A romantic scene featuring a man and a woman in a close embrace, about to kiss. The woman has long brown hair and is wearing a light blue strapless dress. The man has dark, wavy hair and is shirtless. They are standing in front of a dark wooden log cabin with a gabled roof. The cabin's windows are lit from within, showing a warm interior. The scene is set at night, with trees and foliage visible in the background. A bright, glowing yellow and orange light effect, resembling a sunset or fire, is at the bottom of the image.

Loose Id

*This Side
of Heaven*

Fallon Blake

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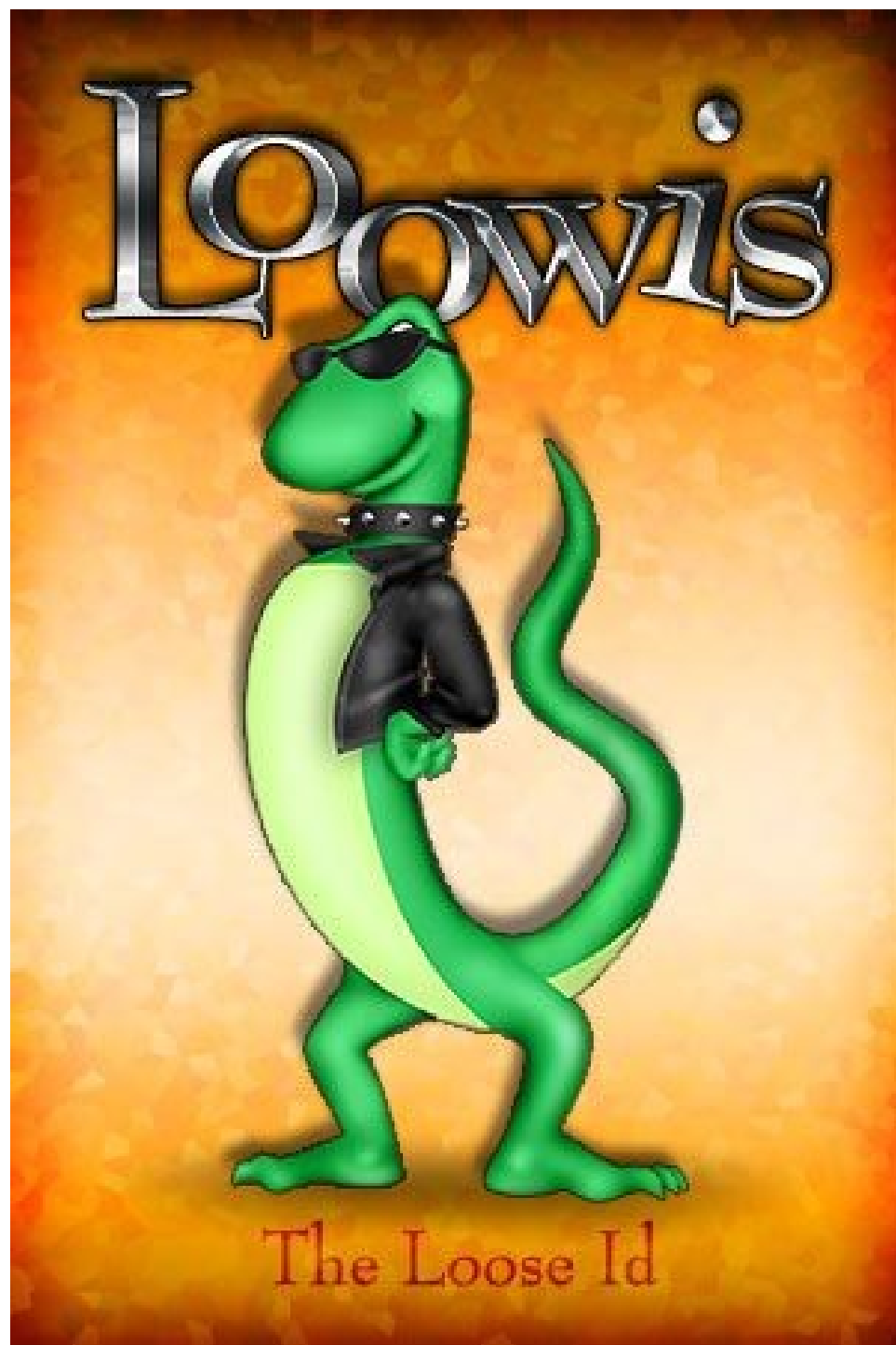
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Chapter One

She would not cry.

Weary, Samara Hale rubbed her hands over her face. She took a deep breath and walked into the room, surveying the contents of Oliver's den. The loss of her uncle seemed more acute here among his things. After running her finger over the spines of his beloved books, she took a seat at his antique cherry desk and wondered where to begin. Despite being surrounded by his stacks of books and papers, she'd never felt so alone.

Oliver Hale was the only father figure she had ever known. Her real father had abandoned her mother before Samara was even born, and she knew next to nothing about him, a bitter reality that had often plagued her throughout her life.

Oliver had been consumed by his work, but he had loved her and never hesitated to dote on her. It had been just the two of them since her mother died fifteen years earlier. A retired mythology professor and also a bit of an eccentric, Oliver had filled her adolescence with tales of angels, demons, and various kinds of mythological creatures.

"Not much for organization, was he?" A deep male voice spoke from behind her.

She spun around so fast, she nearly fell out of her chair. He'd scared her half to death. She tried to slow her breathing as she came face-to-face with quite possibly the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on.

He was well over six feet tall, with a lean, muscular frame and dark chestnut hair long enough to brush his unshaven jawline. But it was his eyes that did her in. The color of whiskey, they promised wicked things, *sinful* things. She could just imagine...

Good Lord. She was standing in Oliver's den, just days after his death, drooling over a complete stranger.

"Who the hell are you?" She hadn't intended to sound so harsh, but she was as startled by her train of thought as she was his sudden appearance.

“Didn't mean to scare you. I'm Nathaniel Greyson. I knew the professor.” He casually leaned against the bookcase.

As if that clears everything up.

He had a dangerous, otherworldly quality she couldn't put her finger on, despite her skill for reading people. It wasn't something she advertised, but she'd been able to read people's emotions since she was twelve. She often became overwhelmed by what she'd sensed in others, so Oliver had taught her to close herself off.

A little rusty at using her ability after she'd shut it down for so long, she hoped she could keep it under control. She narrowed her eyes, drew in a deep breath, and opened herself up, compelled to get a sense of this mysterious visitor. Lust slammed into her and nearly knocked her on her ass. Everything about him intoxicated her, and she was almost drunk on his presence. The degree of need thrumming through her forced her brain to function on a more primitive level.

His smell was a spicy blend of earth and wild masculinity, and there was something familiar about him. She tried to steady herself. “What do you want?” After the unexpected dose of attraction, it wasn't a big surprise that her voice sounded shaky.

He licked his full bottom lip as his gaze wandered the length of her body. “World peace, a cold beer, a beautiful woman. You know, the usual.”

“Are you always this charming, or am I the only one lucky enough to get this special treatment?” she asked, tucking a strand of her shoulder-length hair behind one ear.

“Oh you'd definitely get the special treatment,” he said with a grin that was all arrogance.

The room grew warm, and her skin felt as if she'd spent all day in the sun: heated, tingly, and slightly damp with perspiration. Mindless of her actions, she gripped the neckline of her white sundress, fanning herself. She fought to hold his gaze, willing her eyes not to drink in some of his more interesting attributes. Like the curves of his muscular arms folded across his wide chest. And the toned, washboard stomach she suspected was hidden under his fitted black T-shirt. Or the rather large bulge she saw behind the fly of his faded blue jeans. She almost licked her lips before she caught herself.

Snap out of it, Sam!

It had been way too long since she'd been laid.

She did not need this kind of distraction right now, but she couldn't think straight. Was all this passion coming from him? It had to be. But he'd just met her.

Confused, she returned to the desk chair, aiming to get a handle on the sudden flood of desire surging through her, but she was powerless to stop it. Her clit throbbed, and her panties were undeniably wet. *Damn traitorous body.*

"I'm a bit busy here, if you didn't notice. Is there something you wanted?" She tried not to sound strained but failed miserably. She'd never reacted to a man like this before. The need to feel him deep inside of her was shocking and a little scary.

Air. Maybe some fresh air was what she needed.

She stood up, closing her eyes for a moment to pull herself together. "I think..." When she risked a glance, she was startled to find him standing right in front of her, yet she hadn't even heard him move. He was close enough to touch, and her fingers itched to skim down the hard planes of his arms.

He leaned in, stopping mere inches from her face. "Are you all right?" His breath was warm against her skin as his eyes searched hers.

"I, um..." She started to speak, and then, in a flash, she pressed her hungry lips to his.

He paused as if she'd surprised him, then cupped her face in his hands and pulled her closer. His tongue invaded her mouth as he devoured her. He returned her hunger with his own, leaving her greedy for more, and she gave herself over to the kiss.

She moaned, pressing her body to his until she ground against the rigid length of his cock. Lust overwhelmed her, drowning out the voice in the back of her brain questioning what she was doing with this man she didn't even know. Any sense she might have had flew straight out of her head as his strong hands grabbed her ass, lifting her up. She wrapped her legs around his waist, reacting without coherent thought. Her dress bunched between them. Only the thin scrap of her panties stood between her and the rough fly of his jeans, and her clit pulsed as he thrust against her.

He sat her on the edge of the cluttered desk. Still consumed by his kiss, she blindly shoved notebooks and papers out of the way. Her lack of concern for what she was doing alarmed her for a moment, but she dismissed it when he palmed her breast.

He caressed her nipple with his thumb, sending little shocks of pleasure straight to her core. She reached down between them and inched her hand under the waistband of his jeans, her small fingers working to wrap around the velvety length of him within the tight confines of the denim. Her thumb rubbed slick precum onto the smooth cockhead in small circles.

Breaking the kiss, she groaned. He whispered against her lips, “My God, woman, what are you trying to do to me?”

Holy shit. What just happened? His mission was simple: protect Samara Hale. Fuck if Uriel wasn't going to have his head on a pike. *Which* head remained to be seen.

It was forbidden for Telal to form romantic involvements with their mortal charges. The consequences for violating the ancient laws were steep. He knew Uriel expected more of him, but he was part demon, after all.

Samara was still perched on the edge of the desk, her dark brown hair sexy and disheveled. How many times had he longed to touch her, to feel the softness of her sun-kissed skin, to lose himself in her? With the hem of her dress still askew and a thin strap dangling from her slender shoulder, she looked ready, willing...

Damn it all to hell!

He couldn't bring himself to finish it, to plunge his granite-hard cock into her sweet pussy and find his release. Oh God, he wanted to, but Samara deserved better than that. He'd already taken things too far, but really, how could he resist? This was the first time he'd been face-to-face with the woman he'd loved for longer than he cared to remember.

He sighed. It sucked divine ass to be good sometimes.

“Oh my God. I can't believe I just did that.” Her face flushed through three different shades of pink, the look of desire gone, replaced by stark embarrassment as she adjusted her dress.

He couldn't help but grin. She was so cute, all flustered and blushing. “You mean kiss me? Yes, you did.”

“For a second there, I thought I was dreaming,” she muttered, her eyes downcast.

“No, not a dream. Although I think this may spark a few for me.” Mindful of his raging hard-on, he adjusted himself as he sat down in the chair she had previously occupied. He propped his feet up on the desk, then leaned back with a smile.

She rushed past him to the other side of the desk. If he'd thought she'd try to read him this soon, he would have at least attempted to control his rabid lust. That must have been a bit of a shock. No wonder she was trying to establish some space between them. Instead of putting her at ease, he'd set her on edge. Well, he was doing a damn good job fucking this up. *Way to go, asshole.*

She tucked the errant strands behind her ear as she smoothed her hair, avoiding his gaze. “Um, who did you say you were again?”

He could see her collecting herself, almost as if a wall had gone up. Her spine stiffened. The emotion disappeared from her face, and her body language screamed *back off*. It was unnerving to see her change from passionate to cold in such a short span of time. He held back the desire to plant a kiss on her, laced with enough sin to crack her little facade, and forced himself to focus on the matter at hand. “Nathaniel. I knew—”

“Oliver. Yeah, I remembered that part. Doesn't really answer my question, though.” She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. “Could you stop projecting all of that lust?”

“You weren't asking me to stop earlier.” He couldn't resist teasing her.

“Oh knock it off. I can't think straight.”

“You can feel what I'm feeling?” He already knew the answer, but he had to tread gently or she would shut him out. He couldn't risk that. Samara needed to trust him.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I-I'm not sure what just happened between us. I don't usually go around throwing myself at strange men.” She laughed but it sounded forced.

A twinge tightened his chest when she referred to him as a stranger. If she only knew exactly how well *he* knew *her*.

Calmly, he stood, then leaned over the desk, reaching for her. He used his fingers to lift her chin so their eyes would meet. “You really aren't aware of the power you hold.” She would have no idea how loaded that statement was. It took every ounce of his will to keep himself from kissing her again. “Samara, you're unique. I think what happened between us was brought on by your power.”

She looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

He gestured to the chair on the other side of the desk as he returned to his seat. “You’re probably going to want to sit down for this conversation. Did Oliver ever talk about angels and demons?”

She looked skeptical as she lowered herself into the chair. “He told me stories when I was younger. Why? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Humor me, okay? I promise it will make sense when I’m finished. Well, I hope it will.” He muttered that last part under his breath, then leaned forward to look her in the eyes. “What do you know about the Telal?”

The way she smiled suggested the stories held fond memories for her.

“Oliver used to tell me tales of fallen angels so consumed by lust for human females, they mated with them, creating supernatural children called nephilim. Only his spin on the story was that Lucifer had the bright idea to have demons possess a few of the women. Whereas the nephilim were angelic and human creatures, these offspring had demon thrown into the mix. Right?”

“That’s right.”

“I remember that Lucifer’s intention was to use these hybrids to create an army of soldiers who didn’t need to possess people to corrupt the human world. Oliver called them Telal. Even mentioned a group of them he’d dubbed the Sect. They were like the good guys. Instead of joining forces with Lucifer, they chose to fight for the angels.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I still don’t understand what this has to do with why you’re here. Can we just skip the mythology and get to the point?”

“The point is”—Nathaniel paused—“it’s not mythology. Telal exist.”

She let out a mocking laugh. “You’re kidding, right? Is this some kind of joke?” Cocking her head to the side, she crossed her arms over her chest. “Because I don’t find it funny. At all.”

“Listen, I understand your skepticism. I might think you had a screw loose if you took what I’m saying at face value, but it doesn’t change that it’s all factual. More than likely, every story Oliver ever told you is absolutely true.”

He saw a flicker of realization dawn in her eyes. He was finally getting somewhere.

“You're not saying that *you* are Nathaniel—*the* Nathaniel? The leader of the Sect?” Her voice raised an octave as she stared at him in disbelief.

“Mentioned me, did he?” He grimaced at the thought of what Oliver might have told her. In his early years, he'd had no control over the demonic part of him. He and another Telal named Seth had made a notorious pair, leaving chaos and destruction everywhere they went. Uriel had found him on one of his darkest days and had literally taken him under his wing. Learning to suppress his demon side was a long and arduous process, but the archangel had never given up.

As payment for his sins and for what Uriel had taught him, he'd sworn to recruit and pass on his knowledge to other Telal and protect mortals from demons. This was how the Sect was born. If it weren't for the archangel, there was no doubt he'd be leading a horde of Telal, vying for Lucifer's favor alongside Seth.

He was almost afraid to ask. “So what'd Oliver say?”

“Oh you can't be serious!” Gripping the armrests of her chair, she leaned forward, narrowing her eyes. “You're telling me that *you* are the one who's supposedly been guarding me all these years? The one who's supposed to *save* me?” Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Did he talk about your gift?”

“Don't try to change the subject.”

“Yes. I'm that Nathaniel.” Heaven help him, she was sexy when she was angry. If only she knew the whole truth. Nathaniel had been charged with being Samara's guardian after her mother died. He'd watched her struggle through her youth, then become the beautiful, intelligent woman before him. “I answered your question; now answer mine. Did he explain about your gift?”

“You mean my empathy? I wouldn't necessarily call it a gift.” She snorted. “Do you understand what it's like to feel what other people are feeling? All of the time? To not know if what you're feeling is even your own emotion? It's terrifying, and if it weren't for Oliver, I'd probably be insane by now. So if that's what you mean by gift, then yes, we talked about it.” She collapsed against the back of the chair in a huff.

The hurt that edged her anger was palpable. Pain was something he knew all too well. “I understand what it's like to fight inner demons. I know it's been difficult for you, but I'm glad you had Oliver.” He caught a sudden glimpse of sorrow in her face. “I'm sorry, Samara. I know you loved him.” The shimmer of tears in her eyes made him ache to hold her.

She cleared her throat, blinking back tears. "I miss him."

"He was a good man, a good friend. He never judged me for being what I am. I wish I could say the same for others." Nathaniel thought bitterly about the angels who referred to his kind as abominations. "Oliver knew this day would arrive. I'm just sad he isn't around to see you come into your own."

She gave him a cutting look. "Wait a minute. How am I supposed to believe any of this? For all I know, you're just some wacko obsessed with Oliver's work." She stood up, then headed toward the door. "I think you should leave."

He'd hoped he she'd be a little more accepting, so he wouldn't have to resort to blatant displays of power, but she hadn't left him much of a choice. There wasn't enough time to ease her into his world. Demons were coming for her, and they sure as hell weren't the delicate type.

