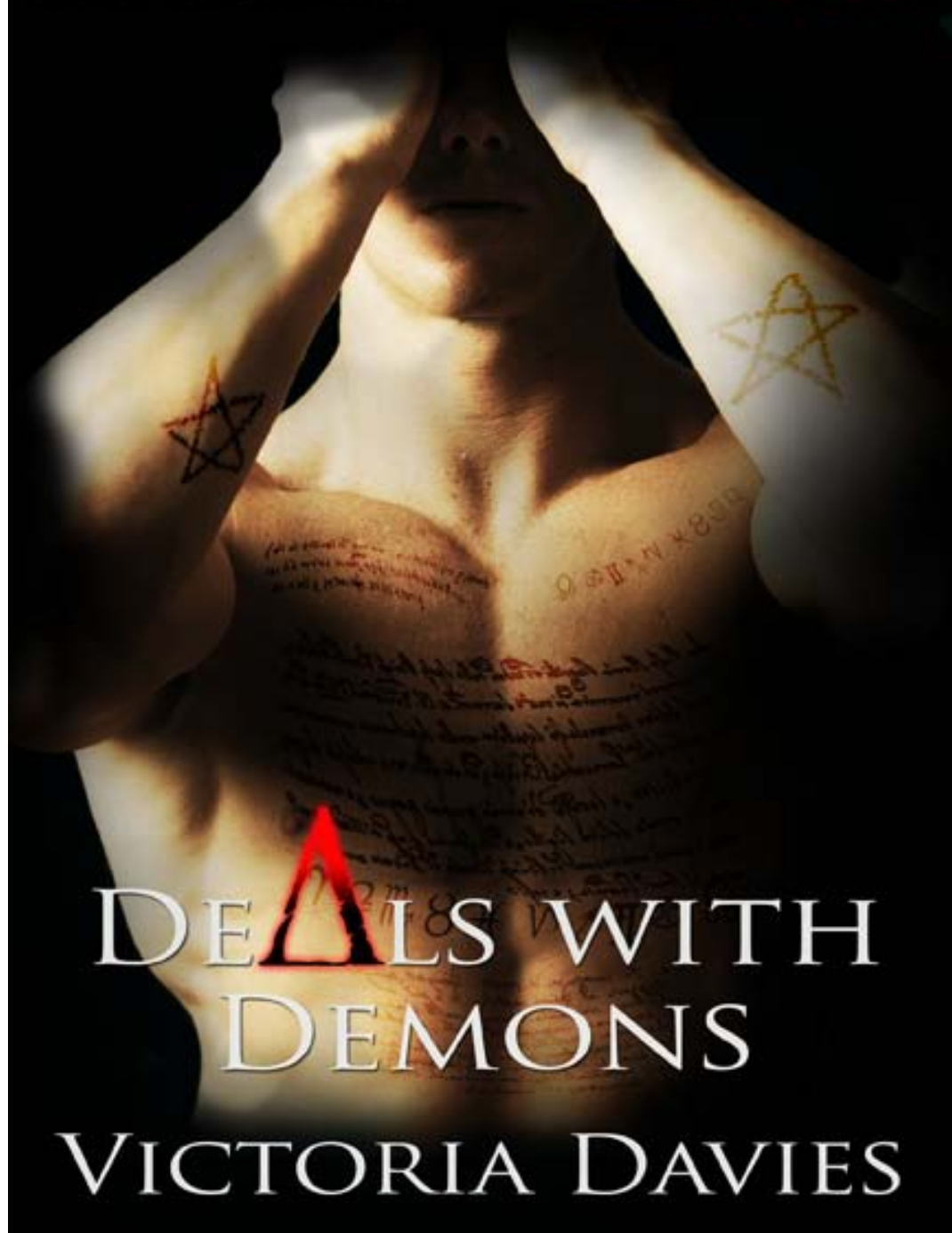


Samantha Publishing Ltd.

ANGELS & DEMONS



DEALS WITH DEMONS

VICTORIA DAVIES

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

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.

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Deals with Demons

Victoria Davies

Dedication

To my amazing family, who has always loved and encouraged me.
I couldn't have done this without your support.

Chapter One

“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. Sensers' 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 sinner.

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."

Chapter Two

The night air felt cool against her heated skin. Beyond the balcony rail the city glittered in the darkness. Talia fidgeted with the hem of her light pink strapless gown that had been carefully chosen to show off her creamy skin and long legs. Here's hoping it helped her win her birthday wish.

"I found another bottle," Devlin said, stepping onto the balcony.

Talia twisted in her chair to see him. No matter how much time she spent by his side, she would never get used to his stunning looks.

Towering over six feet, he was not a man any fool messed with. His long blond hair was pulled back from his strikingly beautiful face. Piercing green eyes studied the wine in his hand as he absently walked over to her. Tonight he'd forgone his usual black suits in favour of simple slacks and a tight black silk T-shirt. Watching the way the material molded to his chest, Talia unconsciously licked her lips. Even dressed casually, Devlin was a man who took her breath away. How had she managed to live with him for five years without jumping him?

Well, no more, she decided, eying him hungrily. Tonight was her nineteenth birthday and all she wanted was him.

Devlin dropped into the chair beside her and set the wine bottle next to the half-eaten birthday cake on the small table.

"How does it feel to be nineteen?" he asked with a smile.

"Much the way it felt to be eighteen," she replied nervously, wondering how to phrase her request.

Devlin, it's my birthday. Do me. She sighed. Not quite the sophisticated offer she wanted. Besides, she was crazy to even imagine he'd want to be with her. She saw the women he dated. Hell, his harem lived in the mansion most of the time. There was no way for an awkward nineteen-year-old to compete with the elegant models he preferred.

"You're thinking too hard," Devlin told her, opening the wine and pouring them each a glass. "I can see the little wrinkle you get on your forehead."

Talia touched her face self-consciously. "You can't," she denied.

"What were you thinking of?"

"Birthdays," she said with a sigh.

"Yes, because you are getting so very old," he teased.

She supposed for a man who'd lived centuries, a nineteenth birthday was nothing at all. But she was mortal. The best she had to hope for was another five or six decades with him. Every year mattered.

"I haven't gotten you a birthday present yet, have I?" Devlin mused. "What do you wish for your birthday, Tali?"

"You," she blurted without thinking. Talia winced. It hadn't been the smooth, seductive invitation she'd imagined. When she peeked at Devlin she saw he was frozen with an unreadable look on his face.

Dammit, she thought, a blush heating her cheeks. How did she undo this blunder?

"What do you wish for your birthday?" he asked again, slowly.

Talia sucked in a sharp breath. Was he serious? She'd spent enough time around demons to understand the basic tenants of magic. To bind a wish you had to answer it three times. He was taking her seriously.

"You," she whispered, unable to look away from his eerie green eyes.

Moving faster than Talia could see, he appeared before her, crouching on his knees. "Careful," he warned her. "Only one more chance. Have a care with your answer, Talia, for if you bind this wish I won't let you go. What do you wish for your —"

"You," she cut in.

Devlin swept her into his arms before she'd even finished the word. One hand tangled in her long black hair, tilting her head up. Devlin met her eyes, hesitating a moment before he lowered his head and claimed her mouth.

Talia gasped as he kissed her for the first time. How many nights had she imagined being in his arms? And now she was. Before the night was finished, she'd be a demon's lover.

Her hands gripped the chair arms uncertainly as he kissed her. His intensity was overwhelming. She struggled to match his passion but Talia didn't exactly have much experience to draw from. She'd been in love with one man all her life. Dating boys her age had never seemed very appealing when she compared them to Devlin.

"Open your mouth, darling," he murmured against her lips.

Parting her lips for him, Talia gasped as his tongue touched hers. She wanted this, she did, but suddenly everything was moving too fast. She couldn't find her footing.

Gasping for breath, she pushed the demon back and jumped to her feet.

"Dev," she panted. "Wait."

Slowly, Devlin rose before her. His eyes glowed with an inner fire and the sight sent a shiver of delight racing down her spine. A demon's eyes glowed in situations of intense attraction. At least she knew he truly wanted her.

"I told you," he murmured, waltzing her backwards until she hit the brick wall of the mansion, "I'm not letting you go."

“I’m not asking you to,” she said breathlessly.

He stepped forwards, pressing his body against the full length of hers. When his knee parted her legs, she clutched his shoulders for support.

“I’ve waited so long for you,” he told her, cupping her face in his hands. “Don’t be afraid.”

Twisting her head, she laid a gentle kiss on the palm of his hand. “I could never fear you,” she whispered.

Devlin closed his eyes as he leaned his forehead against hers. She made no protest, revelling in his closeness. The way he held her soothed her trepidations. Devlin touched her as if she were something infinitely precious to him. How she wished she truly was. Maybe tonight was their new start. She’d make him fall as deeply in love with her as she was with him.

When he opened his eyes, Talia read only tenderness in them.

“Come inside with me.”

Talia swallowed hard, managing only a shaky nod.

Stepping back, Devlin caught her hands and pulled her with him. He led her slowly to the entrance to his bedroom and slid the glass door open.

Talia glanced back at the birthday cake and bottle of wine. She wished she’d thought to have an extra glass for courage.

“Your choice,” Devlin told her. “It’s always your choice.”

She knew that. For all he was a demon, she knew he’d never hurt her in any way. There was no one she trusted more than him.

Tentatively, she placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed him backwards.

His room was dark. Only the weak moonlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows illuminated the massive space. But she didn’t need light. She knew every inch of the mansion, including Devlin’s personal domain. He had never restricted anything from her.

Which meant she knew exactly where the decadent king-sized bed lay.

The door slid closed behind her, moved with invisible hands. Talia never flinched. She was used to being around demons working magic.

Devlin walked backwards, his gaze never leaving hers, until he stood before the bed.

Unable to tear her gaze from him, she forgot to breathe as she watched him slowly grip the hem of his shirt and pull it over his head. She’d seen him bare-chested before but never under such exciting circumstances.

He tossed the shirt away before running his fingers along the fastening of his slacks. Talia held her breath as he hesitated, toying with her. With a crooked smile, he finally unzipped the pants and let them slip over his hips. He kicked the material away, but Talia didn’t even spare the discarded clothing a glance. Devlin had just revealed he wasn’t the kind of demon to wear underwear.

Talia sucked in a sharp breath as she looked at him naked for the first time. There was nothing soft about Devlin. His body was as honed as a blade. It was made for power and strength. And yet tonight it would be capable of bringing pleasure as well.

He let her look her fill before raising a hand to her.

“Come to me,” he commanded.

Talia had no choice but to obey.

She walked to him, trying to hide her nervousness. There was no denying she was in over her head. When she slipped her trembling fingers into his, he pulled her into his arms. He kissed her thoroughly, drawing his lips over hers. Talia tried her best to match his passion but she lacked the experience she needed to truly bring him to his knees.

“Relax,” he murmured, answering her groan of frustration. “There will be other nights, my daring girl. Tonight is for you.”

“But I want to be good for you,” she confessed in a humiliated whisper.

Devlin laughed painfully. “Tali, nothing about you could ever disappoint me. If you want to learn—” he drew his lips over hers, “—I am more than willing to teach. But it would only be refining your natural skills.”

“What skills?” she groaned.

Devlin dropped a light kiss on her exposed shoulder. “You destroy me,” he whispered to her. “No one else has the power you do.”

She drew a sharp breath at his words. Biting her lip, Talia reached behind to grasp the zipper of her dress.

“Teach me,” she told him, drawing down the zipper.

Devlin watched with hot eyes as the fabric parted and fell away. The dress had been too tight for a bra and Talia stood before him in only her skimpy black panties. Rolling her shoulders back, she stood tall and waited for his verdict.

