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ANGELS & DEMONS



BRE  K

TARRA BLAIZE

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

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.

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Break

Tarra Blaize

Dedication

For Kirill, Louise and Danielle.

You made me believe this was a matter of when, not if.

Chapter One

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.

"This may be a workplace, Ms. Gills, but there's more than office space in this building." He casually reached out with one large hand and stroked her inner thigh right where her pencil skirt ended. Heat rushed towards the spot. Could Gethin somehow sense her blood rushing to the surface of her skin as her nerves went on overload? She had to wear pants. Really. The only problem was, after one week working for Gethin, someone had broken into her company apartment and stolen all of her sensible work clothes. She could still remember her outrage when she opened her closet door one morning and found her clothes stolen and replaced with row upon row of blouses, skirts, and sheer undergarments secretaries would only wear on the silver screen. Judging by the cool smile on his face when she came to work wearing the most modest combination possible, she was fairly certain he was responsible. After all, who else in this office was enough of an ass to do so?

He scraped lightly with his nails down the sheer nylon of her tights. Trying to disguise the jolt of her body, she reached out to pick up her steaming mug of coffee. Her hand shook too much to lift it. Too much

caffeine, she told herself, despite the fact that she had yet to take her first sip. She slid her glasses back on and turned her attention to numerous rows of symbols scrolling slowly down her computer screen.

He glanced at her monitor. "Is that the document I asked you to track down in the database?"

She nodded.

"Email it to me. Now. This document isn't your responsibility any longer. Don't change the format."

She knew very well why the format of the symbols had to be preserved. They weren't symbols after all. She'd finally put together all the patterns she'd been agonizing over day and night. The coded words and numbers in the endless data she was able to access as she faxed reports and emailed spreadsheets were cleverly disguised as financial market data and weaponry orders.

Mission accomplished.

She'd cracked the code.

Never before had she been any kind of undercover spy or deep-rooted special agent. She was just Layla, a con artist with the ability to disguise herself and the brilliance to tackle almost anything related to a computer. She also could see paranormal beings when they had shielded themselves from human eyes. Yes, she, trailer-park trash extraordinaire, was one of the few humans who could see what the angels and demons were up to, day after day, week after week, year after year ever since Hell had overflowed five years ago.

A pity she had that rare ability, because she wouldn't have gotten into this mess otherwise. A mess with gorgeous dark curls and red eyes that could go from ice to lava in the space of a second. While she had so far avoided his fury, his passion would be her downfall. Why could he not be as needlessly cruel a demon as the others so he could go firmly into her "evil" category? She knew of other demon assassins, ones who made deranged human serial killers look like Bambi, for crying out loud.

But Gethin seemed...different. As if he had some sort of a purpose, a moral code, and he channeled his violence purely into political assassinations. His calling card was nicking his target with a bullet and bleeding them dry despite any medical attempts to save the victim. But what truly terrified her were the long drawn-out tortures done in the lower levels of the building to get information. Tortures he'd refer to in a calm, detached manner, warning her that he wouldn't be back for five hours. *Hold my calls and reach my cell phone for emergencies only. I'll be in the basement digging for data.*

She'd been shown the basement on the second day. It was a large maze of empty rooms with sinks and drains, chairs and tables. All bloodstained. All so silent that she could still hear the echo of doomed screams ricocheting from wall to wall, forever trapped in this never-ending violence gripping them all.

"Ms. Gills?"

Her attention snapped back. She flushed. "Yes?"

"Is that an answer to my question?"

“What did you say?” She thought back to what he might have asked while she was lost in thought but drew a blank.

“You do sleep naked then.” His fangs flashed.

Shoving her glasses firmly back up her nose, Layla swiveled her chair away from him and towards her computer screen, offense written in every rigid line of her body. “I’ve got work to do, Gethin. If you want it done, you really ought to leave. Now.” She glanced back at him, hoping he’d get the hint and leave her in peace.

The blasted blood demon just smiled. “Check your inbox. I need to find a demon and I need him found by yesterday. Start now. Forget locating that human. I’ll dump that on someone else.”

“I’ve already located the human, if the data you’re referring to was sent at three this morning.”

She had the distinct pleasure of seeing genuine surprise flash across his face. “So fast? My goodness, Ms. Gills, you may just be worth the obscene paycheck I give you.”

“As if you ever doubted it. Stop bothering me and I’d be even more productive. Then I’d be able to demand a raise.”

“So that you could buy more asexual clothing and hair clips?”

Her eyes widened. A freely given admission of guilt was too good to be true. “That was you then? With my clothes?”

His face was inscrutable again. “Do your work, Ms. Gills. I’ll be back in here at eleven to make sure you’ve made headway. Until then, I’ll be in the basement.”

Her stomach made a long, sickening turn. “I see.”

“Do you want to watch?”

“No!” It came out more vehemently than she’d intended it to.

“No interest in seeing what happens to my enemies? What I do to those people who you locate? How long it takes them to crack, split open and spill out words faster than blood?” He loomed over her chair, gripping the armrests so hard she knew from experience that there would be dents in the metal. His voice was no longer playful or teasing. It was harsh, raw and powerful, and she could almost taste the blood he lusted after.

The carved muscles underneath his shirt expanded as the bloodlust legendary to his kind took hold. Her breath quickened as her blood began to race, and she closed her eyes, struggling to break out of the hypnotic trance he wove around her. This is how she’d ended up on his desk the last time, legs locked around his powerful waist as she dug her nails into the corded strength in his arms. Not again.

“I’ve no interest in anything except being left alone.”

He laughed sharply, relinquishing control of her body so abruptly she felt dizzy.

“You say one thing, but your body says another.” He turned and headed towards the door as she did her best to not stare at the way his tailored suit hugged the contours of his behind. “By next month, Ms.

Gills, I promise I'll have you naked and willing in my bed. With my fangs deep inside your femoral artery. Research that if you have free time."

She didn't have to. The jolt of desire told her that she was just as sick as he was.

Taking off her glasses, Layla rubbed the bridge of her nose as she sat back, exhausted. She had just finished the latest round of data memorization and needed a break. Just two minutes. But a glance at the clock told her it was nearing eleven, and Gethin was nothing if not punctual. Sure enough, the elevator doors on the other side of the office slid open and he strode out, just as indifferent to the blood on his shirt as the others in the office were. She gave up pretending she was doing something and simply dropped her face in her hands, not looking up even when she heard her door open and shut.

Her glasses fell with a clatter when Gethin dropped a folder stuffed with papers onto her desk.

"These need to be filed."

Layla tried to keep the dismay off her face as she stood with the folder, but judging by the irritation on Gethin's face, she'd failed.

"Filing not good enough for the princess, Ms. Gills?" he taunted softly, taking a small step to bring his body close to hers. She looked up to meet his probing stare, hating how effortlessly dominant he was just by height alone. She could have sworn the heat of his body reached hers, and her blood began to race. She wondered if he was causing it—or if it was just her traitorous hormones.

Filing was beneath her job level, but she'd have no qualms if it didn't interfere with the time she needed to memorize the names and addresses she'd begun to decipher. But what could she do? "Certainly not," she ground out, well aware that she was doing a piss-poor job of acting like it. "Is this the entire pile?"

"Looks like it'll take you two hours. I've got a meeting that should last around three hours. Afterwards I'll have some more names for you to research. Now go." His eyes became distant, as they always did when he spoke about his projects. Layla couldn't help but wonder if after the attack it would be her name he'd be researching, her information he'd be uncovering. She dared not speculate how he'd kill her if he found her. Her body grew cold with sudden terror—he would surely torture her if he ever found out she was a spy, and she would be in the basement with him for more than a few hours. The worse the betrayal, the longer the time—and she'd heard rumors of it lasting weeks, months even, before he'd finish.

"Very well, then." She attempted to disguise her fear as impatience. Turning sharply on her heel, she headed out of her room, gripping the papers so hard that her knuckles turned white.

She was excellent at hiding. Good at masking her true feelings. More than adequate in the detective work he asked her to do. But it had been frightening how quickly he located the people he wanted on those rare times she'd been unable to uncover names and he'd taken on the project himself. It was terrifying to see their names in the papers afterwards, headlines announcing yet another mysterious—and at times downright gruesome—assassination.

She tried not to think about the vital role she played in their deaths. Her brother's life was at stake, and given that Gethin's assassinations more often than not tended to be big, bad demons and corrupted humans, she could even say they deserved it. But sometimes...sometimes it wasn't enough. Even though she knew it would have happened without her, all too often she felt as though she'd pulled the trigger herself.

But the names she'd uncovered from the decoded files—there was no way she could possibly memorize them all. How many had the air demons been expecting? Twenty? Fifty? There were hundreds upon hundreds, with more coming each day. Names of people, companies, nicknames, locations. She was expected to memorize them all. She'd need days, and the air demons had given her five weeks, tops. She'd already used up over four of them.

If his meeting would last three hours she needed to finish the filing in record time so she could memorize, memorize, memorize before he got back.

One hour and ten minutes later Layla strode out of the bathroom, paper towels clutched tightly around her index finger. She'd never filed so quickly, and though the cost was a wicked cut from a metal tab, it was well worth it. She had almost two hours to knock out her goal of fifty names and addresses before she had to deal with another assassination project for Gethin.

"Lana!" Todd was at her desk looking worried. Accustomed to being called Ms. Gills by all others, it took Layla a moment to respond. Todd was one of the few bright spots in her life right now. A quiet, friendly blood demon, nowhere near as powerful as Gethin, he was always there when she needed help. She'd grown closer to him than she'd anticipated and had to struggle daily to keep a friendly distance.

"Lana, I'm so sorry, but—what happened to your hand?"

His gaze was level with her face and he even made an attempt to hide his growing fangs, bless him. If it had been any demon other than Todd, she'd worry that his bloodlust would result in her being an unintentional lunch. But Todd had the kindest heart she'd ever known. Too bad he assisted a murderer and drank blood in an office where she was an undercover spy. Otherwise, he might have been the perfect guy to ask out on a date.

The blood had soaked completely through the paper towel. "Oh, drat. Nothing major, Todd. Just a paper cut of epic proportions. I've got some first aid at my—" Her voice trailed off and the blood rushed from her face as she registered what Todd was holding in his cupped hands.

Her glasses.

Snapped in two.

Layla cried out. Her stomach clenched in horror and her lungs struggled to take in air. Terror made her head feel light, and she lurched forward to grab her glasses, heedless of her injured finger. Sure enough, the transmitting device inside the frames had snapped cleanly in half. Todd's mistake had sent her

blackmailers the emergency signal. The air demons were about to attack, and she had barely any data ready.

Chapter Two

Todd grabbed her arms and carefully lowered her into her chair, kneeling before her. “Lana, I’m so sorry. They were on your desk and I didn’t see them and I put something on top of them.”

Lips numb, she asked, “When did this happen?”

Todd’s face filled with guilt. “About fifteen minutes after the boss sent you off filing. It’s all my fault. You’re in shock. I’ll get them replaced. I promise.”

She didn’t answer. She had to download the files onto a PDA, no matter the risk of someone detecting it. When the small receiver in the wire core of her spectacles was broken, it had signaled to her blackmailers that something had gone wrong and that she needed to be removed. She had to have something to show the demons or her brother was gone. Dead. Just like she would be very, very soon.

With a deep breath, she tried to clamp control over a world that had just imploded. “It’s not your fault, Todd. It was my fault.” The honest words felt bitter in her mouth. “I shouldn’t have forgotten them on my desk. I know it can become a nuthouse around here.” She turned away, her mind beginning to spit out warnings. She had around five minutes. Five minutes before a portal would open in thin air and the air demons would flood the room, killing all in their efforts to recover the data stored in her brain.

Her brother. Herself. Gethin. Todd. Someone was going to die today, and she’d lost her bargaining chip.

She needed those files. Now. But Todd was still in front of her, his reddish-brown eyes filled with remorse. She needed to save him, somehow. At least him. How to get him to leave?

“Todd, I’m fine. Really. They’re just glasses. But, if you don’t mind, can you take them over to the optometrist’s to get them fixed right now? I’m sorry to be such a bother, but I get headaches when I don’t wear them, and I know you’ve got a lunch break right now.”

Todd stood, visibly relieved. “Of course. Want to come with and grab lunch? The boss is still in his meeting, and we could get back here in an hour or so if we leave now.”

