

The Devil to Pay

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The Devil to Pay

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

To my husband, Bill, my kids Jamie, Jeff, Caitlin, and Hallie, and to my own Nutty angels, June Ulrich, Linda Friar, and Tammy Strickland.

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“There’s no escaping fate, when one has the Devil to pay”

Prologue

“Hell’s teeth, that hurts!” Ayden Royce cursed.

The once proud warrior angel hung suspended by thick iron chains in the very same spot for eons while the fires of damnation tormented his soul and seared his flesh. He had been there since the very day that Satan had been defeated and the Devil had been cast into the deepest pits of Hell, his punishment to forever be devoured by the relentless flames of his master’s defeat.

Ayden had once attempted to measure his eternal damnation by the strikes of the fiery lash that bit into his skin. Somewhere in the billions, he’d lost count and had to start again. After which, he’d lost count again, and again, and, well...

He supposed that if he had bothered to keep track of just how many times he’d lost count by now, it would have numbered in the billions as well.

Ayden twisted in his chains as another tongue of fire licked at his chest and curled around his waist.

Another thing the angel had come to realize over the centuries was that no matter how much pain he endured, part of the punishment of Hell was that you never really got used to it. Each strike of fire against skin was as agonizing; each rendering of the muscle from the bone was the same excruciating torment as the very first assault. Nothing ever changed, and the immense sameness of it all never ceased to amaze him.

To make matters worse, his flesh never seemed to char away as it would have in the physical world. His body just reformed and instantly became healthy once again, ready for the next horrific touch of his relentless torture.

This was how he’d suffered ever since his one error in judgment had consigned him to endless agony in this godforsaken place.

“What’s the very worst thing about being condemned?” Ayden’s demon keeper, Blalock, asked during an especially long session of the angel’s punishment. The ancient creature often attempted to pull Ayden into one sort of pointless debate or another to break the monotony of their damned existence.

“I’ve been cursed for all eternity,” he groaned as yet another lash of fire seared his tender back. “And eternity is an awfully long time.”

“How true, fair Ayden, but I must say, I’ve known no one to suffer it as nobly as you.”

A minion of the Devil, Blalock settled himself into what had been their routine since the dark day when

Ayden had begun his exile in the underworld. Covered with scaly, crimson-colored reptilian skin, the beast stretched his thickly muscled form once and yawned.

An unpleasant fellow to look upon, the demon had a wide, flat forehead, a warty, uneven face, and a skull adorned with at least twenty bony protuberances. The entire rest of his body was pretty much the same, although somewhat shaped like a man's, complete with chest, arms, and legs.

Like all the other beings of his kind, Blalock had no sex, but then such creatures weren't born of male and female procreation, but rather created from the slimy ooze that coated the floor of Hell.

What he did have was a terrible, fetid rotting odor that assaulted the senses almost as much as the view of his hideously twisted, misshapen form.

"Go to bloody Hell, Blalock," Ayden bit out as another burst of flame assailed him.

"Too late. Already there," Blalock retorted as he took his usual place at a huge stone desk, his malformed face scrunched in what passed for a demonic grin, "But then, aren't we all?"

Ayden grunted as another lash lit a white-hot path across his back and legs.

"I do love to jest," the demon confided. "You should try it some time. Just because one is burning in eternal damnation doesn't mean one can't have a sense of humor."

Reaching into a corner of his workspace, the demon pulled out a pair of reading glasses, and mounted them precariously on his multi-ridged nose. "One wouldn't guess there is so much record keeping involved in torturing the damned."

Ayden twisted in his chains as a tongue of fire licked at his chest and curled around his waist.

"You know," Blalock glanced up from his tasks. "You never scream anymore. Why is that?"

Ayden took a few moments to allow the pain of the last strike to recede before answering. It was simple, really. It was the screaming that Blalock liked best, what he'd called the beautiful music of human and non-human torture.

Well, too bad. Ayden had long ago decided to suffer in silence. In all the time of his damnation, he had never been beyond his small cubicle, but he knew that there were many levels to Hell. The angel had spent an eternity listening to the endless cacophony of ear-piercing screams, the pitiful cries of desperation, and the heart wrenching pleas for mercy. Hell was full enough of shrieking and wailing. Though he had no control over anything else in his miserable existence, he was determined to withhold at least that.

"Doesn't seem any point to it, now does it?" He gasped once the breath had returned to him.

Blalock gave him a sideways glance. "Point? You think there is a point to any of this? Some hidden meaning to what we're doing here? Ha! You sir, are confused. There is no reason for any of this except that your misery delights our master. Why else would you be here?"

"We both know why I'm here," Ayden said through his clenched jaw. "I made one small mistake and I shall spend eternity paying for it."

"Small mistake? You call showing mercy during the most important battle of all time a small mistake? You may as well have spat in Satan's warty face."

True enough. There wasn't a moment that passed that Ayden hadn't regretted his action. One small slip in his judgment and here he was, burning in Hell forever.

"No matter," he gasped when another fiery lash bit into his side. "What's done is done. There's nothing I can do to change it."

"My point exactly. So, I see no reason to withhold what little pleasure I get from hearing your magnificent voice."

Ayden spit out blood that had pooled in his mouth when he'd bitten his tongue. "You've had pleasure enough as it is."

Blalock smiled. "Well, I suppose I do enjoy my work." He turned back to his desk, shuffling the papers before him.

"Exactly," Ayden said.

"What's this?" Blalock asked as he held up a charred piece of parchment.

Had his chains allowed, Ayden would have shrugged. Instead, he waited in silence as the demon studied the peculiar document.

"Well?" Blalock crossed his warty arms.

Ayden didn't think it possible, but when Blalock looked up, his face was twisted in shocked surprise.

"It's a summons. For us both."

"Perhaps you and I will be trading places," Ayden barely breathed. That had long been an unfulfilled wish—that the demon could suffer at least the smallest fraction of pain that he'd inflicted upon others.

"Not hardly," the beast answered. "But it does appear that you've come into a bit of luck, my boy."

"What?" Surprise bit into Ayden's mind so hard that the next lash of fire took him completely unaware. He jerked in response, the thick metal bands of his manacles slicing painfully into his wrists and ankles. He hated when that happened.

"You have been summoned to an audience with the grand one himself."

Without warning, the two were transported to the most fearsome place in the many levels of Hell—The Great Hall, where Satan himself resided.

A huge cave, its walls were made of thick stone formed from melded ash and bones of the damned. The chained, bloodied bodies of once human creatures doomed to suffer endless degradation covered every inch of the floor.

Blalock clutched Ayden's thick chains, pulling him forward as though he were leading oxen across a muddied field. Stumbling several times, it was all the angel could do to remain upright.

Ayden choked as the horrific sulfurous stench assaulted his senses.

The wretched souls fixed to the floors and walls strained against their chains, their long, bony hands grabbing at Blalock and Ayden as they passed.

"Come, come, my boy. We mustn't keep his Lordship waiting. He gets very angry when he's put off."

"Pardon me, but being chained in the same position for centuries makes it difficult to move at all."

"Don't be impertinent," the demon growled, jerking the chain and nearly pitching Ayden to the floor

again.

Ayden briefly glanced at the creature that sat enthroned before him. The minute his eyes registered Satan's supreme hideousness, the pain of the sight struck him deeply. The old Devil had changed greatly over the centuries. Once, he'd been the most beautiful angel among them. One whose form had not been unlike Ayden's own. Satan had been the most favored among the angels.

Now, he was the substance of terrifying nightmares.

A huge, gelatinous creature, Satan was a constant, stirring boil of ruddy slime and fire. Ayden caught a glimpse of his black, necrotic core; a twisted and misshapen remnant of the most stunning creature ever created was nothing now but a fetid stew of death and decay.

"On your knees, you worthless, mangy, pox-ridden cur!" Satan's voice boomed, causing the poor souls around them to shrink back into the tarry quagmire of the cave's floor and walls.

Ayden immediately dropped to the floor, desperate to return to his chamber and his painful torture. Anything was better than this.

Even Blalock fell to his knees. "Your Greatness. You have summoned us?"

Satan snarled at Ayden. "That disgusting pile of flesh and bone no longer entertains me."

"What would you have me do, my lord? Cast him into the pitch, perhaps? Strip every measure of flesh from his bones and throw them into the fiery pit?"

"And ruin the texture of my domain? Hardly," Satan sneered. "I have another task for him."

Startled, Ayden looked up. "A task?"

"I grow tired of my subjects' pathetic whining. I need you to fetch me another soul to appease my appetites—a woman pure of heart for me to feast upon. You must find such a being and lure her here. Please me, and your damnation will end, your debt erased. Fail me, and you will spend the rest of eternity beneath my heel, burning in the magma of my hatred for all humanity."

Ayden swallowed. Suspicion curled around his spine.

"Why me?" He asked.

In the next instant, Blalock raised the thick chain, striking Ayden across his back.

"How dare you question our master?" Leaning toward Ayden, he whispered, "Are you trying to get us vaporized?"

"Silence demon!" the Devil commanded. "I chose you because of your magnificent beauty. After all these centuries, your spirit still retains its angelic loveliness. Why waste my precious energies to create such a glorious countenance when it already exists?"

Ayden hadn't glimpsed a reflection of his own outward appearance for eons. He quickly glanced down at his body and was stunned by what he saw. His smooth skin covered perfectly sculpted muscle and bone. His arms, hands, and legs were well formed, unmarked and appearing the very same as the day he'd been damned by the Heavenly Council. Any scars from his sojourn in the fiery pit must have been only on his soul, because his physical body showed no sign of it.

"You have but one chance to earn your release, angel. Do not disappoint me."

Ayden paused as the meaning of his master's words stirred in his mind. He had one chance for freedom.

It was more than he had ever hoped for.

One simple task and he could leave this place forever. Never again would he feel the fire upon his skin or suffer the cries of the damned constantly ringing in his ears. At last, he would rest without pain or regret.

It was almost beyond imagining.

When he'd first been condemned, he'd prayed for redemption, begged for sweet mercy. It had made little difference in the end. The ears of the creator of all things were deaf to the cries of the damned.

For the first time in centuries, Ayden felt the stirrings of hope burn in his chest.

When he spoke, there was no hesitation in his voice.

"I will not fail."

Chapter One

Creston Corners, England, 1811

"That's it, Livvie, my girl. That's the last of them." Martin Stone sighed heavily.

Olivia watched the pallbearer's coach pull away from the house across the street, her heart sinking at the sight of it. George Tunney's death had been the worst of them all.

"A good evening to you, Miss Stone," Micah Proffitt waved from his place at the front of the funeral procession.

"And to you, sir," Olivia called back, giving him a halfhearted wave. Her minimal show of interest was greeted with a wide toothy grin from the toad-like man. Smiling as if the Prince Regent himself had shown him favor, he marched off, carrying his walking stick with as much frivolity as a funeral director could afford during a procession, barely keeping his smug expression contained.

In any place other than Creston Corners, Mr. Proffitt's behavior would have been considered appalling, but these days, no one was very particular about the appearance of the funerals. There had been so many.

"Tis a sorrowful, thing," her father said beside her. He knew all about propriety, he'd lived it once as a former clothier for the infamous London *ton*.

These days, unfortunately, Martin Stone was but a distant shadow of his former self. Still wearing his nightshirt and seated in his wheel chair, his body twisted with a severe case of rheumatism, he had come out of his sick bed with Olivia to watch the funeral march as it made its way down Creston's main thoroughfare.

"It is, indeed," Olivia sighed.

"He was the last single man in the county."

It was true. A terrible plague had befallen the tiny village south of London. One by one, every eligible bachelor had taken a place in the town cemetery, leaving the community's daughters unmarried and with no hope for a decent match in the area. Many had already left for places of better picking such as London or Brighton. Some had even journeyed to the continent.

"You realize what this means?" Olivia's father asked quietly.

She turned to him. The sight of his diminished form weighed heavily on Olivia's heart. Worse yet, with her mother's passing five years before and two younger children to tend to, she knew quite well what needed to be done.

The question was, did she have the courage to go through with it?

"I sent my acceptance of Mr. Proffitt's marriage proposal this morning," she said stoically.

Olivia tried not to react when her father narrowed his eyes at her. "But, your hopes, your dreams..." he began sadly.

"Are just childish imaginings. It's time I faced up to my responsibilities."

"It's Mr. Grimwald," her father said. "He's been putting the vice on you, hasn't he?"

"I spoke with him yesterday and he was very insistent. The bank will not be put off any longer. The mortgage payment must be made by next week, or they'll foreclose. Then there is the money we owe from last year. The term of the loan can no longer be extended, Father. We either have the funds in hand by Monday next or we'll both be in front of the local magistrate."

She didn't continue. There was no need. If they didn't pay their debts in short order, it would mean prison for them both, unemployment for their housekeeper, and the workhouse for her young brother and sister.

Turning away, she blinked back her tears. She didn't want him to see her cry.

"But, your dreams..." he said again.

Olivia bit her lip. Never a frivolous girl, in truth she'd had only one dream. She wanted to do what her father had done before her, to own her very own London Men and Ladies fashion boutique. She didn't want to be nothing more than a seamstress. She wanted to create beautiful clothes. Olivia had literally thousands of sketches and all manner of plans for her little business. For years, her every thought had been consumed by patterns, fabrics, laces, and stitches.

But such dreams needed money and her family's pockets had long ago gone empty. For three years, they'd been living off the kindness of a distant relative, but no more. Her uncle James had passed a month before and his support had come to an end. While he'd been alive, there had been barely enough in their monthly stipend to live on. Now, there would be even less.

Their last hope was for Olivia to marry well. Since her family had not the slightest connection to anyone of import—no connection to a merchant or an illustrious peer—a girl of her station had to make the best match possible. Engagement to a local businessman of some means was her only hope.

Now, with all the deaths in her village, men of marrying age with financial stability were in short supply. One who would finance his wife's frivolous fancy was nonexistent.

She supposed she could travel to London to seek out her potential match, but that would mean abandoning her family. No matter what, Olivia wouldn't do that. They needed her and she needed them and that's all there was to it. To marry in any place but the Corners was unacceptable.

Olivia had to face the reality of her situation. There was only one candidate available who had a business, some modest funds, and an intense desire to wed her.

The undertaker, Micah Proffitt.

"I'm so sorry, my dear. I know life hasn't been easy for you these last years," her father said.

Olivia sighed. "It hasn't been easy on either of us, Papa. Things will be different from now on."

She waited for him to voice his age-old protest, to reassure her that they were never in such dire circumstances that would require such drastic measures.

To Olivia's surprise, he said nothing. The sting of her father's silence hurt far more than she'd expected.

"Is it over, Papa? Is he gone?" Olivia's younger brother, Simon, shouted as he ran down the front walk pulling their sister behind him.

"I hope the death angel is done with Creston Corners," his twin, Hilary, said.

The tow headed nine-year olds had done all they could to avoid yet another funeral, feigning the great pox by painting themselves with berry spots all over their faces, arms and hands. Of course, these escapades had fooled no one. Just the same, the entire neighborhood had gone along with the ruse.

"It's over, children," she said, her breath catching as she saw her father's expression droop. "Perhaps now you will be on the mend. It's been a terrible stress on everyone. I feel about to break out in spots myself!" She feigned a swoon, lifting her arm dragging it across her brow.

"Oh, no, not you, too, Livvie!" the two of them squealed.

"Here, here, children. Let's get back inside before this ill wind blows on all of us," her father said, grasping each child's hand.

Taking her father's lead, Olivia turned his chair, wheeling him toward cottage's front door.

"Tis a sad day in the Corners," he said as he glanced at their neighbors, each of them arm in arm with their own families walking back into their homes. It should have been a bright Sunday afternoon, but a pall had fallen on the place and it looked as though it wasn't about to end any time soon. Storm clouds rambled overhead, emphasizing the darkness that had taken over the day.

"We're past due for a bit of sunshine. It'll come," she said as she motioned the children inside, though the truth was, she was beginning to have doubts herself.

"It's about time the lot of you came indoors. Too much fresh air, you know. It can't be good for a body," their housekeeper said from the foyer.

Mrs. Kempt was as good a servant as anyone could ever want. Once a lady's maid, she had been Olivia's mother's best friend and companion for many years. Though the coffers were stretched terribly thin these days, it was clear that Lavonia Kempt was not about to desert her charges because of a little money trouble. In fact, the term 'suffering in silence' had likely been invented by the starched, white-apron legions from which the housekeeper had arisen.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kempt, for looking after us all. However would we do without your attentions?"

"Not very well, if you ask me, Miss." She turned to the youngest of the Stone clan. "Come children, if you're ever to get well again, I'm afraid it's off to bed with you both. I'll just have to make my special tea and cakes. Nothing else will heal ailing children."

Silently, Olivia watched as the older woman herded Simon and Hilary toward the door. Before leaving, Lavonia turned back.

"And what of the two of you? Some tea and cakes as well?"

"None for me, thank you. I must catch up on my sewing or I'll lose the light of day." As it was, Olivia's orders for embroidered handkerchiefs had doubled over the last weeks. So many people had passed with this latest bout of sickness, there seemed no end to the mourning. Then of course, there were her family's needs to be considered as well. Socks and trousers demanded repair and spring was just around the corner. Hilary would need a new or at least refurbished dress to wear.

Known as having the finest hand in the county, Olivia had used her gift of thread and needle to help keep their family solvent. Well, barely so. However, with new responsibilities as an undertaker's wife, she doubted she would be allowed to sew anything other than burial shrouds.

"Mrs. Micah Proffitt," she muttered to herself as she gazed out the sitting room's only window overlooking the garden. During the summer, when the weather allowed, she would open the window and inhale the heavy scent of the roses that bloomed riotously there. Now she watched a lazy bee hovering nearby. For a brief moment, it seemed to turn toward her, regarding her as closely as she did it. To her surprise, the insect quickly whirled around and sped off toward the hedge. It seemed even the bee did not approve of her choice of husband.

"What did you say, dearest? What about Mr. Proffitt?" her father asked as he wheeled into the room.

Olivia bit her lip. "I'm going to invite Mr. Proffitt for Sunday dinner."

As she'd spoke, the sky outside darkened a deeper shade of gray. Olivia could see thickening storm clouds forming on the horizon.

A long silence stretched between them. She kept her eyes on the window, watching as a few fat drops of rain struck the glass.

Her father sighed. "It mightn't be so bad, Livvie. I know he's a cold fish, but he makes a good living and you'll never want for anything."

She gave him a dry laugh. "A dead fish, don't you mean?" She paused when she didn't hear her father's chuckling behind her. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't be so cruel. I couldn't expect a better offer."

"Nonsense, darling. You've been cast into a corner and there's nothing to be done about it. I know you had your heart set on a marriage proposal from George Tunney."

Olivia bit her lip. To be honest, she had been terribly upset at old George's passing, but not because he'd been a potential suitor. That had never been an option. He'd come for tea on a regular basis and everyone thought that he'd been about to propose marriage. They couldn't have been more wrong.

The truth was, old George only brought her periodicals from his trips to London and the most they ever discussed were the latest fashions. Though he'd never spoken of it, Olivia thought perhaps there'd been more to his travels than just his taste for fashion.

Once they'd discussed marriage in a general way, and George had intimated that if he ever did take a wife, it would be only to have the appearance of wedded bliss. He'd confided in her on more than one occasion that he hadn't ever wanted close relations with any woman. His preference in potential paramours was exclusively devoted to the masculine gender.

His abnormal appetites should have shocked Olivia, but to be honest, at the time, she'd been relieved. What she'd wanted from a man, any man, was not to be just a marriage of appearances. She wanted a real marriage. A loving and physical one like her parents had had. She remembered how her mother had seemed to come alive whenever her father was in the room. How they had been so devoted to each other, constantly gazing at one another, or taking long walks, holding hands down Creston Corner's main thoroughfare. That was the kind of love and life she longed for. Until recently, she refused to accept anything less.

But times had changed, and all of the potential suitors, at least those who'd been seriously looking for a wife, whether for love or respectability, were gone.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to her father and put on her bravest face. "It will be all right, father."

Martin said nothing, but retrieved his pipe from his pocket, his eyes never quite meeting with Olivia's.

"Well, I've wasted enough time," Olivia said. "I've got work to finish and with the storm coming, there's precious little daylight as it is. I must be about it before even that has gone."

Just as she turned to leave, she glanced up to see Mrs. Kempt at the doorway, arms laden with tea and cakes. She gave Olivia a disapproving expression but said nothing.

She didn't have to. Olivia knew exactly what the housekeeper was thinking.

"Everything will be fine, Mrs. Kempt."

The woman huffed, the sound more like a curse than the name she spat. "Mrs. Micah Proffitt, indeed."

Chapter Two

Seconds after his agreeing to the Devil's terms, Ayden was transported out of Hell. One moment he'd been burning in the fiery pit, and the next, he found himself lying in a bed of white lilies, staring up at a brilliant blue, cloudless sky.

The cool morning air teased at his senses and the sound of insects buzzing nearby tickled his ears. Warm sunlight bathed him in an almost ethereal heat. The scent of lilies, roses, and honeysuckle sat sweetly upon the air. Ayden inhaled deeply, drinking in the sensation of the world around him.

How long had it been since he'd heard anything but the sounds of misery and felt the touch of anything against his flesh that wasn't torturous flames? Ayden nearly wept.

Blinking rapidly, he scolded himself for such weakness. He'd have to be careful not to let this new circumstance overwhelm him, or he'd be completely useless as the Devil's minion.

It was in the midst of that thought that Ayden spied a tiny creature hovering nearby. A garden-variety honeybee appeared before him. He watched, entranced as the insect buzzed lazily about for a few seconds. Then, as if catching Ayden's eye, it hovered close to the angel's nose.

Waving the tiny insect away, the angel laughed when it buzzed angrily in a tight circle and then flew to a nearby rose, giving its full attention to the flower.

Ayden sighed. Stretched out on the firm ground, he felt as if he couldn't be any happier if he'd been resting on a cloud. While it wasn't the same luxury he'd known in his sojourn amongst the heavens, it was as close as one could get outside the celestial gates. Before he could rise from his floral bed, the sun receded and a dim, gray cast overtook the air around him. Blalock's deep voice boomed in his ears while white-hot fire crackled around him.

"You are not here for frivolity. You have but one purpose. Find the woman and bring her to the master."

Ayden bit down against the pain that assailed him as the flames once again scorched his skin. "Who is this woman?"

"That you'll have to find out for yourself. Hell knows there are plenty of the silly chits here to pick from."

Ayden waved at the now dying flames, coughing as ensuing smoke enveloped him.

"Yes, of course there are. I'll just snatch one by the hair and have her before the master within the hour."

"Don't be impertinent. There are rules governing these creatures. They have guardian angels watching over them. The Creator of all things does not allow us reign over the humans. There are three laws that determine who are allowed to enter through Hell's gates."

"Laws?" The thought that anything or anyone had reign over the Devil never occurred to Ayden.

"Three circumstances which a creature, human or otherwise, can gain admittance into Hell. First rule, the subject must have committed an unforgivable act. It must be an act so deplorable and depraved that there is no other place in existence appropriate for the subject to serve out their punishment. The killing or torture of an innocent—a child, for instance."

A justifiable punishment, Ayden thought.

"The second circumstance is when a subject is unrepentant for their sins. He must admit his misdeed and be sorry for it and willing to do penance or he goes to Hell."

"Of course. And the third rule?"

"If the subject does not qualify for entrance under the first two rules, then they can only enter of their own free will. Not even the Creator of all things can refuse someone's entry into Hell if he so chooses it."

"Has anyone ever chosen Hell?"

Blalock laughed, a dry, brittle sound. "Never."

Ayden gasped. "If that's true, how could I possibly convince anyone to suffer the agony of eternal damnation?"

"You do whatever you must. Lie, cheat, steal. Grant her deepest desire. Do whatever it takes to get her to sign a legal and binding contract. When you have fulfilled the terms of the document, the master owns her and you have only to bring her to him. Of course, the seduction is a very small part of plan. Once you have her amenable, then we shall offer to grant her three wishes. When her wishes have been dispensed, then under the terms of the contract, she will surrender her soul to the Devil. Simple, really."

"Simple."

"You know what will happen if you fail."

The scent of charred flesh rose in the air around them and Ayden swallowed back the acid bile that rose up his throat when he recalled the Devil's last words to him. Even now, so distant from the oily pit, his gut roiled at the thought of an existence chained at Satan's feet.

Ayden remembered too well what life had been before his punishment. Called to leave his peaceful home to fight in a war he hadn't understood, Ayden had taken up his bow as a minor general in the greatest battle of all time. Satan's call had been so seductive. The chance to serve with the dark angel for all eternity had set him on the path to his own damnation.

Then he had ruined it all. He had committed an unforgivable act.

He'd shown mercy.

Ayden groaned at the memory. A warrior angel, he'd been ordered to shoot his flaming arrows into a small village, to burn every last living thing to the ground. He would have too, had he not seen the young girl kneeling in the meadow. She'd had her head lowered and her hands clasped in prayer. It was such a stirring

sight, that it caused him to put down his bow, kneel before her and beg for forgiveness.

Bitterness coiled in his gut like a snake. Forgiveness. As if he could ever have received such a gift.

Ayden cursed. "I've failed my master once before. I will not do so again."

"See that you don't."

The searing heat of the other's presence suddenly evaporated and the air returned to that of a summer afternoon. The music of gentle life once again surrounded Ayden. There was no time to revel in it. He had a job to do.

He'd made the mistake of taking pity on a human once before. He would not do so again.

While he considered the task ahead of him, clouds gathered overhead and two raindrops gently pelted Ayden's face. A moment of apprehension stirred in his chest. Could he truly convince another to give up their soul to spend an eternity in Hell?

Although the angel was sure he'd regret condemning another to an endless existence of burning torture, there was no choice about it. He was not going back.

Ayden pushed the thought away and took a deep breath. Turning a full circle, he surveyed the neatly rowed garden, heavily laden with spring blooms. Just beyond that there sat a small, quaint cottage, its yard surrounded by a brightly painted white fence.

It wasn't the house that drew his attention. In one of the windows, he glimpsed the gentle silhouette of a woman. As he watched, a white glow formed around her. Flickering, its radiance grew until it strengthened into a sharp luminescence. Then she turned, and when he saw her expression of innocence, he realized she wasn't in the light, she was the light.

"An innocent," he muttered, moving forward, now carefully treading amongst the flowering plants.

Reaching the side of the house, he stepped up onto the trellis that leaned against the window and peered inside. The sight took his breath away.

To his surprise, a woman with impossibly large azure eyes gazed back at him. She had porcelain skin and lips the color of ripe plums. Her hair, a coppery riot of curls pulled gently back into a chignon with only a few dainty ringlets gently caressing her face and neck, teased his imagination. He suddenly had the urge to pull the tie loose and let the silken tresses fall across her neck and into his waiting hands.

For the first time in his existence, Ayden was struck still. He suddenly knew why Satan wanted such a creature so badly.

This woman wasn't just a beauty, he realized. She was grace and joy and every good thing that had ever been conceived. When she tilted her head slightly to the left, her teeth worrying across her bottom lip, Ayden nearly came undone.

She wore a puzzled expression at first, but as she gazed at him, another emotion began to form on her face.

Desire.

She wanted him.

A warm fire flared in the pit of his belly. Ayden suddenly had images of himself hovering over her, pushing her down among the marigolds. He would pull back the soft cotton of her strange wrappings and settle himself in the juncture of her legs. With a breathy sigh, her head would fall back and her eyes would close, an expression of pure desire coloring her beautiful face. When he rubbed against her, she would moan, her voice deep and rich, rivaling the sound of any creature ever born. Then, spreading her legs wide beneath him, she would fully open. And his body would waste no time answering her sensual summoning, for he would plunge himself deeply into her warmth again and again, reveling in the feel of her tightening around him.

Shocked, he jerked back from the window.

"What's happening to me?"

Blalock chuckled behind him. "In this age, angels no longer walk upon the earth. You've been given the form of a man. You will hunger like a man, thirst like a man." The demon pointed down to Ayden's fully formed erection. "Lust like a man."

"Lust." Ayden reeled. He had never felt such a delicious wanting as this. Suddenly his body shook from ravenous need. What it would be like to feel this woman's skin against his own, his mouth plunging into hers, his tongue tasting every inch of her, her breasts, her neck, her belly, her...

Leaning against the window frame, he let his desire run unbridled. She stood unmoving now, staring back at him, and he imagined what it would be like to touch her, to take her in his arms and drive her to the edge of desire. A grin spread across his face as his skin prickled in anticipation of what it would be like to bed her.

A connection had formed between them, and he felt her shock and surprise—and her desire.

The woman's raw expression of sexual hunger immediately set off a blaze of heat in his groin, and without thinking, he grasped the sides of the open window and launched himself into the room. He wanted her, needed her, burned for her, but what that meant exactly he had no idea. Having been created an angel, he'd never experienced such strange human desires. Now, for the first time, he was fully human and fully aroused, he knew instinctively what this strange new form demanded.

Just her. Without questioning why, he imagined again plunging his sex deep into her core, hoping that she would enfold him in her rose-petal softness, welcome him into her deepest well of passion. So strong was the urge to be with her at that moment, not even the threat of returning to Hell could deter him.

Chapter Three

Alone in her room, with Mrs. Kempt's rebuke still stinging her ears, Olivia went to her sewing basket and pulled out the lace handkerchief she'd been working on the intricate trim of yellow daisies did nothing to take her mind off of her troubles.

Glancing over to her bedside table, she caught sight of the final gift that George had brought her. The last month's issue of *La Belle Assemblee* sat open, prints of the summer's latest styles staring up at her. The women's publication was a great boon for Olivia since she watched fashion with a careful eye. If ever the chance came to her, she would give anything to design grand patterns for the titled ladies and gentlemen's fashions. Her head was full of ideas and notions about the industry and how even the dreaded, newly invented 'sewing' machine might actually be useful.

Inside the pages, she had stuffed some of her sketches. All of them bold new designs, save one.

On his final visit, merely a week before, George had challenged her to invent something decadent for the male gender. With a swift hand, she began as always, consumed with a flood of ideas. However, the more she worked, the more something else emerged. Something shocking.

Even old George had been impressed with her handiwork.

"He's a Greek god! Adonis never looked so beautiful," George had said, admiring her work.

So concentrated on the lines and shapes of her project, Olivia hadn't seen the completed picture she'd drawn until she'd finished. Holding it out in front of her, what she gazed upon literally took her breath away.

"What have I done?"

"You've created something wonderful," George had muttered beside her. Seconds later, he was begging her for the drawing, stating that he'd some friends in London who would pay dearly for such sketches.

Olivia had barely heard him. Though she was loath to admit it, the drawing bothered her. The face of the man she'd drawn was alarmingly handsome, and yet frightening in a way she didn't understand. He seemed to come off the parchment, daring her to do something that she wasn't really sure of, but felt certain that it was somehow very risky.

The experience had frightened her so badly that she'd thrust the picture into George's hands and swore she would never look at it again. Unfortunately, that hadn't been the case.

In the days since, she couldn't help herself. She'd drawn the man dozens of times, in every imaginable pose, and lately had been depicting him in barely any clothes at all. The truth was, although she'd only ever had bare glimpses of the male form, she knew this one. Intimately.

In fact, as the days had passed, the picture had somehow come to life in her mind. For hours, she'd lie awake at night, thinking about the stranger and what it would be like for him to come to her naked and wanting, filled with desire for her. He would begin his attentions gently kissing her at first, and then consume her with every touch, every caress, until he would bring her to sweet release.

But no matter how hard she would pleasure herself, her desire never abated.

"Open for me," her dream man would whisper, and like some wanton light skirt, she would obey. In her mind's eye, she could actually feel his hands on her skin. Her arms, her breast, her buttocks, even her most private part between her legs surrendering to his touch.

Olivia would moan at the imagined heat of his fingers as he would push deeper and deeper into her, and then she would cry when he withdrew his hand.

When she dreamed of his kiss, it was as though she were drinking warm brandy, his breath igniting small fires everywhere he touched, his tongue swirling in her mouth, his teeth scraping hers in an evocative imitation of consuming hunger.

Every night she would dream and every morning she would awaken filled with shame and horror at how her body and mind had combined to thwart her spirit. While she had never been a prude, she at least had always managed to suppress such scandalous thoughts, hoping that those things would be left for her wedding night.

Now, however, things had changed. Soon, her dreams would be the only happiness she could hope for. She glanced at her worktable, cluttered with cuts of cloth and rolls of thread and the object of her downfall lay closed among them. Rifling through the pages of the periodical, the stack of papers fell out and onto the floor. Even now, the sight of them sent desire stirring in her blood. Her obsession with the drawing should have frightened her more than anything else—but it hadn't.

Even now, when she was faced with marrying the most horrible man in the world, she couldn't help but gaze at the pictures once again and dream of her imaginary lover. She should have pushed away the temptation, but her body demanded otherwise.

What difference did it make? Her fate was well and truly sealed. It couldn't hurt to dream, could it?

The picture, the first one she'd drawn after George had left that afternoon, had been a perfect copy of the original. She'd drawn it as if a ghost inhabiting the charcoal had forced her hand. It now stared up at her. Her heart beat a rapid tattoo. Closing her eyes she could almost feel his lean, strong fingers touching her skin, first her neck, her shoulder and sliding farther and farther down her back, and soon his hand would be cupping her bottom—

"Stop it this instant!" She cursed, though it was little use. Pure heat burned in her belly and a fierce trembling overtook her. A sudden jolt of desire stirred within her and she feared that if she glanced at the picture one more time she would shatter.

"What am I to do?" she asked, though she knew there was no answer to be found on the parchment before her. In truth, she didn't want to marry Micah Proffitt. She had never wanted any man. Until now.

"Silly, stupid girl," she muttered as she held up the paper before her. It was true. She wanted him. No, that wasn't right, Olivia thought. She desired him. Longed for him. Ached for him.

One thing Olivia knew for certain, this man wouldn't laugh at her silly ideas. He wouldn't put her on the

shelf like some porcelain doll, or wear her on his sleeve like a colorful scarf.

This devil would demand every bit of her.

Olivia shivered.

"I'd sell my soul for you," she muttered, breathless.

Without warning, thunder crashed outside her window causing all the crystal perfume samplers on her dressing table to plummet to the floor, deafening her with the sound of shattering glass. Roaring like a lion, the wind burst into her room sending her drawings whirling about her, Olivia alone trapped in the center of the maelstrom. Then, just as quickly as storm started, all sound and movement ceased, her drawings fluttering to the floor. Olivia stood breathless and terrified in the midst of the disarray.

"What in the blue blazes?" she muttered, running to the window. The sky had darkened even more, becoming nearly opaque outside the glass. Squinting in the dimness, she thought she saw the outline of a man.

A shot of surprise went through her when she realized just who it was staring back at her.

It was Him. The man in her sketches, and he was no longer outlined in black charcoal pencils. He was real, full bodied, with molten silver eyes, a strong, square face, and wearing a devilishly handsome grin.

Olivia gasped, both in shock at his startling nakedness and awe of the sculpted beauty of his form. His every muscle looked as if they had been carved in stone, a damp sheen of sweat glistened on his skin. A thick musky male scent rose on the air around him and blended with the blooming roses outside her window.

The sound of his breathing, the movement of his chest with every intake of air, held her in thrall. All time ceased as she stared at him.

The stranger's presence shook Olivia to her very core. Her treacherous body began trembling and she moaned when a flood of delicious desire shot through her, coupled with shock when she realized that this man was truly flesh and blood real. Suddenly, the world was fading around her and she saw something scandalous hovering in the depth of his fiery gaze.

He had come for her.

Before she knew what was happening, he had climbed through the window, his long legs landing square on her bedroom floor. Then he was walking toward her, every step a long, even stride. She could swear she felt the vibration of his approach in the soles of her feet as he advanced.

"Who are you?"

He didn't answer, but moved closer still, until his body was so near, Olivia could feel the steam rise from his skin. The urge to touch him overwhelmed her and for a moment, she raised her hand and let it linger just inches from his chest.

"I want you," he said simply.

Olivia started when she realized the sound of his voice was exactly as it had been in her dreams. A new wave of desire washed over her, lapping at the edges of her senses like gentle waves in a pond.

"But, sir, we've not been introduced," she managed, her voice tight and her tone strained. As though a simple introduction would have made their tryst acceptable. Silly girl!

"Please."

Although merely a single word, he said it with such raw need that it caught her off her guard and struck her at her lowest level, stinging her psyche as if it had been pricked by a knife.

"I don't—" she stopped, suddenly realizing that he was touching her, leaning forward. The hard press of his erection pushing between them.

"Please," he whispered again.

Olivia had no further thought. The anvil of her impending marriage swung in a high arc above her, its weight threatening to crush the life right out of her. Panic filled her when she thought of the empty life that awaited her.

In her mind's eye, she saw Proffitt suddenly leaning close to her, his cold claw like hands reaching out to her, his wet, bloodless, quivering lips so close to kissing her...

"Yes," she answered in a strangled cry.

Before she drew another breath, the beautiful stranger was upon her, wrapping his long, lean arms around her, tasting, touching, *absorbing* her.

"Yes," she said again, stronger, more of a declaration than acquiescence.

He grasped her buttocks with his wide, strong hands, lifting her up so that she fell against his chest, her feet leaving the floor, her body supported by his strong arms. He was not alone in this wanton embrace. She straddled him, her legs tightening about his waist, the thin materials of her summer dress and shift hot and damp between them. She grunted as he pushed her against the wall, settling her there as he pinned her securely with his body.

"Please," she cried again, her body straining against him. Deep in her mind, Olivia knew she shouldn't allow a man to arouse her in such a way, that she should have fought against him, screamed for help even. But his touch was such exquisite torture, his body pleasuring her beyond all imagination that she couldn't deny herself. She wanted him as well.

Pressing her harder against the wall, he assuaged her pleading with his kiss, his tongue plunging deeper and deeper into her mouth, his hands kneading her skin like warm, soft dough. Gasping between kisses, she wrapped her arms around him, running her hands up and down his arms and shoulders, scraping her nails as she went.

Olivia's desire heightened when a deep rumble went through him, half growl, half moan. In response, she ground her hips against him and squeaked with delighted surprise when he pulled the clothing from between them, the thick flesh of his shaft pressing between her legs, hungrily seeking her center.

"Open for me..."

She was on the verge of obeying when he was suddenly ripped away from her, and a thick, strong force grabbed her about the neck and pinned her to the wall. A chilling blast of air assaulted her and though she tried to fight it, the energy pushed her back, her head slamming against the wall.

Stunned, Olivia tried to call out, but before she knew what was happening, the air left her lungs in such a

rush, and she was sliding toward the floor.

"No!" She heard the stranger cry out, the pain of their separation as sharp for him as it had been for her.

As quickly as he had appeared, her dream lover disappeared. The world faded to black around her. There would be no chance for happiness, not now, not ever.

It was the last thought Olivia had before the world around her winked out, and she fell to the floor in a full out faint.

Chapter Four

"You stupid fool!" Blalock's voice boomed in his ears.

Back in the garden, Ayden fell to his knees, panting. "What?" Suddenly his body was on fire and his every nerve screamed in protest. Wrapping his arms around his waist, he leaned forward, taking in huge gulps of air.

"You nearly ruined everything, you dolt."

"What in blazes are you talking about?" he gasped when the pain ebbed and his voice grew stronger. Anger curled in the pit of his stomach.

"Of course you don't. You've no experience with this sort of thing." Blalock glanced around them. "I dare say it's been awhile for me as well. I've not been topside for centuries."

Ayden rubbed his stinging eyes and tried to clear his vision. When he could see clearly, he was startled at what was before him.

No longer a tangled hideous monster, Blalock had become human.

Ayden blinked several times. No, his eyes had not lied. Blalock now had arms and legs, a slightly balding head. His face was human, with a wide mouth and prominent nose. His body, also shaped like a man, was now covered in brown material cut to fit him. Three garments in various shades of brown, but far different from anything Ayden had seen before. And gazing down, he saw that polished animal hide now covered the demon's feet.

Blalock turned a chestnut gaze upon Ayden, his eyes narrowing at the former angel's attention.

"What in blazes are you looking at?"

"You're so...different."

"I have no choice, thanks to your ineptness. Now, as to your deplorable behavior back there, pay attention. If you fail, I fail too. And I don't like to fail." The demon crossed his arms and sent Ayden a tight gaze.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just say if you don't succeed, you won't be alone at the Devil's heel."

Ayden stood up, his legs still unsteady. "I won't fail. But, this place is so strange, this body so...unwieldy." He glanced down at his painful erection. "See!"

Blalock chuckled. "All part and parcel of the human form. Just do as I tell you and everything will be fine."

Ayden paused, a stir of nausea rising in his gut. "What did you do to me?"

"What did I do?" He scoffed. "I did nothing. It was her. The woman. It seems that you have been given the most potent gift of all. Few humans can resist its power; in fact entire civilizations have been lost because of it."

"Because of what?"

"Libido, my boy. Sexuality. The sweet syrup of human procreation. Without it, mankind would have died out centuries ago. And you have it in spades."

"This is good?"

"For our purposes, very good. But, we must be cautious. That massive talent between your legs can also be your undoing."

"I don't understand."

Suddenly Blalock grabbed Ayden and held him in a powerful embrace. Before the angel could protest, the demon kissed him hard, forcing his lips open and invading his mouth savagely. Ayden struggled with all of his strength but couldn't break free, and the harder he fought, the rougher Blalock's attack.

In addition to the pain and fear, disgust and shame assaulted Ayden as well.

When Blalock let go, Ayden staggered back, humiliation rising in his throat like bile.

"What did you do?"

"Taught you a lesson, dear boy. Sex is tied to strong emotion; it can be a gift or a weapon. Never forget that."

"I won't." Ayden lifted his arm and wiped at his mouth. He tasted the warm tang of copper and looking down, saw blood on his hand.

"I didn't know..."

"Of course, you didn't. But now you do. And this isn't the worst of it, but I'll be nice and not teach you anything further. That is, unless I have to."

For a moment, Ayden said nothing, anger stirring in his blood. He wanted the female, and the demon's threat notwithstanding, he would have her.

"Now," Blalock began, "a few ground rules. You can't become a rutting pig every time you're around a

female. You are to show your attentions to that woman only and no other. Women of this time generally despise men who cheat on them."

"I don't want anyone else."

"Good. Now, as to your approach. You must save your 'attentions' until you are alone together. Also, you cannot give all your favors all at once. You must go slowly."

"Why?" Ayden clenched his fists, the thought of being with the woman nearly consuming him.

"Because, if you take her too soon, she'll have no interest in signing the contract. If you wait too long and don't keep her wanting, she'll grow suspicious. Remember, you aren't the only man with an erection around. Another can just easily take your place."