“You are so incredibly perfect,” Devlin murmured, his eyes glowing brightly in the darkness.

Talia released the breath she hadn’t even realised she’d been holding.

Grabbing her around the waist, Devlin grinned wickedly. Before she could protest, he tossed her backwards onto the bed.

“Warning next time,” she grumbled, trying to sit up.

Devlin dropped onto her before she could move. He caught her wrists and pinned them above her head with one powerful hand.

“Mmmm,” he murmured, looking down at her. “Delicious.”

She laughed nervously. “Is the big bad demon going to eat me?”

His eyes glowed brighter. “Your wish is my command.”

Devlin ran his lips down her throat and continued to slide down her torso. Talia gripped the black sheets, riding the incredible sensation of his touch. She barely noticed when he pulled her panties down her legs. But she did notice when his fingers trailed slowly up her inner thigh.

“Devlin!” she gasped, reaching to push away his hand.

A delighted chuckle rumbled from him. “Enjoy,” he told her, moving up to kiss her quickly.

Talia eyed him dubiously as he reached out to run the tips of his fingers up her legs. Her breath caught at the shocking sensations such a light touch inspired. Devlin’s hot mouth trailed over her body, finally pausing when he reached her breast. Rolling his eyes up so he could see her, he took one pink nipple into his mouth. Talia cried out as pleasure shot through her.

“Devlin,” she groaned, trying to navigate the new sensations.

As he suckled her, he drew his fingers higher and touched her lightly between her thighs.

“Oh my,” she gasped as a single finger traced her folds. “That can’t be legal.”

“Little innocent,” Devlin murmured, sliding back down her body. “You told me to eat you, remember?”

As his head slipped down between her legs, she realised what he intended. “I didn’t mean...ah...” she moaned as his tongue replaced his fingers.

Talia arched off the bed with a ragged cry. She twisted in the sheets as her demon lover played with her. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined anything like what he did to her.

“Dev, stop!” she finally cried when she couldn’t take it anymore.

With a last lick, Devlin raised his head. Overwhelmed by the pleasure, Talia could only stare mutely at the smiling Devlin. His expression was filled with pure male satisfaction as he climbed up her body.

“Ready?” he asked wickedly, licking at her breast.

“Oh my God,” she gasped.

“Come now, darling, you don’t have to call me that. I’ll also answer to ‘my master’.”

Talia laughed, hitting him on the shoulder. He retaliated by squeezing her nipple, making her writhe beneath him.

When her pleasure-fogged mind cleared enough for conscious thought, she cupped his face between her palms and kissed him softly. “I’m ready,” she told him.

Wordlessly, he shifted to fit himself against her entrance.

“Hold on to me, sweetheart,” he told her, pressing forwards.

Talia gasped as he forced his long length into her. Pleasure disappeared in the wake of a painful pressure building within her.

“I changed my mind,” she cried.

“Hold on, love,” he replied, stopping. “Just a little more and I swear I’ll make it all better.”

Talia eyed him warily, biting her lip, but slowly nodded.

Gritting his teeth, Devlin thrust into her.

Talia screamed, arching off the bed. “Oh hell!” she yelled, battering his shoulders. “I don’t know what the other women told you, but trust me, they lied. You are so not good in bed.”

Devlin groaned, striving to hold himself perfectly still. “It’s only like this the first time,” he assured her.

“Dev, if you think there’ll be a second time you are one seriously delusional demon.”

Devlin shook his head in exasperation before leaning down to stop her flow of words with a kiss. With his free hand, he played with her breasts, sending spikes of pleasure through her to make her forget the pain. Talia willed her tense body to relax. Already the pain was fading, leaving behind the foreign feeling of invasion.

“Better?” he asked her, his voice strained.

“A little.”

Devlin groaned in relief and carefully shifted inside her.

Talia gasped in surprise at the pleasure she felt.

“Much better,” he purred, seeing her reaction. Slowly, he withdrew.

Watching her wide eyes, he slid into her again. Unlike the first time, Talia felt no searing pain. Instead, a curious heat spread through her.

“Again,” she commanded, wanting to test this unfamiliar pleasure.

Grinning, Devlin complied. He rocked into her leisurely, giving her time to adjust to his presence. When her body started to relax around him, however, he picked up the pace.

“Lift your hips,” he commanded, pulling her up to meet his thrusts.

Talia threw back her head, moving her body as he commanded. Every time he drove into her she felt a pressure building within her. But this time, it wasn’t uncomfortable. Every thrust broke a little more of her control. She dug her nails into his shoulders, trying to ride out the waves of unfamiliar pleasures pounding through her body. She rocked her hips instinctively, matching his rhythm.

Any thought of pain was long gone from her mind. Instead, all she felt was tortuous heat.

“More!” she cried, not even realising what she was asking for.

Devlin drove into her, pushing her closer and closer to that precipice within her.

“Devlin,” she gasped as he thrust into her one last time and pushed her over the edge.

Talia screamed as her climax rocked her. She’d never felt anything like the pleasure that swamped her. Every cell in her body exploded at the same time. The world blacked around her as she tried to cling to consciousness.

She heard Devlin above her cry out and felt a piercing pain in her neck. Her demon lover had sunk his sharp fangs into her throat. The thought might have disturbed her before, but right now it only added to the

pleasure. Her orgasm continued as he drank from her, battering her with unending waves of indescribable pleasure.

Finally, Devlin drew back his head.

Talia stared at her lover and watched a single drop of her blood trail down his chin.

Talia jerked awake, falling less than gracefully from the bed. On hands and knees, she scuttled backwards until she hit the wall.

Her harsh breathing filled the dark, empty room. She was alone.

“It was a dream,” she said aloud, trying to calm her racing body. “Only a harmless dream,”

Maybe thinking about Devlin had stirred up the memories of their one time together.

Talia reached up to touch the black rose on her throat, half-expecting to feel an open wound. But the skin was smooth and blood free. It may have been a freakishly realistic dream but it was a dream none the less. Devlin was not here. She was no longer nineteen. And she was not the silly woman who’d once loved him more than anything.

Talia was older now, and wiser. She’d never fall into the old trap of thinking Devlin gave a damn about her. He was a centuries-old demon, after all. Manipulating people was a hobby for him. It was her fault she’d believed the magic of her nineteenth birthday meant as much to him as it had to her.

She pushed herself to her feet before stumbling back to the bed. Devlin St. Clair was no longer her fairytale hero. If he knew what was best for him, he’d stay the hell out of her way.

Chapter Three

A demon lounged against her building.

Talia had spent her night tracking a rather pitiful mark trying to escape his overlord. All she wanted to do was take a long, hot bath and sleep like the dead. But instead she had to deal with the freaking demon in her path. Who did a girl have to kill to get a break around here?

With a sigh, she strode forwards. Talia was not a woman who ran from her fears. At least not anymore.

As she came closer she noticed two unusual things. The demon stood deliberately in the shadows to hide his face and, beyond the fact that he wasn't human, Talia couldn't sense anything else about him. Usually she felt demons' emotions and could predict their movements. Sometimes she learned even more, sensing ages, desires and even brief glimpses of their personalities. But with this demon she got...nothing.

She flexed her wrists as she stepped onto the same block as her visitor, making sure her daggers were easily accessible. Talia felt the weight of his gaze as she strode forwards. Did he know who she was, what she was, or was he merely hunting?

She stopped a few feet from the demon and crossed her arms.

"I would suggest you turn around and walk away before you give me a reason to kill you."

"Some would argue you already have several reasons," a cultured voice replied.

A voice she knew too well.

Devlin stepped forwards into the pale glow of the street lamp.

He looked the same as he always had. Tall, dark and breathtakingly beautiful. The same stunning green eyes she remembered studied her in silence, drinking in the sight of her. He wore all black, as usual, and she knew if she checked, his suit and overcoat would have designer tags. He always had loved luxury and pleasure.

Talia stood strong before him, hiding her shock behind her cool business façade. She was proud of her response, especially considering the dream she'd had the night before. The last thing she wanted was for him to see how badly his appearance spooked her.

She'd always wondered what she would do when she saw him again. Would she go for his heart with a dagger or throw herself at his feet and beg him to kiss her again? But now fantasy had become reality and she was helpless to do anything but stand frozen before him.

"Hello, Tali," he said softly.

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped. “I’m not that child anymore.”

Something flickered in his eyes. If she hadn’t known him so well she would have sworn it was pain. But she did know him, and she knew he’d never cared about her in any way that mattered.

“What are you doing here, Devlin?” she asked harshly.

“You challenged me to come get you,” he reminded her.

Talia snorted. “Like I thought you’d come. You have better things to do than chase after an inconsequential human.”

A frown marred his beautiful face. “You are many things, Talia,” he replied, “but inconsequential is not one of them.”

She hid her shock at his words.

“I need to speak with you,” he said abruptly. “Shall we retire to your apartment?”

“Like hell I am letting you near my home.”

“This is not a matter to be discussed in the streets.”

“Ever heard of a phone?” she snapped, unyielding.

Devlin shook his head in exasperation. “I’d forgotten how stubborn you are.”

“Not stubborn,” she corrected. “Cautious.”

He glanced at her sharply. “You cannot think I am any threat to you.”

“As I learned the hard way, I don’t know anything about you at all.”

He actually took a step towards her, anger burning in his eyes, before he stopped himself.

Talia was shocked at the display of emotion, however small. He prided himself on forever being in control.

“If I wanted to harm you,” he said through gritted teeth, “I’d have had ample opportunity before now.”

“You knew where I was?”

“I look after what is mine.”

“I’ve never been yours,” she snarled.

He opened his mouth to reply but thought twice. Instead, Devlin drew a deep breath before speaking in an even voice. “I wish to hire you, Talia. Surely you do not discuss business with a client in the streets.”

“I have an office,” she replied. “Make an appointment.”

“You would refuse to see me.”

“Damn straight.”

“You do not want to refuse me this time.”

“Give me one good reason why I would ever want to associate with you again,” she demanded.

“Because I want to hire you to track the demon who murdered your family.”

Talia jerked back in horror.

“Still want to discuss this in the street?”

Talia could hear the impatience in his tone. Without another word she opened the door to her building and motioned him inside. He followed her silently as they climbed the stairs. No way was she stepping into a small elevator with a demon.

“I was surprised you chose to live here,” Devlin said as he stepped into her apartment. “You always had the same taste for luxury I did.”

“Nothing about me is like you,” she denied.

Devlin flinched slightly.

Talia shrugged out of her coat and tossed it over the back of the white sofa. She motioned to the kitchen table and grabbed her notebook before she dropped into a chair.

Graceful as always, Devlin slid into the seat across from her.

For a moment she couldn't believe this was real. Devlin was sitting in her kitchen, staring at her with his beautiful eyes. He was still the most stunning man she'd ever seen. Every cell in her body burned simply from being near him. But she knew all too well she walked a dangerous road. Devlin's appeal was a deadly trap. It sucked you in and left you broken and bleeding.

“Tell me about the demon,” she said to turn her mind away from painful memories.

“His name is Saleel.”

The monster of her childhood finally had a name.

“How powerful is he?”

“He is almost as old as I,” Devlin replied, “and, very likely, almost as powerful.”

Talia stared at him in shock. As news went, it rarely got worse. She was tough, but at the end of the day she was still mostly human. It was impossible for her to kill something as strong as Devlin. She might hate her demon lover but never, even in her wildest fantasies of revenge, had she deceived herself into thinking she had the slightest chance of physically harming him.

In one sentence he had forever destroyed her dreams of killing the man responsible for her shattered childhood.

