

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Risking Eternity
VOIREY LINGER

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For two hundred years, Dominicus has lived in isolation, sentenced to take human souls to hell. But this night's victim is unlike all the others. She tempts him. One kiss and she comes apart in his arms. One taste, and he can't walk away.

But Maggie isn't the only temptation he faces. Dominicus fights an attraction to Renatus, his best friend through the eons and a male with whom sex is forbidden. With her, he risks Hell, with him, losing the only piece of Heaven he has left.

Maggie cannot begin to understand what Dominicus has done. Demons covet her soul and Lucifer won't give up his prize. In claiming her, he's not only compounded his sin, he's sparked a war between Heaven and Hell. Angels battle demons, and Dominicus must make a choice. Does he deliver to Lucifer the human whose soul calls to him and ensure his salvation, or save her and risk eternal damnation?

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Risking Eternity

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RISKING ETERNITY

Voirey Linger

Dedication

To my chat Divas and the Ratters. I couldn't do it without you. Inez, you are a meanie and I adore you. Em, Kat, Kate, Kim and Margie. *smooches*

And a special thanks to one person who may never see it. Stephen, you were the first person who really saw me as a writer. I promised you this way back then and now I can finally deliver.

Trademark Acknowledgement

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Starbucks: Starbucks US Brands

Chapter One

Hard bricks bit into Dominicus' rear end and he shifted on the edge of the building's roof, trying to find a more comfortable position. Rain fell in a fine mist, drenching the night and muffling the noise of the city. The low clouds blocked the Heavens and reflected the city lights and gave the sky an unnatural orange glow.

This was the thing he disliked most about his assignments, sitting hidden from the world while he waited for instructions. He frowned. No, there was something he hated more. The stench at the gates was worse, and sometimes the pleas from those who realized what was happening.

The dying never went quietly into Hell.

It was his punishment, leveled on him by none other than the Most High. Every night he waited, invisible to human eyes, while a human died. Every night he watched as the blackened soul separated from the dying body. Every night he took that soul to Hell. The human myth of an Angel of Death had been made real and would remain so until his curse was lifted.

He shifted again and returned his attention to the nightclub, five stories below. Neon glowed in the night, highlighting the people crowded under the awnings. The hard pulse of music drifted up to him. A taste of the atmosphere inside seeped onto the streets to lure in those looking for gaiety. Scanning the crowd, he tried to feel out the soul-deep emptiness, the bite of evil, that would mark his assignment, but there were too many people clustered together. They all had cravings, all needed something they thought they would find inside the garishly lit building.

"Are you prepared for this night's work?"

"Checking up on me, Renatus?" Dominicus turned to look at the white-robed angel who had appeared behind him. Light sparkled off droplets of rain collecting in

Renatus's golden hair. The fine elegance of his features were marred by a pinched frown of disapproval.

"Of course not. You don't need to be watched, do you?"

Dominicus couldn't help but wonder if the light angel intended the subtle dig or if his words should be accepted at face value. Too many years living on the Earthly plane had soured him, made him suspicious. Still, Ren was his only contact with the Heavens now and didn't deserve his distrust.

"If you are not here to make sure I am doing my job, then why have you come?" Dominicus watched as Ren took a seat beside him on the ledge, close enough the snowy white wings brushed his own black ones. The faint tickle of contact made his feathers stand on end.

"So hostile, Dom. Your time here does not seem to have mellowed you."

No. His time hadn't mellowed him. Quite the opposite. If anything his penance made him more certain he was justified in his rebellion. The Most High didn't do enough to preserve the souls of creation. In the past two centuries, he'd delivered too many to the gates, seen the hunger and greed in the demons' eyes as they devoured the souls and took their power for their own.

"Why are you here?"

"Can I not come to visit my friend?" A flicker of something crossed Ren's face, something that looked suspiciously like regret.

Dominicus shot him a wry look. "You could, but you have not." The angel wasn't there to see him, that was certain. Ren never came without purpose anymore.

Renatus could not understand Dominicus' continued defiance. His legalistic mind could not understand any defiance, for that matter. Dominicus' constant questioning of Most High's laws was an ever-growing barrier between the friends.

An awkward silence fell between them and Ren turned to study the people below. "There is concern for you in the Heavens," he finally said, his voice quiet and hesitant.

"You have been on the Earthly plane, separated from your kind for far too long. There is concern you have Fallen."

Dominicus contained a snort of disbelief. Two hundred years after he was barred from the Heavens, they were now concerned? Where was their worry when he was cast down to the mortal plane to exist in solitude? All had turned their backs on him. All save Renatus.

"I have not Fallen."

"And yet, you have not Risen, either."

"Risen?" he asked incredulously. "I am confined here, cut off from all I have known, from receiving power. I have no companionship but yours, and you are a rare visitor. There is nothing to lift me back into the Heavens."

"That is not true, Dom." Ren's hand clutched Dom's arm as he repeated his oft-voiced plea. "You've always had the power to return. Rescind your statement. End this defiance and ask the Most High for forgiveness. Please, come home with me."

"Until my punishment is lifted, I will stay as I am."

"Don't be so sure."

Dominicus gave Ren a hard look, searching for a clue to his meaning. Had something changed? Perhaps his situation was not as static as he'd believed. Judging from Ren's expression, this was not a good thing.

"What is happening, Renatus?"

"I cannot offer anything but the pronouncement."

Dominicus stiffened. If Renatus was here in his official role of Messenger, his existence would soon be completely altered. "Which is?"

"I was sent to warn you this assignment is of the utmost importance. The Most High says, *'This is your test. You have learned more than you know. We must all make our own decisions, find our own paths. It falls on you to do the right thing.'*"

The Most High's words resonated within Dominicus, the absolute truth in them sending a shiver through his body even as his hand curled into a white-knuckled fist.

Leave it to the Heavens to deliver an important message and yet be cryptic.

"And what is the right thing?"

"That, my friend, is your test."

* * * * *

The throb of music had Maggie's head pounding. People crowded the floor and the stench of sweat and alcohol lingered over scantily clad bodies. They rubbed and teased, promised sex under the guise of dancing. She leaned against the bar and watched them dance, but she wasn't interested in joining them tonight.

She was tired of this scene. Night after night she stalked the bars, looking for fun, for entertainment, for companionship. Day after day she woke up, hung over and lonely. She wanted a guy who was going to be around for a while, not just a quick fuck. The club scene was definitely not the right place to be looking for long-term.

She pushed away from the bar. Time to go home. The shortest route to the door was across the dance floor, so she picked up the beat and started to dance her way through the crowd. A man blocked her, his lips moved, but she couldn't hear him over the pulse of music. Shaking her head, she moved away to find another path, only to have him appear and block her again.

Maggie started to make her way to the door but the swarm of bodies pushed her and she swayed unsteadily. The bass thumped and her head pounded back in rhythm, hurting so much the room swam and her stomach rolled and she swallowed against the rising bile.

She stumbled and a man's hands steadied her. It was the same guy. Where did he come from? She jerked away and tried to get to the door. Sounds were getting fuzzy, as if her ears were filled with cotton, and the room seemed to be getting darker. What the fuck was wrong with her?

She pushed her way through the door and into the night. The music faded and she took a deep breath, trying to purge the smells of the club from her lungs as she walked toward the line of waiting cabs.

A wave of dizziness assaulted her and she stumbled. Someone caught her, spinning her away from the cabs and toward the line of people waiting to get into the club. He'd followed here, the guy from the dance floor. *Shitshitshit*.

The line of people beside her surged. There were men yelling and a scuffle broke out.

"Come on, let's get you out of here," he said, his hand gripping her elbow as he tugged her toward a nondescript blue car.

No, she couldn't go with him. She couldn't remember why, but something in the depths of her fuzzy brain screamed to not get in that car with him.

She tried to jerk away from him, but he just wrapped his arm tighter around her waist, holding her to him as he pulled her farther away from the club. Confusion and fear melded.

Oh God, help me.

"No, let me go. Someone make him let me go! Please, someone help me," she called, but the escalating fight in the line drowned out her cries for help. There was a flash and a pop, and the mass of people bobbed as they all ducked, screaming. The world tilted crazily and a burn ripped through her chest.

"Shit, I can't fucking believe this," the man muttered, close to her ear. His hand covered her chest and when he pulled away it was covered with something dark. He ground out another curse. His arms left her and she fell to the ground.

The ringing in her ears grew louder, drowning out everything else. Maggie realized this must be what it felt like to die.

Chapter Two

Dominicus curled up his lip in distaste. Death and dying were not the business of angels. Yet here he was, ready to take yet another soul to the gates of Hell. Why was this punishment leveled on him? With every passing night, he was more convinced it was wrong to allow the fragile souls of mankind to be taken to that place of evil, and yet, he had no choice but to take them.

He used his power as a cloak, rendering him invisible from the crowd. Once hidden from the humans, he bent over the woman while the man holding her laid her on the hard concrete. She'd been drugged by a predator and shot by a stray bullet. The poor human didn't have a chance of surviving. Freckles stood out in dark relief against her rapidly paling skin and red hair tangled under her, growing dark as the pool of her blood grew and soaked into it. The last vestige of life sparkled in her eyes and he reached down, ready to take her essence, but the soft glow of her being stopped him.

Purity. The demons coveted souls such as this. That purity was the only thing that glowed so clearly at the point of death and it had no place in Hell.

He looked deeper, seeking whatever may have earned her damnation and found nothing. She'd made mistakes, true, but at the core of them all was the desire to love and be loved. Surely there was no sin in seeking affection. The thought plucked a chord of pain in his own heart. Was everyone not deserving of love?

There was a nudge from the Heavens, reminding him of his duty. *This assignment is very important. It falls on you to do the right thing.*

But what was the right thing?

A tear slipped from the corner of the woman's eye. He knew the only thing keeping her alive was his hesitation to take the soul from her body.

The man who'd followed her from the club stood and looked around quickly. His mind projected his fear of discovery and the need to flee. Dominicus could see the shadow of a soul hovering over the man's body like a film of soot and ash. Ah, yes. This was evil. Dominicus could see inside him, see his lust, his hunger for violence. He could see the faces of others he'd drugged and raped, of one who had died after ingesting his poisons. He could see this woman was tonight's intended victim.

It falls on you to do the right thing.

The right thing was suddenly so clear.

Reaching out, he took hold of the edge of evil shrouding the man's form and pulled. The human spasmed, his face a mask of shock and horror, as the soul ripped free with an unearthly scream of pain. If ever there was something vile enough to be worthy of Hell's minions, surely this was it.

The man fell, dead before his body hit the ground, and Dominicus took flight.

With powerful strokes of his wings, he entered the lower realm. Hellfire's dull red glow gleamed off the waiting demons' reptilian scales as the catlike creatures paced behind the blackened gate. He barely spared them a glance before throwing the putrid soul to them. It shrieked and the demons leapt, swarming over it and dragging it farther into Hell. He didn't stop to mourn the soul this night. He barely took time to notice the stench of decay or the wash of heat over his body. Getting back to the girl was his only concern. The muscles of his back and wings burned and his heart pounded. He had to go faster, to get to the girl before one of the devil's minions could wander to the scene and claim her. He couldn't lose her.

Approaching the nightclub once more, Dominicus took in the chaos of the panicked crowd. Some fled the scene, anxious to get away before the police arrived. The ones who remained milled in confusion, fear and morbid curiosity.

Dominicus spotted a black and tan puppy sniffing the woman's toes and fought to fly faster. He landed beside the dying woman with a shout, startling the hound.

"Begone! You have no business here," he snapped, leaning in to cover the barely living human with one wing.

"You think not?" The pup cocked its head to one side and its eyebrows quirked as it studied him. Evil in the guise of innocence.

"I know it. Your master has his prize and there is nothing else for you here."

"Oh, but you are wrong," the demon answered, its mouth dropping open in a doggie grin. "The soul you took to the master was already his. The prize is still there, clinging to its mortal body. You, of all beings, should understand the value a pure heart such as this holds for Lucifer. He wants it."

He did know. There was power in purity. Demons had no power of their own, could not recover their strength without taking from another. This soul would be a gluttonous feast for creatures accustomed to the fouled souls of the unclean.

"Your master's wants mean nothing to me. The woman now lives and shall continue to do so. Now go! Back to your master. I banish you from this place." He swung his arm at the dog and it scurried out of reach.

"I'll go, but your power is limited, angel. You can't protect her forever. We were promised this girl and we will have her." The hound gave the girl one last glance, then turned and trotted away, disappearing into an alleyway as the strobe of police lights turned the corner. Dominicus watched heavy hearted as the demon departed. The echoes of her spirit were familiar. He wondered if he would soon be like her; an angel Fallen from Heaven, damned to Hell.

He couldn't let that happen to him.

His attention returned to the woman. Her breathing had stopped and he could see her soul beginning to lift from her body. Laying a hand over her chest, he used his power to push the spirit back into her and pin it there. She would live until he could find another, less obvious place to tend to her.

Dominicus once more used some of his precious stores of power to distract the agitated crowd, to divert attention away from what he was doing. Once he took her from this place no one would remember what had happened to her.

Carefully, he lifted the woman's bloody body and took once more to the air. Returning to the roof of the building across the street, he laid her down as gently as he could.

Healing was not a gift he possessed. Like any divine being he could do it, but not as quickly or completely as one with the gift, such as Renatus, or an angel who was not separated from the renewing strength of the heavens. He only prayed he had the power left in him to heal her.

Placing a hand over her wounded heart, he called on the bullet, drew it to him until it worked its way free of the brutalized flesh. Merciful Heavens, there was so much damage to her fragile human body. He didn't know if he was strong enough to keep her alive.

"What do you think you are doing?" Renatus hissed, appearing beside him.

"I do what I must." He sent another wave of his dwindling power into the woman's chest.

"I told you this was important. You were warned to follow orders on this assignment and you did not."

"That is not what you said. You said to do the right thing, and I am."

"You call this the right thing? You are saving the dead and killing the living! Dominicus, you must listen. This might be your last chance to save yourself from a Fall."

"This matters to you?" Dominicus retorted.

"Of course it does." Ren's face was a mask of hurt. "You have been my friend through the eons. I want you to return with me, for our lives to return to normal."

But things could never be normal again. Did Ren not see that everything had changed? They could never go back. He could never go back. His entire existence was forever altered.

Turning his back on Renatus, Dom focused on the human. The flesh was not repairing fast enough and the soul began to separate from the body once more. Merciful Father, he couldn't save her. He wasn't strong enough. Her eyes began to dull.

Father, please help me! His soul screamed, but there was no light from above, no strength from the Maker filling him.

"I need help. Give me your power."

"What? Are you insane?"

Renatus leaned close to look into his eyes, no doubt looking for signs of a Fall, and Dominicus saw his opportunity. Keeping one hand over the human's wounded heart, he reached out with the other and grabbed Renatus by the back of the neck. Jerking the other angel close, he covered his mouth with his own. Hand fisted in the golden hair, he held Renatus still as he kissed him deeply, drawing power, channeling it through his body and into the dying woman.

Ren fought, twisting to get free, and Dominicus gripped tighter, jerking the other angel off his feet and pressing their chests together. Heavenly power flooded him, surging through his body in a rush of heat, thickening him. Dominicus angled his head, breathed in every last tendril he could before Renatus broke free. Breathing heavily, the light angel backed a safe distance away and dragged his arm over his lips.

"You are touched by evil," he spat, wiping his mouth, his face twisted with disgust.