The demon's words pierced him like an arrow. "What can I do?"

"Practice the art of seduction. I'll teach you everything you need to know. For now, we need to find shelter and get you ready to be properly introduced. There is another who serves our master nearby. Though he will not be pleased at the task, he will do as he's told."

Ayden followed the demon down a well-trampled path. While they walked silently along, the angel's thoughts returned to the woman. The creature had stricken him so hard that he was reluctant to leave her, even for a brief time.

"Just make sure," the demon told him as they neared a large, low roofed structure, "that you remember that the woman will eventually belong to our master. Don't entertain any thoughts of saving her for yourself."

Ayden scowled at the thought. "I'll seduce her and be done with it."

Though he bore no outward scars, the kiss of the Devil's torture had been etched upon his soul. Ayden would allow nothing would stand in the way of his freedom. Nothing.

"Now," Blalock cleared his throat, "let's see about getting you some clothes. You can't go around like that or we'll both be arrested for indecency. Even in this barbaric time, they have some semblance of morality."

The air around her surely weighed ten stone. Olivia struggled out from beneath the bevy of concerned family members that crowded around her.

"Are you hurt?" her younger brother asked.

"Did you hit your head?" Mrs. Kempt was next.

"What in blazes happened?" That had been her father. Only Hilary had remained silent, her wide brown eyes staring at Olivia as though she'd suddenly become a ghost.

"I think I was startled by the storm."

"The storm? What storm?" Her father pressed forward, nearly tipping over his wheelchair.

"Didn't you hear it? Didn't you see the flash of lightning? Hear the roaring thunder?"

Olivia blinked as her family stared at her dumfounded.

"I didn't hear anything," Mrs. Kempt, the most level headed of the group pronounced.

"But, it was a huge crash. We must check the garden. I think one of the oak trees was hit."

"I saw something outside the window, but it wasn't a burning tree." Mrs. Kempf said, crossing her arms in front of her, suspiciously eyeing the window.

"No? What was it?" Olivia sat up and pulled in a breath.

"Not what, who. I swear it was a man peeping in your bedroom window. A large, beastly man. Only, it must have been a trick of the light because when I got to the window, he was gone."

Olivia wanted to press for details, but before she could say another word, a loud rapping sounded at the front door.

Mrs. Kempt nodded to them all and went to answer it.

"What was it, Liv? A man? A beast? What?" Simon pressed her.

"It was..." she paused. She wasn't sure just what she had seen and instantly thought it best not to arouse the suspicions of her family. "It was a trick of the light. Shadows from the clouds, I expect. My own silly imaginings but nothing more."

Her father sat staring at her through his small, round spectacles.

"If you say so, Olivia. Still, I shall ask Mr. Hampton to check the perimeter of the property this evening, just to make certain."

"If you wish, Papa. I'm sure it'll come to nothing."

Her father set his pipe down and motioned to Simon. "Here, son, wheel me into the library. I'll write him immediately."

Just then, Mrs. Kempt reappeared. "It's a note, Miss. From Mr. Proffitt."

"What is it? What does he say?" Olivia motioned for the housekeeper to read it aloud, too shaken from her ordeal to read it herself. Just the thought of what she'd almost done with handsome stranger caused a well of shame to rise up within her at the mention of her fiancée's name.

"He says he's thrilled by your acceptance of his proposal and requested that you join him for dinner this evening. Give the word and I'll send his young charge packing. The gall of the man! It isn't proper for a young miss, engaged or not, to take dinner in a man's home without a chaperone. Even if he is her fiancé."

"Yes, well, we may have little choice about propriety," she muttered, suddenly feeling a chill come over her. "Please, tell his boy that Papa and I will attend."

Her father and brother paused at the door.

"Are you sure, Olivia? You don't have to do this."

Olivia swallowed. "I know, Papa." She didn't bother to explain herself further. Their future depended on Olivia's choices and that's all there was to it.

When everyone had left her room, Olivia glanced at the pages of her sketchbook strewn across the floor. Kneeling down, she picked one up and gazed at it a moment.

Funny, she thought. She didn't remember drawing that one.

Closing her eyes, she remembered what it felt like when he touched her. She still had the sting of his hands upon her skin, felt the moist heat when his shaft had pushed against her opening. She looked down at the drawing once more. A sob caught in her throat.

"Who are you?"

The man peered up at her, wearing the same expression as the stranger had. Hunger and lust lit his features, but something else lived in his eyes. A burning of a different sort. Desperation, perhaps. Regret, most assuredly.

"What on earth do you have to be sorry for, I wonder?" she asked as she carefully placed the picture in the book with the others. No answer came and she then closed the pages and turned to slip the book into the oak chest that sat at the foot of her bed, along with the other prized possessions she kept hidden there.

She'd called the polished chest her 'dream' box. One by one, all of the things she'd loved throughout her life, her favorite doll, a china pattern, and a Sunday frock her father had made for her long ago, all lay preserved in the structure. Now, another dream lay beside the rest to be forever coveted yet never shared. It wouldn't do for her new husband to find her pining over the picture of a man that didn't exist.

It was her own overzealous imagination that had forced her to see the object of her dreams outside her window, to imagine he'd come to life and made love to her. Absently she reached up and rubbed the sore spot on the back of her head. Likely when the thunder sounded, she'd tripped and fallen. Yes. That was it.

Sighing once more, she mentally closed the box as well as physically. Such things were desires for young girls with wealthy papas and a long line of handsome suitors. Not for poor girls like Olivia Stone.

Just then, she heard a rustling sound. Glancing up, Olivia saw Hilary standing in the doorway. The child wore a most curious expression.

"What is it my dear? What's wrong?" Olivia rose from where she'd been kneeling beside her chest and went to her sister's side.

"Did you see him?" the child whispered, nervously looking around them.

"See who?"

"The angel. He was so beautiful."

"Angel? I don't know what you're talking about." A sudden thrill washed over her, but Olivia wasn't sure if it was excitement or fear. Could it be possible? Had her imaginings been more than just a vision?

"He was here. I saw him standing over you. He was tall and had golden hair and eyes. And, more than that, I could see the shadows of where his wings had been."

"Shadows of his wings?" A strange new emotion stirred within her. Could she truly have conjured her heart's desire from the air? Olivia quickly put down that thought.

"That's not possible."

"I saw it, Livvie. I did. And he was beautiful."

Chapter Five

It had been a most satisfying afternoon. Micah Proffitt hummed with glee as he put the finishing touches on his latest projects. Three fine caskets adorned his workroom, and he couldn't have been any more pleased at their opulence.

Made of cherry wood, the boxes were special, even if one didn't notice the finely carved angels that adorned the lid of each one. Special, because not only for their liturgical design, but also for their intended recipients. One large box made for the size of an average man, and the other two smaller, children's cabinets, all for Micah's next three 'projects'.

Having lived in Creston Corners for over a year, Proffitt had quickly decided upon what direction he'd wanted his life to take. Although he served another's interests, he knew that he'd done such marvelous work that his master would surely grant him any wish he desired. As it happened, there was something he wanted. Or rather, someone.

The most beautiful woman he had ever seen, Olivia Stone was the epitome of his every dream. She was kind and intelligent and the only female that had ever said a good word to Proffitt. Although it was not generally his nature to surrender himself to such pithy emotions, when it came to Olivia, he was as enamored as a new puppy nipping at her skirts.

He wanted Olivia far more than he'd wanted any other thing in all his life. He was determined to have her, no matter what.

There was but one problem. Well, he thought, rather three problems. Olivia was extremely devoted to her father and siblings. She would never truly leave them while they were alive, devoting herself to their care beyond all else. But Proffitt had a plan. Three lives for one.

It was a simple enough task, really, and certainly not one to bother his conscious much. He'd been furthering the dark one's purpose by providing him with nearly every young male in the county. It was simple, the more innocent souls he vanquished on earth, the higher his standing in Hell. He'd been laboring for such a long time to earn the Devil's favor. Surely, those lives would count for something, wouldn't they? He only had one desire, after all. To possess the delectable Miss Stone, body and soul.

"You dare to ask something of our master?"

Proffitt spun around and found himself face to face with a beast so horrible it had to be one of the Devil's own. A tall, gangly demon, now in human form, stood before him. There was no need for introductions since he

well remembered Blalock.

"Please forgive me, my lord. I meant no disrespect." Proffitt dropped to his knees and wrung his hands, head bowed and body shaking.

"Never mind your blathering. The master has a task for you. A very important one."

"Oh, yes my lord," he sputtered. "Anything at all."

"Good. I will be lodging with you for a while. I have brought someone with me who is also in the employ of the Dark One. He is here to collect an innocent. I will be tutoring him for the time being."

"But, my lord, it is I who serves the master in this hell-forsaken place. He doesn't need another!"

"Do you dare to argue with the Devil's own messenger?" Blalock's voice roared, his demonic countenance expanding, his form suddenly filling the room.

Proffitt cowered even further down. Turning his pitiful expression upward, he shook his head. "Of course not. I-I didn't mean to offend. I am ever his faithful servant. He needs only to ask—"

But Blalock vanished, not waiting wait for Proffitt to finish his statement.

A loud roar sounded and a rush of wind blew through the workshop, sending debris of leaves and broken tree branches in from the open windows to whirl into place before the undertaker. When the mass of tree and branches parted, a man stood before him—an impossibly tall, broad-shouldered, thickly muscled man, who was naked and wearing a fierce scowl.

It took a moment before the undertaker found his voice.

"W-who are you?"

The man stared down at him before answering. His gaze so intense that Proffitt was sure he would spout fire and death.

"I am Ayden Royce. Who are you, little man?"

The undertaker swallowed. "Micah Proffitt, sir, at your service." Climbing up to his feet, Micah gave him a low bow, averting his eyes from the sheer beauty of the other man's form. If only he had such a blessed form, he would have bedded every woman in the county by now.

"Where's Blalock?"

"Uh, Lord Blalock left rather abruptly. Well, then, first we shall have to dress you. Yes, that's right. We cannot have you rambling about thusly."

The man frowned, "Dress me? What is this, dress?"

"In clothes. Linen shirt, trousers, a fine pair of Hessians... You really don't know about clothing?"

"You mean such wrappings as Blalock was covered with? I remember, in the before time, men wrapped themselves in strange garments and..." he stopped speaking and his expression clouded. "It was long ago."

"Never mind. I'll teach you everything you need to know about being a proper gentleman, Master Royce. Uh, tell me, just who it is you are seeking. Perhaps I can help you find the poor bastard, eh?"

Ayden's eyes narrowed. "A woman. She has hair the color of burnt henna and a flawless face. Her eyes are the shade of the night sky and clear like polished stone."

Proffitt stifled a groan, a sinking feeling taking shape in his gut. There was only one woman in Creston Corners that matched that description. "Uh, yes, well, does this woman have a name?"

The stranger closed his eyes, concentrating. When the stranger opened his eyes again, the undertaker knew he had been communicating silently to their master. Proffitt saw the flicker of Hell's fire burn in his eyes for just a moment before returning to their shining silver color.

"She does indeed have a name," he said. "Blalock told me her name is O-liv-ia. Olivia Stone."

Chapter Six

Ayden could tell that the little man—Micah Proffitt, Blalock had called him—knew instantly of whom he'd spoken. The muscles of Proffitt's face remained smooth and unmoving, and his expression belayed an alarm that appeared to shoot straight through him.

"I see. Well, then. Quite a catch, though not so much for one like yourself. I mean, with your glorious countenance, you could have your choice of the ladies. In fact, I believe one such as Miss Stone to be a bit on the plain side, don't you think?" He didn't wait for Ayden's answer but turned sharply, and squaring his shoulders motioned for Ayden to follow him. "Come, come, we must get you outfitted. There's much to be done."

Ayden suddenly had the impulse to squash the little man, much like he'd stepped on the horrid little aphids that had once plagued his beautiful roses. Instead, he took a deep breath and followed the undertaker.

Although he didn't care for being led around like a helpless goat, Ayden thought it best to humor his host, barely ducking in time to miss the top of the doorframe. The narrow hallway led to another door that was secured with a heavy lock. Proffitt pulled a key from his vest and quickly turned the mechanism then pushed open the door ahead of him.

"This will be your room while you're here. It isn't much, but I'm afraid it's the only room that will accommodate your size. Now, sit while I gather things for your bath. When you're clean we'll see about fetching you some clothing."

Ayden said nothing as he surveyed the room. It wasn't much larger than his chamber in Hell, in fact, it barely met his height and there was room only for him to walk in a tight circle. On one side of the room, there was a wooden structure that had surely been used for torture. It was made of four posts with a large pad resting between them and a gathering of material that was covered in drawings of flowers.

"It's a bed. A place for you to sleep," the little man said. "And that is a chair, and a desk, oh, and a looking glass. Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back directly."

True to his word, Ayden's mentor left the room and pulled the door shut behind him. The loud crack of the door's closing shot through Ayden's nerves like an arrow. Clenching his fists and letting out a low breath, he slowly turned and began a closer examination of his surroundings.

First, the, what was it? Bed. It was like no bed he'd ever seen. There was no straw and it was on short wooden pedestals.

Ayden placed his hand upon the surface. It was soft and pliable. Pushing down, he heard a groan from the frame that made him quickly step back. When the thing didn't collapse entirely, he then moved closer still and with both hands pushed with all of his might. While the bed sank a bit in the middle, it stopped after a few inches. Satisfied that it would take his weight, Ayden decided to try it out.

Ayden sat down. Closing his eyes, he could recall a time in his distant past when he'd slept on animal skins in the Dark King's camp. This was different. Stretching, he leaned back until he was resting completely on the bed and looking at the stained ceiling above him.

This bed reminded him of a soft place that smelled of sunshine and outdoors. Odd, he thought, because there was also the scent of dust as well. It had not been used for a long time.

Closing his eyes, the former angel let his thoughts wander. It was a pleasant enough state of being, and before too long, Ayden drifted into a half sleep, his mind filled with delicious images of spending long nights and lazy afternoons wrapped in this strange material, sleeping. Or, better yet, not sleeping, and sharing the warmth with the soft, sweet smelling Olivia.

As he lay there, he realized their brief time together had filled him with such profound yearnings. All he could think about was what he would do if he had her in his grasp, the two of them alone and unhindered by Blalock, the undertaker, and even the Devil himself.

First, he'd run his hands along her naked body and pull her to him so that their bodies met, skin to skin. Then, consuming her mouth with his, he would drink in her sweet flavor in a deep kiss. Finally, he would roll her over to settle beneath him and secure her, his body covering her completely, his sex pushing against hers, her legs wrapped around his waist—

"Getting all comfortable, are we?"

Ayden startled. In an instant he was sitting up, clutching the soft fabric of the bed's covering around his middle. Ayden bit down on a curse at Proffitt's intrusion into his wild imaginings. Added to that, anger warred with the shame that rose in his blood. Why he should have such feelings were a complete puzzle, but have them he did.

"Have you a purpose for bothering me?"

The little man cleared his throat. "I've brought you soap and water and some things to put on."

Ayden narrowed his eyes a moment and then leaned over to see a pitcher and bowl on the table beside the bed.

"I will wash now."

"Very good, sir. I trust you know how to dress yourself?"

"I'll manage."

Proffitt nodded sharply and then turned on his heels, quickly exiting the chamber.

Rising from the bed, Ayden eyed the garments with curiosity. He'd seen the other man's attire, so figuring out how to cover himself was no challenge. Turning toward the ewer, he located a small cloth and a towel, and dipping it into the lukewarm water, began his ablutions.

Glancing up from the surface of the water, Ayden saw his reflection in the looking glass. An unfamiliar stranger looked back at him. Reaching out, he touched the surface of the mirror, outlining his own high brow, rugged cheekbones, too full mouth, and the tangle of whiskers framing his mouth.

Raising his hands to his shoulders, Ayden saw at once that his most beautiful asset was missing. Gingerly he touched place where his wings had been shorn from his flesh the moment he'd been changed from angel to human. The area was still tender, a stinging reminder of one more thing he'd lost because of his punishment.

For an instant, his reflection disappeared and a too familiar scene took its place. It was of the time when the battle between angels and humans nearly consumed all living things. Now, standing in front of the dish of water, he saw again the poor souls that had run in fear from his burning arrows. He'd been an excellent marksman and rarely had missed his target. Men, women, and children—all had felt the searing pain of war.

Closing his eyes, he knew that if he listened closely enough, he could still hear their screams. It was all he could do to shove the memory away from his thoughts.

The one advantage to being tortured for centuries is that one never slept and therefore never had the chance to re-live their memories in dreams. Or, in nightmares.

Turning away from the table, Ayden began the slow process of dressing himself. Just as he was about to put the final touches on his ensemble, a light knocking sounded at the door.

"Yes? Who's there?"

"It's Trevor. Uh, I'm Mr. Proffitt's valet. If you'll allow me, sir, I'll help you with your dressing."

"Come," Ayden called.

When the door opened, the lad stepped inside. A youth of about fifteen and as skinny as a skeleton, he quickly ducked inside and gave Ayden a curt bow.

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"You are a—what did you say? A valet?"

"Oh, well, not exactly. I'm Mr. Proffitt's servant. I help him dress, keep his house, cook his meals, and dig the graves for him."

"Are you his slave, then?"

"Well, not in the legal sense. I'm in his employ."

"Then he does not own you."

"Oh, no, sir. I'm my own man. Well, mostly. Anyway, I can see that you've need of some help. Here, allow me."

Though he was small, the boy had very nimble fingers and had the buttons and ties done in no time at all.

For a moment, Ayden said nothing, and then cautiously he reached up to his face. "Proffitt has no hair on his face. How does he remove it?"

"I shave it for him. Oh, and I trim his hair as well. Would you like me to do so for you as well?"

Ayden rubbed his chin; the hair was rough and tangled. He was certain it would scratch the delicate skin of a young lady. "Yes, I would."

The boy left the room, and when he returned, his arms were laden with several odd looking tools.

"I've borrowed from Mr. Proffitt's things. Since you're his cousin, I'm sure he won't mind."

Half an hour later, the boy finished his work, and turning Ayden back toward the glass, he pointed to the reflection. "There now, see if you don't look like a right proper gentleman."

Cautiously, Ayden surveyed the lad's work. He did indeed look quite neat, even handsome, he thought. He ran his hand across his smooth chin. The sensation was...different.

Stepping back, he studied his new appearance. The charcoal color of the waistcoat suited him, as did the bleached white linen shirt. The trousers were black and very form fitting, hugging his legs like a second skin. He looked down at the boots, and although they were a bit snug, the polished leather had a most pleasing scent to them.

Ayden smiled. He felt more than ready to meet with Miss Olivia Stone.

In fact, the former angel was so sure of his own ability to complete his mission; he found he was almost guilty at the ease of which he would acquire her for his master. Indeed, the promise of the young lady's delights was almost enough to tempt the fallen angel to forget just why he'd been brought to this strange and foreboding place.

"Something troubling you, sir?" Trevor asked.

"I was just thinking that it's too bad that I won't be visiting for very long. Perhaps I'll return one day."

"How long will you be staying, that is, if you don't mind my asking, sir?"

Ayden studied the boy. He seemed amiable enough. It could be that he was a soldier for the enemy, one of the hidden high angels, though Ayden doubted it. The lad didn't seem like a great warrior, after all.

"I don't really know. I've business with a young woman here, and when that's complete, I will be going..." he paused, remembering his home amongst the heavens, his beautiful garden and his simple cottage with the window that overlooked a gentle flowing stream. He suspected there was no place on earth that equaled the splendor of his small valley.

"Well, if you don't stay long, you won't be missing much. Creston Corners isn't all that big, at least not compared to London, you know. Now there's a place that a bloke could get lost in."

"London." Ayden let the word roll off his tongue. He had to admit, he liked the sound of it.

"Have you never been, sir?"

"No, I haven't."

"Oh, where do you hail from, then? The Continent?"

Ayden considered telling the boy just exactly where he did come from, but any mention of Hell directly to anyone other than the master's operatives was probably not a good idea.

"Yes, the continent. It's very warm where I'm from."

"Ah, yes. The south of France, then. Well, you don't have much of an accent like those Frenchies do. Were you a missionary?"

"A missionary?"

"I think that's what they call it. You serve a higher master, if you get my drift."

That was something that Ayden did understand. Of course, there was no need to tell the boy exactly which master he served, now was there?

"Yes. That's correct. I am a missionary."

The boy prattled on about the local landscape and population, and while Ayden paid close attention, he couldn't help it when his thoughts went back to the woman. When would he see her next? Or, better yet, when would he bed her? He feared he'd best not wait too long, lest something happen that would keep her from him, such as her turning her attention to another, or if that despicable little undertaker stole her away.

Truth be told, Ayden wasn't sure if he could stay away from Olivia very long, judging by the evermore-painful erection he got every time he thought of her.

"Trevor, you rotten little lay-about! Where in blazes are you?" Mr. Proffitt's voice rattled through the building.

The lad jumped at the sound. "Uh, it's been a pleasure serving you, good sir. If you need anything else, you've only to call."

Ayden watched amused as the boy bobbed his head repeatedly and backed out the door only to turn and meet Proffitt's wrath.

Red faced and looking as though he were about to burst, the little man grabbed the boy's ear in a white knuckled pinch and pulled him from the room, scowling at Ayden as he did so.

"With your leave, my good man," he said, and then he fairly ran down the hall, Proffitt cursing and growling in a tone not meant for others to hear whilst dragging the poor boy behind him.

It was to Ayden's great pleasure that he could hear every word Mr. Proffitt said as he led his young charge away.

"You worthless cur! Get to work peeling those potatoes and washing the leeks. Miss Stone is coming tonight for dinner and everything must be perfect, or I'll wear the hide right off of you, I swear. Now, get to it!"

"Excellent," Ayden said when their voices faded away. It meant that he wouldn't have to look far for his

master's prey. By tonight, he expected he'd be able to bed the woman and have her on the way to meet his master. He was certain that by the time the sun rose in the morning, he would be forever free of Hell's dominion.

Chapter Seven

After dispensing his servant to the task of preparing the dinner, Proffitt returned to his bedchamber and began his own dressing for the evening's company.

Anger burned in his chest so hot that he could swear it would burst from his shirtfront. So long he had waited for Olivia to turn to him, he wasn't about to let his master's lackey steal her away!

"That Devil may have designs on you now, sweet Olivia, but I saw you first!" he muttered as he worked at buttoning his shirt.

He took a long time dressing, his clumsy fingers working over the buttons of his shirt and trousers. Damning his servant for not having the dinner prepared and thus being unable to dress Proffitt as a proper valet should. Perhaps he would take his measure out of the lad's flesh. Well, as soon as his usefulness was done. He'd soon have a wife to take over all the house duties. After all, besides the bedsport, was that what a wife was for?

Of course, he knew of Olivia's silly preoccupation with fashion and society. Too bad, he thought ruefully. Once they were married, the only sewing she'd be doing would be on burial shrouds. By the master of all darkness, she'd perform as he ordered, or face the consequences of his ire, to be sure. It was his belief that a sound beating was the only way to handle idiot servants and lack-about wives.

Despite his declarations, however, Proffitt knew the chances for his success, now that this beast of man had arrived, had dwindled dangerously. But Proffitt wanted Olivia more than anything, and had waited for her longer than he had for anyone. Still, if the Devil wanted her, the undertaker had no chance of denying his ownership. But Proffitt was damned determined to at least sample her charms before the dark one claimed her.

As he looked in the mirror and adjusted his cravat, the undertaker considered something else. Perhaps he could be the one to deliver sweet Olivia to his master? After having his way with her, of course, he could then lead her to Satan's domain, victorious in having done something this fellow Royce could not accomplish.

He smiled into his own pockmarked reflection. It was simply a case of having his sweets and eating them, too.

Chapter Eight

"Come, come, Olivia, we must hurry or we'll be late."

Though she hadn't meant to, Olivia waited until the very last minute to leave for dinner. Thoughts of her approaching matrimony weighed heavy on her mind. Fortunately, she'd yet have some freedom, as their impending marriage had to be registered with the local parish and posted in the banns before they could wed.

"I'm ready father," she said, donning her wrap. Although late in July, the evening still had a chill and she couldn't afford to catch her death before making sure her family was cared for.

As the two made their way down the lane, Olivia steeled herself for what lay ahead. She had to give every effort to making a successful match. Her family's wellbeing depended on it.

Her father didn't know it, but in her acceptance of Mr. Proffitt's proposal of marriage, she had included a few other necessary arrangements.

First, she had requested enough money for her father to pay off the mortgage on the cottage, their bank loan, and with funds left over to provide for her family. Mr. Proffitt would also agree to sponsor Simon, when he was old enough, to apprentice with a London tailor. And finally, her future husband must agree to find Hilary a proper chaperone, a respectable woman who would sponsor her in her first London season, and then guide her on her own bid in the marriage mart one day.

Though she'd tried her best to drag out their walk to Proffitt's house, commenting on practically every flower, tree, and cottage lane along the way, twenty minutes later, she and her father were seated in Proffitt's parlor.

Together, they sat smiling over refreshments and trying very hard not to show their increasing discomfort. Her father sighed several times and Olivia did her best to sit still, trying with all her might not to fidget. A chill had settled over the room and she was sure she felt the cold damp atmosphere of death about the place. Of course, for an undertaker, she supposed that should be expected, but knowing about it and experiencing it were two different things.

"I think we shall be an excellent match," Proffitt said as he tipped his wine glass toward them.

"It's what I hope as well," she said, trying to swallow the lukewarm tea around the huge ball of ice that had formed in her throat. She had refused his offer of the strong, rough wine after a single sip. She surmised it must have been aged in his own cellar in a cask full of well-worn boots, the taste was so bitter.

"With your dressmaking skills, I shall be in great demand when the fair maids and maidens of Creston Corners begin to die off."

Olivia blinked. "What do you mean? Is there word of another plague? One that affects women as well?"

Proffitt shook his head and quickly patted her gloved hand. "Oh, no, my dear. I was only thinking that now with so few men about, the women would find it extremely difficult to continue. A woman needs a man, and those that don't fall to impoverished conditions will likely succumb to the effects of their terrible loneliness. It is a sad fact that grief can steal one's life as surely as the plague."

"Oh, yes, of course." Olivia quickly pulled her hand from beneath Proffitt's. She shivered. His touch had been like that of an eel. The cold and damp of his fingers had penetrated even her lambskin gloves.

"I have also considered your request for a modest sum."

"Request, Olivia?" her father asked.

She felt her father's gaze upon her. "I only meant to make sure you and the children are cared for."

"Olivia," he said, "You shouldn't have—"

"Nonsense, my friend. Your daughter is very thoughtful. Of course, I would consider it an honor to add my small contribution to the family coffers. After all, it is you who's giving your lovely daughter into my care, depriving you of her company and of the income from her talented stitching. It's the least I can do. Perhaps it would be easier to accept if you considered it a gift?"

"Yes, of course. A gift, but not a charity. Never that."

Olivia reached forward to place her teacup on the table when a loud banging sounded from the hall outside the parlor followed by a string of curses.

"Hell and damnation, the roof of this hovel is low enough to cramp a midge!"

Looking up, Olivia saw the immense shape of a man fill the doorway. The shock of the sight stunned her so badly that she literally jumped and the delicate bone china cup she'd held fell clattering to the floor, spewing its contents and shattering like ice falling upon stone.

When the stranger lifted his gaze to meet hers, a shock of lightning struck the air between them. Olivia barely breathed.

It hadn't been a dream after all. The stranger in her drawings really was a flesh and blood man!

The very moment that Ayden's gaze had landed on Miss Stone, he knew she was his. Ayden watched her expression as confusion and surprise gave way to stunned realization. In those few seconds, he knew he'd caught her. She was his and nothing that either of them, or anyone else, would ever do could change that.

Ayden smiled, but as soon as he did so, another emotion filled him.

He should have reveled in the glory of his power over her, in his victory that would have her fairly leaping into the arms of the Devil himself.

The very thought of the horrific form of his master laying claim to the pure, delicate beauty of the creature before him wrenched his gut like nothing he'd ever felt. But that knowledge hadn't been near as startling as his very next realization.

With a power to rival the force of a volcano, Ayden wanted her. For himself.

It was all he could do to control his desire to snatch the woman from her seat, carry her to his room, and finish the tryst they'd begun in her cottage. Instead, he clenched down hard with his jaw, remembering Blalock's warning.

"Excuse my intrusion, cousin. I did not realize that you were entertaining guests."

"Oh," the delightful Miss Stone said, covering her mouth with her hand as a beautiful rosy blush colored her cheeks. Ayden clamped down on his lust, careful not to let his glee at her response show on his own face.

"Cousin Ayden," Proffitt said in a sour tone. "I apologize for not inviting you to our engagement, but you were resting so soundly after your long journey, I thought it best not to rouse you."

Ayden sent him a withering look then inwardly smiled at the small man's startled expression.

"I thank you for your kind thoughtfulness, Cousin. However, the wonderful scent of meat roasting seems to have awakened my appetite. Imagine my delight at seeing such a beautiful guest to share your delicious feast."

Ayden watched as the woman trembled at the sound of his voice. She too had an effect on him, since her every breath stirred the pool of desire in his gut. The quickening rise and fall of her breasts, so tightly ensconced in her fragile lace wrappings mesmerized him. Ayden swallowed back his excitement, fully aware that if he did not tread carefully, this little bird might yet take flight.

"Uh, of course." Proffitt spoke in a strained voice as he made the proper introductions.

"A pleasure to meet you, sir."

For the first time since entering, Ayden noticed the other man in the room. An elderly gentleman, with hair graying at the temples and a long face, held out a feeble hand.

"And you, sir." When Ayden took his offered grasp, he quickly noted how frail the man was. For a brief moment, he had the instant impression of one who had suffered greatly.

"Indeed," the woman said, breathless. She too held up her hand, but with her palm down and fingers slightly curled.

Ayden hesitated, not sure what to do next. Then Blalock's voice sounded in his head.

"Take her hand, fool. A gentleman always places a kiss above the hand of a lady. It's a show of good

manners."

Slightly annoyed at Blalock's intrusion of his thoughts and at his own ineptness, he glanced up at Miss Stone, only to see a five-inch high version of his tormentor standing on the fireplace mantle behind her.

"Leave me be!" Ayden growled inwardly. "I can handle this."

"Nonsense. That ugly cur isn't going to help you. He wants the woman for himself, you dolt. You need my help."

Ayden hesitated. He was a stranger in this place, and Blalock knew more about manners and proper behavior among humans than he did. Though Ayden didn't want the old beast interfering, he knew that without help he might fail. That could not be allowed.

He fervently wished he didn't need anyone's assistance, but he'd no experience here. There was nothing to be done about it.

"Stay." Ayden bit down on his anger.

Returning his attention to his duties, the angel smiled pleasantly. Leaning over, he took the woman's hand in his and gently breathed in the scent of her before placing a chaste kiss a few inches above her fingers.

A strong tremble shook her hand in his and his body tightened in response.

"Miss Stone," he said, reigning in his emotions as he spoke. He felt his own desire crashing against the walls of his control like the sea breaking against the surf during a storm. With her overwhelming scent of wildflowers sending him to the edge of reason, her touch damn near undid him.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he muttered, lifting his gaze to meet her eyes.

Innocent eyes, he realized. Suddenly the vision of a doe caught in a thicket, frightened and trembling, waiting for the deadly hunter's advance broke into his thoughts.

"And you as well," she said, breathless.

The spell between them was broken when he heard her father's voice.

"Will you be joining us for dinner, Mr. Royce?"

At the sound of the other man's question, Miss Stone quickly pulled her fingers from his grasp, tightly folding them in her lap and dropping her gaze to the floor.

"I would love to," he answered, not taking his eyes off Olivia. "If my cousin doesn't mind, that is."

A moment of silence passed between them. Ayden watched as his 'cousin' licked his lips and clenched his fists. "I suppose it makes little difference." He reached over and grabbed Olivia's hand, clutching it in a tight-fisted hold. "Miss Stone has just agreed to be my wife. You can celebrate with us during dinner."

Dinner proved to be the height of all disasters. Olivia sat stone still while the entrée was being served. Though the roasted duck in plum sauce couldn't have been more delectable, the crushing atmosphere of the company spoiled the meal as if curdled milk and maggots had been mixed into the gravy.

"Our Trevor is quite the accomplished chef, don't you agree?" Proffitt muttered as he slurped up the last of his soup before handing off his bowl to the stumbling servant.

"Indeed," Martin said as he set his spoon down beside his own half-consumed dish. "You will have to send him around to share some of his recipes with Mrs. Kempt."

Olivia stifled a nervous laugh. "Oh, Papa. As if she would even let a stranger into her kitchen."

Though she'd tried to ignore him, Mr. Royce had watched her the entire meal thus far. She could feel his gaze caressing her skin as if he had reached across the table and pulled her into his too familiar embrace.

"Where are you from again, Mr. Royce?"

Olivia cringed. It was the third time her father had tried to pull the stranger's attention from her.

"I have a small estate in..." he paused, as if remembering. "The South of France." With that, he slid his gaze across the table to his cousin who was happily sawing off a piece of the duck and then stuffing it into his face.

"Lovely country, as I hear it," Martin Stone said, his gaze never leaving the stranger's face.

"Yes. But it's not nearly as beautiful as the scenery here." He nodded to Olivia.

Stunned, Olivia watched him pick up his knife and fork and mimicked the gestures of their host, though for the life of her, it looked as though he'd never before held such instruments. When he'd at last sawed off a sizable chunk, he picked it up and placed it in his mouth.

Olivia felt her breath catch in her throat as she saw his pure pleasure at the taste of the fowl and the way his jaw ground the piece of meat. Then, mesmerized, she watched the strong muscles of his throat move as he swallowed. Never had she thought of the act of eating so sensual. With Ayden Royce, it was almost scandalous.

In fact, everything this wondrous stranger did was just this side of wanton. It was as though he'd been created for sex and nothing else.

Olivia bit down on her tongue to stifle a moan.

"Olivia, darling," her father said beside her. "You've hardly touched your food. Are you feeling ill?"

"I'm fine, father. It's just all a little overwhelming."

"Bride-to-be melancholy, I suspect," Proffitt said, small pieces of his food spewing out from his mouth as he spoke.

"Yes," she said. "That must be it."

"Not to worry, my dove," Proffitt began, dabbing at his mouth in a macabre imitation of a gentleman. "I've already assumed your acceptance, and a month ago, had the church post the banns. I confess I did do a bit of bribery and subterfuge, but it was well worth my efforts. I've even reserved the church Saturday next and given a donation to the vicar. It's all arranged."

Olivia would have fainted had it not been for the touch of her father's hand on her sleeve.

"How kind of you," she barely managed.

"You'll see how good a husband I will be, sweet Olivia."

Then Micah Proffitt gave her a leering grin.

The sight of her intended sent a swirl of nausea through her. "I'm not feeling so well, after all." She muttered her apologies to the men. "I think I should leave you gentlemen to your dinner and entertainments."

Perhaps your servant could see me home."

Simultaneously Proffitt and Royce stood. "You could rest here, in my room," Proffitt offered.

Olivia held up her hand. "No, no, it's a minor headache. I'm fine, really. Please forgive me. I've much to do to prepare for the wedding."

"Of course, my dear." Her father took her hand and patted it gently.

"Miss Stone." Royce stepped forward. "Allow me to escort you home."

"Without a chaperone? It just isn't done," Martin said, placing his napkin on the table. "I, too, am fatigued, Olivia. I'm sorry to cut our visit short, Mr. Proffitt, but perhaps another time would be better."

"Of course, as you wish. I'll personally deliver you home in my carriage. That way we can commence planning our nuptials."

"Your tack can only take two people and father's chair. The two of you go. I can certainly walk."

"I have a solution, Miss Stone," Royce said. "Perhaps my cousin would ride with your father and I can escort you in plain view of the carriage. That way your father and my cousin can discuss the particulars of the 'nuptials' and I can keep you company."

"That won't be necessary—"

"Please, allow me the pleasure."

That was it, Olivia realized. The moment she knew she was in serious trouble. The expression Ayden Royce wore was that of pure unquenchable desire. His eyes focused on her as though no one else in the world existed. He looked at her with such intensity that she knew instantly that she couldn't deny him anything. Ever.

"Of course, Mr. Royce," she said in a wavering voice. "I shall be glad of your company."

Chapter Nine

Though it had seemed a grand idea at the time, the walk to Olivia's had been pure torture. Ayden groaned as the memory of her in his earlier embrace caused the thickness in his groin to grow even tighter. Yet another reason why he hated clothing and planned to be rid of them the very moment it was wise to do so.

Although he'd wanted to be close to Olivia, not being allowed to touch her was a sweet misery all its own. He could hear the music of her every breath, inhale her enticing scent, and feel the damp heat of her desire even from the required two feet between them as they walked. Even lashes of fire searing his skin did not pain him as badly as keeping such a distance from Olivia.

So, he bid his time and waited two full hours after his return to Proffitt's home before he made his way back to Olivia's. Now he stood outside her window. The very same one he'd entered earlier that day. So anxious he was to bed her that his body fairly hummed at the thought of it.

Inhaling a deep breath, Ayden gingerly placed his hands on the window, quietly pushing the shutters aside. The moment he started to pull up through the window, a familiar hand grabbed his shoulder and forced him back down.

"A moment, if you don't mind."

Before he could refuse, or make any comment at all, Ayden found himself face to face with his demon keeper.

"Of course," he said, knowing that it would do no good to refuse.

"Very good. Now, we have one thing to discuss before you proceed."

With a quick move, Blalock reached downward and grabbed the most sensitive part of Ayden's anatomy, giving it a combination of a squeeze and a jerk upward.

Pain shot through Ayden's body like a thousand tendrils of fire. "Bloody hell's bastard!"

"Now," Blalock continued, "so we don't have any misunderstanding, there'll be none of this." He jerked again.

"I don't understand," Ayden began but found that his voice had left him as Blalock's tightening fist reiterated his point.

"Of course you don't, dear boy. That's why I'm telling you in such a fashion. No penetration until I say so. None. Not so much as a tickle. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Ayden ground out, his teeth clenched and sweat breaking on his brow.

"Good."

With that, he turned loose and Ayden fell to his knees. "If I can't take her, what in blazes am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, recite poetry perhaps, woo her with tales of your misspent youth?"

"What?"

"Never mind. Let me put it in terms even you will understand. You can do anything you like with her as long as you don't penetrate."

"But, what's left?" Tiring of this guessing game, Ayden pushed himself to his feet.

"Well, to start with, you can use your hands and your mouth."

"My mouth?"

"Oh, yes, the ladies find it quite stimulating, I'm told."

"Oh." Ayden let out a slow breath. "And what am I to do with this?" He pointed to his erect member.

"What about it?"

"For one thing, left too long in its present state it becomes extremely painful."

Blalock's smile widened. "Of course it does. I suppose you can always pleasure yourself. You know, while you're busy with one hand and your mouth, you can always..."

Understanding the demon's meaning, Ayden nodded. "Yes, of course, if you think that will help."

"Well, there are those that believe pleasuring yourself can cause vision problems, but I've never seen it. Don't worry about it. If I know my humans, this one won't be long deciding what to do. Once she signs the contract, you can penetrate 'til your heart's content."

Ayden glanced back into the room. He could just barely see Olivia's form lying on the bed, tossing with a restlessness he completely understood.

When he looked back, Blalock had gone. He was both relieved and unsettled, not knowing when the Devil's henchman would return.

Olivia's womanly scent drifted to him. She smelled of roses and sunshine. The allure was as powerful as a siren's call. Whatever damage Blalock had done to his nether parts must have been minor, because at the first thought of the sweet Olivia, his body hardened, ready once again to plunder her delicious charms.

Without making a sound, he entered her room and padded softly to her bedside. A dark nymph wrapped in pale sheets, the sight of her made his breath catch in his throat. She wasn't just beautiful, she was beauty.

"O-liv-i-a," he said slowly, tasting her name as it rolled around on his tongue. Already he could scent the warm honey that pooled between her legs at his summoning, feel the sharp sting of her surprise as she startled awake. She was both frightened and excited, thrilled and nervous. He had stirred a primal lust in her that was matched only by his own.

And when she opened her eyes and looked up at him, simultaneously spreading her legs beneath the silken sheets, it was almost his undoing.

"O-liv-i-a," the stranger called out from the mist of her riotous dreams. Olivia rushed to consciousness, her body suddenly humming with excited anticipation.

Opening her eyes she saw him, the beautiful man who'd nearly assaulted her the day before and who, like a demon lover, had tormented her dreams the entire night.

Lightning fast, desire shot through her, trapping her breath in her chest and at the same time relaxing her back onto the mattress. Like a dockside whore, she opened her legs and beckoned him in.

"Take me," she whispered, thinking surely this was just another torturous dream. All thought left her when he moved closer still. Then, leaning over, he touched her only with his mouth upon hers. Without hesitation, he set to work, pushing open her lips with his own and fixing her with his tongue, moaning into her mouth, his relentless assault making promises of what he was about to do.

As he caressed her mouth-to-mouth and tongue-to-tongue, he gently cupped her breasts, and with his thumbs, he rubbed her nipples with small circular motions. The feel of her night rail against her sensitive skin drove her nearly mad, and when she thought she could endure no more, he climbed over her and placed his right knee firmly between her legs. Pressing forward, he pushed muscle and bone into her center and began rocking back and forth, back and forth.

Desperate, she grabbed at his hips and urged him downward, until she felt his hard shaft tease her belly with every thrust. Releasing her breasts, he grabbed her wrists and pushed her arms up over her head, pinning them to the mattress with his left hand. His right hand he used to balance himself above her on the bed.

Olivia thought she would die from wanting him inside of her.

"Please, please, please..." she repeated over and over, a mantra of her unrelenting desire.

But he did not cease his sweet torture. Instead, he closed his mouth over her right nipple and began to suckle, long and sweet. Olivia's breath caught in her throat. She was paralyzed with sensation.

When she thought she could endure no more, he ran his tongue between the cleft of her breasts, down her belly and just above tangle of curls between her legs. Moving his right hand farther down, he cupped her mound tightly. Before she could react, he began to insert his fingers, into her deep, moist center, sliding them in and out, slow and deep in a primal, steady rhythm.

When Olivia moaned, he moved his mouth back up to her left breast and began to suckle her there, taking small bits of her flesh between his teeth and ever so gently sucking inward.

Olivia wept at the sensation, hot tears sliding down her face and dampening the pillow beneath her.

He paused a moment and she heard him take a deep breath and whisper.

"Let yourself go."

And she very nearly did.

Except something stopped her. It was as if a cold hand had come down on her and put out the flame of her desires, sending an icy rush of reality to flood her senses.

