



Heaven doesn't want him. Hell is afraid of him. She can see right through him...

The Kavanaugh Foundation, Book 2

If the abrupt appearance of Will Vassago on her couch is any indication, knowledge of Anjali's rare ability to see past demons' disguising glammers has spread far beyond the Foundation. One thing that hasn't changed since she accidentally touched him two years ago—his unnerving affect on her hormones.

Officially, Vassago needs Anjali's help to find an escaped Skinwalker demon. He's also got some not-so-official plans for their down time, but if her sensitive gift reveals who he really is—a fallen angel—any chance to fan the embers of desire between them will be lost.

Anjali tries to get their assignment over with before she loses control entirely. With every encounter, the unquenchable fire in her body burns hotter. And Vassago is startled to realize when he almost loses her to the rifts of Hell he has already lost his heart.

Then they discover the Skinwalker is only the tip of the iceberg. If they can't get a lid on the situation, Manhattan will suffer a fate worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, and not even Vassago's celestial sword will protect Anjali from the Angel of Death.

Warning: Contains an OCD demon hunter, a naughty angel with voyeuristic tendencies, bedtime wrestling over who gets to be on top and a very inappropriately used sari.

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Angelic Surrender

Crista McHugh

Dedication

To my daughter, Megan, who shows me each day is a miracle.

Chapter One

The smell of brimstone singed Anjali's nostrils, and she quickened her pace. Heavy breathing and pounding footsteps echoed down the nearly deserted street behind her. Logan had better kick it up a notch if he wanted to keep up with her.

The scent seemed to call to her like a child's taunt on the playground. *I dare you to catch me if you can.* She grinned. Catching demons was what she did best. She raced forward and focused her second sight when the smell became overwhelming.

"Anjali, are you sure you know where you're going?" Logan called out after her.

She jerked to a stop and scanned her surroundings. The dim lights from the lanterns illuminated the red and gold adornments on the buildings. They'd chased the demon from Little Italy into Chinatown. Just what she needed—a confusing maze of twisting alleys. But on the upside, it might be easier to trap it now.

Logan stopped next to her and leaned over, his lungs working like a blacksmith's bellows. For all his surfer-boy good looks, he had lead feet. "Thanks for letting me catch up."

"You're the one who wanted to come hunting with me." She moved forward, scanning each alley. A flicker of movement caught her eye when she passed the third one on the right. Bingo!

A shadowy figure with clawed fingers nearly a foot long crouched behind a dumpster. She took a step closer, and it tightened into a smaller ball around its bloated belly, revealing the line of spines that decorated its back. A Gaki. Thankfully, this seemed to be a small one, only the size of a grown man.

"You've found it?"

"It's behind the dumpster." She inched closer to have a direct shot at it. "Stay behind me, Logan."

That's when the Gaki charged. Anjali barely had time to cast a quick spell before it collided with her stunned friend. His clothes ignited from the brief contact, and Logan reflexively responded with the whole Stop, Drop, and Roll routine.

Fury burned at her like the flames on his clothes. *I may not be much of a witch, but I know how to handle you.* She channeled her anger into the pit of her stomach, allowing it to gather until she had enough to unleash her spell. To the normal human eye, nothing happened, but with her second sight, she watched the magic coil around the demon like a golden rope.

A shrill cry from the demon's mouth sent a shiver down her spine. It fell to the ground. The more it struggled, the tighter the bonds became. A hiss rose from the asphalt where it lay.

Logan stood and examined the burn marks on his clothes. "A little warning would have been nice."

“That’s why I told you to stand behind me.” A grin touched her lips, masking her relief that her best friend hadn’t been injured. “Demons aren’t like vampires.”

“Tell me about it.” He squinted in the direction where her hands pointed. “Do you have it?”

“Yep.” She added a new surge of magic to the bonds, and another screech echoed off the buildings of Chinatown.

He shook his head. No one saw what she saw, but then, that’s why she was the only demon hunter in the Kavanaugh Foundation. They had hundreds of employees who could spot a vampire on a crowded street, but she could sense demons in a way none of them could. How was that for a psychic gift? Being the only freak in the Foundation led to dozens of requests to accompany her on hunts. She’d declined all but a few. If Logan hadn’t been her closest friend for the last ten years, he’d be patrolling the streets of Manhattan alone, looking for vampires instead of chasing after her tonight.

“So, what do you do now?”

Good question. She never quite understood the “what happens after I catch the demon part”. Up until now, she’d just been happy to cleanse the air of the sulfuric stench of brimstone. “I wait until it gets swallowed up by the earth.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Nope. I catch them, and something else deals with them.”

“And that doesn’t weird you out or anything?”

She bit her bottom lip. How could she explain to him when she couldn’t quite explain it to herself? When the earth opened to swallow the demons she’d captured, a shield of magic seemed to wrap around her. It wasn’t a spine crawling experience. More like a warm blanket protecting her from whatever lay on the other side of the rift. Whatever the other part of the equation was, she didn’t fear it.

The air around the demon wavered, and for the first time, she noticed the distortion took the distinct shape of a man. No distinct features, nothing else to give a clue to her counterpart other than his height and the way his arms grabbed the demon by the magical bindings. She felt the tug and released her bonds.

Curiosity heightened her senses. She wanted to know more about this invisible man other than the way his hair seemed to sway around his jaw and the rippling lines of his biceps. She reached forward. Firm, warm flesh grazed her fingertips. The brief touch sent a jolt through her entire body, and she jerked back in surprise. He was more than just ethereal matter. He was real, solid like her.

A hiss zipped through the space between them, and the distortion flinched.

Was I not supposed to touch him? Did I cause him pain? She scurried back to Logan, not wanting to cause her counterpart any more distress.

The ground opened, and the red glow of the underworld illuminated the invisible man’s features—straight nose, pronounced cheekbones, sensual lips. Enough to make a girl feel hot and bothered just from his silhouette. As soon as the demon fell through the rift, the man disappeared.

She frowned and searched the area for the telltale distortions, but saw nothing. A headache formed in her temples, announcing it was time to stop using her second sight. She sighed and relaxed, letting the world appear normal in front of her once again.

“So, are you going to tell me what freaked you out?”

She turned and realized she’d been holding on to Logan during the entire time. She released him and frowned at the soot stains on her hands and clothes. “You’re filthy.”

“Yeah, and I know how you feel about dirt.” He rubbed his hand on his charred clothes and then on her face. “You’d make a pretty chimney sweep.”

She wrinkled her nose and swatted at him. The first thing she wanted to do when she got home was scrub her skin clean.

“Spill it, or I’ll keep covering your face with smudges.”

“Fine.” She wiped her hands on her jeans, hoping to erase some of the dirt from her palms. She mentally replayed the vision of the man she’d seen in the fiery light and forgot about the soot. “I think I saw someone else.”

Logan crossed his arms and raised a brow. “Oh?”

“It looked like a man.” She stepped forward and knelt by the scorch marks on the road where the demon had lain. “He took the demon from me and disappeared, but not before I touched him.”

“And what did he feel like?”

“Like you or me, but different. It was like getting hit with magic at the same time.”

“A warlock?”

“Maybe. It didn’t burn, so I don’t think he was a demon.”

He crouched beside her and stared at the black smudge in front of them. “Are you sure you’re not hallucinating?”

“No, I touched him, whatever he was.” She turned to Logan and cocked her head to the side. “You believe me, right?”

“Of course, Anjali. With the exception of your OCD tendencies, I’d say you’re mostly sane.”

Her lips twitched in a grin. “Mostly sane?”

“Well, you have to be a little bit insane to work for the Foundation.” He helped her to her feet and threw his arm around her shoulders. “Ready to head home?”

“Sure. Are you?”

“I’ll have to change my clothes, but other than that, I need to get back to my job. Unlike demons, the undead tend to prowl the streets on a daily basis.”

“Poor vampire hunter,” she teased.

Vassago hid in the alley and watched the petite Indian woman walk down the street with her companion. In all the millennia of finding and returning escaped demons to Hell, only a few humans had noticed him unless he'd wanted to be seen. None had dared to touch him without permission.

Until now.

He glanced down at his wrist and remembered how odd an uninvited human touch felt. Her warmth had shot straight up his arm and exploded in his chest. It exhilarated him the same way killing an enemy or flying above the clouds did. He wanted to experience it again and took a step after her, only to retreat back into the shadows. He needed to know more about her before he approached her again. For now, he'd watch and learn what made her so different from the rest of the humans.

Chapter Two

Two years later

Anjali juggled the sacks of groceries in her arms and unlocked the door of her Upper East Side Apartment. When she saw the man sitting on her couch, a yelp escaped her lips, and the sacks tumbled to the ground.

“Good morning, Anjali,” he said with a slight European accent. “Need some help?”

She fumbled for the canister of pepper spray on her key ring. “Who the hell are you, and what the fuck are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to see you.” He flashed a dazzling smile that almost made her want to lower the pepper spray and drag him back to her bedroom. Gorgeous didn’t begin to describe him. Straight black hair surrounded his face, the blunt angles of the cut complimenting the sharp curves his cheekbones and the straight line of his nose. A few strands fell in front of eyes that seemed so dark they looked black from where she stood.

“I’m not in the habit of having strangers break into my apartment and then serving them tea.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. “I’m going to call the cops if you aren’t out of here in one minute.”

He stood and approached her like a leopard stalking his prey—dangerous, yet beautiful in a brown leather jacket, T-shirt and faded jeans that molded his body like a glove. His dark eyes locked with hers. A feline grin spread on his lips. He seemed to be daring her to carry out her threats. “Come inside, and let’s talk.”

His voice washed over her and burrowed deep into her mind. Lust replaced fear. How long had it been since she’d been with a man? Her hand trembled.

His smile widened as her resistance crumbled, and he gently pushed her arm down. A jolt ripped through her body, gathering in the pit of her stomach. His breath tickled her neck as he leaned forward. “Please,” he whispered in her ear. “You’re beginning to make me feel unwelcome.”

A new wave of anger surged through her, and she squeezed the nozzle of her pepper spray, aiming for his eyes. A cry of outrage echoed through the room. She bolted past him. Her fingers dialed 911. Just before she hit the Send button, he yanked the phone from her hand and threw it into her bedroom.

“That was rather rude of you.” His black eyes flashed red, and a new wave of fear coursed through her. Whatever he was, he wasn’t human.

“Then you’re going to hate this.” Her knee landed squarely in his groin, and a grunt of pain escaped his lips.

Anjali ran into her bedroom to retrieve her phone. Forget the police. She was calling the Foundation on this one. They knew how to handle these kinds of things. She snatched it off the bed and ran for the door.

He blocked the doorway, preventing her escape. “There’s no need to piss me off, Anjali, not when I came here to ask for your help.”

She feinted to the left, hoping he’d fall for it and she could squeeze past him. He didn’t waver. Now she wished she had qualified for vampire hunter training. At least they would have taught her a few self-defense moves.

Was it just her imagination, or did he seem to grow in size, almost filling the narrow doorway. She backed away and eyed the fire escape. “What do you want?”

“I told you. I want your help on a certain matter involving demons.”

Warning bells pealed in her mind. Only a few people knew she was a demon hunter, and he definitely wasn’t one of them. “What makes you think I can help you?”

The cocky son of a bitch had the nerve to laugh at her. “Let’s just say I’ve seen your work.”

“You’ve been stalking me?”

“Stalking is such an ugly word. More like investigating you.” He turned sideways and indicated that she go into the living room. “Please, let’s discuss this like civilized people.”

“You broke into my apartment. You admit to stalking me. And now you want me to sit and chat with you like we’re old friends?”

“More like business acquaintances.” But the way his eyes flickered over her body told her his thoughts wandered in a different direction than purely business.

A flush crawled over her skin. Anjali wondered what kind of appeal she held for him. She was just some skinny Punjabi with a nose that was too big for her face. Yet he looked at her as if she could be a Bollywood pin-up girl. Her nipples hardened under his stare, and she crossed her arms over her chest to cover them. His smirk told her she was a few seconds too late.

“You have five minutes.” She flipped her phone open and began texting the Foundation about the stranger in her house as she followed him into her living room.

“You know I’ll be gone before they get here.”

A silent curse hissed in her mind. So he was not only inhumanly gorgeous but had eyes in the back of his head too?

“Let’s discuss logic for a moment, and maybe that will help put your mind at ease.” He stopped inches from her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Instead of repulsion, a calming wave of reassurance

passed through her. “I need your help. A dead or injured demon hunter is useless to me. I’m not going to harm you in anyway.”

Her sex clenched from his silky words. “I’m not worried about you killing me.”

“Then why do you act like a scared little rabbit?” He tucked a strand of her black hair behind her ear. “I’m not that intimidating, am I?”

Intimidation had nothing to do with it. Tempting would be more appropriate. Her panties grew damp as she imagined his lips on her skin. Damn, she wanted him, but she refused to let him know that. She shrugged his hands off. “The clock’s ticking.”

“Of course. Shall we sit?” He sank back into her couch.

She took a seat on the edge of the chair across the room. With a little distance between them, her mind cleared, even though her sex still throbbed when she crossed her legs. “So, what makes you think you need my help with anything, Mr...?”

“Vassago. But please, call me Will.” He flashed another one of his dazzling smiles.

“Answer my question.”

His smile fell, and his posture stiffened. “Very well. I’m trying to find a demon that’s gotten loose in Manhattan. Normally, I wouldn’t need help, but this is a—um, special case.”

“Special in what way? Do you want to capture it and use it for something?”

“No, I want to capture it and send it back where it came from.”

“And what makes you think you can do that?”

He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “Let’s just say I have connections.”

A few minutes without his charm at full wattage restored her confidence. She mirrored his posture. “Mr. Vassago, as much as you’d like my help, I’m afraid I’m already contracted and cannot take on any more work without my employer’s permission.” *There. That ought to cool him down and get him out of my place.*

“So I’d need to speak to someone at the Kavanaugh Foundation first?”

Her breath hitched. *Shit, if he knew about the Foundation...* “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t lie to me, darling. I’ve already told you that I’ve been studying you.” He stood and closed the space between them. “I know what you do, where you work and what your abilities are.” She froze as he traced the line of her jaw with his finger. “I even know your favorite flavor of ice cream.”

“What the fuck are you?” Rage curled in the pit of her stomach and fueled the magic in her veins. She may be a sorry excuse for a witch, but she could definitely summon a spell that would get her message across in a language even Mr. Stalker would understand.

“I’m not someone to be trifled with.” He slid his finger off her face. “If I need to ask the Foundation for permission to hire you, I will. Until then, I looked forward to working with you.”

He turned on his heel and strolled across the room, allowing her ample viewing time of his tight ass. Just before he got to door, he paused in front of a painting. "I like this one," he said and tilted it to the left.

A shudder ripped through her like someone had just scraped his fingernails down a chalkboard. She released her breath slowly through her teeth and wished her heart wouldn't pound so loudly in her ears. As soon as he left her apartment, she straightened the painting. Then she dialed the Foundation. They needed to know about him ASAP.

While the phone rang, an annoying voice in her head whispered over and over again that she hoped this wouldn't be the last encounter with Will Vassago. Her body liked him far more than her mind cared to admit. She secretly wondered if his smooth charm carried over into the bedroom.

Then she glanced at the rest of the pictures in the room. They all hung at the same angle, tilted slightly to the left. Her fingers curled into a fist. *Damn him!*

Vassago reached the national headquarters for the Kavanaugh Foundation in the Financial District within a few minutes of leaving Anjali's apartment. *Flight had a few advantages*, he thought with a smirk, even if it meant having to remove the exquisite texture of Italian leather from his arms for a bit.

He landed in the dark shadows and removed the glamour that kept him invisible from most mortal eyes. Once he donned his jacket, he stepped out into the sidewalks and entered the building. He strode past the receptionist inside and punched the button for the floor he needed without her calling ahead. Not that it mattered. She needed to pick her jaw up off the desk in order to make that call. He winked at her as the doors closed.

Most human women stared at him that way when he made himself visible in his human form. His jaw tightened. All except Anjali, that is. Although he'd caught glimpses of her checking him out, she never surrendered to him like most human women. Her ability to resist him grated on his nerves like a hundred lashes. But after what he'd witnessed in the last two years, he should've expected that from her. She was different from most humans. She saw things most people didn't even know existed. Things like him.

He walked to the next receptionist as if he had every business being there. "Is either Mr. Pemberly or Ms. Derwydd here?"

This one regarded him with the same wide eyes as the one downstairs. When he employed his charm, he found women's minds easy enough to manipulate. "Ms. Derwydd is actually just coming out of a meeting."

"Lovely. Will you please tell her that Vassago is here to see her?"

The receptionist made the call, her eyes never leaving him. He grinned. Nice to know humans hadn't lost their appreciation for his kind. When she hung up the phone, she managed to mumble in a breathy voice, "This way, Mr. Vassago."

Part of him wanted to continue to tempt her and enjoy the pleasures of her flesh, but he'd found he'd lost his taste for human women over the last few years. All but one. And with a Skinwalker on the loose, he didn't have time to revel in that game with Anjali until after it was caught.

The receptionist knocked on a frosted glass door before opening it. "Ms. Derwydd, Mr. Vassago." She cast one inviting glance his way before she returned to her desk.

"Vassago, you really need to stop harassing my employees," a voice with a thick Welsh accent said from the windows. "I don't appreciate you breaking into Anjali's apartment."

"Ah, the infamous Morwen Derwydd. It's a pleasure to finally meet you." He admired her flowing red hair and pale, flawless skin. "Although I must say, Titian didn't do your beauty justice. Rossetti, either."

She frowned and gestured to the nearby chairs. "If I didn't know what you are, I'd be flattered."

His lips twitched. "I won't tell what you are if you won't tell what I am." Leverage could be such a lovely thing.

She grimaced and sat near the windows. "What did you want to speak to me about?"

He sat and leaned back against the rich leather of the chair. "I would like to borrow Anjali for a bit."

"Why?"

"If you know what I am, I'm sure you can figure it out."

She crossed her legs and drummed her slender fingers on the arms of her chair. "Vassago, the finder of lost things. What escaped from Hell this time?"

Damn, she was smarter than he thought. But then, centuries of experience would do that to a woman. "A Skinwalker."

A brief second of panic flickered in her unusually bright blue eyes before a smooth mask of composure settled over her face. "That's something that needs to be addressed immediately."

"I'm surprised it hasn't come to your attention sooner, what with two people already skinned alive."

A muscle twitched along her jaw. "I've heard of the bodies, but I didn't think the minions of Hell would be so reckless as to let a Skinwalker escape."

"Accidents happen," he said with a shrug. "Of course, from what I'm hearing from down there, this wasn't a routine escape."

"You mean someone released it?"

He gave her a tight smile. "I mean I need to find it as soon as possible and return it to Hell before more people are killed. I don't sully my hands with things in that realm."

She held his gaze for ten long seconds, silently informing him that she didn't believe his bullshit for one moment. "Where does Anjali fit into all this?"

"I'm having trouble tracking it with its human disguise. Anjali seems to be quite gifted at seeing things most of us miss."

"She's a gifted psychic and a mediocre witch."

“But quite the bloodhound when it comes to sniffing out demons,” he finished. “With her help, I can find it and deal with it sooner than on my own.”

She nibbled her bottom lip and stared out the window at the surrounding skyscrapers. “Do you promise you won’t harm her?”

“I give you my word.”

A snort told him exactly what she thought of his word. “She’ll be your plaything.”

The idea of playing with Anjali until she stared up at him with lust filled eyes and begged him to make her come toyed in his mind, but he pushed it aside for the moment. “She’s stronger willed than you give her credit for,” he admitted through gritted teeth.

Morwen laughed, wounding his pride. “Never had a human woman turn you down before?”

“I think we’ve both established she’s not a normal human.”

The office door opened, and a silver-haired man with a cane entered the room. “Morwen, I was thinking about the recent string of attacks that Logan reported this morning...” The words died on his lips the second he saw Vassago, and his face paled. He made the sign of the cross. “*Vade Retro Satana.*”

Now it was his turned to laugh. “That barely even works on my boss, old man, especially when someone has so little faith to back it.”

“Nigel, Vassago was just leaving.” She narrowed her eyes, and a rush of magic surrounded him, tightening around his chest like steel straps. The witch was more powerful than he’d first assumed. “You can borrow her for this case, but if anything happens to her, I’ll come looking for you.”

“I’ll treat her with the utmost care.” The magic retreated from him, and he stood. “Good day, Morwen.” He cast a glance at Nigel and experienced a slight thrill when the old man flinched. At least some people still feared his kind.

Chapter Three

Anjali grabbed a spoon and shoved her silverware drawer closed. Her pulse pounded at her temples, and her jaw ached from gritting her teeth. Ever since Will Vassago had left her house, she'd discovered one thing after another that he'd disturbed. First, she'd had to straighten all her pictures. Then she'd noticed he'd rearranged the contents of her pantry so they were no longer in alphabetical order. Now, when she reached for a spoon to eat a cup of yogurt, she'd realized that he'd mixed all her silverware up, disrupting the neat stacks of spoons, forks and knives inside the drawer.

"If I ever seen him again, I'm going to show him the meaning of pain."

She was about to peel back the foil lid when a knock sounded at her door. Her muscles tightened, and she gathered her magic. The door handle turned. He wouldn't catch her off guard this time.

Logan stuck his head in. His face went slack. "Uh-oh, someone's pissed off."

She relaxed and let all her magic flow back into her veins. She'd almost forgotten that she'd agreed to meet Logan for dinner after hearing him rant this morning about his trouble tracking down a new vampire that was plaguing Manhattan. "You're early."

"No, I'm right on time." He pointed to the clock by the door. Five p.m. *Where had the day gone?* "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"Some asshole broke into my apartment and messed with my stuff." She shoved the yogurt back in the fridge and cast a glance at the chaotic drawer. She'd restore it to its proper order when she got back. Right now, dinner with a friend sounded like just the distraction she needed.

"Did you call the police?"

"This isn't something they'd handle, if you know what I mean."

His brows furrowed together, and a frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Spill it."

She inwardly groaned when she saw his expression—the overly protective big brother look. Never mind that she was two months older than him. "I came home from the store to find him sitting on the couch, waiting for me."

"And?"

"And I freaked initially. Got the definite not human vibe from him, but as far as I could tell, he wasn't a demon or a vampire." She stuffed her arms into her jacket as they filed out into the hallway.

Logan rubbed his jaw. "What else would that make him?"

“A warlock of some sort maybe. I mean he broke into my apartment without any signs of forced entry. And from what he let slip, he’s been stalking me.”

Panic flickered across his face. “That solves it. You’re staying at my place tonight.”

