



Loose Id

A LOVE  
NEVERENDING

ROWAN LARKE

# *A Love Neverending*

*Rowan Larke*



## **A Love Neverending**

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## About this Title

**Genre:** BDSM Paranormal

Death took Jason from Clarissa, and she blames herself. Night after night, she throws herself into the arms of other men—men who abuse and pleasure her, but never take her far enough. She is waiting for the one who will take her over the edge and into death, so she can be reunited with Jason.

Death didn't take Jason far enough. Every night, Jason watches. His immortal self is trapped inside the club Clarissa owns, and he longs to be with her once more.

Death is a dark angel. A handsome man. The promise of violence in his eyes draws Clarissa to him. Will a single night in bed with Death be all it takes to destroy Jason and Clarissa's love neverending?

***Publisher's Note:*** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: BDSM theme and content (including spanking), violence, voyeurism.*

## Dedication

*They say it takes a village to raise a child. In my case, it takes a community to write a book. Specifically, the community at Romance Divas. Thank you, ladies.*

*As always, to my girls, the subset of Divas who hold my hand and love me for all my insanity.*

*And to my boys: my sons and husband. I love you guys.*

*Special love to: Crystal Jordan, who held my hand while I wrote this book, even if she couldn't read it.*

*Patti O'Shea, who made my day when she had to print the last ten pages to read, because she just HAD to know how it ended.*

*Jen Leeland, who told me this book deserved to be written, even when it scared me to write it.*

*Sarah Frantz, for being there when this book sold, giving me the best hug of my life in congratulations (complete with slo-mo!), and for being with Suzanne Brockmann when I told you, making for the best First Sale story EVER.*

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## Chapter One

His fingers traced the line of her jaw, and she whimpered. “Don't,” she said. His eyes—gray-blue, she noticed, the color of clouds before it rained—lifted to meet her gaze. “Don't be gentle.” She couldn't bear it if he were gentle. If he didn't hurt her the way she deserved.

Their gazes locked, so she saw the *moment* he understood. She watched the slow, lazy smile cross his face. White teeth appeared, evenly spaced, and a dimple that winked with promise. The dimple itself was familiar—as if each man she'd had one of these interludes with had worn the same one. A badge of their deviance. Of hers. Need arrowed through her, riding a wave of relief. He'd give her what she needed.

He stepped toward her, his body pressing her against the wall. “Like it rough, do you?”

His chuckle, low and throaty, should have been menacing, but Clarissa felt her thighs tighten against the rush of liquid heat inside her. *Need it rough*, she answered, but only in her mind.

His hands tore at her shirt, which was flimsy enough to fall away from her body with a single tug. He nipped at the skin of her neck while his hands fumbled with the fastenings on her skirt. She encouraged him, wiggling her hips, allowing him to free her of her clothing. When she was naked, he stood back.

His gaze skimmed her skin, and she watched his eyes as they moved side to side, assessing her. The skin of her torso was milky, dotted and lined with scars she bore from previous nights like this one. She watched him inventory them and felt empowered as she saw the light flash in his eyes. He actually purred. “You *do* like it rough.” He sounded pleased with himself, like he'd searched out some treasure. Clarissa let him believe what he wanted, but *she'd* marked *him* the moment he'd stepped in the club.

She knew what he saw, and followed his inventory along with him. She was neither too young nor too old—barely out of her twenties, she still had the flush of youth without the

innocent ingénue. Her breasts weren't big enough to put a porn star to shame, but they were full and still high. The small tracery of scars along their upper planes entranced him for a full minute.

His gaze descended. Her stomach was flat, though not from exercise but rather the lack of having given birth. Her thighs were firm, and that *was* due to exercise. The quick flare of desire in his eyes at the sight of them was encouraging. *Yes*, she told him in her mind. *I know how to flex those muscles in just the right way.*

She was a sex machine. Taut and tight, soft and warm in just the right places. And wet whenever she needed. And she *needed*. Needed it rough, needed it fast, needed it anonymous. She needed it to obliterate the thoughts that would otherwise fill her mind and tear at her heart.

Her stomach clenched with sudden desire. Not for the man standing before her—though he was attractive enough in an aging-high-school-football-player kind of way. No, her stomach clenched with a single need—to lose herself. She felt his gaze continue to rove across her skin and suppressed a shiver.

He never did look at her face.

Once he finished his appraisal, he stepped toward her again. His hips banged against hers as he ground his erection against her pelvic bone. His teeth sought out the sensitive flesh of her shoulder. The bite was tentative but hard enough to sting, and Clarissa moaned, both from real desire and in encouragement. She felt his cheek wrinkle against her neck as he smiled again.

“My fucking pleasure,” he growled, and she didn't correct him. But this wasn't about him. It never was.

He grabbed both of her wrists, transferring them to one hand, and dragged her across the room toward the meeting table. He braced her against it, so she couldn't move, and wedged his knee between her thighs, separating them roughly. With a quick jerk, he pressed his thigh along her mound. She writhed against him like a cat in heat and moaned encouragement. Wet heat pooled between her legs, and she clenched the muscles, not wanting to leave evidence of her need on his clothes. A small dignity at this point.

“More,” she said through gritted teeth.

His face twisted into a malicious grin. “I've just started.” Then his face hardened, a twist of expression making him suddenly seem dangerous, though she wasn't afraid.

The first slap to her breast was tentative. A careful measure of her, as if he hadn't seen the evidence on her skin of what she could take. She looked at him evenly. *Is that the best you can do?* The second slap, with his other hand, carried more weight, and she moaned appreciatively. The sting rushed adrenaline to her head, clearing it of thought.

After a few more slaps, her breasts were red and tender, and he smiled with self-satisfaction. Catching both her feet with his, he spun her around, pushing her face and now-tender chest onto the wooden tabletop. The sudden pressure spread new pain through her system, and since her hair covered her face and he wouldn't be able to see, she smiled. This was good. Pain and pleasure, punishment and release. He spread her legs wide and hooked her feet around the table legs. They were far enough apart, she had to stand on tiptoe, which strained the muscles of her legs and ass.

This time, the first slap was *not* tentative. His meaty hand connected with her taut bottom, and she moaned again. A flutter of shame beat against her mind as desire spiked within her. Her focus narrowed to the stinging warmth of her flesh, and gratitude flooded her. Each fall of his hand was in a different place, a different weight behind it. The harder slaps she rewarded with a plaintive moan. Eventually, though, the succession of slaps no longer added to her pain. She'd hit equilibrium. And in the absence of new pain, thoughts rushed her mind.

*Shit.* She wiggled her hips, trying to demand more from him, but he was lost in his own zone. His hand took on a rhythm—a predictable beat that echoed some thought or music in his own mind. She could pull him out of it, but he would resent her, and the night would be over before she found her release. Thoughts beat at her defenses, and she forced her eyes closed against sudden tears. *Jason.* The name brought more pain than anything the man had doled out yet.

She squeezed her eyes tighter, trying to keep the thoughts at bay. She almost sobbed with relief when his fingers grasped her hips, angling her ass up higher off the table. The drag of her sweat-damp skin across wood sent fresh awareness through her stomach and breasts. Her eyes flew open, and she gasped, grateful not to have said the *thank-you* dancing through her mind.

When she was angled to his liking, he stepped away, the air sudden and cool on her flesh. Admiring his handiwork, likely—the red, flushed skin of her ass. The moisture of her desire would be obvious to him because of the way he had her pelvis tilted. His fingers probed her



entrance, and she was relieved to note he hadn't taken time to lick or lube them. Neither was he taking the time to prime her with one finger—instead he thrust three inside her at once, spreading her wide. The friction of his dry flesh inside her wetness was a dragging ache. She was wet enough for both of them, though, so that after three thrusts the friction was no longer a pain. It was only sensation.

She wriggled. *More*, she wanted to demand, but he'd want to be in control. He slapped her ass again, as if to put her in her place, and she stilled her movements. But the twisting, cloying demand for more wouldn't stifle itself. Images flickered behind her eyes. Jason. His smile. That dimple.

She squeezed her eyes shut, eradicating the images for a brief moment with the flare of light and dark from her constricted eye muscles. “More,” she said through clenched teeth, afraid he'd hear her. Afraid he wouldn't listen.

The tips of each finger dug into her hips, grinding against bone, and she clenched her jaw against the new and sudden pain. He stepped up behind her, and she realized he'd shed his pants, or at least lowered them to his knees. The head of his cock brushed against her slit, and she moaned.

*Not yet*, she wanted to tell him. *I need more. Bite me, scrape me, hurt me.* Shame and desire followed the silent plea, and she groaned with satisfaction and disappointment when his cock slid home.

He found his rhythm, and she drifted. Without the pain, her mind was free to go where it wanted. And it always wanted Jason. She bit back a sob. *Hurt me*, she wanted to whimper. *It's what I deserve.* Because it was her fault Jason was no longer there. Her fault, and she needed to be punished. Not that it was ever enough. It never could be. When it was done, and she'd been hurt and humiliated, Jason was still dead. And the pain of her body never entirely obliterated the pain of knowing that fact.

The man behind her slammed into her at a different angle, twining his hands into her hair and lifting her head off the table. Her back muscles tightened, howling their rage at this contortion. Relief washed through her. Pain banished thought. Slowly the hot coil of orgasm twisted within her as she felt her pleasure build.

He used her hair to turn her head, mashing the side of her face into the tabletop. Each receptor in her skin screamed at the contact, and she sobbed with relief as her orgasm tightened, demanding release. He thrust within her, twisting his hips so he could grind deeper, and she took him in willingly, encouraging him to do more. Deeper. Harder. Faster. *More*.

He slammed inside her, and the coil of her orgasm spun, swirling out of control and taking her with it. She was lost to the sensation, lost to the bliss that both coated and filled her body for one eternal moment. Then he pounded home again, the final deep thrust of his own orgasm, accompanied by the throaty groan, which, like the dimple, seemed to belong to all of them.

He sagged against her, sated, and rested a moment before pulling his clothes back in order. Without a word, he left the room. Cool air swirled around her body with the movement of the door, which didn't latch behind him when he left.

She stayed where she was, catching her breath, letting her tears fall into her hair. It was done, and still the ghosts of the past wouldn't leave her be. Jason still lingered behind her eyelids, still filled her mind with his presence. She punished herself, night after night, but it was never enough. She caught back a sob, biting her lip for the small amount of pain and comfort it might bring. It wasn't enough.

Lying there, she felt the first few tremors tear their way through her body, and still she could see Jason's soft brown eyes fringed with dark lashes. The arch of his eyebrows, which always made him seem slightly amused. The little curl in the front of his hair, which remained no matter how much gel he used to spike it straight. The soft light in his eyes when he looked at her.

Her tears fell faster, creating a sticky line between her cheek and the tabletop. Sobs racked her body, each hitching breath underscoring the truth she could finally admit to herself. It wasn't enough. It'd never *be* enough. No matter how much they hurt her, debased her, abused her—she could never make amends.

The most she could hope for was that one of them, one night, would take it too far. Release her from the agony of being alone.

*Death.*

She faced it, admitting the truth to herself in the quiet darkness. She was one of the walking dead...her body just had yet to follow suit.

"Jason," she whispered. "What did you do to me?"

## Chapter Two

In the far corner of the room, where she couldn't know he was there even if she *could* see him, Jason's shoulders sagged. What *had* he done? He'd loved her. "*Love neverending*," he'd told her. She hadn't believed. Hell, neither had he.

Then he'd died.

And now he was caught in this cycle—this self-defeating, agonizing cycle—of watching her hook up with any man who might cause her a little pain. To punish herself? To stop herself from mourning? The hell if he knew.

All he knew was that he watched. Every. Damn. Time. And it ripped his insides apart.

His hands clenched into useless parodies of fists at his sides. He couldn't strike out. Couldn't pull the men off her, couldn't stay their hands from the slaps, punches, cuts, or burns they inflicted on her. He just *watched*. He'd scoffed at the idea of hell when he was living. Now he was living in a hell designed specifically for him.

Alive, he might've appreciated the irony of it. Dead, he wasn't impressed by it at all.

He watched as she smoothed her hair away from her face. As she straightened, he could see her fitting the pieces of herself back together, until she had her mask in place—a smooth, perfect face to present to the world. She crossed the room, unselfconscious in her nudity, picking up the pieces of her clothing. Literally *pieces* of clothing, he realized, as she fingered the tattered remains of her shirt. Disappointed? Saddened? He couldn't tell.

She shrugged and dropped the shirt into the wastebasket beside the desk as she moved past it to the green metal filing cabinet beyond it. After opening a drawer, she withdrew a shirt from its depths, unfolded it, and shook out the creases before sliding it on.

There were jeans, shirts, skirts, dresses, underwear, and shoes inside each of the deep drawers. Jason had peeked over her shoulder one night and seen them, all sorted into

coordinating outfits, and each outfit a different persona. Empty carcasses of the woman she might be. The woman they might want her to be.

His fists tightened, and the stubs of his fingernails bit into the flesh of his palms. *Damn it, Clarissa*, he wanted to scream. *Had* screamed, other nights, though she'd never heard him.

Once she was clothed, she performed the same ritual: Scrubbed the surface—whatever it might have been—where she'd been fucked, sprayed air freshener, and straightened the room so no evidence would remain in the morning when she returned.

The one thing none of the men had ever realized was that Clarissa wasn't just some dumb bar whore they'd picked up. No, Clarissa was the sole owner of D'Light. She was whatever she needed to be to get men to part with their money—entrepreneur, ingénue...whore, his mind whispered, but he thrust the thought aside viciously. She played the part, and brilliantly, but she *wasn't* a whore. She acted like one to punish herself. For him. Which was worse on so many levels.

And so he watched each and every degradation.

Punishing himself. For her.

She stiffened her spine, straightened her shoulders, and surveyed the room once more. With a nod to indicate she was satisfied, she turned off the light and slipped from the room.

Jason sagged, the weight of even his ghostly body suddenly too much to bear. He collapsed to the floor and sat with his legs splayed before him. How long was this insanity going to go on?

*Until one of them kills her.*

He really appreciated his mind throwing *that* answer at him, but it was probably true. A cool rush of fear made his skin pucker with gooseflesh. She'd continue just this way until one of them killed her. And then?

The mouthy voice in his head didn't have an answer for that one. Would he be able to move on if she died? Would he see her ascend to Heaven, and continue his pathetic existence without the punishment of watching her? Without the joy of seeing her face? More than likely, she'd just find all the same assholes in the afterlife, and he'd be stuck watching her fuck them all again.

With a grim shake of his head, he tried to pull himself out of his mood. He hadn't been this angst-ridden since the first morning he'd opened his eyes and realized he was dead. He grinned a

little at that. The first *day* hadn't been all bad. Once he'd done the usual—tried talking to people who couldn't hear him, walking through things instead of around them—he'd figured out he was bound more or less to the club.

And really, there were worse ways to spend some dead time than haunting a nightclub.

Then night had fallen.

When he'd first seen Clarissa, he'd been a little confused. She'd always been pseudo-Goth, eschewing tattoos for piercings. Her clothing had been more subdued, black without the tatters. Her makeup had never been the over-the-top whiteface either, though she'd been pretty liberal with her eyeliner.

But that night she'd been a mouse. Thin to the point of scrawny. No makeup whatsoever. Baggy clothes. Her lips had been pursed into a straight line of distaste. She'd looked sort of like an angry schoolmarm.

That was his first clue that more than a day or two had passed. No one changed *that* quickly. He'd watched with interest as she'd made her way through the crowd, hunting for something. *Someone*, he'd realized a minute later when she'd made her selection.

The guy had looked ordinary enough. Jason had followed them back to the room—*this* room—where the man had unloaded a series of *things* from his briefcase. Things Jason recognized, though he could only put a name to one out of every four. The man—Mihai—had laid them out along the table while Clarissa watched in fascination. He'd explained safe words and control and power play, and she'd nodded, but Jason could see her face. He'd known she'd never use her safe word. Never bother calling someone off if he went too far.

His chest had ached. He'd called to her, talked to her, tried to persuade her—but of course, she couldn't hear him.

They'd played until she was exhausted. Until her back arched with the pain. Until every inch of her body was marked by him. Not once did she tell him he had gone too far. Not once did she use the word he'd given her to make him stop. Mihai had looked disappointed. Frustrated. Even angry. Jason had known it was the man's own self-control that had kept her from being injured that night. It was only Mihai's own limits that left her bruised but not broken.

Jason, from his vantage point, had seen the tears that leaked from her eyes. Had seen her fingers flex and loosen in their restraints while she fought some inner demon.

Then his heart had broken when the man rose, and Clarissa wasn't *Clarissa* anymore. She was a shell. As empty as the clothes she'd started keeping in the filing cabinet a few weeks later.

The mask stayed in place. All the next day, the next night, the night after. The first time she'd picked up a guy to use and be used by. The only time it slipped was after. After the man was done. After he'd left. When the tears would slide into the tangle of her hair, and she would curse Jason. Or ask him why. Or beg for release.

And Jason watched it all, unable to do anything else. Though he'd tried. Tried beating the men away from her, dragging them off her, screaming at them, at her...until all he could do was watch in stoic silence. He'd bear witness to each sordid encounter if that's what it took...and hope with every fiber of his being that she'd still be alive when it was over.

## Chapter Three

Tamiel jogged down the alley. His chest felt tight—like a hand made of ice had reached inside him and was twisting his heart in its cold grip. If he wasn't in time... A shiver racked his body. When he didn't make it in time, bad things happened.

He glowered up at the overcast sky. “Yeah, I'll do what I have to.” A rumble of thunder, which sounded vaguely approving, came in reply. “I don't have to *like* it, though.” Another rumble of thunder—this one threatening—and Tamiel shrugged. It wasn't like he could lie about it, whether it made Him angry or not.

Tamiel squared his shoulders and continued. He knew exactly how far he was from his current assignment, to the footstep. Three more, which he stretched into five by shortening his stride. The sky darkened a little, but Tamiel ignored it. He could prolong the inevitable, but he'd get to it.

*Here we go again.* Inside the Dumpster. His stomach roiled. It could've been the stench—garbage and piss, really strong body odor—but if Tamiel were honest with himself, it had nothing to do with olfactory overload. It was what he knew he was going to find when he opened that Dumpster.

He could hear it already, even though there was no way he could *actually* hear it already. Short, snuffling breaths between already-weakening sobs. He lifted the Dumpster lid, reached in with both hands, which closed unerringly around the tiny, squirming bundle. A tiny white fist wrapped around the tip of his dark finger, and his throat tightened over sudden sobs.