In the next instant, Olivia awoke alone in her bed, tangled in sheets still damp from her own moist heat. Suddenly aware that she was alone, her mystical lover had disappeared. Crying out from both the physical pain from Ayden's absence and the frustration that her wanton body had been robbed of sweet bliss once again, she turned on her side. Wracked with tears, she sobbed into her pillow, begging for mercy and cursing this strange affliction. How could she go on like this?

Chapter Ten

One minute Ayden was enthralled by the breathless whirl of sexual pleasure, and the next, he was lying face down on the ground, clutching his middle and trying to escape the shearing pain of being ripped from Olivia's bed.

"Very nice job, Ayden. You are indeed a magnificent specimen. You've much to be proud of."

Ayden looked up to see Blalock perched on a stump, munching on an apple, rivulets of juice sliding down his chin.

"Why did you stop me? I did nothing wrong!" he ground out.

"Indeed you didn't, but let's be honest. No man continuing along that course can avoid the inevitable for long. I'll grant you are formidable, but no one is *that* strong."

Ayden tightened his arms around his middle and tried to level his breathing, frustration and rage mixing in him like fire and ice. "How long before I can have her?"

"Let's see. Before you get too lost in the sensation of your magnificent body, you do remember why you're here?"

"Yes," he said, as another spasm of pain shot through his stomach. "I need to be inside her. I need—"

"This isn't about your needs. Complete your tasks and your reward will be as you've been promised. Nothing more."

Ayden swallowed hard. "I won't forget."

"Good. Now, once she signs the contract, you will be allowed time for pleasuring yourself and the lady. Well, at least until the lady changes her mind about your obvious charms or until the term of the contract expires, whichever comes first."

Those words alone slowed the pulse of Ayden's desire. His thoughts must have shown on his face because Blalock cleared his throat.

"Come, come my boy, surely you know that this wasn't meant to last. Take comfort in the fact that you'll get to sample the fruit that many, mortal and immortal alike, never get the chance to experience."

Ayden groaned. Blalock was right. Any thought he might entertain of possessing the woman was foolish. He only had one objective. Procure Olivia for the Devil's contract and earn his own release. Nothing else mattered.

At least that's what he told himself. No matter that he didn't quite believe it at the moment. He would deal with that later. Hopefully, much later, he thought.

"Of course, you're right," Ayden admitted, though even to his own ears he sounded as though he didn't quite believe it.

Blalock grunted and swallowed the reminder of his apple, core and all, in a disgusting display of gluttony. "Indeed, I am."

Ayden shivered when he considered what other appetites the demon might have.

If he noticed the angel's repulsed expression, the demon didn't mention it. He merely jumped to his feet and waved at Ayden. "Come, come. There is much to do and not much time before the happy nuptials."

Ayden said nothing more, but followed like a war weary soldier, marching off to a battle he was destined to lose

Blalock took his charge back to the undertaker's cottage. After rousing Proffitt's valet, the demon torturer set him to the task of learning about human things.

"Mr. Royce has been away a very long time," he told the youth. "You will assist him reacquainting himself with proper etiquette and dress."

"Indeed, sir, that I will." The boy, Trevor, bobbed his raggedy-cropped head. "He'll be as well versed in London society as any bloke who's ever trod in Piccadilly."

"Then I leave my charge in your capable hands."

As he walked out of the parlor, Blalock nodded once to Ayden, who looked as though he'd just been consigned back to the deepest pit of hell.

"Cheer up, my boy. You are within reach of your reward. That's all that's really important, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," the angel replied. "What else would be?"

Blalock smiled. Of course, there was an entire realm of delights in this world. Sights, sounds, and tastes. Ah, the times the damned could have in this wondrous place. And yet, his employer was not the sort to allow his subjects frivolous pleasures. In fact, although poor Ayden believed his enticing the young Olivia would earn his freedom, Blalock knew the master had other plans. In all of his memory, the old demon had never known Lucifer to set one of his tortured souls free. Again and again, the helpless sots would end up back where they started—suffering Hell's eternal damnation.

It was with those thoughts that Blalock entered the workshop of his host. Cloaked in darkness, the cramped room was full of all sorts of tools and lumber. Amidst the sawdust and myriad of wooden casks, the little man paced back and forth.

"Stupid, stupid beast," Proffitt muttered to himself. "How could I be so stupid?"

"A bit agitated this morning, are we?"

He spun round and found the foul demon, Blalock, leaning against one of the newly finished coffins.

"No, my lord. Just planning my next march, you know, people dying every day. A man in my position must always be ready." Proffitt swallowed, hoping that the demon believed his lie. It would surely be disastrous if their employer knew of his true intentions.

"Of course. I've been checking into your records. It appears you've been extremely busy of late." From out of nowhere, the demon produced a clipboard with several stacks of papers piled on it. Without looking back

at Proffitt, he began thumbing through the documents. "Let's see. Twenty-three men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two have expired in the last month." He ran his hand along the smooth lid of the coffin beside him. "My, my, you are an industrious fellow, aren't you?"

"I provide a valuable service, both here and below."

"Yes, you do. And I'm sure our master will be quite impressed with your enthusiasm for your job."

"I love my work."

"That's very admirable of you. You'll be delighted to know that your efforts have not gone unnoticed. I'm sure you'll get what you deserve. But then, you already know that, don't you?"

"My only intention is to please the master. Any other gifts he chooses to bestow upon me, even the very smallest compliment, will be most appreciated."

"Of course."

Proffitt paused, and a cold chill settled in his gut. Like a slithering snake, an uneasy silence slipped between them.

"Is there something you require, my lord?"

"For now, not a thing. Well, I must be off. I'm sure you're engaged preparing for your wedding."

"Yes, my lord. The ceremony is scheduled for Saturday morning at ten, and the breakfast shortly after that."

"I want to thank you for the invitation, by the way, Ayden and I will be delighted to attend."

Proffitt swallowed. He hadn't sent any invitations, and had no intention of inviting Blalock and Royce. The last thing he needed was an angry demon and his charge in the midst. Still, it would do no good to anger his guest. Swallowing his frustration, he returned Blalock's oily grin.

"Of course, my Lord. I'm honored at your attention."

"I'll bet you are."

Proffitt cringed. "Are you certain that there isn't anything I can do for you?" he asked, hoping more than anything that the demon would just leave him alone.

"Not at the moment." Blalock said. "If I think of something, I'll let you know." He chuckled again and then disappeared, the echo of his mirth still hanging in the empty air.

It wasn't until he'd gone that Proffitt realized that the demon had made no mention of the three ornate coffins in the room. He didn't know how, but he had a sinking suspicion that Blalock knew exactly whom they were intended for.

Though Olivia dreaded it since the moment she'd written her acceptance of Proffitt's proposal, Saturday had arrived. At half past nine, she was seated in a small dressing room in a small building adjacent to the church's main sanctuary. She did her best to remain calm while Mrs. Kempt finished the last touches on her hair, an arrangement of baby's breath entwined in the delicate braid was wrapped at the base of her chignon.

"There you go, Miss." Mrs. Kempt had kept to a tight-lipped attitude all morning.

"Thank you," Olivia muttered, barely able to breathe from the tight wrapping of her whalebone corset around her middle. Her wedding dress was sapphire silk, with a light blue lace overlay. It gathered just under her breasts and flowed to her feet, and when she walked, it floated around her like a cloud.

She heard her housekeeper take in a sharp breath. "I know things are desperate, Miss, but surely there is another way?"

Olivia shook her head. "No, there isn't, or I would gladly give in to it."

"Perhaps if I wrote my brother in Bayberry..."

"I would feel terrible taking money from anyone, and doubly so from your family. No, this is the only way to fix things."

Without another word, Mrs. Kempt took Olivia into her arms and gave her a firm squeeze.

"You will be in my prayers, dear child."

Olivia blinked back her tears. "Thank you."

The older woman pulled away and quickly dabbed her eyes. "Well then, I'm off. If you need anything, send that pitiable young man that Mr. Proffitt employs. Such a thin thing, likely old Proffitt is starving him half to death. We'll see if I don't feed him up when the wretch isn't looking."

Without another word, Olivia watched her housekeeper leave. The older woman's grumbling voice echoing down the hall.

Olivia bit down on a sob. Surely, her situation could get no worse.

Just then, a gentle tapping sounded on the dressing room door.

"Yes?"

The door slowly swung open. Olivia turned to see Ayden, looking breathtakingly handsome, wearing a bleached white linen shirt and black trousers. His boots were polished to an expert gleam. The sun shone just behind him, casting him in a golden light. She was sure the archangel Gabriel couldn't have appeared more stunning.

Olivia swallowed. She amended her earlier assessment of her circumstances. Her luck had just plummeted.

"Good morning, Miss Stone." He bowed formally.

Olivia's throat had gone bone dry. She barely managed to a strangled whisper. "Mr. Royce."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said with a slow, lazy smile.

"I'm on my way to the sanctuary," she said, panic rising in her chest.

"May I walk with you?"

She let out a breath. "I'd rather you didn't." Olivia nervously bit down on her lip as an air of familiarity rose between them. Well, they weren't exactly lovers, now were they? She surely had been dreaming the night before. Hadn't she?

"Why not?"

Olivia dared to glance at him. His linen shirt fit tightly against his chest, and she remembered the smattering of dark blond curls that had tickled her skin when he'd pressed himself against her. She glanced

farther down where the fabric of his trousers stretched across his thickening member, where the wide expanse of his hips led down to his tight, muscular thighs...

She almost swooned at the thought of those hips pressing against her.

"Sir, it is not proper for a gentleman to be in a lady's dressing room, especially before her wedding to another man."

"You care about such propriety?"

Olivia bit down on a grimace. As if she would have such a care. At the moment, her only worry was whether or not she was going to give in to her inclination the fall back on the bed, lift her skirts and beg for his scandalous attentions.

"Any decent young woman would," Olivia muttered instead, backing up until she felt the dressing table behind her.

He matched her retreat, taking a step forward. "And you are decent young woman, a sheer pillar of pure virtue."

Olivia couldn't help but whimper. "It is what I strive to be. Now, if you don't mind." She started to turn away from him, but suddenly he was there, close enough that she could feel his hot breath on her cheek. She could only imagine what his fine, muscular hands must feel like pressing into her back, grasping her shoulders, kneading her flesh.

"But I do mind, Olivia. I think you mind as well. Come, let's go for a walk. Nothing dangerous can happen if we're just walking, now can it?"

"Of course not." Olivia struggled to maintain her balance. Somehow, she knew she couldn't show him her true feelings. If he knew how badly she wanted him, how terribly strong her attraction was toward him it would surely mean disaster.

Without speaking further, she picked up her basket of flowers from the table and moved toward the door. Like her shadow, he stayed close behind, his movement stirring the air around them.

Quickly exiting the dressing room, they walked the short distance on the path that led to the church's main sanctuary. The walk was trimmed with bluebells and pale yellow jonquils. Ayden paused beside her and stooped down to gather a handful of flowers.

"For the lady on her wedding day."

Olivia nearly fell into a faint when his hand lightly touched hers. "Thank you. They're lovely."

As she reached to take them from him, Ayden grasped both her wrists. She jumped when a shock ran through her at his touch. Jerking away, she dropped the basket of flowers and nearly toppled over. At the last second, he grabbed her and set her to rights and before she knew what was happening she was in his arms, her body tight against his chest.

"I'm s-s-sorry."

"It's all right. I felt it too."

Her chest tight, she looked up at him. "You did?"

"Yes, I did. And I have since we first met."

"Oh." Suddenly her breath came out in a rush. The previous night's dream burst into her thoughts and she pulled back, embarrassed.

Ayden bent down and retrieved the fallen blooms. "Here, you're flowers," he said, holding them out to her.

"My goodness," she said, her hand trembling as she took them from him.

"They're beautiful. Just like you."

Olivia felt the heat of her blush burn on her face. "You're too kind."

"Not really," he sighed. Taking her arm, they resumed their walk toward the church. "I do know about flowers, though. I had a garden once, not unlike this one."

"You must miss it very much."

"It's been a very long time." He stopped then and turned toward her. "We've reached the end of the path."

"Oh." Though she should turn away and run for sanctuary, she couldn't help turning back to him. "Aren't you coming inside?"

He glanced up at the building and she saw the slightest of shivers pass over him. "No. I won't be attending your wedding."

It was Olivia's turn to tremble. "Why not?"

He coughed. "I don't believe I'm really wanted there, for one."

"By my fiancé? Why wouldn't he want you there? You are his cousin, after all."

Ayden smiled then. He looked as though he were about to say something but paused.

"Please..." Olivia began, not knowing exactly what she wanted to say, but certain the words would come.

"I want you," he said quietly, and reaching up, he slowly caressed her cheek.

Olivia fairly melted at his touch.

"Yes," she answered, closing her eyes. Imagining what it would be like to surrender to her desires.

"Then come with me. There is a small, enclosed garden just the other side of the fence. No one will see us."

Olivia swallowed. "I don't know. I'm about to be married."

He grasped her hands, his fingers slowly entwining around hers. With every move, the previous night's memories rose to the surface, and Olivia's resolve to refuse him crumbled like sand castles pummeled by the relentless waves against the surf.

"O-liv-i-a," he whispered.

"We must hurry," she said, closing her eyes and moving toward him. "I'm to be married in less than an hour."

Chapter Eleven

Ayden drew her into his arms, feathering soft kisses along the line of her jaw, her neck, and then dipping his tongue into the deep well of her bodice. She tasted like sweet cakes dipped in honey.

"Ooooohhh," she purred beneath him.

"What is your wish, my darling?"

"More. Please, more," she barely breathed.

That was all the encouragement he needed.

Pressing her backward, he gently settled her on the wrought iron bench. Once she was seated, he knelt before her and gazed into her eyes. Her pupils were dilated, and the evidence of her desire darkened her expression like a moonless night.

Suddenly he knew just what would delight her. Laying his head in her lap, he breathed a hot breath into the folds of her skirt. He grasped her ankles, sliding his hands beneath the silks to massage her calves.

"Wait!" She grabbed his shoulders, pushing him back. "What are you doing?"

He could hear her fear trembling in her voice.

"Pleasing you."

He watched as understanding crossed her face.

"Oh!"

Ayden smiled. Once again, she worried her bottom lip with her teeth.

"All right," she whispered. "You may proceed."

And proceed he did.

Lost in the layers of cotton and lace, his fingers quickly found his destination. The dark, musky folds of her womanhood waited before him. Damp with her excitement, he scented the lavender soap mixed with the proof of her readiness for him.

Like a man partaking of a feast, he began his attack, running his mouth along the sides of each of her thighs; he nipped and nibbled, inching closer and closer to her center. In response, he heard her squeak, felt her tremble with every delicious touch. Farther and farther upward he went, closer and closer to her, until at last he was but an inch from her center.

He blew a warm, moist breath upon her. A deep tremble answered his voiceless question.

Above him, Olivia moaned low and deep, opening her legs wider.

Ayden waited a few seconds, fearful that at the last second that his demon keeper might appear and wrench him away one more time.

"Please..." Olivia whimpered above him.

Drawn by the sound of her voice, Ayden could no longer hold back his own lust. He might not be allowed to find his own release, but he would give Olivia hers and damn the consequences when he did.

Leaning forward, he placed a gentle kiss on her mound, and then, like savage marauder, he plundered her inner sweetness.

In response, Olivia jerked, twisted and ground her hips forward. With her every movement, her waves of pleasure went through him, and though he wanted to lay her back and take her the way his body demanded, he resisted. *Not yet!* He forced himself to stay and increased the fervor of his attack.

When at last he was certain neither of them could stand any more, he moved his mouth upwards, and finding the small bud of her womanhood, drew it between his lips, suckling it with long deep draws.

Suddenly Olivia froze, and it felt as if her body thrummed with excitement. She drew in a sharp breath and whimpered. Then, like a bow drawn too tightly, she tensed one final time, arching her back and crying out.

Knowing her time was imminent, Ayden threw himself upwards upon her, his body pressing and grinding into hers. In response to his fervor, she wrapped her legs around his waist and grabbing his shoulders, dug her nails into his flesh.

Ayden felt her tense beneath him, his body wanting nothing more than to rip down his trousers and plunge deep within her soft folds. At the last second, the memory of Blalock's punishments came into his thoughts and he held himself still.

To his delight, Olivia suddenly began to tremble, small at first, but within seconds, building, building, building, until a final, powerful orgasm took her.

Her every muscle clenched tight, and Ayden too, responded, his body seizing in the same fashion as hers. Instantly he realized that while he totally enjoyed her sensations, it was a sweet agony at best, since he felt her response through layers of his clothing and not skin against skin.

As quickly as Olivia's pleasure had peaked, it faded and she wilted in his arms, her arms and legs dropping away from him like a ship's sail with no wind to hold it up.

"I I-I love you," she whispered and then collapsed backward in a faint.

Rolling back on his heels, Ayden pushed himself off her soft form. The sight before him both shocked and pleased him.

In that moment, he knew that Olivia was the perfect picture of angelic beauty and womanly love. The sight of her wrenched something deep in his chest, and his breath caught below his breastbone. During his long sojourn in Hell, he had never felt a pain so deep.

"Excellent job, my friend," Blalock cheered behind him. "Brava!" He clapped his hands furiously.

"Go away," Ayden said, the enormous rush of his enjoyment now withering into burning shame.

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic. I'm only complimenting you on your efforts. And what a performance it was! My boy, you really are very good at this. I doubt the Devil himself knew what a perfect choice you were for this assignment."

Shaking, Ayden stood up, clenching his fist, anger boiling in his blood like water in a pot. "Will it always be this way? Are you going to watch every time?"

"Self conscious are you? Don't want an audience?" Blalock laughed. "Well, too bad. At least until the deal is sealed, and by the look of it, you're pretty damned close to doing it."

Ayden wiped his sleeve across his face, doing his best to quell his rising emotion as well as ignore Blalock's leering grin. "What must I do next?"

"We have a wedding to attend."

"No." Ayden prepared himself for the demon's rage, but none came.

"Don't want to see your lady-love married? Why ever not?"

Ayden held his tongue and glared at the demon torturer.

Blalock crossed his arms, his expression hardening. "Tread carefully, Ayden Royce. The last thing you want to do is fall in love with her."

A strained silence settled between them. And though it might cost him a thousand years beneath the fiery lash, Ayden was determined he would not breach it.

Blalock's tone grew dark. "I've told you before. This one's not for you."

Ayden dropped his gaze downward. "Anything is possible."

"Possible, yes, but not likely. Let her go. Satan already has a claim on her soul and there's nothing anybody can do to change that."

Ayden remained silent. He couldn't have argued if he'd wanted to. Suddenly his heart felt as if it had turned to stone.

Though it was unexpected, it was Blalock who lifted the heavy silence.

"Cheer up, my boy," Blalock said. "You can still play with her, enjoy her as a man does a woman. That's as much as any human male could ever ask for. Much less than an angel, certainly."

"I know," Ayden said at last.

"Good. Now, let's get you cleaned up. We've a lot more to accomplish today, and I believe the wedding party is searching for the bride as we speak. It wouldn't do for them to find you here, especially with her in this condition."

Ayden nodded and followed his keeper out of the garden. When he reached the gate, he turned back to take a final look at Olivia.

She was still as he had left her, her gown tangled around her, her hair falling loose from the ribbons. She indeed had a look of a woman well bedded.

Clenching his fists, Ayden turned to leave. As he stepped away, she moaned again, as if in her unconscious state she felt the pain of their separation as much as he did.

Ayden growled in frustration. The thought of her alone, vulnerable, her body still humming from the energy their lovemaking, sent a stab of pain through him.

He had learned his first lesson as a man. Life was not fair.

* * * *

Olivia did not want the dream to end. The memory of Ayden's attentions having just brought her to sweet ecstasy still warmed her. It was indeed the very best dream she'd ever had. It would have been perfect, had it not been the distant sound of a woman screaming.

Suddenly, the twin fists of surprise and pain clutched at her, shaking her from her soft sweet imaginings and thrusting her into a harsh, cold reality. She no longer lay in a man's gentle embrace, but upon a hard, wooden bench.

"Dear God! She's been ravaged!"

Olivia dared to open one eye to see Mrs. Kempt, her father, and her fiancée hovering over her, their expressions of surprise, shock, and red-faced anger. As though lightning had struck her, she jerked upward, scrambling to put lace and silk of her wedding dress to rights.

Above the din of startled shouting, she heard the voice of her father. "Olivia!"

Olivia cringed at the sound of her father's shocked tone.

"I'm fine. I just took a spell. Please, it's all right."

"A spell, indeed," Mrs. Kempt scoffed, as she did her best to pull the veil from the side of Olivia's head, her hair tumbling down in a cascade of curls and crushed bluebells.

"Is it true, Olivia?" her father asked. "Have you been compromised?"

"I, uh..."

Suddenly Proffitt started waving his hands. "My bride tells the truth. I saw her fall faint. It's the excitement over the wedding, isn't my dear?"

Olivia studied his face. He met her gaze and gave her a sharp and knowing nod. A shock went through her. Was it possible he knew the truth?

"Yes," she whispered, her throat constricting as though the gold chain of her cameo necklace had become a noose.

Proffitt moved forward grasping Olivia's left arm. "That's it, then. Let's give my bride a few moments to freshen up, shall we?"

"You don't have to marry him, Liv." Olivia's father leaned in close and whispered into her ear. "We'll think of something. I swear it." His expression softened, and she could see the tears shimmering in his eyes, on the verge of spilling over.

"It's all right, Papa. Really. I only had a..." she paused, swallowing down her lie, though it scorched her throat. "Bit of nerves. Go ahead to the breakfast. I'll be ready shortly."

She smiled and leaned forward giving her father a quick embrace.

"Are you sure?" he asked one final time.

"Yes, Papa. I'm sure."

He held her a second longer, and as he did, she glanced up and met Proffitt's gaze. For the first time, she saw the black depths of his soul reflected in his harsh expression. Although he said nothing, she saw a malicious shadow slide across his features.

It meant only one thing. Her 'indiscretion' would not go unpunished, she was sure of that.

Chapter Twelve

It was all Proffitt could do to keep from wringing the wretched girl's neck. He'd seen it all. The woman he desired above all others had engaged in a romantic tryst with that blasted demon.

Fury drummed in his ears and it was all he could do not to give the woman a sound beating on the spot. He'd been standing at the garden gate, the two so involved in their lovemaking that they'd not seen him there. Disgust and rage warred within him. How dare they?

Though it took immense effort, the undertaker held his temper. It would not do to anger the Devil's own minion. Though he'd not dealt with Blalock directly, the demon had a reputation spoken of in the lower circles of Hell.

So, his revenge would have to be cautious. So be it, Proffitt decided. He was a cautious man.

No matter. While he couldn't take any action against Blalock, he still had plans for the girl. And surely, because of her mounting list of sins, her soul, just like Proffitt's, belonged to the Devil after all.

But Royce had stolen his love and defiled her. He would dispense with the creature once and for all, as he had the others who'd stood in the way of his plans for Olivia. Surely his master wouldn't mourn the loss of a lowly minion such as Royce. Especially when the Devil had such a fine example of evil in Proffitt's own dark soul.

Chapter Thirteen

"There you go, my boy. Off to the wedding for you."

Ayden looked back at the demon. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"Me? Oh, heavens no. I haven't been on consecrated ground for centuries. And believe me, it doesn't set well with our master. Strictly forbidden. Something about causing the heavens to break open, unloosing heavenly wrath and all that."

"Really?"

"Indeed. I'm a direct employee of the Dark Lord, and The Supreme High One gets a little tetchy when his sacred places are 'violated'. No, I'm afraid I shall have to wait outside."

"If that's true, why am I allowed inside?"

"It's a bit complicated, but since you're now in human flesh, that which has never truly been touched by the flames of eternal punishment, you won't be noticed. At least, we hope not."

"Oh. But, I thought..."

"Don't think. Just go inside and enjoy the morning's entertainment."

Blalock gave him a shove and before he knew it, Ayden stumbled into the sanctuary. He'd seen altars before, but this one was different. Sunlight flooded in from all angles through colored glass. The thick scent of spiced oils filled his senses. Around him, every wooden surface gleamed with an ethereal light. It was beautiful in a way that he had never known. It was alive and yet reverent, as if it were a living being created for one purpose only. To worship The Most High One.

Of course, he knew what it was like to be that pure, that special. Ayden remembered that feeling, as did all angels, even the fallen ones.

Edging his way farther in, he heard a curious sound. Thick musical tones vibrated in the air around him. At the other end of the sanctuary a tall, thin man dressed in starched white linen robes sat in front of an organ, his hands working furiously across the keyboard.

Behind him, wearing long black robes topped with white collars, eight men entered the church singing, their voices entwining with the organ music. Of course, they were no match for an angelic choir, but they did

sing beautifully. The entire scene pricked his heart. It reminded him of another time long, long ago before the heavenly war and his eternal punishment.

For a brief moment, he remembered walking into heaven's sanctuary that final time, when his judgment had been pronounced, and all of those who'd fought with him, including Satan himself. He'd thought no pain could rival such humiliation of a fallen angel. Now, an eternity later, he realized he'd been wrong. The worst part about eternal damnation was that as a heavenly being, he would never forget.

The instant he saw Olivia, all of his piercingly painful memories disappeared. Wearing the beautiful gown he'd seen her in that morning, she clutched at a bouquet of yellow tea roses as though her very life depended on her holding them upright. Her expression was not one of an excited young bride, but of starch white panic, her teeth worrying across her bottom lip, her eyes wide in abject fear.

Her father was seated beside her in his wheeled chair, stiff-necked and wearing a dour expression. Gently he reached up and took her hand, giving it a squeeze. Looking down, Olivia tried to give him a reassuring face, but her smile wavered and Ayden's heart pricked again when he saw her hand tremble in his grasp.

Finding a seat at the back, Ayden lowered himself onto the smooth wooden bench. In the front of the room, he saw Proffitt standing alone and wearing an expectant expression. He was clothed in an oppressive black suit that was obviously too large at the shoulders and too narrow to fit his waist. When he breathed, the buttons on his vest stretched and gaped, threatening to pop loose at any second.

When he saw Ayden at the back of the sanctuary, the undertaker narrowed his eyes and twisted his mouth in a cruel smirk. It was as if he was pronouncing victory over the angel.

Olivia and her father moved stiffly, as though each inch forward pained them greatly. The moment arrived when they stood at their destination, her father at last ready to give away his daughter. She quickly bent down and gave him a gentle kiss on his cheek, and then like a woman facing the gallows, she turned toward her groom.

Proffitt grabbed at her arm and jerked her to his side.

Ayden swore he heard her whimper, but she must have clamped her mouth shut, because the sound was barely a distant echo. The undertaker shot her a fierce scowl and then quickly glanced around the room to see if anyone had taken notice.

If they had, no one voiced their opinion.

It was all Ayden could do to keep from marching down the aisle and smashing the greasy smirk from the little toad's face.

Just then, the music ceased, and a cold silence fell over the room. Others were there as well, townspeople that Ayden had seen earlier in the week. Some he'd been introduced to, others not. None of them took their eyes from the wedding party, though. Several shook their heads sadly but no one spoke a word.

The ceremony itself lasted but a few minutes. A man in a long black robe with a white collar stepped up to the podium. Mesmerized, Ayden watched as Proffitt firmly guided Olivia up the last few steps of the altar. She glanced back to her father, and the angel thought she might yet break away and flee the horrid ceremony.

At the last second, their gazes met and Ayden felt her pain as surely as if the fires of Hell had come back to strike him yet again. He rose to his feet and stepped out into the aisle, but before he could move forward, Olivia's eyes grew wide. She must have realized that he meant to rescue her from her fate, because she quickly shook her head and mouthed the word 'no'. Without further action, she turned to Proffitt once again and took the arm he offered her.

Ayden could stand no more. Red-hot anger surged through him. Spinning around, he left the church, pushing the doors open with such force that they slammed back against the doorframe.

"Is there a problem?" Blalock said, now leaning against a tall oak tree just outside the churchyard.

Ayden bit down on his emotions. "I didn't want to be seen."

"Wise decision." Blalock smirked. "We wouldn't want sight of your lustful interest make the young lady change her mind."

"You want her to be with that detestable demon?"

Blalock laughed, a course, rumbling sound. "To be honest, it makes no difference to me who the chit ties herself to. But even one such as I cannot help but see the unjustness of it."

"Unjustness? What do you mean?"

"For a low, disgusting, lizard like Proffitt to possess such a gift as fair as the sweet Miss Stone is indeed criminal, is it not?"

Ayden looked away. The last thing he wanted was for the old demon to see just how much he agreed with him.

"All I care about is satisfying the terms of my contract and earning my freedom."

Blalock lifted a single brow. "Really? Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Indeed." Blalock sighed.

Ayden's breath caught in his throat. Something about the demon's smug expression sent an uncomfortable twinge at the base of his spine.

"Is there is something you're not telling me?" Ayden asked.

"Nothing of import, really. It's just that once the deed is done and she signs the contract, you need to make haste and get your fill of her obvious charms. Once the terms of her contract have been fulfilled, she is to surrender her soul to the master."

"And how long is that?"

Blalock smiled. "Long enough, I imagine." He waved his hand. "Don't concern yourself. Humans live in the present. Their memories are small and their concern for their future is fleeting."

"And it won't frighten her, knowing that her time is short?"

"She'll barely be bothered by it at all." He grinned and shot Ayden a knowing expression.

"I see." Of course, to an angel who was an eternal being, the end of one's 'time' was not an easy concept to understand. The image of Olivia lying lifeless, her soul stripped forever from her warm, sweet form struck him

to his very marrow.

"Ayden?" Blalock crossed his arms. "You look as if it matters to you. As if *she* matters to you?"

Ayden cast his eyes downward. "I was curious, that's all."

"Good. I'd hate to think that you would put someone else's eternal damnation before yours—I mean ours." His grin grew returned. "After all, aren't *ours* the only souls we should be concerned about?"

Barely hearing the demon's words, Ayden's mind instead flashed on a different picture of Olivia. He saw her trussed up, hanging in the pit that had held him captive for so many centuries, her body twisting in agony as the scorching lashes of fire consumed her petite form. He could hear her screams and feel hot tears sliding down her face.

Ayden swallowed. The thought of giving Olivia over to such a fate filled him with terrifying dread.

"Of course," he said at last.

"I mean, really, who in their right mind would sacrifice themselves for another, especially a woman who has no concern for her own existence."

"Who, indeed," Ayden echoed, his discomfort growing by the minute.

The sky darkened to a deeper azure and suddenly Ayden felt as if the air around them had turned to ash.

Blalock seemed not to notice. "Humans are weak, pitiful creatures who don't deserve even the slightest consideration. If they were worth anything at all, wouldn't his royal highness, the Creator of All Things, have given them a place in heaven instead of expecting them to earn it through their pitiful existence here on earth?"

"I suppose so," Ayden said. A cool breeze had begun to stir around them.

"Well if He doesn't provide for them, then it's certainly not worth a single thought from us."

"Not a thought." Ayden took a deep breath, a twinge of guilt beginning to stab at him. Everything Blalock had said thus far was certainly the truth. After all, the High One had set humans up with a perfect existence in the beginning. Through their own rash behavior, the race had proven their unworthiness, hadn't they?

"It certainly would take an unbalanced being to sacrifice its own comfort for such a worthless creature. I know I couldn't do it. Could you?"

Well, that was the question, wasn't it? Ayden bit his lip. For all his arrogance and harsh opinions, Blalock was correct about one thing. Ayden would never sacrifice himself for another.

Just as he was about to agree, the air around him shook as the church bells started banging out the pronouncement of the couple's nuptials. The off key booming stung Ayden's ears so painfully that he grabbed the side of his head until the racket subsided. The next thing he knew, Blalock grasped his arm in a tight hold.

"Well, there you have it. The deed is done. About time, too, if you ask me. Come; let us partake in the morning feast. I hear old Proffitt has spared no expense on his wedding breakfast. At least the old scoundrel has something to his credit, eh?"

Without further comment, Ayden fell in step beside his torturer, despite the fact that he really didn't feel up to a meal at the moment. Especially not one where he would sit at the same table as the poor Miss—Mrs. Proffitt. Suddenly, his earlier thoughts of bedding the woman turned sour in his stomach. How could he ever touch her again knowing what fate awaited her?

Worse than that, how could he consign her to such a future?

Ayden shook his head to clear away any doubt about what he was capable of. The alternative of his returning to Hell was equally unthinkable. He knew in his gut that he could and would condemn her to Hell's torture, and gladly too, to avoid his own punishment. But it didn't make him feel better knowing it.

* * * *

As they marched toward Proffitt's house, Blalock felt the unease in his subject increasing by the minute. The dull-witted cur was having feelings of doubt, and that was just not acceptable. With his own threat of unthinkable punishment hanging in the balance, it looked as if Blalock would have to take a hand in things.

How stupid he had been to think that the angel could so easily be led to his fate like a lamb to the slaughter? Angels were said to be the equal to demons, intellect wise, at least. Fortunately for Blalock, because of their pure form, they had one peculiar trait that the old demon could use to his advantage.

Angels couldn't lie. Not even a small, insignificant untruth could ever be uttered from their lips, which put Blalock definitely in the best position possible, at least by his estimation. Because of their innate honesty, angels couldn't discern a lie, either.

On the other hand, Angels had other disturbing traits, one of which was that they were extremely bright creatures. As a result, they were experts at deductive reasoning which made them dangerous. Very dangerous.

So, just any old fib would not do. What Blalock needed was a plan. A very well thought out and clever plan. Fortunately, he was just the demon for the task.

As they neared the manse, Blalock made a quick glance at his protégé. Though still wearing the golden hue of perfect health, the angel did have a definite expression of wariness about him. His eyes were a cloudy gray, matching the gathering storm over their heads. His mouth's usual plump delicateness was now bowed in a dour pouting shape. Blalock knew that look, well enough. And it was one that would definitely rouse suspicion in the girl.

Worse yet, Blalock was certain that Ayden might very well end up convincing the girl not to sign the contract.

Exasperating creatures, angels were known throughout the realm for their stubborn loyalties, as well. Once they took up a cause, you could count on them to fight with all their being and suffer the consequences no matter how painful. After all, that's what had gotten the angel in trouble in the first place.

As he pushed Ayden toward the door, Blalock considered just how he might achieve his objective. He himself couldn't harm the girl; the Devil had not given him power over anyone but Ayden. The old demon would have to take a hand in the situation himself. He would have to be the one to convince her to sell her soul to the Devil.

Just then the door to Proffitt's workshop burst open and Proffitt's valet came bustling out muttering to himself about seeing to his master's needs and doing whatever it took to avoid the lash.

Blalock said nothing as he passed, but glanced toward the open door instead. Inside, he could see three

coffins perched on their benches within the room. Three wooden boxes, one the size of an adult, two built to entomb children.

That was when the solution dawned on him. Blalock would simply eliminate two threats at once. The angel's predilection for heroism where the girl was concerned, and the undertaker's threat of thwarting the demon's efforts to steal the child's soul would both be put down at once. The perfect plan made itself evident so completely that the demon almost shouted for joy just at the thought of it.

There was, of course, the small matter of the cumbersome angel's growing affection for the girl. Blalock sighed. Fortunately, that matter would be dealt with when the appropriate time arrived. After all, who is more easily manipulated than a fool in love?

Chapter Fourteen

"Some tea, my dearest?"

Just when Olivia was certain her situation could grow no worse, events conspired to send her plummeting down yet another slope of disaster.

"Uh, no thank you," Olivia paused, panic rising in her throat. What should she call her new husband? Mr. Proffitt? Micah? *Dear?*

Although she'd had literally no appetite when she'd taken her place beside him at the wedding table, now her stomach roiled. Frantically, she searched for words that would be appropriate and yet not invite any more intimacy than was necessary.

Intimacy?

Olivia bit down on another wave of panic.

Fortunately for her, Proffitt merely gave her an understanding smile and began to pour the brew for himself.

Trying her best to settle her nerves, Olivia took a deep breath and reached toward the glass of water set in front of her. She'd barely gotten the rim to her lips when a shadow fell over her. Her breath stopping in mid inhale, she glanced up and was captured by Ayden's molten silver gaze.

"Congratulations," he muttered in a tone not the least bit congratulatory.

"Thank you," she answered, breathless. It was obvious he was not happy at her nuptials. Despite her predicament, she found herself pleased with that thought. As quickly as the notion flitted through her mind, however, memory of their earlier meeting burst forth and she couldn't help the warm heat that washed over her.

He leaned forward as if to speak, but before he could continue, another man intruded upon them.

"Hello, my dear," the stranger said. He had a pleasant enough face, Olivia decided, and his voice was smooth like polished wood. Older than Ayden, he wore a stylish mahogany waistcoat and tails, dark brown trousers and high, polished Hessians. Immediately her eye was drawn to his cravat, which was a rich amber color fastened a fist-sized ruby. Although he'd spoken kindly enough, his words were too measured, too cheerful. His wide grin and overwhelming presence instantly set her nerves to the edge.

"Hello," she said, feeling an urgent need for caution.

"My name is Blalock. Lord Blalock from the Hellburg. That's a small village in the Lake District. My cousin is the Duke of Lavonia. You might have heard of him, Lucien Ash?"

Lord Blalock took her hand and held it in strong, unrelenting grip.

"I'm afraid not, sir. I'm not of noble lineage and I'm afraid I don't leave Creston Corners very often."

"Perhaps one day I'll get the opportunity to introduce you. He's a bit of a recluse. I was just telling my nephew, Mr. Royce, what a beautiful and charming creature you are. Very delectable. Why, if you were a fruit still on the vine, I'd guess you to be barely ripened, but we both know that's an absurd assumption, now isn't it?"

"I suppose so." Olivia sent a pleading look toward Ayden, but he quickly averted his gaze. She sensed unease in him, if the way he'd begun clenching and unclenching his fists was any indication.

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. I'm so sorry to have missed your exchange of vows, but I was detained elsewhere. I'm a very busy man, you know."

"Perhaps you can join us for breakfast." Olivia didn't feel a bit charitable in her spirit, but a proper lady would offer to share her feast. Of course, after her morning's activities, perhaps she shouldn't quite classify herself as proper.

"I'd be delighted," Lord Blalock answered.

"What's this, what's going on?" Proffitt said while chewing a piece of mutton, bits of meat and saliva sputtering out of his mouth as he talked.

"Why, it's Lord Blalock, your cousin, uh, is that correct, sir? Are you related to my...husband?" Olivia barely choked the word.

"Oh, you mean because of his distant connection to our boy, Ayden? Well, I suppose so," Lord Blalock replied. "In fact, it's very possible our connection is likely closer than anyone would guess, eh, old man?"

Confused, Olivia sent a furtive glance to the undertaker but was quick to see his obvious shock at the other man's statement.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Proffitt spat.

The other man seemed not at all surprised at her husband's angry tone.

"Brotherhood of man and all that. You know, the more I see of you, fair cousin, the more I'm certain you do favor Lucien. A fact, I'm sure he would be very interested in as well."

Olivia glanced at Proffitt and saw him pale, color draining from his face like milk from a bucket with a hole in the bottom.

"Perhaps we should go," Ayden said in a low voice.

"Nonsense, my boy. I believe these seats here will soon be available?" Lord Blalock motioned to the two seats directly across from Olivia and Proffitt where two gentlemen sat, busily gobbling down poached cod and mint jelly. The instant they noticed Blalock's pointed stare, they picked up their napkins, wiped their chins, and rose from their seats, quickly stumbling for the exit. Ayden's companion snapped his fingers twice and a serving girl appeared from out of nowhere and quickly removed any evidence of the previous occupants.

Olivia said nothing but gave Blalock a questioning glance. He only smiled back at her, wearing a suspiciously innocent expression.

Helping himself to a plate of sausages, he lowered his voice so that only she could hear. "You know, I was just passing by the churchyard's garden. What a lovely place. Rather romantic, don't you think?"

"Uh, yes, quite beautiful this time of year," Olivia stated. She was relieved when no one at the table answered.

Or so, she had thought.

Her new husband cleared his throat.

"Indeed," Proffitt ground out beside her. "Have you had a chance to see the bluebells this year? Quite impressive."

Olivia swallowed. She hadn't known Proffitt long, but it didn't take a genius to realize that by his tone he was well aware of the mean spirited comments of their guest.

"I thought so. I especially enjoyed that small bench there in the center. One can truly get the full view of nature's riotous display."

Olivia moaned, her gaze going to Ayden. His eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Clearly, the exchange was as uncomfortable to him as it was for her. The knowledge that she was not alone in her shame gave her small comfort.

"You're a bit pale, my dear," Olivia's father said beside her. For the moment, she had forgotten his presence. A new fear formed in her stomach. Had he seen her behavior earlier? Was it possible that he would learn of her sins and cast her out? Such a thought was unbearable.

Yet, for some strange reason, Olivia had the desire to confess everything here, once and for all, at her wedding breakfast. She'd bare her shame and be done with this farce of a marriage. Of course, it would leave her family in worse straights than ever. Not to mention that her father and siblings would suffer the public humiliation with her.

No, she would stay silent. She would suffer alone and no one, save her husband, Ayden, and the despicable Lord Blalock would ever know the truth.

At that moment, she felt a pressure on the top of her foot. It wasn't a painful mashing, which she likely deserved, but rather a reassurance. Glancing up, she met Ayden's expression. Although he remained silent, his eyes spoke volumes.

You are not alone.

A sudden warmth washed over her and Olivia reveled in it. He offered her comfort at a time when she felt most alone.

Thank you.

The hint of a smile rose in his eyes and Olivia felt as though the sun peaked through the darkest clouds shadowing her life. Indeed, his offer of support meant more to her than anything. The fact that he would risk his own respectable position for her, a woman of loose morals and even looser skirts, caused a new emotion to grow in her. She didn't totally understand it, and certainly couldn't substantiate it in more than a glance or two, but for the first time, she had a bit of hope.

"Mrs. Proffitt, you haven't eaten? Perhaps the fare is not to your taste?" her husband asked, but she knew he was feigning false concern.

Dragging her vision from Ayden, she looked down at her plate. For some odd reason, she felt no shame in lying at that moment.

"I apologize. This morning's excitement has stolen my appetite."

The pressure on her foot increased. She looked up under hooded lids to see Ayden give her a barely perceptible nod. She held her breath.

No one at the table seemed to notice their silent conversation. Suddenly an idea rose in her mind. Was it possible the two of them could share an affair de Coeur and stay out of the public attention, or even more importantly, beneath the scrutiny of her new husband and Lord Blalock?

