

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Seeking Charlotte

N.J. Walters

Book three in the Hearts of Fire series.

Creed Lawson knows Charlotte Jones is trouble from the moment she presses her lithe body to his and kisses him. But that doesn't stop him from taking what she's offering – a night of hot, uninhibited sex. But Creed hasn't bargained for the feelings she stirs in him, nor the talk of crystals, demons and destiny.

Charlotte is an empath. The ability to feel people's emotions has made it difficult for her to lead a normal life. At eighteen she received one of the eight pieces of the Heart of Fire, a crystal that contains untold power. She was told there was a male who held the other half of her stone, as well as a demon that coveted all the pieces of the crystal.

The demon has finally found her. But she knows that Creed is the special man she's been waiting for. Charlotte is facing the fight of her life. Will Creed fight beside her or walk away?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Seeking Charlotte

ISBN 9781419926624

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Edited by Shannon Combs

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication April 2010

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SEEKING CHARLOTTE

N.J. Walters

Dedication

This book wouldn't have been possible without three incredibly talented ladies. Thank you to Ciana Stone, T.J. Michaels and Nicole Austin for asking me to be a part of the Hearts of Fire series. It was a pleasure and an honor to work with all of you. You're not just amazing writers. You're also very classy ladies.

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Prologue

Charlotte slipped past the large wooden door, shutting it softly behind her. She closed her eyes, inhaling the quiet, the sheer tranquility of the chapel. She loved it here and often came just to sit and absorb the serenity. The calming scent of the sandalwood incense enveloped her, settling her jittery nerves. Her eighteenth birthday was only a few hours away. This was her last night at the orphanage she'd called home for most of her life.

She opened her eyes, trying not to think about her packed suitcases or the way the lump in the pit of her stomach grew larger with each passing hour. Instead she looked around the chapel. Three tall ivory candles sat on a table in front of the altar. Their light flickered, illuminating the beautiful colors in the stained-glass windows. If Charlotte had her way, she'd stay here forever.

From as far back as she could remember, she knew she was different. Being around other people was difficult for her. No, not just difficult. Painful. Emotions of all kinds, but especially the negative ones, bombarded her constantly, making it incredibly hard for her to function on a daily basis.

Empathy. That's what Angela Raguel, the headmistress of The Gideon House, had called it. Charlotte called it a curse. Over the years she'd gained some measure of control, which allowed her to function on a daily basis. But it was still a challenge.

She didn't remember her parents. They'd died in a car accident when she was still a baby. She'd had several sets of foster parents as a child, but no one wanted to keep the child who cringed away from their touch, a child who would rather be alone.

She wasn't sad that she'd ended up at the orphanage. It was here she'd met her very best friends in the world—Memory Wells, De'alla Isaacs and McKenna Fulton. They were sisters without sharing blood. Like her they were different. They understood what it was to feel like a misfit, to not belong.

Memory was the oldest. She had what Charlotte thought of as the “magic eye”. Memory could picture something in her mind and have it appear on the film in a camera or a piece of paper. She’d been the first of them to leave the orphanage and was already making a name for herself in the world of photography with her compelling pictures.

Then there was De’alla, or Dee as they all called her. She was smart and confident, everything Charlotte wasn’t. Her sister had the ability to communicate with the forces of nature and could actually control water. Dee knew exactly what she wanted out of life—college overseas, followed by a high-paying job with plenty of travel. With her focus and drive, there was no doubt that Dee would get exactly what she wanted.

Kenna was the youngest, although she seemed much older. Like Charlotte, Kenna loved the darkness, the stillness of the night when most other people were asleep in their beds. But unlike Charlotte, Kenna was a fighter. She’d trained in all manner of martial arts since she was a child. Her talent for psychokinesis enabled her to manipulate and direct energies with her mind and release them through her body, thus making her a formidable and highly skilled fighter.

They all kept in touch with one another but it hadn’t been the same since Memory and Dee had left. And now it was her turn to leave.

“Come here, Charlotte.”

She jumped, her heart skipping a beat before it began a quick *tap tap* in her chest. The headmistress of the orphanage was waiting patiently in front of the altar. As always, Angela looked serene, her pale blonde hair curled around her face. Her eyes were her most striking feature. They were a clear, brilliant blue, surrounded by thick, pale lashes. There was an otherworldly quality about the woman that was disconcerting at times. Charlotte always felt there was much more to Angela than any of them could ever know. She was also one of the few people from whom Charlotte couldn’t pick up any emotions or thoughts.

Charlotte hurried up the aisle, suddenly wishing she were wearing something nicer than jeans and a T-shirt, but it was too late to change now. She'd spent the last few hours wandering in the garden, saying goodbye to her beloved plants. She felt a deep connection to the earth and found solace in nature. For the past five years, she'd been in charge of the kitchen gardens. It hurt that the job now belonged to someone else.

She almost hadn't come here tonight, but Angela had been so good to her all these years, there was no way she could refuse the older woman.

Angela smiled and held out her hand. "Happy birthday, child."

"Thank you," she murmured, ducking her head so that Angela wouldn't see the tears in her eyes.

"Look at me." Angela's voice was firm but kind. Sighing, Charlotte raised her head and met the older woman's direct stare. "This is your last night here and I have a gift for you." She held out a long silver chain with a crystal dangling from the end.

The light reflected off the sides, refracting through the crystal itself, sending a rainbow of colors dancing, cascading over her palm. Charlotte leaned closer and could see the point on one end of the crystal and the slightly jagged end on the other, as though it had been ripped from the earth that had created it. "A quartz crystal." The stone seemed to shimmer like a star. It reminded her of the night sky. So many mysteries. So much beauty.

Angela smiled as she slipped the silver chain over Charlotte's head. "Yes. It will help you strengthen your intuition and powers. It will also help soothe and calm you when you are around others."

Charlotte wrapped her fingers around the pendant and felt a jolt of heat and power race up her arm and down through her body, overwhelming her senses. She tried to release the crystal, but her fingers wouldn't cooperate.

"Just breathe, child."

She heard Angela's voice as if from a great distance. Concentrating on her breathing, she inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. Images flashed through her mind,

pictures of an amazing world filled with crystals and light. Charlotte knew all the people who lived there were in danger, but there was nothing she could do to stop the impending disaster. Nothing anyone could do.

"The world sees you as an outcast, a misfit." Angela's voice was little more than a whisper in Charlotte's mind. It brought her back to reality with a solid thump. The words were true, but they still hurt. A lone tear trickled down her cheek.

"But you are special," Angela continued. "You have a unique gift, as do your three sisters. You are one of the Chosen."

"Chosen?" That didn't sound good to Charlotte. She didn't want to be different. All she'd ever wanted was to feel normal. The crystal pulsed in her hand, wrapping her in its comforting glow.

"Yes, Charlotte." Angela sighed as if tired. Charlotte forced her attention from the crystal but still couldn't make herself release it. "Everything in the universe must have balance. Without dark, light cannot exist. Good must counteract evil. Male and female energies complement one another."

"I understand, but what does that have to do with me being one of the Chosen?" It felt silly to even call herself that.

"The ancients foresaw the death and rebirth of their world. In an attempt to keep the balance of life, they created the Heart of Fire. Born of the elements of earth, air, fire, water and spirit, it is the primordial spark, which contains all the knowledge and power of the lost civilization of Atlantis."

Charlotte swallowed hard, her fingers gripping the crystal tight. She was very much afraid that Angela was speaking of the world she'd seen in her head, even though such a thing couldn't be possible.

"The crystal was actually created out of eight separate pieces, each one balancing the other. Alone, they enhance the gifts of the bearer. When combined into four pairs, they contain great strength. When joined as one, their power is infinite."

That sounded way too scary for Charlotte. She forced herself to release the crystal. It bounced against her chest before nestling between her breasts. It was such a small thing to have such a huge legend attached to it. "This can't be true." She needed it not to be anything more than an entertaining story, much like the bedtime tales of ancient worlds that Angela had told them as children.

"It's very true. There is a stone for each of your sisters and out there in the world there exists a counterpart."

This didn't sound good. If there had to be balance, then— "A man?" Charlotte blurted out. She hadn't even had her first kiss yet. It was difficult to get close to a cute guy when you were bombarded by every emotion he had, lust being the most prominent one.

Angela offered her a reassuring smile. "Yes, a man. You have to find him, as your sisters will have to find their other halves. The crystal will help you. It will resonate with the right man. The crystal *wants* to find its other half." The smile fell from Angela's face.

A shiver crept down Charlotte's spine. Whatever was coming wouldn't be good.

"The crystal will also help you detect your enemy."

"Enemy? I didn't ask for any of this." Charlotte tried to remove the necklace, but her fingers refused to cooperate. "Why won't it come off?" Panic swamped her. Her vision dimmed and, for a moment, she was afraid she'd pass out.

Angela wrapped her strong arm around Charlotte's shoulders and guided her to the front pew. Charlotte leaned back and drew in a deep breath, concentrating on the soothing surroundings rather than the cacophony of thoughts in her head.

"The crystal belongs with you, to you. It will not willingly leave."

"I don't want to be part of this," she gasped.

Angela shook her head. "It was decided you would be one of the Chosen long before you were ever born. It is your destiny."

There was so much to think about, but time was running out. In only hours Charlotte was scheduled to leave here to start working at a greenhouse halfway across the country. If she wanted details, now was the time to get them. "Who is the enemy?"

"His name is Asmodeus and he is a demon, one of the princes of hell. His domain is lust. He twists it to gain his own ends. And he wants all the pieces of the Heart of Fire and the power that comes with it."

Charlotte swallowed hard. She had a difficult enough time just going to the grocery store. How in the heck was she going to defeat a demon? It was impossible.

Angela continued and Charlotte forced herself to pay attention. "Asmodeus will attempt to trick you, seduce you into believing he is your counterpart. He lives off the life energy of others, especially the darker emotions, and will drain you if you do not protect yourself. The crystal will help you defend against that, even as it leads you to your counterpart."

"This can't be true." She desperately wanted this entire thing to be nothing but fantasy. One look in Angela's eyes dispelled that hope. Charlotte could see the truth there.

Shaking her head, she stood. "I don't want this."

"You are one of the eight. Nothing can change that."

Crystals, lost worlds, demons—it was all too much to think about. And she didn't even want to imagine having to find the male with the other part of her crystal. Wasn't going to happen.

Charlotte was going to work in the nursery, grow flowers and plants and have a quiet life. She was nobody's idea of a hero, least of all her own. Her sisters could save the world. "I'm sorry, Angela." She turned and hurried out of the chapel, not looking back. Her life here at The Gideon House was over.

"I'm sorry too," Angela whispered just before the door closed behind Charlotte.

Chapter One

Charlotte Ann Jones was between a rock and a hard place and she had no one to blame but herself. She'd been so busy checking her rearview mirror to see if anyone was following her, she hadn't noticed the engine light on her car flashing red. It was pure dumb luck her normally reliable Volkswagen Beetle sputtered to a halt within twenty yards of a roadside bar.

The problem was that Charlotte didn't do well in crowds, especially not crowds like this.

"Damn it." She slammed her hand against the steering wheel in frustration. "I should never have gone to that conference in Tennessee." But she'd been contacted by the head of the organizing committee and asked if she would consider giving a workshop.

She usually said no to such requests, but for some unexplainable reason, this time she'd said yes. With several books and innumerable magazine articles under her belt, Charlotte was something of an expert in herbs and their uses. The conference had been catering to a small but dedicated group that grew and used their own herbs for everything from cooking to beauty products to ceremonial uses for their spiritual practices.

Sighing in defeat, she grabbed her purse from the passenger seat and checked for traffic before climbing out of her car and locking the door behind her. The night closed in around her. Instead of comforting her as it usually did, she felt it pressing in around her like a malevolent force. She glanced up at the clear night sky, trying to draw strength from the full moon hovering high above her.

Her hand went to the necklace that dangled between her breasts, her fingers caressing the crystal pendant that hung there. In all the years since Angela had given it

to her. It had become so much a part of her that she forgot it was there for days and weeks on end. It had been seventeen years since that fateful night and Charlotte had long since decided that Angela's story had been little more than fairy tale.

Now she was no longer certain.

Glancing over her shoulder, she hurried toward the neon lights of the bar. Better to face the crowd inside than to remain outside and come face-to-face with *him*. Darrin Bates had seemed like such a nice man when he'd been introduced to her at the conference. He was about five-foot-eleven with light blond hair and blue eyes. He had a lithe build and a ready smile. Darrin was also an expert on herbs, as well as her other passion, crystals.

It had started out innocently enough. They'd chatted and he'd invited her to have a cup of coffee with him. He didn't overwhelm her senses. Was rather bland at first glance. It was while they were having coffee that she first noticed that something wasn't quite right. Her crystal pendant began to grow cold, so cold that she'd felt it all the way through the fabric of her sweater. She began to sweat. Her stomach churned, leaving her slightly nauseated and weak. She felt—unwell.

That's when the images had hit her so hard and fast, there had been no controlling them. Darrin wanted her. Pictures of them together in various sexual positions had flashed through her brain. Instead of arousing her, they'd left her numb and not a little disturbed.

She'd wrapped her fingers around the pendant, drawing strength from it. He'd noticed her actions and asked her about the stone. Waves of protectiveness had swamped her. She had to guard the crystal.

She'd made some excuse and fled the café, stumbling back to her room. Thankfully it was the last night of the conference. Charlotte had planned to join in the final evening activity—a campfire and cookout—and start back home to the mountains of North Carolina in the morning. Instead she'd tossed all her belongings into her bag, checked out of the hotel, gave her excuses to the conference coordinator and hit the road.

A noise in the distance brought her back to the here and now. The lights of the roadhouse bar were getting closer. Charlotte stepped up her pace, practically running. Her purse bumped against her side as she glanced over her shoulder. A car was coming. She didn't know how she knew it was Darrin, but she wasn't about to question her instincts. For some reason the man wanted her. But more than that, he wanted her crystal.

Was Darrin her counterpart, the man Angela had spoken of all those years ago? Charlotte certainly hoped not. The more time she'd spent in his company, the more he'd given her the creeps. There was nothing wrong with him, not outwardly. Physically he was everything she'd always thought she'd wanted in a man. In fact, he was her ideal. Perfect.

Too perfect.

That's what had bothered her the most. He had the right answers for every question, the right moves. She'd watched him at the conference. He was smooth but he subtly manipulated everyone around him, getting exactly what he'd wanted. For some reason she'd been blind to that fact until earlier tonight when they'd been having coffee. Darrin had started asking way too many questions about her, wanting to know where she lived, where she'd grown up.

Maybe she was being paranoid, but she didn't think so.

Sound carried on such a clear night and the growl of the engine was getting closer. Giving up all pretense of calm, Charlotte raced for the front door. Her heart was pounding as she gripped the handle and yanked it open.

A tsunami of emotion slammed into her, almost knocking her on her ass. Anger, frustration, greed and lust hit her smack-dab in the face. The dark emotions were always the hardest ones to handle. She held on to the door handle and gritted her teeth until the worst of it passed.

Using every skill she'd built up in her thirty-five years, Charlotte began to erect a barrier around her. There was no way to block out every emotion but at least she could

dim their intensity somewhat. Every little bit helped. The sound of tires on gravel gave her the kick in the pants she needed to get moving. She didn't look behind her as she stepped inside. She needed to hide.

Because if that wasn't her counterpart chasing her, then it was the other one Angela had spoken of. Asmodeus. She had never said the name out loud, but she'd done plenty of research over the years. Whether you believed in demons or not, there was a lot of information out there on them. And right now, Charlotte was more than willing to believe.

According to what she'd read, a demon could influence people and events but it could not control them. Not without exerting a great deal of effort, which drained them. As a result, a demon could only stay in this realm for a finite amount of time unless they were able to draw power from another source. Demons were like psychic vampires, living off the intense emotions of others. Most ordinary people had no idea of the amount of energy such emotions produced. Then there were other, more stable sources like her crystal.

She wished her sisters were closer. They would help her, especially Kenna, who could kick some serious butt when the occasion called for it. Not that Memory or De'alla were slouches. But Charlotte was alone.

