone, and she probably never would. Relationships, marriage ... none of it interested her in the least. The idea of using him and dumping his ass like yesterday's garbage crossed her mind.

Now *that* idea had merit.

His sinful gaze traveled the length of her body. "Sex between us is only a matter of time, but I'll settle for a kiss."

Her gaze fell to his lips, an unconscious gesture, and one that had her visualizing exactly what he could do with those lips. *Could* do, but she had no intention of letting him. He'd mentioned the two of them in a sexual manner before, and her body had always responded. She'd caught herself fantasizing about him—but not only in a sexual way. Fantasizing about sex was normal for her. Dreaming of intimate dinners and hand-holding was red-flag shit.

"Get us out of here," she snapped.

He folded his arms across his chest. His pectoral muscles bunched, his biceps bulged, her mouth watered. He made it obvious he wasn't going to move. She could push the issue, and he would have no other option than to de-materialize them. Ambrose sent him in to do a job, not seduce one of his finest assassins.

"What happened to discipline, Samael?"

He didn't answer her. What an infuriating bastard. She marched up to the bars, wanting nothing more than to slap the smug expression off his face. She didn't care if she ever found out how soft his lips were, or what he was like in bed, or how he'd respond if she bit him. She only wanted to expedite the process of getting her ass out of jail, and that was the *only* reason she stood before him.

She wrapped her hands around the bars, stood on her tiptoes and gave him a quick peck on the mouth. As she leaned back, figuring they were done, Samael snaked his hand through the bars, cupped the back of her head and brought her back for more.

His lips were as soft as she had imagined them to be. Part of her wanted to pull away, while another part ached to feel his body pressed against hers for the full effect. His hand was a light pressure on the back of her head, his fingers splaying in her hair. The steel bars caused a barrier between their bodies, but she could well imagine what it would feel like to melt in his

embrace.

His tongue slid across hers, wicked and hot. He pulled back, nibbled her lower lip, then deepened the kiss, his hand a constant pressure on the back of her head. She fucking loved it.

What was she *thinking*?

She knocked his hand away and pulled back, breathless. He ran a hand through his short, black hair, looking as though the kiss had affected him as well.

Not that she noticed.

"There. You got your pound of flesh. You think we could go now?" Did she sound panicky? *Damn*. She swiped her hand across her mouth just to let him think she'd hated the kiss. In all actuality, she wanted more. *Ached* for more. What was it about this man that held her so captivated? It truly annoyed the shit out of her.

"I suppose that will quench my desire for the next five minutes. Give me your hand."

She slipped her hand in his, wondering why the one male she couldn't get along with turned her on the most. "Where are you flashing us to?"

He winked at her. "My hotel room."

Samael was unbelievable. She closed her eyes as a slight tingling traveled through her body. The sensation was quickly accompanied by nausea. She rarely materialized anywhere, and not possessing that capability meant DUA—Disorientation Upon Arrival.

The feeling lasted for a few minutes. Samael kept his hand wrapped around hers, and that helped ground her. When she finally opened her eyes, she recognized the surroundings—they were always the same. He'd materialized her to a crappy, dark hotel room. The comforter lying across the large bed was a nineteen-seventies nightmare, and the carpet had stains that would give Monk a new twist on his OCD.

She'd never owned a house or lived for a long period in one area, except for the Highlands of Scotland. Once she joined the Alliance it was off with the domestic head, and traveling had become her life.

Samael let go of her hand and walked to the dresser. She pushed herself off the floor and prayed for the room to quit spinning.

He sauntered back to her with papers in his hand. "Ambrose faxed these documents to me right before I went to the jail. He's put you on probation."

"What?" Seductive thoughts aside, she snatched the papers out of his grasp and read them. Sure enough, Ambrose had put her ass on probation. She was to partner up with Samael for the next few weeks, and then a hearing would be held for her before the three heads of the Alliance—Ambrose, Sven and Roger. From there they would either give her a solo mission, or she would be put back on the training schedule until further notice. It all depended on what Samael reported back to them about her.

She sat on the bed and crushed the papers in her fist. On one hand, this was her ticket out of the field. Death might not claim her as it had so many other Alliance members. They seemed to be dropping like flies lately. Everyone had become so complacent with their hits running from them, the assassins were being taken unawares when the vamps finally started fighting back.

On the other hand, she'd be a failure. And if there was ever a word that wasn't associated with Jade, it was the F-word. She may not like getting close to her targets, but she did her job to the best of her ability. Adapt and overcome. Persevere.

Then the visual slammed into her. Her last conversation with Lexie trickled back.

*"The hands that staunched the blood pouring out of your neck were masculine. Definitely not yours."*

*"Who was with me?"*

*"I didn't see his face, only his hands. But someone will be there with you when you take the hit. I'm sure of it."*

Jade's gaze locked on Samael's hands—his very large, masculine hands. If she took a hit during one of her missions, she was quite certain her victims wouldn't aid her. And technically there shouldn't be any humans around ... so that left Samael, her new partner.



“Looks like we’ll be spending a lot of time together. You up for it? I sure am.”

She glanced up at him and noted the wicked gleam in his eyes. Yeah, he sure was up to the occasion, considering the wicked bulge in his jeans.

Not that she noticed.

## Chapter Two

Samael swiped his hand across the condensation that had settled on the bathroom mirror as steam rolled out of the shower. Thoughts of redemption ran through his mind as he brushed his teeth. If he could get his name back into the Book of Life he would have something to look forward to, other than eternal damnation. He had a long way to go, considering his past transgressions, and yet there was hope.

He recalled what Lucifer had said the day Samael had asked to leave the ranks.

*"I'm disappointed with you, Samael. Your faith in our cause is underwhelming, to say the least. I will not challenge your wish to leave the ranks. Keeping you against your will would not be a wise decision on my part. I need the men in my army to believe in their cause, to work toward our goal. Neither can I let this betrayal go without punishment."*

Luc withheld punishment that night. Instead he would wait until the opportune moment presented itself, when taking vengeance against Samael would somehow aid Luc's cause. No doubt he would bide his time until Samael acquired something of significance, like his name in the Book of Life. Only the bastard couldn't take that away from him. Not unless Samael did something that had his name taken back off, Luc held no power when it came to the Book of Life.

Samael could only go on with his daily activities and wait for Luc's promised retribution.

He put his toothbrush back into his case and slipped into a pair of jeans. Jade had been quiet since he'd given her the note from Ambrose. He couldn't understand her at all. She had everything a person could possibly desire. Friends who cared about her, money, and an exciting job that actually meant something. Being an assassin in the Alliance had proved to be a great responsibility to Samael, and much unlike his job as a Marquis, he was working toward the greater good.

When he left the bathroom he expected to see her in the small room. It was freezing outside, but she remained perched precariously on the edge of the balcony, one leg propped up on the ledge, the other dangling down the side of the hotel while she leaned against the concrete beam. She'd been out there for hours, listening to her iPod and watching the humans on the ground.

The breeze lifted her dark hair and whipped it around her face. Her eyes were white, which meant she was in a highly emotional state. If anyone should happen to get a glimpse of her, they'd know she wasn't human. She resembled an ancient sorceress on the verge of eviscerating some poor sap.

He opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony. The frigid night air instantly raised goose bumps on his skin. "You should come inside."

She took her time, acknowledging his presence at her leisure. Slipping one earpiece out of her ear, she fairly snarled at him. "Leave me be."

Luc had nothing on this woman's look of contempt. "I'm not the one who put you on probation, so there's no need to take your anger out on me. If a human saw you like this—"

"Did you hear me, demon? I want to be alone."

He almost gave her what she wanted. He knew what it was like to want privacy and receive none. Yet it remained his duty to ensure she didn't bring attention to herself like this. "It's exactly this type of attitude that got you put on probation in the first place. Now get your ass inside."

Her hand went to rest on the dagger strapped to her thigh—a clear warning for him to back off. He didn't. He'd been threatened with much worse and by individuals who could back up those threats.

This mission he'd been given by the Alliance would go smoothly, with or without her cooperation. He had to prove to Ambrose he was an asset to the Alliance, not a liability like the woman sitting before him. Everything he desired rested on his integration into normality within the human world.

He moved closer to her. "Have you ever heard the saying, 'The road to Hell is paved with

good intentions'?"

She settled back down and looked away from him.

He continued, "If you don't act on good intentions, then they don't mean anything. They never come to fruition. Obviously you're trying to do good in the world by getting rid of—"

"Can you save me your philosophical bullshit?" She hopped off the balcony and brushed past him, deliberately trying to throw him off balance when she threw her shoulder into his.

"You know, if my reports were based on your attitude, you'd be back on the training schedule immediately."

"Attitude was never my problem."

It sure as hell was in his book. "And what is your problem? Other than getting yourself caught by humans all the time when on a mission?"

She crawled onto the bed and lay on her side, propping her head in her palm. The curve of her hip drew his gaze. "Let's talk about your problems."

"I wasn't aware I had any." He took his time gazing at her body, and when he finally brought his focus back to her face, he noted the way her eyes had hooded. She could deny her attraction to him all she wanted. The desire in her gaze spoke for itself. "Other than you, of course."

"Face it, you're attracted to me, but since you're fresh out of Hell, you have no idea what to do with a woman. Especially a woman like me."

"A woman like you?" He ran a hand over his chin. "Oh, you mean a bitch. Go on."

She smiled, showing fang. "A strong woman. One who won't put up with your high-handed ways. I don't think you're equipped to handle a woman like that, bitch or not."

"I'm millennia old. What do you think you can throw at me that I haven't already caught?" The banter was enjoyable, something he hadn't experienced in Hell. There had never been time to enjoy oneself when preparation for Armageddon was the top priority.

"Why did you quit your job as a Marquis? You want more power?"

"If I wanted more power, I wouldn't have left. I have considerably less influence as an assassin in the Alliance than I did in Hell."

"Then why? You're seeking redemption, aren't you?"

"Perhaps." He waved a hand in her direction. "I highly doubt I'll find it here, though."

Jade abruptly sat up. Her hair fell into place around her shoulders, spilling down across her breasts. "No, you won't. Being an assassin in the Alliance will only bring on your death, and we all know demons go straight to the pit when they die. What are you trying to prove? You gave up your position in Hell only to find yourself in the Pit. Smart move."

She came too close to hitting exactly what he feared. Still, this was his only hope. What could he do? Become an accountant and work in the human world? "So it's to be a battle of wits between us while we're paired together?"

"First of all, we're not paired together. You've been sent for nothing more than to keep an eye on me and report back to the Alliance. Second of all, it's a battle of wills, not wits. And FYI... Be prepared to lose."

"I hold the power. It's my reports that will keep you in the Alliance or have your ass thrown back into training."

A smile slowly crept onto her face. Again she reminded him of an evil sorceress. "I was speaking of the chemistry you think we share. It's just not going to happen."

He'd beg to differ there. As he'd said in the jail, sex between them was just a matter of time. The proof was in her languid movements, the way her body responded to him whether she wanted to admit it or not. "How you forget so easily."

"Forget what?"

"Demons have an excellent sense of smell, even more potent than a vampire's. You want me, admit it. I've known since the day we met."

Her answer was to pick up a pillow and toss it on the floor at his feet. "You can sleep on the floor."

*Evil witch.* “When you change your mind, which you will, just give me a holler.”

“Like Hell.”

He settled on the floor, smiling to himself. It was a nice change of pace to forget the importance of his future, and the length of time it would take to acquire redemption. She’d been right about one thing—if he died before his name was in the Book of Life, then he would go straight back to the Pit.

And that wasn’t something he’d wish on anyone, friend or foe.

\* \* \* \*

## Chicago, Illinois

The last two days had been a nightmare—for Jade. Samael took sick satisfaction in watching the vampire assassin lose her temper. Her face would grow red, the muscle in her jaw would clench, and then came the explosion.

It was sexy as hell.

Her body had curves that were made for a man’s touch. Her snarky attitude kept him on his toes, and her humor was as sick and twisted as his. Spending time with her excited him. After spending so much time by himself on the road, it was refreshing to be around someone who represented life at its fullest.

They were on their first mission, having just arrived in Chicago that afternoon. The frigid air held a hint of decaying leaves and smoke from various fireplaces. Fall had settled in the city, causing the locals to bundle up and move at a brisker pace. Jade walked next to him, doing her best to ignore his presence as they scouted the address they had been given by the Alliance. Three vampires were linked to suspicious deaths in the area. The vamps hadn’t heeded the warning given to them by the Alliance, and he and Jade had been given the order to kill.

Samael knew exactly why Ambrose had sent them on this mission. Their victims lived in the city with lots of humans around, and he and Jade were to keep their presence secret. Jade might have a problem with this one.

“You didn’t bring any grenades, did you?”

She glanced at him and rolled her eyes. “Why are we doing this in broad daylight? We should make this hit at night.”

She was right, but these were special circumstances. “This makes it harder for you to keep from bringing attention to yourself with humans around. Don’t forget that all of this is a test. I’m going to take the reins for this mission, but you’ll be front and center for the other three. I need to get a feel for you as a fighter. Or I could just cop a feel. I like that idea better.”

She curled her lip, but otherwise ignored him.

Tough on the inside and gorgeous on the outside, Jade remained an enigma to him. When Ambrose had called him for this job, Samael had been more than ready to jump right in. Long brown hair, beautiful hazel eyes, and a temper to match the devil himself wasn’t what made her unique. A softness lurked somewhere under that tough exterior, and he was going to be the one to find it.

As they reached the building, Jade kept walking and he left the sidewalk, pushing through the double doors of the apartment building. She would make sure the vamps didn’t escape as he engaged them. The mission had every potential to be very cut-and-dried, which should keep her out of trouble. He had no doubt one of the vamps would run, and he planned to let him. He had to see how Jade would handle a vamp in the middle of the day with humans milling about.

Finding the vamps in the apartment building posed no problem at all. He followed their energy past the lobby, up the stairs to the third floor. A young couple emerged from a door at the end of the hall. They held hands as they strolled down the hallway towards him.

He’d never been young and innocent, and the couple made him wonder what it felt like. What was it like to be birthed from a mother who held you and murmured assurances to you? He’d been born into servitude. All the angels had been given jobs from the onset of their existence, and not one of them had complained—until the humans were created. It was then the angels

saw what could have been theirs—what *should* have been theirs.

Free will.

He pushed the thoughts aside and waited until the couple moved out of sight. He then materialized into the room filled with the vamps' energy.

Two vamps lounged on a couch watching TV, one digging in a bag of chips, while the other sipped from a can of beer. He could feel the energy of another vamp in a back room of the apartment. He would allow that vamp to get away, if the vamp chose to run, which they normally did when they saw him. That scenario would give Jade a chance to prove herself.

The vamps in front of him shot off the couch and looked as though they were searching for a weapon. He wasn't in the mood to play with his hits today. He materialized his sword. Samael used his speed to decapitate the closest vamp. Before the disembodied head had a chance to hit the floor, the other vamp had acquired his sword and took a swing at him.

Samael blocked the steel with his own sword just as the front door slammed shut. The third vamp had run—just as Samael expected. Because they were older vamps, they could go out in the daylight. While Samael fought to kill the remaining bastard, he hoped Jade wouldn't make a spectacle on the busy streets of Chicago when she came face-to-face with the vampire.

The time for her first test had arrived.

It didn't take much effort to knock the sword out of the vamp's hand and decapitate him. Samael didn't waste time, running for the door as he de-materialized his sword. He would call the individual who took care of the bodies in this area later. Right now he had to ensure his sexy little assassin didn't do something rash.

Once in the hallway, he walked at a steady pace, not wanting to draw attention to himself. On the inside he had a near overwhelming desire to run as fast as he could to help Jade, even though he couldn't allow himself to interfere with this test. Something inside him wanted to protect Jade—an assassin who was more than capable of defending herself. Her skills weren't the reason Ambrose put her on probation—her lack of tact remained the issue.

From what Ambrose had told him, Jade had just recently started changing her fighting tactics. Though her fighting strategy had always been on the outlandish side, she'd never brought too much unwanted attention to herself. Something within her had changed in the past few months.

He didn't think she would do anything stupid. Surely she could control herself.

Before he reached the lobby he heard the screams.

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell were you *thinking*?"

Jade did her best to ignore Samael as she fiddled with her cell phone. She waited patiently in the lobby at the police headquarters to be questioned by detectives. The police had taken her to the station in a squad car with Samael hot on their heels in the rental. When the detectives asked if she wanted an attorney made available to her, she had declined. A thirty-something attorney might know the law better than she, but acquiring one would bring just more attention to the situation.

"Well?"

"What the hell was I supposed to do?" The vampire had come running out of the building like a bat out of hell, waving a deadly dagger around—or so she'd thought. His energy bordered on explosive as he pushed through humans walking on the sidewalk. She'd bolted from the back of the building and did the only thing she could do.

"Not *push* him in front of an oncoming city bus. How are you going to explain that to the police? There were witnesses." He sat back and stretched his legs out, his hands going back to cradle his head as he looked up at the ceiling. "I can't believe you did that. Your probation makes so much sense to me now."

She noticed whenever he got agitated he tended to move a lot. Stretching, running a hand over his face, tapping his foot—anything to move. She kept her voice to a whisper and watched the humans around them stare in their direction. The humans didn't look away when she pinned

them with a glare. It was creepy. Both of them were dressed like Wesley Snipes in *Blade*—one of her favorite movies of all time. “I thought I saw a dagger in his hands. I panicked.”

She’d panicked because the visual of her dying had flashed through her mind. It turned out the vamp hadn’t been waving around a dagger. Her imagination had run amuck.

“The detectives aren’t going to buy that.”

No, they probably wouldn’t. “Sure they will. Will you just shut the fuck up for five minutes and let me think?” The horrific scene flashed before her eyes again. The vampire running at her, the crazed look in his eyes, the crunch of his head under the tire when she pushed him in front of the bus, and the screams of the humans when the vamp’s blood gushed from the wound.

And then all hell had broken loose.

Samael sat forward and braced his elbows on his knees, trying to look relaxed, but she could still feel the frustrated energy coming off him. “I can flash us out of here.”

She rolled her eyes. That seemed to be a demons’ fix-all. “And then what? The police in this station know what I look like. Do you have any idea how many states I’m wanted in?”

“I wonder why.” He pulled a hand down his face and abruptly sat up, causing those around him to become jittery. “We need to get the hell out of here. If you’re actually wanted in more than one state they’ll know who you are.”

She shook her head and waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “They don’t have anything to identify me with in their files. I don’t even think they have a picture of me. Maybe a sketch, but—*hey*, let go!”

He pulled her to the door of the female bathroom, smiling congenially at people who passed. “Get in. I’ll be right behind you.”

Oh, as if *this* wasn’t bringing attention to themselves. The druggies looked sane next to her and Samael. “This is asinine. The police only want to question me. It wasn’t like I was booked or anything.”

He pushed her against the bathroom door and leaned in so close she could see gold specks in his eyes. “Get in the goddamned bathroom.”

“Who’s making a scene now?” She launched herself through the door when Samael’s eyes turned red. If he did something stupid, she’d somehow get blamed for it. She could hear Ambrose now...

*“If you hadn’t done what you did in front of humans, you wouldn’t have been at the police station to begin with.”*

Blah, blah, blah.

Within seconds Samael shouldered his way through the door. He grabbed her arm and the tingling began. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath. Teleporting sucked. Getting bullied by a demon sucked. Her *life* sucked at the moment. Cool air hit her face and she opened her eyes. They were standing by the rental. She placed a hand on the SUV and leaned against it as dizziness washed over her.

“Get in.”

She didn’t argue as she slid into the passenger seat, wishing the lightheadedness would go away quickly. If anyone should be put on probation, it was Samael. First he dragged her through the police department in front of everyone, and now he’d materialized them to the rental in broad daylight.

“Where are we going?” They didn’t have a hotel room, and they had yet to get their next assignment from Ambrose. They had to let him know they’d completed this mission before new papers would be sent to them.

Before Samael could answer her, his cell rang. He leaned forward and fished it out of his pocket. With a quick glance at the I.D., he answered. “Yes?”

She could hear Ambrose on the other end. “How are things going?”

Samael slipped the keys into the ignition and started the car. “Actually, quite well. We just finished up with our current assignment.”

“How did she do?” Ambrose asked.

A flash of anger raced through her. Over seven hundred years as a top assassin in the Alliance, and Ambrose was checking on her. Yeah, her life definitely sucked. She couldn't really blame Ambrose for what he did. If she were in his position, she would have done the same thing. She considered telling him about Lexie's vision, but then he'd take her off the streets altogether. She wasn't sure she wanted to quit her job as assassin quite yet.

