

Dreamspinner Press Presents

NAP-SIZE DREAMS



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Prologue

“I’M NOT allowed to go to church.”

Donnie gave the new kid a blank look. “Not allowed to?” In his experience, parental censure only applied to *missing* church services. Suddenly, understanding dawned. “Oh, you’re Jewish?”

The new kid shrugged bony shoulders. “No. We’re not anything, far as I know. I’m just not allowed. That’s all.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. Mom’s never said. Just that I can’t go in a church. I’ve never been inside one, not even once.”

Donnie tried to imagine that. “We have to go to Mass every week. Twice, sometimes. It’s cool, though. I want to be a priest when I grow up,” he added in a burst of enthusiasm, then blushed. Sometimes kids made fun of him for being so religious.

The new kid just looked interested. “Yeah? What’s it like?”

Donnie launched into a description of a typical Mass: the incense, the ritual, the surplice he got to wear as an altar boy. He wasn’t sure the new kid really *got* the idea of the Host, but he didn’t make jokes about it or anything, so that was cool. Actually, he looked kind of sad. Donnie had the strangest urge to put his arm around those thin shoulders,

maybe even stroke the straight dark hair that fell over his collar and made him look like a gypsy.

"I could take you to my church, if you like," Donnie blurted. "Just for a visit, I mean. To see what it's like. Father Thomas always leaves it open in the afternoons."

"I'm not sure... Mom doesn't like me to be late home," the new kid said doubtfully. He looked like he wanted to be persuaded, though.

"It's only 'round the corner. Come on!" Donnie urged, in his excitement actually taking the new kid by the hand without thinking.

The new kid smiled suddenly. "Well... all right. But just to see it."

"HERE we are," Donnie said unnecessarily as he pushed open the heavy wooden door into the church.

"I don't think I like it here," the new kid said softly. "I feel sick."

"That's just the incense. You'll get used to it," Donnie told him, more confident now he was on his own patch, so to speak. "Look, you see this? This is Holy Water. You have to get a bit on your fingers and make the sign of the cross, like this."

The new kid didn't move. "I don't think—"

"Come on! It's only water!" Daringly, Donnie scooped up some more water and flicked it at the new kid like he'd seen

some of the other altar boys do when Father Thomas wasn't around.

The new kid flinched as the droplets struck his face—and then he screamed. Loud and high, his cries echoed through the church.

"Stop it!" Donnie hissed. "Father Thomas will hear you!"

"It's burning me!" the new kid cried, his hands clapped to his eyes.

Donnie pulled at them, desperately trying to hush him. "Cut it out! This isn't funny!"

"It hurts! It hurts! Make it stop!"

"You've got to be quiet!"

"Boys, boys, what in the Lord's name is going on here?" Father Thomas's deep tones cut through Donnie's panic.

"Father! He says it hurt him, but it's only Holy Water. How can it hurt him? It can't, can it?"

Father Thomas looked stern. "Young man, I think the joke has worn a little thin." He pulled at the new kid's hands, getting them away from his face.

The skin was reddened, blisters already forming, and bloody tears fell from his eyes. Donnie stared in shock.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God!" Father Thomas gasped. His face changed, twisted. Donnie backed away in unconscious fear as the priest carried on in a terrible voice. "I adjure thee, thou most foul spirit, every appearance, every inroad of Satan, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth—"

A strange, inhuman cry came out of the new kid's throat. His reddened eyes fixed on Father Thomas; he began to back away toward the door.

“Go out, thou seducer, full of deceit and wile, thou enemy of virtue! I adjure thee, that thou *depart from the House of God!*”

A great wind seemed to sweep through the church, and Donnie watched in horror as the doors to the street opened of their own accord and the new kid, his blistered, bloody face distorted by terror, was hurled outside, the doors slamming shut behind him.

Angel

“GOT a new one for you, Don.” Marty threw a file across the desk. “Manslaughter case, gets out tomorrow.” He grinned. “Bit of a kinky one. Killed his lover during risky sex. The guy asphyxiated right in the middle of things.”

“Yeah?” Don asked, deciding to reserve judgment until he'd actually read the file. “How long's he been inside?”

“Three years. Yeah, I know, doesn't sound long, but if you ask me, a better lawyer and the guy wouldn't even have gotten time. The creep he was doing was known for pushing things to the edge. Anyhow, looks like he kept his nose clean while he was inside. Reprimanded once for being disrespectful to the prison chaplain, but that's all.”

Don's lips tightened. He didn't have a lot of time for anyone who mocked his religion. He flicked open the file and looked at the mugshot. The guy's name was Michael Andras. He stared at the camera with a blank, sullen expression in the coldest pair of eyes Don had ever seen. His hair was straight and black, falling almost to his shoulders. His face was... not attractive, exactly, but certainly compelling.

A rush of sympathy shot through him. Don wondered what it must have done to the guy, to find out he'd inadvertently killed his lover. And then to go to jail and have everyone knowing he was queer. Still, the face in the photograph seemed to give off definite "don't mess with me" vibes, so maybe he'd been okay.

In any case, as the man's parole officer, it was Don's duty to put aside whatever personal feelings he might have toward him.

THE new guy was late. Don drummed his fingers impatiently. He hoped this wouldn't turn out to be a no-show. He was about to make a note on the file when the door opened without warning and a slender figure slouched in, his face half-hidden by long, raven hair.

"Michael Andras?" Don asked, and the guy looked up at him. The hair was longer, but the man's looks were distinctive enough that Don could easily recognize him from the mugshot on the file.

