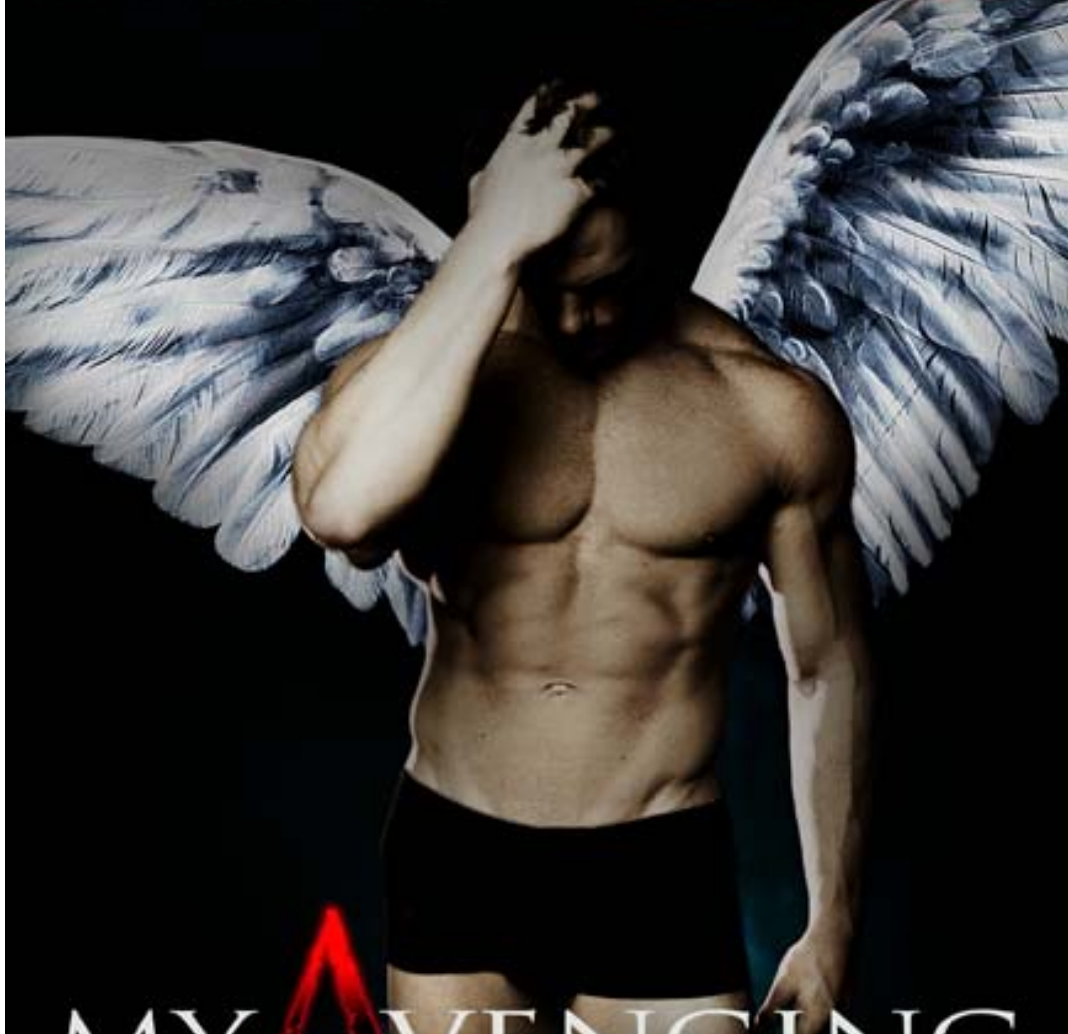


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ANGELS & DEMONS



MY  VENGING
ANGEL

MADELYN FORD

To save her life, he must break a covenant—and lose his heart.

An Angels and Demons Story

It's Victoria Bloom's twenty-fifth birthday. But is she out celebrating? Oh, no. She's in a stuffy old attic with the Three Stooges—a.k.a. her so-called spirit guides. There's a demon who wants her dead, the same one that killed her mother two decades ago. No worries, say the Stooges. All she has to do is summon an angel. What could go wrong?

Well, plenty when you summon the wrong angel. The next thing Tory knows, she's got one very bad-ass, pissed-off and sexy Archangel on her hands.

Michael, mighty warrior, leader of an elite team of demon killers, is shaking in his heavenly combat boots. Not because he finds all humans distasteful. But because he'd rather face Lucifer himself than the woman his soul has just recognized as his mate. Binding himself to a mortal, one who will eventually die, is the one path he's sworn never to follow.

It's too late now; his fate is sealed. With one touch, she becomes as necessary to him as the air he breathes. He will move heaven and earth to protect her—but against a demon as powerful as Asmodeus, heaven and earth may not be enough...

Warning: This book contains one bad-ass Archangel with a fiery, um, *sword*, a witch who blows things up, one nasty demon who is trying to kill them both, and ghosts who make interfering their mission. Steamy sex is had, even with the voyeur ghosts—though Tory is still blushing.

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My Avenging Angel

Madelyn Ford

Dedication

To Rich, thanks for putting up with this writing thing. I love you. And to my kids, for thinking macaroni and cheese is the best dinner ever. And a special thanks to Kristin, for having to read this story “just one more time”. You’re the best.

Prologue

Asmodeus stared down at the sniveling, postulating human, a sneer lifting the corner of his lips. He'd been ripped from his dimension, brought to this godforsaken plain known as Earth and he wasn't happy about it. In fact, if it hadn't been for the protection spell the man had woven into the circle surrounding him, Asmodeus would have killed the weakling for his audacity.

"Why have you summoned me, human?" he demanded, taking a step forward to test the barrier. He was delighted to find a slight weakness in his invisible cage. He could work with that.

"I ask your help, my lord," came the timid reply.

Folding his arms across his wide chest, Asmodeus watched as the man remained on his knees, head bowed to his chin, and found the action mildly mollifying. He might just hear the human out before he killed him.

"You called me forth to ask my help?"

"Yes." Brown eyes met his briefly before dropping back to the floor. "There is a woman—"

"I am the Lord of Wrath, king of the vengeance demons, not a damn matchmaker. Release me now, human," he growled, rethinking his earlier plan. He was going to enjoy taking this creature apart piece by tiny piece.

The man's head shot up, surprise lining his features. "I don't want her love, my lord."

"No? Then what is it you seek?"

Eyes narrowing, a look of intense hatred bleeding into those brown orbs, the man growled, "I want the bitch dead."

"And if I do this for you? What are you willing to sacrifice?"

"Anything. Everything."

Asmodeus studied the pitiful being for a moment, then a grin slowly spread across his face. Dead he could do. In fact, he would relish every moment of the act: skin tearing beneath his nails, blood oozing forth and the fragrant cries of pain tickling his ears. But he was getting ahead of himself. First there was payment. And then he had to decide if he would kill the human after reaping his soul or just maim him, leaving him alive to do Asmodeus's future bidding. Oh, so much pain, so little time.

With one tiny hand, she brushed sweat-drenched hair from her eyes while she reached out with the other, fingers trembling slightly, to nudge the prone figure on the bed.

“Mommy,” she whispered. Her gaze fell to the empty bottles littering the bedside table and she knew it was a waste of her time. Mommy always got like this after the bad man left. But she had to try. “Please, Mommy. You need to wake up.” She grew louder as her urgency rose. “The bad man is coming back. We have to hide.”

The soft voice in her ear told Tory she was running out of time. Hands swirled out of the mist in an attempt to herd her away from Mommy but she clutched Mommy’s shirt tightly in her fists. Unexpectedly, pain exploded throughout the side of her head, filling her eyes with tears. Mommy had hit her.

“Go back to bed, you little shit,” Tammy Bishop mumbled, rolling away from her. “Get out of here.”

“But Mommy...”

The voices were frantic now, raising the level of terror coursing through Tory’s small frame. Then she sensed him, the bad man, the one Mommy had said was her daddy. But she’d felt the evil rolling off him and knew Mommy had lied. Tory’s daddy was a prince. Or an angel. Or maybe a princely angel. Just not the bad man.

She let the mist guide her into the hall closet and burrowed under a blanket that had been thrown carelessly on the floor. Surrounding her, the mist obscured the blanket and her presence beneath it only moments before the front door of their little apartment crashed open. She slapped a hand over her mouth to conceal a tiny cry, tears beginning to slowly leak down her cheeks. The voices murmured softly, trying to soothe her, but it wasn’t until heavy footsteps went unheeded past her hiding spot that Tory’s immediate panic receded. And then the screams began.

Clasping her hands tightly before her, Tory began to pray to the angels. She didn’t want to die and even though Mommy sometimes called her a baby, she wasn’t. Tory knew if the bad man found her, he would kill her. And so she prayed until Mommy grew silent and the laughter began. The sound, one Tory knew she would never forget, chilled her to the bone. Her prayers were forgotten as pure terror filled her soul, squashing all that was good, all the hope and love within her, leaving her dejected and heartsick.

It called to her, trying to draw her into its evil web, and the only thing holding her back from answering was the mist. They saved her that night, the spirits drawn to her light, not releasing her from their otherworldly grip until all was silent and the veil of evil had lifted. Only then was Tory able to crawl out of the closet.

“Mommy?” she called as she slowly trudged down the hallway.

Coming to a stop outside Mommy’s bedroom, the hands tried to hold her back, but she slipped right through their grasp. Their protection had weakened them and she had to see...had to know.

What filled her vision stunned her for one split second before high-pitched screams of horror were ripped from her throat. And while she shrieked, tears streaming down her cheeks, trails of her mother's blood slowly trickled down the walls.

Task completed, Asmodeus was enraged to find himself forced back within the human's circle. He should be free. He'd lived up to his end of the bargain. Now he should be able to collect the man's soul and be on his way, but he'd obviously been betrayed. He was going to enjoy killing the little pissant.

Centering his focus on the circle of protection, Asmodeus concentrated all his energy on the weakened spot until the spell fractured, leaving him free to cross the black line. The shocked look on the human's face filled him with eager anticipation. He could only hope the man ran. Nothing was as satisfying as hunting a target down.

"You can't do that! You have reneged on our deal. You promised me the bitch would die!"

To his great annoyance, the human did not flee. No, the sniveling little bastard held his ground, bitching and whining in the short span of time it took Asmodeus to reach him. He wrapped a fist around the man's neck and then lifted the sputtering weakling from the floor, leaving him dangling in the air, clutching at Asmodeus's wrist.

"How dare you question my vow? Your drugs made it too easy. The woman was hardly any challenge at all. There was little left for your authorities to identify."

"She is not dead," the human croaked out. "The child still lives."

The warlock's words stopped Asmodeus cold and he dropped the human like a sack of potatoes. Child? There hadn't been a child. And when he'd given voice to these questions, the man rose to his knees, his hands cradling his throat.

"The vision has not changed. Obviously the girl still lives."

Asmodeus cocked his head, considering the human's words. This time he would learn all of it. There would be no more mistakes. He would be no human's puppet. "What vision?"

"If the brat is allowed to live she will be the death of me."

A grin spread across Asmodeus's face. The fool. "She already is. You just don't realize it," he purred as a black Khopesh sword materialized in his hand. Fear had barely registered on the human's face when, after a broad sweep of his arm, the man's head began rolling across the floor. Inhaling deeply, he sucked the escaping soul into him, to be forever more trapped in torment. Oh, life was good.

Stepping over the body at his feet, Asmodeus set out to complete his mission. He had a girl to kill. Then he would be free.

Chapter One

Looking at the items around her, Victoria Bloom knew something was missing. She had the pentagram outlined in chalk on the old attic floor. At each point rested a large white candle, all of which was surrounded by a circle of protection. Ginseng burned on the makeshift altar, the scent so overpowering it almost gagged her. The *Grimoire of Armadel* was opened to the correct page. Ari, one of her spirit guides, insisted she was ready, but still she hesitated. The one thing Tory considered to be essential for the ritual to work was the very thing she lacked. Belief.

Funny really, considering Tory was a medium, meaning she saw ghosts, and she was preparing to perform an ancient ritual, all on the advice of a woman who had been dead for almost four centuries. But she couldn't deny something had to be done. On her twenty-fifth birthday, her powers had begun to emerge, powers her guides would soon no longer be able to camouflage. Calling forth an angel, though, seemed a little extreme, even for her.

"Hurry up," Ari whispered in Tory's mind. *"You don't have all day."*

"Yes, the spell must be performed before the sun sets. You don't want to accidentally call forth a demon, do you?" Sam prodded and Tory sighed. Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to be the only voice in her head.

"Boring," Thomas added, his nasal tone a reprimand. *"Now get the sigil drawn so we can get this over with."*

Tory snorted but didn't bother arguing. It wouldn't do her any good anyway. One of the three guides always seemed to have the last word.

In the center of the pentagram, she carefully copied the sigil from the ancient grimoire. The three stooges, something she had affectionately termed her guides when she'd been a child and continued because it annoyed them so much, had debated for days, poring over the book before finally coming up with a name. Tory would have picked the most powerful warrior to aid her but the stooges had been adamantly against her choice. It seemed even though Michael's mission was to protect humans, he didn't like them very much.

Setting the book aside, Tory picked up the dagger. With the stooges egging her on, she sliced the blade across her palm and gasped. It stung like a bitch. Eyes watering, both from the incense and the cut, she pressed her palm in the center of the sigil, leaving behind a bloody print. Then she moved out of the protective circle and began to chant, calling forth the angel Zadkiel. The words flowed from her, unknown

and mysterious, a testament to how much power now flowed through her, energy Tory feared would be her downfall.

A blinding light burst forth within the center of the pentagram, causing her to draw a hand up to shield her eyes as the words faltered on her lips. Time seemed suspended. The rays illuminated every corner of the attic and Tory held her breath, fearing for the first time more than just the evil hunting her. As her body was enveloped within the white beams, she waited for the burn.

Slowly, the light dimmed and she was stunned to find herself unscathed. But still Tory hid her eyes behind her hand. Who knew what the hell stood on the other side. And since her father was, if the bastard still lived, a demon-worshipping warlock, hell was entirely possible.

"You foolish human. I was in the midst of an important meeting. Send me back. Now."

Her hand fell from her face, her gaze latching onto the figure in the middle of the pentagram. *Holy shit*. It had worked. And he was huge. Close to seven feet tall with long black hair cascading around broad shoulders and rippling biceps. His arms were folded across his massive chest, fists clenched in obvious agitation, causing the veins to bulge prominently.

Tory lifted her eyes to his face and the stark beauty she found there left her dumbfounded. He had a strong face, high cheekbones and a pronounced jaw presently ticking in anger. Ice-blue eyes framed by thick black lashes and full lush lips frowned down at her.

"Well?" he asked, arching one raven-hued brow.

"Please, Zadkiel, I am in desperate need of your help."

"Lord, save me from idiots. I am not Zadkiel, you nitwit."

"*Oh shit*," Ari muttered.

"What do you mean, oh shit?" Tory demanded. "What have you three gotten me into now?"

"*Michael*," came the whispered reply, and Tory knew she was in some serious trouble.

"Just what I need. A feeble-minded human. Can this day get any worse?" the angel mumbled, jerking her attention back to him.

"I am not feeble-minded," she cried indignantly, fear quickly forgotten. "And it would serve you right if Fate bit you on the ass."

Michael snorted. "Those three bitches know better than to mess with me. Now I have more important things, woman, than to share insults with you."