The noise was almost overwhelming. A country song blasted out from the old-fashioned jukebox in the corner. The crack of pool balls sounded from off to the left. The murmur of voices was a din all its own. Like a white noise it was there, but she couldn't make out any individual voices.

It was difficult to see at first. The room was dimly lit. Gloomy. Small tables were scattered everywhere, surrounded by heavy wooden chairs. It was so dark Charlotte couldn't see the floor. When the bottom of her sneaker stuck in one or two places as she made her way toward the bar, she decided she was better off not knowing what was down there.

As she passed several bar patrons she tried to ignore them. The man to her right was angry at the woman with him. The two men currently playing pool had auras so dark she didn't want to be anywhere near them. They were violent, dangerous men. The woman with the teased blonde hair and tight top, displaying her very plentiful attributes for all, was currently lusting after a man sitting at the end of the bar.

Charlotte resisted the urge to put her hands over her ears. It was a childhood reaction to try to block out the noise in her head. It hadn't worked then and wouldn't work now. She focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

The bar area took up a good portion of the wall right in front of her, making it central and readily available to every other section of the building. Bottles of liquor and glasses of various sizes sat on shelves behind it. A waitress was at the bar picking up a tray filled with a round of drinks. Charlotte started toward her, planning on asking where the ladies' room was. She could hide out there and call a tow truck on her cell phone.

As the waitress moved away from the bar, a man came into view. Every thought Charlotte had in her head disappeared and she came to a complete stop, unable to move. The tingling sensation started at her toes and slowly worked its way up her body until it reached the top of her head. Heat flashed over her and a wave of intense sexual longing coursed through her body. The problem was it wasn't coming from anyone else. It was coming from her.

The man in front of her was dangerous. Charlotte could sense that much about him. There was a barely contained sense of violence surrounding him. He was sitting at the bar, forearms resting on the edge, hands wrapped loosely around his beer. He was seemingly relaxed, but it was a ruse. She knew he could erupt at a moment's notice, like the predator that he was, and swing into action if he felt threatened.

The tone of his skin and his facial structure told her he had at least some Native American ancestors. The light from the bar reflected off his straight black hair, which fell to his shoulders. His incredibly wide shoulders. His features were strong, his jaw

square. His nose reminded her of a hawk's beak. She got the impression of power and determination. This was not a man to be trifled with.

She knew she was breathing way too fast but couldn't seem to slow it or her racing heart. Her nipples tightened and her breasts swelled. It had been years since she'd had sex. She'd tried it in her early twenties, but as an experiment it had failed dreadfully. She'd sensed her boyfriend's growing sexual excitement, followed swiftly by disappointment when she didn't reach an orgasm. Disinterest had quickly set in. It wasn't long after that their relationship had fizzled out. Charlotte hadn't bothered with men since.

But this was different. She'd never experienced anything like this in her life. Her panties were damp and she barely stifled a moan as her pussy spasmed. She didn't even know the man's name, but she wanted him.

As though he felt her gaze on him, he turned her way. She was too far away to see what color his eyes were, but they were dark. They narrowed and he lowered his eyebrows. She could sense his growing irritation. Between her breasts the crystal pulsed, growing warmer by the second.

Someone bumped her from behind, breaking the erotic spell that held her captive. Charlotte jumped on contact and started moving again. She risked a quick glance over her shoulder. Sure enough, Darrin was standing just inside the door and he was scanning the crowd. The look on his face was anything but placid and bland. He was furious. Violently furious.

Fear flooded her. She didn't think. Reacting on pure instinct, she hurried toward the man at the bar. He tracked her with his eyes until she was standing right next to him. He turned on the barstool so he was facing her.

She glanced toward the door. Darrin was still searching for her. Whether he really was Asmodeus or not didn't matter. He was a dangerous man and she was his target. Charlotte turned back toward the dark-haired stranger. "Please help me."

If anything, his expression grew even more forbidding. A muscle in his jaw worked and she suspected he was grinding his back teeth together. A wave of annoyance rolled off him. He was going to say no. Going to dismiss her.

She couldn't let that happen.

The pendant around her neck was so hot she was surprised there wasn't a wisp of smoke rising from her sweater. At the very least there should be a scorch mark. He started to turn away from her and, for the first time in her life, Charlotte did something totally outrageous and completely out of character. Grabbing his shoulders, she went up on her toes and kissed him.

The muscles in his shoulders bunched and rippled beneath her palms. His hands settled on her waist and she knew he was going to push her away. Panic swamped her and she redoubled her efforts. Running her tongue along the seam of his lips, she teased him. Charlotte wished she had more experience in the art of seducing a man, but she'd always been a fast learner.

Opening her senses to him, she tried to sort through all his emotions. The annoyance was still there, but it had been joined by a surge of lust. Obviously she was doing something right. Encouraged, she shifted closer, plastering her breasts against his rock-solid chest. His lips parted and she plunged her tongue inside.

His hands moved from her waist. One of them slipped down to grip her bottom while the other one slid up to cup the back of her head, tilting it slightly to the right. He pulled back and stared down at her. She blinked, bringing his face back into focus. His eyes were dark brown, maybe even black. Either way, they were the same color as her favorite dark chocolate.

His gaze narrowed, settling on her mouth. She licked her lips, nervous under his unblinking stare. This time it was he who initiated contact. There was no tentative exploration, none of the awkwardness she'd felt. The stranger laid claim to her mouth.

His tongue stroked inside, touching and tasting every dark corner. His lips were warm and firm, his grip on her sure as he held her tight to his body. The hand on her

butt pushed her forward and her belly came into contact with something very large and extremely hard.

Charlotte felt his cock pulsing all the way through the fabric of his jeans and her sweater. Any other time in her life it might have embarrassed her. This time it made her feel powerful, womanly. She felt his heat, his life force, luring her deeper into his seductive hold. She'd never felt this close to another human being in her entire life and she wanted more.

She might have initiated the first kiss, but she was no longer in control.

Her pussy throbbed in perfect rhythm with his cock. His hand caressed the cheeks of her ass, urging her even closer. She arched her upper body and moaned as her nipples tightened even harder.

"Get a room."

Charlotte jolted, tearing her lips from the stranger's as the male voice intruded, cutting through the sexual haze that surrounded her. She heard several whistles and catcalls, encouraging them to keep going. Some male patrons even offered some very explicit suggestions, one of which included stripping her naked and laying her on top of the bar.

Reality came crashing back down. She was kissing a complete stranger. No, not merely kissing. If he'd stripped off her jeans, lifted her onto his lap and plunged his cock into her pussy, she wouldn't have stopped him. She wouldn't even have cared that the bar was crowded and people were watching. She'd never experienced such sexual desire. Hadn't known it was even possible. This wasn't like her at all. She was shy and reserved, not wanton and wild.

This man was dangerous to her in ways she couldn't even begin to imagine.

The stranger shot the bartender a dark scowl. "I just might do that."

"For fuck's sake, Lawson, at least take it outside." The bartender shot her a glare before tossing the towel in his hand over his shoulder and stalking off to the other end of the bar to serve a customer.

"I'm sorry." She didn't know what else to say. Her body ached with an unfamiliar heat. Her cheeks were warm with embarrassment.

"Lady, what the hell is wrong with you?"

It was the first words he'd spoken directly to her and they went through her like a physical caress, reaching the private, hidden places of her soul, not to mention her body. She swallowed hard and opened her mouth to answer. She had no idea what she was going to say, but she was interrupted before she even got the chance to speak.

"What are you doing?" Darrin put his hand on her shoulder.

She gave an involuntary cry and jerked away, instinctively moving closer to the stranger. Lawson. That was what the bartender had called him. She had no idea if it was his first name or his last name and she didn't care. Whoever Lawson was, he was preferable to Darrin. "Go away, Darrin. Stop following me."

Darrin turned his attention to the stranger. "Sorry about this, mister." He took Charlotte's arm and tried to drag her away.

She gripped both hands around Lawson's wrist and hung on tight. Looking into his face, she silently pleaded with him to help her. She could almost hear his mental sigh, sense the abrupt change in his emotions. They shot from aroused to deadly in the blink of an eye. "He your husband?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Lover?"

"Lord no." Just the mere thought was enough to make her slightly nauseous.

Lawson raised one eyebrow at her rather enthusiastic reply and flicked his gaze back to Darrin. "Doesn't look like the lady wants to go with you," Lawson drawled.

"Stay out of this," Darrin snarled, but he let go of her arm. Charlotte quickly moved away from him so he couldn't grab her again.

"Now I can't rightly do that. I've got plans for the lady." Lawson stood and eased in front of Charlotte. "And those plans don't include you."

Darrin smiled and Charlotte got a glimpse of the pure evil behind the mask. Her mouth went dry and her limbs began to shake. She blinked, trying to focus, as his shape seemed to shimmer. The man disappeared and in his place was a huge, hulking creature with scaly flesh and sharp teeth that dripped with blood. Charlotte blinked again and Darrin was back.

Either she was having a nervous breakdown of some sort, which was entirely possible given recent events, or Angela had been telling her the truth. Asmodeus was real and he'd finally come in search of the pendant. Her fingers went to the crystal. She focused all her energy on it, putting a protective barrier between her and Lawson and Darrin. She'd involved an innocent man in this fight and it was up to her to protect him.

Darrin jerked back as the invisible energy hit him. The corners of his mouth kicked up in a parody of a smile and he inclined his head slightly. "Well, well, the kitten has claws," he taunted. Once again, Darrin's image seemed to flicker. He turned to Lawson. "You should have walked away when you had the chance."

Turning his back on them, Darrin walked through the crowded bar. People instinctively stepped out of his way, giving him a clear path to the door. At the last moment he turned around and scanned the crowd. He seemed to focus his attention toward the area where the pool table was. Two seconds later, a male voice rose in anger. "Get your hands off my woman." It was followed by a crash and a shout.

Darrin disappeared out through the door as a bar fight broke out. Lawson grabbed her hand, towing her toward the door. "We need to get out of here before the cops arrive."

Keeping close to the walls, he led her toward the entrance. They'd almost made it when a huge man stepped in front of them. "I want the woman."

Charlotte cringed as waves of violence and lust hit her. The man wanted her and didn't care if he had to rape her in the process. In fact, he'd prefer it that way. Her head was bombarded with negative emotions, making it hard for her to function. She

wrapped her free hand around her pendant, desperately trying to shut out the overload of emotions swamping her.

Lawson didn't even bother to reply. He swung his fist. Flesh and bone collided as he sent an uppercut to the man's jaw, dropping him where he stood. Charlotte blinked at the man now sprawled across the dirty floor.

"Come on," Lawson yelled above the din of the crowd. He grabbed her wrist and all but shoved her out through the door.

Not releasing her, he pulled her toward a black pickup. "My car is back down the road," she tried to explain. "It broke down earlier."

"Forget it." He glanced over his shoulder as the door slammed open and other patrons stumbled out. Sirens were faint in the distance but they were getting closer. "You can call for a tow truck later."

He unlocked the driver's side, opened the door, picked her up and tossed her inside the truck. She scooted over to avoid being squashed as he followed close behind her. He jammed the key in the ignition and turned it. The engine started with a deep rumble. Putting the vehicle in gear, he peeled out of the parking lot, leaving a spray of dirt and gravel in his wake.

Charlotte braced herself in her seat using her legs and one of her hands. With her free hand, she groped for the seat belt. Her purse got in the way and she dumped it on the floor, slightly surprised that she still had it after everything that had happened. Once she was strapped in tight, she turned to Lawson. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere we can talk."

Neither of them spoke as he drove for about twenty minutes before turning off onto a side road. A few minutes later, he pulled the truck to a halt. Charlotte looked around. There were no houses in sight. No sign of any kind of life. She gripped the seat belt tight as a shiver went down her spine. She was in the middle of nowhere with a complete stranger.

He turned off the engine and the quiet enveloped them. The creak of the leather seat sounded loud as he turned toward her. "Talk."

Chapter Two

Creed Lawson stared at the woman sitting next to him. She was currently clutching her seat belt like it was a lifeline. She looked small and frightened. Not at all like the sexy spitfire who'd practically climbed onto his lap at the bar. The woman was a study in contrasts.

The only light came from the moon, but it was more than enough for him to see her. Not that he needed any light. Her image was permanently burned into his brain.

Creed was a simple man. He preferred to keep his life uncomplicated. And that principle stood when it came to his dealings with the opposite sex. He liked his women tall, blonde, busty and lusty. The kind of woman who was looking for a good, hard fuck and nothing more. He didn't do commitment and avoided any woman who even hinted at more than a tumble in bed.

Why then was he so damn attracted to the woman beside him? She wasn't overly tall, about average in fact. Her hair was short and shaggy, the color of rich, delicious toffee. She was slender, but her breasts were substantial. Not huge but definitely a handful. And Creed had big hands.

When she'd plastered herself against him at the bar, he'd felt their softness. His fingers had itched to peel her sweater over her head, unhook her bra and see for himself just what color her nipples were. He wanted to touch them, taste them. In spite of her boldness, there was an innocence about her that brought all his protective instincts to the fore.

His cock twitched, reminding him that it had been quite a while since he'd had a woman. He'd been on the road a lot lately. His work as a bounty hunter took him all over the state and beyond. He'd just finished bringing in his latest bail jumper and had

gone to Joe's roadhouse bar with every intention of getting laid. He'd already had the woman picked out – tall, blonde and interested. Then *she* had walked in.

"What's your name?" It belatedly occurred to him that he didn't even know her first name. Not that it really mattered. He wasn't going to get involved in whatever mess was going on in her life, but it would probably make her feel more comfortable if he called her by her name.

"Charlotte. Charlotte Jones." She stuck out her hand.

Charlotte. The name suited her. It was a feminine and slightly old-fashioned name. Not one you heard much these days. Wanting another excuse to touch her again, he took her hand. Her grip was surprisingly firm. The woman was stronger than she looked. As he withdrew his hand, he felt rough patches on her skin. Calluses.

He frowned. Charlotte Jones was no stranger to hard work, despite the rather ethereal air that surrounded her. He studied her closer. Her face was heart shaped, her lips full, and her eyes a light, clear blue. There was a look of expectation in her eyes that set his instincts humming.

She was trouble. With a capital T.

If there was one thing in this world Creed trusted, it was his instincts. That inner sense of knowing when there was danger, of being able to read people's moods, had kept him alive through twelve years in the military, five years as a cop and the last four as a bounty hunter.

He didn't consider himself a particularly spiritual man in spite of his Lakota heritage, but Creed knew this moment was a crossroads in his life. He'd sensed such pivotal moments before and knew he was on the precipice of change whether he wanted it or not. His grandfather, who had raised him after his parents had both been killed in a car accident, would have told him this was an opportunity for spiritual growth. Creed just knew it was trouble.

Charlotte cleared her throat. "Um, is Lawson your first name or your last?"

"Last." He should have left her at Joe's but for some unknown reason, he'd been unable to do so. The thought of that guy Darrin getting his hands on her left Creed cold. Now that was one cold-blooded motherfucker. His eyes were dead and Creed got a sense of pure evil surrounding him.

Most folks didn't really believe in evil. Creed did. Anyone who'd been a cop or had spent as much time as he had in war-torn countries believed. There were all kinds of evil out there in the world, and tonight it had turned up at a roadside bar in North Carolina.

"So what's your name?" She was persistent. He'd give her that.

"Creed."

She nodded. "Thank you, Creed Lawson, for stepping in back there and for getting me safely out of the bar."

He didn't want her gratitude. He was nobody's hero. "Least I could do after that hot kiss." He reached out and rubbed the pad of his thumb over her bottom lip. "And the promise of more."

Her lips parted and her tongue darted out to touch the tip of his thumb. His entire body tightened and he barely managed to swallow a groan. Damn, the woman had a natural sensuality about her that made every damn cell in his body sit up and take notice. He inserted his thumb deeper into her mouth and her lips closed around it, drawing it farther into the damp cavern. Her tongue stroked over the sides.