Shockingly cold blue eyes regarded him intently, making Don uncomfortable, although he couldn't have said why. A

surprisingly full mouth quirked up at one side as Andras continued to stare at him in silence. Don swallowed, suddenly remembering the man was gay. Don was used to being checked out by guys—with his looks, it happened a lot—and he could handle it okay when he was on his own time, but here in his office, it seemed like an intrusion.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” Andras said at last. He laughed, a short, dry sound without much humor in it. “Must be twenty years ago, now. But I remember you, *Donnie*.” He paused. “Not the sort of thing I’d ever forget, is it? The day I found out I’m a demon.”

Don froze. It all came flooding back: the cloying scent of the incense, the panic he’d felt at the kid’s cries. He heard his chair clatter to the floor and realized he’d stood up, leaning over his desk to stare at Andras. When he looked closely, he could see faint patches of scarring on Andras’s face, the skin there a slightly paler tone. “You—where did you go?” Don asked at last, feeling like he was being a coward, straying away from the real issues into more comfortable territory. “I never saw you again. Where did you go?”

Again the mouth quirked. “Oh, we went lots of places. Didn’t go to church again, though.”

“My parents had me in therapy for a year after that,” Don said numbly. “And made an official complaint about Father Thomas for ‘encouraging my delusions’.”

“Well, you didn’t expect them to *believe* you, did you?”

“I—” It had never even occurred to Don back then that his parents would doubt what he said. He wasn’t sure he’d ever gotten over that feeling of betrayal.

“I see you never made it to the priesthood.”

Don fought down the defensive feelings that rose up in him. It *had* sounded like a challenge, though. “No. I’m no longer a member of the Catholic Church, as it happens. I attend a nondenominational church in the city center. I find they’re more accepting.”

Andras’s eyebrow raised slightly. “Have a lot to accept, do you?”

Don’s lips tightened. “I’m gay.”

There was a definite smile now. “Oh? I’m guessing you’re never short of a date on Saturday night, looking the way you do.” Andras pulled out the chair on his side of the desk and sat down unbidden. “You know I used to think you were an angel? After we left Clarkson, I got books on all that stuff. You looked just like the pictures of the angels: all blond hair and pretty face, the light of God shining in those heavenly blue eyes of yours.”

Don flushed. Recollecting himself, he picked up his chair and sat down again, the desk a comforting barrier between them. “I don’t think looks have anything to do with holiness.”

“I think I could change your mind, there,” Andras told him, a bitter twist to his mouth now.

Don’s lips tightened in unconscious parody. “We- we should get back to business. Details of your parole, that kind of thing. You’re looking for work?”

“Found a job.”

“Already?”

“Maybe I used my evil demon influence on the guy.”

Don took a deep breath before speaking. “So what job have you found?”

“Short-order cook in a diner on Fourth Street. I guess we demons have a natural affinity for grilling and frying things.”

“Do you talk like this all the time?” Don snapped. “Because I really can’t see that job lasting if you do.”

Andras gave him a serious look. “No. You’re the only one who knows. I guess the prison chaplain might have suspected, but since he didn’t have faith worth *shit*, he wouldn’t have believed I was a demon if I’d started spouting fire and brimstone right up his skinny ass.”

Don shivered despite himself as those frostbitten eyes pierced him again.

“But you believe, don’t you, Donnie?” Andras said.

It sounded like a taunt, but those pale, lonely eyes seemed to tell a different story. “I—yes,” Don told him haltingly. “But I’m not sure I know what it means.”

DON jerked awake, gasping. Automatically he looked down. There was a broad wet stain spreading across the crotch of his pajama trousers. He cursed softly.

A strange thing, dreams. If you struggled upon waking to recall their details, they slipped away from you like sand through an hourglass. But these dreams—the ones he would rather forget—they came back to him at unwelcome moments throughout the day. A sound or a half-glimpsed

face in the street would be all it took to send him into memories of dark hair and darker desires.

He'd been distracted at work; people had begun to notice.

During the week that had followed their first interview, Don had found his mind endlessly returning to the strange, dark man who so casually described himself as a demon. Was that really what Andras was? And if he wasn't, how could the traumatic experience of their childhood be explained? The power of the mind, maybe? Andras had expected the Holy Water to burn, and so *had* it burned?

But the boy Don remembered *hadn't* expected it. He hadn't been fearful, or tense; he'd just been curious, and a little odd, maybe even a bit lonely. Eager. Not that that had been any problem for Don. "You need to be needed," his therapist had told him, and Don found he couldn't muster any argument to that.

Don struggled to see any trace of that boy in the man he'd become. And yet... perhaps it was just his memory at fault? Had his mind's eye painted the boy's picture with features more beautiful, more terrible, less human?

He'd dreamed about him often in the months following the incident. In some of his dreams, the boy was a spitting fiend who burst into flame at Father Thomas's admonishments. In others, Don had acted, had saved his new friend from himself, and brought him back to the path of Light in scenes embarrassingly reminiscent of some low-budget Christian TV channel. In yet others... well, Don hadn't understood *those* dreams until he'd been a few years older. And by that time, he'd had a whole new set of

problems to deal with—coming out to his deeply traditional parents, leaving the Catholic Church—small wonder he hadn't thought of Michael Andras in more than a decade.

And now, it seemed, Michael Andras was all he *could* think of.

He'd studied the man's file until he knew it off by heart. Had read reports of his trial and conviction. He'd even Googled erotic asphyxia and found out a great deal more about risky sex than he'd ever thought he'd want to know.

The one thing he hadn't done was pray, and the guilt dragged at him like an anchor around his heart. Surely the right, the Christian thing to do was to pray for Andras's soul? But if Holy Water burned him, might not prayer do even worse?