Before that moment, Olivia thought she would never be so horrid a woman as one who would cuckold her husband. As wealthy and as well positioned as Micah Proffitt was, he was not the mate of her heart. Since she would give him freely of her body, was it not enough? Could she not at least dispense her heart where she chose?

Before she could continue her rationalization, she heard Ayden clear his throat. He had been speaking to her father, congratulating him on his lovely family.

When their conversation had finished, he sent another covert glance to Olivia.

Meet me after the breakfast?

Do I dare? she answered back.

Please.

Olivia bit her lip. Should she? Could she?

Panic washed over her when she thought about what her new husband would demand of her. Would he be so coarse that he would force her directly to the marriage bed once the wedding breakfast was done? Was

there any way to escape her fate and take shelter in her lover's arms one more time before abandoning herself to Proffitt's husbandly attentions? Her tide of hysteria was cut by the sound of Lord Blalock clearing his throat. Smiling at her pointedly, as if the cur knew exactly what thoughts rambled through her mind, he swallowed another large gulp of wine and turned to her husband.

"My dear cousin," Blalock began in a tone that cut through the other guests whispering conversations. "I am most curious what you do in your little room downstairs. Perhaps you wouldn't mind taking a few moments this afternoon to give me a full introduction to the fine art of the funeral business. I've heard it said that you build the finest cabinets in the county."

The room grew silent and Olivia could feel a heavy weight settle in the air around them. The lordship's request sounded more like an order, though he maintained his grin and pleasant expression while he spoke.

To her surprise, Olivia's new husband took in deep breath, as though he was about to throw down with this Blalock fellow. Before she knew what was happening, energy crackled between them. Shocked, she glanced at her husband, who wore an expression of mixed surprise and fear.

Like a monstrous ghost had descended upon him, Proffitt lost all of his color, and a pasty-fleshed lump had taken his place.

"Of course, Lord Blalock," he said, his form seeming smaller than before.

Blalock gave them all a satisfied smile. "You are most generous, sir." He turned to Olivia. "Please forgive my intrusion into your afternoon. I know how anxious you must be to spend time with your husband. I promise I won't keep him long."

"I shall find something to occupy my time," Olivia answered a bit too quickly. She felt her husband stiffen beside her, but she didn't care. She knew indeed exactly how she would spend her afternoon.

* * * *

Two hours later, Ayden paced the length of the parlor for the hundredth time. How much longer could this go on? His body was at war with his mind. He wanted Olivia to distraction, and no matter how he tried, he could not get the vision of the two of them, entwined naked on the bed in her room, out of his mind. It was near to maddening!

"Easy does it, my boy. You are so very close, you know." Blalock had returned a few minutes earlier, more jovial than usual. Aching in every part of his body, Ayden was in no mood for frivolity.

"Close? To what exactly? To convincing her to sell her soul or to destroying myself completely?"

Blalock smiled. "To achieving your goals. She has agreed to this meeting, has she not?"

"I'm not sure. We had no opportunity to converse on the matter, thanks to that little man, Proffitt."

"I see the problem here. You have no experience reading or understanding the human female. Well, let me reassure you, my boy, you are indeed fated to an afternoon of soft sheets and sensual delights. Why, at this very moment, she is preparing herself. Choosing her attire carefully, likely for its ease of undress. She's brushing her hair, dampening her skin with crushed violet water, and arranging the pillows on her wedding bed just so."

Ayden's groin tightened and his skin began to burn. "Stop. I can take this no more." He was across the room in three large steps and poised with his hand on the door.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you." Blalock's voice blazed as hot as the deepest pit of Hell.

Ayden swallowed, his emotions as raw as an open wound, his body aching with every breath.

He whirled on Blalock. "You don't know what this is like! This is worse torture than Satan's scorching lash."

"Of course it is, or it wouldn't be worth it. But stay the course because this afternoon you will get to deflower your little bluebell. You will indulge in the sweet nectar of her innocence, plow the fertile damp earth of her desires, ignite the flames of her passion."

Aching desire washed over him. Ayden swallowed. "Will I?"

"Yes, my boy. The hour of victory is upon you. You have my permission to give her every attack in your arsenal and take no quarter."

Ayden swallowed. The thought of losing himself in her was almost overwhelming. He took a shaky breath. "And when I've done that, this malady will pass? This constant visceral need that she's cast upon me will end?"

"More importantly, you will be victorious over her. You will *own* her body and soul. At least until the terms of her contract have been fulfilled."

"I see." Suspicion snaked through Ayden. "And what of her husband? Won't he be enraged at my laying claim on his property? That is what she is, isn't it? This 'marriage' business is all about ownership, isn't it?"

Blalock smiled. "One would think so, wouldn't one? The truth is that humans break contracts all the time. Marriage is as legal as a deal with the Devil, and yet these pitiful creatures cast it aside as easily as sheets on the nuptial bed."

"I don't understand."

"They are weak creatures, Ayden, pathetic, mewling, beings that have no care for what conventions they tread upon. That's why you and I should have no concern for their tribulations."

"No concern." Ayden thought for a moment. If this was true then he can satisfy both his need for the woman and the Devil's demand.

"Exactly," Blalock smiled. "Now, get yourself ready for this afternoon's glorious delight. Fortunately, your ladylove's groom will be otherwise occupied."

* * * *

Olivia waited, nervously seated in a chair by the window of her new husband's bedroom. She feared that any minute he would arrive before her planned tryst with Ayden and the horror that would be the rest of her life would begin. She glanced over at the mass of tangled fabric and lace that was her wedding gown. She was ashamed that it had been tossed aside as easily as she had dispensed the rest of her hopes and dreams. It wasn't the gown's fault after all. Not only that, but it would a long time, if ever, when she should have so fine a garment.

Olivia jumped, her quiet thoughts interrupted by the loud rapping sound of knuckles against hardwood.

It was not her dear Ayden's voice whispering from the hall, but that of her new husband. "Come, my dear. Be a good girl and open the door."

It was Proffitt, coming to claim his new bride. Olivia rose from her seat and began to pace. Instantly, she knew that she would not let Proffitt do what he had a legal right to do. She would refuse him and then he surely would annul their nuptials.

Of course, he could force her, as was his right. But that would be unthinkable.

Again, Proffitt beat upon the door. "Olivia! Let me in, dearest."

"I'm not feeling well."

"Nonsense. It's just wedding day jitters. Now stop this foolishness and open the door."

"Please, Mr. Proffitt, um, Micah. You must give me time."

"You have one hour, Mrs. Proffitt. Then I shall come back, and we shall commence our marriage, see that we don't."

Olivia let out a breath. Disaster was surely about to descend upon her. With sudden clarity, she knew she would never allow Proffitt to touch her. Nor would she allow Ayden his way. Surely that path would surely lead to her undoing. Whenever he approached her, she lost all of her resolve, all of her strength to deny him.

No. Neither man would have her. She would escape them both.

Olivia wrung her hands, twisting them in her dressing gown. She had one hour to figure out how to end her marriage and escape Ayden Royce's advances. Glancing around the room, she noted her small traveling bag. She'd packed it with a few sparse belongings to take with her to her new home until her own things could be delivered.

Escape, she thought. After all, she had a talented hand with a needle and thread. She'd go to London and beg for a position in one of the seamstress shops. Yes. That's what she would do. And, she would earn enough money to send home to her father and the children. It would be all right.

What else was she to do?

Chapter Fifteen

Angered by his new bride's refusal, Proffitt returned to his workshop. He was not surprised to find a visitor there.

Of course, he had hoped that the demon might tire of waiting for him and move on to tormenting some other poor soul.

Best to be done with this nonsense, he thought. After waiting for the sweet Olivia all these long months, what would a few more hours matter?

"Good afternoon, Proffitt."

"Blalock," he said in a venomous tone. "With all the wedding day activities, I'd forgotten about your request. You must forgive me."

Blalock waved his hand, obviously dismissing Proffitt's obvious displeasure. "I am most curious about your workshop. I hope I am not imposing, I know you have much to do this afternoon."

"Yes, I do have plans. If you don't mind—"

"It won't take long. First, I'd like to hear all about these lovely coffins. Carve them yourself, did you?"

Proffitt hesitated. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I have."

"Lovely workmanship."

"Thank you."

Blalock began to wander around the room. After a moment, his eye was caught on three coffins in the corner. The large adult one, flanked by two smaller ones, obviously built for children.

"What have we here?"

"A special project I'm working on."

"Really? Anyone we know?"

"Not particularly. Profit moved to the other side of the room. "Perhaps you like to consider something for yourself? One of the more elaborate models, perhaps?"

The old demon chuckled. "Oh, I won't be needing that. I plan to stay around quite a long time. I am interested to hear if you've heard of any new deaths in the area. Surely, these fine works are intended for a family? One adult, two children. How very sad."

Proffitt moved closer. He gave the demon a long glance. "What is it you really want?"

Blalock smiled. "Whatever do you mean? I'm just curious about your work."

"My work? I am nothing but a simple tradesman."

"Oh, I think you are much more than that. Let's be honest, shall we?"

A moment of suspicion passed between them before Proffitt spoke. "Go on."

"You and I work for the same employer, do we not?"

"If you mean the Dark One, yes. At least, I hope to, one day. It's a distant hope of mine."

"I think you're closer than you know. Let's just say, Satan has had his eye on you for a long time."

Proffitt leaned closer, a thrill of excitement running through him. "Has he?"

"Yes, indeed. In fact, chances are, you have a very bright future in his lordship's service. That is, if you're willing to do his bidding."

"Of course. I'll do whatever he asks of me." Proffitt stiffened his spine. "I have been all along, you know."

"I should say you have. And a fine job. At least, for beginner. Now, if you really want to endear yourself to him, you'll go in a new direction."

"A new direction? What in blazes are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your new wife."

"My wife? What has she got to do with this?" Proffitt felt the snake of suspicion start a climb up his spine.

"Everything, my good man. Everything. She is your partner from now on, isn't she? Your *fait accompli*?"

Proffitt's suspicion rose even more. "She knows nothing of this business." He waved his hand around the workshop. "I have done it all."

"Of course you have. Well, things are evolving my good man. It's time you took advantage of what the Master has to offer you. He has a proposition for you."

"A proposition? I don't know..."

Blalock would suffer no hesitation. "You want to realize a long and profitable existence in the afterlife, do you not? As profitable one as you have here."

"I do."

"Good. I have just the thing that will ensure the realization of your dreams. A task you must complete. A simple one, really, and so perfect for a man of your great will and stamina."

"And just what am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"You are not to interfere with your wife's affairs, and most assuredly not with my associate, Mr. Royce's."

"Now, see here—"

Blalock put up his hand. "If I were you, I wouldn't cross the Devil. He doesn't take kindly to those who oppose him. He's known for his *burning* retribution, you know. Trust me, you don't want to encourage his wrath."

Proffitt's blood started to boil. How dare the Devil's lapdog threaten him like this! Why, he had a mind to take matters into his own hand.

"And if you're thinking of taking your mewling sentiments to the Dark Lord, think again. I have been in his deepest confidences for eons. Since the beginning of time, I have been his minion. He created me. I'm like a son, to him. And Devil, much like you humans, is very protective of his offspring."

Proffitt stood back on his heels. Deep in his gut, he knew to argue further would do no good. Best that he bide his time. And biding his time was a thing he was very good at.

"Very well. I shall wait for my bride."

"Excellent. I'm certain you'll get what you deserve in the end, Mr. Proffitt. Very certain."

Chapter Sixteen

Ayden paced outside of Olivia's door. A strange nervousness had overtaken him. His brow was damp with a fine sheen of sweat and he could barely breathe, his chest was as tight as if he were wrapped in a truss.

Was this fear?

In all of his existence, Ayden had never known such a bizarre feeling. He raised his damp palm to wipe his brow. As one of the warrior angels, he'd fought hordes of soldiers, aided in destroying cities and used arrows of fire and ice to lay to waste farms and villages.

He didn't understand. The anxiety stirring in his gut scared him in a way nothing ever had. The fact that he could even be afraid was beyond his comprehension.

Ayden swallowed back his discomfort. Raising his gaze, he stared hard at the door. His resolve strengthened when he thought about the woman beyond it. In that moment he wanted her more than anything he'd ever known, more than his garden, more than his escape from Hell. More than life itself.

Before he could consider that bizarre thought even further, the door suddenly swung open. In a miraculous twist of fate, the very beautiful, newlywed Mrs. Proffitt stood before him.

Ayden's mouth went dry and words knotted in the back of his throat.

"Mr. Royce!"

The sound of her voice was high pitched and breathless, and it was pure heaven.

"Olivia." He lifted his hands to her face, suddenly fascinated by the tiny mole that rested in the valley at the corner of her mouth.

"What are you doing here?" Her face flushed as she slapped away his hands.

Her reaction to him only stoked the fire burning in his. He had to have this woman. The sooner, the better.

"I came for you," he said, his words thickening in his throat. He stepped forward, his body meeting hers. She retreated and he read the panic in her expression. Her eyes darted about furiously, her pale pallor

suddenly lit with a rosy blush.

"No, we can't—"

"We can't?"

"I'm a married woman now."

"Is that why you've gathered all of your belongings in a cloth bag? Why you're wearing a traveling gown, and why you are stealthily exiting your wedding bed?"

Ayden watched, delighted as her face deepened to glorious magenta. The effect of her embarrassment made him want to tear the clothes from her and toss her onto the bed beyond and bury himself in her soft warmth.

Suddenly her hands went up. He hadn't realized that he was leaning forward, arms at the ready, until she stopped him square. The gesture made him want to push against her. In fact, it was as if her fingertips were on fire and burning a brand into his chest. The feeling was incredible.

"Please, sir. You must cease your attack upon my virtue."

Ayden's smile widened. "Is that what I'm doing?"

"Yes, it is. Now, if you don't mind, I really must be going." She moved to walk around him, but this time Ayden put his hand out, gently but firmly touching her sleeve. The heat from her seared a scorching path all the way to his groin.

Ayden squeezed her arm lightly and listened to the pleasing moan that escaped her lips.

"What are you doing to me?" she whispered with a touch of desperation seasoning her tone.

"I want you." Confessing his need made him all the more anxious to get her beneath him.

"I know what you want, but I can't."

"Of course you can. All you have to do is turn around, disrobe, and let me lock the door."

She shook her head, tendrils of wispy curls escaping from her tight chignon. Ayden groaned as he envisioned his hands rifling through her gorgeous hair, pulling out pins and letting it tumble down to her luscious shoulders. So caught up in his vision he almost missed what she said next.

"I cannot! Sir, you have nearly ruined my life. Please, I beg you, leave me be."

"Ruined your life? Of course I haven't. I've given exactly what you wanted, what you've asked for."

His words had a profound affect because she stepped back, dropping her bag on the floor.

Distressed, she put her hands to her mouth and turned away from him. "You have, haven't you? I've been the worst sort of light skirt. I should be condemned, my reputation shredded at my feet."

Ayden followed her into the room, closing the door behind him. "Because of the bed sport we've had?"

She whirled around. "You really don't understand, do you? I was found compromised by my family and by my husband. Once the tongues start wagging, I'll be the talk of the town."

"And this distresses you," he said. He was next to her now, though she'd turned her back on him. Gently, he placed his arms around her, pulling her close so that he could feel the heat of her through their clothes and the flowery scent of her drifted up, stiffening his manhood to a majestic height.

"Mmmm, you feel wonderful," he said. Olivia didn't speak but turned and plunged into his embrace.

He tilted her head upward and touched her lips, opening her mouth and plunging gloriously inside. She was like sweet nectar on his tongue.

She trembled beneath him, and then stiffened. Ayden realized suddenly away that something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

It took all of his strength, but he pushed her back. "What is it?"

With eyes moist and her mouth trembling, she looked up at him. "I'm wrong. I'm all wrong. I never wanted this marriage, not really. I only want Mr. Proffitt to care for my family. We're so alone in the world and our funds have evaporated like dew in the heat of the day. I knew it was wrong, but I was desperate."

Dumbstruck, he watched as her despair broke loose and putting her hands to her face, she gave in to a burst of tears. Ayden was dumbstruck by her outburst. His passion flagged briefly with his confusion, but when he realized that he now held her close, it raised to full height. The woman's upset fanned the flame of his passion all the more.

A curious thing this man's body. But his fascination with his own anatomy aside, he realized that Olivia's distress was escalating. It was up to him to get her calmed and out of her clothes before their time together ended.

"Here now, it's not all your fault."

"What? What did you say?"

"It's not your fault. I have been somewhat bothersome."

"Bothersome? You've been positively distracting. But, that's a man's nature. No. I should have been stronger." She reached into her sleeve, pulled a handkerchief out and gently dabbed at her eyes.

Another feeling took hold, and Ayden realized that it wasn't related to his other profound condition.

"A man's nature?"

"Yes, that's right. Men can't help being so amorous."

"And women aren't that way?"

She looked up at him. "We're not supposed to be. For a woman to engage in such activity, outside of the marriage bed, no less, shows a definite lack of character."

"Oh. I didn't know. And this character is important?"

"Incredibly. A woman without restraint is nothing more than a common prostitute."

"I'm sorry." Ayden was as surprised by his words as she was.

"You are? Truly?"

He nodded. He didn't know why, but Ayden wanted nothing more at that moment than to throw himself at her feet and beg forgiveness.

"Truly."

"Oh. I've never heard a man apologize before."

She folded her arms and sat on the bed. Not wanting to spoil this new intimacy between them, he moved slowly and sat down beside her.

"Perhaps I am not like other men."

She glanced up at him. "I know you aren't. That's the puzzle, you see. I mean, it's as if I called you forth. I was afraid and lonely, and suddenly there you were. Like an answer to a prayer."

"Maybe that's what I am." He'd not thought about anything but his own need, but it was hard to believe the strange attraction between them had found its birth from the denizens of Hell. And yet, he was doing all he could to consume her and then leave her ruined at the Devil's feet.

The moment soured in his stomach.

He started to rise, meaning to leave her alone forever. It would mean his return to hell, of course, but could that be any worse than seeing her like this?

"Wait," she said, her voice small and trembling.

He paused. "You don't want me to leave?"

"Yes, I do." He felt her sigh beside him and the sound burned his soul. "And I don't."

"Olivia, you've said yourself that we cannot be together. I understand that now. Is it not terrible torture to continue on just to deny each other in the end?"

"Yes, it is torture, exquisite torture."

He gave her a dry laugh. "I know a lot about torture, and my dear, this certainly is not the same. Though, I must admit I prefer the kiss of the burning lash to seeing you cry again."

She looked up at him then, her expression changing. It was her eyes, he decided. They softened as she studied his face, as if he was some great puzzle and she just had to figure him out.

"What?" he asked, almost fearful of her answer.

"Someone's hurt you very bad, haven't they?"

It was Ayden's turn to pull away. The thought of her knowing why he was really at her side stabbed him in the gut like a dull blade.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said. "It's not important."

"Yes, it is. In fact, it may be the very thing that draws me to you. I mean, I've always been one to take in scorched birds or injured kittens. Why not a broken man?"

"A broken man? Is that what you think I am?"

"No, at least not until now. But it would explain a lot."

Ayden didn't know why, but anger suddenly stirred within him. "So, you pity me, then."

She shook her head. "Not at all. I meant that I've a tendency to want to take care of things. Like my father, or my brother and sister."

"Oh. They've been tortured, too?"

She shook her head and a gentle laugh escaped her. "No, nothing like that. People just have needs, you see. My siblings need a mother. My father needs a caretaker, and you..." she paused as though the words she searched for sat just out of reach.

"I need a woman beneath me, one to touch and taste..." Ayden once again didn't know why she'd brought the words forth in him, why he was voicing such nonsense. At least he hoped it was nonsense. "One to love."

"Oh," she said again. Suddenly, she was in his arms, her mouth scorching his, her hands slipping between the fastenings of his shirt, downward to release the suspenders that held his trousers up.

In kind, he took hold of her as well, tearing the fabric from her bodice, tangling in all the trappings of her clothing. When he couldn't reach her skin, prevented by a whale-boned corset, he gave up and sent his hands plunging downward, slipping his fingers beneath her thighs, lifting her up and settling her on his lap, her opening but spare inches from his erection. How badly he'd wanted to breach her womanhood. How sweet it would have been to feel the warm moist flesh of her opening glide upon him as she sheathed herself upon him.

On sheer instinct, Ayden knew he needed to continue slowly, that he must draw out the moment of their joining to the very last. Without giving in to his baser nature, he moved forward just slightly, the head of his member teasing at her entrance.

Olivia attempted to push herself upon him, but Ayden gently held her back. Ayden had been hit by lightning once. When he'd been fighting on the plains of ancient Greece. It had been in the midst of a thunderous storm and the High One had thrown down all of his might in form of fiery rain and caustic winds. Undaunted, the angel had fought on, until another angel, one of the high anointed ones with broad wings and four faces, lifted the arc of his bow and shot Ayden in the chest.

Because of his armor, plates forged in the fiery bowels of earth, Ayden's existence had been spared. But the biting shock of the smallest sliver of the bolt had touched his skin and sent him into a thousand hells all at once.

The feeling had hurt him, far worse than his lashes in Hell, but it had also left a profound mark on his soul. The lightning had been made of Holy fire and it was like nothing that Ayden had ever felt before.

Until that moment.

He delighted when she wrapped her legs around him, opening herself further and groaning with delighted pleasure when he sheathed himself fully inside of her.

Heaven and Hell. Olivia was both. Her touch was fire on his skin, and at the same time, soothing oil on his soul.

"Faster!" She cried beneath him. He was shocked that she could even articulate at so frantic a moment. But he didn't ponder it for long. With the next thrust, Ayden gave up all thought and poured his whole self into his work.

As he increased the pace of their lovemaking, the obscure thought occurred to him. What if satisfying his own urges would not be enough to satisfy his desire for the woman? What would he do if Blalock were wrong, and bedding the chit was not enough?

What terrible torture that would be!

No, he must somehow make this experience into something greater than just a casual mating. He had to make it an event that would keep him in her heart and in her bed for quite some time. That way he'd have time enough to purge this strange affliction from his soul.

Pulling away from her, his nether regions reminding him of the pain of such a venture, he began a slow torture of his own. He would leave her wanting him more than anything else. His deal with the Devil be damned. Ayden intended to make his own demands upon her. Not one of hellish contracts or eternal damnation, but one born out of the mystical, magical bonding between a man and a woman.

With gentle touches and firm kisses, he plied his will upon her. She met his intense need with terms of her own as well.

You are mine! He pushed into her once again.

Yours! Her body echoed as she accepted him fully.

Chapter Seventeen

Olivia didn't know what had come over her. One moment he was beside her, listening to her diatribe on virtuous women, and the next he was on top of her, performing the duties she'd demanded of him.

She was worse than a wanton. She was at the depths of degradation. And she was enjoying it completely.

After she'd begun her attack, he'd turned the tables on her and twisted sideways, putting her beneath him, his body pushing against hers in the most sensual and intense way possible. Forget that she was completely ruined. She had now thoroughly destroyed any chance of a decent match. Worse yet, she had opened that door and taken Ayden down the path with her.

She'd gone from just wanting his touch to wanting him inside her. The shock of his entry into her womanhood was like fire in a bottle. Yet the feeling was not enough. She wanted him there, reaching into her soul, pushing himself to her very core.

"Faster!" Olivia commanded.

And he obeyed. The fury of their lovemaking increased. Ayden was both inside her and all around her, filling her with such sensual delights as she had never imagined. When they had reached the zenith of his efforts, she felt her body begin to spasm, giving in to the intense orgasm that was about to consume her.

"No Olivia," he demanded through strained teeth, his jaw clenching tight. "Not yet. Not until I say so. Do. Not. Give In."

Sweat broke out on her brow and she held her breath. One final time, Ayden withdrew to the very edge of her opening. Seconds passed as he kept her there, suspended by sheer will alone.

Then, roaring like a furious lion, he plunged forward one final time.

"Now, Olivia! Let go now!"

Obedying him, she let out her breath in a furious rush and bowed her body. He lifted her from the damp sheets and cool air rushed around them.

She didn't know how much time had passed when at last she came back to full awareness. He was there, hovering above her, the shade of his eyes now turning to smoke in the afternoon light and his expression unreadable.

"What?" She asked, the warm blanket of embarrassment falling over her.

"I want you." He said.

Olivia took a quick breath. Confusion warred in her brain and she shook her head.

"You've just had me."

He shook his head. "I want you again. Not here. Somewhere else. A place of our choosing. A place that no one else will ever know but us."

Olivia bit her lip. A tear formed in her eye and when it fell, to burn a path down the side of her face and fell into the gentle cradle of her ear, she took in a breath.

"Ayden, there is no such place."

He let out a sigh, then. "Why not?"

Not knowing what to do, she took his hand in hers and gently massaged his fingers between her hands. "It's not to be for us, I'm afraid. But there is a place here," she gently touched his bare chest. "And also here." She brought his hand to her own.

"I don't want this to be over," he said, his words slow and almost forced.

"Neither do I, but we have no choice in this. Whether we like it, we are the creatures that we are. You were made for me, and I for you, it's just that we didn't meet in the right time. Mismatched bits of cloth that can never be sewn together."

He bent his head down and gently kissed each of the pink tips of her breasts, which rested at the crest of her stays. A shiver passed between them. Glancing up, he smiled, mischief coloring his expression as his eyes sought hers.

"I still want you," he said again.

"I know that."

In the next instant, he was off the bed, pulling up his trousers and then pulling up the corners of the bed's spread up around her, her wrapped her in a tight cocoon.

"What in the blazes are you doing?"

"Taking you out of here. Now. Forever."

"But, I'm married, and..."

He stopped and pinned her with his gaze. "Do you want to stay?"

Olivia swallowed. That was the question, wasn't it?

"My family—"

"Your family doesn't want you to be unhappy, do they?"

"No."

"Good. Let's make them happy." Then, he pulled her up and tossing her over his shoulder, carried her out of the room.

"I should stop you," she said.

She should have, but she didn't. Somehow, she would figure how to get out of her marriage. Surely, this lusty affair would have some weight in getting an annulment. Then there was finding the money to support her family. But, Ayden was a Lord, was he not? Suddenly she'd realized that she'd never even asked him what his finances were.

"Ayden," she said as he maneuvered his way down the stairs, past the open-mouthed servants and wedding guests. "We need to discuss your, ah, attributes."

"In another place, Olivia. Anyplace, except this one."

"Oh."

Since there was nothing else to say in the matter, Olivia smiled sheepishly as they strode out of Proffitt's house while Mrs. Kempt, her father, and her husband's young valet all looked on aghast.

"Well," Olivia heard Mrs. Kempt say to her father as they passed by them. "At least he had the decency to cover her this time."

At the very moment, the young couple exited the Proffitt household, Blalock and the cuckolded husband had just exited from the cellar door. He heard the little man sputter beside him and couldn't help the chuckle that rose in his chest.

"I suppose this means the marriage is over."

"The bloody hell it is," Proffitt said beside him. "I refuse to release her from her marriage vows. She can cavort all she wants, she is still my wife."

Blalock smiled. Watching the little cretin's stewing in his own juice was quite entertaining. When he'd been thrust into this assignment, he'd thought his time would be spent tied up with the doldrums of young love. Little had he known how pleasurable life on the topside could be.

"Of course she is."

Proffitt narrowed his eyes. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Immeasurably." He laughed again. "Look, there's no reason this can't be enjoyable."

"Enjoyable? For you. Not for me."

"Suit yourself."

Proffitt scowled and headed back to his lair. That's what his cellar was. Or, better yet, it was a spider web, and the undertaker was nothing but a great, fat spider settled in the center, waiting for the wary fly to come buzzing into its trap.

Fortunately for Blalock, he was an expert on spiders. He was sure they were the master's creation as well. And like Blalock, they had been made to plague both man and insect.

"Pleased with yourself?"

Blalock looked up to see Martin Stone sitting at the edge of the verandah, staring down at him with scowling disdain.

"In fact, I am."

"I can believe that."

Blalock cocked his head. "Did you want your daughter paired with that despicable lout?"

Stone shook his head. "Of course not. She is her own woman, always has been."

"And, you aren't terribly upset by her exhorting with my cousin?"

"Nonsense. I'm outraged. She's made a public spectacle of herself. Why, if I had legs—"

"If you had legs, you'd be dancing."

Stone stopped, and Blalock watched the struggle for seriousness in his expression. When he'd finally mastered it, he sent Blalock a serious frown.

"I only want her to be happy. She deserves it." He sighed, now staring at the path that the young couple had just tread. "She's made a deal with the Devil, that one."

"How very astute of you," Blalock said, his own smile growing wider. If only the old man knew the whole of it.

With that, Stone turned his wheeled chair around and rolled back to the front door of the house.

"Hmmm. Young love. Quite entertaining, indeed."

* * * *

Ayden didn't know where he was going. But, he would find a place for them and he would make long slow love to her. Surely it would cure them both of this strange lust that had consumed them. It had to.

He'd reached the edge of a brook that ran through the meadow beyond Proffitt's house. It was a small glen that was well hidden by a copse of trees that surrounded it.

Olivia cheered. "Oh! It's perfect!"

Not needing any more assurances than that, Ayden neatly set her back on her feet in front of him, pulled the blanket from around her, and settled it on the ground.

Then, like a fearsome beast, he began to stalk her.

"What are you doing?" She stepped back, obviously startled at his new, strange behavior.

"I'm trying to decide just how I'll take you first."

"Oh."

He could see the nervous excitement on her expression. Smiling, he was careful to choose his next

move. "I could come to you as before, settling you on the blanket and assault you from the front."

She licked her lips. "You could, yes."

He began to pace, stretching out the moment as long as he could stand it.

Then, with the speed of a cougar, he was behind her, breathing onto her neck, so close that he could see the fine hairs at the base of her skull raise and tremble.

"Or I could do it thusly. Bend you over and take you from behind."

Olivia jumped and sprinted forward.

"Stop!" He called out, authority in his voice. He watched, amazed as she obeyed, her body trembling from head to toe.

"This is a bad idea, Ayden. I don't know what possessed me to allow this to go on."

"Silence!" he shouted and she jumped again. Then, taking his time, one excruciatingly slow step after another he moved forward, again to stand behind her.

"I will tell you this once, Olivia Stone. From now on and forever, when you are alone with me, you are mine. Mine to do with as I please."

"As you please?" Olivia said in what was a cross between an indignant and playful tone. "See here—"

She started to spin around but Ayden grabbed her by the arms and held her steady.

"Yes. I think from the behind is right. I want to feel your luscious bottom against me, Olivia. I want to nibble every inch of you, tasting you like a fine pastry. And I like pastry, Olivia."

"Oh!"

He then pushed her gown down to fall from her waist, unhitching the thousand or so tiny buttons that held her whalebone corset in place until it sagged loose upon her. Then, he pulled the thin straps of her shift from her shoulders, liberating the remainder of her garments until she stood before him naked.

Ayden watched fascinated as Olivia's blush colored her long neck, and then spread down her back to color her round, firm bottom.

"Yes," Ayden said. "This is far better than before."

Olivia started to move again. Not away from him, but back. She was leaning back until she was a breath's space away from him.

"Stop." Ayden said again, though this time, it was his voice that was caught in his throat. "I want to look at you a moment longer."

"Please, Ayden. No more. I can take this no more."

"You can and you will."

Long moments passed as she stood before him, naked and trembling in anticipation.

Reaching out his hand, he lightly touched her shoulder and was surprised when a small moan escaped her.

"Like that do you?"

She nodded, "Please Ayden, you're killing me."

"Hardly that, my dear." He lifted his other hand and brushed her bottom. In response, her body tightened.

"You are so beautiful, Olivia. In all the heavens I don't think I've ever seen anything as lovely as you."

She took in a breath. A nervous chuckle escaped her. "In all the heavens? You speak as though you've actually been there."

"Never mind that now. Bend down for me."

"What?" She started to turn again but he grabbed her arms again. "If you do as I ask, when we're finished, I'll let you have your way with me."

She swallowed again. "My way?"

"As you wish, my dear. From the front or behind, or even standing on my head. However you choose."

She took a deep breath and he watched as the muscles in her back expanded. Slowly, ever so wonderfully slowly, she began to lean forward. Forward until her lovely bottom was there before him, her skin glowing in the late afternoon sun.

Without hesitation, he placed a gentle kiss on her right buttock. She jumped slightly at the touch, but then held herself steady.

Ayden kissed her repeatedly and in various places. And when he'd gotten enough of that, he began to nibble her soft skin with each kiss. Just a small bit of flesh between his teeth. Olivia let out a louder moan this time, one of longing, of wanting, and of distress.

He smiled, his erection again hard and straining. How it could be thus so soon after their lovemaking earlier, he couldn't fathom. But, ready he was.

The first time had been wonderful. Knowing her as he did now, this time was going to be incredible.

Chapter Eighteen

Olivia could stand it no longer and told him so in no short order. In truth, she had never believed any union with a man could be as glorious as hers had been with Ayden. He'd been a kind and, at the same time, demanding lover. He'd taken every bit of her, and yet had filled her with more passion than she'd ever thought

possible.

A part of her was nervous about bedding him again so soon, half out of fear that she might shatter under such intense sensations, and half in fear of learning that the next time would be different—much less amazing and fantastic than her first experience had been. Certainly, she did not deserve such an incredible experience the second time. She was, after all, a wanton woman, an adulterer, in fact.

But Ayden would not be denied. He continued his sensual assault on her backside and the more she begged him, the more he put her off. So, she decided to suffer in silence, though her center was damp with excitement and need. Despite her best efforts, however, her heart beat a furious tattoo in her chest, slamming against her ribs relentlessly.

“Oh,” she practically purred.

The sound of her voice must have been as torturous to him as his attack on her had been. For he met her frustrations with a groan.

“You are so tasty,” he said again. He ran his tongue from the center of her back down to the crest of her hip, his mouth hovering at the top of her buttocks.

Olivia nearly screamed. Before she knew what was happening, he was wrapping his arms around her waist, lifting her off the ground. She hung suspended her body suspended by his arm beneath her belly, her backside against his groin and her feet dangling off the ground. Without warning, he plunged into her.

“Oh!” She gasped.

With a show of great fortitude, he lowered them both to the ground, and gently placing her on her knees, knelt behind her. Once settled, he began his assault anew. With his every move, he brought forth new delights. Again and again, he pushed into her, and the heat of their lovemaking consuming her.

Excited and exhilarated she moved with him. Adding her own movements seemed to ignite him and before long, they were in complete unison, two halves of a wonderful whole.

It was more than just a mating, she realized. It was as if they had both been made for each other.

As these thoughts rolled inside her head, something began to happen. A fire raged in the core of her womanhood, building and building.

Suddenly everything else blew away from her mind and she rode the waves of their love to its inevitable end. Like an ocean hitting the sand, he took her, and Olivia gladly accepted each wave of his passion without hesitation.

Just as she thought she could take no more, he eased into her once more and leaned forward, his short, ragged breaths caressing her neck.

“Come with me, Olivia. Come with me to the end.”

“Yes,” she answered in a single breath.

When he began again, something changed between them. She could hear his breaths in short, powerful grunts, and a few seconds later, when they reached near to oblivion she heard him cry out in a scream that was as much pain as it was pleasure.

She meant to ask him what was wrong. Had she hurt him somehow?

But when she took in a breath, something strange happened. Her body tightened around him, and she fell forward, her face upon the soft fabric of the blanket. Suddenly a thunderstorm burst out above them. She felt damp rain on her face, her body convulsing in riotous pleasure. The feel of him inside her burst in her psyche and in the last seconds, he clutched her to him. . Once again, they trembled together, wrapped in the intense fury of their lovemaking.

As her contracting muscles slowed and settled into the steady rhythm of his breaths behind her, Olivia couldn't help but wonder what would happen next. Had they sated their lustful needs only to go back to their empty lives?

Damp tears fell down her cheeks and joined with the rainwater on the damp blanket beneath her. Like the storm that raged around them, Olivia let loose her emotions, her body trembling with her pain as much as it had with their lovemaking. She did nothing to stem the flow of her tears, not even when she felt him pull up the edges of the blanket around them so that they were cocooned together on the damp ground. Then she pulled in a deep breath, and felt Ayden wrap his arms around her and draw her closer into his embrace.

“Shhhh,” he said.

She only nodded and took in a final breath and silently thanked the heavens for this single moment in time. In truth, she felt loved and wanted, but she felt something had changed around her, and yes, even inside of her.

She was no longer Miss Olivia Stone, or even Mrs. Micah Proffitt. True, a part of her grieved for the girl that had now gone forever. But another part, a bigger part, was glad that she'd risked everything this day. That she'd traded her virtue and her good name for this single moment of being loved. No matter what would happen, she would always have this.

* * * *

“You lied to me.”

Blalock looked up from his chair in Proffitt's library to see the avenging angel standing over him. The boy was positively glowering, seething even.

“Is there a problem?”

“A problem? It's a catastrophe and you're the cause of it.”

Blalock watched as his protégé began to pace. He set down his copy of Miss Austen's latest foray into the comedy of errors. The boy was genuinely upset.

“Stop your rambling and tell me what the problem is.”

Ayden whirled around. “Problem? The problem is that you lied to me. You told me that once I'd bedded the wench this curse would be gone from me.”

Blalock tried to feign surprise. “It isn't? How curious.”

“You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?”

Blalock couldn't hide his glee. “Come now, what did you expect?”

“I expected to ensnare her and then you would make her the offer and I would be done with this

business.”

“Done with it? My boy, you’ve hardly begun.”

Ayden stopped and sat down on the settee in front of him. “This is Hell. No, it’s worse than Hell.”

Blalock leaned forward. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Clearly not certain if he wanted to share his innermost thoughts with anyone, let alone the crafty old demon, Ayden took in a deep, unsteady breath.

“I can’t believe I’m telling you this.” He paused again. “We made love.”

Blalock waited, holding his own breath in anticipation. “Yes, go on.”

Like a great lion, Ayden shook his head. “We made love. Real love.”

“My boy, to the human male, it’s the same thing. Love, real love, it’s just sex.”

Ayden’s face fell. “Is that all it is? All it really is, then?”

Blalock leaned forward. “You look surprised. I thought my instruction was complete. You know, the old ‘stick it to her’ skirt-lifting experience. You really don’t understand, do you?”

“I understand that Olivia is the most wonderful, beautiful, incredible woman ever born.”

It set the old demon back on his heels. “You’re in love with her?”

Ayden only nodded, looking as miserable as a dear dying in a thicket of thorns, he placed his head in his hands. “What do I do now?”

Blalock shrugged. “How should I know? Keep bedding the wench until you’ve had your fill of her, I suppose.”

“When will that be?”

Blalock leaned back, and watched the angel-turned-man for a moment. “It shall be when it shall be. These things can’t be measured. No, not at all.”

“They can’t?”

“Of course not. In fact, when the time does come, you’ll be the first to know it. The femme beauty does fade, you know. Or, perhaps another flower of womanhood will draw your attentions. Why, there’s a veritable garden of lovely wenches out there. Each one more tantalizing than the one before.”

The angel sat back, obviously considering Blalock’s promises. For a moment, the old demon had a twinge of guilt. He was misleading the lad, after all.

The truth was that love, the real, made-for-all-eternity kind, was bestowed upon humans without rhyme or reason, without any provocation at all. It was one of the true mysteries of the universe.

“Oh. Well, then, I’ll just wait. Yes. That’s what I’ll do.”

“Exactly. Like any other affliction of the body it will pass and you can go on to enjoy other encounters with females.”

Ayden stood then, nodding, looking only half-convinced. “I’ll go now.” He stumbled out the door, his body and his heart in obvious conflict.

Blalock sat thoughtful for a moment.

This meant one thing for certain, they would have to finish this business before much longer or they would run the risk of failure.

If there was anything he could count on with his master. Failure was not acceptable.

* * * *

Olivia sat on her bed and waited for her father to call. When she’d come home that morning, after spending an entire night following her heart into the Devil’s tryst with Ayden, he’d walked her home just before dawn, to her father’s house.

She had tried to sleep, but precious slumber had eluded her. She’d tossed her sheets until she heard the first ramblings of life in the house. That had been an hour earlier, but she’d remained unmoving.

Now she waited, her ruined life laid out before her, like a tragic Shakespearean play.

“Olivia, you’re home.”

She looked up to see her father sitting in his wheeled chair at her door. The look on his face was unreadable but she didn’t need for him to tell her what he thought of her. She knew.

“Hello father. I came to say good-bye.”

“You mean to run away?”

Olivia glanced up and tried to keep the tears burning in her eyes in place. “Of course I don’t want to leave. But, I’ve embarrassed you all by my actions. . I won’t hurt you anymore.”

“What will you do?”

“What I’ve always done, I suppose. I’ll sew and mend. Perhaps I’ll get a position with a seamstress.”

“Oh, daughter. The thought of you alone in a strange place. So very far from your family...” He stopped and pulled his kerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his mouth.

Olivia couldn’t stop her tears any longer. Twisting sideways so he couldn’t see her shame, she cried.

“I’m so sorry, Father. So very sorry.”

In the next instant, she felt him beside her, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her into his embrace.

“There, there child. Don’t cry. I should never have let you agree to the marriage to that cur. If I’d insisted that you stay unmarried, the other fellow wouldn’t have tempted you so.”

“No, Papa, I conjured Ayden up in my mind. I wished for him to appear and then there he was.

Everything I’d ever wanted. It’s my fault, all my fault.”

“Nonsense, Olivia.” He pulled her away for a moment. “You married to save us from ruin. I’m to blame. I should have found another way.”

“Oh, Father! I don’t know what else to do.”

Her father took a steadying breath. “Oh, my dearest. Running away won’t do. I know this is a terrible situation, but Proffitt is within his rights to claim you as his wife. Only the wealthy can afford divorce or separation. You must do as you promised and honor your marriage vows.”

Olivia couldn’t help her tears. After a few moments, she drew in a deep breath. “I know. But, I need time. Allow me stay here for a few days and I promise I’ll go back.”

Her father sighed. “I should have written Cousin Arthur.”