One second he was sitting in the chair, and in the next he'd stepped through the thin veil that separated this world from the upper and lower realms. He'd always equated the feel with walking through a spiderweb. The other side was a cold and desolate place. Angels, demons without hosts, and a few Telal used it frequently for transport. But it wasn't a place you wanted to spend time. He shook off the residual creepy feeling it always left him with and reemerged right in front of Samara. He knew it looked as though he'd disappeared, then reappeared.

Her eyes widened with shock.

"Samara, I am who I say I am. Have no doubt about that."

He caught her just as her knees buckled.

Chapter Two

This can't be happening, can it? A supernatural being, plucked directly from Oliver's stories. And he was carrying her after she'd fainted like some brainless twit.

God, he smelled so amazing.

She buried her face in his shoulder as she wrapped her arms around his neck, still disconcerted by his actions.

He stepped outside and placed her on one of the padded teak lounge chairs, then sat down next to her.

"You're real," she stated, still in shock, her brain a mass of confusion. She ran her fingertips across the roughness of his unshaven cheek. "You can't be real."

"I'm real. I promise you."

She longed to trace those full lips of his but pulled her hand away before she was unable to stop herself. "How did you do that? Appear out of nowhere?"

"We call it *stepping*. I didn't really disappear. I just stepped through the veil that separates this world from the one spirits exist in. It's one of my gifts. You didn't think you were the only one with hidden talents, did you?"

She fidgeted in her chair. How much did he know about her?

She stood and walked to the railing to look out over the beach below. She couldn't think clearly with him being that close. Nathaniel affected her in ways she couldn't control, like he'd instigated a whirlwind of raw emotion inside her heart. She couldn't tell whether she was coming or going, and it scared the shit of her. She took in the panoramic view of the cerulean water and the soft color of the dusky sky, trying to wrap her mind around everything.

The beach was always beautiful in the early-evening hours when the sun was setting, and it always seemed to clear her head. The waves beat a gentle rhythm, crashing over the white sand.

As the wind blew through her hair, she inhaled the familiar scent of the salty ocean breeze, hoping for a little clarity. “Oliver loved it here, you know. He used to sit and stare out over the water for hours. He told me this place allowed him to forget about the evil in the world, even if only for a time. I always thought he was being philosophical, maybe even dramatic.” She'd had no idea he was being so literal.

Leaning back against the rail, she turned around to face Nathaniel. “I'm having a hard time accepting all of this.”

He moved to close the distance between them, and she put her hand up. “Please, can you stay back? I can't...”

He looked almost pained for a second but kept his distance. “I know Oliver taught you to block things out. What you need to learn is how to use your ability, not shut it down. Part of the reason I'm here is to help you do that.”

He was out of his ever-loving mind if he thought she was going to open herself up to the chaos of everyone's feelings. Her biggest nightmare was that she would go crazy and have to be locked away. It was why she kept everyone at arm's length. Why she chose photography as a career and why she hadn't dated much. She insulated herself from the smothering emotions of those around her. It made for a pretty solitary existence but also taught her to be self-reliant and independent.

Uncomfortable with him knowing about her empathy, she shook her head. “No, I don't need to learn to use it. I've been able to shut it off, for the most part. I'd rather I didn't have it at all.”

“Well, that's not entirely true now, is it?” There was that mischievous grin again. It pissed her off and made her hot, all at the same time. *Damn him.* “You tried reading me, didn't you?”

Ugh. Smug bastard! She glared at him. “Yes, I tried reading you.”

“And what did you pick up?”

Warmth suffused her cheeks as she remembered how his desire had overwhelmed her when she'd opened herself to him.

“Ah, I see you remember. Samara, you're not just able to feel others' emotions. You're able to take them into you, make them stronger, and project them back out. In a sense, you can use people's feelings against them.”

She gasped in horror. “Why would I want to do that, and how is it a *gift*?”

“It's not always a bad thing. In fact”—lust simmered in his eyes—“it can be a good thing, as you so beautifully demonstrated back in the den.” He cleared his throat, shifting his stance and changing the subject. “Aside from that, once you learn to control it, you'll be a powerful weapon against demons and the Telal. Did Oliver tell you about the prophecy?”

A tall blonde female clad in a painted-on leather outfit walked up the wooden stairs of the deck. “Yes, Samara. Did good ol' Oliver tell you about the precious prophecy?” Hips swaying, she sauntered over to Nathaniel, her hand lingering along his back as she circled him like a predator stalking her prey. “How does it go again? Oh yeah. 'A time will come when the powers will shift, and evil will seek to rule the world of man.' That part always gives me chills.” She shivered dramatically. “The rest is about someone being born to restore the balance.” She waved a perfectly manicured hand and rolled her eyes. “Boring.”

“Who the hell are you?” Samara snarled. And why were her hands all over Nathaniel?

Oh my God. Was she jealous? She'd known this man all of about an hour, and she was ready to yank the bitch's hair out for touching him. What the hell was wrong with her?

Nathaniel's expression hardened, and the air around him swirled. “Naamah. I was wondering who Seth would send. I would say it's nice to see you, but then I'd be lying.” His voice was heavy with disgust.

A seductive smile spread across the woman's lips as she glanced down at Nathaniel's ass. “It's always nice to see you, Nathaniel. Here recruiting? I knew you were hard up”—she threw a look of contempt at Samara—“I guess I just didn't realize *how* much.”

The tramp was really pushing it. “Excuse me?”

Nathaniel's gaze went cold, and he stepped in between the two women. “Listen, you fucking parasite, stay away from her. Who are you wearing today? Stripper? Whore? Whose hopeless soul did you hijack so you could come out and play?” He cocked his head to the side.

“Oh, be fair, Nathaniel. It's not like these insipid humans are innocents.” Naamah gestured the length of her curvy figure. “Take this one, for instance. She's a pill-popping adulteress who murdered her first husband for his money. Not what I would call a Good Samaritan. And besides, being a demon of seduction, I have certain needs. Which I'd be more than willing to let you fulfill. Telal have such amazing stamina.”

“That'll never fucking happen, and if you don't back off, I'm going to step you back to oblivion where you belong.” His voice held a dark, threatening edge.

Okay, this was all a bit surreal. A Telal guardian, a skanky female demon who possessed people, and a prophecy? What could possibly happen next?

“I love it when you talk dirty.” The demoness peered around Nathaniel at Samara. “You should be glad that it's me and not Cresil. He wanted to be the one to claim you. He has all *sorts* of nasty things planned for that petite body, things I'm sure you'd love.”

Holy shit. Were her eyes glowing orange? The contrast of Naamah's cheerful voice and creepy eyes made Samara shudder. Evil surrounded the demoness like a radioactive cloud, and Samara moved closer to Nathaniel. He would protect her. She noticed his every muscle was taut, like he was anticipating a fight. Her heart raced as fear rose like bile in her throat.

Nathaniel growled at Naamah. “If you want Samara, you'll have to go through me. You and I both know that ends with me sending you back through the veil and you hunting for another host.”

In a blur, Naamah lunged for Samara, trying to sidestep Nathaniel. The demoness's fingertips brushed the fabric of Samara's dress before she had time to move.

Nathaniel exploded from his stance, pushing Samara out of the way.

She almost lost her balance, watching in horror as he enclosed Naamah in his muscular arms, then disappeared in a puff of black smoke. Samara screamed as the blonde crumpled to the deck in an unconscious heap. It looked like he had just sucked the demon right out of her body.

What the hell? Had the entire world gone completely insane? Or was it just her—

Before she could finish that thought, the cold tip of a blade pressed into her throat, and a meaty hand clamped over her mouth, cutting off her scream. Her assailant yanked her backward; her body met a solid wall in the form of a massive male frame. His breath was hot and rank against her cheek. Fear ran through her veins like ice water as he rendered her arms almost immobile, pinning them down with just one of his huge arms.

“Hello, love.”

Samara whimpered.

His tongue was like wet sandpaper as he licked the outside of her ear. “Mmm, you're a sweet thing. Name's Cresil. I would properly introduce us,” he murmured, jamming his erection against her backside, “but I have a feeling Nathaniel will be reappearing at any second.” Cresil started to drag her down the steps toward the beach, his thick fingers bruising her cheek.

Nausea roiled through her stomach. *Where the hell is Nathaniel?*

As her heart beat in a rapid panic, she frantically tried to grab the railing. Her nails scraped along the weatherworn wood, and she winced when tiny splinters embedded in her skin. She knew if he succeeded in getting her away from the house, she was in for something horrific. *Fight. Him.*

She brought her heel down onto Cresil's instep. When his grip loosened on her mouth, she bit one of his calloused fingers.

He chuckled. With a rough jerk, he pulled her more tightly against him, and they stumbled down the last few steps. “That's it, love. I like a woman with fire.”

It was dusk; there was not a soul on the beach. Desperate and terrified, she tried to twist out of his grasp. He was too strong. *Oh God, this can't be happening! Nathaniel wouldn't just leave me here, would he?*

“You do realize that with one slip of the blade, I could make that white dress of yours a real pretty red?”

She felt his smile against her cheek as he spoke. In a flash of burning pain, the tip of the blade pierced her skin. Samara froze, holding her breath. Out of nowhere, she felt a strange mental shove, as if something was trying to force its way into her mind.

He was trying to possess her!

Using what Oliver had taught her about creating a barrier between herself and others' emotions, she forced down her mental walls, shutting Cresil out. Abruptly he released her, and she fell on all fours in the sand. Lightning fast, she scrambled up the stairs, taking in huge gulps of air. She looked back to see if Cresil was on her heels and saw the glint of a blade protruding from his bloody throat. Her hand flew to her lips as she shrieked, and she tripped on one of the wooden steps. She couldn't pull her eyes away from him as he sank to the ground, a strange black smoke rising off his body like a dark cloud.

The rest of the world came into focus when she noticed Nathaniel standing behind her assailant.

Nathaniel dragged the body through the sand, leaving it hidden among the sea grape plants at the base of the deck. After obscuring the drag marks from the sand, he wiped his blade on his shirt, put it back in the sheath in his boot, and rushed to her side.

In one fluid movement, he scooped her up and squeezed her against his chest. “Thank God.” He let out a deep breath. “Samara, are you okay, baby? Damn it! I can't believe I didn't see that coming.”

She clung to him, trembling, and closed her eyes for a moment. It was hard for her to form coherent thoughts, much less words. She could still feel Cresil's evil presence trying to invade her mind, his sour smell still burning her nose, his cold blade pressed to her throat. “H-he said his name was Cresil. H-he had a knife. Was that...was that another demon? I think...I think he was trying to possess me.”

Nathaniel gently kissed her temple. “You're safe. I've got you now, but I think we need to get you out of here as fast as possible.” He carried her up the steps, pausing to open the sliding-glass door.

She wanted to believe him, but as she glanced out into the dark night, she had a chilling feeling this was only the beginning.

Chapter Three

“Hey, we're going to need a cleanup crew at Oliver Hale's. One unconscious and one not breathing. Thanks, Matthias. Tell Uriel I'll call him later.” Nathaniel snapped his phone shut and sighed. He was able to communicate mind to mind with Telal, but since most of the Sect considered it an invasion of privacy, they used modern technology, unless it was absolutely necessary not to. He walked out of the kitchen carrying a small towel and cup of tea. “Drink this. It'll help.” He handed the steaming mug to Samara and sat next to her on the couch.

Would she be able to overcome Cresil's attack? Everything that had happened in the last hour would be a lot for anyone to process.

He searched her face and prayed for her to be strong. Lucifer's minions, he could handle, but nothing made him feel more helpless than a woman in tears, especially this woman.

Nathaniel took the wet towel and ever so gently cleaned the small cut on her neck. “I think this will be fine. It's just a nick.”

She moved her hair to give him better access, then winced. “I'm okay. At least, that's what I keep telling myself.” She took a small sip from her mug, the color returning to her cheeks. “What's going to happen to that woman?”

He sighed. There were parts of this job that he just fucking hated. Piecing mortals back together after they were demon possessed was one of them. Even if the possession was well deserved, it didn't give demons the right to use them like they were disposable costumes to wear and discard at will. “We'll make sure she wasn't physically harmed, adjust her memories, and then take her home.”

“She's lucky to be alive.”

“Yes, she is.”

Samara looked so small wrapped in the soft blanket, her feet tucked up under her on the couch. He couldn't believe he had been so stupid. He should have known something was off

when Naamah showed up. Why would Seth send a demon whose specialty was seduction to come for Samara? She'd been just a distraction, and he'd played right into the trap. His heart had nearly stopped when he'd looked down on the beach to see Cresil holding a knife to Samara's throat. Sick, sadistic bastard had a thing for blades. Nathaniel hated having to kill the host in front of Sam, knowing it would scare her. He hadn't wanted her to fear him but hadn't seen any other way to get rid of Cresil.

He'd be damned if he was going to let her out of his sight again.

"As soon as you feel up to it, we'll have to pack some things for you and get you out of here. You're safe for now, but they'll be back."

Her eyes were wide with fear. "Why? What do they want with me?"

"The Sect believes you're part of a prophecy—"

"What prophecy? Is this what that demon Naamah was talking about?"

"Yeah, it foretells the coming of a person powerful enough to restore the balance between good and evil. With your unusual brand of empathy, we think that person is you."

"Why didn't Oliver ever mention this to me?" The hurt she felt was etched all over her face.

"I wish I had an answer for you, Samara."

"Yeah, well, it seems he kept a lot from me." She breathed a weary sigh. "How is it everyone thinks I'm the one who is going to stop evil from ruling the world? It sounds absolutely crazy."

"You are much stronger and more powerful than you give yourself credit for, and the demons and Telal on Lucifer's side will do anything to stop you. The scales have been tipped in their favor for a few years now. Seth is the Telal who led this battle, and he seems to think you'd serve them better as a host than you would dead. It's risky, even for him. Sending Cresil means Seth's not playing around." He cupped her cheek in his large hand. "I'm so sorry I left you alone."

"You came back for me and got rid of that demon. Is he...is he dead?"

He dropped his hand to his lap and let out a breath. "Cresil? Unfortunately no. He's back in hell for now. If you kill the host, the demon goes back through the veil. Death isn't always

necessary. Human hosts can't physically step through the veil, but if I'm touching them when I step, I can pull the demon through with me, like I did with Naamah.”

“Ugh, demons. They made my skin crawl.”

“When you learn to spot them, you will feel much like you do now. The hair on the back of your neck will stand up. You'll notice a flash of orange in their eyes when the light hits them just right. But what I notice most is the smell of sulfur. With the young demons, it's only a faint odor. The ancient ones, like Cresil, reek.” His lip curled in revulsion. “It's almost like the longer they've been in hell, the worse they smell.”

“This is just so much to take in.” She sighed. “We can't stay here, can we?”

He shook his head.

“So I really don't have time to fall apart, do I?” She managed a smile, and there was a glint in her eyes that hadn't been there a moment ago.

He laughed. The fact she was teasing him was a good sign; she was much tougher than she looked. “Let's get you in the car, and you can fall apart all you want. Do you have things here you can pack? You'll need some warm clothes. The nights are going to be cooler than you're used to.”

He didn't back away when he pulled her to her feet. They were standing a hairbreadth apart. Close enough for him to tell she used coconut-scented shampoo and for him to catch a hint of the trust now warming her eyes. If she kept looking at him like that, he was going to take her right there in Oliver's living room. Demons and rules be damned.

She swallowed hard enough for him to notice, and rushing around him, she headed across the room into the hall. “Oliver kept my room for me so I could stay whenever I wanted. I should have plenty of things here.”

Under his breath he groaned, plopping back down on the couch, and watched her tiptoe into the bedroom located across from where he sat. She hadn't closed the door, and he could see glimpses of her walking back and forth. A road trip to an isolated cabin in the mountains, alone with Samara? He raked his fingers through his hair. He was going to need a lot of cold showers.

“Did you say warm clothes?” She came to the doorway for a brief moment, twisting her hair up and securing the dark mass with a clip. “Where are we going?”

“I have a cabin in North Carolina. We'll be safe there.”

She retreated back into the room, but he had a perfect view of her. She didn't seem to be aware he was still watching. She pulled her dress over her head. The sight of her naked back made him suck in a quick breath. His gaze ran the length of her body from the gentle curve of her neck to the tattoo between her shoulder blades.

His gaze drifted lower, and his mouth went dry at the sight of dainty, hip-hugging panties. She bent over to put on a pair of well-worn Levi's. He wanted to kiss the spot on the back of her thigh just where it met the curve of her luscious ass. And then remove those little panties with his teeth. A raging burst of desire sent blood rushing south, and his cock twitched. It was painful to be this close and not touch her. He clenched his jaw with almost enough force to chip teeth as he used one hand to push down his growing hard-on.

It was difficult, but he made himself get up and walk to the sliding-glass doors. Oblivious to the magnificent view of the moon shining over the ocean, he tried to squelch his rampant lust.

Fucking get a grip.

His demon side just wanted to get a grip on that tight ass of hers while he pounded into her. Oh who was he kidding? There wasn't a part of him that *didn't* want to go in there and fuck her until she screamed his name.

He shook himself. She needed time, and he knew it. She'd just learned about the existence of supernatural creatures, been attacked by a demon, and heard about her part in an ancient prophecy. It'd been a hell of a day. The last thing he should be doing was acting like a sex-crazed Telal—even if he that's exactly what he was at that particular moment. He craved her more than anything he'd ever wanted in his existence, but he wasn't willing to screw it up by rushing her. Not to mention the consequences he would face. It was better not to think about *that* right now.