Dominicus smiled and licked his lips, taking the last drops of Renatus's energy into his body. It tasted like he'd always imagined Ren would, strong and male. "No, I am preserving good. If I have to steal your power to do so, I will."

Such a theft between angels was a breach of trust, between friends, a violation. A tinge of guilt pricked Dominicus, but he shoved it aside. This was the time to act. He would make his peace with Renatus when the girl was recovered.

Lifting his hand, he assessed the human's wounds. The ragged flesh had closed and her heart was once again functional. With a nudge of power from him it began beating again, her body jerking as she drew air into her lungs with a harsh gasp.

"Your sacrifice has saved a life tonight, my friend. You should rejoice."

"I will rejoice when her spirit enters the gates of Hell, where it belongs, where you were supposed to take it. Do you have any idea what you have done?"

"So harsh. It's unlike you," he murmured. Ren was becoming very distraught over this human. How very strange. Later, when the woman was out of danger, he'd try to figure out just what that signified. For now, there was more work to be done. "I need to take her home. Do you know where she lives?" He looked at the other angel expectantly.

"You expect me to help?" Renatus asked in amazement. "Find her home yourself. You have chosen to act outside Heaven's commands, so you can proceed alone." With that, Ren left, his departure even more abrupt than usual.

"I shall simply have to do this the human way," he told the girl, who blinked at him uncomprehendingly. Spotting a small wallet tucked in the waistband of her skirt, he pulled it out, smiling when it opened to reveal her driver's license. Maggie Barton. The name suited her. He smiled and checked the address. Her apartment was not far from this location. He picked her up and took to the air once more.

Landing on her bedroom balcony, he used his waning power to will the door to open and carried her through the darkened apartment to her bathroom. Another thought turned on the lights and sent steaming water pouring from the showerhead. With a final push, he willed her clothing and his away before carrying her unconscious body into the tub. Under the stream of water, he began to tenderly wash the blood from her.

Her injury was repaired but the drugs were still strong in her body. She didn't flinch, even when the water hit her face. She lay limp and motionless, dead weight in his arms, while the water ran down the drain, streaked crimson with her blood. Worry

stabbed at him. Did he have enough strength left to deal with the chemicals in her system?

When the water ran clean, he willed it off and shook the droplets from his feathers. He took the towel from the bar by the tub and wrapped her in its fluffy softness. Another towel hung by it, and he draped it over her head, squeezing the moisture from her hair. Through it all, she never showed any response. She was getting worse.

Moving to the bedroom, he placed her on the bed and leaned in, trying to breathe in her essence, to analyze what she needed. Alongside the bitterness of alcohol lay the salty bite of the date-rape drug.

"Poor girl," he whispered as he stretched out beside her. "I'll get rid of it all for you. You will wake up clean and pure." He lowered his face to hers, until her faint breath washed over his face. He smoothed her damp hair back from her face with one hand. "I can only give you this one night, though. The rest is up to you."

He placed his mouth over hers and breathed in, drawing the toxins from her. The first taste made him want to pull away in revulsion. She was filled with enough chemicals to stop the hearts of several humans. It would have killed her, just as surely as the bullet.

The demons must have wanted this soul very badly indeed.

The drugs clung to her, slowing her body, making her breathing shallow. Focusing his power into his mouth, he drew deeper, purging them from her body. They flooded his mouth where his power burned bright, singeing him as he destroyed them. Again he sucked in, taking another vile breath of chemicals, but this time he could taste something else, something sweet and pure mingled with the foulness.

The flavor of Maggie.

Another deep drink from her lips, and the sweetness overcame the sour. A groan of pleasure escaped him and his tongue slipped over hers, searching for more of her taste. Like a feast for a starving man, her sensual flavor overwhelmed him. Healing forgotten, he ran his tongue over hers, caressing, encouraging hers to play, too.

She made a small sound and her hand came up, fingertips grazing his bare arm until she cupped his shoulder. Her delicate touch held him in place more effectively than brute force ever could. His flesh thickened, the hard length of him pressed against the soft towel separating them.

He needed more. More heat, more contact, more of her intoxicating taste. It had been too long since he'd lain with a female, centuries since a cherub had graced his side or his bed. The pull of this woman was simply more than he could resist. More than he wanted to resist. He sent more of his power over her, let it shimmer over her, awaken her nerve endings and spark arousal.

Easing the terrycloth aside, he slid his hand over her still-damp skin, creamy flesh sprinkled with cinnamon freckles, and marveled at her softness. He ducked his head, took one hard nipple in his mouth and moaned at the sweetness of it. She cried out in orgasm, her body shuddering under his. He'd forgotten how tempting human pleasure tasted. May the Heavens help him, he hadn't touched a human since the Most High had declared human and angelic offspring to be forbidden.

Ah, the prohibition. He released her nipple and squeezed his eyes shut tight. The closest thing to Heaven he'd touched in two hundred years and she was forbidden to him. He forced himself to stand, to move away from her.

He looked at her again, the towel twisted around her body and one pink nipple still gleaming from his mouth. She was too lovely, too tempting. He shot a thought at the lights, willing them to turn off, but they only flickered. He'd used too much of his weakened powers burning the chemicals from her.

He returned to the bed and removed the damp towel before pulling back the covers to tuck her in. It was best to cover the temptation. She trembled with delicate shivers. Considering the amount of blood she lost, she would need as much help as she could get keeping warm. Using the towel he pulled from her, he wiped the rest of the water from his body before retrieving his clothing from the bathroom.

A wave of dizziness washed over him as he pulled on his jeans. He needed to rest and allow his power to be replaced.

His feathers ruffled in irritation.

Dominicus returned to the woman's side and laid a hand on her forehead. The chill of her skin was worrisome. She was far too cold. Too tired to do anything else, he slid under the covers. He spooned behind her, drawing her into the heat of his body and eased one wing under her. Pillowing her head with the warmth of his feathers, he pulled the other forward and spread it over them, blanketing them against the too-cool room.

Alone with his thoughts, doubt and guilt assailed him. He'd killed a human and taken physical pleasure with another. It didn't matter that he hadn't come. She had, and the kiss had crossed from healing to carnal.

As if that violation was not enough, he'd crossed a boundary of friendship and taken advantage of Renatus physically. Even worse, he'd stolen power from Renatus and betrayed their relationship for this woman. That broken trust was the sin he felt most acutely this night.

Too soon, exhaustion claimed him and he fell into a troubled slumber, holding Maggie in his arms and sheltering her under his wing.

Chapter Three

The chill woke her. Opening her eyes cautiously, she checked the clock. Noon. What an ungodly time to be awake on a weekend.

How did she get home? There was some guy who hit on her at the bar, bought her a drink, but things got fuzzy after that. She hated it when she drank too much. She always ended up doing something stupid.

Maggie rolled out of bed and stumbled woozily to the bathroom to find her robe. She flipped on the lights and braced herself for the bombardment of pain against her hungover eyes, only to stop in surprise when it didn't hurt. When did hangovers stop being miserable? She didn't have a headache, and her stomach wasn't rolling. The only thing hurting was her chest. She rubbed the aching spot just to the left of her breastbone.

Her hand stilled at a small patch of uneven skin. Pulling the robe aside, she examined the spot in the mirror. It was small and silvery. The circle of skin almost looked like a scar, but she'd never been hurt there, and couldn't remember ever seeing it before. How weird.

She quickly brushed her teeth, holding onto the vanity for support. She might not be hurting, but she was wrung out. Head spinning, she took a step and crashed into the wall. Shit, that hurt.

Caffeine. That would fix everything. She just needed her morning cup of wake-up. Opening the bedroom door she was stopped by the scent of freshly brewing Columbian roast. Did she manage to set the timer on the coffeepot last night? Somehow, she doubted it.

Crap, she hoped she didn't bring anyone home with her. That had happened once before, and she still cringed at the memory. The humiliation of finding a strange man in her bed left a dark stain deep inside her. *Please God, don't let me have done that again.*

"Hello?" She looked around cautiously.

No one. The apartment was empty. She wilted in relief. The timer on the coffeepot had been set after all.

She shook her head to clear it and reached in the cabinet for her favorite yellow mug.

"Good morning, Maggie."

She spun with a scream, the cup flying from her hands to shatter against the floor.

The beautiful man standing in front of her didn't seem to notice her alarm.

"I trust you slept well?"

"Um, yeah. I did," she stammered, unable to look away. Suddenly, bringing home a man didn't seem quite so bad. Hell, her taste was improving. Black hair hung around his shoulders, so rich and thick she wanted to sink her fingers in and never let go. Stubble covered his strong jaw and eyes as blue as the Heavens hinted that this was a man who could corrupt the most jaded of women.

And damn if she didn't want him to give her his best shot.

Lust pooled in her belly, warm, wet and creamy. She wanted to nibble on his full lower lip and see if it tasted as good as she thought it would, to crawl all over him, to see if he looked as good out of that black t-shirt as he did in it.

"Let me take you to the couch and I'll bring you your coffee."

"Oh, but—"

He swept her into his arms and carried her out of the kitchen. "There is broken glass and your feet are bare."

She'd never been swept into anyone's arms before. Holy crap, that was sexy. She was a big gal, tall and well, rounded, but he didn't seem to notice as he carried her

across the small apartment. And he didn't just drop her on the couch like most guys would, either. He set her down carefully, like she was something precious and fragile.

Dazed, she stared at him. He felt even better than he looked. She needed to figure out his name and how to keep him around a while.

A steaming cup was placed in her hand. The coffee was rich, with just enough hazelnut creamer to make her mouth water. If he cooked, she was going to chain him to the bed, leave him just enough slack to serve her. But first, she needed to find out his name.

"Listen, this might sound really rude, but last night is a bit of a blur."

"Last night was hard on you," he replied, sitting beside her.

She blinked in surprise. Hard on her? Hard like how?

Visions of rough sex filled her brain but there were no aches to go with it. Actually, they were no gentle-sex aches either.

"Um, yeah, I guess."

"You are recovering well. I'm happy I was able to help you."

Recovering? Help her?

Jumbled images of a man handing her a drink filled her head, him following her from the club and... Something else happened, she was sure.

"You brought me home and put me to bed, didn't you?" That he hadn't taken advantage of her condition was left unspoken.

"Yes. You needed assistance."

"And you helped me." She shook her head to clear it. She'd never met a man in that club who'd help a woman without getting something in return. "Well, I'm really grateful for your help." It was time to drop a little hint, let him know she wouldn't mind some advantage-taking, especially if it meant more time with this hottie. She leaned in and suggested, "Maybe we can spend some time together. Give me a chance to thank you properly."

"Stay safe. Take care of yourself. That will be enough thanks for me."

"Can't I just do one little thing to thank you?" *Or two or three little things?*

"What is this little thing you have in mind?" He smiled at her and his gaze dipped to her chest before returning to her face.

"A kiss."

He jerked backward with a hiss. Crap. *Wham, bam, no thank you ma'am.* She'd read that one wrong.

"Sorry, forget I mentioned it." The heat of embarrassment washed over her face and she wished she could take the words back.

"I cannot easily forget such a tempting invitation."

"But you don't want to."

"I want to, lovely, but I didn't help to earn this kind of gratitude."

"I know. That just makes me want to kiss you more."

He leaned in toward her, stiff and awkward. This wasn't going to go well. He probably had pulled back because he already had a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend. Maybe he wasn't into women. That would be a little better than him thinking she was ugly.

No way was she going to let it stop her, though. She'd probably never get another chance to taste a piece of candy like this again and she wasn't going to miss the opportunity. One innocent kiss, just a little nibble and no one got hurt. She wouldn't even use tongue. Much.

Maggie leaned in and brushed his mouth, keeping hers gentle. Oh God, his lips were luxurious, as soft as angel wings and twice as heavenly. Heat sparked, arcing through her and pooling in her core with a hum of energy. She slipped her tongue over his lips, unable to resist stealing another taste.

With a moan, he angled his head and the kiss went from angelic to pure sin. His tongue slipped over her lips, dipping into her mouth. Heat sizzled between them, sending a stab of arousal spiking through her. A strange crackling sensation danced

over her tongue and through her body, setting every nerve ending ablaze. Just like that, she was ready, needy, poised on the brink. Another sizzle of electricity crackled in her mouth and tension twisted, tightened. It broke over her and she screamed her orgasm into his mouth.

He pulled back, leaving her bereft.

“Be careful, Maggie” he whispered. “There are more dangers in this world for you than you could possibly imagine.” Without giving her a chance to respond to that cryptic statement, he stood, walked to the front door and left without looking back.

She sank into the couch with a dazed sigh. He was delicious. Honest, gorgeous and, oh God, he made her come with just a kiss. Imagine what he could do if he used a few more body parts. It would be easy to fall for a guy like—

“Shit—his name!” If she hurried she might be able to catch him. She ran to the door and swung it open, but there was no sign of him. The courtyard was still.

“I am so stupid.” She sagged against the doorframe and banged her forehead against it. A prime piece of man candy like that and she didn’t even get his freaking number. Jeez, she could hear herself whimpering.

Wait, that wasn’t her. Glancing down, she found a black and tan puppy sitting on her doormat, staring at her. Its ribs showed through the fur and its tummy was gaunt. Brown marks over its eyes twitched, giving it a worried expression. “Oh, aren’t you adorable!” She reached down to pet it but it shied away from her. “And not too friendly, apparently.”

Too bad the apartments didn’t allow pets. The poor little thing looked like it needed someone to take care of it, and she could use some companionship. Maybe if she had a puppy she wouldn’t feel so lonely.

The puppy’s tongue lolled out in a pant and its mouth seemed to grow, strangely large for such a small dog. Ropes of drool hung between sharp teeth and Maggie wrinkled her nose. It was a slobbery little thing. Then its mouth closed and the little dog cocked its head to the side. Ears perked, it studied her intently, a faint red gleam to its

eyes. Unnerved, she took a step back. Its pink tongue flicked out for one last lick of its little black nose, then the pup stood and padded away, disappearing down the steps.

“That was pretty freaking weird.” Shaking her head to clear it, Maggie looked over the yard one more time, hoping to see the stranger’s black shirt through the bright pink of the crepe myrtles. No one was there. With a dejected sigh, she stepped back in the apartment to finish her coffee.

* * * * *

The puppy paused at the foot of the stairs to flash Dom a triumphant smile before disappearing with a shimmer. The warning was clear. Lucifer had no intention of giving up his prize.

The devil wasn’t going to have a choice.

Settling into the shaded corner of the empty balcony, he watched the apartment across the courtyard. A peek through the walls allowed him to watch Maggie as she wrapped her arms around herself. The Hellhound had unnerved her, but the demon’s next visit would be different. Evil could be sweet when it wanted to seduce.

He had to make sure that dog never crossed her threshold.

“You cannot keep her from her fate.”

Dominicus’ stomach jumped at Ren’s sudden appearance. The infuriating seraph had a talent for surprising him.

“You speak as if it was preordained and free will had no place in the realms and mortal plane.”

White wings twitched. Direct hit. The Most High valued the free will of His creation.

“This is not about free will. The human does not owe her life to her choices, but to those of a divine being. Yours.”

“Am I not part of creation? Do I not have the right to exercise free will?”

Renatus moved to the balcony railing and fixed his gaze on Maggie's door. He held himself stiff, his wings tight to his body. Challenging him never swayed his stance, but watching him get wound up was such fun.

"You are not helping your cause this way, Dominicus. You challenged the Most High once before, questioned his wisdom in allowing the demons to take evildoers. Now you are saving the life of one. You do not have the right to usurp the Most High, to take life from the living and give it to the dead. You cannot keep this pet. Leave now and let the demons do their job."

