



*She has Heaven to lose. He has Hell to pay.*

Centuries of heartbreak. Grinding failures punctuated by too-few victories. What angel in her right mind would want this job? Celeste, who's driven to save Devil-contracted souls before Hell can claim them, is weary, but not beaten. Yet.

Her latest case makes her wonder if it's all worth the anguish. A demon enticed a too-young musician into selling his soul for fortune and fame. To make matters worse, that demon is Damael, an insufferable, frightening minion with airtight contracts—and a body that makes her long for sin.

Damael's always had a soft spot for Celeste, but if his bored superiors want drama, he'll give them drama. Though it pains him to trick the angel he wants with all his black heart, eons of restrained lust win out. He makes the deal: her body in exchange for the human's soul.

She wasn't supposed to accept.

Damael can't be trusted, but with the deadline bearing down, Celeste lays everything on the line in a last-ditch effort to save just one precious soul. Even if it means losing hers—along with her heart.

Warning: This title contains graphic language, explicit sex, an angelic heroine with attitude...and a demonic hero who's smoking hot. Literally.

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# Sweet Disgrace

*Cherrie Lynn*

# Dedication

For my wonderful editor, Linda Ingmanson.  
Very special thanks to Inez Kelley for her input,  
her enthusiasm for this story and her all-around awesomeness

# Chapter One

No one could see the angel in the corner.

She wanted it that way, but Celeste knew they wouldn't pay her attention even if she revealed herself. The entire backstage area of the arena was abuzz with post-concert excitement, the last reverberations of thunderous heavy metal echoing off the walls. Out on the floor, a hazy layer of smoke from the pyro drifted over the unruly audience. The sea of people churned, some reluctantly filing out, others chanting for an encore. Since she'd been standing there, she'd witnessed fights, drugs, nudity...and God only knew what she *hadn't* seen.

Humans. So hasty, so in-the-now. Even as she sometimes cursed their hedonism and impulsiveness, her heart broke for the destructive, short-sighted decisions they often made.

They certainly liked to make her job difficult. No, impossible. This was impossible. Only one thing worked in her favor: if Damael had a weakness lurking in his charred black stump of a heart, it was her.

Even that hadn't helped her of late, if it ever had. She didn't want to think about her own weakness...the single reason her superiors should *never* want her to face that demon. There was nothing to be done for it. Telling the archangels why she really wasn't the best person for this job would cause ripples she didn't want to contend with.

Though dozens of the misguided mortals milled about her, some shouting, some running, there was only one she was interested in. They'd just escorted him from the stage, where he'd stomped and roared and demanded adulation from the thousands of feverish minions who'd gathered to pay him homage—just as his blood-signed contract dictated they would. To the eye that didn't know any better, he was merely another of the frail yet seemingly invincible modern-day gods. Here today, gone tomorrow.

She knew better. She knew what he'd given up all those years ago to stand where he was today, a superstar. She knew what he was about to lose in a few precious hours if her intervention failed.

*God, give me strength.*

Peeling herself from her vantage point, Celeste slipped into the steady stream of roadies and set her sights on the crowd swiftly exiting the stage. She could only catch a glimpse of her charge, surrounded by two bodyguards and various other members of his entourage. Xavier Marx—born Adam Matthewson—freed his long black hair from the white towel someone had slung around his neck and allowed himself to be propelled down the steps toward his dressing room.

She followed, traversing the hallways beyond the backstage area, not letting him out of her sight. A difficult feat given the number of people trailing behind, many of them trying to get a peek themselves. It was best to try to avoid contact with them—lest she be accosted with their thoughts and feelings—but not possible given the density of the crowd. She glided through, catching flashes of elation, pain, desperation, some anger... By the time she reached her destination, she felt almost weighed down with the sludge of their emotions.

Adam entered his dressing room, tugged his girlfriend in with him and slammed the door in the faces of his bewildered handlers. Celeste braced herself for the various brushes of abstract emotion and plunged through the cluster of babbling people...and right through the solidity of the door beyond. She emerged on the other side to relative silence.

The girlfriend, Melody, sat on the couch with a sigh, perching on the very edge of the cushion. Adam pitched himself into a chair and scrubbed his face with the ends of the towel still draped around his neck. “*Fuck.*”

“What’s the matter?” Melody asked after watching him for a moment. “You sounded awesome. Everyone was great.”

He whipped the towel off and tossed it to the floor, leaning his head back. Suddenly, he seemed exhausted. “I sounded like Trey was standing on my nutsack.”

“I didn’t think so. Did that crowd look for one *second* like they weren’t getting off? It was crazy, babe.” Her tone was low and soothing, most likely from years of experience dealing with a rock star’s ego and insecurities.

Adam didn’t appear to be moved. He opened his mouth as if he meant to snap a retort, then promptly shut it again, staring up at the ceiling.

*He remembers*, Celeste thought. For twenty years, he’d tried to convince himself it wouldn’t really happen to him, that it had all been a crazy drug- and alcohol-induced dream and he hadn’t really sold his soul to a demon for fame. But the knowledge was always there in the back of his mind, haunting him. She didn’t even have to look into his thoughts; it was clear on his face. The agitation. The fear.

His twenty years was up tomorrow at 5:03:47 p.m., Pacific Standard Time, exactly two decades after an eager seventeen-year-old with a dream dipped a quill into his own blood and signed away his soul.

How Damael must have grinned as the youth essentially gave him everything he had, everything he was. Celeste could see that beautiful, deadly, inherently evil smile in her mind even now. Soon, she would see it for real. He’d be here to collect the soul owed him.

“I need a shower,” Adam grumbled, leaping to his feet as if he couldn’t tolerate sitting still one moment longer.

Melody gave him a smile and started to get up. “Want me to join you?”

“No.”

The girl deflated into her seat, crestfallen. Adam watched her stare at the floor, his jaw tight. "I'm wiped out, Mel. Let me get cleaned up and we'll go to the bus. I had food sent out there." He walked over and dropped a kiss on the top of her blonde head before heading into the next room. Melody picked up a paperback that had been lying facedown on the heavy trunk next to the couch, her expression still troubled as she curled up and began to read.

"Well, damn," a low, lazy voice drawled from behind Celeste. "I was hoping to see some action."

She whirled to find Damael standing behind her, lounging against the wall. He was getting better at shielding his aura. Ordinarily his mere presence caused the hairs to prickle at her nape. Melody went on reading, oblivious to the demon in her midst.

If only Celeste could be so ignorant of his presence.

As usual, he was immaculately dressed for modern times, something she'd always found quite curious for all the centuries she'd known him. Earthly fashions had never interested her much, certainly not enough to eschew her traditional white robes. He wore a black suit, crisp black shirt, silky blood-red tie. His hair matched the midnight-hued material just like those unsettling eyes, though she knew the latter could flash the same hot crimson red as his tie.

And they rarely blinked. Rather, they stared while she felt as if layers of her very being were being stripped away, one by one, until her naked core lay exposed and at his mercy. It had always been this way.

He straightened and then smiled at her, a gesture she always found disconcerting. "Hello, sweet angel."

She gave him a curt nod and her usual greeting. "Hello, foul minion of Hell."

He laughed and, while the sound was musical, it carried a bitter edge. "Ah, your happiness to see me never fails to flatter. What brings you this time?"

As if he didn't know. "What do you think?"

Every movement casual, he strolled over to sit at the end of the couch Melody wasn't occupying. "They actually sent you to salvage that waste of flesh?"

"He's *not* a—" Catching herself, she pushed the outrage back down where it belonged and bit her bottom lip before she let any more of it fly. He loved to bait her. He lived for it. *Don't let him win.* She repeated it like a mantra.

Adam took that moment to walk in with a white towel wrapped around his waist, his color not much better than that of the terrycloth. Against the vividness of his tattoos and his wet black hair, he was deathly pale. Celeste frowned at his jerky movements as he knocked off the lid of the cooler and plowed through the ice until he brought out a bottle of water.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked, watching the way Adam's hands were trembling as he wrenched off the lid and lifted the bottle to his lips. Melody let her book fall to her chest and stared at him with concern.



“Oh, that.” Damael waved his hand. “I’ve been having a little sport. He saw horrific faces looking up at him from the crowd all night. And just now, in the mirror. He’s seeing strange things everywhere.”

“You’re despicable.”

“You’re lovely as always.”

Ignoring the comment, she held out her hand. “Let me see it.”

Gaze steady upon her own, Damael reached into the breast pocket of his satiny jacket and pulled out a scroll tied with a black ribbon. The corner of his mouth tugged up with smug triumph as he handed it over. “The wording hasn’t changed since last time. You lost that one too, if I recall.”

Indeed, it was rare to find a loophole. Damael straightened his blood-red tie and lapels as she unfurled the thick parchment and read. The text grew smaller and smaller, and to human eyes would have disappeared altogether before the signature line. There was no way Adam had been able to read what he was signing, yet there was his hastily scribbled signature amid splatters of blood like obscene teardrops on the pale background.

Her heart fell and cracked. So young. So desperate.

Without a word, she handed it back to him. He watched her, his expression unreadable, as he rolled it up and returned it to his pocket.

“Why do they send you *now*?” he asked, surprising her with his sudden intensity. “Why don’t they send you to talk some sense into these idiots before they destroy themselves? Perhaps then you could be somewhat useful.”

Secretly, she agreed. “It has to do with free will, choosing one’s own destiny—”

“Blah, blah, blah. If that’s the case, then he’s chosen it. It’s done. Let him suffer the consequences.”

She sighed, folding her hands in front of her as she met his dark gaze squarely. His irises were a starless oblivion. Black and bottomless. She feared they would pull her right into their void and stretch her into nothing if she stared for too long. Yet she would not allow herself to look away. Those eyes were far less frightening now than when he was caught in the throes of lust—whether for a fresh soul or for her.

“What would it take for you to release him from his contract?” The oft-asked question sounded hollow even to her ears. She already knew the answer.

Flashing that singularly gorgeous smile, he stretched his long legs in front of him and laced his fingers across his stomach. Faint tendrils of smoke curled from his broad shoulders—he must be fresh from the flames. Amazing that a creature so beguilingly beautiful could be capable of such cruelty, but she was reminded of where he came from with every wisp that rose from his body and every smolder in his eyes. She’d witnessed his cruelty firsthand. She’d lost to him so many times. In fact, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d won.

The question that came from his lips then stunned her. “How desperate are you to win him?”

Celeste’s brows drew together. “Desperate? That’s hardly the word I’d use.”

“So then...you don’t care that much?”

“Of *course* I care. I’d like nothing more than to see him continue his life, and then to bring him safely home when his time is up.”