His cock was as hard as a spike. It was all too easy to imagine his shaft stroking in and out of her hot mouth as she sucked him off. He had a feeling she might not have too much experience in that department, but he was damn sure she'd make up for it with sheer enthusiasm if her kisses were anything to go by. His balls drew up tight to his body.

He had to stop before this went too far. As much as it pained him to do so, he withdrew his thumb and sat back in his seat. Dragging his hand through his hair, he

took a deep breath and gathered his self-control. He never had trouble keeping his emotions contained, but tonight it was almost impossible to do.

"So is Darrin a boyfriend?"

She frowned and her lips took on a pouty shape that just begged to be kissed. He refrained. Barely.

"I already told you he wasn't."

He shrugged. "Just checking."

Charlotte pressed the release button on her seat belt, pushing it away so she could turn and face him. "I met him at a conference this weekend in Tennessee. We had coffee together." She shook her head and rubbed her hands over the legs of her jeans. "I don't know exactly what happened. He started asking me all kinds of personal questions."

Creed's radar went on full alert and he forgot all about his vow not to get involved. "What kinds of questions?"

She darted him a quick glance and he caught a glimpse of fear in her eyes before she looked away, her gaze drifting out the window to peer up to the night sky. "Where did I live? Did I have a boyfriend?" Her hand went to the pendant around her neck.

"What else?" Creed sensed she was holding something back.

"It's crazy," she whispered.

He reached out and cupped her chin in his hand and tugged gently until she was looking at him. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

Her eyes widened and he could sense her moment of shock, quickly followed by sheer relief. Hell, he'd surprised himself with asking. He should be driving her to the nearest gas station so she could get a tow truck for her car, not delving into her life problems. Wasn't his business. Except it sure as hell felt as though it was.

"Evil."

The hair on the back of Creed's neck rose. That's exactly what he'd thought about the man.

She hunched forward and shrugged. "Like I said, crazy."

Creed couldn't take the distance between them any longer. He grabbed the lever and pushed his seat back as far as it would go. Then he wrapped his hands around Charlotte's shoulders and urged her toward him.

There was the briefest of hesitation and then she surged forward, all but throwing herself into his lap. She was shivering, so he pulled her tight to his chest, running his hands up and down her arms.

"You don't think I'm nuts?"

He shook his head. "No. There was definitely something off about that guy."

"I left the conference but he followed me. I knew he was behind me on the road. I didn't see him, but I could feel him. I was so scared when my car broke down."

He held her tighter, surprised at how his gut clenched at the mere thought of her being at the mercy of Darrin. "What's his last name?"

"Bates." She shivered again. "At least that's what he said his name was."

His instincts came into sharper focus. "You think he was lying?"

She nodded, the top of her head brushing against his jaw. Her hair was soft and smelled like flowers. She hesitated and when she spoke her voice was so low he could barely hear her. "I think his name is Asmodeus."

That was an odd name. "Why would you think that?"

She shrugged and he shifted her in his arms until her head was resting against his shoulder. He used his thumb to tilt her face upward. He needed to see her eyes, needed to see if she was lying to him for some reason.

"He asked me where I grew up." The fingers of her right hand clutched at his shirt. The left one was still wrapped around her pendant. Something about the object brought her comfort.

Creed thought about the crystal he wore on a leather thong around his neck, the one his grandfather had given him on his eighteenth birthday, the day before he joined

the army. He wasn't a religious man, but the crystal had brought him comfort and strength through many hard times in his life. Plus it reminded him of his grandfather who had passed five years ago.

He shook his head and brought his attention back to the woman in his arms. "And that's significant?"

She nodded. "I grew up in an orphanage. Before I left I was told to be wary of a man named Asmodeus."

His heart clenched at the thought of Charlotte growing up with no family. At least he'd had his grandfather and an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins. But he relaxed the more he thought about what she'd told him. "Then you can stop worrying. If he was a man when you were just a child, then Darrin wasn't old enough to be the guy you need to worry about."

She shook her head. "I think Darrin Bates is much older than he looks."

Creed sighed. "Either way, he's gone now." He wanted to keep on holding her, but Charlotte was quickly becoming an addiction. He didn't want to let her go. What he really wanted to do was finish what they'd started in the bar. He wanted to strip off her clothes and taste her lush nipples. Find the damp heat between her thighs and stroke her until she was breathless, begging him to take her. Then he'd drive his cock deep, fucking her hard and fast until they both found release.

"Yes," she moaned, shifting restlessly in his arms. She placed both hands on his chest and sat up. The motion pushed her hip against his swollen shaft.

He could feel the need deep within her. Smell her growing arousal. He knew without a doubt that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. But he wanted no misunderstandings. "Yes what?"

She licked her lips and stared at his mouth. "Yes, I want you to fuck me hard and fast."

Need slammed into him like a sledgehammer. She'd said almost the exact same words he'd thought. They were definitely on the same wavelength here. He grabbed the hem of her sweater. "Let's get this off you."

Charlotte couldn't believe what she was doing. She was about to have sex in the front seat of a pickup in the middle of nowhere with a complete stranger. Except Creed Lawson wasn't a stranger. She felt as though she'd known him forever, been waiting for him her entire life.

She'd not only sensed his emotions; she'd also caught glimpses of his thoughts. And they'd set her body on fire. He wanted her, right here, right now. He wanted her mouth wrapped around his cock, sucking him deep. He wanted to taste her pussy, making her scream as she came. Then he wanted to fuck her hard and fast.

He just plain wanted her.

No man had ever made her feel this sexy or desirable. There was a connection between them that was very real. Charlotte knew Creed was the man she'd been unconsciously searching for her entire life. He was somehow connected to the crystal she wore around her neck.

She gasped as he lifted her sweater over her head, raising her arms to help him as best she could in such tight quarters. He tossed the garment aside and covered one of her cotton-clad breasts with his hand. He had large hands. The bronze of his skin looked even darker against the white of her bra. He rubbed his thumb over her nipple, sending a shiver of desire skating over her flesh.

He hooked his fingers into the front clasp of her bra and gave a twist. The garment came apart, the cups separating, displaying her breasts for him to see. Charlotte was glad it was fairly dark in the cab of the truck. Her cheeks were warm and she knew she was blushing.

"Beautiful." There was no mistaking the sincerity in that one word as he leaned down and dragged his tongue over one of her nipples. It puckered even tighter, sending

a flash of heat down between her thighs. She shifted restlessly and her hip rubbed against his erection.

Pure, undiluted need enveloped her. Charlotte was no longer sure where her desire ended and his began. His emotions fed hers, bursting out of control until she could barely breathe. Her skin felt almost too sensitive to touch, yet she wanted his hands everywhere. Wanted to feel his hard flesh beneath her palms.

Grabbing the fabric of his shirt, she tugged. Creed reared back, grabbed the back of his black T-shirt and yanked it over his head. It briefly caught in the leather thong he wore around his neck. He swore and shoved the pendant over his shoulder and out of the way.

Charlotte had to touch him. She placed her hands against his chest. Muscles rippled beneath her palms as she traced the hard bands of his stomach. There was no hair on his chest, only an expanse of bronze that was irresistible. Leaning down, she touched her lips to one flat, brown nipple. Creed groaned, his hand sliding up to cup the back of her neck, and held her close.

He tasted salty and male and delicious. There were no other words to describe him. He lifted her off his lap and reached for the button of her jeans. "Let's get you out of these. I've got to see you naked."

She was shy around most people and men in particular. But for some reason with Creed she felt different, freer somehow. She grabbed the tab of her zipper and pulled it down. The metallic hissing sound seemed to echo in the cab of the truck. She hesitated and Creed took over, sliding his hands inside her jeans and pushing them down her hips. He shifted his grip around to the back, cupping her ass beneath the thin fabric of her underwear.

He inserted one thick finger in the crease of her ass, caressing the puckered opening. Charlotte jumped in surprise even as her pussy clenched with growing need. Cream slipped from her slit, coating her folds. She wanted more.

As if sensing her growing desires, Creed withdrew his finger and got serious. It wasn't easy in the close confines of the truck, but in under a minute he had her boots off and her jeans and panties in a tangled heap on the floor. He caught her around the waist and urged her forward until she was straddling his lap, facing him.

The fact that she was naked and he was still half-dressed heightened her arousal. She squirmed in his lap, rubbing her mound against his jeans-covered erection. Unable to wait any longer, she fumbled with his belt buckle. He could have helped her but didn't. Instead Creed cupped her breasts in his hands and began to massage them, stopping every few seconds to pluck at her nipples with his thumbs and forefingers.

His lips caressed the side of her neck, moving upward toward her ear. "Open my pants and take my cock in your hand. I want to feel your fingers wrapped around it."

Charlotte was practically sobbing with need by the time she got the zipper down on his jeans. His cock sprang forward, unimpeded by any underwear. It was long and thick, the bulbous head damp and slick. She rubbed her thumb over the tip of his cock, capturing a bead of pre-cum and spreading it around.

Creed swore. "That feels so damn good." He nipped at the lobe of her ear. The sting was more erotic than painful, making her skin tingle. He captured her mouth with his, claiming it as his own, overwhelming her with his passion.

Desire, thick and potent, filled the cab of the truck as their tongues twined together. The leather of the seat creaked as he shifted, his hips pushing against her. She could feel the lust pounding through his veins, his overpowering need to have his cock buried deep in her pussy. She'd never been so in tune with another person in her entire life.

Charlotte moaned and pumped her hand up and down his cock. He groaned deep in his chest and she felt the vibration throughout her entire body. He wrapped his hands around her waist, his thumbs rubbing over her hipbones. She arched into his touch, wanting it lower. Her pussy was wet and ready and only he could satisfy her. She knew instinctively that sex with Creed would be unforgettable.

One of his hands slid down, his fingers combing through her damp pubic hair and then beyond. She cried his name as he touched her slick folds.

"You're so wet and ready for me." She could hear the satisfaction in his voice. All she could do was nod.

"Let me check." He slipped one thick finger into her hot, tight channel. Tremors shook her thighs as her inner muscles clamped down hard. Creed pulled his finger out and circled her opening. She whimpered, squirming on his lap, trying to get him back inside her. She needed him. Desperately.

"Do you want me, baby?"

He inserted the tip of his finger, teasing her.

"Yesss," she hissed.

"Tell me what you want." he demanded.

"You." Her breasts ached so she leaned forward and rubbed them against his chest.

Creed sucked in a deep breath and his cock flexed in her hand. "I want to eat your sweet pussy until you come. I want to slide my cock between your breasts while you suck me off." His dark emotions overpowered her as his words seduced her even further. She could picture it all and she wanted it.

"Creed." She didn't say anything else. Couldn't speak a coherent word. She was one raw bundle of sexual desire. The crystal was hot where it rested between her breasts. She could feel the energy pulsing and pounding. It echoed the same need throbbing between her thighs.

"I want to take you from behind," he continued in his low, seductive tone. "Hear your skin slapping against mine." He dipped his finger into her wet core. "But there's no time. I've got to have you."

"Now." She shoved his hand away from her, gripped his cock and guided it to the opening of her channel.

Creed flexed his hips and surged inward. It was a tight fit. It had been a long time for her and he wasn't a small man. It was uncomfortable at first, but her inner muscles relaxed, adjusting to his invasion. Her slick channel wrapped around his cock, contracting to pull him deeper. He wrapped both hands around her waist, guiding her down his shaft, one inch at a time until he was buried to the hilt.

They were both gasping for breath by the time he was all the way inside. His heart pounded against her chest like a jackhammer. Or maybe that was her own heartbeat she was feeling. It was hard to tell.

"You okay?" he asked. She nodded, unable to speak. Being joined with Creed, filled by him, was overwhelming. His cock pulsed inside her and suddenly she was overcome with the urge to move.

Bracing herself on her knees, she rose up slightly and then let herself slide back down. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out. It felt so good she did it again. Creed buried his face in the curve of her neck and began guiding her. Their slick bodies slid easily, her breasts rubbing against his chest with each upward glide and downward thrust.

Creed nipped at her neck and jawline, peppering her flesh with stinging kisses followed by openmouthed ones. His hands cupped her ass, raising and lowering her over his cock. His hips slammed upward as she dropped back down on his shaft.

It couldn't last. It was too intense. Too much.

Charlotte felt her body begin to tremble. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she tilted back her head and cried out. "Creed!" Her pussy spasmed, clutching his cock in a damp, silken vise.

His fingers dug into her hips and he pulled her down hard. The muscles in his neck corded as he threw back his head and yelled. His cock rippled and she could feel the flood of heat bathing her. Her body reacted immediately, sending her off on another round of spasms.

She collapsed against Creed's chest, gasping for breath. She felt exhausted, satisfied and energized at the same time. The emotional energy that surrounded them slowly began to dissipate and reality began to intrude.

She'd just had sex with a stranger without a condom.

Chapter Three

Creed couldn't remember sex being this good. Ever. He'd barely had time to touch Charlotte, let alone taste her. The need for her had been too great to wait. Thankfully, she'd felt the same way. Her orgasm had set off his, her silken muscles wrapping around his cock. It had felt so damn good. Too good.

Every muscle in his body turned to stone as reality set in. Creed couldn't believe he'd done something so stupid. He hadn't worn a condom. He *always* wore a condom.

"Damn." He eased Charlotte back and stared at her face. Her skin was flushed but her brows were drawn together in a frown.

"We didn't use a condom."

It didn't surprise him that she was thinking the same thing he was. What did surprise him was that he wasn't nearly as concerned as he should be. "I'm sorry about that." He dragged one hand through his hair. He had failed to protect her. "I'm safe. I've never done anything like that before in my life."

"Me either," she replied. "I'm healthy." She chewed on her bottom lip. He wanted to soothe the small sting with his tongue.

"It should be okay. I mean, this isn't the right time of the month for me." She broke off and let out a huff of breath before squaring her shoulders. "I shouldn't get pregnant."

Creed got a picture in his head of Charlotte with a gently rounded belly. He quickly shoved it from his brain. He didn't do commitments. Yet there was something very appealing about the image.

"You'll let me know if anything comes of this." He couldn't say the actual words, but they both knew he meant if she got pregnant.

She nodded and then slid from his lap. Creed gritted his teeth as his cock slipped from inside her. He carefully zipped his pants and buckled his belt. He found his shirt balled up beside him, shook it out and quickly pulled it on. All the while, he was very aware of the woman beside him.

Charlotte was struggling with her clothing, so he helped her get dressed. It was dark but he knew she was blushing as she pulled on her panties and jeans. She stared at his hands as he hooked the front clasp of her bra.

"Thank you." She turned her sweater back to the right side before putting it on. The silence between them was awkward as she shoved her feet back into her boots.

"Come here." He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and hugged her. She sighed and settled next to him. "Let's go back to your place." He knew it was a mistake to stay, but he didn't want the night to end. Not yet.

"Okay." She glanced up at him and smiled. "I live in Rock Creek. It's about an hour and a half from here."

Leaning down, he brushed his lips over hers, smiling when she immediately responded to his touch. He broke the kiss and brushed a lock of hair around the curve of her ear. "Buckle up. We'll be there before you know it."

Neither of them spoke for the longest time, but it was a comfortable silence. Creed's mind was filled with a jumbled mixture of conflicting thoughts. There was no denying the connection he sensed with Charlotte. He didn't want to acknowledge it, but it was there. He felt as though he'd known her forever, not just a few hours.

His big body was humming with barely banked desire. He could easily remember the feel of her inner thighs and her pussy. The way she'd taken him inside her, squeezing his cock tight. The front of his jeans got tighter as his erection grew with each passing mile. If he didn't stop thinking about sex, it was going to be a hell of a long trip.

"Tell me about yourself." His fingers gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles were white. What was wrong with him? He never wanted to know the details of a

woman's life. The idea was to keep everything about sex. No emotions involved. That way they could both walk away when it was over.

Still, he waited, wanting to know more about her.

The rustle of fabric as Charlotte shifted position on her seat was music to his ears, thrumming over his skin. He could easily imagine removing each garment she wore, slowing unveiling the sexy body hidden beneath.