Samael glanced at her. "I was actually amazed with her. She is very ... efficient."

"Getting the job done was never an issue with her. She's always worked fast. Did she bring attention to herself?"

The muscle in Samael's jaw tightened. Obviously he didn't like lying to Ambrose. "It was more like a hit-and-run. We made it out of the building undetected."

Well, Samael certainly wasn't a bad liar. He *had* made it out of the building without anyone the wiser. It was *outside* the building that she had been caught by crowds and onlookers.

And the crack about the hit-and-run ... *classic*. She gave him a thumbs-up, and he smacked her hand down. She settled back in her seat and rubbed the sting out.

Ambrose and Samael would never understand her reasoning for doing the things she did. They might be secure in their fighting abilities, but she could do the math. Assassins in the Alliance had an expiration date—and that arrived around five hundred years in service. She was currently two hundred years overdue for death to arrive. Lexie's vision made those numbers even worse.

Ambrose spoke again. "Drop by the Alliance security office in that area, and I'll send them your next assignment. Rest up tonight and review the papers. Call me if you need anything or have any questions."

"Will do."

Jade held her hands in front of her and studied them, not wishing to look at Samael at the moment but wanting to thank him. He didn't have to lie for her, and she wasn't sure why he had. "Thank you."

"What the fuck did you do to your fingernails?"

She dropped her hands in her lap, curling her fingers so he couldn't see them anymore. "I bite them, okay?" *Jesus*, he was rude. She got nervous before carrying out her missions lately, so she bit her nails sometimes. How gentlemanly of him to point out that particular flaw.

"I'm going to start calling you Stumpy."

She gritted her teeth and glared at him. "That nickname can go both ways, buddy."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Not bloody likely. If you need proof just wait until we get to a hotel. I'll give you all the proof you'll need, and there will be plenty of it, let me assure you."

He pulled out of the parking lot and she buckled. "Why do men do that? Stack so much importance on the size of their dick?"

He grunted. "When's the last time you heard a female bragging to her friends that her man had a short dick?"

The conversation had taken a turn into *Twilight Zone* territory. She had to get it back on track, because now all she could think about was the size of Samael's dick. Everything about a former angel was perfect. *Everything*. She had no doubt—*focus*. "What happened to the vamp's body after it got plowed by the bus?"

"I called the person in charge of body pickup in the area, and he said he would see to it. He didn't sound pleased. He'll have to go to the city morgue to retrieve the body. Hopefully he gets there before the vamp wakes up. Obviously his head wasn't severed, it was crushed. He didn't die."

Those responsible for body pick-up didn't like to deal with EMT's or police. It made their job that much harder. "Do you know where the Alliance office is in this city?"

"I do."

How did he know where the Alliance office was located? She'd been in the Alliance much longer, and she still had to call for directions eighty percent of the time. "You know this how?"

"Before I go to a mission, I get all the information I believe is necessary to complete the job."

Obviously you don't feel the need to do that."

She could tell he was still angry with her. Even though she disliked Samael, she didn't want him to think her a liability or a failure. "I'll do better next time."

He stopped at a red light and turned to look at her. "That's good. Because the next time I'm not going to lie for you."

"Did I ask you to lie for me? Why did you do it if you're so against it?" She respected that he had no desire to lie, and yet she'd never asked him to lie for her. It remained a puzzle he did at all, since he was obligated to report to Ambrose on her progress.

"You've been an assassin for a long time. Until this afternoon I thought Ambrose went too far by putting you on probation. Part of me believes you just need a vacation, and now another part of me thinks you might have lost the finesse this job requires. Did something happen in the past few months that changed your outlook on the job? Do you honestly believe you're still a good assassin?"

The question stung. "If I believed otherwise, I would quit."

A few minutes went by and she assumed the subject had been dropped. He pulled in front of a small building, just off a busy street. When he turned the car off, he sat sideways and looked at her. His spicy scent permeated the SUV. She shifted in her seat.

"You answered only one of two questions."

"Are you under contract to interrogate me as well?"

"It's a simple question."

And one she wouldn't answer. "Is this the Alliance office?"

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Only the soft crinkling of her leather jacket as she shifted in her seat could be heard.

He placed his hand over hers. His warmth sent a jolt of electricity through her body as their energies collided. "I'm not only here to report on your progress. I'm here to help you. But I can't do that if you don't trust me."

What she trusted was Lexie's vision. The part about the masculine hands added just another nail in Jade's coffin. She hadn't completely dismissed Lexie's warning in the beginning, but Jade held onto the fact that she worked alone. Now that Samael was by her side for her missions, the vision was that much closer to coming to fruition. She had no doubt he would rush to her side and try to save her if she took such a deadly hit.

She wanted to tell him about the vision, but in turn he would tell Ambrose, and she'd be yanked off the streets without hesitation. She slipped her hand from his and opened the passenger door. "Let's get our next assignment."

Before she shut the door she heard him sigh. Hopefully that meant he'd grown tired of trying to extract information from her.

She wasn't ready to share Lexie's vision with anyone. She needed more time.

\* \* \* \*

Samael set his dagger on the bed and picked up his Smith and Wesson semiautomatic pistol. He had yet to use the weapon issued to him by the Alliance, but where Jade was concerned, he didn't know from day to day what arsenal he'd have to rely on. Best to keep it clean and in good working order.

He hoped to gain insight to the way her mind worked earlier, when they were parked in front of the Alliance office. Instead of learning anything about her, she'd closed up, refusing to let him in on whatever had happened to her in the last few months, and something *had* happened. No one changed that drastically after centuries of repetitive work. She'd either snapped from the stresses of her job, or something had happened to change her outlook on life. He was betting the latter. The look in her eyes said it all.

He field stripped his pistol, laying the parts out before him. He was allowing the woman to get under his skin. In Hell he cared about his ultimate mission and made sure the demons under his command completed their jobs in a satisfactory manner. Other than that he'd kept all personal



business to himself. The mission he was currently on dealt more with Jade's psyche than her fighting habits themselves. Once he found out what was bothering her, she'd be good as new.

A light knock on his door brought his attention away from his musings. He set his pistol down and opened the door with his powers, having felt Jade's presence on the other side.

She held out a brown paper bag. "I went downstairs to get something to eat. There was a burger joint next door so I brought you something back."

"Thanks." He stood and smiled to himself, figuring she'd brought him dinner because she wanted to talk. Just as she was about to step inside the room he felt an ancient evil presence materialize behind him.

He quickly blocked her path and snatched the bag. "I'll talk to you in the morning."

She backed up and tried to peer around his shoulder. There was no doubt in his mind that she also felt the presence behind him, though he wasn't about to introduce her to this particular demon. "Old acquaintance," he said lamely as he shut the door in her face.

"Cute girl. Does she have a sister?"

Samael turned to face his intruder, uneasiness settling in his gut. He kept his face stoic. "What do you want, Luc?"

Lucifer slapped an expression of hurt across his features. "Millennia of service and I can't just pop in to see how my former Marquis is doing?"

Luc had the power to read minds. Samael kept a tight rein on his musings. "You lead a life of purpose. Anything you do eventually has a reason behind it, even if that reason is not obvious at the onset."

Luc ran his hands down the lapels of his dark blue suit. "I believe you're calling me devious."

"Why are you here?"

"Oh very well. If you don't want to play the mind games I love so much, I might as well get straight to the point. I'm here to give you one last chance to return to the ranks. No harm, no foul. We can make this a seamless transition."

"You have plenty of demons to fill my spot. There's something specific I have now, otherwise you wouldn't bother yourself."

"You're getting good at blocking your thoughts from me."

"Years of practice."

"You're no fun anymore, Samael." Luc strode to the window and opened the blinds with his powers. "Hundreds of demons are murdered by the Alliance every year. They find themselves in the Pit, and I'm forced to take those whom I believe will aid me in my battle. Most want nothing more than to go after the assassin who sent them to the fire, and it takes me days to convince them that there are better ways to spend their time."

Samael kept his expression impassive when Luc glanced back at him.

Luc turned back to the window and continued. "I could easily send those demons out to eliminate the Alliance, and yet I've held them back."

"Because you wait for Ambrose to join your ranks. If you attack what belongs to him, what he's worked so hard to build, he'll never join your side." It was no secret Luc wanted Ambrose on his side. As a former Warrior Angel, Ambrose contained powers that rivaled Luc's. He would be the perfect asset to Luc's army.

"Absolutely correct. I tolerate his vampires because I desire Ambrose to be my second-in-command. And now I must also tolerate my demons joining his Alliance? I do have a breaking point."

"You hope for too much. Ambrose seeks one thing—redemption. He must atone for his past sins."

Luc waved his hand and the blinds fell back into place, shutting out the outside world.

"Convince him, Samael. Allow Ambrose to see what it's like on the other side. He would answer only to me. He'd command my entire army with nothing and no one to hold him back."

Samael couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You want me to spy for you? Get close to Ambrose so I can recruit him?"

Luc leveled his light green eyes on Samael. Black engulfed his irises as he moved to stand in front of him. "I know what it is you desire. Do you think you are capable of attaining redemption after serving in my army for so long? I could kill your physical body now and send your soul to the Pit for eternity."

"I will not do this for you."

Luc laid his palm on Samael's shoulder. "You were right, Samael. Everything I do serves a purpose. I wait until the perfect opportunity to strike, and your time is drawing near. Think about my offer."

Samael stepped out of Luc's reach as the demon disappeared. The silence that now permeated the room felt like a physical weight that settled on his shoulders. Redemption had seemed out of reach before Luc's presence, and now it seemed even more impossible. His choices were diminishing before his eyes.

There were only two choices left to him—ignore Luc's offer and face the fires of the Pit, where redemption could *never* be found, or do as Luc had asked and damn himself for all eternity while bringing others down with him.

### Cincinnati, Ohio

Jade had always wanted to make love in the snow. It was the one thing she had yet to do. Too bad she was with Samael, the arrogant bastard who'd been making her life a living hell, as the soundless flakes fell to the ground. And he'd know exactly how to make her life hell, having been a Marquis in that realm.

Crouched down in the accumulating snow, wearing a knitted black hat with a crocheted ball at the top and thigh-high black leather boots, she looked like a hooker going into the third grade. Snow in November. Unbelievable.

Samael hadn't made a play for her since their shared kiss in the jail. From a woman's point of view, that was one hell of a sucker punch. She didn't want him, did she? Why then did she always think of him when she went to sleep? While she was in the shower? God, she was turning into a pre-pubescent teen. If he'd had a last name, she'd likely be scribbling it onto the hotel notepads right after her first name.

At least he hadn't asked her any more questions she was unwilling to answer. Right after he'd had that visitor of his, he'd closed himself off from her for an entire day. He hadn't even answered his door when she knocked. At least he no longer felt the need to interrogate her.

Thankfully, Ambrose hadn't called her, which meant Lexie had kept her mouth shut as well. That was a time bomb waiting to go off. Lexie wasn't exactly a patient person. The fact that she remained silent after two months of having the vision was shocking in itself.

A snowball smacked her on the side of the face. She turned her head in the direction the hit came from, snow falling from her cheek. She found Samael behind a tree, smiling as though they had time to frolic in the snow. As if four vamps weren't planning more murder and mayhem in the house across the street. And she thought *she* was the child.

"Do you have a fucking problem?" she snapped. He always seemed so relaxed right before a hit. She envied him that ability. Before the vision, Jade had been the exact same way. Now she was a virtual basket case.

He gave her a look of astonishment. "I have no problems in the fucking area, thank you very much."

She took a deep breath and focused on the house once again. It was set in a cul-de-sac, far away from the other houses on the road—but close enough so that she had to calculate every move she made. It was the perfect mission for her. She'd have to be careful not to bring attention to herself.

Samael could be so irresponsible at times. She had to be vigilant with each and every mission. Anything and everything could go wrong. She had to get this mission right, or else he would have no other option than to give her a bad report. And though she was terrified of being an assassin with the vision fresh in her mind, she was even more afraid of the unknown. *This* she could do ... if they allowed her to do it her way. It was the not-in-front-of-humans rule that sucked ass.

Last night in the hotel she'd thought about joining Samael in his room. She had yet to figure out what held her back, other than a fear of getting too close to him. She could only imagine what he would say about her to the other assassins. He didn't seem the type to talk about his latest screw, but you never really knew.

Another snowball hit her in the face, and she stood up and drew her weapon—a nine mil. She pointed it at his crotch, smiling when the merriment melted off his face. "I am going to shoot your balls off."

In the distance the movement of a black car caught her eye. The driver carefully made his way down the slick road. She fell into position again, ready to go on the attack. The car took its time pulling into the driveway of the house they were watching. The garage door went up, and the car disappeared inside.

She looked back at Samael. They would have to move fast. Out here in the middle of

nowhere the vamps would sense a demon's energy. He gave the motion to move in, his face a mask of deadly intent now.

Now *that* was the side of Samael that turned her on the most. Silent and deadly, she could only imagine what he'd witnessed and done in his lifetime. Talk about a bad boy. He'd created the mold. This was the side of Samael that everyone else saw—and all the women drooled over. It struck her then that she had access to all of Samael, even his playful side.

No time to think about it now.

When the garage door went back down, she jogged to the side of the house and went around to the backyard as Samael had signaled. He was going in through the front door. Having been by herself for almost all of her missions, she found it difficult to take orders from him. Giving orders likely came very naturally to him. As a Marquis of Hell he'd led many demons. Which begged the question ... what had been his job as an angel? She gave herself a mental note to ask him later and concentrated on what she was here for.

Her heart beat like a hummingbird's wings, which was becoming the norm just before a hit. She hunkered down by the sliding-glass door, the crackling of her leather jacket the only sound she could hear, and waited for another signal. A blond vamp sat at a desk in the cluttered living room, playing a game on his computer. Dishes rattled in the kitchen, and the sound of a microwave came on. A domestic scene if she ever saw one. She found it hard to believe the assholes in this house were feeding from the homeless on the city streets, leaving them for dead.

She could see her breath come out in small, white clouds, and the frigid air made her toes numb. She glanced around the house, wondering where Samael had gone. Scanning the backyard behind her, she saw no hint of the demon.

Puffs of white air coming from behind a potted plant caught her attention. What the hell?

Her acute hearing picked up on the front door being kicked down—that was her signal. Apparently vampires weren't the only species that had acute hearing. Pit Bulls also boasted of the talent, and one proved it by knocking over the potted plant, barreling at her in an attempt to reach its masters.

\* \* \* \*

Samael felt the energy of an angel inside the house. With his powers he locked the sliding glass door so Jade couldn't come in. The plan was to unlock the door and let her in, but something wasn't right. The angel's presence was familiar. An Angel of Souls had arrived to collect the soul of one or more of the vampires.

He kicked the door in and tried to locate the angel. Domiel appeared before him and suspended time. The vampires had been in the dining room and kitchen. They were in various poses of movement, frozen in place. A cup of coffee had been knocked over, the liquid hovering in the air.

"I'm glad to see you finally came around."

Samael hadn't seen Domiel since his fall. They had worked closely together in Heaven, both having the same occupation. "I see the temptation to fall has not affected you."

Domiel clasped his hands behind his back. "We all desire to experience something more than which we have."

Samael frowned. "Drop the act, Domiel. What the hell have you been doing since I saw you last?"

Domiel leaned against the back of the couch, laughing. "Not a damn thing. You remember what it's like, don't you? The cries of the humans, the pleas that threaten to tear your resolve when it comes to taking the soul of a loved one. What's it like for you? Do you still work for him?"

"I quit. I'm working for the Alliance now, a group of assassins headed up by Ambrose." Domiel would also recall Ambrose, as he had been a Warrior Angel.

Domiel's silky white slacks and shirt flowed around him as he moved. "What's it like to have

freedom?"

Samael shook his head. "Don't go there. Remain where you are." That little, inconspicuous question led many an angel down the wrong path.

"I'm just asking. Is falling from grace worth it in your opinion?"

Samael had been asking that question of himself since he'd made the decision to fall. "It's not a black or white issue," he answered honestly. "There are some things you can do that seem to make falling worth it, and other things that make me curse the day I fell."

"What of the woman outside?"

"Are you asking about sex?"

"Perhaps."

Samael laughed. Part of him believed if it had been possible for angels to have sex, then most of them would have remained in Heaven. It was one of the many things denied them, and it had its place at the top of many angels' reasons for their fall. An entire constituency of angels had fallen out of lust for human women in the Second Angelic Revolt.

"I'm not going to knock it."

"How did I know that would be your answer?"

Samael wasn't willing to add fuel to the fire. "Why are you here? For one of the vampires?"

Domiel's face darkened. "I was, however your presence has changed my course of action."

How could that be? His presence would have no affect on the final destination of a person's soul. "What does that mean?"

"I will see you soon, brother."

And with that Domiel was gone, and the vampires sprang into action once again.

\* \* \* \*

Jade tried frantically to open the sliding glass door. Locked. Samael was supposed to have opened it for her. There was no fence surrounding the yard, so she couldn't outrun the dog to the fence and bound over. Maybe they used an electric doggie fence? She didn't want to hurt the poor bastard. She loved dogs.

With no more time available to mull over her limited options, she jumped onto a glass patio table and immediately realized her bad decision was going to get her bit.

The tiny table wasn't in the best condition, and it tumbled over when a leg gave out. The glass shattered, sending shards of glass all over her and the protective dog.

The snarling beast lunged at her.

She snatched up a chair and held it off. "You bite me buddy, and I'll bite you right back."

She didn't want to hurt the hound from hell. It was only protecting its deranged owners. Wasn't this typical? She was going to get a bad report because she wasn't in the house helping Samael. All because she happened to be an animal lover.

No, she had to find a way in. She started walking around the dog to get to the sliding glass door. Instinct told her to break through the glass, but if humans had heard the table shatter, their attention would now be on this house. The old Jade wouldn't give a shit. The new Jade had to abide by the rules.

Seconds later the sliding glass door opened. "Looks like you made a new friend."

Jade thrust the chair's legs at the dog again, wondering how in the hell Samael had completed the mission so quickly. White, foamy slobber dripped from the dog's mouth. The dog bent at the legs, looking from her to Samael, then back at her again. The hair on its little behind stood straight up.

"You're telling me you can't take care of one little dog?"

"I don't want to hurt him, Samael. Can't you materialize him somewhere else without hurting him? Is that asking too much?"

"What? Don't tell me you're a PETA member." Samael clapped his hands together. "Sit!"

The dog not only sat, he rolled onto his back and whined. She glanced up at Samael, whose nose was red from the cold. He was actually very cute at the moment, bundled up in his black

jacket and black knit hat. "How did you do that?"

"Dogs can sense evil, I guess." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "He doesn't want me to open a can of whoop ass on him like I did his owners."

She still couldn't believe he had finished the mission himself. So fast? This was going to look terrible on her report. "Why did you complete the hit yourself? I thought this was supposed to be a test."

He raised an eyebrow. "I had no choice. You have a few missions to go. I didn't want to interrupt your playtime with Cujo here."

She rolled her eyes, trying to push back the nagging thought that he was coddling her on purpose. Why would he do that? He had no reason to. In fact, his job demanded he didn't. "I'll call the body pickup in this area."

"No, I'll do it. You can make nice with your furry friend until we take him to an adoption agency."

He disappeared inside the house just as her cell played "Promiscuous Girl." She flipped it open. It was Lexie.

Lexie giggled on the other end before she spoke. "I have been having the best sex of my life. Training makes me sore at times, but I'm not sure I can even get out of my bed without help right now. How are you doing?"

Jade eyed the now complacent-looking pooch. While lying on his back and giving her puppy-dog eyes, he wagged his tail. "Is that why you called me? To tell me about your sex life?"

"Well, considering you were so interested in it for the past two hundred years, I thought you'd like to know I was happily sated."

The dog rolled over and came sniffing around her feet. She kept still, wondering what in the hell Samael had done to get the mutt to behave like this. "Yeah, good for you."

"Okaaaay, so I heard you were on probation. That meshes with my vision, doesn't it? You aren't working alone anymore, you're working with Samael. I think it's time to tell Ambrose."

So, the news had already made the rounds. *Perfect*. "It's just for the time being. I'll be back on the beat in no time. There's absolutely no reason to tell Ambrose." Not if her missions kept ending like this one. She'd be training with the newbies like some washed-up jackass.

"I had another flash of the vision. The hit is going to take place in a dark building. I couldn't see much because there didn't seem to be any light at all."