She forced herself to smile at him. “I’d love to, but actually, the reason I rushed through filing is because I remembered an assignment he gave me yesterday that I totally forgot about. I just want to download some stuff onto my PDA so I can have a chance to read them whenever possible. I’ve got other small errands I need to do, and reading on the way will help save my rear end.”

Todd's eyes crinkled slightly as he gave his trademark sweet smile. "Let's avoid getting you into trouble, shall we? If you fall behind, I'd be glad to run some errands for you. Lana—" he paused, delicately cleared his throat, "—you're dripping blood everywhere. Do you need help?"

"Thanks, Todd, but I've got it." She didn't need a demon going crazy on her right now. She grabbed a tissue and started to mop at the cut she'd forgotten all about. Her finger stung anew with a vengeance. "The glasses are already a huge favor."

"No problem," he assured her and hurried off, cradling the frames as delicately as he could. She instantly turned towards her laptop, grabbed her PDA and set up the downloads required.

Four minutes, approximately.

She grabbed a piece of paper and began to jot down some of the biggest names. If her PDA failed she'd have a hard copy backup. James Elron. New York. Elron Corporation, Vice President. Demon. Marked for assassination. Blood dripped all over the paper, but she didn't care. Tabitha Stevenson. Roy Jacobs. Agatha DeMarcus.

Two minutes later, an observation brought with it a rush of nausea so intense she made a blind grab for her wastebasket.

Gethin's meeting had apparently ended early, and he was striding along the offices, ducking into each one to check up on his employees.

He would reach her in less than a minute, and even a blood demon without his astute observations would see red flags instantly with her heart racing, breath short and blouse dotted with blood. She wrote faster, racing the downloading files. Perhaps if she had thirty very important names the air demons would believe she had gotten as many as she could. She'd scribbled twenty-seven down so far. Twenty-nine. Thirty-three. Spinning her chair so she faced away from the rest of the floor, she folded up the piece of paper and slipped it under her bra. She turned back to end the file download—she'd gotten about a tenth of them—and was reaching for her first aid in the top drawer of her desk when her office door swung open.

"Fucking hell, what did you *do*?"

The unfamiliar cadence to his tone shocked her so much she dropped the first aid cream. "N-nothing," she stammered.

Gethin looked absolutely furious as he strode around the desk, but his voice—there was a thread to it she'd never heard before. One that made her heart lodge in her throat and tears prick her eyes.

"Your heart is racing. You're covered in blood. You're about to hyperventilate."

She held up her finger, morbidly fascinated by the small ribbon of scarlet twisting down her finger to race across her palm. "I think I sliced my finger on a file. I didn't get blood in them. But the carpet here needs to be cleaned before it sets in."

"I don't care about the fucking file or the damn carpet." His fingers wrapped around her upheld wrist as he knelt before her to better examine the injury. Clearly, her sex drive was kicking in overtime before

she died, she thought, sardonically amused. Gethin kneeling between her legs almost made her last hours on Earth worth living.

"I've got a Band-Aid..." Her sex drive nearly turned inside out with dark delight when Gethin's mouth closed around her finger. Instinctively, she tried to pull her arm back, but it was like trying to escape a steel trap. She was utterly helpless as Gethin ran his tongue across the cut, his newly elongated fangs whispering across her flesh before he lifted his head. His eyes blazed as he dragged that same tongue around his lips to remove all bloodstains. Her breath hitched in her throat.

"Do you have any idea how good you taste?" he rasped. As if unable to help himself, he lapped one last time at the cut, his rough tongue creating a painful pleasure that fanned across her skin.

She closed her eyes. Shuddered. No, but if it were half as good as she imagined *he'd* taste... "Please let go of me. I've stopped bleeding." Demon saliva had healing properties, but she'd prefer a Band-Aid to playing with fire. "I—I think you've nearly closed the cut back up." The slash had been at least a good inch long. Where it had been weeping blood before, it was nothing but an angry red line now.

He didn't move from his position. He tilted her hand down, his grip heated around her wrist. Entranced, she watched as his other hand lazily traced the contours of her palm. She knew he was watching her face, but she couldn't summon the courage to meet his eyes.

"You certainly bleed a lot, Ms. Gills," he finally said. "Do you often injure yourself filing?"

"No," she whispered. "I'm fine now, thank you." How much time left? A minute? Maybe more? Maybe less? She was on borrowed time. She had no idea when exactly her glasses had been broken, but she could feel the snakes writhing deep inside, every sense, every inch of her skin hyper-alert to what was going on. Muted noises of other workers outside her office. His hot skin pressed demandingly against hers, her hand delicate in comparison to the hard, wide palms of his. The slight scent of coppery blood. She couldn't bring herself to give a damn right now that she was breaking just about every rule in her book. If she was going to die she might as well remember something to put a smirk on her face before her time was done.

"Lana," he whispered roughly. His hands left hers to wrap around the nape of her neck and draw her inexorably forward. He cradled her jaw as he leaned forward to meet her halfway, eyes melting into a hot, flaming crimson, face taut, and his firm lips slanting over hers with no hesitation whatsoever.

She'd barely registered the heat of his mouth when a horrifying noise rent the air, as if Heaven itself were being torn in half. Gethin's lips tore away from hers as he shoved her so hard her wheeled chair slammed into the far wall of her office. Dazed, she realized a slash of blue light had ripped, in midair, right next to where she'd been sitting.

"Air demons!" Gethin roared, and the office exploded.

She scrambled to her feet just as Gethin grabbed her around the waist and flung himself through the glass walls of her cubicle, shattering them as other blood demon warriors rushed towards them. She writhed

and twisted, desperately trying to free herself as the air demons poured through the enlarging holes torn in her office, their normally pale blue eyes darkening with their burgeoning powers. More and more portals slashed into existence, and already she saw bodies falling to the floor, throats torn open and wounds gaping.

He continued running, arms locked around her so tightly her breathing was restricted. She was forced to fall limp in his embrace as he raced full tilt through a maze of hallways, doors and stairs, many of which were only vaguely familiar to her. Having abandoned her attempts to free herself, she concentrated on memorizing the path he took, one hand on her chest to anchor the priceless list of names lest it fall out into the chaos.

Her world flipped again when Gethin halted abruptly, opened a door and flung her into a small room—one that looked strongly barricaded, she realized. She staggered and would have fallen had his hands not gripped her upper arms with bruising force. There were others in here, all looking as terrified as she felt. “My private office is the most guarded from these attacks,” he snarled. “Stay here with the other humans. Do not leave. If you leave, you will die. My demons are capable of fending them off, but you don’t stand a chance out there. Do you understand?” He shook her, hard, sharpened teeth bared in a snarl, muscles straining against his white shirt.

“You saved me,” she whispered, aware that tears were streaking down her face.

He’d been turning away, heading back to the battle that raged on behind them, but he turned at her words and grinned fiercely. The red of his eyes were swirling with dark streaks, and his powerful energy nearly crackled in the air around him. “But of course, Ms. Gills,” he drawled. “You owe me a hell of a lot more than a kiss for this, and I fully intend to collect as soon as possible. Lock the door behind me.” And he turned and vanished into the labyrinth of the office building.

Heedless of the cries and warnings of the other humans behind her, she waited a few agonizing seconds before she slipped back out. One woman whom she vaguely recognized from the front desk leaped forward to try to pull her back into the safety of the room. She tore herself from the woman’s grasp, kicked off her heels and darted the way Gethin had taken her as quietly as possible.

He’d saved her, and the least she could do was get to the air demons before they killed him. She had enough blood on her hands already, and she didn’t know if she could live with herself if Gethin was murdered too.

It was in an eerie silence that she tripped over the first body as she rounded a corner at full speed. Pain exploded in her ankle as it twisted, sending her to her knees with a force that promised bruises. Disoriented and dazed, she looked for the obstacle and gagged, the bile rising in her throat sharp and acidic.

She couldn’t even tell who or what type of demon it was—its face looked like it had been methodically tortured with a cheese grater. Blood trickled down the mass of pulpy, torn flesh to pool on the

floor where her foot had slipped. She jerked away, scrambling on her hands and one knee towards the other side of the hallway. The blood followed, soaking into her skin and smearing a trail of red after her.

She fought her rebelling stomach, but failed. Hunched over, she vomited violently, head spinning so fast she would have fallen had she not been on the ground. *Not my fault, not my fault*, she chanted, but it did nothing to ease her pounding head. So instead, she focused in on her brother's face, with his baby cheeks and the mischievous brown eyes they shared. How grown-up Nathaniel had looked in his navy blue uniform as he went into the third grade this year, chin up and never looking behind him as he strode confidently into his new school.

He wasn't on the floor behind her. He wasn't dead. And she had to keep going if she wanted to keep him that way.

With both arms braced on the wall for balance, she struggled upright and limped down the hallway, not even sure where she was going, fighting the waves of pain as each move jarred her ankle. Twisted, she hoped. Not broken. Either way, she was even weaker than before. A sitting duck, really. *But if I get lost now it'll be easy to trace a path back. Just follow the blood.* Just follow all the blood and it always came back to her. The silence pressed in around her, mocking her labored breath and the frantic, uneven pitter-patter of her feet against the cold, white floor.

She felt like she'd been hobbling for hours using the walls for support—though in reality it couldn't have been more than a few minutes—before she heard shouts and screams piercing the air. She must be approaching the main office. Layla touched her chest nervously. The paper with the names was still there. She needed to see an air demon, and she needed to let herself be taken before anyone tracked her down.

And then what, once she was dead? She'd beg the demons to kill her quickly, and dump her body somewhere in this labyrinth of halls, she realized dully. Because if not, Gethin would figure out what happened and go after Nathaniel. And all she'd sacrificed would be for naught.

Flattening herself against the wall, she stealthily wiggled her way forward, holding her breath as she peered around the last corner. The air exploded out of her lungs in a gasp of shock, and when she tried to draw it back in it was as if the air had thinned. She'd seen battles rage between demons and angels, but never between two groups of demons.

As opposed to the dark against light superpowers she'd always associated with the war, the room billowed with acrid smoke and violent colors. Blood demons on the far side of the room were throwing up swirling shields in their trademark crimson, using their powers to disrupt the blood flow of their enemies so that either their bodies starved without oxygen or they bled out in just a few short minutes. The air demons were closer to her, manipulating the oxygen in the air, slashing through the shields with dark blue light, ripping rents in the air. As she watched horrified, an air portal tore through the space a blood demon was occupying and tore his body in half.

If she hadn't emptied her stomach before, she would have now. Before she could choose what course of action to take, she heard a now familiar screech behind her. Spinning around and going to the precious piece of paper, she watched as Vyn's head appeared in a small portal in midair about ten feet away from her. She couldn't get closer to him without the blood demons seeing her.

"Human!" Vyn snarled. "Where are the names?"

"I have them," she whispered, trembling from head to toe. "Th-they're right here. Thirty-three names. Thirty-three names and addresses." She hesitantly drew out the piece of paper, shaking her head when he reached out impatiently, beckoning for her to come closer. "Swear. Swear you'll forever and ever leave my brother alone, and never harm him or anyone near him either directly or indirectly. Promise me."

Vyn smiled, a sickly, smarmy smile. "But of course, Layla. And we shall spare you too."

She swallowed hard. "No, you won't."

The smile grew. "You're right. We won't. Come. Now."

"You have to kill me quickly." Tears rose, blurring the battle that rained sparks and poured blood behind Vyn. "You have to leave my body here so that Gethin doesn't realize it was me and go after Nathaniel. You have to. Or you'd be indirectly responsible for anything Gethin does to him."

Vyn laughed. "I don't have to do anything, human."

"Swear!" Her voice rose hysterically as she dangled the paper just out of reach. "Swear on your liege lord!"

Vyn's breath hissed out as his face contorted into a snarl, his pale blue eyes narrowing with shock. Very few people knew that the only thing that could bind a demon was his oath to his liege lord. Not every demon had one, but if he did, outright falsehoods were impossible.

"Yes. Swear." She shoved the paper back into her bra, watched his eyes follow the motion greedily. "Swear it, you bastard, or I'll—"

Whatever she was about to say choked in mid-sentence as the portal lengthened and broadened as it grew to accommodate the air demon storming through. She backed up so fast she nearly tripped, but Vyn's hand lashed out and struck her across the face. Her head met the wall and sparks the same color as the air portal danced and swam sickly. She fell to the floor hard, ankle screaming, as Vyn bent over her. Feebly, she kicked and shoved, baring her teeth to sink them into his restraining arm. But he was too strong. He batted her away as if her fists were no more than flies and roughly yanked the piece of paper out of her clothing. Mission accomplished, he struck her once more, and as she lay there stunned, he turned to head back into the portal.