“Well, I'm as ready as I'll ever be,” she said.

He turned to see her walk out of the bedroom and drop a duffel bag at her feet. Even dressed in faded Levi's and a simple white tank top, she had the ability to take his breath away. Long, dark lashes framed pale green eyes almost too big for her face. A wide, bow-shaped mouth and messy espresso brown bangs gave her a quirky beauty he found irresistible.

This was going to be a *long* drive.

He picked up her bag and walked toward the front door. “I hope you have a jacket in here.”

“Layers. It's all about the layers.” She grinned as she slung her camera bag over her shoulder, palming her keys. After they went through the door, she turned to lock it while he waited for her on the stoop. She placed her hand on the smooth wood surface, and he heard her whisper, “I’ll be back, Oliver.”

Nathaniel followed her down the stone path. She let out a loud gasp when she noticed the 1969 Chevy Camaro parked in the driveway. The black paint gleamed in the moonlight. “Is this a Yenko?” She walked to the car, then ran her fingers over the emblem on the fender. He knew she was searching for the Yenko name. “It is! Oh it's beautiful.” She paused with a look of pure admiration. “I photographed one of these on a freelance job when I was younger. You know there were only about two hundred of these made in 1969? Of course you do,” she mumbled with a shy grin. “This is your car.”

He couldn't help but smile, seeing her reaction to the American classic. “Samara, I'd like you to meet my baby. This is Joan.”

She popped up suddenly to look at him over the hood of the car. “You named this beautiful, sexy car Joan?” She crinkled her nose. “That's a *horrible* name for a car!”

“I don't know. I'm kinda partial to the name.” He shrugged, giving her a grin, and walked around to open the passenger door for her. “Get your butt in the car, Samara Joan Hale.”

* * *

“Unbelievable! Some fucking demon you are. You can't even handle one human female.”

“Watch your tone, Seth, you insolent half-breed. You're still pissed she's been in your backyard this whole time and you had no idea.” Cresil snorted, pouring himself a lowball of scotch from the decanter on the side bar. Swirling the amber liquid in the glass, he walked to the plate-glass window overlooking a busy South Beach night.

Seth sighed with annoyance. “Bothers you, doesn't it? Taking orders from a half-breed? Oh, and go ahead, make yourself at home, Cresil. *Mi casa es su casa*. Try not to get your stench all over the furniture.” He glared at the demon as Seth plopped himself down onto the chair behind the desk and clasped his hands behind his head.

It was not ideal working with Cresil on this mission. But since he'd needed a demon powerful enough to possess the girl, he hadn't had much of a choice. Although devious and persuasive, Naamah just wasn't going to cut it. The demoness did have her uses, though.

Naamah lounged on the black leather couch on the opposite side of Seth's office. "Don't look at me. I did my job, lost a damn good host too. Although I have to admit I'm liking this new one. Care to take it for a test-drive, Seth?" she asked seductively, raising a thin brow.

He gave her new, lithe figure and stunning red locks a cursory glance. Gorgeous and carnally skilled as she was, he was not going there. Usually he didn't mind mixing business and pleasure, but this was too important to afford any distractions. The power he would gain from harnessing Samara's gift for Lucifer would be limitless, and there'd be nothing to stop him from destroying the Sect and Nathaniel with it. He would have time to indulge in sins of the flesh later. "Tempting as that is, not a chance in hell."

"You're no fun." She pouted. "Good thing I'm not as insecure as this one was. Models are such easy pickings. Gotta love Miami." She grinned with wicked delight.

Cresil turned to face them, rolling his eyes. "Can we get back to the girl? As sweet as she is, *she's* going to be more difficult than we anticipated. Her power—I've never encountered anything like it. Once she figured out I was trying to invade her mind, her defenses went up, and it was like coming against a solid wall. I couldn't even sense her."

Samara Hale intrigued him. Seth couldn't remember the last time he'd been faced with such a challenge, and Nathaniel's attachment to her was going to make his plan that much sweeter. "Sounds like you're a little apprehensive, Cresil, or maybe you just need to grow a pair. She's strong, not invincible. She's only human, after all. We can't afford any more fuckups. Nathaniel won't make the same mistake twice. He might be Uriel's bitch, but he's not stupid. We'll have to get her away from him to have enough time to attempt another possession."

Chapter Four

What the hell was she doing driving to North Carolina with a man who claimed to be a Telal? Okay, Samara could admit he ignited something tumultuous and primal in her. Ever since she'd learned to close herself off from everyone else, she'd used that skill on her own feelings. With the hatred she felt toward her father for abandoning them, and the deaths of her mother and now Oliver, it was just easier to not feel at all.

Her life had been simple just a few hours ago. Granted, she lived in shades of gray, but it was safer that way. She liked safe and simple. What Nathaniel made her feel was dangerous and wild and out of control. She didn't like it. At least, the logical side of her didn't. There was a tiny voice deep inside screaming for her to let go, to unleash the tidal wave she was holding back, but she tamped it down, terrified she'd drown.

"You should try to get some sleep. We're taking the back roads and won't get there till after dawn." His voice jarred her out of her thoughts.

"So, where's this cabin of yours?" She should be concerned about going to an isolated cabin in the mountains with a man she barely knew. But she wasn't. For some reason she felt like she'd known him for years, even though it had only been hours.

"It's on about ten acres of land near Sugar Mountain. It's quiet. The cabin sits on a small lake in the middle of the property. It's secure, and you'll be safe there." He didn't take his gaze from the road.

"I'm glad I brought my camera. I've always wanted to shoot the mountains at the beginning of fall. I love Florida, but one of the downfalls is not having a change of season."

"Well, it'll be a little chilly for you, bein' a warm-blooded creature and all." He winked, and her libido revved, mimicking the powerful engine of the car they were in.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

“Just how old are you?”

He let out a small laugh. “To be honest, I’m not sure.” His brow furrowed. “Let’s just say I’ve been around for a few centuries. Longevity’s one of the perks to being Telal. Because of our angelic genetics, our cells don’t age or die. They repair themselves. We’re not invincible, but it makes us more difficult to kill, and we live for a *long* time.”

The realization of how many years he’d been on Earth was staggering. Watching everything around him change and die must have been difficult. She couldn’t fathom the character and strength he must possess to have survived this long. “You must have led some life. I can’t imagine how lonely that would be.”

He blew out a quick breath. “You have *no* idea. It’s better than the alternative, though.”

“Meaning?”

“Being part demon means when I die, I don’t get an invitation to paradise.” He clenched his jaw.

A mixture of anger and sadness invaded her, creating a weight in her chest. *Wait a minute.* She attempted to block it out. When she couldn’t, she focused on the emotions brewing inside of her. They were distinctly masculine, and for the first time since she’d developed her gift, she could identify that they were not her own. She hid her surprise.

“That doesn’t seem fair. I mean, you fight evil. You’re working for angels. Why wouldn’t you go to heaven?” No wonder he was angry. She’d be pissed too.

“It’s complicated. Let’s just say nothing demonic can enter heaven. Ever.”

She could feel his pain punctuating the statement. She wished she could relieve him of the burden. Compassion drove her to reach out to him with her sixth sense. She wasn’t sure what she was doing, but somehow it felt right. She took a breath, concentrating on drawing his pain into herself. Something deep within clicked into place, and she tried not to gasp as his pain burned like white-hot fire inside her. Startled, and more than a little freaked-out, she almost panicked. What in all of heaven was happening to her? Then, as fast as it appeared, it dissipated. In its wake was a tranquil peace. She’d never experienced anything so relaxing. The hurt had melted away and left her...*happy*? How could that be?

Her gaze darted to his face. Had he felt what she’d done? What had she done exactly? The knuckles on his hands were white from the tight grip he had on the steering wheel, and he was

breathing like he'd just run a marathon. When he turned to look at her, his face was full of emotion. Her heart leaped into her throat, and without warning, she was awash in a flood of warmth, desire, and *was that love?* These were his emotions—strong, vivid, intense. They stole her breath and consumed her, leaving an ache in her chest and a throb in her pussy. No one had ever made her feel like this.

In the middle of nowhere Georgia, he pulled the car over onto the shoulder of US 301 and shut off the engine. Before she even had a chance to speak, he pulled her across the console and into his lap, crushing his mouth to hers. He tugged her hair free from its clip, weaving his fingers into the tresses at her nape as his lips bruised hers.

Samara returned his kiss with every last bit of hunger she'd buried deep inside herself. She delved her tongue into the depths of his mouth, sliding it against his. His taste was intoxicating, and she couldn't get enough. The strength of the need vibrating from Nathaniel both shocked and aroused her. No one had ever made her feel so desired. Could he really want her this much? Did he have any idea just how much she wanted him? He nipped her lower lip, then traced a line along her jaw with his lips. He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled, tilting her head to give him access to the sensitive area of her neck just below her ear. With teeth and tongue, he continued to torment her.

A breathy moan escaped her lips as she melted into his embrace, the cotton of his shirt a barrier between them. She needed it out of the way. Clutching the fabric in her hands, she yanked it over his head and sighed at the feel of his smooth skin and hard muscles beneath her fingers. She trailed her fingernails up his arms and smiled at the groan she'd elicited from deep within his throat.

His mouth burned a searing trail on her skin as he resumed his path down her neck and along her collarbone. She trembled with anticipation as her nipples hardened, begging to be touched. She couldn't stand it anymore and yanked off her top.

His large, rough hands skimmed along her skin, spanning her rib cage. But before he continued, he reached down, pulling the lever to recline the seat. She fell into him, her hair hanging in a messy curtain around his face and chest. Running a finger under the strap of her bra, he looked into her eyes. “Sam, we're going to reach a point very soon where I'm not going to be able to stop.”

She could feel the tight leash he had on his lust at that moment. The ability to experience him in this way was heady, and the power of it made her bold. She sat up, reached back, and unclasped her bra, freeing her small, pert breasts. “I don’t want you to stop.”

He growled and pulled her down to him, claiming her mouth once again. The feel of her body pressed against his, skin to skin, was bliss. It was her turn to tease him as she trailed wet kisses down the sculpted muscles of his chest. Finding a sensitive nipple, she flicked her tongue over the soft flesh. She smiled at his sharp intake of breath, her tongue still tasting his salty skin.

“Wait. Do you—”

“No worries. Telal can’t have children, and we heal too fast for STDs.”

With a sigh of relief, she nodded, but she didn’t miss the small touch of sadness in his voice.

He threw her off balance when he sat up, and her back pressed into the steering wheel. He lifted her so her breasts were the perfect height for his mouth. His tongue circled a puckered nipple, and she gasped. A delicious throb grew between her thighs as she arched into his mouth, digging her fingers into his scalp. He licked and sucked while she writhed in his lap. When she thought she couldn’t take any more, he released the pebbled tip. Before she had time to catch her breath, he gently pulled the other nipple into his mouth, and she threw her head back, reveling in the sensation. As he feasted on her breasts, he put his hands on her hips and pressed her down against the hardness of his cock.

It had been so long since she’d let anyone touch her like this or touched anyone in return. Other than a few clumsy incidents in college, she didn’t have much experience with sex. Her empathy made things uncomfortable and disappointing when she could sense her partner’s feelings, or lack thereof. Intense desire to get oneself off without a care for their partner, wasn’t exactly a turn-on. Nathaniel’s feelings and emotions were genuine, unselfish, passionate—so different from the others. They couldn’t compare. Not even close. To feel *this* desired, *this* wanted—it was everything she had dreamed being with a man could be.

She pulled him away from her breast and back to her mouth for a quick, fierce kiss. She wanted her Levi’s *off*! As if sensing her intention, he tugged at her waistband, unbuttoning her fly. In an awkward shift of limbs, she laughed as she accidentally hit the horn trying to shed her pants. Triumphant, she grinned, tossing the offending garment into the passenger seat.

She swung her leg over his hips to straddle him again. Immediately his hand plunged inside her panties, and he slipped a finger between the folds of her slick pussy. With featherlight touches, he teased her clit. Her breath caught in her throat in a shock of pleasure.

“God, you're wet.”

The deep timbre of his voice went all the way to her core. Frenzied, she worked, trying to release him from the constraints of his zipper. His firm abdominals tensed under her fingers, and she could see each muscle flexed and defined.

My God, he is beautiful.

The thick, hard length of him lay just under his boxer-briefs, and she stroked him through the soft material.

Damn, he was glad this stretch of road was deserted at this time of night. The windows began to fog, and the scent of her arousal permeated every inch of the Camaro. Samara looked ethereal leaning over him with her hair wild and her lips swollen from his kisses. She was going to be the death of him, this wicked vixen whose hand rested on his aching hard-on. When he felt her fingers reach beneath his briefs and brush the head of his cock, he groaned.

She bit down on her bottom lip, her eyes half-hooded. He'd waited so long for this, to see her look at him with a desire that matched his own. It was an amazing feat of restraint on his part to let her lead this dance. He knew she needed a sense of control, or the intensity of the moment would scare her off.

“Okay, these have to go,” she demanded, tugging his pants down.

He slid his fingers from her wet pussy, and she shivered. He lifted his hips as she pushed his pants down around his thighs and exposed his throbbing cock. Samara worked his jeans past his knees, giving him more maneuverability. She scooted forward so his dick was pressed to his belly, nestled between her thighs and against the silkiness of the panties still covering her mound. As she placed one hand on each of his shoulders, she leaned forward and slowly rolled her hips, grinding on him.

He lost it.

Every thought he had about holding back disappeared with one movement of her hips. His lust for her raged as he gripped the sides of her panties in both hands and, with a resounding rip,

tore them from her body. She let out a small peal of laughter. He tossed the shredded silk aside and roughly pulled her down to devour her mouth. Every muscle in his body tensed as beads of sweat formed on his skin. He took ahold of her hips, lifted her up, and in one swift movement, impaled her with his cock.

“Yes!” she cried. Her skin flushed as she licked her lips.

He stilled for a moment, letting her get used to his thickness, and relished the moist heat of her pussy. She rotated her pelvis in slow circles with him buried deep inside of her.

“Oh fuck, Sam,” he growled through clenched teeth.

With steady rhythm, she moved up and down, her slick walls creating sensuous friction, and he fought to let her remain in control. She leaned into him, pressing her breasts against his chest, rocking her hips back and forth. Small sounds escaped from her lips, and he could tell she was nearing climax. He wondered if what she was sensing from him was hurtling her toward orgasm, because *he* was close. Still holding her hips, he reached down with his thumb and strummed her swollen clit.

“Nathaniel.” She sighed, picking up her pace.

At the sound of her moaning his name, his control snapped. He dug his fingers into her ass and pulled her down with each jarring upward thrust. She shattered around him, and he roared. Giving one last deep thrust, he came hard. His entire body tensed when he released each euphoric jet of cum into her.

She draped herself across his chest, nuzzling his neck. “Oh. My. God,” she uttered between rapid, shallow breaths.

He wrapped his arms around her small frame and held her, not wanting to ever let her go. He savored the feel of his cock deep within her for a few more seconds, then eased himself from her pussy. “As much as I would love to lie here with you, we’re still parked on the side of the road.”

She giggled as she sat up. “We are, aren’t we?”

He grabbed his T-shirt and softly cleaned his slick semen from her inner thighs.

“Such a gentleman,” she teased as she climbed over the console to the passenger seat.

After he tossed his shirt into the backseat, he dangled her ruined underwear from the tip of his finger and gave her a sly grin. “Gentleman, huh? Well, these didn't make it.”

“Guess I'll just have to go commando,” she said, winking at him as she put her feet into the legs of her Levi's, then finished getting dressed.

He barely managed to get his own pants up and zipped after his dick responded to *that* thought. The heavy car door creaked as he opened it, and he went to retrieve a blanket from the trunk. When he got back into the car, he wrapped the thick flannel around her before shutting the door.

“Thank you.” She smiled at him with sleepy eyes. And curling up in the seat, she fell asleep.

With a low rumble, the engine purred to life. His heart swelled for this tiny woman who'd ensnared every part of his soul. If this were as close as he could get to heaven, it would be enough.

He breathed a weary sigh. It would only be a matter of time before Uriel discovered he'd crossed the line. In fact, it wouldn't surprise him if the archangel already knew. When it came to the Telal under his command, Uriel's gift of foresight was irritatingly uncanny. Well, it wouldn't be Nathaniel's first fall from grace. With demons hunting Samara, it probably wouldn't be his last.

Chapter Five

Samara sat up with a start, unsettled to wake up in unfamiliar surroundings. She glanced around the room, liking the neutral tones of the furniture. They reminded her of caramel-cream lattes. Engaging black-and-white nature stills graced the walls. Everything was simple yet tasteful. Her bag sat on an old wooden chest against the wall to the left, next to what she guessed was the door to the bathroom.

The chilly autumn breeze drifted in. She looked out the window to her right and saw the sun glittering on the surface of a lake. The foliage of the trees painted the landscape in a beautiful array of red and gold. With a sigh, she fell back into the downy pillows, realizing she was in North Carolina. Nathaniel must have carried her to bed. Her grin spread from ear to ear as she thought about their little detour last night. Good God, the man knew how to use his hands. She never would have thought she'd like it a little on the rough side or that sex could be so soul-shatteringly amazing.

The smell of coffee brewing was almost orgasmic, providing the motivation for her to get out of the huge oak bed. The hardwood floor was cold beneath her feet as she grabbed fresh clothes and toiletries from her duffel. Eager to wash away the grime from their long hours in the car and sleeping in her clothes, she headed to the bathroom. The rustic stone masonry was a perfect match to the decor of the bedroom. After relieving herself, she eyed the luxurious sunken garden tub with longing but decided that the large walk-in shower would be quicker, so she turned on the water.