"I have a small cottage on a few acres of land where I grow some vegetables, but mostly herbs."

He glanced her way. She was watching him with those big blue eyes of hers. Creed barely resisted the urge to take another detour. But there was a house with a bed at the end of this trip. One in which he intended to spend several pleasurable hours.

When he didn't comment, she continued. "I sell some of the herbs fresh and dry the rest for mostly mail-order sales. I've also written several books and a bunch of articles about herbs."

"So you're an expert."

She paused and her tone lightened, as though she was laughing at herself. "I suppose so. I prefer to think of myself as a student of nature. What about you?"

His shoulders automatically tightened and he forced himself to relax. "Army at eighteen. Stayed for twelve years. Became a cop when I got out. Quit that four years ago." Those few lines summed up his entire adult life.

"What have you been doing for the past four years?" He could hear the genuine interest in her tone. He didn't want to tell her. It always amazed him how many women were turned on by the fact he was a bounty hunter. Not that he didn't use that interest to get laid some nights. But he didn't want that. Not from Charlotte.

"Bounty hunter." He waited for the usual questions. Most folks thought it was like the reality television they watched, but it was quite different. It generally consisted of a lot of phone and legwork followed by long days of driving, punctuated by a few heart-

pounding moments when the apprehension took place. It took days, sometimes weeks or months. It was never wrapped up in one hour like on television.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

Creed glanced over at Charlotte, surprised by the concern in her voice. She was frowning. There was none of the excitement that the mention of his career usually induced.

He shrugged and turned back to watch the road. There wasn’t much traffic this time of night and they only passed the occasional car or truck. He loved being on the road at night, surrounded by the darkness and the peace and quiet.

He usually hated having someone else in his vehicle with him, but Charlotte was different. Somehow she fit right in, not disturbing the calm. She was also still waiting for an answer to her question. He suddenly needed to reassure her. He didn’t want her to worry. Not about him. “It can be. But I’m good at what I do.”

“I’m sure you are.” She paused and he could sense her pondering her next words, weighing each of them before she said them. “You’ve picked dangerous careers. You’re a warrior but you’re also a caretaker. You like to protect people.”

No one had ever pegged him as quickly as Charlotte had and her insight made him uncomfortable. “I like the power, baby. And the adrenaline rush. Nothing quite like it.” Better she think that of him than for her to uncover the man beneath the facade. He liked his privacy. He had his own reasons for doing what he did and they were nobody’s business but his own.

Charlotte didn’t say anything and Creed felt like a jerk for what he’d said, but he wasn’t taking it back. He didn’t want her seeing him as some sort of hero. He wasn’t. He was just a man trying to get by in life.

“You grew up in an orphanage?” He didn’t like the silence between them. Charlotte was thinking too much and that couldn’t be a good thing. He wanted to keep things on an even keel.

"Take a right up here." She pointed to a side road that veered off the highway. Creed followed her directions.

After a few more moments, Charlotte spoke. "My parents died when I was young and I eventually ended up in The Gideon House."

"You weren't adopted?" He couldn't imagine a cute kid like her being in an orphanage.

"I was fostered out once or twice, but they always brought me back. There were...complications."

He wanted to ask what the problem was but didn't. Obviously it was still a sore subject for Charlotte.

"But I met my sisters there." She laughed and the light sound sent a shiver down his spine and made his balls clench tight to his body. "We're not related by blood, but by love. Memory is the oldest. She's a successful photographer. Then there is De'alla. Dee is a business wizard. The youngest is McKenna." Charlotte paused before continuing. "Kenna is a firecracker." She chuckled again. "How about you? Any family?"

He shook his head. "It was mostly my grandfather and me for years. He died five years ago." He envied the closeness she had to the women she called sisters. He could hear the love and affection in her voice. He'd never felt that close to anyone in his life. Not even his grandfather.

"I'm sorry."

Creed shrugged. "Me too." He didn't tell her that the old man had been shot in a convenience-store robbery. The gunman had gotten away with a hundred bucks, a case of beer and some smokes. He'd gotten off on a technicality and walked. Creed had left the police force not long after.

"Take a left."

As though they'd both spilled too much of themselves, they stopped talking. The intimate mood was gone. It felt as though they were both rebuilding the personal walls that had tumbled down around them. Ten minutes later, Creed pulled his truck into a short driveway in front of a house. It was a two-story dwelling, small but well cared for.

He turned off the ignition and turned to her. "Is the invitation still open?" He held his breath, waiting for her answer. He wasn't ready to walk away from Charlotte yet. Wanted to spend the night in her bed, wrapped around her and buried in her sweet warmth.

Charlotte released her seat belt, grabbed her purse off the floor and opened the door. She slid out of the truck and turned to face him. "Yes."

Creed released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding. All at once his body went into overdrive. His cock was fully erect and pushing at his zipper. His fingers ached to touch her soft skin. He wanted to taste her unique flavor—a combination of cream and honey.

He was out of the vehicle and around to her side in a flash. Bending down, he scooped her into his arms and carried her up the front steps, waiting impatiently as she dug into her purse and drew out her keys. It seemed to take her forever to unlock the door. But then they were inside. Creed didn't even glance around the downstairs, heading straight for the staircase. He didn't bother turning on a light. There was more than enough moonlight drifting in through the windows for him to see the stairs. Taking them quickly, he paused at the top.

"First door on the left." Charlotte pointed the way. He carried them toward her bedroom. As he kicked the door shut behind him, he smiled.

Charlotte was breathless. No man had ever swept her off her feet like Creed had—literally and figuratively. After delving into their pasts on the drive here, she wasn't even certain Creed would want to stay. Like her, he had secrets. She respected that,

even though she wanted to know everything about him. But that would mean sharing and she wasn't sure she was ready to do that just yet.

Once he knew about the crystal and the prophecy that went with it, she wasn't certain how he'd look at her. He'd probably get in his truck and drive away. And she wouldn't blame him. She'd had years to come to grips with what Angela had told her, had researched the subject endlessly over the past seventeen years, and she wasn't sure she even believed it.

With the clarity of hindsight, it was easy to relegate Darrin Bates to the category of sick pervert and leave it at that. That's the explanation that made logical sense. But she was very afraid it wasn't the right one. If she listened to her gut, it was telling her that Darrin was Asmodeus, a demon from hell.

She pushed those thoughts aside. She didn't want to think about crystals and destinies. Right now Creed wanted her. And she wanted this time with him, untainted by demons and magic and actions that had been set into motion thousands of years ago.

He carried her over to the side of the bed and slowly let her legs go. She slid down his body until her toes touched the floor. She dropped her purse and heard the heavy thump as it landed at her feet. Her breasts were smashed against his chest, her hips aligned with his. His erection pressed hard against her stomach, a very tangible reminder of what they both wanted.

Creed reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet. Opening it, he drew out two condoms and tossed them on her nightstand. "I'll take better care of you this time," he promised. He cupped her face in his hands and smoothed his thumbs over her cheeks.

Charlotte didn't want to talk about it. What was done was done. Besides, she trusted Creed, knew this was as much an anomaly for him as it was for her. There had been no mistaking his shock when he'd discovered he'd forgotten a condom. That was one good thing about her ability. She could almost always sense when someone was

telling the truth. There was still the rare person she couldn't read, but they were few and far between.

She opened up her senses, lowering her barrier the tiniest bit. Heat and desire swelled, crashing through her protective shield, shattering it into a million pieces. Charlotte gasped and then moaned as Creed's passion mixed with hers, intensifying with each passing second.

Her breasts swelled, pushing against the confinement of her bra. Cream slid from her core, dampening her panties. Creed sucked in a breath and lowered his forehead until it touched hers. "What the hell are you doing to me?"

"I'm not doing anything." She gasped as her pussy clutched tight. "You're doing it to me."

Creed swore softly. Then his mouth slammed down on hers. He ate at her lips, as if trying to devour her whole. And she loved it. She shoved her hands under his shirt, feeling the hot, hard muscular chest beneath. The man was gorgeous. Like something out of a dream, consuming her, making her want things she'd never wanted before.

Creed was dark nights. Forbidden fantasies. And she wanted to experience all of them.

He tore his mouth from hers long enough to lose his shirt. He was breathing as hard as she was, his chest rising and falling rapidly. He yanked her to him again and their mouths met. Tongues dueled in an erotic battle of supremacy. He growled low in his chest when she sucked on his tongue. He retaliated by capturing her lower lip between his teeth and tugging gently.

His hands were busy. He shoved her sweater up, breaking the kiss long enough to whip it over her head before returning his lips to hers. He was chocolate and she was a chocoholic. She couldn't get enough of his hands on her, couldn't touch him enough to sate the longing that was surging through her. Her bra popped open and his hands covered her breasts, shaping the firm, full mounds.

Charlotte whimpered when he plucked at her nipples. They were more sensitive than they'd ever been. Each touch thrummed through her pussy as though he were touching her there.

"Naked." He peppered her jaw with kisses. "Got to get you naked."

He put actions to his words, and in less than a minute she was sitting on the edge of the bed while he tugged off her boots and socks and pulled her jeans and panties out of the way. She shrugged out of her bra, tossing it aside. The band caught briefly in the chain of her pendant, which was currently hanging down her back. She left the pendant there, out of the way, wishing for once she could remove it.

Creed knelt between her legs, naked from the waist up. She wanted to see all of him. "Take off your jeans."

"In a minute," he promised. "I have to taste you first."

He circled her ankles with his fingers and then slowly slid his hands up the inside of her legs. "Open up for me," he coaxed as his fingers caressed the insides of her knees. Charlotte placed her hands on the mattress beside her, supporting herself as she pushed her legs wide. Creed continued his erotic ascent until he reached the tops of her thighs. He teased the creases at the tops of her legs. She could almost feel him touch her pussy. She moaned and arched her hips forward.

"You're already wet and ready for me. Aren't you?"

"Yes." There was no denying the obvious. Her folds were slick with cream.

"Mmm." He parted her folds with his thumbs and then leaned forward. Charlotte held her breath, not quite certain what to expect. She'd read about this sort of thing, but no other man had tasted her there.

He sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. The warm air brushed against her sensitive flesh, sending ripples of pleasure through her. "You smell hot." He stroked his tongue over her pussy, up one side and down the other. Charlotte's inner muscles spasmed with delight at the intimate caress. "You taste even hotter, like honey and cream with a hint of spice." He lapped at her again. "Delicious."

Charlotte moaned. He was seducing her with his words as much as with his touch. She was his to do with as he would. She wanted to experience everything he'd talked about in the truck.

Her breasts ached. She lifted her hands from the mattress and cupped them. Creed raised his head, watching as she plucked at her nipples.

"Oh yeah. That's hot, baby. Once I'm done down here, I plan to bury my dick between those two beauties."

The smell of sex surrounded them, cocooning them in a world all their own. Charlotte had never been bold before, but something about Creed brought out her inner wild woman, a creature of passion and power she hadn't even known existed.

For a brief second, fear reared its ugly head. Asmodeus was the demon of lust. Was Creed, not Darrin, the demon? Before panic could set in, the crystal began to pulse and heat against her skin, calming her. No. This was right. Whatever happened after tonight, she and Creed were meant to be together, if only for this one time.

Her heart clenched at the thought of Creed walking away, but she was a realist. There was only here and now. The future was uncertain and would unfold in its own time.

Creed slid two thick fingers inside her, pushing all doubts aside. She arched her hips, wanting him deeper. "Play with your nipples. Get them nice and hard for me," he encouraged.

When she did as he asked, he gave a rumble of approval before burying his face between her thighs. He found the bud of nerves at the apex and sucked it into his mouth, lapping at it with his tongue.

Charlotte cried out at the intensity of the pleasure. It bordered on pain, but she wanted more. Creed slid his fingers out of her pussy and then drove them deep as he continued to lap and suck on her clit.

She bucked her hips, wanting more. Unable to sit upright any longer, she lay back on the bed and planted her feet on the edge of the mattress, arching up. Creed looked up at her, satisfaction on his face. "That's it, baby. Give me everything."

She spread her legs as wide as they would go, offering herself. He lapped at her swollen flesh, licking and sucking. His fingers found a rhythm, sliding in and out of her slick channel. The contractions started and she knew she was going over the edge.

Charlotte cried out as her orgasm hit her hard. Her legs and arms quivered. He pushed her hard, prolonging the pleasure until she couldn't take any more. She pushed weakly at his head, which was still buried between her legs. "Stop."

He raised his head and licked his lips. They were slick with her juices. "Oh baby. I'm just getting started."

Chapter Four

Creed stood, savoring the taste of Charlotte on his lips. She was so damn sweet. She'd come hard and fast. He loved that she responded so easily to his touch. It made him hot.

Not that he needed to get any harder. His cock was like a spike and his balls ached for release. As she lay there, half on, half off the bed, Creed kicked off his boots and peeled away his socks. His hands went to his belt buckle and one corner of his mouth kicked up in a smile when he saw her hips undulate. She'd come but she still wanted him.

He carefully opened his jeans, releasing his cock from its confinement. He wasn't wearing any underwear. Rarely did. He liked the sensation of being free. He shoved his jeans over his hips and down his legs. He stepped out of them and put one knee on the bed. "Let's get you more comfortable."

Creed lifted Charlotte farther on the bed. She was still lying sideways on the mattress, but that didn't matter, not for what he had in mind. He climbed up on the bed next to her. She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. Her face was flushed, her skin covered with a light sheen of sweat.

He snagged one of her pillows and lifted her head, putting the cushion beneath her. The angle wasn't quite right, so he grabbed the other one. She protested slightly as he added the second pillow. She was lying flat on her back, but her head was almost upright.

"Do you remember what I said I wanted to do to you?" He swung one leg over her until he was straddling her torso. Her eyes widened as he cupped her breasts in his hands, pushing them together. He shuffled up on the mattress, sliding his cock between the two mounds. He groaned, molding her breasts around his shaft.

Charlotte licked her lips and nodded.

Creed pushed his hips forward until the tip of his cock peeked out from between her cleavage. He kept going until the head of his cock brushed her lips. Her tongue snaked out to capture the pearly bead of fluid that seeped from the tip. "That feels so good," he praised as he withdrew slightly and then pushed forward again.

This time she parted her lips and took his cock head into her mouth. She swirled her tongue around the top, finding the ridge just below. Creed thought his balls would explode.

He rubbed his thumbs over her taut nipples and she moaned. The vibration shot down his cock, reverberating in the heavy sac below. He stiffened and started to withdraw, but she gave a little sound of pleasure and latched on to his cock.

Her mouth was warm and wet. She stroked her tongue over every inch of him she could reach. Her hands cupped his ass, her fingernails digging into his skin, encouraging him to move.

He started slowly, rocking forward and back. She gagged once but dug her nails harder into his ass when he started to withdraw. She might not be skilled at sucking cock, but she was enthusiastic.

Creed continued to move, his cock sliding a bit deeper with every few thrusts. She scraped her teeth gently over his shaft. He'd had women give him blowjobs before, but nothing had ever felt this damn good. He gritted his teeth and hung on. He wanted to be inside her when he came, but he didn't want to stop this. Not yet.

Charlotte continued to suck his cock, her tongue teasing the sensitive ridge around the base of the head. Creed massaged her breasts, thumbing her nipples. They were hard nubs. As dark as berries. He wanted to suck them.

His balls drew up tight and he knew he was out of time. He didn't want to come in her mouth. Not this time. He jerked his cock away from Charlotte's sweet lips and shifted lower until he was eye level with her breasts. Leaning down, he latched on to one red, puckered bud and sucked. Charlotte moaned, her hips pumping off the

mattress. He'd bedded a lot of women in his day, but never had one responded to him as readily as Charlotte did. It was intoxicating.

He shifted to her other breast, suckling her nipple until she moaned again. "Creed." His name was a breathy whisper as she wrapped her hands around his cock and pumped. This time he was the one to groan.

Not giving himself time to think, he climbed off her, swearing as her hands fell away from his shaft. Reaching behind, he grabbed a condom, ripped it open and sheathed himself. Charlotte was restless now, her legs shifting against the covers.