"No!" she cried as she struggled to her knees. "No! No!"

He ignored her, the life of her brother securely in his fist as he stepped back through the portal.

"How dumb do you think I am?" she screamed. "Those aren't the real names!"

He froze at her bluff and turned around. His cold eyes were nearly pulsating. "Then where are they?"

“In my head.” She could make up names, recall names she’d looked up for Gethin, anything. She could do anything, everything. She had to. “I’ve memorized them. I don’t trust you, Vyn. And with damn good reason.”

With a frustrated sound, the portal around Vyn began to widen. Layla got to her feet and was heading towards it when Vyn gasped sharply and the portal stopped growing. His gaze went past her shoulder.

“He’s blocking the portal,” he breathed. “Get here, fast. Give me those names or I assure you, Nathaniel will die long after you do.”

Layla looked over her shoulder to where Vyn’s gaze was riveted in horror. Her shocked stare collided with Gethin’s astonished one as he froze in mid-stride. A rent in the air went right by his ear, but he didn’t even flinch.

“Layla!” Vyn bellowed, and she looked at him blankly. “You need to crawl through this.” Sweat beaded his brow as he struggled against the unseen force that prevented him from getting to her.

Nathaniel. She had to save Nathaniel.

She started to crawl towards the air demon, not even trying to get to her feet, as a roar that nearly shook the ceiling down drowned out every other sound in battle. Terror filled her mouth with hot sand, and she looked behind her to see Gethin charging towards her. His eyes—God save her—the entire orbs were a vicious blood red, focused on her, murderous rage radiating from every pore. An air demon tried to block Gethin’s way—he simply collapsed, blood dotting out of his pores and pouring in rivulets from his nose.

“Layla!” Vyn called out, desperate, reaching out for her, but it was too late. She felt all of Gethin’s powers crash over her. Her blood raced, raced so hard that her heart stuttered. Blinding pain flashed through her head and set her limbs on fire. She felt her arms give way, the distant slap as her cheek hit the ground beneath her.

She had to get to Vyn. She had to get to Vyn, or Nathaniel would die. But as her vision faded and someone flipped her body over roughly, the last thing she saw was a closing portal transition into a snarling face with hard, red marbles for eyes, eyes in which she saw her own death before darkness mercifully swept her under.

Chapter Three

The pain in Layla's head was the first signal that something was wrong. The sharp stabs at the base of her skull were unrelenting in their rhythm. She shifted in an attempt to avoid whatever was causing it. Instead, she made it worse.

Her mouth felt dry, her skin clammy. Was she sick? No. She would have been in bed, at her apartment. Upon opening her eyes, she realized that being home with the flu would have been, by far, the better scenario.

She was in a tiny room so blindingly pure and devoid of color that she closed her eyes as soon as she opened them. Her body was lying on something hard, lumpy and uncomfortable.

Gethin. The air demons.

Nathanial.

She forced herself to open her eyes and get up, panic fueling the adrenaline rush that coursed unfettered through her body. Aches and bruises screamed in protest, but she ignored them, sitting up straight and forcing her tired eyes to take in her surroundings, analyze what the hell had happened.

Speaking of hell—had she died? Apparently not. She was in a room with white walls, white ceiling and a white floor. She was lying on a small bed, there was what looked like the most primitive of toilets in the corner, and the only exit was a large white door marked only by hairline cracks.

She got up, wincing when she tried to put weight on her ankle and failed. Hopping to the door revealed what she already suspected—the door certainly could open, but not from her side. This was a cell in all sense of the word—and come to think of it, she didn't even know if it could open. Perhaps Gethin had buried her alive in this small tomb. Or perhaps he was just going to hold her here until she went insane.

He wouldn't have to wait long at all for that to happen, she thought grimly. Because he'd stuck her in here, utterly helpless with Nathanial in dire danger. And there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing at all.

She let her back hit the wall, and then, with a muffled scream, she slammed into the wall. Her whole back stung, but it didn't help. It didn't change anything except prove how thick the walls were—she didn't even hear a muffled thud when she hit it.

But chances were someone was either watching her or guarding her. Keeping quiet might keep her alive longer, but she had to get out, had to get to Nathanial somehow. In the meantime the air demons

would probably soon realize the document they'd taken from her was indeed the real deal—hopefully that would keep them absorbed for a few days, long enough for her to get out of there.

“Hello?” she called tentatively.

Nothing.

She knocked firmly on the door. Then she pounded it with her fists until tears poured unchecked and her breath exploded out of her lungs in huge, violent gasps. After what felt like hours, she let her hands remain pressed against the cool surface and placed her forehead between them. “You have to let me out,” she whispered. “You don’t understand. You have to let me go.”

The words were spoken to herself, but to her surprise, she heard a distinct *click-slide-whump* of several locks being opened. The door swung open so fast she didn’t have enough time to catch her balance on her injured ankle.

She fell flat on her face, stunned.

“Get up,” a familiar voice said harshly.

Startled, she scrambled clumsily to her feet, reaching out a hand without thinking. “Todd! You’re alive!” She could have wept in relief. She’d managed to save one person, at least. But any possible happiness was dashed as he shifted to avoid her touch, his sweet face set in angry, unforgiving lines.

“Don’t touch me, traitor,” he snarled. “Don’t even talk, because whatever you’ll say will be nothing but a falsehood. And I assure you it is in your best interest to be very honest in the next few hours, because the boss isn’t going to let himself be fooled a second time.”

Stunned, she let him bind her hands behind her. She couldn’t escape. She could try. She still would. But Todd had a hand clamped over her restrained arms and was roughly hauling her down the hallway, turning into another... She felt what little calm she had left in her drain away when she recognized some of the rooms.

She was in the basement.

Without any conscious decision, she jerked her body hard in the opposite direction. His hand slipped with a surprised grunt, and Layla tore off, trying to lean as much weight as she could on her other leg. Her ankle threatened to buckle with each step. Knowing what she would face gave her the strength to keep going until Todd caught up.

“No!” she screamed. “You’ve got to let me go! You don’t understand! I-I—” She choked on the words as Todd simply tossed her over his shoulder and carried her kicking and screaming until he opened a door and dumped her on the ground beyond it. She got one look at his set jaw before he untied her hands and locked her in yet again.

Wishing she could wipe her nose, Layla wearily sat and scooted around until she had her back to the wall. She didn’t even feel anything but vaguely nauseous when she realized she’d seen this bloodstained table before—on one of her unofficial building tours in her first week.

This was Gethin's playroom, and she was soon to be just another broken toy.

Indeed, she felt like a broken toy as she sat there and wondered miserably how much she could tell Gethin without risking him going after her brother as well.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the door right next to her opened slowly. She didn't need to look at his face to know who was walking in—the weight of authority lay heavily in the air about him.

She didn't know what she expected him to do. Cause her blood to leak from her ears. Pick her up and break her bones. Unleash his bloodlust and drain her.

He certainly seemed to be in the right mood. His entire body was clothed in soft black material. His body seemed tense, coiled and braced for action. He simply stood there, the leathery material of his boots a mere whisper from her bloodstained feet and smudged, grubby legs exposed by huge tears in her pantyhose.

Her skirt was ripped too, high enough that she would have normally turned bright red in embarrassment. But all she felt was a dull pain in her chest. Nathaniel.

Neither of them spoke. The silence stretched and spun out endlessly. All the unspoken emotions clouded the air between them as she sensed his stare boring into the top of her bent head as she studiously examined the neat stitches in his black jeans.

And then, as if someone had flipped a switch, he snapped. An unearthly roar ripped from his chest, and the heavy metal table flew into the wall with a mighty heave. The ceiling shook, the ground trembled and a dent the depth of her head appeared where the furniture had landed. The two chairs were next, hurled over and over again as he took out all his rage and frustration on the inanimate objects in the room. She curled up into a little ball and waited.

He finished abruptly, his heavy breaths amplified in the deadened air. On the periphery of her vision, she watched those boots stalk closer, closer, until he was next to her. She didn't have the courage to look up, to see if his hands were reaching for her next, his eyes glowing with a lust soon to be sated with her very own life.

Should she tell him she was blackmailed? If she did he'd ask her what leverage the air demons had over her. She couldn't know for sure if he would save Nathaniel or kill him—and just because she thought Gethin might be a demon she could trust didn't mean she was ready to stake her brother's life on it.

She'd been betrayed enough to know that those closest always stabbed the deepest. A husband? He'd see right through that. Money? That was begging to be murdered where she sat. A threat to her own life? But then there was that gaping hole of why she hadn't just begged him for protection—especially as she had the nagging suspicion that he would have kept her safe, and not only out of sexual attraction.

As she struggled to come up with a believable story, she looked up at him. And flinched.

If she had ever wondered if demons could have anguished souls, her answer would have been found in his eyes.

“I had to,” she whispered as he dropped in a fluid harmony of muscle to kneel at her side, one hand stroking her neck almost lovingly.

“I know you’re going to kill me. And I accept that. But you have to believe me. I had to do this.”

He was silent for a moment. “I don’t have to believe a single damn word that comes out of your pretty little lips,” he finally whispered huskily. He made no movement to wipe away the sheen of perspiration that coated his bare arms and face, or to brush at the trickle of sweat that slowly traced the hard line of his jaw before dropping down his neck. His eyes were sharp as knives and only inches from her face as he leaned forward. “And what makes you so sure I’m not going to keep you alive?”

She briefly shut her eyes, unable to face his probing assessment. His breath fanned over her averted face, stirring tendrils of her hair. “You have to believe me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m telling you the truth. How can I prove it to you?”

“You can’t, of course,” he chided her gently. “Many traitors start off by telling me that they’re innocent. I must admit, you did a good job. With your nervous attitude, pretty blonde hair, understated appearance... You must have laughed so, having me wrapped around your delicate little finger.” His fingers surrounded one of hers and tightened around the joint, demonstrating just how delicate it really was. “And when I start snapping these, you’ll scream out how it wasn’t your fault. And when you start bleeding, you’ll be too busy screaming to lie anymore. And after half your body’s mangled beyond recognition—be that in the next hour or the next week—then I’ll start taking what you have to say seriously.”

“Fine.” She was broken. Dull and broken and so tired of it all.

“Fine?”

She didn’t have to look at him to see his sardonic expression.

“You’re accepting of this being your fate?”

She laughed, her throat dry and hoarse. “I don’t really have a choice, do I? But you need to promise me something.”

Gethin stiffened, and she grabbed his leg. It was unyielding iron beneath her pleading fingers. “You have to promise me to protect someone. From the air demons. That’s all I ask.” She expected a refusal, a denial, for him to laugh in her face. Any reaction so that she could launch into a sob story about a false child, to gauge whether he could truly help her.

But instead, he got up, jerked his leg from her grasp and left the room, leaving her shaken and bewildered.

Chapter Four

After being escorted back from a bathroom by a granite-faced Todd, Layla found food waiting for her. Clearly, Todd didn't think she deserved the respite, and slammed the door on his way out. Not knowing when the next meal would come, she ate, and she ate fast. When she had finished the last of the toasted garlic bread layered with cheese, salami and prosciutto—surely Gethin wouldn't kill her while that was still in her stomach—Todd appeared again to silently remove the empty plates and lock the door behind him. She was alone again with nothing to keep her occupied.

She'd gotten bored of limping about, was tired from the random bouts of weeping, and had just finished mentally prepping herself for many more hours of misery when the door opened and Gethin strode in, his face just as blank as Todd's. Damn them both. But what small part of her rejoiced at any kind of company soon faltered and dropped dead at the...*thing* Gethin so casually dragged behind him into the room.

"Is he still alive?" She leaned away nervously as Gethin reached the table where she sat.

Gethin raked the bloody air demon with a contemptuous look as the roped muscles of his arms grew taut with the effort of hauling the dead weight to dump on the table like some sort of grotesque feast. "I damn well hope so. He was screaming just a few minutes ago, and I'd be really fucking pissed if the bastard managed to drop dead before I finished with him."

"You're going to kill him *here*?" Layla gasped. She didn't recognize him beyond being an air demon, but a living thing was a living thing. She scooted her chair away as fast as possible.

"Well, that depends on you, Ms. Gills." He grinned, almost rakishly. The charm didn't spread to his eyes. "I've gotten quite a bit of information from him, and while I'm pretty sure he doesn't mean anything to you, I bet you're just...virginal enough in this whole demon business that you'd let me see if your story syncs up enough to his to give him a peaceful end."