“Even though he essentially renounced all that is holy when he gave himself to me. And he’s lived a life of nothing but debauchery since, hurting everyone who loves him.”

“He’s no more lost than the others who eventually find their way.”

“Oh, I’d say he is,” Damael said. “I’d say he’s quite off the path, and a monster is eyeing him from the bushes, ready to pounce. It’ll strike in about twenty hours. That monster is me.” He had never looked away from her once and, while she still found that unsettling, she began to relax somewhat. Damael was no threat to *her* whatsoever; she was off limits to him.

“You will, of course, give him all of his allotted time, less only that needed to—”

“To sufficiently extricate the essence from its mortal husk and lay eternal possession upon it,” he quoted easily. “I will, to the last second. It’s in his contract.”

The cold nonchalance of his words made her seethe. “You make murder and damnation sound almost pretty. Certainly easy. Just another day on the job for you, right?”

“Yes, well, don’t you get tired of watching it?” he asked. “You’re the only one of your kind who stays, you know. The rest of them flee in the final minutes. Why do you not?”

She dropped her gaze to the floor. “To punish myself, I suppose.”

“Why?”

“Because I lost.”

“*How?*” He unfolded his tall frame from the couch then walked over to stand in front of her. She knew because his shiny black shoes came into her field of vision, a startling contrast to the pristine white of her robes brushing the floor. His voice was sardonic and cold, nothing at all like those she was accustomed to hearing in her realm. “He lost when he signed himself to Hell. Just because you can’t undo his stupidity doesn’t mean *you* did anything wrong.” Two fingers slid under her chin, exerting enough firm pressure to tilt her chin up until she was looking into those fathomless eyes.

Inhaling sharply, she couldn’t lend voice to her indignation. She should have backed away immediately and exhorted him to *never* touch her again. She should have, but she couldn’t. No dark magic he possessed could bewitch her as completely as the feel of his skin on hers. She’d always assumed it would burn, or pain her in some other way, or at the very least, disgust her. It only called forth a desperate longing for the forbidden. For something beyond her realm of experience.

“You stay and subject yourself to the terror of those you’re trying to protect. Why?”

“Because...” She couldn’t find any more words, lost in the roiling black sea of his eyes. Usually flat and glassy, just now they were turbulent.

“Because?”

“Because in that moment you rip their soul from their bodies and take them down, I don’t want you to be the only thing they see. I want them to see me, and feel my love for them, and know they *were* loved. That they didn’t have to choose this path.”

“That’s noble of you. But under the circumstances, rather cruel.”

“Maybe my compassion for them is something they can hang on to throughout the torment they face.”

“Most of them deserve it.”

“No,” she said, finding firmness at last, but not the strength to step away from him. He held her completely bound with nothing but his fingertips nudging the tender flesh under her chin. “If I allowed myself to believe that, I couldn’t do this.”

“So again I ask you, little angel, what would you do to win him back? To not have to witness the horror this time?”

She swallowed thickly, a little flare of hope and excitement coursing through her. “You keep asking me what I would do, but I have the suspicion you already have something in mind.”

One black wing-shaped brow edged higher on his forehead. His fingertips fell away, and all at once she felt as if the power that had been holding her upright buckled and collapsed. She almost stumbled, but managed to catch herself.

“Perhaps.”

His gaze roved down from her face, taking in the folds of her white robes. A liquid ache pooled at the juncture of her thighs, spreading farther the longer he looked at her. She wasn’t unaccustomed to this sensation where he was concerned, but still it dismayed her. Wickedness seeped into his expression...nothing perceptible, really, but a subtle shift she could sense rather than see.

“W-what do you want?”

That flat black stare lifted to her face again. This time she felt certain it was pulling her in. “You.”

She blinked, pressing her thighs together in a feeble attempt to squelch the unsettling throb between them. “I don’t understand.”

“I think you do.”

“You want me to take his place? I cannot—”

“No. I want you naked and writhing beneath me.”

Stunned outrage flashed through her, followed too closely by a rush of heat that could have blown up from the very depths of Hell itself. She should have stepped back and demanded for him to stop such appalling behavior. It wasn’t proper, it couldn’t happen—

But his voice drew her along as easily as a bit of tissue caught up in a strong draft, blown this way and that, helpless as to the direction or the destination. “I want you, your sweetness, your light. I want to bury myself in it. You, crying out my name. That’s what I want.”

"I'll never say your name," she snapped, as if this were the most offensive suggestion he'd made. "You want to ruin me."

"Oh, no," he murmured, and she closed her eyes as his hand came up and stroked her hair. "Don't play coy. You know me. You tried to ignore it, but you know how I've wanted you. For all my centuries of hatred, death and decadence, you..." He exhaled shakily, and she opened her eyes in time to see him close his own. "You are somehow perfection."

This proposition from any other of his kind would send her fleeing. And, as he implied, he should be repulsed by her, not tempted. Why he'd wanted her throughout all these millennia was a mystery to her. She'd always felt it, sensed it, though he'd never put his desire into words. Until now.

Gathering her frazzled senses at last, she straightened and lifted her chin. "Apparently, you've spent too long in the fire. You've finally lost what's left of your mind."

"I've spent too long in the fire, all right." The sensual fullness of his lips became a wry slash.

"Be that as it may, there will be no deals of that nature between us. I want to take the matter before the mediator."

His brow wrinkled. "Don't make yourself look foolish because you're angry at me."

"No foolishness. I simply think it could be argued Adam was too young and impulsive to fully understand the consequences of his agreement."

Damael scoffed. "They all are, whether they're seventeen or seventy. Don't you think?"

"My mind's made up."

"Very well. But keep in mind, there's an easy way to get through this, with guaranteed victory on your part." His gaze took another journey down the length of her body, and she fought the urge to wrap her arms around herself even though she was completely covered. "Easy and, dare I say, far more pleasurable than listening to Nicolae's prattling."

Without another word to him, Celeste turned and exited the room through the closed door. She had to get him out of her sight. *Had* to. It wasn't because she was tempted—

Well, all right, she was. To the tips of her wings, she was tempted. He must be here to do just that: tempt her, make her stumble, watch her fall. She had to keep reminding herself of the demons she'd seen in true form...dripping maw, giant webbed wings, burning yellow eyes with narrow black slits for pupils. Scales blackened from millennia spent near hellfire. Nothing at all like their beguiling personas on earth.

Here, on this neutral playing field, they were each in humanlike form. Otherwise her light would strike him blind. His darkness could have any number of adverse effects on her, if he so desired. And neither was allowed at this juncture.

She wanted to win Adam's soul, but not on Damael's terms. No matter how her traitorous body responded to his touch. How much more would it respond if that touch wandered elsewhere? She couldn't allow it, even if it meant losing again.

Losing.

In this matter, it was so much more than a simple blow to her pride. It doomed a soul to everlasting slavery, all because of a moment of poor judgment. One moment of giving in to Damael's mesmeric smile and his promises of fame and riches and glory beyond one's wildest imaginings, of making all their dreams come true. She could almost understand why they did it, why they were *eager* to do it. After all, she wanted to believe he might actually give her what he promised if she succumbed to his will.

Would he really release Adam from the agreement?

Giddiness rose in her chest at the very thought of telling that man he was free. Telling him to go and enjoy his life and exorcise that haunted shadow in his eyes.

It would really feel...incredible.

She startled as Damael drew up close beside her, resisting the urge to leap away. He presented her with the most frustrating conundrum—she didn't want him to touch her, but didn't want him to see her skittishness around him. Her weakness.

"Are we off, then?" he asked, his face schooled into its usual dispassionate expression. "I'd rather get this over with."

Her earlier giddiness crashed and burned in her chest, to be replaced with burning anxiety. The mediator was her only chance. If she failed—and most likely she would—there would be no further recourse available. Adam's fate would be in Damael's hands.

And in her own, now that he'd made his proposal. Damn that demon.

## Chapter Two

Damael watched Celeste skirt gingerly around the mortals and couldn't repress a smile. While she avoided the primitive sludge of human emotion, he plowed through it, fascinated as always by their fears and insecurities. Naturally such things would be repellant to his angelic adversary and unfortunately for her, those assorted unpleasanties were so prevalent in the human psyche that she made attempts to avoid any contact with them whatsoever.

He dropped the smile as he thought of how that must make her feel, and then cursed himself for caring. If it had been any of her haughtily pious cohorts, he'd have laughed in their faces about it. But Celeste...she carried the burden of it all. He could see it, see the heartbreak in her eyes when she witnessed the world's suffering. Every ounce of compassion she possessed showed on her face. It mirrored every crack in her heart.

Which made him want to bring a puppy back from the dead or something, just to give her a miniscule reason to smile.

Either he was imagining things, or that angel grew more exquisite with each passing century. That pissed him off.

It had been a few decades since he'd last seen her. In that time—and every time she was absent from his sight for a long period—he'd almost convinced himself he was imagining attributes she didn't possess. Her copper hair didn't *really* shine like that, her robes weren't as pristine as new-fallen snow, and the grace with which she carried herself didn't remind him of swans floating tranquilly across—

What kind of a blathering idiot was he?

The answer came quite easily. The kind that got himself into situations like this.

But those eyes...ah, Hell, that's when he had to give up lying to himself. Those eyes could kill him with a wink, if they didn't drown him first. Or invite him to go flying off forever into their endless blue, never to come back again.

That cerulean gaze hit him full force as they exited the building into the night and she turned on him. "Are you ready to go now?"

"I'm never ready to see Nicolae. But, if you insist... Shall I do the honors?"

She nodded, focusing her attention on one of the tour buses parked nearby. Fans had swarmed the fence blocking off the loading docks, hoping to catch a glimpse of their idols as they exited the building.

Adam, never one to neglect them, often strolled over to sign autographs after a show. He hadn't appeared to be in the mood tonight, however.

Too bad. Tomorrow night, he wouldn't be here. Tomorrow night, there would be candlelight vigils and an extensive media circus. Lead singer of Without Disgrace found dead. Was it an accidental overdose? Suicide? Foul play? Ordinarily Damael would be rubbing his hands together in glee at the mere thought. Chaos and destruction were his forte.

But not when Celeste kept looking at him in *that* way of hers.

He tried to push the concern far from his thoughts as he conjured the teleportation spell that swept them from the bustling arena to the relative silence outside Nicolae's rambling old mansion a thousand miles away. Here, only the sounds of nature prevailed, and the thick forest surrounding the area was rife with them.

Without a word, Celeste turned and walked toward the front door. He grudgingly followed, resigning himself to the fact that there simply was no banishing this ridiculous infatuation from his thoughts. Why even try? Centuries' worth of lust wasn't easily wiped away.

Sometimes he thought his masters kept his nose to the grindstone this way because it tortured him so much to wonder if she might be the one to appear and try to undo his wrongs. The bastards got off on things like that.