*Oh hell.* The thunder rumbled again, and Tamiel barely flicked his gaze heavenward before turning to the bundle now cradled in his arms. *I will do my job, Boss. I just still don't like it.*

Tamiel squared his shoulders. “It's all right, little darling,” he whispered. It wasn't all right, not at all. The world was really fucked-up if this was *normal* in any way, but he kept repeating the words. Soothing her. “Be at peace, dear,” he told the little girl in his arms. Her dark eyes

stared up at him, seeing him, registering his presence with an expression like confusion on her tiny little face. Kissing her eyelids, he watched sleep claim her. Then he watched as she drifted, her eyes flickering beneath her lids before she descended into deeper sleep.

After only a few moments, her breathing slowed. He knew it was almost time and steeled himself for the inevitable. When she breathed out for the last time, he could see it—a pale blue cloud leaving her nostrils. He bent to gather the exhalation, and it swirled around the inside of his mouth, like he was tasting a fine wine.

The soul was sweet, sweeter than any chocolate, beyond anything any mortal could ever imagine. Heartbreaking in its purity and innocence. The sort of flavor you craved; the sort of thing he never wanted to taste again. Like the world's finest chocolates layered over shit—the flavor was amazing, but knowing what it was...he could never ignore that. Tamiel tilted his head to the sky and blew the sphere of cloud out of his body and toward the heavens. The clouds separated for a moment, and Tamiel followed the little soul's progress. Watched the gates open.

She hesitated, and he smiled encouragement at her. “Go ahead, little one. Have a better life next time around.” She dipped as though she was nodding, slipping through the gates with a little bobbing motion.

Once she was gone, he tilted his chin downward and closed his eyes. “Perhaps when you do, you'll come back to something better than this shit.” Another rumble of thunder echoed around him. Tamiel shrugged. “It's been a while since you lived down here. The place has sort of gone to seed, sir.” A surprised flash of light split the sky, followed by a rumble of thunder that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

“Babies are born to sin, and so, go to hell. Nice.” Tamiel spoke softly, knowing He would hear him whether he spoke aloud or not. “One of Your more creative lies.” A little rumble—a warning, but a gentle one. His boss was often gentle with him lately, Tamiel realized, and he should be more grateful; he just...wasn't. “I know, I know. Not *Your* lie. One of Your prophets did the dirty work for you. Still. It was brilliant. People really believe You're a heartless bastard. Nice PR.”

Tamiel wiped his hands on his jeans and retraced his steps toward the mouth of the alley. He wasn't finished. She was around here somewhere, beneath a pile of newspapers, perhaps, or wedged behind... Tamiel sighed and turned back around. Behind the Dumpster, of course. It



probably made sense to a human. Tamiel pulled it aside with one hand, and let its momentum carry it to the other side of the alley. The sound of metal on brick echoed around him when the Dumpster ricocheted off the far wall.

She was on the ground with her legs curled up to her chest. Her right arm was outstretched, her hand still clutching a blade. She had blood smeared over her chest, legs, and arm. Lifeless eyes stared up at him, and he closed his own against the simple beauty of her face. She was young—fifteen, sixteen, *maybe*.

Tamiel nodded at her, knowing his eyes were smoldering. He looked fierce, and he knew it. It was part of the job. He had to make them fear him. Although the fact that he was here suggested she wasn't an irredeemable sort. She had a chance. So he eased up on his fearsome self, just enough that she had a glimmer of hope. Enough that he might be able to capitalize on it later. "You left her in a Dumpster," he finally said. His voice sounded much like the thunder rumbling around them. For good reason—the words were His, filtered through Tamiel. The girl's eyes widened, and her lower lip trembled.

"I didn't want to leave her," she whispered. Liquid shimmered in her eyes. A little thrust of her chin and a tilt of her head kept the tears from spilling over. Tamiel ground his teeth to keep any expression from showing but the fierce burn of his eyes, when what he really wanted was to cradle her like he had her daughter. "I didn't want her to be alone. But then, I couldn't let her see me like that." The ghost-girl gestured at her own body, and Tamiel nodded. "So I left her close by."

"What did you think would happen to her?" A little less rumble in his voice now.

The mother—this little girl who had given birth—bit her lip and gave him what was supposed to be a defiant shrug. It looked weak, frail, and completely pathetic.

He knew, with that single gesture, she hadn't thought about it. She'd wanted to escape her pain and fear, and she hadn't really thought about what would happen to her little girl. Yet she also hadn't intended to leave the baby behind. She just...hadn't thought it through.

Oh, these were the worst.

Tamiel stepped forward. "I'll help you, little one," he murmured, his voice entirely his own now, and cupped her face in both of his hands. They dwarfed her—the tips of his fingers almost

met at the part of her hair, while the heels of his hands touched at the base of her chin. She was tiny. Tiny, and so very young.

Tamiel closed his eyes, finding it hard to meet her gaze. Then he lowered his face to hers and placed a gentle kiss on the bridge of her nose, inhaling deeply of her as he did. Her soul slid into his mouth, soft and warm. Not very sweet, however. She'd lived a hard life, and the residual sweetness—the little she still retained—was due more to her youth than anything else. Still, it was there, beneath the flavors of corruption. She tasted like salt and sweat and something a little desperate threaded through by the taste of chocolate-coated caramel.

Tamiel fought down the urge to choke on it. He rolled it around in his mouth, sifting through each of the flavors, feeling the nuances of her life melt down into a single, rounded sphere. Tendrils of her existence slid down his throat and into his stomach. He could feel it seep out from there until it filled his body, a soft blue warmth that still felt alien beneath his skin. He ached to expel her. Instead, he set to work.

The first view was always strange. Gossamer threads in every shade of the rainbow and beyond fluttered around a soul. Each color represented something different—friendship, love, family. They were the tethers to life. As Tamiel settled into place, the gold and silver threads grew brighter, while the others dimmed. They weren't important for what lay ahead.

In the space of a single breath real time, Tamiel walked through her life with her. He stood like a cage around her as she relived every second. None of it could hurt her this time, but the memory of pain was just as poignant. Every bad choice was played out, only this time, the right choices were visible as gold and silver threads leading away from the situation.

Her eyes widened at the beginning, where the threads were so tight, they were like a web, and she and Tamiel hacked their way through together. After a while, there were only one or two silver offshoots, soft and gleaming, though not as bright as they once were.

As if that weren't enough, a thundering voice ran in a constant litany around them—a tunnel of sound that recited choice after choice, and which one she had taken.

Her path grew steadily darker, and Tamiel's arms crossed protectively, which cradled her chest within his. He'd seen darkness before. It was all he ever saw in these moments, but he'd never grown used to it, and he'd been doing this a very long time. Eventually the silver threads

thinned, and they reached a moment where there were no off-shooting threads. Laysha sobbed within Tamiel as she relived it.

“You did not *choose* to be raped, Laysha.”

Tamiel held her within himself while the rape played out. He reminded her softly that this wasn't happening now; it was over long ago. Still, Laysha thrashed and sobbed, her pain very real, and he wished he could ease it for her. But she had chosen her death, and this was one of the consequences. A suicide's progress from life into the afterlife was never easy. It was the reason they perpetuated the lie that a person who committed suicide could never get into Heaven. They *could*, but their motives had to be absolutely pure, and there weren't many of those. Tamiel wondered if there was anything pure left in this world.

The synthetic world around him darkened, and Tamiel used his position to tilt up her chin and make her examine the landscape around them. There were no silver threads, no gold threads. No *choice* in this moment whatsoever. Tamiel's voice was as soft, as gentle as he could make it, but it was still a voice imbued with God's will, and it sounded like softly muted thunder. “This was not your defining moment, Laysha.” He explained, but he wasn't sure she understood. “The moments where we have no choice are not the defining ones, although most humans look back and think they are. How many times did you think 'If only I hadn't been raped...?'” He watched her nod, slowly and sadly, a tear sliding down her cheek. “But that was not one of the moments that defined you, because you truly had no choice. Any option left to you in that situation still ended up the same way—you were *going to be* raped—it was only the extent of your injuries that changed.”

Sobs racked her body, though she didn't let the tears fall, didn't give voice to the screams that all but tore her apart. They sped through her short life.

Tamiel's eyes filled with tears he blinked away to watch the rest of her life with her. This was his job, and he wouldn't shirk it.

They watched together in silence as Laysha ignored the last shining silver thread, so bright and so strong, he felt her wince at its beauty. She tried to turn within the circle of his embrace, to hide her face and block out the truth of what she saw. He couldn't let her do that, however. He stayed still, rooted to the spot, holding her to face her truth. “You could have taken your little girl to the hospital. A church. Any number of places where she could have been cared for. You might

not have been talked out of your decision to kill yourself. But you might have been.” The appropriate threads lit up, and the light caressed Laysha's face. She flinched like she'd been slapped. “You could have saved her,” Tamiel said, hating himself for it. “And by so doing, you might even have saved yourself.”

She took a very long moment. She examined that thread. Followed its very long, curling path to its fulfillment, as if she could actually see the life she could have led. Then she shouldered the weight of the decision she'd made, testing its heft, as if uncertain she could really carry it.

Tamiel released her from the cage of his protective self and forced her to turn to face him. “It is very easy to see the right choices in the here and now, Laysha.” He sighed, his heart—did he have one anymore?—heavy with his task. He knew what the decision would be. He'd seen her life and seen her choices. And she'd had one, right up to the moment she'd died. Suicides were judged harshly, and unfortunately, there was no reason to think she could be redeemed.

Tamiel closed his eyes. “God's will be done,” he whispered. But he knew how this was going to play out. It was the reason his hands felt leaden, the reason he hesitated a moment before releasing her from his grip. When he did, she didn't resist him, and that was probably the worst part of all. He watched her soul-self be dragged to her body before it went through the memory of the steps she'd taken to die. He could see her soul's eyes—now bright with knowledge she hadn't had when she'd killed herself. Her soul fought her body's hands, and Tamiel was forced to crouch beside her, holding her hand while she finished the job she'd started.

When it was done, he stumbled back, just a step or two, to give himself a little distance. Tamiel wanted to close his eyes and block out the sight. It's too late, he thought, though she couldn't hear him anymore. She was locked in her old body, fighting an inevitable death now that she'd finally found a reason to live. These were the first stages of her own personal hell.

He watched every agonizing second—part of his job, he told himself, but it wasn't true. His job was done, and he made himself watch so he wouldn't grow callous.

He reached out with a single finger and moved it through the air around her body. The tethers, the few remaining multicolored ribbons binding her to life, severed and snapped away, floating on a breeze he couldn't feel.

He kissed her eyelids, inhaled her soul into his being once more. When he exhaled, he aimed toward the sky, though he knew her soul would arc downward. Down into a life more difficult even than her last, to test her soul again. How many times had she tried? How many lives had she been through, losing her battle with despair to have a life like this? Tamiel's shoulders heaved with suppressed sobs. "She needs a Watcher next time, Boss." The words dribbled out of his mouth like bile.

This was his job—God's shit work. Not one of the Fallen, those angels who had defied God's will, but one of the Dark Angels, the ones who did the work God's Light had no business being near. The ones who sullied their wings and weighted their hearts until they could no longer fly, so they were bound to the earth by the misery of the dead and dying.

Tamiel turned, his useless wings dragging behind him through the refuse of the alley. He still had work to do.

There was *always* more work to do.

## Chapter Four

Clarissa smoothed the skin of her face with her palms, pleased there were no visible lines around her eyes or mouth. Her thirties hadn't been easy so far, though she was only two years in, and she was vain enough to be glad it hadn't marked itself on her face. The rest of her body... She shrugged. The rest was what she'd made it. A sex machine. A professional masochist.

She tossed a damp paper towel into the trash on her way out of her private washroom and made her way to her office. *Not* the carefully contrived one on the main floor. That one was window dressing for the men. A place to have their fantasies play out. Strangely enough, they always understood the drugs and the girls and the secluded back rooms were provided out of their cover charge, but they never realized she was just as much a part of their experience. Every man she'd ever picked up truly believed she was just an easy fuck they'd found at random. It was part of the fantasy.

She was fine with their confusion. It wasn't every man who got her specialized attention. Just the few who might slip their control if they weren't handled just right. The ones who might just hurt her enough to make her forget. Or kill her and release her from her pain.

Just the ones with that dimple when they smiled.

She stood at the window that overlooked the inside of the club. It was one-way glass, rendering her invisible to the people below. Not that there were any yet. The dance floor was empty, for the next few moments anyway, until the front doors opened.

This was her favorite time. Just before opening. The club was like a dancer about to go onstage, holding its breath, waiting its turn. Once the doors opened, it became something else, but for this moment, it was suspended perfection.

She looked through her own reflection at the stillness below her and wondered what Jason would have thought of the view.

She cut the thought off. Jason had died before construction had begun on this area. It was hers and hers alone. He'd never set foot here; there were no photos of him—she didn't even have the CDs they'd listened to together. The bed she'd installed in a small room beyond the office itself was a double, but she'd bought it brand new. The sheets and pillows on it were, too, so they couldn't hold memories of him spooning with her, or the phantom scent of his aftershave. There was nothing that might make her think of him. It was a rule. The place was emotionally empty.

Not that it mattered. Everything made her think of him.

The first few patrons trickled through the doors, and she watched them dispassionately. One of them she recognized. Mihai. He'd approached her once, and after speaking for a while, they'd discussed the lifestyle. She'd tried him, tried the lifestyle, but it wasn't for her. What she needed had nothing to do with *safe, sane, and consensual*. What she wanted was someone as out of control as she was, so she could find what she really needed.

Release.

Despite her abrupt refusal of what he offered, Mihai still came to the club once a month or so to check in on her. She wasn't sure if he came to see if she'd changed her mind, or just to see if she was still alive.

She sighed. She was still alive. Still stuck in this same limbo of numbness that was only alleviated by pain. No matter how many of the men she picked up and let use and abuse her, none had taken that single step too far that would release her.

She examined the new arrivals for potential troublemakers. At least, that's what she told herself, though she wouldn't deny she was looking for that dimple if there were anyone to ask her. It looked like the typical early birds—college kids who wanted to see if the rumors they'd heard about the place were true, married men who hoped they were, so they could take care of business before going home to the wife. She sighed and shook her head. They were all the same. Looked the same, talked the same, used the same dismissive lingo. They even moved the same, stiff and uncertain, as if they were afraid the *wrong* way would get their hands slapped.

Except one.

He moved with the fluid grace of a dancer, as if he heard music in his head that no one else could hear, and his body rolled with the rhythm it set. Dressed in a pair of black jeans and a white sleeveless shirt, he should have looked casual, even underdressed in the boudoirlike decor

of the club. Instead, he looked...elegant. Better dressed than the men who wore suits. It was as if he was comfortable in his own *skin*.

He ordered a drink and leaned against the bar casually, white teeth flashing in the dark skin of his face as he graced the bartender with a wide smile. While he stood offering her his profile, Clarissa examined the lines of his cheekbones, the soft hollows of his cheeks beneath, and the strength of his jaw. If he'd been sculpted out of stone, she'd have said he was too angular, but in the flesh? He was perfection. Drink in hand—something in a lowball, maybe scotch?—he turned to stare at the dance floor for a moment before his gaze lifted.

And met hers.

He should only be able to see his reflection, but he was holding her gaze. She shifted position, and his eyes followed. He could *see* her. Despite logic, the one-way glass, and the distance between them. She shivered. The whites of his eyes glowed under the black light, and his pupils were so dark that they appeared like holes—sucking vortices dragging her into the man.

She shivered but couldn't tear herself away. The feeling that she was being pulled into those eyes—into the man himself—was overwhelming. She jolted when her forehead touched the glass, and she realized she'd been leaning toward him. Falling into him.

He smiled, a laugh without sound, and his teeth flashed in the light, distracting her for a moment. But only that—a moment—before she noticed the dimples that dug into each of his chocolate cheeks, framing his smile like punctuation. A flare of desire, followed by a rush of longing, dragged the air from her lungs, and she stared at him in shock. Then she smiled back before making her way down to the dance floor.



## Chapter Five

Jason waited at the base of the stairs, knowing she'd emerge once the members started to arrive. She was predictable now, his Clarissa. He wondered if she'd always been that way. Sometimes his memories of their time—of his life—were blocked out by the memories of his afterlife. He was afraid sometimes that his past would eventually be erased entirely, and he'd become a demented ghost wandering the club in the guise of a nearly thirty-year-old man.

He was surprised when the door opened, and he glanced at his watch. He wasn't sure how a ghost had a watch, but it came in handy, so he'd stopped questioning it. It was early. The club had just opened; why was Clarissa down here? She wouldn't want to be out on the floor with the twentysomethings. Jason's stomach clenched. Something wasn't right, and he didn't like it.

He followed her, blinking when he passed too close to one of the lights. Still clearing his vision, he held back, far enough that she wouldn't be able to see him. If she *could* have seen him, that was. He could hear her, though. Her voice was soft—flirtatious but not overly suggestive. He felt the answering twitch of desire and sighed at himself. He wondered what she'd think to know she could get a dead man hard.

"Tamiel Kasdeja," the man answered, and Jason turned toward him. Jason narrowed his eyes as he examined him. Instinctive dislike wasn't changed by the look of Tamiel. Dressed in a white sleeveless shirt that set off the darkness of his skin, Tamiel looked like some sort of television ad. His muscles bunched and moved as he lifted his drink. More than six feet tall, the man was wide through the shoulders. Powerful.

His face was too pretty; he wasn't a football player—he was more likely a model/bodybuilder. Jason knew the type. Pretty...but useless. He rolled his eyes.

Tamiel smiled at Clarissa, and Jason's stomach wrenched. Not so useless after all. He had *that* look. The one Clarissa was looking for these days. The one that said he'd beat her, bruise her, fuck her, and leave her. Only there was something—a dangerous intelligence to him,

accompanied by a wild, unrestrained energy. Foreboding billowed over Jason like a cold cloud. *Shit.*

Their words flowed back and forth, and Jason didn't listen, watching their body language instead. In the space of only a few minutes, they moved closer. The man's finger traced a line up the inside of Clarissa's arm, and Jason surprised himself by growling. Tamiel laughed, and the sound rumbled in the air around them like thunder on a summer day—powerful and full of promise. He met Jason's gaze.

No, there was no way. “Can you...see me?”

Tamiel didn't answer. After a long moment, he turned his attention to Clarissa and smiled at something she'd said, and Jason fisted his hands at his sides. He wanted to hit something. Preferably the big man who was now *touching* Clarissa, leading her across the dance floor. Toward the stairs. Not the fake back office.

Fear seared through him, lancing all other emotions, even his rage. “No,” he shouted. Tamiel turned and looked over his shoulder at the same time, and his grin wavered on his face. Something dark seemed to frame his body, and Jason halted in his tracks. What the hell *was* Tamiel Kasdeja?

## Chapter Six

Fuck. The night had gone from bad to worse. He'd stopped in the club to drown himself after letting that little girl's soul loose into the universe again. Not ten minutes inside the doors, though, and he'd seen Mihai. Fortunately the little pissant disappeared, so Tamiel had ordered a drink. Then he'd felt her watching. It took him a second to find her through the one-way glass up on the second level. He'd met her gaze through the mirrors, and she'd come down to join him.