He rolled her onto her stomach, wrapped his arm around her waist and lifted her. "On your hand and knees."

Charlotte ached all over. Her skin felt too tight for her body. Every touch was an erotic stimulation. She had orgasmed but she was primed and ready again. Creed's taste was still on her lips. He was salty and musky and hot. She'd never sucked a man's cock before. Had never wanted to. But she'd loved doing it for Creed. Had wanted him to finish in her mouth. He, however, had other ideas.

When he'd flipped her onto her stomach and raised her up, she remembered what else he'd said to her in the truck. He was going to take her from behind. She braced herself on her hands and knees and spread her legs wide.

The crystal shimmered as it rested against the pillow in front of her. She ignored it, not wanting to think of prophecies and destiny. All she wanted was to feel Creed's cock buried deep, their skin slapping together with each hard thrust.

"That's it, baby. Make a place for me." Normally she hated when a man called her baby. But, like everything else, with Creed it felt different. Rather than being condescending, it was more a sexy endearment.

His hands clasped her hips and she felt the head of his shaft push at her opening. "Rest your forehead on the pillows," he instructed. "I want you to put your hands behind you and open your ass cheeks wide. Show me you want my cock in your hot pussy."

Heat suffused her cheeks even as she did what he asked. Her pussy clutched hard with his erotic instructions. There wasn't another man on the face of the earth who could get her to do this. There was something about Creed that made her want to do everything he asked of her and more.

The pillow was soft against her forehead as she rested it there. Reaching behind, she clasped the cheeks of her butt in her hands and spread herself wide. She knew he could see all of her. The puckered opening of her behind. The wet, slick folds of her pussy. She didn't care. She wanted him to see. Wanted him to know how much she wanted him.

She felt the mattress dip as he shifted away from her. Before she could object, she felt his breath on her skin. She tensed as his tongue traced a hot, damp path from the base of her spine all the way to her clit. Cream seeped from her slit as he suckled the slick folds, drawing a whimper from deep inside her.

"You're perfect," he praised as he sat back and cupped her pussy in his hand. "Hot and wet." He pulled his hand away and brought it back with a sharp smack.

Charlotte froze, her body tensing as he did it again. The sting receded and heat rushed to her core, ramping up her desire. "Oh my god," she moaned.

"You like that, don't you, baby?" He did it again and then rubbed his fingers over her pussy. "Oh yeah," he breathed. "Now you're ready."

He positioned himself and drove his cock to the hilt. Charlotte's hands fell back to the mattress as he began to thrust. She held on to the covers as he took her hard and fast. He pounded into her, their skin slapping together. Her breasts jiggled with each hard thrust. His hands on her waist were the only things keeping her from sliding off the bed.

Creed changed his rhythm from long strokes to short, hard stabs. Charlotte couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Could only feel. Every nerve ending in her body was firing. Tension filled her. She was so close. She pushed back with each thrust, wanting him deeper.

There was no separation between them, physically or psychically. All her barriers were down. His emotions swirled around her. She could feel his passion, his desire. Beneath it was fear. Not that he'd ever call it that. He'd call it reserve or caution. But Charlotte recognized it because she felt it too. What was happening between them was too much.

Too powerful. Too emotional. Too everything.

Still, neither of them could stop. Would stop. They moved together in an erotic rhythm, both searching for the prize at the end.

It hit her hard and fast. She cried his name as she came, her inner muscles clutching his cock hard. She heard him yell and felt the surge of heat and knew he'd found release. She resented the condom, wishing he was filling her without the barrier of the latex. Which was crazy.

Another spasm took her and she gasped, feeling the wash of heat. She didn't remember collapsing on the bed, but when she came back to her senses she was facedown on the pillow. Creed was still inside her, his body covering hers. He was sucking in air, his forehead resting against her spine.

He leaned back and slowly withdrew. She couldn't hold back the low moan that came from deep within her. She didn't want the separation even though she knew it was inevitable. The mattress dipped briefly, springing back as he rose from the bed.

His feet made no sound as he left the room, but she knew he was gone. The room seemed emptier without him. She heard the flush of the toilet and then running water. He was in the bathroom getting cleaned up. Which is what she'd do as soon as she got enough energy to move.

Creed returned and pressed a warm, damp cloth between her legs. It felt good against her sensitive flesh. She was long past being embarrassed. At least for the moment. She had no doubt she'd be completely mortified in the morning when she thought back on this.

The covers rustled and then Creed was lifting her and tucking her into bed. He crawled in next to her and pulled her into his arms. "Sleep. I'll wake you in a bit." He kissed her forehead and she snuggled closer. His words reassured her. He would be here when she woke. He wasn't done with her yet.

Awareness came gradually to Charlotte. She'd been having the most decadent dream about making love with a large, bronzed-skinned god. She brushed at her face, irritated that something had interrupted her before she was finished. Something was tickling her. She snuffled and turned her head on her pillow. A large hand cupped one of her breasts. A thumb brushed over her nipple.

Reality came slamming back. Creed. He was no dream, but a flesh-and-blood man. It was his hair tickling her face as he leaned over her, his hand covering her breast. She rolled over onto her side so she was facing him. It was still dark outside, but dawn wasn't far away.

"Hey." She reached up and touched the side of his face. He turned his mouth toward her hand, kissing her palm.

"Hey, yourself." His voice was rough and low and it skittered down her spine, making her nipples tighten.

She'd slept longer than she planned. She was under no illusion that what was happening between her and Creed would lead to a permanent relationship. He was a loner and had made no promises to her. She ignored the ache in the vicinity of her heart. As much as she wanted to believe in ancient prophecies, fated mates and magic crystals, she was a realist. Darrin Bates was simply a creep who fixated on her and Creed Lawson was a one-night stand – an incredible one, but one nonetheless.

She sighed and closed her eyes, not wanting to face reality yet.

"That was a huge sigh." He trailed his fingers over the curve of her cheek, down the line of her jaw and over her collarbone. Her eyes flew back open when he tweaked her nipple with his thumb and forefinger.

"It's almost dawn."

Creed's eyes darkened as he leaned closer. "But it's not dawn yet."

His mouth touched hers in a kiss so tender it brought tears to her eyes. His lashes lowered as he deepened the kiss and Charlotte forgot all about her concerns. There was still time for them to make love once more. Because that's what this was, at least for her. She might not know everything about Creed, but she recognized him in her heart.

She could read his every emotion and knew he was as conflicted as she was. Lust vied with deeper emotions. She wouldn't call it love, but he felt something for her, if only tenderness and caring.

He might even fall in love with her if he allowed himself to stay. But he wouldn't. He was shut off from people. Not because he didn't care, but because he felt things too deeply. She sensed he'd suffered great loss as a child and as a man that had caused him to close himself off from the possibility of being hurt again. He kept his relationships superficial to avoid emotional entanglements.

He broke off the kiss and combed his fingers through her hair. "Are you okay? We don't have to do this if you don't want to."

He'd obviously sensed her distraction, once again reminding her how in tune he seemed to be with her. She tried to smile, but it wasn't easy. "I'm fine. I want to."

His gaze narrowed but he took her at her word and kissed her once again. This time she shoved all her doubts and fears aside and concentrated on simply enjoying the moment. She parted her lips on a sigh of pleasure and his tongue dipped inside. She welcomed him, stroking his tongue with hers. He gave a low rumble of pleasure as he deepened the kiss. He spread his fingers wide, holding the back of her head, tilting it slightly so he could get a better angle.

Their breath mingled as her body came alive once again. Her nipples were already beaded from his early attention. Now she felt the familiar tightening between her thighs, followed by a growing heat. Liquid arousal seeped from her channel, readying her for what was to come.

She flattened her palms on his chest and lifted her left leg, draping it over his thigh. His heart beat hard against her hand and his erection nudged her stomach. Charlotte explored his body, admiring the strength beneath the bronzed skin. Creed obviously worked out, for there wasn't a spare ounce of fat anywhere on the man. He was all muscle and sinew and bone.

His wide shoulders tapered down to a flat stomach. His legs were long and thick with muscle. Charlotte wanted to see all of him, touch him the way he'd touched her.

She pulled back slightly but couldn't resist several more kisses. She was gasping for breath by the time she managed to speak. "I want to touch you." She pushed against his shoulder and he rolled onto his back, shoving the covers away until they were both fully exposed.

"Whatever you want." His dark eyes devoured her face before moving lower and fixating on her breasts.

Charlotte licked her lips and her palms itched to begin. Creed was laid out before her like a feast. And she was starving. She knelt beside him and picked up his hand, studying it. It was so large and strong, yet it could be so gentle. Setting it back down on the mattress, she trailed her fingers up his thick forearm to his biceps. The muscles twitched beneath her fingertips, but he didn't move.

This was her time to explore, to discover, and she planned to make the most of it. Shifting, she straddled his thighs and leaned forward, placing her hands on his thick shoulders. A leather cord circled his neck and fell over his shoulder. She couldn't see what was on the end of it. She started to reach for it when his erection brushed against her stomach, distracting her, announcing he was ready whenever she was.

She gave a low purr of pleasure and began to map the contours of his chest. The wide expanse of bronze skin was incredible. Lowering her head, she kissed one flat nipple. Her pendant shifted, settling against his stomach.

Creed rumbled his pleasure but otherwise didn't move a muscle. She licked a path down his torso, tracing each band of muscle. She'd seen men with six-pack abs on the

covers of fitness magazines before, but she'd never seen one up close. Personally, she thought Creed was sexier than any of those men. He wasn't bulky, but he was all muscle.

His waist was firm, his hips slender. She trailed her tongue over one hipbone. His cock flexed and a bead of liquid formed at the tip. Unable to resist, Charlotte licked it off. Creed's hips jerked, the head of his cock bumping against her lips. She smiled and shifted lower on his body as she kissed her way down his shaft, stopping when she came to the heavy sac beneath it.

His balls were lightly furred, as was his groin. She cupped the sac in her hands and rolled it lightly between her fingers. Creed's hands were fisted in the covers, the only sign of just how close to the edge he was. She liked the idea that she could make him lose control. It was only fair considering how wild he made her.

That's what she wanted. Creed totally out of control, making love to her one last time.

"Charlotte," he groaned, his hips flexing as she scraped her nails over his balls and up his shaft. "I want you."

He didn't say need, but want. She noticed the distinction. She needed him on some deep elemental level, knew he was important to her. He'd changed her and there was no going back. Somehow he'd unleashed a passionate side of her nature that she'd only sensed but had never really explored. A depth of emotion she'd never tapped before.

She crawled up his body and straddled his cock. Undulating her body, she moved up and down the hard shaft, letting it stroke her slick folds. The crystal settled between her breasts, warming her skin. They both moaned as her pussy slid over his thick length.

It wasn't enough.

"Condom," he rasped, reaching out to the packet on the bedside table.

Charlotte resented it, even as she saw the sense in it. Grabbing the foil wrapper from him, she ripped it open and drew out the condom. Placing it at the tip of his cock, she slowly rolled it down over him, one inch at a time.

By the time he was sheathed, they were both breathing hard. Bracing her hands on his chest, she raised herself over him.

“Put me inside you.” Creed wrapped his hands around her waist, holding her steady. “However much you want. However fast you want.”

Her skin tingled with anticipation. Charlotte gripped his shaft in her fist and guided the tip to her opening. She lowered herself until just his cock head was inside her. Even after everything they’d done last night, it was slightly uncomfortable as he stretched her. Her inner muscles were sensitive and a bit sore but she wanted this. She sat down a bit farther and another two inches slid inside.

Charlotte sucked in a breath, her chest rising and falling as she managed another inch. She felt full but not full enough. She wanted all of Creed. Taking a deep breath, she pushed down until she was sitting flat on his groin with all of him inside her.

A light sheen of sweat covered his chest and he was breathing heavily. His fingers dug into her waist as if to keep his hands from moving. He was doing his best to let her be in charge but his control was slipping.

She didn’t want control. She wanted his hands to move, wanted to feel his fingers on her. “Touch me.” She grabbed one of his wrists and slid his hand up to her breast.

Creed groaned and moved his other hand so he was cupping both of her breasts. Her crystal was nestled in her cleavage and with each passing second she sensed the growing energy flowing from it. Like last night, it began to get hot. But this felt different.

Unable to fight the urge any longer, Charlotte reached for the leather thong wrapped around Creed’s neck. She tugged gently, freeing the pendant so she could see it. “What is...” Her voice trailed off as she lost the ability to speak.

Attached to the end of the leather was a crystal. The quartz piece was several inches long and even though the only light in the room came from the moon, it seemed to glow. Her breath caught in her throat as the pendant warmed in her hand.

"Charlotte." Creed growled her name and began to flex his hips. The movement drove her even deeper. She dropped the crystal and it landed on his chest. Later. They'd talk about it later.

"Ride me," he demanded.

She braced herself against his chest and began to raise and lower herself over his cock. One of his hands left her breasts and drifted lower until it was buried between her thighs. Every time she rose up or down, his clever fingers stroked her swollen clit, sending shards of pleasure shooting through her.

Watching Creed like this was incredibly intimate. She couldn't take her eyes away from where they were joined. His cock disappeared time and time again into her hot channel. His fingers touched her intimately, driving her closer and closer to the edge. Her pendant bounced between her breasts as their movements became more frantic. Out of control.

Creed wrapped his hands around her waist and suddenly rolled. She shrieked and grabbed at his shoulders. His mouth slammed down on hers as he fucked her hard and fast, with short, hammering strokes. She couldn't get close enough so she twined her legs around his waist, hooking her ankles together, urging him harder and faster.

She felt the weight of his crystal as it bounced against her chest, striking her pendant. Her chest began to hurt. Heat scorched her and she cried out. Creed tore his mouth from hers and swore. He buried his face in the curve of her neck, but he didn't stop. Couldn't stop. Their emotions were out of control, neither of them able to halt the madness consuming them. She needed him and he needed her. It went deeper than sex.

The slapping of their skin and their harsh breathing were the only sounds she could hear above the pounding of her heart. Wild with desire, she gripped his shoulders,

arching into each pounding thrust. Her climax hit her like a runaway locomotive, slamming into her with a force that took her breath away.

For one brief moment, time stopped and they were one. There was no separation between them emotionally, physically or spiritually. His emotions were hers and hers were his. She knew everything he was experiencing in that second. It was indescribably beautiful. Perfect.

Heat burst through her, over her. A golden light flashed between them, enveloped them. Creed roared and she felt the hot spurt of him deep inside her. She frowned. Something wasn't right.

Another wave of heat and pure pleasure struck her and she lost herself in her orgasm. Her body trembled and glowed. Charlotte felt as though her spirit was soaring through the cosmos, flashing through time and space. She caught glimpses of people and places. The images came so fast and hard they overwhelmed her. She cried out. Creed called her name. She sensed his concern, his fear for her.

Then the world went black.

The first thing she became aware of was Creed's big body covering hers. He was crushing her into the mattress, but she didn't care. She felt safe and protected, cared for. But as much as she liked it, it was becoming increasingly harder to breathe. She tried to shift without disturbing him.

He gave a low grunt and moved, pulling out and rolling onto his back. Charlotte jerked forward, following him, and something threatened to choke her.

"What the hell?" Creed tried to sit up and almost smacked her in the face with his elbow.

"Stop jerking me around," she grumbled. "Our necklaces are tangled together."

They both reached for their pendants at the same time. "Fuck," Creed swore as he reached over and turned on the bedside lamp. Both of them stared down at their pendants. They weren't tangled. The crystals had fused together.

"You're one of the Chosen too." She could hear the wonder in her own voice. She'd thought he might be, but actually seeing the crystals joined together was a heck of a lot different than thinking he could be part of this whole thing.

"Chosen what?" He reached behind his neck and undid the leather, freeing himself. "What the hell happened?" He removed the thong from the crystal and tossed the piece of leather onto the bedside table, leaving just his pendant attached to hers.

Charlotte shook her head, not quite knowing where to begin. He gripped her chin in his hand and turned her so she was looking at him. "What game are you playing?" The indulgent lover was gone, replaced by the implacable warrior. She could feel the barriers slamming into place. But it was too late. For both of them.