“Why did you come?” she demanded painfully. “Is this merely some new torment to inflict on me?”

He sucked in a sharp breath. “I would never hurt you.”

She laughed bitterly, knowing the words for the lies they were. “I can't kill something as powerful as you. Now I will never be able to avenge my family. It would have been far kinder to let me live in ignorance.”

“You cannot fight him, it's true,” Devlin said softly. “But I can.”

Talia looked at him sharply. “What?”

“You can sense him. You can track him. When you find him, I will kill him.”

A shock too deep to be hidden showed on her face. “Why?” she asked, for once the old anger gone from her voice. “If he is as strong as you say, it will be dangerous for you. He might even be able to kill you. No demon puts himself at risk in such a way. Why would you?”

A self-deprecating smile twisted his lips. “He hurt you,” he answered simply. “That is reason enough.”

It was too much. Before her sat the hero from her girlish dreams, not the monster she had hated all her adult life. She couldn’t handle the dichotomy. Talia pushed herself out of the chair, needing to put some distance between them. She paced across the room until she was as far away from him as she could get. Was he telling the truth? Would he honestly risk his life to kill the man who had hurt her? Why?

Maybe it was restitution, she mused. But his actions didn’t fit with her image of him as a selfish demon who took what he wanted without consideration for who he hurt. Why would he wound her so badly in the past only to show up now as her saviour?

She turned back to face him from across the room. “I don’t understand why you would do this.”

A short laugh escaped him, filled with a world of pain Talia couldn’t understand. For a moment he didn’t move. He closed his eyes and turned away from her.

Talia shifted uneasily as she watched him. They were playing a game she didn’t know the rules to. Everything he did was the opposite of what she expected.

Finally Devlin opened his eyes and looked back to her. She drew in a sharp breath. Gone was his wounded look, his air of vulnerability. Instead, the Devlin who sat before her was the one from her memories, the demon who ruled his world with an iron fist. He never did anything free and there was no mercy in his soul. Devlin pushed back his chair abruptly before striding over to her.

“I see you cannot believe I’d help you merely because you asked. So let’s try a different path. Make a deal with me,” he demanded, his tone hard.

Her body shook. “Even a child knows not to make deals with demons.”

“But you are no longer a child,” he replied, his gaze moving heatedly over her body. “Offer me a deal to win your vengeance.”

“What could I possibly offer you to make you risk your life?” she asked, honestly bewildered. She had nothing to tempt him with even if she was stupid enough to make a deal.

“Use your imagination,” he murmured, his eyes burning with unfulfilled need.

She sucked in a sharp breath. He wanted her to bargain with her body? She told herself she was disgusted even as her traitorous heart raced at the idea of being in his bed again.

“I don’t sell myself,” she snapped angrily.

“Think of it in a different way,” he replied, showing no mercy. “You need my strength. I need your passion. A mutually beneficial arrangement, is it not?” He took a step forwards, forcing her to back up until her body hit the wall behind her.

“Is it such a repulsive idea?” he asked her softly, his breath fanning her face. “You know you would enjoy it as much as I. This is the only deal I’ll offer you, Talia. I shall kill your monster and in return you will be mine for one night. After that you may leave my world forever. I will never seek you out again.”

“You’ll release me?” she whispered. “No more henchmen demanding I return?”

“You’ll be truly free,” he agreed.

For a price.

She looked up into the green eyes she’d seen only in dreams for six long years. Even hating him as she did, his nearness stirred up all sorts of unwanted desires. She owed it to herself to at least be honest. It would be no hardship agreeing to be his for one last night. In fact, she probably would have made a deal just to have him in her bed again.

One night. All she would ever have from him was one more night. Was she strong enough to take what he offered? If she did, she would have to be very careful to leave her emotions at the door. She’d learned the hard way nothing but pain came from loving this demon. It was a mistake she would never make again.

But if it was only sex... She admitted her body still craved his touch, even after six years.

“Okay,” she whispered before she could talk herself out of it. “I will accept your deal. Kill the demon who murdered my family and I will give you one night.”

There was no triumph in his eyes as she’d expected. If anything he looked even more miserable.

“Deal,” he agreed in an emotionless voice. “Seal it.”

Already she felt his magic staining the air around them, waiting for the deal to be completed. To seal a deal with a demon there needed to be an exchange of body fluids. The most traditional way was mingling a few drops of blood. Of course, there were other ways.

“How?” she questioned, feeling her body tingle with anticipation.

“Given the nature of our bargain, I think you know,” he replied.

Sealed with a kiss.

She wet her lips nervously. If she couldn’t even kiss him, how was she going to sleep with him? *Grow up, Talia*, she commanded herself. *Get it over with.*

Her hands shook as she raised them to cup his face. His body was cooler than hers, a fact she’d forgotten. Against her will her traitorous fingers trailed over his smooth skin, marvelling at his presence before her once more.

His hands rose to settle on her hips and she felt his touch burn through her jeans. No matter what happened in her life, she knew she would never react to another man the way she did to this one.

Rising on her tiptoes, she pressed her lips to his. Her touch was hesitant even though she wished to be bold. Part of her couldn’t believe he truly wanted her, even given the evidence to the contrary.

But her worries were groundless. Devlin tightened his hold on her, pulling her closer as he took control. He kissed her desperately, as if he were as starved for her touch as she was for his. His tongue traced her lips and she parted them obligingly. He invaded her mouth, consuming her, claiming her. She felt the magic around them shift and change. The deal was being sealed. And if she remembered correctly the last part of the process would be rather painful.

She gasped as unseen fire licked along her skin. Devlin swallowed her cry as the magic settled onto their flesh, burning into them with invisible chains. The terms of their deal sealed themselves into her skin, only to be erased when their bargain was completed... Or if Devlin chose to release her. But she knew there was no chance of that happening.

She stumbled out of his arms, waiting for the last tingle of magic to disappear.

"God, I forgot how much that hurt," she breathed.

"I am sorry," Devlin replied evenly.

Moving away from him and the memory of their kiss, she tried to regain her composure. Only Devlin had the power to rattle her this badly, but she'd be damned if she let him see what effect he had on her.

"I'll start hunting first thing tomorrow," she said, trying to focus on the job at hand. "Can you give me any locations he's been recently?"

"Yes, but you cannot hunt him alone."

She snorted. "Trust me. There are no other sensors who will want to help me with this one."

"That's not what I meant." He gripped her arm and turned her to him. "Saleel is more dangerous than any demon you've faced before, Talia. You need me with you at all times. Until our deal is completed I am not leaving your side."

Her eyes widened in horror. "No," she refused flatly.

"This isn't a choice. You want this guy? Fine, but you have to deal with the consequences. I can't claim my night if you're dead."

She flinched and told herself it was because she didn't like being cornered, not because of the reminder that all he wanted was her body when she had once been ready to give him her heart.

"You can't be with me all the time. You have a very busy life."

"Not for the next few days I don't," he replied. "I will be here day and night, Talia, until Saleel is dead."

"And if I don't like it?"

"Too bad. You've had six years of freedom. You owe me at least a few days of obedience."

She jerked her arm from his grasp. "I owe you nothing. I was in your debt once but as far as I'm concerned my bill has been paid in full." With her innocence.

He didn't challenge her words but merely repeated, "I am not leaving."

Talia grit her teeth, already sensing defeat. She didn't want him around, but it was true she wouldn't be safe once she started tracking Saleel. No matter how much she hated him, she had to admit Devlin wasn't wrong about the danger the demon posed.

"You're sleeping on the sofa," she said with ill grace.

He bowed in acquiescence.

She growled at him as she stalked to the hall closet and grabbed a sheet and blanket. Throwing them at him, she gave him a final glare before she strode to her bedroom. Talia couldn't help slamming the door behind her.

Chapter Four

It took her a few minutes to remember who was in her home when she woke the next morning. When she did, she buried her head in the pillow with a groan. Devlin was here. And as the nail in her coffin, she'd promised to sleep with him. She shivered at the thought, but not in fear. It was an impossible situation. How was she supposed to work with him, live with him and keep her heart safe?

Sounds came from the kitchen, letting her know her troublesome guest was up. With a sigh, she rolled from the bed and walked groggily to her dresser. Time to start the day and see what new heartache it would bring.

When she entered the kitchen she saw the table set with scrambled eggs and French toast. Devlin had cooked for her? Devlin didn't cook. He hired people for that.

"Did you make this?" she asked in shock.

Devlin glanced at her from the stove, spatula in hand. "You forget to eat breakfast when you're working."

How did he know she forgot to eat? But she was much too proud to ask. "Still, you made this? As in, cracked eggs like a human? You can conjure food with your magic."

"You don't like me using magic for small things," he replied with his back to her. "You've told me a million times."

Why do you remember that?

She longed to ask. Instead she slid into her chair and reached for the eggs.

As she ate she felt Devlin's gaze burning into her. He watched her like a hunter, and for the first time in many years she felt vulnerable. Dominant, arrogant, demon lord Devlin she could handle. Breakfast-making, wounded, sexy Devlin was another problem entirely.

"I want to get started right away," she told him, wiping her mouth on a napkin and deliberately refusing to thank him for the delicious meal. "Tell me the last place Saleel was."

"According to my sources he likes to spend his nights at a club called the Shadow Walk."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a demon club, Talia. They don't take too kindly to sensers going there."

"Oh." Talia mulled over the new information. "Well, we'll just have to be fast. You sneak me in, I try and get a sense of Saleel and we get out."

Devlin looked amused. "Every demon will know what you are. I could tell when you were an untrained child. In the past years your power has only grown."

"Fine, mister hot shot," she snapped. "You come up with a plan."

"Sensers are not welcome in demon clubs," Devlin replied, "but allowances are made for demons powerful enough to make trouble. The owners will take offense to you waltzing into their bar. They will look the other way if I bring my lover in for a drink."

Talia blushed, inwardly cringing. "Okay," she said, trying to brush away her discomfort. "We can make that work for us. I'll pretend to be your lover in the bar while we search for Saleel."

"You have to be convincing," Devlin said with humour in his eyes.

"Pretend to want you? I think I'm a good enough actress to pull it off," she replied sweetly.

He narrowed his eyes.

"Shall we go now?"

Devlin glanced at the clock. "I don't know about you, but ten o'clock is a little early for me to start drinking."

She rolled her eyes. "The faster we get there the better I can sense his trail. You know time is a factor here."

"What clubs do you know that are open at ten in the morning?"

She paused. "When do they open?"

"Early evening at the least," Devlin replied. He leaned back in his chair with a satisfied smile. "How will we pass the time?"

"I'm not spending the day with you," Talia snapped. Rising, she grabbed her dishes and tossed them into the sink. When she stalked into the living room Devlin was hot on her heels.

"Why not? After all it's been six years," he said lightly. "We have lots to catch up on."

"Really? How's Marilyn?" Talia froze and bit her tongue. Marilyn had been his primary mistress when she'd lived at his mansion. Had Talia truly asked about her rival out loud? Embarrassment reddened her cheeks. Trying to salvage the situation, she said casually, "Never mind. I don't care. Tell me how you found out about Saleel."

Devlin was silent for a long moment but she refused to turn back to him.

"I don't know how Marilyn is. I haven't seen her in six years."

Talia twitched in surprise.

"I haven't taken any lovers in six years," Devlin finished softly.

Closing her eyes, she wished she could believe his words. But unfortunately for her, she knew lies when she heard them. Devlin was an innately sexual being. Most demons were. There was no way he could survive for six years without sex.

"You know I won't believe you," she said over her shoulder. "Why even bother with the lies?"

Again he laughed, but she heard the pain and self-mockery in the sound.