She pulled back. "Father, no? You know it would have been fruitless. He hates you."
 "The reason he hated me is long past. It was I who refused to accept his apologies."
 "The two of you were the best of friends once; did you not believe it could happen again?"
 He shook his head. "You don't understand. Arthur and I were both in love with the same woman."
 Olivia watched as his eyes misted over. "Mama?"
 "When she died he didn't even give us the respect to come to her funeral."
 "I'm sorry, Father, really I am."
 "You needn't be, my dear. It's my fault. I've let it go on far longer than I should have."
 She hugged him again. "I love you, Father."
 "I know, sweetheart. Go get some breakfast and when you're done come back and sit with me awhile."
 "Oh, Father." She leaned down and kissed him.
 Her father smiled. "I went into their wedding, threw her over my shoulder and carried her out of his life forever. Much the same way as your young man did yesterday. Who knows, one day you'll be free again and he'll do the honorable thing and offer for your hand."
 Olivia bit her lip. "That would be wonderful, wouldn't it? But, I'm afraid it's not going to happen."
 "You don't know that, Olivia."
 She shook her head. "No, I'm afraid not. He's never offered me anything more than our night together. I won't press him for anything else. I have a small shred of pride, you know."
 "But, what if he loves you?"
 "We've exchanged many words, Father, but that wasn't one of them."
 Clutching her abdomen as the ball of ice formed there, she turned away before she started to cry again. No, this time she would hold steady. She had her family and her sewing. That was enough.
 It had to be.
 * * * *

He sat outside her window for most of the day. Now, the sun had set and one by one, the gas lamps in Olivia's house went out, the one in her room being the last.
 Ayden took a deep breath and began his advance to her bedroom window. When he reached the frame, he paused for a moment. Instead of being in bed, he saw that she was standing in front of the open door, her lithe form silhouetted in the doorway.
 "Olivia?"
 She turned, her expression one of surprise and something else, he realized. Regret?
 "Ayden?" She walked to the window. "What are you doing?"
 "Coming to you."
 She shook her head and he delighted the way the tips of her curls bounced in accordance.
 "You can't stay." She looked away for a moment, and when she turned back, he saw that her lashes were damp with new tears. "I'm leaving for London."
 "What?"
 "I'm leaving within the hour. Not even Papa knows."
 "What are you doing?"
 "I'm going to contact an acquaintance of an old friend. He liked my drawings and offered employment with his wife's seamstress."
 "What about us?"
 He could see her hands clenching and unclenching. "There is no 'us' Ayden. What happened was a mistake."
 He jumped through the window. "I want you."
 She shook her head. "Yes, you do. But you don't love me. A roll on the blanket under the stars may be terribly romantic but it's not what a woman needs. It's not what I need."
 "What do you need, Olivia? I swear I'll get it for you."
 "I need a man who loves me."
 Ayden stepped back. Of course, she needed a man who would love her. In his heart, he knew that he was that man. He meant to tell her so, too.
 "Don't do it, Ayden."
 Ayden glanced up and saw the shadow of Blalock just behind Olivia.
 "Go away," Ayden said in his mind's voice.
She's right, you know. You can't love her, ever. Your soul belongs to the Devil and you're not free to love anybody. Certainly, you can take her body and say sweet words to her, but she's not for you. Ever.
 Ayden glanced again to Olivia. It was clear she hadn't heard Blalock's voice.
 In spite of the demon's presence, Ayden hardened his resolve. "I love you."
 There. He'd said it.
 "No, you don't." She leaned forward and kissed him lightly. "When you've had your fill of me, you'll go on to your next conquest. I know it."
 "You don't know that."
 "I'm afraid I do. Good-bye, Ayden."
 With that, she turned and started to walk away. Ayden felt the burn of her loss so acutely that he'd have sworn it was the Devil's lash once again, but it wasn't. Because this cut was far deeper than any he'd suffered in Hell. It went straight to his heart.
 "I won't let you go." With that, he bounded across the room and grasping her shoulders, pulled her into a full embrace. Not waiting for her to deny him, or even take a full breath, he kissed her.
 When he'd finished plundering her mouth, he breathed deep.
 "Tell me you don't want me, Olivia! Tell me."
 "I don't want you," she said, her voice wavering as she spoke.
 "You're lying."
 "I'm not."

"You love me. You made love to me..."

She shook her head. "It won't happen again, Ayden."

"The hell it won't." He took her again, and this time moving her back until she was against the dressing table. With one swift motion, he grasped her bottom and set her on the surface, knocking bottles of perfume and powder aside. Lifting her skirts, he began making love to her, driving them both to the edge of sanity and beyond.

He felt her move above him, felt her silent cries against his chest as she muffled her voice against his skin. Ayden knew that that moment that he would never let her go. To hell with the Devil, he thought, this woman belonged to him.

As quickly as that thought occurred to him, however, he realized just what it was he'd intended. With a final desperate push, he climaxed and felt her tightening around him, her body answering his call in kind. When they were finished, he pulled away and gently kissed her warm, moist cheek.

"Oh, Ayden. Please leave," she sobbed. "This is killing me."

"Is this truly what you want?"

Without speaking, she quickly nodded and turned away from him. This sight of her

That was when he knew their time together was done. He'd failed to fulfill the Devil's demand, failed to convince her to give up her soul for him. But that wasn't what hurt the most.

He now knew he loved her enough to let her go.

"I do love you." And then he left her. Forever.

Chapter Nineteen

Proffitt pulled the unwieldy carriage into submission. His handling of his prize stallions was not at its peak, especially since he'd finished off the last of his wine from the wedding. He'd then taken care of two bottles of brandy and the last four bottles of ale in his cupboard.

Damn them all, he'd decided. He was a married man. His bride had been duly bought and paid for. When that wretch had returned his money as well as delivered the letter that Martin Stone had written him, Proffitt had begun his drinking binge.

Now that he had enough liquor to strengthen his resolve, he intended to belay any thoughts the chit might have of deserting him and retrieve her. He would make her his woman whether she and her ninny of a father wanted him to or not. She was his wife, and he was damned determined to remind her of it. Besides, after visiting the constable he'd learned that the law was on his side.

So, filled with the brew of self-righteousness and fine wine, he'd had his servant set up his rig and had gone to fetch the blasted woman himself. Cuckold him, would she!

Once he'd arrived in front of the Stone house, Proffitt attempted to climb down from his rig. It was a poor effort in his state of drunkenness and his efforts landed him squarely on his backside. No matter, he thought. He climbed to his feet and staggered to the door.

Using his fists, he beat against the heavy oak and called out.

"Mrs. Proffitt! You come here this instant! Obey your husband, woman! I insist!"

The door opened right enough, but it was not the delightful Olivia, it was her haggard housekeeper.

"Here, here, Mr. Proffitt, just what do you think you're about?"

"I'm here to get my wife. I insist you fetch her for me, you wilted dandelion or I shall not hesitate to push past you and get her myself."

"You do and an iron pot will meet your misshapen head. Miss Olivia is none of your concern."

"She's my wife, and I have papers to prove it."

Just then, the chit's father appeared at the door. "Micah, please. Olivia needs some time to adjust. He started to close the door but Proffitt stepped into the frame.

"I have no care for what she needs! At this very minute the constable is on his way here. If she doesn't come with me and surrender herself to my bed immediately, I shall have you all arrested for interfering in my marriage!"

"No!" Olivia said from behind the housekeeper. "Please, I beg of you! Don't do this."

"I shall indeed, unless you come with me this instant. Don't think Micah Proffitt will stand for such maltreatment because I won't. And, you'll be lucky if I don't take my straps to you, woman. Now, let's go!"

He saw her expression of pure misery and delighted in it. His trousers lifted at the very sight of her distress. This was indeed going to be his triumph.

"My daughter is in love with another man." Stone said firmly. "She has already committed carnal sin with him. Why would you want a tarnished woman?"

"To punish her. Now come, wench. Let us begin our marriage aright."

Olivia's father raised his fist. "Proffitt, I swear, if you so much as touch my daughter, I'll—"

"What? Run me down in the street with your wheeled chair? Pah! You are not even half a man, sir. Now, Olivia. Let us go."

"Good-bye, Father," she said, staggering forward.

"Let her go! I'll get my pot, see if I don't!" the housekeeper threatened.

"Raise your hand to me woman and you'll regret it!"

Olivia turned to her family. "Please, no! He's right. I have given him my consent. It'll be all right. I just want you all to be safe. This is my fault and it's time I stood up to my responsibility."

"Olivia..." Stone said, reaching for her hand.

"Good-bye, Father." Before she let him touch her, she turned and walked passed Proffitt toward the coach.

For a moment the undertaker stood open mouthed and watch the gentle swish of her skirts as she retreated. Damned if it wasn't going to be a fine night, after all. "Ah, just so there's no ill will between us, here is a bottle of wine for your house. Perhaps you would join me in a toast one night soon. In fact, I insist. We shall break it open together, shall we?"

"It looks as if we've no choice in the matter." The old man said as a tear slid from his left eye. He was actually crying!

"No, actually, you don't. We need to discuss our contract. I've decided to make changes in my pre-nuptial arrangements, which is within my rights, according to the law."

Chapter Twenty

Olivia wrapped her arms around her middle, trying desperately to ward off the chill that was coming over her. She rode in silence beside her husband and did her best not to squirm when he placed his hand on her knee.

"Ah, my love, it'll be fine. You'll see. You've only to satisfy me in the bed and then make certain your chores are completed each day. My lad will help you get adjusted. Once you've learned how to care for my home properly, then I shall have to discharge him. Probably have to go back to his drunkard of a father. Terrible brute, that one."

Olivia hardly listened as he prattled on. Her head was beginning to pound and her stomach was twisting so tightly she could barely breathe for the pain of it.

Idly, she wondered if she jumped from the carriage now, would the fall be enough to kill her? Death would be far better than the mess she'd made of her life, surely.

Just when she'd thought she'd garnered the nerve to meet with fate, the carriage stopped. They were back at the Proffitt house.

"Come, come, my dear. We've business to attend to."

She made her way down from the cab and meant to follow him, but he stopped abruptly and she nearly ran into his back.

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Proffitt," came a pleasant voice in front of them. It was Lord Blalock, Ayden's friend.

"Yes?" Proffitt made no effort to hide his annoyance.

"A word with you before you retire?"

"Uh, perhaps some other time." He made to move past the larger man, but the other prevented him.

"I think now would be best. Perhaps your wife would like a moment to settle in?"

Olivia skirted around her husband and made for the house. She heard her husband growl behind her.

"I've taken the locks off of all the doors, so unless you can move the armoire, there will be no denying me, Mrs. Proffitt!

Just then, the rumble of thunder sounded. Perhaps he would be struck by lightning, she thought. Olivia could only hope.

* * * *

Blalock was furious. Things were not going the way he'd planned. Not at all. First, the chit had denied Ayden. Then the angel had come barreling into the study, cursing and shouting and ordering Blalock to take him back to Hell. It had been all he could do to calm the angel. Who knew the little chit would refuse an angel with the body of Adonis?

Then, he returned here to find that the little worm had gone after the girl.

"What do you think you're doing?" Blalock asked.

"I think I'm going to go bed my bride. Now, get out of my way."

"We had an understanding."

"You had an understanding. She is my wife, you oaf. It's legal before God and all. Now, if you don't mind."

Blalock stood unmoving for a few more seconds, a new plan forming in his mind. "Very well. I shall trouble you no more."

With that, he stepped aside and watched the little man go into the house. When he'd gotten to the door, Blalock called after him. "Perhaps you'd like to go to the cellar and fetch another bottle of port. Wine does help to calm the fears of young ladies, or so I've heard."

Proffitt stopped and turned. "Not a bad idea that. Good night."

Blalock watched him go. What was it that Shakespeare fellow had said? A hoist with his own petard?

Very well, indeed. He followed Proffitt into the house, very pleased with the new plan that had formed in his thoughts. Yes, very pleased, indeed.

* * * *

Ayden was sitting in the garden thinking of Olivia. The pain in his chest sharpened with every beat of his heart. All those years in Hell and he'd never guessed that there could be any pain worse. How wrong he'd been.

"Well, well, my boy. About ready to leave this fickle plane, are we?"

"Yes. The sooner the better."

"Of course. Living with the mortals is a draining task, indeed. Well, no mind. There's plenty of company to be found in Hell, as they say."

"I wouldn't know. My cell was a bit small."

"Yes, it was. I do miss it sometimes."

"You would." Ayden leaned forward and placed his face in his hands.

"Yes, I do. And thank heavens we're leaving this earthly mishmash behind us, eh? I mean, what with Proffitt defiling the lovely Miss, and her family's tragic demise, and all. Awful business, the lot of it."

Ayden sat up, his spine stiff, his hands suddenly fisted. "What in blazes are you talking about? Olivia defiled? Nonsense, she's on her way to London this very minute."

"No she's not. I just saw her arrive here a few minutes ago. He's gone to get them some wine before settling their marriage accounts, if you know what I mean. A tidy sum in that chit's bed, no doubt."

"It's not possible. You're lying!" Ayden stood and raised his fists.

"Oh, it's no lie. See for yourself, there in the basement window. He's going through to the wine cellar."

Ayden turned, and crouching down watched as the undertaker prepared a wine service.

"It's not possible," he said.

"It is. What's more, you know what else he's planning? He's going to do away with her family. I saw him put poison in a bottle of wine this afternoon. He gave it to them already. Made them promise to open it with him tomorrow night. Too bad about the old man and the children, don't you think? And, poor Olivia. She'll be inconsolable."

Ayden advanced on the demon, grabbing him about the throat. "And you let him? You stood by and did nothing to stop him?"

Blalock shrugged. "What could I do? So her family dies. What care do I have of them? Why even you don't shed a tear for the wench, now do you?"

"You're wrong. She's very important to me."

"Then you have a piss poor way of showing it. Don't take my word for it. Go down there and see for yourself what he has planned for the Stone family."

Ayden said nothing further as he brushed past the old demon. He made it to the door in two steps and couldn't help but hear the chuckle from the veranda behind him. All he could think of was saving Olivia from that worm. Nothing else mattered.

Olivia entered Proffitt's room and a cold chill settled over her. The urge to flee back to her father's house was overwhelming but she fought it. Her course was clear. If she didn't do as Proffitt insisted, her family would suffer. She'd rather die than let her family pay for her mistakes.

The room was quiet and dark, now that the sun had set. Oddly enough, there were no sounds from outside. No night birds calling, no rodents scuttling across the yard. Nothing. It was as if the Devil himself had commanded their silence. Olivia pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders.

A light knocking sounded at the door and Olivia nearly jumped from the bed. She knew it wasn't Proffitt for the sound wasn't the demanding pounding of her new husband, nor was it the urgency of Ayden's arrival. No, this was different, firm but measured.

"Who is it?"

"It's Blalock, Mrs. Proffitt. Might I have a word with you?"

Olivia hesitated. A strange man in a young bride's private room? It wasn't heard of. And yet, she was certain there was little about her nuptials that would be considered acceptable.

"I'm sorry, sir. I can't let you in. My husband shall be here at any moment. Perhaps if you came back another time, we could sit for tea, have a proper visit."

"Damn it all. I've no time for your idiotic proprieties." The hint of anger to his tone made Olivia scoot back on the bed.

"I do apologize, but that's as it should be."

"No, no wait, listen. Your husband is otherwise detained. I need to speak to you about our mutual friend, Mr. Royce."

Before she knew what she was doing, Olivia was up and unlatching the door.

"Sir, I beg you, please keep your voice down!"

"Lest your husband hear?" Lord Blalock chuckled. "Believe me, Proffitt knows of your marital wanderings and doesn't care the least about it."

Olivia bit her lip. "I'll thank you not to speak of such things."

Blalock bowed. "As you wish. Could I escort you to the parlor? There is a matter of utmost urgency that we must discuss."

"Urgency? I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. But it requires your attention just the same."

Lord Blalock held out his arm to her, and not knowing what else to do, Olivia gingerly took it. The two walked arm in arm down the stairs to Proffitt's parlor. She held her breath, certain that her husband would appear at any second and make good on his threats to beat her.

"Please, be at ease, Olivia...uh, I may call you Olivia? I feel as though we are on the verge of becoming very good friends."

Once they were in the room, Olivia pulled away from his arm.

"I wish you would get to the point," she blurted out.

He motioned for her to take a seat on the chaise and pulled up a high backed chair. "I understand that your husband is very anxious to begin your wedded bliss. Even after he and I came to an understanding that it would be best to postpone consummation of your nuptials to a later time."

Embarrassment covered Olivia like a cloak. "Sir, you go too far!"

Like an avenging angel Blalock leaned forward, "Don't play the innocent tart with me, Miss. I know that you've been exploring the delights of the flesh with my friend, Ayden. Now, are you going to be adult about this or should I just collect my friend and leave you alone with your dull-witted spouse?"

Olivia drew in a sharp breath. "Very well, sir. Pray, continue."

"Thank you. Now, it's come to my attention that you and Ayden are quite enamored of each other." He put up his hand. "Don't insult my intelligence by protesting otherwise."

"I've no such intention, sir. However, what happens between Mr. Royce and I are our own affair."

"Indeed." He chuckled. "But you are a married woman and Mr. Royce is not well educated in the ways of the heart."

Olivia felt as if her face were on fire. "Your point, sir?"

"My point is this. You don't want to be married, do you? At least not to the despicable Micah Proffitt. What woman in her right mind would?"

"I made a vow."

"Yes, you did, but you really had no choice about it, now did you. All the eligible young men in the area tragically deceased. Your family lingers at the very door of destitution. You had no choice. And no one would blame you. Desperation is a coarse mistress."

"Yes, she is." Olivia lowered her gaze.

"There, there. No need to fret. You were but an innocent in a sea of horrible circumstance."

Olivia's eyes began to burn. "Whatever I was, sir, I have made a contract and I will stick to it. If I don't, my family will pay the price."

"Well, not exactly."

Olivia shot him a wary glance. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying things may not be as dire as you think. As it happens, I know of a way for you to get out of your marriage that is quite legal and will have the end result of making you a very financially secure young woman."

Olivia swallowed. Was it even possible that she wouldn't have to stay married to Proffitt and her family would be safe?

"That would be more than I could ever hope for." She said at the last.

"Then you are interested."

Olivia nodded. "Yes."

Mr. Blalock smiled. "Good. Let me tell you of my proposal."

"You wish to wed me, too?"

The other man laughed. "Oh, dear, no! Mine is a proposition of a different sort." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a piece of parchment.

"What's that?"

"A contract. Now, here are the particulars. My employer, someone whom I shall name at a later time, is prepared to make you a most generous contract."

"A contract?"

"Yes. In exchange for the item for which my employer is asking, you will be given three wishes. These items can be anything or, ahem, anyone you desire. Riches beyond imagination, a lofty position in society, or perhaps the heart of a certain young man. The choice is yours entirely."

Suspicion stirred in her stomach, churning like a dozen bumblebees trapped in a jar. "And what does your employer require from me? What could I possibly have that would be of value to anyone?"

The other man smiled. "Something of far greater value than you know. And no, it isn't your virtue. My master has no need for the unseemly yearnings of the flesh."

"Oh. Well, I dare say, I cannot enter into any contract unless I know exactly what is required of me. I may be naïve, sir, but I am no fool."

"Of course, you aren't. Very well. It is your soul, madam. That which is at the very core of your being. My master is Satan himself, the ruler of the underworld, he who is the king of all darkness."

Olivia jumped to her feet. "Sir, you play a cruel joke on me."

Blalock stood up. Before her eyes, Olivia saw his skin darken and two small horns rise up beneath his hair on either side of his head, just above his ears.

"Oh, it is no jest, Madam. I assure you."

Olivia stepped back a pace. "Come no closer!"

Blalock shrugged. "This is your home, Olivia, and I won't behave badly. I am only a messenger, you know. A broker of sorts. Yes, that's it. A broker of souls."

Olivia's mouth went dry. "You have no business here, sir. Please leave."

"If that's what you want. But, you need to think a moment before you send me away."

"I've nothing to consider. I will not sell my soul at any occasion."

"Perhaps not. However, circumstances have changed even in the minutes we have sat here."

"What do you mean?"

"There are some things you have not been privy to. Such as the recent deaths in the area."

"I know of them. A terrible plague is what it was."

"Really? Is that what you think? I've heard that it was poison, you know."

"Poison?"

"Yes. Now, who do we know that has access to such a thing?"

"I've no idea. Farmers use poison to kill rats, perhaps."

"Perhaps. Anyone you know having a rat problem here in the village?"

Olivia shook her head. "Out with it, sir! Tell me what in the Devil you're talking about." Realizing what she'd said, Olivia quickly clapped her hands to her mouth.

Blalock only laughed. "Think about it. Who would profit from so many deaths in the village?"

"My husband is an undertaker, but, he couldn't have done such a thing." To think otherwise was insanity.

Blalock shrugged. "As you say, Madam. Since you've no idea what has overtaken the village, perhaps if we looked closer to home. I visited your husband's workroom this morning. He has the most lovely coffins there. Each one built and carved by himself, you know. And, he even had three ready for immediate use. An adult coffin and two children's boxes."

Olivia felt the room swim around her. "Oh, heavens! No!"

"I'm afraid it's so. And more to the point, he himself admitted to me moments ago that he delivered a bottle of wine to your father and that he intends for them to drink with him tomorrow night at dinner. You will no longer have your father and siblings to care for. That's how Proffitt has it all planned."

Olivia sank into a chair once again. "What am I to do?"

"I've already taken steps to rid us of the impending crisis."

"You have?"

"I can't take all the credit. Mr. Royce is down in your husband's workshop, confronting your husband as we speak. Too bad, though. It won't go well for him."

"What do you mean?"

"Ayden's fate is sealed, Miss. He has already given up what you hold so dear. He is an angel fallen from grace, here to fulfill his contract with my master. When he's finished with Proffitt he must pay for his sin. Murderers have a special place in Hell, you know."

"Oh." Olivia's chest tightened as she clutched at her skirt.

"And, of course, it won't go well for either of you."

"It won't?"

"No. I'm afraid when the authorities learn of your midnight tryst with fair Ayden and discover that he has murdered your husband, they'll likely hold you responsible. I dare say it won't go well for your family."

Olivia could not believe her ears. Panic clutched at her chest and her mind whirled in frantic circles but no solution came to her.

"What am I to do?" Sobbing, she pulled her handkerchief from her sleeve and tried to stem her tears.

"There, there, my dear. You needn't be so distressed. We can fix it all, you and I. Just a single signature on this parchment and all your troubles will disappear."

"That's all I need to do and you'll rescue Ayden and my family?"

"That's all. And, you do have time to enjoy your part of the contract, you know. Why, my master is not a cruel one. He wants you to have what you deserve."

Olivia looked up at him, curious. "What sort of being are you?"

He shrugged. "Not any sort you need concern yourself with. In fact, once you sign this contract, I'll be no trouble to you at all."

"Really?"

"Really. Now here you go."

"I don't know what to do." Olivia took the paper from him and was surprised to feel the warmth of it. It almost felt alive.

"You will sign here where it says 'In exchange for three wishes, I, the undersigned, will surrender that which is the unique part of my being, one unencumbered soul, to the Supreme Master of the Underworld, Lucifer, the one most despised, Ruler of the damned, Satan.'"

"Okay." With shaking hand, she picked up the quill and set it to the paper. She paused a moment. "No. I can't."

Rising from her chair, she started to pace.

"See here, Madam. This is preposterous. You are indeed trying my patience."

"I'm sorry." She took in a breath.

"Very well. Perhaps you don't understand. Once you sign this, it stays with you until the terms of your contract have been met. Now, what is your most desired wish?"

Chapter Twenty-One

Olivia took a deep breath. Could it be possible? Was this a chance at happiness, at having her dearest dream be granted?

But at what price? Her conscious screamed.

Quickly she stamped down the thought. Deep in her heart, she knew it was wrong. To sell one's soul at any price was a terrible, horrible thing. And yet, she also knew that it was her last chance at ever having true happiness. The fulfillment of her heart's desires now hung before her and if she didn't act, she end up beaten to death by Proffitt's anger, or swinging from a rope at Tyburn along side of her beloved, Ayden.

"Well, once I had wanted open my own dress shop in London. I've always had a passion for designing

ladies fashions."

"Well, then we'd have to let you realize your dreams. And others?"

"Um, I want my family taken care of so that they will never face bankruptcy again. Trusts set up for my brother and sister."

"It goes without saying. Very well. Anything else your heart desires?"

Olivia thought for a moment.

"I'd like to know something first."

"Yes?"

"About Ayden's contract."

"What about it?"

"Oh, well, he is here on a contingency, but I fear that he has failed in his efforts. He will have to go back to Hell, most likely."

"Oh. What if he were one of my wishes?"

"Go on."

"What if one of my wishes was to relieve him of his contract so that he may have a long and happy life?"

It was Blalock's turn to sit back. "That is the most beautiful thing I think I've ever heard. Of course we can make it part of your contract. How selfless of you!"

"I can't stand the thought of him suffering such a terrible fate."

"Of course you can't. But, why not indulge yourself a little."

Olivia pulled back. "What do you mean?"

Blalock shrugged. "You have placed the needs and wants of others above your own, above your deep desire for your little dress shop. Why not have one tiny desire of your own fulfilled."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

The demon leaned forward. "You can have him all to yourself. Mr. Royce, I mean. It wouldn't be too hard a thing to do. And, you are giving up so much. Why not wish that he stay with you until the time that the Master claims your soul?"

"I could never do that to Ayden."

Olivia chewed her lip, rubbing her hands to assuage the bone deep chill had settled in them. She wasn't even sure if she could hold the quill he offered her.

"Of course, you could insist that he be set free once your contract is fulfilled."

"I could?" Olivia watched as the addendum to the contract suddenly appeared at the bottom. She carefully dipped the quill into the ink and began to sign the agreement. The fear and dread she felt was tied into a tidy knot.

As she finished signing her name, however, her anxieties started to dissipate. Her family would be safe at last. She needn't ever worry about Micah Proffitt ever again, and at least for a little while, she would have Ayden in her life.

Olivia glanced up to see she was alone. Sighing deeply she closed her eyes. She'd really done it this time. Instead of just sacrificing her virtue or her life for her loved ones, she'd given up her soul. It didn't matter, she told herself. She would have the added bonus of living her dream. What else could she ever have wanted?

* * * *

Ayden descended the stairs two at a time. The workroom was lit by a yellow glow from an oil lamp that sat in the corner. Squinting, he could see Proffitt huddled over one of his coffins.

Seeing the three ornate boxes sitting in the corner of the room, the angel became enraged thinking about how the undertaker had planned to take additional innocent lives. After all, he was guilty of the same crimes, was he not?

"Mr. Proffitt," Ayden called as he reached the bottom stairs.

The little man spun around. "You? What do you want?"

"I want to know what you're doing."

The little man made a snorting sound. "I'm fashioning a proper strap, that's what. I mean to make my wife more biddable, if you know what I mean." He wiped his hands on his apron.

"I see."

The little man spun round. "No, you don't see. I mean to see to it that she learns her place in this house. You can be assured, sir, that she will not partake in any more late night trysts."

"I have no doubt of it, sir." Ayden's anger roared inside of him. It was all he could do to keep from strangling the rodent of a man.

"Good. Then there will be no misunderstanding between us."

Ayden scowled. Did he think that Ayden would let him beat Olivia and not have a word to say about it?

"No misunderstanding," Ayden repeated, folding his arms across his middle.

"I know that we both work for the same master. There's no reason for us to be at odds. Why, you've already tumbled the wench, haven't you? By rights, she was my wife before the two of you became lovers. What's say we have a truce between us. Then, when I'm finished with her, you may have her back."

Ayden ground his jaw and said nothing.

"Of course," Proffitt continued. "Why would you even have a thought about the chit? I mean, it is a very big world and there are plenty of fine women that would fall at your feet, you know."

"Indeed."

"Let me prove that there are no hard feelings between us. Share a glass of wine with me? You know, something to celebrate my marriage with."

Ayden stiffened. What sort of trick was this? Just then, he heard Blalock whisper into his mind.

"Go on, my boy. Drink with him. He won't harm you. He wouldn't dare."

Ayden nodded. "Very well. Would you like me to pour it?"

The little man shook his head. "Oh, no. That would make me a poor host. I'm afraid I've let my emotions have the better of me for long enough." He turned and fetched the bottle off a nearby shelf. Then, producing two glasses, he placed them on his workbench. With his back turned to Ayden and his body obstructing the view of

his pouring the wine, he began to hum.

Again, Ayden heard Blalock's voice in his ear.

"This is going to be priceless! Never a wine tasted so sweet as that made from the fruit of revenge."

"Here you go, my friend. To our glorious master!"

Ayden took a deep swallow of the wine and watched over the rim of his glass as Proffitt did the same. When he was finished, he turned and threw his glass into the fireplace. A series of pops and hisses sounded. "Here my friend, do the same! It is quite satisfying."

Ayden walked to the fireplace and tossed his own crystal into the flame. As he watched, Proffitt tossed the now empty wine bottle in beside it. The room around them filled with the wine's fragrance and Ayden noticed that it burned his eyes slightly.

"Very good show, Mr. Proffitt."

Ayden turned to see Blalock seated on the top step looking somewhat like a vulture ready to pounce on its prey.

"Blalock!" Proffitt sounded a bit unsettled. "Had I known you would be joining us, I would have brought another bottle of wine."

Blalock laughed. "I'm sure you would have. But never mind. Your company is refreshing enough."

"Well, then. Enough lazing about. I am quite a busy man."

"Oh, yes, you are. In fact, your schedule is full."

"It is." Proffitt stumbled back a pace.

"It turns out, you have an appointment."

Ayden watched as Blalock slowly stood and descended the stairs.

"I do?" Proffitt stepped back further. His face was turning a dark red now and Ayden could see beads of sweat forming on his brow, soon turning to tiny rivulets streaming down his face.

"Oh, yes, you do. Our master awaits you, Micah."

"No, you're wrong. I mean, I'm perfectly healthy. I'm going to live a good long life serving Him."

"Well, that's a bit presumptive of you. I'm afraid your time here has been cut short."

"No. It's not possible."

"Oh, yes it is. You tried to poison Ayden. He is in the midst of a binding contract with the master. The highest lord of the underworld doesn't take kindly to anyone foiling his plans."

Proffitt began to choke and sputter, his face now turning grayish blue, his hands flailing about. Suddenly he was on his knees, making a horrible wheezing sound. Ayden started to move forward, but Blalock held up his hand.

"Don't have pity for this one, my boy. He deserves the full measure of what he's done to others." Blalock walked to stand over Proffitt. "That bottle of wine you gave to Mr. Stone somehow made it back in your wagon. I placed it down here especially for you."

"No!"

With that, the little man let out a final wheeze and fell face first onto the floor.

Ayden could barely move. "Is he dead?"

"But not buried," Blalock's tone was almost melodic. "Oh, don't look so glum. He'll have plenty to keep him busy where he's going."

Blalock walked around the room, carefully examining all the contents there. "Very nice. Quite a lovely business he had here. Should sell for a large sum, indeed."

"What are you doing?" Ayden followed after the demon.

"I'm adding up the poor widow's assets. She's going to be rather well off. Probably won't need any help from us."

"Then, that's it. I've failed."

Blalock smiled giving Ayden an uneasy feeling. "I convinced her that accepting our proposal was to her benefit."

Ayden felt the air leave his chest. He sat on the steps with a thump and closed his eyes. A profound sadness filled him. An uncomfortable feeling rose in his heart. Olivia had done as he'd hoped and he felt as if he'd betrayed her.

He glanced up. "Will we be going back now?"

Blalock shook his head. "You misunderstand. Before you are released from your servitude, you must complete the terms of the contract."

"Terms of the contract? I don't understand?"

"The young lady has made a certain request and if we don't do as she demands, then she is not required to surrender her soul. It's all very legal, you know. Can't break the laws of Heaven and Hell. It just isn't done."

"What do I have to do?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

The morning sun had barely risen above the horizon when the constable arrived. Lord Tarverton was old and rotund. He literally had to tip forward to see over his enormous girth and get a good view of the body.

"You say he didn't come upstairs to bed? With a lovely young bride like you, I find that a bit of a stretch." Olivia bit her lip. "Well, we were at odds. I mean, our wedding night..."

She glanced around the room, her eyes first meeting with Ayden, and then Blalock. Both were as calm and cool as if they were readying themselves for an afternoon stroll. In the furthest corner of the parlor stood her late husband's valet, Thomas. He alone seemed to grieve the passing of Proffitt, though most likely not for any personal attachment. Coming from such a poor family, he was likely lamenting the loss of his salary.

"This terrible event has indeed frightened the poor girl to death," Blalock said. He pulled the constable aside. "You know how it is, a man of experience like yourself. A blushing virgin bride's wedding, a man of his advanced age..." He lowered his voice. "To be honest, I'm not sure any of us would be up to the demands of a woman like that one, eh?"

The constable sent Olivia a leering grin then turned back to Blalock.

"I'll warrant for a bit of skirt like that there'll be a few of us that would die trying." He cleared his throat and straightened his coat. "Now, beg pardon, sir. What's your name and relationship to the deceased?"

"A friend of the family. Mr. Royce here is, or rather was, a cousin to Mr. Proffitt. A distant cousin, that is."

Ayden said nothing, but kept his head down and arms crossed. It was clear he was not comfortable with Proffitt's death. In truth, beyond the fact that her husband lay dead a few feet from her of mysterious circumstances there was little Olivia herself knew of the event. While she was relieved at her sudden freedom from the marriage bond, she felt more than a little guilty of his passing so violently.

"I see. So sorry for your loss. It looks like apoplexy to me. Was he prone to fits?"

"Of the worst kind," Blalock said.

"Yes, yes. Well, who's going to bury the undertaker then?"

Olivia went numb. "Oh, dear heavens," she cried, lifting her handkerchief to her eyes.

Thomas ran to her side. "This is so tragic and so unexpected. I'm so sorry, Missus. Um, will you be in need of assistance now? I mean, I wasn't just a valet, you know. I did all sorts of things for Mr. Proffitt. Helped cook with the meals, polished the coffins, and I even muck the stalls in the barn."

"Yes, yes, of course, you can stay on. I've no intention of firing anyone."

The constable turned back to Olivia. "Were it any other female but you, Mrs. Proffitt, I might have suspected foul play, but as it is, I doubt you have a malicious bone in your body. As for himself, well, he did indulge in the bottle and the pipe. Very sad. My condolences."

Blalock finished the accounts with the constable and sent him away, then turned to Olivia. "Well, well, the first wish you have is now fulfilled. You have enough money to support your family, a nice home, though I dare say, it needs a woman's hand."

"He died so terribly. And the look on his face—"

"He had little pain, I assure you. It was just a muscular aberration. I've seen it happen many times."

"Still, I shall never forget his expression."

Blalock leaned forward. "Why, Mrs. Proffitt, are you sorry for his loss?"

"Even though he plotted to kill my family, and indeed did many horrible things, one can't help but feel a little sorry for him."

Blalock sent her a puzzled expression. "You are a most curious woman, Mrs. Proffitt."

* * * *

Ayden approached Olivia's bedroom. He stood for a moment, listening to the soft, whispering movements of her beyond the door. Was that her removing her skirt? The sound of her comb gently sliding through her hair? A sigh, perhaps?

One thing was certain, Ayden, despicable creature that he was, wanted to be with her, now more than ever. How cruel was this body he'd been given! Even through the worst of times, he ached for her. Her touch, her breath upon his skin, her silky moist center around him. It was driving him mad. Well and truly mad.

When he could stand no more, he tapped gently on the door, both excited at the chance to be with her yet again, and shameful of his powerful need for her. But need her he did, and unless she turned him away, he would first beg her forgiveness and then her favor.

"Olivia...", he began. He didn't know what to say after that. Sympathies for her loss didn't seem quite right. Nor did an impassioned plea for her affection. Instead, he chose to say nothing, just merely hold his breath and pray that she would open the door and let him in.

When no answer came after a few seconds, he drew another breath. "Olivia."

He listened closely and was rewarded by the sound of her sigh and the soft padding of her feet as she came to answer his call. When he heard her turn the door's knob, he stepped back, eyes downcast, uncertain what he should say next.

The door slowly opened.

"Ayden," she said.

Glancing up he saw that her eyes were damp and her flushed cheeks were covered with silvery tracks where her tears had fallen.

"I want you," he started, suddenly feeling as though he had no right to be standing outside her door. "I mean, I want to be with you."

Her eyes cloudy, she looked up at him. "Ayden, you are such a dear. I'm so sorry, but I don't think I will make good company tonight."

"I don't understand. What has changed?"

She licked her lips and looked away, careful not to meet his gaze. "I have changed, Ayden. I've discovered what a terrible person I am. I wished for Proffitt to be out of my life, and now look what has happened."

"But he was evil. He deserved what he got."

"I have no doubt of it. But, it was I who was to blame for his demise and I can't help wondering whom else I might harm with my foolish actions."

"It's not like that, Olivia. You are good and kind." He paused, reaching up to touch her face. "You are beautiful."

Her blush deepened. "That you think so highly of me warms my heart, Ayden. I'm sure after some time has passed I shall agree with your assessment. However, for tonight I need to be alone. Please forgive me."

Ayden swallowed. "As you wish. Will I see you in the morning, then?"

"I'll be down for breakfast. I'm afraid I won't have much time for 'us' until later. The townspeople will want to pay their respects, you know."

"Did anyone respect old Proffitt?"

"Not that I know of, but we must keep up appearances, just in case."

"Well, then, good-night fair Olivia." He leaned in, and pressed a kiss upon her forehead, lingering just a moment to take in her scent of wildflowers once more.

The next morning, after sharing a modest breakfast with her, Ayden left Olivia to her tasks of dealing with her husband's death and instead went to work in the garden. With the authorities coming and going, with the neighbors—whom he suspected had not the first sympathy for Proffitt—but rather came to visit out of morbid curiosity, it was all he could do to keep out of the way.

While he weeded Proffitt's poor excuse for a garden, Ayden watched the house. He could see Olivia through the parlor's huge window, and was mesmerized by the way she tilted her head and gave all of her attention when someone spoke to her. But it was those fleeting moments when she was alone he saw her dab her eyes with her handkerchief and wore such sad expression melted his heart.

A curious thing, he thought, that for all of her anguish and loathing of Proffitt, she truly did feel saddened by his plight. Like Blalock, he had no inkling as why she should ever have such sympathy for the detestable toad of man.

To be honest, she was a fascination to him and knowing that his time here was short, he indulged in watching her.

"She's quite lovely, isn't she?" Blalock said suddenly beside him.

"Very." He didn't want to talk to the old demon anymore. In fact, he was quite sick of talking, or rather listening to Satan's spawn.

"You seem quiet this morning. Did I see you sleeping on the chaise in the parlor this morning? I'd have thought you would be jumping at the chance to bed the chit again. Or perhaps after your tryst the other night, you've had your fill of her?"

Ayden spun around. "You say the foulest things!"

"Indeed? Well, it's my nature. You know, demon from Hell and all that. Ah, never mind." He paused a moment, narrowing his eyes at Ayden. "I see what's going on here. You're smitten."

"You... He promised me that when she signed the contract I would be set free."

Blalock shrugged. "Not my concern. You must see this through and the Devil must be satisfied, did you not agree to that?"

Ayden closed his eyes and remembered.

"Please me, and you will have your freedom..."

Freedom, indeed. From Hell's eternal flames, perhaps, but free of his aching need for Olivia? He suspected that might not even be possible.

"I will do as you command me, but after this, no more. How much longer will I have to endure?"

Blalock shrugged. "Patience, my boy. These things take time."

The sun finally set and Olivia sat alone in the parlor. The constable and the townspeople had been satisfied that Proffitt's death had been of natural causes, and as of this afternoon, he was now resting in his grave.

A gentle knocking sounded at the door and Olivia dried her eyes.

"Come in," she called.

Ayden entered, and in spite of the late hour, he looked as fresh as if he'd just risen from a long night's sleep.

"Are you still upset over Proffitt's death?" He asked bluntly.

She looked up at him, instantly warmed by the shade of concern that lived in his eyes.

"I am better now, thank you." She paused. "It wasn't so much my grief for old Proffitt, you know, as my shame at not feeling anything at all. Any loss, even one such as him should be mourned properly."

"If you say so, but frankly, I don't understand it."

"That's all right. What's done is done. Time to move forward."

Ayden nodded. "Then, what is next? Do you want to marry me, now?"

Olivia took in a breath. Is that what he thought she really wanted? "I appreciate the gesture, but it's a bit more complicated than that. First, we have to take time to grieve properly. At least a year, I believe."

"But, you just said —"

Olivia held up her hand. "While I may not truly feel the loss of my husband, society will expect me to carry on as such. That means I'm not free to wed so soon, even if I wanted to."

"Even if you wanted to? You don't want to marry me, then?"

"I don't mean to say that I'm not flattered by your offer. And I am very fond of you," she felt the blush rise on her cheeks, but went on speaking her heart. "Very fond of you. Marriage is something that one has to be very sure about. Not just with the heart, but with all of one's self."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, and that's the problem. That's why there is a courtship and a period of engagement before couples should wed. I want no less for myself, I think. Then, if I am allowed, I will choose what's right for me."

Olivia glanced up at him and held her breath.

"Then, does this mean no more bed sport?"

"You mean, sex?"

Ayden nodded. "Yes."

That was the question, now wasn't it? If she were the honorable young lady she'd been before meeting him, it would have meant that there would absolutely be no bed sport. But now, after having been with him, knowing the delights of the flesh and the pure exhilaration of their attraction, how could she possibly deny him anything? Or herself, for that matter?

No, she was a helpless victim of her own passions and there was nothing to be done about it. Besides, after having sold one's soul to the Devil, what possible harm could she do to her fate now?

It wasn't Olivia's nature to mourn for long, and the warm, willing man who sat in front of her was like a tonic to her wounded heart. Deep in her soul, she knew that loving another with both mind and body could not possibly be a sin, and if it was, compared to the ones she'd already committed, it certainly wasn't the worst. So, she would love him, devote herself to him, and hold tightly to his love for as long as time allowed. And then, she would have no regrets. Ever.

She watched Ayden's expression carefully. He held his breath, as did she, but for different reasons. He wanted her, fully and completely, she suspected. As she did him, but she doubted he would know the depth of her feelings or even be capable of returning them.

"I will allow the pleasure we share." She said at last.

He immediately sprang forward, pulling her into his arms, lifting her from the floor. "But we must be discreet!" She managed before he overwhelmed her with a deep, hot kiss.

Dizzy from his ardor, she vaguely heard him assure her.

"I can be discreet." With that, he lifted her up as if she was but a small child then carried her out of the parlor and into her bedroom.

Settling her on her feet, he quickly got to the business of making love. Not taking time to undress, he pulled up her gown, and lifting her thighs, pressed his erection into her. Olivia gasped when she sank down upon him, and sighed when he settled them on the bed. Then, with sheer delight, she enjoyed every nibble, every kiss, every touch. And when he was finished, she sank into his arms, laying her head on his chest. The strong, steady music of his heartbeat lulled her into a drowsy contentment.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"I'm a terrible person."

They were lying in bed, temporarily sated by their lovemaking. It was just before dawn and the sounds of the night birds and crickets were fading.

Ayden took her hand. "That's not true. You put your family's needs above your own happiness." He took her hands and squeezed them lightly, then, as if seeing her for the very first time, narrowed his gaze to stare into her eyes.