"It's not a game. I'll tell you everything I know. Over breakfast." There was no way she was doing this in bed, naked. Not now.

Creed kicked the covers from around his feet and rolled out of bed. He swore again and turned back to her. "The condom broke."

She closed her eyes and said a brief prayer. That's what had felt different when he'd come. "It should be fine." Even as she said it, she wasn't sure. She felt as though some force from long ago was somehow controlling, directing her life. She didn't like it. She hadn't asked for this. Neither had Creed.

Gathering the sheet around her, she scrambled out of bed. "I'm taking a shower. If you're still here when I'm done, I'll make us something to eat and tell you everything."

Creed's dark, brooding stare followed her as she scurried out the door and into the bathroom. Not giving herself time to think, she turned on the shower and stepped beneath the hot spray. Her body ached in unfamiliar places, and her breasts and the area between her legs were tender as she washed.

She ignored the pendant even though she could feel it vibrating against her skin. It was different, changed, just as she was. Just as she suspected Creed was. Tears flowed down her cheeks, mingling with the drops of water that cascaded over her. She ignored them. Crying had never done any good.

What was done was done.

All that remained was for her to pick up the pieces and move forward.

Chapter Five

By the time Creed had showered and dressed, Charlotte had bacon fried, eggs scrambled and toast ready to serve with the pot of coffee that was already perked and waiting. She tried to ignore him as he entered the kitchen but was unable to resist a quick peek. Really, it should be illegal how good the man looked, especially first thing in the morning.

His hair was damp and hung in a straight black curtain all the way to his shoulders. He had his shirt tossed over one shoulder, leaving his chest bare and giving her a wonderful view of his bronzed skin. Jeans hung low on his hips, the button still open.

Charlotte swallowed and concentrated on serving up the food, trying very hard not to focus on the fact that Creed wasn't wearing any underwear. "Sit down." She waved toward the table. "Anywhere is fine."

He pulled out the chair at the head of the table, draped his shirt over the back and sat. Charlotte put two plates of food on the table and went back for coffee. She was hungry but wasn't sure she could choke down any food.

"Well?" Creed took the coffee she handed him and leaned back in his chair. Looked like neither of them was eating until they talked.

She perched on the edge of the chair next to him, took a deep breath and tried to marshal her thoughts. "Where did you get your crystal?"

Creed sat forward, plunking his mug down on the table. The coffee sloshed but didn't quite splash over the rim. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Humor me. Please."

He reached over and snagged her pendant, staring at it. The two ends of the crystals had fused together, creating one stone. Charlotte's skin burned where his fingers brushed against her. She swallowed hard as her body responded to his touch. Her

nipples tightened, pressing against the thin cotton of her bra and long-sleeved T-shirt. She hoped he wouldn't notice.

He dropped the pendant and it bounced once before settling. "My grandfather gave it to me on my eighteenth birthday. Said it was special and would help me focus better."

"You're an empath, aren't you?" It was a question, but one she really didn't need the answer to. She already knew.

He sat back and dragged a hand through his hair. "Look, I don't have any special abilities. I pay attention to people. Anyone can do that."

"But not as well as you do," she added softly. "You're able to sense what people are feeling, even know what they're thinking. Sometimes the sensations are overwhelming. The crystal helps you build a barrier and function better in the world."

He picked up his fork and stabbed the tines into a piece of bacon. Bringing it to his lips, he caught the end with his white teeth and began to chew. She watched the strong column of his neck ripple as he swallowed. Her palms were moist and her heart was racing.

"It's nothing." He shot her a glance that dared her to disagree.

"Okay." She conceded he wasn't ready to share anything more about his ability. "Did he tell you anything when he gave it to you?"

"He spun some tale about it being in the family for generations and that the crystal was important to the future, to mankind. That it was just a piece of a larger one." He put down his fork and rested his elbows on the table. "Look, it was just a story. Something to make me feel special. I was leaving home to join the army the next day."

Charlotte shook her head. "No, he was right. I was given mine on my eighteenth birthday as well. All of my sisters got one on their birthdays too. The eight stones are part of the Heart of Fire, a powerful stone created by the mystics of Atlantis. Alone, they help the wearer focus their ability. When joined with the companion stone, they

have great energy. When the eight are joined together, it's said that the power is infinite."

Creed snorted. "You actually believe that?"

She tried not to feel hurt, but her heart ached. Creed might have had the companion stone but he obviously wanted no part of the legend. Still, she felt he had the right to know everything she did.

"All the stones will seek their counterparts. My stone got hotter, almost hummed, when I was around you. Didn't you feel it?" She desperately sought a connection with Creed. In spite of the fact they'd spent all last night entwined in each other's arms, she felt very much alone this morning.

He laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "I felt a lot of things last night that had nothing to do with the crystal." He picked up a slice of toast and tore off a corner.

Charlotte swallowed the lump in her throat. He was feeling boxed in, and to a man like Creed there could be no worse thing. He didn't want personal entanglements. She knew that. "A demon also wants the crystals. His name is Asmodeus."

Creed swallowed his food. "You thought Darrin was this demon? Asmodeus."

"Yes." She nodded. She pushed her plate away, knowing she couldn't eat a bite. Her stomach was churning too much for her to be able to keep anything down. "He's one of the seven princes of hell and the demon of lust. As a demon, his time is limited in this realm. The Heart of Fire would give him limitless power, enable him to live in this realm and wreak havoc in the world."

"Lady. That's crazy." He picked up his coffee mug and took a swallow. "Look, I don't know how you managed to join the crystals together and I don't care."

"I didn't do anything," she protested. "The crystal did it while we were making love."

"We had sex. Great, mind-blowing sex." His voice softened. "I like you, Charlotte, but I'm not a staying kinda guy."

"I know." She could sense his growing desperation to be away from here. Away from her. She bit her bottom lip and looked away. She would not cry. She wouldn't. A lone tear leaked from the corner of her eye and trailed down her cheekbone.

"Damn it." Creed pushed away from the table and stood next to her. He swore again as he reached for her and plucked her out of her chair. Wrapping his arms around her, he held her tight. His lips brushed the crown of her head. "I don't want to hurt you, Charlotte. But I can't stay."

She nodded, burrowing closer to his warm skin, rubbing her cheek against his chest. "I know."

He sighed. "You're a special lady, but this whole thing about abilities and magic and demons is more than I bargained for."

"I know." She couldn't seem to find anything else to say. She knew she had to try to make him understand. "I'm an empath too. I can sense people's emotions, sometimes even know what they're thinking."

He stiffened and she held him closer, not wanting to lose the physical connection. "I'm good with plants too. I know what they need in order to grow bigger and stronger than should be possible. They respond to me."

Creed slowly disengaged himself from her and stepped back. "You can read my thoughts." His voice was flat and hard.

She shivered but forced herself to meet his glacial stare. "Flashes, really. Mostly I can sense your emotions." And right now anger was winning out over all of them, masking vulnerability and a touch of fear.

He grabbed his shirt and tugged it over his head, tucking it into the waistband of his jeans. He fastened the button and did up his belt. "I gotta go." He hesitated and then reached into his back pocket and drew out his wallet. Opening it, he fished around inside and pulled out a white card. "If something happens. Call me."

She didn't need to be an empath to know he was talking about the time they had sex without a condom and the broken condom from this morning. "Sure." She took the

card and stuffed it into the pocket of her jeans, knowing she'd never dial the number on it.

Creed wanted to be free. So she was setting him free.

As if he sensed her thoughts, he scowled. "I mean it."

She shrugged and turned away. She couldn't do this any longer. "I think you should go now."

Stay! She wanted to scream the word aloud. But she didn't and she wouldn't. If he stayed it would be of his own free will or not at all. Maybe his part in this was over. Angela never told her that the man who held the other crystal would stay, only that she would eventually meet him.

She sensed him behind her, could almost see his hands hovering over her shoulders. She closed her eyes and hunched inward. If he touched her, she'd break down and cry.

His heavy sigh brushed the fine hair on the back of her neck. "Take care."

She nodded. "You too."

The sound of his boots echoed on the wood floors. *Don't go*. The sound of the front door opening and closing hit her like a slap to the face. *Don't go*. Wheels on gravel quickly followed the sound of an engine catching. *Don't go*.

The phone rang. Charlotte stumbled toward it, knowing before she answered who it was.

"What the hell is going on?" Kenna's voice, so forceful, so caring, was the final straw. "And don't tell me nothing. I can feel it."

Not for the first time in her life, Charlotte was very glad for the connection she shared with her sisters through the crystals. She broke down and began to sob. "I met him."

She sensed the hesitation on the other end. "Him who?"

She laughed and cried at the same time, swiping the tears from her face. "Creed Lawson. My counterpart. The man with the crystal."

"He hurt you." It wasn't a question. "I'm going to kick his ass."

Charlotte dropped into her chair, pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her free arm around them. It was so like Kenna. She was the youngest of them all, but she was fierce in her protection of those she loved.

"No, you're not." She took a deep breath to calm her emotions. Picking up the crystal, she focused on it, drawing its power to settle her. The crystal was humming louder. It was almost like a song. She cocked her head, trying to hear it, but sensed Kenna was getting impatient.

"Why not?"

"Because this is about free will. Creed had no idea about any of this. We've had years to prepare ourselves and I still didn't believe it until I met him and the crystals fused."

"What is he like?" She could sense fear and anticipation in Kenna's voice. If Charlotte had met her man, then Kenna was next.

Charlotte tried to find the words to describe Creed. "He's gorgeous and rough and dangerous. Exactly the opposite of what I envisioned."

"You're serious?" Kenna didn't wait for an answer. "Where the heck did you meet him?"

"A roadside bar."

"What?" Kenna yelled. "Tell me everything."

So she did. The story came pouring out of her. She left out the parts where she and Creed slept together, but Kenna was no dummy.

"Asmodeus was disguised as this guy Darrin?"

Charlotte nodded even though her sister couldn't see her. "I think so."

"You're in danger. You should get out of there now." Kenna's anxiety was starting to make Charlotte uneasy.

"Where should I go? This is my home."

"Take a trip. Go and stay with Memory. Or better yet, Dee. Maybe we should all be together."

"Not yet." Charlotte sensed the time wasn't right yet. "If we're all in one place it makes it easier for Asmodeus. We can't meet until the time is right."

"You mean when I get the other half of my stone."

"It will happen."

"Just be careful." Kenna hesitated and then lightened her tone. "I can still go after this Lawson guy and kick his ass for you."

"I love you, Kenna."

"Me too."

"I have to go now. You know that Memory and Dee are both waiting to call." All the women had a connection that defied logic. They knew when one of them was distressed or in trouble. It had always been that way.

"I can be there in a matter of hours if you need me."

Charlotte smiled through her sorrow. "I know. But now isn't the time. You take care."

Kenna snorted. "You don't need to worry about me. Call me later."

The click was loud in her ear and Charlotte sighed and hit the button to end the call. Not one second later the phone rang again. She answered it. "I'm fine, Memory."

Creed kept glancing in his rearview mirror. The farther away from Charlotte he got, the worse the sensation of dread in the pit of his stomach grew.

"Fuck." He turned on his signal light and pulled off the road. Putting the truck in park and turning off the ignition, he sat there and stared out the window at the mountains and the forest. Usually nature calmed him, but not this time.

He scrubbed his hand over his face, trying not to see the sadness in Charlotte's eyes, the defeated slump of her shoulders. "She's just a woman you met last night in a bar."

He slammed the palm of his hand against the steering wheel. "Great. Now you're not only talking to yourself, you're lying to yourself."

Charlotte was much more than simply a woman he'd picked up in a bar. He'd sensed her the moment she'd walked into the place. Ignoring her hadn't worked. She'd found her way to him. Was it the power of the crystals drawing them or something more?

Did it matter?

Creed was no longer sure. In one short night, Charlotte had turned his world upside down. He didn't do relationships. Being able to sense other people's emotions made them much too uncomfortable. Better to be alone than to be constantly disappointed, or worse, lied to and betrayed.

If he was honest with himself, Charlotte had made him want something more. He led a solitary life, which suited him just fine. Most of the time. Some nights the loneliness ate at his soul and left him yearning for a woman to share his life with. Every time he'd tried, the relationship had been a disaster. So he'd stopped trying years ago. Now he limited himself to meaningless sexual encounters where both partners knew the score going in.

Nothing in his life had prepared him for Charlotte. Like some tawny-haired angel, she'd stared up at him with her big blue eyes and asked him to help her. Like an idiot, he hadn't been able to refuse her. Not when she kissed him so sweetly with her full pink lips, her sexy mouth warm and welcoming. Not when he touched her soft skin.

He let out a breath, the tips of his fingers tingling at the memory. Her skin was the softest thing he'd ever felt in his life. His hands closed into fists as if he could keep the feel of it with him forever.

Her lashes were long and thick, brushing her cheekbones when she closed her eyes. There was a calmness about her he found soothing and a sexual attraction that set his body on fire.

His cock twitched and began to grow. Yeah, there was no doubting the physical connection between them. But was there more?

Creed rubbed his chest. A sense of loss, an overwhelming ache filled him with each mile he'd driven. How had one small woman affected him so greatly in just one night?

It all came back to the crystals. She'd said that the pendants had drawn them together. Did he believe that? Did he have any other choice but to believe?

Closing his eyes, he looked inward, combing back through his memories to the night his grandfather had given him the unique crystal.

The old man had looked especially solemn with his long graying hair and timeworn face. "This is a very special stone, grandson, one that has been in our family for generations beyond memory. The crystal will help you focus your senses and enhance them."

"Where did it come from?" Creed asked. He stared at the piece of quartz hanging from a leather cord. It shimmered, displaying a rainbow of colors trapped inside. It called to him on a deep, spiritual level. He wanted to touch it but knew better. His grandfather had to finish his story first. Only then would Creed be allowed to have the present. The man had been his sole guardian since he was ten and Creed had long ago learned his grandfather's ways.

"It came from a land and a people long gone from this earth. It is part of a whole that has great power. It is your destiny."

Creed scowled. He didn't like talk of destiny. He had his life planned out for himself. He was joining the army tomorrow.

“Take it.” His grandfather draped the pendant around Creed’s neck. He immediately felt the jolt of power. The crystal heated against his skin, growing hotter with each second until it was burning him. He wrapped his hand around it and almost fell to his knees as pictures and images bombarded him. People screaming and dying. Walls of a great city crumbling beneath a tsunami of epic proportions.

“You will need all your strength to face your future. But you will not be alone.” His grandfather’s voice faded back into the past where it belonged and Creed came back to the here and now with a jolt.

His fingers reached for his throat, but there was nothing there. The crystal was gone. Creed opened his eyes and stared out over the amazing vista before him. He’d always had an uncanny sense for people and situations. That’s what had made him such a damn good soldier, cop and bounty hunter.

It also wore him down. He could tell when someone was smiling to his face but hated his guts. He knew when someone was lying and when they were hiding something. It made it incredibly difficult to be around people.

But not Charlotte.

He realized with a jolt that he’d never once felt uncomfortable around her. There was no malice, no hidden agenda. And she hadn’t been lying. Not even as she’d spun her tale of a dark demon.

“So she believed it. Doesn’t make it true.”

His gut clenched and goose bumps raced down his spine. He’d had this feeling too many times over the years to ignore it. Charlotte was in danger. Maybe not from a demon, but from that guy Darrin. What if he’d somehow found out where she lived?

They hadn’t removed the registration from her vehicle last night. It would have been easy for Darrin to break out the window and steal it. And he’d left Charlotte all alone.

He started the truck. After checking for traffic, he turned the vehicle around and started back the way he'd come. He didn't question how he knew it, but some menace was stalking Charlotte.

They weren't done. Not by a long shot. Because something was becoming abundantly clear. He might not want to be involved with a woman, but he was connected to Charlotte in a way that defied all logic. He yearned to see her sweet face, hear her quiet voice, taste her tender lips, feel her soft skin and smell her unique scent of honey and spice and flowers.