Their latest concoction was a masterpiece, anyway.

*If you want her, take her. It's about time, isn't it? Promise her whatever she wants, then take everything she has. There are no laws forbidding it.*

None in their lands, at least. Indeed, there were very few laws at all. He was prohibited from harming her at this juncture, destroying her. But lying? Cheating? Stealing? Seducing? All allowed. More than allowed; his kind thrived on it.

The thought of turning those tried-and-true techniques on Celeste thrilled him...almost as much as it sickened him. It didn't matter. He'd slyly charmed his way under plenty of nun's habits, but an angel would be a tough nut to crack. In fact, he was fairly certain he would sing "Kumbaya" around campfires in Hell before it ever happened. But he'd been ordered to make the offer, and he knew the consequences of refusing. In the grand scheme of things, it seemed a rather harmless bit of amusement to ruffle her feathers. He would have fun taunting her about it. And dreaming...

She glanced back at him as one delicate hand reached up to push open the front door to Nicolae's hidden home. "I appreciate you not fighting me on this, at least."

He returned her look dispassionately—at the very least, he *hoped* nothing showed on his face—and shrugged. "You aren't going to win. It's a waste of your time, but it's all the more time I get to spend with *you*, my sweet." He dredged up one of his most charming smiles for her and chuckled when she scoffed.

As soon as she turned away, the smile shattered. If anything existed in the universe that could put dampers to centuries of passionate longing, it was being here.

Nicolae's perpetually bored expression didn't lift as the two of them entered his study. As one of the few mediators for their kind on earth, he was completely neutral, and everything about his demeanor and dwelling attested to that. There was no happiness to see Celeste in his old, seamed face, no disgust to see Damael, nor vice versa. His walls were mostly bare and the sacred books of both realms lined his bookshelves. One small lamp burned on his desk, and where its light lost the battle with the gloom, shafts of moonlight crossed the ceiling from a set of high windows.

Nicolae leaned back in his tall chair and pressed his fingertips together, gaze roaming from one to the other as they took their seats. The mediators were mortal—because no one in his or her right mind would want to settle disputes such as this for all of eternity—and the only humans on earth who could see their kind at all times.

Celeste perched daintily on the edge of her chair. Damael slouched beside her in his own, arms crossed over his chest, as uninterested in this entire affair as their host looked. Celeste kept her eyes trained on the man, an effort Damael was certain was deliberate. She didn't want to look at *him*.

Or rather, she *wanted* to. She wanted to feast her eyes on him, and that wasn't his arrogance making baseless assertions. He could see it. Ever since his indecent proposal, she'd gone to almost ridiculous lengths to avoid meeting his gaze directly. She couldn't let herself look at him because she couldn't let herself be tempted.

Celeste wasn't some untrained wingless cherub on her first assignment. She was an old pro, and she'd certainly known him long enough that nothing he could ever say or do should shock her at this point. She was familiar with his dastardly ways.

The only explanation was that she wanted to give in. He wasn't foolish enough to ever foster false hope, but the fact that she wanted it as much as he did was almost enough.

Almost.

"State your matter," Nicolae said, and Celeste could swear the man was trying to stifle a yawn.

Damael shifted beside her, and a glance his way showed him to be pulling the contract out of his pocket. He tossed the scroll onto the massive, gleaming oak desk and resumed his former position, crossing an ankle over his knee. "Blooded contract. Adam Matthewson thought a few years of rock stardom would be worth the tortures of Hell."

Nicolae settled his spectacles on his nose. He unfurled the scroll and eyed it critically, showing a sign of life Celeste was thankful for. He did take his tasks seriously, she had to give him that. His lips twitched under his thick white moustache as he read.



Knowing he was seeing the same airtight language she had, Celeste cleared her throat and spoke.

“Adam was seventeen years old when he signed his soul away. He had no real guidance, was moved from foster home to foster home—” it was here Damael feigned playing a violin, “—and had no money whatsoever. His future was bleak, but making music was all he ever wanted to do with his life. Given his mental and spiritual immaturity at the time of signing, I propose he be released from the contract.”

“Hmm,” Nicolae said, still reading. Perhaps she’d been wrong. He didn’t seem to have heard a word she said.

“He was bounced from foster home to foster home because he was a delinquent,” Damael said. “He had no guidance because he rejected any and all attempts made to reach out to him. I appeared to him because he *asked* for me.”

“*Really?*” Celeste snapped, turning her face toward him but keeping her eyes cast downward. “You mean, one day he offhandedly remarked to a buddy, ‘Dude, I’d sell my soul to the devil for a record contract’, and you took that as an engraved invitation?”

His grin was infuriating even though she wouldn’t let herself look, she *wouldn’t*. The blinding white of his teeth teased at the edges of her vision. “Something to that effect.”

“I doubt very much he truly believed in what he was doing.”

“But he did it. He was all too eager to do it.”

“He was desperate for some kind of change. He would have tried anything.”

“Weren’t all the ones you’ve lost? Did that exonerate them?”

Nicolae made a gruff sound in his throat, probably more to shut them up than to clear his throat. He glanced at her over his glasses, his gray eyes not unkind nor unsympathetic, but firm. “Well, my dear, I’m afraid your opponent has left no loopholes.”

It would’ve been so easy to sag in defeat. She was proud of the steely ring she managed to force into her voice. “Based on Adam’s particular set of circumstances, his age and his mental state, it could be—”

Nicolae shook his head, his wrinkled hands already working at rolling up the parchment. They were nowhere near as graceful as Damael’s had been when he performed the same action earlier. Graceful, elegant...surely those hands could never be harsh on her body—

*Truly? Remember the horrific things you’ve seen him do as the final grain of sand slips through a doomed mortal’s hourglass.*

Things she didn’t want to see him do again.

“Trouble is,” Nicolae said, “based on individual circumstances, I could overturn them all. There are so many different situations that force people into these agreements, most all of them desperate or hopeless. You know this.”

Celeste cast her gaze to her lap. “Yes, I know. I had to try. It sickens me that he approached one so young and—”

“Pardon me for being an evil bastard. It’s what I do.”

“You’re certainly good at it.”

Nicolae ignored their arguing, addressing her directly. “Understandable. It’s nothing to take lightly.” She kept looking down as the contract exchanged hands again, going back into the safety of Damael’s pocket. She wanted to snatch it from him, rip it into a million pieces, cast it into the fire. It wouldn’t make any difference. He had to be the one to perform that particular action to nullify it. “Your only hope at this point is if he offers a compromise,” Nicolae finished. “If he’s willing, I’ll be glad to hear it.”

“I’ve offered a compromise,” Damael said casually. The words brought her head around, and she stared at him in shock. His gaze flickered in her direction, one corner of his mouth tilting upward in a smirk she wanted to slap off his pale, beautiful face. “I offered it well before we stepped through your door. She only needs to be persuaded to take it.”

“And what is that, might I ask?” Nicolae inquired in his monotone as he jotted notes about their meeting in a massive ledger sitting on his desk.

“All I require is a few hours of her time, spent at my discretion...if you catch my meaning. And I’ll shred this contract before her very eyes.”

The old man paused in his writing and glanced at her as her cheeks went up in flames.

“Well, this is a first. And I don’t say that often.”

“An outrage is what it is,” she muttered, beating back the shame that threatened to consume her. Shame that she was...not *considering* it, really, but contemplating...

No. She wasn’t even doing that.

“In that case, are we done here?” In a single fluid motion, Damael stood and snapped his jacket straight, his unwavering stare trained on the mediator. She sat a moment in astonishment that he didn’t want to stay and debate the matter to death. Her knuckles were aching from gripping the arms of her chair so hard, and she realized it was because she wanted to grab his arm, tug him back down. Talk this out some more.

But he’d made his offer, and she’d refused, so he was done.

Nicolae was unfazed, closing his tome and meeting the demon’s gaze straight on. “You’re serious about that offer?”

Celeste didn’t have to look up at her adversary. She could clearly imagine the serpentine smile unfurling on his lips. “Absolutely.”

“And your superiors approve?”

Damael made a sound Celeste interpreted as disgust. “*Superiors*. That’s funny.” He looked down at her, and she could’ve sworn the hard line of his lips softened, a rare hint of emotion crossing his features. He extended a hand to her.

*Don’t take it, don’t touch him, don’t...*

It was pure instinct that lifted her hand to his, yet it went against everything she had ever been taught, in defiance of every instinct she *should* have possessed. His skin was warm, tantalizingly so, and a little thrill skittered down her spine. He enclosed her hand in his larger one, stroking the back with his thumb before pulling her up beside him.

The dark turbulence was in his eyes again. Every time she looked into them, she felt she was teetering on the edge of an event horizon. They didn't reflect light like other eyes. They consumed it, just like she often felt they would consume her.

She should leave. Now. Not only this room, but this assignment. It was over, her last conceivable hope—the only hope she'd had, really—gone. Adam had chosen his fate. As Damael had said, nothing required her to remain and watch the horror this would become and, after all these centuries, she understood him well enough to know nothing she could say or do would change his mind. Except perhaps the one impossible thing he requested of her.

"It's incredible he offered a bargain, especially one such as this," Nicolae's voice spoke unexpectedly. Celeste had almost forgotten they had an audience. She looked at him, blinking several times and snatching her hand from Damael's. Their joined fingers had been the object of the old man's gaze. Once that contact was severed, his solemn stare lifted to her face.

She struggled to find her voice. "You aren't suggesting I should—"

"No, not suggesting. Observing." His mustache twitched and he went back to his ledgers. "Good night."

"I believe he was suggesting."

Celeste slammed her way out the front door of the old house. "I don't care what you believe."

Damael kept up with her rapid pace, his own gait smooth and effortless. "His concern, of course, is for the poor soul who's going to suffer for eternity because of one angel's selfishness."

She stopped and whirled on him. "If Adam suffers for eternity, it's because of one demon's greed."

"Or his own."

"You court the downtrodden, entice them to sign away their most precious possession, and it's their fault?"

"Well *yes*," he said, his careful façade cracking and revealing an unaccustomed indignation. "He could have said no. I held no powers of coercion at that juncture. And I followed through with my end of the bargain beautifully, wouldn't you say? Within two years, they had a record deal. Two more, they were the biggest rock band in the world. Sixteen years later, they're still going strong, playing sold out arenas, releasing platinum albums. He's spent all that time fucking and drugging and drinking himself stupid, and

getting paid for it, which was all he ever wanted out of life. It's probably only because of our bargain that he's still alive *now*."

"That's nonsense. I read the file. His life would barely be half over if you hadn't come into it. And he's more than that."

"Than what?"

"Than what you see. There's more to him."