Jade nodded, though Lexie couldn't see her. "See? Everything is going to be fine. The more I know about the surroundings the better. Did you hear anything in the background?"

"Yeah, I could hear a lot of people. So it's a public building. Why it would be so dark, I don't know. Guess the lights went out or something."

Shit. Jade would have to deal with the not-in-front-of-humans rule. "Okay. I'll stay alert."

"Do me a favor and tell Samael about the vision. At least you'll have two pairs of eyes looking out for you."

"Uh, I don't think that's a good idea. He'll probably tell Ambrose." There was no way in hell she was going to tell Samael about the vision. If she happened to be right, and he was coddling her during their missions now, he'd go overboard if he found out she was destined to die.

"Promise me you'll tell him, and I'll keep my mouth shut. If you don't, then I'm calling Ambrose the second after I hang up with you."

Jade gritted her teeth and crossed her fingers. She briefly imagined knocking Lexie out. "Fine."

"Promise."

"I promise I'll tell Samael." *Like hell I will.*

"Are you crossing your fingers?"

Jade uncrossed them. "No, now will you relax a little?" She had no desire to lie to Lexie, but Lexie would do no different if she were in Jade's shoes. Actually, Lexie would be *daring* immortals to slash her throat.

"Well, be careful. Sometimes my visions are skewed, you know that. And that's the only

reason I'm giving us time to figure this out. So, Samael still got the hots for you?"

Jade held her breath on that one. She'd told Lexie about Samael's advances, and Lexie would expect her and Samael to jump into bed without hesitation. "He sure does."

"You have him walking bow-legged yet?"

Jade had never mentioned her attraction to Samael to anyone. She acted blasé around him and made everyone believe she thought him to be the lowest of the low. Still, Lexie knew Jade's view on sex. As long as there were two consenting adults, she saw no problem in getting a little naughty. And there was no single straight woman on earth who would turn down Samael's advances. "Hell no."

"So that's why you're so pissy? Why don't you just have sex with him? 'In and out, let 'em pout' was always your motto. You said sex was your stress reliever. What's wrong with sucking on a little demon lollipop?"

"I'm not very fond of him, if you recall."

"That's never stopped you before. Are you infatuated with him? Do you have any real feelings for him?"

"Only you would use the word infatuated. And hell no, I'm not." *Hell yes, she was.* Jade had listened to those who fell in love say they didn't know what exactly made them feel the way they did, but that the attraction was unmistakable. She felt the same way about Samael. There was just something about him.

He was trouble. But love? She was too old to fall for someone so quickly.

"Wow, you sure are defensive about feelings you say you don't have."

The sliding glass door opened once again, and Samael stepped out of the house. She turned away from him, knowing he could hear Lexie were she to speak again. "I'll talk to you later, Lexie." She snapped the phone shut and clipped it back to her belt. The last thing she needed at the moment was Samael hearing Lexie over the phone talking about Jade's possible feelings for him.

She searched his face for a hint that he'd heard her from inside the house. Nothing. Thankfully he'd been too preoccupied on the phone to eavesdrop on her conversation with Lexie.

"Let's load up the pooch and get out of here. I called the clean-up guy and he's on his way."

She turned back to him and gave him a once-over. A demonic lollipop. The thought made her wet and had her aching in places that had been long ignored. It *had* been a while since she'd had sex, and even longer since she'd fed. Samael was more than willing to fill one of those needs, possibly both. Could she push thoughts of forever out of her mind and just enjoy the feel of his body, the taste of his blood?

She'd have to feed soon, and if she fed off him, then she wouldn't have to go out looking for it.

"What are you thinking about? You seem tense."

She shook her head to clear the erotic images in her mind. "After we drop off the dog, are we going back to the hotel?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "Where else would we go? We have a day off coming to us tomorrow. Is there something you would like to do?"

That's right. She'd forgotten. Samael had rented out two rooms for proprieties' sake, though now that Lexie had brought Jade's needs to attention, propriety was the farthest thing from her mind. Ever since Lexie had told Jade about the vision, she'd concentrated on staying alive, not getting her groove on.

"No. I was just asking." She glanced around the yard, unable to meet his questioning stare. "Sorry I wasn't more help to you."

He walked up to her and slapped her on the rear. "Yeah, but you didn't blow anything up or push someone in front of a bus. I'd say that's a definite improvement."

Lexie put her cell phone on the nightstand and ran a hand through her hair as she leaned against the headboard of the ratty motel bed. Keeping her vision from Ambrose was a mistake. She could feel it, and yet she understood Jade's decision to keep it from him. Lexie would do the same thing if she were in Jade's position. She couldn't imagine not being an assassin.

"You're going to worry yourself sick."

She laid her head on Azazel's shoulder. He was right. The vision of Jade's death consumed her thoughts, both day and night. She couldn't even escape the vision in her dreams. Nightmares woke her in the middle of the day, a cold sheen of sweat always covering her body.

Lexie saw blood on a daily basis, her own dagger bringing death to thousands of vampires and demons. Blood didn't bother her. The blood giving her nightmares flowed from the neck of her best friend. And there wasn't a damned thing Lexie could do about it. Her hands were tied.

"I've had many visions before, some that came true and others that didn't. But this one ... this one is madness. I should do something. Go to her and help her. I don't want her to face this alone."

Azazel wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "She isn't alone. She's with Samael. This isn't like what we faced with Kelsey. Jade made her decision, and you two are too alike for you to go behind Jade's back and tell Ambrose. Like I said, she's with Samael anyway. He'll look out for her."

Kelsey was another assassin and good friend of hers. A few months back Kelsey had been possessed by a group of spiritual demons. Lexie's visions had helped save her friend.

"Which is great, except for the fact that he's in the vision as well. I see a man's hands attempting to staunch the flow of blood from her neck. But there's so much blood I can't see how bad the injury is. It's dark as hell. Then I see nothing but her eyes, completely void of life."

She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. Not that it helped. The vision flashed through her mind again, so authentic she could have sworn she stood right there by Jade's side as her friend died.

Azazel kissed the top of her head. "Did you know Samael was once an Angel of Souls? If Jade told him about your vision, then the process of altering fate has already begun. He, of all people, will know what to do should she take a hit."

Lexie pulled away and glanced up at him. "What does his being a former Angel of Souls have to do with someone trying to hack Jade's head off?" Once the damage was done, and the injury inflicted, a former angel could do nothing.

"Your vision of Kelsey never came true," he pointed out.

She swallowed. That was true, and yet she couldn't shake the terrible feeling she had concerning Jade. When she had other visions, they normally had something to do with herself in some capacity. She wouldn't be there when this vision came to pass.

She didn't like feeling helpless. "I need to hunt. I need to kill something with my bare hands."

"You never fail to turn me on."

She smacked his arm. "I'm serious. Let's go after our next hit." At least then her mind would be off her visions. Fighting always cleared her head, and right now, she needed peace of mind more than ever.

\* \* \* \*

"The pizza's getting cold," Samael yelled through the door that connected his and Jade's room. He'd rented rooms on the fourth floor. Close enough to get out should a bad situation arise, and far enough off the ground he didn't have to worry about potential enemies climbing in through the window. As an assassin, the possibilities of enemies finding you were always a concern.

When they'd returned to the hotel, Jade had asked to borrow the rental. She hadn't enlightened him to where she was going when he handed her the keys and he hadn't bothered asking. She'd returned the keys over two hours ago and she'd been scarce since.

He knocked on the door. "You coming or what?"



“Be right there,” she called out in a sing-song voice.

He scowled at the door. Jade was acting ... strange. Ever since they left their last hit she hadn't once yelled at him or let slip a smartass comment. Now that he thought about it, she'd been acting pleasant.

Jade. *Pleasant*.

A disturbing thought entered his mind. Would she attempt to kill him? She always did get quiet right before a mission. As soon as he thought it, he shot the idea down. She was an assassin, not a murderer. She killed to keep humans safe, not for pleasure.

She sure liked keeping him on his toes. He'd repaid in kind at their last hit. He shouldn't have used his demonic powers to kill the vampires so quickly. These missions were for her to prove herself, not for him to protect her. When Domiel had popped in, it had thrown Samael off-guard. Something hadn't been right about Domiel showing up for a soul and then departing without one. In all his years as an Angel of Souls, that had never happened to Samael.

When he had called Ambrose he'd lied again. Well, embellished is more like it. Telling Ambrose she'd taken on the toughest being there—that wasn't too far off the mark. The vamps hadn't been nearly as scary as the pup.

Okay, so he'd lied. Big deal. When it came to assassins, Jade was a good one. No one argued about that. Samael just had to sit down and talk with her about her fighting style, and she'd be fine. But there was something she wasn't telling him. Something happened in the past few months that changed her. He'd made a few calls to those who knew her best, and all had said that Jade did her job well. It was just over the past few months a different Jade had emerged.

And still he couldn't shake the incessant need to protect her, which didn't fit into his goals. If he became wrapped up with Jade he'd lose track of his ultimate mission, which was saving his soul. Dying in this line of work because you were too pre-occupied protecting someone else would prove catastrophic for him—and for her. If Luc found out Samael had feelings for Jade, he'd jump on that weakness.

What worried him more than his protecting her was the way she was acting right now. It was so out of character it seemed suspicious. Just what could she be up to?

He recalled the first time he had met her. It seemed like so long ago, when in reality only two months had passed...

Ambrose turned to Samael as he pushed the doors to the training center open. “Jade is training a class of new recruits right now. If she's on schedule, she should be focusing on how to fight a demon. She will teach the trainees the skills they will need to fight a being who contains greater powers than they do.”

Interesting. Samael followed Ambrose, stopping just before they reached the blue mat spread out on the wooden floor. Twenty or so men sat cross-legged at the edge of the blue mat. A few of the trainees glanced at them as they approached, most focusing on Ambrose.

A dark-haired woman stood with her back to the trainees. She placed a clipboard on a table and turned back to the crowd.

Samael was no untried lad, but the sight of the female took his breath. She had the features of a porcelain doll, the body of an angel. Her tight, black spandex pants molded to her legs, and the red top she wore showcased toned abs.

She had the bearing of a commander. She held her back straight, her shoulders were thrown back, and when she faced the men before her she looked them right in the eye.

She waited until the murmurs died down before she spoke. “Okay, here's the deal with demons. They can pop up anywhere because they have the ability to materialize. One second you could be thrusting your sword toward their neck, and the next they're gone. So, here's what you don't do. Number one, if a demon disappears on you, expect him back. Demons are fighters. They don't run from a fight as most vampires you come across will. Secondly, don't try to locate them with your sight. You'll be turning circles like a jackass—and then you'll be a dead jackass.”

Her words made him smile. She happened to be correct on all counts, but the idea of a vampire gaining the upper hand on a demon was not likely. He'd heard of it happening, though it remained a rare occurrence.

Again he found himself focusing on the beauty before him. The authority she exuded impressed him. Very few individuals could boast of leadership skills. He'd always respected those who were able to take command.

A student raised their hand. "Are we going to be training with a demon to hone these skills? Or are you going to show us an example, like you did with the daggers?"

The trainer glanced briefly at Samael then turned her focus back to the trainee. "We seem to have a demon on site, but he hasn't been trained yet. I'll be bringing in a demon tomorrow—"

"I am well acquainted with the art of sparring. If you need my assistance you only need to ask." Samael took an easy stance, hoping not to scare the petite trainer.

She assessed him once again, then shrugged her shoulders in a nonchalant manner. "If you don't mind, I'm sure the trainees will appreciate the gesture."

Samael raised an eyebrow and glanced at Ambrose.

Ambrose inclined his head toward Jade. "Jade has been an assassin in the Alliance for nearly seven hundred years. She's training the recruits today because the regular trainer had time off coming to him. She can more than hold her own. You don't have to go easy on her."

Samael shrugged, not knowing why Ambrose considered that information important, and made his way to the middle of the blue mat. Because Jade was an assassin, he'd never have thought to go easy on her.

Jade lost no time in instructing him. She handed him a dagger. "We'll square off, and you disappear, simple and to the point. Basically what we are doing is giving the students a show. They'll need to know what to do if one of their missions includes a demon—it's imperative to their survival out in the field."

"Understood." He moved a few steps back from her, holding the dagger loosely in his palm. Up close her eyes were a dark hazel, and she had a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose. She stood five-ten at the most, though her take-charge personality made her appear bigger than she actually was. Her aura proved to be powerful and strong as he stood before her.

He was instantly taken with her—something that hadn't happened to him in years—if at all. There had been very little time for women as a Marquis of Hell. The focus always remained on the ultimate goal—a goal he hadn't believed in for centuries.

She spread her feet apart, bent at the knees, and nodded at him.

He de-materialized only to re-materialize right behind her. He brought his dagger to her neck before she had a chance to turn around. She clearly hadn't expected this move, and yet what better way to train? Expect the unexpected. He'd never trained in Hell. Most demons had been warrior angels in Heaven, so no training needed there. But if they had trained it would have been a no-bullshit session.

To convince a vampire they had a chance at besting a demon was ludicrous. It would do the students no good to think otherwise.

A low hum of voices reverberated throughout the training room. Jade smacked his hand away and turned to face him. Her cheeks were mottled with red. "Now is not the time to show off. I'm trying to teach them skills that could potentially save their lives."

"Have you ever fought a demon before?"

She gritted her teeth so hard he thought she might need to visit a dentist soon. "Yes, and those demons never materialized that fast. And by the way, it was my training that brought them down. It's the reason I'm breathing right now." She raked him with a glare just before she turned to her students. "Demons will try to disorient you by giving you time to try and locate them. I've never seen a demon materialize that fast before. It's not common for them to do so."

So much for teaching them to expect the unexpected. This training seemed useless to him, but with his new boss in attendance Samael decided to play nice. "Shall we try it again, then?"

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Very well."

He did the best to keep the smile off his face as they squared off again. Jade was sexy as hell when riled. When she nodded at him he de-materialized to wait outside the building, giving her the time she asked for. He gave her fifteen seconds, and when he materialized back to her, he did so in a kneeling position. Wrapping his arms around her knees he brought her down, flipped her onto her stomach and took her dagger.

With her ass pressed against his groin he lost his concentration. The curves of her body—

She threw her head back, and her skull connected with his nose—a move he hadn't been expecting. The loud cracking noise attested to the fact that she had broken his nose. Pain was something he had been trained to ignore, and though he didn't flinch, he briefly saw stars. Within a heartbeat she flipped to her back and kicked her feet out with impressive force.

Vampires were strong, and her kick knocked him back a few feet, giving her ample opportunity to scoot away from him. She would have made it too, if his new boss hadn't been standing only ten feet away. In attempt to save face, he grabbed one of her ankles and yanked her back until he had her pinned underneath him once again, his dagger at her neck.

Her breathing came fast and hard, her chest merely inches from his. She lifted her chin, even in this submissive pose, and glared at him. If he had retained the ability to read minds, he'd no doubt hear a slew of curse words issuing from her right now. He might even deserve them. This was not what she had anticipated in the training.

"Training session over," Ambrose called above the onslaught of shouts from the trainees.

Samael got to his feet and offered Jade his hand. She ignored it, as he'd anticipated, and slowly rose to stand. Her skills might not kill him, but from the look she gave him he was surprised he wasn't wearing a toe-tag.

Ambrose walked up to them, breaking up the energy that hung in the air between them. Jade kept her focus on Samael, rolling the hilt of her dagger across her palm. Samael had no doubt she ached to skewer him with it.

Ambrose towered over her. "Jade, this is training. You know the rules. We do our best not to connect."

"Sorry Ambrose. Instinct took over." She leveled her glare on Samael. "I explained to him we were here to aid the understanding of the students using a show-only type of training, something to give them an idea of what to expect when on the streets. Not go balls to the wall."

"I believe we accomplished that," Samael said.

"The only thing we accomplished was to prove you can't take a simple directive. I don't know your fighting background, but training in the Alliance doesn't get rough until the students begin sparring. Then the dangers are mostly from those who cannot distinguish between reality and practice."

"Like you just did?" Samael couldn't help himself. He immediately wished he could take back his comment. For a split second embarrassment had clouded her features, quickly followed by a look of pure malice.

Jade pivoted on her heel and stormed from the training room.

Jade's voice snapped him out of the memory. Suddenly she was standing before him.

"Mmmm, smells good."

Samael stood dumbfounded. Gone were the leather pants and dusty leather jacket she had sported earlier. In their place were a snug, beige sweater and a tight pair of dark blue jeans. Her hair was down and curly, shining as though she had run a brush through it thousands of times. She wore light makeup and smelled like a field filled with gardenias. She wore no shoes, opting to go barefoot instead. She'd painted her toenails a bright red.

She was a vision, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out exactly what was on her mind. She had no desire to kill him.

She was trying to seduce him.

"What's wrong?" Jade just spent the last hour primping, waxing and lathering herself in fragrant oil, only for Samael to look at her as though she were nuts. Wearing a new outfit and new lingerie, she looked like a million bucks. Instead of the appreciative glance she'd anticipated, Samael looked confused.

Within the space of a heartbeat his features relaxed. "Nothing. Nothing at all. You ready to eat?"

Eat, *ha*. She was ready to suck—in more ways than one. Her fangs weren't the only body part aching. "I'm starving."

She followed him to the small table set in the corner of the room, watching the way his muscles moved under his T-shirt. The tattoos covering his right arm were her favorite part of his body. Hopefully soon she would be running her hands along that flesh. Having a little taste. He turned around and raised an eyebrow. Had he said something? "What was that?"

"There's pepperoni with extra cheese and a deluxe. You didn't specify what you wanted."

It wouldn't be long before she did. She glanced around for paper plates or napkins. "I take it we don't have anything to put the pizza on?"

He picked up a slice with everything on it. "This works for me. I guess having lived in hotel rooms for the last few months, and always eating by myself, I forgot."

That was the big downfall to being an assassin for the Alliance. The work grew tiresome and lonely after a while. Yes, she had seen the world, but it had been all by herself. If she had a mission in England she couldn't share the experience of eating at a nice restaurant, or take in the sights with a companion. There had been times she had done so with Lexie and Kelsey, but those times were few and far between.

She sat at the table with him and picked up a slice, bringing it to her lips. She caught him watching her. She'd never paid any attention to eating pizza when she was by herself, but with him watching her she found it to be a very un-sexy thing to do. The cheese stretched, the oil found its way to the sides of her mouth, and there were no napkins she could use. It took her several bites, and the use of her fingers, to get the cheese to separate from the long strand it made from her mouth to the slice.

"When was the last time you fed?"

As a vampire she couldn't mistake his meaning. She could play coy, but that wasn't her style. "Why? Are you offering?"

Demons knew vampires salivated at the mere thought of their blood. Rich and thick, it made human blood taste like tepid water. It could also sustain vampires for a longer period of time.

"If I was?"

Hmmm, this seduction thing wasn't all that hard. Feeding proved a sensual experience for both parties, and for the most part sex was involved. It wasn't exactly a secret Samael wanted to bed her, either. And now that she felt the same way...

She hadn't even touched him yet, and she already felt like her old self.

She set her pizza slice back in the cardboard box. "Have you been with a vampire before?" Did she really want to know the answer to that?

"Have you been with a demon before?"

Her face heated enough to keep the pizza warm. Demons were her favorite. Vampires and humans paled in comparison. Lexie had always hated demons, especially those from the First Angelic Revolt, but Jade had been the opposite. Demons had been there and done that, knew every position in the book. Hell, they wrote the book.

"Ah, so you have." He smiled and set his own slice back in the box. He used his thumb and index finger to wipe the corners of his mouth.

The need to defend her honor bubbled up inside her. "Samael, I'm over seven hundred years old. I'm not a virgin."

His smile came slowly, and it crinkled the skin at the sides of his eyes. "I'm quite a few

millennia older than that, so it's safe to say I'm not a virgin either."

A nervous laugh escaped her. Or had it been a hysterical giggle? "Well..."

"Your place or mine?"

"Ha. Funny." She'd heard people say they felt butterflies at the onset of a relationship, and now she knew what they had been referring to. Only this wasn't the beginning of a happily-ever-after. This would be sex—*just sex*. She'd denied his advances before because of some misplaced infatuation. Her feeding—and whatever came after—was based on necessity. There was nothing more to it than that.

He pushed his chair back from the table and raised a hand, crooking his finger in a come hither gesture.

The butterflies went wild, and the world stopped as she slid off her chair and made her way to Samael, pizza forgotten. He sat back and patted his thighs, which he spread apart slightly. Did he expect her to straddle him, or sit on his lap like she would a mall Santa Claus? She would have to straddle him to get access to his neck. Sitting sideways would make it difficult to get her sexy on, as Lexie put it.