A carnal vision of wet, slippery skin and the movement of two bodies sloshing water onto the floor flashed through her mind. She pushed it away with a frown. She couldn't afford to fall for him. Men like him didn't pursue women like her. Not that she knew any men like him, but she didn't want to end up like her mother, wasting her love on a man who was only going to leave. Her ability had to be the cause of his attraction. There was no other explanation.

Unless...

Samara shook her head, banishing the thought before she could even consider it.

She undressed as she contemplated what had happened in the car. She'd wanted to draw out his hurt. Then it was almost like a fire inside of her burned Nathaniel's pain away. Her ability had always frightened her, but now she was starting to believe maybe there was a reason for her gift. Maybe she could do something good with it.

The feel of warm water and soap on her aching muscles was heavenly. Sex in the tight space of a classic Camaro had been a workout. Not that she'd minded.

She heard the bathroom door open as she rinsed off, and turned to see Nathaniel. Her stomach fluttered at the sight of him. He was perfection: bare chested, a pair of khaki cargo pants slung low on his narrow hips, and unkempt hair. He looked liked like sex leaning against the stone countertop. And bless him, he was holding a steaming mug of coffee.

"Good morning," she called over the sound of the water.

"Yes, it is."

Her body flushed under his roaming gaze. Without a drop of shame, she turned to give him an eyeful. "Like what you see?"

"You're playing with fire."

She shut off the water, squeezed the excess moisture from her hair, and stepped out of the shower. She grabbed two fluffy towels from the rack, then wrapped one around her body before using the other to dry her hair. She feigned innocence with a wide-eyed look. "What?"

"You know what," he said with a teasing grin.

"Oh come on. You knew what you were walking into. It's not like you thought I'd be showering with my clothes on." She smirked.

With mock guilt, he hung his head. "You caught me." He laughed and handed her the coffee.

She sipped the rich, hot liquid and groaned appreciatively. "He kicks ass *and* brews a damn good cup of coffee. I'm impressed."

"Babe, I have lots of talents you haven't seen."

Oh she just bet he did. “On that note, I need to get dressed. So out.” She held open the door for him.

“You just gave me the full monty, and now you're modest?”

She gave him a playful shove.

“Okay, okay, I'm going. I bring her a cup of coffee, and this is the thanks I get,” he muttered.

She laughed as she shut the door.

Fresh faced and dressed for the day, she headed downstairs in search of more caffeine. Although Nathaniel's home was technically a log cabin, it was far from the ramshackle place she'd pictured. She'd never have guessed he had money, but glancing around, it was apparent. The cabin reflected the man she'd come to know—understated, warm, and comfortably rough around the edges.

The first floor was open, with beams crossing the ceiling and cresting two stories in the kitchen and living area. There was a fireplace made from the same rustic stone she'd seen in the bath, and like the upstairs bedroom, the furnishings were in warm colors. Exploring, she discovered a small gym off to the side of the staircase. A large portion of the room was taken up by a wrestling mat. She could picture Nathaniel sweating it out as he pummeled the heavy punching bag suspended from the ceiling. Next to the workout room was a den, complete with a library that rivaled Oliver's and a computer any geek would be proud of.

The craving for more coffee drove her to the kitchen. Sunshine streamed in from the large windows in the back of the cabin. She loved to cook, and this space was a culinary wet dream. Terra-cotta tile lined the walls; copper pans hung over a long butcher-block island that boasted an impressive gas range. As she removed the coffeepot from the machine, she could hear a staccato chopping sound coming from outdoors. She peered out the window, caught sight of Nathaniel splitting wood, and almost burned herself as she poured coffee onto the counter rather than in her mug.

“Shit,” she muttered, absently wiping her hand on her jeans, unable to tear her gaze away. His well-carved muscles rippled under skin that glistened with a sheen of sweat. What was it about a hardworking man that made her melt like it was a hundred degrees?

She forced herself out of her reverie, back to the spilled coffee, and cleaned up the mess.

Her stomach gurgled, reminding her it had been a while since she'd eaten. Was it noon already? Food would be the perfect thing to get her mind off naked, sweaty animal sex with a certain Telal. She popped in a CD from his music collection and began her search for something to cook. She settled on pancakes and bacon. The throaty vocals of Janis Joplin filled the cabin, and she hummed along as she mixed the batter.

Lost somewhere between flipping pancakes and “Me and Bobby McGee,” she jolted when strong arms encircled her from behind. Mortified he'd caught her singing at the top of her lungs, she groaned and whacked him with her spatula. “It's not nice to sneak up on people!”

“The smell of bacon was calling me. I'm glad. Otherwise I'd have missed the show.” He winked at her, retrieving a bottle of water from the fridge in all his bare chested glory. “There's something incredibly sexy about a woman wielding a spatula and singing Janis.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and went to set the table. “This looks great. I'm starving.”

She was struck by the comfortable normalcy of the moment. Sex was one thing, but sharing this type of intimacy was exactly what she needed to avoid. It almost made her believe there could be something real between them. “I was hoping this would be okay. I didn't have much to work with.”

“It's perfect. Ruby wasn't aware that I was bringing you home until I called her this morning, or she'd have already had the kitchen stocked. I told her to go ahead and stop by the store on her way in.”

Samara's brows shot up. “Ruby?”

He sat down at the table, eyes sparkling with amusement. “Mrs. Ruby McCloskey is my housekeeper. She also happens to be a very gifted witch. In fact, it's her wards we're counting on to keep Seth from stepping in whenever he wants.”

“Oh.” Face hot, she berated herself for jumping to conclusions. “A witch? I guess I shouldn't be surprised there are witches, with demons running around,” she muttered as she poured syrup over her pancakes.

“Archangels and the Sect typically don't associate with witches. Which I happen to think is wrong,” he said between bites. “It's part of the reason Seth's been able to gain the upper hand. Personally I think we should take advantage of every option we have. I'm in the minority, though.”

She moaned as she took the first fluffy mouthful, dripping syrup on her chin.

Fork freezing midbite, he gave her a look so filled with heat, she could almost smell smoke.

“What?”

“You keep that up, and I’m going to be eating more than pancakes,” he said in a voice that flowed over her like warm chocolate.

She used her finger to wipe the syrup from her chin and then slowly sucked the sugary droplet from the tip.

Nostrils flaring, he finished his bite. “You’re going to pay for that when I bend you over my knee and spank your beautiful ass.”

Her eyes widened, surprised by his threat and the secret thrill she felt in response. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wait and see.”

The front door opened and a female voice called out, “Hello! It’s just me.”

A petite woman rounded the corner hauling two canvas bags. She appeared to be in her fifties, her black hair shot with streaks of silver, hanging down her back in a thick braid. Her deep blue eyes gleamed vivaciously as she smiled. The calming presence of this woman warmed Samara all the way to her bones.

She jumped up to greet the woman. “Let me get those for you.”

“Thank you. Name’s Ruby. And you must be Samara.” Ruby followed her into the kitchen, giving Nathaniel a pointed look. “*You* should be carrying these.”

He finished his last bite and moved to help. “Any more in the car?”

“A few.”

“I’ll get ‘em.” He kissed Ruby on the top of her head before he went out.

Ruby turned to Samara as she began unpacking the bags. “You’re a pretty thing. I can see why he’s so smitten.”

“Who, Nathaniel?” *Did she just use the word smitten?* “Oh, I don’t think so.”

“That’s all right. You take your time.” She gave Samara’s hand a gentle pat. “It takes some of us longer to see the path we’re on. But don’t you worry. Our boy’s a patient one.”

Puzzled, Samara wasn't sure if she was irked or strangely reassured by the woman's musings.

The door slammed as Nathaniel came in carrying the rest of the bags. "Not telling her any horror stories, are you?" He narrowed his eyes playfully as he set the groceries on the counter.

"You stink to high heaven. Go clean up, and we'll take care of this. Go on, shoo." Ruby waved him on.

"So pushy. Take care of my girl, okay, Ruby?" He flashed them both a devastating smile. "The alarm is activated, but if you sense anything—either of you—come and get me." He disappeared up the stairs.

Enjoying the view, Samara followed him with her eyes, smiling because he'd called her *his* girl.

Ruby gave her a grin that let her know she hadn't missed the look. "How are you holding up?"

Samara exhaled. "I'm doing okay. I think. It's been a weird two days."

"I imagine so. You've had a lot thrown at you recently. I understand you just lost your uncle. I would offer my sympathies, but you're probably tired of hearing that by now."

"Thank you." Oliver's sudden heart attack had left her with more than just grief. Now she had questions he'd never be able to answer. He'd told her stories and myths. Never mentioned a word about a prophecy or her part in it. Couldn't he have warned her about the existence of demons and Telal? And if he'd known demons would someday come for her, why hadn't he tried to help her develop her ability so she could at least defend herself? Frustrated and sad, she realized she might never know why so much was kept from her.

"Is there something you want to talk about? I'm pretty good at listening."

Damn, this woman could see right through her. Samara paused for a long moment. "I just don't understand why my uncle never told me the truth."

"Sometimes those we love keep things from us because they think it'll protect us." Ruby looked into Samara's eyes as she washed the breakfast dishes. "Would you have believed him, had he told you?"

“Probably not.” She pursed her lips before she continued. “It just makes me wonder what else he was keeping from me. You live your whole life thinking things are one way, and when you find out they’re not, it just sucks to discover the person you loved was the one hiding it from you.”

“Honey, don’t let this taint your memory of him. It’s hard now, but maybe when the whole picture comes into focus, you’ll understand why he kept things from you. I’m sure he had his reasons. Have you considered that maybe his silence wasn’t by choice?”

Samara smiled thoughtfully at Ruby as she grabbed a dish towel to help dry dishes. Could Oliver have been as much of a pawn then as she was now? She was nobody’s fool. There was something much larger at play here. Determined to find out exactly what the hell was going on, she wouldn’t rest until she had some answers. The problem was, where to seek them?

Chapter Six

“You need to try and relax.” Nathaniel wrapped a blanket around her. “Would it be easier if we were touching?” he asked as he tossed another log into the fire pit.

Fall evenings had always held a bit of magic for Samara. With the scent of the wood fire in her nose, she savored the crisp autumn air as she inhaled deeply. The lake lay out before her like a sheet of dark glass as she stood on the small sandy beach. Before she sat down in one of the cedar Adirondack chairs, she stole a glimpse of Nathaniel and bit her lip.

“Touching might be a bad thing.” Considering the last time she'd used her gift on him, they'd ended up having sex. Not that she was complaining.

“It could never be a *bad* thing.”

“You're not helping.”

“No, you're right. We need to concentrate on developing your ability. Maybe we should start with what happened in the car. What did you feel?”

Other than the most mind-blowing orgasm she'd ever experienced?

No no no. Focus!

The entire experience had alarmed her, and she still hadn't reconciled what had happened. It wouldn't be easy telling him just how much she'd learned about him. There were things she wished she could keep to herself, but she knew even the smallest detail could be significant. “I remember pain and anger. Somehow I knew they weren't my emotions. I don't know if this makes any sense, but they sort of felt male to me.”

“Didn't you say you couldn't tell which emotions were yours?”

“Last night was the first time I was able to differentiate between my emotions and someone else's.”

“This is good. It means you're gaining some control. What's the next thing you remember?”

Nathaniel's violent maelstrom of hurt and rage wasn't difficult to recall. As the powerful emotions from that night welled up inside her, a huge knot formed in her throat. She gathered her courage and went on. “Crushing, unbearable pain.” The echo of Nathaniel's anguish caused an ache in her chest, and she automatically rubbed the spot. “I didn't want you to hurt anymore.” Her voice caught as a tear slipped down her cheek. “I couldn't... I had to do something.” What she'd done to relieve his pain was still about as clear as muddy water. She'd just have to explain it as best she could.

“It's sort of like I sent a part of myself into you. Your emotion was strong, and I was so drawn to it, I reached out to you. The only way I can describe what happened next would be to say it was reflexive. I didn't have to think about what I was doing, I just did it on instinct. I latched onto the hurt I felt inside you, and when I withdrew from your essence, your aura—whatever you want to call it—I brought your pain with me.” She wiped her cheek as she took a deep breath.

On the edge of his seat, Nathaniel's elbows rested on his knees, with his hands clasped tightly in front of his mouth. Fervent emotions swirled in his golden brown eyes. Unable to handle the intensity of his gaze, she looked down at her feet. She hoped he wasn't angry. What she had done was a gross misuse of her power, no matter the intention. If he'd trespassed inside her psyche that way, she'd be pissed as hell. “This is where it gets strange. When I pulled your emotion out of you and into me, almost immediately, I felt it burning. Like there was a light inside me, destroying that part of you. It flared hot enough to about take my breath away—hurt like hell. Then just like that, it was gone. I suddenly felt very calm and relaxed. It was the weirdest thing.”

The fire crackled in front of them, the only sound for what seemed like an eternity. Nathaniel stood, adding to the awkwardness of the moment. He took a few steps away and cleared his throat. “You've a better handle on this than I thought,” he said with his back to her.

“I'm sorry. I can't always control what I pick up from people. I-I wasn't trying to invade your privacy.” This was one of the reasons she used to wish she were like everyone else. Before she'd been able to rein in her empathy, she'd learned things about people she didn't want to know.

Things she knew they'd rather not share, and seeing inside them, knowing them in a way they couldn't hide, had repercussions. It made people uncomfortable, and eventually they avoided her all together. She didn't mind being an outcast. But knowing they looked at her like she was some kind of freak, that hurt. She couldn't stand it if Nathaniel saw her that way too.

He came and sat down in front of her, took her hands in his, and looked into her eyes. "Sam, don't ever apologize for being who you are. Shit, as your guardian, I'm supposed to protect *you*. Take care of *you*. Not the other way around. You taking care of me? It's a hard bite to swallow. I've only had one other person make me feel that naked, and he's not nearly as sexy as you." He gave her a smile that curled her toes. "Besides, I have a confession to make. Stepping isn't the only gift I have."

"Oh?"

"I'm able to read thoughts. With angels and Telal, I can communicate telepathically."

She sat up straight, heart racing. Had he been reading her mind this entire time?

"Before you ask, I haven't been reading your mind. For starters, you can block like a son of a bitch. And I would never violate you that way," he added, eyes shining with sincerity.

"So you're telling me you're a freak too, just not quite as much as I am."

"I like my women a little on the freaky side."

She glared at him. "That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant. You're not a freak, Sam. You're an amazingly beautiful woman with a good heart and a scary amount of power. *I'm* the one who's part demon. That sort of makes me the freaky one."

He thought she was amazingly beautiful and had a good heart? Sweet talker. If he was trying to charm her, he was succeeding.

She had a terrifying thought. "Can demons read minds?"

"Some. Their abilities vary from demon to demon, just like they do from Telal to Telal."

"Do you know about the ones hunting me?"

Nathaniel nodded. "Naamah's power is seduction. She can make mortals feel pure lust, and she feeds on that. Cresil—he's in an entirely different league."

The mention of Cresil made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. "How?"

“He corrupts everything around him, gets off on it, and he's damn good at what he does. He also has a penchant for knives. Let's just say he's one seriously sick fuck.”

A shiver crawled up Samara's spine. She swallowed her fear and forced her thoughts away from the demon who had held a knife to her throat and tried to possess her body.

“Seth is, well...Seth has a true gift. He's a healer, but he doesn't use his power the way it was intended. He allows the demonic part of him to twist his ability into something evil, inflicting pain and causing disease. It's made him a formidable enemy.”

“How do we stop them? There has to be a way.”

“With demons, sending them back through the veil is the best defense. But that only stops them until they can find another host. Their real weakness lies in their emotions. You have the ability to turn that against them, cripple them with their own hatred. The angels are not even sure how powerful you are. It's why the demons are determined to possess you.”

The chill in the air seeped into her bones, and the dark woods surrounding them appeared ominous. Right now there were demons stalking her, and the Sect was relying on her to stop them. What if she weren't this big badass that everyone seemed to think she was? Terrified and feeling exposed, she wrapped the blanket more tightly around her.

“Come here.” Warm lips softly met hers as he pulled her down and wrapped her legs around him so they were facing each other. “As long as I have breath, I'm not going to let anything happen to you.”

“Okay,” she whispered, her fingers wandering through his silky hair. She felt safe nestled against him, and it wasn't easy for her to admit she needed that. Especially since she'd only had herself to rely on for so long. A storm had just blown her life apart, leaving her desperate for shelter. Could she allow herself the comfort of trusting someone else with not only her life but her heart? She didn't know. And right now, with fear still coursing through her and this man's arms around her, she didn't care.

She tugged at his hair with new urgency and poured all her fear and anxiety into her desire for Nathaniel as she leaned in to kiss him. A fraction of an inch from his lips, she paused, poised on the brink of devouring him, and breathed him in for a moment. Nathaniel broke the spell, molding his mouth to hers. He kissed her like a man starving for her lips, her tongue. In a feat of strength and grace, he stood up, with her still clinging to him and her mouth still on his. The stiff

evidence of his arousal nudged her as she slid down his body. Reluctantly she released his mouth, setting her feet on the ground.

He spread one of the thick blankets down in front of the fire. As he pulled his long-sleeve shirt over his head in one fluid movement, her gaze wandered over his luscious bronze skin. He kicked his boots off one at a time and slowly, almost excruciatingly so, unbuckled his leather belt, a devilish smile curling his lips.