Damael scoffed. "You're right, there is more." He ticked off on his fingers. "The wife he abandoned. The daughter he rarely sees. The family he turned his back on. The—"

"Who hasn't made poor choices in their lives? Surely there is one good thing you can say about him."

"I like his music?"

"He must have remorse."

"Even if he does, he doesn't try to make it right, does he?"

She drew herself up so that they'd be eye-to-eye if only she were taller. This close, the magnetism of his eyes was even stronger, but she wouldn't let herself back down this time. As he looked down at her and she stared up at him, the tips of their noses almost touched. "He won't ever have the chance now, *will* he?" she said, her voice low and shaking.

Damael only grinned. "You're truly in a snit over this one, aren't you? Does that have more to do with him, or with my proposal?"

With a growl of frustration, she turned and stalked away from him. He caught up easily. "It doesn't have to be this way, you know. I keep trying to tell you. I'll make it worth your while, and you'll have another sweet, innocent, *blameless* soul in Heaven in forty or so years."

His sarcasm bit into her, but she refused the bait. She walked aimlessly toward the woods surrounding the mansion, knowing she could flee him at any time, but not doing so for reasons she didn't even want to attempt explaining to herself. Two figures materialized in front of them, and she recognized her friend Tanan, who was on his own earthly assignment. His demon adversary trailed behind him, looking as if she wanted to rip out his throat. They must be on their way to seek Nicolae's counsel as well.

*And that's the way it's supposed to be*, Celeste thought miserably. Pure animosity. None of this indecent bargaining nonsense Damael was spouting. She gave Tanan a nod, but she didn't like the way the female demon was looking at her friend, and as they approached, that bloodthirsty glare turned toward Celeste.

"Careful, Nax," Damael called out to his colleague, and she was almost glad he provided a distraction to pull that leering gaze off her. "Nicolae's in rare form today. He even danced a little jig for us."

The female's blood-red lips tilted at the ends. Now the leering gaze took on an entirely new intent as it devoured the length of Damael's body. Like him, she was beautiful, but it was a scary beauty.

Wickedness rose off her in waves, shone from her pale eyes. Celeste wondered just how well the two of them knew each other, and then wondered why the question sparked such an intense burn of envy.

Holy God. Lust, envy...she was beginning to succumb to sin, and she needed to get away from here. It was madness to remain.

"Did he help you?" Tanan asked Celeste, looking hopeful. She could only hope her own turmoil didn't show on her face.

"No. It's lost."

"Of course it's not," Damael said happily. The two angels ignored him as Tanan placed a comforting hand on Celeste's shoulder.

"You did all you could."

"Not *all* she could," Damael said.

"Shut *up*," Celeste snapped at him. Tanan's head tilted back in surprise, just before an iron grip locked around Celeste's throat, fast as lightning. For one terrible instant she thought Damael had grabbed her this way, but long fingernails were biting into her flesh, tearing it. The female demon jerked Celeste's face close to her own.

"*He* can't hurt you, bitch," she sneered. Celeste stared helplessly into that terrible visage, as ridges rose in the delicate features of the face and the icy blue eyes paled to frozen white. "But I can rip off your wings and eat them."

Suffocating darkness threatened to overwhelm her, the demon's dark magic working through her like a poison permeating her veins. She struggled to gather her own defenses, to retaliate, but she'd been taken by surprise and pain robbed her of all her senses. Seemingly from a great distance, she heard Tanan shout, and then the merciless grip disappeared and Celeste collapsed to the ground, shuddering.

When she finally managed to look up, she saw Damael had Nax in much the same grip as the other demon had just held her, his hand locked around her throat. Nax was trying to snarl at him, but the effort was futile.

"I suggest," Damael began slowly, his voice pitched so low it sounded monstrous, "that you go take care of your own business, and leave me to mine." He thrust her away from him, and she almost landed flat on her black-leather-clad behind. Tanan was looking as if he thought he should intervene, but didn't know whom he should attack.

Nax glared at Damael one moment longer and then stalked toward the house without another word, her hand at her throat.

"Are you all right?" Tanan demanded, leaning over Celeste as if he meant to help her up. She started as Damael grabbed him, prepared to jump up and defend her friend if she could, but Damael only pushed him toward the house.

"That goes for you too. Get the fuck out of here."

“But she—”

“She’s fine. Off with you, now. Shoo.” He made a motion as if he were waving a fly away from his soup. Tanan leaned around him, undeterred.

“Celeste—”

She put a hand to her forehead, trying to clear out the lingering dark fog. “I’m all right, Tanan. You can go. Go and win.” She felt sorry for him now, having to deal with that she-devil when she was going to be doubly furious for being bested and embarrassed.

The two males stared at each other for another minute, one gaze puzzled, the other lazy and vaguely contemptuous. Finally, Tanan turned and headed toward the house. Celeste let her arms buckle, her cheek slamming to the ground. She only wanted to lie here for, oh, another century.

“Just my damned luck,” Damael sighed.

She groaned a reply that sounded something like, “What?”

“She had to hit you with the bad mojo. I could’ve used a nice aphrodisiac spell right about now.”

“I hate you.”

“I’m *joking*. You’ve heard of that, haven’t you? Do they do that where you come from?”

Through her hazy vision, she saw his shoes step closer, saw him crouch down beside her. More of the world came into view as he pushed the hair from her face, tugging gently as he pulled out bits of leaves and broken twigs. She let her eyelids close when the whirling in her head intensified, but that only seemed to make it worse, so she opened them again. “Th-thank you. For stopping her.”

He didn’t reply, just continued his task. She found it soothing, now that she was oddly confident he would kill any threatening force that came near her. Soothing...until she looked at him. Remnants of his earlier anger was still in his eyes. The black irises were so large there was hardly a ring of white around them.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, not allowing herself to look away. Trying to figure out his motives herself proved too much for her clouded thoughts. “I’d have been one less for your kind to contend with.”

He blinked at her. “Do you think that’s what I want?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Well, there are those of us who would like to strike you all dead on sight, run rampant in the earth and maim and kill and destroy until it’s a wasteland. You just met one such as that. But I, sweet angel, rather like the competition.”

“But I’m no competition, am I?”

He seemed to debate with himself for a moment. “You won the Roman emperor that time. Nailed me on the basic required language I’d been writing for centuries.”

She managed to laugh. “I remember now. You took it with exceptionally good grace.”

It might have been her imagination, but she thought his expression darkened, a haunted shadow crossing his perfect features. For the first time in her existence, it occurred to her to wonder what consequences he faced for failing. She didn't meet any repercussions except sorrowful embraces and encouraging words that gave no comfort. What did Damael's masters do to him when he didn't deliver?

She hadn't seen him for a long time after that miraculous victory. A long, long time.

Which begged another question that sent a chill through her. Would he really risk whatever hell might be in store for him by releasing Adam if she gave in?

"How do you feel?" he asked, and she realized she'd been staring up at him longer than she should have. Behind him, the sky was black and glittering with stars, but it had to be nearing dawn. She could escape into that great open expanse right now, be done with all of this. Leave Adam to the doom he'd only brought upon himself.

But she wasn't doing it. And it was becoming more apparent to her that she wasn't going to.

She shifted on the ground and winced at the sharp pains that crackled along her limbs. There really was no reason to lie to him. "Not well. I still hurt."

"Shall I make it better?"

"You can?"

"If you'll allow me."

Wariness crept through her, and she furrowed her brow at him. "That depends on what I must allow."

He withdrew his hand from her hair and rested his elbow on his bent knee. Under ordinary circumstances, his smile might have been described as seductive, but at the moment she found it to be merely cruel. "A kiss."

## Chapter Three

A sound of frustration escaped her, and she turned her face away from him, toward the ground. “You lie. I should have known all of this was leading back to your perverse—”

“It’s the quickest way to draw the energy into myself. Unless you’d rather—”

“Hush. No.”

“Don’t be like that. I can help you.”

“You only want to help yourself.”

“How is that? I’ve offered you everything you want. Adam’s soul. Your healing. I’m a regular good Samaritan here, am I not?”

She gave a bark of laughter and instantly cringed. He couldn’t deny that her vulnerability was tugging at every predatory sense he possessed. She was on the ground, crumpled, helpless. Like a little bird with a broken wing, and he was the cat creeping up on her, step by agonizingly slow step.

Her fingers dug into the ground as another spasm seemed to overtake her, and he made a production of sighing wearily. “This is needless, I’m telling you. I can take it all away.”

“How long will I be this way?”

“Have you never come under attack before?”

“If I have, it’s been so long I can’t remember.”

“Well, then. You could lie here for days if I don’t help you.”

“And why should I believe that?”

“Because it’s the truth?”

“*Ha*. Unlikely. You only want me to kiss you.”

“That’s a given. But I’m being sincere as well.”

She glanced at him with a sort of desperation in her blue eyes that left him struggling to conceal compassion he had no business feeling. It made him hope his outlandish scheme to heal her would work, but it always had with humans. Maybe she would be no different. “I want to believe you. So much.” Even as a whisper, her words were strained, agonized. “What does that say about me? Please, if there is any vestige of selflessness within you, leave me be. Don’t make me into a fool.”

The longer she’d spoken, the more strength her voice had gained, until finally those eyes were blazing at him with righteous anger. He realized his earlier assertion had been off base. Even while wounded, she was not vulnerable. At least not in spirit.



“You’re a worthy adversary,” he told her. “I’ve always thought that. You don’t give up until the end. You deserve more than to be left on the ground, wallowing in pain.” He reached forward and slid his hands beneath her, seeing her eyes fly open wide in alarm. Weakly, she struggled against him, but he was too strong for her at this point. He lifted her and shifted until he was sitting on the ground, cradling her in his arms.

She felt frail against him, insubstantial. The softness of the wings folded tight against her back made his mouth run dry. He’d never touched anything like that before in his life. Hadn’t known such suppleness existed, until she was in his arms.

Her chest was heaving, her hand gripping his jacket even as she stared up at him apprehensively. He couldn’t interpret whether her reaction was from fear or desire or perhaps a combination of both. Sudden frustration engulfed him whole and chewed him up without mercy.

“Stubborn angel, I give you my word, dammit, and I don’t do that often. Let me help you. But I won’t do it without your permission,” he added, hearing the tight, barely leashed desperation in his own voice. “*Give it to me.*”

“If you lie to me, I’ll send an extermination squad after you.” The vow was laced with an intensity that made him not doubt her words for a second. And then the coolness of her fingers crept over either side of his face and she pulled his mouth down to hers.

The shock that went through his system was another first. She must have felt it too, because the instant his lips met hers, she gasped and her hands tightened on him. But she didn’t fling him away. A shuddery sigh escaped her, and her air-light body seemed to melt into him. Her hands gentled too, sliding from his face to bury themselves in his hair.