The ghost had followed.

A sickly green aura tinged the air around the ghost, and it had taken all Tamiel's willpower not to choke on his whiskey. Then he'd fought the urge to grab Mihai and make *him* face the ghost. See what happened when Dark Angels decided not to do the work God set out for them. Some stupid fucker hadn't made it to this guy in time, and now he was wandering. Lost, and sort of pathetic. As Tamiel had drawn closer, he could see the flat hardness in the ghost's gaze, the tightness of his jaw.

Definitely tormented.

Not with fire and brimstone—Tamiel would be able to see the reflection of the flames in the ghost's eyes if that had been the case. It wasn't by the creatures who wreathed themselves in shadows either. Tamiel felt the first tug of curiosity. What sort of man was tormented by haunting a nightclub?

Tamiel glanced at Clarissa, suddenly glad she had stopped for a moment to talk to someone about club business, although he'd been ready to kill the little bastard at first. At that point, though, he'd just wanted in her pants. Temporary relief from the stress of his life. His anger slipped away like sand through his fingers, while he tried to get a bead on what he'd stepped into here. Something fucked-up, which shouldn't be a surprise, given how things were going for him lately.

"I just wanted a night off," he muttered, and the bass line of the music thumped loudly for just a moment, like thunder rumbling through the club. Tamiel rolled his eyes. Sometimes his boss was just so dramatic. "So, it wasn't just chance I wound up here, was it?" The lights flickered, and he took that as confirmation. He'd been shepherded. Manipulated once again. "I couldn't have just a couple of hours? Get a drink, enjoy a pretty lady?" The bass line rumbled again, and Clarissa turned to look over her shoulder at the dance floor. She muttered something to the guy about looking into the equipment and flashed a smile at Tamiel that hit him like a punch to the gut. He shifted his weight, trying to discourage his physical reaction to her. She was definitely still interested. Tamiel just wasn't sure he *should* be.

"So, what, am I supposed to try to help the long-dead ghost?" None of his frustration or anger sounded in his voice. He sounded defeated. He guessed he was. Having been manipulated into place, he was going to do what he had to do. The bass line completely overwhelmed the treble, and Tamiel thought that, for once, He was frustrated at not being able to speak to Tamiel directly.

The lights in the club flickered. For a brief moment, only one remained on. The one directly above Clarissa's head. It bathed her in a warm yellow glow and picked up the little vortex of threads around her. Tamiel lifted an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "And the ghost?" he asked.

Another rumble, this one like the shrugging of massive shoulders. "Not good enough. Whose was he? Why's he still here?"

The light above him flickered and flared to life. Tamiel swallowed and flicked another glance at the ghost, who stood just a few feet away. "Mine?" There was no way. "I've been working my ass off. There's no *way* this is my fault." The rumble deepened, humming along his nerves until his teeth rattled with the force of it. "No." He felt sick to his stomach. He'd been working so hard. Tonight was the first time he'd taken a break—which wasn't a break, by the way—and God was going to try to tell him this was *his* fault? "I don't fucking think so."

Tamiel turned away from the ghost, but not before he saw the way the ghost was staring at Clarissa. In that single glance, Tamiel saw what his torment was. He stole another glance at Clarissa from the corner of his eye. Sometimes the things you couldn't see about a person head-

on were easy to spot that way. Sure enough, he saw it. The tether, like a gossamer thread in a shade of crimson, tying her to the ghost.

“I don’t...” *Understand*, he was going to say, but he did. The final moment in anyone’s life was supposed to cut those ties. Sever their bonds to the living, so both could move on. For the living—those ties needed cauterizing, time to heal, but they *did* eventually heal. Except in this case. This tie was just as strong as it had been when the ghost was alive.

He closed his eyes and swallowed back the bile that filled his mouth. “Really?” he asked God, his voice breaking with strain. “All because I wasn’t there in time?” The fact that he’d wanted to sleep with her—and still did, if he were honest with himself—seemed a little insult on top of injury. “*I screwed this one up?*” The lights surged and returned to normal. That’d be a yes. “Fuck.” There was a threatening little rumble that Tamiel ignored.

Clarissa turned to him before God gave him an answer. Her smile was tight, as controlled as she was in everything else Tamiel had seen her do. He bit his lip and shook his head a little. What a fucking waste.

He followed her, watching her hips sway with seductive promise, and wondered why his dick wouldn’t accept the fact that he should just not be attracted to this woman anymore.

## Chapter Seven

Jason watched, a lump forming in his throat when she smiled at Tamiel. A smile full of vibrancy and light and promise. The smile she used to give him.

He managed to follow them up the stairs. Despite the fact the very air of this section of the building seemed to repel him, thickening as he climbed, he continued. And it began as it always began.

Clarissa stepped into the man, molding herself to his body. He kissed her, his mouth moving over hers, claiming her. Tasting her. Jason could see his tongue working into her mouth and swallowed rage like a rock in his throat.

Tamiel's hands circled her waist, held her closer against him. When they broke the kiss, he met her eyes with a savage seriousness. "What do you want?" he whispered, and his voice was soft and loud, dark and light—a multitude of sounds that made Jason want to clap his hands over his ears.

It was like the voice of God.

"I want," Clarissa whispered. She met his eyes but couldn't seem to bring herself to say any more. "I need..." The words trailed off, and tears stung her eyes.

Tamiel nodded and kissed her again, tenderly, and Clarissa stepped away from him. "I don't want that," she said, her voice cold, though there was a tremor through her words.

Jason didn't understand what was going on. After three years mourning him, was she finally moving on? Was this man somehow more than just another... Well, whatever it was Clarissa had been doing with men since he died? Why *him*? The pang of jealousy that accompanied that thought had nothing to do with Tamiel and everything to do with Clarissa moving on. Knowing it did nothing to ease his sense of powerlessness, or the crushing fear or frustration that followed.

Tamiel was staring at her. He hadn't moved. Hadn't spoken. Instead he seemed to be waiting for her. Jason wished he had the same patience. "Clarissa," he said, knowing she wouldn't hear him. "Oh God, Clarissa." His heart broke, mended, fell into a thousand pieces while he made his own decision. Fear and fury and resignation all balled together within him and made his voice rasp when he spoke again. "If you've got to move on, move on. Be happy."

Tears stung his eyes, and pain banded his chest as he held the rest back. If he let himself grieve, he might never stop. "I love you," he whispered and stepped back into the shadows, determined to watch, as always, to punish himself.

\* \* \* \*

Clarissa stared at him. What had possessed her to bring a man *here*? It would never be the same. Never be her sanctuary. It would reek of sex and longing and...something more desperate, something she'd never been able to name. She should tell him to go away. Leave her in peace.

But something shifted in those eyes—black as obsidian, as night, as every cliché she could think of. Something like light on the edge of a knife—it was sharp and dangerous, and while she was wary of it, she was aware of a rush of hot need between her thighs.

"What do you want?" he whispered, and when he said her name, it was like a prayer on his beautiful lips.

"I want..." She started but couldn't finish. She couldn't say aloud what it was she longed for. Couldn't admit that deviance. "I need..."

*...punishment...*

*...pain...*

*...death.*

No, she couldn't say that aloud. Instead she just looked at him, feeling her desperation grow.

Then he kissed her. A tender exploration of the contours of her mouth, a careful stoking of the fires within her. She pushed him away, fear, fury, and desire coursing through her veins in a hot rush. "I don't want that." Her voice was as cold as she was hot, though it shook a little as she tried to keep her conflicting emotions under control. They roiled within her, too close to the

surface. Too close to that part of herself where they'd need to be acknowledged. Where she'd have to deal with them.

She shoved them all aside, even as she launched herself at Tamiel. "Don't be gentle," she commanded. "Just...don't." She fumbled with the button of his jeans. Her hands were shaking. She let them drop away and stood on tiptoe to press her pelvic bone against his erection, grinding against it for his attention. "I need release," she whispered in his ear before taking it between her teeth.

He growled then, and the sound was almost inhuman. She shivered from head to foot, but she didn't back away. Whatever he unleashed, she'd take. She *needed*.

He met her gaze once more, a forever-long second of time. Gold and silver flecks battled within his eyes, until they swirled into the darkness, and his irises were solid black once again. He nodded as if to indicate he'd made a decision. Then he surged forward, and his hands grasped and tore at her clothes. She was naked before she understood he'd literally torn them, both the skirt and shirt she'd been wearing. She hadn't bothered with underwear, so she was completely bare, and she shivered with the sudden rush of air against her skin, as well as the molten heat of his gaze.

"You *need*," he snarled in her ear, and she heard it—the threat of violence, the promise of fulfillment—and she quaked in his arms. "I can give you what you want," he murmured, and she understood he *knew*, knew without a doubt, what it was she was really looking for. The tremors that seized her nearly flipped her straight into orgasm, the feelings were so intense, and she pulled herself together with difficulty. Long enough to sigh into the skin of his arm where her face lay.

Long enough to whisper, "I need."

Excitement coiled low and tight, making the muscles of her pelvis and thighs tingle. Her pussy clamped over nothing, the muscles clenching and unclenching in need of something that wasn't there. Death, her mind whispered. He knew what she wanted. He could deliver. Another tremor, another series of muscles fisting over air. Oh dear God, she *wanted*.

He was naked a moment later, his clothes folded neatly in a pile and out of the way. "I will," he whispered. "I will give you what you want." He sounded certain and sad, and Clarissa



fought back sudden tears. After a long pause where they faced each other like competitors—like conspirators—he spoke again. “And I’ll take what you offer.”

She looked at him in confusion for a moment before registering the tension in his coffee-colored thighs, the glisten of light off his taut abs. His balls were tight and dark beneath his stiff, jutting erection. She swallowed at the sight of it, wondering how she would fit him within herself. He was massive, yet even through her confusion and worry, need tore at her with clawed fingers. Before she could speak, before she could move to accept or decline his deal, he closed the distance between them. After lowering his head to her neck, he suckled her skin before nipping at it with his teeth, then working his way down her neck and shoulder. He sank his teeth into the flesh of her upper arm, drawing a small drop of blood, which he licked with his tongue as if to ease the sting.

The feel of his teeth sliding into her skin arrowed wet need through her abdomen, and her pussy tightened. His hands circled her waist—and it was only then that she realized how large they were and began to feel afraid—and he lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist so that the tip of his erection brushed her ass cheek. Her other cheek came violently to tingling awareness when he freed a hand and slapped it.

She moaned, and her head fell forward to rest on his shoulder. Thoughts evaporated, fear fled, and she was nothing but sensation. Writhing, primal need. He didn’t spare her. There wasn’t a single tentative slap or apologetic touch. Instead his hands landed every place she needed them—her ass was red and swollen, her breasts inflamed. He brought her nipples to painful arousal with his teeth, and continued them until she writhed in sudden orgasm in his arms.

He lowered her to the floor and ordered her to rest on her hands and knees. While she waited, he pulled something from within the neat pile of his clothing, something he uncoiled with a long, whispery sigh. *Leather.*

The first lash of the whip cracked across her ass before she understood what it was. Pain, pure as fire, danced across her skin and into her subconscious. Blissfully there was no room for thought. For fear. Only the delicious absence of it all.

He lashed her ass, her back, even her shoulders. He only stopped when she reached equilibrium—that place where new pain was simply absorbed by the old and no longer served any purpose. Then he flipped her onto her back, which protested, and she welcomed the pain.

*Jason*, the name floated to her consciousness, and although it carried pain with it, the word itself held almost no meaning.

Then Tamiel's teeth tightened over her clit, and the sudden sensation was too much pain, too much pleasure at once, and she cried out. He didn't seem to hear her but continued his torturous assault, blending pain and need together until she spiraled within them.

She slid without awareness into another orgasm, shuddering with the response of her body, totally devoid of her brain. She caught back a sob, aware only as she did of the tears streaming down her face. Tamiel worked his way up her body with bites painful enough for awareness but not enough to damage her skin, and she blinked her eyes furiously, wishing the liquid to evaporate before he could see.

When he did meet her gaze, she was astonished to see an answering moisture in his own eyes. He lowered his mouth to lick away the tears even while he pressed the head of his cock into her, stretching her wide—wider than she'd have thought from looking at him earlier, as impressive as he'd been. She had the insane idea he'd willed himself to be bigger—thicker and longer—just to put the edge of pain into their joining, but that was impossible.

He pounded into her. The head of his cock ground against her G-spot, pushing just past the point of sheer pleasure so that each thrust made her wince. The walls of her pussy stretched but never seemed quite wide enough to accommodate him, and she chafed. Yet she was wet—wetter than she remembered ever being—as he pounded away. Taking her.

His orgasm surged through him—a full-body tremor, accompanied by a fierce growl unlike anything she'd ever heard. She pulsed around him, the feel of his hot release within her enough to spur her on, enough to make her realize the pain the rest of her body was in. The liquid soothed her pain, a hot rush against tender flesh, and she all but sobbed with the relief of it. She shuddered beneath him, her back tearing to awareness against the carpeted floor.

He withdrew, though the weight of his body stayed on hers. For long moments, the only sound in the room was their ragged breathing, staggered so one sounded like the echo of the other. She curled her toes, her body restless even in its contentment. Because it hadn't been enough, despite the ache inside her body and all along it. Despite the bruises she knew he'd inflicted, the pain she'd feel for days—it hadn't been *enough*. It would never be enough. Not until she was dead.

One of his large hands circled her throat, and her eyes flew open before she realized they'd been closed. "You want," he said in a tone of wonder, but his voice was guttural, almost unintelligible—the sound of an animal imitating speech.

For a moment, her terror was complete. He was willing to do it. Of all the men she'd met, all the men she'd fucked—this one knew what she was asking. Was she willing? Was it what she really wanted?

*Yes.* Of course it was. And sadness washed over her—not because she wanted to die but because there wasn't a shred of doubt left in her. Succumbing to the sensations ebbing from her body, she was simply relieved.

Tears slid from her eyes, into her hair, into marks on her face she couldn't remember him causing. Through her liquid-filled eyes, like looking through a kaleidoscope, she saw ten of him, and over his shoulder, Jason, staring at her with love and longing and hope and need in his eyes.

"Watch me," Tamiel said in that strange voice, and Clarissa kept her gaze focused on the blackness of his eyes. The black circles of his irises, which as she watched, seemed to bleed into the whites like spilled ink, until each entire eye, corner to corner, was black. His pupils were darker still, swirling vortices of darkness, pulling her in. "In," he commanded, and she didn't understand, but she knew not to break his gaze, and so she stared at him, felt the pull of his eyes, the tug on her soul, until the darkness seemed to leak entirely from his eyes to encroach at the edges of her vision.

She shuddered, her body finally registering the pain she was in, how close she really was to death. He was allowing her to breathe, waiting for her final decision, but her airway was tight, and she was taking shallow breaths. She was one word from death...and she couldn't speak. *I want to die.* Tamiel's eyes flashed as though he'd heard her, and despite his grip on her neck, she nodded. "Yes," she whispered, before Tamiel's hand tightened around her throat, and she could no longer catch her breath at all.

Then there was nothing.

\* \* \* \*

Jason straddled Tamiel, who still lay on Clarissa, trying to tear him from her. "No!" he screamed, over and over until his voice was raw and nothing escaped but air.

He hadn't understood until too late what Tamiel was doing. He was crushing her, suffocating her with his body and hand. Jason pounded his fists ineffectually on Tamiel's flesh, slipping through the man, reminding Jason he was insubstantial. Inconsequential too, as he tried to tangle his fingers in the man's hair, to pull him, push him, throw him off her, with no effect. Jason choked back tears as the knowledge that he couldn't stop this slammed home.

When Tamiel rose, he threw Jason off as if he were nothing. Jason slid to the floor. His teeth clicked together on impact. He shook his head to clear it and was aware of Tamiel moving across the room.

Jason turned his attention to Clarissa. A single glance was enough to tell him she was beyond his help. He stared down at her, impotent rage welling within his chest. A sense of triumphant jubilation wreathed her, tilted her lips into a smile. Her eyes were glassy and protruded a little from the strangulation. The whites were white no longer, they were red-veined pink, and Jason swallowed the bile that rose at the sight. *No. Not Clarissa. No no no no...*

Unable to scream, the words echoed through his head, losing meaning, building meaning—they were the only barrier between his conscious mind and the other voice...the one whispering the truth in a sibilant hiss. *She's dead.* The words penetrated anyway.

Jason let loose a wail no one could hear, sobbing what might have been her name or denial or no words at all, but emotion being given voice.

Hatred flared within him, hot and lancing, burning through his veins, singeing the muscles of his arms and legs, which were bunched with his need to lash out. He swung at Tamiel. His fists went through him, and Tamiel didn't even flinch. Agonized, Jason hitched his breath on a sob. He wanted the man *dead* for what he'd done. Wanted him splayed out on the table downstairs so Jason could strangle him with his own whip, still moist with Clarissa's blood. Red tinged the edge of his vision, and he welcomed an all-too-familiar rage, all the while aware there was *nothing* he could do.

"Damn you!" He hurled the words at Tamiel, who stopped in the process of pulling his jeans together at his waist. Tamiel turned to look at Jason over his bare shoulder and met his gaze for a long moment before Jason understood what was happening. Tamiel was looking at him. Seeing him. And when Tamiel's mouth opened, as if he was about to speak, he was going to speak *to Jason*.

Jason released his breath on a hiss. All his anger, frustration, pain, and hatred simmered below a feeling of wonder. Fascination. Validation. After so long, to have someone actually *see* him, even this man—it was a miracle laced with agony. “God fucking damn you,” he whispered.

The smile that lifted the corners of Tamiel's lips was so bitter as to be cold, and Jason shivered. “It would not be the first time,” he said, and his voice was soft, somewhere between the animal grunt he'd used with Clarissa while they fucked and the velvet seduction he'd used earlier that night. It was a strange sound, full of sorrow and pain at the loss of a passion and happiness the likes of which Jason had never known.

Jason stepped back from the enormity of it—the complexity of Tamiel and whatever he was. Because it was clear to Jason he was not human.

“You killed her,” he whispered finally.

“I gave her what she wanted.” As if she'd wanted a flower, or a puppy.

“She's *dead*.” Tears slid from Jason's eyes, even as the sibilant voice in his head echoed the word. *Dead...dead...dead*. “You *killed* her.”

Tamiel turned to face him. He spoke even as he crossed the space between them. “I gave her what she needed. It is what I do. It is why I am damned and double damned.” Then Tamiel stood over her body, closed his eyes, and disappeared.

Jason stared for a few minutes, waiting for him to reappear. He had to get help. But he couldn't leave her. He'd manage to move a step, two, away from her before whirling to kneel by her side again. He thought he saw her pulse jump at her throat, and that spurred him on. If there was the slightest hope she could be helped, he had to find it. He slid through the door, a bizarre feeling, though not painful, and took the stairs two at a time.