Yes, necessity. She had to feed. He offered.

She straddled him and placed her hands on his shoulders, horrified to find herself shaking. What was this? Her first sexual encounter? Now that she was sitting on his lap she could smell his spicy cologne—one of her favorite things on a man. She could think of nothing better than a man who smelled so good you wanted to lick him senseless. Taking a deep breath, she leaned in, instantly aware of his energy that wrapped around her body like a glove.

\* \* \* \*

Samael had never allowed a vampire to feed off him. He could try and convince himself he was doing this to get her in bed, but that was a lie. He wanted his blood to sustain her. The thought of her feeding from another grated on his nerves something fierce.

Her hair tickled his cheek as she bent forward. He splayed his hands on her hips, ran them up her sides to rest on her slender back. When her fangs penetrated his neck, his head fell back as lust slammed through his body.

Certainly there had to be some unspoken Alliance rule against fucking the very person you were sent to report on. It put a whole new spin on keeping a professional distance. Not that he cared at the moment. He couldn't recall a woman feeling so damned good in his arms before. She fit perfectly.

Jade had done a one-eighty on him, and he wasn't the type of man to question her decision to get closer. Ever since the night in the jail, when he had coaxed a kiss from her, he'd wanted her right where she was. He wasn't going to start asking the reason for her change of heart now. He'd experienced it from the beginning—something about Jade made him think of spending eternity with her. He hadn't been joking with her when he told her sex between them had been a matter of time. What he hadn't included in that sentence was the word relationship. It had been too soon for her ... but not for him.

He cursed the clothes that separated them. He doubted it would alarm her if he dematerialized them. She was aware of his powers. Without another thought, their clothes were gone. The feel of her naked body against his was better than Heaven.

She pulled away when she realized what he had done. "Impatient?"

She had no idea how long he had wanted her in this very position. He'd fantasized about this moment when he'd met her in Scotland and a thousand times since. "Yes."

She leaned forward and nibbled on his lower lip. "That's too bad. I had some sexy lingerie on just for you."

It took him several seconds to wrap his thoughts around that statement. Only hours ago she had kept her distance from him, then out of nowhere she'd made it her personal mission to seduce him. The hours she spent getting herself ready, the smile she'd offered, and the lingerie

...

She had every intention of using him, and not just for sex. She wanted to procure a good report, and she thought sleeping with him would get it.

He refused to stop her. Let her think he had no idea what she was up to. Her tactic angered him. Enough so that he picked her up, and without warning tossed her on the bed. She wasn't getting another ounce of his blood. He couldn't keep the scowl off his face, and she took no time in misinterpreting it.

"Uh ... I take it you like to play rough." She scooted back on the bed, all legs and no inhibitions. She told him without words she was ready to take on anything he dished out.

"You've no idea." Spread before him was his sexual fantasy come to life. Long, thick hair, flushed cheeks, full, cherry lips, and curves. Curves that would make any straight man drool. She didn't hide her body from him as most younger, less confident women would do. She let him feast his gaze on her body, unashamed with herself.

Leaning his leg on the edge of the bed, he wrapped a hand around her ankle and yanked her down into the position he desired. Her legs dangled over the bed, her back against the bedspread. Her glistening folds only inches from his mouth.

She was no docile flower here, either. Setting herself up on her elbows, she positioned herself perfectly so she could watch him taste her. A smile tugged at his mouth when he saw her own mouth part, her breath quicken—she wanted this as badly as he did, even if her reason differed from his. She still wanted *him*.

Slowly he lowered himself to his knees before her. Placing his palms below her thighs, he raised her legs, set them on his shoulders and leaned in to lick her clit. Thoughts of her deceiving him skittered away, replaced with the all-consuming need to bring her to orgasm.

He made lazy circles around her clit with his tongue, knowing she ached for more pressure and a faster pace. Instead of giving that to her, he left her most tender piece of flesh and nerves to trail kisses down her inner thigh. The moan torn from her throat was not one of pleasure, but one of impatience.

He brought his lips around her clit again, sucking gently. Her hips came off the bed. He bit her gently, forcing her back down. For the few days they had been together, he'd wanted to see the softer side of Jade, and Lord help him, he was halfway there. The truth of why she slept with him came to mind again—unwanted and unexpected. The truth was a solid reminder that this wasn't the softer side of Jade. This was the assassin who wanted to remain an assassin.

He let go of her left leg and slipped a finger inside her. He flicked his tongue over her clit faster, applying more pressure. Her core contracted around his finger, her legs began to shake. A disturbing question entered his mind—why couldn't she want him just for him? Not what he could do to save her job.

"Yes, yes..." Her hand snaked out of nowhere and latched onto his head, fingers curled into his hair painfully. She announced her orgasm by calling out his name.

Upon hearing his name, part of him felt so guilty he wasn't sure he could go on. When she let go of his hair and looked at him with eyes half-closed, and lips curling into a smile, he forgot what the hell he'd been thinking and crawled onto the bed without hesitation. The scent of her arousal hit him with such force he had to keep himself from thrusting his cock inside her right then and there.

He couldn't take her unless she assured him she wanted this. If he were a complete asshole, he'd take what was offered without question. He'd give her one last chance to change her mind.

She used her elbows and heels to move farther onto the bed. He took hold of her arm and flipped her over onto her back. Grabbing his cock in one hand, he leaned down and whispered, "Are you sure you want this?"

She rubbed her ass against his erection. "Yes."

That one word was all he needed to hear. He slid into her wet core, groaning at the tight fit. Her ass tilted up at a perfect angle, and he held onto her hips as he drove inside her, her moans goading him on.

He moved his hips slowly, wanting to give her a few minutes to recover from her first orgasm.

Another would be on its way shortly. Leaning forward, he reached around her legs and began running his finger over her moist clit to make her come again. Her back arched and her head tilted up. Her light perfume smelled like vanilla. The smell brought back the realization she had set out to seduce him for a better report. She'd pampered herself with perfume and sexy clothes to get him right where he was.

No matter what he concentrated on, the same realization kept creeping back into his mind. With anyone else, he wouldn't have pondered the whys of sex. With Jade it was different.

She cried out, thrusting her hips into his while riding her latest orgasm. He brought both hands to her breasts, holding onto those beautiful peaks while he quickened his pace. The pressure in his balls built, and he tried holding the orgasm back. The feeling of being inside her was too good ... so tight.

He wanted more time to explore her body, feel her legs wrap around his torso. He ached to see the pleasure on her face, watch her tongue glide across her lower lip, swollen from their kisses.

Suddenly she arched her back, and his will shattered completely.

He came silently, gritting his teeth as he closed his eyes. Letting out his pent-up breath, he waited until his breathing became normal once again before pulling away.

She rolled onto her back and ran a hand down his arm, admiring the tattoos there. How he wanted their first joining to be different, and yet he didn't have the will to keep her seduction from his mind.

The sight of her skin flushed, the sated look on her face, made him want to savor the moment, but instead he heard himself say, "I hope you don't expect me to give you a better report because of this." The words came out of his mouth of their own accord.

Her eyes widened with surprise. She pushed herself up onto her elbows. "What? Absolutely not. I—"

He stood and glanced down at her. "Because I won't."

"What? That wasn't my intention. Samael, where is this coming from?"

Her skin glowed from having just fed. Her hair framed the face of an angel. He flashed his clothes back on and left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Jade stared at the door Samael had just walked out of. She could only imagine what this must have looked like to him. The lingerie, the primping ... no wonder he thought she was trying to seduce him for a better report. One minute she'd been annoyed at him, and the next she was on his lap purring like a kitten. She could understand she sent him warring signals, but hadn't he already given her glowing reports when all she did was fuck up?

Why the hell would she have to sleep with him for something he already gave her?

It hadn't occurred to her what he might think of her seduction. He'd wanted her in bed for so long she'd figured he would be happy—thrilled even. It never crossed her mind their night would end up like this. While they were having sex she had the idea that they would go at least two more rounds. Licking her lips she could still taste him.

Oh God, he tasted good. His blood ran through her veins, carrying a power she'd never felt before. He must have been some angel in his day to still contain that much power. For all intents and purposes she knew very little of his past.

But what she did know surprised her. He was gentle and demanding in bed. Those attributes complimented each other perfectly. Whether his actions were right or wrong, he protected her during missions. She had no idea if he did so because he truly wanted to keep her safe, or if it had more to do with Samael wanting to take the lead.

Had he thought she attempted to seduce him for a better report right from the onset? Why had he slept with her if that was the case?

Warring emotions strangled her better judgment. No matter which angle she looked at it from, it all started to feel wrong. The sense of peace and safety she'd felt from his embrace melted

away, leaving her cold and angry.

She had never been the type of woman who needed a Mr. Right. She didn't need saving, and she sure as hell didn't need a man to take over her life and start making demands. It seemed not only had Lexie's vision screwed up her fighting ability, it had also affected her outlook on relationships and the like. The thought of imminent death must have screwed with her head in more ways than one.

She slid out of bed and headed for the door that separated their rooms, not wanting to be here when he got back. *If* he came back. Once she reached the door she glanced down at herself.

Where the fuck were her clothes? Damn! They were brand new and he'd vanished them to somewhere.

She pivoted on her heel and headed in the direction of the pizza. She snatched the whole box of pepperoni.

Game on. If he wanted to think she was out to get a better report, so be it. There wasn't anything she could do to change his mind. But she had proven a point to herself.

Their time together *had* just been sex.

And that was the most disappointing thought of all.

\* \* \* \*

Ambrose pinched the bridge of his nose to alleviate the phantom headache encroaching. Never had another vampire experienced a migraine due to stress, but he sure as hell had. Keeping over six hundred vampire assassins in line proved detrimental to his health.

Jade was going to be the one to do him in. Either the woman took joy in testing him or she had a death wish. The more he thought about the situation involving Jade, the more he'd come to the conclusion she was hiding something from him. Lexie had been MIA every time he tried to reach her. If anyone knew what was going on in Jade's head, it was Lexie. They were two peas in a pod.

It had crossed his mind Jade could be upset because she'd lost her best friend to a man. Azazel was now the focus of Lexie's attention, and that had to be hard for Jade to accept. Ambrose figured Jade would lean more toward the other assassin in their trio, Kelsey, to fill in the place Lexie had left, but she hadn't.

Kelsey had her own problems. Ambrose could see the lingering terror in the assassin's eyes. After Kelsey had been possessed by a spiritual group of rogue demons, who controlled her for over a week and fed off her every thought and secret, she was due for a serious vacation. Instead of taking the offered time off, Kelsey had thrown herself back into work, and there wasn't a damn thing Ambrose could do to change her mind. Everyone dealt with emotional scars differently, and Kelsey's choice to bury the memories remained her prerogative.

Which had him right back to where he had started: Jade.

Unlike Lexie, Jade didn't relish fighting. He'd sensed it about her from the start. She took pride in ridding the vampire species of scum, and yet that was the extent of her desire to be an assassin.

She'd always been a damned good assassin until now, and he hated to lose her, but her actions were more than questionable. Now, after he exhausted his efforts with Lexie and Kelsey, he only had one more person who might know what the hell was wrong with Jade.

Sighing, he opened his eyes and flipped open his cell. He clicked on Samael's name and leaned back in his chair.

"Hello?"

"It's Ambrose. I have a few questions for you. Are you alone?"

Samael's voice held a hard edge to it. "I am."

It was times like these Ambrose wished he could hear other people's thoughts right through the phone. Too bad he could only use that power in person. "I've been trying to figure out what could have happened to Jade that affected her fighting habits so drastically. Don't get me



wrong, she's been a bit ... heavy-handed. But she only started bringing attention to herself a few months ago. Before that I'd had the occasional problem with her, but nothing like this. My question to you is, do you have any idea what might have caused this? Has she said anything to you?"

There was a pause on the other end. "No."

Ambrose waited for Samael to say more. The line remained silent. Another brick wall. He could push Samael, but something in the demon's voice stopped him. "Okay. I guess that settles that. End of questions."

"If you need anything else give me a call."

Samael hung up. Ambrose removed the cell from his ear and stared at it. If he wasn't mistaken, Samael had seemed angry. He tossed the cell onto his desk, not willing to delve into another problem-assessing adventure with a new assassin, and shut his eyes.

"Did you get word on Jade?"

Ambrose opened one eye and glanced at the door to his office. Sven stood in the doorway sipping a can of Coke. The ancient Viking leaned against the frame of the door. One of his oldest friends, Ambrose depended on Sven like no other. He and Sven were the actual founders of the Alliance. Both had done things in their past they weren't proud of, and both were trying to make it right.

During the marauding days of the Vikings, they had killed their fair share of innocents. In doing so, they had created more vampires without their knowing. It wasn't until years later they found out the evil they had birthed through their bloodlust. The Alliance had seemed the only answer to keeping rogue vampires in line. Sven had been there from the beginning.

"Yeah. She completed the second mission effectively, taking out the toughest vampire of the four."

Sven smiled. "That sounds more like our Jade."

Ambrose shook his head. "I don't believe Samael. Number one, she's supposed to be completing these missions on her own, and he's supposed to observe. Two, I can detect something different in his voice when he talks about her. Their dynamic changed."

Sven touched his chin and cracked the bones in his neck by wrenching his head side to side. "You know Jade. She loves her demons. They probably shackled up."

Ambrose barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes. "The two having sex isn't going to change..."

"Hell yeah, it would. If Samael likes the goods he's going to want to protect her. So he helps out with missions. Simple as that."

Sven was right. How did it not occur to him before? If Samael was becoming enamored with Jade, then he would try to protect her. His helping with missions began to make sense. "I just got off the phone with him again and asked him if he knew anything that had happened to Jade that would affect her fighting. He said he didn't."

Sven sat down in front of his desk. "He might not be lying. Jade can be secretive when she wants to be."

Ambrose nodded. Before he could respond his cell rang. He picked it up, hoping it was Samael or Lexie. Instead it was Roger, the other founder of the Alliance.

"Yes?" Ambrose listened intently to the news Roger passed with a heavy heart. He never wanted to receive news like this, and yet it was happening more often as of late. "All right, I'll make the calls."

He snapped his phone shut and took a deep breath.

Sven closed his eyes, the news weighing heavily on him as well. "I'll help you call Alliance members. I'll take care of the arrangements."

Ambrose nodded. "Call Lexie first and have her break the news to Jade. She'll take it better if it comes from Lexie."

"Will do." Sven got up and left the office.

Now more than ever he wondered if something bad had happened to Jade recently. If so, this

news wasn't going to help the situation. It would make it infinitely worse.

### Dayton, Ohio

The light snow of the past few days had given way to frigid winds and bright blue skies. The bare branches of the trees swayed dramatically and pushed the rental all over the highway. Jade cranked up the heat in the SUV. It was her turn to drive which meant she had control over the stereo and the heater.

“What, are you trying to roast me?”

She slid a glance at Samael. “You of all people should be used to the heat.”

She brought her attention back to the road and chose not to respond to his muttered curse word. She’d been called bitchy plenty of times before, so it shouldn’t bother her. For some reason that sentiment coming from Samael did.

Her day off yesterday consisted of Oprah, The View, some cooking show, and a marathon of Clean House. *Boring*. Samael hadn’t come back to his room until late that afternoon. He’d been gone all night and most of the day.

Where had he been?

It wasn’t her business. He could spend his day off in any way he chose. That he chose not to spend it with her was of no consequence. She hadn’t desired a happily-ever-after with Samael, so she’d gotten exactly what she had wanted—sex with no strings attached. It should have made her ecstatic.

“Take the next exit.”

She gritted her teeth and did as he commanded—*commanded* being the appropriate word. Nothing she could say or do could convince him she hadn’t used him, but then he’d also used her. She didn’t hear him spouting off an apology for his actions. Even though he’d thought she had some ulterior motive for having sex with him, he’d still gone through with it. So he had used her as well. Fine. They were even as far as she was concerned.

She wasn’t some young, impressionable youth whose heart broke at the mere thought of sex without emotion. But she’d be damned if she allowed him to take some superior stance with her. She’d been in the Alliance much longer than he. Ambrose had just started hiring demons, which surprised all of the vampire assassins. To put it mildly, Ambrose never cared for the demonic species.

Ambrose now used demons because of the powers they carried. If someone needed to be flashed out of jail—like her—or needed help fast, a demon could merely pop in and save the day. Demons were now the new elite of the Alliance, and in all honesty it was a tough pill to swallow.

Before all their other missions Samael had a carefree, laid-back attitude that helped curb her neurosis concerning imminent death. Now he sat just as stoic and serious as she had been, which did nothing to calm her nerves. It made them much worse.

And Lord knew she had to carry this mission. The time had arrived to prove to Samael her worth in the Alliance, or he was going to suggest Ambrose put her back on the training schedule. How humiliating would that be? Only months ago Lexie had been fired for disobeying a direct order, and now here Jade was getting put on probation. Ambrose was on the war path. She had to be good for a while, or no presents at Christmas.

She pushed all disturbing thoughts aside and tried to focus on the mission at hand. Two vampires, six murders, in the span of three weeks. Of course the Alliance had already investigated and found the murders were linked to the vamps, so all she and Samael had to do was go in and terminate.

She never understood why vamps still lived outside the laws of their species, especially when it meant certain death. You hooked up with a demon to feed, you found a drunk, or a willing partner. It wasn’t hard to find blood.

Her cell rang and she picked it up out of the cup-holder. Her arm brushed against Samael’s, and the innocent touch sent a ripple of awareness through her. “Yeah,” she barked into the cell.

"Jade? I'm so sorry I have to pass this news to you. I ... I have news on Wesley." Lexie's voice had a frantic edge to it.

"What happened?" Of course Jade already knew. She could hear it in the sound and pitch of Lexie's voice. Jade could damn near feel her blood pressure spike as she gripped the steering wheel.

"Sven just called. Wesley was killed in action last night. Three vamps took him out of commission."

Jade squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds and opened them once again. It wouldn't benefit her to break down with Samael in the car. Not right before a hit. Time to suck this up. Yeah, Wesley's death was terrible, but if Jade did the numbers ... it was just about Wesley's time to go. Wesley had been in the Alliance for over five hundred years. Well disciplined, well trained, and one of the best assassins in the Alliance.

"Jesus."

Her before-battle stress hit an all-time high. She reminded herself of Samael's presence and took a deep breath. He had more powers than Wesley, and that alone should alleviate some of her fears. She wasn't alone.

At the same time having Samael around could prove to be a bad thing. Masculine hands attempting to staunch the blood...

"Ambrose is holding a ceremony a week from today. Look for an invite with your next mission. I know you knew Wesley pretty well."

That was an understatement. Jade had been the one to train him. They'd kept in touch throughout the years and met up at the quarterly training sessions at the headquarters. It would be strange not to see him there. "I will. Thanks for letting me know, Lexie."

"No problem. Stay tough. And please be careful."

"I will." She snapped the cell closed and set it back in the cup holder, stunned she'd kept the car on the road. This happened to be the news she dreaded hearing most of all. It was a bit selfish to admit, but this kind of news always reminded her she wasn't invincible. If death could take Wesley, it sure as hell could take her.

Samael leaned toward her, took one of her hands from the wheel and held it in his. "I'm sorry for your loss."

She nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat. Of course he had heard Lexie on the other end of the line. His hearing was even better than hers. His touch was unexpected, but comforting. She couldn't stop herself from squeezing his hand. It surprised her how natural the gesture felt, even after what had transpired between them.

"It was his time, Jade. You'll have to trust that. Death is just a word. What we go through is a transition. The body dies, yes, but the soul—our essence—goes on."

She took her hand from his to swipe a tear from her eyes. Her time was coming as well. She had no intention of weeping right before a hit. Mourning would come later. "Where to?"

Samael, understanding she wanted her space, settled back in his seat. "About a mile down the road you'll make a right. Follow it down until I tell you to stop. These vamps live in a small two-bedroom house. We'll park down the road and you can walk to their home."

"Okay." She followed his directions and parked a little down the road from the house. Taking a deep breath she took stock of the houses that surrounded the car. Quiet neighborhood, a good possibility there would be tons of barking dogs announcing her presence if she wasn't quiet. If assassins didn't access their surroundings and weigh different issues that might come up, something would inevitably happen and the assassin would be taken unawares.

Then again, she was just trying to take her mind off Wesley, and focusing on anything but his memory seemed a good idea.

"If you're sure you're all right you will be taking this mission on your own. I need to evaluate how you would handle this situation if I weren't here. The address is on this slip of paper."