IT WAS almost midnight on Friday, a weary drizzle falling, when Don found himself on Fourth Street. He'd taken to walking in the evenings, hoping to stave off the dreams with exhaustion. There was more than one diner on Fourth Street, but Don didn't feel the urge for a coffee until he was passing Nick's Place. Had Andras chosen it simply for the name? Don fought down the chuckle that threatened to break out. He must be more tired than he'd thought if he was finding that sort of thing amusing. He pushed open the door and walked in.

"We're closing," the waitress snapped. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her roots were showing.

Don flushed. "Sorry."

“It’s all right, Celeste, he’s a friend.” Andras’s rough voice cut jaggedly across the atmosphere of exhaustion that pervaded the diner. “Why don’t you get on home? I’ll close up.”

She looked at him for a moment—probably the owner wouldn’t be too keen on the ex-con being left in charge of the cash register—and then she shrugged. Not her problem. “Okay, Mike, I’m outta here. See ya tomorrow, if I don’t get lucky and drop dead first.”

Glacial eyes watched her go, apron slung over her shoulder, and then turned to Don. “This an official visit? Because it’s a little late for office hours.”

“I—no. I was just passing.”

“Thought you’d check I wasn’t grinding up the customers for burgers?”

Don’s teeth clenched at the sound of amusement in Andras’s voice. “Thought I’d see how you’re getting on. Everything going well?”

“Nothing that couldn’t wait until Monday.”

“I wanted a coffee, dammit!” Don felt himself flush again at his loss of control.

Andras regarded him somberly. “I’ll make you a coffee,” he said finally.

Don let out a breath and pulled out a chair.

Andras’s lip quirked. “Not here. You can come to my place. It’s not far, as the angel flies.”

Don almost walked out, at that. But there was something in the hang of that dark head that convinced him

to stay, to wait while Andras closed down the kitchen and locked the night's meager takings in the safe.

The drizzle had turned to rain now, and Don turned up his collar as they walked along the sidewalk, dodging the drunks and the hobos. As always, their presence on the streets was like sandpaper on Don's soul, reminding him that he didn't do enough, could never do enough.

"The poor will be always with you," Andras muttered cynically.

"What?" Don whirled to face him.

"I'd have thought you'd be familiar with that one. You'll notice he never says *why*. And yet you believe in a loving God."

"I believe that God has a plan for us all, even if we don't understand it," Don told him firmly.

"I think I understand his plan for me," Andras countered bitterly. "I'm to burn in Hell, to suffer everlasting torment."

"You can't know that," Don ventured.

"I've had a taste of it already, don't you remember? This is it."

Confused for a moment, Don belatedly realized that they'd reached Andras's apartment. Conscience struck. "I- I shouldn't come in. This is unprofessional."

"Afraid I'm some kind of incubus about to ravish you and seduce you from the path of the Light? I'm only offering a coffee. I'd swear on the Bible, but I'm not sure that'd end well." There was a wry smile on Andras's full lips.

Don wished the feeling of light-headedness brought on by his disturbed nights would leave him, would let him think. It made sense that a demon would be unable to touch the Word of God. But then, hadn't Andras just quoted Scripture? There was something, he knew, about the Devil—the Prince of Lies—knowing the Bible and using it for his own ends.

Did he truly believe Andras was Satan incarnate?

No. He was a man. Every instinct within him told him this. A man who was a demon, perhaps.

But still a man, nonetheless. And hadn't Christ come to bring the message of salvation to all men?

"No. I don't think you're evil," Don told him, feeling a sudden rush of strength. "And I don't think, on reflection, that there would be anything wrong with me coming in for a coffee."

Andras gave him a searching look, then fitted his key into the lock.

THE apartment was small, mean, and sparsely furnished, as was to be expected. There were no photographs upon the narrow mantelpiece.

"Is your mother...?"

"She died. Liver failure. I forget where we were at the time."

A lie, Don thought. But an understandable one, coming from this man.

"I'm sorry. I know I never met her—"

"No. We didn't stick around after what happened."

"You went to live with your father?" Don asked artlessly.

Andras angled his head strangely and looked at Don.
"What do you think?"

"You're saying your father is—was...."

There was a bleak expression on Andras's face as he stared out of the small window, bare of anything but a layer of grease and grime, that looked upon a litter-strewn back street. "I don't know much more than you do. After my mother died, I found a birth certificate for her son, Michael." He was silent for a moment. "There was a death certificate for him too. Died, aged six months, of meningitis."

Don froze. "You think you're—"

"I think a bereaved mother will do anything to assuage her grief." His eyes rose to meet Don's, and Don was shocked to see the challenge and the hatred within. "Do you believe your God of forgiveness understands that?" Andras asked bitterly.

"Yes," Don told him firmly. "Yes, I do. I believe... I believe your mother has been reunited with her son now."

"And where does that leave me, then?" Andras asked.

Don couldn't answer. He was out of his depth here. He should never have come; he should have spoken to the church leaders; he should have—

"Coffee's ready," Andras told him blandly.

DON drank the coffee without tasting it, realizing wryly that it would most likely keep him awake tonight, when he so desperately craved sleep. But then again, at least he'd be spared the dreams.

He should not have felt a pang of disappointment at the thought.

"Come with me," Michael said suddenly.

Andras. His name was Andras. "Where?"

"To the roof. Come on. The rain's stopped now."

Mechanically, Don set his cup upon the water-stained table and followed Michael out of the apartment and up a narrow staircase, emerging through a warped and peeling door into a suddenly clear and starry night.

"Why did you bring me up here?" Don asked, shivering a little in the night air.

"I like it up here. It's why I chose this place." He turned to Don with a teasing smirk. "Not scared of heights, are you?"