As he trailed his hand down the hard musculature of his torso, her mouth watered. The lower his hand went, the faster her breathing became. Eyes never leaving hers, he unbuttoned his pants, leisurely lowered the zipper, and with deliberate casualness freed his swollen cock. When he slowly licked his palm, then stroked the thick length of his shaft, Samara stopped breathing.

Sweet Jesus.

Had she *ever* been this turned on? The fact that he'd barely touched her and yet her pussy was wet enough to soak through her panties told her no. She blinked a few times in quick succession and had to remind herself to breathe.

"Do you like watching me stroke my cock?" His voice resonated through her, causing her to shudder.

She wanted to scream, God, yes, but she couldn't seem to make her mouth work. He stood there and looked like the mythological creature he was—provocative, dangerous, and beautiful. Mesmerized, she watched his hand pump slowly back and forth as he shamelessly pleased himself in front of her. Her knees were weak; she balled up her hands to keep them from shaking.

"As good as this feels, I'd rather it be your hand on my cock." He paused to shed his pants and underwear. He closed the distance between them, dick proudly jutting out, inviting her to touch. She obliged by closing her fingers around him, marveling at the contrast between soft skin and steel-like hardness. She might not be able to form words at the moment, but she had other ideas for the use of her mouth.

Strong hands gripped her shirt. Before he could divest her of it, she dropped to her knees. This wasn't something she'd done before, and she was almost greedy for it. The idea of being able to gratify him in such a carnal way excited her. Lightly raking her fingernails across his

buttocks and licking her lips, she prepared herself for this delicacy. A drop of precum formed at the slit; she gently blew against his sensitive skin.

“Woman, you're going to drive me in—Oh damn.”

She swirled her tongue around the plump, smooth tip, stealing the salty bead of liquid. The masculine flavor that could only be Nathaniel enthralled her, and she wanted more. What would he taste like as he came on her tongue? Delicately she sucked the head of him into her mouth, flicking her tongue along the tender underside of the ridge. She opened wider and eased inch after inch into the recesses of her mouth, her saliva lubricating the velvety skin. When she'd taken as much of him as she could, she wrapped one hand around the base of his shaft.

Eyes wide, with a mouth full of his cock, she looked up at him. Her gaze met his. His face was pained with ecstasy, and she dug her nails into the muscles of his ass. Nathaniel hissed as his hands fisted her hair. Encouraged, she began to lave her tongue around him, sucking him in and out with a steady rhythm. She moved her hand from the base of his cock to fondle his suede-soft sac.

With an animalistic growl, he yanked her up with a force that both shocked and excited her. He tore her shirt over her head, tossed it aside, then dipped down to press his lips to hers.

She thrust her tongue into his mouth, deepening their kiss, wanting to taste him in every possible way.

Deft fingers effortlessly unhooked her bra, and the chill drew her nipples almost painfully taut. As if on command, he palmed both of her breasts, rolling each tip between his fingers, warming her flesh.

She moaned.

He ended their kiss, putting one arm around her shoulders and the other behind her knees, then picked her up, only to turn around and lay her on the blanket. She watched his muscles play beneath his skin as he finished undressing her.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he whispered, his gaze caressing her now-nude body.

The heat from her blush rushed across her skin. She'd never thought of herself as beautiful. In that moment, the way he worshipped her body made her feel cherished, special—like a goddess.

“I’ll do my best to keep you warm, but if you get cold, let me know, and I’ll stoke the fire.” He gave her a wicked grin.

The cold was the last thing on her mind. To say he was more than capable of keeping her warm would be an understatement.

With his hands braced on either side of her shoulders, his large frame hovered just over her body, almost touching. Her skin ached for him to press his heated length against her from head to toe. She *needed* him to touch her. Her soul craved that deep connection she’d had a small taste of last night, when their emotions were entwined and she could feel what he was feeling.

The desire to open herself to him was strong. But she fought the yearning to take in his emotions and tried to focus on her physical senses: the woodsy, spicy smell of him, the way the fire made his skin glow, the sounds of their labored breathing. Her arousal burned through her like a fever. There was no other way to put it. She simply craved everything about this man.

He trailed little bites and kisses down her throat and between her breasts. She arched, attempting to move her nipples in front of his mouth, and groaned when he continued to taunt her, kissing her everywhere but the places she wanted.

“Eager little thing, aren’t you?”

Her hands snaked around his neck as she brought her mouth to his, sucking his bottom lip between her teeth. “Yes,” she growled.

His fingers slid between her pussy lips, and she released him with a gasp. He traced the outer folds, smearing the slick wetness around her swollen sex. “Do you remember what I told you earlier today?”

Heart racing, her gaze flew to his face. He didn’t mean to go through with her spanking, did he?

“Turn over.” The command in his voice had her trembling with salacious anticipation. She wasn’t sure what possessed her to obey, but she did. He ran a hand over one round ass cheek. He traced the cleft with a single finger, brushing the puckered hole of her anus, and she held her breath. When he continued down to her drenched pussy, he stopped just short of her entrance. “I just want you to know I would never hurt you. When done right, spanking can be very...erotic.”

Erotic? The rational part of her said no way. Pain did not equal pleasure. Her libido said otherwise. Even though her pulse pounded and every sense was magnified in nervous

anticipation, she trusted him. She turned her head to the side so he could see her eyes, and nodded.

He caressed her ass with one hand and stroked her clit with the other. She barely had time to register how good it felt before he firmly brought his palm down onto her flesh with a sharp sting. Heat flooded her pussy and warmed the skin on her bottom. Her whimper became a moan as he immediately drove two fingers into her channel. He drew back, returning his attention to her now-throbbing nub.

She raised her ass to give him better access and was greeted with another swift slap, accompanied by fingers plunging into her again. Rapidly swinging from pain to pleasure sent her body into overload, and the two sensations blurred for a moment.

“Oh God!”

He lifted her hips, bringing her to her knees so she rested on her forearms, her face still buried in the blanket. He planted a soft, wet kiss in the spot still tingling from his slap. His hands spread the folds of her sex from behind, and Samara cried out as she felt his tongue circle her swollen lips. When he flicked his tongue back and forth over her sensitive clit, she almost screamed. With languid, sweeping licks, he ate her pussy as if he'd never tasted anything better. He penetrated her passage, fucking her with his tongue. If she didn't come soon, she'd collapse from sheer frustration.

The need building inside her was unbearable as she rode the edge of an orgasm. When he sucked the little bud between his lips and spanked her ass again, he sent her soaring. Racked by wave after wave of explosive sensation, unintelligible sounds tumbled out of her as she came.

The last remnants of her orgasm had her trembling, and her pussy ached to be filled. “Please, I need you to fuck me.”

The prettiest pink pussy he'd ever seen was on display, glistening with cum, just for him. The blushing mark of his handprint made him so hard, he ached, and she'd just begged him to fuck her. It wasn't possible for him to want her more than he did right now. The thin thread of his control disintegrated. He guided his cock into her ready entrance, then gradually submerged himself in her hot cunt. Damn if she didn't feel like heaven. Sweat beaded on his upper body as he strained to keep his pace slow, allowing her time to adjust.

Apparently she had other ideas. She rocked back, burying him to the hilt.

“Fuck!” he growled.

“As you wish,” she said as she threw him a sly grin over her shoulder and rose up on all fours. When she wiggled her ass against him, he hissed, feeling the end of her channel rubbing the head of his dick. He gripped her hips and pulled almost completely out before he forcefully rammed himself into her.

Her head thrown back, she let loose a guttural cry from deep in her throat. “God, you feel *so* good.”

This woman would be his undoing. Raw with hunger, seductive, and uninhibited, she'd bewitched him, heart and soul. He knew she held back part of herself. She grew up with a frightening ability and was sheltered from the truth of her existence. It would make anyone cautious. Her trust would not be an easy thing to earn, but he wasn't afraid of the challenge. So much time had been wasted loving her from afar. Now that he'd had her, she'd become a part of him, and he'd be damned if he'd ever let her go.

He licked his finger, then reached around and rubbed her hard little clit in small circles. He withdrew his shaft, leaving just the tip at the opening, and drove into her again, balls-deep. The pace slow and torturous, he wanted to draw out their pleasure for long moments.

“Nathaniel,” she pleaded.

It was all he needed, and in a fury, he pumped in and out of her. She matched him thrust for thrust. The sound of their flesh slapping together drove him to the brink, and he slowed to gain control of himself. She sat up on her knees so her back was flush with his chest. She twisted her head, reaching behind her, and pulled his mouth to hers in a vicious melding of lips, teeth, and tongue.

His hands automatically found those perfect nipples, pinching and tugging until she moaned. She ground herself against him and moved her hips in deliberate circles, driving him deep into her and pushing him close to the edge. When her pussy tightened and she fell apart in his arms, screaming his name, he could no longer hold back. He plunged his cock into her with three quick, hard thrusts and violently came, spurting his cum deep inside her as she shuddered around him. He pulled her to him and kissed the place where her slender neck met the slope of her shoulder as they rode the last ripples of their climax together.

He slid out of her, and with a shiver, she squealed. They collapsed next to each other on the blanket, laughing. He leaned over, then pressed his lips to hers. He grabbed the other blanket to cover them up. As she snuggled into him, resting her head on his shoulder and throwing her leg over his, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. They were a perfect fit. God, he loved this woman. In this moment, he knew it with every fiber of his being.

“Well, you two seem to be getting along rather well.”

A sense of dread filled Nathaniel at the sound of that booming voice.

Chapter Seven

Nathaniel felt Samara's entire body tense. Protectively, he pulled her against him. "It's okay," he whispered, trying to reassure her. "Remember me mentioning there was one other person who could make me feel as naked as you do?"

She frowned, looking rather annoyed. "Yeah, well, it's understandable when you actually *are* naked."

"Smart-ass."

The intimidating and impeccably dressed archangel cleared his throat with blatant irritation.

This is not going to be good. "Nice of you to drop in, Uriel."

"Get dressed. Both of you," the archangel ordered as he turned away from them.

"Uriel? As in the archangel?" Samara hissed through clenched teeth as she scrambled to collect her clothes.

He could see her blush, even in the dark.

"I'm a freaking adult. So why do I feel like a teenager who just got busted making out?"

"Uriel tends to have that effect on everyone." Nathaniel zipped up his pants, then helped her finish dressing.

"How long do you think he's been there?"

"Don't know, but any longer than a few minutes, and he definitely got an eyeful," he teased, trying to hide his apprehension for the serious ass reaming he was about to receive. He didn't want to worry Samara any more than necessary.

Adorably mortified, she groaned.

Uriel always did have a knack for showing up at the worst possible time. Like when Nathaniel was sleeping, showering... While he was having sex with a mortal charge he'd been

forbidden to touch was a new one, though. The only regret Nathaniel had about breaking the law was that he'd rather have told Uriel himself.

He'd made his bed, and now he'd have to lie in it.

The archangel turned around with his usual air of superiority. His eyes had always seemed eerie to Nathaniel. They glowed with a soft white light, no evidence of pupils or irises. He was over seven feet in height, built to scale, and looked every bit the celestial warrior he was. The only thing missing was a pair of white, feathered wings, which Nathaniel knew Uriel had in his true form. Even without the wings, the image he presented was intimidating as hell.

The demon part of him cringed.

"I'd rather we met under different circumstances, Samara."

"You can say *that* again," Nathaniel heard her mutter under her breath. She managed a weak smile. "Hi." She greeted Uriel as she nervously chewed a fingernail.

The archangel's features softened a bit as he put his hand on her shoulder. "Can you give us a few moments? Nathaniel and I have a few things we need to discuss."

"Go ahead inside. We'll be in, in a minute." Nathaniel tenderly pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Make sure you set the alarm." He crossed his arms over his chest, watching her retreat into the cabin. "I love her," he admitted to Uriel after she was safely inside.

"I've known that for years. Your love for her is not the issue. The fact that you acted on it is. You violated one of our most sacred laws!" Uriel's voice thundered in anger. "The Telal need these laws to... I don't need to tell you these things. You *already* know." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Nathaniel, you are the leader of the Sect. It is your duty to be above reproach. I cannot allow this to go unpunished. Is this woman worth your chance for redemption?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Yes."

Uriel's eyes narrowed as he tightened his jaw. "Good, because it's gone. And now, because of your disobedience, I will have to appoint a new leader for the Sect."

Nathaniel's heart dropped. *Okay, that stung.*

The entire reason he'd joined Uriel in the first place was for a shot at redemption. The only important things in his long existence were having a chance to make up for the wrongs he'd

committed and the possibility of a pleasant afterlife. *Until Samara*. As long as he had her, nothing else mattered.

“I should appoint her another guardian—”

“You do that, and we're going to have a problem.” Anger flaring white-hot, Nathaniel clenched his fists. He didn't give a damn if Uriel was an archangel. He wouldn't stand aside and let another Telal guard Samara.

“She must be something for you to risk my wrath. I don't have to reiterate how important she is. Is she coming to accept her fate?”

“Uriel, she's a person, not just part of your damned prophecy. It's been two days. Give her a break,” Nathaniel said, not attempting to hide his ire. How he wished she weren't at the center of something that would always place her in danger. As long as she was alive, demons would hunt her.

The archangel gave him a look meant to put him in his place. Nathaniel wasn't impressed. Not having the burden of redemption dangling over his head like a bone just out of reach was strangely liberating. He'd continue to fight Seth and his minions, but without the promise of heaven, Uriel no longer had him on a leash. He was his own man for the first time in a few thousand years, and it was an unusual feeling.

Demons. The hunt. It was all he'd ever known. He'd never even considered doing anything else. What the hell *was* he going to do for the rest of his godforsaken life? Other than have sex with the woman he loved. He could definitely make a career out of that. But she was mortal, and mortality had limits. He loved her. That was the easy part. Life after she was gone was another story entirely. Not something he wanted to think about right now. His current priority was keeping her safe from Seth and his little band of parasites. He'd deal with the rest of it when the time came.

“You know they are going to come for her,” Uriel said, jarring him back to the task at hand. “It's not a matter of *if*, but *when*. She'll need to be trained as soon as possible.”

“She's already gaining some control over her gift. Oliver only taught her to suppress it. She's not even sure what she's capable of yet. Already she's been able to target negative emotion and pull it out of me. And this was before attempting any exercise for control.”

“Good. She'll need to be taught to defend herself physically as well. I'm sure you'll want to handle that yourself.”

The thought of someone else with their hands all over Samara, training her in martial arts, made Nathaniel's blood boil. The demonic part of him roared. With a deep breath, he locked it away. It had been a long time since he'd lost control, and he wasn't about to have that change now. “I'll take care of it.”

“If you were any other Telal, I'd have to assign someone else for this mission. As it is, Matthias and Zachariah will be close, should you need them. Use your telepathy. Do not take any unnecessary risks.”

“Wow. That was almost a compliment. I should fuck up more often.” He gave the archangel a wry look right before he disappeared. Damn, he really hated when Uriel did that.

Chapter Eight

He came at her, arms outstretched, reaching for her throat.

Samara locked her hands onto his wrists and turned them outward, breaking his hold as she kicked forward, and stopped just short of his groin. She could tell her reaction time was improving.

“That was perfect,” Nathaniel said. “You’re learning fast.”

“I have an excellent teacher,” she said, wiping her brow.

“Just remember, it’s about using your natural reflexes and taking advantage of your attacker’s weaknesses. Once you get the basic hand-to-hand combat down, we’ll work on defending against different weapons.” He handed her a bottle of water.

In between quick, shallow breaths, she took a few gulps. “Can we start with knives?”

Although it had been a week since Cresil had assaulted her, it was still fresh in her mind, and she was determined to learn to take care of herself. Lucky for her, Nathaniel was adept at many forms of martial arts, having had a few hundred years to hone his skills. Practicality and a rapid learning curve were major factors in her training, and the Israeli martial art of Krav Maga seemed to suit her needs best. It was sort of a down-and-dirty self-defense system that relied on reflexes and exploiting vulnerabilities rather than strength and refined technique.

Constantly surprising herself, she liked the inner strength she was building with each training session. The ability to think on her feet was empowering, and it gave her a confidence she’d lacked before.

“Thinking ahead, huh? Yeah, we can start with knives. Now why don’t you get that cute butt of yours in the shower?”

“Not going to join me?” She trailed a finger down the grooves of his stomach.

She could tell he was considering it, but he shook his head. “I need to cut some wood, and if I don't do it now, it'll never get done, because you know we won't stop with just a shower. You said you wanted a fire tonight, right?”

After biting her nails almost down to the quick, she'd decided she wanted to surprise Nathaniel with a romantic dinner by the warm glow of a fire. The one thing that scared her almost as much as the demons hunting her was believing in the possibility of love—especially with this man. She'd never realized the walls she'd built to keep everyone's emotions out had also kept hers locked in. And just beginning to allow herself to feel, she knew she couldn't go back to that lonely, closed-off excuse she'd had for a life.

It was time to find out if there was something more than just mind-blowing sex between her and Nathaniel.

Ruby had promised to bring the ingredients she needed along with a good bottle of red wine. A little liquid courage might help loosen her tongue. Samara had never even considered a real relationship before now. Just the idea of talking about a future with Nathaniel made her jittery. What if he didn't feel the same? *No, no doubts*. If she continued to think like that, she'd talk herself right out of it. Not this time.

“A fire would be nice, thank you. Well, I'll be upstairs. Naked. And wet.” She cast a flirty grin over her shoulder as she walked out of the small workout room.

She headed up the stairs and mulled over how fast this place had begun to feel like home, more like home than Florida. The raw, natural beauty of the mountains was taking up residence in her heart right alongside the man she'd come to share the cabin with. She felt accepted and safe. Enough to be herself, something she'd never felt comfortable doing anywhere else but the home she shared with Oliver. She belonged here.