“And I’ll be by myself all night while you’re out hunting. How is that any different than me staying at home?”

“He hasn’t broken into my place yet.”

Why am I making so many excuses for this guy? If I were in my right mind, I’d be clinging to Logan like a damsel in distress, not insisting on waiting in my apartment for Mr. Stalker to come in and seduce me. “Who’s to say he couldn’t?”

Before Logan could reply, her cell phone beeped. She flipped it open and almost threw it out the staircase window to the street four stories down. A string of four letter words exploded from her mouth after she read the message. *I’ve agreed to lend you to Vassago to find the demon he’s hunting. Be careful. Morwen.*

Logan peered over her shoulder. “Being outsourced?”

“Ha-ha.” She snapped the phone closed and pounded down the stairs. “Vassago’s my stalker boy.”

“Gotcha.” He waited until they were out on the street before asking, “Why does he need you to find a demon?”

“I didn’t let him explain, but I guess his reasons were good enough for Morwen. Now, if I can find the demon without killing Vassago.”

A low whistle sounded behind her. “He really must have rubbed you the wrong way.”

More like rubbed me the right way for all the wrong reasons. She remembered how her body had responded to his touch. How turned on she’d become when his breath tickled the side of her face and hated herself for acting like such a teenager. She’d been around plenty of good-looking guys without losing her head. Hell, Logan was a prime example of a hot guy, judging from the admiring stares he drew from women wherever they went. Too bad she only saw him as a friend. “Whatever. I could use a beer.”

“Jen’s going to meet us at the Taxi Stand.” A grin played on his lips.

Ah, Jen, his secret crush. It pained her to watch them together. Logan seemed like the type of guy to settle down and raise a bunch of blond surfer kids on a beach somewhere, not spend his life sentenced as a single vampire hunter in Manhattan. His job frowned on any type of long-term relationship, and Jen knew it. Despite his advances, she kept him at arm’s length. Besides, Jen suffered from the same malady she did—they both only saw Logan as a friend.

Anjali forced a smile on her face. “Sounds like fun.”

The Taxi Stand was a little hole in the wall pub in the East Village with greasy food and cold beer. Just what she wanted on an evening like this. Something to get her mind off of the annoyingly good-

looking stranger who was slowly turning her life upside down. A rich, dark chocolate dessert would be a lovely chaser to the meal if her stomach could handle it.

Jen waved at them from a back booth as soon as they entered, and Logan's grin widened.

Anjali hung back as he kissed Jen's cheek and slid into the seat next to her. She could see why Logan liked her. The witch was bright and bubbly with her heart-shaped face and blonde-streaked red hair. A perfect distraction from the dark world Logan normally inhabited. But Jen also worked for the Foundation, and rules were rules, even if she did want to pursue something more than friendship with him.

She slumped into the seat across from them and murmured a greeting.

"Uh-oh," Jen said in the same tone as Logan did earlier. "Somebody's grouchy."

Anjali crossed her arms and let him fill their friend in on everything that had happened while she ordered a drink and plate of chili cheese fries. Jen's jaw dropped when he finished. "So Morwen's letting you work for him, even after all that?"

"Yeah. Apparently, she deems it safe."

"Either that, or what he's hunting for has her worried enough to decide it's better to work with than against him." She twirled a strand of hair around her finger. "I wonder what he is."

"He could just be another type of demon hunter." Logan leaned back and draped his arm over Jen's seat.

"Logan, he said he knew what flavor of ice cream I liked."

"I'm not saying he's sane. I'm just trying to come up with a reason why Morwen would agree to this."

"Perhaps because I can be very persuasive when I want to be," the smoothly accented voice said behind her.

Anjali flinched, and a shiver ran up her spine that made her scalp tingle.

Across the table, her friends stared at Will Vassago with wide eyes. Then Jen's lips curled into a flirtatious smile. "Ah, you must be the mystery man we've heard so much about."

"Gossiping about me, Anjali?" He slid into the spot next to her, still dressed in the same clothes he'd worn earlier today and looking as handsome as sin in them. His thigh pressed against hers and radiated heat that spread through her body.

She shimmied away from him and tried to regain control of her raging hormones. "More like telling them how much you pissed me off this morning."

"Ah, so you saw the pantry?" He grinned and snatched one of her chili-cheese fries.

She smacked his hand, causing him to drop the fry. "And the silverware drawer. And the pictures."

"I was curious to see how you'd react."

Logan raked his gaze over the new guest, and Anjali watched some of the tension ease from his shoulders. Whatever Will was, he wasn't a vampire. But then, he wouldn't have left Morwen's office if he had been. "Why are you stalking Anjali?" he said in his big brother tone.

"I was curious to learn what her abilities were. And now that I need her help, I wanted to make sure she'd be the right person for the job before I dragged her into this."

Jen leaned forward, giving Will an unimpaired view of her cleavage. "So, tell me about yourself."

Logan winced at her obvious flirtation, but what bothered Anjali more was the way her gut tightened. She hated Will. Why should she care if another woman flirted with him? It's not like she wanted him or anything.

His black gaze flickered to her, and a flush crept up her neck into her face. "I think that's on a need to know basis."

"We're all friends here, Vassago, as well as employees of the Foundation," she replied, turning away from him before her hormones got the better of her and she ended up straddling his lap.

"Yes, but I only agreed to work with you."

Damn, he could manifest all the charm of James Bond when he wanted. And she could tell Jen had already fallen for it. If they stayed here any longer, the witch would probably invite him back to her place, and Logan would spend the next week pouting. Of course, she'd be pouting with him if Will went home with Jen. "I got the message. Why don't we just leave and get to work? The sooner I help you find what you want, the sooner I'll be able to return to my normal life."

He made a *tsking* sounding with his tongue. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you didn't like me, Anjali."

"Well, you've made a memorable impression so far." She grabbed her jacket and tried to push him out of the booth. Another jolt shot through her when she touched him, making her pulse race and her mouth go dry. Why couldn't she get past her physical attraction to him? He was rude, cocky, aggravating...and drop-dead gorgeous.

His sensual lips curled up into a smile as if he knew exactly what kind of effect he had on her. "Eager to be alone with me?"

"More like eager to be rid of you."

"Didn't anyone ever tell you that lying is a sin?"

Logan's fingers curled into a fist. "Back off, asshole. It's quite obvious she's not enjoying your company, so lay off the Casanova act and let her do her job. You know, the one you hired her for."

"Correct. It's almost sunset. Time for all of us to get to work." Vassago stood and offered her his hand. "I have a car outside, and I'll fill you in on my situation in there."

Her common sense yelled at her to think twice about getting into a car with him. The man exuded danger. Yet when she took his hand, a familiar blanket of reassurance wrapped around her. It seemed the only way she was going to learn more about this enigma was to play along with him.

Logan caught her arm as she walked away. "I'll swing by and check on you in the morning," he whispered.

“Thanks.” She donned her jacket and followed Will outside.

A glossy black Audi TT stood waiting at the curb. He opened the door for her. “Step into my chariot, my lady.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes at his corny line, but as she brushed past him, the heat from his body sent ripples of desire through her. She glanced up at his lips, and her mouth watered to taste them. Men like him shouldn’t come equipped with things like that. They made a girl’s mind wander in very naughty directions. Working with him was going to be anything but boring.

Vassago could barely contain his laughter as he walked around his car. Anjali tried so hard to resist him, but he could already see the chinks in her armor. She was a human, after all. She could be tempted the same way any other woman could be. He’d just have to put more effort into it.

He slid into the driver’s seat and inhaled the scent of the new leather. If he had to masquerade as a human, at least he’d enjoy it. Only the finest things in their world surrounded him, from the silkiness of cashmere to the quiet purr of a powerful engine. It wasn’t Heaven, but it wasn’t Hell either.

She waited until he pulled out of his parking space before she spoke. “Time to answer some questions, buddy.”

Buddy? He’d never had a woman call him that before. Normally, he’d be offended, but from her, it merely amused him. “Ask away, and I’ll answer what I’m allowed to answer.”

“What are you?”

Ah, the obvious question. “What do you think I am?”

“Are you going to play games with me? If so, then I’m getting out at the next traffic light.” She placed one hand over her seatbelt buckle and the other over the door handle.

“I think that’s on a need to know basis.”

“Well, if you want to me work with you, I need to know what I’m dealing with.”

Touché. Very well. As you’ve probably guessed, I’m not human, but I’m also not a threat to you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Why are you looking for a demon?”

“It’s my job. I guess you can say I’m a demon bounty hunter. I catch them and send them back where they belong.” He watched her reaction out of the corner of his eye to see if she could figure out the rest of the story.

Her lips parted, and the sharp sound of her inhalation filled the silence of the car. “Can you open the rift between worlds?”

“When I need to, yes. And that’s all you need to know for now.”

She chewed on her bottom lip and tucked her glossy blue-black hair behind her ear. Her hands retreated to the center of her lap. “What are we hunting for?”

“A Skinwalker.”

Another hiss. Her body stiffened as a look of pure terror crossed her face.

Good. At least she has enough sense to be afraid. “I’m taking you to the place where the last victim was found. Maybe from there, you can get its scent and track it down.”

She nodded. Her fingers tumbled over each other. “How long ago was the attack?”

“Two nights ago.”

“It will need a new skin soon.”

The Foundation made the effort to thoroughly educate her on rare demons, but she has no idea what I am. Very interesting. At least he didn’t have to explain how to identify a Skinwalker to her. “Exactly. I want to find it before it leaves another flayed body in an alley.”

Her expression softened when she glanced at him. “So you truly want to save human lives? Is that why you wanted my help?”

“I suppose so. To be honest, my boss is having his own little shit-fit about a Skinwalker escaping, and he’s riding my ass to find it and bring it back before he looks bad.”

His honest reply earned him a laugh. “I guess that would give true meaning to the fury of Hell.” She leaned over and sniffed him. “Funny, you don’t smell like brimstone.”

Resentment curled in his stomach. As if he’d stoop to such levels. “That’s because I don’t reside there.”

The harshness of his voice seemed to set her on edge again, and she resumed chewing her bottom lip. “How long has it been loose?”

He shifted in his seat. His answer would almost be an admission of his failure. “Five days.”

“And how did it get here?”

“That’s one of those need to know answers.”

“Fine.” She turned away from him and stared out the window. “If I remember correctly, Skinwalkers can’t cross water.”

“Right.”

“Good. That means it’s trapped on Manhattan.” A small smile appeared on her lips. “That should help narrow the hunting area a bit.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

Her smile vanished. “I’m trying to find something positive about a demon that skins people alive being on the prowl.”

They rode the rest of the way in silence to the crime scene in the Garment District. When they stopped, she opened the door and frowned. “What can you tell me about the victim?”

“Not much, other than it was a female.” He pointed to an area behind a dumpster. “She was found over there.”

She followed him and appeared to look off at something in the distance. He'd come to recognize that expression over the years. Her second sight was scanning the scene for any sign of a clue. Her fingertips grazed the concrete, and her brows bunched together. Then a sharp cry escaped from her throat. She yanked her hand back like she'd touched a hot iron and jumped to her feet.

"I have an image of the victim," she said softly.

He rested his hands on her arms and pulled her closer to him. The floral scent of her shampoo tickled his nose, awakening protective urges he'd never experienced before. "What did you see?"

To his surprise, she leaned into his embrace rather than fighting it. "I saw her death."

The haunted note in her voice pulled at what he had left of a heart and made him tighten his hold around her. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

She rubbed her face, and by the time she finished, her eyes no longer had that distant glaze to them. "At least I know what to look for now." She pushed him away and went back to the car. "It's somewhere to the north of here."

"How far north?"

She closed her eyes, and the tendrils of her magic rushed past him. Several seconds passed before she responded. "Harlem."

Chapter Four

Anjali rode in silence. Her stomach still wanted to heave up its contents after seeing the murder of the Skinwalker's last victim. Written accounts were nothing compared to the real thing. The woman's screams still echoed in her ears.

"Are you okay?"

The concern in Will's voice surprised her. If she didn't know better, she would've almost believed he regretted dragging her into this. The few seconds she spent in his arms after the vision soothed her more than she cared to admit. "I've been better."

"Sorry about having to take you there, but it was the only way."

"I know. I needed to catch its scent." She closed her eyes and concentrated. "It's getting stronger."

"Good. If we can catch it tonight, you can rest easier."

She was going to need a sleeping pill and a few glasses of wine before she dulled the memory enough not to have nightmares. When she opened her eyes, the greenery of Central Park raced by outside. She had to give him credit—he knew how to handle the Audi with such precision that she felt like they were flying.

When the memory tried to ambush her thoughts again, she blurted out, "How did you get into this bounty hunting thing?" Anything to distract her.

A tight smile stretched across his mouth. "I was assigned to it."

"Is it something you've always done?" *Please don't clam up on me. I need to get my mind off the demon.*

He glanced at her and took a deep breath. "No. I had some issues with a previous employer and ended up doing this instead."

His vague answers only whetted her curiosity. "Fair enough. What did you do before?"

"I was a mindless minion of an egocentric despot." His grip tightened on the steering wheel. "Please, can we change the subject? I don't like talking about my past."

"Sure. You pick the subject."

"Fine. How did you become a demon hunter?"

Goose bumps prickled her skin. Normally, she would have never considered sharing this information with someone she barely knew, but he knew more about her line of work than most people. "I wasn't cut out to be a witch, and my vampire hunting skills were ridiculous."

"But you wanted to work for the Kavanaugh Foundation?"

She shrugged. "I grew up at their Academy. It seemed like the natural thing to do."

The tension eased out of his face. "How old were you when you lost your parents?"

"I was three." Like most of the kids at the Foundation's orphanage, she'd ended up there because a vampire killed her parents. "I barely remember them. I made my own family there, though."

"Such as your friend, Logan?" His voice took on a hard note when he said the other man's name. Could he actually be jealous of her best friend?

She nodded. "He's like a brother to me."

The park disappeared from view, and the car slowed down. "We're coming into Harlem."

A feeling of dread crawled up her spine and forced the air from her lungs. *So much for distraction. Time to hunt the Skinwalker.* She focused her energy on the demon's signature. "Turn left."

She directed him through the streets until she was certain they'd honed in on the area where the demon hid. The scent of brimstone hit her like a blast from an oven the moment she opened the car door. Normally, getting this close to a demon excited her. But then, most of the demons she'd faced in the past had been minor ones. Skinwalkers were the Goliaths of the demon world, and she felt like David, armed only with a stone and slingshot.

Will stood behind her and placed his hand on her shoulder. Another wave of reassurance rolled through her. What was it about his touch that could both comfort her and drive her crazy with lust? *At least it wasn't both at the same time, or I'd be in over my head.* "I think it's a few blocks ahead."

"When you spot it, stay behind me. I don't want you getting hurt."

She blinked a few times. Did she hear him correctly? He was going to take it on alone? *Fat chance, buster.* She stiffened her spine and marched ahead, slipping into her second sight. She may not be much of a witch, but she knew how to bind a demon until he could take it back to where it came from. She thought she heard him chuckle, but when she whirled around, his face assumed a deadly serious expression. "You hired me, so let me in on the action."

"I also promised your boss you wouldn't get hurt, and I meant it." He stepped in front of her. "Tell me which way to go."

"Who the hell do you think you are, ordering me around like this and thinking you can take on a big nasty demon by yourself?"

He spun around to face her. The air wavered around him, and a golden light radiated from his skin. It would have been beautiful if she hadn't noticed the red glow burning in the depths of his eyes. "I've been doing this since before your ancestors could write. Don't question me."

Her heart rose into her throat. Until now, she'd thought he was nothing more than an arrogant flirt. Now she witnessed a trace of his power, and it frightened her. What had Morwen gotten her into?

The air stilled, and light vanished from his face, leaving the debonair façade in place. She swallowed past the lump in her throat and found her voice again. "But apparently you need me to help you this time."

He tore his gaze away from her. From what she could see of his profile, he struggled to contain his emotions. “You said up the block?”

She nodded and walked beside him. Nausea gathered in the pit of her stomach. “I think it’s one of these brownstones.”

Streetlights flickered on as they passed, marking the fall of night. With each step, her apprehension grew. It was one thing to find a body by a dumpster, but this was a mainly residential neighborhood. What if the Skinwalker attacked a family in the middle of dinner? What if it killed a child?

“Now you know why I want to find it as soon as possible,” he answered as if he heard the questions in her mind.

The growl in his voice gave her the courage she needed to keep putting one foot in front of the other. “So you’re more than just a stalker bent on getting under my skin?”

The shadows bathed his face as he continued to stare straight ahead. “If you’re trying to paint me as a good guy, think again, Anjali. I do my job because no one else can do it. That doesn’t mean I have to be nice or play fair.”

“Sorry. Just trying to figure out what makes you tick, that’s all.” She slipped her second sight into place as the scent grew stronger and searched for any subtle scorch marks that would indicate that demon had passed by.

Her breath hitched when she saw the multitude of handprints on a door across the street.

Will stopped and followed her gaze. “Which one is it?”

She pointed at the door. Her feet felt like they’d been cemented to the sidewalk. By the time she pried them free, Will had already crossed the street and bounded up the front steps. Sweat prickled the back of her neck as she followed him. Something seemed off about this. Too many handprints for one demon.

The door swung open when he touched it, revealing the splintered doorframe on the other side. He stepped inside and whispered a slew of what sounded like curse words. A pool of blood flowed into the entryway from a side room. She peeked around his chest and saw the raw human carcass.

Images of the victim’s last moments slammed into her consciousness. The fear, the pain, the panic. His screams echoed in her mind as he watched the long claws rip open his skin and peel it away from his muscles. Then a red swirl of blood and fire consumed his sight.

The sour taste of bile filled her mouth, and this time, she couldn’t contain it. She managed to run outside and lose the remnants of her chili-cheese fries on the steps.

“Can’t handle the sight of blood?” He didn’t need to touch her to let her know he stood right behind her.

Her cheeks flamed at being caught puking. When she lifted her head, she saw no criticism on his face. He held a flask out to her. The sweet, alcoholic taste of rum overpowered the sourness left behind from her vomit. She swished it around like mouthwash and spat it out. “Do you always carry alcohol on you?”

He took the flask back with a shrug. "It's sometimes useful."

"And to answer your question, it wasn't the blood that turned my stomach, Vassago."

"Please, call me Will." He crept back into the house. "What was it then?"

She stayed behind him, refusing to look at the corpse. "One of the many joys of being a psychic. I saw his last memories."

He paused, causing her to run into his back. She inhaled the scent of his fine leather jacket and almost forgot about the brimstone that singed her nostrils. "What were they like?"

She jerked away from him. "What kind of sicko are you?"

"I'm merely curious. There's only one being who can kill my kind, and I'm too useful to Him to meet my end. I was just curious what death was like."

"I don't see the afterlife, if that's what you mean." She twisted her hair into a ponytail and focused on the cracked tile in the foyer. "I saw his last moments of life. They were..." Her bottom lip throbbed as she bit into it to fight back her own scream of fear. "Horrible."

"Skinwalkers inject a venom into their prey before they flay them. In small doses, it causes hallucinations."

Definitely fit the bill from what she saw. "Like a bad acid trip."

"I guess you could say that."

"And at larger doses?"

His muscles tensed under the brown leather. "The victim starts doing the work for them."

Her stomach heaved. *No, I'm not going to puke in front of him again.* "Remind me to stay away from their fangs or whatever they use—"

"Their tail. It's like a scorpion's."

"Right. I promise I won't approach one from behind."

He ran his fingers through his hair and cast one more glance at the victim. "I guess we were too late this time. Any clue where it went from here?"

Her chest tightened as she slid her second sight back into place. A low throbbing headache formed in her temples from having to use it so much today. She scanned the room and saw a trail of footprints leading up the stairs. Her heart skipped a few beats. "It's still here, Will."

Chapter Five

Vassago's hands curled into fists. "Where?"

"Upstairs." Anjali's normally caramel-colored skin matched the dull beige hues of the painted walls. He could almost smell her terror.

"Don't move."

"No, you don't know where it is upstairs."

Her determination to follow him earned his respect, even if it meant she bordered on being suicidal. For any human to acknowledge her fears and still face them amazed him. Most of them turned and ran. It made him want to wrap her in his arms and take her straight back to the safety of her apartment where he could lock her away like the precious treasure she was. "I think I can figure it out for myself."

She lifted her chin and hardened her expression. "Partners, remember?"

"Employer," he replied, pointing to himself, "and employee."

The floorboards creaked overhead, sending a shudder that made the feathers on his wings stand on end. He needed to stop dicking around and catch that demon before it killed anyone else. He rushed up the stairs and gathered the unholy fire at his fingertips.

At the top of the staircase, he caught the demon stretching the skin of a man over its body like a diver putting on a wet suit. Flat, black eyes stared at him. Then it curled its lips into a snarl and rushed him like a linebacker would a quarterback. The loose skin flapped around its face and limbs as it moved, adding to the distortion around it. The force of the blow knocked them into the room at the end of the hallway.

Vassago released his fire at the same time the air left his lungs. A high-pitched shriek rose from the demon, but it still attacked. Razor sharp claws broke through the surface of the human skin-suit and raked across Will's chest. His vision seared red from the pain. Out of the few times he'd taken on a Skinwalker, he'd never faced one this aggressive.

A flicker of golden light danced on the edge of his vision, and something yanked the demon off his chest from behind. "Quit playing around, Will. Vanquish it or send it back to Hell or whatever you do."

Anjali's face showed her concentration as she strained to bind the demon with her magic. Two shadows appeared behind her, and for the first time in his existence, he understood the meaning of fear. Instead of aiming his fire at the bound demon, he slung it at one of the shadows. Flames consumed it, and a void opened under its feet. A vortex formed around it, sucking it deeper into the red glow below. It fell back into Hell, leaving scorch marks on the carpet to testify to its presence.

A surprised yelp escaped her lips just before the other shadow swung its thick tail. She managed to jump to the side, avoiding the venom-tipped stinger but not the powerful girth of the appendage. It caught her squarely in the gut and hurled her through a wall into the next room.

Rage fueled his fire like never before. He unleashed it at the demon that attacked her, but the beast rolled out of its path. The bound demon in the skin-suit retreated to its brother and blocked the hallway, preventing Vassago from reaching Anjali. A third shadow loomed in the recesses behind them.

His throat tightened. He'd been told one Skinwalker had escaped, not four. What the bloody hell was going on here? Pale blue flames pulsated at his fingertips. When he got done with these demons, someone in Hell was next on his list.

The sound of ripping fabric filled the hall, and a dark tunnel appeared behind the third demon. Wind whipped Will's hair into his face. His feet started sliding forward as if the tunnel was some kind of inter-dimensional vacuum. It sucked the three demons into it. He grabbed the nearest doorframe and held on for dear life.