"No. It's just—"

"It's just that tall buildings and the possibly mentally unstable don't, in your opinion, generally mix well?"

"I don't think you're mad," Don told him flatly.

"No? You believe that I'm a demon, as I say. But do you *really* believe it? In your heart, in your mind, in your *soul*?" Michael's mouth twisted. "I've always wondered what it would be like to have one of those."

"I think, actually, theologians are divided on the question of whether demons have souls," Don told him,

fighting the urge to reach out to the man and then wondering why he did so.

“Ah, but it’s all a game to them, isn’t it, Donnie? A theoretical exercise in debate, like the one about the angels on a pinhead. They don’t think what they’re discussing is real, do they? Not like you do. You believe. So, Donnie, you won’t be shocked, will you, when I show you this?”

Michael pulled off his T-shirt and strode to the edge of the roof. Don gasped and started forward instinctively. “Michael, you’re not going to do anything... my God, are those scars on your back?” Don hesitated to believe what the dim, borrowed light upon the roof seemed to reveal. It looked like Michael had been flogged repeatedly. Some of the scars had faded to white, while others looked pinker, newer. Michael turned slowly, and Don realized his chest was similarly marred. “What the hell happened to you?”

Michael laughed. “Now come on, Donnie, you’re letting your naivety show. You’ve seen the file. I killed a man, remember? But that’s not the only way I get my rocks off.”

“You *like* being beaten?” Don knew these things happened. Of course he did, but he couldn’t imagine what the appeal was. He felt a sudden hollow sensation in his gut. *I killed a man.* Had Michael done it deliberately after all?

He’s a demon. He’s evil by definition.

But then, it depended on whose definition you went by. “Did you mean for him to die?” Don asked defiantly.

Michael’s head was bowed, his face almost hidden by that coal-black curtain of hair and the cloaking shadow it cast. “No,” he whispered. He looked up suddenly. “But perhaps it’s in my nature to kill.”

“No,” Don told him fiercely. He would not, could not, believe anyone beyond redemption. “Maybe you are a demon, but you live here as a man. I refuse to believe you don’t have free will just like the rest of us.”

“A man?” Michael’s smile was mocking, but there was despair in his eyes. He was standing right on the very edge of the parapet, now, his back to the ten-story drop. “Is this a man, Donnie?”

Michael spread his arms out wide in a disturbing, no doubt deliberate echo of the crucified Christ. There was a ripping, tearing sound, and time seemed to slow as two great black wings—which Don would have sworn upon a Bible he’d seen no signs of only moments before—unfolded from Michael’s shoulders, leathery and foul.

“God,” Don whispered, horrified and yet enthralled.

“Wrong answer,” came the taunting reply as Michael leaned back and slowly toppled over the edge.

Don rushed to the parapet, not knowing what he feared most to see. As he watched the dark shape circling, silhouetted against the streetlights below, Don found himself clutching at the brickwork for support, weak-kneed with relief and guilt.

DON had left, had run blindly for the stairs and hailed the first cab that passed, almost too incoherent to give the driver his address. When he’d reached his apartment, the bottle of bourbon (*do not drink only water, but take a little wine for your health*, he’d quoted to himself with an edge of hysteria)

had seemed like a lifesaver, but now Don eyed it with distrust. Already, the memory was fading as his conscious mind tried to convince him that he could not have seen what he had seen.

Christ, what kind of Christian was he, who was given so clear a sign and yet did not believe?

DON hadn't realized how much he hated Saturdays. No work, no church—what the hell was Saturday *for*, anyway?

Michael was probably working.

Don was *not* going to go to the diner today. He was going to clean the apartment, shop for food....

So why did eight o'clock find him slumped in front of the sports channel, nothing achieved? Angry at himself, at Michael, at God, Don grabbed his jacket and left the apartment, slamming the door behind him. His feet remembered the way to Fourth Street.

"Uh, is Michael in tonight?" Don asked the waitress at Nick's Place. She showed no sign of recognizing him from the previous evening.

"He don't work Saturday nights. Just the daytime. Whaddaya think this is, a freakin' sweatshop? You gonna order or what?"

"No thanks," Don told her. He could feel her flipping him the bird as he walked out onto the street.

THERE was no answer at the apartment. Obviously, Michael Andras had a life.

Don had found a list of BDSM clubs when he'd been doing his research. Names, addresses, directions. It wasn't hard to find out these things. So much information, just flying around in the ether. He looked down at himself: casual button-down shirt and khakis. The sort of things he wore to church on Sundays. No. That wouldn't do.

There wasn't a whole lot of scope in Don's wardrobe, but he figured jeans and a tank top might just get him in the door. After a moment's thought, he dove to the back of the closet and unearthed a battered leather biker jacket he'd bought from a thrift store when he was in his teens, a youthful attempt to shout to the world, *hey, I may be gay and a Christian, but I'm not a wimp.*

He studied his reflection in the mirror. A clean-cut, college-kid face gazed back at him awkwardly, looking absurdly uncomfortable above the unfamiliar clothes. He wished he hadn't shaved this morning, but with his coloring, stubble never really showed anyhow. Should he do something about his hair? It looked too clean, too...

Like an angel, Michael had said.

Don decided to leave it. If you kept second-guessing yourself, you'd never get anything done, right?

Right?

IT TOOK an effort of will to stop his fingers drumming against his thighs as he stood outside the club. *Chains*. The

club where Michael had met the guy who'd died. Any other man, Don knew, would have never set foot in the place again.

Somehow Don knew he'd find Michael here tonight.