Perfect. Fucking. Timing. She snatched the paper out of his hands and resisted the urge to beg him for his assistance. Damn it all to hell, she'd been doing this for hundreds of years. A

small annoying voice in her head told her to hang up the towel, just quit while she could—while she remained breathing. It wasn't as though she were under contract, as she had been for the first fifty years. Even then she could have quit, and Ambrose would have understood.

Only the nervousness and apprehension increased with each mission, especially now that Lexie had shared her vision. It was as though she were defying death with every success she had in the field. Death came on a whim, and no one could determine their time before those few seconds of understanding, when death stood next to you, smiling in your face. She had no doubt her number was nearly up. Only time stood in death's way.

*Fuck that.* She could do this. She had to.

Her heart did a few flips as she got out of the car. The cold wind slapped against her face, bringing her out of her self-induced stupor. She glanced at the paper in her hand and memorized the numbers scribbled on it. Just before she shut the door, Samael spoke to her.

"If you need me, call out. I'll be there in seconds. I'd decided you were going to do this on your own before you got that call. You don't have to do this alone. I'm sure Ambrose would more than understand."

Her façade of a kick-ass assassin overcame her and she snapped back, "I'm more than capable of handling this, *Sam*."

She slammed the door and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. The big leather jacket was perfect for hiding all of her nifty little weapons, and she patted their bulk, hoping to gain strength from their protection.

She considered it a good thing vamps couldn't die from strokes, because the way her heart beat now, she was likely to have one. Wesley had been a damn good assassin, and if she were being truthful with herself, he'd been better than she.

She found the blue and white house, checked the address and moved toward the back. The sun shone bright in the quaint little neighborhood, and the day had just started. She walked as though she had a purpose, a tactic she used often. If someone looked suspicious, it was because they were. She made it look like she was meant to be there. No one would take notice of her. If they did, they wouldn't recall what she looked like, other than a woman dressed for cold weather.

The back porch was free of glass tables, thank God. Only a few wicker chairs, minus the pads, were stacked in a corner. She had to move fast, in case the vamps were alert enough to sense her presence. Because this hit was located in a small neighborhood, she would have to use her dagger and keep quiet when she killed them. She had no choice but to get close to them—vision or not.

The blinds were pulled, so she couldn't peep through the sliding glass door. She checked it, not surprised to find it locked. The lever was on the inside, with no way of picking a lock.

She walked briskly to the side of the house and peered in a bedroom window. A handsome vampire was taking his clothes off to get in a shower. She scanned his face and body, filing each detail the best she could. She noted the clothes on the floor beside him—T-shirt and jeans. Once she had a good mental picture of him she morphed into his image. This would get her access into the house without a fight.

When he stepped into the shower she walked to the front door and raised her hand to knock, palming her dagger in the other. Before she touched the door it creaked open. Cold blue eyes met hers, first with apprehension, then with surprise. She didn't hesitate, just walked in.

"Jack, what the hell are—"

She kicked the vampire back in attempt to take him by surprise and get the upper hand quickly. She shut the door behind her. Adrenaline shot through her body, propelling her through the motions. She had no time to think. It was time to kill. The vampire in the shower would hear the struggle and come running to help his friend. She had to make this kill quickly.

She lunged forward and swiped her blade through his neck. The vampire tried to scream, but the only thing that came out of his mouth was a gurgling sound—exactly what she had anticipated. Blood spurted from the gaping wound in his throat. Better him than her.

He tried to staunch the blood flow with his hands, blocking her next move to sever the head from his body. Two of his fingers fell to the floor.

Using the heel of her boot she brought it behind his legs and knocked him to the floor. Vamp number two chose that time to burst from the hallway, naked and wet. Jade had known he would hear her, even though she did her best to be quiet and efficient. He was a vamp after all. Seconds were precious in this business. She had to leave the wounded vampire on the floor and engage the new one. He posed the biggest threat at the moment.

He stared at her in shock, seeing his own image.

Her leather jacket weighed her down, whereas the new vamp had freedom of movement. Even though on the outside it looked as though she were wearing a blue T-shirt and jeans, she still wore her own clothes.

She should have thought to shed her jacket at the door. No time to berate herself now. The new vamp wrapped a hand around her wrist and throat and pushed her back against the wall. He must have heard about the member of the Alliance who contained the ability to morph into others. He might be an asshole, but obviously not a stupid asshole-and he was much stronger than her.

He slammed her hand that held the dagger into the wall, and the plaster gave way, creating a hole. She head-butted him and dipped under one of his arms, gaining access to his side, where she placed a solid kick.

He kept hold of her hands, yanked them, and sent her flying into the wall once again. Her head bounced off the plaster and stars clouded her vision. If she didn't get the upper hand quickly, she would die.

*Call on me if you need me.*

Like hell she would. The vampire struggled to get the dagger from her hands. She'd be damned if she'd give up her weapon. That remained the first and most important lesson the Alliance taught. Being weaponless meant death, plain and simple.

Her vision cleared slightly, and with the vamps naked body only inches from her own she didn't need a map to figure out where to strike next.

He moaned, grabbed his balls and fell to his knees. Two swipes of her blade and the moaning stopped. She glanced at the other vamp who attempted to crawl away on his hands and knees, leaving a trail of blood on the hardwood floor. She strode up to him, grabbed him by the hair and made the final cut to sever his head.

She let go of his hair and the head fell onto the lifeless body, then rolled onto the floor, vacant eyes staring into nothing. Just like her eyes in Kelsey's vision.

"Looks like a fucking massacre in here."

Out of breath and exhausted from her encounter, she slowly turned to see Samael in the doorway. Had he been there all along? Again, it felt as though he were coddling her, protecting her from her hits. She morphed back into herself and dismissed her train of thought. There was no reason for him to protect her. "It's done."

"Good job. You left your cell in the car. I'll call the clean-up crew."

Blood coated her boots and hands. She didn't want to use the sink to wash up, because that would force the cleaning crew to do more work. Not only did they take care of the bodies, but they erased any and all traces of assassins having been there.

She didn't exactly have a choice, though. Stepping out of the bloodbath, she took off her boots and made her way to the bathroom. She used the bathtub and cleaned as best she could. Another hit, another victory in the field—one more step closer to death. The blood coming off her boots mingled with the water and circled the drain. The reddish liquid held her mesmerized as she thought of the vampires who'd just met their end in the living room. How odd that she feared death, yet she brought death to other vamps almost every day.

Irony was a twisted bitch. Jade used a rag and swiped at the droplets of blood left behind.

Five minutes later she was walking back to the SUV. Everything looked normal in the quiet neighborhood, which was the ultimate goal. Mission accomplished. Only she didn't feel like

celebrating. Not with news of Wesley's death fresh in her mind.

She slid into the passenger seat and stared straight ahead. The adrenaline had worn off, and she shook slightly. Thankfully her jacket hid it well. She had no wish for Samael to see her neurosis unfolding. It had been difficult the last few missions, but she'd managed to keep him oblivious of her issues concerning death.

"Ian, the clean-up guy, will be on his way shortly."

She never could imagine cleaning up after the kills. She suddenly wondered who would clean up after her death. "Great." She ignored the glance he cast her and kept her gaze on the road as he drove out of the neighborhood.

As the silence stretched on her anxiety hit a level so high she could feel it physically. Her body was one big jolt of electricity, and the quiet of the SUV felt like a tangible thing. Anger prodded words from her mouth. "You know, I wasn't using you to get a better report. That's just fucking ridiculous. I'm either going back to the Alliance in a normal capacity, or I'm going back to the training schedule. No harm, no foul."

"I find it strange you wanted nothing to do with me, you had a bad mission, and then you tried to seduce me all in one day."

Yeah, that did look bad. But how in the hell could she tell him she'd secretly wanted to jump his ass for months? It wasn't as though she was in high school. She might as well come out with it and clear the air. "Truth is I didn't ... well, I..."

*Son of a bitch.* She took a deep breath and tried again. "I never hated you, Samael."

"I never said you hated me. What I said was you had never expressed interest in me, and suddenly you did. There has to be a reason behind it."

The seatbelt choked her, tight as hell against her neck. She adjusted it and took a deep breath. "It's not like that. I..." *Just say it, goddamnit. Stop being such a child.* "I liked you from the beginning, Samael. How about we just leave it at that?"

It wasn't as though they could have a relationship anyway. Assassins in the Alliance didn't work together on teams. This job would always remain solitary and that was the way she liked it. That way she didn't have to explain to people why she was such a wreck after each and every hit. Plus men just complicated things.

Lexie and Azazel worked together out of necessity, because Lexie was *training* him. Funny, no one believed Azazel had needed any training, since he was once one of Lucifer's best assassins. The Alliance merely used the word *training* in lieu of calling it a partnership. Ambrose would never separate the two, but they were a special case.

"I wish I could believe you."

His quiet tone slapped the anger right out of her. She could feel a pity party coming on. There were times her job made her feel so damned alone. Sex between two consenting adults was one thing, but when you had feelings for the other person it grew into something larger. Where had these feelings for Samael come from? She'd never given a second thought to her other sexual encounters.

She cleared her throat. "Are we heading back to the hotel or are we going to the Alliance office in town?"

He kept his gaze on the road. "I stopped by the Alliance office yesterday, and I have our new assignment already. We're going to Florida."

Why would Ambrose give them an assignment before they finished their current one? It had to be a special case. "Florida? Didn't Ambrose have something closer?"

"Are you complaining about sixty-degree weather?"

She wasn't complaining about the weather, but something told her this would be no ordinary mission. The Alliance tried to cut down on travel expenses by keeping hits close together.

"Okay, what's the deal?"

The muscles in Samael's forearms worked under his skin as he gripped the steering wheel. She had the overwhelming urge to touch him. She quickly chastised herself for that desire and looked out her window. Images of their sexual encounter flooded her mind, and she couldn't

push the visual away.

His voice penetrated her wicked thoughts. “Two female vamps. Apparently they like to frequent a club called Tease and feed off the locals there. It’s located somewhere in Miami.”

That mission sounded easy—*too* easy. There was no way in hell Ambrose would send them the few thousand miles to Florida unless there was something special about this case. It had to have something to do with her test. The last test she needed to pass. “And? I know there’s more.”

He glanced at her. “They’re former Alliance members.”

Former Alliance members. That would mean they knew the drill, would know how to spot other Alliance members, and were trained killers. She would also know them, which made it personal—and difficult. “Their names?”

“Rachael and Christine.”

*Damn.* Rachael had been good at her job, but Jade didn’t think she’d have a problem taking the bitch out. She’d never liked Rachael. But Chris had never given Jade a hard time. She was actually nice and fun to be around. Why had the two gone rogue? Not that there was ever a good reason to go rogue, but there were so few female assassins. Jade couldn’t remember the last time an Alliance member went rogue.

“When do we fly out?”

“That’s where we’re headed. To the airport.”

“I haven’t packed. Everything is still at the hotel.”

“Not after I materialized it into the back. Right before we left I took care of that. We need to get to Florida fast, because these women are bringing attention to themselves in the worst way.”

Jade could only imagine. She remained silent on their way to the airport. Myriad of thoughts were playing havoc in her mind, but only one stood out—Samael. The tenderness and understanding he displayed when she’d found out about Wesley’s death. His appearance seconds after her success with the vamps. He had been there watching her, and she had been too engrossed in her fight to notice his energy. Samael had been protecting her.

Other than Ambrose, who protected all his assassins when he was around, and Lexie and Kelsey, no one else had gone out of their way to protect her.

When they arrived at the airport he parked the rental and moved to get out of the vehicle. She grabbed his arm. When he turned to face her she leaned in and kissed him. The kiss was nothing like their former kisses. She gathered all the tenderness inside of her and hoped he sensed the sincerity in her touch. His whiskers were rough against the soft skin of her face, his spicy cologne a scent that was now familiar to her.

She pulled away reluctantly, but she didn’t want to push herself on him. Her eyes widened when she noted his had gone demonic. The pupils were no longer round like a humans, they were black horizontal slits—much like the pupils in a goats eyes.

“Samael, your eyes.”

His regulated his pupils so they looked normal once again. “What was that for?”

“I ... I wanted to thank you for the tenderness you’ve shown me. And for trying to protect me.”

His brows came together as he stared at her. She couldn’t tell if he was frowning from confusion or disapproval. Without a word he slipped from the vehicle.

She sat back in her seat and pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. She’d expected many responses from him, but not that one. It had been so long since she’d had a serious interest in a member of the opposite sex, she hadn’t remembered how difficult it was to express what you were feeling. Just trying to read someone’s emotions proved complicated.

When he opened her door she stepped out without looking at him. She’d tried to break the wall he had erected between them, yet she had no intentions of begging. She heard the door shut and before she could blink she was pinned against the SUV by the weight of his body. He towered over her as she looked up at him.



“Why can’t I understand you Jade?”

*Just lean down and kiss me again, you fool.* “Perhaps you’re not meant to.”

“You’re not giving me the chance. Every time I think I have you figured out you surprise me with your actions. I don’t think you have any idea what you want, from me or anyone else for that matter.”

He was right on a few things, but not where it involved him. She’d wanted him from the onset—even when he made her look like an asshole in front of future assassins.

She had wanted him in spite of his numerous attempts at making her mad. Her wanting him went beyond the physical. She wanted to know his desires, his plans, his dreams.

But she couldn’t tell him that. He’d push her away again, call her a liar. Ask her what brought on the questions and how it benefited her to know those things about him.

“I know what I want, but you’re not ready, nor are you willing, to hear it.” She pushed him away and waited for him to open up the back of the SUV so she could get her luggage. Perhaps she was giving him mixed signals, but then again he was doing the same to her.

Only time would tell what the future would bring for them, and time was the only thing she didn’t have.

\* \* \* \*

Samael had everything to lose when it came to his feelings for Jade. For one, Luc wouldn’t hesitate to pounce on a weakness such as feelings for another person. No matter how much Samael wanted to explore his relationship with Jade, he had to keep her at an arm’s length away—for both their safety.

When he and Jade had finished having sex, he couldn’t stand to be in the same room with her any longer. If he’d remained, he would have allowed himself to ask her *why*. He couldn’t understand why he found it so difficult to keep their relationship professional. Even if they had just had sex, it wouldn’t have been a big deal in the scheme of things. But these feelings he had toward her were dangerous. He couldn’t allow his feelings to override his common sense.

Samael buckled his seat belt and tuned out the stewardess who was now giving instructions on floating devices as the plane taxied to the runway. Jade sat next to him with her iPod in her ear.

Walking around the city he’d had time to contemplate the offer Luc had given him. Samael was screwed either way. The best that he could do right now was focus on one day at a time and keep to his plans. Jade made everything difficult. As much as he convinced himself not to care, he couldn’t ignore that he already cared for her. If Luc ever found out he’d have the leverage over Samael that he needed.

And what the hell had Domiel been up to? The more he thought about it, the more Samael doubted Domiel had been there for any of the vampire’s souls. It didn’t make sense that those vampire’s souls would go to Heaven. They’d been murdering innocent humans. Had one of the vampires been innocent? What did that say of the Alliance? How many innocent vampires had they sentenced to death?

It wouldn’t bode well for his goal of redemption if he were killing innocent vampires.

As the plane rounded the runway and the stewardesses got ready for takeoff, Jade leaned over and put her head on his shoulder. He had the oddest sensation to lay his cheek against the top of her head and inhale her scent. Enjoy the feel of her body pressed against his.

Lust wasn’t new to him, but the tender affections of a petite, strong-willed vampire were as foreign as the pearly gates he’d long since left behind.

Up until now the decision to leave Luc’s ranks had seemed his best option for redemption. His decisions in Hell had affected himself, and no one else. If he’d done something wrong Luc would have taken it out on him, not his demons. Now his decisions would affect those around him, particularly the one who was currently snuggled up to his side.

## Miami, Florida

Jade couldn't believe it. Her hotel room was located on a completely different floor than Samael's. Was he trying to tell her something? Hell yes he was, but she wasn't going to listen. This fight didn't sit right with her, and she had no intention of putting up with it any longer.

The plane ride to Florida had been silent and nerve-wracking. Samael had barely spoken a word to her, even though she'd tried to start conversation after conversation. Instead his interest had been focused on the iPod he'd taken with him, and once he'd put the headphones in his ears she'd given up on chatting with him. Apparently the little chat they had shared in the parking lot of the airport hadn't helped a bit.

She took the elevator to the third floor, found his room and pounded on his door. She put her ear against the door but heard no movement inside. The TV was on, and the mental image of him ignoring her presence and watching CNN pissed her off. She waited for an entire minute then pounded her fist against the wood again.

The door next to his opened and a young man peeked out. His blond hair stood straight up and he wore a blue robe that was barely held together by the tie. "What the hell are you doing? Shut the fuck up, will you?"

She raised her eyebrows and palmed the Glock at her side, ready to scare the shit out of the bastard by having him kiss the barrel of her weapon. That was what the *old* Jade would do. Instead, she put her hand back down and smiled at the punk. "Mind your business."

"I'm trying to get laid."

"So am I," she hissed.

He gave her one last dirty look and slammed his door shut.

This wasn't working. For some reason Samael didn't want to speak with her. After glancing around the hall and finding no one there, she quickly morphed into Ambrose. It was time to take control of this situation. She cleared her throat. "It's Ambrose. I know you're in there. Open the damned door."

The door opened immediately. Samael stood in front of her in black boxer-briefs, cocking an eyebrow. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Good question. She slapped a stern look on her face—one she'd seen Ambrose wear more than once—and tried not to stare at Samael's package. "This hit is important. I've come to observe Jade myself. I could tell over the phone that your relationship with Jade has taken on a new meaning. Don't try to deny it."

She pushed past Samael and walked into the room. This could go so badly. At the same time she could figure out exactly what Samael thought of her. What would he say to Ambrose if he asked about her? She couldn't pass this opportunity up.

She turned back to Samael when she heard the door shut. "Let's talk about Jade. And this time I want you to be completely honest with me."

\* \* \* \*

It took Samael a nanosecond to figure out it was Jade. If Ambrose had looked at him in such a lustful way, Samael would have knocked him out and asked questions later. It was still weird as hell to have the image of Ambrose looking at him that way. He cupped himself without thought and materialized clothes on his body.

Samael could feel Jade's energy permeate the air around them, determined and riled. This should prove to be interesting. "What do you want?"

Ambrose's—er, Jade's—gaze flashed back to his face. "Let's start with what you think of her fighting tactics."

Damn, it was difficult to keep the smile off his face. It should piss him off that she was pulling this stunt on him, but it was also good to see her humor return. After the tension of their flight he

was ready to talk. First he'd go along with her stunt. "I thought you wanted me to write up a report and send it to you after this mission?"

"Answer the question, Samael."

He had to wonder how she thought she would get away with this. He would meet up with Ambrose at one point and both would know what she had done.

At least he would have his fun now. "I honestly don't know how she's managed all these years as an assassin. She seemed as though she were a novice during our missions. I had to save her ass more than once."

Jade kept the stoic look on her face. "Go on."

"Ambrose, I didn't tell you this at first, and I realize I shouldn't have lied, but she pushed a vampire in front of a bus for Christ sake. In front of numerous humans. She doesn't think well in high-stress situations."

Jade's eyebrow twitched. It took her a second to respond to him. "She is a live-wire, isn't she?"

"You can't even imagine the half of it." Samael glanced at the door then leaned toward her as if conspiring against her. "You know what else?"

"No, what?" she asked between clenched teeth.

"She seduced me in hopes of getting a better report."

"How *dare* you ... I mean *she*. What was she thinking?"

Samael shook his head, trying his best to look exasperated. "I'm not exactly complaining, because it was a definite perk of the job, but seriously, I would take her off the streets. I never had the heart to tell her what I really thought, but damn, what can you do?"

"If you knew she was sleeping with you for a good report, then why did you go through with it?"

Time to really fuck with her. "Come on, Ambrose. What man could say no to a hot piece of ass like that?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I see."

"I'm a man, not a machine."

"Of course. That's all I needed." She inclined her head and started for the door.

He wasn't going to let her off that easy. "Oh, another thing, just between us men."

She stopped and glared at him until she recalled she was supposed to be Ambrose. She suddenly looked inquisitive. "Yes?"

"I have time to call her up to my room, right? I mean, I'd planned on getting one last piece of ass before I parted ways with her. You understand, right?"

Her eyes flared wide as she tried to form words. Finally she took a deep breath and snarled at him. "You're a *jackass*."

"Is that a no?"

She bared her fangs. "How dare ... you know it's me, don't you?"

He cocked his head. "Did you honestly expect me not to? I knew before you stepped into the room. Nice try, though."