Tory watched him curiously, wondering what he thought he was going to do. His eyes closed and he seemed to be concentrating really hard on something. Several moments later, his face scrunched up, his eyes opening to pierce hers with an enraged glare. He took two giant steps forward, stopping inches from the edge of the protective circle. Tory held her breath, suddenly afraid it would not hold him, leaving her with one very pissed off angel on her ass. But Michael didn't try to step over the invisible barrier.

"Release me."

"I do not intend to hold you indefinitely as my own personal avenging angel." Tory watched in fascination as her statement caused his brow to arch again. Damn, but he was hot. It was such a shame he was a jerk.

"Then what are your intentions, human?"

"I have a name. It is Victoria Bloom, Tory for short."

"Your names are meaningless," he replied with an indifferent shrug. "Nothing better than cattle."

"Why protect us if you disdain humans so much?"

"What you have become disgusts me. The corruption. The greed. But that has nothing to do with why I hunt the fallen. There is no atonement for those who raised a sword against the Father and it is my job to terminate them."

"The fallen? You mean demons?"

Michael shook his head. "There are others who track and kill what you know as demons, the abominations created by Lucifer and Lilith. The fallen were once angels who rebelled and have been cast into Hell."

"*Tell him,*" Ari whispered in her ear.

"*Yes, tell him,*" Sam repeated, an annoying echo in her head.

"*Asmodeus,*" Thomas added insistently.

"Who is Asmodeus?" Tory demanded. It was the first time any of the stooges had mentioned a name in connection with the demon who hunted her and she was pissed they had been hiding something so important all this time.

"Asmodeus?" Michael growled. "What does the Lord of Wrath have to do with why I've been brought here?"

Tory ignored the big bad angel, instead focusing her attention on the three stooges. "Someone had better start explaining. And quickly." Her belligerent tone could not be helped. Discovering she had been kept in the dark when her very life hung in the balance didn't have Tory feeling particularly magnanimous.

Ari ignored her. The spirit's awareness was completely centered on Michael, and neither Sam nor Thomas made a sound. Those two were never quiet. Especially Thomas. The cranky old bird had an opinion on everything.

"Is it that bad?" she whispered, swallowing convulsively around the words and fighting the bleakness slithering up her spine.

"Just who the hell are you speaking to?"

Tory flinched at Michael's demand. "My guides. They say the demon hunts me."

"Exactly how is this my problem?"

Wrapping her arms around her torso, Tory tried to fight off the chill sweeping the room at Michael's icy tone. The tiny kernel of hope she'd been secretly protecting since she'd discovered the truth of her birth

withered and died. She should be used to it, having learned long ago no one gave a damn about her. At least no one living. So why the hell did it hurt so badly?

"I will release you." The words were forced out around the sob fighting for freedom, but Tory managed to hold back the tears.

Michael opened his mouth to speak but it shut with a definitive snap when an inhuman screech rent the air. The mist lapping at Tory's calves split, a portion swirling violently toward Michael until stopping inches from the magical barrier it too could not cross. Stretching and lengthening toward the ceiling, it began to slowly transform until in its place stood the iridescent figure of a young woman.

"You conceited bastard," Ari shrieked. "You owe me."

Startled by Ari's appearance—the spirits rarely, if ever, showed their human form to Tory much less anyone else—it took Tory a moment for her outburst to sink in. It certainly sounded as if Ari had some familiarity with the angel but that couldn't be. Ari would have told her before she'd ever attempted this fiasco. Wouldn't she?

"Ariadne," Michael said softly.

The way he breathed out her name and the sheer fact he looked like he'd been run over by a Mack truck confirmed Tory was not the only one eating a big helping of betrayal. Never in a million years would she have believed any of her guides, but especially Ari, would dupe her in such a way. And why? For what purpose? Since Michael had appeared, Tory had felt like she was driving down a one-way street in the wrong direction. The stooges had been the only beings on Earth Tory had felt she could trust. Until now.

"You owe me," Ari repeated, this time at a whisper and Michael sighed heavily, searching Tory out with his eyes. She felt those blue orbs sweep over her frame, slowly, like phantom fingers reaching out to draw her close. Then Michael nodded.

"If you return to where you belong, I will deal with Asmodeus."

Ari glanced over her shoulder at Tory. Her face was etched with sadness and seemed to beg for understanding, but Tory found herself a little short on that emotion. Maybe if she'd had some clue as to what was going on... Hell, who was she kidding? She would have still been pissed had she known all the spirit had apparently been hiding from her.

"Your vow, Michael, and I will go."

Michael only hesitated for a second before nodding in acquiescence.

"The words. I am not foolish enough to believe you without the words."

As the angel's eyes narrowed in a mixture of anger and indignation, Tory was glad the piercing gaze was not aimed at her. She would have wet her pants. But Ari just rested her hands on her hips and waited.

"I vow I will deal with Asmodeus."

"And you'll protect Victoria. You, Michael. Not one of your little followers."

His fists clenched, released, then tightened again as he glared down at the apparition, and Tory fell back several steps. Baiting a pissed-off angel seemed like a really bad thing to do, and since she was the only other being in the room still living, Tory figured she would be the one to pay if Michael decided to come after someone.

“You have my vow,” he practically snarled, seemingly not the least bit happy about Ari’s demands. Not that Tory could blame him. She wasn’t particularly pleased herself. The last thing she wanted to do was spend any more time in the angel’s presence than absolutely necessary.

“Release the spell, Tory.”

Her head shot up in surprise and she found Ari had turned toward her and was watching her solemnly. “Just like that? Without a word of explanation? I don’t think so.”

A ghostly hand reached out to caress her cheek. “It’s the way it must be, baby girl. I can no longer protect you. But Michael can. And he will. It’s time.”

Stupidly, Tory shook her head. Time for what? She couldn’t even form the words to ask. Ari had been with her for as long as Tory could remember, long before the death of her mother. She couldn’t imagine a tomorrow without the spirit in it, even if her faith in Ari had taken a hit.

“I would never allow you to come to harm,” Ari said softly, her ghostly gaze filling with unshed tears. “Release him.”

Tory hesitated a moment, her mind trying to remember all the reasons why this was such a bad idea, before sighing as she reluctantly knelt at the edge of the circle. Using the blade still covered with her blood, she cut a line in the chalk, effectively breaking the protection spell. A powerful blast of energy hit her square on the chest, knocking her on her butt as she unconsciously drew the power back inside her body.

Towering over her like an avenging warrior, Michael held within his tight grasp a mighty sword, the likes of which Tory had never seen. The leather-wrapped handle had little adornment, only a leaf print etched in the silver base. Nothing really to remark over. The blade though was another story and had her frozen in disbelief. If one could actually call it a blade. The damn thing was a good three feet of red and orange flame swaying menacingly.

She was so dead.

Tory squeezed her eyes shut, hands over her head, waiting for a blow that never came. Instead, she heard Michael stride past her. Peeking from beneath her fingers, she watched for one surreal moment as he swung the blade of flame directly into the apparition that was her best friend. Then, with a flash of light and a loud popping sound, Ari was gone and Michael was standing over her again.

“What have you done?” Tory whispered, past caring she might anger him. There wasn’t a damn thing she could do if Michael decided to take her life. She figured at least with the angel it wouldn’t be the painful experience the demon hunting her would make of it.

“Get your ass into that circle and bespell it. I will return shortly.”

Her jaw dropped. That was all Michael had to say to her. “Now just one minute—” Her sputtering came to an abrupt halt when Tory found herself in Michael’s arms. But only for a second. Instead of dealing with any arguments from her, he’d scooped her up then dumped her in the middle of the pentagram.

“Why me?” he mumbled. Then one minute Michael was there and the next he was gone.

Chapter Two

Striding through the maze of intricate passageways, Michael wrestled to get his temper under control. He was leader of the Powers, an elite group of warriors originally formed to police their own kind but whose sole purpose was now hunting down and terminating those who joined Lucifer's ranks. He should have been immune to the trappings of humans. Or so he would have liked to believe. It was a valuable lesson born home by a tiny blonde he could have crushed with his bare hands if he'd been inclined. But he hadn't and it just pissed him off.

Instead, the need to draw her into his arms had slammed him in the chest. For the briefest moment, he'd actually felt his soul reach for hers. Michael had stopped that shit almost immediately. He'd seen what mating with a human had done to Gabriel. The death of Ariadne Duchesne had damn near destroyed him. In the four hundred years since she'd been slain, he and Gabriel had spoken maybe a couple dozen words and those had all been laced with hostility. At least from Gabriel's end. He blamed Michael for her death. It was why Michael had agreed to help the human. He wanted to make amends. Not because she made his dick harder than a spike and his soul cry with need.

"Big of you to grace us with your presence."

Michael folded his arms across his chest and arched a brow at his second in command, hardly amused by Zadkiel's sardonic drawl. Never mind Zadkiel had been the one Tory had been trying to summon. Tory... Best to forget about her with all that luscious blonde hair smelling of lilacs.

Shit. If he got a hard-on Zadkiel would never let him live it down.

"Maybe if you'd had something of interest to impart, I'd have stuck around."

"How's this, lord asshole? A report has come in from Skath. A witch managed to scry upon one of Lucifer's high-ranking lieutenants."

"Who?" Michael demanded, letting the asshole comment slide because when Lucifer's name was uttered in his presence, the rage flooding his system usually prevented him from concentrating on anything else. The knife his *once* best friend had quite literally embedded in his back was not something Michael had ever thought he would forget. Until today. Today the all-encompassing fury was replaced with something feeling suspiciously like fear.

Zadkiel cocked his head to the side, studying Michael for a moment. Holding his breath, Michael waited for the smart-ass comment that never came.

"Asmodeus. He's somewhere in the Houston area."

As the air rushed from his lungs, Michael nodded, glancing away. If Asmodeus was in Houston he was far from Boston and Tory. “Gather a team and keep me informed. I want to know every move he makes before the bastard makes it.”

“Michael, what’s going on?”

Michael had turned to leave, wanting to gather a few things from his room before he returned to Tory, but Zadkiel’s quiet question stopped him in his tracks. He sighed. It wasn’t like he was particularly surprised. He didn’t usually get involved in the hunt unless it was for one of the top-ten ruling archdemons. He commanded and his lieutenants followed. It was how things had worked before Ariadne had pulled him into this mess. Before Tory.

“I have the chance to fix things with Gabriel. It’s a long shot, but a shot nonetheless, and one I can’t pass up.”

“What? How?”

Michael smiled at Zadkiel’s surprised excitement. He’d have shared Zadkiel’s joy if only he didn’t fear there was much more at risk than Gabriel’s friendship. Michael suspected his entire way of life was in peril, his very soul in jeopardy.

“I believe I know what Asmodeus is after, but I do not understand why. There is a human he hunts, one I have vowed to protect.” At Zadkiel’s cocked eyebrow, Michael sighed. “It is a long story, but Ariadne’s spirit had latched onto the human and it was to her I have given my vow. I can only hope once Asmodeus has been destroyed and the human’s safety is ensured, my debt to Gabriel will have been repaid.”

“Just like that?” Zadkiel questioned, his tone laced with skepticism.

Glancing over his shoulder, Michael shrugged. Truly, he doubted it, but it was the first chance he’d ever gotten to repair the mess with Gabriel. He suspected the only way he’d ever receive Gabriel’s forgiveness was by experiencing the soul-crushing death of a mate. His mate. And Michael swore there wasn’t a chance in hell of that ever occurring. His job did not include a mate, no matter what Victoria Bloom made him feel.

“Let me deal with this human, Michael. If you vowed to protect her, wouldn’t it make more sense for you to lead the hunt? There is no one more capable.”

Michael turned back to Zadkiel. Here was his chance. Though he had given his vow to Ariadne, technically since she was not the one who had called him into the circle, he was not required to uphold his end and he could send Zadkiel in his place. And his lieutenant was correct. Relations with humans were not exactly his forte. Hell, he’d probably end up doing more harm than good. So why did the thought of Zadkiel anywhere near Tory make him want to hit something?

The answer was something Michael would rather not consider, though he knew. Deep in his heart, he knew.

“While nothing would give me greater pleasure, the vow I gave was very explicit. I must ensure Tory’s protection.”

“Tory?” Zadkiel repeated quietly and hearing her name on his lieutenant’s lips reinforced Michael’s belief. He was screwed with a capital S. He tightened his fists to keep from popping his second in the mouth.

“Care to elaborate?” Zadkiel glanced down at Michael’s clenched fingers.

“No.” And with that snarled pronouncement, Michael stormed from the room, taking the flight of stairs two steps at a time. Stopping only when the door to his bedroom was closed tightly behind him, he was glad he had not run into anyone else. Of course, the look on his face probably would have dissuaded even the most persistent. Well, except for maybe Raphael. He enjoyed tweaking Michael’s temper for his own sadistic amusement, but since Raphael had no cause to be here Michael felt relatively safe. But just in case, maybe he should see about keeping Raphael busy for a while. Which lead his thoughts back to Tory. He definitely didn’t need Raphael showing up in the middle this assignment.

Damn it. He didn’t need this mess right now.

But the one thing Michael knew was there was no avoiding it. Few angels suspected the truth about mating, and the small minority who had found theirs believed themselves to be the exception. It was a lie, of course. Across time, across space, across dimensions, there was a soul mate out there for each one of them. Angels had been created with the capacity for great love, and what grander love existed than the unselfish bonding of two individuals?

Stuffing articles of clothing into a duffel, Michael tried to ignore the dismay that always overcame him when he considered those early days, when Earth had been discovered and some angels had set off to occupy the planet. It was then the first changes had begun, when Lucifer had first met Lilith, when the first visions of hell had been conceived.

Sighing, Michael zipped the bag closed. He’d fought it, strived to keep Lucifer and Lilith apart, just as he’d attempted to dissuade Gabriel away from Ariadne. But neither had listened to his misgivings, and he’d been right. Both instances had turned out disastrously. Now it seemed it was his turn. Would history repeat itself once again? Or would the Fates look more kindly upon him?

Doubtful. Those bitches hated him.

Raphael had once suggested bribing the trio. With chocolate. Shaking his head, Michael’s lips formed into a small smile. Raphael was always unintentionally pissing them off and getting his ass burned in the process. Michael, on the other hand, had never cared one way or the other. Guess it helped the Fates were terrified of him.

Throwing the duffel over his shoulder, Michael left his room, wondering if this was the last time he would be gracing these four walls. Or was he destined to return a haunted shell like Gabriel?

Maybe he should pay the Fates a visit, see if Tory had crossed their notice. But then he decided that would just be asking for trouble. No need drawing attention if there wasn't any.

Exiting the Hall of Powers, Michael surveyed the landscaping making up Heaven. It was one of many different dimensions. There were others, like Hell, Fairie, Merwood and Earth, where humans and those with human origins could travel between, but it was believed the only entrance into Heaven for those earthbound was through death. Michael was one of the few who knew differently. It was another lie, propagated to prevent the fallen from attempting to surge the Pearly Gates. If they could only find them. Finding the entrance to Heaven, that was the trick.

Michael and the rest of the angels were not tied to the Earth like their human counterparts, but aside from that fact, they had far more in common with the species then most would be willing to admit. Hell, humans were the children of angels, after all.

Damn Kronos and Rhea for starting this mess. If they'd kept their hands off each other he wouldn't be in his current position.

Shaking his head, Michael concentrated on his intended target, visualizing Tory before teleporting back to her. A moment passed as he tried to get his bearings. The small enclosure was hot and filled with a fine mist that obscured his vision. It took Michael those few seconds to determine where he was, and when he finally did the duffel slid from his fingers. Tory was before him, naked as the day she'd been born, standing under the spray of water, a clear glass door the only thing separating them.