He'd expected to have to talk his way in; maybe bribe the guy on the door. He'd forgotten, for a moment, the effect his looks had on other gay men. It wasn't fair, Don thought, that such a trivial thing as looks affected how the world treated you. It wasn't right, but then, perhaps he should be thanking God for a face and a physique that opened doors instead of shutting them.

Prayers of thanksgiving didn't seem appropriate in a place such as this, though. It was dark in the club, stiflingly hot, and indistinct music throbbed out a sound that seemed to be all bass. Shadowy figures moved in the gloom, dressed in straps and studs and yes, chains, their clothing revealing far more than it ought. Eyes turned to follow him as he passed. Were they checking him out? Or simply wondering what the hell he was doing here?

Was this the sort of place Michael felt at home in?

Don walked stiffly through the club, trying to ignore the scenes of debauchery to the left and right of him. *Yea, Lord, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.* The place was labyrinthine, with more than one room. Don wandered through them all, searching, trying to see only the faces of the men within.

At the far end of the place, an iron staircase spiraled downward, a roughly painted sign proclaiming that it led to the dungeon. Don trod down it, instinctively trying to muffle the clang of his footsteps.

At the bottom, he halted, shocked beyond belief. Michael was in front of him, the center of a small crowd of onlookers. Shirtless, he was strapped to some strange fixture that held his arms and legs outspread while a leather-clad muscle man beat him bloody with a whip. As Don stood there, sickened, the lash flew through the air again with a swish and landed once more, sending droplets of blood to spatter on the floor.

“No!” he shouted, rushing forward, ignoring the mutterings and the outcry from the man wielding the flogger. “Michael....” Don’s voice sounded strange, strained, in his own ears. “Michael, can you hear me?”

The ice-cold eyes that turned upon him were blank, glazed. “Donnie,” Michael whispered.

Frantically, Don worked at the straps that held Michael to that obscene gibbet. “It has to stop, I’m taking you home. You mustn’t come here anymore.” Don listened to his own voice with a strange detachment, not knowing what he would have done if Michael had resisted his efforts. He half-expected the clubgoers to try and stop him, but they merely stood and stared, as if this were all part of the evening’s entertainment.

As the last strap opened, Michael’s limp form slumped into Don’s arms, unexpectedly heavy. “I’ve got you. You’re safe now,” Don whispered, hoping he wasn’t lying. He half-led, half-carried Michael up the staircase and out of the club, uncaring whether the man’s bloody back was seen and remarked upon, wanting only to get Michael home.

“Jacket,” Michael muttered, his voice hoarse and almost inaudible.

“What?”

“Give me your jacket, or we’ll never get a cab.”

It wasn’t easy, stripping out of his jacket while still supporting his burden. And when he placed the heavy leather around Michael’s shoulders, Michael hissed and almost cried out in pain.

“We’ll be home soon,” Don assured him, feeling inadequate.

He’d never thought it could take so long to find a cab in the city on a Saturday night. But at last they were on their way back to Michael’s apartment. It was nearer than Don’s. That was important. Don’s hands were shaking as he turned Michael’s key in the lock.

He helped Michael to the bed and stood helplessly for a moment. The man’s back was a mass of cuts. Where did one start? *One simply starts*, Don told himself. There were basic medical supplies in the bathroom cabinet. Did Michael usually do this for himself? Christ, the thought of him alone, dealing with so much pain....

Pain he had sought, Don reminded himself.

No. Surely no one sought this kind of pain, except to mask a deeper hurt? Don was out of his depth, adrift in a sea with unknown currents. “Why?” he asked abruptly, aggressively.

“Why?”

“Yes, why? Why do you do this to yourself?”

Unbelievably, Michael laughed. “Perhaps I’m a saint, seeking to mortify the flesh?”

Don closed his eyes for a moment before he could respond. "You're no more a saint than I am."

Why did Michael look at him so oddly?

"Oh, I'm no saint, right enough." Michael rolled over onto his side, grimacing, and started to get up.

"You should lie down, let me deal with it," Don protested.

"It's not as bad as it looks. The flogger's designed that way. I'll take a shower."

Don felt like an idiot as Michael pushed past him and into the bathroom, his movements only slightly stiff. "So why did you let me take you out of there?"

Michael leaned on the doorframe and looked back at him from under his dark curtain of hair. "You'll figure it out," he said, his tone amused. He unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down over his hips, suddenly, shockingly naked. There were more scars across his buttocks and legs, Don noted dumbly.

When Don raised his eyes, he realized Michael had been watching him all the while and flushed.

"Like what you see, Donnie? Or is it all too much, too tainted?" He moved back towards Don. "I'll bet it's not what you see when you look in the mirror. Is there a single blemish on you, Donnie? Is what's under those clothes as perfect as that angel face of yours?"

"I'm not perfect," Don returned angrily, fighting the urge to back away.

“Maybe what you see in the mirror isn’t what I see, then.” Michael reached up a hand to delicately stroke Don’s face.

Don shivered. He could feel the heat coming from the man’s body, and those glacial eyes were mesmerizing, so close to his own. Suddenly Michael’s other hand shot out and around Don’s waist, pulling them together. Don could feel Michael’s erection pressing into his groin, making his own cock stiffen in response. He should pull away, he should....

He should not let Michael kiss him, his tongue tasting of whiskey and of want. Should not allow his hands to snake around Michael, mindful of his injuries, and fall to his hips. Should not use his hold on Michael to pull him closer, tighter.

Michael’s hand stroked his face once more, then moved to run through Don’s hair gently, as if he were afraid his fingers might become tangled in Don’s curls, might cause him pain. Don moaned softly, bewildered by the force of his desire for this damaged man, and when he felt Michael pushing him away he resisted without thinking.