"Of course," he said tightly. "Sit, Talia, and I will tell you of Saleel."

Slowly, she sat across the room from him.

"I have been looking for Saleel since I first took you in," Devlin said. "I never heard any word about his whereabouts. Truly, I thought he was long dead until he resurfaced two nights ago."

"Has he killed anyone?"

"Not yet. My guess is he's come back for a reason." Devlin raised his stunning eyes to hers. "He means to finish what he started."

Talia felt as if the blood in her veins had turned to ice. "He wants to kill me."

"Yes," Devlin agreed quietly.

The demon of her childhood was stalking her, bent on finishing her off once and for all. Talia swallowed hard. "Good thing I have you around," she said, trying to appear unaffected.

His eyes widen in surprise at her cavalier pronouncement.

"We simply catch him before he gets to me. Right?"

Devlin nodded sharply.

"Good." She stood. "I have some research to do on another case. Call me when it's time to go to the club."

She left the room before he had a chance to call her back.

In her room, Talia leaned heavily against the door. She'd had demons gunning for her before. It wasn't anything new. But this wasn't any ordinary demon. When she closed her eyes she still heard the screams of her parents. Her childhood had been ripped away from her and tainted with evil. Saleel had a lot to answer for.

She sank to the ground, touching the rose on her neck out of habit. The familiar gesture calmed her slightly. She wasn't the same terrified child Saleel had come up against before. This time she was a woman trained to destroy demons. Plus she had Devlin in her corner. She may not truly understand why he was helping her, but she knew enough about Devlin to know he was a demon of his word. If he promised to keep her safe, he would.

For a price, her mind added.

Yes, for a price. He never did anything for free. Demons looked out for their own interests first. She knew that well enough. But if one night with an old lover freed her of the fear she lived with, she considered it a good bargain.

Pushing herself to her feet, Talia decided to make use of her time. She opened her weapons closet and pulled out a few daggers. A rusty sencer was as good as dead. Might as well get some practise hours in while she waited for the sun to set.

When Devlin knocked on the door, she was ready. Talia sat on her bed, staring at the dark city beyond her window.

“It’s almost time,” Devlin said as he stepped into her room.

“I’m ready.” She’d dressed in her customary black but chosen a daringly low-cut shirt to dress up her outfit. The long sleeves covered the daggers hidden in wrist sheaths, and with her short hair and low neckline the black rose on her throat stood out like a beacon. Her tight black jeans disappeared into knee-high boots, each equipped with a thin blade hidden in the lining. She looked dangerous. She looked like a demon’s lover.

Devlin had dressed for the occasion as well. Gone were his habitual suits. In their place he wore a black silk T-shirt that reminded her painfully of the one he’d worn the night she’d slept with him. Black breeches encased his legs, laced up the sides all the way from hip to hem. He looked scrumptiously sexy and a part of her hated him for it.

“You know the plan?” he asked, sitting next to her on the bed.

“As soon as we get to the club I need to pretend I’m infatuated with you,” she recited. “You’ll cover me while I search for any sign of Saleel.”

“Do remember to be careful,” he told her seriously. “This club will not be happy with your presence. I’d rather not have to fight every demon there to get you out again.”

“I’ll be a good girl,” she taunted.

Devlin snorted. “You have no idea how to be a good girl.”

She had years ago. But he was right—the innocent Talia had died her last night in the mansion. The woman who’d walked out of his house had been a different person entirely. Now being good was the last thing she wanted.

“Good girls don’t kill demons,” she agreed with a cold smile, “and I love my job.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Why did you pick that particular line of work?”

She shrugged casually. “Needed to pay the bills.”

“With the blood of my brethren?”

“Seemed poetic justice.”

“Why?” he asked harshly.

Talia refused to look at him. No way was she letting him dredge up the painful past she was doing her best to forget. “We should go,” she said, pushing off the bed. “The night is young and we have work to do.”

Devlin sighed but let his questions drop. Resigned, he followed her from the room.

Talia stared up at Shadow Walk's entrance with trepidation. Already she felt the presence of the demons within. It battered at her like a storm. All her instincts were telling her to run, and yet she glided closer and closer to the club.

Devlin reached out and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her to his side. "Walk strong," he commanded her. "This is definitely a time when it's okay to look dangerous."

"Right," Talia breathed, straightening her shoulders. "I'm ready."

Together they strolled up to the bouncers. They took one look at Devlin and stepped aside. Both the demons at the door hissed softly as Talia walked by, but she did her best to ignore it.

The club was unlike anywhere she'd been before. They walked down a long staircase to the main floor and Talia realised it was all underground. She supposed it made sense since some demons had light sensitivity and others preferred to live completely underground.

Pounding music filled the air and red lights lit the crowded dance floor. This was definitely not a place for humans. Here the demons were not even attempting to blend in. Looking over the crowd, Talia saw horns and wings. Red eyes watched her with unnerving interest and several men licked their fangs as Devlin guided her over to the bar. Talia squared her shoulders and added a roll to her hips. If they wanted to play she'd make sure she came out on top. Devlin had told her to be dangerous. Talia let a cold smile curve her lips as she strode through the crowd. She could do dangerous.

The bartender slipped up to them the minute Devlin leaned on the counter. Talia was mildly surprised by the respect he commanded without even trying. She knew he was intimidating but in her eyes he was still the man who had rescued her on the most horrible night of her life.

"What will it be?" the bartender asked.

"Can I order you a drink, darling?" Devlin asked, running his hand down her back.

Remembering her role, Talia shook off her nerves and smiled sweetly up at him. "Whatever you're having, love," she replied, pressing herself closer to him.

"Our special is a true bloody mary tonight," the bartender said, looking at Talia with a hostile gaze.

Talia's eyes widened.

"I'll have a whiskey on the rocks," Devlin said easily, ignoring the man's hostility, "and a tequila sunrise for my date."

Tequila sunrises had been her favourite drink as a teenager. Talia glanced up at Devlin, surprised by his memory.

The bartender quickly prepared their drinks and handed them over. As Devlin paid, Talia cautiously sipped her drink.

"How is it?" Devlin asked.

"Excellent for a tequila sunrise without the tequila," she replied wryly. "My, he must have thought I was underage."

Devlin smiled slightly. "I told you this place wouldn't welcome you."

"Yeah, well I believe you."

"Come on," he caught her free hand. "Let's get a booth and you can start looking."

They threaded their way through the dance floor even though Talia saw no free booths. Given the hostile stares and hisses coming her way, she hoped they found something soon. She had never felt this exposed before. Of course, she'd never been in a room crowded with demons before. Even living with Devlin, she'd never seen this many demons in one place.

They walked over to the row of booths lining the wall and Devlin strode to the first one. A young couple sat in the red velvet seats, laughing and flirting. They looked up in surprise when Devlin stopped before them and Talia actually saw their faces pale.

"Please, sir, help yourself," the girl stammered, pushing at her date to get out of the booth.

Devlin watched with an amused smile as the couple fled, leaving the booth empty.

"What are you, the boogie man?" Talia asked, sliding into the seat.

"Close," he agreed, sitting beside her. "Remember your role, Tali. You need to be closer to me."

"Don't call me that," she replied automatically as she let him pull her to his side. "Judging by the reception you're getting, I think you owe me an explanation. How big a bad ass are you in this town?"

"You lived under my roof for five years," he replied. "Didn't you pay attention?"

"I only saw Devlin the friend. These people see Devlin the demon."

"Mmmm," he murmured, tilting her face up to his. "Does this mean I can scare you into following my orders now?"

She smirked at him. "What do you think?"

"I think," he said, tracing his thumb over her lower lip, "it takes beings far more horrifying than I to make you cower." He replaced his thumb with his lips, kissing her lightly. "I never wanted to scare you, Talia."

She relaxed into his embrace, touching the tip of her tongue teasingly to his lips. Taking her up on her offer, Devlin kissed her more forcefully. His hand trailed over her body, running up her abdomen to loosely cup her breast. She gasped into his mouth, nipping him lightly in warning. Even if it was a cover, she didn't do heavy petting in public. A girl had to have standards when sleeping with the damned.

"Your acting is very convincing," Devlin taunted quietly as he trailed his lips down her throat.

"I learned from the best," she snapped without thought.

Devlin jerked back, regarding her with puzzled eyes. Talia knew he was about to ask questions she didn't want to answer. In order to distract him she rose up on her knees and swung a leg over his thighs. Straddling him, she cupped his beautiful face in her hands and kissed him passionately.

His hands gripped her hips to steady her as he thoroughly enjoyed her onslaught. When she finally drew back she was out of breath and more than a little turned on.

“As much as I am enjoying your...acting,” Devlin said. “You should see if you can pick up anything on Saleel.”

“Yeah,” she agreed breathlessly, ignoring the hard bulge pressing between her thighs. “I’ll try.”

Devlin drew her closer to him, hiding her face in his chest. “Close your eyes,” he whispered. “Cast out your senses. I’ve got you.”

Relaxing into his hold, Talia did as he said.

“Quietly, Tali,” she heard Devlin whisper in her ear.

She didn’t have time to correct his use of the nickname. Knowing she’d been too obvious with her powers, she pulled back, softening her scan. She didn’t want the other demons alerted to the fact that she was working tonight. They tolerated her for the moment. The last thing she wanted to do was start a bar fight in a demon club.

Devlin continued to trail kisses across her skin as she worked, moving her body to the pounding beat of the music. Talia forced herself to ignore how good it felt to be in his arms.

Concentrating hard, Talia worked her powers through every inch of the club, looking for any sense of the demon she sought. The search was frustratingly hard, especially since she couldn’t use her full range of powers. Being subtle definitely sucked.

Then, without warning, she felt it. At the very edges of her senses she felt a sickeningly familiar tingle. It was one she had felt before, right before she dove from her bedroom window.

“Got him,” she whispered, nauseated. “Backdoor.”

“You’re sure?” Devlin asked.

Talia pushed herself up and nodded. “He feels the same in my head,” she confessed softly. “I can still remember what it was like to find him in my house...”

“Shhh,” Devlin soothed, wrapping his arms around her. “He’ll never touch you, Tali. I’ll keep you safe.”

For once, she didn’t argue with him. Clutching her old protector to her, she tried to steady herself and push away the fear. She could fight this nightmare. She hadn’t gotten her reputation by handing out flowers and hugs to the monsters she hunted. This was simply one more job. Besides, this time she had the ultimate ace in the hole. She might hate Devlin, but even she acknowledged he was a more vicious warrior than she’d ever be.

When she was in control once more, Devlin helped her to her feet and expertly navigated them through the crowd towards the backdoor.

“Which way did he go?” Devlin asked as they stood at the entrance.

Talia closed her eyes, touching the door handle lightly. “He went out,” she said.

Without a word, Devlin opened the door and guided them up the cramped stairs. They exited into a dark, empty alley. Closing her eyes, Talia tried to pick up the trail. It was old and hard to find. Saleel had been trying to cover his tracks, which meant he knew what she was.

Sensing wasn't a science. She couldn't close her eyes and magically know what the demon she was chasing would do. It was more like she sensed the shadows people left behind. Everyone left traces of themselves as they went through their lives. Her job was to find those traces and immerse herself in them until she saw and felt everything the demons had. Sometimes it was easier than others. Saleel, unfortunately, was not such a case.

Opening her senses to the alley, she unleashed her full powers. There had to be a hint of him somewhere.

She moved blindly around the alley. Sometimes she picked up stronger images if she stood in the same spot her marks had been in. If she was lucky enough to cross his path everything would be much easier.

Devlin stayed silent as she waltzed around the alley. This was her area of expertise, not his. Wisely, he knew enough to stay out of her way.