Charging through the door at the bottom of the stairs, he slid through the body of another man, whose hand was outstretched for the knob. “Oh, thank God,” Jason murmured. Then he realized who the other man was, and he barked a short laugh. Because tonight hadn't been bad enough? Now he was going to be forced to beg for help from Dom Mihai.

When Mihai reached the top of the stairs, he knocked tentatively, his voice barely loud enough to carry through the door. “She can't hear you,” Jason said, and his voice was strained. “You *have to* go in.” He was pleading with the back of the man's shaved head. *Go inside. Find Clarissa. Take care of her.*

That thought wasn't pleasant. *He* should be the one to take care of her. But it was out of his hands. Literally, he thought with a snort. He couldn't do anything for her. The man turned as if he was going to go back downstairs, and Jason's hopes fell to his feet. He could almost hear them shatter.

"No! You *can't* go." He slid through the man again, unflinching, although going through people was infinitely more uncomfortable than going through doors and walls. Frantic and frustrated, Jason wasn't surprised that his hands shook. It all escalated as the man stepped down. One stair. Another. Jason screamed. "No!" Steeling himself for whatever might happen, he plunged his hands *through* the metal casing and *into* the thumbprint reader beside the door. The one that wasn't there when he was alive. Somehow, knowing it couldn't read his print, even if he'd been alive to use it, made him hate the contraption all the more. Concentrating so hard sweat beaded on his forehead, he imagined his hands as solid objects. *Real*. A shower of sparks flew up around his wrists. He heard the sizzle of electric components, the hum of power.

And the door clicked open.

Astonished, he stared at the door. Stared at the man who was halfway down the stairs. Willed him to look. To have heard the single *click*. To notice the door, now standing a few inches open. "Please," Jason begged. "*Please*, just go help her."

Jason followed him, a single step behind as the Dom pushed the door to swing inward before stepping through. Mihai raced to Clarissa's side. Checked her pulse. Something there gave him hope; Jason could see it dawn on the man's angular face. He began CPR—chest compressions, blowing air into her mouth, counting quietly to himself. Jason watched, his heart thumping loudly in his chest, realizing she had a chance. She might live.

She had a chance.

"Clarissa," he whispered. Adoration, hope, and fear wove into the sound of her name. If he could just *will* her to live, he would. The Dom continued, taking the measures that might just save Clarissa's life, and Jason felt his body begin to weigh him down. His mind spun—the sudden relief of fear, the overwhelming *hope* she'd be all right—until he felt too dizzy to stand.

With relief, he gave way and let it carry him into unconsciousness, where he didn't have to deal with it anymore.

## Chapter Eight

Tamiel walked away, leaving Clarissa alone. Sadness beyond words filled his inhuman eyes, and she stared at him, confused. “What now?”

“Normally this would be where I walk you through your life and show you the decisions you've made. Only this time...you have to do it yourself.” She saw Tamiel's hands clench and unclench at his sides, the only evidence of his frustration.

“Why?” Not that she really understood what he meant, but being different had never worked out really well for her in the past.

Tamiel snorted. His body was so tense, and Clarissa wanted to reach a hand out and ease whatever pain he was bracing himself against. “It's my fault,” he said, and the words were wrenched out of him. “I screwed up, and somehow you're tied up in it. So I can't help you.”

He sounded anguished, and Clarissa *did* reach out this time to touch his cheek. His eyes closed, as if her gentle touch were a slap. “Whatever you did...after this punishment, do you think you'll forgive yourself?”

Tamiel smiled tightly. “Probably not.”

She laughed, and it occurred to her it might hurt his feelings, but she couldn't help it. “Whatever you are, you're an awful lot like me.”

“Your journey will be done. After this.” Tamiel nodded at something behind her, and she turned to peer over her shoulder. It looked like a thicket of rainbow-colored brambles threaded with gold and silver. They glinted as if kissed by a source of light she couldn't see, but the tunnel the brambles formed was dark.

“I have to go through there?” She didn't look back at him—it was too hard to meet his anguished gaze. Besides, the tunnel held her attention. She was captivated.

Tamiel's breath grazed her neck when he spoke again. “You do. It will be frightening. Humbling. I can't be with you, but my words can.” She turned to him at that. Faced him, trying

to commit his face to her memory. The way his lips moved to form the words. As if remembering those details would help her remember what he said. “What you will see is the life you've already lived. You can't change anything. And none of it can hurt you now.”

When Tamiel's gaze flitted over her shoulder, Clarissa followed suit, and she noticed the tunnel seemed to have inched closer. She shuddered. If she didn't go to it, it would come for her.

“Just remember, it is all past. Own what you did. It makes a difference.”

Then the tunnel was upon her. Tamiel curled his fingers around her wrist, holding her to him for a moment more. “Please don't forget, Clarissa. Normally I'd be there, and talk you through. The voice you will hear is unsympathetic. I am not. I wish you didn't have to do this alone.”

The sound of a whip lashed through the air around them, and Tamiel flinched. She looked and saw the thorny vine coiled around his wrist, digging deep into his flesh. He released his hold on her slowly. Not cowed by the pain he was obviously in, he only let go when he was ready.

“Thank you,” Clarissa murmured, and Tamiel winced again. She held his gaze for a moment. “I forgive you.”

“It's my fuckup that got you here.” His voice rumbled. “I wasn't there. I was supposed to be there for him, and I wasn't.”

Clarissa shook her head, but he disappeared as the tunnel swallowed her whole. Once inside, the brambles were like arms, cradling her, ushering her forward. She realized what they were, slowly—the ties that bound her to her life, the reality she'd always known. A single crimson line wove through the center of it. When she reached the end of the tunnel, the brambles released her, dropping her into a cold, empty void.

“This is what you wanted.” The thunderous voice spoke, and the words echoed around her, the only thing left to keep her company as the glistening colors faded away.



## Chapter Nine

Ghosts don't dream.

It was a truth Jason had come to accept after his first few weeks of being dead. Something was missing in their makeup, something physical or emotional—but they simply didn't wander during their sleep state the way mortals did.

When he opened his eyes, he was no longer sitting over Clarissa's body but sprawled across the sofa in her office area. Clarissa was over him, staring at him, and the only explanation he could imagine was that he was dreaming. It couldn't possibly be *real*.

He stared at her, drinking in each familiar feature. The softness of her cheeks, the angle of her jaw, and her wide, soulful eyes framed by thick lashes. *Clarissa*. He wanted to say her name aloud, have her turn to look at him, to watch her face light with the smile he knew so well. But he was too afraid. What if she still didn't hear him? What if she did hear him, turned, and gave him a blistering glare instead? It was no less than he deserved, God knew.

As he admitted his fear, she began to turn her head, and terror lodged in his throat. *Clarissa...don't...* Yet the thought—the hope—that she'd be able to see him was almost greater than his fear. To be seen meant he was real. Valid. Oh God. He steeled himself for her reaction. Or lack thereof. For whatever might happen.

Her gaze touched his face. A caress. A kindness. Her lips parted on a sigh, and her eyes softened—that expression of adoration he'd seen from her so many times but never *really* been able to believe. “Jason,” she whispered, and her voice broke on the word. “Oh, Jason.” She closed her eyes, and he wasn't surprised to see tears caught on her lashes like dew on a spiderweb.

“Clarissa,” he whispered, reaching out with a tentative finger to wipe them away. Bracing himself for the lack of contact, he gasped with an almost obscene pleasure when he felt the soft resistance of her flesh. Her eyes flew open as he pushed the tears away, and he stared into their

hazel depths, transfixed. “You’re here,” he whispered. Joy—fierce and overwhelming—battled with guilt and disappointment.

She should still be alive.

She would be, if not for him.

“Jason.” She reached for him, touched his shoulder with a shaking hand. “You’re real.”

Jason swallowed a sudden lump in his throat. Three years since someone had said his name. Since he’d been anything near “real”. “Oh God, Clarissa.”

He wanted to take her in his arms. Wanted to hold her and cradle her and kiss her... He wanted to throw himself at her feet and apologize for everything. For the mess he’d made of their entire lives.

She inched toward him. “Jason,” she whispered. “I missed you so much.” Then she was in his arms, her head resting against his chest, and he was pressing kisses into her hair, holding her tighter than she should be able to bear.

He moaned, unable to put words to his emotions. She was *there*. She could see him. She could touch him. And he could touch her. Without thinking, he lowered toward her, and she turned in his arms so his hungry mouth found hers.

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She moaned into his mouth. Into his kiss. Leaning into his embrace, she felt her body relax, even as her heart raced. She’d missed him. *Oh God*. She’d missed him. His slight stubble grazed her face, his lips coaxing her to react. To narrow her focus to him. Only him. It worked. It always worked.

He withdrew from her kiss, and she felt cold without him. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Sorry?” she asked.

“For everything,” he murmured into her hair. “For *dying*.” He paused, and Clarissa’s stomach flipped inside her body. She wanted to stop him from talking now.

“Jason.” His name was barely audible, as if emotion had robbed her of her voice. She pushed him away, and coldness kissed her skin where his warmth had been. She resisted the urge to drag him back toward her, and she also didn’t meet his eyes. *Don’t engage*. “I don’t...” She wrung her hands. How many times had she practiced what she’d say to him, if she had the

chance? How many times had she pleaded her case? Relived the night in her mind and come up with a thousand different alternatives?

No matter how much she did it, though, when she'd finished, the end result had still been the same. Jason was still dead.

"And it's still my fault." She hadn't meant to say that aloud, but when she did, she flicked her gaze at him, trying to gauge his reaction. She expected him to look angry, all his hostility aimed at her. What he did look, however, was stunned.

"It wasn't your fault, Clarissa."

Despite how certain he sounded, she didn't believe him. She couldn't. "It had to be, Jason. If you were happier...if I hadn't pushed so hard. If we hadn't fought that night..." She trailed off, the same futile anger and frustration filling her. As always, it fell away, leaving her with nothing but blame.

"It wasn't you, Clarissa." He shrugged his shoulders, the way he always did when he admitted something he didn't want to. Shouldering a burden. "It wasn't like you did or didn't do something."

She shook her head. That wasn't true. It couldn't be. "Jason, we were together for two years. I loved you. You never showed any indication you were—" Her voice stalled. She couldn't say it. The elephant in the room between them. She could talk about it; she just refused to say the word.

Jason, seemed to know exactly what she was thinking, though. "Suicidal, Clarissa. That's what I was. And of course I didn't show any signs when I was with you. When you were around, I didn't feel it."

She deflated. He'd just proven her point. "So if I'd been there...you wouldn't have done it."

"Not that day. But it would have happened."

She shook her head. "No. If I'd been there, you wouldn't have done it. And you would have shaken off that mood, and you'd have been fine. You wouldn't have died."

Jason didn't yell. His voice dropped about an octave and got all cool around the edges. It was the only indication he ever gave that he was mad. "It wasn't a mood I could shake off. It isn't like I woke up one morning and thought 'Hey, I'd really like to die today.' It's the way I thought *every day*. Every day, and all the time. It was never a matter of *if*; it was a matter of *when*."

Something inside her broke at his words. Her tears flowed faster, and her stomach hurt, as if every pain she'd ever felt gathered there and festered. "But why?" She launched the words at him. Her voice was guttural, ragged with the screams she wanted to loose but couldn't. "You had everything. The club, great friends...*me*." Her voice broke on the final word, and she kept talking to cover it up. "I must have let you down if you were willing to walk away from it all."

Jason inhaled like she'd wounded him. "It had nothing to do with you, Clarissa."

"It sure as fuck felt like it, Jason." Anger. Oh, the rage she had no idea she carried inside her whipped alive at his words. "It sure felt like it was about me when I found your body. When I made funeral arrangements. When I woke up every morning and wondered where you were, why you weren't beside me. When I remembered why, and had to deal with it all over again."

"Oh shit." He turned to face her. His face filled her field of vision, so she had no choice but to look into his brown eyes. To hear his words. "Clarissa, I was suicidal before we met. All through high school. All those friends I had? They weren't people I bared my soul to. They were distractions. Because when they were around—when we were talking and hanging out and shooting up—I wasn't thinking about dying." His breath fanned over her face as he gasped for air, as if his admission had been as difficult as running a race.

Maybe it had been. Clarissa absorbed it, a lightbulb of understanding flickering inside her head. She could almost see what he meant. But he'd been hers, and she'd loved him, and he'd done it anyway. "Didn't it matter?" she asked him. "That I loved you?"

He flinched as if she'd hit him, but she wasn't going to let him go without answering.

"It mattered," he said finally. "It's why it took me two years to do it." He brushed a piece of hair off her face, but she knew he just wanted to touch her. She wanted him to touch her too. "I made the decision to kill myself before I ever met you, Clarissa. When you left that day...I realized I had the opportunity. And if I didn't do it then, it'd be too late."

It was too confusing. Too overwhelming. She didn't understand, but what he was saying sort of made sense too. If it were anyone but Jason saying it. Anyone but him and she'd be able to reconcile what he was saying with what he'd done. But she'd loved him. Loved him beyond reason, and he'd *left* her. Willingly. Without saying good-bye or discussing it, he'd just gone.

“I didn't do it to hurt you, Clarissa.” Once again, Jason seemed to know just what she was thinking. He sounded frazzled too, because she didn't understand. She didn't really *want* to. She took a breath, trying to steady herself.

“You have to understand, love. I *did* think about you in that moment.”

Her heart stuttered in her chest. Seriously? That was supposed to make it better? He considered her, thought about her, about how much it would fucking *hurt* to lose him, and he did it *anyway*. She opened her mouth to tell him off, but he just kept talking.

“It wasn't like I thought about how hurt you'd be. Or angry. Or sad. My thoughts were more along the lines of how much better off you'd be without me. I thought about how much you loved me and how badly I could fuck you up because of it. I was a party boy. I was fun when we went clubbing, but I knew nothing about running one. And D'Light—it was your *dream*. Your *big* dream. I was going to fuck it up. Dealing coke out of the bathrooms or busting someone's ass when I bounced them. I was going to ruin your dream. I had to stop myself from doing that.”

“You were...protecting me?” She didn't want to understand, hadn't she decided that? But she could see the picture he was painting. She could understand how someone who'd made up his mind to die would be freaked-out by what they'd had. Because what they'd had was so good. And if he were so sure he was going to mess it up...

Clarissa shook her head, trying to dislodge the thoughts. She didn't want to understand. She didn't want to sympathize. But she did. She stared at that beautiful man she'd shared so much with, and she realized that the entire time, he'd been terrified. She touched his cheek with the tips of her fingers, and she could feel something inside her breaking. Walls she'd built to protect herself, anger and frustration and disappointment...all of it curdling like milk left in the sun. “Goddammit, Jason. I wanted you to stay with me.”

Jason nodded. “I know that now. Hell, I can even see how wrong my thinking was then. But at the time? I just thought about how bad I was going to hurt you. How I was going to take everything down with me when I did it too. If I didn't kill myself, I'd have married you. I bought the ring.” A smile slipped across his face then, the sort of smile she'd never seen on him in life. Peaceful. “And that's when it started again. That's when I realized I'd fallen too hard for you, and I needed to save you. I had to get away from you, before I took you down with me. If we got

married, we'd have kids. How bad would I have screwed *them* up?" He met her gaze, pleading with his eyes for her to understand. "I had to stop myself."

Much as she didn't want to, she understood. "I should've stopped you." The words were a whisper. She didn't believe them anymore. Didn't believe she *could* have stopped him, and that was both a blessing and a curse. She collapsed back into his arms.

For a long moment, she was content to be held, and when she spoke, she changed the subject. "Am I...dead?" A sound caught her attention, and she tilted her head to listen for it. "I think...someone's calling me, Jason."

## Chapter Ten

Jason propped himself up on one arm and turned to look through the doorway of the office to where her body lay sprawled on the floor. The Dom still knelt over her, performing CPR. Mihai kept muttering under his breath, words Jason couldn't hear, though the sound of them was familiar. Like a chant.

Clarissa—the one beside him—reached toward her abandoned body. “I think...” she whispered...but the rest of her words were lost as she wavered in the air before him. “I’m...not quite dead.” The realization hit them both at the same time. “He’s going to bring me back.”

Her eyes, wide and terrified, met his.

Tears filled his eyes, blocking her from view. “Go, love.” His throat closed over the words, but he managed to force them out.

“What happens to you if I do?”

He grinned at the steely tone of her voice, blinked away his tears, and met her gaze. “I don’t know.” He shook his head. “Maybe I’ll stay here, haunting the club forevermore.” He shrugged, pretending nonchalance. “Usually ghosts are sticking around for some unfinished business...something they regret.” He touched her cheek, unsurprised when his fingers felt only the barest resistance. “The only thing I ever regretted leaving was you. So maybe I’ll move on now, to whatever is next.”

Clarissa’s eyes filled, and he could see her weighing the options. He could also see she wouldn’t be strong enough to fight the Dom’s efforts for much longer. “If I go, this might be it?”

Despite the way his stomach roiled with the idea, Jason held her gaze while he nodded. She had a chance to live—he wasn’t going to take it away from her. “Kiss me,” she whispered, and her voice was steel and need and pain, and he could do nothing but obey.

\* \* \* \*

The second his lips touched hers, everything else faded away. The demands Mihai was making on her other body disappeared beneath the needs *this* body was insisting be fulfilled. Her world narrowed to the feel of Jason's lips, the slow intrusion of his tongue into her mouth, his hands twining ever so gently in her hair. A fierce, agonizing need flared between her thighs, a wet heat demanding release. And still he coaxed her. Convincing, persuading, soothing her, all with his tongue and his lips.

She moved, intending to maneuver herself over him, but he followed her movement so that she found herself splayed out on her back, Jason moving over her, though holding himself so his weight didn't pin her down. When his tongue thrust into her mouth, the pain—the need—between her legs throbbed. She moaned in her throat, unwilling to release his mouth, his tongue, even to give voice to her desire.

His name resounded in her mind—a wail. A wish. A wish granted, she realized, and with the thought, she became frantic. She wrapped her legs around his thighs, pulling his hips against hers. She ground against him like an animal in heat. Needing. She helped him out of his jacket, his shirt, and licked at the skin of his chest, his shoulder, his neck. She wanted to reach more of him, but the angle was wrong, and she wasn't willing to let him go, even to allow herself access. She'd been without him long enough.

“Jason,” she murmured. Begging. Though she wasn't sure what she was asking for.

Thankfully he seemed to know exactly what she wanted. In a matter of seconds, they were both naked, his body pressed along hers, skin against skin. She writhed beneath him so her clit was massaged by the ridge of his hip.