She slumped in her chair, defeated. "Very well. What do you want to know?"

"What happened then, Layla?" Each time he said her real name he let it roll around his tongue as if it were some kind of foreign delicacy, a sort of morsel he wasn't quite sure if he liked yet. The injured air demon was breathing shallowly, but steadily. She kept her eyes focused on a dent in the wall just over Gethin's left ear.

“I—they told me what to expect from you, what I needed to look for and what data I needed to decode. The air demons told me you’re trying to find someone important. I don’t know who, or why. They want to find this person first, and Vyn’s been trying to catch up to whatever information flow you get, but I didn’t give him too many names—”

Gethin was silent for a long minute before transitioning to the previous subject. “I want a list of each name you were able to pass on. What were you taught to expect from me?” From his slouched pose to his crossed legs, Gethin might have looked almost careless to the stupidest of observers. Layla wasn’t sure what answer he was looking for, so she caught her breath before telling the truth.

“Vyn told me—Vyn being the one in charge of me—he told me that you liked blondes.” She saw his eyebrow rise and hurried on. “He said that you were very violent, and very—um, potent.”

Gethin chuckled, leaning forward with his elbows propped on his knees as if watching a particularly intriguing television show. “He actually said I was potent?”

Vyn had told her bluntly that when Gethin wanted to fuck her she’d better go willingly to his bed, but she didn’t dare relate that to him. “Something along those lines. I don’t quite recall.”

“Don’t start lying now, Layla,” Gethin drawled. His crimson eyes were sensuous and mocking. “I’m pretty sure you remember everything you were told word for word, but if you’re too shy to admit you were ordered to play the naughty secretary, then that’s fine with me.”

Anger made quick work of embarrassment, and Layla straightened in her seat with a glare scorching enough to wither a lesser man. “I assure you, Gethin, that there is nothing I want more than this whole ordeal to end. So please, can we conclude this as soon as possible?”

His face became unreadable, blank where there had been a gleam of laughter before. “I believe I’ve told you this can only end in one way.” Quiet reproof stroked across each of the heartless words he uttered.

“And I believe I told you I’ve accepted that.”

“And you believe me.” It was more of a statement than a question.

She nodded, unable to speak. Her hands were wrapped around each other in a death grip.

“Are you so eager to die then?” he asked, softly, so gently that she felt the unmistakable pressure of tears push against the backs of her eyes and coat the back of her throat. “Do you truly have no one to live for?”

I have no one to live for, but someone to die for. She didn’t say the words out loud though, and instead fixed her gaze on the injured air demon. He’d stopped bleeding, courtesy of Gethin’s power, but he hadn’t moved once the entire time. “I’m sure you did a thorough background search on me,” she said instead. “Surely you know I’ve no one.”

He made a *tsking* sound in the back of his throat. “No family, of course. Quite the childhood you must have had with the rap sheet your parents built between the two of them. Judging by how your father traveled, I assume you stayed at home with your mother?”

Her childhood—or lack thereof—wasn't something she wanted to go into, but she didn't have much of a choice. "My father left when I was very young, yes. I stayed with my mother until I moved out for college."

"Which you didn't even graduate from. Why did you drop out after your mother died?"

She finally looked at him, expecting to see what she usually saw on other people's faces who knew about her background—pity, scorn, disgust, a shifting of perspective that she was somehow dumber, less capable because she didn't have a pretty piece of paper signed and stamped hanging on her wall. She'd shown all of them.

But instead, she saw something that might have just been understanding.

"I couldn't afford not to work with all with the debt I inherited," Layla said flatly. "And by then I was a legal adult and realized I was good enough at what I did that the people who would pay the most wouldn't care that I hadn't graduated."

"A pretty little hacker then, who's got her balls in some nasty air demon's hands," Gethin mused, almost to himself. "And since it's not family, and not friends given your all-too-obvious loner status, then who are the air demons threatening to kill if you don't finish the mission? Who do you care about so much that you can't even bring yourself to tell me?"

Her mouth felt bone-dry. "I've told you everything I can. They didn't let me know much about their plans. I really don't know anything." Agitated, she bit her lip, realizing with a sinking feeling that very soon she'd have to make an ultimate decision about Nathaniel.

"Can't, shan't, won't." Gethin almost hummed the words, stretching his body out luxuriously as if waking up from a particularly delightful nap before he got to his feet. "Well then, I see we've reached the end of what you're willing to say. But do tell me this—when your little friends here were training you for being under my employment, how did they convince you to memorize and prepare all that you needed to know? How did they threaten you about whomever you're still protecting? I've never known them to be particularly eloquent—with words, that is."

He knew. He had to know. But he stood there, his hands shoved in his pockets, the air demon only a foot away, with a calm, almost friendly look on those beautiful features of his.

"They threatened someone I care for," she said slowly, stating only what she was certain he knew.

"Anything else?"

"No." The lie was cold as ash on her tongue.

He reached out and brutally hit the air demon across the face. Layla cringed at the unexpected violence, wrapping her arms around her middle for support as the air demon came to, moaning. When he tried to sit up, he saw Gethin standing over him and collapsed back again with a whimper of terror.

“Hello,” Gethin said gently. “I want you to answer me again—was the blonde human tortured when she refused to cooperate or didn’t do what was demanded of her in the exact way she was supposed to? Was she ever hurt just for fun, to teach her who was in charge?”

No, don’t! Layla wanted to shout out, but the air demon only darted a frightened look her way before answering shakily. “Y-yes, she was hurt whenever she didn’t do something the way she was supposed to. But the demons in charge of her made sure there were no marks, sir, because the marks would have tipped you off.”

“Thank you,” Gethin murmured. Something on his face gave Layla all the warning she needed to close her eyes and put her hands over her ears, but there was no mistaking the sickening crack of a neck being snapped. Then strong arms swept her out of her seat so suddenly that all she could do was grab at his wide shoulders as he strode out the door. “We’re done here, Layla. No more death today. I promise. We don’t need any more pain today. I’m taking you home for the night.”

And for some reason the word *home* was all Layla needed to bury her face into Gethin’s strong chest and block out everything else that she couldn’t fix. She’d need her strength later. The next second that Gethin let his guard down, she would be up and out. And off for Nathaniel, because maybe, just maybe, she would be able to take him away from his adoptive family before anyone else did. God only knew how she could ever forgive herself for ruining a seven-year-old’s life, but a life on the run was better than death. Maybe she could even approach an angel for the first time and beg for help.

But for now she would enjoy the fleeting sensation that she was somehow safe in the hands that had just broken another demon’s neck, and might end her life as well. Life sure had a wicked sense of irony.

“Where are we?”

At the alarm in her voice, Gethin looked up from the laptop balanced across his legs. Pushing fine strands of hair from her face, she blinked bleary eyes and realized that somehow, despite everything, she had managed to fall asleep somewhere after being carried out of the basement and long before she was put into the car she was now in.

“We’re going to one of my properties.” He shut the laptop with a quiet click and stowed it away, turning that taut, muscular body towards her. He had changed clothes, and was back in one of the tailored suits he tended to wear when doing business of the non-bloody kind. She was, confirmed by a quick scan, still in the same bloody, wrinkled skirt and blouse she’d been wearing the whole time, however long that was. Three hours? Five? Twelve? It was dark outside, so that meant at least nine, ten hours had passed since her glasses had been snapped. A lifetime away.

“Why?” The question that slipped out was a part of the longer question she wanted to ask—*why am I still alive?*

He ignored her, instead focusing on her bare feet. She looked down and winced at how swollen her ankle looked.

“I would have iced it had you told me,” he chided.

“Can you make the swelling go down?” Layla asked hopefully. “You know, just shift my blood around or something?”

The blasted demon shook his head, not looking the slightest bit repentant. She tried moving her foot. It throbbed dully in response. “How am I supposed to get anywhere?”

The look he slanted at her was nothing short of ice. “Why would that be a concern of yours?”

She bit her lip. True, if she intended to sit docile and demure at his...his lair, then certainly, she could have every bone in her body shattered and it wouldn't matter. But she sure as hell intended to take off as soon as possible. “I want to be able to walk because I need to protect myself,” she responded finally with every shred of dignity she could muster.

He turned his attention to the scenery flashing by, brightly lit storefronts and neon signs contrasting with shadowed streets and dark glimpses of the sky. “From whom, may I ask, do you need protection?” It was said in the same tone he might condemn someone to death, she decided. All arrogance and icy demeanor with something seething right beneath the surface.

“Because the air demons might break into your home and try to kill me.”

He had the audacity to laugh. “You don't fear death. Remember? You've accepted your death is imminent at my hands.”

“Well, maybe you won't torture me the way the air demons will.” She said it softly, under her breath, but she could tell by the rigid set of his shoulders that he'd heard every single word.

“They won't get to you. They won't get to anyone I keep under my protection. No one knows you're here. Anyone who knows that you were locked away to begin with in one of the rooms will assume you're still in there.”

The irony was too rich. “And we've established you can pick out traitors, haven't we?” Her bitter laugh strangled to a halt on a gasp of shock as he suddenly loomed over her, hands tight on her shoulders as if uncertain whether to shake or slide up and strangle.

“Don't remind me,” he snarled. She watched in horrified fascination as the red of his eyes grew darker, deeper, and spread to slowly dominate his pupils until they were nothing more than a dying star among swirling pools of lava.

“I didn't mean to bait you,” she whispered. To her chagrin, she realized the sensation tickling her cheeks were tears. Perhaps now was not the best time, but she had to ask. “How many—how many died?”

His hands slid away from her body. He didn't move back to his seat, instead remained too close for comfort. His harsh features seemed even sharper as he kept his face close to hers, gaze slashing across her face as if searching for the slightest hint of insincerity. He wouldn't find any.

“You might have saved Todd’s life,” he finally murmured. “He’s none too happy with you. Not only did the pretty office girl turn out to stab us all in the back, but she denied him a chance to protect his allies, and he shoulders the blame for the death of three friends.”

Three. Three seemed like such a small number in the grand scheme of things, but that was three demons who had lived and laughed and maybe even loved. Three demons who died because of her, and she had no intention of asking for their names just yet. Call her a coward, but that knowledge she couldn’t handle right now. All she could focus on was getting out. Out and away from a blood demon who held so much power over her, but left his intentions murky at best.

He reached out and touched her cheek, her temple, with strong hands lighter than a feather’s stroke. The skin was sore and tender. Probably bruised where Vyn had struck her. That bastard.

“How did they torture you?” he asked.

“They didn’t,” Layla answered automatically. When she saw his eyes narrow she retracted the statement. “Well, they didn’t make it pleasant. But I’m alive. I’d rather not discuss it.” She realized belatedly that she was squeezing her hands together and made a conscious effort to keep them palms down on her lap.

She thought he was going to pursue it or make a dark comment about her limited time on Earth. She could see the words forming by the way he watched her with an odd combination of curiosity, anger and sarcasm. But whatever words were tethered on the tip of his tongue were swallowed back as he turned away to back into his side of the limousine.

She did her best to avoid the temptation of looking at him, dark and brooding, streetlamps illuminating the planes of his face in repetitive, violent flashes. She kept her gaze on her hands and forced herself not to shift uncomfortably whenever she sensed the weight of his gaze, and ignored the fact that her elevated heartbeat would be completely apparent. Damn him for bringing the torture up again and again. She was no stranger to deliberate pain—violence in her childhood and teen years was borne of alcohol and anger, slaps and scratches from her mother, the occasional backhand or shoves from the many men her mother brought home.

The violence under Vyn’s orders hadn’t been just deliberate, but methodical. No marks were ever left—scars on her body or too much damage to her mind would have been detrimental to their goals. Rather, it was emotional, it was magical and it was done to show her not only how vulnerable she was, but to showcase what would be done to her brother should she not succeed.

She had technically given the air demons what they wanted, but she was a loose end, and no one ever cared to trip over one. She would escape tonight, because there was no way Gethin would devote an entire night and day to babysitting her. The breach in security would demand all of his attention, and that would leave her to get past whatever guards he would put on her.

Except what would she do about her ankle?

The car rolled to a stop. Through her tinted window she saw they had reached a tall, thick wall with a heavily fortified gate that slid open smoothly a moment later. The car continued, slower now as the wheels crunched over gravel, and finally pulled to a stop in front of a mansion that probably had more in common with a high-tech fortress than just appearances alone.