A limp figure slid along the floor in the dim light, slipping closer and closer to the tunnel. Anjali.

He forgot his fire and directed his energy to his muscles. When he released the doorframe, his feet stumbled backwards under the pull of the vacuum. His legs alone wouldn't keep the two of them from following the demons into God-knew-where. A groan rumbled in his chest as he pulled his favorite jacket off. It blew into the tunnel like a piece of paper caught in a storm.

A soft moan pulled at his heart over the loud rush of wind. Anjali's body continued to inch toward the blackness. He stopped fighting the suction and let it carry him between her and the opening. Then he unfurled his wings.

His arms curled around her limp body, scooping her up off the floor while his legs and wings fought to resist the incessant tugging that wanted to plunge them into the darkness. He gritted his teeth together. *Not without a fight, assholes.* They wouldn't get their hands on her if he had anything to say about it. A new surge of strength raced through his body, and he managed to add a few more feet between them and the hole.

Wood splintered around him, slicing tiny cuts into his skin. The howling wind made his eardrums throb. Dust filled his mouth, and the muscles in his legs and wings began to tremble under the force of the suction. As much as he hated to resort to this, he closed his eyes and muttered a silent prayer to the one being who had the power to destroy him or save him. The same being who had cast him out of Heaven and sentenced him to an eternity on this plane of existence. God.

The prayer left a bitter taste in his mouth as soon as he let it fly up. He lowered his head and shielded Anjali with his wings from the increased debris. The soles of his shoes dug holes into the carpet as the vacuum slowly tugged them backwards. He closed his eyes and accepted his fate.

Then, as quickly as it appeared, the rift sealed itself. Vassago tumbled forward, nearly crushing the human in his arms. He rolled over into his back and listened for the quiet pounding of her heart.

When he saw the shallow rise and fall of her chest, he pulled her close to him and tucked her head under his chin. Relief washed over him. She was still alive. He almost laughed at himself. Here he was, a fallen angel, a divine being who had once looked upon the face of God, and the mere tickle of her breath on his skin brought him more joy than he'd felt in centuries.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up, ending his moment of bliss. Instead of sensing demons, he felt the presence of another enemy. He pulled Anjali into a corner and wrapped his wings around her, hiding her from the blinding white light that floated up the staircase.

"Hello, Vassago." He could almost hear the smirk in her voice as the light took the shape of a woman's body. "Having a little trouble with demons?"

"Sraosha," he growled. "What are you doing here?"

Angelic laughter was supposed to resemble music, but hers sent a jolt through his body as if he collided with a power line. "Doing what I always do. Taking the souls of the deceased to their final destination."

The light dimmed around her, allowing him a glimpse of her face. Perhaps it was a good thing she let the light conceal her when she gathered souls. The bright light described by most people who'd had a near death experience was her presence. When she revealed herself, the hollow black eyes always caught his attention. They marred the otherwise pale beauty of her face.

He tightened his hold around Anjali. "You seem to be busy lately."

Sraosha flicked her nearly white hair back. "It's sometimes good for a girl to feel wanted, even if it is collecting the souls of humans who've been skinned alive. They seem so grateful to know..." Her pink lips curled up into a predator's grin. "Peace."

"Glad to know you're still useful."

"I'm always useful. The minute a human's born, I add them to my list." The flat black discs fell on Anjali. "Getting a little fond of one?"

"Piss off, Sraosha. You can't have her."

Another peal of laughter made his gut clench. "Every human in this world will eventually come to me, and you can't do anything to stop it." She reached her hand out toward Anjali, but Vassago sliced his wing through the air with the force of a guillotine.

"Don't you dare lay a finger on her." One touch was all the Angel of Death needed to capture her soul.

A golden brow arched in silent anger. "You dare deny me what's rightfully mine?"

"Remember who you work for. Nothing belongs to you. You're just His minion."

“And if you had just learned to nod your head when you were told to do something, you’d still be in Heaven instead of existing among these mortals.” She took a step back and cocked her head to the side. “But maybe you like them. Maybe you like them a little too much.”

“Don’t you have other things to do besides taunt a Fallen?” The way her gaze lingered on his demon hunter had him alternating between wanting to fly away to a safe place and wanting to claw Sraosha’s eyes out.

“I have other souls to collect.” She leaned closer to them.

“Not hers.” Fire flowed through his veins. He couldn’t kill another angel, but he could sure leave her a broken mass of feathers.

Her lips parted, revealing two rows of pearly white fangs. “Are you so sure? Did you even notice that she’s bleeding?”

Something warm dripped on his hand, and he felt his way up to the sticky mat forming in Anjali’s hair. Fear gripped his heart, and he wished he’d learned the healing arts from Raphael before he’d gotten kicked out of Heaven.

“Don’t worry so much, Vassago. She’s not on my list tonight.” Sraosha stood, and the white light surrounded her once again. “But she is on my list.”

The Angel of Death vanished in an intense pulse of brightness, leaving him alone with the injured human in his arms.

Chapter Six

The sound of sirens pulled Vassago back to reality. One of the neighbors must have heard the battle and called the cops. Once they saw the puddle of gore downstairs, they'd shoot first and ask questions later. Time to disappear.

He knew his glamour would hide him, but he'd never tried to conceal a human before. In truth, he'd never cared enough about one to hide her or take her with him. The thought chilled him. Maybe Sraosha was right about him getting a little too fond of Anjali.

Footsteps pounded on the pavement outside. His glamour extended over her, warping the air around them. Then he carried her to the window and took flight over the chaotic streets of Harlem. Down below, the people scurried around like ants, paying no attention to him or the demon hunter in his arms. A few flaps of his wings carried them above the thin clouds.

During the whole trip, she didn't stir, not even to shiver when the air grew cold around them. The only positive thing he noticed was that the bleeding from her head wound seemed to have staunched itself by the time he hovered outside her apartment. He juggled her in his arms and slid the one window without a lock open.

He'd entered her apartment numerous times before, but this time, fear tempered his actions. He laid her on the richly colored bedding, being careful not to soil the covers with the congealing blood. If rearranging her pantry sent her into a fit, he could only image how she'd react to any stains. Once he dampened a washcloth in the bathroom, he returned to her and began the slow process of cleaning her matted hair.

She stirred, and her eyelids fluttered open. "Will?"

"Yes?" He resisted the urge to kiss her lips and taste every sweet essence of her life.

"What happened?"

"You hit your head." He'd tell her about the extra demons in the morning after he'd had a chance to find out a bit more information.

"Oh." She nestled closer to him and pressed her soft curves against the hard planes of his body.

Warmth pooled in his groin. He clenched his jaw. Talk about an inopportune moment to have desire seize control of his body. She was injured—barely even conscious—but thoughts of lying next to her and slowly coaxing her to an orgasm filled his mind. Had he really been around humans so much that their baser nature had tainted him?

Soft fingers traced his cheeks. He glanced down at her and saw concern on her face. "You're hurt."

"Not nearly as bad as you." He tried to push her away, but she wove her fingers into his hair and held tightly.

"You saved me from the Skinwalkers."

"I promised I wouldn't let any harm come to you, but so far, I've done a poor job."

She shook her head. "I'm the one who followed you when you told me not to."

Only the slight slurring of her words reminded him she wasn't playing with a full deck. Otherwise, she sounded as coherent as she normally did, which helped ease some of his worry. "Maybe you'll learn to listen to me from now on."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't hunt demons if I didn't enjoy the thrill of playing with dangerous things." Her eyelids lowered to the sex kitten level just before her lips brushed against his.

Heaven never felt this blissful. Ambrosia never tasted this sweet, and sin never tempted him the way she did. He savored the delicate contact of their kiss, unsure where to take it. None of the other women had been bold enough to kiss his mouth, even when he'd taken them to the brink of ecstasy. How could one simple gesture between two people shatter his perception of reality?

She pulled away with a sigh of contentment and licked her lips. "You taste good."

The corners of his mouth twitched. She almost seemed too innocent for all the naughty things that ran through his mind. "Like what?"

"Chocolate caramel ice cream." Her eyelids slipped lower, and her arms relaxed around him.

"Perhaps you're just dreaming." He spread a towel under her head and lowered her back on the pillows.

"Figures," she mumbled and drifted off to sleep.

He sat on the edge of the bed and watched for an unknown amount of time. He soaked in the tiny details of her face, from the way her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks to the small scar along her jaw. The rise and fall of her chest remained deep and slow, and he couldn't find any signs of distress in her expression. Just the dreamy half-smile that remained on her lips after their kiss.

The clatter of crystal from the next room pulled him from his obsessive observation. He jumped to his feet and crept to the door. Fire gathered his hands.

"Relax, Vassago," a familiar voice said from the darkness. "It's just me." The air rippled around the source of the voice, and Caim stretched his wings, causing a table with picture frames on it to wobble. "Oops, sorry. I forget how small human dwellings can be."

Vassago leaned against the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

"Lucifer sent me to check on you."

"Uh-huh," he said with a nod. "More like he's hoping I don't spill the beans about the four Skinwalkers that got loose."

“So you know about that, huh?” The other Fallen angel stared at the floor and scratched the back of his head.

“Kind of hard to miss them when they’ve ganged up on you.” He moved to the couch and indicated Caim should sit before he broke something. “What’s going on down there?”

“I wish I knew.” He sat with a sigh, taking care not crush his wings. The damn fool was far too vain about them. “I was hoping you might be able to give me some answers since you’re in this realm.”

“I’m probably more in the dark about this than you are. Five days ago, I received a message from Lucifer telling me to find an escaped Skinwalker. Not four—one. Then I hear rumors from Bareth that the demon didn’t escape, but was kidnapped. And now I find there’s more missing than even the boss is willing to tell me. Imagine how I feel.”

Caim leaned forward and glanced around as if he was trying to make sure no one was listening in on them. “What to know what I’ve heard?”

“Information would make my job a bit easier. I hate having all these run-ins with Sraosha when she comes to collect the souls of the victims.”

“The boss man’s pissed off because someone in this realm found a way to open a rift between here and Hell. Whoever it was, ripped open a portal right in the middle of the containment units and took the Skinwalkers.”

“Ripped open a portal?” The memory of the way the black vacuum appeared this evening and sucked the demons through it played over again in his mind. “Did it cause a storm?”

“Storm is putting it lightly. We’ve been rounding up escapees since it happened. As far as we know, only the Skinwalkers crossed over.”

“Any clues about who or what did it?” He strolled across the room and began righting the knocked over picture frames. He had enough problems to deal with without having Anjali up in arms because someone disrupted the order of her home.

“None, and that’s what really has a stick up Lucifer’s ass. He hates being challenged, and whoever opened the rift makes him look like an incompetent warden.”

A chuckle escaped from Vassago’s lips. He could only imagine how the Brightest Star reacted to his tarnished reputation. “So why did he send you if he’s trying to cover this up?”

“That’s part of the problem. Apparently, someone upstairs caught wind of it, and they want this taken care of ASAP, or they’re sending in their own infantry.”

“Ouch.” He rubbed his cheek as if it had been slapped. The last thing he wanted was a bunch of holier than thou art angels tripping into his territory. “You know, I would appreciate some extra help.”

“Believe me, I’d love a vacation from Hell, but we’re too busy down there at the moment.”

“Then how about some extra ammo?” He pointed to the onyx hilt without a blade that hung from Caim’s belt.

The other Fallen covered it with both hands. “No way. You’re not getting my sword. I earned this baby.”

“Do you think you can bring me another one similar to it? It will make catching those Skinwalkers a bit easier, if you know what I mean.”

“You’ve been itching to get your hands on a celestial sword ever since you lost yours.”

“And I was pretty good with one, if I remember correctly.” He leaned against the wall. If he played his cards right, he’d get what he wanted and make it seem like it was someone else’s idea. “If Lucifer wants me to nip this problem in the bud, you’d think he give me all the assistance I needed.”

A whoosh of air left Caim’s lips in a low whistle. “You know how to put me in an awkward position.”

“I’m not the one who sent you.”

Caim remained quiet for a moment. *Good. That means he’s actually using his brain for once.* “I’ll see what I can finagle. In the meantime, you’d better get on the ball. It’s getting a bit uncomfortable for those of us who are stuck down there.”

“Will?” a sleepy voice called from the bedroom.

Both of the men froze. Caim’s eyes flickered to Vassago, and a slow grin stretched his mouth. “Busy playing with humans?”

“No.” It wasn’t a total lie, at least not yet. He’d restrained his desires so far. “She’s able to find the Skinwalkers in their human disguises.”

“Is there someone with you?” Anjali’s shadow wavered in the bed.

“Lay down. I don’t want you to fall and hurt yourself.” He pulled the door closed and whispered to Caim, “Get me a sword, and I’ll have the Skinwalkers taken care of in twenty-four hours.”

“Sure.” The other Fallen still wore his silly grin as he crossed the room to the open window. “And by the way, just because you feel a little protective of this human doesn’t make you a Guardian Angel or something. You are what you are, and there’s nothing you can do to change that.”

Hollowness filled his chest. He’d accepted his fate a millennia ago, but he still felt the emptiness of being cast out. The closest he’d come to feeling whole again was a few hours ago when she’d kissed him. “I’m not trying to change anything.”

“And they call me stubborn.” The air rippled around Caim, and he disappeared from view.

Vassago opened the door and managed to catch Anjali as she fell out of bed. “I thought I told you to stay put.”

“I heard you talking to someone.” Her bottom lip jutted out in a pout, and he ached to catch it between his teeth and nibble it until it appeared fat and swollen from his kisses.

“You were dreaming.” He pulled back the covers and lifted her back onto the mattress.

She wrapped her arms around his chest and pressed her ear against where his heart beat. “Yes, I suppose this is a dream. You wouldn’t be this nice to me if I was awake.”

“Maybe.” His voice sounded hoarse, like he’d been shouting into a blizzard all night.

“My head hurts. I hate being sick.”

He couldn’t stop the chuckle that resulted. “What do you want me to do about it?”

She sighed. “Just hold me until I go back to sleep.”

“Gladly.” He’d hold for the rest of her life if she asked for it. Sraosha’s taunt played over and over again in his ears, though. Anjali was human, and she’d eventually die. And when she did, he feared he’d go to his creator and beg for an end to his own existence.

He tightened his arms around her small frame and tried to focus whatever healing abilities he had to the knot on the back of her head. The effort exhausted him, and his eyelids grew heavy. His wings draped over them like a protective cocoon, and he fell asleep with the woman he knew was too dangerous to love in his arms.

Chapter Seven

When Anjali opened her eyes, the dim blue light of dawn glowed through her windows and hit the dark blanket wrapped around her which burst into a prism of colors. Iridescent shades of indigo and gold danced across the black surface. She lifted her hand and felt the silky brush of feathers.

The blanket shuddered around her. *Am I still dreaming?* She reached out and stroked the feathers again to make sure they were real.

“Be careful, Anjali,” a deep voice rumbled under her. “They’re more sensitive than you think.”

She jumped back only to find her body restrained by a pair of steely arms. “Will, what’s going on?”

His laughter tickled her ear. “Maybe you’re still dreaming.”

Of course I have to be dreaming. Here I am, wrapped in the arms of the most frustratingly gorgeous man I’ve ever met, and my clothes are still on. It’s not a dream—it’s a nightmare. She lowered her head and listened to the steady beating of his heart. It soothed her like a lullaby.

“Why are there feathers in my dream?”

More laughter. The feathers retreated from her line of sight. “What are you talking about?”

Now he’s playing games with me. She lifted her head and tried to find what he’d done with them. The only thing she discovered was an infuriatingly cocky grin on his face. Heat crawled along the surface of her skin, but she couldn’t tell if anger or lust fueled it. “What did you do with them?”

“It’s just a dream.”

Was it? Everything around seemed so familiar—her room, her bed, her incense that lingered in the air from the stand next to her bed. Everything except the man laying under her whose thumbs massaged tiny circles into the flesh of her arms, and clouded her mind with naughty thoughts.

“Fine. If it’s just a dream, then I can do this without consequences.” She leaned forward and kissed him. The heat she experienced before seemed more like a match compared to the bonfire that rolled over her skin now. His fingers dug into her arms, and warning bells went off in her head. This wasn’t a dream.

She tried to pull back, but one of his hands cupped the back of her head and held her in place. His teeth caught her bottom lip and gently nibbled on it, sending tiny spasms of pleasure straight to her aching sex. Her mouth opened in a muffled gasp, and his tongue swept in. Each sensual stroke dragged her deeper into his embrace. She gave up trying to fight him.

He must’ve sensed her surrender because he rolled her over onto her back. The weight of his body pressed along hers, feeding the growing hunger building up inside her. She arched her hips and found the

hard ridge that teased the place between her legs. Screw the fact he was dangerous and bordered on being a stalker at times. She wanted him to fuck her into oblivion. She pried her hands between them and unzipped his jeans.

He broke off their kiss and pinned her hands above her head. “No, not yet.”

“Will, what the hell—?”

He silenced her with his warm, sexy mouth that knew how to melt her anger with a few flicks of his tongue. When she stopped trying to free her wrists from his hands, his lips travelled lower, tasting the hollows of her neck and making her moan in pleasure. Her panties had already become soaked by the time he reached her collarbone. She writhed under him and wished to feel his skin next to hers instead of the layers of clothes that separated them.

“Why do you fight me, little one?” His grip tightened around her wrists. He nipped her flesh and followed the sting with a soothing lick with the flat of his tongue.

Her breath came out in ragged pants. Dear God, she wanted him. Her whole body longed for his touch, from the slick folds between her legs to the pebbled nipples of her breasts. “Why do you tease me?”

“Because I can.” He brought her wrists together under one hand so the other could cup her breast. He rolled the sensitive peak between his thumb and finger.

Another jolt of painful pleasure rocked her body and made her forget the sharp retort she’d prepared for him. Yes, he knew exactly how to please her and make her beg, and part of her hated to admit that one man could reduce her to a babbling mass. The rest of her seemed content to let him use her body as he wanted so long as he continued to evoke the blissful sensations that blurred the edges of her consciousness.

“Surrender to me, and I can take you places you never dreamed of.”

“What are you? Some kind of incubus?” *Some kind of delicious incubus that makes any other man I’ve been with seem like a half-witted teenager in bed.* Between his mouth and his fingers, he had the tension coiling her in womb, begging for release, and he hadn’t even touched her below the waist. She could only imagine what it would feel like when his fingers grazed her sensitive clit, or when he plunged his cock deep inside her.

“If I were an incubus, we’d both be naked and exhausted by now.” He sucked her earlobe and held it there between his teeth while his tongue swept over it. Her breath froze, and her body tensed under his. “They only prey on weak-willed women.”

“Let go of me, and I’ll—” She caught herself before she told him she’d do whatever he wanted. What had he reduced her to? A begging bimbo who only craved sex?

The amused glint in his eyes increased her disgust. She fought against him, trying to slip a fist free or aim a knee to his groin. Anything to let him know she wouldn’t give into him that easily.

His weight pressed her deeper into the mattress and prevented her from moving any of her limbs. He laughed at her like she was child throwing a temper-tantrum. “You’ll what?”

Her gaze locked with his, and her throat lodged in her throat. How could he be so beautiful and so cruel at the same time?

“You don’t like to be dominated, little Anjali? Is that it?” A series of feather-light kisses traced her lips, contrasting with the way he held her prisoner in her own bed. “You fear losing control of things.”

“No,” she lied before catching his mouth and sliding her tongue into its warm recesses. He tasted like pure sex, a powerful aphrodisiac that went straight to her head like a fine cognac. Now she finally understood the meaning of the phrase “drunk off kisses”. She’d gladly drink him in all day.

His hand slipped from her wrists and cradled the back of her neck. His erection strained against the fabric of his underwear as he ground his hips into hers, mimicking the motions she’d gladly welcome if they’d been unclothed. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one affected by the mad chemistry between them. And it was madness, after all. What would someone like him want with a measly human like her?

A snap sounded above them, and when she opened her eyes, her jaw dropped at the sight of the shiny black wings that appeared overhead. They surrounded her like a second pair of arms, grazing her cheek with their silky feathers. She blinked a few times, wondering if she was dreaming again. They seemed too exquisite to be real. She reached out and stroked them from where they sprouted from the middle of his back all the way to their tips.

A groan rumbled through his chest. He pulled his lips away from hers. Tension strained the lines of his face, but a dim red fire glowed from the depths of his eyes. “Anjali, once we’re done with our other business, I plan on taking you to bed and not letting you leave for a week.”

“Who says we have to wait? I’m sure a few hours won’t make much of a difference.” There. She’d said the words aloud. She told him in no uncertain terms that if he wanted to fuck her senseless, she’d welcome it. She ran her fingers along his wings once again to prove her point.

His eyes shut so tightly, crow’s feet gathered around their corners. His breath hissed through his teeth. “Please don’t tempt me any more than you already do.”

Her heart sank into the pit of her stomach. He was going to get her all worked up and then walk away, claiming to be some kind of noble creature who had more self-restraint than her, a dark angel with sudden surge of morality. “Tell me what you are, Will.”

“I’m a man,” he replied. “That’s all you need to know for now.”

Was it really that simple? That he was a man, and she was a woman? Was that why they fit together so well?

Some of his weight lifted from her body, and his kisses turned chaste compared to earlier. Now he was the one resisting. It was coming to an end, and something deep inside starting screaming like a spoiled three-year-old.

She reached out to pull him back to her, to finish what they'd started. His jeans fell around his ankles when he stood, giving her an unimpeded view of his erection. Without any hesitation, she lowered his underwear, fell to her knees, and drew his cock into her mouth.

Will moaned, and she knew she had him where she wanted him. A slow smile curled her lips upward. At last, she'd found his weakness and successfully turned the tables in her favor. What man didn't enjoy a good blowjob? Now she had him by the balls, literally and figuratively.

Anjali took him deeper into the back of her throat. Her tongue traced the thick vein on the underside of his cock, earning another appreciative moan. Once again, she wondered if this was madness, but she needed to feel him, to taste him, to reassure herself he wanted her as much as she wanted him. But it went deeper than that. Sex would do more than satisfy the ache building inside her. It would reassure her that she was alive in the face of all the death she'd witnessed last night.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and tilted her head up so she could see his face. His eyes appeared hooded, like he was half-asleep, but a muscle rippled along his jaw. "You're playing a dangerous game, Anjali."

She chuckled and increased her suction. Perhaps it was a game, but she refused to lose. She began to swirl her tongue around the base of his shaft, slowly licking her way back up to the crown. When she reached the end, she released him. "I can always stop."

"Don't." The word sounded like a pained grunt, and he tightened his grip on her hair, pulling her back to him.