Stepping slowly through the space before her, Talia felt a sudden rush of excitement and stopped cold. The emotions swirling within her were definitely not her own. All she should be feeling right now was fear and disgust. Freezing in place, she forced herself to open up to Saleel's emotions. She needed to sense his desires, his plans. Though it went against every instinct in her, she welcomed in the feelings of her family's killer.

Chapter Five

He had stood here last night, right where she was. He'd looked up at the sky. Talia felt her head tilt back in grisly mimicry of her nightmare's movements. He'd breathed in, happy to be back in the city once again. Talia felt hungry and knew he'd been considering feeding. She blanched as she realised why he hadn't attacked some poor unsuspecting person. Anticipation was half his fun. He wanted to fantasise about her death instead of sating the need with some stranger. He was saving all his hunger for *her*.

Talia faltered, too horrified to look deeper. But this was the first step of the trail. She needed to know where he went next. She was a professional. This was her job. There was no room to be squeamish, not when the stakes were so high. Concentrating once more, she forced herself back into Saleel's emotions. He'd been happy when he walked out of the alley. Talia felt her feet moving of their own accord, following the killer's footsteps. He'd left the alley and turned right. One place in particular had been forefront in his mind.

"He went to my childhood house last night," Talia gasped, jerking from her trance. "Devlin, he went to my house."

The thought of Saleel in her home again turned her stomach. She thought she could be strong through this but she didn't know how to stand tall in the face of such horror.

Devlin put a hand on her shoulder but she shrugged it off. Instead, she ran her fingers over her rose mark. *Courage*, she thought. *You can do this. You can survive this.*

"We should go," she said, straightening her shoulders. Her childhood home was the last place she wanted to go, but as usual she had no choice. Talia walked stiffly from the alley, a silent Devlin trailing behind her.

It was a short drive to her old home. When they arrived, Talia was surprised to see it was inhabited. Some other family lived in her house, no doubt clueless to its history of horror. Somehow she'd imagined it'd stood empty all these years.

"What did he do here?" Devlin asked.

With a sigh, Talia got out of the car. She walked to the front of the yard and closed her eyes.

It was easier this time to sense Saleel's presence. She knew immediately where he'd stood, moving automatically into the same spot at the head of the walkway. He'd stood here and watched the house. Talia swallowed hard as she realised he'd wondered if he should kill this family too. The hunger was there and

the desire to destroy. He watched the family at dinner, saw the smiling children and loving couple and wanted to rip them apart.

Talia forced herself to go deeper. Why hadn't he killed these people? The answer slowly bubbled to the surface. He hadn't wanted to alert Talia to his presence. A mass murder in her childhood home would have been too much of a coincidence to ignore. His game with her had saved this family. At least it was one thing to be grateful for.

"Where did you go?" she whispered to herself, scanning harder. He'd watched the family for a long time, trying to decide whether or not to attack. When he was finished he'd gone to...the cemetery.

Talia got back into the car, choking back the bile in her throat. "He is going to my family's graves," she informed Devlin.

He hissed in anger.

"Saleel wants to admire his work." She shook her head in disgust.

Devlin shifted the car into gear and then headed for the cemetery. "We'll get him," he told her.

"Promise?"

"You have my word."

Talia smiled bitterly as she rubbed the rose on her neck. It was an absent movement born out of habit. She didn't even think about who she was doing it in front of.

Devlin watched her actions with hooded eyes. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Touch the rose."

She dropped her hand as if it burned her. The rose and the events surrounding its appearance were topics she never wanted to speak of, but Devlin was waiting for an answer. Sighing, she replied, "I touch it for strength. It's a symbol of a horrible mistake in my life. Touching it reminds me to never let myself be that foolish again. I have to be strong."

"Horrible mistake?" Devlin bit out. "Nice to know."

"You asked," she snapped.

Devlin's eyes darkened in anger but he held his tongue. They drove the rest of the way in silence.

When they arrived at the graveyard Talia got out without a word and started down the familiar walk to her family's graves. She never spared a glance for Devlin.

They hiked through the dark cemetery and Talia tried her best not to be freaked out by the creepy setting. It was an old cemetery, the kind featured in horror films. It wouldn't be hard to imagine a monster lunging at them from behind an old grave. *Not a monster*, she amended grimly. *A demon*.

Finally, they crested the hill and saw her family's graves. She sucked in a sharp breath when she realised what awaited her.

Four white lilies lay before each headstone. Four dead white lilies.

“Monster,” she whispered, too angry to feel anything.

Devlin held out a hand. Fire shot from his palm and burned all the offending flowers to dark ash. Talia shook with anger. How dare he come here to mock his victims? Did he have no decency at all?

“I want to kill him with my bare hands,” she snarled.

Devlin laid calming hands on her shoulders. “I know but now is not the time to give in to your anger. We have to find him before we can slice him into tiny pieces.”

Knowing he was right, Talia tried to shrug off the consuming rage gripping her. Even as she made the attempt she knew she wouldn’t be able to shake this emotion. She couldn’t sense others’ feelings if she was all blocked up with her own.

“I can’t,” she cried, tears of frustration and rage pooling in her eyes.

“Talia,” Devlin said, turning her around. “Look at me.”

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes to his.

“I know this is impossible,” he told her. “I wish I could do this for you. But I can’t. You’re the senser. We need your powers if we’re going to stop this guy before he hurts anyone else. I know you can do this. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. You have such strength in you,” he murmured softly. “I always knew that. Do this for your family. Do this so you can feel safe again. Saleel robbed you of something infinitely precious. Help me make him pay.”

Still shaking with anger, she tried to do what Devlin asked. She closed her eyes and focused on Devlin. Talia felt his hands on her, felt his nearness. She felt safe around him, even after the pain he’d put her through. Maybe she always would. After all, no matter what he’d done to her as an adult, he’d still saved her life as a child.

Concentrating on her lover helped her let go of some of the anger. Slowly, she became aware of Devlin’s emotions. Using her powers, she tried to draw deeper. She sensed the turbulent emotions swirling through him. Lust was in the forefront but also anger at what Saleel had done to her. She saw his protective streak and smiled slightly. But there was more. She just couldn’t see it all. Something important was missing. Something to do with her rose—

Devlin shook her roughly. “No, Talia!” he yelled at her.

Talia jerked back, blinking.

“I didn’t give you permission to invade my feelings,” he growled.

“Sorry. I was only trying to move past my anger. I did it without thinking.”

He closed his eyes in frustration. “Try and sense Saleel,” he told her, anger heating his voice. “And never turn your tricks on me again.”

She swallowed, guilt clawing at her. She could have stopped much sooner had she wanted too. But the thing was she didn’t want to. She wanted to know all his secrets. If she understood more about him, maybe he wouldn’t be able to confuse her as much as he did.

“Sorry,” she said again, turning back to the graves.

Anger washed over her once more, but this time she let it flow by her without engaging in it. She had no time to waste right now.

Closing her eyes, she opened her senses to Saleel.

Sickening waves of pleasure buffeted her. She tried to hold back her nausea as she felt his twisted pride when he looked at the destruction he caused. He’d been happy as he stood over the graves of her family. The idea that any creature would take such delight in the wanton devastation he’d wreaked turned her stomach.

“Feel his plans,” Devlin instructed, resting his hands on her shoulders. “Breathe past the emotions and see where he went next.”

Talia did her best to hold on to Devlin’s voice and use it as her anchor. He wasn’t like the evil she was touching. Devlin may have hurt her emotionally but he would never harm her physically. He was her safe harbour, even now.

Sifting through the monster’s emotions, she tried to catch traces of what he’d been planning as he stood here. Where was he going next?

The answer was elusive. She felt the presence of the thought she searched for but every time she tried to bring it into focus it disappeared like a dream.

“Dammit!” she cursed.

“Breathe,” Devlin said, his voice calm. “Take it slow.”

With careful precision, Talia tried again to catch the thought. She almost had it. Just a little more...

She gasped in horror, breaking her connection.

“Where did he go?” Devlin asked.

Talia gasped for breath, trying to calm her racing heart. “My apartment,” she whispered finally. “Devlin, last night he headed for my apartment. If you hadn’t been waiting for me...” The demon of her childhood would have ripped her apart and she wouldn’t have been strong enough to stop him.

Talia was crushed in Devlin’s embrace before she even felt him move. “Christ,” he whispered in horror.

His arms were tight around her. Even though she drew comfort from his embrace, Talia knew she walked a slippery road. She had to put distance between them, even if she didn’t want to. Especially if she didn’t want to.

“Devlin, let go,” she commanded, squirming in his arms.

“Please...give me a minute,” he begged softly. “I almost lost you last night.”

Instantly, she stilled. Fear flowed over her like an icy wave. She had almost met the same fate as her family and she hadn’t known. She hadn’t felt anything but the joy and pain of seeing Devlin. What if it had

been Saleel who waited for her in the shadows? She'd be dead now and she hadn't even sensed he was there.

The scope of the demon's powers rocked her. If he had the ability to hide his presence it meant he was far stronger than she'd thought. Devlin could be in real danger fighting this man.

Unable to help herself, she wrapped her arms around her demon. He held her tightly and for once she wasn't complaining. For a long moment they stood in the cemetery, locked together unmoving. Finally, Devlin dropped his arms and stepped back.

"If he went to your house last night he would have seen me there. He knows we're together now," he said, not looking at her.

"And he knows what I can do which means he'd anticipate all the places we'd go today."

"He's not in the cemetery. I would have felt him."

"Which means—"

"He is probably waiting close to your apartment."

"There's an empty parking lot out back. Perfect place for an ambush."

Devlin smiled crookedly. "I thought this would take longer. Looks like everything will be over tonight."

Talia looked at her demon and for once didn't feel the usual hate. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she forced herself to ask. "He could kill you."

"If I walk away he *will* kill you."

"Yeah," she agreed with a shiver.

Devlin reached out and tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear, a tender look on his face. "I'm having no second thoughts, Talia. Not about something this important."

Talia stared at her protector. Was she really important enough to him that he would risk his life? God, she desperately wanted to be. Her need caught her by surprise and she shook her head to clear it of the disturbing thought. Glancing back at the car, she tried to focus on the matter at hand. "If you're sure about this we should probably go."

"Yes."

"Do you need anything?"

Devlin grinned wickedly. "What do you think?"

Talia swallowed. She'd never seen him fight in full demon form but even his half-form was dangerous. He'd be fine. He had to be.

"Let's go," she said.

Chapter Six

They pulled into the parking lot slowly. Both of them scanned the area, looking for hiding demons.

“Where is he?” Talia asked.

“He’s out there.”

“Maybe he decided fighting you is suicide and he left.”

“He’s out there,” Devlin repeated.

Talia breathed in shakily.

Glancing at her, Devlin reached over and took her hand. “Everything will be all right,” he promised.

She looked at him across the darkened car. So many nights she’d dreamed of being free of him. For years the thought had kept her going. Her hate gave her power. But right now, looking at him, she couldn’t imagine a world without him in it. The pain and betrayal he’d put her through years ago didn’t seem to matter as much as it used to. The bottom line was she didn’t want him hurt. She didn’t want him taking any chances for her if it meant his death.

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

“I know.” His tone was heartbreakingly gentle.

“For you,” she corrected him. She squeezed his hand. “Don’t die,” she commanded, not meeting his eyes.

Devlin sat in silence for a long moment, studying her bowed head. “Would that distress you?” he asked.

Talia swallowed hard before nodding once.

“Why?” he breathed.

Talia dropped his hand and looked out the window. “You saved me as a child,” she said. “Of course I wouldn’t want to repay you by getting you killed.”