Pushing away from the wall, Dominicus silently closed the distance to the other angel. Ren's anger filled the small space, humming between them. Dominicus' skin prickled with awareness and he noted his weren't the only feathers standing on end.

He pressed his body against Renatus's back and placed his hands on the railing on either side of the other angel, caging him in. The snowy wings trembled against him, but Renatus made no attempt to move. He leaned down, placing his lips close to Renatus's ear, close enough to smell the peace and beauty of the Heavens captured in his golden hair.

"And if I refuse?" he asked.

"Refuse?"

"To give her up, to let the demons have her." He dipped his head and let his lips brush, soft as a butterfly's wings, across the skin of Renatus's neck. The other angel's head dipped to the side just enough to encourage.

"You cannot."

"I can."

"Please stop, Dom." Ren's voice was a weak whisper.

"Stop what? Stop helping the human or stop wanting? Maybe I should stop making you want." He placed another gentle kiss against Ren's neck. A soft sigh escaped the golden angel and he softened, relaxing into Dom for the barest of moments.

"You are a seraph, a male. You do not make me want." Renatus's voice wavered, his muscles twitched.

"Are you sure about that?" Dominicus moved against Ren, letting his groin settle against Ren's buttocks.

The support of Renatus's body vanished and Dominicus sagged forward.

Reappearing to one side, Renatus shook out his feathers and drew himself upright, visibly pulling the dignity he clung to so tightly around him once more.

Arrogant seraph. He could pose all he wanted, but he couldn't deny what was under those robes. His pride sent a stab of anger through Dominicus, fed the loneliness he'd lived with since being cast from the company of other angels.

"The balance between the realms is disrupted, Dominicus. You are courting the disaster of creation, the destruction of the mortal plane."

"You are wrong. The balance was already off. Hell held too much power and the Heavens must take back control."

"What audacity." Ren gaped at him, clearly offended. "Do you really think you know better than the Most High?"

"Think, Renatus. What message were you ordered to bring me before Maggie was shot?"

"That you needed to follow orders. And yet you —"

"No!" Two steps brought him close to Renatus's face once more. "The exact words, Messenger. Repeat the proclamation you delivered."

The other angel's jaw bunched and he repeated the words through clenched teeth. *"It falls on you to do the right thing."*

"It was more than just that, my friend. You said, *'This is your test. You have learned more than you know. We must all make our own decisions, find our own paths. It falls on you to do the right thing.'* I have made my own decision, I am finding my own path and I have

decided saving this girl is the right thing to do. I know it is. She is too pure for Hell's fire."

"It is not your place to judge souls," Ren huffed. "You are disrupting an agreement which has held Hell from Earth for two thousand years. We allow him to claim spirits to feed his demons and he does not unleash destruction. Lucifer will not stand down. He will rise up and take revenge, and creation will pay the price. Humans will be devoured by demons on Earth and there will be war in the Realms. Are you prepared to be responsible for that?"

"It will not happen. The devil may seize this excuse to rally his minions but Most High is the one with power, not Lucifer. He will not allow Hell to rise."

"Stop interfering before you damn us all," Renatus snapped, then he was gone, fleeing to the sanctity of Heaven while Dominicus spent another day on the tumultuous Earth.

Bending down, Dom picked up a white feather from the now-empty balcony.

"I cannot step aside," he whispered. His eyes drifted closed and he dragged the feather over his lips. "Forgive me, Ren, but I cannot."

Chapter Four

Maggie pushed the unlock button on her key chain and the car beeped a welcome. Stupid thing sounded too cheerful. Monday morning shouldn't start so early. Or be so bright and sunshiny. And what the Hell was with those stupid birds chirping? She was too freaked out to deal with chirping.

The television had been on while she got ready for work. The name of her favorite club caught her attention. A man died there. The photograph looked familiar. She couldn't place him, but it made her think of a too-salty margarita. The news identified him as Gregory James, a registered sex offender who was found dead outside the club Saturday night. There were reports of gunfire, but he had apparently died from natural causes.

The news had her stomach rolling. She'd been there that night.

She needed Starbucks, bad. She reached out to open the car door.

"Hello, Maggie."

Gasping, she spun away from the car, the key held out in front of her like a weapon and her heart pounding in shock. Oh jeez, it was him, the hottie from her kitchen, the one who made her coffee and scorched her with a blazing kiss before disappearing. She took a shaky breath and relaxed against the side of her car. Remembering the taste of him, something deep inside went soft and girly at the sight of him.

And wet. Very wet.

It really wasn't fair for a man to be that beautiful.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." His expression filled with concern and he took a step toward her.

"I wasn't paying attention." Flustered, she reached up to shove her hair away from her face. "Ow!" Pain exploded in her eye and tears flooded it, running down her cheeks in an instant waterfall. She'd jabbed herself with the key still clutched in her hand.

"Are you all right?" A warm hand tipped her head up and the blurry outline of his face swam in her vision. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Smooth move. I'm sure that one really impressed him.* She was such a ditz. First getting herself so drunk at the club she needed someone to babysit her all night, now stabbing herself with a car key.

Light hit her eye and she winced, blinking furiously against the sting.

"Crap, it hurts. You just got here and now I probably need you to take me to the hospital or something. I feel like an idiot."

"Let me see. It might not be as bad as you think." He tipped her face up more and leaned close to examine her injury.

Oh shit, he smelled good. Like summer and the ocean. She knew he tasted even better, fresh and clean and male. So very male. One taste wasn't enough. She wanted another nibble.

"How does this feel?" He cupped his hand over her injured eye, shading it. Her skin tingled where he touched her and the sting faded, dulling to a mild irritation.

"It doesn't hurt. What did you do?"

"I made it better for you."

"You did," she laughed. He removed his hand and she blinked. A little sore, bruised feeling, but she could see clearly. "I promise I'm not usually this clumsy."

"I believe you. It was entirely my fault for startling you." He brushed her hair out of her face with one hand, his gaze never once leaving her face. He didn't look around or try to look down her top, he just watched her.

She swallowed hard.

"I, um, didn't think I'd see you again. You left without even telling me your name."

"Dominicus."

"Of the Lord." The words popped out of her mouth before she thought about them.

"You know Latin?"

"Not much. I took a year of it in college, but not much soaked in and even less stuck. I'm kind of surprised I knew that." She gave a nervous laugh and he smiled as an awkward silence fell between them.

"You were going to work and I'm making you late," he finally said, his voice rich, silky and filled with something that sounded a lot like regret.

"No problem. I was leaving a little early. I like stopping for coffee on the way. I can still get some if I hit the drive-through."

"No, don't do that."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't stop. Drive straight to work. You'll still get your coffee, but you need to go straight to work today." Something in his voice caught her attention. Something commanding, compelling.

"Right. Straight to work," she repeated, her voice soft and dreamy even to her ears.

He backed away and she reached for the door handle. She looked at him and shook her head to clear it.

"Wait a minute. Did you just tell me not to stop for my daily dose?" *Oh, no. No he didn't.* She knew he was too perfect to be real.

He cringed.

Yeah, that's what she thought.

"Please, Maggie. You will get your drink, I promise. Even if I have to bring it to you myself, you will get it. I am asking you to please not go to the coffee shop this morning."

She laughed. "You don't understand, me without my morning dose is a scary thing. Providing me with coffee is a community service."

His hands closed over her arms, stilling her as he looked into her eyes. "Maggie, I beg of you, do not stop."

"Why?" She frowned at his seriousness.

His expression became pained and he looked around as if the parking lot would provide a logical explanation.

"I cannot say." He looked back at her, somber. "Please, just this one day, do not get coffee."

She studied him, trying to figure out why he was so worked up about it, but in the end, she nodded. It wasn't like there wasn't a pot at work. That stuff just didn't taste as good.

"Thank you, Maggie." He bent and dropped an unexpected kiss on her mouth. No more than an innocent peck, it burned sweetly over her lips, making them tingle and leaving her wanting more. Her eyes drifted closed and she gave a happy sigh. Damn, but the man could kiss.

"Goodbye, my dear," he whispered. Dominicus walked away and rounded the corner of an SUV.

Crap. She still hadn't gotten his phone number. "Hey, wait!" She jogged after him but he was gone, vanishing as quickly as he'd appeared.

Dammit, where did he go? She'd never get his number at this rate. With an exasperated huff, she got in the car and started it, twisting the key so hard in the ignition, the engine whined in protest. She wasn't going to get worked up over this. She wasn't. He came back once, he'd show up again. And if he didn't... Well, fine. Who wanted some weird guy telling her not to get coffee?

Maggie pulled into the employee lot coffeeless and ten minutes earlier than usual. *Marjorie isn't going to know what to think about this.* Her manager was more accustomed to chastising her for being a little late.

Hurrying to the building, she tripped over something that let out a yelp and scurried out of the way. A little bundle of brown and black fur hid in the bank's landscaping and peeked out at her with a sad face. The puppy looked a lot like the one from her apartment complex. Was it the same dog or did someone dump a litter in the area? The markings around its mouth pulled down into a frown and it held a tan paw up with a pathetic whimper. It was too darn cute.

"Sorry little guy, I have to go to work." She took a step, but was stopped by a low rumble. The pup barked and stood to move between her and the bank.

Er, okay. Maybe it was mad she stepped on it. "Nice doggie?" She stepped off the sidewalk and walked around it. What was with these freaky dogs? The pup sat down and cocked its head to the side with another whine. She glanced toward the bank door, then back to the pup. Her morning was getting weirder by the minute.

She pushed through the front door and headed to the employee breakroom.

"There you are, Maggie." Her manager greeted her with a smile which didn't reach her eyes. "The coffeemaker is broken so I stopped and picked up something for everyone at the little shop down the street." Marjorie pressed a warm cup into Maggie's hand. "I got you hazelnut."

"Th-thank you." Maggie stared at the paper cup in shock. She was stammering, stunned. Marjorie Beemus didn't have a generous bone in her body, but she bought overpriced coffee for everyone and managed to get Maggie her favorite in the process? She stared at the older woman, trying to figure out what pod people stole her boss and how to keep whoever it was they stuck here in her place. It still looked like Marjorie, from the calculating pale green of her eyes to the haircut that belonged on a six-year-old boy instead of a fifty-six-year-old woman.

You will get your coffee, I promise. Even if I have to bring it to you myself, you will get your coffee.

He couldn't have known, could he? It was a coincidence. It had to be. She sat down hard on one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs, still staring at the cup. What the fuck was going on? This couldn't just be Monday strangeness. Could it?

No. She wasn't going to ask, wasn't going to think about it. She was just shaken up over the dead guy from the club.

Just drink it, Maggie. Don't ask why, or what Dominicus knew. Don't think about people dying or acting weird, or being followed by strange puppies. Just drink it and get to work and everything will get back to normal.

Normal lasted twenty minutes.

She finished cashing a customer's check and glanced up at the plasma screen TV the bank kept tuned to news. The scene showed a very familiar location. Flames shot out of a brown square shop and a truck with a white tanker trailer sat in a gaping hole in the side of the building. The location scrolling across the bottom of the screen made her stomach clench.

"Marjorie," she called to her manager, "can we turn the volume up a little? This is happening near here."

The reporter's voice filled the otherwise silent bank. *"It is unknown at this time why the tanker filled with flammable gas crashed into this small coffee shop. Officials are evacuating everyone in a half mile radius while fire crews fight to keep the flames from reaching the volatile cargo."*

"Will we be evacuated?" one of the other cashiers asked.

"That's less than a block from here," Maggie answered, numb.

Marjorie moved to the front window and peeked out. "I can see the police lights down the street. We'd better start securing the bank."

He'd known. Somehow he'd known this would happen. He'd known and bullied her into staying away. Her mind raced. Was he some kind of terrorist? Didn't terrorists believe they were on holy missions or some crap like that? *Dominicus. Of the Lord.* It couldn't be his real name. Did he have a divine calling to rid the world of Starbucks?

Everything was suddenly very clear. She'd kissed a psycho. And liked it.

Shit.

The screen lit up as the tanker exploded and the television screen went dead as the impact hit the bank. The thick windows shook and shards of glass sprayed the floor and the shock wave blew out the doors and knocked Maggie to the floor. Dazed, she pulled herself to her feet. The alarm was screaming and someone was yelling over it. Marjorie. It was Marjorie yelling. They had to lock up the money.

"Come on, Maggie. Don't bother with counts. We'll take care of those once the place is secure. Just get your cash drawer to the vault *now*. We need to lock up!"

Hands shaking, she followed her boss's orders, thankful for them, relieved someone else was thinking for her, because her brain had stopped working the minute she'd realized Dominicus was involved with this horror in some way.

The vault door closed and she stared at it, wondering what she was going to do. Call the police? Right.

Officer, I woke up yesterday and a strange man was in my house. He made me coffee and kissed me. Today he showed up and told me to skip going to Starbucks. He's got a weird-assed Latin name and I think he's on a mission from God to kill coffee.

"Maggie?" A hand closed over her shoulder and she jumped. "Did you hear me?" Marjorie asked, her face lined with anxiety and concern. It occurred to Maggie that this was the most genuine expression she'd ever seen on her manager's face.

"I'm sorry. I'm a little, um..." She looked around the bank helplessly. Customers and employees were milling, their shoes crunching the shards of glass from shattered windows. They all wore the same vacant expression, all looked shocked and disoriented.

"I understand. Go home. There's not much we can do here today. Management is staying, and if you are needed we'll call you. Plan on staying home tomorrow, but call sometime in the afternoon."

“Right. I’ll head home.” Where the dangerous wacko with the gorgeous blue eyes who kisses like a wet dream can find me.

She moved on stiff legs to get her purse from the breakroom before she stepped through the now-empty frame of the door, glass crunching under the thin soles of her conservative pumps.

Sitting by her car was the puppy. The poor little thing had been out here when the blast hit. It trotted up to her, giving her a big doggie grin and a lick on the leg before bounding off, apparently uninjured. She wondered again if it was the same pup.

Down the street, the fire belched thick, black smoke into the air and fire crews scrambled to pour water on the flames. An ambulance roared past, away from the destroyed coffee shop, its siren joining the din of noise and chaos.

Life was so precious.

If the puppy showed up again, she could take care of it, help it find a home. She couldn’t help anyone else, but she’d make sure that little dog had a good life somewhere.

Her car was a mess. The windows were blown out of the doors but by some strange miracle the windshield and rear window were intact. She opened her car door and grabbed a thick fashion magazine from the passenger seat, her brain too jumbled to even think about the claim or deductible. Opening the magazine, she spread it over the driver’s seat, covering the shards of glass and slid in. She didn’t know how long she stared into space before her head dropped forward to hit the steering wheel and sobs racked her body.

What was she going to do? What was she supposed to do?

Chapter Five

"You fool! What were you thinking?" Renatus's anger whipped a whirlwind of dust and debris over the balcony.

"I have to save her."

Dominicus watched as Maggie parked her car and walked to her apartment, carrying a bag. Her steps were wobbly and her face too pale. He should be down there carrying her to her apartment, holding her and drying her tears. Even from this distance, her fear reached him, tore at him with more power than the other angel's fury ever could.

After a traumatic morning, she was returning to an empty apartment. She had no one to soothe her, to hold her. No one to hold her as she cried. She was as alone as he.

"Why can't you understand, Dom? She has to die."

"Why?" Frustration bubbled through him and he spun to confront his only liaison with Heaven. "What makes this one soul so vitally important to Hell? Why is the Most High so willing for her to be lost for eternity? She's done nothing to deserve this." He moved in to stand toe-to-toe with Renatus, so close he could feel the Heavenly breath washing over his face, could see the seraph's eyes dilate. "Why are you so anxious for her to be gone?"