For one split second, Michael wondered how long it would take him to strip off his clothes and join her.

Blonde hair, darkened by the flow of water, cascaded down a slender back, the ends coming to rest an inch or two above a tight, heart-shaped ass. His body tightened, his dick lengthening and hardening against the zipper of his jeans. Then Tory turned and Michael almost swallowed his tongue.

Dipping her head under the shower head, she arched her back, thrusting small, perky breasts into the air. Involuntarily, his hands rose, reaching for those mounds and the cherry-tipped nipples proudly on display. Barely taller than a pixie, Tory was mostly long sleek legs, legs he wanted wrapped around him.

Groaning softly, Michael clenched his fists, forcing them back down to his sides. What he wouldn't give to drop to his knees, burying his face in the blonde curls shielding her sex; to free his dick and sink into bliss. Harder than steel and pulsing with need, his dick more than agreed. But his brain, the sliver not blood deprived, recognized something was wrong with the scene before him, and he desperately clung to that thought.

Then it hit him.

"Why the hell aren't you where I left you, safe within the circle of protection?" he bellowed, causing Tory to let loose a shriek, her hands jerking in a vain attempt to shield her nakedness from his view. But her

image had been burned into his mind and Michael already recognized what a lost cause it was. He would have her, of which there was no doubt. The question was would he be able to keep her?

Eyes wide, Tory stared at him, and Michael wondered if maybe he had been right when he'd first believed her to be dim-witted. It would just be his luck. There was little he found more irritating than stupidity and incompetence. His time with her would be doomed before it ever even began.

"Get me a towel," she finally snapped, and when he didn't jump to do her bidding, Tory added, "Now."

For such a little thing, she sure had balls.

"Well, don't just stand there."

Michael barely suppressed the grin from breaking free. "Maybe if you asked nicely I would be more inclined to do your bidding. Otherwise, I can continue to enjoy the view."

Michael was pretty certain he could hear her teeth grinding from across the bathroom. "Please."

"Oh, you can do better than that," he purred in delight as her eyes narrowed. Apparently she was neither stupid nor timid, just in need of training, and Michael was more than up for the challenge.

"Please," Tory repeated, her softer, breathier tone going straight to his dick.

Michael reached for the towel resting on the edge of the sink before moving across the small space, stopping out of her reach, forcing Tory to leave the confines of the shower stall and come to him. Then, instead of handing it to her, Michael wrapped the towel around her shoulders. His fingers lingered over her satiny skin, sliding down her arms as his gaze held hers.

Desire leapt between them, her eyes darkening under his steady perusal. Michael couldn't resist bending his head, capturing her lips gently. A soft moan escaped her, parting her lips and allowing his tongue access to the wet cavern. With a slow sweep, Michael tasted Tory, a mixture of honey and vanilla, a taste he could easily become addicted to.

As the flame burned bright, licking across his skin in waves of intense heat, the kiss grew demanding, and Michael pulled Tory against him, her damp skin clinging to his T-shirt, her puckered nipples grazing his chest. It took every ounce of control Michael had not to bend his head and suck one of those little beads into his mouth.

Dragging his lips from hers, Michael moved to her ear, capturing the lobe between his teeth before whispering, "Why did you leave the protective circle, Tory?"

"Because it is daylight," came her fevered reply, and Michael couldn't fault her reasoning. Demons were unable to tolerate the sun. It burned them to ashes. But while he couldn't fault her reasoning, he didn't have to like it.

"If you and I are going to work, when I tell you to do something, you must obey, Tory. No arguments. You must do what you are told."

Tory jerked away from him and the loss of her in his arms hurt—far more than Michael would have ever expected. When he moved to draw her back, she skirted out of his reach.

Chapter Three

“You arrogant pig,” Tory snarled, avoiding Michael’s attempt to drag her back into his arms. What had she been thinking, rubbing against him like a cat in heat? He’d more than made his position blatantly clear. He was there for one reason and one reason only, because Ari had forced a pledge out of him. Had she no pride?

With her body screaming for Michael to finish what he had started, obviously not.

“Don’t come near me,” she scolded when Michael tried to follow her.

“Then cover yourself,” he snapped.

Tory felt her face flushing with embarrassment. In her great haste to do as ordered, Tory almost lost the tentative hold she had on the towel. She finally managed to shift it from her shoulders, securing it tightly under her arms while glaring defiantly at him.

“I was in the shower. And you were not invited.”

“You were not where I had left you.” Bending, Michael retrieved a black duffel bag from the floor, and after one last sweeping glance over her, he turned toward the door. “Get dressed,” he demanded over his shoulder. “Then we’ll talk.”

Tory made a face as the door slammed behind him. Arrogant prick. But she couldn’t help noticing the bulge that had clearly been outlined in his dark jeans. It kind of surprised her. She hadn’t expected angels to be susceptible to desire.

With the towel still clutched tightly between her breasts, she had no choice but to follow him from the bathroom. She hadn’t brought any clothing into the bathroom when she’d decided to shower. She hadn’t known she’d need to.

“Love, you are playing with fire. Quit tempting me and cover your delectable ass or you will find yourself flat on your back.”

Tory knew her mouth was hanging open and she lashed out to cover her unease. “Tempt you? I’d sooner rut with a donkey.”

She watched with a weird sense of fascination as Michael arched a mocking brow before slowly stalking her across the room. Tory hadn’t even realized she’d been retreating with each step he took until her back hit the wall behind her. She was totally at his mercy now, trapped by his body. His chest pressed against hers, drawing a soft gasp from her lips.

“Would you care for me to disprove your statement? Because I would be more than happy to, love,” he whispered, his lips inches from her own and there was something wholly dangerous about his tone. Excitement skittered across her skin.

“I didn’t think angels were interested in sex,” Tory breathlessly said, arching her neck to avoid contact with his lips, knowing if he kissed her again, she would beg to make his promise reality. And Tory didn’t need any more complications. Her life was disastrous enough without falling in love with an angel. Deep down she sensed there would be ramifications for such an act. She was human after all, and Michael wasn’t.

“We aren’t. Not unless it’s with our mate.” Michael stiffened for a second, frowning down at her, and Tory got the distinct impression he hadn’t meant to voice that out loud. He lowered his arms, moving back enough for her to gain release, but still she stared at him wide-eyed. Rubbing the back of his neck, he turned from her and moved toward the window. “Get dressed, Victoria.”

He sounded in pain and Tory took a step toward him before she even realized she had done so. She halted, sighing softly. A strong impulse tugged at her, the need to give Michael comfort, but she didn’t understand it and suspected he wouldn’t accept it. She needed him to kill a demon. She shouldn’t expect anything else because she would only end up getting hurt.

After escaping into the closet, Tory quickly dressed, hardly giving any consideration to what clothing she slipped over her body. Her comfy jeans and an old BU sweatshirt. She recognized her need for the familiar as a form of protection. But against Michael or her own fanciful inclinations? A psychologist would have a field day with her issues.

Michael was exactly where she had left him when she exited the closet, staring intently out the bedroom window. She waited for him to say something, turn toward her, acknowledge her presence—anything, and when he didn’t, she snapped.

“You wanted to talk, so talk.”

Michael glanced over his shoulder, a slight smile on his lips. “Where are your spirits?”

Tory shrugged, surprised not only by his question but by the fact she hadn’t heard a peep from either Sam or Thomas since her spell bringing Michael to her had gone haywire. “They’re around here somewhere.”

Michael nodded, glancing back out the window a moment before finally turning to face her. “And how long have you been able to see the dead?”

Tory lifted her shoulders again carelessly. “I hear them more than I actually see them. And they have been around for as long as I can remember. Since I was a child.”

“Who was the witch, your mother or your father?”

His question raised memories Tory would just as soon forget. The truth of who and where she came from was something she had spent years wishing she could change. It was knowledge she still had not

come to terms with, but unfortunately she knew she had to reveal because she suspected it had everything to do with why she was now being hunted.

"I don't remember much about my parents. I think they both died when I was five. My mother was a drunk but totally human. My father, or at least the man my mother had claimed was my father, was..." Her voice faltered, too embarrassed to ever give voice to the disgusting truth. Wrapping her arms around her torso, she sank onto the edge of the bed.

"Was what?" Michael asked quietly.

"Ari said he was a warlock," Tory confided and flinched, waiting for his reaction. She knew as an angel Michael couldn't help but be disgusted. Witches were white spell casters, men and women who devoted their lives to doing good. Warlocks were the complete opposite. Filled with greed, they aided demons in their evil work for profit and gain, intentionally giving up their souls in the process. They were everything angels despised.

"Was he under the command of Asmodeus?"

Surprised by the lack of revulsion in Michael's voice, Tory jerked her gaze up, shocked to find him kneeling at her feet. He lifted a hand, his fingers reaching out to gently stroke her jaw before cupping the back of her neck.

"I truly do not know. My father had little use for me or my mom, only coming around when he needed something, probably sex, I really do not remember. But even at four or five, I knew there was something wrong with him, so my guess would be yes, he was under Asmodeus's command. He felt evil."

"Can you still? Sense this evil in individuals, I mean?"

"And goodness," she said with a nod. "It has gotten stronger in the last couple of months. It was why Ari insisted I call forth an angel. She believed this extrasensory perception will soon be mutual, and that this demon will finally be able to find me."

Michael's facial features seemed to freeze in place and he snarled, "How long has he been hunting you?"

Tory, surprised by the rage dancing in his eyes and the flexing muscle in his jaw, shrugged. "I never knew until recently he even existed. The three stooges managed to hide all knowledge of him from me as effectively as they had hid me from him."

"What of spell casting? I can feel the power in you. Have you not thought to use a spell?"

Tory rolled her eyes. Did he think she was stupid? Then she recalled the times he had said as much. *Asshole*. "Yes, I've tried every spell I have been able to get my hands on. None of them have worked, but it's not exactly like I've had anyone to teach me this shit. There's only been Ari, Sam and Thomas."

"Yes. A hunter, a theologian and a banker. I'm sure they were a hell of a lot of help," Michael drawled, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Well, it’s not like anyone else was going to step up to the plate,” she stated, annoyed by his arrogance. It was her family Michael was talking about. An odd family, she would give him that, but the only one she’d ever known. “I didn’t have a flock of angels at my disposal.”

Michael dragged her closer as he leaned in. “You should have. If I’d known...” Shaking his head, he let his hand fall away before rising to his feet and striding to the other side of the room.

Tory needed to change the subject. Feeling as if they were standing on the edge of a steep cliff with a painful fall imminent, she picked something she thought would be safe...at least safer than where they had been heading. While she didn’t know exactly where that might be, she feared it enough to want to avoid it. “Where is Ari? What did you do to her?”

Michael was silent a moment, disappointment etched across his face. With a sigh, he followed the direction she’d gently nudged the conversation. “I returned her to the Hall of Souls where she belongs.”

Biting her lip, Tory wondered if she would have the nerve to ask what she was really dying to know—how Ari was connected to Michael. It wasn’t really any of her business, and maybe if she kept telling herself that it would eventually sink in.

Or not.

“Whatever it is, ask it of me.”

Michael sounded eager, too eager for the jealous rampage she wanted to embark upon. Who’d have thought she’d be envious of a dead woman, but apparently she was. And feeling very territorial over an angel she had absolutely no business even considering.

“How did you become acquainted with Ari?” *Okay, so I’m a fool*, Tory freely admitted to herself.

Michael’s eyes grew vacant, as if he were immersed in a past memory. It took everything in her not to jump up and stomp from the room in an ill-tempered fit. Lord, she could just imagine his shock at that.

Appearing to be waking from a stupor, Michael blinked, his vision clearing. “She had been no more than a child, only nineteen when Gabriel introduced us,” he said with a tinge of sadness.

Nausea settled in the pit of her stomach, but instead of demanding what the hell Ari had meant to him, she asked, “Who is Gabriel?” Because truthfully she was too big a wimp to find out.

Michael’s eyes narrowed. “You know who he is, but are you sure you really want to discuss this? You might not like where it leads.”

Tory didn’t reply right away. Instead she recognized the challenge in his eyes and his words and tried to determine the meaning behind them. Did Michael already know the feelings he seemed to raise in her? Was he warning her from the truth, knowing how badly it would hurt her? Or was it something else entirely?

She was about to demand an answer from him but Michael beat her to the punch.

“*The Archangel Gabriel. Ariadne was his mate.*”

Mate? Michael had mentioned it before but what did he mean?

Tory would have verbalized the thought if not for Michael's sudden movement. He grabbed her arm, yanking her from the bed and shoving her behind him as a bright flash of light engulfed the room. Glad for his back shielding her, she buried her face in his shirt, hiding from what that light might entail. She wasn't worried it might be a demonic presence. It was still daylight out, and for some reason she figured demons would not cast such a pure white glow when they entered a room.

"What the hell are you doing here, Zadkiel?" Michael demanded, causing her curiosity to get the better of her. Tory peeked over his shoulder and shuddered.

Michael had brandished that beast of a sword again, but it wasn't the weird blade of flame that had caught her attention. It was Zadkiel. Tall, though not as tall as Michael, he stood before them, light brown hair brushing against broad shoulders and framing a face most women would have swooned over. But not Tory. Maybe if she hadn't seen Michael first... No, this angel didn't have her heart hammering and her mouth watering.

Her obvious preference for Michael couldn't be good.

A few mumbled words from Michael in what Tory thought might have been Latin and the sword disappeared, but he didn't relax his stance. It didn't take a genius to figure out he was not happy about the other angel's presence. Was it because of her? Or for some other reason?

"You wanted to be kept aware of Asmodeus's movements. I'm here to comply."

Chapter Four

Michael rolled his eyes. Sure he was. Zadkiel could have found another way to deliver a message of this importance, but it was Michael's own fault for mentioning Tory. He should have known Zadkiel would never be able to overcome his curiosity, and the way she clung to him would only further fuel Zadkiel's interest. Completely aware of every inch of Tory plastered against his back, Michael knew the wise thing would have been to push her away, but he couldn't do it. The way Zadkiel was eyeing her inflamed the need to draw her even closer, directly into the protection of his arms. Wouldn't that intrigue his second-in-command beyond imagination?

"So make me aware," Michael snapped, watching Zadkiel flicker a glance over his right shoulder, landing without a doubt on Tory. He could almost see the wheels turning behind his second's brown orbs. Zadkiel wanted to ask about Tory but thought better of it.

Michael hadn't made Zadkiel his second because he was stupid.

Zadkiel cleared his throat. "Asmodeus is on the move, leaving a trail of dead bodies in his wake. Powerful witches, every single one of them, and interestingly enough, all bear a striking resemblance to your...companion."

Tory's quiet gasp filled Michael's ears though it was the gentle trembling running along his spine that fully caught his attention. He hadn't wanted Zadkiel's notice directed at Tory any more than necessary, but the shudders racking her slight frame drew him and Michael turned, gathering her into his arms, completely aware of Zadkiel's probing gaze.

"It's my fault," she whispered, burying her face in his chest.

"Nonsense. You do not control Asmodeus's actions anymore than I." Michael cupped the back of her head to hold her close, his fingers sinking into wet hair. Lifting her face, he rested his forehead against hers. "Go dry your hair, love, before you get sick."

Tory hesitated only a moment before whispering, "Okay."

Michael knew her acquiescence was due to the fact she was upset. By the time she finished doing as he'd commanded she'd have her emotions under control and would no doubt come out claws drawn.