Olivia caught her breath. As always, his touch sent a rush of heat through her. "I suppose you're right, but it doesn't feel very good, you know. I duped him. Even though he was a despicable man, no one should ever die as he did."

Ayden smiled. "You are a kind soul, Olivia." He leaned forward, pulling her close as he did, and at the precisely correct moment, he kissed her.

A stab of desire shot through her, and suddenly she was in his arms, her body against his, her hands clutching at his shirt. His hands clutched her as well. Roaming up and down, he pulled her bodice from her skirt and caressed her body, popping the buttons at the front of her corset, and then sliding down to her thighs to ease his fingers beneath her shift.

Olivia gasped at the heat from his touch and doubled her struggle with his pants and shirt. Her efforts fueled his passion, and seconds later, he'd freed himself from his garments and fully descended upon him, skin against skin.

"Oh!" Olivia moaned as he continued his assault on her senses. Mouth to mouth, then sliding his kisses downward he nibbled on her neck and then down to her breasts, nuzzling each one. But, he didn't finish there. Before she knew what was happening, he was pushing her legs open and sliding his hands between her thighs. He inserted two fingers of his right hand inside of her, gently massaging her as he did so. Then, balancing himself on his left hand, he moved over her, opening her cleft to allow him entrance. With the first thrust, she widened her legs, taking every bit of him into herself.

"Olivia," he sighed, caressing her, his motions first slow and deliberate and then quickening the pace, he settled himself upon her.

"Ayden," she answered, this time not only with her voice, but also with her body. So well they fit together, Olivia was certain that they had been made, each for the other. As he moved, she moved with him, a fine machine of muscle and bone, of passion and determination.

Desperate to reach their climax, to reach satisfaction she tilted her hips upward, her body begging him for completion. But, Ayden only laughed, a low rumbling sound vibrating deep in his chest.

"Not like this," he told her, and before she could ask, he pulled back and grabbing her at her hips, spun around so that he lay beneath her and she was perched on top, her body hovering just above his erection.

Panic shot through her. "Wait!" She was spread out on top of him, her body open and raw, exposed and vulnerable all at once.

"Do you trust me, Olivia?" He said, taking in ragged breaths, holding her suspended above him.

"What?" The haze of desire was pushing through her fear, through her hesitation.

"Do you trust me?"

The question seemed simple enough, but a part of her froze. Did she? Suddenly she remembered all that Blalock had told her. She remembered Ayden's plight, and the fact that his life was now inextricably tied to hers.

"Yes," she barely breathed.

The instant she spoke, he pulled her down upon him, her body swallowing him whole.

The feeling was so exquisite that she suddenly felt as if she were made of glass, as if she were on the verge of shattering into a million tiny shards.

"Easy, Olivia," he muttered beneath her.

"I don't know..." she began, but could say no more because her body took over her mind, and without hesitation, she began to rock back and forth.

Like a fire building into a roaring blaze, Olivia felt the sensual heat build until it was white-hot energy between them.

"Now, Olivia!" he groaned pushing his hips upward. The two of them reached the edge of awareness, their bodies entwined and pulsing together until the wash of their desire engulfed them both.

When their climax had ended, Olivia felt weightless, like a feather held aloft by a summer breeze.

Suddenly, the events of the day, from her wedding to Proffitt's funeral overwhelmed her. So many things had gone awry, but Ayden was still with her and because of that, she had a small bit of hope. For now, her life was her own, and she would live it as much as possible until the inevitable occurred.

At that moment, exhaustion and emotion conspired and enveloped her in the haze of sated sleep. Just before she gave in to oblivion, she took one more breath, "Oh, Ayden, I do love you."

"Oh, Ayden, I do love you."

The words touched Ayden's soul as none other ever had. Rising from the bed, he gently pulled the quilts over her. She moaned at his touch, but he quickly quieted her. "Shh," he said, turning toward the door. Without looking back, he left her there. Knowing deep in his heart that he must make his choice. Save himself, complete the Devil's task and condemn her forever. Or save her and return to his own punishment.

Ayden sighed. It all came down to one thing. Love. Did he love her enough to give up his freedom? Was he even capable of love? As he reached the bottom stair, he looked up and saw a dark figure there.

"I'd be careful, if I were you," Blalock said, wearing a grim expression.

"Why? She already belongs to the dark one."

"Not for her sake, for yours. I don't want to see you do something foolish."

"Foolish? Like what?" Ayden tightened his grasp on her. "I am nothing compared to the Master. I have no power in this world or any other."

Blalock shrugged. "It certainly looks that way on the surface, doesn't it?"

I know." Ayden knew well the futility of his situation. He was but a pawn in the Devil's game and nothing would ever change that.

"Yes. Still, be careful. Humans are fragile things. Beings like us sometimes think we can rescue them, but we only end up paying a terrible price for our actions."

Ayden narrowed his eyes. "What would you know about it?"

Blalock glanced away for a moment, briefly scrutinizing a framed painting on the far wall. When he turned back, his expression was one of weary sadness.

"You forget what I am, angel. I am a demon of the first order. I was made from centuries of human suffering, that sticky black core of anguish and regret."

"Then why are you so damn good at torturing?"

Blalock gave him a sad smile. "It's what I was made to do."

For a moment, the two stood quiet, neither one moving, neither one backing away.

After a few seconds passed, Blalock sighed and stepped aside.

"Go on. Enjoy your time together. It grows shorter with every moment's passing."

The air around them seemed to have doubled its weight. The memory of his fiery prison cell flashed in his mind. The once fallen angel could have sworn he tasted ash.

Ayden nodded and slipped past, making his way to the stairs and up to Olivia's room.

Blalock remained in the parlor long after Ayden had left him. Somehow, the little room gave him comfort, though why he needed it just then was a mystery to him. Truth was he'd grown fond of both the angel and the fair Olivia. How was that possible?

Walking to the window, he gazed thoughtfully into the night. Perhaps it was this human form? Wearing the skin of man certainly gave one an entirely new perspective on life. He remembered that once, long ago, the Creator of all things had done so, though at the time Blalock had not understood why.

The flesh and bone structure that encased him was alive and ever changing. Emotions flooded his mind like tidal waves crashing against the surf. Worse than that, he actually had felt something he'd never thought possible...remorse!

"Well, bloody rot in hell," he said quietly. Was he becoming soft? Had he truly changed because of his new countenance?

Blalock sighed. It wasn't fair. He'd been so very good at his job in Hell. Not that he hadn't felt bad about torturing the damned. He'd always felt a little bit sorry for them.

But he was a demon and he'd been made to be a punisher. Every creature delighted in doing what they'd been created for, didn't they?

Worse yet, while a part of him wished this damned business with the angel and the woman would come

to an end, another would be very sorry to see them go. Having worked for the Devil since the beginning of time, Blalock knew that Ayden would never be allowed out of Hell even if he were successful. In fact, his contract had enough loopholes that an army of earthworms could nest in it.

The Devil was all about lies and illusions. He made his victims believe what he wanted and they became his—body and soul.

Olivia was a different matter. The Devil had been very careful to see to every instance, save one. If the demon or the angel defaulted on their end of the arrangement, the girl would be set free.

Of course, that wouldn't happen. Olivia would get what she'd agreed to, and in a very short time, the Master would come to collect. There was no escaping fate when one had the Devil to pay.

* * * *

It was sometime after midnight when Olivia awoke. She was wrapped in a cocoon of warmth and male limbs. Ayden was with her, curled around her protectively. Taking a deep breath, she enjoyed the feel of his heated skin against her. Though she knew she'd never see it, she was sure heaven must be like this.

Ayden moved beside her, still sleeping, but pulling her tighter against his body. The sensation of even more contact sent an electrifying shot of desire through her.

"Mmm," Ayden said, as he slid his hand down across her belly to the soft curls between her legs. "What's this?"

Olivia laughed, "I think you already know."

Ayden laughed too, but not for long. She heard the whistle of his breath against her ear as he nuzzled her. "Mmmm, you taste good."

"You have strange ways, Mr. Royce," she laughed until her mouth found his.

Suddenly the pace of their passion became urgent. Olivia only knew of touch and heat, and intense desire. She pulled him closer while he moved atop of her, his hands guiding her open and then lifting her bottom up so that he met her thrust for thrust.

It was joy and energy, flesh and bone. Olivia had never experienced intimacy like this before. In fact, with each joining she learned more about her lover's touch, the nuances of his body, and just how to move with him.

Olivia had never jumped from a cliff into a rushing river, but she imagined that making love to Ayden to be very much like it.

* * * *

When Ayden awoke the next morning with Olivia curled into his embrace, he reveled in a new emotion. Joy. His body hummed from the energy of their lovemaking, and his heart felt as if it might explode from his chest.

He wanted nothing more than to stay beside her forever, making love and enjoying her company. But just as the feeling came over him, he heard movement in the room. Sitting up, he found that they were not alone.

Blalock sat in an oversized chair across the room. "Good morning."

Ayden sighed. Gently disentangling himself from Olivia, he slid from the bed.

"Your clothes," Blalock motioned.

Ayden nodded and saw his garments lying neatly folded on the end of the bed. "So now you're going to be the housekeeper?"

Blalock gave him a dry laugh. "Hardly that. I'm taking the position of business manager."

"I see. What am I to be, then?"

Blalock smiled. "Well, let's just say that your job is to do whatever makes the lady happy. Within reason. No trying to kill off business competitors or drawing undue attention. Or trying to get her out of her contract, either."

"Fine," Ayden bit out.

"Don't be sullen. You'll find this isn't so bad an existence. Who knows, if you do your job well, perhaps the master will offer to keep you on. You know, spend your time seducing innocent young girls for his pleasure."

The thought seared Ayden's mind. Do his job well? Seduce other women? How could he even think of other women when Olivia was all he wanted? His body ached for her, yes, but there was more. He realized that with her kind and gentle nature and the way she cared for others before herself, she filled a space in his heart he hadn't even known had existed before they'd met. What must I do today?"

"We have a great deal of work ahead of us. You, Olivia, and I are going to London. I've secured us a townhouse and have already made contacts."

Ayden finished dressing and turned to glance longingly back at Olivia.

"Not to worry, she'll be asleep for awhile yet."

Ayden spun around. "What have you done to her?"

The demon held up his hand. "I did what was needed. The chit is exhausted and needs her rest. She'll wake in a bit."

Ayden watched Olivia for a moment, and when he was satisfied that she was all right, he turned to

Blalock. "Do not hurt her."

Blalock shook his head. "I'm afraid, my boy, there is nothing that I could ever do that is worse than what she has already agreed to. But, that's a worry for another day. Come, let us go."

* * * *

Olivia was dreaming of herself and Ayden together. They were holding hands and laughing. Two young, blond boys ran around them, chasing each other in an endless circle. Beside her, a small baby lay sleeping in peach colored blankets, contentedly sucking her thumb.

She and Ayden sat arm in arm and enjoying the warm sun.

But as she sat there, the sun's gentle warmth began to change. The air around them grew hotter and hotter, sweltering in fact. Olivia looked around and saw that Ayden and the children were gone and she sat alone in a desert.

Suddenly her surroundings disappeared and the next thing she knew, she was hanging from chains

over a burning pit. Flames lashed out at her feet, and pain seared her at every turn.

"No!" she screamed as a burning strip of leather struck her back, tearing her shift and flesh.

Furiously blinking away her tears, Olivia looked up to her tormentor. Ayden stood, but he looked different now. His skin was red, and he had two wings hanging limply from his back, the once pure white edges now seared black.

Olivia screamed again, pain shooting through her body. She sat up and quickly realized she was not in the hell she'd just imagined, but back in her own bed. Alone.

Scrambling up, she jumped out of the bed, her feet landing square on the floor. Wracked by tears, she ran to the window. Once there, she threw open the shutters and let the bright afternoon sunlight in. She took large gulps of air.

Just then, she heard a gentle tapping at the door.

"Missus? It's me," Thomas called. "I thought I heard you scream. Are you all right?"

Was she? Olivia grabbed her robe and went to the door. Without opening it, she called out. "I'm fine, Thomas. I was having a nightmare. I'm very sorry if I've startled you."

"No trouble, Missus. I've a pot of oxen stew on the boil and some fresh tea. Would you be liking some?"

Olivia swallowed hard, her shaking lessening. "Yes, please. You may serve it in the dining room. I'll be down as soon as I'm dressed."

"Right. Um, Missus? Mr. Blalock arranged for a maid to help you dress and such. Should I send her up?"

"That would be fine, yes."

Wherever would she get the money to pay a maid?

"Oh," the boy cleared his throat. "One more thing. Mr. Blalock says to tell you that you're not to worry about money. He's spoken with the banker and Mr. Proffitt's funds have all been transferred to you, well, to him, as your guardian. It seems Mr. Proffitt, God rest him, had appointed Mr. Blalock as the executor of his estate. There's more than enough to go around."

Stunned, Olivia stepped back from the door. After all the anguish of the day before she'd all but forgotten the money. Her family was safe and she was free.

The memory of her dream rose up in her mind. Well, she thought, free at least for the moment.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The trip to London was long and arduous. Ayden had never even been in a carriage, let alone one as ornate as the one Blalock procured for them. The three of them traveled with a great deal of luggage and their servants. The valet rode up top with Molly, Olivia's new maid. The demon torturer sat across from Ayden, though for his medium stature, his presence seemed to fill the cab. But, at least he and Olivia sat close. It gave him an odd comfort just having her next to him.

Olivia had fallen asleep watching the miles roll by with detached interest. Now she sat with her head on Ayden's shoulder, her mouth slightly open.

Ayden glanced over at Blalock, who was busy concentrating on a book he'd found. *Dante's Inferno* sat open in his lap, and a wearing gold-rimmed reading glass, he appeared quite the proper gentleman. No one who saw him would ever guess he was a horned, scaly demon from the deepest pit of Hell.

"My, my," Blalock began. "I do love revisiting the old times. Of course, this is an over dramatization, but just as entertaining."

"Enjoying yourself?" Ayden asked, somewhat irritated.

"As a matter of fact, I am. And you?"

Ayden glanced down where his hand touched Olivia's. Even now after bedding her several times, desire pooled in his groin. If not for the others present, he would have pulled her on his lap and awakened her with passionate kisses.

"How long before we get to London?"

"Two days. We'll be stopping in a small Inn outside of town for the night. I've been in contact with an acquaintance of the master's, a solicitor who's gone ahead of us. He's already secured us a comfortable townhouse, as well as some prime property on the main thoroughfare."

"For the dress shop?"

"Yes. I will be managing the accounts by day and you will be keeping our girl entertained at night."

Ayden glanced over at Olivia. For the first time, he realized that he saw her innocence. No wonder the Devil wanted her. Her skin was pure and unmarked. Her hair glistened in the afternoon light, looking like brown straw spun with bits of gold.

"She's so beautiful."

"Indeed," Blalock said. "Of course, the Devil isn't interested in her physical attributes. He wants her for something else, something extremely valuable. Her purity of soul."

Ayden swallowed. "Just what is that?"

"It's difficult to explain. Let's just say that she is one of those precious few who have been blessed with true goodness. Her soul is like crystal, unbroken and clear."

"Why does he want her? What does possessing her soul do for him?"

Blalock thought for a moment, glancing away, watching the scenery outside the coach for a moment before speaking.

"Two reasons, I believe. First, he feeds off human innocence as if it were nectar. That's why he lures them down there, you know. There unending agony makes him eternal. Of course, it's a negative exchange, though. I believe it's what's charred him over the centuries. And he hates them, you know. They have the love of the Creator and he hates that."

"What's the second thing?"

"To keep them from the Creator, of course."

Ayden sat back thoughtfully. He gently picked up Olivia's hand and held it for a moment. He felt her fingers cool against his palm and squeezed them lightly to warm them. As he did, he also felt her pulse beat at the base of her wrist. Strong and even. He didn't know why, but he lifted it to his lips. The scent of her lavender perfume drifted up to his nose and he inhaled it.

"You're not changing your mind, are you? Because she's already signed the agreement. It's just a matter of time until she's with him."

"I know that," Ayden said, anger stirring in his gut. "I'm not going back to Hell."

"Good. You can't stop it now. Fate, I mean."

"Fate?"

"A preordained destiny, if you will. All beings are subject to it. We are powerless to change things. You'll see."

Ayden said nothing more. That was it then. He couldn't save Olivia if he'd wanted to.

He should have been satisfied with that, but somehow he wasn't. Unease had been growing in his thoughts almost since he'd arrived. Knowing that he'd had a hand in her ordeal somehow left his heart feeling heavy.

"You're not feeling guilty, are you?"

Ayden glanced up. "I don't know what that is?"

"Responsible? You're not, you know. She'd already offered up her soul, the Devil just plucked it from the garden, so to speak."

"She did?"

"Of course, she did. Anyway, things would have turned out the same whether or not you'd come along. But I must warn you again. Don't let yourself fall in love with her."

"I won't," Ayden said, though not with as much conviction as he'd wished.

"See that you don't. You can't change her fate and it'll only mean disaster for yours."

"I know." Of course, he didn't go on to say that knowing it and feeling it weren't the same thing.

When they arrived at the townhouse, Olivia stood at the front door open mouthed and speechless.

"Does this meet with your approval?" Blalock asked behind her.

"Are you sure we can afford this? I mean, if it's too expensive, we can choose another."

"Nonsense. Your husband left you quite well off, Mrs. Proffitt. That and the fact that owner who is a gentleman, and who has had to quickly vacate the house—something about a case of boils—makes it the perfect residence. The price was very affordable."

Not knowing what else to do, she followed him into the three-story townhouse. As clean as she'd ever seen a home, it practically sparkled in every corner. The smell of lemon wax met her, and by the looks off all the woodwork, the mahogany banister, and the wall sconces, everything had been oiled to a shine.

The furniture was without spot as well. Even the crystal chandeliers in every room they passed had been dusted and hung to the top of the vaulted ceilings.

"This way Madam. Gentlemen." The butler, a tall, lean, elderly man looked as though he'd been starched inside of his uniform. He didn't break a smile and when he bowed to them, not even a single hair on his head dared to move.

"Mr. Jasper. These are your new charges. Mrs. Proffitt and Mr. Royce. Their servants, the valet, Thomas, and Molly, Mrs. Proffitt's maid."

"Yes, sir. If you will follow me."

Olivia saw Ayden pause. "Ayden?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Oh, not to worry," Blalock whispered. I've told the staff that you are Mrs. Proffitt's personal bodyguard. You'll be taking the master's suite next to hers. Of course, privacy will be of the minimum since out of necessity the rooms are adjoining."

"Oh," Olivia said. She did her best to keep down the heated flush that rose in her. It would do no good to show embarrassment in front of the staff.

"You do think of everything, Mr. Blalock."

The old demon smiled, "Yes, I do."

Blalock watched the young couple walk up the stairs together. They didn't touch, which was what he'd instructed them to do. Yet, he knew the moment the doors to their rooms were closed they'd be together.

That was the way it was supposed to be, but it still gave him pause. He had the sense that if left to their own devices, the two would find some way to thwart his master's plans.

As if they could, he thought, ruefully. And yet, he had the feeling that if anyone could outsmart ol' Satan, then it would be those two. Not because they were smarter than any other in this godforsaken life, but because their growing affection for each other combined with their pure souls made a formidable force for good in the world.

That worried Blalock.

He didn't like worry. He liked order and having things his own way.

"Are you going to retire for the evening, sir?"

Blalock turned to see Jasper at the doorway. "Not yet. I've some correspondence that needs to be taken care of. Supplies needed to be ordered, fabrics, a full staff at the shop, that sort of thing."

And of course, he had one letter to post. The one person in the entire world who could take a no-named little country mouse like Olivia Stone and propel her to the heights of society.

The most extraordinary maven of the London's *ton*—herself one of Hell's most valued procurers, the very popular Lady Valeri Desmond, Baroness of Hempsted.

* * * *

Ayden watched as Olivia entered her room, and then walking to the next doorway down the hall, entered his own. The master's suite was just as expensively decorated as the rest of the house. In the corner sat a huge mahogany four-poster bed complete with no less than six ornately stitched pillows, covered with a matching quilt.

But, his mind wasn't on this bed. He quickly searched the room, which also contained a dressing table, armoire, and a huge secretary. There was also an anteroom with a large porcelain bath. Beyond that was a door with a gilded silver knob.

He quickly went to it, and turning it opened into a similar room, but decorated for feminine tastes.

"Ayden," Olivia said, relief in her voice. She rushed into his arms.

"Hello," he said.

"This place is so big! I swear I feel like I'm going to be swallowed up."

"It is large."

"I never imagined such a thing was possible." She laughed. "I suppose I've been living in the Corners too long."

"Well, now you're here and you're not alone."

She laughed. "You're right. I don't know why I'm being such a ninny."

"Nonsense. With all that has happened, it's a wonder you've not locked yourself in your room and refused to come out at all."

She looked up at him and smiled, "I was considering it."

"I have an idea. Why don't we call for our dinner up here, lock the door and spend the evening in bed."

Olivia sighed. "Do you think we can?"

"You are the lady of the house, are you not?"

"I, uh, I guess I am. I hadn't really thought of it."

"Well, you are. And if you decide we should stay thusly the entire weekend, then I am at your command."

Olivia laughed as Ayden gave her a deep bow.

Ayden decided that he very much liked the sound of her laughter. In the short time they'd known each other, there hadn't been a lot of it between her horrible marriage and their stolen passions.

But now, they did indeed have time. Not as much as he'd liked, because he realized that in other circumstances he'd want them to be together forever.

That was not possible, so he had to be satisfied with enjoying her company, and her bed, for now. To his mind, there was only now, anyway. What care did he have for the future?

A very quite knocking sounded, and Olivia turned. "Wait."

Ayden nodded, and stepping back into his own room, he pulled the door against the jamb, but kept it open enough to see through a tiny slit into the other room.

"Please forgive my interruption of your rest, Missus," the butler said. "Mr. Blalock has instructed me to bring a late supper to you. He said that you hadn't taken to the food available on your journey."

"I haven't had much of an appetite, lately."

"Traveling does that to some, Missus. I have prepared a light meal of tea and boillion. I hope it meets to your satisfaction."

"Thank you, Mr. Jasper."

"Just Jasper, Missus. You've no need to give me a title."

Ayden watched as the butler pushed in a small service cart, then poured her a steeping cup of tea and uncovered her soup. As he watched, his own stomach started to grumble. The butler must have heard it because he paused.

"I was about to push another cart into Mr. Royce's room, but perhaps you might want company while you eat?"

"Oh, yes. You may bring it in here, thank you."

"Very well. Shall I come back and pick it up in an hour?"

"Uh, no. I'll have Mr. Royce push them back into the hall...in case I'm asleep."

"Very well."

Ayden waited until the door closed before entering Olivia's room again.

"This is wonderful."

Ayden smiled. "Here, let me." In minutes he had them both seated over bowls of steaming soup.

"I really was hungry, after all." Olivia said after a few minutes.

"And the food is exquisite."

When they'd finished, Ayden poured them both a glass of wine and motioned to the bed.

"It's time you took your rest, Mrs. Proffitt." With that he went to the chair and lifted her in his arms."

"Will you stay with me, Ayden?"

"As long as the Fates allow," he told her and meant it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was past midnight when Blalock finished the last of his letters. He put them in the top drawer of the secretary when he heard a tapping at the door.

"Enter," he called.

It was Jasper. "You have a caller, sir. A woman awaits you in the parlor. I tried to tell her it was late and you'd not yet had a chance to rest since your arrival, but she insisted. Would you have me send her off?"

Blalock smiled. "No. I'll see her now. Fetch us some brandy and a plate of cakes.

"As you wish sir."

Blalock pulled a key from his pocket and locked the desk drawer. Then, turning off the oil lamp, he left the study.

It had been centuries since he'd seen Valeri. Still in her original form of a middle-aged woman, she had once been the vixen of France...and a brothel madam in ancient Greece...a spy during the Crimean conflict. Of late, she was one of the leaders of the *ton*, having secured a seat at Almack's and several invitations to appear at court.

Since her sojourn in this particular time period, she'd buried no less than five husbands. If Olivia needed a mentor, then Valeri would be the one.

"Blalock, you old demon you!" She said rushing into his arms.

"Ah, Val, my dear, you are a treasure." Blalock took her into a warm embrace.

"Indeed. Look at you! You are so handsome this time."

"Yes, well, I've been in the master's favor of late."

"Must be high favor. Good for you. Now, what can a poor girl like me do for such a handsome gentleman?"

"Come, have a brandy with me and we'll discuss it."

It was after two when Blalock stood by the window, watching Valeri's carriage pull away from the house. Everything was falling into place, though he still had to worry about his charges losing their heads as well as their hearts. It was a worrisome thing, no doubt, but if Blalock's plans worked as he hoped, then all would be well and he would soon be getting back to his comfortable pit in the bowels of Hell. And, he was sure that it would. Entirely. Well, almost entirely.

* * * *

Olivia said nothing as Ayden carried her to the bed. It was a huge affair, and she felt as if she'd be swallowed up in it if left alone.

"Do you want me stay with you tonight?"

Olivia took a deep breath. "Oh, do you want to?"

"Always." She couldn't help yawning. "Of course, I don't think I'll be able to do anything but sleep. I'll understand if you wish to find your own bed."

She watched Ayden's expression soften. "I will do nothing that you don't wish, Olivia. It would be enough just to lie beside you, I think."

"Then beloved, come to bed."

She smiled at him warmly, unfastened her dressing gown and let it fall to the floor. Then, she pulled the straps of her shift down over her shoulders and let loose her shift so that she stood naked in front of him.

Ayden's smile returned and he laid her gently on the bed. Pulling back the quilt, he first tucked her neatly inside and then went around to the other side, removing his own clothing as he went, slow and deliberate. Her gaze frozen upon him, she gasped as she watched her beautiful angel emerge. His skin slightly bronzed, he had wide shoulders and a narrow waist. Every muscle was sharply defined and of a nice size.

And when he climbed into bed beside her, she took joy of the feel of him, warm skin and hard muscle beside her.

"You feel wonderful," she breathed.

"Mmm, so do you." He rubbed his face against her shoulder and she giggled. "I'll need to put my valet to work in the morning."

"I know, but I like the feel of your face like this."

He sighed. "It is a curious thing, this life of ours. No matter how many times I shave it, it comes back. I remember when men just let their beards grow unheeded. But, I like my face smooth."

"So do I, but I like this, too."

"And this?" Ayden leaned in close and placed a gentle kiss on her mouth.

Although she was exhausted, she opened her mouth wide and let his tongue enter and she enjoyed the feel of it.

At the same moment, she felt his erection grow between them. He pulled back slightly and she took a deep breath.

"Make love to me, Ayden."

He smiled. "You're tired and it's late."

"But, well you're, um, thus." She pointed down.

Ayden's smile widened. "My sweet, it is always, *thus*. Every minute we are together. But, worry not. It shall be on the ready in the morning when you've rested."

With that, he leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. "Now off to sleep with you."

And Olivia did as she was told.

* * * *

Ayden watched as she smiled once more, heavy lidded. In truth, he could have taken her that very moment, but somehow it didn't seem right. He wanted her as much as the first time he'd seen her, but with her so tired, he knew she wouldn't enjoy it.

For some odd reason, her enjoyment mattered very much. He loved the way she drew in her breath when he nuzzled her neck, or the way she made those small grunting noises when he slid his hand down her belly. And when he kissed her between her legs, she would hungrily lift her hips to meet him, her entire body begging him for completion.

Yes, in spite of his voracious appetite for every inch of Olivia, he knew that pleasuring her was tantamount. So, he took a deep breath, and willed his riotous body to be still. He realized in those small, quiet moments that it was enough to be at her side. That there was joy from just being in her presence.

Watching her chest rise and fall with each breath, the sound of air going in and out of her mouth, and feeling the endless pulse beating at the base of her neck was as incredible as losing himself inside of her.

It was a very long time before he fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The next day was full of planning, choosing fabrics and laying out sketches. By midday, Olivia's head was spinning and she was certain that all of her hopes and dreams were going to be next to impossible. It wasn't until after lunch when a calling card arrived upon Olivia's desk.

"Lady Hempsted? *The* Lady Hempsted?" Olivia asked when Jasper arrived with the missive.

Olivia was sharing a pot of tea with Ayden and Blalock while going through the morning posts.

"The one and only," Blalock smiled. "She's an old friend of mine and when I sent her your sketches, she was insistent that you meet with her today. I hear she is at the height of all that is fashionable in London."

"She's more than that. It's said that she holds a lifetime membership at Almack's. And, that she is hosting the largest party of the year. The Waverton Ball. It's all the talk."

"Yes, her stepdaughter has just accepted a suit to Lord Daniel Leatherby, the Duke of Wilberham. It's going to be quite a crush," Blalock said smiling.

"Indeed, it would be the height of any fashioner's career."

Ayden had not said anything since he'd entered the room. Now he sat down beside Olivia. "Are you certain this is a good idea?"

"Oh, Ayden, how can it not be? If I get a single design out in the public, then there's a chance someone will see it. It could lead to being recognized as an original. It could bring in more customers."

"Of course," Ayden let out a breath. Olivia could see the hint of discomfort seep into his expression.

"It's all right, my love. We still have time."

He nodded but said nothing. He looked at Blalock. "Very efficient of you, sir, to get Olivia's drawings out so quickly."

"Yes, well, I anticipated her needs prior to her wedding. She is a very talented young woman."

Olivia smiled. "I thank you, sir. Now, I've got to clean up and get ready for our guest. I'll send a card that she may come this afternoon, if it's at her convenience."

Two hours later, Lady Valeri made her grand entrance. Dressed in an extravagant afternoon dress of Egyptian white cotton, trimmed in blue silk, with a high waist and brocade jacket, she also sported a large, peacock-feathered hat.

"Hello, my dear child!"

"Lady Hempstead," Olivia curtsied low with her head bent in respect.

"Here, here child. Enough of that. We wouldn't want you to fall and injure that pretty little head of yours. Absolutely not. I simply must see more of your designs."

"Yes, of course. I have them all set out in the parlor. Perhaps you'll join me for some refreshments."

"Nothing I would love more. I've been forced to spend the afternoon with the London Ladies Beautification Society. We'll be urging the city to plant flowers along pre-designated lanes. Anything to hide the continual clattering of horse droppings."

Olivia listened for long minutes while the older woman spoke of her exploits. Usually patience was not a problem for her, but with the Lady's long-winded speeches, she felt her nerves being stretched tighter than a violin's bow.

"Now, my dear. Enough of my dawdling. Let's have a look at your designs."

Suddenly, Olivia's stomach flipped. Her time had finally come. After all, she'd bartered her very soul for a chance at impressing the *ton*.

"Thank you, Lady Hempstead. Here is my portfolio."

They spent the next twenty minutes looking at and commenting on Olivia's drawings. She suggested various fabrics and accoutrements and took notes of what Lady Hempstead listed as her personal preferences.

By the time their visit ended, the Baroness had placed several dress orders and insisted on introducing Olivia at her next tea.

* * * *

Ayden waited for Olivia's visit with the duchess to end, but the time seemed to stretch on forever. He sat in the library, thumbing through an eclectic mix of Shakespearian plays and the latest political ramblings. Fortunately, he'd had no trouble reading the text, as angels were gifted in reading and speaking in several different languages.

Now, however, none of it pricked his interest. He could only stare at the pages and remember how excited Olivia had been at lunch. Anxious, breathless, and almost trembling, she could do nothing but talk about the shop and her new business.

A strange feeling had begun to plague him. Olivia was no longer the frail, frightened woman he had met. Now that she didn't have the anvil of Micah Proffitt hanging over her, she had begun to change. Or, perhaps she wasn't changing at all. Maybe this was the true Olivia. Intelligent, amiable, and quite capable of taking care of herself.

"Hello, Ayden," Olivia said from the door.

Laying down his book, he rose to meet her and was surprised when she swept into the room and straight into his embrace.

"It was a good meeting, then?"

"The very best. She was so impressed with my sketches. It was unbelievable. And, she has ordered no less than six dresses. Six! Can you imagine it? I was praying that she would buy one, or perhaps even, two. But six? It's more than I could ever hope for."

"Yes, of course. You must be very happy."

"Very happy." She paused taking a deep breath. "Oh, there is so much that needs to be done."

Olivia started to move away, but Ayden reached out and touched her sleeve. "Wait. It is getting late. I mean, you missed dinner, and it's nearly dark."

"Oh, did I? Really?" She glanced to the window. "My goodness, it's dusk."

"Why don't we go upstairs? I'll have Jasper bring in your meal. Afterwards, we could retire for the evening."

"Well, there is quite a lot to do."

"I know, but you've been occupied all day, and I was thinking you and I could be together for the night."

Ayden held his breath. The fact was, he'd been waiting the entire day for her and had hoped that they would spend a long, lazy night together making love. Since they'd awakened that morning, and she'd pushed away his advances citing they had a great deal to do. Since then he'd spent the day on edge, his body sensitive to her every move, his want for her barely held in check. The truth was he wanted her in bed and he wanted her now.

"Of course, and I want to be with you, too. But, there is so much to do." Olivia must have sensed his disappointment. "Very well, tonight we can go to bed early, but it's out of bed and to work first thing in the morning."

Ayden fairly beamed. "As you wish, my lady." He said, leaning forward for a kiss.

Olivia smiled, ducking his advance. "Of course I'll have to get busy ordering the appropriate fabrics. Then there's setting up the shop. I've been dying to get my hands on one of those fantastic sewing machines. You know, it has these planks where you set your feet and—"

Ayden could take no more. He lunged, and grabbing Olivia by her shoulders, pulled her into a deep, passionate kiss. His hands did not stay idle while his mouth worked. In bare seconds, he had her bodice pulled from her skirt, and his fingers kneading her breasts, pulling them above the corset, and though the shift kept him from touching her directly, he still seductively rolled her soft nipples between his fingers.

Olivia sighed in his arms, her arousal opening up like a flower facing the morning sun. She moaned, the sound low and vibrating in her chest.

Gasping together, they pulled apart, the air around them snapping with excitement. Unable to wait any longer, Ayden lifted Olivia and cradled her in his arms.

Without thinking, he carried Olivia to the stairs, then, taking them two at a time, made it to the second floor, down the hall and to her room.

In a single shove, he pushed open the door and then kicked it closed behind them. In seconds, they were on her bed, and in a flurry of clothing and quilts, Ayden set to work.

Lifting her skirt, he bent down and began kissing, hungry for the taste of her, dying to hear her seductive moans of pleasure.

"Ayden, wait!" She cried out. The alarm in her voice broke through the lust-filled haze that had consumed him.

"Olivia?" He asked, his senses feeling clouded and slow.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Wrong? I don't understand?"

"It's just that you're so different. I mean, you're so intense."

Ayden shook his head. "I want you. Now, Olivia."

"You have me, but you're acting like an animal."

He shook his head. "Well, it's just that since the day in the garden, we have not gone very long without making love."

"I hadn't realized."

Sheer panic shot through Ayden. What if she didn't want him? What if, now that she had her deal with the Devil, he no longer mattered to him?

Ayden's chest squeezed tight around his heart. He'd always thought that he'd be the one to end their time together. The Devil would claim her and then he would have his freedom.

But, what if she left him instead?

"You no longer want me," he said, unable to hide the pain he felt.

"Oh, dear, no," she muttered. "It's nothing like that at all. It's just that the shop is very important to me. It's what I've wanted all of my life. I mean, I wanted to marry, too, but I never really expected my husband to die and to find someone as wonderful as you."

Ayden swallowed the breath he'd been holding exploding from him. "Then, you still want me."

"Of course, I do."

Nodding, he reached out and took her hand, pressing it to his mouth. "I will do as you wish." He started to move from the bed, but Olivia held out her hand to him.

"Ahem. Sir, I do believe you started something?"

Ayden glanced up at her, her silvery blue gaze trapping him like a vice.

"I believe I did."

He moved forward again, this time, pulling her into his embrace slow and gentle. Then, pulling up her skirt once again, he laid her back on the bed, and released his cock from his britches. As he pressed his erection against her, she moaned again, this time not just a sound of pleasure, but one of pure desire.

"Take me now!" She commanded, and Ayden did as she ordered, lifting her legs high he plunged inside of her.

"Come with me, my love," he called to her.

Rocking back and forth, he felt the heat and desire rise within them. Both had started on a path from which they could not turn back. So easy it was for them to reach their climax, that when their bodies tightened together, it was as if their hearts beat a single tattoo.

Ayden meant to take her to the height of pleasure, and did, but this time he plunged over the edge with her.

Olivia knew the moment Ayden had fallen asleep. She heard his breathing change, felt his body relaxed beside her. She marveled at how childlike he seemed. What a curious man he was! One moment he was an eager, attentive lover and the next a complete innocent.

The light from a half moon shone in the window, making him look like a gossamer angel, his skin almost white and glowing.

It was a sharp contrast to the man beast that had practically ravaged her in the parlor then carried her upstairs and went after her like a hungry animal.

Watching him sleep now, she considered just what it was that she'd wished for. Had she turned him into the beast? Or was it just the incredible fruit of their lovemaking?

She didn't know which it was, but at least now, she realized what must be done. Ayden was a virile and strong man, make no doubt.

Scooting away from him slowly, Olivia slipped from the bed and grabbed her robe. A few seconds later, she had managed to make her way silently out of the bedroom and to the sitting room adjacent to her room.

"I see you're not quite ready for sleep." Blalock said from his seat by the window. A steady rain fell, spattering against the glass. "Well, neither am I."

Surprised to see Blalock at that late hour, she did her best to cover her discomfort at his sudden presence. Besides which, Olivia really didn't feel like company. Perhaps if she humored him, he'd soon be on his way.

"Too much excitement today, I suppose."

"Yes, Lady Valeri is quite an agitator. Every time we meet it's like touching lightning."

"I can certainly see that. She's very enthusiastic."

"That's one way of putting it." He turned to the liquor cabinet. "Would you like to join me in a late night brandy?"

Olivia hesitated. Other than an occasional glass of wine, she rarely ever partook in spirits. So many things had changed lately, why not this?

"Yes, thank you, but just a bit. I'm not used to strong drink."

"Of course you aren't. Here."

Olivia took the glass from him and sniffed at it. Mmm, it's quite fragrant."

"Peach brandy. Try a sip."

She did so, and found it a mixture of warm, burning liquid and syrupy sweetness. "Very nice."

"I thought you'd like it."

"You've been very thoughtful." She said, after taking another sip.

He shrugged. "Just performing my duties."

"I can't imagine what it's like, I mean doing what you do. Don't you ever feel badly for your, um, subjects?"

"Of course not. Why should I?"

"You don't even feel sorry for them?"

"Well, I suppose I do occasionally have a fleeting concern. But, it is their choice, after all."

"Of course it is."

He gave her a concerned look. "You think I should mourn for those who choose to walk the Devil's path?"

"Is that what you call it? You trick desperate people into selling their souls to the Devil, and you make it sound like a Sunday afternoon stroll."

"It's a fair enough trade, don't you think? Your family is safe, you have your chance at dressmaking, and your lover beside you until the terms of your agreement are fulfilled."

"I suppose you're right. It just seems that a soul should be worth so very much more than that."

"More than your family, your dreams, and your true love?"

She gave him a sharp glance. "My true love? Is that what he is?"

"Well, I just assumed so, since you obviously are smitten by him. He's certainly very devoted to you."

"Oh," she said. "It does look that way, doesn't it?" She took a few breaths before continuing. "Might I ask, when I'm gone, what will happen to him?"

Blalock shrugged. "Whatever he chooses, I suppose. He will be free. That is the terms of the contract, after all."

"Yes, it is. I mean, he'll manage all right, won't he?"

"I have many talents, Mrs. Proffitt, but divining the future is not one of them."

* * * *

Ayden awoke to find the bed empty and a chill having fallen over the room. "Olivia?"

No answer came from the dimness. He let out a breath. She had likely gone back to the library to work on her sketches. He was almost jealous of those damn things. She'd kept them in a locked box, of all things.

Still, he knew it was her dream, what she wanted more than anything, the way he wanted to return to his peaceful garden. It was what he intended, once the terms of her agreement had been met.

And yet, he found himself reluctant to leave her. He knew that if he let himself, he could become ever more entangled in Olivia's tribulations. He knew that was where the worst possible danger lay. If he let himself, he could very easily fall under her spell, be consumed with her life's tragedy.

And that's what would send him back to Hell.

Shaking himself, he brought his mind back to one of the warnings that Blalock had given him early on.

Bed the girl, but be careful not to fall in love with her.

Is that what had happened? Did he love her?"

Ayden shook his head. No, he told himself. He did not love her. Once she had gone on, he would be free of her body's seductive draw. It would be that simple.

Or so he hoped.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The next weeks exploded with activity. Olivia and Ayden worked hard to get the shop ready, hire the staff she needed, and begin the first dresses. Each day Ayden learned the business of business, and found that he had quite a talent for numbers. He kept books, worked on rows of figures, managed to squeeze every inch of fabric possible on their meager means.

He watched as their one room dress shop fill with curious lookers, then concerned buyers, and finally became packed with voracious consumers. In all the whirl, Olivia was at her height of glory. With each day filled with glowing with excitement, she made every sale with exuberance. Miraculously, she managed to not only further line the shops coffers but did so in a way that had her customers more than satisfied with their purchases and panting for more of her designs.

In a very short time, she had changed from the shy young miss, to a mature, exciting and successful woman. And it frightened him very much indeed.

* * * *

Olivia watched as Lady Terryton looked through the last swaths of fabric.

"Do you think the French lace, or the Turkish?" she asked.

"Definitely the French, it's much more delicate, just like your daughter, milady."

The middle-aged mother beamed. "Oh, that is so true. The French lace it is, then. Can I hope to have this finished within the week?"

"Oh, yes ma'am. We will make it a priority. If you will stop by the front of the shop, my girl Molly will schedule your daughter for her first fitting."

Just as she was about to close the shop for the day she heard the bell on the front door ring. She turned to Molly and smiled. "It must be Lady Bellwood. She keeps changing her mind about which neckline she wants. I'll see to it."

Olivia left the workroom and went into the main shop. "Yes, may I help you?"

Her voice trailed off. A tall, dark man, with broad shoulders and handsome face filled the doorway.

From behind him, a smaller, older man stepped forward.

"Indeed, you are Mrs. Proffitt?"

"Yes?"

"I'm here to introduce you to Lord Michael Greaves, fifth earl of Cinderwall."

"Madame," he bowed formerly.

Olivia curtsied, "My Lord, how may I help you?"

"I've heard of your designs. I'd like to view your portfolio. My niece will be coming out this year and I want her to be the talk of the town."