She took him in her mouth again, relishing the saltiness of the pre-come that pearled on the tip. While she worked her lips up and down his cock, she watched his reaction. The smoldering glow in his eyes made her pulse race. Could he really desire her as much as she did him?

The heat of his skin spread throughout her body and settled in the pit of her stomach. His wings grazed against her cheeks in a gentle caress, so different from the firm way he guided the movements of her head. But more than just a physical connection was forming between them. As she listened to his murmured encouragements and inhaled his spicy scent, a strange emotion seized control of her. She feared losing him.

The realization made her gasp.

For a split second, she paused and met his gaze. His eyes widened, and a hiss filled the silence between them. Then he hauled her up to feet and threw her back on the bed. His hands fumbled for her zipper. "I want more than just your mouth."

"Good, because I want your cock elsewhere." She couldn't get her pants off fast enough. A sensual fire flowed through her veins, making her sex throb with each beat of her heart. He would give her what she craved. She would ride the waves of ecstasy in his arms, to reaffirm her humanity as she came under the canopy of his wings.

The click of her deadbolt turned her blood to ice.

Will jumped from her bed and threw the covers over her. His glorious wings snapped together behind his back and shrank until they disappeared while he yanked his jeans up. He hid in a corner, ready to pounce on whoever the intruder may be.

Logan entered her apartment like he always did until he turned around and saw her. His eyes widened. "Anjali, are you hurt?" A few heartbeats later, he sat on the edge of her bed. "What happened?"

"She got whacked pretty bad by one of the Skinwalkers." Will emerged from the shadows looking as put together as GQ model. "I've been sitting with her all night to make sure she's okay."

Liar. Just a minute ago, you were about to hump me like a sex-crazed frat boy, and before that, you were ready to come in my mouth. She inwardly fumed at his noble act for a second before she caught what he said. "What do you mean, one of the Skinwalkers?"

Logan combed his fingers through the rat's nest of her hair. A flush crept up into her cheeks. How many of the tangles were due to her actions this morning? "You have quite a goose-egg there, not to mention a collection of dried blood. Maybe I should call Jen and have her check you out."

She closed her hand around his cell as soon as he pulled it from his pocket. "No, there's no need to wake her up and drag her over here this early in the morning. Besides, I'm not bleeding now. I'm awake and making sense, I hope."

"You are."

"Then I'll be fine." She squeezed his hand and turned her attention to Will. "Back to my question."

"There were four last night." He strode out of her room in a way that told her that's all she'd learn from him.

"Four?" She hopped out of bed, and walls wavered in front of her. Logan's arms kept her from landing face-first on the floor. Her stomach rolled. *Talk about a blow to the head. Or maybe my blood still hasn't returned from between my legs.*

She heard a rustle, and two images of Will's face danced in front of her before they merged into one. "I warned you earlier about getting out of bed too quickly."

That's why you were more than happy to pin me to mattress earlier, huh?

"That settles it. I'm calling Jen." Logan started dialing the familiar number.

"Give me a second." Will reached behind her head and ran his fingers along the tender bump. He closed his eyes while his lips moved silently. His fingertips massaged the injury. A bright light filled her mind, making her wince at first but slowly filling her vision like the sun on a cloudless day. The pain and dizziness melted away under its heat.

She lifted her chin and pulled his hands back until she could cover them with her own. The light faded, leaving goose bumps on her skin. "Thank you."

“I’m a bit rusty, but at least I haven’t lost my touch.” The corner of his mouth rose in a bit of self-depreciating humor. “Would you like some coffee?”

She stood and didn’t waver this time, even with Logan still having a death grip on her. Her friend glanced back and forth between the two of them. He wanted to ask her questions, but not in front of Will.

Her hands fell to her sides. “Coffee sounds great. I’d love a—”

“Triple shot skinny mocha and lots of whipped cream on the top,” he finished for her. “I know. Anything for you, Logan?”

“No.” The lone word almost came out as a growl. His hand tightened around her waist.

Lovely. Now Logan’s acting all psycho male. She offered Will a shrug. Hopefully by the time he came back with coffee, she would have calmed her friend down. That is, if she could put her own mind at ease. When it came to Will Vassago, she wasn’t sure which end was up.

Chapter Eight

The chilly morning air soothed Vassago's overheated skin and helped ease some of the throbbing pain in his balls. It stunned him that one simple human could be both his own private Hell and his closest thing to Heaven. The taste of her skin lingered in his mouth, as did the heaviness of her breasts in his hands. He loved the way her slender body responded to his touch, the way her hips rolled under his, the way she gasped when he discovered a new erogenous zone, the way her mouth wrapped around his cock.

He paused in the middle of the sidewalk and fought back a groan. Was this some kind of divine punishment? To make him crave the one human who knew how to resist him?

Someone jostled him as they passed, jerking him from his mental whining. Even though the sun had barely risen half an hour ago, the streets of Manhattan already hummed with activity. He pushed thoughts of Anjali from his mind and merged with the flow of pedestrian traffic.

Her favorite coffee shop was less than three blocks from her apartment. Over the past two years, he'd watched her make an almost daily trip there and order the same thing. She oversaw the entire process of her drink manufacturing with the eye of a hawk. Several baristas had been reduced to tears because of her criticisms of how long they let the espresso brew or the quality of their foam. But, on the other hand, she always left a nice tip when they got it right.

The moment he entered the door, the two girls behind the counter looked up at him and giggled nervously. One even spilled the steamed milk in her pitcher. But their reaction didn't provide the ego boost he usually got. Only one woman's reaction mattered anymore, and that realization ate away at his gut like bad Mexican food chased with homemade moonshine. When it came his time to order, he leaned on the counter and said, "Anjali would like her usual."

The girl's eyes widened at the same time her smile faded. He laughed inwardly. *Yes, that's right. I'm taken by none other than the woman you call the dragon lady.* "Anything else?"

"Eight shots of espresso in a single cup."

"Eight?"

He nodded. Between the caffeine rush and the further erosion to the lining of his stomach, maybe he'd resist the urge to climb back into bed with Anjali until they captured the Skinwalkers. He stood back and waited for the girls to fill his order. Satisfied they'd made the mocha to her standards, he left with the two cups in hand.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up the second he stepped outside. Someone was watching him. Another angel to be precise. He knew their signature as well his own name. The question was who? And which side were they on?

He weaved through the endless stream of people clogging the sidewalk, trying to pinpoint his spy. A gust of wind whooshed past his face, and he looked up. The air wavered above him. He followed the almost invisible currents to an empty courtyard. "Show yourself," he ordered when they stilled.

The air shifted like the screen of an old TV that relied on rabbit ears to get a reception. It flashed and swayed before showing the image of a scowling angel with white wings. His red hair fell past his shoulders, and two sword hilts hung from his belt.

Vassago recognized him immediately and mirrored his expression. "Puriel, it must be torture to sully yourself here on Earth."

"Shut up, you arrogant Fallen," the Angel of Fire growled. His wings shrank behind his back. "I'm here on divine business."

"Spying on me?" He sat on a small concrete bench and set Angali's cup next to him. "I thought God knew and saw everything."

"No, I was sent to clean up your mess. It hasn't escaped Him that four demons escaped from Hell last week."

"And He sends you to do the work of the Fallen?" He crossed his arms and made a *tsking* sound with his tongue. "I can only imagine how pissed off you must feel to be demoted like that."

Puriel drew both hilts from his belt, and blades of red fire materialized from their ends. "What I wouldn't give to slice your head from your body."

Will took a sip of his espresso and stared down his adversary. Only one being could kill him, and as far as he knew, God hadn't issued a death warrant for him yet. "When did you start carrying around two swords?"

The angel's upper lip curled into a snarl as the blades retreated, leaving them empty hilts. It was only then that Vassago noticed they weren't a matching set. "I've come to deliver a message to you."

"I'm listening."

"God wants these demons returned to Hell as soon as possible."

"As does Lucifer, which is why I'm on the case." He tried to remain calm. If Puriel's presence was any indication, God was getting a little impatient. "I have a lead, but taking down four Skinwalkers is not an easy task. I only managed to send one back last night."

"And three more humans died in the process."

He shrugged, figuring playing an asshole was better than admitting he cared. "Regretful, I know, but my resources are limited."

“So I’ve noticed.” A look of pure revulsion flickered across his face before he looked away and held out one of the hilts. “I was told to give you this.”

“A sword of my very own? How generous.” He remained where he stood and continued to sip his coffee instead of taking it.

A snicker broke the silence. Puriel turned it over into the palm of his hand. “Take a closer look, Fallen. Recognize this?”

Vassago’s lungs refused to work for a moment, and the cup almost slipped from his fingers. The twisting vine design on the hilt called to him like a long lost friend. His hands recalled the way it used to fit perfectly in them. His sword. The one that had been ripped from him as he was cast out of Heaven. “Are you trying to tempt me?”

Another snicker. “Real angels don’t stoop to temptation. Trust me, I wouldn’t be offering it to you unless God ordered it. Personally, I’d love to see you fail. Then I get to come in and handle things my way.”

“Like you did at Sodom and Gomorrah? I think the people of New York have suffered enough fire and destruction this decade.”

He snatched the hilt from the Angel of Fire and reveled in the familiar weight in this hand. How many millennia had passed since he held it last? He set his coffee cup aside, no longer caring about the sweet bitterness of the espresso. Fire flowed through his veins, and he directed it through the hilt. The cool blue flame sprouted and formed a blade. A rush of excitement set his nerves on edge and made his skin tingle. He’d almost forgotten what it felt like to wield a divine sword.

“You have three days to find those demons and return them. Otherwise, I get to have my fun.”

“Only if God orders it.” Vassago pulled back his celestial fire, and the blade retreated. “It must be tough being a yes man.”

“I choose to obey orders. I’m not forced to do anything I don’t want to do.”

“Just as I chose not to obey orders and had the insight to question authority.”

A cold smile crept up on Puriel’s face. “And that’s how you ended up here instead of remaining in paradise.”

“One man’s paradise is another man’s Hell.” He tucked the hilt into his belt, savoring the way it dug into the flesh of his waist. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to work. There are Skinwalkers to catch, after all.”

Anjali stood in the shower and let the hot water pound on her aching body. In addition to the knot on the back of her head, she discovered enough bruises on her back to impersonate a Rorschach card. Maybe she could convince Will to rub his magical fingers along it and get rid of the pain like he did with the

pounding in her head. Of course, that meant he's have to touch her naked skin, and she knew all too well where that might lead.

At least Logan seemed satisfied that she'd live. He'd hovered over her for at least fifteen minutes, going on and on about this new vampire that was sucking victims dry all over the city. She only half-listened. Vampires were his problem. She was too busy dealing with demons that skinned people alive.

He finally left when she announced she was taking a shower. They were friends, but not that kind of friends. Relief crossed his face when she told him she'd give him a call later today and update him on her condition. Big worrywart.

Getting rid of Logan had only been part of her problems. The second one involved the continue ache between her legs. Leave it to Will Vassago to get her hot and bothered and then not follow through. The stream of water across her sensitive nipples lacked the stimulation of his fingers and tongue. The tension deep in her womb demanded some form of relief.

She slipped a finger between her legs and sucked in a breath through her teeth as it grazed her clit. Her body almost crumpled when she repeated the action. A groan worked its way up from her core. At this rate, it wouldn't take her very long to come. The image of the lustful red glow in his eyes danced before her, like he was observing her from nearby and approving of her actions.

She increased her pressure and whispered his name. Her hand seemed like a poor substitute for his touch. She closed her eyes and pictured him kneeling between her legs, his lips sucking gently on her clit while he watched her in amusement. Would his tongue delve into her pussy as he played with her? Keeping her palm grinding against her sensitive nub, she plunged a finger into her cunt and bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out. A second finger followed, gliding in and out of her, making her wish it were his cock.

Why did she want him so much? Why did she wish he were standing here in the shower next her, performing these actions that left her tense and breathless, pressing his lips to her neck while whispering naughty things in her ear?

A few strokes later, her sex clenched, and something inside her shattered. Her knees wobbled. His name broke free from her lips in a hoarse gasp. She clung to the soap dish to keep from slipping to the bottom of the tub as waves of pleasure crashed into her consciousness. The intensity of the orgasm almost blinded her, and all yet her thoughts still centered on the one man who'd taken her to edge and left her hanging. She fought the truth that made her want to scream in frustration. Will Vassago had gotten under her skin in the worst possible way.

The water became icy cold, and she turned off the shower. When she pulled back the curtain, Will stood against the bathroom door with a cat that ate the canary grin on his face. A sharp cry echoed off the tile as she pulled the curtain over her body. "How long have you been standing there?"

“Long enough.” He took a step toward her and pushed a paper coffee cup in her direction. “And here I thought you just needed some caffeine for stimulation. If you wanted something different, all you had to do was ask.”

A flush seared her skin so that she almost welcomed the cold water that dripped from her hair. She yanked her bathrobe off its hook and wrapped it around her body as quickly as her trembling limbs would allow. “Fuck you.”

He laughed. “From the sounds of things, you want me to fuck you.”

She grabbed her mocha and held it between them. “If you don’t go back into the living room, I’m going to introduce your crotch to the extremely hot beverage in this cup.”

Instead of backing away, he closed the gap between them. “I can think of another hot wetness my cock would enjoy.” His finger hooked around the belt of her bathrobe.

Her heart hammered. Her mind screamed at her to make good with her threat, but her body refused to cooperate. The steamy air swirled around them, intensifying the scent of their desire. The ache reformed in her center. Why couldn’t she think straight around him?

His laughter tickled her cheek. “Later, my pet. First, we have demons to catch. Then maybe we can explore our more primal needs afterwards.”

A rush of cool air filled the bathroom as he opened the door and stepped outside.

Anjali wrapped her robe tighter around her shivering body. She could only imagine what his primal needs entailed, but her body leapt at the challenge. Sex would probably be anything but boring with him.

She closed her eyes and prayed for a distraction. What she got, she didn’t want. Images of the Skinwalkers invaded her consciousness and forced the air from her lungs. They were moving through the darkness. Their hunger made her stomach turn and her skin crawl. They were hunting.

Chapter Nine

Vassago stretched out on the couch and tried to slow his breathing. He'd somehow managed to keep his cool in the bathroom, even after he heard Anjali cry out his name when she came. Not that it was easy. He'd needed to lock down every muscle his body when he saw her slip her fingers into the one place his cock longed to enter. Was it possible to envy those fingers?

Needing distraction, his hand trailed back to his sword. Its return troubled him. Was God finally showing forgiveness? A half laugh tickled the back of his throat. Not likely. God would show all the mercy in the world for humans, but none for the angels. Or so he decreed, anyway. More than likely, the sword served as a wake-up call that he should get off his ass and find the demons. After all, that's what he did best—find things that wanted to stay hidden.

Anjali appeared at her bedroom door with her blue-black hair tumbling around her shoulders in damp waves. Her eyes narrowed. "You have your dirty shoes on my furniture."

He glanced down at the polished sheen of his Italian leather shoes and saw his reflection wink back at him. "They don't appear dirty to me."

She marched over with her arms ram-rod straight at her sides and shoved his feet off her couch. "They've still been outside and stepped in who knows what."

He laughed as he stood. Of course his little OCD human would be upset if something dirty got on her furniture. "Fine, I'll stand."

He appraised her clothing for the day—a fitted T-shirt that highlighted the curve of her breasts. A pair of baggy cargo pants. Athletic shoes perfect for running down demons. "Ready to resume hunting?"

She gathered her hair up into a ponytail. "Yes. The sooner I help you find your demons, the better."

He caught her chin with his finger and lifted her face until their eyes met. Her mouth tempted him far more than he cared to admit. "My thoughts exactly."

Those luscious dark pink lips parted in surprise, and a surge of self-satisfaction raced through him. Once they'd taken care of this problem, they'd have more than enough time to explore their mutual attraction, preferably in bed.

She jerked her head to the side. "Let's go."

"Where to?" Demons hated the sunlight almost as much as vampires, but in a city with over eight hundred miles of subway, they could find plenty of ways to travel without touching it.

"South of here, close to the Financial District as far as I can tell." She rubbed her temples.

“Had another vision?”

“More like it had me—for lunch. I feel like I’m connected with these demons, and I can’t shake them.”

He wanted to wrap her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right, but the crisp way she snatched her jacket off its hook told him that was the last thing she wanted. He followed her to the door. “We’ll have to take the subway.”

“What happened to your Audi?”

The corners of his mouth twitched. “I left it behind in Harlem. Judging by how badly your head was injured, I didn’t want to deal with traffic when I took you back home.”

She paused and cocked her head to the side. “How did you get me home then? I’m sure we must have caused a scene on the subway.”

“I chose the fastest and most immediately route at the time, but I won’t be repeating that now.”

“Flying?” Her voice wavered in the higher pitch, like she almost couldn’t believe she was asking the question.

He remained silent as he jogged down the stairs. The less she knew about him, the less complicated their relationship would be.

Anjali, on the other hand, could be far more stubborn than he first realized. She stood at the top of the stairs with her arms crossed. “I’m not moving until I get some answers.”

Vassago swore under his breath. She had him by the balls, and she knew it. Without her, he had no chance of finding the Skinwalkers in their human disguises. And if he didn’t find them and return them soon, Manhattan would be razed to the ground if Puriel had his way. The events of 9-11 would seem like child’s play compared to what the Angel of Fire was capable of doing. “Fine, I’ll answer some of them, but I refuse to shout up a stairwell to you.”

She traipsed down the stairs and joined him. “I’m glad we could reach a middle ground.”

They set off for the 86th Street station. About a block into their journey, she cleared her throat. “What exactly are you?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “What do you think I am?”

“Damn it, Will, I’m growing tired of this game. Why can’t you just answer my question?”

“Perhaps because you’re not the only person who belongs to a group that wishes to keep their organization secret.”

“But you already know about the Foundation. All I’m asking for is equal treatment.”

When he didn’t answer, a heavy sigh filled the silence between them. She took his hand and pulled him to a stop. The warmth of her skin sent a tingle straight to his gut. Memories of her face filled with desire flashed in front of him, and he resisted the urge to taste her lips again and distract her from the answer he wasn’t ready to give.

When he finally made eye contact with her, her brows knitted together in uncertainty. “I should know by now that certain things exist, whether I want to believe in them or not.” She chewed her lip for a few seconds before she asked, “Are you an angel?”

Her question shouldn’t have taken him off guard like it did. After all, this was Anjali, the same woman who could see him when he didn’t want to be seen, who dared touch him without permission. Why shouldn’t she be the first human to figure out what he was without him telling her? “In a sense, yes,” he replied and resumed walking.

Her giggles halted him. “I thought you were supposed to be good. You know, messengers of God and all that.” She approached him and ran her fingers through his hair. He bit back the moan that built up inside him. “Where’s your halo?”

He snatched her wrist and held it away from his head. Her questions revived an onslaught of memories he’d long forgotten. The pain of his exile. The taunts he endured from the others. His utter loneliness until he found a way to amuse himself with the humans around him. The bitterness seeped into his voice. “Just because I have wings doesn’t mean I have a halo. Not every angel is good, so get that image of a harp playing sissy in a white robe out of your mind.”

Her mouth flapped open like a fish’s, and he released her wrist. *Wonderful*. He’d finally shocked her into silence. The gleam in her eyes, however, told him her mind was still working at a mile a minute. “I thought all the Fallen Angels were condemned to Hell. You don’t smell like brimstone.”

“Anjali, my pet, haven’t you ever heard the expression, ‘Heaven doesn’t want me, and Hell’s afraid I’ll take over’?” He tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Hush. We have a train to catch.”

“This isn’t the end of this conversation, Will.” But she remained quiet until they boarded the Number Five train heading south. As it rocked side to side, she leaned her head on his shoulder. “At least I have some idea what I’m dealing with now.”

He wrapped his arm around her and enjoyed the peaceful moments the ride afforded them. Was this what it felt like to be a human in love? To feel a level of closeness to another soul just from a simple touch? Her acceptance warmed the hard pit in his chest and made it beat stronger. He had no idea what the future held for them, but for once, he was anxious to explore that possibility.

Anjali eased into Will’s arms, relishing how well she fit in them. For a brief moment, she forgot they were both freaks of nature. A demon hunter and a fallen angel. What an odd combination. But to her, they almost felt normal, like they could be any new couple on a subway train. Her heart thumped. Could she actually be falling for Will in more than just a sexual sense?

The scent of brimstone interrupted her happy delusions as they pulled into the Broadway-Nassau station. She tightened her hand around his. “Will, we need to get off here.”

A line appeared between his dark brows, but he nodded and followed her lead. When the train disappeared and the crowds thinned, he whispered in her ear, “You found them?”

She wrinkled her nose from the sting of sulfur. “Not exactly, but they’re close.” The scent grew stronger in the direction of the tunnel to the A-C trains. She focused her second sight as she tracked them. “How many am I looking for?”

“Three. I managed to send one back last night.”

“Why didn’t you tell me there was more than one?” She weaved past anyone slow enough to get in her way.

“I didn’t know there was more than one until they ambushed us last night.”

“So your boss has been withholding information from you?”

“In more ways than one.”

They reached the other platform, and she scanned the people milling around, looking for abnormal shadows on the walls or scorch marks on the ground. “It would be helpful if you shared what you knew with me.”

He lowered his voice so only she could hear him. “All I know is that someone opened a rift between worlds and took four of them.”

A shiver coursed through her veins. “Who would do such a thing?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Believe me, when I find the person responsible for this, I’ll have his head.”

Another shiver raced down her spine. The hard edge to his threat left little doubt in her mind that he’d carry it out. In her experience, most of the demons she dealt with were those that managed to sneak through a pre-existing portal. This incident had the makings of something far more sinister.

A train came through and exchanged the people in the station. She froze and waited to see if the scent vanished as the train pulled away. It didn’t. The Skinwalkers were still here, somewhere.

Across the tracks, her second sight zeroed in on a group of men. They sat on a bench near each other, not doing anything that attracted attention, but the rest of the people steered clear of them. The skin over their faces seemed to be stretched too tightly over the bones, distorting their features into hideous expressions. *Bingo!*

She touched Will’s chest and nodded in their direction when he turned to her. “See them?”

“How can you—?” His question broke off as he studied their appearance. A hunter’s smile spread across his lips. “Anjali, you are a marvel.”

She wanted to discuss a game plan on how to capture them without attracting too much attention, but he wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her to him, and kissed her in front of everyone around them. Unlike the slow, sensual kisses from this morning, this one was brief but strong enough to throw off her

equilibrium and leave her dazed. Then he released her and dashed toward the staircase that led to the other side, ignoring that catcalls he received from a few bystanders.