Watching her disappear into the bathroom—hell, he couldn't tear his eyes from Tory's retreating figure. It was only Michael's iron-willed control preventing him from dragging her back into his arms. It amazed him how quickly she'd become embedded in the very fiber of his being.

“Love?” Zadkiel questioned, forcing Michael’s attention back to his second and the smirk plastered across his face. Frowning, Michael took a threatening step toward him, but Zadkiel only added, “Not quite the big scary archangel now that I’ve really seen how you treat humans.”

“You will show some respect to my mate,” Michael snarled before his brain caught up with the anger consuming him. Zadkiel’s eyes widened and Michael cursed. That was the last thing he’d wanted to admit to anyone.

“Shit. You’re sure?” At Michael’s arched brow, Zadkiel nodded. “Of course you are. Now I understand why this has become such a priority. Any idea why Asmodeus is after her?”

“No, all I have is conjecture. Tory believes her father was a warlock, which explains the power she is coming into. And as I’m sure you have noticed, what she has, she has in abundance. So I have two theories. Either her father made a blood pact with Asmodeus, and the bastard believes Tory, as his only descendant, is responsible for fulfilling it. Or he knows she is coming into her power and thinks to take it for his own. But I will not allow him to succeed.”

“Well, of course not. And it won’t hurt giving her a little Ambrosia.”

Michael snorted, turning his back on Zadkiel. Ambrosia, nectar of the gods. Little could Homer have known how literal such a statement was when he’d coined the phrase all those centuries ago. And completely against the laws of Heaven.

“I will hardly be able to enforce a law I have myself broken.”

“Neither can we afford for you to end up like Gabriel,” Zadkiel said quietly. “I do not see how you have any choice.”

Yes, he could justify the action that way, but it still would not make it any less wrong. Ambrosia was nothing but a pretty word for angel blood. Quite by chance, many millennia ago, it had been discovered a few drops could make a human immortal. But too much had devastating effects, turning the human into an abomination. A vampire. Even Gabriel had feared the consequences, never taking such drastic steps to prolong Ariadne’s life.

Though maybe he should have because the thought of losing Tory the way Gabriel had Ariadne twisted deep in Michael’s gut. He wasn’t sure he could be so noble.

A wave of gut-wrenching remorse swept over him and Michael instantly recognized from where it had come. Tory. She needed him.

“We both have our own responsibilities. Yours is tracking Asmodeus. Mine is taking care of the woman in there,” Michael said, waving a hand toward the bathroom door. “Let me know if you discover anything new, but right now I need to concentrate on Tory.”

He didn’t bother to wait for a reply. In his desperate need to reach her, he just left Zadkiel standing there. It was vexing really. Had it been any one of his warriors, Michael would not have hesitated

reprimanding for such an action. But the shoe was on the other foot now, and Michael could not deny he was operating in ways completely out of character for him.

Michael found Tory sitting on the toilet seat, arms wrapped tightly around her waist, and though she didn't make a sound, tears streamed slowly down her cheeks. His heart lurching, he hesitated only a moment, uncertain how he should proceed as he watched her rocking slowly back and forth. What did he know of easing a human's pain? Hell, what did he know of offering comfort to anyone?

But she was his mate.

Kneeling before her, Michael did not even think she realized her actions when she leaned into him. It was the most natural thing in the world to gather her into his arms. The one thing he'd feared had become the most treasured.

He'd be breaking one of his people's oldest covenants by feeding her Ambrosia. In that, Michael knew he had no choice. He only prayed his motives would be deemed pure enough to be forgiven.

Settling on the floor, he shifted Tory onto his lap, cradling her against his chest, surrounding her with his warmth. She sank into him, giving her weight up into his protection and that measure of trust twisted something inside Michael, invoking a feeling he'd never encountered. *Could this be love?*

He closed his eyes, relishing the feel of Tory in his arms. He still wanted her. His dick had grown hard the minute he'd stepped into the bathroom, but this was different. The harsh bite of arousal was gone. It was more subtle and not wholly unpleasant. Murmuring into her hair, he rocked her gently until her trembling began to subside and she finally grew still.

"We will find him," Michael said quietly.

At first a snuffle was the only reply. Then in a whisper, Tory asked, "But how many more will die because of me?"

"My love, you have no more control over life and death than do I. Who's to say it wasn't their time? And they are in a better place."

"Are they? Really?"

"I would like to think so. They are at peace. No more suffering, no more pain."

Tory snorted. His kitten was getting back her claws.

"But no life. You're just dead?"

"It is a different reality, love, but still an existence."

"Will you tell me about it?" she asked, her tone filled with a longing that tugged at Michael's heart strings. If he got his way, death would be something she'd never experience. Not first hand, at least.

"Later. But for now I want you to rest. We will need to be prepared once darkness falls. We might not know Asmodeus has found you until he is upon us, and I do not want you encumbered by fatigue."

Tory did not argue, which Michael saw as verification of her exhaustion. Nor did she utter a protest when he rose with her held tightly against his chest and left the bathroom. Ever so gently, he laid her on the

bed then followed her down, unwilling to relinquish the feel of her body next to his. And it would make what he planned that much easier.

Grimacing against the pain, Michael bit down on the top of his tongue hard enough to draw blood. As the honeyed taste filled his mouth, he lowered his head, his lips covering Tory's. Then, running his tongue along the seam of her lips, he tried to coax a response, to no avail.

Framing her face with his hands, he whispered, "Open for me, love." Gently applying pressure on her chin with his thumbs, he was filled with jubilant triumph when she complied. Michael groaned as her tongue tangled with his before sweeping inside her mouth, making certain his essence mingled with her saliva.

What he would have given to get lost in Tory's arms, but he couldn't risk her consuming too much of his blood. Michael pulled back, his breath see-sawing from his lungs, his dick throbbing with unfulfilled desire. Glancing down, his eyes met green ones brimming with tears and it was like a punch in the gut.

"Tory?"

"I know I'm nothing more than an imposition, a vow forced upon you by Ari, but please don't leave me," she whispered, tripping over the words as one tear slid slowly down her cheek.

Brushing away the offending wetness with his thumb, Michael stared dumbstruck, only realizing he'd taken too long to respond when, with what sounded like a soft sob, Tory attempted to push him away. But refusing to budge, he pinned her squirming body to the mattress with his hips nestled between her thighs and her breasts pressed firmly against his chest. Her lush heat burned him through his jeans, cradling his dick with the promise of paradise. The vow to Ari was one Michael could definitely get behind.

"Ari does not belong here in our bed, Victoria. Now or ever."

Michael didn't know what reaction he had expected from his mate, but her hand connecting with his cheek was not one of them. It completely blindsided him, allowing Tory to push him off her and gain her freedom.

"Then where does she belong, Michael? Because I got the feeling you two were awfully close."

For one stunned moment, Michael tried to come to terms with the words Tory had snarled at him. Standing beside the bed, fists clenched in jealous anger, she was a sight to behold, revving up his desire a notch or two to where the only thing that mattered was getting her back under him. Then the implication of her insidious taunt sunk in. He must have misunderstood her meaning.

"Exactly what are you accusing me of, Tory?" he demanded quietly.

Chapter Five

Tory swallowed heavily. The pain lining Michael's face hit her full force in the chest, frightening her with the urgent desire to return to his arms, to ease the hurt she'd caused. Stumbling back a step, she refused to give in to the need. He could easily be playing her. For all she knew, Michael could be a real Casanova, his one and only desire to get into the pants of every woman he encountered. Though her body was screaming he was different, that what was between them was special, Tory was short on trust, and at present her faith in her own intuition was in short supply.

"Did you betray Gabriel? Is that why you feel such guilt over Ari's death?"

"Guilt? You think I what, fucked Gabriel's mate and once he discovered the truth he killed her?"

Blue eyes filled with rage centered on her, making Tory want to slink off into a corner and hide. It took every ounce of fortitude to hold her ground, to shrug her shoulders nonchalantly like the prospect of Michael's affirmation wouldn't destroy her.

Michael took a deep shuddering breath, rolling from his lounging position on the bed to sit on the edge of the mattress. Elbows centered on his thighs, his hands ripped through his hair before coming to rest on the back of his neck, his gaze locked firmly on the floor. "You know nothing of mates," he stated quietly. "But soon that will all change."

Michael's head lifted and Tory read the promise in his eyes. She turned to flee, only to be caught in the steely grip of his arms wrapping around her, her back braced against his chest. Squirming in an attempt to gain her freedom only seemed to make him more determined to keep her prisoner. His hold tightened as a set of teeth sunk into the tendons where her neck met her shoulder. The bite wasn't hard enough to draw blood but it drew a primitive instinct in her and Tory relaxed against him with a shudder.

"I do feel responsible for Ariadne's death," Michael whispered, his lips gently kissing away the sting of his bite. "But not in the way you think, love."

Michael's arms slid away from her. He stepped back and, with some reluctance, Tory allowed him to turn her. She wasn't entirely certain she wanted to face him, afraid of what she would read there. It would take an idiot not to have noticed the guilt smoldering in his blue orbs every time Ari's name was mentioned.

His hand caressed her cheek, leaving a trail of goose-bumps as his fingers slid slowly down her neck and arm, stopping only when he reached her hand. Entwining their fingers, he led Tory to the bed, giving

her arm a quick tug, sending her tumbling to the mattress next to him. With his body turned toward her, Michael drew her palm to his lips, placing a kiss in the center before pinning her hand over his heart.

“Many factors led up to Ariadne’s death, so I will only give you the basics. But none of it had to do with betraying Gabriel. When Gabriel asked that I allow her to be trained as one of my hunters, I agreed for purely selfish reasons. The lifespan of a human hunter is not long and in the woman’s death, I saw Gabriel’s freedom.” Michael gave a harsh bark of laughter. “How naïve I was thinking Gabriel would continue on as if she had never existed.”

The look of anguish on Michael’s face shattered the place deep inside her where fear and distrust had long resided. She cupped his cheek with her free hand, exalting in the way he leaned into her touch as if she had the power to heal him. It would only be fitting since he’d managed to free her from the baggage she’d been carrying since childhood.

“Hunting demons is a dangerous business. You can hardly be blamed for Ari’s death.”

“It is not her death putting a wedge between Gabriel and me. It’s what I said later, the callous words I spoke for which he has never forgiven me. And I cannot blame him.”

“What did you say?” Tory probed gently, but Michael only shook his head.

“I do not want you to hate me too,” he whispered.

“That will never happen,” she stated, her voice filled with absolute conviction. She didn’t think there was anything he could say to change how she felt about him. Not that she wanted to examine too closely what her feelings were. Tory wasn’t ready to admit them even to herself.

Unable or unwilling to meet her gaze, Michael stared down at their joined hands and Tory thought he wasn’t going to respond. Then he spoke, so softly Tory had to strain to make out the words.

“I told him he was better off without the human to distract him. There were plenty of females with which he could scratch an itch. He didn’t need Ariadne.”

“Ouch,” Tory murmured, wondering how Gabriel had taken such a pronouncement. Probably not very favorably.

“How the hell was I to know?” Michael cried. With a growl, he attempted to pull away from her, to put some distance between them, but Tory feared if she released the tight grip on his hand she would lose whatever was growing between them.

“How were you to know what?” Tory demanded.

“How the hell was I to know my mate would complete me in ways I’d never even suspected I needed?”

With those harshly snarled words, Michael crushed Tory to him, his lips demanding entrance, which she immediately gave. His tongue swept into her mouth, drawing a moan from her throat. Clothing was tossed aside with little finesse, the urgency having taken hold of Michael, leaving Tory feeling a little lost as he pushed her flat on the mattress, rising over her.

He brushed her hair from her face as his gaze swept over her slowly. “Christ, you’re beautiful. My mate. My love.”

Her breathing hitched, his words filling her with wonder. But Tory had little time to contemplate as Michael once again lowered his head, his lips devouring her own. His cock was there nestled between her thighs, and she waited impatiently for him to thrust into her body. Instead, he dragged his lips from hers, sliding down her body to surround a nipple in the moist heat of his mouth.

A cry slipped free as she arched her back, silently demanding more. She wanted harder, faster, anything to quench the flames licking at her insides. To her great dismay, Michael released the tight bud, chuckling softly. Her fingers embedded in his hair, trying to tug him back, only to have a sob forced from her throat when he moved to her other breast, his lips surrounding the nipple, his tongue lashing at the tip.

Not abandoning her other breast completely, his fingers tugged at the wet nipple, pulling and pinching until Tory thought she would lose her mind. Or orgasm just from his lips and fingers at her breasts. She arched her hips, searching for some form of relief, only to cry out at the feel of his hand sliding between her thighs. Fingers swept through the blonde curls and wet folds shielding her sex, moving to circle the opening of her vagina with the lightest of touches before sinking his fingers slowly inside.

“Damn, you’re so wet,” Michael murmured, his warm breath tickling her breast. “And tight. I won’t last five seconds inside you, love.”

Tory might have demanded he get to it before she died of unfulfilled lust but at that moment his thumb brushed her clit and she lost the ability to breathe much less think rationally. One finger then two drove through unused tissues, scissoring inside her pussy, stretching her. Understanding the semantics of sex, she still was not prepared for the unbelievable pleasure coursing through her veins. Her hips lifted and a sob tore from her throat as she met his swallow thrusts, wanting—no, needing deeper penetration. It was there just out of reach, and she wanted her damn orgasm.

One last lick to her tortured nipple and Michael was sliding down her torso. Tory tried to stop him but he slipped from her grasp. His lips lingered here or there, sucking lightly on her skin before continuing his journey. His broad shoulders forced her thighs farther apart, and to her horror he stopped, his face inches from her pussy. Reflexively, she attempted to close her legs, embarrassment flooding her as he seemed to be studying her sex.

Broad hands held her open, his thumbs spreading the folds so he could get a more intimate view. Tory would have surely protested his perverse interest if his tongue hadn’t swept over her pussy, lingering on her clit and ripping a cry from her lips. Shit, she’d never expected such pleasure... Then his lips sucked her clit into his mouth and Tory detonated into a million little pieces.

She was still jerking and twitching from the most amazing climax when Michael rose over her, his erection poised at her entrance. His hands framed her face, his eyes capturing hers and he whispered, “Mine. My mate. Do you understand, love?”

And though Tory had no idea what the hell he was going on about, she nodded.

With a look of supreme satisfaction, he slowly began to work his cock inside her, his muscles tense under her fingertips, and Tory knew he was holding back for her. When he came to the membrane shielding her womb, the proof of her virginity, his eyes held a mixture of surprise and extreme arrogance.

He pulled her closer, his lips hovering over hers. "Hold on to me tightly, love. It will be over in a minute." Then he thrust forward, his lips capturing her soft cry. But it wasn't pain bringing tears to her eyes, it was the sense of fullness, of not knowing where she ended and Michael began, of being one.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, brushing away the tears from her face.

"Damn you," she whimpered. "You made me fall in love with you."

A brilliant smile encompassed Michael's face. "It's only fair since you made me love you first."

With a sniffle, a grin broke through her tears. "You better or I'll never forgive you."

"No fear there, love. Forever."

Then his hips retreated and thrust forward. Tory's eyes closed at the extreme rapture filling her. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she tried to hold onto the tidal wave swirling around her, but each plunge of his hips speared his cock deeper, harder, drawing her further into its murky grip, only to come crashing over her, sucking the breath from her lungs.