Devlin’s bitter laugh cut her like a blade. “Of course,” he agreed. “Well, my dear, do not worry on my account.”

“Just be careful,” she muttered.

“Always,” he said shortly before swinging out of the car.

Talia squeezed her eyes closed for a second. Couldn’t she have said something supportive or encouraging before sending him off to fight for her? What was wrong with her?

With a sigh, she opened the door and got out. Closing the car door, she scanned the parking lot. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't feel Saleel anywhere.

"Look sharp," Devlin said as the shadows around the parking lot seemed to twist and grow until the darkness surrounded them, blocking out the street lights.

"Oh hell," Talia said, inching closer to Devlin. This demon controlled light? Definitely not good news.

"Stay by the car," Devlin told her, casting a last glance her way. When she nodded her agreement, Devlin rewarded her with a slight smile before he sauntered forwards.

"Greetings, Saleel," he called.

"Greetings, Devlin," a disembodied voice replied. "I have no fight with you. Step aside and give me the human."

"Sorry," Devlin shrugged. "She's mine."

"We do not court death so lightly," The demon sounded truly surprised.

"Nothing I do is ever done lightly," Devlin replied. "Will you withdraw?"

"I cannot. My failure to kill her has haunted me for years. Her death will be my solace."

The voice sounded calm as he talked about her impending death. Talia shivered in dread.

"It appears we are at an impasse," Devlin said. "Remember, Saleel, it was you who started this fight. We do not attack humans under other demons' protection."

"I found her first," the voice said. "If anything, I have the prior claim."

Without any warning, Devlin twirled around with a snarl, shooting a laser of light from his palm. The light hit the shadows and a dark figure leapt out of the way, rolling on the ground.

Talia gasped in surprise as the man who murdered her family rose to his feet and shook out his coat.

"How unsporting," he said.

He looked so...normal. Saleel was a tall man, loose brown hair curled around his face giving him an almost boyish charm. He smiled easily, and if Talia hadn't known who he was she would have thought him handsome. It made her sick. A man as evil as he was should look the part.

The demon strolled towards them. His black eyes flickered past Devlin and met hers.

"Hello, darling," he said with a twisted smile. "Have you missed me?"

Devlin moved to stand before Talia, using himself as her shield. "Don't talk to her."

Talia gripped Devlin's coat with shaking fingers. She remembered the way Saleel felt in her head. It was as if the night her family died were happening all over again.

"I'll do more than talk to her," Saleel replied with his boyish smile. "Once you are dead."

Devlin hissed, baring fangs that hadn't been in his mouth a moment ago.

"Come now, Devlin, such passion over a human? What if I promised to get you a new pet?"

"You won't live long enough to fulfill any promises."

Saleel hissed viciously, his charm dropping away. “Do not tangle with me,” he warned.

“Get back, Talia,” Devlin said, ripping off his coat and crouching defensively.

Talia stumbled back to the car, knowing she’d only be in Devlin’s way if she tried to fight Saleel.

Devlin changed before her eyes. Razor-sharp claws elongated from his fingers, coupled with the killer fangs in his mouth. He grew taller, filling out with muscles her Devlin didn’t normally have. Pointed ears peaked from his now-wild hair and black tattoos trailed over his skin in a language long dead. The green of his eyes bled pure black, no hint of white showing in his gaze. He looked feral and vicious. Even to Talia’s eyes, he was completely terrifying.

She’d never seen this side of Devlin before. He’d been very careful to keep it from her. This form was one demons changed to when they needed every drop of their power. Usually Devlin was more than a match for his enemies in his human form. Judging from his complete change, Talia knew Saleel posed a real threat.

She turned her stunned gaze to their enemy and saw Saleel going through a similar transformation. Gone were all hints of the boyish, charming man. In his place there stood a monster ready to fight to the death.

Without warning, Saleel charged.

Talia held her breath as the demons clashed. Claws flashed before her eyes and terrifying snarls rent the air. They moved almost too fast for her eyes to follow.

Saleel slashed at Devlin with his vicious claws, trying to sink his fangs into his opponent’s jugular. Talia cried a warning even as Devlin twisted out of the way, narrowly avoiding a death blow.

When flashes of fire lit the dark, Talia knew Devlin was attacking with magic as well as physical strength. It looked like her demon needed every advantage he had. Saleel must be stronger than he’d anticipated.

Talia watched in stunned silence as the two ancient, powerful beings tried to obliterate each other.

Grunts of pain filled the air and Talia smelled the tang of freshly spilt blood. Both demons had been wounded. Devlin attacked with blinding speed even as dark blood pumped sluggishly from his shoulder. Baring his teeth, he lunged at Saleel. He wrestled him to the ground before the other demon blasted him off with a burst of hot fire.

Devlin rolled out of the way, patting out the flames that clung to him. It’d take more than a little fire to take down such an old demon, but Talia still winced in sympathy.

The two demons circled each other, each looking for an opening. It was excruciating watching them fight and knowing she was useless to help.

Or was she?

Talia inched backwards until she was able to slip the car door open without alerting the demons to her plan. Slowly, she crouched and reached a single hand inside. When her questing fingers felt the cool leather of her bag she grabbed it and yanked it out.

Crouching behind the car to hide her actions, she carefully withdrew the black gun from her bag. It was her Plan B backup. Demons didn't die from regular bullets, but if the gun was loaded with silver ammo it would slow them down. Clicking off the safety, Talia slowly stood.

She knew she'd only get one chance at this. If she fired at Saleel and missed, the demon would come after her. Worse, if she fired and hit Devlin then they were both dead.

Sliding towards the warring demons, she kept the gun hidden behind her body. She didn't want Saleel alerted to what she was going to do before she did it.

The two demons were locked too tightly for her to get a clean shot. Talia had always been a dagger kind of girl. She knew how to fire a gun but it wasn't her area of expertise. This time, however, she had to be perfect.

One chance, she thought. Make it count.

The demons grappled before her. Devlin had Saleel pinned to the ground but once again the demon fought free of Devlin's attack, launching himself into the air.

Talia whipped her head back, trying to spot the dark demon against the black sky. As if by magic, Saleel was completely hidden from view.

Devlin paced the ground, staring intently at the sky.

How long can he stay up there? Talia wondered, pressing her back against the car for protection in case he came after her.

Suddenly Devlin shot his hand up towards the sky. Deadly energy erupted from his palm to rip through the night like lightning.

A painful cry sounded as the attack hit home.

Caught by the fiery magic, Saleel thundered back to the ground, slamming into the pavement with brutal force. Devlin was on him in an instant. Curling his sharp claws, he lunged for Saleel's vulnerable throat.

Even as his body twitched from the surge of electricity thrumming through him, Saleel had enough strength to roll free of Devlin's attack. Saleel twisted like a snake and drove his own claws deep into Devlin's uninjured shoulder.

Devlin's cry of pain echoed through the empty parking lot. Talia flinched in sympathy, knowing how much pain her demon must be in. He never admitted to discomfort. Only something extreme would get a rise out of him.

Saleel turned his claws viciously, cutting even deeper. Devlin was forced to push back in order to free himself, losing his advantage over his foe.

As Devlin limped back, Saleel pushed to his feet. He looked down at his weakened opponent, but instead of jumping back into the fray to press his advantage, he turned to look at Talia.

Talia retreated a step when jet black eyes locked on her. Opening her sensing powers automatically, she saw the way his thoughts turned.

If Saleel killed her quickly it would eliminate the need to fight. Surely Devlin wouldn't continue if she was dead. There would be no point and demons were nothing if not calculating. They did only what was to their best advantage. Saleel was banking on her death ending the battle. He could kill her and escape. There was no downside in his mind. Well, except for one.

Talia flinched as she read how Saleel wanted to prolong her death. The deranged demon wanted to truly enjoy it. Without Devlin, he would have made her scream for hours. But Saleel was a pragmatic demon. Pleasure was all well and good, but when the price was his personal safety, he was willing to forego his more sadistic desires.

He took a step towards her even as Talia raised her gun.

She pulled the trigger without hesitation. Demons moved too fast to chance having second thoughts. It was him or her, and she had zero qualms about killing when her life depended on it.

The first shot caught him in the heart but, with his changed demon form, she doubted the wound was more than a scratch. Demon skin was like armour when they converted fully.

Automatically, she adjusted her aim. The second bullet took him in the throat.

Saleel faltered but didn't stop.

Talia aimed for his forehead and fired. Again and again she pulled the trigger until she heard nothing but the useless clicks of an empty clip.

Her attack hadn't killed Saleel but to her surprise it had slowed him down. Dropping the gun, she drew both of the daggers sheathed on her wrists. If this was her end she'd go down fighting.

However, before Saleel reached her, Devlin rose from the darkness like an avenging angel.

Her bullets had slowed Saleel enough for the other demon to catch up. Devlin raced for Saleel and thrust his clawed hand into Saleel's back in a brutal assault.

Saleel froze, staring at her with surprise.

Talia was equally stunned, rising from her fighting stance. She watched a slow dribble of blood trail from Saleel's lips, staining his perfect, pale skin.

Before her, the demon of her nightmares choked on his own blood. Part of her was horrified by what she saw. Bullets hadn't pierced his flesh, yet Devlin was strong enough to drive his hand through the armour-hard skin? She shivered. Devlin had powers she hadn't even guessed at.

"Do you know what I'm holding?" Devlin voice split the stillness. The sound that emerged from his lips was rough and guttural, far from his own voice.

"Yes," Saleel choked out the word.

“Good.”

Devlin jerked his hand out of Saleel and the demon dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. In Devlin’s bloody hand, Talia saw Saleel’s still heart.

Devlin squeezed the organ until it exploded in his hand, his face expressionless. He shook the mess to the ground and stepped back from his kill.

Slowly, he raised his gaze to Talia’s.

She looked at him without any mask, unable to hide her feelings. In truth, she didn’t know what she felt. For a long moment she could only stare at him until her gaze dropped to Saleel’s lifeless body.

Devlin had frightened her with his strength and brutality, it was true. But more importantly, he had killed her monster. He’d fought a deadly battle for her and won. Devlin might be terrifying but nothing changed the fact that he was still her hero.

She took a stumbling step forwards, then another, until she stood before him. Before he could speak, she carefully wrapped her arms around him.

Devlin stood frozen in her embrace, as if he were unsure whether his touch would be welcome.

Stepping back from his stiff body, Talia looked up to meet his eyes. She showed him without words that nothing he did would ever turn her away. Especially not when his actions saved her life and endangered his own.

Devlin smiled slightly, his demon-black eyes bleeding back to his natural green. He looked past her and snapped his fingers. Blue flame leaped around Saleel’s body, destroying all evidence of their fight.

Talia shielded her eyes from the brilliant glow of the unnatural flames. Instead of being frightened by the display of magic, she felt refreshed. The flames were cleansing the evil from her life. They took Saleel’s stench and banished it forever from the world.

She looked back up at her demon as the flames started to dim.

He was watching her, not the fire. Devlin’s eyes glowed as he lightly touched her face, tilting her chin up.

“I held up my side of the bargain,” he told her softly.

She sucked in a sharp breath.

Now it was time for her to hold up hers.

Chapter Seven

Talia waited nervously in her living room, listening to the sounds of the shower running in the bathroom. Devlin was in there washing off the evidence of his battle and healing his wounds. When he was finished...

She jumped off the couch and began to pace around the room. When he was finished he'd come back into this room and expect her to fall into bed with him.

And what troubled her most was how little she was opposed to the idea.