It had been easy to fall into a comfortable routine of self-defense training during the day, practicing her mental ability after dinner, and exploring each other at night. With the help of Nathaniel and Ruby, she'd gotten over her fear of using her gifts, and she'd been amazed by what she was capable of. It was almost second nature to skim through a person's emotional content—like flipping through a Rolodex. She could pluck out individual feelings at will. Even with all these new discoveries, she had yet to repeat what had happened in the car with Nathaniel, and it frustrated her. She could bring emotion in, then project it back out, but not heal it, which was

what she suspected she'd done earlier. Maybe only strong emotions triggered that part of her ability. Time and practice would tell. Hopefully.

The idea of attempting this on a full-fledged demon terrified her. When she'd read Nathaniel, she'd touched on the demonic part of him briefly. He kept it buried, and she'd had to search deeply to locate it. It felt foreign and evil, festering inside him; she was more than relieved when he was able to lock it away. If it weren't for the fact that he could suppress it so effectively, she might actually be afraid of him.

She brushed her thoughts of demons aside, started the shower, and went over the menu she'd planned for dinner this evening: filet mignon with a wild-mushroom-and-port-wine sauce and asparagus, followed by flourless chocolate torte. A decadent meal, for sure, but still light enough to not interfere with any after-dessert activities they might engage in.

Her stomach fluttered with nervous butterflies, and she drew a deep breath. "You can do this, Sam. It's just dinner. You'll never know if you don't take a risk." She spoke to her reflection in the bathroom mirror before stepping into the steaming shower.

Scrubbed clean and shaved baby smooth, she toweled off and dressed in her usual worn jeans and tank top. One of the reasons she'd wanted a fire this evening was so she could wear her strappy little black dress and not freeze her butt off. She left her hair down to dry with its natural wave, hoping for a sexy, tousled look that evening, then headed down to the kitchen to get started on the torte.

The sound of the front door opening drew her attention. She caught a peek of Ruby entering the foyer. "Hey, Ruby! I'm in here getting ready to start dessert." As she ducked down to retrieve a cake pan from one of the lower cabinets, she caught a faint whiff of something fetid.

"Hello, love." Cresil's words spilled from Ruby's lips. Before her brain had a chance to register the horror of what that meant, an explosion of pain burst through the back of her head, and everything went black.

* * *

Pain. Oh God. Moving her head was not a good idea.

Where was she? Her pulse raced as she realized she was gagged. When she tried to move her hands, rough rope dug into her wrists. Anxiety filled her, and she willed herself not to cry out. Instead she tried to focus on her breathing to calm herself. She squinted at the bright,

fluorescent light overhead. As her sight adjusted, she tried to take in her surroundings. She was lying on the hard, dusty ground in some sort of large barn or shed. The building was made of old, warped wood. Stacks of timber lined the far wall. Confused, she attempted to clear the fog in her brain caused by the ache in the back of her head.

Samara tried to lie as still as she could and strained to listen to the voices she heard in the distance.

“The wards should hold. He won't be able to just step in here, even if he figures out where she is. It should buy us enough time.”

Samara's heart dropped at the demonic sound of Ruby's voice. Everything came crashing back, and tears stung her eyes. Oh God. Cresil had possessed Ruby.

With as little sound as possible, she attempted to pull her hands free, but her bindings were too tight, and the small movement was already abrading her skin.

“It won't do you any good. Seth knows how to tie a girl up—has a thing for bondage—so I don't think you'll be getting your hands free anytime soon.”

Her aching head slowly came off the ground as she searched for the woman whose voice she'd just heard. A willowy redhead leaned against the wall. She pushed off and walked toward Samara.

“Scared little lamb. It'll be easier for you if you don't fight. Although it might be fun to watch you bleed,” she whispered, narrowing eyes that flashed with a hint of orange as she stood at Samara's feet.

Samara realized she was looking at Naamah, who'd obviously found a new host. She didn't even want to think about the poor woman Naamah had possessed this time. When a stiletto-clad foot raised up to kick her, Samara used her unbound feet to sweep Naamah's legs out from under her and knock her down. Her body surged with adrenaline. She couldn't believe what she'd just done.

“You'll pay for that,” Naamah hissed as she stood up, dusting herself off. “Boys! She's awake.”

Samara struggled to sit up, scooting over so she could lean on the wall behind her. The wood against her back was little comfort. Her breath came in rapid pants as two figures approached. *Ruby*.

Samara's heart ached. Eyes glowing orange, and with a maniacal grin twisting her features, Ruby bore little resemblance to the woman Samara had come to care for. Any hope of using her new training was squashed. There was no way she could bring herself to hurt Ruby, regardless if Cresil possessed her.

A man she'd never seen before towered over her. His good looks were staggering, undiminished by his shaved head. Soft, full lips were set in the face that should have belonged to an angel. She studied him, but even without the use of her power, she sensed something cold about this man. Looking into his ice blue eyes, she shivered. This must be the infamous Seth.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Samara Hale. My name is Seth, and you've met my associates Cresil and Naamah." He spoke as if he'd invited her to a business meeting. "I would ask you to join us and save us all the time and effort this is going to take, but we both know you'd only tell us what we want to hear. Isn't that right, Miss Hale?" He chuckled. "Oh, I'm sorry. You're gagged, aren't you? Let me remove that for you." He bent down to remove the cloth, then gently brushed her cheek with his fingertips.

Samara jerked away from him, stretching her stiff jaw. "I don't suppose you'd untie me?" she asked, trying not to sound hopeful.

Seth stood, shaking his head. "See, I would, but I don't think you'll be a good little girl. You could cooperate, though. It might make this whole process a lot less painful for you."

"Cooperate?" *Yeah, when I sprout horns and a tail.*

"Just open yourself up and allow Cresil or Naamah in. It would be your choice."

He made it sound so simple.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Ah, there's that fire," Cresil said, sounding entirely too happy. "I told you she was feisty." Samara's heart rate sped up as he pulled a straight razor from his back pocket. "I *want* you to fight." Closing his eyes, he inhaled. "Your fear is so...intoxicating."

Cresil's presence behind Ruby's eyes was almost too much for Samara to process, and she nearly screamed. She tried to shove down her horror and drew a few deep breaths. Cresil's use of Ruby's body was going to break something inside Nathaniel when he found them. *If* he found them. She had to believe he would.

A very subtle prod tested her mental barriers. Closing her eyes, she focused all her energy on reinforcing her psychic walls. The dull side of the razor traced a line down her cheek, throwing off her concentration.

Focus!

“You're good, but you can't keep this up forever.” Cresil gave a demonic laugh. “I don't know why you just don't join us. I mean, really, what's in it for you on the other side? The honor of serving the angels? Don't make me laugh. Or are you going to wind up a fool like your boyfriend and fight for a promise that'll never be fulfilled? One mistake and they yanked it all out from under him. It's sad really. A few thousand years of service and he's still going to roast in hell.”

The acrid stench of demon burned her nostrils. Her eyes flew open. She was met with the sight of Cresil crouching in front of her. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh you didn't know? This is priceless. Uriel revoked Nathaniel's only chance of ever getting into heaven *because of you.*”

“You're lying.”

“Why lie when the truth is so much more fun?” His grin was chilling.

“He's right, you know.” Seth spoke from behind Cresil. “The Sect has these things called rules, and Nathaniel broke a big one when he slept with you. Never cared much for rules myself. It's why I didn't join Nathaniel when we first met Uriel.”

What in the hell were they talking about? She felt like she was on the outside of some sick joke.

“Oh, he didn't tell you about that either?” Seth continued with a look of mock sympathy. “You poor thing. They've kept you in the dark, haven't they? Nathaniel and I have quite a history. In fact, his devious evil deeds rivaled my own for a few hundred years. Mr. Self-Righteous wasn't always a do-gooder.”

“So what? What do I care what he did a few thousand years ago? No one's perfect.” Even if what Seth had said was true, the Nathaniel she knew now was the one who mattered. These assholes sorely underestimated her if they thought any of this was going to sway her. Still, had Nathaniel given up his redemption for her? She couldn't think about that right now. She needed to try and figure out how to get out of this mess.

“Aw, that's sweet. She's defending him.” Cresil snickered before his face went cold. “I think it's time to try this my way.” Painfully groping her breast, he gave his lips an obscene swipe with his tongue. Samara wasn't sure if it was Cresil that nauseated her or the fact that he was committing these vulgar acts through Ruby. When he flicked her nipple through the material of her shirt with the tip of the razor, a small cry escaped her.

“You make me sick,” she hissed.

He sliced a thin red ribbon along her breastbone, just above the neckline of her shirt. He gave her a look that inspired raw terror. “Little pig, little pig, let me in,” he whispered menacingly before licking the blood from the blade.

She screamed inside, trying to choke back a sob. “*Nathaniel!*”

“*Samara? Baby? Can you hear me?*”

Was that Nathaniel's voice in her head? Cresil must be driving her to insanity, or was he trying to trick her?

“*Sam! Talk to me!*”

“*Nathaniel, is it really you? How? I must be losing my mind.*”

“*It's me. I'm not sure how, but you're not losing your mind. What's going on? Where are you?*”

“*I don't know. Cresil's trying to possess me. Nathaniel, he has a razor. He has Ruby!*”

“*Shh, baby. I'm going to find you. Just listen to me. You're strong enough to keep him out, but you need to help me figure out where you are.*”

She frantically looked from Cresil to Seth and hoped they couldn't sense what she was doing.

Naamah grabbed Cresil's arm and pulled him away. “Don't scar her. I want that body when you're finished.” Samara couldn't make out Cresil's response.

“*Sam, look around and tell me what you see, what you hear.*”

She tried not to be obvious about checking out her surroundings. “*It's an old wooden building. There are handsaws hanging on the wall with maybe carving tools? There are stacks of wood and what looks like unfinished furniture. I think I hear running water, like we're by a creek or a river or something.*”

“Do you see a plaque over a work table with the phrase 'Carve your own path'?”

“Yes! How did you know that?”

“You're at Ruby's, in her husband's woodworking shop. I'll be there in a second.”

“Wait! They've warded the place so you can't step in.”

“I'll step as close as I can, and I'll have to go the rest of the way on foot. Is Seth there?”

“Naamah too.”

“Sam, you're strong enough to fight them.”

“I'm afraid.”

“I know. Hang in there, baby. I'm on my way.”

Chapter Nine

Samara watched as Naamah and Cresil continued their heated discussion. Infighting was good. Hopefully it would keep them distracted for a little while.

"I want her skin flawless! She needs to look just as she does now if I'm going to use her to seduce Nathaniel," Naamah hissed through clenched teeth.

Anger rose fast, drowning out some of Samara's fear. Use her to seduce Nathaniel? Over her dead body.

"Enough!" Seth bellowed. "Quit bickering. You two can fight over her after we break her."

Samara held her breath as Cresil crouched down in front of her again. "Miss me, love? We were just chatting about you. Now where were we?" he asked, toying with the razor.

"Ruby, I know you're in there. Fight him!" Samara pleaded, searching for any hint of the woman she knew in the eyes that stared back at her.

"She can't help you right now, but she sends her regards." Cresil snorted.

Something clattered just outside the shop, and everyone's attention snapped to the door.

"Naamah, I thought you said the husband was incapacitated." Seth huffed in irritation and narrowed his eyes. "Go check on him."

"What makes you so sure it's not Nathaniel?" Naamah asked, a look of fear marring her near-perfect features. Interesting that Naamah was so obviously afraid of Nathaniel and yet she wanted to seduce him. *Talk about issues.*

"I highly doubt he's already figured out where she is, and even if he has, there is no way he could've gotten here that fast. Go check." Seth gave her a shove toward the door.

Naamah glared at him over her shoulder.

A brief look passed between Seth and Cresil. Samara had the distinct feeling there was an unspoken communication going on between them. Cresil yanked her forward so he could wedge himself behind her, and she yelped.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered into her ear as he angled the razor at her throat.

Cresil at her back with a blade to her throat was all too familiar. Her chest heaved, and her pulse pounded in her ears as she tried to squelch her rising alarm. Judging from Seth's body language and Cresil's threatening position, they seemed to be anticipating something. She didn't think it had anything to do with Ruby's husband. It was nerve-rackingly silent as the seconds ticked by, and Naamah had yet to return. After Seth and Cresil exchanged another look, it was obvious they weren't expecting her to.

Seth took position next to the door, his back pressed to the wall as he peered through the cracked opening. He shook his head as he looked at Cresil.

"Oh God, Nathaniel. They know you're here."

"Figured that's why they sent Naamah out. One down, two to go. Where are they?"

"Seth is just inside the doorway, and Cresil is in the back right corner. Hurry, he has a razor to my throat."

"I'll fucking kill him. Where's Ruby?"

Samara's heart sank, and she paused for a moment.

"Sam, is she all right?"

"No, she's not. Cresil's inside of her."

He roared so loud inside her mind, she winced. In a shower of wood and splinters, Nathaniel crashed into the shed, knocking the door completely off its hinges. Quickly spotting Samara and Cresil, his amber eyes glowed with violence. Turning to Seth, he growled, "You son of a bitch, let her go!"

"I don't think so. You're out of luck, friend," Seth said as he nonchalantly leaned against the shattered door frame. "The place is warded, thanks to your witch. So you won't be stepping Cresil anywhere, and I think you've gone too soft to kill Ruby just to send him back. Quite the conundrum. Do you kill the mother you never had to save the woman you don't deserve?" Seth taunted with a smug smile.

Samara's gaze couldn't track the blur of Nathaniel's fist as it connected with Seth's chin, snapping his head back. "You always did hit like a girl." Seth laughed, wiping blood from his mouth.

An excruciating pain distracted her from the two men as Cresil tried to breach her mental walls. She gathered her energy and pushed back against him.

"Oh you've gotten stronger. If you're as powerful as I think you are, I'm not going to want to give you up," Cresil murmured in her ear. She tried twisting away from him, but he grabbed her chin and forced her to look in the direction of Nathaniel and Seth. "Pay attention. I want you to watch Seth destroy your lover. There'll be plenty of time for us when they're done." He licked her cheek, and she shuddered.

The supernatural speed of the two men was hard to keep up with. It was a beautiful but lethal display of skills, almost like a choreographed dance. For each strike or kick, the other man countered with a block or punch of his own. Samara's heart thundered as she watched Nathaniel, praying for him to gain the upper hand. When he grabbed Seth, clenching his hands behind his neck, and pulled him down to brutally knee him repeatedly in the face, she wanted to cheer.

Seth maneuvered out of Nathaniel's grasp, his face swollen and bleeding. Astounded, she watched as his wounds healed right before her eyes. He laughed. It was a brittle sound, making the hair on the back of her neck bristle. Suddenly Nathaniel dropped to his knees and clutched his stomach as he groaned in agony.

"The benefit of admitting I'm part demon is that I don't have to pretend I give a shit about honor." Seth narrowed his eyes, completely focused on the man at his feet.

Nathaniel's jaw clenched tight, his entire body drenched in sweat as he struggled with an unseen force.

"You're pathetic. Always have been. You thought siding with the angels made you better than me. It didn't. It just made you weak."

Even through her toughest defenses, she felt Seth's hatred of Nathaniel from across the room. Something told her he wouldn't stop until Nathaniel was dead. And with the kind of power Seth held, she was afraid.

Cresil laughed with glee. "Oh this is good. Your terror is so delicious."

She didn't think there was enough water on the planet to wash away the sick feeling crawling along her skin at Cresil's sadistic excitement.

Seth's icy gaze met hers as he stood over Nathaniel. "I think she really cares for you. She looks genuinely distressed, and she's probably going to hate me for this," he said with a malevolent smile.

Nathaniel stopped breathing. He went pale as he fell to the ground and curled up into the fetal position.

"Stop it! You're killing him!" Samara screamed.

"That's the idea."

The look he gave her would have scared her a second ago but something in her shifted. Strangely she was no longer afraid.

The dam holding back everything inside of her suddenly ruptured, and power flooded out. Rage bubbled up from within as blood rushed to her ears, blocking out the sounds around her. Everything became crystal clear, and she knew exactly what she needed to do.

With a vengeance, Samara invaded Seth's mind, riffling through his essence until she stumbled upon the demon inside him. She saw the moment fear dawned in his eyes, and gave him a small smile.

"What are you doing? What the fuck are you *doing*?" He put up his hands as if he was trying to ward her off.

She cried out when she yanked the evil from Seth.

Cresil released her like he'd been electrocuted. "What the fuck?" His gaze darted from her to Seth and back again.

Seth collapsed to the floor, then held his head in his hands as he groaned in pain.

Samara fell to the ground too, unable to cope with the influx of Seth's depravity. At the speed of light, all the malicious deeds he had ever committed flashed through Samara's mind.

She brought her bound hands to her mouth to stifle a scream. Her heart felt like it would explode in her chest as the evil burned through her like acid—a searing internal torture. Rational thought was impossible. Hurt was the only thing she knew, and it pervaded every inch of her

body. When she thought she couldn't take any more—sure she'd die from the pain—her vision went completely white.

A soothing calm washed over her like warm water. A comfortable stillness eased her entire being from head to toe. She sighed in relief. If she hadn't been in the middle of a fight against demons, she might have allowed herself to settle into the contentment she felt.

Quietly she listened for Nathaniel. The shallow sound of his breath was like music to her ears. Eerily relaxed, almost like running on autopilot, she mentally reached for Ruby. Her friend was there and okay but suffocating from the putrid evil infecting her. Using her last burst of energy, Samara drew Cresil out of Ruby and absorbed him.