“Go,” Gethin said tersely. Without thinking, she opened the door and stepped out. With a gasp, she clung to the door to avoid falling as her injured leg sent a wave of dizziness and nausea over her. When her vision cleared of black dots Gethin’s arms surrounded her.

Pride stiffened her back. “I can do it myself,” she said, but then felt silly. Who was she trying to deceive? She couldn’t, and the despair was another brick in the wall she felt was slowly and surely being erected around her, blocking her from what she had to do.

Gethin’s eyes flashed in sudden anger and the arms around her tightened almost painfully until he gained control over himself. “I’m not going to carry you, you little fool.”

It was as if Gethin seemed to understand and respected what little pride she had left. Despite their roughness, his words made her feel a bit better as she slowly made her way to the front of the house. The front door was opened by a demon who could have doubled for a linebacker. He spoke to Gethin, but focused a contemptuous glare on her. “Matthias just died from his injuries, sir.”

Someone let out a small gasp of horror. Gethin’s body was rigid, his pupils swallowed up in red, but the look in them was just as blank as the man’s in front of him. “He did not die in vain, Marc. He’ll be avenged. How many air demons were captured?”

“Twelve.”

“How many of them are still alive?”

She remembered Gethin had snapped one of the demons’ necks.

“Seven. What do we do with them?”

Gethin was quiet, and she searched his face anxiously. There wasn’t an ounce of pity in his face, but she hoped. *Kill them quickly. Put an end to this gruesome war, please. Please.*

“I’m heading back for a few hours tonight after I handle her,” he finally concluded. “Keep them drugged. We don’t need them to play any of their damn asphyxiation games with us. Fucking exhausting.”

She knew those asphyxiation games, and something of her thoughts must have shown on her face because Gethin turned the full force of his attention on her. “It’s fairly exhausting for us to manipulate our own blood to increase the red blood cells and hemoglobin necessary to stay conscious. In attacks such as the one you witnessed, they can group together and really do damage. You, on the other hand, had no defenses, did you?”

She hadn’t. Turning her face away from the all-knowing smile, she focused her attention to the austere interior of his living quarters. There was no sense of personality, of a warm household or relaxation. It was a building made for a warrior, one who valued survival over the luxurious trappings of a privileged

life. She realized with a start that this was the way she'd lived. The simple decoration—admittedly, his probably cost twenty times more than hers—revolved around security. There were no large glass windows that would be difficult to defend, no frivolous furniture to inhibit movement.

Chances were it would be nearly as hard to get out as it would be to get in, but perhaps her handicap would also lure them into a false sense of security. She certainly hoped so, because the idea of grappling hand-to-hand with Marc wasn't pleasant at all.

As she studied the locks on the door they'd just entered, she realized it was quiet. Both men had stopped talking and were observing her with suspicious eyes. Hers widened in dismay. Did she have "escapee" tattooed on her forehead? To cover up her reaction, she blurted out, "May I have a shower, please?"

Marc's expression of distrust didn't flicker the slightest. Gethin's look, however, shifted imperceptibly. His nostrils flared, his jaw hardened and she was inexplicably reminded of his last words to her before he realized her betrayal—*You owe me a hell of a lot more than a kiss for this, and I fully intend to collect as soon as possible.*

Gethin must have sensed her heartbeat increase. He reached out to grasp her firmly by the shoulder. "I'll get her settled in. Once that's done, I'll leave and return in about three hours, four at the most. I expect her to still be here when I get back."

Marc addressed her for the first time, his voice cold. "Don't even try to run, whatever the hell your real name is."

"It's Layla," Gethin interjected, his gaze firm. "And I fully expect her to make a break for it. Your job is to keep her here without injuring her. Feed her too while you're at it."

The giant man didn't look too happy at the prospect of wasting food on her but nodded brusquely in acknowledgement of Gethin's orders. "I'll bring up something once you leave, sir."

Gethin's firm grip supported and guided her up two flights of stairs, though by the last one she was exhausted. Perhaps she should have swallowed her pride and let him carry her to conserve her strength. It sure looked like she'd need it, given that Marc was more than aware of her imminent jailbreak attempt. "Where am I staying?"

"In an extra room I have here." He steered her into one of the first doors on the third floor. Behind the dark wooden door that was probably more fortified than a tank lay a small bedroom with a queen-sized bed and connected bathroom.

"For how long?"

"As long as I say." He ignored the despairing noise she made. "And, so that you don't have any grand illusions of escaping, pick up this chair and swing it against the window."

"I don't have to," she murmured. "It's probably bulletproof, reinforced with wire and other things common human citizens such as I have yet to hear of."

“Accurate as always.” He matched her quiet tone. “Now go into the bathroom and take your shower. I’ll be back in—” He was cut off by the sound of his phone ringing. “Excellent.” He brought the phone to his ear after glancing at the screen. “What did you find?” he asked, moving to the other side of the room to sit on the edge of the bed. She stood stock-still, hoping to overhear the conversation, but the volume was too low to make out any clear words. He caught her eye and made an imperious motion towards the bathroom.

She hesitated. Had it just been her imagination, or did she hear murmuring that sounded similar to her name?

He moved the phone away from his mouth. She saw instantly that his fangs had elongated. “If you don’t get in there right now, I’m going to take it as an invitation to join you.”

She obeyed as quickly as possible, slamming the bathroom door hard on the oh-so-masculine chuckle that followed tauntingly.

By the time she stepped out of the shower, she was not only bloodstain free, but apparently alone with nothing more than a towel. She had no desire to put back on her smelly, soiled clothing, but she felt helpless enough without being naked.

As lovely as the water had felt, it had hardly relaxed her or stopped her brain going a hundred miles per hour. There was no way she could escape, given that everyone in the building was on full alert. If only she were an angel or demon herself...then she could burst out of this house barely breaking a sweat, just like her favorite action-flick heroines.

She looked around the room, hoping to see something had changed since the last time she’d looked around—a sign for a hidden escape route, a phone or even a clock to check what time it was. All she saw was a bowl of steaming soup and a few slices of brown bread on the handsome dresser next to the bed. Next to it was a pile of clothes. Never one to turn her nose up at either, she dipped a piece of bread in the soup and stuffed it in her mouth as she wiggled into the man’s shirt, socks and sweatpants. The top nearly swallowed her and the waistband of the pants had to be rolled up three times before it stayed, but the thick woolen socks were heaven-sent.

Heaven-sent. She dipped more pieces of bread in the soup and ate them slowly. She’d tried to pray for help before, when the demons had first confronted her and dragged her off, but she’d heard no response. How angry she’d been, that the angels hadn’t even bothered to save her brother. Perhaps she wasn’t going through the pearly white gates given the way she’d lived her life, but to not even help a seven-year-old?

It was worth a try. Just one more. Feeling foolish, she got to her knees, folded her hands and closed her eyes. “Dear...well, dear whoever’s up there,” she began hesitantly. “I know You probably get a lot of questions, given how the demons escaping from Hell has really thrown the entire planet into chaos, but if You can just get me out of here, I promise that I’ll handle the rest on my own and that I’ll save him. So, if You could do this for my brother...”

There was a long, awkward period of silence. She cracked open an eyelid, hoping to see something, but all that faced her was an empty room with a half-eaten bowl of soup. “Damn you all!” Layla exploded in anger and was getting to her feet when a sharp explosion of light enveloped the room, sending her back down to her knees. Half-blinded, ears ringing, she sat there motionless. Voices yelled in the distance and heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs. The door burst open a moment later and Marc, along with other men she didn’t recognize, ran in with guns drawn. Layla moved out of the way and then made a soft sound of shock.

She was...glowing.

Chapter Five

“Where the hell did she go?” Marc bellowed. His gun swept around, pointed at her and moved away. Face contorted with rage, he didn’t seem to see her at all. Nor did his men. “Fucking air demons!”

“But it was white, not blue. Only the angels have white light,” one of his men protested.

“There’s no way she’s in league with the angels,” Marc snapped back. “I’ll notify Gethin. Call every man we have. We need to find her and bring her back in.”

She sat there, too scared to move. Several men ran off as the rest ripped through the room, turning over the mattress and canvassing the bathroom. The glow on her skin, one that had hurt her eyes before, seemed the slightest bit...dimmer. She felt her adrenaline spike up. Clearly an angel had answered her prayer and was protecting her from detection. But how long would it last? Once the glow was gone, was that it? Given how fast it seemed to be diminishing, she had to move and fast.

Carefully getting to her feet, she quietly made her way out the room, hugging the wall as more men ran past her uttering guttural commands into phones and yelling curses mostly directed at her. She made it down the stairs and out the front door without triggering any alarms. Could they hear her? Her breathing quickened and her limping steps sounded overly loud to her ears despite the socks.

The driveway extended past gates opening to let out cars, and she aimed for it, knowing it was her only chance to get out of the compound. The road that lay outside the gates was deserted. It would be most prudent to cut through the woods parallel to the road. She could hitchhike once she became visible again. Gritting her teeth against the pain in her ankle, she marched off towards the line of trees bordering the road. As she plodded through the trees, finding a nice walking stick on the way, Layla sent a reverent and heartfelt thank you towards the night sky.

What had started off as a shiver had developed into a full-blown, bone-deep tremor. She couldn’t feel her lips, but given the way her teeth were chattering she was lucky she hadn’t bitten them to the point of bleeding yet.

Her skin had long stopped glowing, and the only roads she could find were devoid of cars. Humans stayed home at night nowadays.

She wondered where she was. Surely she should have seen a sign by now indicating what area she was in? The first house she’d buzzed for help after escaping was apparently empty. The second too. She rang, she pounded, she screamed and she begged. No one opened the door. Wary of the demons that were

no doubt widening their perimeter with every minute she remained free, she opted to walk parallel to the road. No doubt Gethin knew of her escape. From how far away could he hear her heartbeat? From how far away could he smell her? Fear drove her farther and farther away from the highway, and now she was lost in the woods with nothing but damp sweatpants and sweater, soaked socks, a walking stick and a persistent, freezing drizzle to keep her company.

But she couldn't have walked that far, she reasoned. So if she walked at this extreme angle here, she would be able to...

"Get a grip, Layla," she told herself firmly. The hair stood up on her arms as if someone was watching her. Nervously, she looked around, but all she could see through the falling water were the dark, gloomy trunks of trees that seemed to hem her in from all sides. There were no strange sounds when she held her breath, just the pitter-patter of rain, a steady rustle of wind through leaves and her own harsh breathing when her lungs strained past the breaking point. Was it her imagination or was her blood racing more than it should be?

She forced herself to continue walking. One step, lean on stick, limp. One step, lean on stick, limp. One foot in front of another, head down, trudge on. She repeated this mantra, first whenever the mood struck her, then in her head constantly and finally out loud to distract her from her growing paranoia. At this point such suspicions were natural, and the stress clearly caused her to make irrational diagnostics about her surroundings. This scene was straight out of a slasher flick. Indeed, she was hunted by paranormal beings, but that didn't mean she was currently being stalked.

Then again, she hadn't survived as long as she had by ignoring her gut feeling.

Let's see. Hair standing on end? Check. Itchy feeling between shoulder blades? Yes. Elevated heartbeat? Not too uncommon by now, but yes. Goose bumps and nervous chills? She was getting pretty damn cold by now and her ankle was aching something fierce, but still, they were there, sweeping across her forearms and snaking down her spine.

A small flicker caught her eye and she spun around, raising her stick in front of her like it was a sword. Nothing. She stayed frozen, not even blinking, trying to take in the dark foliage around her, poised to flee at the slightest movement. Nothing moved.

Something crackled behind her and she moved too quickly to face the newest threat. Without the support of the makeshift cane, she stumbled on the uneven ground and wasn't able to catch herself as she fell hard on her rear end. There was nothing there, but she just sat there, gazing at the endless forest around her without actually taking anything in as despair began to eclipse rational thinking.

She had to face reality. Layla was terrified she'd waited too long. She was stuck in an endless forest with cold rain. Morning was hours away. She had no real weapon, no cash and no phone. She was injured, hopelessly outnumbered and couldn't find help, let alone the way back to the lesser evil she had to deal with. As much as it made her limbs feel leaden and lungs constrict, the only thing she could do for

Nathanial at this point was to trust that Gethin would not be quite like the other demons. Perhaps if she could convince him that she could help him get revenge on the air demons somehow, he would promise to take care of Nathanial.