"I did *not* have sex with you for any other reason than the fact that I just wanted it. That's it. It wasn't as though you weren't giving me good reports anyway, even when I didn't deserve them. Did you ever think of that? Give me a bad report, I don't give a damn. But this cold shoulder thing has got to stop."

"Are you finished?" He waited until she nodded. "Flash back to your image, because the last vision I need is Ambrose talking to me about our sex life, thank you very much. Now, the hotel was booked up, and the rooms we have were the only rooms available. And besides that, I was on my way to get you. I'm taking you out to dinner."

He convinced himself that they needed to eat, and he wasn't taking her out to dinner to get to know her better. The pull he felt toward her was intoxicating, and he had a hard time keeping her at arm's length.

The more time he spent around her the more he desired her. Everything about his feelings

where she was concerned screamed disaster, and yet he was powerless to walk away.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh?” That surprised her into silence. She had no idea what to say. He didn’t seem angry that she’d pulled a morphing stunt on him.

“It’s Friday. Rachael and Chris normally don’t arrive at The Tease until midnight, according to the paperwork. We have plenty of time to eat.”

“Does this mean you believe me?” She hoped they could find a truce or a little middle ground. It bothered her to think he was angry at something that wasn’t even true.

“Perhaps. We’ll see what the night brings.”

It would bring on bad things, most notably her death. On the plane she’d had enough time to contemplate their latest assignment and Lexie’s newest vision. Jade’s own demise was crystal clear to her now. A dark room, lot’s of people, masculine hands staunching the flow of blood—all that was going to take place tonight, in a darkened club with Samael next to her.

His talk of Wesley’s death, or transition as he’d called it, had begun to sink in thirty-thousand miles above the earth. She’d glanced around at the humans around her, the babies, the elderly ... who was she to balk at the ending of a nearly nine hundred-year existence?

Her only regret happened to be standing in front of her. She wanted more time with Samael, and even that wish had made her feel selfish. Didn’t everyone want one more day with someone? Not many people left this earth kicking their heels up and dancing with joy.

She’d lived a hell of a life, full of danger and intrigue, accomplishments and laughter. If it was her time, it was her time, just like Samael had pointed out to her.

When he walked past her, sliding his arms from his blue button-up shirt, she settled her gaze on the magnificence of his body. The muscles that played in his back as he shrugged out of his shirt and threw it on the chair by the bathroom held her interest. The enormous width of his shoulders contrasted to the slimness of his waist.

He didn’t shut the bathroom door as he peeled the jeans off his body. Dear God, his ass was rock hard, his thighs a muscled masterpiece. Some demons had no hair on their body at all, while others, like Samael, had a fine dusting—just enough to make a woman’s mouth water. The last time they were together she hadn’t had the chance to gaze at him as she did now.

When she finally managed to bring her gaze back to his face her breathing seemed to quit altogether. The lust in his gaze was unmistakable. Before he had a chance to speak she began yanking her clothes off. If she was going to die tonight, she’d damn well do it with a smile on her face. Bloody fight be damned.

He closed the distance between them, flashed the remaining clothes from both their bodies, and lifted her in his arms. The familiar scent of him was a drug she’d quickly grown addicted to. How she’d lived without it all these centuries she would never know. If she could pick anyone to be with her in her final minutes, it would be Samael, and she was thankful he would be there.

As he laid her on the bed she pondered the temptation of telling him about her fate, but she quickly chastised herself for that thought. It was her time to go and nothing could be done about it. He’d said so himself.

He kissed a path from her neck to her naval. She shuddered involuntarily recalling what he could do with that wicked tongue of his. He nibbled the skin right around her belly-button and her hips came off the bed. She sat up and pushed him down on his back. “No. It’s your turn.”

His features took on the look of a commander, and for a second she nearly recoiled from him. “I take care of you first. I always will.”

He gently rolled her onto her back, taking the reins of their lovemaking again. She wanted to pound the bed with her fists. She finally found a man whose focus was riveted on pleasuring her first and *now* her time on earth was up? Fate sucked.

In less than five seconds flat he had her whimpering, her thighs pressed firmly against his face, his tongue going wild against her pussy. If he was suffocating she didn’t notice, and apparently he didn’t care. She couldn’t control her limbs—they moved and jerked of their own

accord. All senses were tuned in to the magic of his mouth and the impending orgasm that threatened to wrack her body.

She screamed out her pleasure, unwilling to hold back in what might be her last sexual encounter. Someone pounded on the wall, and still she didn't give a damn. She could hear the human boy shout, "Shut the fuck up!"

As if she cared. Her body was liquid fire, and things were just getting started. She glanced at Samael, the light from the bathroom casting shadows on one side of his face. "Your turn."

She didn't tease him as he'd done her. She went straight for the prize, licking the tip of his cock and taking him in her mouth without hesitation.

*"Goddamn that's awesome."*

That he'd just breathed the words instead of spoken them let her know he liked it already. She cupped his sac and elicited another moan from him. It made her giddy with power. Most males at the Alliance were afraid of him, the women wanted him in the worst way, and here he was, putty in her hands.

The thought of another woman lying with Samael had her damn near growling. But she'd be gone soon. She had no hold over him, no say in who he could and couldn't have sex with. Jade would be the only ghost at the castle wreaking havoc on bitches who thought they could have a taste of Samael.

Let one whore touch him—

"Fangs!" His guttural cry echoed through the room.

She pulled away from him. "Oh, Sorry! I was just thinking ... oh, shit."

He rolled her onto her back, clearly finished with her piercing his dick with her fangs. She must have nicked him good. She could taste his blood in her mouth. That had *never* happened to her before. She felt like such an ass. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

He winced. "No, it was great. Well, not the biting part, but it still works at any rate."

She was mortified. She would make it up to him, only she wouldn't have the time. And the thought of another woman getting access to him...

"You're eyes are turning white, and those fangs of yours are protruding just a wee bit too much for my tastes."

Vampire's eyes turned white when they were in a highly emotional state. It amazed her that when she thought of him with another woman she became so feral. "Sorry. I'll leash the fangs. Promise."

He smiled down at her. "Just watch the goods."

If she did live through this night, which was a definite no, she would be forever mortified of what just took place. But death had a way of making a person grab onto their last few minutes and relishing them. She pushed her humiliation aside as he slid inside her.

God he was big. He wasn't being macho when he bragged about his size, and she couldn't be happier about it. He was big everywhere, and she lapped it up like a hungry kitten.

He wrapped his arms around her, their legs entwined, and another orgasm ripped through her as he took complete possession of her body. His hips moved in lazy circles, and when she tightened around him he quickened his pace, seeking his own release.

During their lovemaking the asshole next door pounded on the wall two more times. Both ignored the intrusion and went about their play. She wanted to stay in his embrace the entire night, but his words rang through her head once again.

*Everyone has a time to go. Apparently it was his time.*

Hers was only hours away.

\* \* \* \*

It had taken him a few days, but he'd finally come to the conclusion Jade's feelings had really been hurt when he'd accused her of using sex for a better report. The male in him didn't give a shit if she used him or not, and yet a part of him wanted Jade to *want* to be with him without hoping for personal gain. The entire situation was a disaster.

What they shared back in the hotel room ... there was no denying it now. She wanted him, and he more than wanted her. Spending time with her had made the past week the best of his existence. Considering how old he happened to be, that said a lot.

What Luc didn't know couldn't hurt. Luc knew he was on a mission with Jade. He couldn't guess at Samael's feelings toward Jade, and as long as he kept his personal thoughts blank when the demon was around, he'd never know. At one point Samael would have to walk away, but it wouldn't be tonight.

He settled into the chair opposite her after helping her into hers. The restaurant was crowded as hell. Even though he made their reservation hours ago, they'd had to wait for fifteen minutes to be seated. The plan had been to take her out to a nice restaurant, but now he wished he could have found something a little more private.

Jade leaned forward in her chair. "Do you like working in the Alliance?"

"Beats the hell out of my last job. Pun intended." So much that he'd been thanking the luck that brought him to Ambrose's acquaintance. Working for Lucifer had been an experience he had no wish to duplicate. And if not for the Alliance he'd never have met Jade. The thought disturbed him. Again the urgency of the situation beat at his resolve. Better to walk away now.

"What did you do as an angel?"

She practically whispered her last question, which was good, considering all the humans that surrounded them. "I was an Angel of Souls. I helped souls make the transition to Heaven."

Her eyes widened. "Are you serious? What was that like, being around death all the time?"

"I told you, people have a fear of the word, when in actuality it's more of a transition. It's nothing to fear. From what I saw through other's passing, it's the people they leave behind that hurt the most. The job had its good and bad points, like any other. Upon an individual's death I would come upon them and instill peace so they wouldn't be afraid. It was a special gift given to the Angels of Souls. The human involved was the only one able to feel the peaceful presence. They were drawn to us, and once I would touch them their souls were mine to transport."

She raised her eyebrows. "Wow. That's some job to have. What would happen if they didn't want to go?"

"The special power we were given ensured the humans wanted to go with us. They can't resist reaching out to us, and when they touched us we would transport them."

She nodded. "So, can a person escape their fate? Like if they're fated to die, is there a way to thwart it? Can someone fight an Angel of Souls?"

His laugh held no humor. "No."

The look of interest melted off her face. "Why did you decide to fall?"

Most angels fell for power, under the influence of the Morning Star's promise of a new beginning. A beginning in which his followers wouldn't have to serve as they did in Heaven. Looking back at his decision to follow the crazy bastard, he should never have chosen to fall. But hindsight was twenty-twenty. "I fell so I would no longer have to serve, only to find myself serving here on earth."

The waiter came by to take their drink order. When he left, Jade leaned forward once again. "Do you ever get lonely on this job?"

"It's not the loneliness that bothers me. I'm getting sick of being constantly on the go. I'm going to talk to Ambrose about it."

For the first time that night her smile darkened slightly, and he didn't know what he said to make her do that.

He contemplated if it could be her job that put her in such a bad mood all of the time, and prodded her to ask him so many questions. Having worked the same job for millennia's, he could understand if her job was wearing her down. "Why don't you quit if the job makes you lonely? You could train assassins at the headquarters and stay in one place. Problem solved."

She shrugged and picked up her menu. "It's definitely something to consider. Are you going to try and get stationed there?"

"As you said, it's definitely something to consider." Easier said than done. They didn't have a

future, so why was he egging this on?

She looked up from her menu, their gazes locked, and he knew then and there the direction he wanted to take his life. It was as though everything became crystal clear in that one glance.

Suddenly he wanted to know everything about her, consequences be damned. "All right, you asked your questions. It's my turn. What's Jade short for? I'm guessing there weren't many women named Jade back when you were born."

"No, there weren't. My real name is Jacqueline, but I've gone by Jade for the past few centuries. Lexie tried nicknaming me Jack but I wasn't having any of it."

The waiter came by and took their orders. When he was gone Samael asked the question that had been nagging him for days. "Where did you get the power to morph? And do you morph and pull stunts on people all the time like you did with me?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I do sometimes. My parent's obviously didn't have the capability, because once they found out I possessed that power they gave me up. When I hit puberty I started morphing into those around me, and I couldn't stop myself. Next thing I knew I was on my own. Some say it was a witch's curse, but I always thought it was a power given to me like the psychic power given to Lexie."

He'd never met a person who could morph into different beings. Psychics, yes, but very few people had the power to morph. She was truly a special woman. "How did it affect your life?"

"Once I started controlling it I never had a problem. When I was twenty-four, and still not married, I could barely survive. I worked at a manor in England as a house maid, but when the lady of the house found out her husband had the hots for me she had me fired. I was on the streets, got jumped by a few men who thought they could have me, and that's when I was turned vampire."

"Didn't Ambrose turn you?"

"Yeah. I got my ass kicked by the guys, and Ambrose saw me. He wasn't going to turn me at first but he later said he felt a powerful energy coming off me. It was my morphing powers. At the time the Alliance was new and he needed more members to fill out the ranks. He said he could see the fighter inside of me. I started training with Lexie and Kelsey and that was that."

Ambrose had no doubt witnessed the same thing in Jade that Samael had caught onto. She was a born leader. He had seen it from the first moment he'd met her. It was what had attracted him to her in the first place. He couldn't imagine her death at such a young age. She'd been destined for more. Fate had made her a vampire.

It made him wonder what fate had in store for her after this last mission. Would she go back to being an assassin, or would she take a chance on their future and become a trainer?

His last thought had him seeing red. They didn't have a future, and if he wasn't careful with his decisions, neither would live out the year.

\* \* \* \*

Jade couldn't recall the last time she had enjoyed a dinner so much. The stress of the past few days melted away while she was in Samael's company. Her first impression of him as a militant asshole was quickly being replaced. Laid-back and funny, not to mention sexy—*God* was he sexy—he was everything she never knew she wanted in a man. She took another sip of her vodka sour, wondering briefly if they had enough time to get busy in the backseat of the SUV before they went on their mission.

She glanced in the direction of the bathrooms, waiting for Samael to come back to the table.

His talk of settling down had brought on many questions. Questions that would matter if she lived through the night. What would it be like to stay in one place—with Samael? Could they develop a relationship that might last more than a week? She couldn't recall the last relationship she'd had. Being a member of the Alliance, with the constant danger and traveling, never allowed time for a relationship.

Until Lexie's vision, Jade had never focused so desperately on death. Now that it was imminent, all the things she should have done in her life crept into her thoughts. Slowing down to

truly enjoy herself, becoming a trainer, and staying in Scotland sounded too good to be true. Sure, she would have missed the crazy adrenaline she experienced right before a hit, but there would be times she would be needed in the field. Even Ambrose went on the occasional mission.

Samael emerged from the restrooms, and everyone in the dining room watched him as he walked back to the table. He wore a black collared shirt, the first few buttons undone. He reminded her so much of Ambrose it was scary. Standing six-foot-five you couldn't help but notice him. And though she'd had the pleasure of being with him, she really didn't know anything about his past. What were his favorite foods? How did he like to spend his free time? Had he fallen in love before?

"What are you thinking about?" he asked as he sat at the table.

She set her drink down. Sharing her thoughts would only bring on more regrets and too many what-ifs. "I was thinking our time here is almost over."

*My time is almost over. I'll never see you again, and it bothers me that we just found each other. I want to scream that it's not fair—I want to touch you one last time. Another day. Another hour. I just want to spend time with you. Why couldn't you have come into my life earlier? Why?*

He glanced at his watch, complete unaware of the longing she held inside her chest. "Yeah, we'd better be going."

He flagged the waiter down and paid the bill. Anxiety welled up inside as they made their way out to the SUV. Thoughts of going back to the hotel room and living another day crossed her mind.

No. She wasn't a coward. Samael's explanation of death effectively alleviated most of her fear. She refused to give in to the lingering doubts. It was time to face that which she'd skirted with each and every successful mission. No one could change the time of death fate decreed for them. Why postpone the inevitable? She had a feeling something would go wrong, someone else could be hurt or killed along with her.

When Samael took her hand a sense of belonging and peace came over her. It overrode the terror invading her being.

He squeezed her hand. "You ready for this mission?"

Peace gone. She shrugged her shoulders and attempted to act nonchalant. "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Just checking. I have a feeling this one's going to be a bitch."

He'd taken the words right out of her thoughts.



## Chapter Seven

Club Tease was raunchy, loud and crowded. Overhead strobe lights glared red and yellow, hurting Jade's oversensitive night vision. The music was techno crap, which had her cringing. With all the humans piled inside the club like sardines she and Samael would have to follow Rachael and Chris out of the club. They couldn't possibly assassinate them here. It made her wonder if this was her night to die after all. It certainly wasn't all that dark, either.

"I'll be at the bar getting a drink."

She glanced at Samael. "Have fun. We're lucky we can't contract some funky-ass disease here. I always knew there was an upside to being a vamp."

He shook his head and smiled, heading in the direction of the bar. So she was on her own again. Fine. For some reason her nerves weren't dancing along with the crazy beat of the techno music. During the ride to the club she'd come to terms with what would transpire—for the hundredth time.

She felt calm in the midst of all the chaos around her. Her life was in the hands of fate now, and nothing could be done about it.

Scanning the crowds wouldn't do her any good. There were too many humans for her to locate Rachael and Chris with her sight. As she walked towards the dance floor she concentrated on finding that vamp energy that would alert her to Rachael and Chris' presence. Rachael's energy would be much more potent than Chris'. She was older and contained more power than her friend.

It didn't take her long to locate them.

Sitting at a table crowded with admiring human males, both were staring at her. Jade inclined her head in greeting. Rachael sneered at her, but Chris looked stricken.

*Yeah, bitches, the Alliance has arrived.*

It amazed her that she wasn't nervous. This hadn't happened for a long time—too long. It felt good to feel powerful and strong. Bring it on. Only not in the club, she reminded herself. Rachael and Chris knew she was here, so following them undetected wouldn't be an option, but Jade somehow doubted they would run. They were out to prove themselves above the law. Now that the law had arrived they would do their best to eradicate her.

Having trained with both of them, Jade knew their strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately that went both ways. Perhaps that was why she wasn't shaking and cursing her job at the moment. Jade was the better assassin, hands down. Though she'd never gone toe-to-toe with the both of them at once, she still believed she would be the fighter to come out on top.

A little voice echoed inside her head ... *don't become too complacent*. It was the same words she had uttered to Lexie right before the hothead got fired—and bested on the battlefield by her now live-in beau. Lexie had been aching for a fight, and she'd instigated a fight when there had been no reason to do so.

But this was different. Jade knew her opponents personally. She had this in the bag. And *when* she got through with this mission—not if—she'd call it quits. Settle down and become a trainer with Samael, if that was something he was serious about. Hope surged inside her chest as she thought about the possibilities. Lexie had witnessed Kelsey's death in a vision, and Kelsey was still alive and well.

Winking at Rachael, Jade headed over to the bar. Nothing could be done until the two left the bar, so she'd have to wait them out.

She'd been an assassin for over seven hundred years. Why would she tuck tail and give up now? For years she'd been kicking ass and killing demons and vampires. Allowing Lexie's vision to affect her fighting skills had been a mistake. There was still time to turn this around. And if she were to die tonight she was going to take two bitches with her. Game on.

She found Samael sitting by himself at the bar. The scene around him was absolutely comical. Humans gave him a wide berth, unwilling to get close to him even to get a drink. Whether it was the dark energy he emanated or the sheer size of him, she'd never know.

Samael held up his glass. "Guess we're waiting?"

"Looks like it. Unless you want me to kill them in front of the humans now?"

He cocked a brow. "You're joking right before a hit. That's surprising. You had me thinking nerves were a problem on mission day."

She turned to the bartender and ordered a vodka sour. That statement had hit way too close to home for her to be entirely comfortable with it. Once the bartender handed her the drink she took a sip and faced Samael again. "How long do you think they'll stay here to avoid me?"

"Not sure." He held out her cell. "You left this in the car."

She put it on the bar along with her drink. "Thanks. I'll be right back. I need to use the ladies room."

\* \* \* \*

Jade bent forward and kissed him on the cheek, taking him completely unaware. The gesture was sweet. As he watched her make her way through the crowd, he smiled. He'd finally found the soft side of Jade, and it had taken him less than a week. It was going to be hard to walk away from her.

Samael kept an eye on Rachael and Chris, making sure they didn't follow Jade into the bathroom. Both stayed where they were, looking utterly unconcerned with his and Jade's presence, which baffled him. Either they were stupid and completely confident in their abilities, or they knew something he and Jade didn't.

Jade's cell started playing a rap song. He barely heard it over the music. Picking it up he glanced at the I.D. It only said 'my bitch' on it. That certainly didn't tell him who was calling. He flipped it open. "Yeah?"

There was a pause. "Samael? Hi, this is Lexie. Is Jade there? Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. She's in the bathroom. She'll be out in a minute." He wasn't sure if he should tell her to call back or not. He opted to keep her on the phone. "So, how are you doing?"

"I'd be better if Jade would call me every now and then and tell me she's okay."

That seemed a strange thing for her to say. Did Jade always call to check in with Lexie? It sounded odd. "I'm with her for the time being. Don't worry. I'm flexing my muscles as we speak."

Lexie laughed. "Well that's good. And I'm glad she told you about my vision. She's so against me telling Ambrose about it because she thinks he'll take her off the streets at once. I guess he would, since he's very protective of us at times, but keeping this secret isn't sitting well with me. If something does happen to her I'm responsible because I saw it and should have said something about it."

Samael turned on his stool and looked through the crowd to see if Jade was coming. He didn't see her. Rachael and Chris were still seated at their table. Everything was as it should be.