Her lips were cool, pliant, sweeter than all the fruits of the earth. She didn’t stiffen against him or feign any sort of unwillingness or reluctance, and this, more than anything, was his undoing. He could almost believe she was allowing this because she wanted it, not for any favors he could do her.

But he’d given his word.

He opened himself to the darkness coursing through her. As he’d hoped, it responded, drawn back toward its source. He drank it from her, absorbed it, cleansed her of it until not a single particle of Nax’s filth remained in Celeste’s pristine spirit.

He had to be careful not to place any of his own there. He felt as if everything within him was being sucked out by nothing but the tender play of her lips beneath his. She could wring him dry, leave him nothing but a husk, and he would only think it a delicious way to go.

His task was done. She was clean. But he couldn’t release her. She whimpered into his mouth, and he drank in the sound as eagerly as dawn claimed the sky above them. He ached, throbbed, yearned to possess her. The effort of restraining his hands from roaming the softness of her body was as precarious as binding

two mad beasts with something as fragile as yarn. One more move, one more sigh from her, and that binding might break...

She stunned him to his core when she lifted herself from his embrace and crawled to her knees without losing the contact with his mouth, without releasing her hold on him. There on the ground, he sat back as she shifted and straddled him, staring up at her with something akin to astonishment. And there in his gaze, she seemed to check herself. She froze, lips hovering mere centimeters from his, fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Oh, God," she whimpered. Those eyes were so close to his it was like a whole other world opening up in front of his face.

She was going to stop; he was about to lose her. That was...best, really. It was. She would never have to know just how deceptive he truly was. He told himself this as he sat and looked at her and decided he would sell his own soul—or whatever it was he had—to touch her...really, truly allow himself to *touch* her. Everywhere.

Celeste's thumb gently traced over his eyebrow, her gaze searching his face. "Your eyes look normal again."

He opened his mouth to remark that was surprising, considering the agony she'd put him in, but what he said was, "Do I frighten you?"

A crease appeared in her ordinarily smooth, flawless forehead. "Many times you have."

The thought had occurred to him before. But since she knew he posed no threat to her while they were on assignment, he'd dismissed the notion. She'd often seemed appalled by him, surely exasperated, but never truly *afraid*.

"I would never hurt you," he said, and meant it completely.

"Well, you can't, not while—"

"I wouldn't. *Ever*. Hurt you."

She was trembling against him. One touch, he told himself, that was all. He dropped his hand to her thigh, slid it upward, felt the firmness of the muscle beneath the silky fabric of her robes. Her head lolled back and she pushed her hips toward him with exquisite abandon. His thumb brushed the juncture of her thighs through the material, and a tiny cry escaped her swollen lips. The slim white column of her throat bared to him so fully, so trustingly, was too much to resist, and he dragged his mouth down the creamy expanse as his hand sought entrance under her garment.

She stiffened as he gained it, every muscle tight and on alert, but she didn't pull away. Didn't stop him. Only gave the most seductive moan he'd ever heard as his fingertips found soft, hot, welcoming wetness—

A sudden sound from the house broke the spell. Celeste jerked away from him, scrambling backwards as if fleeing a venomous snake about to strike. She jumped to her feet, still exhibiting a grace that made him think of an offended feline, and quickly smoothed her robes down with several swipes of her hands.

He sat, forlorn and grudgingly devastated, while she looked down at herself as if just now realizing she could move again instead of only rolling on the ground in agony.

“It worked,” she said wonderingly.

Oh, yes, it worked. It had worked all too well. The dark energy he’d pulled into himself was still boiling, turning his thoughts red. He was so hard the only image his mind could conjure was taking her back to the ground and shoving his aching cock as deep inside her as he could get it. Feverishly he wondered if she would arch against him with the same liquid fluidity with which she moved. If her voice would carry its usual sweet lilt when he finally made her cry out his name. Or, even better, would he evoke such fierce, violent reactions in her that she might sound almost as savage as he knew *he* would?

It was the only relief he could imagine—fucking her until all those centuries of lust were out of his system for good.

And that might take a while.

Now, he managed to compress all that hunger, all that desperation. He beat it into submission and smoothed it over with one carefully controlled utterance. “I told you.”

“Thank you. That was...unexpected.”

“That I kept my word? Or that you liked it?”

Her lips parted as if she meant to snap an automatic retort, then she closed them again. She wouldn’t want to *lie*, after all. What came out of her mouth then wasn’t what he’d anticipated.

“Will you...give me some time alone with Adam?”

Frowning, he got to his feet. He’d had enough of her looking down on him. “Why?”

“Please do this for me. Leave him alone for the next few hours, that’s all I ask.”

She was striving for normalcy, apparently wanting to pretend she hadn’t just had his fingers between her legs, so he matched her. “You know, doing all of these favors for you is getting a trifle exhausting.”

“What *favors*? Everything you offer is wrapped up in your own selfish motivations. This is the first true favor I’ve asked of you.”

What could she be plotting? He waved a hand and sighed. “Fine. I don’t see what it can possibly hurt, so go on. I don’t care.”

“Thank you.” Eagerly, she turned as if to run away, then whirled back to face him. “Again.”

“I’m giving you two hours,” he said crossly, annoyed by her enthusiasm, but making a point to look unconcerned. “And then I’m torturing him enough to make up for it.”

She rolled her eyes and disappeared in a flash of golden light.

The lavish hotel suite was dark despite the dawn breaking outside. Celeste moved silently into the bedroom, where Adam and Melody's softly breathing forms lay on the bed wrapped in dreams. The heavy drapes were pulled closed over every window, but she could see well enough. Adam was on his back, a frown marring his features even in sleep. His dreams were troubling him.

She had yet to stop trembling herself. Getting back on the job fast was the only thing she'd been able to think of to get her mind straight again. But she could still feel the gentle bluntness of those long, tapered fingers...

What might have happened if they'd been somewhere else, far from any distractions?

She could have easily given in. If Damael wasn't lying to her, it would have saved Adam.

Saving Adam was her job.

Confusion engulfed her whole. She wanted Damael, she wanted to save Adam. What was the problem?

Damael held all the cards. She felt her lips twist with disgust. That was the problem now, and always. That damned demon always had the upper hand, no matter what. But despite what her traitorous body dictated, she still had a choice in this.

It all depended on Adam.

Sighing, she moved to his side and sat, leaning forward to place her hand on his forehead. Almost immediately, his turmoil all but engulfed her. His fear, his dread and anxiety. She pushed against it, forcing it to yield to her light, and watched his expression relax and smooth over.

Oh, God. She was actually considering this.

No second guessing now. Concentrating, she gave another push, this one taking her straight into the middle of his thoughts.

She hated it. Hated wading through the weight of human emotion, because what she found was usually shocking or appalling to her. If she saw something in Adam that caused her to have that reaction now...

Focusing her energy, she took control of his subconscious, his dreams. She allowed him to set the scene, giving him freedom to show her what was truly inside him.

She should have known. The setting that formed out of the hazy, slumbering fog of his mind was a stage.

It was empty except for a mic stand under the spotlight, and the rest of the huge arena was dark and open and echoing. The seats in the upper deck area disappeared into the shadows clinging to the ceiling all around. They might have gone on and on forever.

Maybe that was his fantasy, to have an endless audience. Maybe he was as greedy for fame as Damael accused.

Celeste kept to her own shadows off to the side, watching as Adam walked out onto the stage and looked around. He was wearing a simple red T-shirt and ripped jeans, his long black hair trailing down his back. His feet were bare. He hooked his thumbs in his jeans pockets and ambled up to the microphone stand, staring at it for a long time before reaching up and laying one hand on the top.

After a moment, he grabbed it with the other hand as well, and his head fell forward. His shoulders began heaving.

Drawn by his suffering, she moved swiftly toward him, reaching out to lay a hand on his trembling arm. But even she couldn't reach through this. He didn't react to her touch.

"Adam."

Only then did he lift his head and look at her. He was pale, his eyes...dark. Haunted, as she'd thought before. He wasn't conventionally handsome, but he was striking with angular features and full, sensual lips. His hands remained wrapped around the mic as if it would somehow protect him.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice soft but hoarse. His eyes were bloodshot.

"I'm here to help you."

He swallowed, throat muscles constricting. His gaze took in the full measure of her, her robes, what he could see of her wings. "I believe you."

There was no point in sugar-coating things. "Rather, I *can* help you. But first, Adam...I need to know if you're worthy of it." She felt wretched even as she said it. Who had appointed her judge and jury? No one, certainly, but she simply had to know who this person was. Would he be grateful for her help? Would he even care? Or was he as selfish and greedy as Damael claimed?

He didn't seem to like the sound of that, his expression slackening as if all hope had fled him. All at once the lines in his face seemed to deepen.

"Does that worry you?" she asked.

"Yeah. I figure I'm pretty much screwed."

"Tell me why."

He shrugged, looking out at some distant point in the endless sea of seats. "I'm no fu— I'm no saint. I've done...things."

"I'm not here to judge the things you've done. All of that is on file and I've read every word. But it only gives me facts. I want to know *you*. I want to know why you did it. And you can't lie to me, not here. So, will you tell me that?"

He knew exactly what she was talking about. In waking life he could pretend the encounter with Damael hadn't happened, but here, deep in his subconscious where he was so tormented, he knew. It was right on the surface. She saw his expression undergo a transformation at the mere mention of it, from slack fear to outright terror. But his voice remained steady. "I didn't know..."

“That isn’t good enough. Give me more than that. You gave your soul to a demon. A *demon*, Adam. Even if you didn’t read one single word on that contract, you had to know what the repercussions of that would be. You had to know this day would come.”

He ran a hand over his face, as if trying to wipe away the memory. “I knew, but I didn’t. It’s complicated. When you’re seventeen, twenty years seems like forever. Back then I *could* pretend this day would never come. And the things he promised me...it was everything I ever dreamed about. I know most kids dream big, but it was more than that to me. It was like if I couldn’t have it, if I couldn’t sing and have people listen, I didn’t see the point in living.”

“How long had you been singing?”

He shrugged. “Since I was about four. The only decent foster mom I ever had used to sing to me, and she would teach me songs. It’s weird. I can’t remember her face, but I can hear her voice as clearly as if it were yesterday. It was beautiful.”

She could hear that voice faintly, because he was thinking of it. It *was* beautiful. “What happened to her?”

“I don’t know. They moved me back with my real mom when she supposedly got clean, but within a couple of months, she was using again. So eventually they kicked me back into the system and placed me somewhere else.”

“How did the demon approach you?”