She stalked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine for courage. She'd watched Devlin kill a man. The battle had been vicious, leaving the air littered with magic and the ground drenched in blood. It was wrong to be thinking about sex right now. It was sick and twisted and completely unnatural. And yet she was.

For the first time since she was fourteen, she felt free. In the back of her mind she'd always known Saleel was out there somewhere and one day he might come back to finish what he'd started. Even as she tried to create a new life for herself, she'd been haunted by the ghosts of her past. But now she was safe. She was truly free from Saleel's nightmare, and her knight stood in the shower, waiting for his reward. Gratitude was too weak a word to cover what she felt for Devlin. So was lust.

She knew the right word to use but couldn't bear to even think it.

Instead she focused on the present, on what she had gained. She was a free woman for the first time in her adult life, not hounded by fear or rage. She wanted the first act she committed as her new self to be making love to the one who meant everything to her, even if he was a demon.

Being with him wasn't about their bargain, if it ever had been. Talia smiled cynically. She had waited six years to be back in his arms. Even knowing she'd disappointed him their first time, she couldn't deny he was the best lover she would ever have. He'd bargained for one night and she was determined to make it one she'd cherish forever.

The bathroom door opened.

Heart pounding, Talia slipped back into the living room and waited. Within seconds Devlin stood before her. His hair was still slightly damp and his clothes stuck to the residual moisture on his body. He looked breathtakingly perfect. And for tonight he was hers.

Eagerly she stepped forwards.

"You kept your end of the bargain," she said huskily.

Devlin lowered his head. She felt his breath fan her face and held still in anticipation. She waited breathlessly for his kiss, but at the last moment he stopped.

“Christ,” he swore softly, spinning away from her.

Talia flinched at the rejection. Was he remembering the last time they’d been together? Had it truly been that bad for him?

“I can’t do this,” he said, dragging a hand through his hair.

She struggled to keep her pain from showing on her face. What had she expected? After six years he’d magically decide she was the only one for him? Straightening her shoulders, Talia swore he’d never know how he’d managed to shred her again. It was her own fault for giving him the opportunity.

Devlin turned to look back at her and Talia made sure her face was emotionless.

“I can’t force you to do this,” he told her softly. “Especially not after what you’ve been through tonight.” He laughed hollowly. “Looks like I can’t be the monster you thought.”

“What?” Talia frowned in confusion.

“I release you,” Devlin said in a voice filled with dark power.

Talia shuddered as the hidden writing lifted to the top of her skin and slowly floated from her arms. She felt the magic draining from her body. Nothing would force her to fulfill her bargain now. Her demon had let her go.

“Why did you do that?” she demanded, staring at her now bare arms.

A heartbreaking look crossed Devlin’s face. “I know you hate me, Tali,” he told her quietly. “But I was never capable of hurting you. Your nightmare is over now. You can go on with your life and forget all about me.”

Impossible.

“Are you...” Her words trailed off as she wondered how to phrase her question and what she’d do if he gave her the wrong answer. Summoning her courage, she tried again. “Are you releasing me because you don’t want to coerce me into doing something against my will? Or are you releasing me because you’ve decided you don’t want me in your bed tonight?”

He looked at her as if she’d gone mad. “I’ve wanted you every night since you left,” he said harshly.

Lies, she thought, but it still felt good to hear. “Then why push me away when you finally have me?”

He took a step towards her. Talia held her breath as he returned to her and tilted her chin up to see her face. “Do you want me, Talia?” he asked.

“Always.” The word slipped from her lips before she could stop it. It revealed too much.

“There’s no bargain,” he said, wrapping an arm around her waist. “I will not stop you from walking away.”

“Stop trying to push me away if you don’t want me to go,” she said softly. “A girl’s pride can only stand so much.”

A devilish grin twisted his lips. "Forgive me, my lady," he murmured, "for my exceedingly foolish words."

"Make it up to me," she breathed.

"Oh, darling, I'll make it up to you all night long."

Fine by me, she thought dizzily as he claimed her mouth with his. There was nothing tentative about his kiss. He meant to claim her tonight and she had no protests. His lips slanted over hers, teasing breathless moans from her. Her knees buckled and she stumbled against him. All it took was one kiss from him and her body stopped obeying her commands. If he kept this up she wouldn't be standing very much longer.

As if reading her thoughts, Devlin swung her into his arms and charged through the apartment to her bedroom. He crashed through the door and staggered to the bed, dropping them both onto the large mattress without taking his mouth from hers.

Talia wrapped her legs around his waist as his mouth trailed down her throat. She tilted her head back, giving him better access. His lips touched the black rose and she felt a moment's hesitation. *It won't be like last time*, she swore to herself. She wasn't a fumbling girl anymore. She'd bring him to his knees if it was the last thing she did. No old scars would stop her now that they were finally together. She only had one chance to show him she was more woman than he could ever dream of handling.

"Do all demons move so slowly when it counts?" she taunted, trying to sound aloof.

"Slow, eh?" Sitting up, he gripped her shirt and ripped it off her.

"I liked that top," she complained, not mourning its loss at all.

"Oops," he replied, unapologetic. He ran light fingers across her abdomen, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through her. She shivered as he trailed his fingertips along the edge of her bra.

"This needs to go," he murmured.

"No arguments," she agreed, trying to catch her breath. She watched as one of his nails elongated into a demon claw. Hooking the claw around the front clasp, he sliced through the black material as if it were butter.

He pulled the offending lingerie from her body and stared down at what he'd revealed. The hot, hungry look in his eyes made Talia feel more beautiful than she ever had before. Enjoying his stare, she made no move to cover herself from his intense gaze.

Leaning down to nuzzle one breast, he said hotly against her skin, "You're heaven, darling."

"Says the demon," she said with a laugh. "What would you know of it?"

"I know of heaven," he whispered, looking up at her. "Heaven is when you're by my side. And true hell is when you're not."

How she wished his words were true and not perfect pillow talk. Banishing the unwelcome thought, she reached for her lover.

“I don’t have claws to rip off your shirt, but if you don’t move faster I’ll try anyways.”

Devlin pulled his T-shirt off without another word.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Talia stared at the spectacularly perfect male chest before her. How had she not remembered *that*? Something was wrong with her, that’s how.

“See something you like?” he asked, smug.

In reply, she sat up and molded her mouth to his chest, running her tongue around a nipple.

Devlin hissed in pleasure, one hand burying itself in her hair to hold her to him. She trailed her lips over the vast expanse of bronzed skin as her nails skimmed lightly up his sides. Talia revelled in the shuddering breath she felt him take. Dammit, she was going to make sure he never forgot her.

Pushing him down onto the bed, she trailed her lips lower until she felt the rough fabric of his pants against her face. She ran her tongue along the line of skin next to the material. Looking up his chest, she met his eyes as she pressed a kiss right over the top buttons of his fly. His green eyes glowed in the dim light and she felt a feminine thrill. Demon eyes stared down at her. Apparently she was doing something he liked.

Talia ran her hands up his powerful legs. When she reached his fly, she trailed her fingers teasingly over the clasp.

“Tali, *please*,” he begged.

She undid the buttons with a flick of her fingers and lowered the zipper. Devlin uttered a low moan of pleasure as he sprang free from the constricting material.

“My, my,” Talia whispered, staring at the large erection before her.

He watched her with wordless pleading in his eyes as she sat up slightly and ran a single finger along his length.

“Christ,” he cried, arching off the bed.

A slow smile of satisfaction curved her lips. She did have the power to bring this invincible warrior to his knees.

“Did you say something?” she teased. Talia continued to trail her finger over him in the lightest of touches. Caresses meant to burn and torment, never to ease.

“Talia, touch me more strongly or crawl back up here and let me take over.”

“Nah-uh,” she denied. “This is my turn to play.”

Good to her word, she lowered her head and ran the tip of her tongue over the skin her fingers had teased only seconds before.

“Talia!” he shuddered.

She trailed her lips up his long length. By the time her mouth touched the tip of him she knew she had the power to drive him wild. Talia smiled with satisfaction when she saw his clawed hands fist the sheets.

This was what she wanted, Devlin at her mercy. Parting her lips, she took him into her mouth, giving him exactly what he craved.

A wordless shout shook the walls. Talia practically purred in satisfaction as she worked her hot mouth over him. He twisted beneath her and she gripped his thighs to keep him still. She knew a man like Devlin hated to lose control, even in the most pleasurable of circumstances. The thought only made her hotter. How far could she push him before he broke down and begged her for the shattering release only she could give him? Talia trailed her tongue up his hard shaft, liking the thought.

His incoherent moans filled the air, urging her on. One hand reached down to tangle in her hair. She revelled in the desperate touch, wanting him wild and aching. Beneath her hands, she felt the tension in his body and knew he was straining for release. Should she be kind? Or should she tease him just a little bit more?

A wicked smile curved her lips. It was an easy choice. Talia drew him deep into her mouth one last time and sat back.

“No!” he cried. “Christ, Tali, you will destroy me.”

“Good,” she said, her voice unintentionally serious. “Let me destroy you.” *The way you once did me.* She shook her head to clear it of the malicious thought.

Devlin reached down to grip her arms before pulling her up to him. Talia gifted him with a wicked smile as she slid up his chest. Her own body thrummed in anticipation. She wanted to feel his hands, or better yet his mouth, running all over her. Nothing in her life had felt as good as being in his arms.

Kicking off his pants, Devlin pulled the waistband of her jeans and moved to rip them off her as he’d done her shirt.

“Uh-uh,” she said, stopping him. “You have no idea how long it takes women to find jeans that fit.”

“You have ten seconds to remove them,” he growled.

It took her three.

Devlin rolled her under him. He pushed himself up on one elbow, gazing at her with a look of supreme dominance.

“You almost brought me to my knees,” he whispered against her mouth. “My turn to play.”

“Be my guest,” she replied, gripping the sheets when he latched onto her breast.

Devlin flicked her nipple with his tongue. He trailed his fingers down her smooth skin until they were buried in the dark curls between her thighs.

She cried out as he slipped one finger into her hot passage.

“Dev,” she gasped, rocking against his hand. Slowly, he moved in her, making her writhe with every stroke. When he slipped another finger into her she practically levitated from the bed.

“So tight,” he whispered against her breast.

Because I've only ever been with you, she longed to say. "Doesn't matter," she gasped instead. "Hurry up."

He removed his fingers from her and Talia was unable to stop her cry of protest.

"Shhh," he soothed, raising himself up to press against her entrance.

Talia took a breath and looked up into his glowing eyes. She may have been ready for him, but Devlin was big enough that nothing about him was easy. Gripping his shoulders, she tried to relax and welcome him into her body.

She closed her eyes as inch by delicious inch he forced his hard shaft into her, stretching her to accommodate his foreign size. He held still when he was fully seated inside, giving her body time to grow used to his. She was touched by his gentleness when she knew by his eyes exactly how wild he must feel. She rolled her hips to reward him, letting him know she was ready for anything he had to offer.

His eyes burning into hers, he withdrew to the tip and surged back into her.

Talia arched off the bed, gasping in intense pleasure. If this was how he normally made love there was no way she'd survive the night.

Gripping her hips, he rocked into her at a demanding pace. He pulled her body up with his, moving her in time to his thrusts. Talia was only too happy to follow his lead, raising her hips to meet him every time.

She pulled his head down to kiss him passionately, her tongue mimicking the thrusts of his body. He pressed into her until both their bodies were slick with glistening sweat. Talia pumped her hips with desperate need. She felt the pressure within her building and had no thought other than finding total and absolute release.

Devlin turned more savage, thrusting into her without mercy or restraint. Talia was never one to complain about a good thing. She locked her legs around his waist, pulling him deeper.

"Devlin," she cried, feeling an earth-shattering orgasm creep tantalisingly close.