The light angel's gaze dropped and he turned away. Was that guilt?

"Please, Renatus, tell me you aren't pushing this because you want her gone. What could you possibly have against her?" He'd just found her, a being who eased some of the cold knot of loneliness inside of him.

He couldn't keep her. Maggie was a human, confined to this plane, her existence finite. But still, her soul called to him, her loneliness spoke to his. He couldn't give her up. Not yet.

Ren turned away and braced his hands on the wooden railing. "She will lead you to Fall, Dom," Ren whispered so low he almost missed it. "You are so close now."

"Ah, Ren. I will not Fall."

"You don't see how close you are. I do. You've kissed her, a human, despite the Most High's order. He forbade the mating of angel and human."

"A kiss is not a mating. You think to correct me when your own daughter was nephil?" Renatus flinched, jerking as if struck, and guilt knifed through Dominicus. Why did he have to go for blood every time? Why must the anger take over and strike out at the only one he had left? "I did not mean..."

"You did mean it. You want my...my pain, and you have it. Yes, I fathered a child with a human. She was called an abomination, feared by humans and ridiculed by those of the realm. Do not forget what happened to my Michani when the Most High decreed the nephilim should not be. My daughter was no more than a child when she died and I have worn her blood on my soul for seven thousand years."

Renatus stared into Maggie's apartment, but Dominicus knew his thoughts were far away, with the golden half-angel who died too young.

"Ren," he whispered and placed his hand on the other angel's back. His eyes burned and his throat thickened painfully. Stepping in close, he brushed his lips over Renatus's nape, wishing he could take back the hurt he'd caused. Ren shuddered and Dom dipped his head, pressing his forehead to Ren's hard shoulder.

"I don't want to hurt you. Never. But I can't seem to stop." Why did he keep lashing out?

Renatus twisted, cupping Dom's head, holding him when he would have backed away. Pressing kisses against his temple, Renatus murmured, "I seem to do the same."

Dom closed his eyes tight, savoring the rare bit of contact Ren gave him, letting it soothe his soul and comfort him. Heaven help him, it was so hard existing alone.

Taking Ren in his arms, Dom brushed his mouth over his. He tasted of tears, and guilt sliced through Dominicus again. He held back, mindful of the distance Renatus always kept between them, not wanting to damage their relationship any more. He couldn't let himself chase Renatus away. Without his friend he was lost.

He gasped in surprise when Renatus reached up, fisting both hands in his hair and holding him. Tongues tangled as Renatus kissed him in a rough, frantic clashing of teeth and lips.

Dom jerked his head back, pulling free to stare into Ren's eyes. He needed to know he wasn't the only one who needed this, that this wasn't out of pity or some misguided expression of forgiveness for his earlier stupidity. Ren froze, his guarded expression revealing nothing, but he couldn't hide the flash of fire in his eyes.

Dominicus leaned forward, giving Ren time to pull away, to avoid him, but the other seraph held himself still, so rigid it felt as if he would shatter. Dom let his tongue glide over Ren's full lower lip, taking a careful taste, the first one Ren had ever allowed. Dom could taste the emotions, Renatus's fear and anxiety. Want and aversion mingled and he wondered if he could make the bitter flavor of distaste fade. He stepped in, letting his hips push forward. Their erections brushed, nestled together through their clothing.

Dominicus groaned. His hand wrapped around Ren's hip, pulling him closer. Angling his hips, he pressed against Renatus. The friction sent a curl of desire through him. His shoulders tensed and he thrust again. Ren's buttocks flexed under his fingers and Dominicus nearly sobbed in relief.

How he needed this, the tenderness, the love. He needed the acceptance of his only friend. His lips caressed Ren's again in a tentative plea.

Ren choked and pulled back, his expression horrified. "No. No, this cannot happen."

"Ren..."

"Do not say it. This cannot happen, not between two males. Not between seraphim." Renatus shoved at Dominicus, pushing him away. Rejecting him.

"Please, Ren..."

It was too late, Renatus had disappeared, and once more Dominicus was left alone.

* * * * *

Maggie dropped the bag of dog food on the floor, reached into the cabinet and pulled out the yellow cup. She needed her coffee more than her next breath. God, everything was so fucked up. Thank God, the pot was still warm.

She dumped in a generous splash of hazelnut creamer, lifted the cup to her lips and took a sip. Her brow wrinkled as something pricked at her. Wasn't this the cup she dropped yesterday when Dominicus snuck up on her? She could have sworn it was but apparently she was wrong.

"Are you all right?"

Maggie jumped and spun with a shriek. The cup dropped to the floor and shattered, splattering coffee everywhere. This was not her freaking day.

Oh God, the delectable psycho was back.

"How the fuck did you get in my apartment?"

"I just came in," he said with a shrug.

Right, without knocking. No way did he just walk in the door, either. She'd double and triple checked those locks when she got home. She'd been too shaken not to.

She wasn't shaken now. She was pissed. Two days ago her life had been normal. She went to work and came home. She partied with her friends some nights. Now she had puppies and explosions and a sexy crazy man. She was sick of it. Gorgeous or not, he needed to go away now.

"You can just go back out." She pulled open a drawer and fumbled for a knife.

"Out?"

"Out!" Her fingers closed over a handle and she swung her arm out, pointing the weapon at him. "You know, out! Out of my apartment, out of my life. Out!"

"Is something wrong, Maggie?" His voice was cautious, as if he were finally getting a clue she wasn't feeling all that friendly toward him.

"Something wrong? Like maybe my favorite coffee shop being blown to smithereens right after you told me not to go there? Like that kind of wrong?"

"This has upset you?"

"What was your first clue?" she snapped.

"You are attempting to attack me with a pizza cutter."

Her anger deflated as quickly as it had appeared, leaving her drained. Exhaustion weighed her down. She tossed the cutter onto the countertop with a frustrated huff, feeling like an idiot. Again. "Just how did you know that was going to happen, Dominicus?" She scrubbed her face with one hand before reaching in the cabinet for another cup.

"I was granted knowledge of it. I wanted to keep you safe."

"*Granted knowledge* by whom?" Nice to know he was low on the totem pole. Didn't the low-end guys end up being suicide bombers? She supposed that meant he was going to end up playing Roman candle eventually. Good thing she hadn't had a chance to get attached.

"By the Most High. Maggie, I don't understand why you are this distressed."

"The most high what? Is he some kind of ringleader, like the Grand Poobah or something? Is he in control of the terrorists?"

"Terrorists? Of course not. He is the Most High over the Heavens and the Earth, the ruler of all creation."

She stopped, frozen for a moment. The what? "Wait, do you mean God?"

"Of course."

She nodded dumbly. He actually looked confused as to why she didn't understand him. He was batshit crazy. There was no other explanation.

"So God told you a tanker truck was going to plow into my favorite Starbucks."

"No. I had no idea about the tanker truck."

Well that was a relief.

"He told me you would die there this morning."

Okay, not so much.

"I spent all day yesterday hoping you would come back, now I'm regretting that you did. You are insane."

"I swear I speak the truth."

She poured more coffee and took a gulp of the too-cool brew. Maybe he'd make sense when the caffeine kicked in. "You are gorgeous, can make me come with a kiss and you are completely fucked in the head."

She was suffocating, choking to death on the knot of nerves lodged in her throat. She slammed her cup onto the countertop and picked her way through the broken shards to her bedroom to change clothes. Her work clothes, with the tight skirt and buttoned-up blouse felt too restrictive. Dammit, why did every guy she liked have to end up being some kind of weirdo?

She slammed the door behind her, locking it, and stripped out of the pencil skirt and blouse. Wearing only her panties and bra, she dug in a drawer for something comfortable to wear. Sweats would be good. The looser the better.

"Maggie, please listen to me."

She gasped and spun around. How the hell did he get in? "Get out!" She rushed toward the bathroom, ready to slam the door in his face.

"You died, Maggie."

His words stopped her. Her muscles seized and she stood, rooted to the spot. The memory of a nightmare she didn't remember having washed over her.

She lay on the cold hard concrete outside of a club, blood pooling around her.

"You need help, Dominicus." Hands shaking, she forced herself to move, to reach behind the door for the robe hanging on a hook there.

"I was supposed to take you to Hell but I couldn't. You weren't evil. I took one who was."

A shadow like black smoke screaming as it ripped away from the body.

"Leave now. Before I call the police." She shrugged into the heavy robe and tied the sash tight around her. The bulk of it shielded her, held her together when she was on the verge of shattering into a million little pieces, provided protection from the crazy man she'd hoped to lose her heart to. Tears pricked her eyes. Please, just go. Please leave before I lose it.

"I fixed you. I would never harm you. I took advantage of someone I love, stole his power so I could fix you."

A hand pressed over the hole in her chest. Heat blazing through her, squeezing her heart and forcing it to pump, knitting the flesh and making it heal.

It couldn't be real. Her hand slipped through the front of her robe to rub her chest, to soothe the ghost of remembered pain. Her fingers brushed irregular flesh and she paused, examining the edges of a small, puckered scar. A scar that hadn't been there before this weekend.

"Please stop. Please." Her knees gave way and she leaned against the wall, sliding down to sit on the cold bathroom floor.

"I brought you home, bathed the blood from you. When you were cold, I kept you warm with my own body. I want only to protect you, to keep you safe."

Soft, downy wings enfolding her, blocking the chill and cradling her to his hard, aroused body.

"Wings." She was shaking, her body breaking down in fear while a small corner of her mind watched. She could hear the threadiness of her voice, her harsh, shallow

breaths, but she couldn't seem to feel anything but a slow slide into panic. "You had wings. You had wings and you flew with me."

"Yes." The air behind him shimmered for a moment and wings as dark as night appeared. They lay against his back in a graceful arc from his head to the floor, the feathers gleaming in the harsh vanity lights.

Oh shit. Maybe she was the one going crazy.

"I'm seeing things. I have a concussion, or someone put something in my coffee this morning, or...something."

"No, you see what is really there." He went down on one knee beside her and pulled her against him. She tried to scramble away, but he held her tight. He carried her to the bedroom and sat on the mattress, holding her, trying to soothe her.

"Oh, God. I don't know what I'm supposed to think," she sobbed.

"You don't have to think, just believe." He cradled her in his arms and his gentle lips pressed soft kisses over her cheeks.

Angel kisses.

A mirthless giggle escaped her at the thought. Gram had always called freckles angel kisses. When she was little, she believed it, believed she really was special, that angels existed and snuck into her room to kiss her goodnight.

Jesus, she was delirious.

Blazing heat, instant arousal, the sensuous slide of feathers over bare skin.

One had. An angel had come to her bed, kissed her, made her burn.

"You're an angel." She reached up to feel his wing, to slide her fingers over the warm, smooth feathers. They quivered at the light contact. Oh God, the wing was real, living flesh. He could feel her touching him.

"You kissed me that night, didn't you?" The feathers under her fingertips trembled again, the movement so slight she barely felt it, yet it shook her to the core. Oh yes, he'd kissed her. He'd kissed her, and it was good.

"I had to. The man at the nightclub had put something in your drink. I had to pull the drugs from you."

The biting taste of chemicals in her mouth, salty and bitter, the heat on her tongue, burning away.

"But you didn't stop when they were gone, did you? You kept kissing me." It was a hint of a memory, teasing her mind. A wave of want washed over her and her body melted, went liquid as it rippled through her. There was heat and need and his hard body against hers.

"I couldn't stop." His voice was strained, his eyes hot and guilty. "It was wrong, but I couldn't stop."

Lust and need stretched between them, making her body clench and ache. His breathing was harsh, and every rough rise and fall of his chest brushed his skin against hers. Tingles fluttered through her at the slight contact, sizzling over her nerve endings to settle in a pool of heat between her thighs.

"Kiss me again, Dominicus."

For an endless moment he stared at her. His expression reflected the conflicting emotions battling inside of him. Finally he sighed in surrender and he leaned over her, covering her lips with his. His kiss claimed her, marked her soul. She slipped her hands under his shirt, exploring his body, the rippling of his muscles as he moved, the heat of his skin.

Shifting, she straddled his lap and the tingles erupted into showers of sparks. Her breath caught as a flush of arousal washed through her. Easing down, she pressed herself against him, allowed his thickening cock to press against the flesh weighed down by her need. She thrust her hips against him, ground her sensitized clit over him.

"More. Oh God, give me more." Her voice was no more than a whisper, but he heard. She could feel the groan rumble through his rib cage as he moved. Twisting, he laid her down on the chenille bedspread, then stretched over her, covered her. The

length of his hard cock settled against the wet crotch of her panties and his zipper cut into her with a pain that sent pleasure skyrocketing.

He began to move, thrusting against her, pressing the hard ridge into her, driving her higher. Shit, she was going to come. Just from this, dry humping on her bed like some teenage virgin getting her first taste of sex.

He knew it, too. His eyes blazed with arousal, with carnality and desire and determination. Face set, he watched her as the need climbed higher in her, taking over until she couldn't think of anything but him, couldn't feel anything but his body grinding into hers.

Pleasure spiraled, twisting tighter and tighter until it broke, crashing down on her like a wave, pulling her under and dragging her deeper. She clung to him, disoriented, holding on to him as her orgasm swept over her, tossed her into a maelstrom of sensation, and finally ebbed.

Warm lips pressed against her damp brow.

"Sleep, Maggie. It will all make more sense when you awaken." The command, steeped in suggestion, soaked into her. Her limbs grew heavy and she sank into a sleep filled with dreams of angels and puppies, fighting for her soul.

Chapter Six

When Maggie woke, sunlight reached across her bedroom floor. Rubbing her gritty eyes she stretched. Why was she in bed this late in the day, and wearing nothing but her underwear? She sat, holding the sheet to her chest, and winced as something sharp poked her. She slipped her hand under her and pulled out a downy black feather with a very sharp quill.

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. Where...

Black wings arching over her, drowning in pleasure.

She dropped the feather, scooting away from it as if it were a snake. Holy shit, it wasn't a dream. But it couldn't be real, could it? If it was real, he might still be in the apartment. She found her robe draped over the foot of her bed and pulled it on. Tightening the belt, she stepped out of the small bedroom, looking for him.

The apartment was empty. No one was there.

She rubbed her now aching head. Either she was having some seriously screwed up dreams or she was going completely crazy. Hunger hit her and she wandered into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee and find something to eat.

A noise outside the door caught her attention.

"Dominicus." His name escaped on a breathy whisper. She was afraid to hope. Rushing over, she swung the door open. She blinked, staring at the empty doorway. He wasn't there. A whimper drew her attention down.

"Well, hello. You again." She crouched and held a hand out to the little black and tan pup. "Are you going to let me pet you this time?" The puppy licked her fingers and she braved an attempt at petting it.

"Aw, you're a sweetie, aren't you?"

The puppy peeked around her into her apartment before looking up at her, its little ears perked and its head cocked to one side. She laughed at the cute picture it made. It was almost as if it was asking to come in and play.

"No, you can't come in, little one. I'm not allowed to have pets." The pup whimpered again. Turning its head the other direction, it lifted one tan foot and pawed the air. Too freaking adorable. "If the landlord wasn't such a pet Nazi I'd take you in a heartbeat. I did get you something, though. Wait right there."

Leaving the door open, she hurried to the kitchen and pulled out the bag of puppy food and a plastic cereal bowl and took everything to the door before the dog could wander off.