He moved, breaking the contact, and she bit back a sob. “Don't,” she begged. *Don't go...*

*...don't stop...*

*...don't leave...*

*...don't let this be a dream...*

*...don't let me be taken away from you...*

He looked at her then, and his eyes—a chocolate brown she'd always thought of as velvet soft—blazed within his face. “No,” he whispered, and his voice was ragged. He shook his head slowly, disbelief and fear and anger in his expression.



Clarissa stilled beneath him, aware only that something was wrong. Something had changed. He didn't want her. She moved, planning to sit up and find some dignity behind the shield of her clothes. He forestalled her movements, gripping her hands in his, feathering kisses along her wrist. She watched him, confused and aroused and resentful he could make her feel so much so easily.

"I've watched you," he told her. He met her gaze, willing her to know what he meant, but she shook her head. No. He didn't mean what it sounded like. He hadn't...*watched...that*. "For the last year, I've haunted the club. And I've watched you..." She shook her head in denial, but he kept talking. "I've seen you"—he had to clear his throat so she'd be able to hear him—"with other men. What you make them do." His voice faltered, and she could hear the tears and frustration he was barely keeping at bay. "Don't be gentle," he spat.

"Oh my God," she whispered, and Jason nodded. "You watched?"

"Every time."

"Why?" She shook beneath him. Naked and trembling, she felt cold as gooseflesh broke over her skin.

"You were punishing yourself. Being...with them. Letting them do what they did. It was only fair I punish myself right along with you. Since it was my fault."

"Jason." she sobbed. She wanted nothing more than to ease his pain. To ease her own. To stop the ache that throbbed within her with every damn heartbeat since he'd died. "I'm sorry," she murmured, over and over again, until he pressed a kiss on her lips to stop her.

She moaned when he pulled away.

"I've missed you," she whispered, afraid she'd shatter the moment again but unable to not say it. How long did they have? How much time? The thought was enough to spur her to action. She was going to make the most of it. She needed him. Only him. Always him.

"Don't," she said again, and he glowered at her. He growled, and she was startled...and her need ramped up at the sound. Jason had always been the only one to work her up like this. The only one who could make her want him with a word, a sound, a look. "Don't make me beg," she said, and saw relief and need and pain flare in his eyes.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered, and she nodded. Of course he wouldn't. She didn't want him to. His tongue was on her neck, trailing down her skin, between her breasts. He

nuzzled the inside of her breasts before kissing his way across one to suckle at her nipple. Circling it with his tongue, he waited until it was taut before he took it carefully between his teeth, tightening his grip slowly, so slowly she barely knew when he crossed from pleasure to pleasure-pain, and sobbed in agonized relief when he let her go. It continued to tingle with awareness as he treated the other nipple the same, and she wanted to scream with need.

Her hips lifted, arching her body into his, melding her hips to his stomach and chest. He smiled—she could feel the way his mouth moved against her chest—before he kissed his way down her stomach, along the edge of the triangle of hair at the apex of her legs. His breath taunted her clit to awareness before he nipped at the sensitive flesh of her thigh.

Squirming beneath him, she wanted to beg. For the feel of his tongue on her, inside her. For release. He chuckled, and his breath fanned across her clit, dragging her awareness back between her legs. Deeper, into her own aching need.

Then his tongue swirled around the desperate piece of flesh, and she groaned. Her attention, her need, her everything, collapsed within herself, narrowing to that one bit of sensation. She writhed beneath him.

His touch was so gentle. His tongue swirled, so there were moments he almost wasn't touching her at all—yet she was focused on nothing but him. Could feel nothing but him.

She arched her hips again, demanding. Needing. “Please, Jason,” she murmured and felt him chuckle against her. The heat of his breath against her supersensitive flesh was enough to flip her into orgasm, and she sobbed at the sudden fury that blazed through her. He nipped at her during the height of it, sending her spiraling higher, further into fulfillment.

Still shattered by her climax, fragmented into pieces of consciousness—her clit, her breasts, the sudden pounding of her heart—she moaned in startled pleasure when he slid inside her. She tightened around him, reveling in the feel of him, and delighted in the low moan he gave as she did.

“I've missed you,” he whispered into her mouth before claiming it with a kiss. He lifted himself above her, bracing his weight with his arms so he could hold her gaze while he slid slowly, torturously out of her. He adjusted to allow her to hook her ankles on his shoulders, and although he grinned lazily, she saw the sudden glazing of his eyes and knew it felt just as good for him.

He looked down and watched where their bodies were joined, but she focused on his face, trying to recapture every detail. To see if she'd forgotten anything—though she hadn't. Need built within her again, and she wriggled her hips to encourage him to speed up.

He slowed down.

She laughed and bit her lip when he gave her a falsely stern glower. “You don't laugh at a man when he's inside you, Clarissa. It hurts his feelings.” He slid his hands down her body to cup her ass, lifting her into him, grinding his hips against hers. She moaned as the friction of his pelvic bone on her oversensitized clit shattered her thoughts, and she was once again nothing but sensation.

He slid in and out of her with slow, careful thrusts designed to keep her on the edge of need. He held her gaze, laughter and delight and torment shining in the depths of his eyes. He slowly increased their tempo, stoking her toward orgasm with a steadiness she wanted to hate. But the sweetness of it made her every protestation fall from her lips as a moan.

Her orgasm tightened within her, the muscles of her thighs, stomach, and ass clenching and relaxing in a rhythm slightly faster than the one he'd set. He sped to match her, and she held his gaze through the rising haze of lust and fulfillment. His arms bunched, and his eyes glazed. Beads of sweat stood out on his skin, and she barely resisted the urge to lean forward and lick them away.

But only because he felt so good right where he was. Because he was hitting a spot within her that was tension and relief at once. Because she was already throwing her head back in a soundless scream as she fell through her orgasm. He groaned above her, his body tightening all at once, pounding fiercely into her as he milked the last of his orgasm from his body. He groaned loudly, and she realized she'd clenched her muscles tight around him, though she hadn't planned any such thing.

It felt...amazing. Right. Perfect.

Like every time had always felt. Softness and warmth and...love.

Her eyes slid closed, and she became aware of a pair of hands moving over her stomach, her chest, her neck. With frustration, she realized what she felt was Mihai, trying to revive her body. *Not yet*, she told him, though of course he couldn't hear. *No!* She screamed it at him in her

mind. *I'm not leaving.* But already she could feel the pull of that body, the insidious tethers of her living flesh.

"I love you," she whispered to Jason, and tears slid from her eyes to coat her cheekbones in moisture. She couldn't say good-bye. Instead she lifted her head to meet his eyes, which were moist with unshed tears. "I love you," she said again and was rewarded with his voice, soft and resonant in her ears, echoing within her chest.

"I love you."

She pressed her hand to her chest, as if she could trap his words there, and felt a rope, like silk, between her fingers. She followed the line of it from the corner of her eye and saw it end at Jason. This was the tie that bound them, even beyond his death. She smiled. Even if she went back, they were forever bound. A love neverending.

Then she was dragged away from him by slow, insistent fingers. Backward, through the tunnel of brambles. Only now she understood what they were. They were the bonds, the connections she should have made in the world she lived in. The people who tried to be her friends, who tried to make relationships with her. They were life.

They turned into fingers—grabbing, clutching—dragging her away. She fought, struggling, kicking, and thrashing, but they didn't let go. Instead, they tightened, becoming manacles and chains binding her to a life she no longer wanted.

When she reached the tunnel's mouth, the sound of something tearing filled her ears—the tunnel's mouth, the world itself—and she watched as the crimson tether that bound her to Jason stretched, spiraling away into the darkness toward him like a ribbon of blood.

Clarissa screamed.

## Chapter Eleven

“Oh shit, Tamiel. What have you done?” Mihai fell to his knees at Clarissa's side, watching the livid bruises bloom around her neck. He sat back on his haunches, tears filling his eyes. Since the first day he'd met her, he'd been afraid of this day. He'd worked to try to avoid this. To avoid staring into those dead and vacant eyes.

Tamiel walked into her life, spent a few hours with her, and now she was dead. “I am *so* sick of losing people to that *asshole*,” he said. The last word was a guttural roar that scratched his throat as it exited. Tamiel, death, and pain—the usual triumvirate.

He stared at Clarissa's face, peaceful in death in a way it had never been in life, and wished it weren't so. Wished he could see regret in her features, or fear. Instead her lifeless features seemed restful. With a sigh, he closed his eyes to avoid looking at her anymore. This was what she'd wanted, from the very beginning.

“She's coming back.” The familiar voice was loud in the silent room, and Mihai's eyes flew open as he faced the Dark Angel.

Tamiel crouched at Clarissa's other side. He cradled her head with his huge hands, and the unexpected gentleness gave Mihai pause. Tamiel nodded toward Clarissa, as if he knew that, for a moment, Mihai had thought of someone else entirely. “I did it. Not her.” The Dark Angel's huge shoulders rounded as if he shouldered a burden too heavy for him.

Mihai didn't understand. He couldn't grasp the meaning of Tamiel's words, and he felt as though there was some deeper message he should be hearing in them. Not knowing pissed him off.

“She wanted to die, Mihai. You knew that about her. If she did it herself...” Tamiel swallowed, seemed to force the words out. “You know what that would have meant?”

Mihai shook his head.

Tamiel smiled quickly. Sadly. “You never understood what I was, did you?” The softness in Tamiel's voice was too much to bear. “I'm a Dark Angel, Mihai. Not named so because of my skin color but because of the work I do. I reap the souls of...difficult deaths. Souls of suicides are my...specialty.” Tamiel's lips gave a sardonic twist to the last word. “Clarissa wanted to do it herself.” His voice was so hoarse, Mihai had to wonder how he made any sound at all. Maybe he didn't. Maybe Mihai was simply reading the words on Tamiel's lips. “All those men before me, they were supposed to do it for her. Suicide by the hands of another. But if I hadn't come tonight, I think she would have done it herself. And she would have paid the price. Suicides go on to their next life, and they struggle from the moment they are born, as payment for the choice they made.”

His next words were strangled. His lips barely moved. As if he'd decided not to say anything but was speaking anyway. “It was my fault.” Mihai focused on Tamiel's face, trying to catch the words before the pain began. “I fucked up the reap of her boyfriend, a few years ago. She's been tethered to him ever since.” Tamiel's eyes were haunted then. “Living her life, incapable of creating new connections with new people. Wanting nothing more than to die because the most sensitive part of herself, the most critical to her well-being, was tethered to a man who was dead and in limbo.”

Mihai felt a wave of dizziness crash over him. “You?” It wasn't what he'd wanted to say. He'd meant to show sympathy, understanding, but all he'd managed was his shock. The expression on Tamiel's face—the pain and sadness—made Mihai wish he could take it back, but his teeth ground against each other as he fought not to feel any closeness to Tamiel. He was the enemy.

“Yeah.” A single word, so full of self-loathing and recrimination. “My fault. So when I saw her tonight—when I understood what had happened to her—I...helped her.”

Mihai bristled. “How did you *help* her?”

Tamiel's closed his eyes, opened them again, and fixed his gaze on Mihai's, unwavering as he spoke. “I helped her cross to see Jason. To say good-bye. By *my* hands, instead of hers, so she wouldn't have to pay the price. But now she has to come back.”

Mihai swallowed again. Coming back was harder than crossing. More painful. You could help, an insidious voice whispered inside his head. He closed his eyes, trying to avoid the

temptation—temptation was the devil's work. But it hadn't been so hard to ignore his powers for almost a century. Not since Eden.

Memory and the current moment collided. Tamiel had been there then, and moments later, Eden was gone. Tamiel had said he dealt with suicides, hadn't he? Did that mean Eden, too? Mihai's eyes slipped closed, as if somehow that could brace him against the pain. Instead, deprived of distractions, something stirred in a distant part of his mind. A monster reawakening. His lids flew open, and he found himself facing Clarissa's peaceful face. Beneath her flesh he could see her soul, could see the struggle she was facing to return home.

He could see her pain.

With a muttered oath, he made his decision. He'd been given a power, and as hard as it was to wield, walking away from it hadn't helped anyone. He closed his eyes. Ridding himself of his power had been like stuffing fog into a box, scooping handfuls of something with no substance and putting it away. *Locking* it away. He'd cut himself off from his power, but he hadn't fallen. Apparently that was a right granted only to the Light and Dark, not to their half-breed bastards.

He reached with shaking mental hands for the box, specifically the chains that surrounded it. Picking up where he'd left off would carry more consequence than walking away. The punishment his brethren believed he'd escaped would be made public to them, and that would only be the beginning. His proclivities would be laid bare. But he could help her.

He opened his eyes and looked at Clarissa. Inside his mind, tendrils of his power seeped from the edges of the box. Not enough yet to commit him to any course of action, but taunting him with their closeness. With how easily they escaped. Staring at her face, at the livid bruises on her neck shaped suspiciously like very large fingertips, he steeled himself. Flicking his wrists, he coiled the tendrils of smoke around them, drawing his power back to himself, wielding it like a pair of whips. He would use them to lash out. Against Tamiel.

For Clarissa, and for Eden.

With a will of its own, his long-ignored talent flooded him with electric pulsing. He'd forgotten how it felt. How overwhelming, how frightening. How tenuous his control over it had ever really been. He was the vessel the power used for channeling, but that was the extent of his control. He couldn't *make* it do anything.

Ironic that being filled by such power left him feeling powerless.

That was the last thought he had. The tendrils of smoke became fog, then an obliterating white noise as the power surged through and around him. Ease her pain, Mihai told it, and it surged forward from him like a pack of ravenous, wild beasts.

Even as his talents worked their miracle on his behalf, he felt the rest of the connections he'd severed slip back into place. The panoply. The entire *host* of angels he'd abandoned. Connections reestablished. A network of minds slid into place around him as if he were a square peg, finally pounded into that round hole. He bit back a scream and let it all happen. This was the price he'd known he'd have to pay to help her. And all he could give her was some relief from her pain. Nothing more.

Again, images flipped through his mind—Eden, Clarissa, Tamiel—and Mihai knew he'd made the only choice he could, so he surrendered to its effects. His mind thinned, as ephemeral as the fog, and he followed its progress. He drifted with it at breakneck speed, spiraling through a tunnel and descending around her. She didn't want to leave. Mihai could see her reluctance. A quick glance at Jason even made him understand—he was an attractive man, and the love in his eyes made him beautiful. But this wasn't God's will. This wasn't Clarissa's time or place.

His stomach wrenched as he realized how thoroughly he'd been manipulated. Tamiel had known he was in the club. He must have guessed that Mihai and Clarissa had a relationship. It wouldn't be hard to put two and two together on that one—Clarissa was a masochist and Mihai was...what he was. A sadist, his mind provided, as if he didn't know the word. Knowing all that, Tamiel had counted on Mihai caring for the woman. Anger burned through him, tinting the fog of his power red, and he locked it down so it wouldn't affect Clarissa.

He'd thought he had a choice.

Mihai almost laughed. He hadn't had a choice since Tamiel had walked through the doors of the club. He'd been manipulated into helping Clarissa. Into returning to his place, and his anger resurged. Mihai had walked—and stayed—away for a hundred years. He wouldn't have returned any other way. Manipulated into it. “Damn you, Tamiel Kasdeja,” he murmured. No response from him, though Mihai hadn't expected one. He let go the thoughts and concentrated on easing the pain.

“EMTs are on their way,” Tamiel whispered. Mihai nodded, focusing his attention on Clarissa. “They're downstairs.”



Tamiel whispered other words Mihai couldn't quite hear, though the cadence of them was familiar. As was the sensation of something crawling under his skin, writhing and coiling under his flesh before settling into slumber. They were invisible now to human eyes. Mihai nodded his thanks. The EMTs hurried into the room. It was up to them now, to call her body back from the brink. He'd done all he could for her soul.

He closed his eyes, calling the power back within himself. It fought him—it always did—and he wrested back control with a soft grunt. When he was free, he met Tamiel's gaze. He knew what was coming. He had a few moments' reprieve, but it was coming. The recoil. The gift that allowed him to heal was passed to him by his father. The recoil was the result of the gift passed on by his mother. The knowing. Empathy.

"How did you know I'd do it?" His breath was shaky. He wouldn't admit it to Tamiel, but Mihai was frightened. He knew what was coming.

"You love her," Tamiel said. His voice was flat and uninflected. When Mihai checked, Tamiel's eyes gave nothing away either.

Mihai answered him honestly. "I care for her. Deeply." He glanced at Clarissa. Two men worked over her body. He could see their mouths work when they spoke, but Tamiel had sealed himself and Mihai off from sound as well as view. He was grateful. Any moment now the pain he'd allowed her to escape would attack him, and even the sound of their voices would be more than he could take. He held Tamiel's eyes. "What happened to her..." He kept his tone soft and even, so it was clear he wasn't accusing Tamiel. He was just explaining. "It made it impossible for love. Every attempt was repelled. But I cared." He glanced her way again. "She deserved better than this."

Tamiel looked as if he'd been struck. "She did." He paused, closed his mouth, opened it, closed it again. When he spoke, the words erupted from him as if they had a will of their own. "I fucked up. And I manipulated you to help fix it." A hint of apology in his tone. All the apology Mihai was going to get, too, he realized, as Tamiel continued. "But she deserved better. She can *live* now." Tamiel's voice sounded strained. "She has the capacity to love now, if that's...if that's what you want."

Mihai wanted to know if there was something behind those words. If there was any of the jealousy he was reading in Tamiel's voice. But he couldn't ask. "If she survives." Tamiel flinched

at the reminder of Clarissa's condition. Mihai dropped his head, avoiding Tamiel's gaze. It required all his attention to remain upright. Wave after wave of pain assaulted him, swamping his consciousness. He clung to awareness by the tips of his fingers—his nails biting into the flesh of his palms, keeping him awake. The brunt of the pain caught up with Mihai then, and he succumbed to it, falling to his knees. Tamiel's gaze flashed with concern, and Mihai waved him away weakly. “It is the payment. For using my gifts.”

“But you're... Your gift is pain.” Tamiel sounded genuinely confused, and something in Mihai broke free at the sound. Tamiel hadn't meant for this. It shouldn't make a difference, but as his vision clouded, that knowledge was like a bright spot peering through the darkness.

“I'm a half-breed,” Mihai said. His voice was barely more than a grunt. Could Tamiel even understand him? “Bastard. Half-angel, half-human. Half-assed gift.” Tamiel still looked confused. And worried. When Mihai began to collapse under the weight of his exhaustion, as the claws of pain began to tear through his consciousness, Tamiel surged forward to cradle him in his arms. Mihai looked up to meet those dark eyes. “My mother was an empath.”

Pain swamped him then. Fire exploded over every inch of his skin, while pain bloomed in hot spurts beneath his flesh. Agony zinged like lightning over and through him, and Mihai's body bucked in reaction. Through it, though, he could see the astonishment flash through Tamiel. Could see him understanding what Mihai told him.