The platform wobbled in front of her, and she realized she was the one wobbling, not it. She reached for the wall to steady herself. *Damn, that man could kiss.* Then she remembered the demons across the tracks. Her half-insane angel would engage them in front of dozens of witnesses and possibly endanger their lives. *Idiot!*

She ran after him, hoping to catch him before he did something stupid. When she reached the opposite platform, she couldn't find him. Maybe she'd been wrong about his destination. Her heart still raced from the run up and down the stairs, but it kicked up a notch when one of the Skinwalkers looked up at her and contorted its borrowed features into a malicious grin. It stood and took a step toward her.

The air wavered around her, and the familiar wave of reassurance washed over her. Will was here, even though she couldn't see him. Fortunately, neither could the demon, who continued to creep toward her. Long claws broke through the flesh of its fingers as it prepared to attack.

The people on the platform instinctively backed away, but they stood close enough to get hurt should the Skinwalker shed his latest disguise. Despite the fact her lungs struggled for quick, short breaths, she shouted, "Back off!"

The demon paused and blinked at her as if no one had ever ordered it around like that. Then it lunged.

Anjali twisted to the side, hoping to avoid its claws. Instead, it froze like it had collided with an invisible wall. Its mouth hung agape like someone had just punched it in its stomach. She sucked in a cool breath and called on her magic. Will would need help fighting this one off.

A gaping hole illuminated by pale blue fire appeared in the Skinwalker's gut and raced to the outer edges like a flame consumes a piece of newspaper. A high-pitched wail filled the subway station, freezing everyone who heard it. A child cried as the blue flames licked away the remnants of the demon's face.

Pandemonium erupted less than a second later. People bolted for the stairs. A member of the stampede shoved her to the floor, making her lose her focus. The magic she'd gathered dissipated from the force of the blow. *Wonderful. We cause a scene, and I get new bruises.*

Two figures ran in the opposite direction. The other Skinwalkers. They hopped down to the tracks and ran into the darkness.

Her jaw tightened. Like hell she'd let them get away. She jumped to her feet and ran to the edge of the platform. A lump formed in her throat. Following them meant running into rats, trains and risking electrocution. *What kind of suicidal mission am I on?*

She glanced behind her at the last bystanders hustling up the stairs. Images of the victim in Harlem flashed in front of her eyes. If they didn't catch the demons soon, more people would die. She gathered her courage and jumped.

Chapter Ten

What the hell is she thinking? Vassago silently screamed as he watched Anjali teeter on the edge of the platform. Then she jumped.

His wings never appeared so quickly in his existence. He caught her just before she landed and carried her to a place where he knew she wouldn't be electrocuted. The glamour faded as his anger grew. "What are you trying to do?"

She whipped around. Her eyes focused directly on the pale blue glow of his sword. "When did you get that?"

"Answer my question first."

"The other two went this way."

He shoved past her and plunged deeper into the blackness of the tunnel. The sound of small footsteps behind him told him she was following him. "So you thought you'd take on both of them by yourself?"

"I could at least trap them until you came. You said yourself that you wanted to catch them. I didn't want to lose their trail."

A new surge of rage flowed through his veins. How could she be so careless with her life? Did she even understand what she was up against? "Go back to the platform."

"No. You're the one who hired me to help you find them, and I'm sticking around until the job is done."

He turned to her with half a mind of flying her back to her apartment and tying her to the bed until he got back. Instead, he almost found himself laughing at her pose. Her arms crossed over her breasts, and her chin raised in defiance. He should have known his little demon hunter wouldn't back down from a fight. "I think I can spot them now. Go back where it's safe, please."

His sincerity seemed to surprise her. She blinked a few times and relaxed her shoulders. A rat scurried by, and she flung herself into his arms with a squeal.

This time, he couldn't hold the laughter back. "Brave little Anjali will take on Skinwalkers, but she scared of a small rat?"

"There's nothing small about New York rats, thank you very much." She pushed him away with her lips pressed in a tight line.

"Maybe, but—" The sounds of scuffling behind him made his nerves stand on end. He tightened his grip on his sword as he tried to zero in on their location.

“Will, behind you,” she managed to shout before a rock hard wall tackled him. His sword rattled along the tracks when he hit the ground, landing just out of his reach. Above him, the Skinwalker licked its fangs. He braced his arms against the demon’s chest to keep from becoming its new chew toy.

“Off!” Anjali’s command punctuated a bolt of magic that collided with the demon and flung him backward into the stale, inky void.

Free of the demon-sized paperweight, Vassago scrambled to his feet and grabbed his sword hilt. A fresh blade of blue fire illuminated the darkness. Several feet away, he saw a shadow rise. Another stream of magic whizzed by him and coiled around the Skinwalker. The demon struggled against the binding.

“I have it. Send it back.” Her voice shook, and the strain on her face told she wouldn’t be able to hold it much longer.

Forget sending it back. He had his sword again, and it was time to stop playing around with those motherfuckers. The demon snarled as he approached it, challenging him with its glare. He raised his blade, ready to plunge it into the demon’s core, when a sharp cry broke his concentration.

He whirled around, his gut clenched. Anjali lay splayed across the tracks with the second Skinwalker hovering over her. An icy chill wound around his throat, cutting off his air. He forgot about the demon in front of him and charged the one that threatened his little demon hunter.

His sword sank into the demon’s flesh like a hot knife into butter. “Wrong move, asshole,” he grunted and sent his angelic flames into its core. They spread out, consuming its body in seconds. With nothing left to hold it, the blade sank to the tracks.

“Will, it burns.”

Anjali’s muffled gasp pulled him out his exhaustion. He lifted her head and saw her dilated pupils staring past him. Her body trembled. “What burns?”

“My skin. It burns everywhere.” She raked her nails over her arm. A large gash dipped blood onto the tracks, far bigger than what she could have done to herself. “Make it stop.” She clawed herself again.

Sweat prickled his brow. The Skinwalker’s venom. He ripped off a section of his T-shirt and made a modified tourniquet from it to keep the venom from spreading further. She fought him off like a mad woman, making incomprehensible moans every time their skin touched. “Don’t worry, Anjali. I can fix this.”

The ground began to shake under him. He looked back and saw no trace of the last demon, only a bright light barreling toward them. He gathered her into his arms and extended his glamour over her like he did last night. She writhed against him, making him wish she was unconscious instead of in danger of slipping from his arms as the next train threatened to run them over.

“Relax, my pet.” He focused his powers into her mind, and her body stilled. With a few flaps of his wings, he managed to get them back to the station and away from the train. The air whirled above the heads

of the humans as he flew over them with his precious cargo, but they ignored them. He navigated the tight tunnels until he got to the surface and entered the freedom of the sky.

Vassago stood in the doorway of Anjali's bedroom, never feeling more helpless than he did at the moment. For the last hour, he'd watched her suffer. He glanced at her cell phone and wondered if Jen's number would be in it. Maybe the witch could find a way to ease her agony.

A new howl of pain made his whole body shudder. She had remained docile through most of the flight, but the moment he entered her apartment, the venom seized control of her. Her muscles tensed, and her nails tried to shred her skin. The only way he could keep her from mutilating herself was to tie her hands to her headboard using a bright orange sari he found draped over a chair. Her body arched off the bed, and her wild eyes rolled in their sockets. If anyone witnessed her behavior, they would swear she was possessed by a demon.

A wave of nausea rose into his throat. He'd managed to save her from the Skinwalker, but the venom tormented her in ways he'd never imagined. Even after he tried to clean her wound, she continued to have hallucinations that made her scream that her skin was on fire. She no longer responded to his voice, his touch, his powers. Instead, she remained a prisoner of the mental hell that filled her mind.

Her body flopped back on the mattress. A sheen of sweat coated her face. Her breaths slowed. Her eyes fluttered closed, and a new tremor radiated through her limbs. "Will?" she whimpered.

He almost pounced on the bed in joy. At last, the venom seemed to be losing its grip on her. "Yes?"

She murmured something he didn't understand and relaxed further into the pillows. Tears glistened on her eyelashes.

He wiped them away and stroked her cheek. She'd finally found peace. He bent forward and kissed her forehead. "Sleep, my pet."

Exhaustion tugged at his bones, pulling him closer to the floor with each step. Although he longed to lie next to her, he feared he'd reawaken her hallucinations if he dared linger too close. He kicked off his shoes and flopped on the couch.

He lay there, half-dozing until the sun cast long shadows in the apartment. A gust of wind blew through the room, and his body tensed. "Who's there?"

Caim's playful laughter echoed off the walls before he materialized. "Sleeping on the job?"

"More like resting." He sat up and rubbed his hands through his hair. The sight of his torn T-shirt made him grimace.

The other Fallen nodded and sat in the chair across from him. He tossed a small bundle his way. "I hope you don't mind that I grabbed a few of your things on my way over. It's no fair that you have such a nice place on this plane while I'm stuck down there. I'm jealous."

Vassago unwrapped the clean clothes and started changing. Normally, he would have enjoyed a nice, long bath after the day's events, but he still couldn't shake the feeling of dread that threatened to smother him. "Second trip out in the same day. What do you have to tell me?"

"Only that Lucifer's majorly pissed at you for destroying two of the Skinwalkers."

He shrugged. "It's not my fault I'm left with limited resources on how to deal with them. Maybe if he'd been a little more upfront with the details—like telling me four got out instead of one—maybe I'd have been better prepared."

Caim caught a glimpse of Vassago's hilt and reached for it. "Holy shit, you got your sword back?"

Vassago covered the hilt before Caim could touch it. "It seems even the egomaniac wants this nipped in the bud. So if Lucifer has issues with me destroying demons, he can take it up with God. I'm tired of playing the middle man."

The other Fallen swore under his breath. "You have no idea how things are down there."

"And I have no intention of finding out." He tossed his old clothes in the trashcan. "I have one more Skinwalker to catch before Puriel takes control of the situation."

Another hissed curse word erupted from Caim. "That's bad news."

"Tell me about it." He tried to comb his hair straight. "Anything else I should know?"

"Only that we managed to kind of get a lead on the location of the original rift on this plane. It wasn't too far from the portal, and let me tell you, there're some tongues wagging that you were involved in it."

"Why the fuck would I want to create more work for myself?"

"Why did you need to hire a human to help you find them?"

"Why would I destroy two demons after going through all the trouble to bring them here?" He punched his fist into a pillow. "Hell's full of idiots if they think there's any truth to that. Either that or someone's trying to deflect attention away from himself."

Caim opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it and rubbed his chin. "You might be on to something there."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me go back and check out a few things." The Fallen dashed toward the window.

Vassago caught his arm just before his glamour fell into place. "Be careful. Just because they can't kill you, doesn't mean that can't leave you a broken mess."

Caim flashed him a reckless grin. "If I find something out, I'm putting in for a week's pass up here and crashing at your place. Think of all the fun we could have with the ladies."

He disappeared and kicked up a whirlwind of papers as he flew outside.

Vassago glanced at the sleeping figure in the bedroom. There was only lady he wanted to have fun with, and as soon as he caught the last Skinwalker, he intended to indulge her for hours on end.

Chapter Eleven

Anjali awoke with heavy limbs. The fuzzy blackness that had sheltered her from the fire wanting to devour her flesh slipped away. Thankfully, the fire disappeared with it, leaving only a cool breeze on her skin.

She turned to the window and saw the curtains dancing in the wind. An orange glow bathed the city outside. Sunset. She tried to sit up, but something bound her hands over her head and prevented her from rising. A surge of fury flowed into her muscles as she tugged against her restraints.

“Will, what the fuck did you do to me?”

He appeared in the doorway and leaned against the wall with a cocky grin. “Glad you’re finally awake.”

“And tied to the headboard.” She gave the material another yank, but it held fast. “What kind of kinky game are you playing?”

“I was merely trying to keep you from clawing yourself to death while the Skinwalker’s venom worked its way out of your system, but if you want to play kinky games...” His voice drifted off as he stalked her like a large panther.

“That was an accusation, not an invitation.” Her words said one thing even as her body rebelled against her. Her nipples tightened under her T-shirt from the hunger on his face. Her sex clenched at the thought of him crawling on top of her and ravishing her body. Geez, after the hell she’d been through in the last twenty-four hours, why did she still crave a nice fuck-fest with him?

“You’ve had a rough day, my pet.” He sat on the edge of the bed. His fingers started at her forehead, traced her cheek and jaw, and then continued down her neck and chest to the curve of her breast. “Anything I can do make you feel better?”

Her mind raced with all sort of ideas, most of them involving the two of them naked. If he made love to her, would his wings wrap around her again? Her mouth went dry, and she licked her lips. “You can untie me now.”

“But I think you’ll enjoy it more if you surrender to me. Imagine letting your mind go and just enjoying the sensations you feel.” His fingers circled her aching peaks. “No worries, no concerns, no wondering what will happen next.”

As tempting as her body thought it sounded, her mind bristled at the idea of being held captive while he did whatever he wanted. “Do you always feel the need to tie up your lovers?”

He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. A jolt of pleasure shot straight down to her womb, and she gasped. “No, my pet, only you. You need to learn that you can’t always be in control. Sometimes, the best things in life are messy and disorderly.”

He leaned forward and caught her mouth with his, cutting off her reply. His tongue teased the opening before plunging deeper. A small whimper rose in her throat as their tongues danced together in a way that made the lambada seem like an innocent stroll through the park. His hand drifted over to her other breast and teased that nipple in the same way as the first one.

Despite her best efforts, Anjali found herself slipping further and further under his spell. She needed to break free of him if she wanted to keep her mind intact. She ended the kiss. “Will, I’m not some pawn for you to play with.”

“Of course not. You’re a queen.” His lips trailed down her neck in a series of nips and licks.

Her soaked panties offered testimony to his skill as a lover so far, but like before, he kept his hands above her waist. “If I’m a queen, treat me like one, not like a slave.”

He laughed and pulled her T-shirt up over her head, bunching it around the sari that bound her wrists. Her bra quickly followed, leaving her breasts exposed to the chilly evening air and his unimpeded perusal. He cupped both of them in his hands. The flicks of his thumbs over the taut peaks made her back arch off the bed. “Every queen deserves to be worshipped.”

“If you’ll untie me—” Her words ended in a hiss as he took one of her breasts into his mouth, gently sucking it while his tongue bathed the rock-hard tip. He had reduced her to a blubbery mass of Jell-O once again. Her fingers longed to run through his hair, to keep his lips right where they were, but the tight fabric around her wrists prevented her from doing that.

“If I release you, then I’ll stop what I’m doing.” The stubble on his cheek scraped along the delicate skin of her chest, forming a sharp contrast to his velvety tongue. He caught her nipple between his teeth, earning another gasp from her. “If you want me to continue, Anjali, you must learn to surrender to me.”

Damn him for making me have to choose between possibly mind-blowing sex and keeping the upper hand in this relationship.

He straddled her legs, concentrating his efforts on her breasts while his erection strained against his jeans and rubbed against the sensitive nub between her legs. Her hips instinctively rose to meet it, to grind harder against him. For a few seconds, she lost herself in the pleasure her body felt from his touch. Then her mind slammed her back into reality. “What a gentleman. Nice to know you won’t rape me, even though I’m helpless to stop you.”

His chuckle added a new level of intensity to the way he sweetly tormented her breasts. “You can always tell me to stop, and I’ll respect your wishes.” His hand cupped her mound, and even through the thickness of the twill and her panties, she felt his heat. “But something tells me you’re enjoying this far more than you care to admit.”

Anjali silently swore. He was good—too good. He seemed to know exactly what was on her mind and how to use it against her. The few encounters she'd had with other men had been strictly under her terms. She told them what she wanted, how she wanted it, when and even where. And they'd all left her sorely disappointed. Will, on the other hand, didn't take orders from her, and the ache he aroused coiled deep inside, threatening to explode if he didn't finish what he'd started.

He withdrew his attention from her breasts and continued lower. His fingers hovered over the buttons of her cargo pants. "Shall I continue?"

Her breaths came out in ragged bursts. *Of course I want you to continue. Can't you tell?* But her mind still fought to remain in control. "Don't you want me to reciprocate the pleasure? You know—touch you, kiss you, take you deep into my mouth again?"

He closed his eyes and inhaled sharply through his teeth. When he opened his eyes, the only way she could tell where his pupils ended was by the deep red glow inside them. "What makes you think I'm not finding pleasure from tasting your skin, from watching your body respond to my touch, from knowing I'm taking you to a place of ecstasy that you've never been to?"

The spit dried up in her mouth. The man seemed too good to be true. But then, he was an angel. A very naughty one, to be sure, but an angel nonetheless. Something mere mortal men could only dream of being. "You can continue, but I'm not surrendering to you."

"Not yet, anyway." He held her gaze while he unbuttoned her pants and removed them and her panties in one quick swoop.

She now lay naked and tied to the headboard before him. Part of her wanted to squirm under the covers to hide her less than perfect body. Instead of the hourglass curves most men preferred, her body formed straight and lean lines from her narrow hips to her barely-a-B-cup sized breasts. She braced for the moment disappointment showed on his face.

Instead, his eyes widened, and his hands caressed her the way a pilgrim would touch the statue of saint in a holy shrine. Worship, he'd said. He wanted to worship her body. And based on his reaction so far, he'd lived up to his word.

A warm glow flowed from the pit of her stomach to the tips of her toes and fingers. How could a man as impossibly beautiful as him find pleasure in her? And yet, as she watched him reverently place kisses on her stomach, she almost believed in the impossible.

His hands massaged their way up her thighs, inching closer and closer to the one place that longed to feel his touch. A wicked grin played on his lips as inserted one finger between her slick folds. Her spine stiffened, and her hips jumped off the mattress from the first stroke. A whimper broke free. For once, surrender sounded more tempting than his endless teasing.

"Like that, my pet?" He applied more pressure over her clit, releasing another whimper from her. "Is that the way you want to be touched?"

No, I want your cock, not your finger. She took a deep breath and caught herself before she shouted her demands. “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

His dark eyes held hers while he lowered his head between her legs and flicked his tongue over the swollen nub. Her legs rose over his shoulders, granting him better access to her intimate regions. Another chuckle vibrated through her body while he gently sucked on her clit. “Clothes are the only restraint I have left. If I were naked, I wouldn’t be doing this to you. I’d already be deep inside you, searching for my own release.”

“And what if I want that?” *Shit! I just played into his game.*

Both brows rose, and he paused from the delicious dance his tongue performed between her labia. “All you have to do is say it, Anjali.”

She bit her bottom lip so hard, the coppery taste of blood filled her mouth. *I need to stay in control. I can’t let him know what power he has over me.*

“So stubborn.” He leaned over and resumed his teasing, increasing the force of his licks and nibbles.

The tension continued to mount deep inside her. She felt like a bottle rocket ready to explode. How much longer could she resist him? She closed her eyes, no longer able to watch his pleasure as he tasted her cream and mercilessly drove her to the brink. Her jaw tightened. *No, please don’t let me go over the edge and...*

The walls around her shattered, and his name tumbled out of her mouth like a prayer. Wave after wave of pleasure rolled through her, causing her body to writhe in the sheets. She gripped the sari for dear life, afraid she’d slip further under his spell if she let go. She fought hard, but in the end, she lost. But oh, what a way to lose.

As the last jolts began to ebb, she opened her eyes and saw him hovering over her. He kissed her gently, the salty-sweet taste of her cream lingering on his lips. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Her mouth hung open. For once, she didn’t know what to say. She should be disgusted at her own lack of restraint, but the soft hum that radiated through her body argued against it. She loved every sensation—the warm hardness of his body, the taste of his lips, the purely male scent of his arousal, the rapid fluttering of her heart in her ears. They all told her this was just the beginning.

His hands returned to her breasts, toying with her dark brown nipples while he waited for her answer.

“Why do you want me, Will?” Her fear and hesitation crept into her voice, but she refused to look away, even when she was at her most vulnerable.

He flinched. A muscle rippled along his jaw, and the knob in his throat bobbed a few times. *Maybe I’m not the only one with fears of intimacy,* she thought as she watched the struggle play out on his face. At last, in a husky voice that went straight to her heart, he replied, “You saw me when no one else could.”

His fingers grazed her temple, and the image of a night two years ago flooded her mind. The night when she realized that the other half of her demon hunting equation was as real and solid as her. “You mean you’ve wanted me that long?”

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “Please, Anjali, give yourself to me, and I promise you’ll never want another man.”

“And in return?”

The red fire intensified when his lids shot open. The hunger in his face caused her breath to quicken. He wanted her as much as she wanted him, no doubt about it. Maybe even more. Yet in a bizarre turn of events, she still remained in control. She was the one who could let him into her heart or tell him to piss off. The thought of losing him filled her chest with an odd ache. She’d already crossed the point of no return. Will had her completely in his hands. All of her—mind, body and soul. She only needed to say the words.

“Please, Will, let’s finish what we’ve started.”

He licked his lips like a wolf about to devour his meal. “And what’s that?”

“If you have to ask that question, then maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

His shirt came off in one swift movement and ended somewhere on the other side of the room. Her lips rose in a smile as his glossy black-feathered wings unfurled from behind him and wrapped around her arms. She longed to stroke them again, to feel their silkiness and watch his face tighten in pleasure, but the sari still bound her wrists above her head. He kissed her again, although nowhere nearly as gently as before. While his tongue twisted with hers, the coarse hair on his chest brushed against her nipples, and the ache in her womb revived.

And then new realization awakened her. No man could ever compete with Will Vassago, not after tonight. No man could turn her world upside down and take her past her fears to a place she dared not go before. Why should she fear a few words?

He ended the kiss, leaving them both gulping for air. The edge of his wings tickled her cheeks. A giggle escaped, followed by a heavy sigh. “Yes, Will, I’m yours.”

Chapter Twelve

Vassago's heart skipped a beat. Did he hear her correctly? His wings twitched in time with his cock, earning him another one of her giggles. She sounded so at ease, so carefree. Pure desire replaced the tense lines of her face. Could she really have surrendered to him?

"Are you going to take those jeans off? Normally, I'd help, but seeing as how I'm still tied up at the moment..." She bit her lip and turned into every inch of the sex kitten he'd suspected was buried under her OCD exterior.

He rose to his knees and removed his jeans as quickly as he dared. Years of waiting had finally come to this. The last thing he wanted was to have it end too soon. Just as he had drawn out her pleasure, he wanted to do the same for his.

Anjali had other ideas. As soon as he kicked the jeans off his ankles, her long brown legs wrapped around his waist and dug into his ass, pulling him down until his cock nestled between her hot, wet folds. He bit back a moan and steeled himself. The temptation to start pounding away inside her almost became too much to bear. Her smirk told him she knew exactly what he was thinking. When had the tables turned?