"Here, pup, look what I got you. Are you hungry?" She quickly filled the bowl and set it in front of the dog. It looked at the food, then back at her. "It's okay. Go ahead and eat, cutie. I might not be able to keep you, but I'll do my best to make sure you find a home." The pup gave her a big doggie grin before taking a tentative bite of the food. Wow, she hadn't imagined the size of its mouth.

"What are you doing, Maggie?"

She jumped with a startled squeak and fell backward, landing hard on her butt. The puppy growled at Dominic's sudden appearance, its hackles raised.

"You have got to stop sneaking up on me!" She stood with an irritated huff and retreated back into the apartment, leaving Dominic to follow.

"I am sorry. I didn't intent to sneak."

"Then give me some kind of warning." She stomped to the kitchen and jerked her yellow cup from the cabinet to pour herself a cup of coffee. Frowning at it in confusion, she turned to face him. "I could have sworn I broke this mug. Twice."

"You did. I fixed it." From his tone, he could have been talking about tightening a screw or hammering a nail. There was nothing in his tone or inflection to indicate he was capable of doing a small miracle, of mending broken glass. Or flesh.

He wasn't human. What future did she have with an angel? He could never be the man she wanted, the partner she needed.

"You fixed it like you fixed me." She met his startling blue eyes over the rim of her cup while she sipped, trying to act like everything was normal while her mind raced.

"Yes."

A shiver rippled through her. What kind of magical powers did he have? What, exactly, was an angel capable of doing? The possibilities scared the shit out of her, but they also left her feeling a little too warm for the thick terrycloth robe she wore.

She took another sip and examined him. He looked...normal. Well, as normal as someone that incredibly sexy could look.

But what he hid had her interest. "I, uh, think you're missing something."

"What would that be?"

"Your—" She flapped one hand by her shoulder, too embarrassed to say it out loud. *Where are your wings, big guy?* It sounded stupid, even to her, and she'd already done the dumb routine around him too often.

"You mean my wings." The air shimmered and there they were again, an elegant sweep of ebony feathers, falling to the floor behind him.

Maggie took a startled gulp of coffee and choked as it scalded its way down her throat. Eyes watering, she slammed her cup on the counter, sloshing the contents onto her hand. She muttered a curse and rushed to the sink to run cold water over the burn.

"Are you all right?" Dominicus cupped her jaw, tilting her head up. Through the tears she could see his brow wrinkled with concern.

"Fine," she tried to answer, but it came out in a gasping croak.

"Let me fix it."

She shook her head. *Crap*, she didn't think she could deal with doing that freaky shit again. Not now, when she knew it was happening.

"Please, I don't want you hurting. Not even a little." He dipped his head and let his lips touch hers in the lightest feathering of a caress. "Please, Maggie. Let me."

How was she supposed to resist that? No one had ever wanted to take care of her before. Even Gram, the only person who'd ever loved her, would have just told her to clean her mess. She melted with a sigh. It had to be part of his angel *juju*, because no human had ever made her feel this special, this loved.

His tongue dipped into her mouth and that faint buzz of sensation crackled over her again.

"What is that?" she whispered against his lips. "It's like my mouth is full of static electricity. It makes me tingle all over."

"It's my power." His lips left hers to graze over her cheek and skim along her jawline. "I can feel your power, too. It's sweet, like a spring morning."

"I have power?"

"Every being has power. It changes as it's traded, but it's there. An angel's power can heal. It can also do this." His lips covered hers again. His power exploded in her mouth and she stiffened in shock. It felt like candy she'd eaten as a child, grains of sugar that crackled and popped on her tongue. Only this was better. So very much better. These little pops set off sparks in her whole body, sent tendrils of heat zinging along every nerve. Just that quick, her nipples were hard and her empty flesh was clenching in need. She moaned and opened more, accepting his kiss, his power and whatever else he wanted.

With a snarl, he tore his mouth from hers and stalked away, leaving her bereft and wanting. Off balance, she fell hard against the counter, gasping for breath and watched, wide-eyed, as he walked into her small living room, as far away from her as the small apartment would allow.

He dropped heavily into a chair. With his legs sprawled in front of him and his arms and wings draped over the sides of the seat, his whole body screamed defeat.

"Why do you always do that?" she asked, following him from the kitchen.

"Do what?" He didn't face her, looking anywhere, at anything except her.

"Run away when we kiss."

He frowned at her. "I do not run away."

"Right. You stomp off or vanish into thin air. Same thing."

"We have only kissed twice. I hardly run."

"Three times now, and you sure don't stay and finish." A twinge of satisfaction shot through her when he jerked to sit upright and glare at her.

"You found your pleasure. Both times."

"You didn't."

He studied her intently before replying. "I stop because you test me. You are a beautiful temptation I don't know if I'm supposed to resist. But do not doubt I want you, Maggie."

"Don't resist." He wanted her. It wasn't just her burning up inside, or some strange side effect of his angelic power. He felt it too. She crossed the room and stood between his splayed thighs, her legs pressed against the front of the chair, so close to him she could feel the heat coming off his hard cock. "Please, touch me. Kiss me again, and don't stop this time."

His eyes met hers, indecision filling them. All she had to do was push and his arms would be around her again, his body pressing against hers, his heat singeing her. Bending forward, she put her hands over the back edge of the seat, one on either side of his head, and leaned in close to his ear and gave him that nudge. "Tell me to go away and I will."

"Ah, Maggie." Her name left him on a sigh, and his hand came up to slide under her robe, over the back of her thigh. "I can't send you away. I could never do that."

Relief stole her breath. Without moving her hands, she crawled into his lap, straddling him, his hard against her soft, his hot against her wet. She moved slowly, afraid he would vanish from under her, pull one of his divine disappearing acts, but his

hands pushed the tail of the robe out of the way. He cupped her ass and he rocked against her.

“Kiss me.” His words were a plea, a chink in the armor of her invincible angel. She placed her lips near his, close enough they brushed when she spoke.

“Kiss me back.”

A deep sound of need rumbled through his chest and he shifted, just enough to join their mouths. The blaze of desire flared again, brighter, hotter than ever and she whimpered as it swept through her. She was swollen, wet with need and so freaking close her entire body shook. He thrust his hips and his cock pressed against her again, rubbing her swollen clit, driving her close to the rush of orgasm, making her tremble on the edge.

It was his power. He was using his power to send her spiraling fast, hard and out of control. She didn't want it like this. She wanted his body filling her, not some mystical Heavenly magic.

Another thrust against her and her back arched, forcing her lips from his as she cried out. She screamed again when his mouth covered her nipple, sucking on the sensitive flesh, biting into it with a pleasure-pain. His mouth was hard and ravenous against her skin, nipping, licking and sucking until she was whimpering.

He was nibbling bare skin. She wondered where her robe had gone, but the thought was fleeting, driven quickly from her mind by the sheer carnality of his mouth on her. She pressed a fist against the back of his head, trying to force him closer, to get that bit of sensation that would push her over the edge. The tension rose, peaking, then he backed off, licking her in long savoring strokes, keeping her balanced on the cusp.

He was toying with her, winding her up and leaving her there. Frustrated, Maggie reached down and shoved her hand under the lace of her panties. One finger found her clit, brushed it and she jerked with a strangled gasp. It was so swollen, so sensitive. Her body clenching at nothing with every delicate flicker of contact, need twisted and cramped low in her belly.

"Do it, Maggie," he whispered. "Come for me." His hand moved up to fist in her hair, forcing her head down until she was looking him in the eye. "Let me watch you come for me."

She blinked, struggling to focus on his beautiful face, his expression fierce with arousal. She slipped her fingers farther into her panties, letting them slip over the wet flesh. She was so close, wound so tight, she just needed a little more, just a little. One rub, then another and he gripped her hips, ground against her harder. Her soaked panties rasped against her and his cock pressed her fingers against her engorged clit, pinching it. The tension broke and she was flying, her body convulsing.

Dominicus rocked his hips, drove against her, like he was fucking her through their clothes, keeping her in that whirlwind of sensation, drawing out the orgasm, not letting her leave that peak. She whimpered as another wave of pleasure washed over her. Dominicus' hands moved to stroke over the bare skin of her back and he crooned encouragement, soothing her while the orgasm finally ebbed.

"You are so very lovely, Maggie," he breathed reverently. "I thank you for sharing that with me."

She rocked carefully against his hard cock. "It isn't over yet."

Sliding off him, she dropped to her knees between his thighs and fumbled to open his jeans with shaking hands.

"You have given me enough, I do not need this." His voice lacked conviction so she ignored him and tugged at his fly. Hands cupped her shoulders and urged her away but she shook them off.

"But I want to. I want this." The denim gave way and his flesh pushed free of the confining fabric. "I want to taste you."

Beautiful. There was no other word for him. Long and hard, his cock rose to his navel in a smooth, elegant curve and slowly dripped pre-cum over the narrow trail of dark hair underneath.

She wrapped her hand around him, squeezing. Pumping her fist once, twice, she watched him arch in the chair, the powerful angel, helpless in her grasp. More pearly fluid beaded on his cock and she leaned in. She licked, tasting the saltiness of him, breathing in his musky scent, before taking him fully in her mouth.

"Oh, Maggie," he breathed and caressed her hair tenderly with one large hand. Encouraged, she sucked, rubbing her tongue over the tender spot under the head, and his fingers twitched, clenching in her hair before releasing to drag his nails gently over her scalp.

Teasing, she sucked his cock deep before letting it slide out again, licking his length and taking him deep again. Bobbing her head, she worked her tongue over him. She rested one hand on his thigh and smiled inwardly at the twitch and flex of muscle there.

His hips jerked, forcing him farther down her throat. "I can't stop," he ground out from between clenched teeth. "Please, it's been too long. I don't want to come this way."

Her lips covered him one more time to taunt, to tempt, before letting him slip free with a pop.

The room spun as his hands wrapped around her ribs and he launched himself from the chair. She clung to him, disoriented, her equilibrium thrown off, until her back hit the floor and the harsh rasp of carpeting scraped her bare skin. In a heartbeat, his mouth covered hers and he ground himself against her, his thrusting forcing her across the floor.

They stopped, staring wide-eyed at each other as sudden shock of skin meeting skin froze them both in place. They were both naked.

"O-our clothes," she stuttered.

"We do not need them. I got them out of our way." He shifted and the blunt head of his cock slipped into her warm crease. He paused, his eyelids eased down and his lips parted in an expression of pure, decadent bliss. Then with a rough stroke he slid in deep, stretching her, filling her, fulfilling her. Her eyes closed and pleasure rippled through her. This wasn't sex. Sex didn't feel this good. This was something more.

"Look at me," he demanded.

"Hmmm... I can't." Her lids were too heavy.

"Please, Maggie. I need to see your soul. I need to know I am not hurting you."

She forced her heavy lids up. "You're not hurting me. You feel good. So incredibly good."

"I don't mean your body. There are other ways to hurt the one you love."

Her brain stuttered on the word "love". Did angels love like people loved? Too muddled to think about it, she let the thought drift away on a wave of pleasure. His hand stroked over her hair and he began to move, apparently satisfied with whatever he'd seen.

His wings curved to settle on the floor on either side of them, the thick muscles of his back flexed under her hands as they took on the weight of his body. His wings shut out the world, created a dark cocoon in which only the two of them existed. There was nothing and no one beyond this moment, this pleasure.

Her knees came up to grip his hips and the dark feathers teased her, tickling over her as his thrusts rocked their bodies. She slid her legs higher, letting her thighs bracket his ribs and he went deeper than before, wrenching a groan from him.

"I cannot... Maggie, forgive me, I cannot stop." Hard hands gripped her shoulders and he grew rougher, faster. He drove into her, pushing her across the carpet with his body. Every stroke rubbed against the tender bundle of nerves inside her. Every hard meeting of their bodies pinched her swollen clit between them. Fire washed over her skin and need twisted tighter within her, driving her higher. His movements grew jerky and his breath came in hard, gasping pants. She was balanced on that razor's edge when he stiffened, jolting against her hard. He held himself there, grinding against her and pushing himself impossibly deep. The dam within her broke and she screamed his name as she came again.

Chapter Seven

Dominicus pressed his face into the curve of Maggie's shoulder, breathed in the scent of her and called himself every kind of fool. It had been so easy to ignore the world. Under the shelter of his wings it had been only them. There were no demons, no Renatus.

No prohibition.

In his mind's eye he could picture the consequences of such sin, see the beautiful golden nephil, just a child, and Renatus clutching his daughter's body as he cried out his pain to the unhearing Heavens.

Squeezing his eyes shut he tried to force that cold reality away. He'd broken the law of the Most High. The law existed to protect, and in ignoring it he'd risked not only himself, but Maggie.

This was how an angel Fell.

Maggie shifted under him with a purring moan, rolling her hips in lush invitation.

"Do angels have super powers?"

"Super powers?" he repeated, his brow wrinkling in confusion.

"You're hard again. Or still." She rolled her hips again with a sigh of pleasure, and an answering groan escaped him. The devil wasn't done tempting him.

"Maggie, we must not."

"Oh, but we must." She pulled her knees up to grip his hips while her hands slid up his back.

He needed to move, to will himself across the room, but his desire to stay was stronger. His own chains held him in place stronger than her delicate limbs ever could. His hips jerked, thrusting his hard flesh into her. She gasped and he moved again,

unable to stop his headlong rush, his free fall into Hell. Damn Lucifer for making temptation taste so much like Heaven.

He covered her mouth with a desperate kiss, forcing her to swallow his groans, taking her sweet sounds into himself. All the while, he rocked against her, thrusting, pummeling her tender flesh. Trying to crawl inside her wet heat, become part of her, make her a part of him.

God help him, he never wanted to leave her.

“Oh, God, Domin—” She gasped as he rammed into her again. The orgasm took her and she spasmed around him, clenching, making him come with her.

He arched and cried out, spilling himself into her once more. His back spasmed and his balls ached with the empty ejaculation. Tears of guilt and want and frustration burned his eyes as wave after wave of agony and pure ecstasy ripped through him.

Bites of fire cut into his back and shoulders where she clawed at him, pulling hair and feathers as her orgasm went on and on. He tried to focus on those small hurts, let them burst the bubble of sensation and pull him from his spiral into damnation, but it didn’t work. The pain transformed into pleasure and drove him higher. He convulsed in a second dry climax and the world spun away.

He was only vaguely aware of collapsing on top of Maggie, his face buried in her bright red hair and his open mouth brushing her freckle-dusted shoulder as he gasped for air.

She shifted under him, but he couldn’t move, didn’t want to. He didn’t want to lose this moment of Heaven before the Most High smote him.

She wiggled again, and her body squeezed, forcing a wave of indescribable sensation through him. Shuddering, wings quivering, he forced himself to pull out of her and roll to the side.

“I think I have rug burn on my ass,” she mumbled, curling against him.

"I'll fix it momentarily." He pulled her onto his chest and ran one hand over her soft hair.

For a long time, they simply held each other. Their breathing slowly returned to normal and shadows began to stretch across the floor, but Dom and Maggie didn't move.

Maggie had begun to doze when Dominicus noted the room had darkened. He shifted her to the floor, and pulling the small blanket from the back of the couch, covered her before crossing to look out the window.

A heavy lump of dread settled in his belly and he swallowed against the bile rising in his throat.

Thick, dark clouds filled the sky, hanging oppressively close to the ground. Their steel-gray underbellies rolled with an unnatural violence and cast the landscape in a sickly green.

Had his judgment come so soon?