Michael's fingers dug into her flesh, angling her hips to penetrate impossibly deeper until with a harsh growl, he stilled, his cock head nudging the entrance of her womb. He tensed, soaking her hidden depths with blasts of semen and triggering another stellar orgasm from which she was sure she'd never recover.

Tory was still shaking from the intensity of their joining when Michael collapsed on top of her, burying his face in her neck. Clinging to him as if she feared he would disappear—and maybe a small part of her did—she recognized somehow the sex with Michael had been different. Sure, she'd been a virgin, but she read and watched movies. At the moment of climax it had felt like her soul had escaped the bounds of her flesh and had connected with Michael's. Even now, it was as if she could still feel him. She was pretty certain *that* was not normal.

Having every intention of demanding an explanation or two, Tory decided to wait until after she'd finished basking in her afterglow. In Michael's arms, she felt treasured, safe. And warm, he was like a giant furnace. Yes, she would want answers. Later.

Chapter Six

Leaning up on his elbow, Michael was amazed to find watching Tory sleep filled him with contentment. Slowly, he traced a finger over the swell of her hip, fascinated at the feel of her skin. It was like silk. And when he had been encased tightly within her body, it was like basking in the white light of Heaven.

Who would have thought he'd become ensnared in a human's web? Now he had to figure out a way to keep her.

Clenching his hands at the disturbing thought, he recognized he would need to devise a plan of action. There was no way in hell he was going to share Gabriel's fate, and even more importantly, neither would Tory share Ariadne's. He'd fight all the forces of Heaven and Hell to prevent it from happening.

Michael sighed. Soon the sun would be setting and darkness would fall. He should get her up but he hated to disturb the peace. After making love Tory had quickly succumbed to sleep, saving him from having to answer the questions he'd glimpsed lurking in her eyes. How was he to tell her she would need to leave everything she'd ever known to be with him? Because he couldn't let her go.

"What time is it?" Tory asked, pulling him from his musings.

His fingers curled around her hip, pulling her body flush with his. "Just a little after six," he murmured against her lips before brushing them with his own. Her soft little moan had his dick hardening and if he hadn't had a demon to worry about, Michael would have given his mate a proper hello.

Instead, Michael forced himself to roll away from her. When it came to Tory, he was quickly realizing he had little to no control and the last thing he wanted was Asmodeus to come calling while he had his dick sunk deep within her pussy. Talk about getting caught with your pants down. It forced a smirk to settle on his face as he reached for his jeans and then slipped them over his legs and hips.

His name, gently whispered from Tory's lips, drew his attention back to his mate. "What is it, love?"

She was biting her bottom lip, her gaze apprehensive, and Michael knew whatever was on her mind would likely make him uncomfortable.

"We need to talk," she said quietly, and he knew he'd been right.

"We will, Tory. But first we need to dress. It is almost dark and Asmodeus could strike at any moment. We need to be prepared."

She studied him a moment and Michael wasn't certain Tory would concede to his demands. It wasn't like he had any compunction in forcing her to do his bidding. Hell, he'd throw her naked ass in the circle of

protection she'd drawn if he thought for a second she'd stay there. If he only knew where the damn portal was, he'd take her to Heaven and never have to worry about the bastard harming her again.

Jerking a T-shirt over his head, Michael realized at first light he'd have to start a hunt of his own. He had to find the entrance to Heaven.

He pivoted then came to a swift stop when he realized Tory was right there anxiously watching him. She was already wearing the same jeans and sweatshirt he had stripped from her body not eight hours ago, and Michael longed to feel her naked skin plastered against his once again. Instead, he kissed her furrowed brow before stepping back lest he give into the temptation.

"All right, love. Let's talk, but not in here. Somewhere without a bed."

Glancing back at the object in question, he watched a little smile wash away the doubt on Tory's face. If it hadn't been like looking into a rainbow, Michael might have chastised her for her lack of faith. Instead he followed Tory from the bedroom, traveling down a narrow hallway to a steep staircase. At the bottom, in a small living room, he remained standing while Tory took a seat on the floral couch beneath the windowpane looking out onto the front yard. He watched her tug her bottom lip between her teeth, a habit he'd already come to associate with his mate's feelings of anxiety.

Her silence concerned him. Not wanting to take the chance she might try to flee, Michael took three cautionary steps closer until his shins rested against an old coffee table sitting in the middle of the room. There he stood, striving to wait for her to speak—she'd been the one who wanted to talk after all—but her hesitation quickly frayed Michael's nerves. "Tory?" he finally questioned, unable to remain silent any longer.

For a moment, he really thought she was going to completely ignore him. She refused to raise her head, her eyes fixed on her shoes, and Michael sighed. He was about to join her on the sofa when she spoke.

"Did you mean it?" she asked in a breathless rush.

Struggling to understand her question, he finally had to shake his head in confusion. "Mean what, love?"

Again Tory hesitated, and Michael's patience had come to an end. Sitting beside her, he lifted her head, forcing her eyes to meet his. Her bottom lip was once again captured between her teeth and, brushing a thumb over it, he encouraged her to set it free before she did any damage.

"Victoria, I cannot assuage your fears if I do not understand what they are."

"You said you loved me," came her quiet response, and he arched a black brow in confusion.

"And I do."

"But we only just met."

So that was what had his mate in a tailspin. Funny, he'd considered many things to explain her unease, but never her doubting his feelings. "If I recall, you were the first to declare such sentiment." Tory

tried to glance away but Michael refused to release his hold, moving to frame her face with his palms. “I told you, Tory, you are my mate. I know for a human it can take longer, but for an angel it is instinctual. Our soul recognizes its other half almost immediately.”

“But what if you are wrong?” she whispered and he sighed.

“Does it feel like I am?”

The denial, when it came, was not damn near quick enough for him. Michael couldn’t believe they were having this conversation. He’d sensed her soul reach for his when they’d made love and he’d also felt his respond.

“Damn it, I’m not wrong,” he answered, harsher than he’d intended. Tory tried to jerk away from him and he wrapped her in his arms in a silent apology, gentling his tone as he asked, “Didn’t you feel it, love, our souls merging at climax, becoming one?”

“I thought...” Tory fell silent, hiding her face in his chest.

Michael’s lips brushed the top of her head before rubbing his cheek against the silky strands of her hair. “You thought what?”

“I thought it was different but I wasn’t certain.”

He smiled into her blonde tresses, his arms reflexively tightening around her small frame. Tory had been a virgin so her confusion shouldn’t have come as a surprise, but it had been centuries since Michael had even considered sex much less indulged in carnal relations. And still, he’d never lain with a human, only other angels. He couldn’t honestly say he’d been expecting the bliss he’d found in Tory’s arms.

Suddenly, he felt her stiffening against him. “Tory?”

“Michael, you have feared Gabriel’s fate all this time and yet have found yourself in the same position. I am not immortal.”

The little hitch in her voice should have had him rolling in guilt, only Michael found satisfaction in his ability to deny her statement. But how to tell Tory she would never die naturally? He had enacted a fundamental change in her very DNA without bothering to consult her.

Well, shit. “About that—”

Any other time, an interruption would have put Michael on edge, but this time he gladly welcomed the mist beginning to swirl around their feet and the nasally male voice whispering, “Damn. He’s still here.”

“Would you prefer he get a quick shag and run? Not with our girl.”

“You do have a point, Samuel. However, I wouldn’t have thought one of his kind would sink so low as to fornicate period.”

“Must be the whole soul-mate thing. Never seen two souls merge like that before. Damn near blinded me.”

Michael rolled his eyes. While he had been a bit busy at the time, he was still pretty sure he would have realized if either of the spirits had been in the room when he and Tory had been making love.

His mate, on the other hand, obviously believed the two—what had she called them—stooges. “You watched?” she squealed, lurching from his arms and jumping to her feet, confronting the two male spirits floating inches off the floor.

Michael sighed. While he was thankful for the distraction, the last thing he wanted was Tory upset by their presence.

“Well, of course we didn’t watch,” Sam reply indignantly. “Well...maybe some of it.”

“Why you no good...” Tory snapped, taking a threatening step toward the spirits.

Wrapping his arm around her waist, Michael halted her progress, not at all certain exactly what she thought she was going to do. They were dead after all and impervious to most forms of torture. Except...

Michael’s grip around Tory tightened, securing her to his side. With a few softly spoken words, his mighty sword appeared in his right hand. Pointing the fiery tip at the two ghosts, he watched in amusement as the mist danced about in a blatant attempt to avoid getting sucked into the flame.

“If neither of you would care to share Ariadne’s fate, I suggest you stop annoying my mate.”

Sam humphed loudly. “We were trying to help you out. Won’t make that mistake again.”

Michael grunted and the mist evaporated as if it had never been. Helping him, his ass. Those two were going to be trouble. He could feel it clear to the bone.

“Helping you? What was Sam talking about?”

Great. Trouble with a capital T.

“How the hell should I know, Tory? I do not think either of them is very stable. They should go to the light.”

The last, which was spoken loudly just in case the two were still lingering about, caused a giggle to bubble from his mate’s luscious lips, and Michael couldn’t stop himself from sampling another taste.

“Well, shit. There is really something wrong with this sight. I think my retinas are fried,” Zadkiel’s amused drawl intruded.

Michael sighed as Tory jumped away from him. Turning to Zadkiel, he reminded himself taking off his second-in-command’s head really wouldn’t appease his annoyance. It would only reattach itself. And while it would hurt like a bitch, it would be far too temporary. No, instead he would give the other male courier duty. Let him spend a century ferrying messages from the lesser factions, like the Fates. For a warrior like Zadkiel that would be hell.

Zadkiel must have gleamed from Michael’s face the train of his thoughts because he quickly added, “Sorry to disturb you. But I have news. There has been another attack.”

Tory’s gasp covered up Michael’s violent curse. “Where?” he snapped.

“Chicago. But this witch has survived, and I thought you might want to question her.”

Michael sensed the tension drain from Tory's limbs. This was good news indeed. But speaking with this witch would require he leave Tory alone. He couldn't teleport with her and a lot could happen in the amount of time it would take him to travel by human means. What if this was Asmodeus's plan, leaving the witch alive to draw him away from Tory?

"You must go," Tory said, as if sensing his hesitation. And it was very likely she could. They were bound, after all.

He reached up, gently palming her cheek. "Only if you promise to cast yourself inside the circle upstairs."

At her vigorous nod, Michael grasped the back of her neck, drawing her lips back to his, taking gentle command of her mouth. If there was one thing he could be thankful for, it was sharing his immortality. And since they were bound, if Asmodeus did make an appearance while he was gone he would know it almost instantly. Tory would be damn near impossible to kill now.

Pulling back, he gave her a gentle nudge toward the staircase, lightly swatting her ass when she frowned over her shoulder. Michael watched until she disappeared from view then turned to find Zadkiel studying him.

He arched a sardonic brow and Zadkiel grinned. "I see the deed has been done."

Michael growled. "Which deed? The one getting me eternal hellfire? Or the one that will draw torment and ridicule from everyone we know?"

If Zadkiel's grin had grown any bigger, Michael would have hit him. "One? Both? Take your pick."

"You're such an asshole," Michael muttered.

Zadkiel's only reply was laughter. *Make that two centuries of courier duty.*

Motioning with his hand, he invited Zadkiel to lead the way. Once the other male had teleported from the room, Michael closed his eyes, let his molecules divide until he was nothing but air and followed.

Chapter Seven

Tory paused at the top of the stairs, Michael's belligerent tone catching her attention. She wasn't eavesdropping, but she couldn't help that their voices carried up the stairs. Hellfire? Ridicule? What was he talking about? What deed had been done?

God, if they were discussing what she thought they were discussing she would be eternally mortified.

After waiting a few more seconds, she heard nothing else of interest, only silence. Tory contemplated sneaking back downstairs. That was when a weird sensation hit her, slamming into her chest and sucking the air from her lungs. In a panic, she tripped, bumping into the wall, her nails scraping at the surface as she tried to catch her balance.

The moment passed as quickly as it had occurred, leaving her breathless and disoriented. Stumbling down the stairs, her only intent to reach Michael, Tory found the living room empty, all trace of Michael gone.

Sweet Jesus, what had just happened?

Then she felt him, like a phantom caress in her chest, Michael surrounding her, stilling her fear. Faint whispers in her mind reassured her all was well, she was loved, protected. It was the strangest feeling sensing him in the deepest recesses of her psyche when he wasn't really there. But it also quenched the uncertainty and terror.

Tory took the stairs two at a time, the murmurs in her head egging her on, reminding her of her promise. By the time she reached the attic she was trembling from the rush of adrenaline.

Damn Michael. He had her in a mild state of panic when there was absolutely no need. Asmodeus had last been spotted in Chicago. He was still a long way from Boston. And anyway, there was no reason to assume he was any closer to finding her than he had been twenty-four hours ago.

After stepping into the middle of the pentagram, Tory went through the ritual of quickly reconnecting the white line she'd broken to release Michael. She recited the spell, enclosing herself within the safety of the circle.

As the minutes ticked by, Tory began to wish she'd brought a book, something, anything to pass the time. Food would have been good too, since she was getting hungry. And she had to pee.

A quick glance at her watch showed only fifteen minutes had gone by, damn it. She was never going to make it. If Michael didn't return soon, she was going to lose her freaking mind.

Another ten minutes and Tory couldn't wait any longer. It was her own fault for thinking about it. Now she couldn't concentrate on anything else. If she didn't go to the bathroom soon she was going to pee her pants.

And she was still hungry.

It would serve Michael right if she ended up dead. How long did it take to ask some chick a couple of questions? It wasn't exactly like he had to factor in travel time or anything.

Sucking in a deep breath, Tory knew she wasn't being fair. Recanting the spell, she reminded herself the poor woman had been attacked, could still be hanging on death's door right now and certainly deserved a little bit of Michael's time.

Though she would seriously prefer the witch find her own angel.

That consideration stopped Tory in her tracks. The thoughts swirling around in her mind were really uncharacteristically nasty, especially the ones involving Michael anywhere near the witch in Chicago. She wasn't normally the jealous type, or at least she didn't think she was. Truthfully, she'd never had anything to be jealous about before Michael but still...

Tory shrugged as she descended the staircase, heading toward the bathroom. Maybe she was the jealous type. So shoot her.

After hitting the bathroom, Tory grabbed a spoon and bowl, a box of Captain Crunch and half a gallon of milk before heading slowly back up the stairs. She didn't want to get back into the circle but she knew if she wasn't there when Michael returned he would be plenty mad. He'd be sure to go all ballistic on her and Tory would find herself a virtual prisoner in her own home.

That would suck.

With her hands full, Tory tried juggling the door and her goodies before finally discovering she had to back her way into the attic to get through the doorway. When she swung back face forward, she found standing between her and the circle a man. Evil emanated from him in waves, totally contradicting his beautiful appearance. The need to vomit damn near brought her to her knees, and her box of Captain Crunch ended up on the floor, the first casualty of the evening.

Over six-and-a-half feet of ripped blond maleness rushing toward her might not have sent her into a panic, but the blood-curdling growl and the long steel blade aimed directly at her certainly did. Tory spun to the right, using the only weapons at her disposal, the half-gallon of milk and ceramic bowl to beat the intruder back. Hardly effective, neither did enough damage to help her get away. The milk bounced off his chest and he used his sword to bat the bowl away, sending it careening into the wall.

The only chance Tory saw of escaping the demon was the stairs, but she hated the thought of turning her back on him. As if she really had any chance of getting away. It was so unfair—just when she finally had something to live for.