"Oh, certainly, milord. Come this way to the sitting room. Perhaps you would like some refreshments while you wait?"

The dark haired, dark eyed man bowed low. "I have just today arrived from the Continent and it would be a welcome gift to a weary traveler."

"Of course, sir."

Olivia motioned him into the parlor. To her good fortune, Blalock had come up with the funds to add on this room, providing comfort for her customers while she enticed them with her latest drawings. It had the desired effect. In the guise of pampering elite society, she was able to bring forth her most daring ideas and they seemed to be lapping them up like a hound at the trough.

In fact, lately, after Ayden had gone to sleep each night, she snuck out of her bed and began adding to her collection. Whether it was her chance at success, or her exciting tryst with the fallen angel, she wasn't sure,

but her imagination had been set ablaze.

"You are indeed a treasure, Mrs. Proffitt. How could you have gone so long without getting notice?"

Olivia smiled. The man was a charmer, there was no doubt.

"I am but a small town girl, Lord Greaves, my family of modest means. I had been engaged to the local undertaker, and on our wedding day, he suffered apoplexy and died. It was his dream, I mean, our dream that I come to London and showcase my designs."

"My dearest, how very sad for you! You must be devastated."

"Oh, you have no idea how terrible it was."

"Indeed. And here I thought that handsome young gentleman who does your accounts was your husband."

"Oh, well," Olivia tried to push down the blush she could feel crawling up her neck. "Mr. Royce is a business associate. My benefactor, my late husband's cousin, and he have been helping me run my business. I swear, when I'm knee deep in French lace and silk, any thought of numbers go right out of my head."

"It explains you wearing the dark gowns, too. Funny, I never realized that you wore widow's weeds. I suppose it's because your loveliness is so golden, it outshines your wardrobe."

"Lord Greaves, you are too kind."

He smiled at her, and bending forward took her hand in his. "I do believe that I am smitten, Mrs. Proffitt."

"I am complimented, sir, but I am still missing my husband."

"Of course. Perhaps later, when the appropriate amount of time has passed."

Olivia nodded, and pulled out her portfolio. As she did so, her eye caught a glimpse of Ayden just beyond the parlor door. He wore a strange expression, one that shimmered with pain, tinged with anger, and something far more disturbing. Regret

* * * *

A sharp blade thrust in his abdomen couldn't have hurt worse, Ayden thought. Seeing Olivia alone in the parlor so late at night with another man made his blood boil.

For ten minutes he watched as the lecherous man poured over Olivia, touching her hand in small, fleeting ways, leaning too close, and giving her his every attention. It was blatantly clear what the beast intended. If only Olivia knew!

When she glanced over at him, he felt guilt and shame wash over her. How had they come to this? Was he not man enough for her? Was their time in bed together so meaningless?

Pacing the length of the shop's now empty sewing room, he let the whirl of anger spin inside his mind.

"Something the matter?"

Ayden looked up to see Blalock standing in the doorway. He wore an odd expression, his eyebrows raised in question and suspicion.

"Nothing. It's nothing."

"I see. I find it interesting that the fair Olivia is getting the attention of one of the most eligible bachelors in the ton, and you're in here wearing a hole in the carpet."

"He is outfitting his niece for her first season, whatever that means."

"I understand he is interested in one of Olivia's sketches for his niece. It's a very important time for a young socialite. Puts them right on the marriage mart. It's a mating ritual that humans do, well the society ones, anyway. Those of the peerage live in a different world than the rest of humanity."

"I see. So, they marry others of their kind?"

"In most instances. A cold hearted bunch, the wealthy. They arrange their alliances in the same fashion that kings marry off their offspring, to produce the most powerful society possible."

"Then Olivia's safe from this man's advances?"

"Well, he won't ask for her hand, no. But that doesn't mean he won't trifle with her."

"Trifle? You mean he'd—" Ayden stopped, the words choking in his throat.

"You mean do what you have done? Charm his way into her heart to satisfy his own needs."

"That's different."

"Is it? You arrived one day, just as she was about to give herself in marriage. A proper young lady on the verge of her nuptials—"

"To a murderer!"

Blalock shrugged. "It's not Olivia's intentions or actions that we're discussing here. She was a virtuous woman until you came along and changed all that."

"You're wrong," Ayden said, even though the words sounded like lies, even to his own ears.

"Am I?"

Ayden swallowed. Blalock was right, and he knew it. He'd used Olivia to satisfy his lusts and then to secure his release from hell. The Devil himself could not have been more despicable.

"Don't be hard on yourself. It isn't all your fault, you know. The master did give you this form, which even a saint would have problems denying such a beautiful woman."

The level of bile that rose of Ayden's throat started to recede. "I didn't realize."

"Of course you didn't. That's why the Devil chose you. In addition to your obvious beauty, you are easily manipulated. Weak."

The bile in his throat turned to acid. "Indeed." A wave of exhaustion washed over him. "I'm going to bed." He left Blalock alone at the door. As he passed by him, he heard the old demon sigh.

"Have it bad for her, don't you. Love, lust, admiration, and dare I say it, respect?"

Ayden ground his jaw. "What difference does it make? The end result will still be the same. I will be here, alive, and she will be...gone."

"Which is the point of all this, isn't it?"

Ayden nodded. "Yes, it is. I will not go back. I swear it. I am sorry for Olivia. I'm sure I will even grieve for her. But I cannot change anything."

"Ah, my boy, you have matured. I am so proud."

Holding back angry words, Ayden only turned and left his demon. It seemed Blalock's torturing hadn't

ended when they'd left Hell after all.

Blalock watched his protégé leave. Shoulders drooped, the scowl that barely escaped him as he walked past. It was clear that the man was plagued with self-loathing, which to the demon's mind was good thing.

In fact, it was better than good. One thing Blalock knew for certain was that guilt was the torturer's best tool. And Ayden carried enough of it that the demon barely had to tap the cork and it would spring forth like a fountain.

More than that, if Blalock played his cards right, and he was certain he would, he might persuade Ayden that his life away from Hell would be fraught with such tragedy, that he belonged in fiery pit, and moreover that he would return there of his own will.

Blalock would gain even more favor in the master's eyes. It almost made him gleeful. That is, if a demon could ever be such a thing.

Just as he was about to retire for the evening, Blalock heard a noise from the other end of the shop. From the parlor.

Walking down the hall, he peered into the room. Olivia had dropped her book and was leaning down to pick it up. As the demon watched, the gentleman beside her leaned forward to watch her retrieve the item. At the last second, he glanced up and his gaze met with Blalock's.

"Forgive me, Lord Greaves. It's very late and I'm afraid I'm a bit clumsy. It won't happen again."

"Not to worry, Mrs. Proffitt. It is my fault. I have taken advantage of your good nature. Please forgive me."

"Oh, there is nothing to forgive. Here, let me get the last book," Olivia said.

The stranger put up his hand. "No, I've taken too much of your time. Perhaps you would have tea with me tomorrow afternoon and I will make my final choices."

"Of course, sir, I'd be delighted."

Blalock watched as they said their good-byes. Then, when Olivia had gone, he followed the stranger out to the front walk.

"I beg your pardon," Blalock began, "I know you'll think me rude, but I believe we have met before."

The man turned around and met Blalock's gaze. "I'm sorry? I don't think so. I'm Jason Greaves, earl of Cinderhill."

"Yes, well, Thaddeus Blalock, of the Hellwater district."

"Well, I've not spent much time in Hellwater, I must say. I do hear they have top breeding mares, though."

Blalock laughed. "That is true." He stopped a moment, careful to study the man, but trying not to be so obvious.

"I must say, this shop is quite a find. I hear that you are sponsoring the young woman."

"I had a small hand in it, yes. But it is Mrs. Proffitt who has earned the most notoriety. She is a treasure."

"Yes, she is that. I am looking forward to getting to know her a bit better, in fact."

"Really? Well, she is a new widow and propriety demands—"

The other man laughed. "Propriety may demand as it will, but a man in my position can often maneuver around such nonsense."

"That makes you quite the lucky gent, now doesn't it?"

The other man smiled. "Oh, I'm not so lucky, but I am determined. I see what I want and I take it."

Greaves bowed and took his leave. As the man turned away, the old demon realized just how he knew the man. Lord Greaves may be the top of the town now, but in a few years, his export business would fail and he would then plan and carry out the murder of his partner who had been embezzling his family money for years.

"Hmm. Hell is a very small place, after all."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ayden paced the small bedroom waiting for Olivia to finish her work and come to bed. That had been their routine since her business had begun. He had to admit she was a very fervent seamstress, a determined businesswoman. And she became almost obsessed with details, which for a woman of her trade was indeed a virtue.

And yet, the more he respected her, the more fearful he became that she would leave him. Of course, she very well should do so, and as soon as possible. Staying with him only sealed her fate. She was about to give away her soul to the most horrible of circumstances.

And Ayden was to blame for her misfortune. It was that very thought that ate at him, day after day. He would never have guessed that his trickery and lust would have led her so completely to condemnation, and yet there she was. Any moment she would have to pay her debt.

An unceasing mixture of dread and self-loathing mixed in his gut. He hated himself because he was the cause of her impending doom.

"Ayden? Are you still awake?" Olivia said as she crept into the room. Instantly he was at her side, pulling her into his embrace and kissing her deeply.

When at last he pulled his mouth from hers, both of them gasped and he wrapped his arms around her even tighter. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too." She hugged him gently. "I am so sorry to have worked so late again."

"Have you eaten?"

She nibbled her lip, her gaze floating downward, guilt coloring her expression. "I meant to, but the lacing on Lady Tremain's dress wouldn't behave and had to be redone twice. Oh, and the fabric I ordered for the silk gown for the Duchess Grandview's daughter was completely the wrong shade of green."

"So no, you haven't eaten." Ayden sighed.

"No, I haven't."

"Then come, let's get you something. I'll call Thomas."

"Oh, no. Please don't do that. I swear the lad worked so hard today carrying crates of crinoline and thread spools in and out from the warehouse."

"Then I shall go down and get you something."

"Well, perhaps some of that fine oxtail stew from lunch, if there's any is left. You needn't even warm it. I won't mind if it's cold."

Ayden nodded. "As my lady wishes."

Olivia watched him go, and took the time to take down her hair and walking to her dressing table she sat in front of the mirror. Picking up her hairbrush, she began her hundred strokes.

As she watched her reflection, she realized how much she had changed these last weeks. Her color was indeed a bit more flushed, and her hair had grown as well. But there was something else that puzzled her. Somehow, her face looked thinner, and her skin, while always porcelain, now looked positively pale. Quickly she pinched her cheeks and waited to watch the color rise to her skin. It was slow in coming.

"Need a bit more sun, perhaps?"

Glancing up, Olivia saw Blalock's reflection in her mirror. Spinning around she faced him.

"Sir! What do you think you're doing? A gentleman wouldn't intrude on a lady's bedroom so."

Blalock gave her a smug expression. "Is that what you are? A newly widowed lady who's having marital relations with our dear Ayden?"

Olivia bit her lip. "It's poor taste to mention it so freely and so frequently."

"I beg forgiveness, Olivia. I suppose in your society that it is far worse of a sin to discuss one's wicked behavior than it is to partake in it. You have my utmost apologies." Blalock gave her a low bow, clearly mocking her.

Anger stirred within her, although in truth she was far more upset with herself than with the demon.

"What do you want?"

He sighed, feigning a wide mouthed yawn. "Nothing in particular. I saw Ayden leaving and I thought I would stop by for a moment. I was concerned for you this evening. Mr. Greaves is a very powerful man. You're little dress shop gaining his attentions is quite a coup."

"I believe so, yes. He's a very charming man."

Blalock's smile returned. "Yes, you could say that. But, be cautious of charming men, my dear. It is so easy to cover one's true intentions with such a seemingly benevolent behavior."

Olivia drew in a deep breath. "Do you mean to say, sir, that there might be more than one Devil in my acquaintance?"

"Oh ho! How very astute of you. I see you have an excellent sense of humor about you. A very attractive trait." He gave her a long-suffering sigh. "A bit of wisdom, though. I'd be very wary of strangers if I were you. It's always better to stay with the Devil you know."

Just then, she heard Ayden open the door. When she glanced back to where Blalock had been sitting, she saw nothing but an empty chair.

While Ayden was in the kitchen, he gave some thought as to how he would spend his time with Olivia. He suspected that she hadn't many days left, especially since he'd noticed Blalock was almost bursting with good cheer these days.

Careful to uncork the wine bottle without spilling the contents, Ayden placed two glasses and the bowl of cold oxtail soup on a tray. He added a measure of cheese for Olivia and two thick slices of venison for himself. Finishing the preparations with half a loaf of bread, he then left the kitchen and made his way to Olivia's bedroom. He'd tried to hurry, because he knew that her long days and great amount of work seemed to be catching up to her.

Until lately, he'd been so focused on his own predicament, but the more he was with Olivia, the more he became attuned to her physical condition. And it was more than contemplation of their lovemaking, although that nearly always consumed his thoughts.

But, he'd noticed lately that she'd been eating less and that her usually full face seemed gaunt. Not only that, her body had started to thin, and she seemed to fall asleep almost instantly when they'd finished their bed sport. For his part, Ayden could enjoy their carnal relations all night, but he began to feel guilty when she was so tired. So, he did his best to enjoy her while he could and satisfy himself with just being near her the rest of the night.

While her appetite had waned, his had grown exponentially. He found the more time they spent apart, the more ravenous he became. And, of course, his hunger wasn't just for food. He didn't understand how it could be possible, but he wanted her even more than when they'd first met.

As he reached her door, he thought he heard voices inside. Jealous anger started to boil inside him. Who dared to invade the sanctity of their bedroom?

With a single thrust, he kicked the bedroom door open and it slammed loudly against the wall. He hadn't meant to make such a noise, but the action was done before he'd realized what had even happened.

"Ayden!"

Olivia sat at her dressing table, her beautiful curls flouncing around her face as she turned to face him. Surprise and anger at his impulsive behavior colored her face, her eyes flashing a brilliant blue.

"Who's in here?" He demanded, not caring if he'd upset her. His own emotions shot perilously high and he barged into the room, clutching the dinner tray, upsetting one of the glasses, which fell off the tray and shattered when it hit the wooden floor.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. No one."

Ayden spun around once, stepping on a shard of glass as he did so. "I heard voices."

Olivia bit her lip and drew in a quick breath. "I was singing."

A long silence fell between them and Ayden swallowed back his ire. "Singing?"

Olivia tilted her head back, looking down her nose at him, her defiant expression almost daring him to accuse her further.

While he did not believe her, he saw himself that no one else was in the room. Very well, he would go along with her, for now.

"Enough," she said, slamming the brush down on the desk. "You are going to stop this jealous nonsense right this minute." She got up then and walking around the shattered glass, she positioned herself to stand directly in front of him. Turning, she pulled up her hair and exposed the back of her dress to him. "Then, you are going help me out of this dress, and when I'm naked, you are going to hand feed me what's on that tray." She folded her arms across her middle. "And if you're very good to me, I will let you make love to me," he heard her draw in a deep breath. "All night."

"All night?"

"That's what I said," she replied, smiling.

Ayden licked his lips. He could continue his ire, demand the truth from her and then allow himself to rant and rave like a madman. Or he could rip every bit of clothing from her, and take her right then and there.

"I'm waiting," she said again.

With all of the control he could manage, he turned and set the tray on the table. Then, placing a hand on each of her shoulders, he kneaded the muscles there. Leaning forward, he blew a warm breath across her neck and felt a shiver run through her. With utmost tenderness, he took a deep breath and then placed a soft kiss at the base of her neck.

"I am yours to command," he said, forgetting the food and wine, forgetting his anger and suspicions, and even forgetting the bit of the glass he'd ground into his heel. His only thought now was of Olivia.

"I want you," he said, his voice coarse and demanding. He didn't care. He'd simply die if he didn't make love to her right this moment.

"Then take me, Ayden. Take me now."

As she whispered her request, she felt a shock of lighting run through him. At her command, she felt his hands go to the top of her gown, and in a single motion, he ripped the fabric downward. The tiny buttons popping off, flying in every direction.

Ayden tugged the dress once, and it came apart at the seams. While the woman in her was suddenly on fire for him, the seamstress thanked the heavens that the dress could be repaired.

She heard him growl as the last remnants of the dress fell to the floor.

"I want you," he said, pulling her back against him. She could feel the heat radiating from him, his rapid, shallow breaths on her neck, and the hard erection he pushed against her backside.

She wanted him, too.

"Please," Olivia said, her voice between a moan and a whisper.

He spun her around, and crushed her against him, his mouth finding hers, opening, exploring, and conquering hers.

Only the thin veil of her shift and his linen shirt separated them. Olivia could swear that if they didn't get the rest of their clothes off, the fire on their skin would surely incinerate the fabric of each.

With all of her strength, she pushed him to arms length. "Undress. Now."

For a second he started to disregard her command, but she pressed her lips into a thin line and gave him her sternest look.

With a low growl, he nodded once and unfastened his trousers, letting them fall from his narrow waist to pool around his ankles. He stepped out of them, and tugging at his shirttails, he yanked the fabric over his head and threw it to the floor.

At her insistence, he stood before her, naked and the very most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Every muscle, every angle and plane of his body exquisite, as though he'd been carved from marble. And yet, nothing about him was as dead as the stone. No. A living, breathing man, he narrowed his eyes and devoured her with a single glance.

"Now." He said, and started to advance again, his body moving slow and determined toward her.

"Wait!" she said, her own body protesting as she did so. "I want to eat, first."

He nodded. "Then you shall eat, my love."

Scrambling onto the bed, she scooted back against the headboard "May I serve my lady?"

"Please," she said, breathless.

Ayden turned to the tray, and poured a healthy amount of wine into the remaining glass. Then, picking up the knife, he cut the cheese and meat into small bits, enough for a healthy mouthful, she thought.

When he lifted the cover off the soup, although it was lukewarm, the scent of thick spices and meat filled the room.

Climbing onto the bed, he leaned over and very carefully picked up the glass of wine. Taking a sip, he then turned toward her. Olivia reached for the glass but he put his hand out.

"Tonight, I serve you," he said softly. Then moving closer to her, he held the glass up to her lips and then tilted it forward and allowed her to drink.

After she'd swallowed her fill, she tipped her head back and held up her hand. "Why don't we eat later?"

Ayden shook his head. "Eat. I want you hungry for me alone."

"Oh." Olivia leaned back against the bed. "Go on."

"As you wish, my lady."

He reached for the tray and settled it on the bed between them. First, he slowly stirred the soup and then taking a half spoon full, lifted to her.

Olivia had to admit that it tasted heavenly, and hungrily she consumed it. When she'd had her fill, Ayden picked up bits of cheese and meat and fed them to her as well, giving her sips of the wine in between. In no time, she was sated, her eyes growing heavy, fatigue from the long day beginning to slow her down.

"Enough," She said at last.

"Is there anything else, you wish?" he asked.

"No."

Ayden smiled, and removed the tray.

"You've been cut." Olivia pointed to his foot.

He glanced down and looked at the wound. "It's all but healed," he told her.

She shook her head, leaning down to look closer. "Well, the blood is dried. Are you sure you're not hurt?"

"'Tis but a small thing. It is of no concern."

There was something in his voice that gave Olivia alarm. When she glanced up she saw the tint of sadness shadow his expression.

"Are you sure?"

He smiled again. "Yes."

He leaned forward, and met her with a kiss, his mouth teasing and coaxing her until all thought of sadness or injury faded from her mind. Instead, there was only him. His arousal, his flesh, and his need.

Which sent a shock of desire through her. "Now," she said when they separated long enough to take a breath.

"Yes, my lady."

But, he didn't just take her. He conquered her. He possessed her. He owned her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Although they had made love many times in the weeks they'd been together, each time Ayden marveled at the newness of their joining. Of course, as an angel, sex was not something he'd ever experienced. But in this fascinating new existence, and the body, which he'd been given, he found it was the most amazing thing he'd ever known.

Beginning his sensual assault, he thoroughly consumed her mouth. Touching her only with his lips upon hers, he enjoyed her every move, her ever whimper, her every hungry thrust of her tongue as she tried to match him passion for passion, touch for touch.

"I want more," she said as he pulled away.

"In due time," he told her. She moaned her impatience, but did as he requested.

"Lay back," he said, and when she did so, he moved so that he hovered over her. The scent of wildflowers and her desire fueled the blaze of searing need growing in his body. He would have to have her soon or perish himself.

Well. I've already been to Hell once.

"Please, please, please," she chanted, her arms enfolding him, pulling downward.

"Not yet. Hands to your side."

"What?"

"I would like to try something different."

Her eyes opened, and she started to protest, but he quickly bent down and stopped her protest short, swallowing her words and leaving her silent and breathless a moment later.

"All right," she said in a weak voice.

Ayden licked his lips, already swollen from their maddening kisses. "Let me make love to you. I want to taste you, kiss you, every bit of you. If you will allow me to do so, that is. I will command your body and each time you disobey, I will begin again and it will be even longer before I give you what you want."

"Oh!" Her hand went to her mouth. "But, what if I can't wait?"

Ayden gave her a mischievous grin. "Then I will punish you."

Olivia's expression became one of mixed emotions. Curiosity and wonder, anxiety and lust warred for dominance on her face.

Then, settled on the idea, setting her jaw, she took a sharp breath. She was going to meet his challenge with one of her own.

"Very well," she said, her arms stiffening straight, her hands grasping handfuls of sheet. She jutted her chin upwards, purposefully not looking at him.

A new idea formed in his mind. Quickly looking around them, he saw exactly what he wanted. Three linen scarves sat folded neatly on the bureau.

"Close your eyes," Ayden told her. "And don't move, or there will be a penalty."

She nodded quickly, a slightly worried expression crossing her face.

Seeing that she was ready for him, Ayden slipped off the bed and retrieved the scarves. Then, turning back, he walked slowly to the bed, contemplating just what he was going to do.

Ayden admitted there were many things he didn't understand. The stirring of emotions and endless lust he had for Olivia for one, or the fact that she so completely trusted him, for another. But of all the things he didn't know, there was one that thing that he did.

At that moment, Olivia was everything to him, and as such, her pleasure was what mattered most. And pleasure her he would, no matter the cost to himself, or his own body's relentless need.

Climbing back into the bed, he renewed his assault. "Be still."

Olivia did as she was told, taking in a shaky breath as she did so.

Ayden couldn't help grinning like a fool. This was going to be fun. Unfolding the first scarf, he placed it over Olivia's eyes. She started to protest but he pressed his fingers over her lips and felt her relax.

Without saying a word, he lifted her head and tied the scarf behind securely. Then, taking her right arm, he kissed every one of her fingers, then her palm and then her wrist. When he had finished, he lifted her arm, and placing it over her head, he wrapped the scarf around her wrist and then fastened it to the bedpost.

Suddenly, he felt her move beneath him. "Ayden? What are you doing?"

He couldn't help a chuckle, "I'm pleasuring you, my lady."

"But such things aren't done!"

"Do you trust me?"

She bit her lip. "Yes, I do," she said at last.

"Good. I won't harm you. And if you tell me to stop, I will." He drew in another breath. "But if you allow me to, I promise to please you beyond all imagination."

"Oh." She fell silent for a minute and he could swear she he felt her thoughts churning. "Very well. Proceed."

More determined than before, Ayden set about his task. After securing her left arm, he repeated the same with her right, this time, taking his time, kissing her arm all the way to her shoulder. Then, he began lightly brushing his lips across hers, gently peppering kisses along her jaw line, first to her right ear, taking time to nibble her lobe.

When he'd finished with both of her ears, her jaw, and her neck, he moved down to her breasts. Caressing each soft mound, he took first the left one into his mouth, his tongue teasing her nipples until they hardened to delightful nubs. Of course, all the while, he felt her struggle to remain unmoving. It became harder and harder to concentrate with his own need growing every second.

Unable to stay still any longer, Olivia moved beneath him. "I can't take it anymore. Please!"

Ayden could hardly keep from spreading her legs, and taking his pleasure. In fact he was just on the edge of doing so when he remembered just what it was he had in mind.

"No, sweet Olivia. You must let me finish."

Olivia moaned. She was now twisting in the bed, her entire body trembling, and when he looked at her face, he saw a single tear slide toward her hairline.

"Hurry," she begged.

Ayden doubled his efforts. Finished with her breasts, he moved to her fine, soft abdomen. Then alternating suckling kisses with tiny bites, he drove them both to the very brink of control. But, that was not all he had planned. Diving ever further downward, he then grasped her thighs, his fingers squeezing the delicate flesh there, kneading the muscles. Without hesitation, he pushed them apart and leaned into the sweet valley between her legs. She was wet with arousal, and when he blew his hot breath upon her, she squealed with delight, pushing her hips upward.

Not ready to give in to her just yet, he dipped down and started nipping at the tender flesh once again, increasing his attack. Olivia answered him in kind, moaning and thrashing about. But Ayden wouldn't relent. He continued until his efforts left him shaking with need.

"Ayden! Please!"

He drew back, gasping, the sweat of his labors now dripping down his face, burning his eyes. He blinked rapidly. "Not yet," he ground out.

"I can't take it any longer," she cried.

"But you will, my sweet. Because I ask you to."

Olivia whimpered, and he saw her bite her lip. She truly was a remarkable woman. So beautiful and strong. Never had he known another soul like hers.

Breathing hard, Ayden made his final move. Reaching up over her, he quickly pulled loose the ties that bound her.

"What?" she asked, her breaths as labored as his own.

"Now," he said. Before she could react, he quickly flipped her over on her front, and then sliding his arm beneath her, pulled her body up and toward him, her sweet round bottom fitting against him.

"Wait," she said, her arms flailing, about. Ayden held her steady, his erection moving to find her warm, moist center. In a single movement, he tipped her forward and entered her completely.

Olivia moaned, her body instantly reacting to his. He could feel her muscles begin to contract around him. Sweet heaven was just seconds away.

"No!" he commanded, and Olivia clenched.

"Wh-what?" She doubled over, allowing him to slide in a fraction more.

"Not until I tell you to let go," he grunted, struggling to hold his own completion.

No other words came forth, as though she were frozen beneath him. Taking advantage of her surprise, he started moving again, pulling nearly completely out of her, and then thrusting back in. Again and again he went, building momentum. She was trembling so hard from her efforts, that deep in her chest, a keening sound rose and it shook him to his core.

Ayden continued until he felt about to shatter, and Olivia began to whimper once more. She again clenched the sheets in her fists, her legs tightening against his thighs.

One final word came out of her then. "Pleeeeeease."

He took a final breath. "Now!"

Olivia screamed once again, the sound a mixture of passion and desire that wrapped around his very core. Instantly she stiffened, her entire body tightening around him. She made small grunting noises, her chest heaving with each breath.

Seeing her react so lit a fire deep in Ayden's soul. She was more than just a woman; she was exquisite in a way that he had never known. And, for that moment at least, she was well and truly his.

* * * *

Olivia could hardly believe the control Ayden had over her. He commanded her every breath, it seemed, and though her mind rebelled, her body did not.

"Mmmm," was all she could manage to say as they sank into the sheets, their bodies slick and warm against the cool fabric.

"At last, you are quiet."

"I would argue that," she said yawning, "but I cannot seem to conjure the words. And my eyes will no longer stay open." She sighed, her body stretched out like an overfed feline.

Ayden kissed the spot on the center of her back, between her shoulder blades, and gently settled onto the bed beside her. Like a fine porcelain doll, he gingerly turned her onto her side and gathered her gently into his arms.

"Sleep sweet, Olivia. I shall be here when you awaken."

Taking a final breath, drifting off into blissful slumber, Olivia knew only one thing. Ayden was well and truly hers, and she wished with all her heart they could be together always. It was a fools dream, true enough, but it was one she wanted, more than anything in the world. More than dress patterns, more than a successful shop, more than being the talk of the town.

She would have sold her soul for him—a hundred times over.

* * * *

Like a caged animal, Blalock paced restlessly around the study. He was growing more and more impatient. He wanted this business done with. More than ever, he longed to return to his comfortable corner of Hell.

It wasn't that he disliked his current assignment. In fact, far from it. It was the exact opposite. He found himself more and more wanting to become a part of this world he'd been forced to reside in.

Now, standing in front of the window, gazing out at the pitch darkness, he wished more than ever for the flames of Hell to rise up and consume him. And yet, here he remained, in the pleasant coolness of this strange reality. At home, he was the cool creature, unaffected by the searing heat of his surroundings. But here, his body burned and the air was without heat.

Furious at his predicament, Blalock thought it best to check on his charges, and somehow persuade them to give up their struggles and submit to their master once and for all.

Closing his eyes, Blalock turned to vapor and then rematerialized in Ayden and Olivia's bedroom. He was about to start his tirade when the sight of them caught him by surprise.

Olivia was kneeling in the center of the bed, bent forward, with Ayden behind her. Both were unaware of Blalock's intrusion, so entranced by their joining.

They seemed to hang there, enveloped by a profound and mysterious energy. Even he, an outsider and one who was only nominally human at the moment, could sense it. It was as though they were suspended in time, between the existing worlds, in a reality of their own creation.

Both wore expressions that illuminated the darkness around them. Blalock had seen many things in his eons of existence, the mixing of energies and light that became all of creation, the imaginable forces of good and evil and a battlefield that encompassed all of heaven and earth. Why he'd even witnessed the terrible casting of half of all angels into the burning miasma of hell.

None of it affected him as powerfully as these two souls joined together.

Suddenly he felt as though he himself was the most insignificant being ever drawn forth from the pits of hell. He started to dematerialize, but something stopped him.

The two lovers finished, and looking like moonlit angels, they sank into the bed with a whoosh of whispered breaths and the sounds of the bed settling beneath them.

It wasn't his witness of this purely human act that struck Blalock so much, but rather the quiet words spoken by Ayden as he gently kissed Olivia's back, just below her neck.

"Sleep sweet, Olivia. I'll be here when you awaken."

Something in Blalock's heart melted at that moment. He was suddenly miserable and wishing for all his heart that he could change the events that had transpired.

Whisking himself away before he gave himself away, he landed once again in the study. Sinking into the armchair, he leaned forward, placed his head in his hands, and muttered.

"Stupid, stupid fools! Don't they know what they have done? How utterly hopeless their situation is? I thought for certain I'd made myself clear. 'Do not fall in love with her' I'd instructed him. How could he do such a thing?"

But, it wasn't only his sadness at their plight that deeply disturbed the demon. Blalock had one other emotion that scared him as nothing else ever had. The Devil to take him, but for all his twisted, scorched and rotted heart...he wanted to help them.

"I am as much a bloody fool as the two of them."

Chapter Thirty

When Ayden awoke with the sunrise, Olivia no longer slept beside him. Searching through the early morning dimness, he saw her standing by the window, her figure a slender silhouette against the grey dawn.

"Come back to bed, my love," he said quietly.

When she turned to him, he instantly saw the shimmering tracks of tears that stained her perfect face.

"In a minute," she said, quietly.

She looked so forlorn that alarmed, Ayden immediately rose and went to her. In a single motion, he folded her in his arms, cradling her against his chest like a child. "Olivia? What is it? What's wrong?"

She shook her head and sniffed. "I'm sorry. I don't deserve this happiness. Any of it."

Confused, Ayden tipped her head back and gazed into her troubled expression. "What is this nonsense? What do you mean, you don't deserve it?"

"I've sold my soul to the Devil." She said, wiping at her damp face. "I thought I could manage it alone. But, last night was so wonderful, I realized what a terrible mistake I've made."

Ayden sighed and pulled her closer, wishing with all his heart he could protect her from the evil that awaited her.

And yet, this was the very thing he'd wanted. She would go to hell and he would be forever set free.

The very thing he'd begged for, what he'd planned, and maneuvered and schemed and waited for would soon be fulfilled. And it filled him with pure self-loathing to think that she had surrendered so easily.

"Olivia, please don't cry," he said at last.

"I'm sorry, but I had to do it. Mr. Proffitt was going to kill my family, and Blalock said that you were going to be condemned to hell. I simply had to do something."

"What?"

"I had to save my family, Ayden. And the idea of you, burning in that wretched place forever is unthinkable. So, I've done it. I've set you free."

"No," he muttered. "It's not possible."

That blasted demon hadn't told her the terms of his agreement. She would never know that it was he who had been the tool of her entrapment. Fear ripped through him as he realized that if she ever found out the truth, she would hate him forever.

"I'm sorry, Ayden. I'm afraid that my new master will soon demand his due. My life with you will be over before it's had a chance to really begin."

She let her tears fall freely now, her delicate body quivering in his arms, shaking from her turmoil.

Guilt and shame warred within him. In the end, he would be the one that she would die for. It would be his torture she would endure. And he was helpless to do anything to change it. Instead of facing an eternity burning in hell, he would go on with his life and the sweet creature before him would pay the ultimate price for his freedom.

"Olivia," he whispered at last, taking her face in his hands, he tilted her face up to face him once again. "Please don't do this. Perhaps all is not lost."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him. "It's okay, dear Ayden. Just know that I will forever love you. All the fires of Hell cannot change that."

After he had settled Olivia back into bed, and made certain she slept once more, Ayden slipped out of the room to find his demon torturer.

"What in the bloody hell have you done?" he demanded as he burst into the study.

Blalock was seated in the lounge chair, his head back, and his eyes closed. On his right knee, he balanced a brandy glass, which tipped precariously to the left, threatening to spill its contents into his lap.

The demon startled, nearly dropping the glass, grasping at it clumsily until he finally held it firm in both hands.

"I'm getting drunk. Piss-faced. Deep in my cups. Downright throttled by the demons of firewater." He opened a red-rimmed eye and shot Ayden a withering glance. "What do you want?"

Ayden ground his jaw and tightened his fists until his fingernails bit into the flesh of his palms.

"I was just with Olivia," he said, as if that explained everything.

"So I saw."

"You saw? What are you talking about?"

Blalock shook his head, and then grasped his temples as if that had been the exact wrong thing to do.

"Never mind. Go on. Tell me what's troubling you."

"Olivia told me that she bargained her soul to save me. You lied to her."

"I did no such thing, you blithering fool. I merely asked her what her wishes were in exchange for her mortal soul. She gave me her wishes and we sealed the deal. As far as I'm concerned, all the terms of our agreement will be met, once that silly party is over with, of course."

Ayden stepped back, stunned. "So soon? But, she's barely had any time."

Blalock shot to his feet. "Time? Time was not in the arrangement. She didn't ask for fifty years of happiness, a hundred years of success. No, she only requested that her family be cared for, that her dream of being a celebrated dressmaker be made real, and that your miserable countenance never stain the oily floors of Hell again."

"You bastard! You knew what she was agreeing to and you didn't stop her. How could you allow her to make such a terrible bargain?"

"Well, that's rich, now isn't it? The pot calling the kettle black. As I recall, you were the one who made the first deal with the Devil. And now you're blaming me."

"I didn't think this would happen. I didn't know Olivia then."

"And that was the idea. She was pure, untouched by the likes of us. And now, look here, you've gone and sullied her soul."

"I didn't know what it would feel like."

Blalock sighed, picking up the brandy bottle from the table beside him. He briefly looked as though he were about to pour it, but changed his mind, brought the crystal bottle to his lips and took a long drink.

"Of course you didn't. That's why our master chose you. Don't you see? You and I are the perfect creatures for the job."

Ayden sank down to the floor, the weight of what they had done near to crushing him.

"Is there nothing we can do?" he said at the last.

"Of course there isn't. Humans are determined to waste their lives on such frivolous things as honor and love. We were doomed to be the mechanism of her downfall the very moment she was born. Besides which, if it had not been us, it would have been some other hapless fools."

The old demon settled himself beside his charge, the half-empty bottle of brandy in his hand. "Here, have a drink. It won't take away the pain but it will dull it somewhat."

Ayden did as he was bidden, taking a long drink of the burning liquid. Memories of his miserable existence in Hell came with its touch upon his throat. But he didn't care about any of that any longer. He had learned a terrible lesson. There were more kinds of pain than the one that scorched the body. There was the kind that scarred one's heart as well.

"I am a terrible wretch."

"As are we all, my boy. But, don't fret so. You still have time with her. Take advantage of it. Love her as no other. Fill her nights with your exquisite lovemaking and her days with your deepest admiration. It's more than a lot of humans get."

Ayden took another long drink, the hopelessness of the situation permeating every bit of his being. "I suppose your right."

"Of course I am. Now, go. Awaken her with kisses and all that. Live in the moment and let the future take care of itself."

* * * *

The next weeks literally flew by, although the deep well of despair never completely left Olivia. Like a giant granite stone poised over her head, threatening to fall at any moment, she felt it.

Fortunately, the dress shop demanded every moment of her day, and Ayden had become the most attentive lover during the night. She sensed a change in him, besides the urgency to fulfill her every desire and to explore their lovemaking to the very extent that their bodies could endure, of course. Ever since the morning of her confession to him, she saw the pain he suffered and felt the sadness that floated in the air around them like a silent mournful ghost whenever they were alone together.

As a matter of fact, she quickly noticed that everything in her life was near to perfect. Why, even Lord Greaves was very attentive of late. He'd stopped by the shop to shower her with compliments on her progress. He sent her swaths of fine silk for his daughter's gown, and even sent flowers to her, no less than a dozen beautiful white roses.

In fact, to anyone who knew her, her father, her brother and sister, and even their housekeeper, it would seem that her life had truly become idyllic.

But, as the day of the Waverton ball approached, Olivia sensed that her time was quickly growing short. She did her best to quell the sense of panic she felt, to give all of her attentions to the gowns she created and all of her emotions to Ayden. But occasionally her hands would tremble, or an errant tear would escape her eye and the next thing she knew she'd be crying over some such thing or another.

One such time, she was in the sewing room, seated at her machine, and did her best to rework a seam on the bodice of a particularly stubborn gown. It was just a little thing, really. She'd accidentally had stuck her finger, and as the bright red blood welled up on her tender skin, the flood of tears let loose. The next thing she knew she was huddled over, crying with all her energy.

"Here, here, what's this?" It was Blalock. He came immediately to her side, and pulling out his handkerchief, wiped her tears.

"I'm so sorry. I am the most dreadful creature."

"Of course, you're not, my dear. You're just overwhelmed by everything. Your most important hour approaches and you fear you shall not achieve your objective."

"Oh, of course, I hadn't thought of that. It just seems that I've made such a mess of it all."

"Nonsense, you will receive you're every wish, my dear. It's ordained."

"Yes, of course it is. But, I really don't feel like I've achieved anything. I mean, I will be successful, but is it because of my efforts, or just that your master has arranged it to be so."

Blalock looked at her with a surprised expression. "Does it matter?"

"It does. I know I haven't much time left."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do." She held out her injured finger. "Do you see that? It hardly bled at all. Six months ago I would have had it wrapped in a cloth for at least ten minutes, but now, hardly anything."

"I suppose that is odd."

"I don't know if you feel it, but a chill has settled over me. Even when Ayden is holding me and we are huddled beneath the quilts, the cold overtakes me. And it hurts, you know. It's coming from inside my bones and there is nothing I can do to stop it."

Blalock grew silent, his hands twisting in front of him. "I am sorry, but you've already signed the contract. After this affair there will be nothing left, I'm afraid."

"I know," she said quietly. "I've got the Devil to pay."

"You seem to have the right of it, my dear."

"For what it's worth, I shan't miss many things. My family, of course, and these beautiful patterns," she said motioning to the stack of colorful fabrics in front of her. "More than anything, I will miss, Ayden."

"And he shall miss you as well."

"I know." She paused, then taking a breath and gathering all of her courage, she looked directly into Blalock's face. "Can you tell me how it will happen? Will I die a terribly painful death?"

The Devil's minion seemed to turn a grayish color then. "Not particularly. I believe he will come to you at dawn, the morning after the party. Your soul will simply disappear. Of course, your family will have your deceased body to mourn, and as is the nature of things, that will fade away in time."

"Oh. What will happen to Ayden? Will you stay with him to keep him safe?"

Blalock was taken aback by her question. "I cannot. The master will be calling me home as well. Young Ayden will carry on here, as per your contract."

"He's so sweet and so attentive to me. I'm afraid my dying will affect him deeply. I hate to think of him suffering so."

"I think it likely he will grieve for you, but it is said time heals all wounds. One day he may find happiness."

"With another perhaps?"

"Perhaps." He sighed. "Might I ask you one question?"

"Of course."

"Are you not concerned for your own fate?"

"Oh, I am. It's just that whatever I must endure, I know I can do it as long as my loved ones are safe."

"That seems so very odd, you suffering eternal damnation and your family here at peace, not knowing of the sacrifices you've made."

"Have you no family, sir? I mean, since Ayden isn't really your nephew."

Blalock coughed, a tiny bead of perspiration forming on his brow. "Well, he is not true family, in the human sense, but he is my charge. So to speak."

"Aren't you the tiniest bit concerned for him? I mean, he's told me the two of you have spent a very long time together. Surely, you've grown fond of him over the years."

"Of course, there is...some connection, yes. I've always told him, for instance, that he has a lovely voice."

"Oh, he sings? You see, that's something I didn't know about him."

"It's not something he often talks about." Blalock took out yet another handkerchief and mopped his brow. "In fact, he's rather embarrassed by it. Perhaps it would be best if you didn't mention it."

"Of course," Olivia said. "Sir, it is very plain that you do indeed care for Ayden. Perhaps he will be fine, after all."

Blalock shot her an indignant glare. "However do you come to that conclusion?"

"Why from you, sir. The way you speak of him, your constant concern about him. It's as clear as fresh cleaned glass."

Ayden watched as the carriage pulled up to the house. He, Olivia, and Blalock had spent the afternoon dressing and preparing themselves for the Waverton affair. Due to Olivia's wonderful creations, most of the ladies arriving tonight would be wearing the fruits of her labor. Of course, he suspected that the demon torturer had had a hand in it all. But, for the moment, his love was excitedly watching out the window, enthralled by the outstanding examples of wealth and power among London's elite.

"Look, Ayden, there's Lady Hampsted. Oh, and Lord Greaves. How beautiful they are." She sent him a beaming smile then turned her attention to her window once again. "And there is his daughter. Such a pretty little thing she is."

Ayden nodded, his attention going to Blalock. For some reason, the demon looked peculiar. If he were human, he would have sworn he'd taken ill. His skin was a grayish cast, and his frown seemed to have plowed permanent wrinkles in his brow. He looked utterly miserable. But, that wasn't possible, was it?

Blalock sent a glance toward Olivia. Ayden watched as the demon's expression changed. The former angel wasn't sure, but it looked as though his torturer actually had sympathy for the woman. His eyes had softened, his mouth set in a tight line. Even his shoulders sagged and he tilted his head to one side.