A quick glance back assured him Maggie slept, oblivious to the turmoil building outside. Crossing the room, he willed himself clothed and slipped out the door. Once outside, the eerie feeling increased. Despite the churning clouds above, the atmosphere on the ground was as still as death. No humans or animals could be seen and the plants didn't stir in the thick air.

"Hello, angel," crooned a voice, sensual and suggestive.

Spinning, he found the puppy lounging beside the doorway. Anger speared through him.

"I told you to leave her alone, Meela."

The dog's body stretched, morphing into something as gruesome as it was beautiful. The nude demoness was inky black, her skin covered in serpentine scales. Red eyes gleamed like rubies and her forked tongue slithered over full, blood-red lips

and sharp fangs. Coal-black hair hung in snakelike ropes and delicate batlike wings spread behind her.

"Ah, Dom. I didn't think you recognized me. How nice to know my lover has not forgotten me after all these years." She walked to him, her hips swaying sensuously, and pressed against him. Hard nipples cut into his chest and the stench of her lust filled his nostrils.

"Spirit knows spirit. The Fall changed you but you are still the cherub who once graced my side. You are still Philomela." She recoiled with a hiss. Dominicus' heart clenched, wondering if he would soon find his Heavenly name painful as well.

"Why are you here, Meela?"

"Where else would I be but following Lucifer's favorite soul? Tell me, is she as delicious as she looks?"

His hands fisted at his sides and his jaw clenched. "You will never know."

"You have really made things difficult, Dom. It was very naughty of you to warn her about the coffee shop. She was so anxious to get her coffee I couldn't even convince her to stay outside the bank just a little longer, and I had the perfect surprise lined up for her, too. You'd be amazed at what a junkie will do in hopes of finding enough money for his next fix."

His blood froze at the thought. He'd been so intent on keeping her away from the wrecked tanker, he hadn't considered the danger of a simple walk across a parking lot.

"Begone, Meela," he rasped.

"Do you really want me to leave, Dom? Don't you remember how well we got along?" She leaned into him again. Lifting one hand, she dragged the tips of her black claws over his chest, leaving slashes in the fabric and red welts over his skin.

"I remember. I also remember you found another far more seductive."

"Now Dom, don't hold that against me." She gave him a practiced pout and he could see the hint of the angel who had once infatuated him. The tawny skin and sparkling green eyes were gone, but she was still Meela, playing coy.

"I don't hold anything against you. We were companions for a time, then you chose to leave. Our time has passed."

"It doesn't have to be. We can be together again."

His eyes flicked to the door.

"Ah yes, your little human plaything. You don't want to leave her."

He clenched his teeth and silently berated himself for giving his thoughts away to the calculating demoness. She had always been far too observant.

Meela pressed to his side once more. "There are ways around the prohibition. Join me and you can be with her, always. I can give you your Maggie."

The dare tempted him more than he cared to admit. Its evil wound into his mind and taunted him. He was close to his Fall. Just one more step and he could keep Maggie forever. In the lower realm there was no prohibition, no sin. There was only pleasure. He could indulge himself. Without conscious thought, one of his hands crept up to cup Meela's hip, sliding over the cool smoothness of her scales.

"Yes," she hissed. "Come with me, Dom. It could be the three of us, you and me and Maggie. I could fuck her while you watch. You can see it, can't you?"

He could. It was easy to picture it, Maggie lying on black sheets while Meela crouched between her thighs, lapping at her with a forked tongue. Red blood on white skin as the demon sank her teeth into Maggie's flesh. Him kneeling in front of a crouching Maggie, his wings spread, demon and batlike behind him. He forced his cock down her throat while Meela shoved those wickedly clawed fingers in her ass.

He saw himself coming, spraying thick, white streams of his ejaculate on her pale human flesh while demons swarmed her, bit at fragile skin and drank pieces of Maggie's pure soul.

"No!" He shoved the demoness away, forced the images she'd fed him from his mind. "Be gone, Hellbitch. Stay away from me and do not come near this woman. She is under my protection."

Meela laughed at him. "You cannot protect her. The Most High has not given you the authority."

"With or without his sanction, I will guard this woman," he snarled, leaning in until he could smell the Hellfire on her breath. "It would serve you to remember seraphim are warriors. Cross me and I will feed you to the Hellbound demons."

"We will see, Dom. You have upset the balance and my liege is not pleased. I leave for now, but you will not stop us from claiming what is ours."

Meela vanished in a wisp of sulfur and Dom blew out a harsh sigh of relief. For now, Maggie was safe and the confrontation assured him he had not yet Fallen. A breeze ruffled his feathers and he looked to the skies in alarm. The clouds had begun to move in a slow spiral and an ominous wind blew leaves from the trees. Someone was not happy, but Dominicus couldn't tell if the power came from Heaven or Hell. At this point he wasn't sure one was better than the other.

He entered her apartment on a thought, materializing in the kitchen, and immediately regretted it when she jumped and screamed. A coffee cup flew from her hand and shattered on the hard kitchen floor.

"Stop sneaking up on me!" she snapped and smacked his shoulder.

"I didn't mean to surprise you. I thought you were sleeping."

"Surprise me? More like scare the crap out of me. Why can't you walk across the room like a normal person?"

"Because I am not a person." Was that not obvious?

She went still and her gaze flicked to his wings. "Right." Sadness flared in her eyes, then was gone, leaving a cold wall of separation between them. He knew that wall far

too well. A wall had plagued his existence, caged him in for far too long. He hadn't expected rejection from Maggie. For this he'd risked his soul?

She bent down and started picking up pieces of shattered stoneware.

"I will clean this, Maggie."

"I can get it."

"So can I, and I am the one at fault. Again."

"Fine. Whatever." She stood with a huff and stalked to the living room.

Taking a deep and frustrated breath, Dominicus willed the mess away. Pieces of cup came together and the spilled liquid vanished. This was truly a horrible day. He prepared a replacement cup of coffee for her the human way and walked to the living room, trying to make noise along the way. She turned to watch him and her gaze landed on the yellow cup in his hand. That deep something flickered in her eyes again, something he could not name but didn't like.

"Have I done something wrong, Maggie?" he asked. His face felt stiff and deep inside something twisted so tight he feared he would shatter.

"Of course not. You're perfect. I'm the one who's all wrong."

That made no sense. She was beautiful with a pure soul. He was so flawed, even the Most High could not suffer his presence. "Maggie, there is nothing wrong with you."

"You'll leave soon, won't you?"

"I cannot stay forever." His heart clenched. He was a Hellbound angel who could offer her nothing but pain. She deserved so much more than he could offer.

"How is your backside?" he asked, sitting beside her and handing her the steaming mug.

Her fair skin pinkened and she shrugged, refusing to meet his eyes.

"May I see?"

She spared him a shy glance before shifting and tugging the sash of her robe free. She angled toward him on the couch and held the front of the robe to her chest while letting the back drop down to her waist.

Angry red scrapes ran from her shoulder down her back to disappear under the waistband of her panties, marring her beautiful skin. He winced at the sight. He'd hurt her. Pushing the fabric lower, he leaned in and pressed his lips against her damaged skin. He heard her gasp and she jerked away, but he slipped a gentle hand around her.

Spreading his fingers over her soft stomach, he held her in place and kissed again, this time letting power flow over her. It rippled, golden and beautiful, across her skin and healed the injuries. Her breath came in shallow pants, bringing a smile to his lips. The power could do more than heal, and he wasn't above using it to his advantage. An angel on the edge had few scruples.

"Does that feel good?" he whispered against her skin.

"Yes. Very."

"Put down the mug, darling."

Satisfaction curled through him at the sound of the mug clunking heavily on the side table. Sliding his hands down her arms, he pushed the robe away, baring her to him. His teeth scraped her skin in a rough caress. She trembled under his mouth as he placed nibbling kisses up her spine. Slipping his hands around her, he cupped her breasts and pulled her against him.

Her head fell back against his shoulder and she moaned. The soft, needy sound sent a surge of desire through him. Sweet friction sent sensation shuddering through him as she moved against him. How could one mere human make him need like this again? What was it about her that made the desire so overwhelming, made him dance on the fine line between redemption and eternal damnation?

He tangled a hand in her hair and pulled her head back, twisting to cover her mouth with his. He had to taste her, needed the flavor of her sweet humanity on his tongue. Without breaking the kiss, he lay back. He flicked his fingers over her nipples

and ground his cock against her spine with a groan of pleasure. All it took was a single kiss, and he was lost in her.

"So, this is why you risk creation." The condemnation echoed through the small room and Maggie jumped with a strangled scream.

"Dammit, don't you people knock!" She turned her back on the intruder and scrambled to tug her robe back on.

"Why are you here, Ren?" He ought to thank his friend for saving him, but at the moment, he didn't feel grateful.

"I've come for the girl. You have not done your job so I will do it for you."

"No." Dom's blood ran cold. Would the Most High allow Renatus to take her from him, punish her for his sin? He rose and stood toe-to-toe with his friend. "You were not sent for her. I would know if you had been."

"Does it matter? She must go and you are not doing the job." Renatus reached for Maggie and Dominicus knocked his hand away.

"Dominicus?" Maggie called from the couch, but he didn't dare take his attention from Ren. To provide an opening was to lose Maggie.

"I cannot let you take her."

"You must. Have you not looked outside? The demons are rising. Creation is on the verge of the End Time and it's all because of her."

"What are you talking about?" Maggie asked, unease adding a subtle tremor to her voice. "Take me where?"

"The demons cannot have her. The Most High is the one with the power. He can stop the demons without sacrificing her soul."

"Whoa, demons? Sacrifice?" She grabbed his arm and tried to jerk him around to face her. "What are you talking about, Dominicus?"

"He's talking about you, foolish human," Ren spat at her, his eyes narrowed in anger. "Dom was supposed to take you to Hell when you died, but he decided to make you his pet instead. He healed you and took another to feed the demons."

"Dom, you were taking me to Hell?"

He couldn't bear to look at her, to see the accusation in her eyes. He'd never wanted her to know what her fate held. Damn Renatus for telling her.

"She is not going." Every muscle in Dom's body quivered with rage, with the need to protect this woman. His woman.

"It isn't your choice." Renatus moved with Heavenly speed, snagging Maggie by the wrist and jerking her toward him.

No!

Dominicus summoned his reserves and struck Renatus in the chest with a bolt of power. He was weak, but it was enough to stun. Renatus released Maggie and gaped at Dom, his expression filled with surprise and hurt. Pulling Maggie to him, Dom tucked her safely behind his shoulder and curled his wing around her, holding her there, protected, surrounded by his body.

To get her, Renatus would have to go through him.

"She stays here, Ren. Alive. Healthy. I will not give her to you any more than I would to Lucifer himself."

Maggie curled her shaking hands into the back of his t-shirt, and the tremor ate at him. She didn't need to know about this, there was no reason to frighten her with matters she could not control.

"Dom, I'm trying to help you. Don't you want to come home with me?" Hurt radiated from Renatus and tore at Dominicus.

"Please, understand, I cannot let her be harmed."

"Cannot or will not?"

"Please, Ren. Do not do this." Dom held his hand out to his friend, silently pleading for understanding. Pain knifed through his chest when Ren simply looked at it.

"Understand what? That after all these years, I finally..." He stopped, fluttering his snowy wings and stiffening his spine. "You turn your back on me for a human."

"Ren." Dom took a step forward, only to stop short when Maggie stumbled against his back, still held protectively in the lee of his wing. It was enough to bring him in reach. He gripped Ren's arm and urged the angel close. Close enough to slide his hand up the smooth arm, tangle his fingers in golden hair, pull the seraph to him.

"Please, Ren. I need you to understand."

"I understand far more than you want, my friend," he sneered. Jerking back he tried to break free, but Dom held him, fought him. His hand fisted in gold and his arm snaked around the other angel to hold him tight.

"Do not leave, not like this, not in anger." He bent and placed a hard kiss on Ren's mouth, his lips rough with desperation. "Do not leave." Renatus hesitated under his mouth. Maybe this time he would not be denied. The fantasy took shape, Renatus's warm golden skin against Maggie's creamy, freckled flesh. Could he keep them both? Dom was afraid to hope, but couldn't stop the flutter of his heart.

"Stop it." Renatus pulled back again, this time breaking free and shattering the dream. "You cannot have it both ways. You cannot Fall and still hold Heaven. If you defy the Most High's demands, you will be cast out. Choose, Dom. Do what is right. Take her to Hell before you damn the rest of creation."

Chapter Eight

Maggie buried her face in Dominicus' broad back, shielding her eyes from the burst of golden light which accompanied Renatus's exit. Breathing deep, she tried to calm her nerves and figure out what was happening. Reality had just slammed her sideways.

She had sex with an angel. Demons wanted to eat her. And, oh yeah, her new angel boyfriend had an angel boyfriend of his own. One who wanted to feed her to the demons.

Calling her day fucked-up would be an understatement.

She eased from behind Dominicus' wing to drop onto the couch before her wobbly knees gave out. Her stomach rolled and she swallowed hard against the bile rising in her throat.

"I think you forgot to mention a few details of what happened the other night, Dom."

"There was no reason for you to have to know..."

"Bullshit! If half of what your lover boy said is true, then I have every reason." He opened his mouth but no words came. Dammit she was right and he knew it.

"I don't even know where I want to start. The fact that you're the Angel of Death, or that I'm supposed to have gone to Hell. Or maybe that you're cheating on your boyfriend with me, which is pretty fucking unfair since I didn't even know you were seeing anyone."

"Renatus is not my *boyfriend*."

"I guess we're starting with you being a cheating pig."

He gave his wings an irritated flutter before flopping into the chair. His long legs stretched out in front of him and his arms and wings drooped over the sides. He

wouldn't look at her, choosing to focus on one wingtip as it traced small circles in her carpet.

"I am not cheating on Renatus. We do not have that kind of relationship."

She snorted in disbelief. "Tell that to someone who wasn't just in the room with the two of you. Sparks were flying everywhere and you two were most definitely playing some kissy-face there."

"Kissy-face?" He gave a reluctant chuckle. "Yes, I kissed him, but we are not lovers. What we are is far more complicated."

"He was jealous."

"Yes. I did not expect that." Dom didn't look unhappy about it either.

He didn't volunteer more and she wasn't sure how much she should ask. Picking up her coffee, she sipped while the minutes stretched out. Thunder rolled outside and Dom continued to trace the carpet with a single feather tip.

"He doesn't want to want me. I've wanted him for a hundred years but he's never felt the same way."

"It looked like there was some serious attraction to me."

"Attraction has never been the problem. Or perhaps that's what started the problem. We were always friends. He was my support when..." He paused, his face contorted in remembered pain. "I had a lover, a long time ago. Philomela was a beautiful cherub, golden and bright like Renatus, she was my world. When Lucifer Fell and the Realm was torn in two, she went with him. She wanted me to go with them, to Fall. She said we would be powerful in the new Realm, more powerful than even the Most High."

She gulped and choked on a mouthful of coffee, sputtering, then croaked, "When Lucifer fell?"

"Yes, when Hell was created."

"Just how old are you, Dom?"

"Angels have no age."

"You're immortal." There was no such thing as a picket fence and happily ever after with an angel. There couldn't be, could there? Her heart twisted at the reminder.

"Not immortal. Those of the realms are infinite creatures. We have no real beginning, and we have no end."

That sounded even worse. Deep inside, she'd hoped she could keep him. Even knowing he wasn't human, she wanted him to be hers. She took another sip of cold, bitter coffee and tried to distract herself from what couldn't be.

"So Philomela was what, your wife?"