“Angel?” She queried softly, but she knew, just knew, that whatever had been with her for that brief second in Gethin’s house was long gone. She needed to find a new way to keep going. But she couldn’t. Not alone. She couldn’t keep going, facing the entire world by herself.

“You won, Gethin,” she said out loud, nearly gagging on the words. Louder, she screamed out, “You won! I’ll come back. I’ll stay with you. I can’t go anywhere else.” With what felt like a Herculean effort, she dragged herself to her knees, then to her feet. She’d walked in a fairly straight line, she thought. Perhaps if she tried walking back, she would find the road.

She turned around and felt her heart nearly stop.

Gethin stood there, black shirt plastered to his chest and hair in wet, curling tendrils, looking broader and stronger than the tree trunks he must have been hiding behind all this time. Her muscles tensed and adrenaline flooded her. Despite the pain in her ankle, she knew she’d be able to make a good run for it. But even as she took steps back, he didn’t move a muscle. His eyes were calm. Both of them knew she wasn’t escaping again.

“Nathanial’s protected.”

The words literally brought her to her knees and a sob rose in her throat. “Nathanial?”

He walked towards her, his pace unhurried. “Nathanial Alderman. Age seven. Birthday is next Wednesday. Nearly nine years ago your father traveled through the tiny town of Agnes, California. Nine months later, Nathanial Alderman was born, with no father listed on the birth certificate. Five years later you made a purchase on your credit card at a gas station near there. You did it again two months later. By then you must have learned he was indeed your brother. You probably use cash ever since then to avoid your transactions being tracked. You’ve worked for some pretty shady people in your past.”

“I couldn’t risk anyone using him as leverage against me.” The words were hardly more than a soft sigh. “The couple who adopted him created a beautiful home for him. I could never forgive myself if I broke it.”

“How’d the air demons find out about him?”

Shame coiled unpleasantly. “I...I check up on him. Around twice a year. Just to make sure he’s being treated well, that he seems healthy and happy. It’s a big enough town that I just play tourist. The air demons must have been tracking me as a potential spy, and... Well, let’s just say that besides the hair, we could have passed as twins. I thought I was so smart with my secret, and walked back into my apartment to find a score of air demons waiting for me.”

He crouched next to her, a rough hand pushing hair out of her face. “Did your mother tell you about a half-brother?”

“Once. She was drunk. I went through so many dead ends before I tracked down who I believe is the right child,” she whispered. “But until there’s a blood test, I can’t even know for sure if he’s my brother. How ironic is that? I’m going through hell for someone I’ve never hugged, never spoken to, someone who might not even be related to me. Does he have a bodyguard? Did you warn his parents? Is he frightened?”

He shook his head. “If he were older I would have spoken to him of the dangers he faces. But for now he has several rotating teams of blood demons constantly watching over him. We can hear the heartbeat of anyone approaching. We’ll take care of him. I might be a demon, Layla, but—” his eyes darkened with chilling intensity, “—I am no child-killer. If you can only trust one thing I say, remember this—not all angels are good, and not all demons are bad either. In this war everyone is right. That’s what creates war, after all. The demons are right to be furious at facing eternity in Hell with no chance of forgiveness. The angels are incensed at our freedom as we’re just a bunch of sadistic, cursed bastards. And the humans are angry too, helpless and angry that they cannot see either side unless we will it. Except for a few like you who our sensory blocks don’t work on at all.” His hands radiated heat as they caressed her cheeks, her neck, her cold arms.

“How did you get out?” she asked. “I watch the angels and avoid the demons, but no one speaks of how you escaped. You speak of everything but that.”

“I will never endanger your life by telling you secrets no human should ever know,” he murmured with finality. “Though perhaps you are too deep in this already to be left in the dark. But you shall sicken if we do not get you warm soon. Will you protest if I carry you to my car?”

“Is it far?” she asked.

His eyes glinted with a sudden devilish mirth, and those lovely, firm lips turned upwards at the corners. “You would’ve never found that first road you were trying to walk parallel to. But there is an active highway about five minutes away in the direction you were already heading in.”

She spluttered wordlessly for a moment, before tensions and terror dissolved into hysterical laughter. It had downgraded to hiccups by the time they reached the road. He put her down by a car parked twenty feet away. He pulled a heavy woolen blanket out of the trunk and wrapped it around her shoulders. “Before this gets too wet, strip out of those clothes.”

She gaped at him for a moment. “No.”

His eyes seemed to glow crimson for a brief moment. She shivered.

“I still could strangle you for escaping out of my house like that. You will explain everything to me once we get to a location where my men don’t curse your name yet. Third one in two days. Biggest pain-in-the-ass human I’ve ever had the ill fortune to deal with. Are all human women like this? Get into the backseat and take off those wet clothes. Now. If you get sick I sure as hell won’t play nursemaid. I’m taking you to my loft, and if you happen to destroy it somehow trying to escape again, I *will* kill you.”

It was more his lack of desire for her to get sick than the threat of strangulation that persuaded her to strip down and surround herself with the blanket. Gethin got into the front seat and pulled smoothly away from the curb. The flannel was wonderfully warm against her chilled skin. The sound of her chattering teeth filled the interior of the car.

The initial warmth only lasted so long. The chill began to spread again, and her nose began to run. Miserably, she looked around for tissues, but found none. "Gethin, I need tissues pronto."

His irritated glare clashed with hers in the rearview mirror. "I don't have tissues. Use your shirt."

"That's disgusting," she muttered, but recognized it as the next best available thing and did so as discreetly as possible. She wrapped the blanket around herself tightly. "Can you turn up the heat?"

"It's up all the way."

"It's freezing!" she protested, but regretted her words a moment later when, with an ill-disguised curse, he jerked the steering wheel to the right to pull over sharply on the gravel. With a lithe twist of his body, Gethin maneuvered his way into the backseat with her.

"You're wet too," she warned breathlessly. His scent was all around now, dark and masculine, and she could see fangs protruding just a bit more than usual. His shirt was more damp than soaked by now, but there was no missing how the thin linen cloth clung to the dense muscles of his chest, the curve of his biceps. His eyes were darker, dark enough that the scarlet color could probably be mistaken for an odd brown should someone observe from far away. And there was no mistaking what burned in his eyes, what made his fangs slowly, elegantly elongate as her heart raced. Fear and desire were hand in hand when it came to Gethin, but she was finally going to let desire take control with no intentions of reining it back in.

"Are you going to bite me?"

He cupped her cheek in his palm and lifted it up and to the left, exposing the long, delicate line of her neck. His thumb brushed against her wildly fluttering pulse. "Scared? You should be," he rasped. "But first things first." He brought her face towards him, sliding two fingers between her parted lips. She hesitated for the briefest moment and then dragged her tongue across the slightly rough skin on his fingertips before snapping her teeth in a decidedly ungentle bite. His breath whooshed from his lungs with something akin to a snarl as he leaned over her and kissed her. His tongue entwined with hers, drawing out goose bumps of an entirely different nature.

He was slowly pushing her down until her back was against the car seats even as she arched her upper body towards his in an effort to press every inch of her aching body flush against his. The muscles, the sheer immovable, impenetrable wall of his body weighed on hers in such a wicked, erotic way that she wrapped her arms around his back and grabbed fistfuls of the material to drag him closer.

His hands had been braced on either side of her, but now he shifted his weight so that one hand gripped her hair, keeping her pinned down flat under him, and the other ripped at the blanket with a savagery he didn't even try to hide. Growling deep in his throat, Gethin tore at whatever cloth separated his

body from hers. She tugged hard at the front of his shirt. The buttons gave way with little popping and tearing noises. He reared back momentarily on his haunches to fully remove the shirt, and as he lifted his arms to be parallel to the low ceiling of the car, all the hard, smooth expanses of silky golden skin she'd always fantasized about were there on display for her. She couldn't help but sit up too and run her nails across the waves of muscles that suddenly undulated across his chiseled chest. She wanted to see if he tasted just as smooth and hot and masculine as he smelled.

When all those lovely muscles bunched, she dragged her tongue across his chest and relished the oddly sweet and salty taste of his skin. She'd barely finished when his hands clamped over hers, raising them over her head to pin them against the seat. Bare beneath him, as if she were a sacrifice to a pagan ruler of the underworld, Layla struggled to breathe as she felt the tides of lust start to drag her under to the point of no return. Fear was a live flame, flickering and twisting in her core, but the heat only added to the razor edge she teetered on, and she knew which side she was going to jump to. So when Gethin opened his mouth, need hot in crimson eyes, she said simply, "Yes."

He pulled away from her embrace to study her face, traces of doubt still there on his. Desperate to get rid of them so that nothing else stood between them, she hooked her legs around his waist and pulled her body flush up against his, wanting his weight to press her into the cushions. She relished the masculine rasp of hair against her hardened nipples, the skin of her stomach, her sensitive thighs, the bare soles of her feet. The hard heat of him had her writhing against him, craving more.

"I won't stop after his," he warned her.

She answered by biting him.

At the sensation of her sharp little teeth, his self-restraint snapped and he tunneled his fingers through her thick, damp hair. A cry escaped her as he fastened his teeth against the delicate skin of her throat, hard enough that she froze, quivering. Her thighs gave way as he settled between them, rubbing his hardness against her slick folds, heightening sensitivity until she felt like a bow drawn taut. Yet she was too afraid to move, to demand that he do more, as the needle-like teeth stung her skin. She had her head pressed as far back as she could, but a part of her, wanton and wicked, wondered what would happen if she pushed against those teeth. If she let him taste her, take her in a way that no mortal ever could—such was the power he had over her.

She slowly leaned into it, and he pulled away with a snarl. "Not during your first time," he ground out. "Don't push me. You're not ready yet."

"But I want to," she demanded.

He responded by nudging the head of his cock against her entrance, and as she felt the broad, blunt head demand access she couldn't help but marvel at this—this man she held in her arms. Sculpted body shone golden with exertion, chiseled face with its set jaw and glowing red eyes, damp curls flush against his forehead—it was all hers, and hers alone.

And then he pushed in, and she thought no more. Pure sensation, of her being engulfed, filled, overwhelmed her. Her throat ached where he'd rested his fangs, and she could almost imagine the slide of teeth into her skin. His head was flung back, his breathing in time with his thrusts. She heard her own gasps match his, surpass his, become erratic as she lifted faster and faster to match his increasing thrusts. His hands held her head still, crushing his mouth to hers, tongue driving deep to assert dominance. She sank her nails into his back, marking him clearly. Damn it, she was so close, but each time she felt herself start to give into the pleasure he slowed down, taunting her, teasing her with the ultimate pleasure dangled just out of reach.

"Harder," she pleaded, and moaned as he suddenly pulled away, demanding hands around her waist, turning her over so that she was on her knees with her breasts against the seat. She could taste the sweat pouring down her face, hear the sound of flesh pounding, small growls emitting from his throat.

The throbbing heat turned white-hot, and she was dimly aware of her cries, full-throated as she surrendered gratefully to the orgasm that flashed through her body, leaving her exhausted and trembling in its wake. She felt his hips thrust erratically, felt him crush her hips to his as he thrust forth one last time, the long, hard length of him pulsing inside of her.

They stayed like that for a long time, until the heat that had fogged the windows of the car began to clear and their erratic breathing eased into one, slowing down. He gently turned her to her side, cocooning her against his hot body as she turned into his chest to wrap her arms around him, feeling, for the first time, utterly at peace.

"What now?" she mumbled, finally.

He chuckled into her hair. "Round two?"

"Shit."

His laughter was louder, longer, lighter than she'd ever heard it. "Don't tell me a little sex is too much for you to handle, Layla."

"One hour recovery, please," she retorted. "I'm getting sick after all. Don't want you to catch it—oh." She stiffened. "Speaking of catching—"

"No sexual diseases, thank you. I'm not *human*."

She ignored his tone. "I was more referring to...other risks of unprotected sex."

"Can't impregnate you if you're fully human." When she looked up at him, eyes startled, mouth open to ask more questions, he simply leaned forward and kissed her until her eyes glazed over. "Maybe you're part demon, given that you can see us. You certainly bite like one. Which might be a problem, except the chances are slim to none, and I'd put all my money on the latter. Time for questions later—ones you're safe knowing the answers to, at least. But now that I've warmed you up, will you sleep?"

"Only if you hold me until then."

He did.