Tamiel's arms tightened, to hold Mihai steady while he thrashed. Caught in the aftermath of his opposing gifts, Mihai's mind wandered, his imagination trying to create an oasis of calm and peace where he could avoid what was happening to his body. A desert, Eden's smile, a snow-dusted plain, the calm serenity of an ocean beach, Clarissa's wide eyes. The last one—before unconsciousness finally claimed him, and Mihai drifted in the painless dark—was the soft press of Tamiel's lips to his forehead, a murmured apology falling unheeded into Mihai's hair.

## Chapter Twelve

Jason looked around himself, bewildered and angry. Clarissa had disappeared, and he'd watched the EMTs work on her other self...until Tamiel said something and the room faded from Jason's view. He couldn't see *anything* but a dark, empty room. Gray, as if it were made of concrete. A single circle of light ringed the center of the room like a bull's-eye, and Jason had felt marked by sitting inside it.

Instead he sat just at the edge of the light. The source was obliterated by the light itself—just a large circle of white-yellow against the blariness. He rubbed a hand across his chest, surprised at the ache lodged there. Looking down, he saw the single crimson thread that leaked from his chest like a ribbon of blood.

Touching it gently, he smiled. This was his connection to Clarissa. Even though she was gone, he was still tied to her. It explained a lot. Why he'd been tied to the club. Why he hadn't moved on. Why *she* hadn't moved on.

That last one made him flinch.

It had been his fault. So much of what went wrong in her life. So much of the pain she'd had to bear. His fault. He'd died, and she'd carried the guilt and shame of it around with her. She hadn't been able to move on. Literally.

He heaved a sigh, frustrated with the melancholy turn of his thoughts. What else was there to do, though? It was like he was locked in a closet on some sort of cosmic time-out.

Was she okay? He knew her soul had been recalled to her body. Had she survived? Was she...intact? A cold sweat broke out over his skin. She'd been deprived of oxygen for a while. Could she have brain damage? Be left vegetative? Alive but dead. A chill broke over his skin with the thought.

It was a full minute later before he realized the irony of it. Isn't that what *he'd* been, for years now?

The wry smile tilted his lips, lingering there even as the room changed. The gray walls faded away, and he was left standing in Clarissa's space in the club. Tamiel stood facing him, no expression showing on his features. Anger and fear and frustration filled Jason at the sight of Clarissa's killer—who was also her savior, if he'd heard right. He didn't know what he was supposed to think, how he was supposed to feel, facing this man again. So his emotions stayed distant, beyond a thin veil of disbelief and confusion.

“It—” Tamiel's voice broke, and Jason stared into his eyes intently, trying to read the emotions he could see swirling in the darkness of his irises. Tamiel shook his head. “Listen, you have every reason to hate me right now, but...we have work to do.”

Jason stared at him but stayed silent. Let the big guy do the talking. Jason wasn't in the mood. Tamiel gave a slight nod of his head. A light seemed to go on directly above him. Tamiel's face clenched as if he was concentrating, and then...dark wings spread behind him. Black like a crow's, reflecting silver where the light kissed them, but so large that they dominated even Tamiel's massive figure. Jason gaped at them. Understanding avoided him, dodging his efforts like a bouncing ball.

“What are you?”

Tamiel grinned, a quick flash of white teeth against his dark skin. “I'm an angel. Duh.” His shoulders twitched, and the wings spread wide behind him, filling Clarissa's space with their darkness. “A Dark Angel,” he amended. The formality between them broke then, the shattering of it almost audible between them. “I'm one of the Host, sent to reap souls when their time comes. Specifically, when that time comes at their own hand. I do a few other things besides, but that's the one that's important to know right now.”

Jason flushed. Tamiel was an expert on suicides. Made sense, he supposed. As much as anything made sense. However, if Jason himself could be a ghost for three years, he could accept, in theory, the idea of a Dark Angel whose job was to...reap the souls of people who took their own lives. Something about that sent a jolt of fear through Jason's body like an electric current.

Tamiel nodded again. “Yeah. People like you.” Tamiel coughed, and Jason had the feeling it was hard for Tamiel to hold his gaze, but he did it anyway. “I was supposed to reap you.” Self-loathing laced his words when he continued. “I fucked up. I don't know how or why.” He gave a

shrug, and Jason noticed the wings followed the movement—that little detail was all he needed to accept the truth of what he was seeing. Tamiel Kasdeja was an angel. Okay, then.

He met Tamiel's gaze. "Why didn't you?"

Tamiel shrugged again, but this time the movement was jerky. Angry. "My department is understaffed. No one really wants to take on the dead and dying, much less those people who do it to themselves." Tamiel took a breath, and when he spoke, his voice was softer, though anger still gave it an edge. "I'm not trying to make excuses. I've been working my ass off for two decades, and I'm not thrilled to know that one of my assignments slipped through the cracks." Another quick inhale through his nose, long exhale through his mouth. "I'm sorry. That's what I want you to know. I'm sorry, and it...wasn't anything personal."

"Not...personal?" Jason wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to say to that. His entire existence after his death was... What? Some sort of *job mishap*? All that he'd seen—everything he'd felt, everything he'd *learned*—and it was just a mistake? He shook his head. "It was pretty fucking personal to me." Tamiel flinched.

Jason had learned so much by living beyond his death. He'd *seen* how it affected not just Clarissa but other people he wouldn't have imagined would even notice. He'd watched the informal wake at the club after his death. He'd finally come to realize how flawed his thinking was, the illogic that had pushed him to commit his final act.

And all that was supposed to be just...a *mistake*?

Tamiel didn't move. His shoulders were squared, his hands folded passively in front of him. Jason realized he was waiting for some sort of reaction. For screaming and anger, probably.

Instead Jason leaned back, wrapping his arms around his knees. "If I hadn't had that time, I'd have died miserable." He laughed. "I *did* die miserable. But I've grown past that." He arched an eyebrow and wagered a guess. "I wouldn't have had that opportunity if you'd been on time, right?"

Tamiel grinned a little and nodded. "You would have moved on. Hopefully you'd be learning that lesson in your next life." The next words seemed grudging. "That next life would have been difficult. You might not have learned anything at all."

Jason shook his head. "You should take your time more often. I bet more people than me would learn. Going through what I have."

Tamiel shook his head. "Those who didn't go insane, maybe."

Jason considered that and gave a grudging nod of agreement. He *could* have gone insane. Watching her. Loving her. A lump rose to his throat. "You didn't kill her, did you?" Tamiel held his gaze, unwavering, and Jason knew he was right. "You just *temporarily* killed her. You planned from the start to bring her back to life."

Tamiel nodded. "Clarissa needed to see you again. To know it wasn't her fault that you died."

"You were giving her closure." Oh it hurt. Hurt to know this man had done the one thing Clarissa needed most. Hurt to feel jealousy over that, considering that Tamiel *had* killed her, no matter what his motives. It hurt to know that she had been blaming herself, and that he'd never even considered that she would. Shit. He'd thought he was a mess yesterday.

Jason stood up, turned away from Tamiel, and headed for the stairs.

"It's time." Tamiel's voice rumbled a little, as if he had thunder caught in his throat.

"Time?" Jason didn't understand what he meant, but he didn't like the little ripple of fear he felt at the word.

"For you to finish your journey." Frustration was evident in Tamiel's tone now.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Only he *did*. He had the strange, terrifying notion he understood exactly what Tamiel meant.

"You're dead, Jason."

"That's hardly a news flash."

"And now it's time to move on." Tamiel looked menacing now, and Jason was *sure* he knew what he meant. Fear and anger clawed their way jointly to his throat, lodging there in a firm ball he couldn't cough out. And then Tamiel said the one thing that Jason would never forgive him for saying. "It's time to let Clarissa go."

Jason looked down at his chest and was not surprised to see the ribbon, bright and red and shining, streaming from where it was lodged in the center of him and winding away into the distance. To Clarissa.

## Chapter Thirteen

“Jason!”

Pain, as though a knife were ripping its way through her neck from the inside. What—  
“Jason?” Fear now, as sharp and piercing as the pain.

She didn't know where she was. Tears slid from her eyes.

“It's okay, love. *You're* okay.” The voice was familiar, but it wasn't Jason's. Why had she thought it would be?

She tried to shake her head, but the pain flared in her neck again. *It's not okay.* She couldn't say it. Couldn't force her voice through the fiery, sharp column that was her throat. Tears trickled down her face, tickling the hollows by her ears. She wanted to wipe them away, but it was too hard to move her arms. Pain blossomed in thick, heavy blooms throughout her body, and she gave a strangled moan.

“The meds will take a few to kick in,” a voice said. She didn't recognize it, but it was a good voice. Male, strong, calm, and patient.

“I'm here,” the first voice said again, and now she knew who it was. Mihai. Her eyelids fluttered as she struggled to open them, but her vision was clouded, and she felt sick, so she closed them again quickly. “It's okay. You had a close call, but you're okay now.”

Why did he keep telling her that? She *wasn't* okay.”Where?” It hurt to say that much, and she fell silent, hoping it was enough. Hoping he'd heard, because the idea of repeating herself led more tears to fall.

“You're in an ambulance,” Mihai told her.

That explained the sirens. “Why?”

Mihai made an uncertain noise. Blinking hard, she could make out the dark shape of him to her left. He leaned close, so close she could feel his breath on her cheek. “Do you remember dying?”

What a ridiculous question. But it didn't want to make her laugh. It made the tears stream faster, made her chest ache with something familiar. Loss and pain. The pain of loss. Memories fell into place like a sudden weight, as if her veins had turned to lead.

Jason.

With her.

Making love in the space between life and death. *Oh God*, she wanted to cry. *Let me go back.*

Maybe she'd managed to say it aloud, because Mihai answered her. “You can't go back, love.” He sounded as if his heart was breaking for her, and that made her unexpectedly angry. *Her* heart was breaking. How *dare* he make her worry about *him*? Again, he seemed to understand what she was thinking. He smoothed the hair back from her forehead, which earned him a sharp admonition from the other voice. Mihai apologized thickly, but Clarissa heard anger in his voice too.

“Why?” she asked, but the other voice said something, and Mihai moved away. Too far for her to feel his breath on her cheek anymore, too far for him to hear her scraped and damaged voice.

“We're almost there,” he said. “You're going to be okay.”

Clarissa shook with repressed sobs. It wasn't okay. She wanted to go back. She'd been with Jason. He'd held her, kissed her, touched her...and Mihai had taken her away from that.

She used her silence as a weapon against him, though he probably didn't notice.

The other voice receded, and Mihai leaned close again. “I know you're angry, Clarissa, but please, believe me. You *can't* go back. It was a temporary reprieve. A chance to say good-bye. Tamiel should have told you before he sent you.” Mihai stopped then, and Clarissa had the feeling he could expound quite a bit about Tamiel. Perhaps he'd call him all the names Clarissa currently wanted to. Except Tamiel *had* given her some time with Jason. She should be grateful for *that*, shouldn't she?



It was all too much. The noise of the sirens, the rumble of the ambulance itself, Mihai's soft voice, the other man occasionally barking information to himself or someone else, who never spoke. The pain of leaving Jason. The anger—at Mihai for bringing her back, Tamiel for not warning her. For sending her in the first place. Had it been easier before she'd seen Jason again?

Somehow she didn't think so, but she didn't want to admit that, even to herself.

Then she remembered something else. A little detail, but it was one that *would* make it all worthwhile to her.

She lifted her hand, though it took almost all her energy to do so. By the time she had it positioned above her chest, she could barely hold it up, and it flopped to her chest like a fish out of water. Yet it was exactly where she'd needed it to be. Because she felt it. The thin, taut, cottony thread she'd been unaware of before her death. Her connection to Jason.

Closing her eyes, she let out a soft sigh of relief.

She just had to bide her time.

It seemed a waste of time for them to patch her up, but she'd let them. The minute she was alone, she'd take care of it. She'd take a million pills or slit her wrists, shoot herself... Hell, she'd do all of the above. But she'd die, and she'd follow that connection straight to his side. They'd be together. Forever this time.

A peaceful smile curved her lips, and she let herself surrender to unconsciousness for a while. To dream, hopefully, of Jason.

## Chapter Fourteen

Tamiel moved to embrace Jason, preparing for another life-walk. How many would this make? He was so tired. Jason had been dead for a few *years*; how much harder was that going to make this? Not that it mattered. He had a job to do. He'd do it. Determination stiffened his spine.

Thunder clapped in the air around them, and Tamiel was thrown back three steps. "What?" he asked peevishly. It occurred to him he was being pissy at the Almighty, and that he'd been doing a lot of that lately. He didn't much care. This job was brutal. Sometimes, being a smart-ass helped him through it.

The thunder grumbled again, and this time he could hear the words. "There's no need for that, Tamiel." Tears pricked Tamiel's eyes, but he didn't let them fall. Couldn't. The tears of an angel were sacred.

"I don't understand," he said, and his voice was mostly free of anger.

"He's learned his lessons. You heard him. I know you heard him, because *I* heard him. What more could he learn from a life-walk?" Tamiel let the voice roll through his mind the way he let flavors roll over his tongue. It had been a very long time since God had spoken to him directly, and not through the rain or the thunder or quivering lights. He'd thought God couldn't talk to him anymore, that Tamiel had sullied himself so much with his work that God had to step away. Instead, his mistake had cost him God's voice as well. The tears he couldn't let fall stabbed at his lids. Tamiel had missed Him.

"Then what do I do with him?"

Laughter at that, and Tamiel relished the sound like it was a drug. "Out of your waters, little fisherman?" Tamiel fought the rise of emotions at God's teasing. The nickname wasn't one Tamiel had ever worn with pride. Not like the apostles, who were fishers of men. Tamiel was a fisher of souls. The joke wasn't any funnier now than it had been centuries ago. Yet the sound of

God's laughter—a sound Tamiel hadn't heard in years—made it impossible to hold on to his pique.

“Yes,” he admitted instead. “I have no idea what to do here.”

“Fix your mistake.”

“I *tried* that.” Tamiel's anger had almost as much rumble to it as God's voice had had initially.

“Make him understand what needs to be done. *Without* a life-walk.” He officially sounded frustrated now, so Tamiel bit off his instinctive reply. “A little test, if you will.”

Which confirmed what Tamiel already knew—Jason hadn't heard a word of their byplay. He'd been frozen in time while Tamiel and God had their sidebar, and Jason would be released when God was ready, and not a moment before. “He needs a test? After all this?” He wasn't arguing, though. For the first time in...longer than he could remember, further back even than the last time he'd heard God laugh...Tamiel wasn't arguing.

Jason looked up at him, blinking as if he was dislodging sleep from his eyes.

“We need to sever the connection,” Tamiel said. No preamble. No warning. It was better that way.

“What?” Jason's hands flew protectively to where the band spun out of his chest like a red spiderweb. “I can't do that.” His voice and his eyes were anguished, and Tamiel resisted the pull of them on his heartstrings.

“Look at how she's been, Jason. Why do you think that is?” Tamiel kept his voice soft. So gentle. Not accusing, not angry. Just calm, decisive reason. “Because she's still connected to you. *So* connected, in fact, she's repelling other ordinary connections with other ordinary humans.”

Jason crumpled. There was no other word for it. His face seemed to fall in on itself; his knees shook. “I did that?”

Tamiel shook his head. Gentle. Always gentle. That was the key here; he knew it. “No. We all did that. Your connection with her was a true one.” Tamiel felt the smile splitting his face. “Your *love* was a true love.” Tamiel gestured at the connecting thread with one finger. “You both earned that. But you died, Jason, and Clarissa didn't. Imagine being tied to a dead body for three years of your life. The flesh rotting, bugs starting to infest it—you wouldn't wish *that* for her, would you?”

Jason shook his head. Tamiel wasn't sure if it was an automatic response, if Jason had heard a word he'd said. But he kept pressing. "You wouldn't do that to her, but you're willing to tie her to your soul. Not cool, man. Not cool at all." No disapproval in his tone, though. He understood what Jason was doing. Shit, if Tamiel himself had that sort of connection to someone, a genuine love like that, returned by the object of his affections? He'd want to hold it tight too.

Jason looked around as if he might find the truth in the room around him. And maybe he did, because as his gaze lighted on item after item with no connection to him, his eyes started to light with understanding. "It's why she was more at peace here, isn't it? Because I never came here. It stretched our connection somehow."

Tamiel shrugged, but it was as good a reason as any. He didn't say a word, afraid anything he said might change what was going on inside Jason right now. Ripples in a pond—unpredictable and unchangeable.

Jason's back straightened, and he met Tamiel's gaze. "If that's what we have to do for Clarissa, that's what we have to do."

Tamiel nodded, but in his mind, he was still imagining how it would feel to have someone truly love him. Someone he could love back. And as he lifted a letter opener from the desk and held it toward Jason, he wondered if he could make the same decision, if he'd been in Jason's place.

Then he shut down thought altogether as Jason held the edge of the letter opener to the connection binding him to his one true love. With a quick breath, Jason slashed upward with the sharper edge, severing the bond. The other end whiplashed away like a released spring, and Jason fell to his knees.

Tamiel hurried to his side but stopped short of touching him. The last thing Jason would want was his help. Right? He felt his hand fist, almost of their own accord, at his sides. He had no idea how to deal with this. No idea how to help at all. The fact that it was all his fault sucker punched him once again, and he fought back waves of guilt. His fault. His fucked-up reap. He was the reason that poor soul had been tethered to some living girl for three years, and the reason she'd been connected to him. Shit, she might have died, and no one would have understood the fucked-up way it went down.

Maybe it was time Tamiel started looking for new work.

Then Jason turned to look up at him, the stunted end of ribbon between his fingers, and Tamiel crashed to his knees beside him. “Will it always hurt this bad?” Jason asked, and Tamiel could only shake his head. Because any moment now, God would order Tamiel to release Jason's soul, and he wouldn't feel anything anymore. Not until the moment of his next birth.

Until then, though...it was going to hurt like hell.

## Chapter Fifteen

Clarissa took the painkillers, and the doctor's well-intended advice, and stuffed them both away to be immediately forgotten. The doctor had asked her a bunch of pointed questions, and it had been easy for her to fake the right answers. He wanted to refer her to a psychiatrist, but she'd refused. Mihai wasn't happy when she'd asked him to tell the doctors the injuries had *not* been self-inflicted, but he did. That got her out of the suicide watch. When they wanted her to stay overnight—connected to tubes and machines to make sure her heart rate and breathing remained even—she'd refused, signed a waiver absolving the hospital of responsibility, and walked out the doors.

Mihai had told them he'd be with her and he'd keep her safe, and she'd let him believe that—right up to the moment they went to climb into the cab. Then she'd told him she needed space. She'd meet him at the club, she assured him. She just needed those few minutes to herself.

She slipped her cabbie a twenty to tell dispatch someone had already picked up Mihai. He'd have to go in and get another one sent, and that would buy her just a few extra minutes. Then she slipped him another twenty to imagine speed limits were merely guidelines. “Important date, lady?” he asked with a grin, and she nodded.