"I suppose that is the closest human equivalent. I loved her, but she loved Lucifer and his dream more."

His wife left him for the devil. That had to hurt.

"What about you and Renatus?"

The wingtip stopped, every muscle in Dom's body froze for a split second before he visibly forced himself to move again.

"I was barred from the Heavens."

"You mean you Fell, like your wife?"

"No. Nothing like Meela. I did something most angels consider to be just as bad. I openly challenged the Most High."

Defying God on his home turf? "That sounds serious."

"Oh, it is. No one questions Him."

She snorted. No kidding. "So what was so important you thought you needed to challenge him?"

"Human souls. Far too many were being sent to Hell to feed Lucifer and his demons. I didn't, don't, think this should be happening. I was sent to escort souls to Hell myself, to teach me a lesson. The only thing I've learned is that I don't think creation has any place there."

She took a sip of her coffee and studied him over the cup's rim. "You were supposed to take me there."

He swiped a hand over his eyes, as if trying to erase a memory. She set the cup down with a thunk. This was her life they were talking about. And her death. Why wouldn't he tell her anything?

"If I was supposed to die, why am I still here? Tell me what happened that night."

"Someone in the club gave you a date-rape drug. Enough to kill you. When you stumbled outside there was a scuffle in the line, someone pulled out a gun and you were shot, right in the heart."

Her hand slipped up to her chest to cover the small scar that didn't belong there. "I don't understand. I try to do the right thing. I don't cheat on my taxes and try to keep my promises. I don't steal or use drugs. I recycle, dammit! What am I doing wrong? What did I do that was so bad I was being sent to Hell?"

"I don't know. You have the purest soul I've ever seen. Ren had told me this assignment was important, that I needed to do the right thing, but your core was so pure and beautiful. It does not belong in the ugliness of Hell. The man who drugged you was there and he was tainted with the darkness of evil. I could see the hate and violence in him. I took his soul to Hell. I healed you and brought you home."

"You saved me." He'd kept her alive, saved her body and her soul.

"Yes. And in doing so, I angered all of Hell's minions. They covet purity, delight in devouring it."

"Ren said demons would destroy the world because of me."

He shook his head slowly. "No. The Almighty will stop them. He will not allow such a thing to happen to his creation. I can't imagine why Ren was so worried about that." He frowned in confusion.

"Can He really stop it?"

Dom looked up in surprise. "Of course He can. He is still the Almighty. He is the one with power and dominion. The question is, will He?" Thunder rumbled again and Dominicus gave a visible shiver.

"Are you scared of storms?" An angel scared of thunder. When she was little, thunder frightened her. Gram would tell her thunder was just angels bowling. It was a silly thing, but it helped calm her. She wondered what Dominicus would think of that bit of nonsense. The idea made her smile.

"No, storms do not concern me, but this isn't a normal storm."

Amusement vanished. "What kind of storm is it?"

"It's not a storm at all. It's demons gathering."

Demons? Her gaze shot to the window, taking in the green cast to the rolling clouds. A noise almost like a siren broke through the moaning of the wind. It's pure, crystal tone made her skin prickle and sent a bolt of anticipation through her. Dom jumped to his feet, his blue eyes shining and every feather standing on end.

"The battle call," he breathed.

"The what?"

"I have to go." He bent down to wrap his arms around her and place a hard kiss on her mouth. "Do not let any being in until I return."

"Go where? What's going on?" She grabbed at his arms, scared of what might happen to him.

"The call to battle has sounded. The Most High is calling his angels to battle the demons. Whatever happens, do not let anyone in your apartment until I return. Evil cannot enter without invitation, so you will be safe as long as you stay in here."

"Safe?"

"Yes, safe. I will return as soon as I am able."

Dominicus pulled her arms from him and backed away. His body began to radiate a golden light. It washed over him, bronzing his skin and making his dark feathers

shimmer with a dusting of gilt. The light grew brighter, until it hurt her eyes and she had to look away. It seared through her eyelids, pure and golden. Then, just as quickly, it faded. For a moment she couldn't see, the room seemed so dark after the blazing light. She blinked as her vision returned and her jaw dropped open at the sight of Dominicus.

He was dressed for battle. Or undressed. His modern clothing had been replaced by a simple white loincloth and golden sandals which wound their way to his knees. A bronzed leather harness crisscrossed his chest, holding a huge sword on his back.

His body, oh what a body, rippled with muscle and gleamed with a sheen of gold. The sheer masculine beauty of him left her stunned and staring. If she'd seen him like this before, pure glistening perfection, she would have known he was an angel, even without the wings.

"I promise to return to you." He cupped her jaw and brushed a gentle kiss across her lips. Then, he was simply gone.

Chapter Nine

Lightning split a tree in half and a scaled demon the size of a house cat scurried away from the charred trunk. It turned its glowing red eyes on her, fluttered its wings, then vanished into a crack in the earth. Maggie shivered and took a step back from the window. They all looked at her before they disappeared. The demons knew she was there, knew she could see them and they all made it a point to look at her before they crawled back to Hell.

According to the clock, it was mid-morning, but her sense of time had stalled when Dom left. The darkness outside was oppressive, stretching the past forty hours into a terrifying endless night. The unusual storm had been the leading story on the news, baffled weathermen searched for answers from satellite images while religious extremists preached the end of the world.

The psychos on the street corners didn't look so crazy anymore.

Something hit the window and she jumped back with a startled scream. A demon pressed its face against the glass and watched her, its evil grin revealing a line of wickedly sharp teeth. Larger than the creatures she'd seen scrambling to the safety of underground, this one was as big as a person and more human in form. The nude creature was obviously female. Its scaled breasts were tipped with blood-red nipples that tapped against the glass like pebbles.

Its claws dragged over the glass and the screeching made Maggie's insides quiver with dread. It called her by name, taunted her. They all had. Renatus hadn't lied. The demons wanted her.

But Dominicus had been right, too. They hadn't been able get to her while she was inside. She jerked the window blinds shut and the thing outside screamed in frustration and anger.

There was a loud thump at the door and a canine yelp of pain and fear. The puppy. The poor little thing was out there with those horrible creatures. She'd seen two of them with a cat the day before, tearing the poor helpless creature to shreds. The idea of them getting that poor puppy was too much for her to bear. She peeked through the blind and made sure the demon was gone before hurrying to the door and opening it a crack.

"Puppy? Are you there?" She didn't see any demons, so she opened the door wider and found the puppy pressed against the wall. It was shaking violently with fear and when it saw her it began to whimper and cry.

"Oh, you poor baby." She opened the door and called it. "Come here, pup, come in here. Good puppy, come in here and I'll keep you safe from those scary monsters." It moved slowly, looking around it in fear and slinking along the ground so low its belly rubbed the ground. She crooned some more, soothing it, urging the poor baby along until it wriggled through her barely open doorway and into her home, where it sat, wet and shivering, dripping on her carpet.

"Okay, pup, stay there. Just stay where you are and I'll get some towels and warm you up." Maggie ran to the bathroom and grabbed a stack of clean towels from her linen closet, then to the kitchen where she tossed half of them in the dryer to warm them up. The rest she took back to where the puppy sat, huddled by the door in a quivering, whining heap.

"There you go, pup," she crooned, wrapping it up in terrycloth. "We'll get you warm and dry in no time. The dog's whimpering eased a little, but it was still cold. It gave a happy sigh when Maggie retrieved the warmed towels and wrapped them around it. It cuddled into them and its eyes soon began to drift closed.

By the time the pup fell asleep, Maggie was exhausted. She curled up on the couch. As she was dozing off her tired brain played tricks on her, darkening the room's shadows to an inky black and stretching them across the walls.

The puppy rose and smiled at her, its eyes glowing red.

"Hello, Maggie."

Maggie's heart stuttered and she screamed.

* * * * *

Dominicus chased the retreating demon through the once-manicured courtyard. Only two days of battling the creatures and they were beginning to retreat, a short battle for creatures of the realms. Hardly surprising given the lack of arch demons in the battle. As fallen angels, the highest of the demon classes had the ability to regenerate power. The small creature scurrying away from him now did not have that ability. Once struck, it would need to feed off the power from another being or return to Hell to consume power from a damned human soul. The lack of arch demons suggested this was not a true battle, but instead a small skirmish.

He shot a weak bolt at the demon's back as it slipped into a gash in the carefully sodded lawn. The lightning strike missed the Hellspawn, instead taking out a nearby crepe myrtle.

Movement to one side caught his attention and he spun in time to see a shadowy shape slinking up a set of stairs. He realized with a start that he was in the courtyard of Maggie's apartment complex and the demon was headed toward her door.

"No." It was a breath of a prayer. He'd warned her to keep the door closed, to not let anyone in. She should be safe. But the doorway was open, with golden flickers of firelight breaking the darkness within.

The creature slipped into the dark doorway and Dom moved. With a thought, he was in the apartment. The lights were off and the small coffee table had been pushed against one wall. It was covered in candles and token offerings to Hell.

His stomach clenched in anger and revulsion. The fiends had made an altar to Lucifer in Maggie's home.

A small noise pulled his attention away from the desecrate altar. Bile rose in his throat at the sight of Maggie lying bound and gagged in the center of floor. She was dazed and stared at him with confused fear in her eyes. Stripped of her clothing, smears

of blood stood out against her pale skin. The demons had clawed at her, leaving venom-filled cuts in her delicate human skin and bite marks marred her inner thighs.

"Hello, lover. I see our little distraction couldn't keep you away for long. No matter. You were gone long enough for us to gain entrance. We now have the prize we were promised."

Meela sat on the couch surrounded by sexless lesser ghouls. Her legs were spread wide. Juices smeared her thighs like blood and some of the evil creatures licked at them while she worked one clawed hand in her crotch.

"I knew you would come to check on your pet sooner or later," she purred. She pulled her fingers from her cunt and licked them clean with her serpentine tongue. "Don't worry, I took good care of her for you."

A blast of Hellfire knocked him to the floor. His sword spun away from him to be snatched up by one of the smaller ghouls. There was an entire clutch of demons in the apartment, and he'd stupidly put himself right in the middle of them.

He'd been apart from Heaven's power far too long to be able to battle them all, and though he'd reassured Maggie he couldn't be killed, an angel dragged unwillingly into Hell faced an eternity of having his soul and power consumed. Respite was only available when they paused to allow their victim to recover enough power to feed their unending hunger once more.

He sent a reflexive plea for help to Renatus, his friend, his battlemate, as another demon launched a ball of flames at him.

"Stupid Dom." Meela gave a patronizing laugh as the unholy heat washed over him. "Do you really think Ren will come to help you now, after you chose a puny human over him?"

She shoved the creatures from between her thighs and moved to crouch over Maggie.

"No!" Dom lunged forward, only to be knocked back by more flames. Two lesser demons pounced on him. One bit his shoulder while another tore at his arm. Their

batlike wings fluttered with excitement as they feasted on the power in his blood. He knocked them away, only to have more replace them. Demon after demon bit at him, nibbling away at him and draining his strength.

Through their frenzied assault, he could see Maggie, her eyes begging him for help as that Hellbitch, Meela, straddled her. Dragging one of her thick claws over thin human skin, the demoness drew blood. It welled in the long scratch that stretched from collarbone to navel.

With a roar of rage, Dominicus tossed the smaller creatures off and surged to his feet, but before he could take a step in her direction, Meela threw up a hand. With the power only a high level minion held, she pinned him against the wall. He hung there, too weakened to fight his way free, too drained to call to the angels again.

"Poor Dom," she said with a taunting smile. "Too weak to fight and you wasted your one call for help on the angel least likely to show up. Do you really think Renatus will help save her? He knows she's the key to stopping this little battle, and it's no sacrifice for him to have her out of the way either, is it, lover?"

Dom struggled to move but quickly realized he'd lost too much of his strength. Sagging, he hung limp and tried to figure out what to do next. As soon as he stopped fighting, he felt a subtle surge. The power Meela was throwing at him seeped into his veins, replacing what the minor demons had taken. Dark and dirty, it flowed through him in an oily sludge, but it was still power. If he didn't fight too much, he might be able to gather enough to break free.

"You know," Meela went on, apparently unaware he was leeching strength, "Ren was finally seduced. He was ready to take you as a lover, to go down on those perfect golden knees and take your cock in his mouth. Think of it. He was there, ready for you, ready to give up everything he'd ever thought about himself as a seraph and take a male lover. And what did you do? You threw him over for a human woman."

Ah, Ren.

Demons had a talent for exploiting one's weak point, and his former lover could see into his soul like no other.

"Ren knows I care for him," he protested.

"Ren knows you used him. He was the only being you had contact with and you toyed with him, didn't you? You took out your frustration on him, forced your body on him when you needed relief, forced your anger on him when he endured sanction for his efforts to care for you. You took everything he gave without any regard for the sacrifices he made."

A wave of guilt washed over him. Even knowing it came from Meela, knowing she twisted facts, he couldn't fight the pain her words caused, because there was a kernel of truth. Ren was biased against the love between men, feared the censure such a pairing would draw in the Heavens. Dominicus knew this and yet, in his loneliness, he pushed his friend for a physical relationship. His hunger for affection had driven a wedge between them.

"Ren even warned you about this luscious little morsel and you ignored him, didn't you?" Meela looked back down at Maggie and dragged another sharp claw over her skin, flicking it over her sensitive pink nipple and drawing blood while Maggie whimpered in pain. "I can see why she has so attracted you, though. She has a delicious soul."

Meela bent forward, her mouth hovering over Maggie's bleeding nipple and rage whipped through him. He drew on the power holding him in place and it wavered. The demoness froze. He'd taken too much. Struggling slightly against her, he tried to mask the pull and she increased the stream to compensate. Oh yes, perfect.

The jump in power meant he could take more, not just replace what the demons stole. He pushed against her again and felt a surge as his strength was replenished. He had to keep it flowing, had to regain his strength and get to Maggie. He pushed again and soaked in the energy the demoness unwittingly provided.

Apparently satisfied he was still safely contained, Meela dipped her head again and lapped at the blood now dripping down the full curve of Maggie's breast, laughing as her victim tried to wiggle free. The fear and struggle forced more of her delicate human power into her veins, turning her blood into a feast for Meela.

"Yes, human. Keep fighting me. Let your blood flow so I may feed." She bit down with her row of razor-like teeth and Maggie cried out through the gag.

"It's a lovely sound, is it not, Dom? All of her little whimpers make such sweet music. Just think. You could have had Ren like this. Under you, crying out as you took him. What a beautiful sight it would have been."

He caught a glimpse of a golden shimmer in one corner of the room. Without hesitation, he took hold of the stream of energy from Meela and pulled. Absorbing a glut of power, he broke free, rushing at Meela just as Renatus appeared, sword in hand. Lesser demons pounced, covering Dominicus' body, slowing him down, but he shook them off, focusing on the one being in the room who mattered. The one who held his heart.

Maggie.

Renatus reached her a split second ahead of him. Swinging his blade, he drove it through Meela's side, knocking her away from Maggie and driving her to the ground. With the demoness out of the way, Dominicus plucked Maggie from the floor without hesitation. It only took him a moment to release her bonds and tuck her behind him, under the shelter of his wing. Something dark flew toward his face and he swung, knocking the ghoul from the air barehanded.

"Take this!" Ren shouted, pressing the hilt of a bloody sword into his hand.

"I cannot take your weapon"

"Take it. Protect the human."