"Come with me, love," he commanded, shuddering above her.

Talia opened her mouth to scream as a pleasure unlike anything she'd felt before crashed over her. It drowned her in its blinding waves. She felt Devlin stiffen above her, shouting his own release. Every inch of her body felt as if it were exploding in pleasure. She couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but ride the inconceivable pleasure and pray it never ended.

Chapter Eight

Talia never wanted to move again. She lay tangled in the silk sheets, unable to do anything about the silly smile on her lips. True to his word, Devlin hadn't let her get any sleep the night before. After their first shattering orgasm they'd made love countless times. Talia lost track of the ways he'd taken her. He'd been hard and rough when she needed it and tender when her body had demanded something slower. Every movement had been perfectly attuned to her needs. It was as if he'd known her body even better than she did.

Looking around her room, Talia pressed her hands against her burning cheeks as she remembered their sexcapades. They'd made love in the bed, against the wall, before the mirror...

She buried her head in the pillows. How was she going to let him go?

The chilling thought dampened her pleasure. He'd bargained for one night and received payment in full. There was no reason for him to stay with her any longer.

Talia's heart clenched at the thought. He'd told her after their one night he'd never contact her again. She was free of him.

Just when she realised that was the last thing she ever wanted to be.

What a mess, she thought, closing her eyes tightly. What was she going to do? Beg him to stay with her a little longer or keep the tattered remains of her pride and watch him walk out of her life forever? Neither option appealed to her.

Carefully, she rolled over to see her lover's sleeping face. Would he want more? The old hurts crept up on her once more. When had she let him become so important to her again? She'd more than learned her lesson. But looking at his beautiful face, she knew the truth she could never voice. She'd never stopped loving him. Even if he left her forever it wouldn't change what she felt. Hell, she was a glutton for punishment.

As if sensing her distress, Devlin rolled towards her, his eyes opening. He smiled sleepily at her and she sucked in her breath at the sexy sight. It was one she wanted to see every morning.

"Good morning," he murmured.

"Morning," she chirped back.

He reached out to touch her cheek. "Thank you."

"Any time," she said and winced. That hadn't been what she'd meant to say.

A slight smile touched his lips, but already the sleep was fading from his eyes, leaving them painfully serious.

Talia rested on her elbows, looking down at him. She stared at his collarbone instead of meeting his questioning gaze. She wanted him befuddled by pleasure and wild with need. Not logical and intelligent. He could do too much damage in that state.

He trailed his fingertips over her bare skin, watching her watch him.

"We should get dressed," she said finally. "We've slept most of the day away."

"Why did you leave?" Devlin asked softly.

Talia tensed, drawing away from him. "Don't ask," she said harshly. "Don't ruin last night."

"I have to," he replied stubbornly.

She cringed as she saw his resolve, knowing he wouldn't be easy to put off this time.

"I have been asking myself that question every day for the past six years. I need an answer, Tali. I need to understand what went wrong."

With a sigh, Talia sat up, pulling the sheet up around herself. "Can't we forget the past? Maybe we could...start over." She made the offer tentatively. She didn't want to lose him, even if it meant giving up her pride.

"To start fresh I need to understand why we crashed and burned the first time. I need to know what to avoid."

She laughed harshly. "It's not you who needs to avoid anything. It's me. I'll do better this time."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

Talia looked away from his too-perceptive gaze. "I won't make the mistakes I made the first time. Promise."

"What mistakes?"

Am I really going to do this? she wondered, panicked. Was she going to bare her heart to him and explain why she'd run the first time? He had a valid point. They needed everything in the open if they had any chance of navigating the turbulent waters of their relationship. And she wanted to. This time she was older and wiser. She wanted to fight for him instead of running the way she had when she was younger.

"All right," she capitulated. "Fine. Let's do this. I promise this time round I won't be as foolish as I once was. I won't look for more to our relationship than there is. I'll accept what we have and enjoy it while it lasts."

"What do you mean, more than there is?" he asked carefully.

She kept her gaze firmly on her painted red toenails. "I won't hope for you to love me the way I did when I was younger. Maybe I was rash to act the way I did," she acknowledged for the first time. "But when I woke up that morning and went to get a change of clothes your women were waiting for me. They

had the decency to explain what the rose on my neck meant, and after learning I was such a thorough disappointment to you I couldn't bear to stay. The pride of the young and stupid."

Unable to stay beside him any longer, Talia threw herself from the bed, dragging the sheet with her. "I'm taking a shower," she said, her back to him.

"Wait." It was only one word but Talia felt the dark rage in it.

Stunned, she turned around to see Devlin in all his demonic glory. Very rarely had she seen this side of Devlin and now he'd changed twice in one night. His other self only showed through in the face of a rage so consuming he lost all control.

Slowly, she backed away, treating him the way she would a wild animal.

"I said wait," he snarled, watching her with black eyes.

She froze.

"What did the women tell you?"

"What?" She frowned. Of all the things to be angry at, she hadn't expected it to be her words about her rivals.

"Tell me exactly what they said."

Talia swallowed, recalling what had happened six years ago. "Merilyn pulled me into her room where the others were waiting. You had quite the harem." She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice. "They tried to welcome me into their ranks. They gave me tips on how to hold your interest and told me I could expect to be invited to your bed once every ten days or so until you grew bored with me." She hadn't meant to say that. Her bitterness and hurt were too obvious. Conjuring the memory had torn her heart again, ripping into the wound she'd thought long since healed. Talia drew a shuddering breath, trying to get it together. She had to deal with this logically, be detached. Just pretend it was someone else's humiliation.

"They were playing with my hair when they saw the rose," she said in a cool voice. "The room was silent until Merilyn was finally kind enough to tell me what it meant."

"What did she say?" he demanded darkly.

Talia didn't want to remember this part. It had hurt unlike anything she'd ever experienced before or since. "She told me," she said, trying desperately to remain aloof, "the mark was a sign you'd fed on me, which I acknowledged. Those women looked at me as if I were the most pitiable creature they'd ever seen. I noticed no one else had the same mark and I asked why. Merilyn told me you'd never fed on them. They weren't your meals." Talia cringed as she said the hated word. "She told me you only needed to feed on blood when the..." She laughed bitterly, revisiting the painful memories of her younger self. "When the sex was so unsatisfying you had to sate yourself with food instead. The fact that no other woman in that room had the mark meant I was the only one clumsy enough in bed to reduce you to feeding."

"Finish it," Devlin said harshly when she stopped talking.

Finally, she looked back at him, knowing she couldn't hide the heartbreak in her eyes. "Being with you was the best night of my life," she said, not caring how trite it sounded. "And to learn you valued me about as much as you did a cheeseburger broke my heart. I knew I wasn't the type of woman you usually liked, but I thought you'd be a little patient with me. Teach me what I didn't know. To be written off so fast by the man who was my whole world..." She cleared her throat, touching the rose out of habit for strength. "I decided I would not let you cast me out. I would go of my own will. I packed my bags and left before I could humiliate myself any further in your eyes."

She looked anywhere but at him, aware that she had finally done the very thing she'd left to avoid.

"I really need that shower," she whispered, turning.

Devlin bounded from the bed, ignoring the fact he was naked, and grabbed her arm. He spun her around to face him.

"I never fed from those women because I never lost my control so completely the way I did with you. I couldn't hold anything back when I was in your arms. You reduced me to my absolute weakest and loved me anyways."

Talia blinked in surprise. She looked up at him hesitantly, feeling as if one wrong word would shatter her.

"And even if I had fed from one of them out of boredom, they would not wear the rose," he told her.

"Why?"

"Because that mark is reserved solely for my wife."

Talia jerked back hard enough to hit the wall with a solid bang.

"The night we met," he told her quietly, "I woke knowing someone important to me was in danger. I rushed into the night, following the faint screams in my mind for help. It was you, Talia, reaching out to your mate. I understood what was happening as I searched for you. After all my years of being alone, I'd finally found the woman destined solely for me. But when I entered the alley all I saw was a frightened little girl."

He snorted in black amusement. "You can imagine my horror when I realised the woman I'd been waiting centuries for was not a woman at all. She was a child and she was terrified of my race. But nothing changed the fact that I needed to protect you. I did the only thing I could. I took you with me and waited five painful years for you to grow up."

"That can't be true," she breathed. "You never even looked at me lustfully until I asked you to."

"The day of your nineteenth birthday I told Marilyn and the others I would never touch them again," he said, denying her words. "I gave them a week to vacate the mansion. You were old enough to take your place by my side and I was determined to seduce you there. There would be no other woman for me but you. Then you wished for me on your birthday." His soft smile was heartbreaking. "I told you, Talia, to be careful of your wish. It was impossible to let you go after hearing those words."

“But the women said—”

“I had discarded them for a naïve, innocent girl. They lied to you for revenge. My night with you was absolutely perfect, Tali. There was nothing dissatisfying about you. I slept so long the next day because you completely exhausted me.” He smiled wryly. “But when I woke I discovered the woman I loved more than life had fled from me. Marilyn told me she found you in tears. She said you’d been terrified by me and feared returning to my bed. She told me to give you space, you’d come back when you were ready.”

“So all this time...”

“I thought my mate feared my touch,” he said, finishing her thought. “I thought I’d... hurt you in some terrible way. And as the years passed my fears only grew. I had no idea how to make it up to you.”

“Hurt me?” She snorted. “What we just did should prove I’ve never feared you that way. Hell, losing your virginity is supposed to suck and instead it was the most mind-blowing experience of my life. Well,” she amended, “it was up until last night anyways.”

He pulled her roughly into his arms. “You never feared me,” he breathed like a prayer.

“And you never used me.” She still couldn’t believe it. “Dev, so many years.”

He closed his eyes in pain. “If I had come after you, tried to talk to you, we could have cleared up all these misunderstandings. We could have been together.”

“Damn pride,” she agreed. “Being mortal around you will suck enough without wasting six of my good years.”

Devlin eased her back slightly. “Tali, when demons mate it’s not for a smattering of years. It’s forever.”

“But I’m not immortal.”

He bent down and trailed his lips over the rose. “You could be. I started our union six years ago. All you have to do is complete the ritual and our life forces will be bound together. You will live as long as I do.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “What do I have to do?”

“Do you remember how I gave you the rose?”

“You bit me while we were...in the throes, so to speak.”

“Exactly. You have to do the same. Our mingled blood seals the contract. The same mark will appear on my throat. Once bound, it is unbreakable.”

“Demon magic,” she breathed.

He nodded sharply.

She looked up at him, considering what he’d told her seriously. Was she ready for forever with this man? Reaching up, she traced her fingers over his face. Who was she kidding? She’d been ready since she was fourteen. She’d spent six years trying to hate him and failed miserably. Her life was incomplete

without him by her side. In a choice between a single lifetime and an eternity with his love, she knew what she'd pick.

"Well," she said, rising to her tiptoes to kiss his lips. "If we need to be in the throes maybe we should move back to the bed."

A fierce joy more powerful than anything she'd ever seen washed over his face.

"I love you," he told her before he kissed her with burning passion.

"God, me too," she said when she was able. She smiled up at him. "I'll make you a new bargain, demon. I'll give you the rose if you'll promise to love only me for eternity."

Devlin grinned as he waltzed her backwards towards the bed.

"Deal."

About the Author

To learn more about Victoria Davies please visit www.victoriadavies.ca. Send an email to Victoria at contact@victoriadavies.ca or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers at <http://ca.groups.yahoo.com/group/victoriadaviesgroup/>

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.

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

Break

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An Angels and Demons Story

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

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

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

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

Enjoy the following excerpt for Break:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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