He'd heard the rumor that Lexie was a psychic. Jade hadn't told him anything about a vision though. "Yeah. That was some vision."

"I have to admit, I'm a little glad you're there to watch over her, but at the same time it goes right along with my vision. You know, the masculine hands and all."

*The what?* "I understand." He had no idea what she was talking about. "Jade only told me a little bit about the vision. Not all of it. I think she's scared."

"She should be. At least she's taking precautions and not getting too close to her hits. I can't even go to sleep without seeing her death replay over and over again. I think it's time she tells Ambrose. I'm just not comfortable keeping this from him any longer. It's been over two months now. My visions have never taken this long to come true or for them to have a different outcome."

Two months. Things were beginning to make sense to him now. Jade's crazy fighting tactics, her before-battle stress—that had all started a few months ago. Something in Lexie's vision had changed the way Jade handled herself during her missions. "She didn't tell me the specifics of the vision. Where does she take the hit?"

The only way to kill a vampire or demon was to decapitate them.

"In the neck. It was too dark for me to make out much. I told her it would probably take place in a busy building, or something of the like. I could hear a lot of people in the background."

He shot a glance around his surroundings. "Like a club."

"Yeah, like a crappy club. Don't tell me that's where you're at now. I can hear music in the background."

Samael turned toward the bathroom and saw Jade emerging. He shot a look toward Rachael and Chris. What he saw shocked the hell out of him and turned his blood cold. "*Jesus.*"

"What? What is it?" Lexie asked.

He shut the phone. Rachael was actually feeding off one of the men sitting at her table. Blood trickled down his neck as he sat back with a look of ecstasy on his face while all the other patrons watched. Rachael leaned back, licked the blood off her lips and fangs, then bit him once more.

This situation wasn't something Alliance members were taught to control. It was absolutely unheard of for a vampire to make such a scene. The two former Alliance members were out of their fucking mind. Even Luc, the craziest bastard he knew, would never bring such attention to the immortal world.

As he shot off his stool another immortal's energy shattered the air around him. Humans were immune to the energy, but he'd been around it more than half of his existence. The energy could mean only one thing. The presence of an Angel of Souls.

He moved through the crowd and followed the energy to the front of the club. The energy was the same as the energy that had met him at the vampire's house a few days before. There, standing near the door, was Domiel. Samael was astonished when Domiel looked right through him. Samael knew that look. Domiel was assessing the individual whose life was about to end.

Samael turned to find the individual Domiel was focused on. There were so many in the crowd he couldn't pinpoint the person in question. Dread consumed him. Lexie's vision penetrated his thoughts. Stole his breath.

An ache formed in his chest as Samael recalled what Domiel said when he'd asked if he were there for one of the vampires.

*I was, however your presence has changed my course of action.*

Domiel had been there for one of the vampires—Jade. Samael had every intention of letting her take that mission, and at the last minute he'd changed his mind. That decision had moved the time and place of her death.

He glanced back at Domiel to assess the direction of his gaze again, and back to the throng of people.

Within the space of a heartbeat the club was shrouded in darkness as the lights went out. But not before Samael had locked gazes with the person Domiel had been staring at.

Unfortunately for his friend, Samael couldn't allow him to complete his job.

\* \* \* \*

Shouts and screams tore through the animated shadows all around her. A roar of conversation replaced the music that had been blaring, and people began pushing other people, looking for a way out of the bar. With Jade's heightened sight she was able to see the mayhem around her.

She kept her attention on Rachael and Chris glaring at her from their table, rising from their seats like the vamps in movies—slow, evil and methodical. She still couldn't believe what she witnessed coming out of the bathroom. The sight of Rachael feeding off a human male had jarred Jade to her core.

Between their table and her, humans began calming down, bumping into each other and laughing. Some danced to music that played only in their heads. The bartender behind her gave a shout and she turned around to see what he was yelling about. Patrons had jumped over the bar and were grabbing bottles.

Before she turned back to her prey, she knew she'd made a mistake. They were gone.

Closing her eyes she strained to feel their presence amidst the chaos. Somewhere to her left, near the dance floor. Jade shrugged out of her jacket, tossed it on floor and palmed her dagger.

Adrenaline was *not* kicking in. In its place was an odd sense of calm that settled its cool hand in her gut. She pushed past the humans, intent on getting Rachael and Chris out of the club. How she was going to do that, she didn't exactly know. But she couldn't allow them to feed on humans in plain sight.

Rachael suddenly stepped in front of her. Chris's energy alerted Jade that the vampire stood just behind her. The intolerable situation had just become a nightmare.

And still she was calm. "Not to sound like an asshole, but can we take this outside?"

Rachael shook her head with a smile. "You do understand the vampire species is due for a change? Vampirism has been so romanticized and worshipped in the last decade that we owe it to ourselves to become part of that revolution."

"Have you lost your fucking mind? Humans think it's cool because they believe we are not real. If they found out the truth there would be another uprising like the witch trials."

Rachael rolled her eyes and slipped a cigarette out of her pocket. After she lit it she blew the smoke in Jade's face. "Humans have come a long way in only a few hundred years. They were religious fanatics during the witch trials, and took the law into their own hands. It would be different for us. The witches picked the wrong time to come out."

Jade couldn't agree more, but why repeat the past? "Witches were helping people back then, not taking blood from them. Jesus Christ Rachael, you can't make this decision for the entire vampire race. I've no choice now. None at all."

It wasn't as though she'd had a choice before, but now that Rachael had been sucking on a human in front of hundreds of people she had to die.

"You think you can take us both?" Chris asked from behind her.

Jade didn't move to look at Chris, knowing damn well from their training Rachael posed the biggest threat. "Let's leave the club and do our business elsewhere."

"What Chris here is forgetting, is that big, bad-looking demon you have with you who's currently beating the shit out of some immortal. I'm not that forgetful. Is he also an Alliance member?"

Jade fought the urge to turn around and see what Rachael was referring to. She had sensed no other immortals in the club. It was a trick.

Getting them out of the club was going to prove difficult. She had no reason to lie. They would see right through it. "Yes, he's a member of the Alliance. He's here to help with this mission."

"Fuck, Rach, what are we going to do?"

Rachael clenched her jaw in what looked to be a painful muscle spasm and glared at Chris. "Shut up, Chris. Everything is fine." Rachael's gaze slid back to Jade. "Jade is under contract not to do anything in front of the humans."

God how she wanted Ambrose to hear that one. See what happens when you're forced to follow the rules? "The humans won't be around forever."

Rachael dropped her cigarette to the floor. "Neither will your demon."

Without warning Rachael pulled out a gun and started shooting—no doubt in Samael's direction. Humans were hit in the line of fire, and the drunken party took a turn from jovial mayhem to utter chaos. Screams tore through the club, people were trampled and calling for help.

Jade launched herself at Rachael without thought. Humans were dying, and Samael had possibly been shot. There had never been a training class to reference this sort of situation. Fighting in front of humans was the last thing on Jade's mind. She had to stop Rachael before more humans got killed.

Just as Jade pinned Rachael to the ground, Chris pulled her off with a knife to her neck. Pressure and warmth flooded over her skin indicating she was bleeding.

The injury was bad, and she didn't need a mirror to confirm what she felt. Things around her seemed to slow, voices dimmed. Still she fought. She elbowed Chris in the neck, snatched the bloody dagger from her hand and slashed Chris across the face, unable to get her aim correct with her vision blurred. Chris fell back screaming, holding her nose—or what was left of it.

Jade quickly scanned the crowd. Trying to locate Samael in the pandemonium proved impossible. Humans were lying on the ground, blood poured from wounds.

Another jolt of pain in her neck told her more than she wanted to know.

Rachael was finishing the job for Chris.

It was real. It was fucking real. One mission to go and death had shaken its head with finality. Warm liquid pooled between her breasts, white dots popped up in her line of sight, overcoming the colors of black and blue of her night vision. When she attempted to breathe she couldn't quite get enough air into her lungs.

This was what Lexie had seen. Her psychic abilities, though uncontrollable, were apparently accurate.

Jade stumbled, unable to remain standing. She fell onto her back when her shoes slipped in the puddle of blood—hers and Chris's. She stared up at the dark ceiling of the club while patrons bumped into each other and trod right over her limp body. She couldn't feel a thing. Her body was numb, but her thoughts were clear as they'd ever been.

Death was much more peaceful than she'd ever imagined. It was silence in a world of noise. It was peace in the chaos. Weakness flooded through her limbs, bringing on a serene thought process as she lay inept. While she waited patiently for the final death blow she didn't focus on the things she should have done or said. Memories flitted through her mind, intensely strong and vibrant. She closed her eyes to see them better.

Samael was foremost in her thoughts—his laughter, his smile, his never-ending ease right before a hit. He was the one man she could have come to love, and if she had any regrets it was not telling him how much she enjoyed his company. Silly annoyance aside, he'd been fun to hang around.

She recalled her first meeting with him. He'd made her look like such an ass, and all she had been able to concentrate on was the way he filled out a pair of jeans. She'd known then that he would be more than a one-night stand. There was just something about him she couldn't resist.

"Jade!"

Every noise in the club slammed into her, and when she opened her eyes things she couldn't identify were twisting about her like a maddening tornado. The tranquil peace of the moment had vanished.

"Don't speak to him. Don't! Take from me, Jade. Drink."

Speak to whom? Blood was dripping into her mouth, a sweet salvation she hadn't the energy to latch onto. She tried to focus on someone standing over her. It wasn't Samael. Samael was on top of her, his neck against her mouth. And yet it was a demon who stood over her. She tried desperately to focus on his face, and as soon as she wished to see him more clearly she did.

It wasn't a demon. It was an angel. His eyes were solid black, his stance elegant and ethereal. He held his hand out to her and she raised her hand in return, wanting nothing more than to touch him. It was as though she were aware of exactly what this angel wanted. It felt right. She *had* to take his hand.

"No! Drink." Samael growled.

It was then that she knew who stood over her. Her conversation with Samael came rushing back to her. She was looking death in the face. An Angel of Souls had come to lead her through the transition.

\* \* \* \*

Samael couldn't move. He held one hand firmly against the giant wound in Jade's neck, the other holding her head so that she could drink from him. The energy at his back held no malice. It carried a sense of peace and freedom.

"You will not take her." His voice did not sound normal to his ears. It was desperate and hollow. It was something else that had become familiar to him during his time as an angel. Humans never wanted to part with their loved ones, and many a time they would beg and plead for that person to remain living. The desperation humans had demonstrated had never bothered him in the beginning, though towards the end of his service in Heaven the pleading had him second-guessing his job in life.

Domiel did not respond, and it didn't surprise Samael. Samael had just spent the last five minutes trying to kill the bastard. He would have accomplished that goal too, if Luc hadn't taken all his powers when Samael had left his services. Samael needed time to save Jade. With his blood he could save her. He had to. Jade's arm rose once again and he took his hand from her head to snatch it back down. He held her arm to his side, not allowing her to touch Domiel.

He would take her soul.

"Samael, you are aware the decision has been made. Your will holds no power in this. Her soul is mine. Fighting me will not alter the fate of the one before you. You changed her fate once. She'd been destined to die the day I saw you. I will not be denied again."

They had served together many times. Would Samael's desperation affect Domiel in the least? "Brother, I am begging you. Leave ... just turn around and leave."

Perhaps if he could keep Domiel talking Jade would get enough of his blood to survive. She was still drinking, though truth be told, he did not know how much she was ingesting. Blood still poured through his fingers from her wound, coating his shirt, but he'd killed Rachael before she had delivered the final death blow. Certainly Jade wouldn't die from the wound in her neck. He couldn't assess how bad it was, and yet her head was still intact.

"You are making this much more difficult than it needs to be. Let her go."

He couldn't. He *would not*. "Help me, Domiel. Please. You can take my soul." Samael could feel Jade slipping. Her body grew cold against his. She tried to breath and the only thing that met his ears was a raspy, gurgling sound.

"I cannot do that. Your name is not in the Book of Life. Your soul belongs in the Pit."

"You *will* not." Samael used his arm to keep hers at his side and cradled her head in his palm once again, hoping the angle her head was now at would help her drink. She was pushing at his arm, trying to gain access to Domiel. It was something she could not control. Angels of Souls made the passing easier, and what she was doing would come naturally to her. It was instinct that caused her to reach out to him.

Samael held onto her, shielding her body from Domiel. He had so many things he wanted to say to her, but he couldn't get the words out. One word ran through his mind over and over again. No. No. No.

*Stay with me. Don't give up.*

How ironic to find himself shielding a loved one from an angel. His mind told him nothing he could do would alter fate, but his heart demanded he not give up.

Domiel kneeled beside them, and Samael knew the battle would soon be lost. He was torn between his attempt to give her his blood and wanting to kill the angel beside him.

"I will willingly go to the Pit, soul for soul."

"You would give your life for hers? You would willingly go to the fires to save her?"

Samael rocked her gently. "I would. I *will*."

Domiel pushed at him. "Move aside."

Samael tried to give voice to the word no, but he could not. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. If only Jade had told him of Lexie's vision he would have taken her off the streets immediately. It was too late now. He opened his eyes and a red haze coated everything in his line of vision.

"Samael, I will help her live. Let her go."

Samael dared not trust him. Domiel's mission was to take the soul, not help the individual live. "Domiel ... I will do anything ... spare her. Take my soul, send me to the pit, it doesn't matter to me. Let her live." His words were redundant, and yet they were the only words swirling

around his mind.

In the past few days she'd angered him, pleased him, touched him and brought love back into his life. He didn't want to watch her die. Not like this.

Domiel placed a hand on Samael's shoulder, the touch comforting and peaceful. "I will give her my blood. She will heal."

The blood of an angel had healing powers much greater than that of a demon. Giving Domiel his trust could cost Jade her life, and yet Domiel was his only hope. "You swear on His name?"

"My word, I swear on His name. She will live."

Samael pulled back, giving Domiel access to Jade. "Why?" Had this had been a test of sorts? Samael had put another's life above his own. It was the one and only thing that could redeem a demon. A selfless act. It was rare that a demon would be given a second chance at redemption, and yet he had been given that chance.

He moved completely out of the way so that Domiel could give her his life-force. Everything and everyone in the bar stopped. It looked like a movie that had been put on pause. Domiel was ensuring no humans saw what transpired before them.

Samael leaned down to take Jade's hand. He had to touch her in some capacity. Was she getting better? Was Domiel going back on his word?

When she squeezed his hand Samael closed his eyes in relief. Suddenly he was able to breathe again. It was then he realized his cheeks were wet and his hands were shaking. She was alive.

Tests didn't come very often to demons, and nine times out of ten the demon failed. Redemption didn't interest Samael, though he welcomed it. He wasn't going back to Heaven right now—he had made too many bad decisions for that—but he would take the offer of a new beginning. His life wouldn't change, nor his job. When the final judgment came he had a chance to live.

Domiel gently laid Jade's head to the ground, stood and faced Samael. "She will rest for a few hours. Take her. I must clear evidence."

Samael nodded. He crawled over to her side and slipped his arms under Jade's legs and back, tenderly lifting her from the floor. It amazed him how much her possible death had affected him. It was true, then, that one never knew how much they loved a person until they were gone. So many things were left unsaid.

With Jade secured in his arms he waited for Domiel to speak with him about his redemption. Jade's face nestled into his neck. She slept peacefully. After seconds went by in silence, Samael finally prodded the angel. "Domiel?"

The angel turned to him, and an unspoken understanding passed between them. "You are welcome, Samael. Take her and go."

Domiel's gesture took Samael's breath. The sadness in Domiel's eyes spoke of the incredible sacrifice he'd endured to save Jade.

"Domiel ... I..." What could he say? Domiel sacrificed everything to help them. "Thank you." Samael de-materialized with the knowledge that Domiel had just compromised his own standing in the angelic realm. This had not been a test.

Domiel had just fallen.

Jade snuggled deeper into the warmth, her body humming with an energy that forced her eyes open. In the back of her mind came the thought that this was what ADHD felt like. Sitting up, she quickly took in her surroundings. Instead of the normal dank hotel room, what she saw before her was a light, airy suite.

Beams of sunlight filtered through beautiful glass doors, bathing the room in a bright, yellow glow. The balcony doors opened up to a patio, where potted plants swayed in a gentle breeze. She glared at the glass patio furniture, but it was beautiful nonetheless. A view of the ocean, bare of sun worshippers due to the season, stretched its blue hand invitingly.

A couch and loveseat sat in front of a large flat-screen TV. A wet bar stood off to the side of the room, the crystal glasses sitting on the bar reflecting the sun's rays.

There were no stains on the carpet.

She touched the skin on her neck, surprised to find it smooth and intact. Last she remembered she was gushing blood and seeing stars.

"How do you feel?"

*Like I can fly.* She glanced down at the source of all the warmth and her cheeks flushed. When she sat up, she had taken the blankets and sheets with her. Samael's gorgeous body was bare, beautiful in the morning light. An overwhelming desire to run her hands over his chest, his eight-pack abs, nearly overtook her. "I feel awesome."

Bits and pieces of her ordeal came to her, and she recalled Samael holding her down, keeping her from reaching out to the angel. Death had come for her, and Samael had saved her. She recalled hearing the desperation in his voice, and as much as she'd wanted to reassure him at the time, the pull of the angel had overridden all such intentions.

At the time the angel shared his blood, she'd been too far gone to appreciate the full impact of the heady substance. Another quick glance at the suite—the streaming sunlight filtering into the room, the blue sparkling water of the ocean—alerted her to the heightened senses she now contained. It was magical.

She lay back down, propping her head up in her palm. "I thought you said everyone has a time to die, and nothing could be done?"

He cocked a brow. "Is that a thank you I hear?"

"Samael, I'm being serious."

He sat up and sighed. "Guess there's a first time for everything. And to answer your question, yes, everyone has a time to pass on to their new life."

She waited, and he said no more. "And?" she prodded. What will happen now? Was that my time to go?"

Slowly, he pulled the beige satin sheet from her body. The satin gliding over her skin was as sensual as a caress, and she could thank her heightened senses for that. It made her wonder what other touches could do to her.

Samael brought his gaze to hers. "Apparently it was. I didn't agree. Lucky for you, I knew the angel."

"So just like that he spared my life?"

Samael shook his head and looked away from her. Sadness lined the planes of his face. "He didn't spare your life. Life would have gone on, just in a different capacity. Death is a transition."

"Then why did you stop him?" Not that she was complaining. She hadn't signed up for Heaven quite yet. She wasn't ready to leave.

Lexie's vision had come to pass, and she was still here, thanks to Samael. Samael seemed to be struggling for words. She touched his arm. "Never mind why you stopped him. I think I'll be thanking you now."

Before she could do anything, he leaned over her, his energy snapping to life. "I stopped him by begging for your life. He had every intention of taking your soul, so I fought him at first, but his powers are greater than mine. When I saw you fall, I ran to you. From there I begged him to



let you live. You've shown me what life can be like, and I couldn't let you go. I just couldn't."

In all the time she'd known him, she would have never imagined him begging for anything. That he did for her was humbling. "I thought angels didn't have free will. If the angel let me live ... what happened to him? Will he face consequences for his decision to spare my life?"

The energy in the room dissipated, as if Samael had vacuumed the force back inside him, leaving behind a desolate environment. "He fell from grace."

She sucked in her breath, the implication of what had truly transpired slamming her with dread. "Oh, Samael. What do we do? We must do something."

Samael nodded. "I'm going to get in contact with him. I have an idea. Don't worry about Domiel, I'm not going to forget what he has done for us."

*Done for us.* The three words lifted the feeling of morose that had permeated the room. "Will you know how to locate him?"

"Yes. I've known him for a long time. I know what his energy feels like, and though it will have changed a little now that he's a demon, his essence will remain the same. Don't worry, I'll try and make this right. I *will* make this right."

She trusted him. It amazed her how much she trusted and believed in him. In the short time since she'd met him, he'd been the bane of her existence and her savior. He'd made her laugh and cry, scream in frustration and scream with desire.

Is this what love felt like? One minute she could bash him over the head with a bat, and the next she couldn't imagine her life without him.

She reached out, placing her hand behind his neck to bring him to her. No words were needed as he covered her body with his. Heaven might be a great place, but she sure couldn't get this beyond the pearly gates.

His hands were made for touching her, and his body was made for her touch. Every hard line, every taut muscle screamed for her attention. She ran her palms over the muscles playing in his back as he held himself above her, marveling at the strength he held in check.