In one short night he'd done something he'd sworn he'd never do. He'd fallen in love.

And that special woman was now in grave peril and it was due to his stupidity. Creed pushed his foot down on the gas pedal, going as fast as he dared along the winding mountain road. As he drove he prayed he wasn't too late.

Chapter Six

"I didn't expect you to be alone so soon." The male voice startled Charlotte and she dropped the plate she was carrying to the sink. It fell to the floor with a crash. Glass splintered and flew everywhere.

"Darrin?" She couldn't believe he was standing there.

"If you like," he inclined his blond head. "However, I much prefer my real name, and since you already know it, you might as well call me Asmodeus. Or you can call me Your Highness if you prefer. I am a prince of hell, after all."

Panic enveloped her. The very thing she'd feared her entire life was happening. Asmodeus was real and he'd found her. "How did you find me? How did you get in?" Now that was a stupid question. Charlotte ignored her racing heartbeat and tried to think. The guy was a demon. He probably had all sorts of powers she wasn't aware of.

"Finding you was no challenge at all. I've always known where you were. I have minions who keep track of such things. As for how I got in, I simply walked through your front door." He tsked. "You really need to lock them. A woman living alone should know better."

Somehow she didn't think a simple lock would have kept him out. She inched toward the telephone, wishing she hadn't left the cordless on the table when she'd finished talking with her sisters. As if on cue, it rang. Charlotte knew it was Kenna.

He sauntered toward the table, looking ridiculously innocuous in his khakis and button-down shirt. Nothing at all like a demon. He picked up the phone and pressed the talk button. "Charlotte can't come to the phone right now. I'm afraid she's rather busy."

She heard Kenna screaming, "You bastard." Then her voice was cut off.

He tossed the phone aside and shook his head. "Such language." He smiled and she could see the pure evil behind it. "Obviously you never learned manners at the orphanage."

He oozed menace and malevolence with every word he spoke. How had she ever thought him bland and unthreatening?

"Because that is what I wanted you to think, sweet Charlotte." He leaned one hip on the table and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked totally relaxed, a man with all the time in the world. With his blond hair, blue eyes and lithe build, he resembled an angel more than the demon he was.

He laughed. "Irony, isn't it? I have you to thank for my appearance." He held his arms wide. "I picked this image from your brain. This is your ideal." He pushed away from the table. "It was so far from the reality of Mr. Lawson I was afraid you wouldn't look twice at him. That's why I disabled your car."

Charlotte couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You did that?" She inched toward the knife block on the counter. She needed a weapon.

"Of course." He preened, his chest actually puffing out. "I needed those crystals joined. So much easier that way." He plucked a crystal pendant from beneath his shirt and toyed with it. It was dark and smoky, not clear like hers. "I was willing to sleep with you to get your crystal. That might have been fun."

He laughed when she cringed.

"You wouldn't have given me much of a challenge though. You're not strong like your sisters." The taunt went through her like a knife blade. She'd always feared she was the weak link in the group.

He was reading her thoughts, using them against her. She had to put up a barrier. Keep him out of her mind.

"Although you do have nice tits. I would have enjoyed fucking you, making you scream. Did Creed make you scream?"

Bile churned in her belly. She wouldn't think about Creed and what they'd done last night. There was no way she'd allow Asmodeus to taint something so incredibly beautiful.

"Be a good girl now and give me the crystal." He held out his hand as if he expected her to simply hand it over. "Don't make me have to take it from you." The underlying threat made her break out in a cold sweat.

Charlotte lunged, grabbing the largest knife from the block. She held it in front of her, blade outstretched. "Stay away from me."

"Well, well, well. This certainly makes it more fun." He prowled closer, herding her toward the counter. She had nowhere else to go. There was no way for her to get by him and make a run for the front door. If she managed to get to the forest, she could hide. She knew every inch of the land for miles.

He reached out his hand and let the tip of the blade touch his palm. It dug into his flesh. Blood began to seep from the wound, trailing down his palm and dripping onto the floor.

"Using a knife is messy business, Charlotte." He pulled back his hand and licked the wound, savoring the blood before swallowing.

Her stomach lurched as he smiled at her, his mouth smeared with blood. He licked his lips. "Tasty. Maybe not as sweet as yours, but good nonetheless."

This was surreal. It couldn't be happening. Yet the small drops of blood on her floor and the man standing in front of her were all too real.

He tilted his head to one side, studying her. "Have you ever felt the blade of a knife slicing through skin?" He shook his head and answered his own question. "No? The way the sharp metal glides through human flesh is sublime."

He licked his lips again and she could sense his growing excitement. It was almost sexual in nature. Asmodeus obviously enjoyed other people's pain.

"It's exhilarating. Powerful. Just think, Charlotte, you could feel just like a god, taking the life of someone else."

Her hand shook even as she tried to steady it.

"If you make me take that knife from you, that's what I'll do to you."

"You can't take the crystal from me." She started to think. She couldn't physically outfight a demon. She'd have to outwit him. "I have to give it to you." She'd done a lot of research over the years and she was almost certain that much was true.

He laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls, growing louder and louder until she wanted to cover her ears with her hands. It grated like fingernails on a chalkboard. "Oh Charlotte, you are naive. I can torture you in so many ways you'll be begging me to take the crystal." His eyes glowed red for a brief second. "I think I'd enjoy that. Imagine yourself naked and on your knees, pleading with me to take the crystal."

His breath was coming harder and faster as he projected the image into her brain. She could feel her knees grinding into the floor, cut by the broken glass scattered all around. The cool air snaking around her naked body. Her torso was bruised and bloody, her skin ripped open and hanging in shreds.

She whimpered and shook her head, keeping her eyes on him rather than looking down to make certain she was still fully dressed and wasn't bleeding out. It was an illusion. It was all a lie, no matter how real it felt. She tried desperately to keep the horrible images out of her head, but it was impossible. Asmodeus' strength was far greater than hers.

Terror swamped her. She had to do this. She had to fight him. Her sisters were depending on her. The world was depending on her. If Asmodeus got this crystal, he'd have more power than he had now. If he got all of them— She shuddered, not even daring to contemplate such a thing.

Power. The crystal had power. But was it enough? Clutching the pendant with her free hand, she focused on it. Asmodeus growled. The sound was low, guttural. More animal than man. The sound chilled her blood.

She lost focus and felt him shoving depraved images into her brain. She pushed them away with all her psychic strength and brought her attention back to the crystal. It was twice the size now that the two were joined. But the power was more than the sum of the two.

"You're an empath. You feel the emotions of others. If you try to harm me, it will only bounce back on you. The pain will overwhelm you, leaving you at my mercy."

She wasn't sure if he was right about that, but it didn't matter. She had no choice. There was no other way. If she couldn't tap into the innate power of the crystal she was lost.

Asmodeus smiled, displaying two rows of jagged teeth. "You can't kill me, Charlotte. You know you can't."

"Maybe she can't. But I sure as hell can."

Charlotte lost all focus, her head swiveling toward the entrance to the kitchen. Creed stood in the doorway, looking like some dark avenging angel. He held a gun steady in his right hand, pointed straight at Asmodeus' head. "Get away from her."

Relief swamped her. He'd come back.

Asmodeus whipped around to face Creed. "What an interesting word choice. Hell. Maybe you're more like me than her. Wouldn't you like all that power for yourself? It's not fair that you're obviously much stronger than Charlotte and she has the crystal."

The gun wavered in Creed's hand and his eyes drained of all emotion. She sucked in a breath and moaned as the weapon slowly lowered back down to his side. The amount of dark power swirling around Creed was tremendous. Her relief coalesced into a thickening dread that threatened to smother her.

Asmodeus stood aside and nodded. "That's what I thought. Take the crystal from her and the power is yours. All yours. You were meant to have it. To wield it."

Charlotte froze as a mask of hate settled over Creed's face. His dark eyes turned even colder. His lips parted on a snarl of anger. There was none of the warmth from the

night before, nothing of the man she'd come to know and love. She knew he was in there somewhere, but she might as well have been staring into the face of a stranger.

"Creed?" The knife shook in her hands. She opened her fingers and let it fall to the floor. There was no way she could hurt him. He was a victim in all this. More so than she was. At least she'd had her entire adult life to come to grips with the legend of the crystals. "Creed." She tried again to get his attention, to somehow break Asmodeus' dark magic and reach her lover, but his gaze was focused on the pendant around her neck.

His boots crushed some of the broken glass from where she'd dropped the plate. Asmodeus was chuckling, urging Creed onward, promising him untold power once he'd put the crystal in the demon's hands.

She stared up at Creed. She loved him with all her heart. But it wasn't enough. Not to fight the power of a demon of hell. No matter what happened, she would never regret meeting Creed or the night they'd spent together. She was only sad that they hadn't had more time together. Maybe if they'd had time to connect on more than a physical level, things would have been different. She swallowed hard and clasped the pendant tighter. She didn't flinch as Creed reached out his hand and covered hers.

Hatred swamped Creed as he walked across the room. He could smell Charlotte's fear, taste the bitterness of the emotion on his tongue. The demon was radiating pure pleasure. And Creed no longer had any doubt the creature was a demon. The double row of sharp, pointy teeth, the glowing red eyes and the smell of rot and sulfur were a dead giveaway. The creature was enjoying Charlotte's terror, her pain. Enjoying the power he thought he wielded over Creed.

He'd pay for that.

Creed had done a lot of dark things in his life. As a soldier, he'd killed. He'd dragged buddies more dead than alive back to safety only to watch them bleed to death. As a cop he'd thought he'd seen the worst of humanity. That nothing could

surprise him or break down the solid emotional barrier he kept between himself and the rest of the world. But he'd never done anything as hard as what he was doing right now.

The loathing he felt for the demon and for himself grew with each step he took. His skin crawled as he turned his back on his adversary. He had to fight every instinct he had not to turn and attack.

But that wasn't the way to win. In a contest of brute strength, he had no doubt he'd lose. The demon would be much stronger. No, he needed to use his mind, his cunning, if they were going to have a chance to defeat this creature and send it back to hell.

Charlotte stared up at him. He expected to see hate, anger or sheer terror. What he saw was love, pure and true, shining from her beautiful, tearful blue eyes. It swamped him, almost breaking the control he desperately needed to maintain in order to keep moving.

He wished there was some way to let her know what he was doing, to tell her to trust him. He'd lived through many battles, but he'd never witnessed the kind of courage he was seeing now.

"Creed." The sound of his name falling from her lips strengthened him. Behind him he sensed the demon's impatience. Time had run out.

Her fingers were wrapped around the crystal. Reaching out, he covered her smaller hand, several of his fingers actually touching the crystal. He leaned forward until their lips were almost touching. Her breath was coming in short, hard puffs. He could see her pulse fluttering in the side of her neck. "Don't let go," he whispered.

Her eyes widened and she gave an imperceptible nod, shifting her fingers so he could get a better grip.

"Take it," the demon ordered. "Take the crystal from her, give it to me and the woman is yours. You can steal her power from her. I can show you how." The room was growing darker with each passing second, as though Asmodeus was sucking every bit of light from the place.

"I love you." She didn't say the words aloud but mouthed them instead.

Creed dropped the thick, wide barriers he'd erected around his emotions. Totally open and naked in a way that left him far more vulnerable than if he'd stripped himself physically, he reached out for Charlotte.

She'd already dropped her barrier and was reaching out to him, offering him everything she had—love, power and trust. "Push everything you've got through the crystal," he whispered.

"Take it," Asmodeus shouted. A loud clap of thunder reverberated through the room and a band of pain wrapped around Creed's skull, tightening so hard and fast he was afraid he'd pass out.

Charlotte snaked her arm around his waist, supporting his weight. Creed gritted his teeth and breathed through the pain, using it to help keep his focus. It was now or never. "Now!"

Keeping his hand on the crystal, Creed whirled to face Asmodeus. Charlotte moved with him, her arm still tight around his waist. All signs of the man they'd known as Darrin were gone. In his place was a towering creature straight out of a nightmare.

Leathery skin covered a hulking body. Long arms tipped with talons almost reached the ground. Two thick horns jutted out of the top of his head. Red eyes gleamed from a dark face. He peeled back his lips and roared, displaying his jagged teeth.

Creed raised the gun he still held tight in his right hand and fired, emptying the clip into the creature from chest to head, hoping to hit a vulnerable spot. Asmodeus roared again and surged forward. Creed tossed the gun aside and sent every bit of strength he had into the crystal.

"Form a barrier," he shouted.

Gathering every scrap of energy from both of them, Creed pushed it through the crystal. It amplified the power and shot back to him, so he sent it through the crystal

again and again. Charlotte immediately understood what he was doing. As he built the power, she constructed the barrier.

It felt strange to be this open with someone, to trust them so deeply. They worked as one, more powerful than either of them could ever have been alone.

The demon shot a bolt of energy toward them. Creed shoved Charlotte behind him, blocking as much of her body as he could. Neither of them released their death grip on the crystal.

Creed expected the bolt to pierce his chest and kill him. Instead it ricocheted away, shattering into a thousand sparks as though it had hit something. "It's working!"

A loud whirring sound filled the air. Creed swore as he watched the demon twirl a thick six-foot-long chain above his head. It had two foot-wide balls embedded with spikes on either end and reminded Creed of a bolas. If this weapon broke through their barrier, they were dead.

The air grew thick with smoke. It was getting harder to breathe with each passing second. Charlotte coughed and buried her face against his chest.

Sweat poured down his body. Every muscle was tense as he struggled to remain upright and focused. Charlotte was depending on him. Failure was not an option.

Charlotte struggled to suck air into her starving lungs. Her head throbbed and her knees grew weaker with each passing second as the demon fought her on both the physical and the psychic plane. Creed stumbled. She gripped his shirt, holding on with everything she had. He recovered immediately, planting his feet and straightening to his full height.

Her entire life she'd felt alone, separate from other people in ways they could never understand. It was ironic that, in the midst of a life-and-death struggle with a demon, she no longer felt alone.

She and Creed were one, sharing thoughts, emotions and every ounce of power they possessed. She trusted him to keep using the crystal to generate energy and he trusted her to build a strong enough barrier to keep back the demon.

They couldn't destroy him. Only all eight of the crystals joined together could do that. But if they could weaken him, Asmodeus would have to go back to the realm of hell in order to build his power and strength again.

It was the only option they had.

She dared a glance toward the demon and then wished she hadn't. He seemed to be growing larger with each passing second. Asmodeus looked at her, his teeth bared, his eyes blazing as he twirled his heavy weapon above his head. It went faster and faster. The whirring sound grew louder and louder, making it harder to concentrate.

Charlotte closed her eyes and focused only on Creed and the crystal. The stone hummed with energy, which became a tinkling sound like musical chimes as it grew in strength. It was beautiful, drowning out the deadly whirl of the demon's weapon.

She cocked her head to one side and listened. She could hear something else. She smiled as the growing melody of her sisters' voices broke through the noise. They blended with the crystal's music until it became a song of power and beauty. She channeled it through the stone, adding their strength and power to the mix. Creed's energy was like the bass note in the music, grounding it.

Creed yelled and her eyes snapped open. The demon released the heavy chain, flinging it toward them. Flames shot from the spiked ends. It made a complete revolution as it came toward them as though in slow motion. Charlotte felt the surge of energy as Creed threw every bit of power he possessed into the crystal.

The barrier she'd created encompassed them in a light so bright it was almost blinding. She'd brought it solidly from the psychic plane to the physical realm. The chain struck the light. Charlotte cringed back, unable to stop the reflex action. The fire winked out and the chain disappeared, the dark magic absorbed by the light.

Asmodeus began to fade and the room began to lighten. "He will leave you, Charlotte," the demon promised. "He will not be able to love you. No one can. He is here only out of a sense of responsibility. Nothing more."

The demon laughed at Creed. "You know she will betray you, lie to you. Everyone does. You were better off alone. Next time I won't give you a choice."

"You are banished from here, demon." Creed raised his hand and a bolt of light shot from his palm, hitting Asmodeus in the chest. The leathery skin sizzled and began to smolder.