“The love of my life is waiting,” she whispered. She pressed a small fist into her chest. An ache had lodged there, just below and between her breasts, and she couldn't seem to ease it.

She stepped out at the curb, surprised to see that people were still filing in and out of the club. Her watch confirmed what the lineup was telling her—it was the busiest part of the evening, just before last call. Things had started happening right at opening, at nine, and now it was almost three. Six hours, and her entire life had changed. Hell, she'd *died* once tonight. The paramedics insisted that was impossible, that she'd only lost consciousness for a few minutes before they arrived, but they were wrong.

The bouncers skeptically watched her approach until she stood under the light. Ken, the kid who was working there on weekends to save up for a bike he wanted, smiled at her. Chris, who worked most of the same shifts as Ken, waved as he unhooked the velvet rope keeping people out of the club. She smiled briefly at them both, but when she met their eyes, she felt...*something*. Inside the doors, she rubbed absently at her chest and kept walking.

Regular customers stopped and said hello; waitresses offered her drinks. She smiled and waved them all away, but even as she did, she felt a strange tightening sensation throughout her body.

Approaching the bartender, she blinked. The dry-ice fog had started up again, and it seemed to be clinging to weblike strands floating all around the club. Following them, she saw they weren't in the rafters, as she'd first assumed, but tied to each person in the club, connecting one to another and another and...to her.

"Shit," she whispered, and then the bartender—Andy—turned to face her with a smile. She watched as a blue ribbon wound out from his chest and slammed into hers, and she flinched a little at the impact. "I'm going upstairs for a few," she told him. "I'd rather be left alone." She cast a quick glance toward the entrance, hoping the bouncers wouldn't let Mihai through right away. She'd forgotten to tell them, and she didn't want to step back outside now in case he waylaid her.

Nervousness made her jittery, and she ordered without thinking. "Vodka. Rocks," she said. Andy lifted an eyebrow—it wasn't her usual drink—but poured without a single word. She drank it down, slammed the glass on the bar, and asked for another. The second one did the trick. As the alcohol rioted through her system, she gained a little distance from the emotions swamping her and took one long, deep breath. "No interruptions, please, Andy."

Then she turned and walked away, ignoring the threads in the air, the bewildered look on Andy's face, and the voice screaming at the door that he had to get in right away.

Up the stairs, and it was as surreal as if she were miming the actions. She stepped into the office, opened the safe, and withdrew the gun she kept there. Then the box of bullets from the lockbox inside her desk. She laid them on the desktop and stared at them for a moment before she reached for her purse and pulled out the painkillers she'd stuffed inside.

The bottom drawer of her desk held a mickey of rye, and she pulled that out too, to line it up between the pills and the gun. With a decisive nod, she pulled out the office chair and eased herself into it.

She stared at them, her gaze moving from one object to the next. Pills first. Wash them down with the rye. Then the gun. She had a plan. She had the tools.

She touched the connection in the center of her chest and rubbed at it absently. The threads weren't visible anymore, but somehow that made it easier to *feel* them. Tears slid down her cheeks. She didn't want to feel them. She wanted Jason.

Her hands shaking, she reached for the bottle of pills.



## Chapter Sixteen

Jason stared at the broken thread in his hands. It had just...stopped. He'd expected more physical pain. The emotional agony was more than making up for it, though. He closed his eyes and swallowed around the lump in his throat. A choked laugh escaped, and Tamiel stared at him for a long moment before Jason could bring himself to speak.

"I thought, when she went upstairs with you, it was because she'd moved on. Was ready to move on...with you." Jason shook his head, afraid to let more laughter free, because it would be far too close to a sob. "Turns out, *I'm* moving on with you."

Tamiel's grin was as weak as the statement warranted, and Jason had the sudden, irrational thought that he could get to like the Dark Angel, if things weren't...whatever they were.

"It's time we started," Tamiel whispered. The room behind them faded, until they were standing, once again, in the gray and lifeless cell Jason had been exiled to before.

"No reason not to. Not now." He didn't want to sound so self-pitying, but shit, it still hurt. "Will she forget me?" he asked. Hadn't wanted to *say* that either, but it seemed he'd lost all his self-control. Not to mention his self-respect.

Tamiel smiled. Not like the question was stupid either, but as if he'd anticipated it. "Never."

Jason nodded. That was answer enough, he supposed. Because any other question would be whether or not she'd move on. Find someone new. And he didn't want to know the answer to those questions. He straightened his shoulders. "I suppose it's time?"

Tamiel seemed a little surprised by the question. "I suppose it is," he said, though he looked around as if he was hoping someone else would answer for him. "You did the right thing," Tamiel told him, and he stood to face Jason, so that he was staring down at him from that impossible height of his.

Jason nodded. He knew that. He hated it, but he knew it. “Thanks.” He steeled himself for what was next... Only it wasn't what he expected.

A voice, like thunder and the ocean waves, spoke through Tamiel's mouth.

“It is not time.” The words, that tone—they were a decree, and Jason stared, shock rolling through him on that endless, rolling tide.

When Tamiel spoke again, it was his regular voice, and Jason never thought he'd be so happy to hear it. And so disappointed, all at once. “Not his time?” Tamiel's voice shook with fury, and Jason's heart raced for a moment until he realized the angel's anger wasn't directed at him.

“What's going on, Tamiel?” he whispered. Tamiel met Jason's gaze, but his eyes were wild with confusion.

“No idea.” Then he cocked his head, as if he heard something Jason couldn't, and his expression darkened. “Seriously?” Jason understood that Tamiel was being pissy with whoever had used him to broadcast that voice earlier, and he wondered if the Dark Angel was also completely insane. Someone with that kind of power—and who else could it be but *the* Divine?—and Tamiel was treating him like a teenager treats his parents.

The half conversation continued for a few minutes. Tamiel's words were more like punctuation: “I wish you'd told me.” “Still. Shit. You should've said.” “Yeah. I'll explain it.” A short pause. “I *said* yes. Anything to avoid the ventriloquist routine again. That sucked *ass*.” A long indrawn breath, then, “Poor asshole.” A rumble of thunder echoed throughout the room to that one, and Tamiel lifted his eyes skyward. “Sorry.” He didn't sound sorry. The thunder didn't happen again, though, so Jason assumed the apology was accepted.

Tamiel shook his head and met Jason's eyes. “You are, quite possibly, the *unluckiest* son of a bitch to ever die.” He motioned for Jason to sit and actually folded himself cross-legged on the floor facing him.

“You learned your lessons, so you didn't have to do the life-walk. That's a good thing because basically it underlines every bad decision you ever made, lets you know the bright and shiny alternative you could've lived, and then locks you back into your body to die all over again.” Tamiel held his gaze, so whatever was coming next must be important. “You've been dead three years. You don't want to know what going back to that body would've been like.”

Jason shuddered.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Tamiel's voice was threaded with laughter, although his face was deadly serious. “Still, you suffered a shitload, so avoiding the life-walk was...good, but...apparently you earned another shot. Which is why you were offered the chance to sever things yourself. If I'd done it”—Tamiel shuddered—“there'd have been a lot more pain. Some blood. Some essential part of yourself—the very essence of *who you are*—would have leached out of that connection, and you would have been born into your next life...incomplete, for lack of a better word.”

The sudden pause made Jason wonder if he'd missed something, but he realized Tamiel was just waiting for him to acknowledge that, so far, he hadn't lost Jason altogether. So he nodded, and Tamiel started up again as if he had never stopped.

“So He threw that last test at you, and you passed. You chose *love*, first and foremost. And you chose to protect the living above yourself.” Tamiel paused, and Jason had the idea whatever he was going to say next required a little more tact. “That choice has given you a new option, so He says. You can go on to your next life—the one you earned when you killed yourself—and fight through it, with no memories of this life whatsoever. You can move on.”

“Or?” Jason couldn't help it. He wanted to know what carrot they were dangling before him. What was the catch that left Tamiel's eyes so wary, so carefully *not* jubilant?

“You can be elevated.”

“Elevated?” Apparently that was supposed to mean something, but he had *no* idea what.

“You can be taken from your status as a mere human and transformed into an angel.”

Skepticism took hold, based on one of the few Sunday-school classes Jason had ever attended. “I thought angels were a whole other species, unrelated to humans.”

Tamiel glowered at him. His voice was flat. “If God can make men from some dirt and water, I *think* He might be able to make an angel out of whatever he wants. Even a human.”

Jason laughed. He couldn't help it. But shit, he was *a ghost* talking with *an angel* about creation. Even Tamiel's lips twitched a little. “So...what does being an angel mean?” Because Jason still couldn't quite shake the fact that although Tamiel was saying this was an opportunity, he seemed to have some reservations.

"It's not at all what you'd expect," he said quietly. "And frankly, being reborn might be the better option. The elevation isn't your reward for the choice you made—it's a job offer. The reward part is that you'd keep your memories. You'd be able to remember Clarissa. What you had together. The life you led. For...well, as long as you're an angel, which is pretty much forever, unless God lets you out of your contract. That's never happened, in all my time with Him."

Jason nodded, but his skin all but tingled with anticipation. He could keep her. For at least a little while, he could keep Clarissa. Remember her. Think of her. Hold the memory of her lips and body against his and *not forget*.

He met Tamiel's gaze. "I know what I want," he whispered.

But Tamiel shook his head. "Know what you're getting into, Jason. He wants you to apprentice *with me*. To become an angel of death."

Jason hissed in a deep breath. Apprenticing with Tamiel. The self-proclaimed expert in suicide. Helping reap the souls of people, like Jason himself, who thought they only had one option left. Understanding came then, swift as lightning. "It's part of my punishment, too, right? If I moved on, I'd have to live through some shitty life and try to atone for killing myself this time around...and I still have to atone, even if I get to be elevated?" It was a question, but he knew the answer, so he wasn't surprised when Tamiel nodded.

"I'll do it," he whispered, although he was no longer certain he was making the right choice. He met Tamiel's gaze and held Clarissa's image in his mind. He'd be able to remember. "I'll do it," he said again.

Tamiel nodded abruptly and snapped his fingers.

Pain racked Jason's body. Agony shot fire through his shoulder blades, and his skin split with a sound like tearing paper. He writhed in agony as something hot, something sharp, like an overheated scalpel, worked its way through the flesh of his back. He screamed as bones cracked and reshaped, sinew tore and ruptured, and muscles tensed and released.

After an eternity encapsulated in a second, it stopped.

Jason dragged in a deep breath, steadying himself on his hands and his knees. When he felt steady enough, he clenched his hands, curled his toes, trying to understand his new body. For the

most part, it felt the same. His legs felt a little longer. He felt stronger. More powerful, in an indefinable way. He felt *alive*, and it felt pretty good.

When Jason stood, an unfamiliar weight dragged at him, and he turned to look over his shoulder at the mass of feathers behind him. He inhaled, and the feathers shook. Light played over them, translucent and edged in silver. “Holy shit,” he whispered.

Tamiel laughed. “Yeah. Exactly. The color will settle in a few days.” Then he sobered, and Jason heard him say, “Already?” It was clear Tamiel wasn't speaking to Jason, though, so he stayed quiet. “You okay, newly born angel type?”

Jason shrugged, feeling the alien weight shift with his movements. “Good as can be expected, I suppose.”

Tamiel nodded. “Good. Because it looks like we start work tonight.”

## Chapter Seventeen

Clarissa swigged straight from the bottle. The rye went down smooth, burning a little trail down her throat, past the knot of *connections* in her chest. The pill bottle lay on its side, a trail of blue pills spilling from its open mouth. As many of them as there had been ten minutes ago. And twenty minutes before that.

She couldn't do it.

The realization sent a sob surging from her chest, her throat, and she choked on the last swallow of rye. Not that it mattered; the alcohol wasn't helping in the least.

"Jason," she whispered. "I'm such a coward, but I just can't do it."

She swept the pills into one of the drawers, listening to each of them rattle against the metal bottom as they dripped off the papers and pens inside, and leaned back heavily in the chair. She didn't have the energy to lean forward and drop in the gun and pill bottle. She felt as if she had no energy left at all. She'd been *tethered* to her life.

All these people at the club—the waitresses, bartenders, bouncers, her regulars—every single one of them had a place in her life. The connections had assaulted her and cemented themselves into place so she couldn't quite imagine her life without them. God, how she resented them for it, and yet...she was grateful.

She slapped her hand against the desktop hard enough to make the pill bottle rattle and roll off the desk to the floor. She didn't want to care about anyone but herself. Herself and Jason, she amended. But he felt so far away. Farther than he'd felt before she'd seen him, before she'd known he was *somewhere*, and not just *dead*.

"What's wrong with me?" she whispered.

"You're alive," Mihai answered, and she started, her heart pounding triple time in her chest.

“Oh, shit, you scared me!” Petulant and pouty, like some sort of vixen trying to get his interest.

“Sorry,” he said, though the grin on his face suggested he wasn't. Not entirely.

“I want to be with him,” she whispered. “I want it so much. But I can't do it.” She stared at him, trying to bore a hole into his brain and get the answers she needed. “Why can't I do it, Mihai?”

He stepped around the desk and fell into a crouch at her side, holding her gaze. “Because you're not broken anymore, Clarissa.” His hands found hers, and she was startled by the warmth in them. The connection with him was more insidious, she realized. It didn't surge out to smack her in the chest, it was snaking through their fingers, inching its way into her, traveling as much of her flesh as it could along the way. It was in his voice, as though little curls of smoke left his mouth when he spoke, and they turned to those velvety ropes, binding her to him.

A little frisson of pleasure throbbed through her with that thought, and she squeezed her thighs together.

“When Jason died, his soul didn't go where it was supposed to. It remained tethered to you by the love you shared.” Mihai's eyes were so wide. Had they always been that shade of blue-brown? Had they always looked at her with such tenderness? How had she missed it before? “That connection was so strong. So deep into the most important parts of you that you started repelling all other connections. Until all you had left was *him*.” He sounded so urgent. Like he needed her to understand all this, like her life might depend on it. She gave the gun a startled glance and realized it might not just be a figure of speech. She tried to listen.

“You were so closed off that no one could get through. No new connections could form. You were as dead as Jason.” His voice was so soft. Even softer over Jason's name, as if the sound of it might send her into tears. Funny enough, it did, and she wiped the tears off her cheeks as if they were a weakness. “That connection between you—” Mihai paused, and she steeled herself. Whatever was coming, he didn't want to say it. “That connection was severed, Clarissa.”

She shook her head. No. No way. She'd been connected to Jason for years—through life, and even beyond into his death. There was no way. “Love neverending,” she whispered. Jason wouldn't leave her. Not now, not ever.

Mihai's eyes changed expression, sadness flooding them like water, obliterating the brown highlights inside them. "Love, yes. Oh that man adored you, Clarissa. And it was as true a love as ever existed, for that connection to go so deep and last so long. But tonight Tamiel had to finish his job. He had to send Jason's soul on to his next life."

Clarissa kept shaking her head. "No."

"You've noticed it tonight, Clarissa. People are making connections with you. Friendships, partnerships, those little connections that make life worthwhile. Those little seeds of relationships that could become something more if they were nurtured." His gaze dipped to the space between them, and she knew he could see those threads that had attached themselves to her. "You can only form those connections because Jason severed his connection to you."

So soft, his voice. So harsh, his words. "He would never stop loving me." She sounded panicked. She *was* panicked. Jason wouldn't, though. He'd never stop loving her. Would never give up on her. Anguished, she bit back another sob. If she'd just swallowed those pills, she'd be with him now. Her fingers twitched to grab them, but Mihai held her hands firm in his.

"He never stopped loving you. But he has to move on. It's his time, Clarissa, and it's selfish of you to want to keep him here just for you."

The angry bite in Mihai's tone stung as much as his words did. A dam broke inside her, and she let the tears go, leaving trails down her cheeks as they flowed. "What will I do without him?"

"You'll live, Clarissa. The other connections you form, they'll slide into place around the hole in your life that Jason left. Just like vines can grow over the stump left behind when a tree is cut down, those connections will cover the rougher edges of where Jason once was. It won't erase him, not ever, but it will make something hard and empty into something pretty again. It'll ease the pain of it." Mihai paused, his eyes shining with fervor. "You'll *live*."

She shook her head, but she wasn't sure she meant it anymore. Those connections had been unexpected, but they'd taken root, and she couldn't shake them off now. She wasn't even certain she wanted to. She'd opened her mouth to speak when she noticed the tendrils of curling lines coming off his body toward her. Lines the soft pink of cotton candy at the end closest to her, deepening to the color of blood at the other. The only other connection she'd seen that color was the one she'd shared with Jason, and she'd assumed it represented their love.



Which is when it dawned on her. That was what Mihai was offering her. His love. She just had to reach out to take it. He released one of her hands, and she raised it to touch his stubble-covered cheek. “I didn’t realize,” she said, letting the words drift into the air between them. Shock continued to assault the back of her knees until they buckled. “I had no idea.”

He held her gaze, letting her stare into his eyes and read the truth in them. She saw it all—friendship, admiration, and respect—emotions that could, over time, bloom into love. Those eyes were so familiar. The long sweep of his lashes, like clouds over the blue-brown oceans of his eyes. He was a good man. The bizarre thought that Jason would like him floated through her mind, and she caught back a sob. Jason was gone.

Mihai leaned up to kiss her gently, and Clarissa closed her eyes and let him.

## Chapter Eighteen

Jason's stomach lurched as the room around them disappeared once more. This time, however, he clearly heard the words Tamiel spoke, and felt the world all but shift beneath his feet. “Shit,” he whispered as his stomach seemed to continue rolling while the rest of him stopped. “That’ll take some getting used to.”

“This isn't what I would have chosen for your first job, kid, but I'm not Him.”

Idly, Jason noticed how he could hear the capital letter when Tamiel talked about Him. He said it with more deference than when he spoke *to* Him, that was for damn sure. Then Tamiel just seemed to fold in on himself—his arms crossed over his chest, his expression closed. His gaze was pointed at something Jason couldn't see, so he turned to look for himself.

Jason's heart stalled in his chest, his throat—his entire body seemed to clench between one heartbeat and the next. Clarissa stood against her desk, Mihai's body pressed against hers. His fingers were tangled in her hair, their lips barely a breath apart.

He couldn't speak. Couldn't, if he were asked, even think. All around Clarissa and Mihai swirled threads of every imaginable color, spiraling off into the distance, twirling in an unseen breeze—and worse, binding them together.

Jason rubbed his chest, the spot where the stunted end of his connection to Clarissa still burned. It thrummed with electric tingles when he touched it, and he moved his hand away slowly. He watched as their lips touched and those bonds flared like sparks between them, tying them closer together.

Then he couldn't watch anymore.