He kissed her neck and her toes curled. She tilted her head to give him better access. "Samael, if I did die, would I ever see you in Heaven?" When a demon died, his soul went directly to the pit. Lucifer owned their souls.

"Depends on how I live my life. Redemption is possible for demons. My test hasn't come yet."

She nibbled his shoulder. "What kind of test?"

"No one knows, but the ultimate test is to give one's life for another. It's the one unselfish act that can reinstate a demon."

She sighed as he moved down her body to lick and tease her breasts. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep a coherent thought. "Would you give your life for mine?"

"Absolutely."

He nudged her thighs apart with his elbows. Her back arched off the bed. "Then that means ... *ahhh* ... that means you would go back to Heaven?"

"Yes." His warm breath tickled her inner thighs. "We can talk later. Sit back and enjoy."

Like she was going to say no to that. She'd get the specifics later. With his tongue delving inside of her, she couldn't quite remember her original question anyway. God, the things he could do with his lips and tongue. And to think, at one point she wasn't going to give him a chance to prove what he could do with that sinful mouth.

When he gently sucked on her clit, she fisted her hands in the sheets. The warmth of the room, the light of the sun ... everything seemed to add to this sexual experience. His tongue was rough against her folds, warm and moist. The power in her veins boiled, as though she were feeding off his powers as well.

Her orgasm was powerful, eliciting a scream from her.

As he made his way up her body, kissing and nibbling a sinful path, she believed she had found a piece of Heaven. Nothing and no one had ever brought her to such unbelievable heights before.

He entered her, whispering in her ear, "You're mine, Jade. In the next few days I'm going to learn every part of your body and elicit every type of moan from you. The only thing that will come out of your mouth is my name when you come."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

\* \* \* \*

The Highlands of Scotland had always been home to Jade. The lush, rolling hills and the scent of pine and earth that invaded her senses in this beautiful land overwhelmed her. Whenever she came to the place she considered home, it was with joy in her heart.

Not today.

Jade closed her eyes as the congregation stood before Wesley's casket. Various Alliance members were saying their final farewells with the sun bright in the sky. Some visibly cried while others displayed a quiet sense of mourning. Wesley had been a respected, long-standing member of the Alliance, and many had turned out for his funeral.

Ambrose allowed those who wanted to speak to take the podium set up behind the casket. He would say the eulogy at the end of the service, when everyone was finished.

Kelsey stepped down from the podium after making a beautiful speech that focused on the love for others and the quiet strength Wesley had always displayed. Kelsey lifted a white tissue to her eyes as she walked past Jade. Jade reached out and touched her shoulder. Kelsey nodded and walked back to where she had been standing next to Lexie and Azazel.

Jade let go of Samael's hand and made her way to the podium. Many people raised their eyebrows at what she chose to wear—a bright yellow dress with a white sweater. Of course everyone else wore black, even Samael.

Before her ordeal at the club, she hadn't known what she was going to say. Death wasn't something she had been comfortable with, even though she had brought death to so many throughout the years. Vanquishing those who hurt others and disobeyed the laws didn't affect her. It was the death of those who changed the world for the better, those who deserved a better end than what they got.

But things had changed. *She* had changed.

No, she hadn't thought about the exact words she would say, but she knew the point she wanted to get across to the assassins standing before her. Though none spoke the words aloud, she had a pretty good idea everyone was thinking the same thing.

When will my time come?

She cleared her throat. "I'm not here to mourn the death of Wesley. I'm here to celebrate his transition to a better place and a higher understanding."

Murmurs erupted in the crowd. She glanced at Samael and smiled when he winked at her. He'd become a source of strength for her in the past few days.

"Wesley was a close friend of mine, and though I initially trained him, he was also one of my mentors. I've had many conversations with him about his outlook on life. Twenty years ago Wesley lost his wife, Caroline. Many of you will recall she died in a fire here on this land. Wesley mourned her death because he had to go on with life without her. I celebrate his transition because now they have been reunited. He no longer has to pass his days with only memories of Caroline. He's with her now."

Ambrose, who stood to the side of the congregation, nodded his head, a small smile tugging at his lips. Though Ambrose could be a major pain half the time, she still wanted to make him proud. She always had. He'd been a father figure to her for most of her life. It wasn't until that moment that she realized she sought his guidance on many things. His approval.

"There are individuals here who put their lives on the line each and every day for a cause they believe in. Some of us are ready to part with this world and join those we have lost, and others have no wish to leave this realm. Wesley belonged to the former category. Death is a transition to another realm, *not* an end. The word death signifies the demise of our flesh, not our spirit. Our spirit always lives on. With that in mind, I'd like you to envision Wesley with his wife

once again, not the flesh that is entombed in this casket before us. It's said in the Bible we should mourn a birth and rejoice at a death. Wesley is now with his creator. I wish him happiness."

She stepped down from the podium and laid two red roses on Wesley's casket. One for Wesley and one for Caroline.

She took her place next to Samael. When he took her hand and squeezed it, the peace of coming home overtook her, and the tears that fell were tears of joy.

\* \* \* \*

As Samael took Jade's hand in his, a cold tingling sensation engulfed his entire body. Because he was still one of Lucifer's demons, and his name was not in the Book of Life, Luc could do anything to him he pleased. The demon was now making his presence known.

Jade glanced up at him, a smile lifting her lips. He smiled back, not wanting to alarm her. When they arrived at the steps to the main hall he let go of her hand. "I'll be right back. I have to talk to someone."

"To who?"

"Please, Jade, just wait for me in the hall." He touched the side of her face and leaned down to kiss her. As Luc had confirmed to him, his timing was perfect. The opportune time had arrived, and Luc was waiting for the confrontation that would lead Samael to the Pit, or as Luc hoped, to his side.

Samael would face the Pit willingly. There was no way in hell he'd endanger Jade. As long as she stayed inside the castle, she would be protected by those around her.

When he pulled away, he ran the back of his hand across her brows, which were pulled together in confusion. "Wait for me here."

He left no room for argument in his tone. As he walked away, he looked back once. He couldn't help himself. She stood on the first step, his dream come to life, staring at him with questions in her eyes. He left her standing there and walked toward the back of the castle, along the edge that faced the ocean.

Luc materialized by the cliff. "I did my research. Unfortunately she doesn't have a sister."

"I will not do as you ask. Take my soul, send me to the Pit, but I refuse to do your bidding."

Luc shook his head. "Why must you make this difficult on yourself? If you had any idea of the pain you're setting yourself up for, you wouldn't hesitate to do anything I ask."

Without warning fire consumed him. He fell to his knees and flung himself to the ground in an attempt to staunch the flames. The flames, like those of the Pit, couldn't be put out. His skin remained intact. The fire was an illusion, the pain was real. Luc's illustration was effective. As Samael rolled around on the ground, all he could think about was feeling the fire for an eternity.

Suddenly the fire went away, just as fast as it had come. Jade was kneeling next to him, her hair a tangled mess around her face, her eyes full of concern.

He should have known she wouldn't listen to him. "Go ... back."

She shook her head.

"Damn it, Jade, go back to the castle."

Out of the corner of his eye Samael saw Luc walking toward them. Samael shoved Jade away, toward the front of the castle. He pushed himself to his feet, his body still recovering from the pain. "You can't touch her. Unlike me, her name *is* in the Book."

Lucifer couldn't physically harm a human. It was a secret not many knew about. He could use his demons to do so, but he could not.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"If you harm her, Ambrose will never consider fighting on your side." He would never consider it anyway, but Samael was grasping at straws.

"You're absolutely right. You will have to suffice. I'll leave you in the Pit long enough so when you emerge you will be willing to do anything to stay out. Does your decision stand?"

"Samael, *no*."

He held out his arm and pointed to the castle. "Leave, Jade. Now."

She shook her head and took another step toward him. He didn't want her getting close to Luc. He could send his demons at any moment, and the only thing holding him back was Ambrose's reaction. If angered enough, Luc might do the unthinkable. And yet that would go against his own agenda. He would wait for the opportune time...

Luc made a dramatic sweep of his hand, intending to send Samael's soul to the Pit. Jade ran for him. Samael braced himself for the pain he knew was coming.

Nothing happened.

For the first time Samael witnessed a look of utter confusion appear on Luc's face. The emotion wasn't contrived. Luc had been unable to command Samael's soul from his body.

It could mean only one thing.

Jade's body slammed into his, her arms coming around his chest in a protective manner. She'd intended to go wherever he went, which would have damned herself in the process. Her body shook next to his.

Domiel suddenly materialized next to them. "The ultimate sacrifice. You weren't just willing to trade your life for hers this time. You made the decision and were about to carry it out. I believe the big Book of Life just got bigger."

Luc's eyes blazed red. Samael could tell that he fought to gain control of himself. It wasn't everyday that he lost his demons through redemption. He would never again have control over Samael.

Without another backward glance, Samael held on to Jade as he led her back to the castle. Luc's presence dissipated, and Samael felt a twinge of guilt for the demons back in Hell. When Luc wasn't in a good mood everyone suffered.

"Domiel?" Samael called out.

"Yes?"

"You were just looking for a reason to fall, weren't you?"

"Of course."

"Do you want a job?"

\* \* \* \*

"Why didn't you tell me about Satan?"

Samael closed his eyes and relished the feel of Jade's naked body next to his. There was nothing stopping them from being together now. "Why didn't you tell me about Lexie's vision?"

"Sure, throw that in my face."

He smiled. "We have to get ready for our meeting."

"Ambrose can wait." Jade ran her finger down his chest, making her way slowly under the covers.

"He will be the one to decide if we can be trainers or not. I don't think he'll object, but we'll want him in a good mood when we ask. Being late won't help our situation."

If Ambrose said no, then they would each be going their separate ways. He hadn't saved up enough money to quit this job for any length of time, and one glance into Jade's closet proved she wasn't big on saving, either.

"Oh, all right." Jade slid from the bed and bent over to retrieve her clothes that were scattered all over the room.

"Or we could stay. I think there's a sock over there you haven't picked up."

"You're so bad." She wiggled into her jeans and nodded her head toward his pile of clothes. "If we're going to go, let's get moving. The faster we get this over with, the faster we can get back to bed."

\* \* \* \*

Jade eyed the door to Ambrose's office. "This is going to hurt."

Samael wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I don't think so. I've already spoken to

Ambrose about what happened at the club. You did what you had to do.”

That didn’t stop her from worrying about her future. Ambrose could be a sweetheart sometimes. He’d always looked out for her, but at the same time she’d never tested him as much as she had in the past few months.

“Jade!”

Jade turned just in time for Lexie to plow into her. Jade wrapped her arms around her friend and gave her a tight squeeze. They hadn’t spoken since the funeral that morning. “Hey. How are you doing?”

“That was a beautiful speech you gave. I’m sure Wesley is reunited with Caroline, and I’m so glad you gave us all something to hold onto other than his death. You put everything in perspective.”

Jade pulled away and shrugged. Lexie’s mascara was smeared a bit, and Jade could tell she’d been crying.

Jade and Samael had only minutes before they had an appointment with Ambrose. To put it lightly, her nerves were shot. Even though she knew Wesley’s spirit was somewhere better, she’d still never see him again. Besides having to come to terms with that, her future lay in Ambrose’s hands. He alone could pull the plug on her and Samael’s plan to stay at the headquarters and become trainers.

Azazel walked up to them and put his arm around Lexie. “Glad to see you’re still in one piece. I take it Lexie’s vision didn’t come to pass.”

The hell it didn’t. Before she could stifle that thought Azazel had snatched it right out of her head. Azazel had the power to read other’s thoughts. Too many times she’d forgotten that, which was why he knew she liked him even though she gave him a hard time. He raised an eyebrow, and she looked back at Lexie, completely ignoring him, hoping he’d get the hint that now wasn’t the time or place to talk about the vision.

“We have a meeting with Ambrose. I’ll catch up with you later, okay?”

Lexie nodded and stepped forward to hug her again. “I know you’ll be put back on the schedule. Just make sure you’re careful? I don’t want to lose you.”

Jade glanced at Azazel who stood just behind Lexie. “Don’t worry about it anymore. Everything’s fine.” Hopefully Azazel would clue Lexie in shortly. Jade didn’t want Lexie to keep on worrying about something that had already come to pass.

Jade turned back to Samael. “You ready?”

“Yeah, let’s get this over with.” He took her hand once again, and they walked into the office that was set just off the great hall.

Ambrose sat behind his desk going over papers. His long, black hair was pulled back and damp. Dressed in a red sweatshirt, he looked more like a college kid than an ancient, powerful vampire.

The time had finally come for her meeting with the top Alliance members. Sven and Roger were not in the room, and she wondered if they were going to make it to this meeting. Ambrose motioned for them to take a seat in front of his desk, which was a good sign. Whenever he’d bitched her out before, he’d kept her standing.

She ached to reach out for Samael, to take his hand, but she didn’t want Ambrose to think her weak. Instead, she sat straight in her chair and kept her gaze locked on his.

“Congratulations.”

The word stunned her. Her nerves had been shot before she walked into this room. From what Samael had just told her, he’d spoken to Ambrose about the scene in the club. Knowing Ambrose better than Samael, she’d been sure she would get reprimanded for her actions. Humans had been around. She glanced at Samael and then back to Ambrose. “For...?”

“Protecting your partner. Samael informed me you brought attention to yourself in the club, though you did so because Rachael gave you no other option. There are times that we must act when humans are present, and that situation was one of them. Sven and Roger are not in attendance at this meeting because we’ve already come to the conclusion, based on Samael’s

reports, that you can remain an assassin with no further training.”

It should have made her ecstatic to hear that. Instead disappointment settled in her gut. She wanted to train here at the compound with Samael. What she sought in life had become clear to her since her brush with death. No one knew when their time on earth was over, and what she desperately wanted was sitting right next to her. Leaving Samael to go on missions was the last thing she wanted to do.

She and Samael had decided not to tell Ambrose about the angel. It was something they wanted to keep between the two of them. It would only bring on further questions that she had no desire to answer.

Ambrose’s light blue eyes glowed in the dim light of the lamp sitting on his desk. “Jade, I’m going to be completely honest with you and let you in on a secret of mine. Once learned, I request that you keep it to yourself. The same goes for you, Samael.”

She nodded.

“I’m aware you’ve heard the rumor about me being a demon.”

Oh yeah, she had. The gossip was that Ambrose was more demon than vampire, since he was, in fact, a fallen angel. Ambrose had fallen from grace because he had nearly started a rebellion in Heaven. He’d been reprimanded and sent to the earth as the first vampire, sentenced to live his life in that condition until the final judgment.

“There are days I deny this to myself, and yet I know it to be accurate. I am more demon than vampire. The rumors are absolutely true. I can materialize to different places, and I contain more powers than any other vampire.”

He settled back in his chair. “I’ve kept one of my powers a secret because it is of great use to me in my line of work. I can hear other people’s thoughts when I focus on them. If I let others know of this power, then the people around me might start shielding their thoughts.”

Dread consumed her. She was an individual with too many damned secrets.

“Before you ask, yes, I know about the angel from your thoughts. I’ll be hearing that story after you get some sleep. I know you haven’t had an adequate rest since you got home. With the news of an angel, I take it Lexie’s vision came to pass?”

Her mouth dropped open. “How did you—”

He tapped his finger to his head. “I can hear her thoughts. I ran into her a few days ago when she’d arrived to attend Wesley’s funeral. I can’t say that I’m pleased with your decision to keep that from me.”

She looked down at her hands folded in her lap. This was just priceless. “Yeah, the vision came to pass.”

“I will expect more from the both of you if you’re to be trainers for the Alliance. You set the example for the new recruits. It will be your voice inside their head when they go on their first missions.”

Her head snapped up. “How did you know we wanted to be trainers?” She glanced at Samael. “Did you ask him already?”

Samael shook his head. “He can read thoughts, remember?”

Ambrose sighed. “I don’t need to read your minds to figure that one out. Samael expressed interest in the job before he left, and you’ve been thinking about it for years.”

“I have not.”

“You can lie to yourself, Jade, but you can’t lie to me. You’ve been thinking about it since you came into this office. If you want to be a trainer, all you have to do is ask. You’ve been a damn good assassin of mine for many years. I would never have disregarded this wish of yours.”

She curled her lip. “You’re creepy, you know that?”

Ambrose ignored her. “We have some new recruits who will begin training two weeks from now. Out of thirty recruits, ten of them are demons. I think it’s important we have a demon as a trainer, someone who knows their thought process and has knowledge of their fighting techniques. Samael, you are still interested in this job, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Very good. The two of you will begin working in the training center. I’ll have the papers drawn up. If there are no more questions, I think we’re finished here.”

Jade raised her hand. “I can tell Lexie about your secret, right?”

Ambrose raised an eyebrow. “Just remember, Jade, I know where you sleep.”

“I take that as a no.”

### Four Weeks Later

The new recruits filed into the training center as Jade and Samael went over their next training session. This should be a good one. Holding the clipboard, Jade waited until each recruit had taken a seat in front of the blue mat before she gave her instruction.

Ambrose stood to the side of the room with a clipboard of his own. Today she and Samael were being assessed for their monthly evaluation. They had it in the bag. The last few weeks had proved fun and exciting. She wasn't going to fuck it up by getting her ass booted from the training schedule.

She took a deep breath. "Some of you know how to use a dagger, and others do not. Recruits are not to judge each other on skill—that's what we're here for. Today Samael and I will be assessing the skills you have now, and then we'll break you into groups of the same expertise. There's no need to worry if you are in a lower skill level than your peers. In a matter of weeks you will all be at the same skill level."

Samael took the clipboard from her and began checking the names of those that were present. Each trainee responded verbally when their name was called.

As he called the roll, she let her gaze wander over the hard planes of his body. The man never failed to make her mouth water, her body ache with need. That damned tattoo sleeve of his made her weak in the knees whenever he wore the black wife-beater he had on now. He did that shit on purpose.

"Domiel?"

No one answered. Samael looked up from his clipboard. "Domiel?"

The door burst open, and Domiel ran in, pulling a white T-shirt over his head. Samael rolled his eyes. "You know the drill. Ten laps."

Domiel smiled and took off jogging around the facility. As he jogged by her, she mouthed, *Man-whore*.

His trademark smile remained in place. "And loving every minute of it."

Jade did her best to hide her smirk as she turned from the group and headed toward the table that held a vast array of daggers.

When she'd first seen Domiel in the club, while she was lying in a puddle of her own blood, a sense of peace had come over her. She'd since found out that the eerie calm that had come over her right before the hit had been due to his presence.

No one felt that in his presence any longer. She'd started calling him Domiel the Dangerous, and not because of his fighting skills—which were quite impressive.

She called him that because of the women who were dropping at his feet. Domiel was eating it up. Even though the man was millennia old, he'd never had sex until a few weeks ago. Now their only problem with him as his trainers was that he was always late for training. Hair messed up, dragging his clothes on as he brought his happy ass in the door, reeking of women's perfume.

Samael finished with roll call, and she turned back to the trainees. "Samael is going to assess the demons' skills first, while the other twenty of you will step to the side with me. We are going to start with another skill that will be integral to this training—battling a demon. Obviously, the demons will not need to practice those skills."

One of the recruits raised his hand. "Are we going to be training with demons to hone these skills?"

Jade glanced at Samael. He had a shit-eating grin on his face.

He turned to the trainee who had asked the question. "Jade and I will give you an example of how a vampire should fight a demon here shortly. The point of the training is to expect the unexpected."

Jade raised an eyebrow. Samael had proven how true that sentiment really was. She'd never expected the love of a demon would change her life, and yet it had.



They had come full circle, though some things had changed drastically. She flexed her muscles in anticipation. Yes, some significant things had changed.

“Hey, Jade,” Domiel called out as he jogged past. “Go easy on him.”

Like hell she would. Immediately after taking Domiel’s blood, she’d had a heightened sense of awareness, and both she and Samael had thought those powers would filter away after subsequent feedings.

They hadn’t. They’d intensified.

She now contained a convoluted mix of angelic and vampire powers. The combined powers were exhilarating and made her one of the most powerful vampires alive.

She glanced at the trainees. “Like Samael said, expect the unexpected.”

Samael walked up to her and kissed her on the forehead. Whispering, even though everyone in the room would hear him, he said, “Save that for the bedroom.”

She snatched the clipboard and smacked him with it. Through the howls and hollers, she found it hard not to smile. How could she not? She had everything she wanted in life—a home, friends, love.

And one hot demon who was about to get his ass kicked.

Life was good.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Dawn McClure is a multi-published paranormal author who currently lives in South Dakota. You can learn more about her and her books by going to [www.dawnmcclure.com](http://www.dawnmcclure.com)

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