A shudder seemed to work its way through him. “By then I was living in L.A. in a one-bedroom apartment with the guys in the band, but for some reason everyone was gone that day. I was alone in the bedroom, picking out something on my guitar. This...guy suddenly walked into the room like he belonged there. For a second I didn’t look up because I thought it was one of my roommates coming in, but then he just stood there, and all at once I felt like the air was sucked out of the room. I couldn’t breathe. I looked up and saw him, and his eyes...his eyes were...”

“What did he say to you?” she demanded, before she could lose him to the frightening nature of his recollections. Homing in on the rapid fire images flashing through his head, she could discern hazy scraps of memory here and there. Damael’s intense, unblinking black stare. His cold beauty. The enticing lull of his voice.

“He said... ‘Adam Mathewson, I’m here to grant you your heart’s desire.’ I’d been smoking up from my friend’s stash, and I remember thinking Derek’s dealer must have sold him some bad shit if I was seeing freaky looking dudes with weird eyes walking into my bedroom. He was one scary motherfu—” He caught himself again and cringed. “Sorry. But there he was, telling me everything I wanted to hear. I would sing. Millions of people would hear me and love me. No more rat-hole apartment and rehearsing in my friend’s parents’ garage. I’d be rich. We’d *all* be rich. Platinum CDs. Touring the world. Booze and drugs and groupies falling all over us. All I had to do was sign.”

“And you did it.”

“Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“He explained what you were giving up?”

“He said he got my soul at the end of twenty years. I was like, ‘Yeah, whatever, dude.’ The soul wasn’t really even something I believed in. You die, you’re dead, you know?”

“I’m all too familiar with that mentality, yes. He made you sign in your own blood?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” he said, as if he’d nearly forgotten that point. “All he did was run his finger across the back of my hand, but it cut me somehow. I dipped the quill in my blood and signed, and the cut healed right in front of my eyes.”

“Did he coerce you in any way?”

“No, not in any words, but...I didn’t feel like I could refuse him, either, you know?”

Celeste sighed, hugging herself and pacing slowly away. Yes, she knew. She knew all too well. But Damael had done all that was required where Adam was concerned. In fact, he’d gone above and beyond by explaining the terms. Most of his kind were unrepentant tricksters. “So, you believed him when he told you everything he would give you, but not when he told you what he would require in return?”

Adam’s gaze followed her as she moved. “I didn’t really believe any of it. Like I said, I thought it was a bad trip. I went along for the ride. Like, ‘Fame and money and rock stardom, sure man, point me in the direction.’ But the thing is, at the same time, I *wanted* it to be real. I hoped it would be real. And then things started happening, and I began to wonder, but...still couldn’t fully make myself believe what I’d done was legit.”

“But you know better now. At this moment, at least.” He remained silent. She stopped and looked at him. “Do you ever remember a time when you asked out loud for a deal like that? Normally they only put in the effort to appear to you when they think there’s a real chance they can win.”

“It was a long time ago. Most of it’s a haze. I don’t know.”

She didn’t have time to riffle through his memory, and it was of no great importance aside from her burning curiosity, anyway. “Very well. Tell me more. Tell me about your daughter. I understand you rarely see her.”

The heartbreak that filled his eyes then almost made her start toward him, but she stood her ground. “I love that little girl more than I can ever explain. But I figure the best I can do for Alexa is provide a good life for her and stay the hell out of it.”

“She needs you.”

“My ex is remarried. Her husband’s a good guy, a stable guy. I know he’s better for Alexa than I am. So I stay away. I’m always either on the road or in the studio, anyway, and what kind of life is that for a kid? I’ve seen the other guys try to make it work. I don’t want to be like that. What kind of a hypocrite would I be, trying to teach her what’s right when I live the life I do?”

“That’s a cop-out. She’s ten years old, correct? Why don’t you at least give her the opportunity to make that decision for herself? Because I can tell you, Adam, that she misses her father. She *wants* her father. She sees his face on the cover of all the rock magazines and she asks her mother to buy them for her so she can at least have new pictures.”

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Oh, God. Why are you telling me this?”

“To see if you care.”

“Of *course* I fucking care. But she doesn’t know me anymore, she doesn’t know—” He broke off, turning away from her and facing the vacant, eerily echoing arena. She stared at his back, seeing the tension thrumming in his tall, lean frame. From the jerking motions of his arms, she figured he was furiously wiping tears off his face.

“Tell me about Melody. How do you feel about her?”

His anguished reply was little more than a whisper. “I love her. Aside from Alexa, she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. She tries to keep me grounded, but sometimes I think I’m too much for her to handle.”

“You’ve been together for a few years, right? How did you meet her?”

“Backstage at a show. Tulsa. She was a local girl, but the second I saw her...” He gave a small laugh. “We were huge by then, but she didn’t know who the hell I was. She was back there with a friend who’d won passes or something, looking scared to death. Nothing like the groupies usually prowling around. I could tell right away she was different. I walked up on her, acting all cool, and she gave me the brush-off. It drove me insane. I had to have her. So I got her number from her friend and harassed her until she agreed to fly out to one of our tour stops and see me.”

More memories, these far dreamier, more tranquil. Melody’s pretty face laughing at him. Telling him she loved him no matter what. Celeste blushed at the nature of some of the visions, one in particular standing out from the others: Adam telling Melody how beautiful she was as she trembled with nervousness and insecurity the first time they made love.

“I haven’t let her go since,” he went on, “but I’ve been a shit to her. I can’t believe that woman has hung in for this long. If I were her, I’d have told me to go to hell a long time ago. Looks like that’s my destination after all, isn’t it?”

She only stared silently at his back. He turned to look at her.

“Isn’t it?” he repeated. “It’s real, and I’m going there.”

“Those are the terms of your agreement, yes.”

“When? I know he said twenty years, but I don’t even remember what date that all went down.”

“The deadline is tonight. Adjusted for your current time zone, it’s just after eight p.m.”

All the breath seemed to go out of him. He looked around wildly as if seeking some exit that would take him away from all this, but there wasn’t one. Celeste approached him, arms reaching for his. “Adam.



Adam, calm down.” His terror was threatening to throw them out of the dream. His chest was heaving, his eyes panicked. She gripped him hard, trying to push her calming influence into him, to give him peace. But what peace was there to be had for the damned? It wasn’t working. Every second that ticked by brought him closer to doom.

“You said you could help me...right? You said...” He struggled to catch his breath, to bring himself under control. Somehow, he managed to do it. She watched as his senses seemed to go off alert, but the shadows didn’t leave his face. His cheekbones stood out in sharp relief to the hollows of his cheeks. He shook his head with a new determination. “I don’t want to be that guy who lives however he wants only to realize at the end he’s screwed everything up and begs for forgiveness so he can squeak through the pearly gates. That ain’t me. Whatever’s about to happen, I brought it on myself.”

*Oh, Adam. You have no idea what’s about to happen to you, or you wouldn’t utter those brave words. You’d cast yourself prostrate at my feet and, yes, you would beg.*

He filled his lungs full, the last of his terror seeming to fold up and disappear. In his eyes, though, was a troubled knowledge that hadn’t been there before. Bravado she saw straight through.

The decision she knew she’d been working toward ever since Damael made his proposal finally solidified itself in her mind.

“You’ve made mistakes, Adam. You exercised extremely poor judgment, and you got yourself into a dire situation because of it. You aren’t perfect, not by any stretch of the imagination.” She drew a breath, knowing as soon as she spoke the words, she would be bound by them. She could almost feel Damael’s lips on hers again, feel his arms around her. Oh, God... “But I know of a way to help you, and...I’m going to do what I can.”

Hope widened his eyes, and some of the darkness faded. The dawning elation she saw there only strengthened her resolve. She would do this. One time, to save one soul, she would do this.

“I want you to listen to me,” she said firmly, increasing her grip on his arms. “If I do this for you, no more screwing up or shirking responsibility. Make amends to the people who love you. I’m going to be watching you, Adam, and after the reprieve you’ve been given, you’d better not disappoint me, or your fate at the demon’s hands might be preferable. Understood?”

It was a nice bluff, and she felt silly saying it, but it worked. Adam nodded vehemently. Celeste almost had to chuckle as he suddenly yanked her into his arms and gave her a fierce hug. She of all people knew the gift she’d just given him, and took comfort in the fact that he realized it too, as much as he could. She was too appreciative of that to be insulted at his effrontery.

“Time’s up,” said a silky voice from behind her, and she felt the fear engulf Adam whole again when he recognized it. The dream shattered around them.

## Chapter Four

Celeste materialized in Adam's bedroom to find Damael standing next to her. The two mortals were still asleep, though morning peeked between the drapes, casting a single sliver of light across the bed. Adam tossed and turned, kicking off the covers. His hair was plastered to his face with sweat.

"How long were you there?" she demanded.

Damael gave her an odd look. "I'd just arrived."

"Did you hear what we were saying?"

"I fulfilled my end." Though the reply was smooth, she got the curious feeling he was offended. "I arrived in time to see a very *touching*, tearful embrace. What was that about, anyway?"

He'd fulfilled his end. He'd also kept his word to her outside Nicolae's house. Apparently he really hadn't heard what she'd said to Adam about helping him, or he would be crowing about it.

She almost wished he had heard, so she wouldn't have to be the one who instigated this. It would be far easier to succumb to his seduction than be the one doing the seducing.

Now that he was in front of her, her nerve was wavering. She'd been trying to keep his kiss out of her mind, not to mention that final moment when he'd touched her beneath her robes. The way her entire being had lit up with heat that had her dying to shed her garment and arch her naked body against his, just as he'd asked for back in Adam's dressing room. If she had started thinking about that, she feared it wouldn't have mattered what impression Adam left her with. She'd be lost.

She didn't want to give in because of lust. She wanted to give in because Adam deserved her help. But if she tried to deny that her desire for Damael was a factor in this decision, then she would have to add lying to her list of sins.

He stood perhaps an arm's length away. She closed the distance, reaching up to cup his face in her hands as he stared down at her. His entire countenance seemed to be one of agonized suspense, as if he were holding his breath, afraid the tiniest movement might interfere with what she was about to do.

She stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his.

And felt that shock again. Like before, it nearly threatened to throw them apart before it melted into a cocoon of warmth that enwrapped them both until it became almost unbreakable. It had been all she could do to muster the strength to pull away from him before.

For a moment, he simply yielded to her questing mouth, and then with a ragged groan he took control, pulling her closer, burying a hand in her hair, slipping his tongue between her lips.

It was a liberty he hadn't taken before. She welcomed it. Her body came to roaring life, so desperate to join his she had the sudden ridiculous notion they'd once been two parts of a whole, separated and flung apart and polarized on the moral spectrum. Ridiculous, surely, but stranger things had happened.