Chapter Six

She woke slowly, aware first of the silken sheets against her skin, and then of the warm body lying so near hers. She opened her eyes and looked directly into ones that were heavy lidded, wicked and more than a tad smug. “Good morning,” she managed, aware her cheeks were bright red. A glance around told her that she must be in one of his apartments. Whereas the first one had resembled a fortress, this place looked like it had been plucked from the pages of an interior design magazine. Warm colors and deep browns melded together into one of the most luxurious bedrooms she’d ever seen in her life.

“Good morning, Ms. Layla Roads,” he rumbled deep in his chest and stroked a possessive hand over her exposed breast. “I was rather hoping you’d wake up soon. I’ve plenty of things I want to do with you, one of which involves discussing your latest escape. The other deals with a repeat of last night, but with fangs.” He flashed his, and she highly suspected that something else about him was erect right now as well.

“Which first?” she asked, feeling the delicious soreness of her body as she stretched. Her neck tingled as his words brought fantasies to life. How light she felt without the burden of Nathaniel’s safety weighing on her and the threat of death so far away. Gethin had made her safe again, but more than that, he made her feel...

No.

She was human. Mortal. He was a demon. Immortal.

And that was that.

As if sensing the sudden change in her emotion, his face went from playful to serious, the blank mask starting to slide back on. Her heart ached, a swift, hard yank that left her reeling.

“How did you escape from my house?”

“I’m not completely sure,” she admitted, scooting back until she was half-sitting with her shoulders against the headboard. The cold metal reminded her of who—and what—she was dealing with. As seductive and delicious as he was lounging in the twisted bedding naked, under it all he was still an immortal killer who would never let emotion intercept with duty. “I...prayed.”

His eyebrows went up. “I didn’t peg you as the praying type, Ms. Roads. I assume you got an answer?”

“They’ve certainly never answered my prayers before, and I assure you there were plenty in behalf of Nathaniel,” she fired back. “My skin started glowing and no one else could see me.” She remembered that

bright explosion of light, the warm glow, and wished for the briefest moment that she could feel that again. As if she were safe and secure, but above all, loved.

“Odd,” he mused. “That they would respond to you now. Though I suppose you escaping did force you to ultimately face that you need help. And here we are. I must remember to thank them when I see them again.”

“Wouldn’t the angels kill you on sight?” she queried. She remembered the few times she witnessed angels and demons coming together. The first time she’d seen such a battle, she’d wept when she watched an angel be overwhelmed and killed.

“Oh, Layla,” he chided. “Haven’t you figured it out yet?”

Layla was quiet for a long moment. “You’re one of the good demons,” she finally admitted, grudgingly. “Even though you enjoy assassinating everyone.”

“Not everyone. Only nasty demons and humans who stuck greedy hands into places they shouldn’t even know about.” Lazily, he tugged at the sheet covering her. She tightened her grip and tugged back.

“Stop it, Gethin.” She felt like throttling him. “All I could ever glean was that Vyn wanted to kidnap or kill someone before you did, and I’d appreciate it if you told me what the hell was going on.”

“Not kidnap or kill,” he chided. “That’s only if she keeps running away from us. You have to understand, Layla, that we’re all looking for this mysterious human someone because she did something no one should have been able to do.”

“A *she*? And *human*?” She’d entertained the idea of demon kings on the run and traitorous angels, but whatever understanding she thought she had of the paranormal creatures was toppling fast.

“I told you human women are the most dangerous things I’ve encountered so far. For a bit I even entertained the thought that you might be the woman we’re looking for.”

“That I did what? What did she do?”

“She opened the portal between Hell and Earth.”

There was a long, long silence while Layla gaped at him. Finally, in disbelief, she said, “That’s what it’s all about? Finding whoever caused this turmoil? I thought you knew and it was just a secret being kept from us humans. I can see and hear you guys, sure, but I had nothing to do with unleashing anyone. As far as my powers go, that’s about it.”

Gethin shrugged. “You can sense us no matter what safeguards we have, and you sure as hell are reclusive enough. For a while we had some intelligence swearing the woman who did so was blonde. Given that you were the first blonde I’d met with any kind of psychic capabilities, I couldn’t help but wonder if the next cosmic joke would be fate dumping my target in my lap without warning.”

“It was definitely a woman?” Her mind was spinning with possibilities. All the assassinations, tortures, blackmailing... It was no wonder every human, angel and demon was itching to get to the bottom of the mystery. Entire religions had imploded, crime ran unchecked in most cities, and more than one

country had gone bankrupt when its citizens fled to more secluded areas in the world. Earth, as everyone knew it, was over forever. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because if I thought you were a candidate after reading a background check on you, then others might as well. You should be prepared. But we’ve got a new lead. A brunette this time. You human women are such trouble, you know that?”

“She might not be human. She might be an angel. Or a demon.”

“She’s definitely part-human and has been on the run for five years straight ever since that portal opened up in the Nevada desert. Whoever she is, she has a lot of help and a lot of power.” He shook his head, admiration obvious. “I’m working with the angels to get her, so that she can reseal the portal. Preferably with the more...mentally unstable demons on the other side.”

“Why do the demons want her?”

“Depends which group you ask.” He tugged at the sheet again, a frown on his face. “The demons who wish to have some kind of peaceful co-existence with the humans and angels just want to kill her so they don’t get sealed away again.”

“Oh, that sounds very peaceful,” she snapped.

“Other demons want to use her power to break into Heaven. Get revenge for the millenniums they were imprisoned. It’s bad enough we’re on the saintly being’s back porch. You can imagine they have no desire to let us in.” He sneered. “So they asked me to do the dirty work for them.”

“And what do you get in exchange?”

He was quiet for a long, long moment. “I get to stay on Earth, and never go back to that forsaken place,” he finally whispered. “Before we escaped... Words cannot describe how we all existed down there. Born into war only to die in war. Imagine facing an entire life trapped in Hell, where loyalty and love are valued above all because there is so little of it. Nothing but endless treachery, betrayal and battle. And we’re free now. It’s a heady feeling. No one wants to give that up.”

“Do you think the angels will kill the woman?” She felt anxious for the fate of this human. Surely it hadn’t been intentional on her part.

“If they believe it’s for the greater good, who knows? If she’s half-angel instead of half-demon, it’ll help her case a lot. Angels are extremely biased with that sort of thing. Just like humans.”

“Well, of course we think demons are evil.” She sounded more defensive than she meant to. Crap. She slid down the headboard and stared at the ceiling, trying to process all she’d learned. There were more people then. More people who had powers others didn’t. “Crime isn’t even documented anymore, it’s so common. If demons aren’t evil, who is?”

“Am I evil?”

“Well, no,” she admitted. “You’re trying to do good. I see that now.”

He chuckled and rolled on top of her, letting his weight rest on her as he dipped his head to nuzzle the side of her neck. “Better hope I wasn’t bullshitting you. Though one of the first things we learned when we broke free was how incredibly gullible human women are to a handsome face.”

“I am *not* gullible.”

He ducked the pillow she swung at him.

“You’re emotional about me already, which is even worse. You won’t survive long in this new world.”

Her face burned at his charge, but couldn’t deny it. She didn’t love him. She...cared about everything that was going on. Besides, if he wasn’t the rampaging murderer she thought he was, why shouldn’t she have some feelings towards him? It wasn’t like anything would come of it. “There’s nothing wrong with being emotional,” Layla said stiffly. “In fact, I’d say I’m stronger for it. As for being emotional about you... I like you. I’m attracted to you. We had sex. It was fun. We might do it again. And then we’ll go our separate ways. I’ll go back to hacking computers and die in sixty or so years. I might even meet my brother when he’s older. Maybe I’ll get married and have kids myself. You’ll live on and on until you’re killed fighting demons. All by yourself. I think I have the better deal there.” She felt tears sting and she turned away from him. “So now what do we do?”

His words were as cold-hearted as hers. “We can go our separate ways, as it seems that’s all you want. You go back to your life, I go back to mine.”

Too easy, she thought. “What about Nathaniel?”

“What about him?”

“He needs protection from the air demons. He might need it for years.”

“I don’t work for free.”

She felt the vises clamp in place, felt as if her freedom, once again, was slowly being strangled from her. “So I’m back to square one. What do you want from me?” Anger bubbled and boiled.

“You’ve got your life, so I really wouldn’t call it square one.”

“You’re bargaining with my brother’s life,” she screamed. “How does that make you any better than Vyn?”

Judging by his involuntary flinch she’d struck a chord.

“Like I said, I don’t work for free. I’m going to take a shower. You’re welcome to join me when you’re ready to discuss terms.” Uncaring of his nudity, he let the sheets fall away as he strode into an adjoining room.

She waited until she heard the water running before marching into the bathroom. She whipped the curtain aside and turned off the hot water. Instantly gratified by the very un-demon-like yelp, she announced brusquely, “In exchange for my brother’s long-term protection, I will help you find this woman,

even if it takes many, many years. And when she is found, I want to leave this sordid life behind. Is that enough of a deal for you?”

Gethin turned the hot water back on and crossed his arms over his chest, water sluicing over the body she'd had over hers the night before. “I would have settled for your companionship, be it sexual or just friendship. But since you brought it up, I'll take your offer of assistance as well.”

That was all he wanted? Had she hurt his feelings? Too bad. She ruthlessly squashed the ache in her heart at how lonely he'd seemed for a brief second. Like he said, being emotionally involved with any demon was just asking for trouble. “And once we find this woman we're through.” She ignored the way her heart tightened at the thought of leaving him.

“If we no longer wish to be together, then yes.” He tilted his face into the shower, running his hands through thick locks.

“I'm not immortal. I can't turn into an angel or demon either. I'm all human.”

That seemed to amuse him. “Let's hope so. I didn't use a condom.”

“But you're not bothered...” She hesitated, eyes searching his face for any sign of discomfort or pain. “Haven't you found that making friends with mortals is a bad idea because they all die?” *And what if I fall for you even more than I might already have?*

“Layla, I've only had the pleasure of being on the surface of this planet for five years. I've never been close to a human before, and I rather enjoy being with you, as perplexing as that is. I also have no intentions of ending this anytime soon. Do human women not hit their prime in their thirties? You're only at twenty-seven, after all. Wouldn't want to miss that.”

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. “I'm speechless.”

“I'll certainly enjoy such a rare moment. Now, join me in the shower. Payback time.”

Not fully comprehending what he meant, she let him pull her in and squealed when he pinned her against him and turned the cold water on full blast.

“We're one step closer now.” Blood-red wine pooled at the bottom of the glass as Gethin tilted the bottle. The restaurant they were celebrating in was small, intimate and just what they needed after a long week of work. He wore his shades, as he always did when around humans, to hide his eyes. “Good call bringing in that portrait artist. Not the best, but at least we have some kind of a face to go on instead of just hair. Far harder to disguise.”

Layla picked up a copy of the drawing. Big haunted eyes gazed up at her pleadingly. The woman looked to be around her age, with a delicate heart-shaped face and a bundle of chocolate curls spilling over her shoulders. Her lips were parted with surprise.

“She looks scared,” she said softly.

“Can’t blame her.” Gethin nudged the wine a bit closer to her free hand. “She’s got more hits focused on her than a network of terrorists.”

“We need to save her.”

Gethin made a noncommittal noise. “We’ll see what her story is.”

“I mean it, Gethin.”

His legs squeezed hers under the table. “Layla, I will do my best to make sure everyone who deserves to stay alive does so. We’ve been over this a hundred times. Just because she’s a fragile-looking female doesn’t mean she—oh, hell. Who’s calling me now?” Irritated, he checked the screen before shooting her an apologetic look. “I need to take this. Hold up.” Before she could protest that the dinner was supposed to be stress free, he was striding away. Well aware that the women who had been ogling him all night were now openly staring at her, she focused on toying with the gnocchi on her plate.

Layla had been trapped before, but this was a different sort of trapped. She knew being with Gethin would cause her pain in the end, but she still kept going. She stayed with Gethin at one of his apartments and worked from there, tracking down the mysterious woman. But as she became more and more entrenched in this new world, she wished desperately to become a part of it. Each moment of happiness was bittersweet. She tried to cherish every second she spent with him, knowing well it couldn’t last.

She’d fallen for the red-eyed demon, and she’d fallen hard.

A pity it wouldn’t work out. It was only a matter of time before one of them had to move on.

She was startled from her melancholy when Gethin strode back in. “Something’s up at the office. I need to go in.”

“I’ll go home.”

“You don’t go anywhere without me.”

She glared at him. His protectiveness had been endearing the first week. Now she wanted to clobber him over the head to knock some sense into him. “Gethin, I cannot stay glued to your side for the next twenty years. You go to the office, I go home. I’ll hop in a cab if need be.”