With his eyes closed, the image all but searing the inside of his lids, Jason heard Tamiel's voice. It floated over him like a coarse blanket. “Lesson one—an angel's tears are sacred. We don't cry. Ever.” Then his voice softened. “Hardly ever.”

Jason nodded, but when he opened his eyes, he kept his gaze on the toes of his shoes. This was cruel and unusual. He'd watched her every indignity, seen her share her body with any number of men. But this was different, and he knew it. Because that connection between them was gone, and she was free to move on.

For a moment, he considered the choice he'd made. To remember. For the rest of eternity, this moment would be branded in his brain. He would see her, locked in an embrace with another man. Holding him. Being held. The connection between them forging into something new. Could he live with *this* memory? Could he last century after century with this image in his mind?

When he lifted his head, saw the myriad of colors dancing around her like fairies in a painting, he knew the truth—this was the most beautiful he'd ever seen her, and he'd cherish this memory for the rest of his days. The best of his memories were double-edged—knowing what he'd had and given away—why should this be any different?

She would heal. She would go on and live and love and find happiness. It didn't change what they'd once had.

He straightened, his eyes shimmering with tears he wouldn't let fall, and watched.

The kiss broke off, and Clarissa rested her hand in the center of Mihai's chest. The precise place those connections wound out from all of their bodies, though Jason wasn't sure if she'd remember that fact. Would she remember being with him at all? The thought made him uncomfortable. He wanted to ask Tamiel, but Jason was transfixed by the scene playing out in front of them.

She smiled, and she was radiant. The grin faltered on her face, and she shook her head decisively. As Jason watched, the pink faded from the connection she shared with Mihai, until it was the palest rose-tinted white. "Not yet," she said.

Mihai didn't look surprised. That was the first thing Jason noticed, and something that would stick with him. Mihai had known this was coming, and he seemed to approve of her choice.

Clarissa, however, didn't notice and kept talking. "You have been—" Her words choked off in a bitter-sounding laugh. "You've been my best friend. I managed to push everyone else out. Everyone but you. I'm so grateful to you, for so many things, and this..." She gestured between them, as if at a loss for words. "I'm honored you'd even want it. But I can't. Not yet. Not

tonight, especially. I'm not broken anymore, but I'm still grieving. I'm still tender, where Jason used to be." Her eyes darted back and forth, like she was searching for the truth and it might only appear in *one* of Mihai's eyes, and she didn't want to miss it when it happened.

Mihai nodded. Stepped away from her and took in a quick, shaky breath. "I'll see you soon, then." Jason couldn't help the relief that flooded him. Couldn't help the grin that slid into place on his face. Even though he knew it was just a matter of time. Eventually she'd be strong enough to move on. But by then maybe he'd be strong enough to let her. So he let himself revel in Mihai's chagrined expression.

After a few uncomfortable moments, Mihai hurried out of the room. Once he was gone, Clarissa collapsed into the chair. She twirled the chair to face the desk. Her disheveled hair fell around her shoulders, framing her anguished face. It made the hollows below her eyes look darker. For the first time, he noticed a tracery of lines webbing out from the corner of her eyes. The bottle of rye sat by her elbow; a gun he hadn't noticed sat a few inches away. Jason's entire body went cold. "Tamiel," he whispered. "We have to stop her."

Tamiel shook his head. "Not our job, Jason." His voice sounded strained, and when Jason took a quick look at him, he could see Tamiel's mouth was set in a grim line.

Tears pricked Jason's eyes. Tamiel seemed to notice that too. The look he gave him was full of caution, edged with something else. Compassion?

Jason got the message in a sudden, blinding blast of understanding. If she went through with it, he could cry. Otherwise, he just had to wait. Holding his breath.

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. It was the same way he'd spent every night since his death—holding his breath, hoping Clarissa wouldn't die.

## Chapter Nineteen

Clarissa took a long pull on the bottle of rye. There were maybe two swigs left. She looked at the bright white pills, scattered across the pens and Post-it notes inside the drawer. There were enough of them to do the job.

Her eyes filled with tears, transforming the drawer into a blurred rendering of light and dark. When the tears spilled down her cheeks and onto the desktop, she could see again. And nothing had changed.

Jason was still dead.

She had seen him. Touched him. Sheathed him inside her.

It hurt so much, losing him again, but it hurt less than it had yesterday. That shouldn't be, should it? Not if she'd seen him just a few hours ago. It should hurt more. A wound, nearly healed, reopened. It should hurt like a son of a bitch.

It did, but not as much as it should. She felt as though she was braced by those other connections that had developed. Maybe that was just the power of Mihai's suggestion, but she felt strong.

She closed her eyes and picked up the gun. Turning it over in her hands, she was surprised at the weight of it. With a deep breath, she cradled it in one hand and stood. She crossed the room to the safe and placed the gun inside. Once the door was shut, she stood with her palm against the cool metal for a moment before she walked away.

By the time she reached her desk, she was swallowing back sobs. She reached for the pills, but her fingers trembled so badly, she scattered the pens and sent the pills skittering to the bottom of the drawer. With a sob, she pulled the drawer entirely out of the desk. She had to do this. Now, before she lost her nerve.

Biting her lip, she turned the drawer over above the small waste can beside the desk. Dropping the emptied drawer onto the desktop, she turned her attention to the bag lining the

waste can. She was shaking so hard that her fingers fumbled with the plastic handles, but she tied them, sealing the pens, papers, and pills away from herself.

When she was done, she staggered toward the bed and collapsed on it. Heat flushed her face, and her palms were slick with sweat. She sagged into the mattress. The blankets fitted around her, cradling her, and she stiffened. Jason should be there, holding her. Closing her eyes, she made herself acknowledge the truth. Jason wasn't going to hold her again.

Sobs overwhelmed her then. The worst part wasn't that he was gone, after all. The worst part was that she was going to be okay. Her life would go on and on, and she *would* love again. She would be happy, and he would still be dead.

And that was the way it was supposed to be.

She slammed abruptly against that truth. Once she accepted it, the tears stopped. She wiped her eyes, opened them, and *faced* reality. This was the way it was supposed to be. It didn't ease the feeling that she was betraying him. It didn't stop her from wishing he had never died. It didn't *change* any of that—but it made her feel less guilty about being alive.

Her eyes closed, exhaustion overtook her, and she slept.

\* \* \* \*

"She didn't do it." The words escaped on a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

Tamiel nodded, smiling broadly. He looked happier about it than Jason would have expected actually, and somewhat relieved.

"What's going on?" Jason asked as Mihai appeared beside Tamiel. With a certainty he didn't question, he knew that Mihai was *there*, with him, and as invisible to Clarissa as he and Tamiel had been. Jason looked from Mihai to Tamiel and back again. They both wore happy, triumphant expressions that gave Jason a sinking feeling.

"You did everything right this time," Tamiel said softly.

"Okay. And?" Seriously, someone needed to make sense of all this for him.

Tamiel looked suddenly concerned. "You might not like all this."

Jason arched an eyebrow. "Gee, because it's all been so peachy keen up to now?"

Tamiel laughed, a quick flash of teeth and a short, barking sound, but he seemed lighter than he had since Jason first saw him. Less bogged down by life and death, as it were. Jason grinned. The same could be said about him, he supposed.

“Enlighten us, Tamiel.” Mihai sounded disgruntled, and Jason turned to face him.

“You don't know either?”

Mihai shook his head. “I was asked to go see Clarissa. Find out if she would take my offer to be the new man in her life.” He actually looked a little chagrined, and Jason shrugged. It was as close as he could get to saying that it was all right, because it hadn't *entirely* been all right. It was, however, done and over with. Right?

Mihai continued. “It was a test.”

Jason's knees threatened to give out. “*What* was a test?” The sinking feeling overtook every other emotion.

Tamiel answered this time, taking responsibility for it. “Just about everything.” He didn't look apologetic anymore either, and Jason understood Tamiel wasn't apologizing. “What you and Clarissa had...it was special.” Jason's heart ached with the sound of it in past tense. “If you looked at the thread binding you, you'd have seen it. A thin gold thread wound with the red. Making it shine.”

Jason nodded. He'd noticed the thread between them seemed...sparkly. He'd assumed it was the lighting.

“True love. Enduring love. This was probably not the first life where you and Clarissa found each other. Probably not the first one that ended tragically either. Because of that, and adding in the fact that I fucked up the reap...”

“It was all a test.” Mihai finished the sentence, dragging them back on topic, perhaps.

“You and Clarissa had a series of choices to make. Love over everything. When you severed the connection to Clarissa for her sake. Love over rebirth. And truly choosing it.” Tamiel gestured behind Jason. “You took on the wings when you chose to become an angel. They became truly yours when you accepted that she might move on with Mihai.”

Mihai looked like this was a bit of news to him, and Jason felt him examining his back. His *wings*. Jason resisted the urge to look for himself, focusing on Tamiel's words instead. “But

Clarissa had choices to make too. If she'd killed herself, you wouldn't have found each other in the next life. Because you'd chosen to join the Host. Your romance would have ended there.”

“But she didn't kill herself.” Jason was starting to understand.

“No, she didn't.” Mihai grinned. “And she didn't jump at the chance at romance with someone else either. She realized the offer was being made. But she also understood she wasn't ready.”

“She did, however, acknowledge the possibility in the future, showing she understood even then that life for her was going to go on.”

Silence while they all digested what Tamiel had just said, broken by Jason's last question. “What was the point? Just to test us?”

Tamiel smiled, and it was radiant. An aura of light surrounded him. “To get another chance.”

Jason's heart pounded in his chest. He couldn't mean...not what Jason was thinking. Jason cast a quick glance at Clarissa, asleep in her bed just beyond where they stood. He met Tamiel's eyes. “Don't dick with me like that.” He was begging.

“I'm not. You two have fought through insurmountable odds to be together. It won't be easy—you will still be apprenticing with me, and she will still be human—but...” His voice trailed off, and he lifted one hand, palm upward, and gestured toward her.

Jason felt light-headed. “Seriously?”

Tamiel laughed again. Mihai's smile was full too, and Jason let hope build within him. “Will other people be able to see me?”

Mihai nodded. “You'll learn to go invisible to them, but you can interact with them when you want to.”

“Won't it be hard to explain how I've come back from the dead?”

Mihai laughed this time. “You'll look different to anyone who knew you before. Anyone but Clarissa, that is. She'll know you. Anyone else, though, will see someone new.”

Jason considered that. Thought about the connections he should have had when he died...only he'd severed them all, he realized. All but the one to Clarissa.

“We can really be together?”



Both men nodded.

Relief and overwhelming joy nearly knocked Jason off his feet. “We can be together.”

## Chapter Twenty

Light pressed against her closed eyes, demanding she open them. Blinking away the remnants of sleep, she tried to obey, but it was too bright. She turned her head away and pried one eye slowly open, but even that was painful.

*What the hell?*

Voices muttered to each other.

Who the hell was in her room? She didn't get to ask. "Don't try to look yet." That sounded like Mihai. To someone else, she heard him say "Can we dim the light?"

"He's going to have to learn to do that on his own at *some* point." Another voice. Soft, but growly.

"Not *now*, though, Tamiel." Mihai's voice, sharp with anger. "And tuck the wings out of the way too."

Well that cinched it. She was dreaming.

The light dimmed, and she turned to peer over her shoulder. Three men stood there, but as she watched, two of them clapped a hand against the third's back before disappearing. The light dimmed a little more. Her eyes adjusted, and her heart pounded erratically. "Jason."

It couldn't be. Mihai had told her he'd moved on. Tears filled her eyes, and she wondered if she'd ever stop crying. If this were a dream, it was a shitty one. Couldn't she just enjoy having him around?

Apparently not.

She stared at his hair, which curled slightly at his ears and the nape of his neck. She took in the familiar planes of his face, the dimple in his cheek. She closed her eyes, as if that might shield her against the rush of emotions, as if she might contain them if she stopped staring at his beloved face.

“Clarissa,” he whispered.

“No,” she said. “You are not here. And I'm not going to let myself pretend you are.”

He laughed. Her heart shattered at the sound, and she screwed her face up to close her eyes even tighter. Not that it mattered. In her mind, she could see how he looked whenever he laughed, and he was beautiful.

“I'm here, love.” The mattress shifted beneath his weight as he sat behind her. His hand, gentle and warm, cupped her shoulder. “I'm here,” he repeated, and although she knew better, although she understood what she was feeling was nothing more than desperate hope, she turned to face him.

And she drank him in.

For all that he looked exactly the same as he once had, he looked completely different too. Lighter. Softer. More at peace. Of course, this was just a dream. So maybe she was projecting? It was she who felt more at peace with his death, so he looked different?

Great. Now she was analyzing her dreams *in her dreams*. “Why are you here?” Go straight to the source, as it were. If Jason were some manifestation of her innermost thoughts, he could tell her what they were. Save her a step.

“To be with you.”

Not the most helpful answer. He moved to tuck her hair behind her ear, and she followed the progress of his fingers with bated breath, her eyes drifting closed at the moment they made contact. The warmth of his flesh against hers lingered, heating her face even after he'd withdrawn. “Damn it, Jason. Why are you here?” She felt her resolve crumbling. Felt herself falling in love with him all over again.

Her chest ached with loss and pain and grief. They balled up together to make something huge and overwhelming, and she pressed her fists between her breasts to stem the tide. Between her fists, a thin crimson rope pressed between her hands. Startled, she looked to Jason for explanation, but his face remained impassive. Except for his eyes, so full of love, they shimmered. She looked down. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't ask Jason even one of the hundred questions flooding her mind and sticking in her throat.

“Everything's changed,” he whispered. “Everything. You're different. I've grown.” He laughed then, and the sound of it had Clarissa sitting upright in the bed. He'd never laughed like that in life. So carefree and happy and unrestrained.

“I'm not dreaming, am I?” The words were an offering, and she waited for them to be rejected.

Jason grinned. “You're not dreaming.”

“You'll explain it all to me, right?” He nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but she shook her head. “Later.” Right now, she needed him. She needed him to kiss her. She needed to touch him and be certain he was real. She needed him to touch her. She...needed.

Leaning forward, still afraid that this dream bubble would burst, she touched her lips to his. And he tasted like mint, as if he'd just brushed his teeth, and that little detail shattered her fears. There's no way she'd have imagined that. No way she, even in her dreams, would put in that stupid little detail. Tears slipped free as she kissed him, and for once peppermint was sweeter than chocolate.

## Chapter Twenty-one

Between kisses, Jason managed to explain to her what had happened. She needed him close, touching her, and he understood that, but he wasn't ready to get naked with her until she understood what had happened. What he *was*.

"An angel," she repeated.

He nodded, still coming to terms with it himself. "Wings and everything," he whispered.

"I don't care," she whispered. "You're here."

And then her hands were unfastening the button of his jeans—*jeans?*—and she wrapped her narrow fingers around him, and he wasn't able to stop her anymore.

"Clarissa," he groaned, and she grinned at him.

He kissed her, tasting the rye she'd had, a sweet-hot flavor that danced across his tongue. He couldn't get enough, stabbing into her mouth with his tongue and listening to her answering moans. *Feeling* them, the thrum of her voice across his flesh.

They were naked in seconds. He had no idea how or where their clothes went. One moment they were tangled in them, the next they were wrapped in each other. "Hell, Clarissa," he whispered into her mouth.

He wanted to take his time. He wanted to taste her and touch her and prove to her that he was real, but he was so close already, he wasn't going to last. After. He could ease the throbbing need between his legs and then take his time with her, make her come over and over.

Slipping his fingers inside her, discovering her wet already, when he felt the muscles of her cunt squeeze against his hand, he moaned. Loudly. "I need..."

Clarissa shuddered. "I need," she repeated, and he thought he might collapse with sudden gratitude.

He slid both hands under her ass and lifted her onto his thighs. She didn't weigh much, but she was warm against his skin, and he let himself enjoy it for the time it took to inhale. No more. He couldn't wait a second longer. With a shaking hand, he guided his cock into her pussy.

The tight ring of flesh squeezed around him as he pushed inside her, and he felt his control slip another notch. Clarissa reached her hands up to clasp the insides of his elbows. She cried his name, and he withdrew, slowly, the drag of his skin against hers almost enough to make him lose it altogether.

Not yet. He wanted to make this worth her while. He *wanted* her to come with him. "Clarissa." He managed to grind the word out between his teeth.

She arched against him, trying to pull him deeper within her, and he realized she was close too. Maybe not as close as he was, but close. Relief swept through him, and he plunged inside her. He continued to take her, pounding into her relentlessly.

A quick thrill of pride rushed through his body, and he realized he was going to last a little longer than he'd thought. Long enough. With a wicked grin, he shifted his weight enough to press his thumb against her clit. She moaned, long and loud, and he shuddered with the intensity of his reaction. He closed his eyes, so he could hear her ragged breathing, could focus on her every reaction to his touch, could feel her draw nearer and nearer to coming.

The muscles of his calves clenched. His thighs tightened, the flesh dragging against Clarissa's ass. His arms tensed, and he fought to keep his touch gentle. His shoulders bunched, and he lost all sense of time and rhythm.

He rode her.

The slap of his flesh against hers set the pace for the circles he worked with his thumb over her sensitive bundle of flesh. Her thighs tightened on either side of him, her pussy clamping hard on him as she strained to reach orgasm. Her hips bucked; she loosed her grip around him, then suddenly tightened. Her face relaxed into a blissful expression. Her eyes closed, her mouth open on a silent scream or moan of pleasure. He spared a moment to grin, proud beyond words he'd brought her to climax, but his body's need was a clawing demand he couldn't ignore any longer. He roared into the air as his orgasm rode him, as hard as he rode Clarissa himself. Just as he jetted inside her, his body unfurled—each muscle losing the abnormal tautness it had had a

moment before. He stretched his body to its limits, straining to milk his climax. He plunged inside her with a final thrust.

Bliss.

For one excruciating, beautiful second, he was nothing but bliss. Even as it fell away, receding like an ocean wave, Clarissa spoke. “Jason? Could you...turn down the wattage a little?”

With a wry grin, Jason opened his eyes, knowing what he'd see. His body was glowing, light blazing from his skin. His wings spread wide behind him, filling the room with their softness. Clarissa sprawled beneath him, a satisfied grin on her face, her eyes moving back and forth as she looked over the wings, drinking in their beauty. “Very impressive,” she said, and Jason's grin widened.

She was something, this woman of his. And she *was* his.

Because theirs was a love worth fighting for. A love worth *dying* for. Worth coming back for. A love neverending.

THE END

## Rowan Larke

Rowan lives with her husband and four sons in a very small town in Ontario, Canada, next to a very large bookstore. She is horrific at blogging and adores Twitter. She's an unabashed coffee addict.

She knows how to knit, crochet, cross-stitch, and sew, and can often be found doing one of those activities while watching hockey with her husband and kids. She's a Leafs fan, for the record.

She has been writing since she was a child, and takes particular delight in writing stories she was told she couldn't.