Ayden suddenly realized what wrong with the old demon.

Just then, the carriage rolled to a stop. The door opened as a footman stepped up. "Madam. Gentlemen," he said, settling a stool, in front of the carriage door. Lifting his hand, he bowed deeply.

Olivia sent Ayden an excited glance and then gathered her skirts around her. Silent, he watched her step out into the carriage. Sick with grief at what lay ahead of them, he moved to follow her. Blalock's hand on his sleeve gave him reason to pause.

"A word with you."

"Not now," Ayden growled.

"Her time is near."

Angry, Ayden pulled away from him. "Leave her be."

"It isn't me. It's the term of her contract. There's nothing to be done about it." Ayden stared into the demon's face. In the depths of his gaze, Ayden saw a pain that reflected back at him.

"I know," he said at last. "When will you take her?"

Blalock glanced away a second. "At dawn." He then motioned Ayden forward, looking toward the door and not meeting his gaze directly.

Stepping down, his attention went immediately to Olivia. She had already been championed by a circle of beautifully dressed women. He watched as she tilted head, obviously enthralled by their attention.

"Such a lovely little thing you are, my dear. And such a wonderful hand with fabric and thread," a tall, lean, rather gawkish woman said.

"Of course she is," another woman added, this one with hair the color of onyx and a thick layer of rouge on her cheeks.

Then, an elderly lady approached them. As ornately dressed as the others, she held her head high. Ayden saw that her hair was layered in several rows tightly woven curls.

"Stand aside, ladies. This young woman is my discovery. I fully intend to have her fashion my entire

wardrobe for the next season."

With that declaration, the entire party began chirping like a passel of hens just let out into the yard. Ayden watched as Olivia fairly beamed. With the women gathered around her, she sent a cheerful glance toward Ayden.

He smiled at her, happy that at last she'd gotten the recognition she's worked so hard for. That she'd dreamed of and had achieved on her very own.

"She's quite a picture, isn't she," Blalock said behind him.

"It isn't fair," Ayden answered, not taking his eyes from Olivia. She had gone on to discuss several of her ideas for the next season's fashions, most likely planning the dresses for all the women gathered and thereby being a single force in their lives.

"Of course it isn't."

Ayden whirled on his master's minion. "She deserves better. I watched her work and so did you. She would have gotten all of this on her own."

Blalock shrugged, tired. "That, my boy, is the nature of the Devil. He tricks us into thinking that we need his help, when all the while the power of our soul can achieve anything, if we're willing to work for it."

"The Devil is a dirty liar."

"He is indeed. For what it's worth, he knows the failings of men far better than they themselves."

"Well, perhaps it's not too late," Ayden said. He turned to Blalock. "Miracles do happen; perhaps there is one that will yet materialize for her."

"Do you think so? Because I don't. If you're talking about the Creator, well, he didn't listen to your cries for mercy, now did he? He didn't then and he won't now." Blalock's gaze wandered once again to Olivia. "I need a drink. Excuse me."

Chapter Thirty-One

Within an hour, Olivia had grown weary. She searched the crowd for Ayden, but didn't see him. Perhaps he had gone to the gardens, she thought. He'd told her once that the chance to have one of his own was his heart's desire. As she made her way to the exit, she felt a firm hand upon her arm.

"Mrs. Proffitt," a man said behind her. Startled she pulled away, but his grip grew firmer. Twisting her sideways, she suddenly saw the man who held her. It was Lord Greaves. He wore a queer expression, one that was dark and malevolent and caused her breath to catch in her throat.

"Milord," she said, nodding to him. "I am sorry, but I must go. I need to speak with my sponsor, Mr. Blalock."

"Such a brave woman you are, Mrs. Proffitt. I mean, your husband in the ground, what has it been, six months? You dare to break all the rules of propriety to come out in public. Deplorable. And yet, I find you both exciting and intoxicating."

"I tried to decline, due to my being in mourning, but Lady Hempsted wouldn't have it."

"Of course, she wouldn't. I watched as the old besom has monopolized you the entire evening. I do need to discuss some changes in my Annabelle's couture. I wonder if I could have but a moment of your time?"

As he spoke to her, Greaves had begun walking, gently but firmly pulling her along with him.

"Sir, I must protest. You may come by the shop in the morning. I will make new sketches for you. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go. I'm not used to such a stir as this, and I'm very tired."

"I'll only take a moment of your time." His expression had changed from forced pleasantness to impatience and almost anger.

Just as she was about to scream, he pushed her roughly into an alcove. Once they were inside, he quickly thrust the curtain shut, so that the two were tightly ensconced in a thick, darkness.

Grieves pushed himself against her, the two of them falling back onto a long settee. He instantly covered her mouth with his right hand, his left fumbling with his own britches as he did so.

"Listen carefully, you senseless bit of muslin. I've been waiting for weeks for this. Now, do as you're told, and spread your legs like a good little light skirt and keep your gossiping mouth shut."

She heard the sound of his trousers coming loose and sliding to the floor. That done, he pushed her further down, nearly smothering her as he did so.

Olivia tried to scream, but he only pushed harder. It was dark, but she could make out the sharp lines of his face, twisted like a macabre painting, hovering just above her.

He said nothing more, but fought against her layer of black crinoline and lacings until at last he'd grasped her left thigh.

"There we go, that's a good little chit! It is time, my lovely, to entertain my fancy. If you're very good and I am pleased with your efforts, there will be a shiny gold coin for you."

Rage and fear rose in Olivia, and she fought him with all of her might. She scratched, bit into his hand, and then jerked her knee upwards into his groin. Unfortunately, he held her so tightly, he was able to twist sideways and protect himself.

The blackguard only growled and letting loose her mouth, he slapped her hard, the gold and emerald

ring he wore cutting into her cheek. Pain shot through her, and for a moment, she lay unmoving, stunned. No one had ever struck her before, and the shock of it completely stunned her.

"You little bitch. Being nice to you was a waste of my time and money. I'll teach you how to treat your betters."

He shoved up the rest of her skirts and thrust forward. Olivia tried one final time to twist away from him. Just as she felt his hardness strike against her, he suddenly moved away.

Opening her eyes, she looked up to see why he had stopped his assault. Above her stood two hulking forms, one of which was Greaves, and the other was a larger man, with broad shoulders and his hands clamped firmly about the peer's throat.

"Ayden?"

The angel tightened his fists and Greaves slumped to the ground. Disgusted, Ayden stepped back, his attention turning to her. Without saying a word, he pulled her skirts down and then lifted her from the settee.

"Ayden, please, I didn't..." How could she find the words? Surely, he would think that she had enticed Greaves into the alcove.

"Shhhh," he said, pulling her close and then turning to peer past the curtain. "Say nothing. I'm going to take you home."

With her in his arms, he slipped out the back of the alcove and made his way to the nearest door. He was met by Lord and Lady Hempsted.

"My dear, whatever is the matter?"

Ayden squeezed her against him. "Please accept our apologies. Mrs. Proffitt is not well. I need to get her home as soon as possible."

"Nothing serious, I hope," Lord Hempsted said. "My physician, Mr. Bellows is in the study. I could send for him."

"No thank you, my lord. She's had too much excitement, I believe."

"If her condition worsens, please send round a card. We wouldn't want the poor thing to fall ill."

Olivia let out her breath when Ayden called round the carriage, and once inside, he settled her on his lap.

"Ayden. I can explain..." she began.

"There is no need. I saw the way he looked at you."

Olivia slipped her arms around him and let herself cry. She wasn't angry that her last night alive, the one that she had worked so hard for had fallen to disaster. She wasn't even afraid of what might yet lay ahead of her.

The truth was she mourned leaving everyone one that was dear to her behind. Earlier that day she had said her silent good-byes to her father, her brother and sister, and Mrs. Kempt. She ached in knowing she would never see them again, but was relieved that were safe now. With Micah Proffitt's money to keep them from falling into debt, she knew they would be all right.

So now, all there was left to do was the hardest thing of all. She must this very night say good-bye to Ayden, forever. It was there, wrapped in his arms with her tears dampening his shirt, she finally realized that forever was a very, very long time.

For the very last time, Ayden carried Olivia into the house and up the stairs. As he did so, his mind was buzzing on what he might do to keep her from Satan's grasp. He knew that the old demon's power was limitless, that his reach was long. There simply was no place in Heaven, Hell, or Earth that he could hide her.

Once in the bedroom, Ayden set her on the bed, and then lit a squat lavender scented candle on the bedside table.

"I'll get us something to eat," he told her, but she held out her hand.

"Don't leave me," she said. He couldn't miss the trembling in her voice. "Wait. I'm sorry. It's okay. I'm not hungry, but if you are, then go on."

"No," he said, settling on the bed beside her. "I haven't any appetite either."

She gave him a quivering smile. "I'm sorry I have to leave, Ayden. I can only give you this night."

He watched, mesmerized by the way her eyes sparkled in the candlelight. Shadows, like dark figures wavered around them from a gentle breeze that wafted in from the window.

"I know." He leaned forward and kissed her gently. "I love you, Olivia," he said at the last, pulling her into his arms.

"I love you, too, Ayden." He could tell that she did her best hold back her tears. There was simply no time for grief. She placed her arms around him. "Make love to me, Ayden. Carry me away so that this night will always be in my memory."

"I will, Olivia. I promise."

They spent the night together, entwined in the sheets, making love over and over, until exhaustion wrapped around Olivia and left her unable to do more than lie next to him. She didn't sleep, though. She just listened to the sound of his breathing. Memorized by the cadence of his heartbeat as she rested her head on his chest. The steady thumping gave her comfort and she let herself drift away.

Peace settled over her at last. Her days were now finished, and she would go to the fate she had chosen. She had received all that she had asked for and could demand no more. She had loved Ayden and her family with all her heart, and in the end, no one that had ever lived could do more than that.

Blalock couldn't help sneaking into their room one final time. Since that first night he had seen them together, weeks before, the vision of the two lovers had cut a deep wound into his psyche. He didn't know why, but something sent him to the brink of madness, as if he were to watch them long enough, he would be privy to something that was more powerful than all the demons in hell or all the angels in heaven.

So, that very last night, he materialized in Olivia's bedroom and looked one last time into that which no demon had ever known.

At first, it was difficult to see them. They lay as still as stone, one against the other, holding hands, her head on his chest, their legs entwined together. They still breathed, but it was different. They were in tune with each other, for when one drew a breath, the other let one go, and vice versa.

But it wasn't their appearance that struck him so powerfully. It was the very air around them, charged with an energy he didn't understand. They were a single entity, he thought, radiating a peace and harmony that penetrated even Blalock's hardened soul.

The demon stepped back, as if their togetherness were a sharp sword poking into his side. He suddenly felt alone and desolate, for the realization dawned that though their lives might be short, it was his that was far worse. He may have immortality, but it was a terrible, torturous one. Worse yet, he had the sense that it was he who should be pitied, not Ayden or Olivia.

"Stupid fool," he cursed, then dematerialized. "Better to be done with this and get myself back where I belong."

Except that the thought did occur to him that with Ayden gone, he'd have to have another in his agonizing care. He prayed to his master that it wouldn't be the fair Olivia. He knew he simply couldn't take that.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Two hours later, Ayden awoke. Olivia lay sleeping beside him, her beauty even more striking in the half moonlight that had crept in the window. Slowly, careful not to wake her, he pulled away and slipped from the bed. Then, standing beside her, just watching her sleep, he suddenly knew what must be done. He had the answer that he had been seeking since the day he'd realized he loved Olivia.

Bending down, he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. He lingered for a moment, breathing in the scent of her, and enjoying the sound of her breathing, coming out in little puffs of air.

She wasn't just beautiful, he realized. She was beauty. Every bit of her. And he loved her as no other thing he had known. That was the reason why he must do what he now planned. He must be the one to take her place. After all, he'd endured Hell for a millennia, what difference would it make as long as she was safe? After her days were finished then she would go to the place of eternal light, the place he himself had come from.

"Good-bye, my love," he whispered. Then, gathering all of his strength, he turned and left her there, blissful in her slumber. Careful not to make any noise, Ayden tread down the stairs and made his way to the parlor. Just as he'd suspected, Blalock was there, no doubt waiting for the first light of the new day to carry out his task. He sat in the large chair and puffed lazily on a pipe. The scent of cherry smoke hung in a haze about him. Across the room, a small fire burned in the hearth. Ayden knew why Blalock kept it lit. It was a reminder to them both of where they'd come from.

Ayden entered the room and gently closed the door behind him.

"Is she gone already?" Blalock asked.

"Not yet." Ayden went to stand by the window. Darkness waited there, but soon the night would give in to day. "I want to see it."

"See what?"

"The contract she signed. I want to see it."

Blalock scoffed. "There's nothing to be done about it."

"How can you be certain? Did you compose it?"

"No. But I checked. That contract is written in the Devil's hand. There's no changing it. And, only the fires of Hell itself can destroy it."

Blalock motioned toward the hearth and as he did so, the small opening suddenly grew to the size of a very large door. Ayden knew what that was—a portal through which a being could pass into the underworld.

For a moment, Ayden stared into the depths of the flames that danced inside of it. He knew exactly what he must do.

"I still want to see the contract, Blalock." He said, doing his best to shut away the memories of the long hours of pain that had assailed him there.

Blalock sighed. "I tell you it'll make no difference. But, you may look at it all night and day if you must. There's no saving her."

Reaching into his jacket, the demon torturer pulled out the ancient parchment and held it out for Ayden. Although Blalock showed no outward signs of mistrust, there was yet a hint of suspicion clouding his eyes.

Ayden hesitated but a moment, knowing what he must do, and do quickly, if he was to save Olivia. Tightening his left hand into a fist, he took the parchment with his right. The paper was soft and warm in his hand, like a living creature. Ayden swallowed.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?"

Looking directly at Blalock, Ayden shook his head slowly, tightening his grip on the contract.

Blalock slowly got to his feet, his eyes locked on Ayden's. "Here now, what do you think you are doing?"

Ayden licked his lips but said nothing. There was no need. Both of them knew what needed to be done.

"Don't be a fool. It's a tragedy, yes, but it was her choice. If you do this, it'll be far worse for you than for

her. Don't you see it?"

"I love her," Ayden said at the last.

"Of course you do, but she wouldn't want this. She wants you to live, to find another."

"You don't know, do you? You honestly don't know."

"Know what?"

Ayden laughed. "All of the wisdom you've shared over the months, all of the so called 'good' advice, and you don't know what love is."

Blalock slapped his hands together. "And you do? It's a fool's emotion is what it is. It's a false sense of affection and lust for another. It's a dream, my boy. And the likes of you and I have no business thinking of such things."

The old demon truly showed his colors. He was red faced and the veins at the side of his neck were swollen and standing out above his skin.

Ayden shook his head. "You're wrong. This is what love is."

Turning on his heel, just out of reach from the demon's grasp, he ran into the hearth, and dove directly into the fires of Hell and the fate that awaited him.

Olivia awoke bathed in warm sunlight. She yawned and stretched, her hands sliding across the cool sheets. The very first thing she realized was that she was alone.

"Ayden?" Pushing the quilts back, she sat up. To her surprise, she wasn't alone. Blalock sat directly across her. She quickly pulled the blanket up around her chest, embarrassed at her nakedness.

"Where is he?"

Taking his kerchief out of his pocket, he mopped his dampened brow. "Where do you think?"

"What?"

"He's not here. Not here at all. The bloody fool did a damn stupid thing."

"What are you talking about? Where is he?"

A silence fell between them. Blalock cleared his throat. "I think you already know."

Olivia's hands flew to her mouth. "No! It's not possible. How did he do it? Why did you let him?"

"I didn't let him do anything, you silly chit. He tricked me. He asked to see the contract and then jumped with it into the fire. Hell's fire, to be exact."

"Oh, God!"

"Well, you can call Him, but it's not like He'd ever done anything to help Ayden."

"What do you mean?"

"Ayden was one of the angel warriors. Satan, the old goat, drew in those who served under him and forced them to fight in the greatest battle of all the ages. Obviously, our side didn't win. The official story was that our boy was quite the fighter, slew thousands, in fact. But, when he was to burn an entire human village, he came upon a young child. A girl, it was. She was so beautiful that Ayden couldn't carry out his orders. It was the beginning of the end of war. Because of that one weakness, the other warrior angels took pity on the humans and the next thing you know, all of them were thrown into the fiery pits. End of story."

"But, he showed mercy. How can he be punished for that?"

"He fought on the wrong side. Besides which, he was so beautiful that our master had to make an example of him. Consigned to all eternity to forever burn but keep his beauty intact so that none would ever forget his weakness."

"What will happen to him now?"

"I can tell you the master's not very happy with him. The old bastard had his sights set on you. Now, he's more than angry. The terms of their contract were quite plain. Not only will Ayden be burning once again, he will be beneath the Devil's heel."

"We have to save him."

"We aren't going to do anything. I do suppose that if you gave yourself to the old one, he might lessen Ayden's suffering a bit. I have another contract..."

Olivia pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms about them. "Perhaps I can deal with him. But, let me ask you some things first."

Blalock sat back. "I'll tell you what I can, but know this, I am not about to go against my master. The Devil made me, you know, the depth of his torture knows no bounds."

"I understand." She thought a moment. "Are there many angels in hell?"

"To my knowledge, besides Ayden? None. Those that were condemned threw themselves at the Creator's mercy and were eventually forgiven. All except Ayden, that is. He was never allowed to communicate with the Creator."

"Then, he was the only one?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"How should I know? I'm not the Devil's census taker."

"Of course, you're not."

"Besides which, Hell is a very crowded place. Wouldn't do to have it full of those creatures. I mean, all those wings flapping about. No doubt it would put out some of the flames."

"Wings? Why doesn't Ayden have wings?"

"Well, technically, he's not an angel any longer. They cannot walk upon the earth as man. Only the Creator of all things can pull that one off."

"So, Ayden is now a man?"

"For all the good it does him, yes."

Olivia thought for a moment and then decided the best way to fight one's enemy was to know him. "Tell me about Hell."

Blalock laughed. "Tell you about it? My dear, it isn't a garden spot, you know. Have you not heard the tales? Fire and brimstone, icy pits, fiery pits, pools of acid, death and rotting flesh..."

It was good that she hadn't had breakfast, Olivia thought. "I mean, how does one get into Hell, exactly? What sort of sins must one commit to actually get in?"

"It is common knowledge that there are only three ways to be allowed in Hell. First, to commit an unforgivable sin—murder of an innocent, a child or simple one. The second way is to be unrepentant of one's sins. To turn away from the face of the Creator and never accept His forgiveness. The third and final way is simply to enter of one's own free will. A rather unexciting act, I daresay."

Olivia licked her lips. "I see. Do many do that? Enter of their own free will?"

"I know of only one. Ayden."

"I see." Olivia fell silent, tears of despair welling up in her eyes.

Blalock sighed. "I am truly sorry. To be honest, I never expected him to do such an unthinkable thing. He's changed greatly, that I will tell you. He isn't the same being that I have tortured all these centuries. Frankly, I don't know what has become of him."

Olivia bit her lip. "What did you say?"

"I do not know what changed him. He is no longer that angel that hung in my pit, that's for certain."

"That's it!" Olivia jumped from the bed, and still holding the quilt around she ran to her armoire and began pulled a dressing gown and several other garments out of it.

Blalock stood up. "What in blazes are you doing?"

"I'm going to save him. And you're going to help me."

"Have you gone mad? I can't do anything. I told you that."

"I only want you to take me there. To Hell, I mean."

"To Hell? Are you going to enter of your own free will, then? You would do that?"

"Well, no. Not exactly. I believe there is yet a way to save him."

"How?"

"I want to argue his case." She slipped her gown over her shift, buttoning it at the waist. "Would you button me please? Ayden usually does it for me."

"If I can, confounded thing." Blalock began working the dozen tiny buttons. "What makes you think you can argue his case? Or, even that the Devil will let you."

Olivia spun to face him. "Because I will offer him my soul if I fail. I will enter Hell and be his subject of my own free will if I do not win the case."

"The Devil will do no such thing."

"He'll have to."

Blalock stamped his foot. "You presume too much, woman."

"Nonsense. If you have a legal contract with anyone, such as you master did with me, then it only goes to follow there must be a court that will uphold it. There are courts in the afterlife, aren't there?"

"Yes, there is the Court of All Things, but surely you won't be allowed to enter there."

"Why not? I contest the terms of my contract, and the one that now has imprisoned Ayden. I have every right to argue it, and argue it I will."

Chapter Thirty-Three

In the next instant, Olivia and Blalock were spirited away to a large, open cavernous room. Olivia looked about them, seeing that the ceiling of the room rose up taller than the highest church spire she had ever seen. Above them, it looked to be clouds rolling in, though she was pretty sure they were indoors, or rather, underground. Beneath them, the floor was black marble. And tall tables lined the perimeter of the room. The air around them was thin and reeked of mustiness and great age.

She looked to Blalock who himself wore an odd expression.

"I don't like this place," he said. "It's too open."

"Where are we?"

"We are in the Great Hall of Eternal Judgments. It is said to be a palace that hangs between heaven and hell. And all who are judged are brought here."

Olivia watched as he hunched down, pulling the lapels of his jacket up around his neck.

"It's not so bad," she said. "I can think of worse places."

"If you're referring to Hell, madam, I must remind you that I live there."

"Well, worse for some, perhaps."

Before they could argue the matter further, a loud gong sounded. Olivia turned to see wide doors open and a long line of people walk into the enclosure. Except maybe they weren't all people.

Some were tall, others quite lean. All walked on two legs like men, but that's where their likeness ended. Some of them had the heads of animals, a lion, a horse, a dog, and even one was a pig. Others were covered with scales, and even one bore a strange resemblance to a bear, of all things, except he was twice the size of those around him and covered in fine white fur.

"They're angels," Blalock said before she could ask. "They reside in different places keeping watch over their charges from afar."

"Oh."

Behind them, another sort of being filed in. He was much like a man, except for the wide wings that were attached from his shoulders.

"He's beautiful."

"His name is Michael. One of the original warrior angels, I think. Very high up in the Creator's army, or so it's said. Very powerful, too."

"Oh. She let her gaze slide around the room until she saw another door opposite from the one where the angels had entered. In it came all manner of black, oily creatures. They were also of various shapes and sizes. Their heads and limbs were twisted and misshapen with warts and other bony prominences covering their dark, necrotic skin.

"My fellows," Blalock said, waving to them.

None waved back.

"Oh, well, it's been awhile."

"Wait. You look like that?"

"I daresay I cut a fine figure in whatever shape I'm given."

"If you say so." Olivia meant to say more, but just then, she felt the air go cold around her. Glancing back at the door the demons came through, she saw the being that she feared and hated most of all.

The Devil was far more distressing than the other demons had been. He was nothing more than a rotting mass of flesh. Instantly she saw the mangled souls that were woven into the fabric the robe he wore. All were moaning and crying, their faces so horrible to look upon that she almost turned away.

But the sight of what the Devil drew behind him stopped her cold. When Olivia saw who it was, her blood turned to ice.

In a large cage set on a wheeled platform hung Ayden. Whips of fire lashed at him, burning his skin but not destroying it. But blood poured freely from him where the tendrils of fire had kissed his flesh.

"Ayden!"

She meant to run to him, but Blalock's hand on her arm stopped her.

"He can't hear you. What you see isn't really him. It's his image. Once you're in Hell, you can't leave.

Unless your judgment is changed, that is."

"We've got to get him out."

Blalock looked into her eyes and the spiritness she had seen there earlier had died away. "I truly wish you could. But I fear you will do nothing but be ensnared yourself. When the great Creator comes, you should throw yourself to his feet and beg for mercy."

Olivia licked her lips. "You already said that wouldn't work."

"What do I know about anything? It couldn't hurt to try."

"I will not. I came here to free Ayden, and either I'll do it or we both shall perish."

Blalock shook his head sadly and chuckled. "At least you are consistent."

The gong sounded again and when she turned, Olivia saw the most amazing thing. It was a tower of pure bright light. So white, it was totally without measure.

"Is that the Creator?"

"It's his image." Blalock covered his eyes and was turned away. "It is said that he cannot allow his true self be seen because so powerful is his beauty that it kills all things living."

"I can see how that is possible."

"Let the proceedings begin," a voice sounded around them.

Olivia turned again to see a single man where the tower of light had been. He had long white hair, and a smooth face that had a white beard and eyebrows. And he had the clearest, blue eyes she had ever seen.

"Come forth, young woman. What is it you seek?"

"I seek to free Ayden Royce from his condemnation." Olivia held her breath.

"Is he innocent of the crime for which he is accused?"

"I object!" One of the demons stepped forward. "This pathetic creature dares to enter here and speak against the sentence that our master created?"

"Silence, Dagnar. Your master's acts are well known here. Do not speak again, lest your tongue be set ablaze in your mouth."

The demon clamped his mouth shut, hunched his shoulders and sat down.

"Now, go on."

"Of course, he's innocent." Olivia said, crossing her arms. Although she had the intense desire to flee this place, the memory of Ayden's suffering kept her standing still.

"Let us see his contract. Did he enter of his own free will?"

"He was tricked into going there."

"How was that?" The blue eyes stared down at her, demanding that she tell the truth.

"He was tricked because of me. He wanted to save me. I made a deal with the Devil, traded him my soul for the safety of my family, for my chance to create beautiful dresses, and for Ayden to be free."

"You did not fulfill your contract?"

"I tried to, but at the last moment Ayden destroyed it and gave his soul in my stead."

"Are you here to take the punishments you deserve?"

Olivia licked her lips. "No, though if that were the only way to free him, I would do it. But the contract was destroyed by hellfire. It simply does not exist."

"Then there is no reason for you to be here." He started to lift his hand.

"Wait!" Blalock said behind her. "She isn't here to contest her own contract, but that of the warrior angel."

"Who are you?"

"I am Blalock, torturer demon, from Hell." Blalock said bowing low.

An unearthly hiss sounded from behind them. He turned and saw the scowl of distaste on his master's face.

"Well, demon, do you agree to this assessment?" the Creator asked.

"Uh, it's true. Everything she has said."
The hiss became a growl.
"But, there is more, if your Excellency would hear it," the Devil hissed.
The bearded being turned to Olivia. "Go on."
"I believe the error in Ayden's contract is a very obvious one, sir. I mean it is specifically in the wording of the document. As I understand it, the evil one is in great error. If he would but produce the document, then we can examine it."
"Impossible!" Dagnar shouted, jumping to his feet. "It is in the great pit of all contracts. It is binding and unbreakable."
"So you say, demon. Bring it forth. I demand it."
Thunder boomed around them and the room shook. Olivia nearly fell but Blalock caught her.
"Now you've done it! You set the place asunder!" He whispered.
Olivia gripped his coat and held on until the shuddering palace became still again. When she looked over, a boiling pot sat in the center of the room. The tall being stepped forward, gazed into, and then waving his hand over it, snapped his fingers. A document appeared in his hand.
"Let's see. It reads...." He began to recite words in a language that Olivia didn't understand. When he was finished, he raised his eyes raised and he looked around the room. "I see nothing irregular about this contract."
Olivia's heart fell. "Please, could you read it so that I could understand it? I mean no disrespect. But, I must hear it for myself."
"Very well. It states as follows:
"There be on this day..." he paused, "it's a date you would not understand." Then he continued. "that a contract now exists between the angel, Ayden Royce, a warrior of Satan's regiment, Corps of Angels, that he has willingly entered into an agreement to obtain one innocent soul, a young woman, to take his place in the fiery depths, to complete the terms of his imprisonment and punishment until the end of time eternal."
Olivia lifted her eyes to him. "Then I tell you sir, that document is in error. It is incorrect, and as such it is null and void."
The courtroom erupted in an uproar. Screams, growls, grunts, and shouting voices echoed around them.
The tall man lifted his arms and all became instantly quiet. "From where do you obtain your information? I do not see it here."
"Of course you don't. Bring Ayden Royce here, now, so that you can examine him yourself."
Olivia held her breath. She knew well that if the Creator refused, her case was done and she would be learning first-hand what it meant to be 'eternally damned.'
"Very well, we shall bring him here."
The air around them grew instantly hot and a flash appeared in the center of the room. Ayden appeared, identical to the image that the Devil had brought in.
"Oh, God," she cried.
"He knows of this one's plight, child."
She turned. "Does he, truly?" She spun around the courtroom, her patience and her caution at an end.
"Look at him! Look at him and tell me what you see?"
The judge stepped forward, carefully examining Ayden, who, despite the pain he felt with each lash held his head high.
"I see a man, suffering in the pits of Hell," he said at last.
"Exactly! You see a man. Not an angel. A man!" Olivia spun around again. "Whatever you might think, this is not the same creature that the Devil tricked into signing the contract to trade his life for that of another. This is a man. One who loved me so very much that he gave his life for mine. I ask you, would an angel, or any of these creatures, do the same?"

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ayden had no recollection of anything after entering into the portal. He didn't see Olivia's contract burn to ash and fall at his feet. Nor, was he aware of the great shuddering rift that moved around him. But, when he was again hanging in the pit of fire, feeling the cruel lash upon his flesh, he knew he'd been successful.
"You dare to oppose me!" Came the Devil's thundering voice.
Opening his eyes, Ayden saw the horrible being hovering over him, his thick, gelatinous body stinking of death and rot, his foul words shaking the foundations of hell around them.
"You lied," Ayden said.
Instantly, the king of demons lashed out, and a tendril of fire flash, slapping Ayden across the face. He gagged, and as he had for eons, once again tasted his own blood.
"You dare to oppose me, you pitiable creature? I shall burn you to ash, and then use it to bathe my feet."
"I'm not opposing you. I'm merely pointing out the obvious. You didn't give Olivia anything for her soul. You arranged for her to marry that murderer then sent me in to entice her, and when she thought she had no

choice, she accepted your offer. She would have been a great dressmaker all on her own. You merely tricked her and reaped the benefits of her wonderful talent."

Another lash struck him, this one lighting a fire that consumed him. Ayden screamed, but his mouth and throat were lashed with the fire as well. When he came to again, he coughed and smoke belched out of his lungs.

"Do you know what you have done? You will suffer a hundred, no, a thousand times more than any of my subjects. For a millennia, and then a dozen after, you will know my wrath."

"As long as Olivia is safe from you, it doesn't matter. I don't matter." Ayden closed his mouth then, and though the Devil raged at him, and beat him, it made no difference. His love was and ever would belong to Olivia. To his amazement, that simple fact sustained him. And no matter how hard the Devil raged at him, he could endure.

And that made the old demon angrier still.

It was in the midst of his tirade, however, that everything changed. Ayden, who was as content as anyone could be under his circumstances, blinked and suddenly he was no longer in the depths of Hell, but somewhere else entirely.

Opening one eye, because the other had been burned shut, he saw her. His beloved. She stood in the center of some sort of holy palace and there were angels and demons all around them.

He didn't understand any of it, but she was crying, and pointing at him. Because his ears had been badly burned as well, he couldn't hear what she was saying, but just the sight of her was enough to fill his heart with joy.

"Olivia," he whispered, though the sound was too quiet for even his own ears.

"Would any of you trade your eternal damnation for someone you loved?" Olivia paused. "Are any of you, angels or demons, even capable of loving anyone?"

The room quieted around her.

The Creator spoke softly. "Angels and demons were not made for such things. They are only to serve their masters. Only humans are capable of such emotions as love and hate."

"Ayden is no longer that creature which the Devil blames his downfall upon. In fact, I doubt he was even then, because he's shown to have one thing that none of you have. Mercy."

"Miss, you have a compelling argument, but is it enough that we should overturn the judgment of this *Holy Court*?"

"If it is not, then surely there is none that can. What I'm saying to you is that Ayden's contract was null and void the moment the Devil made him into a man. He became different creature, and that which was angel was forever changed, gone forever. He cannot be held responsible for what the angel had done."

The room once again exploded in cacophony of angry voices. More arguments ensued. The clamoring voices rang on and on until a loud thunderclap sounded and a flash of lightning seared the air around them.

"Enough!"

Suddenly the room quieted, and the tall angel stepped forward. "You have given us a compelling argument, Miss. We shall consider your words."

He clapped his hands and suddenly Olivia and Blalock were alone, back in her bedroom.

"Is it over?"

Blalock sighed. Sitting down on the bed, he shook his head. "I'm afraid so. It was a brave attempt though." He laughed. "You even had me believing in you."

Olivia sank into a chair, unable to think beyond her grief. "How could they not understand?"

"You said it yourself. They are not capable of love or hate, or even mercy." He sighed. "For what it's worth, I was hoping you'd win."

Olivia nodded, feeling suddenly exhausted. "I'm so tired, Mr. Blalock. I don't know how I can go on."

Blalock shot to his feet. "Don't you dare say such a thing. He gave up his soul for you. If you give up now, his death will be for nothing."

"You really did care for him, didn't you?"

"Of course not. Didn't you hear yourself? Angels and demons are not capable of such things."

"Perhaps you are not what you were, either."

The room suddenly grew quiet, "Well, hell's fire," Blalock muttered at the last. "It can't be possible."

"You said it yourself; angels cannot exist on this world. I would think that demons could not either."

Blalock touched his face, his neck, the collar of his shirt. "Damn it all, you are correct." An expression of panic cut across his face. "What am I to do?"

"Stay here with me. Live out your life here. Find a woman to love, have children. You're a man now," she said, her voice quiet.

"Oh, dear." He sank back in his seat.

Just then, the room darkened and the thunder clapped again. In an instant, she and Blalock were no longer in her room. They were back in the palace, once again standing amongst the angels and demons.

"It has been determined, and ever more ordered, that Ayden Royce, he who was a warrior angel, that who now suffers in the bowels of Hell, is no longer the same being. He is determined to be of the family of Man, and is not to be held accountable to the punishments so judged for Ayden Royce, the angel."

Again, the shouted curses and screams of discontent abounded. In the midst of the chaos, Olivia turned and saw two angels dragging a figure between them.

They sent Olivia a disdainful stare and then dropped the body at her feet. It was Ayden.

"Oh! Ayden!" Olivia sank to her knees beside him, embracing him in her arms.

"Olivia? Is that you?" he asked. His one good eye seeking her out.

"Yes, my love. It's me."

"I've missed you."

She could no longer hold back her tears, and laying her head upon his chest, she cried with all of her heart.

Then, suddenly they were no longer in the palace courtroom, but in the Olivia's bedroom, huddled together on the floor.

"There, there, my love," he said.

When she lifted her head and looked deep into his eyes. Both of them.

"What happened?"

"I think you saved me," he said.

For in truth, all of his terrible burns and scars were gone. He was Ayden once again. Her Ayden, her man, her love.

"Of course, I did. And you saved me."

Together they both laughed, and then they cried. And finally, they made love.

Deep in the bowels of Hell, another hung in the pit. The lash bit at him and he screamed, another and he begged and pleaded. How long it went on, the man had no idea. When at last the torture ceased, a demon appeared.

"Welcome to my pit, sir."

"Please, stop! I can't take it!"

"I am well aware," the demon said, "of what you can take and what you cannot. I am an expert in the field of torture you see. I've been doing it for centuries."

A lash of fire stuck the condemned man again.

"Then this is it! This is my punishment?"

"No, the master has something far worse planned for you. He commands me to finish here and send you topside. You are condemned sir, to walk among the humans and procure innocent souls for him. You will suffer as men do, and you will die many painful deaths, but you will not be made into man."

The soul who hung there screamed.

Then he was no longer in the pit, but lying on the ground, looking up at a clear, blue sky.

Blalock sat up, incredulous that the scars of the lash no longer marred his skin.

"Excuse me, sir. I saw you fall. Are you hurt?"

He glanced up and saw the most beautiful woman imaginable leaning over him. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a neat chignon; her face was as pure and clear-eyed as a doe. He could tell instantly that she was no ordinary woman. She was an innocent.

"Oh, damn," Blalock said.

Epilogue

Ayden finished the last of the accounts before him, put the book away. He heard the sound of Olivia's laughter down the hall. She was chatting with one of their customers. Still very popular among the ton, the ladies often visited her and invited her to their estates for fittings and such.

"Hello my darling," she said as she entered the study.

"My love," he leaned over and kissed her lightly. "What's say we retire for the evening? Thomas made some fine soup and herring. We can eat in our room." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

"That sounds wonderful," she said, "but I find I have a hunger of a different kind. She pulled him closer and kissed him deeply, her mouth against his, her tongue teasing him. "I want you now."

That was all it took these days. Ayden laughed as she pulled at his trousers, and he did her the same kindness, lifting up her skirts.

"What my lady wants, my lady gets." He took her mouth this time while his hands found warm thighs beneath her skirts. He slid them upward, to her waist, lifting her skirt even higher. She laughed and threw her head back and he began kissing her neck, and then sliding his mouth into the valley between her breasts.

"Ahh, Ayden, I do love you so," she said. Sliding her hands downward, she pulled down his trousers and pulled his linen shirt free. "Take me now, my love."

"And so I shall, but first, I have a question."

"A question? At a time like this?"

"Will you marry me, fair Olivia?"

Olivia stopped, her heart beating wildly and tears sprang to her eyes. "Of course, my Ayden. I will marry you. But, you'd best be about your business before I change my mind."

He laughed. "You are a most demanding woman, Olivia. But you have my heart, my body, and my soul. And now you shall have my name."

Olivia smiled at him, "And if you keep at it, I may one day have your child."

Before she could draw another breath, Ayden kissed her deeply, and gently lifted her up and carried her into the dressing room. Once inside, he pulled the curtain with one hand and settling her on the chaise lounge, lifted her skirt again and set to work. He was a determined man, untying her bodice and lifting it over her head so that only her shift and corset remained. Then he lifted her hips and moved against her, his erection finding just the perfect spot.

Olivia moaned and arched her back. Every time they made love it was pure ecstasy, and she counted her blessings that their love had been strong enough to fight the depths of Hell and the Devil himself and win.

"Now, my love" Ayden called out, and her body responded, clenching him over and over, tightening and releasing until she felt him reach his own release.

They lay on the settee for some time, the both of them together, just enjoying each other's company.

"I wonder, whatever happened to Blalock? Do you think the Devil punished him as well?" she asked.
"I'm sure he must have. But don't worry about him. He knows how to make the best of every situation."
Ayden kissed her once again. "Let's no longer speak of that place. We've a life here, and I have every intention of enjoying each moment of it."
Olivia smiled. "Of course, my love."
"Good. Now, I'm going to take you up to our room and summon Thomas to bring us up our dinner. Then we shall eat and make love again."
Olivia laughed. "Of course, my love. Of course." She paused, taking in a sharp breath.
"What is it?" he asked.
"You know, now that you're human, you are no longer immortal. You'll live a normal span of years and then..."
He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. An eternity of emptiness is a hell all its own. I know that time passes and a human's number of days always grow shorter. But every day will be with you, Olivia. A thousand eternities would simply not meet that measure."
Olivia smiled. "Then I'm most happy to spend every one of those days with you, my angel, my love."

The End

About the Author

Pam LaBud is a twenty-four year veteran of the field of nursing. Working mostly in critical care, her long and varied time includes working in the cardiac catheterization lab, post surgical recovery room, the intensive care unit, and home health. For Pam, it's all about giving people the best care possible and providing emotional support to her patients and their families during what is a most critical time.

Currently, Pam continues to work as a critical care nurse as she builds her writing career. Married for 16 years, Pam's husband is a charge nurse of a busy medical floor at night and the two juggle schedules and a busy private life to raise two daughters, ages 15 and 12. Between working as a nurse, shuttling the girls to school and dance classes, Pam carves out writing time on her days off.

"I am many things, but family always comes first, doing the best job I can as a nurse, and then my heart-which is writing romance novels. I'm the prime example of having the full life!"

Pam has been a member of the Romance Writers of America for ten years. She also is a member of her local chapter, the Central Florida Romance Writers, where she served two years as Treasurer and two years as President.

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***More than Words* by Kelly Kirch**

Kylie Dobson is a romance author with a problem. As a seat-of-the-pants writer, she depends on the strength of the characters to drive her plot. But when her hero, Milo, Lord Gafton refuses to chase after the prescribed heroine, everything goes wonky. Kylie is inexplicably sucked into her work of fiction and transported from a contemporary venue to a fictional Regency setting. What's worse, nothing she does is affecting the plot and she can't get out.

Set into motion by her own creative process is a winter storm which seals the Regency party goes in on a country estate. If that wasn't bad enough, a murderer is on the loose and he's picking off one guest at a time. The more time Kylie spends with Milo the more she comes to depend on him. She's convinced that his character sketch will kick in at any moment and he'll fall for her heroine. But will it happen before she loses her heart to him? And what happens when the plot draws to the end? Will the killer have his way and will Kylie solve the case only to be returned to her reality without the man she's fallen for?

***Always and Forever* by Pamela Labud**

Left crippled and weak after a pistol shot to his head, Robert Houghton, Earl of Singleton, a nobleman from the English Regency, is kidnapped by a cantankerous ghost and taken back through time to 1245 Scotland. Now he must rescue a headstrong and beautiful Laird's daughter from a forced marriage to a cruel clan chieftain.

Jenna MacReynolds is the daughter of a dying clan chieftain who faces her doom at the hands of the cruellest man in all of Scotland, the very same who years before had ravaged her and left her barren. She knows that once it is learned that she cannot conceive his child, he will arrange an 'accident' that will take her life, and then go on to claim her beautiful young sister as his bride.

Desperate, Jenna calls up the ancient ghost who owes every first born daughter of the MacReynold clan a single wish. The ghost fulfills her wish, and Robert appears, a broken man who is able only to speak in her presence. Although he's not quite what she had in mind, she has no choice but to accept Robert and offers him her hand in marriage. Soon they find themselves in the midst of castle intrigues, a fierce battle between the clan chieftains, and finally facing their own death at the hand of their enemy.

But the love that grew out of a common purpose has a magical power of its own, and, as Robert and Jenna learn, is strong enough to overcome the fiercest evil and transcend even time itself.

A Dusting of Synby Melinda Barron

As the seventh son of a duke, Keran of Bristol never thought to have his own lordship. So when King Edward IV offers him a bride and a castle near the Scottish border, he is ecstatic. However, when he arrives at the country keep, he finds that His Majesty's court is not the only place where intrigue resides.

Syndra of Mardoon knew that after her father's death, her stepmother would never allow her to be anything more than a servant in her own home. Threatened with the death of her friend if she doesn't cooperate, she hides in the shadows while her younger half sister is introduced to the new lord as his intended.

With the scheming plays put forth by her stepmother already in play, Syndra is reluctant to believe that the handsome new lord can set things right at Mardoon. But one touch of Keran's lips convinces Syndra otherwise, and she finds herself surrendering to him...mind, body and soul.

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