She'd barely moved in that direction when she felt the first sting of his blade piercing her back. With a startled cry, Tory lunged forward, fire burning through her veins. She stumbled, her knees buckling, and she crashed to the floor, a sob ripping from her chest as the blade pierced her again, deeper this time. Gasping for breath, she tried to crawl away, but the floor under her was too slick and she collapsed in a heap on the wood.

"Die, bitch. Die," the inhuman voice snarled and Tory was pretty certain the bastard was going to get his wish. Death's icy grip was descending over her, and within its cold embrace the pain and fear began to slide away. As peace replaced horror, she finally embraced the darkness.

Chapter Eight

It turned out the witch lived in one of those chic condos in downtown Chicago overlooking Lake Michigan. Unlike Tory's home, where her nearest neighbor was miles from her, Evie Stanton's was only a wall away, and Michael couldn't fathom how no one had heard her screams.

As he approached the woman her eyes grew larger with each step. By the time he'd come to a halt right in front of her they were the size of saucers. At one time this would have pleased Michael greatly. He would have viewed it as a sign of respect. But that would have been LBT or Life Before Tory. Now it just annoyed the shit out of him.

"What did the demon want from you?" he demanded. His voice was a little harsh and Evie flinched. Michael knew he was frightening her, and he probably should have felt bad. But damn it, Evie Stanton was hardly on death's door. Hell, she'd only been kicked around a little bit. Michael figured there was a reason for that. Asmodeus had gotten what he'd come looking for.

"Michael, Ms. Stanton has been through a difficult time." Skath, the angel whose soul purpose was to govern the spell casters, approached. His tone was a gentle reprimand, and Michael watched Evie's gaze swivel to Skath, her look changing from one of a frightened rabbit to blatant hero worship.

He growled. "I am aware Ms. Stanton has been through a difficult couple of hours, but even as we speak there is a demon hunting witches, and I'll be damned if I let him succeed in killing his target."

His snarl must have been more brutal than intended because it drew a whimper from Evie, and the woman leaned closer to Skath, who patted her back softly. "Just tell Michael what you can, dear, so he can be on his way. You want him to make the demon pay for his treatment of you, don't you, Evie?"

Evie nodded, tears welling in her eyes before slowly spilling over her lashes. "He had this little brown teddy bear and demanded I scry for the owner, a little girl, he claimed. But I kept seeing a woman, blonde hair, about five-three, and that angered him."

Michael tried to tell himself it could have been anyone Evie Stanton had seen. Five-three blonde-haired women were not uncommon, especially not with the invention of in-home dye kits. It didn't mean she had actually seen Tory.

"He kept insisting I was wrong. I was weak. Then he hit me. Kept hitting me..." Evie left off on a sob, burying her face in Skath's chest. Her slender shoulders shook and Skath grimaced over the top of her head.

Michael nodded for him to continue prodding her. The woman hadn't said anything telling him whether or not Asmodeus had discovered information concerning Tory, but Skath grimaced and swiftly shook his head. Michael could feel a headache beginning to form, an insistent pounding right behind his eyes. Jesus, he really hated dealing with humans.

"What else did you see?" he finally demanded because it was apparent Skath wasn't going to.

"Boston."

The one word mumbled into Skath's shirt sent a chill down Michael's spine and as a vicious curse was ripped from his chest, Evie began whimpering again. "Damn it, I'm not going to touch you. Did you tell the bastard anything else?"

When the woman didn't respond, only vigorously shook her head, Michael turned away, striding back to Zadkiel who stood waiting on the opposite side of the room.

"Well?" his second questioned.

"The woman revealed Tory's location. I must return to her immediately!" And as soon as Michael spoke her name, like a punch in the gut, he knew something was wrong. "Son of a bitch," he snarled, teleporting to his mate's location.

It took a minute for him to gain his bearings, for his body to adjust. In his confusion, he couldn't understand the form huddled on the floor inches from the staircase or the larger hulking figure standing over it, screeching and shielding its eyes. The presence disappeared before Michael could react, a small fraction of time he knew would haunt him for eternity, and then he realized what the motionless mass on the floor was.

"Tory!" Her name tore out of him like thunder.

Michael rushed to her side before falling to his knees. Gathering her into his arms, he cradled her broken and bleeding body to his chest. He felt the cry bubbling up from his chest, forcing its way from his lips, and he clutched his mate to him, rocking her gently as he buried his face in her neck.

It couldn't end like this. It wasn't fair. All these centuries he'd spent protecting humans and he couldn't keep one little woman from harm.

When the wetness hit Michael's face he did not immediately recognize it for what it was. Tears. His tears. For the first time in his long existence, he was weeping. Even Lucifer's betrayal had not brought him to his knees.

"My love, don't do this to me," he whispered, his voice hoarse, forcing him to choke out the words. "I won't be able to survive without you. I am not strong enough."

It's funny really, what one considers when they believe they have hit bottom.

How the hell had Gabriel endured?

It was in that moment Michael realized even in the midst of his heart-wrenching sorrow he could still feel her soul inside him. It had not fled this dimension. In fact, it had never left her body. She lived. And then he remembered the blood he'd shared with her.

He was a fool.

He willed a small dagger into his palm and used the pointed edge to puncture his fingertip. A few drops of blood oozed from the wound before Michael thrust his finger into Tory's mouth, rubbing it against the inside of her cheek. But he didn't dare allow her to consume too much. He only wanted to give her enough to aid in her healing, not to turn her, forcing her to exist on his blood.

Raining kisses along her hair, her face, her neck, Michael gave thanks that he'd already had the forethought to take the necessary steps in prolonging her life. And considering how close she'd come to death, Tory might not want to remove his balls with a dull, rusted knife when she gained consciousness.

Well...he could hope. Sometimes humans got testy about their mortality.

Gently lifting her into his arms, Michael cradled her against his chest before slowly rising, careful not to jostle her and cause her anymore pain. With extreme care, he descended the stairs and moved toward the bedroom, stopping only when his knees brushed the mattress.

The sheets were still rumpled from when they'd made love, reminding Michael of the sense of home he'd found within his mate's willing body. It only made him more determined to secure their future. Asmodeus would die for what he'd done to Tory and it no longer seemed to matter to Michael who delivered the killing blow. He would have all of his available warriors out scouring for the bastard because he intended to make certain the threat to his mate was eradicated. For good.

Except Zadkiel. Michael had a very special task for his second. Until Asmodeus was found he could not risk leaving Tory alone. But the portal to Heaven still needed to be located. As Zadkiel was the only other individual who understood the necessity in finding the damn thing quickly, he would leave no stone unturned until the job was done.

But before contacting Zadkiel with his new orders, Michael stripped Tory of her stained clothing, immensely relieved to find some of the wounds already closing. Gently cleansing her body, he removed all traces of blood from her skin. He would not have her waking still covered in the reminder of her attack. Then he hid her nudity underneath one of his T-shirts, an archaic sense of pride filling him in seeing his clothing draped across her skin.

Glancing down, he was reminded of the fact he was also covered in her blood. He couldn't have her rouse to find him in this condition. After taking a quick shower, he dressed before returning to her side. She was still unconscious—she didn't appear to have moved an inch—so after quickly examining her wounds once again and finding them continuing to heal, Michael drew the blankets over her before leaving her to rest.

But he didn't go far, only to the living room. From there he summoned Zadkiel, who immediately appeared. Michael wasted no time making his demands known.

"I want Asmodeus dead. Now. Have every available warrior hunting that bastard down. Pull those not involved in life-and-death situations and find him."

"Should he be held for you to dole out punishment?" Zadkiel questioned with a sardonic twist and Michael folded his arms across his chest.

"It doesn't matter who kills him as long as he does not escape again."

Surprise danced across Zadkiel's face. "What has happened?"

Michael shook his head. He really didn't want to give voice to the words. The knowledge of Tory's attack left a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. "He was here," was all he could manage to force past his lips and it was enough. Zadkiel turned white as a sheet.

"Good God. Is she okay?"

With a brisk nod, he turned his back on his second and strode across the room to stand next to the couch and stare sightlessly out the window. "She will live. Asmodeus had best not."

"I'll get right on it."

"Zadkiel, wait," Michael called, twisting quickly to catch the other male before he disappeared. Zadkiel paused, his look questioning.

"I have a special assignment for you. I want you to hunt for the portal."

This must have surprised Zadkiel because his forehead furrowed, eyes narrowing, and he grew contemplative. "The portal? Well, I can't say I saw that one coming but I should have."

Michael glanced away, a niggling sense of guilt beginning to fester. "I will not allow Tory to be terrorized in such a way again."

"You do realize if you do this she will no longer be a secret. You will not be able to hide her in Heaven."

Returning his gaze to Zadkiel's, he nodded. "Any humiliation or punishment I would be forced to endure is nothing compared to her safety. Tory is my only concern. The rest is incidental."

With his head cocked to the side, Zadkiel studied him for a moment before responding, "I will do as ordered, my—"

"No," Michael hastily interrupted. "I am asking this as a special favor. For me."

A slow smile spread across Zadkiel's face. "You know, this is the first time you've ever asked for my help."

"And hopefully the last," he mumbled under his breath. "I'm sure you'll see you are suitably compensated."

"Let's just say you'll owe me," Zadkiel said with a chuckle. "You are not the first to find his mate and I'm sure you won't be the last. I might need that favor someday."

Michael snorted. God forbid Zadkiel mate. He needed someone he trusted to retain their faculties. This whole mating business drew a male to the edge of insanity. He'd been breaking one covenant after another since he'd first set eyes on Tory.

A weight lifted from Michael's shoulders as Zadkiel faded from sight. It was good to know someone had his back. Once upon a time, it would have been Gabriel riding shotgun.

With a sigh, he decided it was best not to think about Gabriel right now. Tory should awaken soon. Maybe later he could find a way to mend the cosmic gap between him and Gabriel, but for now Tory was his one and only priority.

Chapter Nine

Asmodeus paced the tiny confines of his chamber, hissing in frustration. The bitch still lived. Why? He should be free. Why was she not dead?

It wasn't from lack of trying on his part. He'd stabbed the bitch enough. But she'd continued to hang on. And then that sanctimonious bastard, Michael, had appeared. Michael. What the hell was he doing showing up? He never involved himself in the workings of humans. It was like a cardinal rule or something.

Ripping a hand through his hair, Asmodeus still couldn't get over the shock. The fucking archangel Michael. He was growing weak. That's why the son of a bitch had almost caught him. He'd known he would grow to regret letting the witch in Chicago live, but he'd been in such a hurry, thinking the end was within his grasp. Well, there was nothing else to do but find another meal. Something to last him several days. Then he would return and finish the job.

That drew a smile to his face. Yes, kill the bitch.

He came to a sudden halt, it finally hitting him. The look on Michael's face just before he'd fled. The anguish. The fear. It was what had struck him wrong. Michael cared about the woman. She was important to him.

Could it be that easy? Could he possibly kill two birds with one stone?

If he could defeat the mighty Michael... Oh, how Lucifer would reward him. He'd set Asmodeus up as his right-hand man. And without Michael around there would be no one to stop them. They'd take their rightful places on Earth. As gods. Corralling the humans like cattle, feasting on their souls until they were too full to move.

Then Lucifer would be next. If he could wipe out Michael, what was stopping him from going all the way and taking over Hell? He'd be *it*. King of Hell.

Yes. King was good. Very good.

Chapter Ten

Tory woke, panic rolling through her, chagrined when she was unable to recall the reason. She couldn't even remember how she'd ended up in bed. The clock on the nightstand read eight, which was obviously a.m. given the amount of sunlight flooding the bedroom.

Wait. How did it get to be daylight? The last thing Tory remembered was darkness had just fallen and Michael was leaving...but he was worried...about something. A demon?

Yes. That was it. A demon.

Tory jerked upright, the memory of the attack crashing over her. The demon's damn sword had pierced her flesh over and over again. She'd never in her life encountered anything so painful. Not even when, at the age of twelve, she'd seriously botched up a spell and set her pants on fire.

This time though, the culprit hadn't been a tiny little fire one of the stooges could put out with a great gust of wind. No, the sword had plunged into her, shredding major organs and destroying her from the inside out. She should be dead. At the very least, in the hospital clinging to life. So unless weeks had passed while she was out cold, something was very, *very* wrong.

Carefully edging off the bed, Tory expected pain but encountered only mild tenderness as she hobbled to the bathroom. Lifting the shirt that hung past her knees, she glanced down and spotted a thin white line where she was certain the blade had exited when it had gone through her body. A sense of panic overwhelmed her and, twisting in front of the mirror, she inspected her back, finding only a few areas of puckered skin. She tried to suck in a deep breath but a wheeze was all she accomplished as she fought back the terror.

What sounded like the door to the bedroom crashing into the wall drew tension through her until she heard Michael's bellow.

"Tory! Love, what is it?"

Storming from the bathroom, she slammed the door behind her before meeting him in the middle of the room. "What the hell happened to me?" When the only response to her demand was a guilt-stricken look, she added, "What did you do to me?"

Michael refused to answer, turning his back on her and moving toward the window in a blatant attempt at avoidance.

"Is it that terrible?" she whispered, a sense of dread filling her. While she couldn't imagine what it could be—she was alive after all—Michael's actions confirmed it was bad.

He sighed, and then softly said, "I gave you some of my essence."

Tory felt her forehead wrinkle in confusion. Essence? What the hell was he talking about? "You didn't use a condom during sex. Is that what you mean?"

Michael shook his head slowly. "There was no need the first time. Until we bonded pregnancy was impossible and we angels do not suffer from mortal disease. No, Tory, I fed you my blood."

"Eww. Your blood? What the hell did you do that for?" she demanded as she strode across the room, not stopping until she was standing right behind him.

Michael swiveled to face her, his piercing gaze meeting hers. "To make you immortal, my love."

Okay, Tory hadn't expected that to come from his mouth. "Immortal?" she repeated dumbly and Michael nodded. "Like immortal, immortal?"

His lips curved into a slight smile. "There's only one kind of immortal, love. You either are or you're not."

"But how?" Tory felt like she was repeating herself, but she couldn't grasp the concept.

"It was my blood, Tory. Too much and you turn into a vampire. Just enough and mortal death is no longer an option."

"But I can still die?" she asked, getting there was a distinction.

"Yes. There is a poison Lucifer managed to develop from corrupted souls, but even it is not certain death. And not something just any demon is able to get his hands on. Only Lucifer and his most trusted, of which Asmodeus is not."

Resting her head over his heart, Tory let the steady rhythm soothe her. Immortal she could deal with. Vampire she could not. She'd been raised to have an unrelenting fear of the creatures. Then again, they drank blood and there were all kinds of wrong about that.

"Okay."

Michael lifted her face, an arched brow meeting her gaze. "Okay? That's it? Just okay?"

"Yes. Okay." Pulling free from his grasp, she returned her head to his chest. "But no more blood. Vampires freak me out."

"I'm not surprised," he said, chuckling hollowly. "It was a vampire who killed Ariadne."

Tory jerked her head, bumping into Michael's chin. She winced, her hand drifting to rub the spot as she stepped away from him. "Lord, I don't even want to know. I have enough aches and pains without contemplating that one."

Michael wrapped an arm around her waist, gathering her to him as he guided her to the bed, clucking like a mother hen the whole way. "Why didn't you tell me you hurt? Rest now," he ordered, pulling the blankets back. But she sat on the edge of the bed, shaking her head.

"What about Asmodeus?"

“Don’t worry about him,” Michael stated, gently pushing at her shoulders, trying to get her to lie back and sleep. “You need your rest.”