Oh God. It fucking hurts.

She couldn't seem to get enough air. The foul, corrupt demon who had smothered Ruby now choked Samara. Pain clawed her insides as Cresil fought for control. He tried to escape her power, but there was nowhere for him to go. He slammed into her inner barriers, and the agony reverberated through Samara, causing her to seize. Screeching inside her head, Cresil battled for his demonic life, while she concentrated all her strength on keeping him contained.

The white light that had destroyed the demon part of Seth slowly appeared in soft glimmer. Gradually it strengthened, building bright and powerful, until it burned Cresil alive. Images rushed through her brain like a movie on fast-forward. Death, sorrow, carnage—there was so much of it. The absolute horror of what she witnessed sickened her soul. All of a sudden, the purifying light winked out and, with it, Cresil's existence. She heard someone screaming. It took her a few seconds to realize the screams were her own.

It all came to a crashing halt, and strong arms enfolded her in a warm embrace. She gasped for breath and looked up to see Nathaniel's eyes full of worry as he searched her face.

Using Cresil's razor, he cut the rope binding her wrists.

Her arms flew around his neck, and she cried.

“Shh, I've got you, baby,” he whispered, stroking her hair. He held her as deep sobs racked her whole body.

The tears were endless, and she clung to him as if she were drowning. The familiarity of Nathaniel's voice and touch soothed her, but only a little. His presence told her she was safe and secure, but she couldn't quite convince herself she'd be all right. The misery and suffering Seth

and Cresil had caused were just too much for her heart to bear. The only thing she knew was that if Nathaniel had not been there, she might have lost herself forever.

“Everything's going to be okay, Sam. It's going to be okay. “

Chapter Ten

A warm body spooned against her from behind. She inhaled through her nose and knew it was Nathaniel. His scent was imprinted on her memory, and it calmed her. She felt safe lying in his huge bed with his arms wrapped around her. She turned to face him. “How long have I been asleep?” she asked.

“Two of the longest days of my life,” he answered, brushing her hair away from her face.

She'd been out for two whole days? The events of what had happened came rushing at her in a flurry. Panic resurfaced with the image of Nathaniel writhing on the ground, close to death. His presence now showed nothing of what had happened. Relief stuck like a lump in her throat as she stared into his eyes.

She remembered drawing out Seth's demon, then Cresil from...Ruby. *Oh God. Please let her be okay.* Dread seeped into her with the memory of the pain she'd felt and the monstrous things they'd done. Were Seth and Cresil gone?

She sat up, fighting a small wave of dizziness. “What happened to the demons? Where's Ruby? Is she okay? Are you okay?”

“Whoa. Slow down. The demons are gone. I'm fine, Ruby's fine, and actually, she's downstairs in the kitchen making breakfast.” Gently, he rubbed her back. “You feel up to a bath? 'Cause you kinda stink.” He crinkled his nose at her.

She scowled, jabbing him in the ribs with her elbow. “*Ass.* A bath does sound good, though.” She swung her legs over the side of the bed and noticed Nathaniel must have undressed her. She was wearing a clean tank top and a fresh pair of underwear, but nothing else. The brisk morning air drifted in from the cracked window, helping her clear the fog in her brain.

He scrambled over the bed to help her up. “Take it easy, Sam.”

“I'm fine, a little shaky is all,” she insisted. The urge to relieve herself gave her more than enough strength to make her way to the bathroom. Thankful he'd given her at least a few minutes

of privacy, she finished and flushed. She padded over to the mirror and frowned at her reflection. She looked horrid. Her hair was a mess of snarls, and dark circles cast gray shadows beneath her bloodshot eyes.

She grabbed her toothbrush and, using a generous glob of paste, brushed away the thick feeling in her mouth. Her gaze fell to her wrists, and she was shocked to discover there were no marks. She was sure she'd have nasty abrasions from the rope. She pressed her chin to her chest, inspecting her skin for the cut Cresil had made with his razor.

What the hell? It's gone?

Just as she finished rinsing, the door opened, and Nathaniel made his way into the bathroom, carrying a change of clothes for her. She must have looked confused, because his brow immediately furrowed. "You all right?"

"I could have sworn..." Her fingers traced over the skin on her chest.

"A lot of strange things happened, and to be honest, I have more questions than answers." Depositing her clothes on the counter, he sighed.

She tried to shake off the icky feeling she had. "One thing at a time," she mumbled under her breath. "How about that bath?"

"I'm glad I had the big, fancy tub installed, because you're going to have company." He grinned at her as he leaned over and turned on the faucet.

She hopped onto the stone counter, watching him regulate the water temperature and then retrieve a few things from the adjacent closet. The athletic pants he wore ended up in a pile on the floor as he undressed. She gave his sculpted physique an appreciative glance. Gorgeous and naked, he approached her with a look that made her go all soft on the inside. She might be battered and out of sorts, but she wasn't dead.

He tugged her shirt over her head. He pulled her to her feet, knelt down to remove her underwear, and incited a wave of goose bumps on her skin.

She hugged herself, feeling bare of more than just clothing. As if he'd sensed what she needed, he embraced her with the whole of his body, pressing the warmth of his skin against hers. "Come on. Let's get you clean."

He helped her climb into the tub and sank into the water just behind her. Lowering herself into the blissful liquid heat, she sighed. “God, this feels good.” She pulled his arms around her and settled in between his legs, leaning back against him.

He began to wash her. As the cloth glided over her limbs, she relaxed under his touch. “Wet your hair,” he instructed, squeezing shampoo into his hand.

She closed her eyes, held her breath, and immersed herself completely. She came up slowly, put her knees to her chest, and leaned her head back. His fingers massaged coconut-scented shampoo into her scalp. A man bathing her and washing her hair with such tenderness felt incredibly intimate. No one had cared for or treasured her like he had. A girl could get used to this. He rinsed her hair using the detachable showerhead, and her tension drained away.

“*Thank you.*”

“*You're welcome,*” he whispered in her mind.

“So I wasn't imagining it,” she said aloud. “I thought I'd cracked or something. I even wondered if it might have been Cresil trying to trick me.” She craned her neck to peer back at him. “How is this even possible?”

“I don't know. I was going crazy trying to figure out where the hell you were, and suddenly I heard you screaming in my head. For a second I thought I'd imagined it too, but then you answered me. At that point I didn't care how. I just knew I had to get to you.” He paused to kiss her temple, his arms tightening around her. “I thought I'd lost you, and it crushed me, Sam. It *crushed* me. I should have—”

She fused her lips to his, stealing the last of his words. Her hand moved up to caress his scruffy cheek. She pulled back so she could look into his eyes, and it hit her like a fast-moving car. She loved him. This beautiful man who'd coaxed her out of her shell. Who'd set her soul on fire. Who'd almost died trying to protect her.

She loved him.

“What is it, Samara?” he asked, concern deepening his voice.

“You almost died, Nathaniel, and I can't imagine my life without you in it,” she whispered.

“I'm alive, and I'm not going to leave you—*ever*.”

“You can't promise me that.”

“Yes, I can. Sam, I've loved you for so long, I can't remember what it felt like to *not* love you. I know you don't feel the same, but I can wait. As long as it takes. I can wait. And until then, you're stuck with me.” He stood, water forming rivers down the smooth planes of his skin. “We should probably head downstairs and get you some breakfast.”

Samara sat in the water, speechless at his admission, and watched him get dressed. She couldn't seem to make herself say it. Why? What was she so afraid of?

Say it.

“I'm going to head down,” he said, leaving a towel for her on the edge of the tub.

Say it.

“Take your time.” He gave her a small smile as he walked out of the bathroom, then softly closed the door.

Angry with herself for being such a coward, she drove her fist through the water.

Now or never.

Nervous but determined, she leaped from the tub, snatched up the towel, and wrapped it around her body. She dashed out of the bathroom, leaving wet footprints on the hardwood floor. She almost slipped and collided with the door frame in an effort to reach him before he made it to the stairs.

“Nathaniel.”

He was standing at the railing, and Samara barely gave him time to turn before she launched herself at him. He caught the tiny, wet woman as she wrapped herself around him.

“I love you.” She stared at him, her eyes wide and chest heaving. “I love you.”

His heart swelling in his chest, he clasped her face in his hands and touched his forehead to hers. “I thought I was going to have to wait a little longer than a few seconds,” he whispered before he kissed her with every ounce of the fierce love he felt in his soul. He hadn't expected her to admit it so soon. The fact that she had enough courage to chase him down—nearly naked and dripping wet—to tell him she loved him made him the happiest Telal in existence.

“If you two are going to keep this up, can you at least go back to the bedroom? We're trying to eat down here,” a gruff male voice griped from below them.

He peered over the railing and shot the Telal a hard look. He'd almost forgotten Matthias and Zachariah were here. "Can it, Zach."

She groaned, hiding her face against his chest. "Please tell me there aren't people down there watching us. Why is it I'm always embarrassing myself around you?" She adjusted the towel and covered herself before she eased out of his arms. "I'm going to go get dressed now, and I'll meet you downstairs."

With a schoolboy grin, he made his way down to the kitchen. Ruby was at the stove, whipping up one of her famous breakfasts. The smell of biscuits and gravy was enough to make his mouth water. He nodded toward Matthias and Zach as he passed the breakfast table, then greeted Ruby with a quick peck on the cheek. "Morning."

Stirring the gravy, she beamed at him. "How is she?"

"Tough as nails and smiling, believe it or not. She'll be down in a minute, and you can see for yourself," he said, pouring two cups of coffee. After what Samara had done to Seth and Cresil, she had been almost inconsolable. Whatever she'd felt from them had damaged her in some way, and she'd been too despondent to do anything but sob. Worried sick, he couldn't do anything but hold her until she'd cried herself to sleep. It had about broke his heart. He'd never felt so helpless.

He knew the tremendous amount of power she'd used would physically drain her. He just wasn't sure what mental repercussions it would have, and that scared him. All he could do was have faith she'd come around. For two of the most anxious and miserable days he'd ever experienced, he sat by her bedside and waited for her to wake up.

"I can't wait to meet the woman who took on Seth and Cresil and doesn't have a scratch on her. Is she scary?" Zach asked, leaning back in his chair as Ruby set the first bowl of gravy on the table.

Matthias reached over and smacked his brother on the back of the head. "A little tact?"

Zachariah and Matthias were identical twins and had been members of the Sect almost since its inception. They were fierce warriors, both extremely lethal but loyal, and Nathaniel trusted them with his life. They were like two sides of the same coin. Matthias was the cool, levelheaded twin with the unique power to mesmerize with his voice. Zach was charismatic and

volatile with the gift of persuasion. Together, the twins made an effective and deadly pair—one to calm, one to control.

“What? Oh come on. You have to admit, what she did was a *little* scary.” Zach ladled gravy over a plateful of biscuits. “Ruby, marry me? God, what I wouldn't give to eat like this every day.”

She winked at him. “If only I were a few years younger and single. I'd be all yours.”

“I've got a thing for older women, and I bet I could convince you to leave that husband of yours,” he said, giving her a wicked grin. “How is he, by the way?”

“As full of gristle and spite as he's always been. Thank you for asking.” Ruby paused, and Nathaniel didn't mistake the wise glint in her eyes. He'd seen it too many times before. “Won't be long—”

“Ruby,” Zach said, warning her. “I don't want to know. Don't say another word.”

Matthias leaned forward, giving his brother a huge shit-eating grin. “This I gotta hear. Go ahead, Ruby. Finish what you were saying.”

“Just that it won't be long until there is a woman in *your* life.” As she returned to the stove, Nathaniel caught her little smile. “She'll be exactly what the *both* of you need.”

Choking, Matthias sputtered coffee all down the front of his shirt. Nathaniel burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?” Samara asked as she walked into the kitchen.

“Ruby was just giving these two jackasses a glimpse into their future.” Nathaniel smirked. “Samara, this is Matthias and Zach.”

“You should listen to Ruby. She knows what she's talking about.”

“Nice to meet you,” they said in unison as they stood up to greet her.

“Man, I wish my charges looked like that,” Zach muttered as he suffered another blow to the back of his head, courtesy of Matthias.

“Wow, two for one. Will you excuse me for a minute?” Samara held up a finger, and turned to where Ruby waited. It warmed him to witness the growing relationship between the two women he loved.

“You okay?” Ruby asked, her face lined with concern as she inspected Samara.

"It's good to see *you* behind those eyes."

"Thank you. What you did for me—"

"Is no different than what you'd have done for me. No thanks needed."

A faint breeze traveled through the kitchen. Nathaniel felt the sudden shift in power when Uriel appeared. Unaffected by the witch's wards, the archangel could pop in whenever he wanted. It annoyed the hell out of everyone, especially Ruby.

"You know, you could use the door like everyone else," Ruby chided. "Good morning, Uriel."

"Yes, ma'am. I apologize, Ruby."

Nathaniel gave the archangel a knowing smile. The unassuming witch had a way of putting people in their place, Uriel included. Nodding to acknowledge the new presence in the room, he had a sinking feeling this was not a social call. The twins must have felt the same thing, because they exchanged a concerned glance.

Ruby placed a fresh basket of biscuits on the table and refilled the gravy bowl. "Come on, boys. You can give an old girl a ride home." She motioned Matthias and Zach toward the door. "I'll just be a phone call away," she said, giving Samara a squeeze.

The twins shouted their good-byes as they headed outside.

"That woman's intuition is scary sometimes." Uriel took a seat at the table, leaving the food untouched.

Nathaniel noticed Samara's nervousness, made a plate of food, and set it in front of her. He knew she had questions for Uriel. Hell, he had a few of his own, but he also knew she needed to eat. Their conversation with the archangel could wait until she had. Only when she picked up her fork and began eating did he say anything to Uriel. "What's the word?"

"Naamah's already found another host and is up to her old tricks. But it seems the demon Cresil is no longer in existence, in hell or through the veil."

Samara's eyes went wide as she took a large gulp of her coffee.

"What about Seth?" Nathaniel asked.

"He's in hiding, but he's no longer the same Telal he once was."

"What does that mean?" Samara frowned.

“You destroyed the demon in him. He's still a powerful immortal being because of his angelic heritage, but he'll no longer be able to use his gift to harm. He's now a healer, as he was meant to be.”

“So he's still alive, then,” Samara muttered, staring down at her plate.

Stunned, Nathaniel blew out a breath. “You don't understand. This is probably the worst thing that could have happened to Seth, short of destroying him altogether. He defines himself by the demon part of him. Everything he's ever done, all his ambitions, centers on his power as a demon. Shit, hell won't want anything to do with him now, and he'll likely be hunted by both sides.”

“Because of me? I still don't know exactly what happened. I mean, I know what I felt. I guess I just want to understand.” The look of confusion on her face quickly bled to anger. “No, fuck that. I want some answers. I've been kept in the dark my entire life, and I'm sick of it.” She glared at the archangel and then turned her seething gaze on Nathaniel.

Uh-oh.

“Did you give up your redemption for me? I want the truth.”

Damn Cresil straight to hell. “Sam, you have to understand—”

“You did, didn't you?” A frown creased her forehead. “Why?” She sadly shook her head. “I'm not worth that.”

“He was not given a choice,” Uriel said.

“Why? Because he broke one of your damned rules? You're really going to punish someone who has done your dirty work for thousands of years, because he fell in love? And you're supposed to be the good guys.” She angrily speared another bite of her breakfast.

In that moment, Nathaniel thought his heart might burst, it was so full. It amazed him how much Samara had changed in such a short period of time. No longer the scared, emotionally isolated skeptic, this woman who passionately defended him was strong and capable. And she loved him.

“Sam, you're worth so much more than that to me.” He spoke with more surety now than he ever had.

“You have the power to save him.” Uriel's eerie eyes dimmed slightly.

“Me?”

“Wait, what?” That caught Nathaniel completely off guard. Exactly what the fuck was Uriel getting at? Half-truths and secrets seemed to be the way of the archangels. They fed everyone just enough information to keep them from getting killed. His gut told him this wasn't the drop-in-and-say-hi type of visit. No, this was the I'm-about-to-dump-a-huge-load-of-shit-in-your-lap kind.

Uriel shifted in his seat as if he was...*uncomfortable*? Nathaniel couldn't recall a time when he'd seen the archangel so uneasy.

“Empathy is not your gift. The ability to feel and manipulate emotions is only an extension of your greater power. You purify souls. It's what you were born to do.”

“But purification is an angelic gift. It's *your* gift,” Nathaniel blurted.

“Samara is my daughter,” Uriel said softly, and the glow left his eyes, to reveal pale green irises staring back at them.

Shocked into silence, Nathaniel swallowed hard and watched for Samara's reaction. The look of anguish on her face stabbed him like a knife in the chest. Before he had the chance to say anything, she was out of her seat and through the back door.

Chapter Eleven

She ran outside in a panicked fury and stumbled toward the lake. *Oh God*. Her chest was so tight, constricted. She tried to breathe past the painful lump forming in her throat. She felt as if she were suffocating. She'd never been this overwhelmed by her emotions, always the expert at keeping herself contained. Not this time. Rage, betrayal, sadness, excitement—all were jumbled together and spilling out in a rush.

Uriel was her father?

No. No.

She would have known, wouldn't she? She would have...felt different her entire life. Oh God. Why hadn't anyone told her? Had her *mother* known?

Confused and hurt, she wasn't sure who she was in that moment. Everything she'd believed, everything she'd known, had been completely obliterated in the last few weeks. Uriel's admission had certainly taken the prize for having the most impact. She felt like someone had just dropped her off a building.