With great frustration, he retreated from her. Her hips rose and followed, and her legs became a vice that threatened to strangle him. Now he was the one bound and powerless to do anything. To his surprise, he laughed. "What are you trying to prove, my pet?"

"That I can tease you just much as you teased me, even with my hands tied above my head." She leaned forward and nibbled on his bottom lip. "I've given myself to you. When are you going to do the same?"

He closed his eyes and slid into her, inch by agonizing inch, until her tight pussy encased all of his cock. Her walls tightened around him, and he moaned. Yes, this was the closest thing to Heaven on Earth, and he was in no hurry to leave it.

Anjali purred her own sound of contentment. It reminded him of when she ate a spoonful of her favorite chocolate caramel ice cream, and the intensity of it sent little waves of vibrating pleasure straight to his cock. When he opened his eyes, he noticed hers were still shut tightly and her nails dug into her palms. The wide grin on her face reassured him that her response was pure pleasure, not pain. She whispered his name, and his pulse quickened.

He began to withdraw, and she whimpered. "What, my pet? Scared I'll leave you unsatisfied?" He plunged all the way to the hilt, earning a gasp from her.

Her eyes opened wide, and her pelvis arched to meet his. The passion in her eyes threatened to consume him. What kind of monster had he unleashed when he awakened her desires? “Please, Will, please don’t stop.”

Her begging awoke something primitive inside him. She had given herself to him, and now he needed to claim her, to let her know that no man would replace him just as no woman could ever replace her.

He smiled and kissed the hollow above her collarbone, trailing his lips up until he reached her earlobe. “Have no fear, Anjali. I’ve never wanted a woman like I want you, and I doubt I ever will. I’m as much yours as you are mine.”

The headboard rattled, and he almost laughed again as she struggled to free her hands. “Why won’t you release me? I want to touch you, to dig my nails into your shoulders, to stroke every inch of you and—”

He silenced her with a kiss. “No. I want you to let go and just enjoy the feeling of my cock inside you. Remember, this is about me worshipping you.”

Her breath hitched, and she closed her eyes again, leaning her head back to expose the regal curve of her throat. He needed to teach her to let go of the situation and experience it for what it truly was—two people joining together to reach a state of bliss neither one imagined possible. Her fingers relaxed, and she licked her lips. “Go on, then.”

He began to move inside her, relishing each stroke of his cock against the warm silkiness. She easily found his rhythm and matched it. The sensual roll of her hips heightened his sensations, stimulating every inch of his head with each thrust. Together, they moved in harmony, her breaths coming in time with his.

The smell of her musk filled his nostrils like the richest perfume. Her breathy cries sang like the sweetest music to his ears, and the taste of her skin rivaled anything he’d ever tasted. He’d been with other women over the centuries, but he forgot about them the moment she touched him. His little demon hunter was in a league of her own. Everything about her called to him. She was made for him and him alone, and now that he knew the joy of making love to her, he’d never let her go.

An ache formed at the base of his shaft, and he tensed. *Too soon. I’m not ready to come.*

“Oh God, Will, please, don’t stop. I’m so close, so very close.” Her whimpers only gave a hint of what her face showed. Her eyes pleaded with him. Her lips appeared swollen from the way she kept biting them. White circles surrounded where her fingertips dug into her palms. Her biceps strained against the sari. Yes, she was just as close as he was, teetering on the brink, and a surge of satisfaction rushed through him for bringing her this far.

He flicked her nipples with his fingers. “Is that what you wish, my pet?”

She sucked in a breath with a hiss. “Will Vassago, you are the most frustrating man I’ve ever met.”

“But you enjoy it.” He doubled his efforts, thrusting harder, deeper, faster than before to bring them both back to the edge. Her legs tightened around him again, holding on to his waist for what seemed like

dear life as he took her closer and closer. He no longer needed or wanted her restraint. She'd learned to free herself of her confines.

He fumbled the knots in the sari, now desperate to feel her hands on his body when he came. His balls pulled tighter against his ass, alerting him he was reaching the point of no return. His wings snapped out to the sides and mimicked the tension mounting inside him. The head of his cock almost burned in pleasure-pain from every stroke. He sucked in his breath, hoping he could hold back long enough to make her come first.

The sari slipped away from one of her wrists, and her arms wrapped around him with the same fierceness as her legs. A shattered cry broke free from her lips. Her body went rigid. The hot walls of her pussy clenched around him just as her nails dug into his skin. She never looked more beautiful to him than she did now.

He released his breath with a growl, and something exploded inside him. A wave of come shot out of him like a bolt of lightning. Every muscle in his body locked up for that second. His vision blurred, and Anjali consumed his senses. Her touch, her scent, her repeated whispers of his name. The pulsations of her sex prolonged his orgasm, milking every drop from him and sapping his strength. He fell forward on his elbows and savored these blissful moments while they lasted. Yes, Heaven on Earth—no other way to describe it.

Her thighs began to tremble, and her legs fell away from his waist. Her fingertips released his shoulders and softly stroked his wings. Her eyes glazed over, and his breath froze.

“Did I hurt you, my pet?”

She shook her head and smiled. “Just the intensity of it surprised me. I never imagined someone could make me feel this way...” Her voice trailed off, and she traced the lines of his jaw. The sleepy wonder on her face sent a second, more subtle rush of warmth through his body. Could he be so fortunate to have her feel something for him?

He adjusted his wings so he could roll onto his back, taking her with him. She cuddled next to his side. Neither one of them said anything as he brushed her silky black hair. He marveled at how well it blended with the iridescent darkness of his feathers, at how well she seemed to compliment him. Maybe he was a fool for falling in love with a human, but Anjali completed him and filled the void inside that had eaten away at him since he'd been cast out.

Her soft breath danced across his chest as the shadows darkened outside. Night had fallen, but he hesitated to leave the comfort of her arms.

A few more moments passed before she said, “I think you've destroyed my bed.”

He couldn't resist laughing. “What if I promised to straighten it up later?”

She lifted her head and grinned. “We'll need clean sheets.”

“Are you going to make me change the sheets every time we make love?” He cupped her cheek in his hand, teasing her like he would a child. “If so, you’ll be spending a lot of time in the laundry room.”

A flush rose into her face, but she leaned closer to him. “Are you saying you’re going to tie me to the bed again?”

“Only if you ask me to.” The idea tempted him, and his cock twitched to life.

Her eyes widened, and she lowered her head back into the crook of his shoulder. “We’ll have to use some sort of protection next time.”

“You don’t have to worry about that with me, my pet.” He wrapped his wings around her like a feathered cocoon. “My kind aren’t able to breed with yours anymore.”

“Anymore?”

He flinched as the memories of the past came crashing around him. He wanted to enjoy holding her in his arms, not be reminded of how he’d ended up stuck on this plane of existence.

“What happened?”

Her question, although spoken barely above a whisper, seemed to shout at him. Sweat prickled the base of his neck. Was he ready to share this dark side of his past with her? “There was a time when the Fallen sired children with humans.”

She lifted her face to him and waited for him to continue. He saw no signs of horror or repulsion on it, so he drew a deep breath. “Lucifer thought that he could create an army of these half-angels and get his revenge over Heaven. You see, these children had all our abilities as well as the chance for redemption from their human mothers.”

“Did you father one of these children?” she asked with a slight tremble in her voice.

“No, I wasn’t a Fallen then.” He shut his eyes and prayed she wouldn’t ask any more questions.

“What changed?”

His gut clenched, and he almost wanted to bolt from the bed to keep from answering her question. Instead, he settled for sitting up and turning his back to her. His wings retracted, a visual cue of how he wished to close himself off from this topic.

Her hand rested on his shoulder, holding him steady. A ripple of acceptance spread through him and calmed his pounding heart. He’d been right in assuming she was different than other human women. She’d seen the darkness and didn’t fear it.

“I’m an Angel of Discovery. My skill lies in finding things that are lost or hidden. When God found out about Lucifer’s plot, He ordered me to find and destroy all the children of the Fallen.” A lump formed in his throat as he relived the agony of hearing that command and the internal struggle following it. “I refused.”

The aftermath of his decision revived itself in excruciating clarity. When humans talked about the wrath of God, they only had a mere idea of what it entailed. With a point of the deity’s finger and the

sentence of banishment, Vassago fell to Earth. The impact alone left his body weak and broken, taking months to heal. Even after that, the pain of being cast out of Heaven plagued him like being covered with raw, blistered skin, but that was a mere abrasion compared to the shame of his blackened wings. It took centuries before he finally accepted his fate and learned to live on this plane.

Anjali's cool fingers grazed his skin and pulled him back to the present. She turned his chin so he faced her. Her dark eyes watched him with concern. Then she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. "I'm glad you had the courage to do the right thing."

He caught her hand and held it against his heart. Maybe he'd never return to Heaven, but he'd been granted a lifetime with her. One human lifetime that he didn't intend to squander. He pulled her closer to him and captured her mouth with his. The sweetness of her kiss surprised him. He had wanted to ravage her, to fuck her into oblivion again, but instead, he found himself now wanting to capture her heart.

She straddled his lap as she continued to draw him out of his misery with her kisses. Her cream ran down her thighs and coated his already erect cock. He ached to grab her hips and force her down until she took all of him inside her again, but he held back. He'd taken control once. Now, it was her turn to set the tempo of their lovemaking.

As if she could read his thoughts, she slid down, impaling her hot pussy around his shaft with the grace of a dancer. A small smile lit up her face, followed by a soft sigh. "You better mean what you say, Will Vassago. If I see you with another woman, I'll make the day you fell seem like a birthday party."

The walls of her sex clenched around him, and his cock twitched. As if there could ever be another woman who could cause this rush of desire in him. He curled his finger around a lock of her hair. "Possessive already, my pet?"

Throaty laughter answered him as she began to rock back and forth. Tingles of pleasure shot up his spine from the slightest sway of her pelvis. His balls tightened. Damn, they'd barely started, and she already had him on the brink again. His hands clamped around her hips, slowing her movements and urging her to draw this out as long as possible. She responded by matching the tempo he set and slowly made love to him until he reached the dizzying height of another orgasm, followed by her own.

They both collapsed in each other's arms as they finally came back down from that blissful summit. Exhaustion weighed down every muscle in his body. He wrapped his arms around her and drifted to sleep, feeling at peace for the first time in millennia.

Chapter Thirteen

Anjali's eyelids fluttered open. She half expected everything to be a dream, that she'd imagined lying in Will Vassago's arms, but his male scent filled her nostrils when she yawned.

"Still tired, my pet?" The warm timbre of his voice sent delicious ripples down her spine.

She lifted her head and smiled. The exhaustion of their lovemaking lingered in his half-hooded eyes. No, it hadn't been a dream. How could she go from wanting to rip her skin off while under the influence of the Skinwalker's venom earlier to lying warm and safe in his arms? "I'm waking up."

A wicked grin flashed on his face as if he was suggesting they have another round before leaving the bed. She wouldn't refuse him if he did. When she woke up this morning, she would have recoiled at the idea of being tied to the bed, never imagining it would result in the most earth-shattering orgasm she'd ever experienced. She'd seen stars. Twice.

But more than just the great sex made her want to stay curled up next to him. She'd finally begun to scratch the surface of the enigma that was Will. What little she'd heard about Fallen Angels painted them as no better than the demons she hunted. After all, they resided in an underworld that burned with brimstone. But if the story he told her was true, maybe the world wasn't as black and white as she imagined it to be.

She scanned the disaster of her room. The sheets lay in a rumpled heap around them. Her bra hung from a lampshade. And the sari still trailed from one wrist. "We made a mess."

"But what a mess," he replied with a catlike stretch. "I'll help you clean it up if you admit you enjoyed it as much as I did."

"Always trying to bend me to your will." She sat up and raked her fingers through her hair, trying to dislodge the rat's nest that had taken root there.

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. "Just trying to prove to you that sometimes losing control of things is fun."

No arguments from her. A twinge of guilt stabbed at her chest, though, when she spied the scratches on her arm. They were lying in bed, making pillow talk, while a demon still prowled the streets.

"Don't say it. I can read your face as well as any book." He sat up too, depriving her of his warmth. "We have work to do. But afterwards..." His dark eyes glittered with the promise of more bedroom antics when they returned.

She was watching him dress when a shiver crawled down her spine, and her vision blurred. Her heart pounded, speeding up with each beat. Her mind's eye flew across Manhattan to the southwest, honing in a building a few blocks away from the Actor's Studio. Her fingers bunched up the covers as a hideous image flashed in front of her eyes.

Blood coated every wall of the room. The Skinwalker crouched in the corner, still in its normal form instead of disguising its grotesque features with the skin of a human victim. A blonde woman lowered her head in conversation with a man who had leathery black wings and a jagged scar running along his shoulder. When she lifted her face, the light flashed off her fangs.

Anjali gasped and pulled the sheet up to her neck, wishing she could hide from what she was seeing. A cold vice squeezed her chest. The vampire flicked her tongue out, lapping up the blood that lingered on her lips. She stared directly at Anjali as if she were in the room and grinned. Her laughter made the light dance off the glittering blue stone amulet around her neck.

"What's wrong?" Will's voice broke into her consciousness, and the vision began to fade. His strong hands gripped her shoulders. "What do you see?"

When she didn't answer immediately, he shook her awake. The image disappeared, leaving just his worried face hovering before her. The shiver that she'd repressed seized control of her, and she worried that she'd never feel warm again.

He pulled her against his chest and stroked her hair until the fear subsided. "You know where it is, don't you?"

She nodded. "He's not alone."

As she described her vision, his arms tightened around her. "Now I have an idea who released it."

"What's going on, Will?" She pushed away from him and looked him in the eyes. "What aren't you telling me?"

"None of your business." He slipped his feet into his shoes and tucked a sword hilt into his belt. "Tell me where they are."

"I'll tell you when we get closer." She jumped to her feet and wrapped the sheet around her while she gathered her clothes.

He picked her up and tossed her back into the bed. "No, you are staying here. I've almost lost you twice in the last twenty-four hours, and I'm not taking any chances this time."

"You should have thought of that before you dragged me into this." She crossed her arms and stuck out her chin. "Either you let me come with you, or I go out alone."

His hands balled up into fists, and the red glow appeared in his eyes. "This is not a time to be stubborn. If I don't catch that demon soon, all of New York will burn for it."

Her mouth went slack. "All of New York?" Her pulse carried the jolt of a dozen cups of coffee as it throbbed through her veins. "There's more to this than just a simple bounty hunt, isn't there?"

“Anjali, tell me now.” The low growl in his voice meant to intimidate her, but she shook her head.

“No way. I’m the only one who knows where they are. Without me, you’re lost.”

“Can’t you see I’m trying to protect you?” He leaned on the bed, his face inches from hers. “You just described a vampire and a Fallen Angel ganging up together and controlling a Skinwalker. Do you have any idea what any one of them could do to you?”

“Your concern is greatly appreciated, but—”

“But nothing. I’m immortal. I can fight them and not be killed. You’re not.”

“I’m quite aware of the limitations of my body.”

He cupped her chin in his hand, and some of his rage dissipated. “Maybe I’m not making myself clear, my pet. I don’t want to lose you.”

His voice broke with the last sentence, and the cold vanished. She didn’t need to hear the words behind his statement to know he loved her. And as insane as it sounded, she realized she was falling in love with him too.

She covered his hand with her own. “Please, let’s face this together.”

“Why do you have to be so pig-headed?”

“You always knew I was this way.”

He released her with a sigh and took a step back. “Fine, get dressed. I’ll let you show me where they are, but I want you to promise me you’ll stay out of the fight.”

“I’ll try.”

Chapter Fourteen

Vassago paced the living room while he waited for Anjali to dress. What the hell had he just agreed to? If he'd had any common sense, he should have tied her back to the headboard and left without her. Unfortunately, she had a point. She knew exactly where the demon and his captors were. Without her help, he'd spend the whole night flying in circles around the island, completely clueless to their location until they made their next move. And judging by her description of the Fallen Angel in her vision, they'd have a nasty fight ahead of them. His hand tightened around his sword as he wavered on whether or not to ask for reinforcements before attacking them.

"I'm ready." Anjali stood in the doorway dressed in jeans and a fitted, long-sleeved hoodie over a T-shirt. The tight lines of her face spoke of her effort to conceal her fear. Once again, he questioned his decision to let her come along.

"Where are we going?"

"Hell's Kitchen."

A hiss escaped his lips. Of course they'd be close to the portal. That's the only way a Fallen could slip into this plane without attracting too much attention. He pulled off his shirt and unfurled his wings. "Let's go."

"We're flying?"

For a brief second, a grin touched his lips. Her wonder reminded him how naïve she could be about things. She didn't have millennia of pain to temper her disposition, and it kept his cynicism in check. "Do you know a faster way to get there?"

"But what if people see us?"

Now he laughed. "This isn't the first time I've flown with you in my arms, my pet, just the first time you'll be awake long enough to remember it." He pulled her close to him and stretched his glamour over her.

Her gasp amused him as he carried her out the window and rose above the buildings surrounding Central Park. Maybe when they weren't trying to save the world, he'd have to take her on a real flight so she could experience the cold rush of wind across her face and dance above the clouds with him. But later. Now, they had a demon to catch.

He landed in front of a locked and abandoned apartment building on 57th Street. His wings retracted, and the glamour retreated as he donned his shirt. "Wait here for me."

"This isn't the place." She grabbed his arm and pointed to the south. "We need to go that way."

"We will, but first, I need to take care of something." He kissed her forehead. "Don't go anywhere without me. I'll only be a few minutes."

He found the invisible barrier built into the brick wall and passed through it. Downstairs stood one of the many portals between Hell and Earth. When he reached it, he turned the dial to the correct combination and took a deep breath, sucking in the last of the cool sweet air before he opened it in and entered the foul-smelling sauna of Hell.

Anjali's jaw dropped as she watched Will disappear through the wall. She reached her hand out, and a tingle of magic raced up her arm. Unlike her own magic, this burned and filled her vision with darkness. She jerked her hand back. Best not to dabble in things like that, no matter how much she wanted to follow Will and see what secrets he was trying to keep from her.

She looked down the street in the direction of the building from her vision. If what she saw was correct, they were dealing with more than just a demon. The way the vampire stared at her sent a chill straight into her heart.

The vampire! Logan had kept going on and on this morning about a new vampire that he couldn't catch. Maybe she was the one he was looking for.

Anjali pulled out her phone and dialed his number. It rang almost to the point where his voicemail would pick-up. Then Logan's mellow voice filled the lines. "Anjali, are you ok?"

"I've had an interesting day." That was an understatement.

"Did you stalker turn psycho on you or something?"

"Um, not exactly." *More like was the best lover I've ever had but continues to keep secrets from me.*

"Do I need to come over and deal with him?" His words held a hint of anger.

That brought a peal of laughter from her. The idea of Logan trying to beat Will into a pulp seemed ridiculous to her, especially now that she had a glimpse of that glowing sword her dark angel carried. It seemed great against demons, but how would it work on vampires? "What do you know about that vampire you've been hunting?"

"It's a female, blonde, and able to disappear faster than any other bloodsucker I've ever hunted. Wade thinks she may be an old one, but we're not sure who it is."

"I may have a lock on her location, if you're interested." Her voice trembled as she told him about her vision. As much as she worried about dragging her best friend into this, having a trained vampire hunter on their team may tip the scales in their favor.

"Do you think she's involved with your escaped demons?"

"Think, nothing. I know she is."

A hissed curse followed. “Anjali, we need to call in Morwen or Wade. This is something bigger than the two of us.”

“Don’t call them yet. We have Will.”

“And what exactly is Will?”

Anjali drew a deep breath. Should she tell Logan the truth? “You’re not going to believe me.”

He must have heard the hesitation in her voice because the next words out of his mouth were, “Tell me where you are. I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

Vassago looked around Hell and grimaced. Nothing had changed in the last century. An eerie red glow flickered off the walls from an unknown flame. The stench of brimstone burned his nostrils and choked his throat. He was grateful he’d only been banished to Earth and not this plane.

With quick strides, he approached the massive stone castle ahead. He shoved past the guards outside the gate and continued forward with the force of a tank. Screw protocol and waiting to be granted an audience with Lucifer. It was time he knew of the mutiny happening behind his back.

No one touched him until he came to the doors outside Lucifer’s private quarters. As soon as a Fallen laid hands on him, Vassago whipped out his hilt and formed a blade of blue flame. “Back off. I need to speak to him now.”

“Who are you to barge in here?” The two guards drew their own swords, harnessing the eerie red flames that illuminated Hell.

The door opened, and a voice boomed, “Let him in.” In a softer but more sinister note, it added, “I can handle Vassago on my own.”

The Fallen lowered their blades, but didn’t pull the fire back. Vassago waited until the doors closed behind him before he doused his own blade. “Thank you for calming them down, Lucifer.”

The Leader of the Fallen grinned and stood up from behind his massive desk. If they’d been in Manhattan, he could have almost passed as some CEO of a major corporation. Everything about him spoke of suave sophistication, from the precise way every blond hair on his head was gelled into place to the wrinkle-free suit he wore. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company? Come to apologize for destroying two of my demons?”

“Nope.” He tucked his hilt back into his jeans. “I’ve come to warn you about a rogue Fallen.”

Lucifer laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m in perfect control of my legions.”

“Are you so sure?” He arched his brow. “If so, where is Asheroth?”

The charming demeanor faded, and his lips formed a hard, thin line. “Are you suggesting one of my top generals is about to betray me?”

“I have it on good account that he’s the one that freed the Skinwalkers, or at least, played a part on it.” He leaned over the desk. “If you don’t believe me, call him. I doubt you’ll get an answer since he’s not on this plane.”

A scarlet glow simmered in Lucifer’s eyes, and his shoulders stiffened. “Do you dare question my dominion?”

“No, but I thought you’d like to know that this little incident has captured the attention of God, and if we don’t take care of this soon, He’s taking matters into His hands, and we all know what that means.” He straightened and turned to the door. “If you want to send someone to take care of Asheroth, I’ll take care of the demon,” he said as he walked away, not turning back.

He’d taken all he could handle of Hell and eagerly returned to the portal. Now that Lucifer had the bug planted in his ear, he’d take action. Nothing pissed off the Prince of Hell like one of his own trying to undermine him. He estimated he’d have reinforcements within fifteen minutes of returning to Earth.

The guards at the portal watched him with a mixture of hate and envy as he entered the combination and stepped into the sweet air of the plane they were forbidden to enter without Lucifer’s permission.

Anjali stood huddled in the alley by the apartment building when he found her. “Where did you go?” she asked as soon as she saw him. Then she caught a whiff of his clothes and wrinkled her nose. “Never mind. I can smell it on you.”