But Michael was smiling up at him, the light in his eyes now seeming white-hot where before, it had been icy. “Can’t get anywhere with you like that, now, can we?” he asked, unbuckling Don’s belt. He undressed Don with the same eerie gentleness.

If Michael had been rough, Don thought, he could have stopped this. A touch of discomfort, of pain, and he might have come to his senses. He was paralyzed by the care Michael took, by his soft, almost reverent touches. And when

Michael dropped to his knees and took Don in his mouth, there was no more thought, only sensation, and he could not have stopped had his life depended upon it. He bucked into Michael's mouth, eyes fixed upon that dark head as Michael took him further and yet further. Fingers raked through the honey-colored curls at Don's groin and dropped to fondle his balls. Don moaned again. Things were happening so fast; it was exhilarating yet terrifying.

Michael pulled off a little, teasing the head of Don's cock with his tongue, pressing it into the slit. It was too much. Don grabbed his head and forced it down again, forced his cock as far down Michael's throat as it would go, and with a sobbing cry, came.

It wasn't until he had ridden out the aftershocks that Don realized his iron grip upon Michael's hair had to be hurting the man. He let go, hurriedly, and watched numbly as Michael clambered to his feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Michael was still erect, Don noticed with a stab of guilt.

But Michael smiled at him in that odd way of his. "Time for that shower. You coming?"

Don looked down at himself and saw with horror that his hands and arms were smeared with Michael's blood. He felt filthy, unclean. He'd wanted to save Michael, and instead all he'd done was use him. "I should go," he said abruptly, forcing himself to meet Michael's gaze.

It was as if a sea of Arctic water had doused the fire in Michael's eyes. The chill washed over Don as well, searing his soul with its cold burn. "Then go," Michael told him, his voice flat.

Don threw on his clothes, the wet, sticky feel of his leather jacket with its blood-soaked lining making him want to vomit, and fled.

When he got home, he threw all of the clothes he'd been wearing into a garbage sack and showered until long after the water had run cold and clear.

"DON, I wonder, might I have a word?" Robert, the church elder, was looking at him with concern.

Don felt trapped. "I, uh, I'm sure you've got lots of things to do."

Robert smiled. "Nothing that's more important than the welfare of my congregation. Why don't you step into the office?"

He led the way to the back of the church, to what had once been the vestry, dealing swiftly and graciously with members of the departing congregation who tried to collar him. "Now, Don, sit down, please. And don't look so alarmed! This isn't an inquisition! I simply noticed that— Well, to be frank, Don, you don't look well, and I saw that you didn't take communion today. I just wanted to be sure there isn't some problem I could help you deal with."

Odd how fatherly Robert could seem, given that he was neither an ordained priest nor more than a handful of years older than Don himself. Don sighed. "I guess I'm missing going to Confession. I- I did something last night I'm not proud of, and I didn't sleep well. That's all it is, really."

Robert gave a wry little chuckle. “There’s a saying I find very useful at times like this: ‘Christians aren’t perfect; they’re just forgiven’. We’re human, Don. We make mistakes. All of us do. If you truly regret what you’ve done, you may rest assured that God has already forgiven you.” He paused and then leaned forward to look at Don intently. “Are you sure that’s all it is, though? Because there seemed to be a little uncertainty in your tone.”

“I—” Don got up abruptly, unable to sit still. “I had sex with a man. That’s wrong, isn’t it? I mean, I know you accept gay couples in the church, but we’re not... I mean, we’re not in a relationship. And we shouldn’t be.”

“He’s married?”

“What? No, no, he’s... it’s complicated.” Don took a deep breath. “He’s a client. I mean, I’m his parole officer. And he’s... vulnerable.”

“Vulnerable? In what way? Is he much younger than you?”

“No, no, we’re the same age. He’s... he thinks he’s damned,” Don forced out, the whole truth seeming too unbelievable to even contemplate confessing it.

Robert was inexorable. “Why should he think that, Don? Was his crime so very bad?”

No. Maybe. “It’s not what he’s done. It’s—” Don ran a hand through his hair. “Do you believe in demons?”

There was a pause as Robert looked at him in surprise, and he seemed to consider his words. “I think, Don, for me to be able to answer your question, I would have to know precisely what it is you’re asking. For instance, if you are

asking if I believe that there are forces in this world that can influence us for bad, if we let them, then I would have to say an unequivocal *yes*. But one has to remember that it is only human nature to want to find some external reason for actions of which we are less than proud—”

“I’m not saying it because I want someone to blame! It wasn’t... it was all my fault, not his.” Don leaned on the back of his abandoned chair and regarded Robert earnestly. “He hasn’t done anything. That’s why it’s so unfair.” He looked away, exasperated with himself. “I’m not making sense, am I? He- he thinks he’s a demon. Accursed.” Even now, Don couldn’t bring himself to mention what he’d seen.

“Don, you tell me you’re not in a relationship with this man, but it seems to me that you have strong feelings for him.” Robert was silent for a moment. “Does he return your feelings?”

Don almost laughed. “He must hate me, now. After we’d—afterward, I just walked out on him.” He sat down and rested his head in his hands. “I don’t know what to do.”

Robert’s tone was kind when he answered. “I think, perhaps, some sort of apology might be in order, hmm? After which you need to examine your conscience to see if it will allow you to continue as this man’s parole officer. Personally, I’d advise against that, but I suggest you pray for guidance. It strikes me that he is in need of spiritual help, and perhaps you may be better able to provide this in a professional capacity than in a personal one. I should very much like to meet this young man of yours. Do you think you may be able to persuade him to come along one Sunday?”