She reveled in the warm mastery of his mouth until she sensed him tense up against her. His fingers gripped her shoulders and he pushed her away, holding her at arm's length as his eyes bored into hers. They blazed the ruthless, hungry crimson that normally sent shivers of unease through her, but her body screamed to be pressed against him again. To know him, to learn what was really in his heart. She was becoming increasingly convinced he had one.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice laced with desperation.

"What you wanted me to do," she said softly, stroking his forearms through the silky fabric of his jacket. "What I suspect you've wanted for centuries, and perhaps I wanted as well. But most importantly, I'm accepting your offer."

Incredulosity filled his expression before he threw off her hands and stepped back. Without the overwhelming heat of his body near her, she felt cold. Too cold. On his face now was an expression she'd never witnessed there before, a look of...fear?

*He's afraid.* As soon as her eyes widened with the stunning realization, he turned away from her, pacing several steps.

"I don't understand," she said.

"You weren't supposed to accept."

Oh, God, no, he wasn't going to do this to her *now*... "Wasn't supposed to...? So it was a lie? For *what*? Simply to torture me, to make me think it was my fault if Adam perished?"

"No. I..."

She'd never heard him at a loss for words before. She didn't like it. His head was lowered, his face partially hidden. He went on, his voice low, pained. "I can't say it was a lie when it's...the only thing in my entire existence I've ever truly, deeply wanted, Celeste."

His use of her name stunned her as much as his confession. How many years, how many millennia had she known him? He'd never before said it, not once that she could recall. Again she found herself closing the distance between them, reaching out until the tips of her fingers met his back, touching him with all the tentativeness and delicacy with which one might handle a poisonous snake. Finally, her palms flattened against the hard muscles. He trembled beneath her hands. His head tilted back and he sighed.

Encouraged, she slid her hands upward, until they became lost in the silk of his hair. "I'm giving it to you," she said.

"So long as I keep my end of the bargain."

"Well...of course. That was the deal. That's only fair. You've shown me lately there's a certain measure of honor in you. Please, don't disappoint me now."

Stepping away from her touch again, he turned to face her, such devastation on his face that it shredded her soul. “I don’t want to. And I don’t know why that is.”

“Then release him, Damael. Take what I’m offering and *release him*.”

Something surged in his eyes, something dark and furious, and she thought of a caged animal. Never taking his eyes from hers, he pulled the cursed scroll from his pocket and with a harsh yank, ripped the thin black ribbon from it. She watched in astonishment as he snapped the tightly furled parchment open, clenched each end in a white-knuckled fist, and tore it cleanly down the middle. Again and again, he ripped the thick pieces until the contract was beyond anything salvageable.

“He’s released.”

Adam sat straight up in bed with a strangled gasp. Melody struggled up beside him, grabbing his shoulders and demanding to know if he was okay.

Celeste saw it all out of the corner of her eye. She couldn’t take her gaze off Damael’s stricken face as he stepped backwards away from her, casting the destroyed pieces of the scroll into the air. They caught fire and floated eerily away, like dying fireflies in the dimness.

“I’m all right,” Adam finally managed, shrugging off Melody’s hands. Celeste looked to see he was breathing heavily, his eyes scanning the room as if he expected to find someone there. Perhaps he did. “In fact, I feel...hell, I feel fantastic.”

“Are you sure?”

He rubbed a hand restlessly across his bare chest. “It’s like a weight is gone. I know that sounds weird. But it’s like this...*dread* that’s been sitting right in the middle of my chest for years. It’s so real, and I could feel it all the time, even in my sleep. Like something was watching, waiting. It’s always been there, ever since...”

“Since what?”

“I don’t know, some crazy hallucination I had when I was a kid. I’d almost convinced myself it was real because lately this feeling has gotten worse, and I thought I was about to lose my mind or die. But now it’s...gone.” He took a deep breath and smiled. Probably for the first time in years.

“What hallucination, Adam? This sounds craz—”

“I wrote songs about it, Mel. And about that feeling it left me with. That’s how tangible it was. I took every kind of pill and drug imaginable trying to get rid of it. It was real enough, and heavy enough, that I knew the second it was gone.” He collapsed on the bed, heaving a sigh. “God, I hope it doesn’t come back.”

Slowly, she shifted her gaze from the couple on the bed to the demon who’d just granted the greatest gift a mortal could ever know. He was watching them too, looking as if he were about to burst out of his skin at any moment. Then, without another word or glance at her, he turned and walked out of the room.

Apparently he wasn't the evil bastard he'd thought he was.

What had he done? The easy answer was that he'd lost. She'd beaten him. But if he chose to look at it that way, then her lips on his had been the sweetest defeat he'd ever suffered. So sweet it had shaken him to his core, more so than at Nicolae's. Then, she'd only succumbed for her own gain. For one moment, one utterly insane moment just now, he'd thought she *wanted* him. And then he'd realized what she'd done, why she'd needed time alone with Adam. To convince herself if it was worth defiling herself to gain his release.

It shouldn't matter, but it did. He should have carried out his orders, but he couldn't. If she wanted Adam's soul so badly she would sully herself by rutting with him, she could by Lucifer have it. She could have it and every one of the others that belonged to him at the moment, still on earth waiting to be reaped.

There would quite literally be Hell to pay now. He could only hope the moments of bliss he'd experienced as her mouth tenderly explored his would be enough to get him through the worst. He liked to tell himself that. It had been worth it, it *had*, just to give her what she wanted this one time. To see the elation on her face.

He trudged along the damp sidewalk with no clear destination, the sounds of the city of Miami a roar that didn't even register amid the cacophony in his head.

He needed to go home. It would be worse if they came for him, if they had to drag him back to answer for what he'd done. He'd made that mistake once before, centuries ago—

Glowing white robes, gently brushing the concrete, appeared in his downturned gaze. Grinding to a halt, he lifted his deadened stare to the loveliest face he'd ever beheld and fought the urge to run the other way. Or to drop through the ground to endure the torment that was waiting to punish his failure, because surely it couldn't surpass the torture of looking at her soft, full lips and remembering...

He was burning alive, and her kiss had been like a drop of water on his tongue.

"That's it?" Celeste asked, her blue eyes like a cool autumn morning. Something he wouldn't be seeing for a while. "I don't understand."

"It's not meant for you to." He attempted to slide around her. She stepped into his path.

"I demand an explanation."

"Oh, you *demand* it." When she only went on looking at him, he shrugged. "You won."

"You let me win. Why?"

He managed a smirk, but knew it came out too weak to fool her. "Don't expect me to make a habit of it." *If they ever let me come back*, he finished silently.

To his amazement, tears glimmered in her eyes. "I thought you wanted me."

*Want* didn't begin to cover it. He craved her like fire craved oxygen to burn. A want, a need so primal and ingrained it was simply a given, a law.

“Celeste,” he whispered, savoring the sound of her name on his tongue. So foreign, so familiar. She shuddered visibly at the sound, her eyelids falling closed. “Wanting you and letting myself have you are two entirely different things. I didn’t really see that before. I see it now. It couldn’t happen that way.”

“Don’t you tell me all these centuries have been a lie. Don’t you dare. I’ll never be able to face you again.”

“You might not have to,” he said grimly. “Surrender is not something my masters look kindly upon.”

Her eyelashes fluttered up as she looked at him. Fear clouded her features, an expression he didn’t like seeing on her face. He wanted to destroy anything that dared to threaten her, or even distress her. If that included himself, then so be it.

“What will they do?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But if I never see you again, know that—”

“No.”

Dismay wracked him as she pitched herself toward him, and God help him—because certainly no one in his realm would—he caught her in his arms. So slight, so fragile, so insubstantial. He could crush her with one sharp movement, one viper-strike of his power. They weren’t bound by their common laws of negotiation now. She knew that, and she trusted him. She buried her face in his chest and cried tears that literally burned him through his clothes.

“Please,” she whispered, her fists clenched around his jacket. “Don’t go yet.”

His hands went on stroking her, soothing her. His face lowered to the cool silk of her extraordinary copper hair. All at once, he was so hard it pained him, throbbing with the need to possess the being in his arms, his mortal enemy. “If I don’t, they’ll come for me.” *And what’s waiting will be ten times worse.*

He couldn’t tell her that. He couldn’t hurt her more.

“It’s all right, little angel,” he murmured, as she only cried harder. “It’s nothing I haven’t endured before.”

“How you came from that *despicable* place...”

Chuckling, he slid one arm between their bodies and tilted her chin up so he could witness the impossible: an angel weeping for a demon’s fate. He hadn’t known those tears would eat into him like acid, but he could endure all things where she was concerned. So it seemed.

“It’s all I’ve known. Until now.”

She swallowed, and he felt the delicate constriction of her throat muscles under his hand. Her eyes blazed into his, the blueness taking his breath away. If white clouds had drifted across the clear, flawless irises, he shouldn’t have been surprised. Nothing was that color where he came from. Nothing.

“Now,” he went on, mesmerized, “I think I can say I’ve finally seen Heaven.”

Her slender hands slid around his neck and she kissed him. Sweetness engulfed him whole. It terrified him. It decimated him. Her tongue slid into his mouth, and the taste of her passion filled him, unleashing

dark desires she couldn't possibly fathom. He fought them valiantly, but at his core, his very nature was decadence and destruction. He wouldn't be able to fight them for long, even for her.

And dammit, he didn't have the strength to refuse her yet again.

"Be certain this is what you want," he rasped between mouthfuls of her dewy innocence. "Once I start with you, I fear I won't be able to stop."

"Don't. Don't stop. Damael..."

A surge of demonic lust laid waste to all further protests. His name, so often spoken in fear or dread, now uttered for the first time in that soft, musical lilt...it undid him. There was nothing between them now, no bargaining, no souls in the balance, nothing to be gained. No deceiving. Just the two of them. This he *could* do.

He grasped her hip, dragged her tight against him, branding her belly with the thick ridge of his erection. She gasped in shock against his lips, her hands charting him desperately. His chest and shoulders, his throat, his jaw, his hair. Everywhere except for the one place he truly needed her attentions.

A familiar electrical shiver worked its way down his spine, tingling out to the ends of every nerve in his body. He was being summoned home. His time was up. They knew.

Seizing her lips with his own, he tried to block it out. He steered her against the wall of a restaurant on the busy street. Passersby strolled past, chattering and laughing, oblivious to the two immortal beings lost in their own little world with each other.

"This won't do," he murmured, trailing his lips down her throat. "I want to take you someplace else."

She sighed, stroking his hair. "Where should we go?"

"Anywhere you want. Anywhere in the world, as long as it's dark and secluded. I want you all to myself."

He felt her shiver, saw her smile. "Well, if it's my choice..."