"For now," the demon taunted. He was still smiling as he faded from sight.

Chapter Seven

Her knees gave out and Charlotte felt the floor rising up to meet her. Creed let go of the crystal and caught her, lifting her into his arms. She stared around her kitchen. It was a mess. Glass was shattered across the floor, her walls, ceiling and floors were scorched and her table was smashed into small pieces. She had no idea when that had happened.

But they were alive and Asmodeus didn't have the crystal.

Creed walked across the room, debris crunching beneath his boots as he carried her away from the smoldering mess.

"You came back." The words fell from her lips like a prayer.

Creed stared down at her, his dark eyes unreadable. "I couldn't stay away." He went up the stairs and shouldered his way into her bedroom, setting her down beside the bed.

The demon's taunt flitted through her brain and she nodded. "You felt responsible for me." Creed had a streak of honor a mile wide. Of course he'd feel responsible for her.

"Yes."

He didn't say anything else as he reached for the hem of her T-shirt and inched it upward. "What are you doing?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Getting you naked." He tugged her shirt higher. "You can let go of the crystal."

She hadn't realized she was still holding on to it. She forced her fingers open and the stone fell to her chest. It was incredible to think that such a small thing contained so much power.

Her shirt was whipped over her head and tossed aside. Creed reached for the front closure of her bra. She batted his hands away. "What are you doing?"

"I already told you." He leaned down and skimmed his lips over the curve of her jaw. She sighed and tilted her neck back, giving him better access. One touch was all it took to turn her resolve into jelly.

Creed was with her. He'd come back for her and together they'd defeated Asmodeus. Nothing else mattered.

They'd talk. Later. Right now she needed to celebrate life, to feel Creed buried deep inside her, taking her to the stars.

"You have on way too much clothes," she moaned as his clever tongue traced the swirls of her ear.

"I can fix that." He stepped back and shucked his boots, socks, jeans and shirt in record time. She blinked as his hard, bronzed body was bared. She'd seen him before but she still couldn't believe how sexy and gorgeous he was.

He reached for her jeans. "Now you're the one with too much clothes." Charlotte suddenly couldn't wait to be in his arms. She helped him tug her clothes from her body. When they were both naked, he tumbled her onto the bed, rolling her beneath him.

Creed braced himself on his forearms as he leaned down and kissed her. His lips were soft and firm. He was fully aroused, his cock pressing against her mound, yet he made no move to enter her, to touch her beyond the gentle kiss.

He pulled back and stared down at her, his dark eyes smoldering with emotion. Now that the fight with the demon had passed, Creed had erected a barrier around himself. It was as natural to him as breathing.

He nuzzled his nose against hers. "I did come back because I felt responsible for you."

Her pleasure dimmed. She might have fallen in love with Creed, but that was no guarantee he felt anything for her beyond obligation. She cupped his face in her hands,

feeling the prickly brush of his five o'clock shadow against her skin. "I'm glad you came back." And she was. There was no way she could have defeated the demon on her own, not even with her sisters' help.

"Every mile I drove, I felt as though I was leaving something important behind." He turned his head and kissed her palm.

Her hands dropped down to his shoulders and her heart began to beat faster.

"I don't know how it happened." He shook his head, his shoulder-length hair brushing her skin like a caress. "Maybe it's the damn crystal. Maybe it was meant to be."

"What?" She caught her breath, almost afraid to hope.

"Us." His lips skimmed the line of her jaw. "You and me, together." He went lower, finding the sensitive skin behind her ear. "Forever."

She moaned as he teased the curve of her ear with his clever tongue. *Forever*. She loved the sound of the word. "I love you." The declaration came out as a breathy sigh as she tightened her arms around him.

He pulled back and stared down at her. His dark eyes never left hers as he reached between their bodies and positioned his cock at her opening. "Say it again."

She obeyed his command, sensing he needed to hear the words. "I love you."

He pushed forward, sinking into her hot depths, forging a place for himself inside her. "I'm a bounty hunter." He said it as though it was a mark against him. "I don't like being around people." He punctuated that statement by pulling back slightly and rocking forward.

"I'm not that fond of being around people myself." She slid her hands down his back until she was cupping his butt, urging him deeper.

He sucked in a breath. "I'm not an easy man to live with." His voice was low, as though he was admitting some deep dark secret.

Charlotte couldn't help herself. She laughed. "No, not you." There was no mistaking the teasing note in her voice.

His head jerked back. He studied her, a slow smile forming. "Oh baby. You're going to pay for that one." Pulling back, he paused before slamming home.

"Promises, promises." She circled her hips and squeezed her vaginal muscles around his thick cock. It was his turn to moan.

His black eyes twinkled with mischief. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Humor fled quickly as he began to move. She thought their lovemaking would be hard and fast. Instead it was slow and gentle. Her orgasm built as he continued to stroke in and out of her slick channel.

She wrapped her legs around him, wanting to be as close to him as possible. Her breasts were plastered against his hard chest as their bodies moved together. He slipped his hand between them, brushing his thumb over her swollen clit. Her entire being thrummed with anticipation. One more touch was all it took.

Charlotte came undone. Her inner muscles tightened around his cock. Creed continued to pump into her in long, even strokes, prolonging her release. Just as she was coming down, she felt the tightening of his muscles beneath her hands, the flex and ripple of his shaft and the hot flood of his semen filling her.

He called out her name as his body jerked and then stiffened. Through half-closed eyes, she watched him come. He was so beautiful, the perfect male beast. He shuddered and then collapsed. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight. This moment was so perfect she never wanted it to end.

"I'm too heavy," he mumbled as he heaved himself off her. He rolled onto his back and pulled her into his arms. She settled easily, her head resting against his shoulder, her hand over his heart.

The crystal pendant still hung around her neck, but it rested on his chest. Like two halves of a whole, the pendants fit together perfectly. Much like she and Creed did.

Unlike the crystals, she had no idea what the future would hold for the two of them. Would they stay together or would Creed leave?

His breathing deepened and her eyes began to close. She was exhausted and knew he must be too. It wasn't every day one had to fight a demon from hell.

She felt his lips against her forehead as she snuggled closer. "I love you," he whispered. Her eyes popped open, all exhaustion pushed aside by the rush of adrenaline flooding her veins. He loved her.

Charlotte started to move, but his arm tightened around her. His breathing was deep and even, and she realized he'd fallen asleep. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The first and only time a man tells her he loves her and he falls asleep right after.

A smile touched her lips. That was Creed. He wasn't anything like what she'd imagined the perfect man to be, yet he was exactly that. He was perfect. For her.

Closing her eyes, she hugged him closer and slept.

It was dark when she opened her eyes again. She blinked, squinting to try to see her clock.

"It's almost nine." His deep voice rumbled against her cheek where it rested against his chest. "The phone has been ringing almost nonstop for the past hour."

"Wow." Charlotte sat up, rubbing her hand over her face. "How did I sleep through that?"

"Exhaustion," he offered. Creed pushed himself up and propped his back against her headboard. "I meant what I said."

She glanced shyly at him. "I did too."

He reached for her and she went easily, curling up in his arms. "So where do we go from here?"

"Where do you want to go?" She wanted him to stay with her, but she honestly didn't know if he could settle down. He was too used to being on his own, of answering to no one but himself.

"I want us to be together." He rubbed his hand absently up and down her arm. Her skin tingled and goose bumps raced down her body.

"I want that too." She took a deep breath and the scent of hot male and sex filled her nostrils. Her pussy clenched, shocking her. The man had certainly released her inner sex kitten.

"I travel for work and you don't. I have an apartment and you have a house. Makes more sense for me to pack my stuff up and move in here." She sensed the underlying question, almost hesitation in his voice. Was this something he really wanted or simply what he thought she wanted?

"If that's what you want."

He lifted her and set her back on her side of the bed. "Damn it, Charlotte. I'm trying to figure out what you want. If I had my way, I'd be moved in by tonight, but I don't want to rush you. I know you're used to living on your own. The last thing you need is a rough man like me invading your space."

Happiness bloomed in her chest. She dropped her barriers, opening herself fully to him as she had when they were fighting the demon. Reaching up, she clasped the crystal with one hand. With her free hand, she lifted his, bringing it to the pendant. "See for yourself what I want."

It was easy. As though the crystal opened up a perfect path between them, she felt Creed and all his emotions. She knew he could also sense everything she was feeling. A slow, sexy grin curved his lips.

"Baby, whatever you want."

Charlotte gasped as she realized he'd gone beyond her emotions and was reading her thoughts, which were quite X-rated and featured Creed in a starring role. She dropped the crystal, her cheeks heating.

Creed flipped her onto her back and straddled her. He was fully erect, the head of his cock glistening with moisture. His chest was rising and falling with each deep breath he took.

Leaning down, he flicked his tongue over one of her distended nipples. "No need to be shy." He glanced up at her, a sexy grin on his face. He looked younger, more carefree than she'd ever seen him. "Whatever you want, Charlotte. I'm your man."

"My man." She said the words aloud. Testing them. She liked the sound of that.

"Yours." He nipped at the curve of her breast, making her moan. "Forever."

It felt right. They might not have known each other long, but they *knew* each other in a way that most couples never did. They knew their deepest hopes and fears, had stood beside one another and faced certain death. Time didn't matter. What they had together was solid.

Yet she paused, needing to make sure he understood. "This isn't over." He raised his head, his eyes dark and steady. "Asmodeus will be back. We'll have to fight him again."

He nodded. His hands cupped her breasts and he thumbed her nipples. It was almost impossible for her to concentrate with him touching her like this. Her pussy was hot and aching. She wanted Creed with a passion that seemed endless.

"I'm not afraid of that bastard." He tweaked her nipples, making her moan. "I'm more afraid of losing you."

She licked her lips, loving the way his eyes narrowed as he watched. "That will never happen." She reassured him the easiest way she knew how. "I love you." She opened her arms to him, welcoming him into her life and her body.

With a low growl, Creed pounced. They rolled on the bed and within seconds he was on his back and she was sprawled across him. His cock was buried in her pussy and she was squeezing him tight.

The phone began to ring again. She could sense her sisters' impatience. For once, they'd have to wait. This was more important.

Loving Creed was all that mattered.

He smiled and she knew he could read her thoughts. It was going to be interesting to see just how deep their connection went. The crystal was sandwiched between them, touching both his skin and hers.

He brushed a lock of hair away from her face. "I love you too. Now let's fulfill some of those fantasies."

Charlotte smiled and let herself be swept away.

Epilogue

Charlotte sat back in her favorite chair, the phone tucked beneath her ear. From her vantage point, she could see the road. Creed had left this morning to go back to his place and collect his belongings. She couldn't believe how excited she was about having him move in.

He'd wanted her to go with him, but she sensed he needed some time alone to sort through his feelings. Not that she doubted he loved her. Far from it. But so much had happened the past few days.

"Are you listening to me?" Kenna's voice snapped her back to the conversation.

"Yes. Of course I'm listening." At least she was trying to. She glanced out the window again. It was a three-hour drive for Creed to get back to his place. Give him four or five hours to pack, leave a forwarding address, and basically shift his life here. Three hours back. That meant he should be here any minute now. He'd already called her five times today and left several messages while she'd been on the phone with Memory, Dee and now Kenna.

"No, you're not."

Charlotte could hear the exasperation in her sister's voice. But beneath that, she could hear the love. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You've been through a lot." Kenna paused. "What was it like? Fighting the demon?"

Charlotte hesitated, not wanting to frighten Kenna but needing her to be prepared. "Terrifying." She shot a look at her mangled kitchen. She'd spent part of the day cleaning and disposing of the broken furniture, but the scorch marks on the walls were going to take a bit more work. She and Creed were going to the hardware store in town tomorrow to pick up supplies to fix the damage. She also needed a new kitchen table.

Turning her back, she shifted in her chair until she could no longer see the damage in the kitchen. "I don't know what would have happened if Creed hadn't come back."

"He shouldn't have left in the first place. You can't rely on men."

"Now you sound like Memory and Dee." Or at least how they'd sounded before they'd bonded with their male counterparts. She had no idea if their relationships were anything like what she shared with Creed, but she suspected they were every bit as intense.

Kenna snorted. "Just being realistic."

Charlotte moved the phone to her other ear. "Listen, Kenna. You can't do this alone. You need him, whoever he is, to help you. Asmodeus will be watching you now. Waiting. Biding his time. I don't know if he'll try to take the crystal from you or wait until the two of them are joined." She chewed on her bottom lip, worried about her younger sister. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"Now you sound like the other two."

Charlotte laughed at the teasing note in Kenna's voice. "We just all love you."

"I know." Kenna's emotions flooded Charlotte. Her sister sounded pensive, uncertain. That was so unlike her.

"You can do this. We can do this." She said the words as much for her sister's benefit as her own.

"Of course I can." She changed the subject. "I can be there tomorrow if you need me."

"No, that's okay. I'm fine."

Kenna snorted. "You just want to have hot, nasty sex with your new stud."

"Kenna!"

Laughter filled the line. "Hey, I'm just repeating what Dee said to me. But seriously, take care and be careful too. Just because you won the first round doesn't mean Asmodeus is finished with you."

"I know." And she did. That was part of the reason Creed had wanted her to go with him today. She'd refused only because she knew the demon would need more time to gain his power before being able to return to this realm. She sensed Creed needed some time alone. And so did she.

His job would take him away from her from time to time. He needed to be able to see that she could handle that. It wouldn't be easy, but they'd make it work.

She and Kenna chatted a few more minutes before hanging up. Once again she gave thanks to the phone company for their excellent long-distance plan. Otherwise she'd be broke from trying to pay for all the phone calls with her sisters.

Charlotte tossed the phone onto the table beside her chair and watched the road leading to her house. The driveway looked empty without her car. The towing company she'd hired had delivered it to the garage in town. She'd be able to pick it up tomorrow.

She thought about getting something to eat but she wasn't really hungry even though her stomach was growling. Her spine tingled and a sense of anticipation flooded her. *Creed!*

Jumping to her feet, she raced to the front door and flung it open. The growl of a heavy engine sounded in the distance. She waited and seconds later his truck came into view. Her heart jumped as she caught her first glimpse of him.

Unable to wait, she hurried down the steps. Creed was out of the truck in a flash. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing now." She launched herself into his arms. He caught her easily, his strong arms closing around her. "Welcome home."

He slammed the door of his truck shut, scooped her into his arms and started toward the house.

"What about your stuff?" The back of the truck was loaded down with boxes.

"Later." Creed carried her into the house, kicking the door shut behind him.

Charlotte knew there would be more battles in the days ahead. Asmodeus would not give up. He'd lick his wounds and come back fighting. The demon would be ruthless in his pursuit of the crystals.

The final confrontation was inevitable. They might not all make it out alive. She tightened her arms around Creed as he strode into her bedroom, their bedroom now. She didn't want to even think about that outcome.

He looked down at her, able to read her thoughts. "We'll defeat him."

They had to. There was no other choice. But that fight was for another day. For now there was only the two of them and the love they shared. At this moment, that was all that mattered.

Tugging Creed's head down to hers, she kissed him. He returned her kiss with an enthusiasm that left her breathless. Her back hit the bed and she forgot about crystals and destinies and demons. There was only Creed.

About the Author

N.J. Walters worked at a bookstore for several years and one day had the idea that she would like to quit her job, sell everything she owned, leave her hometown and write romance novels in a place where no one knew her. And she did. Two years later, she went back to the same bookstore and settled in for another seven years.

Although she was still fairly young, that was when the mid-life crisis set in. Happily married to the love of her life, with his encouragement (more like, "For God's sake, quit the job and just write!") she gave notice at her job on a Friday morning. On Sunday afternoon, she received a tentative acceptance for her first erotic romance novel, *Annabelle Lee*, and life would never be the same.

N.J. has always been a voracious reader of romance novels, and now she spends her days writing novels of her own. Vampires, dragons, time-travelers, seductive handymen and next-door neighbors with smoldering good looks all vie for her attention. And she doesn't mind a bit. It's a tough life, but someone's got to live it.

N.J. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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