Another demon came at him and he swung. With a yelp of pain it scurried out the door, no doubt looking for the first gateway to the safety of Hell. He tightened his wing, holding Maggie against him, shielding her. Her fingers tangled in the feathers at the

base of his wing, gripped the hard muscles there and her face pressed against the bare skin of his back. Her hot breath fell against him in shuddering gasps as she clung desperately to him.

Moments later there was another form pressed to him as Renatus returned to stand back-to-back with him. White wings enfolded black as the seraph lent his body to protect the woman he'd sworn to see to Hell.

More vile, black bodies pummeled Dom, their nipping bites quickly draining the small bit of power stolen from Meela. One flew in from the side, catching him off guard, and sank its teeth into his throat. He wavered as it fed on him, his knees weakening as the beast gorged. Struggling, he managed to raise his sword again, but missed his target. The ghoul dug into his shoulder, tearing his flesh and sucking his strength.

"Oh God, oh God, please help us," Maggie whimpered into his back as her tears ran down his skin to mingle with his feathers. "Please, please make them go away. Oh God, please." Dizzy and nauseated, he added his own plea for deliverance.

A golden stream of light burst through the window, blinding in its suddenness and intensity. It sent the lesser demons scrambling for safety, escaping the Heavenly beam with yelps of pain and fear.

Dominicus sent his thanks to Heaven. Their prayers had been heard.

The room stood quiet. Sunlight flooded through the window and open doorway and birds chirped happily, as if the battle had never happened.

Dominicus swayed. His weapon dropped from numb fingers and exhaustion darkened his vision. Maggie's weight was gone from his back and he groped behind him, searching for her.

"Dom, they are gone." Ren's strong arms surrounded him, held him upright as he stumbled to the couch.

"Maggie?"

Ren stiffened. "I have placed her beside you. She has fainted, but is otherwise well."

“And you, Ren?”

There was a heartbeat of a pause. “My injuries are minor.”

Dom blinked to clear his vision. “Ren...”

“No, do not say it.” Renatus’s pain was a palpable thing, hovering in the air between the two seraphim. The fragile emotions which had taken root between them had been irreparably damaged, the love which might have been withered before it could bloom.

He pushed Dom’s sword into his hand before turning to find his own. “You have done what you needed to do, Dom. Nothing else need be said.” He strode across the small room and bent to retrieve his weapon, his golden form casting an inky shadow on the wall.

The shadow moved, swelling to hover over Renatus. Claws rose from the wall, poised over Ren’s unprotected back. Dominicus fist tightened in the sword hilt.

“No!” He charged across the room and drove his sword through the shadow, until over half of its four foot length was embedded in the wall.

The dark form took shape and Meela’s stunned features appeared, his sword piercing her chest.

“Well, lover,” she gasped, “it seems I was wrong. You have bested me after all.”

With that she melted away, her power drained. She was nothing more than a black puddle of evil, sinking through the floor and oozing her way back to Hell.

Chapter Ten

Maggie woke in her bed. For a moment, she kept her eyes shut tight and let herself believe the past few days had all been a dream. There were no demons trying to kill her, and no angel trying to help them.

No Dominicus.

The pain of that alone was enough to change her thinking. She could deal with the idea of demons if it meant she had her guardian angel.

A hand brushed over her head, pushing the hair away from her face.

"You are awake, little one."

Her eyes flew open and her breath caught as the sight of a golden angel leaning over her. "Ren." She scrambled upright and backed against the headboard. "Where is Dominicus?"

"There, sleeping beside you."

His dark head was on the pillow next to her. His whisker-rough cheeks looked gaunt and dark circles marred the skin under his sunken eyes.

"Is he..."

"He is fine," Ren quickly assured her. "His power is low, but it will return with rest. Soon he will be fully restored. How are you feeling?"

She eyed him warily. "Since when do you care? The last I heard you were ready to haul my ass to Hell. Feeding time at the demon zoo, remember?"

He dropped his gaze to his lap and a muscle in his jaw clenched. "I offer my deepest apology for that, Maggie. I believed... Well, I suppose it doesn't matter what I believed. I was wrong. And I was jealous."

Silence stretched out for a heartbeat too long.

"I never meant to take him from you. I didn't even know..." She trailed off, uncertain just what to say to Dom's almost-lover.

"There was no us to come between," he said stiffly. "I'm one for the cherubs, so do not let it concern you."

"Right." The flush of color on his face said otherwise, but she wasn't going to call him on it. Not when his dignity was all he had left.

She shifted in the awkward silence, hugging the blanket to her naked breasts. They brushed the wicked scratches left by the demoness and she cringed as a blaze of pain swept over her.

"How did Philomela get in?" Ren asked, his tone brisk, all business.

Heat flooded Maggie's face and she looked out the glass balcony door. "I let her in."

"That much is obvious," Ren snorted. "Evil cannot enter without invitation."

"I thought she was a puppy. There's been a cute little stray hanging around for a few days, and I was worried about it being out in the storm. I got the puppy inside, where it was safe and it turned into that thing." She hugged the blanket tighter at the memory.

Ren cupped her face and forced her to look at him. His golden eyes glowed with compassion. "This is what demons do, Maggie. They make themselves look appealing, seduce you. Once you are deceived, once they are invited in, they can do anything, and you can't stop them." His hand brushed over her head, gently pushing the hair from her face before dropping to his lap.

"Am I safe now?"

"In this apartment? No. Dominicus can show you how to make it safer, but as long as this location is your residence, your protection is compromised. You need to move."

"What about the people who move in here?"

"Once you have no claim on this place, the invitation is broken. The new residents will be safe."

She hissed as the blankets rubbed her ravaged nipple, sending another jolt of pain through her.

"You are hurting."

"Yeah. That thing's claws were pretty nasty."

She squeaked in surprise when Renatus jerked the blankets from her and traced one careful fingertip over her breast to the throbbing tip. Pain gave way to something more pleasant and she shifted, unsure if she should feel guilty or not. Was she being unfaithful if she let her lover's almost-lover touch her?

"Demon claws excrete a mild poison. It's not deadly, but the pain it causes sends more power into the bloodstream. The demon can drink the blood to consume the power." He studied her face and held his arms out to her. "Come, let me heal it for you."

Heat flooded her face as she remembered Dom healing her back, his lips brushing the wounds. The golden wave of healing he'd sent over her aroused as it repaired. Would Ren's power do the same? "Dom..."

"Is resting and healing himself. He won't have the strength to take care of you until at least tomorrow, but he will try. Let me heal you so he may heal himself."

She looked uncertainly at the masculine beauty of her sleeping angel. He was so tired, so beaten down. Renatus grazed a fingertip over her injured nipple and her breath caught on the pain. She couldn't live with this fire in her skin, and she didn't want Dom to put her healing before his. She let go of the covers and eased toward Renatus.

Ren curled his fingers into her hair and pulled her forward. Pulling her hair, he forced her to arch her back, to offer her wounds to him.

He placed his lips against her pulse, where a scratch began, and a smooth heat rippled down the length of the injury. A sigh of relief escaped her as the pain ebbed. With firm hands, he lifted her, dragging her into his lap so she straddled him. He licked the freckles dusting the swells of her breasts before taking her nipple in an open-

mouthed kiss. He sucked her deep, flicking the tip of his tongue across the injured flesh. His power flowed over her injuries and sent a low hum of awareness through her. It wasn't as powerful as the arousal she felt with Dom, but the angelic power still sent her nerve endings thrumming.

He released her healing breast and took her mouth with his. His tongue plunged past her teeth and he sucked hard, hollowing her cheeks. The faint tingling burn of the demon marks throbbed and a bitter taste coated her tongue. A sizzling heat filled her mouth and she could taste the poison burning as Renatus purged it from her body. The kiss eased, becoming sensual. He continued to tease long after the smoky flavor was gone, not stopping until she pulled away.

"I think it's all better now," she whispered breathlessly.

"Yes, it is."

She got the feeling Renatus wasn't talking about the marks the demons left on her.

"You sleep now, let your body rest. I'll keep guard until Dominicus wakes."

There must have been some kind of suggestion planted in his words, because when he spoke, she became too tired to keep her eyes open. Renatus lifted her, placing her back into the bed and tucking her in as carefully as Gram used to, back when Maggie was still a child.

"Ren?" she called, her voice thick with exhaustion.

"Yes, Maggie?"

"Thank you." *For everything.*

* * * * *

Dominicus waited while Renatus tucked the blankets around Maggie. Ren crossed to the balcony door to slip into the night and Dominicus rose to follow. Leaning heavily on the doorframe, he watched the other angel as he stood by the railing. The muscles of Ren's arms quivered and his hands braced on the painted wood. His golden head hung and Dom thought he saw his shoulders shaking.

"Ren?" he called quietly.

"You should be resting with your woman."

"But I'm with my friend instead." He moved behind Ren and cupped his shoulders and Ren tuned into his arms. Tears clung to his golden lashes, catching the moonlight, and a heavy ache settled in Dom's chest.

"You were right, Dom."

"About what?"

"About Maggie. She was never intended for Hell."

Dominicus sucked in a sharp breath. All the fighting, all of the battle and she had never been in true danger to begin with. "Then why was I sent to her?"

Renatus's Adam's apple bobbed hard before he answered. "Why didn't you take her? What was different about this one?"

"Her soul glowed with purity. It was the only one in two hundred years which had that light. I understand now. The Most High was not sacrificing souls to the demons, He was simply allowing them to take those who had already chosen evil."

"The lesson has been learned. Your punishment is over. There will be no more souls for you to take. You are free to return to Heaven with me, but you won't, will you?"

"Ah, Ren." He brushed his lips against Renatus's once, light as a feather, and for the first time, Renatus responded without fighting, letting his mouth cling. His hands moved to Dom's waist and he held him, kissing tentatively before Dominicus pulled away. He pressed his forehead against Ren's and hurt for what would never be.

"I've lost you, haven't I?" Renatus asked, his voice full of pain. "Even without a Fall, I've lost you."

"I was never yours, Ren." Neither mentioned it was Renatus's own fears that had kept them apart. It was too late to lay blame. Dominicus' heart had moved on.

"What will you do, Dom? The prohibition stands."

"Only against fathering a child with her. I have no need to procreate."

"Angels don't. Humans do not feel the same. What happens when she wants a child?"

Dom straightened to look Ren in the eye and was touched by the concern he saw there. "We will discuss our options."

"Options?"

"Much has changed over the centuries."

Ren pulled away and visibly gathered his dignity. "I will not interfere any more. I owe you at least that much, my friend. But please, I beg you, stay strong. I could not bear knowing you were forever lost."

"I will not Fall. I promise. Maggie keeps me strong." Stretching a wing around, he reached up and plucked a feather from it. "You will forever be in my affections, Ren." He held it up and waited.

Please, take it. Accept me. Just once, accept me.

The moment stretched out a heartbeat too long and he started to pull back.

Ren's hand closed over his, gently plucking the gift from his fingertips. He lifted the glossy black feather to his lips, kissing it. Dominicus' heart swelled when Ren slipped it in his wing, where it stood out against the snowy white feathers. It would live there, grow there, a visible sign to all in the Realms that Renatus loved.

Dom turned away, unable to watch him leave again, leave for good.

Long moments passed and his heart pounded with pain. He was forever losing his best friend. The thought of it twisted in his chest like a dying creature. He had been restored to the Heavens, yet had never felt more alone.

"Dom?" He glanced back and his eyes welled. Ren stood holding out a snowy feather.

Accepting it, he held it to his lips, kissing it with all the love Renatus had never allowed before slipping it into his wing. When he looked up, Renatus was gone, and Dominicus knew, deep in his gut, that he'd never see him again. With a heavy heart, he

returned to the bed and to Maggie. Curling behind her, he buried his face in her hair and mourned.

* * * * *

Maggie stirred, waking Dominicus. Outside sunlight blazed, revealing scars the battle left on the earth. Trees split by lightning lay on land torn by earthquakes, and humans tried to clean up from what they believed to be nature at its most violent. Despite the destruction, there was peace.

"Dom?" She rolled toward him and blinked groggily.

"Good morning, darling." He brushed her lips with a gentle kiss and gave thanks she was safe.

"Where's Ren?"

"Gone." His chest felt tight, as if his ribs had shrunk and he didn't have room to breathe.

She slipped her arms around him and kissed his forehead. A simple soothing, but it eased the pain. "I'm sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry for."

"If it hadn't been for me..."

"Ren would still not be able to accept loving a seraph. Such affection for a male goes against everything he believes about himself." He buried his face in the curve of her shoulder and held her tight to him. "Does it bother you?"

"Does what bother me?"

"That I love him. That you have to share my heart with him."

She thought for a long moment, stretching his nerves tight, before answering. "No, it doesn't. Not really. He's not what I thought. No matter what he says, whether he could have a physical relationship or not, he loves you."

In his mind's eye, Dominicus could see the inky blur of one dark feather against snowy white. "Yes, he does."

"He's not coming back." She could feel the finality, just as he could.

"No, he's not coming back." The words were muffled by her skin, but she heard, and hugged him harder. Minutes melded together and they simply held each other, comforting each other in silence.

Finally he shifted, angling to look up into her sweet face. "Part of me had hoped that he would stay. That I wouldn't have to choose and the three of us could be together. Selfish, wasn't it?"

"I didn't know him well, but he didn't strike me as the sharing kind."

"No, he isn't." If Renatus had taken that step, he would have deserved nothing less than everything Dom had to offer.

"He healed me last night."

"I know. I watched."

She stiffened in his arms. "I thought you were sleeping."

He lifted a hand and cupped her breast, caressed the place where the claw and tooth marks once were with his thumb. Ren's healing gift had allowed them to heal without scarring and the flesh was unmarked by the horror of the night. "You were making peace with him. I didn't want to intrude. It was beautiful, watching him heal you, seeing his mouth on you, your eyes shining with pleasure."

Her nipple drew tight, whether it was from his words or his thumb, he didn't know, didn't care. He bent his head and took the hardened tip between his lips and sucked it tenderly. A soft sound escaped her and she arched against him. This time, he didn't use his power to arouse. He allowed the sensations to grow naturally.

His body stirred, hardening, lengthening, and without any more foreplay, he slipped into her wet heat. Ah, but this felt more like home than Heaven ever had.

"I love you, Maggie," he whispered into her hair. "If you allow it, I will spend all of your days with you." He let her adjust, waited until he felt her shift under him, then moved in a slow, easy glide.

"I love you, too, Dominicus. I wish I had forever to give you."

"I will take whatever you have to give, darling. And when your days come to an end, your spirit will go on. Perhaps I can be with you then, as well."

Her breath caught and he lifted his head to look into her eyes. "Is that possible?"

"It can be. I will do whatever I can to make it happen, I promise."

He moved again, rocking gently and letting the tension build within them. She breathed his name and tightened around him, her climax as gentle as their loving. Increasing his pace, he let himself begin the climb toward that peak. She came again, this time with a high, keening cry.

"Maggie," he groaned, and his climax poured from him. "I love you."

"I love you, Dom. Forever."

There was an ache in his chest, but it was nothing like the emptiness which had resided there for too long. He was full, his heart was full, overflowing with the love Maggie gave him.

He brushed a kiss across her shoulder. "Forever."

About the Author

In an ideal world, Voirey Linger would live surrounded by brawny, half-naked men who cared for her every need. In real life, she spends her days chasing her children and trying to convince her cats not to kill each other.

Writing brings a few of her fantasies to life while helping her escape the chaos that follows three battling boys and two warring felines. She looks forward to the day everyone learns to get along, but until then she deals with it all the same way any Southern woman would...sass laced with just enough honey to make it go down easy.

Voirey welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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