“When dealing with a rogue Fallen, it’s best to keep his boss in the loop.” He left the alley with her right on his heels. “Where to?”

She hesitated for a moment before she answered, “Follow me.”

She started to dart out of the alley, but he caught the hood of her jacket and pulled back. He extended his glamour over her again, turning them both invisible. “Save your energy for later, especially if you need to run away. Besides, this way, we have the element of surprise.”

He took flight again, allowing her to direct him to the location of her vision. As soon as they landed on the rooftop of another abandoned apartment building, the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. Something felt very wrong about this place, as though the barriers between planes had been breached, and the darkness wanted to seize control.

He wished he could keep her invisible without touching her, but his abilities didn’t extend that far. “Wait here.”

She grabbed his arm as he tried to leave and pulled him into a kiss. He could almost taste her fear and desperation as her tongue coiled with his, as if this would be their last kiss. His heart skipped a beat. Once again, he regretted taking her with him and toyed with the idea of taking her back to her apartment now that he knew where to find the demon.

“Be careful, Will,” she whispered as she released him.

“You too.” He ran to the door leading to the building but stopped in his tracks when the air wavered in front of it. His hand tightened around his sword, and he gathered his angelic fire, ready to attack if Asheroth appeared in front of him.

“How disgustingly touching,” a suave voice mocked. Lucifer appeared, dressed for battle with an armored vest and his sword of black fire drawn. “Are you done playing with your little human?”

“Shut the fuck up, Lucifer.” He pushed him aside and yanked the door open. “Let’s just take care of this before it gets out of hand.”

“After you.”

They descended the staircase for two flights before he caught a whiff of the blood and brimstone. He tensed. The fire flowed into his blade, and he pointed down the deserted hallway on the other side of the door. Lucifer nodded and tightened his grip on his sword.

He cracked the door open, searching for any alarms or traps before stepping out of the stairwell. The air wavered for a split second in front of him before something slammed him into a wall.

Chapter Fifteen

Anjali hopped from one foot to the other on the rooftop, unsure what to do after updating Logan on her location. After all, she only said she'd *try* to stay out of the fight. She didn't promise to stay on the roof the entire time. And after experiencing the agony of the Skinwalker's venom, she wanted to trap that son of a bitch and send it back to Hell.

But most of all, she wanted to be there to watch Will's back. He seemed to trust Lucifer, but she didn't. That Fallen had a reputation for betrayal, after all. His words earlier that evening echoed in her mind. *I'm immortal. I can fight them and not be killed.* Maybe so, but they could sure rough him up a bit.

She bit her bottom lip and wondered how he went from an annoying stalker to someone who had her gut all tied in knots with worry. Damn that irritating, boorish, delightfully seductive Fallen Angel. He should be her enemy, not her lover. And yet, her panties became soaked the second she remembered how wonderful he felt inside her. Just like he didn't want to lose her, she couldn't imagine living without him.

A loud crash echoed up the stairwell, and the entire building shook under her feet. Her heart jumped into her throat. Will.

She ran toward the sound without giving it a second thought. The battle had started, and she needed to be part of it to even the odds. If anything else, she could restrain the demon long enough for Will or Lucifer to send it back to Hell.

Two flights down, the door dangled off its hinges. Plaster littered the hallway, creating a dingy snowstorm effect as the dust settled to the ground. Her skin crawled from the sensation of the grit coating it. The blonde vampire was nowhere to be seen, but the air hung heavy with magic. Was there another witch or warlock involved that she missed in her vision?

At the other end, the Fallen Angel from her vision battled Will and Lucifer simultaneously with two glowing red swords. She froze, not wanting to distract them while she figured out how she could help. She gathered her powers deep inside her and guided them toward her fingertips. Would her magic even work against a Fallen?

Before she knew her answer, the Skinwalker burst from one of the apartments and plowed toward her. The spell left her lips like a knee-jerk reflex, and the golden rope coiled around its ankles. It fell forward and landed with its fangs inches from her ankles. She jumped away as its scorpion-like tail whipped toward her. She'd already learned her lesson to avoid it.

The rope coiled higher, binding the demon's arms and finally catching its tail. She concentrated on the spell. The bonds tightened to withstand the Skinwalker's writhing, even though beads of sweat trickled down her face from the effort. When she finally gained control of it, she cried out Will's name.

He whipped around, distracted long enough for the Fallen to slash his fiery red blade across his back. Will grunted and stumbled forward. Fear paralyzed her as she watched his attacker lift his sword again, this time to deliver a more serious blow.

The focused attack on Will opened the Fallen up to an attack by Lucifer. A cold grin stretched his lips as the Prince of Hell plunged his black blade into the Fallen's chest. An ear-piercing scream shattered the windows, filling the air with glass shards that nicked her skin. She closed her eyes and turned away to protect her face. It disrupted her spell long enough for the Skinwalker to wriggle free from her bonds and jump to its feet.

The demon's barbed tail hissed through the air, heading straight for her face when she opened her eyes. Stone laced her bones, and she couldn't move. Her heart sank into her stomach. *Will I survive the venom this time?*

A flash of blue swung through the air behind the Skinwalker. Warm, tar-like blood splattered her face as Will's blade sliced through the demon's tail. "Anjali, get out of here."

The enraged beast spun around and launched an attack on him, giving her an opportunity to escape. She wobbled to her feet and stumbled to the stairwell. The air became charged with magic with each step, only she wasn't the one drawing on it. Goose bumps puckered her skin.

The spell slammed into her before she could counteract it, lifting her like a rag doll and tossing her into the stairwell. Blood filled her mouth as she skidded across the floor. She reached out and grabbed a railing so only her feet dangled over the seven-story central shaft instead of her entire body plummeting down it.

A blur of movement passed by her, and pain raced across her skull. It took her a second to realize that whatever moved at that speed had also snatched a handful of her hair and was dragging her back up to the roof like a half-empty bag of garbage. The female vampire from her vision.

Anjali's mind raced to try and find a weapon she could use. The only thing she could think of was a wooden stake, and even then, she'd barely been trained on how to use one. Where the hell was Logan? If ever there was a time for a trained vampire hunter, it was now.

"I should have known you would find us, even with all my best spells in place," a voice with a French accent said as they reached the roof. The vampire lifted Anjali off the ground by her hair and coolly assessed her. "I've never tasted another witch's blood before. Will it be like a complex Bordeaux, or more like a rich cognac? Perhaps I should sample your vintage and find out, *oui?*"

The combination of the bright glow from the feeding frenzy in the vampire's eyes with the flash of her fangs sent an electric current buzzing across Anjali's skin. She drew upon the magic in the air to reinforce it. No way would she become some bloodsucker's snack.

A bolt of lightning sizzled between them, and the vampire flung her away with a howl. Black stars danced in front of Anjali's eyes when she hit the concrete roof. Her lungs burned as the impact knocked the air from them. More blood filled her mouth. Will's warning echoed in her mind. Yes, she may be a witch and a demon hunter, but going against a vampire reminded her how fragile her human body really was.

Tendrils of smoke rose from the vampire's lips. "What kind of magic is this?"

Anjali didn't answer. The horizon wavered as she struggled to her feet. Will called her name from below. She needed to get back to him. He would protect her.

"Where are you going, *ma petite*?" The vampire's hand formed a vice around Anjali's neck, choking off her air. "Just because I can't bite you, doesn't mean I won't enjoy killing you. You've cost me three of my demons."

Panic hindered her ability to draw on the magic again. She reached out, desperate to fight off her enemy while her heart still beat. Her fingers clawed the vampire's hard, cold skin and hooked the amulet around her neck.

The vampire swung her over the edge of the roof. Nine stories below, the streets of Hell's Kitchen loomed. Her pulse pounded in her ears, her breath no longer muffling it. *Would I survive the impact?*

Footsteps thumped behind her, but her screams drowned them out as the vampire released her grip and sent her plummeting to the asphalt.

Chapter Sixteen

Vassago's heart lurched when he came up the stairwell and saw the blonde vampire holding Anjali over the edge of the roof like a pendulum. A cold smile illuminated her charred lips, making her fangs flash against the darkness. She knew she had something he cared about in the palm of her hand, and he would be forced to choose between saving Anjali and killing the vampire.

Time inched along at a snail's pace. Black demon blood still coated his body, slickened his palms. He tightened his grip on his sword. His wings broke through the skin on his back and burst through his T-shirt. The muscles in his legs tightened, ready to spring. In his heart, he already knew his course of action.

Anjali's scream pierced his eardrums like a knife when the vampire released her. He dived over the edge after her. His wings unfurled with a snap. His glamour stretched over him, hiding him from the people below. As soon as his fingers grazed her skin, she vanished with him. His arm wrapped around her waist, and her body collided with his a few feet from the ground.

Her wet cough sprayed his chest. He pulled her closer to him and felt the wild thump of her heart through the thin cage of her ribs. She was hurt, but still alive. His mouth watered for vengeance.

He flew back to the roof with her in his arms. When he landed, the vampire had disappeared. Her scent still lingered in the air. Death. He contemplated chasing after her, but the frail, shivering demon hunter in his arms changed his mind. He had an eternity to hunt the vampire. He had less time with Anjali.

Lucifer burst through the door, dragging Asheroth behind him. "Did you get her?"

Vassago shook his head and let his glamour fall. "By the time I caught Anjali, she'd disappeared."

A string of curses sent a shiver down his spine, despite that fact they were uttered in the language of the angels. Lucifer shoved the wounded Fallen in his hands forward. "Time to talk, Asheroth."

"Piss off, Lucifer," he wheezed.

The Prince of Hell's fiery blade flashed to life, and another high-pitched wail from Asheroth rattled the windows below when it struck. "I can't kill you, but I can make you pray for death."

Anjali's icy fingers tightened in the material of Will's T-shirt, and his wings protectively wrapped around her, shielding her from the torture scene playing out before them. Disgust rose into the back of his throat. She didn't need to witness what monsters the Fallen could truly be.

"Please, Your Highness, stop." Asheroth held his remaining hand in front on his face and stared wide-eyed at his fingers and toes littering the roof. "I'll talk."

If he had been anything other than a treacherous Fallen, Vassago might have felt pity for him. His digits would regenerate in time, but the marks of his betrayal would follow him for the rest of his existence.

“The vampire witch, Colette, summoned me. She had a plan to open the divide between Hell and Earth. For my help, she promised to assist me.”

Lucifer shook him like a bulldog shaking a rat. “Assist you with what?”

Asheroth’s laughter echoed with madness. “You’ve been in power too long, Lucifer. It’s time for a new regime.”

A fresh shudder rippled through Anjali’s body and into his own. Vassago cleared his throat. “Perhaps this line of questioning would be best continued back in Hell. There’s only so much a human should know.”

Lucifer narrowed his eyes, but nodded. “Point made. You tend to your little human, and I’ll finish up with this snake.” His glamour enveloped the two of them, and the sound of fluttering wings signaled their departure.

Alone at last with Anjali, he carefully loosened his hold on her. “Speak to me, my pet.”

A weak chuckle answered him. “And say what?”

He brushed her hair back from her face and examined it. Blood trickled from her busted lip. Her pulse throbbed in her neck. The smell of burnt flesh clung to her clothes, but as far as he could tell, it wasn’t from her. “Tell me what hurts.”

“Nothing that won’t heal in a few days. Sooner if we call Jen.” She gave him a faint smile and traced his cheek with her cold fingertips. “Thank you for saving my life, even if it meant losing the vampire.”

“Silly little demon hunter, don’t you know that you’re far more precious to me than killing a vampire?”

A soft gasp escaped her lips just before he claimed them. He kissed her gently, avoiding her injury. The metallic taste of her blood tainted the sweetness of her mouth, and his heart wrenched. He pulled away. He’d have plenty of time to kiss her properly once she healed.

“I love you, Will,” she whispered.

A chill in the air chased away the warm glow that filled his veins from her confession. A blinding white light surrounded them. Her breath rattled out, and she went limp in his arms.

“So sweet,” a cruel voice mocked. “Too bad she was on my list tonight.”

The white light retreated, revealing Sraosha.

“No!” He pressed his head against Anjali’s chest, searching for the sound of her heartbeat and finding only silence.

The Angel of Death snickered. “I warned you not to fall in love with a human. She was supposed to die on impact, but somehow, you managed to save her.”

“Then bring her back. She didn’t die.”

The faint wisp of Anjali's soul wafted up from her body, and Sraosha eagerly reached for it. Vassago encased his wings around it, preventing her from taking it.

"I can't change who's on my list. Unlike some people, I have no problem following His orders. In fact, this is one soul I'm going to enjoy collecting."

"I won't let you take her." He clung to the still body in his arms and tried to channel his angelic fire into it, hoping to breathe the life back into her.

"Don't disrupt the natural order of things. Death comes to all humans. Best you let go of her now before she becomes too entrenched in your memory." A ball of white angelic fire formed in her hands. "I have no problem ripping her soul from her in a way that will bring her pain in the afterlife if it means I complete my task."

Rage welled up inside him, erasing what little bit of angelic grace he'd clung to over the millennia. He embraced the darker side of his nature. He was a Fallen, and he would wage war on Heaven if that was what it took to keep Anjali by his side. The bright blue of his angelic fire darkened and pulsed with his anger. "I'll rip you limb from limb first."

Sraosha's grin widened. "Bring it. I've longed to see if the mighty Vassago is worthy of his legend." Her hand cocked back, and the ball of her fire doubled in size.

"Cease," a voice rumbled behind them.

Sraosha whirled around. Her jaw hung open when she saw the archangel standing behind her in all of his magnificence. Her voice shook as she said, "He's refusing to give me her soul, Gabriel."

"She didn't die as ordained," Vassago countered.

"Her injuries are enough to kill her, even if she didn't splatter the pavement like she should have." She pulled out a luminous scroll from inside her robe and unrolled it. "She's on my list for tonight."

Gabriel arched one brow. "Show me where."

Sraosha scanned the names on the parchment. A snarl curled her upper lip. "She was on here, I swear."

Hope began to weave its way into Vassago's heart. Could God have granted him this small miracle?

"But is she now?" The archangel remained cool and aloof in light of her growing rage.

She pointed at Vassago. "He must have altered my list for his own selfish purposes."

"Do you really think a Fallen has that kind of power?"

"You cannot question me, Gabriel. I was following His orders. She was on my list." Red blotches colored Sraosha's normally pale cheeks.

"But the course of events has been altered. She did not fall to her death."

Vassago held his breath. This almost sounded too good to be true. He glanced down at Anjali and saw her soul hovering over her body. Her lips were turning blue, even though traces of warmth still lingered to

her flesh. He closed his eyes and prayed for the second time in as many days that she would remain with him.

The Angel of Death's voice rose an octave higher. "He doesn't change his mind once it's been made up."

"But He has been known to show mercy from time to time." A steely edge laced Gabriel's voice as he added, "Do you dare challenge Him?"

The archangel's question reverberated down to Vassago's soul, reminding him of when he'd stood in Sraosha's place. He opened his eyes and tried to gauge her reaction. Did she have the courage to disobey His orders?

Her fingers curled into fists, and her back stood ramrod straight. She glared at him and Anjali. "Why should he know mercy? He's a Fallen."

A smile played on Gabriel's lips. "Perhaps you should ask Him your question in person and see what His response is."

The color drained from her face. Her shoulders fell. With a flick of her wrist, she released her hold on Anjali's soul. Vassago released the pent up air in his lungs as the whiff of smoke flowed back into the demon hunter's body.

A coarse cough shattered the silence, and Anjali gulped in a shaky breath. Her pulse, faint at first, intensified with each beat of her heart. The blue faded from her lips. His eyes stung with something he'd never experienced before—tears. He pulled her close to him and savored the small confirmations that she lived while he rocked her back and forth in his arms.

Sraosha retreated from them with a look of pure disgust on her face. "Don't get too attached to your little human, Vassago. Like I said, she's mortal, and one day she'll be on my list to stay."

She vanished with a burst of white light, leaving them alone with Gabriel. Vassago pulled his attention away from Anjali to study the archangel. "Why?"

Gabriel shrugged. "Don't ask me. I'm just the messenger. But let's just say He's free to change His mind." He faded as his glamour washed over him, and the air stirred as he took flight.

"Will, what happened?"

"Nothing to worry about, my pet," he replied and stroked her silky hair. "Heaven interfered."

"You'll have to explain it all to me later."

The sounds of footsteps pounding up the stairs drew his attention from her. Vassago grabbed his sword and tensed.

Logan burst onto the rooftop and stepped dead in his tracks when he saw them. His hands bunched up into fists. "What did you do to her?"

Will laughed. "A vampire did this, not me."

Anjali lifted her head and forced a smile for her friend. “I’ll live.” Then she turned to him. “Which way did she go?”

The stench of death hung in the air from the east. “Toward Central Park.”

“She was here, and you let her get away?”

The disbelief on the vampire hunter’s voice sent a surge of fury through Vassago’s veins. How dare Logan question him? “She’s not a normal vampire. Any time you want to take on her, a Fallen and a demon, please feel free to do so.”

Anjali’s hand grazed his shoulder, drawing his attention from Logan back to her. “Please, don’t start anything with him, Logan. He could either save me or kill the vampire.”

Logan’s expression softened, and his fingers relaxed. “You look like crap, Anjali. What did she do to you?”

Vassago’s heart wrenched when he realized how close he’d come to losing her once again. He lifted her into his arms, noticing for the first time the amulet in her other hand. He didn’t miss the way Logan’s eyes grew wide as he unfurled his wings. “I want to have her wounds tended to. Tell me where we can find Jen.”

She whispered an address and closed her eyes. He watched the rise and fall of her chest for a few seconds before flexed his wings and launched into the air, leaving a stunned Logan alone on the rooftop. It amazed him how such a simple thing like the warm brush of her breath against his skin could stir such strong emotions in him. Her life and her love were two things he would cherish as long as he was allowed to enjoy them.

Chapter Seventeen

Anjali tried to conceal the trembling of her hands by sitting on them. Facing three of the Foundation's Board members was nerve-racking at best, and having them summon her to their office usually meant something more serious than a congratulations on a job well done.

Nigel offered her a small smile. She welcomed it over Wade Pemberley's emotionless stare and Morwen's constant pacing.

"Tell us again what happened," the Head Witch ordered, pausing long enough to fix her bright blue eyes on Anjali.

"I told you, that night was kind of fuzzy. I remember hearing that a witch summoned a Fallen to help open the portals to Hell. Together, they freed the Skinwalkers."

Wade nodded and rubbed his chin. "What do you remember about this witch?"

"I know this sounds crazy, but I swear she was a Vampire. The way she moved, the way she talked about tasting my blood. But she also used magic in a way that puts me to shame."

Nigel and Morwen exchanged worried glances, and the Head Witch resumed pacing.

"Did you happen to catch her name?" Wade asked. As head of the Vampire Hunters, he wanted to gather as much information as he could. And rightly so. This was his area of expertise, not hers. And from what Logan had shared, her trail had gone cold since that night. He suspected she'd left the city.

"I think the Fallen called her Colette."

A hiss filled the room, and Morwen's flawless porcelain skin turned three shades paler. "She should be dead."

Wade turned to her. "Well, technically, she is."

"Let's not bother with semantics," Nigel said with a wave of his hand. His crisp English accent made the conversation sound like it was all part of a drawing room comedy. "The point is, Anjali destroyed the demons and managed to grab the Star of Krukstahl. They won't be trying this again without it."

So, the amulet had a name. When she'd awoken in her bed the next afternoon, Will dangled it front of her, asking what it was and saying she refused to let go of it until Jen healed her. The powerful magic the blue stone in the center generated almost made her reluctant to hand it over to the Foundation, but in the end, the less contact she had with it, the better. Power like that could prove intoxicating, and a mediocre witch like her had no business wielding it.

"It still bothers me." Morwen sank into a nearby chair, her face suddenly appearing years older as worry lines creased her forehead. "If I didn't know better, I'd think they had something more sinister in the works."

"That's something we can discuss later." Nigel rubbed the top of his cane. "Anything else to add?"

As if the fact I met Lucifer in person and was technically dead for a few minutes weren't enough? "I think I included everything in my report."

The Head Witch watched her with such intensity, the hair on the back of Anjali's neck stood on end. The corners of her mouth twitched. "You're released from your contract to Vassago, then."

Anjali's heart skipped a beat. Did Morwen know more than she let on? Did Jen or Logan rat on her? "Good to know."

Wade stood. "I'll send a message to all the hunters and give them an updated description of Colette, including a warning that she isn't your standard bloodsucker."

Morwen nodded and followed him to the door. "Let me provide you with some more information on her."

Nigel smiled at her again after the other two left. "It sounds like you had quite an adventure, Anjali."

"You could say that." She rose from her chair. "I have one question, though, that no one's answered. Why did my skin burn her when she tried to bite me?"

"Ah, that." His cane rocked back and forth in his hands. "Morwen and I have been discussing this, and two theories came to mind. The first is that somehow, your unique abilities shielded you from her, but I think the more obvious reason is that you've been claimed by an angel. Even though he's a Fallen, he can still offer you protection from some things."

Her gasp slipped out before she could stop it. How much did they know about her and Will? "Nigel, I have no idea—I mean—" Her tongue refused to work properly.

He chuckled and pointed his cane at her like a wagging finger. "You'll find not everything in this world is black and white, my dear, and perhaps that is its saving grace. Lucky for you, you're not held to the same standards as the vampire hunters." He stood with a grunt. "Enjoy it while you can. There are some of us that would be envious to have the attention of an angel."

She mirrored his grin. "I plan on it."

When she stepped out of the elevator into the lobby, the same town car with the dark tinted windows that had brought her here waited. She stepped inside and didn't bother telling the driver where to take her. The Foundation's driver already knew her address. The trip uptown passed in silence, leaving her to reflect on her conversation with the Board members. Morwen was right. Something sinister was brewing, but she didn't know what.

She opened the door to her apartment, and the sensation of a dozen spiders crawling up her spine hit her. Will lay draped over the couch, eating BBQ potato chips and scattering crumbs all over her floor.

“How did it go, my pet?”

She marched over to him and yanked the bag from his hands. “Do you see the mess you’ve made? I need to grab the vacuum.”

He caught her arm as she turned and pulled her on top of him. “Is that any way to say hello to me?”

“Will, you know how much I hate a mess, and you—”

He silenced with her kiss that went straight to her toes. His tongue teased hers until she relaxed and forgot all about the crunchy crumbs that littered the rug. If Fallen Angels were meant to tempt humans, he had it down to an art.

He ended the kiss and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I would suggest taking this to the bedroom, but I know how much you hate a mess.”