Don did laugh then. It had a bitter ring. “He’s not had a real good experience with churchgoing in the past.”

Robert smiled sadly. “I’m afraid that’s true of far too many people. Christians, I regret to say, can on occasion be just as intolerant as anyone else. Not all of us can be saints.”

“I told him that,” Don muttered distractedly.

“I’m glad,” Robert said. “I wonder, did you also tell him that our Lord does not turn away any who truly come to him?”

“Even demons?”

“People forget, Don, that even the demons were angels once. They simply took a wrong turn, once upon a time.”

“You’re saying it should be easy for him to turn back to God?”

Robert smiled ruefully once more. “We all have to find our own way to God, and for some of us it is easier than for others, no matter how it may appear to the outsider. You of all people should be aware of that, Don. I hope your friend will find his way back into the fold, for his sake and for yours. But you cannot force him to take it.”

DON stood in front of Michael’s door for several minutes that night, steeling himself to raise the corroded knocker and let it fall, jarringly loud even over the half-heard noise from the street outside. If it hadn’t been for the knowledge that he’d have to meet him across a desk on Monday morning—or

worse, report him as a no-show—Don didn't think he'd have gone through with it.

There was no clue in Michael's face as to what he was feeling as he wordlessly opened the door wide before turning and padding barefoot to the kitchen. Don followed, unable to keep his eyes off Michael's slender, disfigured back. He supposed it would still be a little uncomfortable with a shirt on, although the damage did look ridiculously minor in the light of day. Either Michael had washed his jeans since the night before or this was a different pair; there were no spots of blood marring the denim.

"Coffee?" Michael asked abruptly. "Or did you just fancy a fuck?"

Don hung his head. "I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean for anything to happen and when it did, I—well, I freaked out a little. I'm sorry," he repeated. "Are you all right?" he asked impulsively, looking up just in time to catch a flicker of emotion pass across Michael's face before the mask dropped firmly back in place.

"Oh, I'm fine, Donnie," he said expressionlessly, spooning coffee into the filter. "You do know our next appointment's not for another ten hours, don't you?"

"You want me to go?"

"Does it make any difference to you what I want?"

"Of course it does!" Don sighed. "You've every right to be angry with me," he continued.

"The righteous anger of a demon? I think a lot of people would have problems with that concept, Donnie."

“I think a lot of people would have problems with the concept of a man with wings, Michael,” Don said quietly.

Bizarrely, Michael was smiling, although as always, there was a bitter twist. “Aren’t you going to ask me where they go?”

“What?”

“The wings. Aren’t you wondering where they disappear to when I fold them? It’s what I’d ask.”

“Okay, so where do they go?”

Michael looked away, his inky hair sweeping his shoulders as he turned and leaving Don with the strange fancy that it ought to leave brushstrokes upon his flesh in its wake. “I don’t know. To Hell, I presume.”

“But you don’t know.” It only took two strides for Don to cross the room and look Michael directly in the eye. “I spoke to our church leader today. He told me... things I already knew but had forgotten. Do you know, Michael, what the difference is between an angel and a demon?”

Michael’s lip curled, and Don took an involuntary step back. “Are you mocking me?”

“No! There is no difference. The demons are simply angels who have walked away from God—”

In the tiny apartment, the sound seemed to echo like a thunderclap as Michael’s wings snapped out. He couldn’t open them fully in here, Don noted dully, fighting a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as Michael stepped toward him angrily. “Don’t tell me *these* are the stigmata of a celestial being!”

Don stood his ground. “I told you before: looks have no correlation with holiness. The way you look, the way I look, it’s nothing but an accident of birth. God sees what’s in your heart.”

“Is that right, Donnie? Because God had the chance to see what was in my heart when I was twelve years old, and he didn’t like what he saw. Or had you forgotten that?” Michael paced angrily, wings twitching. “I was a boy. A child, and your God rejected me!”

Don hesitated, then reached out and placed a hand on Michael’s arm. Michael stilled at once, but Don could feel the tension quivering through his lean, tortured body. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget that day, Michael,” he said quietly. “But the water that burned you was blessed by Father Thomas. It was his church you were flung out of and his curse that banished you. And he’s a good man, a good Christian, but his faith is narrow, not broad, and it doesn’t bend.” Don gave a wry smile. “I believe he’s still praying for me to turn from the sinful path of homosexuality.”

Don paused. “You should come to my church next Sunday. It’ll be different there, if you let it be. I think... I think it has to be a two-way process,” he continued uncertainly. “No one’s a Christian by default; it doesn’t work like that. Remember I told you about free will? You have to use it. Exercise your God-given right to choose whether or not to turn to Him.”

“And why should I *turn to Him*, as you put it? Why should I go against my nature, my origins, and take that risk?”

“Because you’re not happy,” Don told him simply. “I know you’re not. The way you speak, the things you do to yourself—”

Michael’s lip curled. “You’re displaying a great deal of ignorance and prejudice about the BDSM lifestyle.”

“No, I’m—I don’t know, all right? I *don’t* understand it, and I probably never will. I can accept that some people find it satisfying, but you don’t, do you? It’s not about pleasure, for you. It’s about your need to be punished for who you are.” Don flinched as Michael took a step toward him but held his ground. “I spoke to the arresting officer on your case, you know. He said it was as if you *wanted* to go to jail. That you called the police and the first thing you said was that you’d killed a man. Not that there had been an accident, but that you’d killed him.”

“So you’d take an admission of guilt as proof of innocence?” Michael turned away. “Strange how the court didn’t agree.” His tone was bitter.