There'd been so many times she'd imagined meeting her father and what she'd say to him, but this? Not like this. Never had she imagined he was anything more than a selfish bastard who'd abandoned her and her mother. That belief had shaped pieces of her—pieces that were now shattered.

When she heard the door click shut, followed by soft footfalls behind her, she didn't turn around. In an attempt to calm herself she took a deep breath, willing away threatening tears. Uriel stopped beside her. His unearthly presence soothed her raw emotions.

She sniffed and stared out over the lake. “You know, I've spent my entire life hating you. *Hating you*. How am I supposed to feel now?”

Uriel stood there, pensive and silent for a long moment.

“How is it even possible you're my father?”

“I was chosen to fulfill a prophecy, just like your mother was chosen.”

Her heart soared, but she almost felt like throwing up. This was her *dad*.

Her knees suddenly gave way under the weight of that knowledge, and she folded cross-legged onto the ground in a huff. Uriel took her by surprise and sat down in the dirt right next to her.

“I am sorry you feel betrayed because this was kept from you, but it was the way it had to be.”

A stray tear found its way down her cheek, and angrily, she wiped it away. “I’m really tired of being told, in no uncertain terms, that crucial pieces of my life were kept from me for my own benefit. What kind of bullshit is that? I’m a grown woman. I don’t appreciate everyone treating me like I’m a child. I can understand not wanting to tell me when I was a kid, but I should’ve been told long before this. About all of it—the prophecy, my powers, Oliver’s involvement, you and Mom—all of it.”

“Your gift is a strong one, and you needed to be emotionally ready to handle the implications of something so powerful. Samara, you have the ability to purify evil. You can pull demons from their hosts and destroy them. It’s not a gift to be taken lightly. You needed to be ready to accept that this is what you were born to do.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

“To take your place in the Sect and fight for the greater—”

“If you say greater good, so help me, I’m going to have to hurt you.”

“Should I brace myself?”

Samara snorted before she could stop herself. “Don’t make me laugh. I’m mad at you.”

“I’ll try to be serious, then,” he said, forcing a stern look.

“You’re funny,” she said, dry as sawdust. “Honestly? I’m not a superhero. I get that this is something much bigger than just the two of us, but you’re my *father*. Yeah, an archangel, but still my father, and to me that means something. I don’t know how it works with angels or if you even feel like we do. But seriously? I’m not void of emotion, and the cloak-and-dagger shit has got to stop or I can’t be a part of this. Prophecy or not.”

Something occurred to Samara for the first time since she'd become aware of the prophecy and her place in all this. "When you said I needed to be ready, did that mean I wasn't ready until I had no family left to tie me to my old life? If I didn't know any better, I might think you purposely put Nathaniel and me together to seduce me into this. Oh God. You walked up on us..." It just struck her that not only had she been caught having sex by an archangel, but her father.

"I'd like to strike that bit of unpleasantness from my memory," he muttered as he turned his head to the side, stretching his neck, and Samara instantly felt his anger as if it were her own.

"So you do feel."

"Yes, we do. Not as passionately as you do. Empathy was a gift given to all the archangels. We are better able to serve mortals if we understand their motives and how they feel." Turning toward her, he looked her in the eyes. "No more secrets, Samara. I give you my vow. And you ought to know by now, no one controls Nathaniel. His heart is his own. He never would have agreed to that. Actually, I have a feeling he would have tried to fight me, if that had been the case."

Samara grinned, picturing Nathaniel battling an archangel to defend her honor.

He paused, his expression grim. "I won't lie to you. You'll never be able to go back to the way you once lived. Demons will hunt you, especially now, which is another reason you weren't told. Some of them can read minds, and if they'd discovered your parentage they would have known possession wasn't possible. Instead of going through the trouble to kidnap you, they'd have just killed you."

"So I was never in any danger of possession?" Well, that was a small relief.

"No. But everything happens for a reason. You needed to find your strength in your own way and in your own time."

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger and all that?" She gave him a sardonic smile.

"Something like that."

Not being able to go back to her old life didn't bother her. Samara hadn't really known what it was like to live, until the day Nathaniel had walked into Oliver's den. She wouldn't go back, even if she could. Things were different. She was different. Better. Stronger.

"I'm sorry we never had the chance to know one another before now, but a parental relationship wasn't possible. One of the reasons your mother agreed to have you was because she knew Oliver would be the father I could never be." His face softened. "You remind me of her."

"She loved you, you know. I never understood why, until now. It used to piss me off that she didn't blame you," she said, her voice cracking, and she cleared her throat. "How did it happen? Were you in love?"

"We shared a single day and night together. She was given full disclosure about my purpose and the prophecy, which she shared with Oliver. She needed to accept it willingly. Deception isn't something we practice."

"No, you just neglect to tell the whole story. It's sort of the same thing to me, and you didn't answer my question."

"It was hard not to love your mother. She had quite an effect on me, even though our time together was brief. She was...effervescent. Yes, that is the word I would use."

That definitely described her mom, and Samara smiled, though it wounded her to learn that both Oliver and her mother had known. It also hurt to know the father she'd resented her whole life was an archangel. One who couldn't be there to raise her because he'd had a higher purpose.

Uriel was right. Oliver had been a good father to her. Unable to imagine anyone else filling that space in her life, she knew things had been as they should've been. But it didn't lessen her hurt. Part of her wanted to throw her arms around him and call him *Daddy*, but she knew he could never be what she wanted. Her father had died of a heart attack just a short time ago. The loss of Oliver had left her with a hole no one could fill.

Sucking in a breath and gathering every piece of courage she could muster, she turned to Uriel. "Tell me about this ability I inherited from you."

She might have been mistaken, but she could have sworn she saw a brief flicker of pride in his eyes.

"What you inherited is the gift to purify souls, although Oliver taught you to suppress it. You did that so well, you forced your gift into dormancy. When you recently began exercising and exploring your power, you reawakened your abilities."

"Is that why I'm miraculously able to heal myself now?" she asked. The frightening thought of Cresil and his razor danced in her head.

“He can't harm you any longer, Samara,” Uriel said soothingly before he continued. “Yes, your body will rapidly heal. You'll be free of disease, and you'll live much longer. But that doesn't mean you don't have to take care of yourself. Quite the contrary. You're nephilim, not indestructible, so it's especially important you treat your body well,” he said, sounding suspiciously like a parent.

“*What?*”

“Samara, you're nephilim and nearly immortal.”

He'd told her that he was her father but the magnitude of what that meant hadn't fully registered until just now. *Holy shit.*

“You had to test the limits of your power to bring your angelic side into full maturity. As you discovered, your ability comes with great cost. One that will wear on you, should you choose to abuse it.”

Her whole body shuddered at the memory of what she'd endured when she'd taken the evil from Seth and Cresil into her. She closed her eyes in an attempt to fight off the gruesome images. The spark of love she felt for Nathaniel gave her exactly what she needed to push the horrors away. She remembered what Uriel had mentioned earlier and knew she'd do anything for him.

“Tell me how to save Nathaniel.”

“You already know. You just have to decide if you're willing to pay the price.”

She did know. Just as she'd done with Seth, she'd have to pull the demon from Nathaniel. And with it, she'd know all the death and misery he'd caused. She'd see it firsthand, but she didn't care. “I love him too much not to.”

Chapter Twelve

“No. No way, Samara,” Nathaniel said as he paced back and forth in the living room, well on his way to wearing a path in the hardwood floor.

The mere thought of her pulling the demon out of him made him sick to his stomach. After watching her fall apart when she'd used her ability on Seth and Cresil, he couldn't bring himself to even consider what she was suggesting. Not to mention the fact she would see the monster he had been before he'd learned control.

“Why? Don't tell me it's not what you want. I know how much pain it causes you. I've felt it.”

“I can't—*won't*—put you through that. I saw what it did to you.” How could he make her understand?

“You're talking about Cresil and Seth. A thousand times worse than anything I could pull out of you. And I didn't love them. I love *you*.” She turned her beautiful, pleading green eyes on him.

He still couldn't go through with it.

It had torn him apart when he'd held a sobbing and devastated Samara after her battle with Cresil and Seth. He wouldn't alleviate his pain by causing hers. “No, Sam, and that's final. I'm not going to talk about this anymore.” He knew he sounded harsh, but he couldn't allow her this. His pride, his heart, his head—everything was telling him not to.

“Ugh! Stubborn ass.” With a deep sigh, she cocked her head and gave him a probing look. “Believe me when I tell you, it will hurt me more *not* to do it. I'm not afraid.”

Nathaniel stopped pacing, and frustrated, he flopped down on the couch.

She knelt before him, resting her small hands on his thighs. “Do you think it's going to change the way I feel about you? Is that what it is?”

Did he? Searching himself, he found she'd seen something in him he wasn't even ready to admit to himself. Fuck. She was almost as bad as Ruby.

"Do you think I'm that shallow?" she asked as she sat back on her heels, hurt swimming in her eyes.

"Of course not, baby," he said, pausing for a minute as he shoved a hand through his hair. "I've done some terrible things in the past, and I'd rather you didn't know that side of me."

"You needed me to trust you enough to love you. Now I'm asking you to trust me enough to love you, *flaws and all*. Nothing you could have done will ever change how I feel about you. The demon inside you doesn't make you who you are. I, more than anyone, know that. Let me do this for you. Because if you think I'm going to live this long-ass life with you and not have you there to annoy when it's over, you're crazy." She mockingly raised her chin.

A small laugh escaped him before he could catch it. "What about that? That's a hell of a happy surprise, you being immortal."

"Uuh-uh." She shook her head, narrowing her eyes. "Don't change the subject."

"Damn it, Sam. What do you want me to say?"

"Say you'll let me yank that nasty demon out of you. Say you'll let me give you a clean slate. Say you'll trust in me."

Fierce determination was written all over her face. He was man enough to admit he was losing this battle. She wanted him to trust her, and he did. He had to believe she would love him. Even after seeing what he was like when ruled by darkness.

She won't. No one could love you after that. She'll turn her back on you. It's not as if you deserve her anyway.

It had been a long, long time since he'd heard that voice of doubt—the voice of the demon part of him. He'd almost forgotten how desolate it made him feel. The irony was, rather than cementing his refusal to allow her to do this, it pushed him past the last bit of resistance he had. He leaned forward, exhaling. "Okay."

Two slender arms wrapped tightly around his neck, and she kissed him softly. "Thank you," she whispered as she leaned into him, pressing her breasts against his chest.

His cock responded immediately. "Don't thank me yet."

“You should give me a little more credit.”

“I'm about to give you a whole *lot* of credit,” he teased. He stood, tossing her over his shoulder. She let out a little squeal. She belonged to him. Always had. Always would. He had more than a lifetime to show her just how much he loved her—how grateful he was she'd chosen to give herself to him. He intended to start right that second.

“Oh, you're so gonna get it. Put me down!”

He took the stairs two at a time and carried her to the bedroom. Playfully he tossed her on the bed and toed off his boots. On her knees, she came to the foot of the bed and pulled his shirt over his head. She ran her hands over the smooth expanse of his chest, leaning in to kiss his tanned skin. The salty heat of him churned her insides, and she could feel the sudden wetness between her thighs.

Unhurried, her fingers worked to unfasten the metal button of his jeans. She looked up to see his eyes burning with amber fire as she lowered his zipper. Still on her knees, she leaned back slightly, removed her top, and unclasped her bra.

“Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you are?” His voice was a throaty growl.

“Care to tell me?” she asked seductively as she pushed the denim down over his hips.

“Half the day, I walk around hard as a rock just thinking about you.” He pierced her with his heated gaze as he removed his pants and boxer-briefs.

She swallowed at the sight of his long, hard erection, and she licked her lips, remembering the taste of him.

“I can't get the image of those perfect nipples out of my head and how they just beg to be sucked.” The faintest brush of his finger across a sensitive tip sent a shiver through her. He eased her back on the bed and leisurely removed her jeans.

On her elbows, she propped herself up and heard him groan as his gaze came to rest on the risqué black thong she was wearing.

“I'm going to remove that lacy little thing with my teeth and then tongue that beautiful pussy of yours until you scream. You okay with that?”

She was only able to manage a nod as she felt his breath whisper across her belly. She was more than okay with that. God, he knew exactly which buttons to push to make her tremble in anticipation.

The rough five-o'clock shadow, along with his soft lips, grazed the skin on her hip. As he took the lace in his teeth, he pulled her panties down her thighs just far enough to hook his thumbs under the elastic and remove them the rest of the way with his hands. He caressed her inner thighs and spread her legs apart.

He nipped at the sensitive juncture where her inner thigh met the outer fold of her sex. Her clit began to throb and swell as he alternated between teeth and lips along the insides of her thighs and just above her mound. A small whimper escaped her as he continued to tease and taunt her with the promise of his mouth.

Strong hands moved under her pelvis, gripping her ass to pull her down closer to him. She gasped when he lightly ran his tongue along the length of her clitoris. Another series of feather-soft touches, with the very tip of his tongue, sent little jolts of pleasure through her as her hips jerked uncontrollably. He lifted her up, pressing the flat of his tongue against the whole of her sex, and slowly licked downward, then plunged it inside her soaked pussy.

She cried out as she threaded her fingers through his hair and looked down the length of her body. The sight of his head between her legs, claiming her with his mouth, was so erotic, it almost sent her into a frenzy. With an audible suck on her clit, he released her, and she wanted to protest. He stalked up the length of her body, devouring little bits of her flesh as he worked his way to her aching breasts. When he reached her nipple, she sucked in a breath as the wet heat of his mouth closed around the hardened point. The feel of his teeth barely grazing the pebbled tip was enough to make her whole body vibrate with need.

The blunt head of his cock probed her slit, and she opened her legs wide, eager to feel him inside of her. His taut, muscular upper body encompassed her small frame. His elbows rested on either side of her shoulders as he looked down at her through eyes half-hooded with desire. Soft strands of his hair tickled her face as he claimed her mouth. With a tender urgency, his tongue stroked hers as he kissed her long and deep.

Oh, but this man could kiss. Kiss well enough to curl her toes and make her forget where she was.

He reached down between their bodies to guide himself into her. She moaned into his mouth, savoring the thick feel of him filling her. Slow and deliberate, he thrust in and out of her slick pussy. He continued to consume her with his mouth as he penetrated her with long, fluid strokes. She rolled her hips in time with each thrust. An orgasm pooled deep in her core.

"I love you, Samara."

She'd never felt more connected to anyone in her entire life. He'd invaded every part of her body, her heart, her mind, her soul. Love for him and their unique fusion filled her from the inside out. It permeated every cell of her being. With her ability, she took everything she felt in that moment and projected it to him. They both climaxed together in an explosion of passion.

"Sam, I feel you everywhere. It's amazing."

"I love you, Nathaniel."

She moaned as she felt each throbbing wave of pleasure flow like an electrical current back and forth between them. They were no longer two people but one. The intensity of their mingled orgasms had her soaring to new heights. Her essence combined with his to form a single entity. He'd become a part of her in a way no one else ever would. The bonding taking place felt more natural, more powerful than anything she'd ever experienced, and the bliss shared between them had to be the best thing this side of heaven.

She looked at him as they floated back down to earth together. "I'm ready."

"Now?" he asked with a look of confusion.

"I have never felt closer or loved harder than I do right now. So yes, I'm ready now."

Before he could protest, she let him feel what was in her heart. The second she saw his eyes soften, she reached out to him with her other sense and calmly searched for that part of himself he kept locked down. Instead of yanking it away as she'd done with Seth and Cresil, she gently coaxed it from him and gathered it into herself.

She kissed him tenderly. When the fire inside her began to burn away the evil, she took a deep breath. The pain wasn't unbearable this time. His life flashed through her mind in a rapid flicker. She saw the death and anguish he'd caused others, but she also felt his tremendous guilt over it. He'd been lost, confused and torn between the two entities inside of him that continually fought for control. Suddenly a flare of aching heat caused everything around her to disappear.

Her vision began to white out, and she could feel Nathaniel's spirit becoming whole now that it was no longer bound by the chains of the demon in him.

She wasn't afraid of the sleep that was sure to overtake her. Instead she welcomed it, knowing he'd keep her safe. For the first time in her life, she trusted another person implicitly, and she was more content than she'd ever been. The serenity came in a gentle, soothing flood, and she heard Nathaniel gasp the moment he felt it.

A life without the evil that had weighed him down for thousands of years was the greatest gift she could give him, aside from herself. His soul was free. She could feel his elation as if it were magnified. Or was that hers? Not that it mattered.

Easing himself from her body, he reminded her they were still physically connected. He moved to his side, and he pulled her flush against him. His head on the pillow next to hers, he stared into her eyes and ran his fingers through her hair. In silence, they stayed that way. There was no need to speak, because they could feel each other on a level that went much deeper than words could ever express.

"I'll love you always." His thoughts comforted her as she began to feel fatigued.

"Always," she replied as she drifted to sleep, nestled in his arms.

 THE END 

Fallon Blake

I am a stay-at-home mom to two beautiful little girls who give me a run for my money on a daily basis, but I wouldn't have it any other way. My husband has been the driving force behind the pursuit of my dream. Without him, I'd never be where I am now. He'll always be my hero.

I live on the east coast of Florida where it's sweltering hot. I'd much rather be living in the mountains of North Carolina. I love fall and if I had my way, it would be Halloween all year round. Most days you can find me glued to my laptop writing away, playing outside with my kids, in the kitchen whipping up some vegan food, or holed up somewhere with my eReader.