“No. You’re coming with me. Give it a few months, Layla. The air demons are still out there. No news is good news except when it comes to demons. We’re only quiet when we’re up to no good.”

“And when you’re not quiet?” she asked dryly.

He smirked. “That’s when we’re *really* up to no good.” He efficiently tucked a few bills under his plate that more than covered the dinner. Without giving her much room to protest, he whisked her outside and bundled her into a cab. “I know you don’t want to go back to the office, Layla. But just for a few minutes.”

“I can’t face them yet.”

He didn’t reply, but his hand closed around her, warm and strong.

Layla was quiet on the drive over and stayed behind in the lobby. She watched the elevator go up to the thirty-third floor and stay there. Nervously, she glanced around. There was no one here except for a guard at the reception desk. If he recognized her, he didn't let on. The minutes dragged on and on, and she was just about to call Gethin to ask him to hurry up when the elevator buttons lit up and began moving down.

The doors slid open and revealed a stranger, a tall, lean man with wraparound shades. She quelled her disappointment and looked away as the man stepped out. What was taking Gethin so long? She began to reach for her phone.

The man approached her cautiously, sliding the glasses down. "Layla?"

He looked vaguely familiar, and the red eyes proclaimed him a blood demon. He must have worked with her, spent time in the offices with her. Yes, she definitely knew him. Had he known any of the demons that had died? She sincerely hoped not. "May I help you?"

"Gethin asked me to escort you home." His face remained polite and friendly. If he hated her as much as she feared her old coworkers did, he hid it well.

"Damnit. Is he going to take much longer? I'd rather wait for him." She checked her phone anxiously. It was nearing ten.

"A few hours."

She groaned. Far too long. "Oh, very well then. I'm so sorry, but I've forgotten your name. Rick, was it?"

He smiled. "Close enough. Richard." He stayed close to her side as they stepped out together onto the dark sidewalk. She felt something prick her arm, but there was nothing when she looked. A mosquito? As a cab pulled over near them, she felt her head spin.

"Richard?"

"Yes?"

"I don't feel well. Dizzy."

"Do you need help?"

She felt an arm wrap around her waist.

"You must have had too much wine. Here, get in."

Her heart was racing, her mouth cotton-dry. She felt herself start to fade as her legs sagged. Too much wine? She'd barely had a glassful, and if something had been wrong with it Gethin would be ill too.

Gethin. She needed to get to Gethin. But as she attempted to coordinate her movement, Richard's arms were banded around her. "You're going to pass out now for an hour, and when you wake up we'll be with Vyn," he whispered in her ear. "Gethin will be dead and the air demons will be *very* eager to see you."

The realization that she was being abducted came too late. The cab hadn't even pulled away from the curb before she was out.

When she came to, she was lying on a sofa with several demons standing guard over her. Richard leaned towards her.

“Well, hello there, princess,” he drawled. “Guess I gave you a way bigger dose than I intended to. You’ve been out for almost eight hours. No matter.”

Her heart was lodged so deeply in her throat it was a wonder she could breathe around it. She was in the nondescript, three-story brick house where she’d been taken prior to working undercover at Gethin’s company. As she was unceremoniously hauled to her feet, one of the air demons opened the door and Richard shoved her through.

What could she do? Her skin crawled as Richard pushed her along down hallways and past rooms she remembered all too well. They were walking to the back of the house. Given what time it was, Vyn was most likely enjoying a light breakfast in the garden. He always had so relished simple human traditions.

When she stepped outside, it was to see Vyn leaning back in his chair, savoring what seemed to be an English muffin with chocolate spread on top. If she didn’t know first-hand what he was capable of, she would have almost pitied him. Watching him, it was hard to ignore the truth behind Gethin’s words about each side being right. If she’d been forever sentenced to eternity in Hell, and had been given a chance to escape to a place where she would not only survive but thrive, where would she have drawn the line to stay there?

Her heart hardened when he looked up and sneered. “Gethin can’t care for you much if he let you slip away so easily. He’s had eight hours to rescue you and still no sign of him. A pity he takes better care of your brother. We’ve been trying to kill the little brat for days now.”

Fury took her breath away, but the burning desire for revenge gave her the strength to speak. “I cannot believe you would stoop so low as to kill an innocent child for revenge.”

“You make it sound as if the death of a child is important in the long term.” Vyn sighed. “You humans understand nothing of death and life, of what is unimportant and what actually matters. I must say, I’ve grown rather fond of your kind and the odd habits you’ve developed, but I’m afraid amusement protects strangers only so much.

“As for the information you obtained for us—I simply wished to warn Gethin’s victims ahead of time. For the right price, of course. I’m very disappointed that you only got thirty-odd names for me. They were all—how should I phrase it—dead ends by the time I tracked them. Your demon lover has been quite the efficient killing machine. Until now.”

“I didn’t activate the emergency signal,” she admitted, ignoring the fear that tunneled through her at his last words. “Another demon broke the glasses accidentally. I had no way to tell you to call off the attack.”

Vyn's eyes flashed with annoyance. "It was the best emergency system we could come up with on such short notice. That certainly explains a lot. But, darling, if you don't mind—" he waved a hand in her direction, "—you've more than outlived your usefulness."

He'd barely finished speaking when she felt her lungs start to constrict. No oxygen. She tried to drag in one last breath before holding it, but there was nothing for her to breathe. She felt her vision blur and her lungs were stabbed with pain. She slowly sank to the ground as everything began to recede into nothing.

Abruptly, her next inhalation brought with it oxygen. Dizzy, shocked, she let herself lie on the cool stones of the garden. Vyn's voice came from somewhere above her. "Ah, don't die quite yet. I've a scout coming back in a few minutes, one who swore he'd bring your brother back to me. Another traitor from Gethin's men, actually. My, my, is he having a bad day."

Everything was terribly, horribly wrong. Surely the breaches in security weren't so bad, were they? A slash of light appeared and widened enough to let a lone figure step out with no little boy in sight. "Gethin," she breathed. How on earth...

"If one person even thinks of moving, they're dead." Gethin's voice was cold. "My men have surrounded this place, and it is up to you whether or not you want to die painlessly."

Vyn leaped from his seat, hands clutching his face, his throat, his stomach as he began to bleed.

"Mercy!" Vyn cried out.

"The same mercy you showed Layla and her brother? The same mercy you show any of your victims? I'm no angel. Such words won't change your fate. But if you let Layla go free now, unharmed, I shall tell my men who have just circled off your entire block to kill quickly and with mercy, as you so like to call it." He looked at Layla, his mask slipping. "I realized too late that phone call was a trap. Step through the air portal, and don't mind the dead demons on the other side. It's perfectly safe. The demons who are still alive aren't traitors."

She hesitated, looking at the bleeding air demon. He'd tortured her, intended to torture her brother, but seeing him dripping blood onto his neatly set table for one, she felt sadness wash over her. She wouldn't mourn him, not at all. Nonetheless, it was heartbreaking that peace negotiations of some type couldn't be settled upon.

"I'm not strong enough to fight in these battles," she admitted.

"Someone I care for told me emotions weren't a weakness, Ms. Roads," Gethin reminded her. "Off with you. Justice must be served with as much compassion as I suspect you feel. And when this is over, I shall do my best to replace these past weeks and months with new memories. Your role in this war has ended with Vyn's death."

Tears falling, she stepped through the air portal without looking back, knowing full well that every air demon in that house would be dead in the next minute, and with them, the knowledge of her brother's connection to her and thus Gethin.

Her part was over.

Gethin had taken a month off, but he couldn't spare more than that. For four long, glorious weeks, he made good on his promise to her—that whatever time they may have together, they'd make the best of it. But three days ago, work had come with a vengeance. He'd returned with semi-permanence to the office, and she stayed at his condo.

"Come meet me at work," he invited. "Lunchtime. Take a break from the computer before your eyes melt. I haven't seen you in two days."

She rubbed a hand over her face, even as his voice ignited a slow, warm glow inside. After so many weeks spent exclusively with him, the first few days back into the normal rhythm of things was difficult. "I can't." When her answer was met with silence, she sighed. "I can't go back there and face everyone. Not after...not after how I left."

"They forgive you. They understand."

"Even Todd?"

He hesitated. "Todd is on shift guarding Nathaniel. But no, Layla, I think a part of him can't forgive you until he forgives himself. He was close to you and close to one of my demons who died. But if you're not ready yet I'll see you when I get home. I'll bring dinner. Pick your poison."

"Cheeseburger."

He snorted.

"There's a gym here, thank you very much. I'm just craving a burger. I'm stressed. You've given me an impossible target to track down. If it weren't for those confessions you got, I'd say this woman died at twenty and that was that."

"Except we all know she's alive and kicking. I want another step made in this case by Thursday." He hung up the phone.

She was nuts about the damn demon, and they both knew it. He cared for her too. It was an unspoken rule that neither brought it up because the mere idea of anything permanent hurt. In the weeks they'd spent together after Vyn's death he'd opened her eyes to a whole new world, telling her all about demon and angel lore, stories of where he came from and what it had been like. He still refused to tell her parts of it, though whether it was because he worried for her safety or because it was still too painful, she didn't know.

Hanging over the relationship was the knowledge that it would end for her as she grew old and he didn't. She knew instinctively that he would be there for her as long as possible. Even so, she feared anew for his life, that a battle or accident would rip him away from her. But he must suffer doubly so—not only was she physically less strong should something happen, but there was time. Always ticking, always passing, as she grew older and older with each passing day while he stayed the same. She'd teased him about it once, but he hadn't laughed.

She was being silly, she scolded herself. Being gloomy about something that would happen in ten, twenty years. Resolutely, she pushed the worries out of her mind and focused back on the task at hand, determined to finish it long before the deadline he'd set.

True to his word, Gethin picked up the dinner she wanted. She smelled the food even before he came into view. Turning away from her computer, she leaped up and flung her arms around him as he walked into her office space she'd set up in the corner of his home office.

His body went from warm and gentle to distant in a heartbeat.

Worried, she pulled back. "Are you okay?"

He stared down at her, eyes narrowed. A muscle ticked in his jaw. "There's someone else here," he stated harshly. His eyes were growing darker and darker with each passing second.

She took another step back, wrapping her arms around herself. She was suddenly chilled to the bone as she glanced around nervously. "What do you—" She stopped in shock as Gethin knelt at her feet, pressing his face into her stomach. "Gethin. What on earth has gotten into you?"

"There's a heartbeat," he rasped. The look on his face when he pulled back and looked up at her nearly broke her heart. "Layla. There's another heartbeat."

It took a moment before it sank in, and then she simply fell back into her chair, bringing them to similar heights. "You said that's not possible."

"No, I said that demons could only impregnate angels and other demons."

Her smile wobbled. "I'm no angel. Or a demon, for that matter."

"Current data proves otherwise. You must have an ancestor, somewhere down the line, responsible for this." He laughed, sounding as shocked as she must have looked. "Of all the humans on the planet, I found the one who's got immortality in her blood."

"I'm not wholly human." She leaned forward and rested her head against his sturdy shoulder, wild elation coursing through her. She was pregnant. She carried his child. It must have happened the first time they'd made love. So many possibilities, a whole new life had suddenly opened up. She trembled.

"I would have never guessed..." He trailed off. Lifting her face in his hands, he examined her deeply. "Layla. I will always, always be there for you. And our child."

"I know," she whispered. "I just never thought that this would happen. Ever."

"But it did." He took a deep breath. "And while I may not have planned it this way—I wouldn't trade this for the entire world. We'll take this one step at a time, you and I. How do you feel?"

"Surprised," she said, attempting to smile. "Happy. Confused. Excited. A bit nauseous."

He laughed deeply. "You'll be one of those hanging over the toilet every morning then, will you? Fuck me. If someone had told me a hundred years ago that I'd be in this position with someone I...someone I loved, I would have killed them for taunting me with such hope."

"You love me."

“Didn’t I just say that?” He actually bit his lip.

Laughter spilled out. “And you called me the emotional one. God, Gethin. I love you, though I’m sure you’ve figured that out already.”

Reverently, he placed a hand over her stomach, and she ached to hear what he clearly could. “Perhaps miracles do happen, after all.”

Smiling so widely she felt as if she could explode with joy, she laid her hands over his on her abdomen. “Yes, Gethin. They do.”

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."

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

My Avenging Angel

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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.

Enjoy the following excerpt for My Avenging Angel:

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.



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