“Damn it, Michael, what do you *want*?” Don cried, exasperated. “You tell the police you’re guilty, of *course* they’re going to believe it! What did you expect?” He ran a hand through his hair, abruptly weary. “Look, Robert—that’s the leader of the church I go to—I spoke to him about you, and it was his idea for you to come along next Sunday. I think he can help you.”

“And you told him what I am?” Michael’s eyes were piercing.

Don flushed. “Yes.”

“You’re a poor liar, Donnie.” Michael wrenched his arm free of Don’s tentative grasp and leaned on the windowsill,

staring once again at the dirt upon the pane. "You should go now," he said bitterly.

Don stood there for a moment, looking at the hunched shoulders, the tensed wings. Hesitantly, he reached out his arm once more, then sighed and let it fall. "Please think about it," he begged.

"You should forget about me, Donnie. Go. Go and forget about me."

"I'll go," Don told him. *But I'll never be able to forget you.* As he opened the door, he chanced one look back at Michael. The desperate longing upon Michael's face was enough to make Don's heart clench in pain. Should he stay after all?

"Go," Michael repeated softly.

Don left.

IT WAS probably a sin, Don thought guiltily, to allow your attention to wander when the preacher for the week got a little long-winded. But looking around at the glazed eyes of the rest of the congregation, it seemed he had plenty of company in his transgressions. Will Baldwin was a Bible-thumper of the old school, bless him, who thought that if a point was worth making it was worth repeating several times over.

Don found his mind straying in a predictable direction. Was it more of a sin if instead of concentrating on the preacher's words, you were thinking of a demon? He hadn't seen Michael since the previous Sunday, having forced himself all week to respect the man's wish to be left alone.

He hadn't even reported him for not turning up to his Monday appointment. Don's colleagues would be horrified if they knew. Any faint spark of hope that he might see Michael today had flickered and died as the service wore on, although in truth, it hadn't been very strong to start with.

It had taken several nights of agonizing over the possible harm he might cause before he plucked up the courage, but Don had prayed for Michael. Not that he'd come to church, no, that hadn't seemed right, despite what Robert had said. But that he'd find the path that was right for him. And if Don had also allowed a hint that he'd like that path to include him... well, he was only human, wasn't he? He tried to push down the nagging worry that he'd been wrong, that it had been his actions, not his prayers that Michael needed. Surely the events of the previous week had shown that to be a lie?

Now, however, Don found himself assailed by doubts. What if his prayers had indeed hurt Michael? Perhaps he had been wrong to leave him alone so long, wrong to pray for him—

Don wasn't the only one to startle to attention as the street door opened with a loud crack of the heavy iron latch. Several faces turned as the door creaked wide, a bright shaft of sunlight preceding the latecomer into the old church building. The light fell at an angle across the congregation, distorting the shadow thrown by the newcomer into a strange, fantastical shape.

Then the gasps and the muttering began. Old Will faltered in his sermon and fell silent. With a sudden stab of certainty as to what he would see, Don turned. Michael

stood in the doorway, his face hidden in shadow. Spread to their fullest extent, his heavy, leathery wings seemed to stretch almost to either side of the church. He started to walk forward, along the central aisle, his wings having to fold slightly to avoid the pillars.

As the murmur of the congregation grew and some people began to edge away from the bizarre figure making his way through the church, Robert's gentle voice cut with crystal clarity across the uproar. "I'm very pleased to see you, my boy. All are welcome in God's house."

Don stood hastily, painfully conscious of the eyes upon him as he did so. "Michael? Would you come and sit with me?" Michael turned to him, his face at first sight expressionless, and then Don looked into those Arctic eyes and saw the depths of loneliness within. "Please?"

With the noise of a clamor of rooks taking flight, Michael's wings folded and, in merely the faintest ripple of the fabric of unreality that pervaded the church, vanished. There were more gasps, and suddenly Don couldn't wait for Michael to make his way over. Stumbling a little in his haste, he picked his way through the seated, stunned congregation to where Michael stood in the aisle, now seeming nothing more than a scarred, shirtless man with wild hair and wilder eyes. "Michael?" Don asked softly. "Are you all right?"

Michael didn't answer, so Don took him by the hand and led him to some empty seats at the front. Even in a church as vibrant and inclusive as this, people tended to shun the front row, Don had noticed. Robert waited while they sat down, and then turned to Will, still rooted in place at the lectern. "Excellent. Now, Will, as I fear we'll have lost

the thread of that excellent sermon of yours, I wonder if you would indulge me with a reading from Scripture? I feel a passage from Luke would be in order. Chapter 15, beginning at verse 4, if you please.”

Will began to read uncertainly, his voice gaining confidence as he went on. “...will he not call together his friends and neighbors, and say to them, “Rejoice with me! For I have found the sheep that was lost.” I tell you...’.”

Michael’s hand was clutching at Don’s painfully. “Michael?” Don whispered again. “Do you feel all right?”

His question was ignored. “Is that what I am?” Michael’s voice was ragged. “A lost sheep?”

“No,” Don told him fiercely. “Not anymore. I’ve found you.”

Michael looked up at Don, and suddenly his eyes were neither cold nor hard, but the color of the sky when the sun has just broken from behind the clouds. “Don’t lose me again,” he murmured, a trace of his old, twisted smile upon his lips.

“I won’t,” Don told him, smiling back.

JL MERROW is a very English mother of two who finds writing the only way to stay sane, except of course when a plot is driving her crazy. Having grown up on an island, she can't remember a time before she could swim and prefers to remain close to water at all times. Luckily, the weather in her native land being as it generally is, this is not difficult.

She enjoys reading, martial arts, and surprising people who judge a book by its cover.

Visit JL's blog at <http://jl-merrow.livejournal.com>.



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