The sexy note in his voice made her sex clench, and her panties grew damp. A wicked thought entered her mind. She reached above his head for the drawer of the end table and fumbled through its contents. “Who says we have to be messy?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think we’ve managed to be neat yet.”

Her fingers curled around the smooth, cool metal of the pair of handcuffs she’d bought the day before, and her grin widened. She slid one hand down his arm. “I have an idea.”

He watched her with hooded eyes until she snapped the cuff around one wrist. When he tried to rise, she pounced on him and captured the other hand. The handcuffs looped around the wrought iron legs of the end table, pinning him to the couch. “Why, you little minx.”

She straddled his lap, grinding her hips against the hard ridge that strained against the zipper of his jeans. “How do you like being tied up?”

The corded muscles in his arms slackened. “It all depends on what you do to me.”

“Whatever I want to do to you.” She pulled his shirt up, exposing his chiseled abs. She bent over and flicked her tongue over them. His salty, male taste went straight to head, and she craved more of it.

A moan rose from his throat as she went lower, tracing the top of his jeans with her mouth. “What kind of monster have I created?”

“One who can’t get enough of you.” She lifted her head and pulled her shirt off, followed by her bra. His eyes widened at the sight of her breasts, and the end table jerked off the floor. “Would you like a taste?”

He licked his lips, and the red glow simmered in his dark eyes. “Very much so.”

She tipped forward, and he expertly caught one of her breasts in his mouth. His teeth grazed her aching nipple. A jolt of pleasure raced through her, causing her to inhale sharply. Even with his hands tied, he knew how to take her to the edge of an orgasm.

He released her breast and flicked his tongue over the taut peak. “Why are you tormenting me like this?”

“Payback.” She gave him her best naughty grin and began removing his jeans. “Besides, this way, we don’t have to remake the bed.”

“You’re such a devious woman. When I get my hands free, I’m going to—”

His threat halted when she eagerly took him in her mouth. The metal chain of the handcuffs rattled against the legs of the table. His cock filled her mouth with its throbbing heat. He arched his hips so she could take him deeper. She almost swore she could smell his desire growing with each bob of her head. She’d surrendered to him before. Now it was her turn to make him beg.

When she glanced up, his face grew tight. “Please, my pet, as much as I’m enjoying your hot little mouth, I’d much prefer something else.”

She gave him one final lick along the underside of his shaft, lapping up the pearl of liquid that gathered on the head. “What did you have in mind?”

“Why don’t you take your pants off and find out?”

She stood and shimmied out of the rest of her clothes. His cock twitched as he watched her, and his breath grew shallow. Behind him, his wings strained against the confines of his shirt. She started to unbutton it. “Shall I remove this first?”

“Anjali, if I don’t get inside you soon, I’m going to make Lucifer look like a saint.”

Wetness pooled between her legs and trickled down her thighs. She wanted him inside her too, but not until he uttered the words she wanted to hear. As the last button slipped out of its hole, his wings wrapped around and pulled her to him like another set of arms. She lay against him, staying in front of his erection so it only grazed her buttocks. “Say it, Will.”

“I’ve already told you that I’m as much yours as you are mine. Do you really need me to promise you more?”

She cupped his cheeks in her hands and studied him. It still boggled her mind that this beautiful angel wanted her and no one else. She brushed her lips against him, tasting the remnants of the BBQ potato chips on them instead of the ambrosia she would have imagined. He was as real as any flesh and blood man, but so much more. And she wanted all of him.

“Do you really need me to tell you that I love you? Haven’t I shown you as much?”

“Sometimes a girl likes to hear those three little words.”

The tips of his wings traced spiraling circles up and down her spine. Tension coiled deep inside the pit of her stomach. Her pussy ached for him, but she could wait this out.

He lifted his head and pressed his lips to hers. “I love you now and forever.”

Although she’d known it all along deep inside, his murmured words knocked the air from her lungs. Wetness seeped into the corners of her eyes. Caught in a world between ancient enemies, between angels and demons, she’d found the one man who captured her heart. Before she let her tears fall, she raised her hips and took his cock deep inside her, finding a home in the bliss that followed.

About the Author

Growing up in small-town Alabama, I relied on storytelling as a natural way to pass the time and keep my two younger sisters entertained. Of course, that also means I'm inclined to suffer some of the same maladies of many Southern writers, which may include overuse of simile and metaphor, exaggeration, melodrama and the ever-popular long-winded sentence.

I currently live in Western Washington with my husband and daughter, maintaining my alter ego of mild-mannered physician by day while I continue to pursue writing on nights and weekends. I refer to it as "therapy".

To learn more about me, please visit www.cristamchugh.com. Send an email to crista@cristamchugh.com.

Look for these titles by Crista McHugh

Now Available:

Heart of a Huntress

A legend...a myth...a high stakes game that could shatter them both.

Heart of a Huntress

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The Kavanaugh Foundation, Book 1

As one of the oldest surviving vampire hunters in the Foundation, Lana has learned the toughest lesson: success comes at a price. So while the yummy stranger she bumps into at Caesar's trips all her temptation switches, duty comes first. Better to be alone than to gamble with someone else's heart—or her own. Although maybe a one-night stand won't hurt...

Byron has set a one-way course for revenge against the Vegas vampire who murdered his uncle. When he collides with Lana, though, her scent calls to him like a potent aphrodisiac. The only explanation: she's his true-mate. And the timing couldn't be worse. He can't afford any distractions—not to mention it'll be hell convincing her to love someone who sprouts fur and fangs every full moon.

One drink together turns into a daring night of passion. Their erotic interlude ends abruptly with the news that Lana's partner has been abducted by the very vampire Byron seeks. Now Byron has no choice. He must reveal what he is and risk a rejection that could spell his own destruction...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Heart of a Huntress:

His voice almost growled the last sentence, like he wasn't used to people challenging his orders. A shiver coursed down her spine. Normally she didn't like domineering men, mainly because she could kick most of their asses when push came to shove. But Byron looked like the type that could match her, tit for tat. An equal. A challenge. She rattled off the address to her condo just off the Strip and nestled into his arms. It would be a short ride, but she might as well enjoy it while she could.

His arms wrapped around her, warm and comforting. How long had it been since she allowed herself to get physically close to someone like this? She knew getting involved with him was out of the question—too many complications—but would one night disrupt the balance of her life?

"Let me take a look at your ankle."

He slid his hand down her leg and her sex tightened. An amused light shone in his eyes when she met his gaze, like he knew exactly how horny he was making her. And if she wasn't mistaken, he was struggling to contain his arousal as much as she was.

He cleared his throat. "It's already starting to swell a bit. Can you move it, wiggle your toes? Do we need to take a detour by the hospital to make sure it's not broken?"

She followed his commands, wincing as she did. "I think I'll survive. It's just a sprain."

"Good. Anything else?"

"Maybe some bruised ribs," she admitted. Her mind played back the encounter with the last vampire, and a cold chill washed over her insides. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saving my life. And for taking care of me afterwards." God, she hated to admit she needed help. It gnawed at her gut, but if she had to be rescued by anyone, she would've picked him. "But you need to be careful. You saw what they're like, and from what I overheard, they were setting up a trap."

"For me or for you?"

"Me."

A reckless grin spread across his face. "Then maybe you're the one who needs to be more careful. Maybe you should take someone with you when you hunt."

She glanced up at the driver, wondering how much he'd overheard and understood. "Let's change the subject."

"Of course," he said as he ran one callused hand over her legs and massaged the base of her neck with the other. "What did you have in mind?"

One look told her exactly what he had on his mind. Even if she closed her eyes, the firm ridge in his pants pressing against her thigh made her all too aware of his thoughts. "Are you always this forward with women?"

"Sometimes. Actually, I'd say I've been holding back on you."

"Why is that?"

"Because you're different than most women."

That was an understatement. How many women prowled the streets at night with a wooden stake in their purse?

"You seem to be the type who likes to call the shots," he continued. The sensuous curve of his lips rose into a smile, making his implications clear. He was waiting on her to make the next move.

Her heart raced. One kiss wouldn't cause too many problems, would it? Plus, it might calm the growing curiosity inside her. Before common sense could talk her out of it, she gently brushed her lips against his. They were warm, soft, yielding to hers.

When she tried to pull away, his fingers threaded through her hair. Her breath caught. The hunger in his hazel eyes told her he wanted more than that, and frankly, so did she. This time, when their lips met, she did the yielding. Her mouth parted and his tongue swept in.

Mmm...this is how a kiss should feel. Each sweep of his tongue, each nibble of his teeth, fanned the smoldering fire inside the lowest pit of her stomach. The stubble on his chin grated against her skin, adding a new sensation to her already hyper-aware brain. She curled his short hair around her fingers and held on for the ride, not wanting it to end.

A soft moan formed in his throat and he grew bolder in his advances. The hand on her leg worked its way under her dress. He stroked her seam through her already-soaked panties. Now it was her turn to moan. He repeated the action and she pressed against his hand, urging him to keep doing it, to go deeper next time.

A loud cough interrupted them, and Lana pulled away. The taxi was idling in the driveway of her condominium complex. Her cheeks burned. Had she really been so caught up in making out with a relative stranger in the backseat of a cab that she hadn't realized they'd reached their destination?

Byron's hand withdrew from under her dress. "Let me walk the lady upstairs, and I'll be back in a moment."

"Yeah, right," the driver replied. "Just so you know, the meter's running."

"No problem." He opened the door and scooped her back into his arms. "Got your keys, Lana?"

She searched her purse while she gave him directions to her unit. Despite the fact that she'd been sucking his face a few seconds ago, she couldn't meet his eyes now. Once they entered the elevator, she whispered, "Sorry."

"For what?"

"For acting that way in the cab. I usually have better control over myself."

His laughter echoed off the stainless-steel walls. "So you're saying you don't normally hook up with random strangers?"

"You don't have to say it that way!" She tried to wiggle out of his arms, but he held on to her tighter. "You really don't have to carry me all the way up to my condo, you know."

"What if I want to?"

Although she hated to admit it, she wanted to stay in his arms. For once in her life, she felt less like a tough-as-nails huntress and more like a fairy-tale princess. Of course, what she wanted to do to him didn't belong anywhere near a Disney movie.

The elevator doors opened, and something sank into her stomach like a lead weight. The end of the line. The end of the night with Byron. Why did that disappoint her so much? She should be focused on work, on composing a report to the Foundation about what had happened tonight and researching whoever this Klaus fellow was, but all she wanted to do was taste his lips again. Years of sex deprivation had finally caught up with her.

He set her down in front of her door. "Will you be okay from here?"

No, her mind screamed. He'd left her body aching and needy for more than just a kiss. She should be flattered that he'd left the taxi waiting downstairs, a sure sign that he didn't want just a random hookup with her. Oh, dear God, was he disappointed with her? Had it been so long since she'd kissed someone that she sucked at it? Only one way to find out.

She seized the collar of his blazer and pulled him against her, her mouth devouring his. She tasted traces of the Jack and Coke he'd drunk earlier, along with something more primal, more sexual. Desire.

All semblances of self-control got tossed to the side. He pressed her against the door, pulling her injured leg up until it hooked around his waist and the hem of her dress gathered around her waist. His erection rubbed against her intimate areas, tormenting her with the layers of material that separated them.

He broke his lips away from hers and trailed them down her neck. The combination of his rough stubble mixed with the gentle flicks of his tongue and teasing nips of his teeth nearly sent her over the edge. Who cared if they were humping in the middle of the hallway? She wanted him to fuck her right here and now.

"Lana." He moaned her name like a starving wolf presented with a haunch of fresh meat. His hands cupped her buttocks, raising her ever so slightly so his cock stimulated the exquisitely sensitive nub between her legs.

A shudder ripped through her body. She reached for the door handle, eager to continue this in her bed. Screw the cab waiting downstairs. She'd pay for the running meter at this point, so long as he left her a satisfied and exhausted puddle of flesh when he finished with her.

The door flew open beside her, and if Byron hadn't caught her, they would've landed on the floor in a tangle of limbs. A petite Hispanic woman stared at them with round brown eyes.

Oh, shit, is this the wrong condo?

Love—it's the real thing. And complicated as hell...

The Egyptian Demon's Keeper

© 2009 Ciar Cullen

Archeologist Eliza Schneider assumes her meeting with an exotic stranger in the Egyptian desert was a heat-induced hallucination...until he materializes in New York. She has to give the tall, handsome Egyptian high marks for originality with his pick-up line: they're fated to save the world together. The master/servant thing goes a long way toward sweeping her off her feet, but it's easier to believe he's just another in her long line of poor romantic choices.

Kasdeya, the Fifth Satan, waited eons for his Keeper to find her way to his tomb amongst the ancient ruins. He only has a limited time to convince Eliza that her role is critical to help defeat the loathsome Deumos, a female demon who has laid her claim to bearing his child—a child that will bring down mortals.

Trouble is, Eliza doesn't even believe Kasdeya is real. If he can't convince her he isn't an illusion—and neither is their love—Deumos will win.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Egyptian Demon's Keeper:

Eliza opened one eye and gulped back a scream. If she was asleep, then the dream was astounding. She wiggled her toes to make sure she wasn't in sleep paralysis.

That man was humming. He was two feet away from her, staring at his palms as if a secret message were about to appear on his skin, and humming.

Okay, she thought, this is pretty bad. Unless the laws of physics had suddenly changed and rain could defy gravity, she *had* lost her mind, and this guy seemed a permanent part of her new psychosis. At least he was beautiful. Eliza hoped fervently that if she had to remain mad, he would continue to be part of her altered state.

"You hear about sunstroke killing people, you know, but you never hear about this stuff."

He jumped to his feet and stared down at her, running his hand through his long black locks. "I was meditating. You..."

"I frightened you?"

His cheeks reddened, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Of course not. Mortals cannot frighten me." He crossed his arms and puffed out his chest, as if the stance would somehow convince her that she hadn't startled him.

"Mortals? Did you say mortals? As opposed to...non-mortals?"

"Correct." He tapped his foot in a very mortal gesture of impatience.

"This just gets better and better. Okie dokie then. I know I'm supposed to be your keeper or servant or something—isn't that what you told me in Egypt? Excuse me, should that be 'the land of pharaohs'?"

“Correct. You are my Keeper, my servant, and it is the land of pharaohs. I’m pleased you listened.”

“Great. I’m dying to please my own hallucination. Would my hallucination mind getting me some water?” *I have to try to pull it together. What if this is a real guy, and he drugged you? Come on, the door is close enough. Please, God, please let my legs work.*

He gestured to the ornate decanter and glass on the low table. The smirk pulling on his lips ticked her off. So, he knew she meant to make a break for it.

“I will pour for you of course.” He handed her a glass, and she pushed herself up so she could sip. Mind racing, coming up blank, she concentrated on clearing her head with the water. She stole glances at him, but his expression was impassive. What does a serial killer look like anyway? Why couldn’t one look like a soap opera star? An Egyptian soap opera star? Did they have soap operas in Egypt? *I’m in real trouble, no matter how I look at this.*

“Look, if it’s money you’re after, you picked the wrong girl. Maybe the museum would belly up a few thousand for me... Did you drug me? That’s it, isn’t it? You got to my canteen in Egypt...”

“And then miraculously found you in New York, slipped unnoticed into your office or apartment and put a poison potion in your glass?”

She shook her head uncertainly. It didn’t explain the raindrops, the change in his appearance from Dr. Kasey Smith to Kasdeya. Nothing was adding up.

“So, you don’t really know David, and you don’t really work for the museum in Boston.”

“What gave me away?” He smiled fully for the first time, his eyes coming to life and gentle creases appearing around them.

Eliza refilled her water glass in a half-hearted attempt to stall. No matter how hard she thought about it, she could only come to one conclusion. The Egyptian desert had robbed her of sanity. Perhaps she was already in an institution and didn’t know it?

“Where are we?” She glanced around the large room, what seemed like part of a larger suite. “Are we in New York?” The ornate furnishings smacked of something from an *Arabian Nights* tale, but with modern amenities. “It has that flying carpet thing going on.”

“Not that again.” His smile faded, and he rubbed at his temples.

“Sorry. I’m known to give people headaches. Do demons get headaches?”

Kasdeya took a deep breath and blew it out. Eliza knew that move. She’d watched her mother, David and just about everyone else in her life do it many times.

“Is the room to your liking? I thought you would feel comfortable with these...things.” He gestured to the furniture uncertainly as if he had carved the intricate woodwork himself and was concerned for her approval. The Fifth Satan was a complicated guy—big, buff, dangerous, easily startled and oddly ill at ease. Did he need something from her? Perhaps he didn’t hold all the cards.

“You didn’t answer my question. Are. We. In. New. York?”

“More or less. Would you like to be in New York?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then we are.”

A mild tremor rolled through the suite. An earthquake in New York?

“Did you do that?”

He cocked his head to one side and studied her. “I thought you said you wanted to be in New York. Well, we’re here. Or there. You are a very confused woman, and you’re beginning to confuse me.”

“Why don’t you tell me what the fuck is going on, Mr. Kasdeya? And if you tell me not to curse, I’ll...I’ll curse again.”

“I will warn you that some of the answers you seek may come as a bit of a shock.”

“As opposed to rain stopping in midair? Try me.”

The last thing Eliza expected was for her captor to strip off his black T-shirt. “Dude, there’s no need for that!” Surely he wasn’t going to accost her? He shook his head subtly, as if he read her thought and wanted to ease her mind. “Look at me.”

“I’m looking.” She couldn’t take her eyes off him if she tried. Like an artist had wrapped a masterpiece of sculpture with velvety skin and breathed life into it, Kasdeya was exquisite. He moved his arm to point at the band of golden script that circled one bicep, and his stomach rippled, down to the ridges of muscles framing his slender hips.

“When was the last time you saw a man without a shirt, Eliza? I’m pointing to my arm. Look at it.” She glanced at his face instead. His smirk of satisfaction annoyed her.

“Oh, so big deal, you’re gorgeous. Get over yourself. All right, let me see your damned arm. I noticed that in pharaoh land. Skip the mumbo jumbo and tell me what it says and why I should care.”

“I don’t know what it says. You’re supposed to tell me. You’re my Keeper.”

“What the hell does that mean anyway? Like a zookeeper? When’s your feeding time? Damn, my head is killing me again.”

“You’re probably hungry. Come, let us dine and we can discuss things casually.”

“Oh, lovely, yes, let’s have a nice little chat over dinner. A night out on the town? Perhaps drinks first?”

“That sarcasm does not suit you. You will want to freshen up of course.”

She agreed to everything but sex. She hadn't counted on his monstrous creativity...

My Fair Monster

© 2008 Lila Dubois

Monsters in Hollywood, Book Two.

Since the day three incredibly hot men in disguise walk into her office and proved Monsters are real, intrepid screenwriter Jane Darby is obsessed with one task: to give the creatures a mythical makeover by writing a revolutionary, blockbuster screenplay. Now if only she can get over her own fear—and get the closed-mouth Michael to talk about his people.

Michael is fascinated by the demur and docile Jane, whose efforts to hold him at arm's length hide an untapped sexual passion—a beast within her waiting to be set free. There's only one way to get under her lovely skin: strike a bargain.

For one week, she agrees to let him do anything, anything, he wants. But Jane's got conditions. First, no actual sex. Second, she has to enjoy it.

Jane's not really worried. What can happen if he sticks to the bargain? After all, she's not really turned on by the idea of Michael tying her down. Or bending her over his knee. Or...

Gulp.

Enjoy the following excerpt for My Fair Monster:

"Oh my God you set me up on a blind date. Was there a roofie in that shot?"

"No, but that's a good idea for next time."

"Lena!"

"Oh calm down! I'm joking, besides, who needs GHB when there's a good DJ?"

"Quit distracting me. What'd you do?"

"Nothing."

"Fine, then I'm going to go dance with that guy."

Lena hesitated long enough for Jane's friends-with-stupid-plan detector to shoot into red, before Lena said, "Dance with him if you want. I just think you could do better."

Jane pulled her friend's face close until they were nose-to-nose. "I know where you sleep."

With that ominously vague threat, Jane left the bar, heading for the dance floor. She stopped on the edge, intending to search for coat guy, but a new song started up. It was rich, with a pulsing back beat. The dancers stopped their wild solo gyrations and came together, the music demanding skin-to-skin contact.

The tingling was back in her fingers, the music pressing into her skin, demanding her recognition, her service. Jane stepped onto the dance floor, and started to move.

Lifting her arms above her head, Jane slide one hand along the fabric casing her limb, wishing it were bare so she could feel the contact. She whirled, planting her feet on the downbeat and throwing her head back.

Something brushed against her back, breaking the rhythm of her dance, but when Jane opened her eyes there was no one close enough to touch her. Like her, the others on the dance floor were lost in the song, touched by music as well crafted as a symphony.

Jane halfheartedly glanced around for coat guy, but gave up when the next hard beat sounded. She bumped her hip to the side and slid her hands over her own breasts, down her belly, to the bare skin of her thighs. She bent, waiting, poised, for the beat to give her a signal. When the music spoke to her Jane snapped up.

Her back slapped into something. Someone.

Hands covered hers, urging her to retrace the path over her breasts to her belly, then hips. He pulled, forcing her ass back against him.

Then they moved as one. Rather than a crude thrusting back and forth—a pale imitation of missionary sex—their duel dancing was rhythmic and subtle, hips moving to the beat. Jane freed her hands from beneath his, needing more. Her fingertips brushed a face, and then his hands captured hers, fingers tight around her wrists, pulling her arms up and back, until they were trapped behind his neck. He held both her wrists in one large hand.

Jane gasped as the position stretched her up, until she danced on her toes. Her breasts lifted, and her partner took full advantage, cupping one breast through her dress. He touched her, fondled her, controlled her.

Jane shuddered and moaned. She turned to look at him, but her arms acted like blinders. She tried to speak but her mouth was dry.

“Just dance.”

She barely heard the words over the music and the rush of blood in her ears. Had she even heard it? Or was the baritone command a figment of her imagination?

His hand left her breast, which both relieved and disappointed her, until it dropped to her bare thigh and headed north, slipping beneath her short skirt to curl around her hip, fingertips brushing the fabric of her thong.

His touch made her aware of her own wetness, and in that moment she wanted nothing more than for him, whoever he was, to touch her, right now. She wanted his finger inside her, long and hard and thick, in one powerful thrust.

The music stopped.

Sound had not stopped pumping from the speakers, no DJ was that stupid, but the song had changed. This new offering was frenzied, with a screaming singer, and too much techno overlay.

Jane snapped from her dance-induced lust-haze. She jerked her arms free of his hold and the man's hot, rough hand slid away from her thigh.

"I knew you loved to...dance." The voice was low, rich and...familiar.

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