Knocking his hands away, Tory growled in frustration. “I will rest once I know what I should expect from the damn demon trying to kill me, Michael, and not a minute before.”

He stilled, assessing her as if he were trying to determine her seriousness. With a sigh, Michael sank beside her on the bed. Clasp ing her hand tightly in his, he drew it into his lap, appearing to study their entwined fingers. Tory’s patience began to wane quickly.

“I figure by now Asmodeus has realized you are not dead, which means he did not acquire whatever it is he is after. Now, if he is familiar at all with humans, he might expect you to linger a day or two. But after that he’s going to realize something is not right. And that is when we can expect him to return to finish the job. Only this time he will be met with the surprise of his eternally damned life. Me. Unless my warriors find him first, of course. Then the threat will be neutralized.”

“And we can get on with our lives.” Tory smiled brightly, but the look in Michael’s eyes had it sliding away.

“You do understand, Tory, he is only the first. You are going to be an amazingly powerful witch once you learn the extent of your true powers. Others will come unless...”

She waited for him to continue, but Michael seemed reluctant so she prodded, “Unless what?” When it didn’t seem like he was going to answer, she added, “I swear, if this is our future, Michael, you hiding things from me, you can just keep it.” Tory rose to her feet and tugged her arm in an attempt to gain her freedom. But Michael yanked back and, losing her balance, she ended up in his lap.

“I want you to return with me, to Heaven.”

Now she stared at him flabbergasted. Was he serious? “How is that even possible?”

“There is a portal, but its location has been lost over time. I have Zadkiel searching for it as we speak. It is how you shall gain access.”

“And if I decide not to?”

Michael rested his forehead against hers and sighed. “You really do not want me to answer that.”

“So you are only pretending to give me a choice.”

“You don’t understand what it did to me, to find Asmodeus standing over your bloody form. I cannot go through that again.”

Michael’s response floored Tory. She was the one who had suffered the horror of being run through with a sword. Granted, she had probably blocked out a lot of the details and not everything was totally clear. And she was almost certain the recollection of pain had also dimmed. But still. He was making it all about him and it just pissed her off.

“What about me? I was the one stabbed. I don’t really want to go through it again either.”

“Then come with me,” Michael bellowed.

“Fine,” Tory yelled back.

For one stunned moment, Michael stared at her, his eyes wide. And then he laughed. “Love, you are going to be the death of me.”

“As if,” she mumbled in reply because his lips had already taken control of hers.

Winding her arms around Michael’s neck, Tory arched into him, her breasts flattening against his chest. Who would have ever thought little Victoria Bloom, the misfit, the freak, could ever find such bliss? Her soul mate. She was still coming to terms with what it all meant.

She would never be alone again.

Her sob was captured by Michael’s mouth as the overwhelming urge to worship every inch of him overtook her. Tearing her lips from his, she grasped the edge of his T-shirt. She was desperate to tug it up over his chest but her fingers kept getting tangled in the material. Chuckling, Michael knocked her ineffective hands away before pulling the shirt over his head. Once it was no longer in her way, Tory attacked, running her hands over taut muscles as her lips latched onto one tanned nipple. Michael groaned, his hand cupping the back of her head, fingers tangling in her hair.

“Do you like that?” she asked a little uncertainly.

“If I liked it any more I’d come in my jeans.”

His response drew a smile to her lips. With one final lick, she pulled away, ignoring the slight tugging in her hair, and lifted her eyes to meet his. “I want you naked on the bed,” she murmured.

Michael lifted a brow, echoing her grin. “Do you now?” he murmured.

“Yes, I do.” She reached down to run a hand over his covered cock, already rock hard. “And I think you’ll enjoy it.”

Michael closed his eyes, a shudder rippling through him as she squeezed lightly, massaging his flesh with a teasing hand. His hips jerked. The low moan escaping his clenched teeth caused Tory to shiver.

“Shit,” he hissed before grabbing her wrist in his tight grip. “Keep that up and it will be over far too quickly.”

She leaned forward, her lips hovering over the shell of his ear. “Then strip. Now.”

Michael’s entire body jerked this time, then he jumped to his feet, shoving his jeans and underwear down in a frantic rush. He stood proudly in front of her, his cock only inches from her face. Tory circled her palm around the base, marveling at the feeling of silk over steel. Tightening her grip, she pumped from root to tip, smearing the drop of precome around the slit before tugging gently, forcing Michael closer.

She studied the organ, watching more wetness leak from the eye as she fondled the head and her curiosity grew, wondering how he would taste. Flicking her tongue out, she lapped at the meaty cap, dragging a groan from Michael’s chest. His fingers returned to her hair, tangling through the strands, drawing her face closer to his body.

“Damn it, Tory. You’re killing me. Open your mouth, love. Suck me in.”

Complying with his breathless demand, she wrapped her lips around the head, running her tongue under the glans. Her hands grasped his thighs for balance, feeling the tension building with each pass of her tongue. She'd never thought she'd have this opportunity to give the man she loved pleasure, and now that she was here, that she actually could, she was rushing toward a high she'd never expected.

Michael began a gentle rocking motion, pushing his cock a little farther into her mouth with each pass. Tory wrapped a hand around the root to keep him from gagging her. Setting a rhythm, she pumped the base each time she sucked the head past her lips. Her teeth lightly scraped the shaft, dragging another groan from him.

"Play with my balls, Tory. Roll them in your hand."

His pleading tone had her palming his testicles, the soft furry sacks feeling so different from the hard shaft in her mouth. She experimented, squeezing them gently in her hand before milking them with her fingers.

"That's it, love," he whispered hoarsely. "You feel so damn good."

Lifting her eyes, Tory found Michael's torrid gaze on her, watching as his dick disappeared into her mouth. His face was pulled tight in a grimace, his teeth clenched as if he fought for control, and Tory loved every minute of it. She felt powerful.

His fingers tugged the strands of her hair. "Pull back, Tory, or I'm going to come," he demanded, which only incited her to suck harder. Michael groaned roughly. "I mean it, Tory. I can't hold on." It only took him a few seconds to realize she had no intention of stopping. His hands went from trying to gain his freedom to gripping the back of her head. "All right, love. You want it, here it comes." He surged forward, forcing the head of his cock to the back of her throat.

Tory gagged only a second before her throat opened, accepting the intrusion. His cock pulsed against her tongue, semen shooting from the tip. Michael cried out and there was nothing else she could do but swallow the creamy fluid. Tory kept her suctioning lips around him, drinking every last drop until he was spent. When she released him, Michael stumbled away from her.

Breathing heavily, he sagged to the mattress, his pants still hanging around his knees. The amusing sight had Tory chuckling and, as he pulled her into his arms, he said, "Give me a second and I'll return the favor."

"You already have," she whispered, laughter fading away. "You've given me more than I ever expected just by being here."

Michael rolled her under him, his hands brushing her hair back as he gazed into her eyes. "I could say the same, my love. I love you, Victoria Bloom."

Nodding, Tory was surprised to feel his cock growing hard against her abdomen. "I want you inside me now."

Michael groaned softly. "Then open up for me, love. Wrap your legs around my waist."

Tory did, giving a soft cry when she felt him entering her slowly. Her first climax took her by surprise, starting before he was even embedded completely within her. Michael cursed, fisting the bedding on both sides of her head as he retreated then thrust deep. Setting a steady rhythm, he prolonged her first orgasm, sending her falling headfirst into another almost immediately.

Her nails dug into his shoulders, her thighs tightening around him as she arched up, meeting each deep plunge. The third time she came the tremors ripped through her entire body, dragging breathy sobs from her throat, and above her Michael tensed, groaning into her ear.

Tory clung to him, never wanting to lose the security of his arms around her. While the prospect of leaving Earth to remain with him frightened her, she wouldn't let fear stop her from grabbing hold of happiness with both hands. She had been alone for too long to be foolish enough to let love slip from her grasp.

Chapter Eleven

Forty-eight tension filled hours later and still no demon. Asmodeus had left a trail of bodies all along the East Coast with no rhyme or reason. Michael's warriors had been chasing their own asses, unable to locate the bastard, and Michael was strung up tighter than a bow.

Tory was doing her best to entertain him, enticing him with sex, but even that had failed to relieve the stress. Not that Michael would dare complain—he wasn't a fool. But he feared getting too distracted would lead to disastrous consequences, namely Tory skewered on the end of a sword.

Michael slid under the spray of water, rinsing the soap suds from his body and wishing he had accepted Tory's offer to join him. Being as it was only about an hour until dawn, he'd declined, believing the likelihood of Asmodeus popping in this close to sunrise next to nil. But he didn't like having her out of his sight.

After turning off the water, he grabbed a towel from the rack and then wrapped it around his waist without really bothering to dry off. He could sense Tory's frustration. She'd been heading up the attic stairs determined to try casting some sort of locator spell when he'd walked into the bathroom. Finding Tory new spells to occupy her time was about the only thing those two stooges were good for.

Michael made a stop in the bedroom to dress before beginning the climb up the narrow staircase. Halfway up a loud boom damn near shook the foundation and his first thought was of Asmodeus. He yelled Tory's name, taking the rest of the stairs two at a time, not slowing until he'd crossed the threshold.

The attic was filled with wisps of smoke and the smell, like burning hair, was nauseating. Michael buried his nose in the neck of his shirt, eyes watering as he scanned the room for Tory. And he found her all right, stomping out the last few sparks of what had apparently been another small fire. It was the third in two days. His mate would have made a splendid pyromaniac if it had been intentional.

She had the good grace to blush when she saw him standing there, arms folded across his chest.

"I don't understand why I can't get this," she said, her tone whining and causing Michael to clench his jaw. It wasn't the first time they'd started a discussion in such a way and he feared probably not the last. He wondered if he would be doing the universe a favor by finding someone to bind Tory's magic.

"Love, I don't understand why this is difficult for you. You are a very powerful witch."

"Me either," she whispered, approaching him. She took hold of his wrists, guiding them around her waist as she rested her cheek over his heart.

He held her tightly, hearing the tears she was trying to hold back in her voice. Burying his face in her hair, he breathed in the subtle scent of vanilla. It never failed to soothe him. The same way wrapping his arms around Tory seemed to do for her. She finally sighed and sagged against him.

“Do not fret. As soon as we have things settled here I will have Skath recommend another witch to help train you. It will be okay. I promise you, my love.”

He felt her nod against his chest and relief wash through her. The strengthening of their mate-bond had been growing over the last forty-eight hours and already Michael could feel the varied emotions surging through Tory at any given time. Soon it would be even more than that. They would be able to communicate via a form of telepathy known as mate-speak, conveying all thoughts and feelings to each other in an incredibly intimate sharing of minds. Something he used to believe a huge deterrent toward mating but now couldn't wait to share.

A sudden disturbance in the air was Michael's first indication they were about to have company. A faint trace of sulfur was his second. Acting on instinct, he pushed Tory behind him as a faint pop reached his ears and Asmodeus appeared on the other side of the attic. He took immediate advantage of the demon's disorientation, charging his foe as he commanded his sword, Justice, to appear in his hand.

Justice, blazing a fiery yellow flame, was attracted to the evil emanating from Asmodeus. It was a weapon forged in Heaven for the single purpose of extinguishing the souls of the fallen, and it had been discovered any soul could be drawn into the fire. When the blade was hued red or orange those destined for the House of Souls could be trapped within the flame for later retrieval, but when the blade glowed yellow even those of pure intent could unwittingly be forever destroyed. Today Justice was eager for a demon's demise.

Michael swung at Asmodeus's torso, cursing when the demon met his advance. He'd hoped this would be easy. Not that Michael was fearful of losing to Asmodeus. The demon had, after all, been routed from Heaven by one of Michael's weaker warriors. Any other time Michael would have played with his quarry for the sheer fun of it. But Tory was in the room and he would not risk her getting caught in the crossfire.

“Tory, get in the circle now!” he called over his shoulder, barely sparing a glance in her direction. He didn't have to—he was very aware of her every movement as if her limbs were an extension of his own. And for once, she didn't argue with him.

Their clash had sent Asmodeus stumbling back a foot, but he regained his balance before Michael could destroy him. The pair circled each other. Michael, confident in his superiority, paid little heed to Asmodeus's gloating facade.

“Nothing will protect your little witch from me,” Asmodeus taunted, his lips upturned in a smug smile. “Once you have been defeated, I will strip the flesh from her body inch by tiny inch. I might even let you watch while the life drains from you.”

Michael rolled his eyes. Why did demons always feel the need to gloat before he killed them? “And you expect to do this how?”

“Don’t you smell it, oh mighty Michael, the poison that will end your life?”

He felt Tory’s gasp wash over him but refused to acknowledge her fear. He wouldn’t give Asmodeus the satisfaction of seeing the demon’s words had affected him. And it really didn’t change anything. It couldn’t. Not when Tory’s wellbeing hung in the balance. Michael would have to be more careful, make certain Asmodeus’s poisoned blade did not touch him.

“Bring it on.” Completely blocking Tory from his mind, Michael egged the demon on, hoping in Asmodeus’s delusions of grandeur he would attack first.

With a shriek that shook the rafters, Asmodeus lunged at him, granting Michael’s wish. The demon’s eyes were lit with eager anticipation. His sword arm already swinging, Asmodeus aimed for his gut. Michael reacted quickly, Justice spitting and popping as the two swords clashed. Pivoting and using the heel of his boot, Michael slammed his foot down on to the demon’s toes, the howl of pain bringing him an ounce of satisfaction. He wanted Asmodeus to suffer tenfold for all the pain he’d caused Tory. Willing a dagger into his other hand, Michael slashed at the demon’s side, feeling the steel slide through skin.

Asmodeus jerked away, spinning to face Michael. The smugness was now gone from the demon’s features, his gaze warier. It should have made Michael ecstatic, but it didn’t. He couldn’t stop seeing Tory, lying bloody on the floor from the last attack. Shaking his head, he tried to clear his mind of the distraction, lurching backwards in time to avoid getting impaled by Asmodeus’s poisoned blade.

With a gleeful cackle, Asmodeus followed. Michael knew if he didn’t end the confrontation soon, eventually the demon would get lucky. While it wasn’t the wound that would prove fatal, the poison would eat away at his soul slowly—the process long and agonizing until nothing remained of him but ash. Feigning to the right, the demon following, Michael then sprang to the left, getting behind Asmodeus before the demon had realized his mistake. Justice firm in his grip, he embedded the tip in Asmodeus’s back.

The demon tried to jerk away, to rip free of his fate, but it was already too late. Justice glowed brightly. Great waves of yellow light surged into Asmodeus’s torso, sizzling and snapping in a happy chorus. Sensing Tory’s spike of fear, Michael wished he could move to comfort her. Instead, he braced his legs wide as pulsing waves of energy vibrated up his arm. The light grew larger, surrounding the demon entirely before flooding the attic with its intense glow. Everything, even the very air in the room, stilled for a brief moment and then all light and energy was sucked back into Justice with a resounding *pop*, leaving only a thin cloud of dust where Asmodeus had once stood.

Standing there, Justice still dancing in joyous waves, Michael barely recognized Tory had broken the seal on the circle of protection. He was too busy trying to get the wayward sword, which still sensed

another soul in the room, under control. Holding her off with an outstretched hand, he yelled, “Stay back!” He then concentrated with all his might on Justice. “Evanesco,” he commanded, and the sword disappeared.

Lowering his arm, Michael barely had time to prepare before Tory was jumping at him. “What the hell was that?” she demanded as he caught her, relishing the way she wrapped her limbs around him. Burying his face in her hair, he shook his head. He couldn’t speak past the lump in his throat because for a minute there he hadn’t thought Justice would heed his order.

“I love you, Tory” he whispered, his gaze drawn to the spot Asmodeus had stood. The threat was terminated. At least for now. But Michael knew it wasn’t over. There would always be some demon attracted by her power, who thought he could make a name for himself. Until Zadkiel found the portal Tory would never be truly free. Thankfully, Zadkiel believed he was close. With his hand cupping her cheek, he drew Tory’s head up, and his lips captured hers in a soft kiss.

“I love you too, Michael, my own personal avenging angel.”

He chuckled quietly. He guessed he was because for this one little human, Michael would storm the walls of Hell itself. His to protect and cherish. Her avenging angel.

Epilogue

As Michael hid, immersed in the shadows, he recalled all he'd learned of his target. Like his Tory, she was small in stature. But what she lacked in height, she more than made up for in courage. And she was strong. She would have to be for what he intended.

He'd been a fool.

Sure, he'd given Gabriel's grief proper lip service. It had been a tragedy, a terrible circumstance of fate. But until he'd held Tory's broken and bleeding body in his arms, believing he would lose her, Michael had never truly understood all Gabriel had suffered.

Now was the time to correct the injustice that had occurred to one of his best friends. Creeping forward, he whispered, "Gladuis," and Justice appeared, its red flame breaking through the darkness. While the woman slept on, unaware of his presence, he placed the tip on her abdomen, displacing the soul he had captured into her womb where it immediately merged with the newly formed bundle of cells.

But Michael did not get away unseen. He hadn't counted on the man sensing his presence and was a bit disconcerted when the man emerged from a connecting room, his gun already drawn. A warrior in every sense of the word, he stopped wide-eyed as his gaze rested on Michael and Justice. A demon hunter. Michael couldn't help grinning. Gabriel would probably try to take off his head if he ever discovered Michael had once again marked Ariadne as a hunter. He figured it would probably be best not to mention it.

"I have given you a great gift," Michael said, glancing back at the still-silent woman before returning his gaze to her husband. "Protect them well, human. Both of them." Then Michael flashed from the room.

Returning to Heaven, Michael breathed a sigh of relief—mission accomplished—and headed back to the rooms he and Tory shared on the top floor of the Powers' headquarters. Zadkiel had been successful in finding the portal about one month after Asmodeus had been terminated, and Michael had smuggled her in the dead of night. Most still didn't know of her existence, only his warriors whom he trusted to keep their silence. He hoped to keep it that way for as long as possible. Not forever. Only twenty-five or so years until either Gabriel saw fit to forgive him or he was far too busy dealing with his own mate to give Michael problems.

After entering the headquarters, Michael hurried past Zadkiel, ignoring the fact he had begun speaking. If there was a problem Zadkiel would have to deal with it on his own. Michael didn't have time. Tory was waiting for him and she had a new spell she wanted to try, something involving levitation. Since she insisted they be making love when she spoke the magic words, Michael wasn't about to be delayed.

And he figured getting a little singed would be worth it. Besides, she was getting better. The last time he'd only lost his eyebrows and they'd grown back.

About the Author

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Remembering the past can be painful. Ignoring it can be deadly.

Deals with Demons

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An Angels and Demons Story

In a world filled with magic, demons and death, Talia survives using her inborn ability to sense and track demons. A handy skill for a demon hunter. There's one demon, though, who's never far from her mind or her heart, damn his black soul.

Years ago Devlin saved Talia from the murderous demon who killed her family. The memory of him has haunted her ever since the night she fled his home, her body branded with a permanent reminder of his lust—and her humiliation.

Now he's back at her door with an offer she can't refuse. He's found the one who killed her family, and he'll help her kill the monster. For a price. One last heated night in her arms.

Temptation and the chance for revenge are too much for Talia to resist. However, once bound to Devlin in an unbreakable deal, Talia realizes too late there's more at stake than the death of her nightmares. Her heart wasn't supposed to be part of the bargain...but she should have known to expect anything when she made a deal with this demon.

Warning: This title contains hot demons and hotter sex. Author advises caution when making deals with the damned.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Deals With Demons:

"The master has ordered you home."

Talia tipped her mug up, savouring the last mouthful of beer before she slid the empty glass to the waiting bartender.

"Bully for him," she told the unwelcome man perched on the barstool beside her.

"I'm to bring you home at once."

Slanting a glance at the nervous man, Talia smiled her most vicious grin. "You can try," she replied, twisting her body to show him the glint of the dagger strapped to her waist.

The man gulped.

She shook her head in disgust. He was a disgrace. Why had Devlin even bothered to send him?

"You can tell your *master* he is welcome to try and force me back. But it will take a braver man than you to get me there."

Talia slid off the stool. She stalked through the crowded bar without a backwards glance.

Once outside she pulled her black coat tightly around herself to ward off the chilly night air. A single thought burned in her mind as she set off in the direction of her modest apartment. Why did Devlin want to see her after all this time?

Talia had been nineteen the night she fled Devlin's mansion. Not once in the six years since had he tried to contact her. And she'd know. She'd been waiting for him to make his move practically from the moment she'd left. The fact that he'd never come for her merely underscored what she'd known all along. To Devlin St. Clair she was not, and never had been, of any importance.

So why did he want her now?

She picked up her pace, trying to run from the unwanted memories.

Two things were special about Devlin. The first was simple. She'd been utterly in love with him since she was sixteen. The second was far more unusual. Devlin was a demon. As if that weren't enough, he also happened to be the most powerful demon in the city. Some might even argue the country.

The world Talia lived in was very far from the one most people thought they knew. Her life revolved around blood, death and magic. It had since the night her family had been murdered when she was fourteen.

Talia shook her head to try and repress the memories. It had been a night much like this one when her life had changed forever. The nip of autumn hung in the air and overhead the bright moon was almost full. She'd been in her room when the demon broke into her home. Her parents' screams had woken her. Because of her rather unusual talents, she'd known immediately what was in her house and she'd known which way he would turn when he climbed the stairs and reached the landing. Her room was to the right of the stairs, her younger brother and sister's was to the left. Talia had thrown herself out the window with the sound of the squeaky floorboard in the left hallway echoing in her ears. Saving herself had torn her apart, but she'd known, even then, she was no match for the demon. Unable to do anything else, she'd run until she was too exhausted to move.

And there Devlin had found her. Huddled in an alleyway, Talia had been trying to hide herself behind a garbage can when he rounded the corner. She'd known what he was, of course. She always knew. But unlike the monster in her house, this demon had crouched before her and silently held out his hand.

"I swear, child, I will never harm you," he'd whispered to her. He said nothing else, merely waited. Eventually Talia had crawled forwards and put her dirty hand into his.

In one night she'd lost everything she'd loved and gained a new life unlike anything she'd ever imagined.

Devlin had brought her to his mansion on the outskirts of the city and she'd lived there for five years. He'd found her the very best tutors to teach her since he refused to let her go to a normal school. And after her academic classes he trained her himself in all varieties of combat styles. Thanks to him she was one deadly woman. But he'd done more than train her. Devlin had been the first person to explain what she truly was.

Talia was a senser. She was gifted with the ability to feel demons and anticipate their movements. Those were the skills that had saved her life when her family had been attacked. Sensors' abilities made them unparalleled trackers and, given how rare a true senser was, their skills were in high demand. Capitalising on her gifts, Talia quickly made a name for herself as a demonic bounty hunter after she left Devlin. After all, a girl needed to eat and her former benefactor had kindly given her the training needed to hurt all the things that went bump in the night.

Which brought her back to why Devlin was looking for her in the first place.

He couldn't have been happy to learn he'd personally trained a woman who earned her bread by killing members of his race. However, if he wanted retribution he was a little slow. She'd been doing this for six years, and with his resources there was no way he'd be unable to find her if he truly wanted to.

Talia drew up in front of her apartment building and fished for her keys. With her salary she could afford a much nicer place, but this apartment was convenient and she liked its old charm.

She hopped into the warmth of the entrance way, thankful to be out of the chilled October air. There was an elevator in her building but she jogged up the stairs instead. An out-of-shape senser was a dead one. Five flights later she turned the keys in her door and entered her haven.

The apartment might not be sprawling but she'd filled the small space with absolute luxury. Her home had all the state-of-the-art toys. A huge flat screen TV hung on the wall before the most comfortable leather sofa Talia had ever felt. Her kitchen was equipped with all the fixings, even if she rarely used them. Takeout was more her style.

Talia kicked off her shoes and headed for her large bedroom. A massive king bed dominated the room and, with a loud sigh, she dropped backwards onto the soft mattress.

Closing her eyes, she relaxed into the bed.

By now the henchman had probably reported her words to Devlin. She wondered if he would actually come for her himself or if he would merely shrug and turn his mind to other matters.

Wincing, she acknowledged the latter option was far more likely. While her world had once revolved around Devlin, in his world she was merely a decoration. His pet senser.

Sitting up, Talia looked across the dark bedroom at her vanity mirror. She had changed since they last met. The skinny teenager had filled out into a nicely curved woman. Her once long black hair was now short and red. The pastels she'd favoured had been replaced by a full wardrobe of black. The only thing the same was her icy blue eyes. Well, she amended as her gaze dropped to her throat, her eyes and the black rose forever embedded into her skin.

The outline of a rose in bloom was clearly visible over her jugular. Right where Devlin had bitten her. At the touch of his lips, the small symbol had stained her flesh, never to be removed.

Demons are not vampires. They don't need to drink human blood to live, but for some demons as old as Devlin, blood could be an irresistible temptation. It was like adding brownies to a chocolate sundae. Not necessary but sinfully delicious.

Seeing the mark on her throat filled her with shame. Memories of the night she'd fled Devlin swirled in her mind.

As a child, it had taken Talia the better part of two years to fully trust Devlin. He'd been forever patient with her, waiting for her to accept him for what he was. But once she had been able to put aside her fear of the fact he was a demon, she had no defense against the other emotions he inspired. At sixteen, he had been an irresistible fantasy. Endless nights had been wasted fantasising her demon would sweep into her room and declare his undying love. Unfortunately for Talia, as she'd grown so had her feelings for her tempting demon saviour. She remembered waiting breathlessly on her eighteenth birthday, wondering if now he'd finally see her as a woman instead of a child. But Devlin was never short on bed partners and when his choice of companions tended to be tall, perfect models it was hard to compete.

But everything had changed a year later, on her nineteenth birthday.

Talia squeezed her eyes shut.

That night Talia had lost her virginity and her home. Again.

"Don't come looking for me, Dev," she'd whispered to her dark room. "Let me disappear."

Don't bother looking for trouble. It'll find you.

Break

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An Angels and Demons Story

Layla Roads' life is a laundry list of irony. Trailer trash. High school dropout. Beautiful liar. Highly skilled computer hacker. And one additional, extraordinary gift: the ability to see the demons and angels engaged in a ferocious battle on the urban streets at night.

When kidnappers hold her brother, Layla finds herself up to her neck in a plot to bring down a powerful blood demon. A crude, sexual, violent demon who kills without flinching, pushes her buttons, and looks at her with too-knowing eyes. What's worse is she feels an answering tug of desire.

It doesn't take Gethin long to figure out he has a pretty traitor on his hands—and that she's being blackmailed. As a lone human female her quest to save her brother is hopeless—just like the attraction between them. For even if Gethin helps her save all she holds dear, she can never be his...

Warning: Includes a devilish demon, a heroine caught between a rock and a hard place, several magical battles, and the steamy backseat of a car.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Break:

The sheer sexuality of the blood demon shook Layla Roads down to her core every time her gaze met his heavy-lidded red eyes. Through the transparent walls of her high-tech cubicle, she had a clear view of him prowling across the empty office with all the dangerous, lithe grace of a panther. Given how his eyes fixed upon her with blatant hunger, she couldn't help feeling as if she were the prey. Prey that, as casually as possible, hid the computer document she'd been in the process of memorizing and pulled up another one on-screen.

There was no one in the office besides her and Gethin. The downtown LA cityscape that sprawled out behind her through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls had yet to be tinted with the orange hues of morning. In the teeming metropolis that extended for miles beyond the heart of the urban jungle, most humans remained in bed behind locked doors, pretending to be safe from the shifting shadows of the night. Night was the battleground for the demons who had escaped from Hell and the angels who wished to push them back in.

The snowy white carpet beneath her heels would soon be stained black with blood. She didn't know when, just that it was a matter of time. Her trembling fingers removed the prim plastic glasses from her face to check the wire core visible through the gray frames of her glasses. A bad habit, but one she hadn't been able to break yet. The information she was memorizing was the only thing that could save her brother's life, but it did nothing to save her own. She was well aware that she was a liability. What demons did to

liabilities caused her to wake up night after night drenched in her own sweat and muffling screams of terror.

Perhaps the air demons would be merciful and kill her quickly and painlessly once her role in their scheme was done. If they left her behind Gethin would know that she had betrayed him, and she knew very well what he was capable of. His vengeance came from a deeper, uglier part of Hell than theirs did.

She had decided long ago that Gethin never slept. Despite this, there were never signs of exhaustion on his face, just carefully controlled violence and good old-fashioned lust that never failed to ignite a matching heat in her. This morning was no exception. The flimsy door to where she worked swung open with a speed that made her jump in her chair, even though she'd steeled herself.

"Ms. Gills." His voice was darker, deeper than the crevices his kind had crawled from, she thought bitterly. It was underscored with pure steel. Heat too—a weapon he used on her without mercy. He wanted her. He'd made it clear by the second day. Anyway, anywhere. In his bed. On her desk. On his desk. On the floor. Against the wall. And no matter how much indifference or discouragement she threw at him, that list grew longer and longer with every passing day. If she'd been exactly who she pretended to be, then who knew? Perhaps then she could act on the desire he stoked. But she wasn't Ms. Lana Gills as he thought she was. So she could never let it go further than words.

There was no hesitation showing on the hard, angled planes of his face or in his stride. His dark eyebrows formed a heavy, disapproving line across his forehead as he stalked behind her and pulled out the umpteenth hair clip she'd purchased, letting her heavy hair tumble down about her shoulders.

The heat of his fingers burned her scalp as if he'd branded her. "That," she said in the most frosty voice possible, "was uncalled for." Her voice didn't shake the way she worried it would.

Gethin simply sat on the corner of her desk and tilted her face up with a relentless hand. She didn't fight his superior strength, especially as he opened his other fist to let small pieces of silver rain down on her lap. She scowled at him, meeting his intense gaze squarely. "You owe me a new hair clip."

He raised an eyebrow. "I thought I'd told you to keep your hair down, Ms. Gills. It suits you." His gaze, crimson red where hers was brown, moved slowly from her eyes to caress the golden curls he'd just released. She'd been warned he had a thing for blondes. They'd been right.

"I generally find that women with tight buns are restricting their sexuality."

She couldn't help it. She snorted. "This, sir, is a workplace."

He grinned wolfishly, and her heart skipped a beat. Whether it did so because the rare humor that graced his face made him even more desirable or because he was fooling around with her bloodstream again, she didn't know. She'd once made the mistake of accusing him of elevating her heart rate as blood demons were able to do. She'd nearly ended up flat on her back on top of his desk, shirt unbuttoned, skirt around her waist, begging for more.

Well, if she had to be honest, she *had* ended up there, but given how quickly she'd come to her senses and scrambled away, it didn't count.



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