There was a flash, and a wild pitching sensation in his gut, and suddenly he was lying with her on a glistening bed of sand as the glowing orange disc of the sun sank into the endless expanse of sparkling ocean beyond their feet. "I never would have taken you for a beach enthusiast," he said.

Celeste's voice was barely a whisper above the gentle lull of the waves, her blue eyes teasing. "Where would you have chosen? Death Valley?" She gave him a crooked smile.

"So they *do* joke where you come from." He stroked her cheek. "And this is just what I would have chosen. Where are we?"

"Someplace I found long ago. It's deserted. You wanted secluded. This is probably as secluded as it gets."

He lowered his head until he was so close to her, the tips of their noses nearly brushed. "What do *you* want?"

"This. You."

“No second thoughts?”

She lifted her hand to his face, brushing his cheek lightly. “No.”

He closed his eyes and savored that word, loving how full of wonder it had been. As if her trust was something she could not explain, it just... was.

Since when had he wanted trust from anyone? Since when had he cared?

Since her. Incredibly, she had somehow reached into him, to his “charred, black stump of a heart”, as she’d once called it long ago, and caused that useless organ to thump. And thump again. Until finally it had beat until it shook off the accumulation of centuries of hate like an old, black crust. He hadn’t thought it possible.

When he made no move to kiss her, she took action, lifting her head the minute distance it took to press her lips to his. A shudder worked its way through him, accentuated by another jolt that signaled his masters were calling him home. This one hurt, but he managed not to grunt as her tender kiss turned searing. The summonses would get worse and worse until he obeyed. Thankfully, he was accustomed to pain, and there wasn’t enough of it in the universe to tear him away from her at this moment.

His hand tugged until her robes fell away from her shoulders, leaving her breasts bare.

It pained him to abandon the fire they generated with their lips, but he had to see her like this. Lovely, quivering... He traced her delicate collarbone with his fingertips and slid his hand down until the soft, rosy-crested flesh filled his palm, her nipple a tight little peak as he brushed it.

She whimpered, drawing his gaze to her face. He’d been lying through his teeth. If he saw the merest flicker of fear there, or second thoughts, he would end this. He wouldn’t do this to her. She somehow gave him the strength to fight all those base instincts that screamed at him to possess her utterly, savagely, mercilessly.

All he saw in her expression was acceptance.



## Chapter Five

Celeste marveled something that felt as right as this could be wrong. No matter how sweet the apple Eve had bitten, she was sure it had been far sweeter for its forbidden lure. That was his kiss. Illicit. And irresistible.

It wasn't fair. He'd mentioned repercussions, but she didn't know what sort she would face, and right then, God help her, she didn't care.

His mouth trailed down her throat and she arched sinuously against him, loving the slide of his lips, like damp silk brushing her skin. Stretching her arms over her head, she gave every inch of herself up for his perusal, feeling no shame as he tugged her robes away from her body and tossed them aside on the sand.

Damael's breath shuddered out. He trailed one finger between her breasts, over her heart, and her eyes fell closed. He could hurt her now, and it would be her own fault, her own stupidity. The ache pooling between her thighs and in her breasts seemed to have chased all rational thought from her mind, and she knew it. Still, the sensations couldn't be denied.

His touch left her, and she heard rustling, as if he was shedding his jacket. She looked to see him doing just that, his gaze never leaving her. She immediately reached up to work the buttons on his shirt, unable to move her fingers fast enough. Once she had them undone, she shoved the fabric down his shoulders, and he stripped it off the rest of the way.

*God*, he was beautifully sculpted, lean and pale in the moonlight. Black markings snaked around from his back to his shoulders and biceps, like sharp fingers from the darkening sky trying to claim him and pull him back into itself. For some reason, it made her all the more desperate to keep him here in her arms, just like this. She didn't want to think about the beastly form his flesh kept contained.

She reached for him, pulling him down so he covered her body with his. Her fingers traced one of the intricate patterns around to the base of his throat. "What do they mean?" she whispered, hearing the tremor in her voice even over the rushing waves. Something about those marks filled her with dread, and touching them exacerbated the sense that perhaps she didn't *want* to know what they meant.

Damael meant to spare her, shaking his head and lowering his lips to nudge under her chin. "Never you mind."

He had done wicked things. She knew that, because she had seen them. Had those actions given him joy? Or had he been ambivalent, only carrying out his masters' bidding? Would she ever truly know?

His lips closing around her nipple shut down her mind's feverish pondering, and she moaned as he drew the crest deep into his mouth and laved it with the warmth of his tongue. Her nipple tightened past the point of pain. She clutched his hair in both hands, holding him to her, tilting her hips up against his only to find the hard column of his erection still encased in his pants. A mewl of frustration escaped her, and he chuckled, releasing his torturous suction on her nipple.

"You are exquisite," he murmured. She felt the back of his hand brush her belly as he grappled with his belt, tugging and yanking. He lifted himself away long enough to shed his pants, and she had to refrain from licking her lips as the rest of his delectable body was revealed to her. The markings continued down the backs of his thighs, stopping at the knee. She knew he was watching her as she shyly let her gaze settle between those thighs, where his cock stood hard and impossibly thick.

"Touch me," he said, guiding her hand toward him even as he gave the instruction. She closed her eyes as he wrapped her fingers around him, apprehensive when they didn't meet around his girth. He groaned and skimmed her ear with his lips, sending more shivers skittering through her. "Explore me. Do as you wish. I'm yours for the taking."

She blinked at him in surprise, thinking she wasn't the only one taking a leap of faith at this moment. He lay back on the sand, naked and magnificent, and she couldn't let go, couldn't keep her hands off him. Instincts older than any mortal civilization were taking over, but they weren't instincts to destroy her enemy. They were instincts to pleasure this creature lying before her like he'd never been pleased before.

She straddled his legs, using both her hands to stroke up and down the length of his cock, enjoying the sounds he made. His eyes were closed, so he didn't see her lean over, but every nerve in his body jumped when her lips closed around the thick head. His hand clenched in her hair, his hips lifted off the ground. All at once, she felt more empowered than she ever had dealing with him. Felt as if, for once, she held his very being in the palm of her hand. It would kill him if she stopped now.

She swallowed him down inch by inch, reveling in his reactions, so raw and unlike anything she had ever seen. She'd grown wet just watching him, wet and flushed and eager to feel him penetrate her where she felt so empty, so needy. She moved her hips against him in a rhythm that seemed older than time as she took him over and over with her mouth.

Suddenly, he reached down and lifted her over him until her legs were open over his mouth. The cry that escaped her as his lips closed over her mound sounded almost pagan, and she offered it to the sky with little concern for who was listening. His tongue slid between her folds, warm and wet and seeking, before fluttering against her clitoris in a way that dragged repeated moans from her throat. Her body arched as he tormented her, building the scalding ache to a peak that had her thighs shuddering. Her wings, usually folded tight against her back so as not to be a nuisance, were twitching like an agitated bird's.

"When you come, spread them for me," he murmured against her. The vibrations of his words against her inflamed flesh nearly did the job. Looking down, she saw his gaze was on her wayward wings, and she

might have smiled if passion hadn't been holding her captive. Helpless, sobbing, she ground her hips while he held her in place. He was relentless in his pursuit to shatter her. Nothing had ever felt so good, so good...another moment, another flick of his tongue in just the right place and...

Pleasure swept her away, sent her tumbling as if one of the waves sweeping the beach had toppled her. She didn't consciously have to do as he'd asked. As every muscle in her body tightened, her wings unfolded and spread wide, stretching to their limits.

She scarcely had time to recover her senses before he flipped her down to the sand, wedging himself between her thighs as his eyes flashed crimson. Instead of frightening her, they drew forth a surge of lust that spurred her to spread wider and wriggle her hips to get him where she needed him. "Oh, please," she whispered, guiding him to the hot core of this inexplicable need for him.

It was all too much. She was insane to beg for more. But in that moment she'd have let him drag her to Hell before she'd give up the masterful wickedness of his body. The ache he'd aroused in her reached another crescendo, and her muscles tightened, the delicious tension almost more than she could bear. Surely it would break her into pieces. He would watch her come apart right here beneath him.

Her breath caught as two of his fingertips skimmed down her belly and between her legs, not stopping their quest until he found her entrance and slid deep inside her slick passage. A shuddering groan tore itself from her throat, and he lowered his head to kiss a trail from one breast to the other. She arched into his mouth as his fingers worked her inner walls, stoking her pleasure, and at the moment she felt certain the building pressure would incinerate her, he withdrew.

Frustration churned within her, and she glared at him reproachfully, silently demanding why he'd stopped. All the words building in her throat died when he shifted and she felt the nudge of his erection into the tender cleft between her legs. She gasped as he pushed, and reflexively she dug her heels into sand that offered little resistance. His burning intrusion was inescapable, but she wanted it.

"Take me," he whispered, over and over almost like a prayer, lifting his head so that his lips brushed hers. The world seemed to recede, falling away all around her, leaving only him. Him, and his impossible fullness slowly rending her. Just as she thought she would have to beg him to stop, his hips met hers and all the breath seemed to shudder out of him, along with the indecipherable words of his native tongue. Hearing them sent a little stab of apprehension through her, only to recede as he lifted his hand and gently stroked her face.

"Are you all right?"

He cared? He didn't want to plunder her, take all that she had left? Hear her ask him for mercy?

Biting her bottom lip, she nodded, staring up at him in confusion. He gave her a gentle smile that was nothing like his usual wicked grin that always seemed to have malice lurking behind it. But she couldn't let herself be fooled. Soon he would be back on task again, terrorizing, pillaging...and perhaps remembering one sweet interlude that never should have been...

Except that first he was going to be punished for losing to her. What were they going to do to him? The thought filled her eyes with tears, and he frowned. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she answered quickly, too quickly.

His voice was ragged, his breathing labored. "Do you still want this?"

Celeste closed her eyes, savoring the feel of him stretching her deep inside. "Oh, yes. I can't explain why, but I do."

"Some things need no explanation."

His lips grazed her throat as he began to move. The long, thick slide of him through her wet sheath made her breath catch, her body coming alive again. Wild heat leapt within her. He could burn her with a mere thought to do so, and the fear only seemed to drive her lust to greater heights.

Suddenly, he jolted against her and cringed as if he were in pain, his eyes squeezing shut. She knew immediately it had nothing to do with any pleasure he was feeling; he was in real distress. Alarm flashed through her. "What's wrong?"

For a moment, he seemed to struggle to regain control of himself, then shook his head. "Nothing," he said raggedly. His eyes, when they opened, seemed to carry the wearied aftereffects of agony, but his gaze played over her face with a new determination. "Just touch me, Celeste," he said. "Trust me enough to give yourself to me. I need this."

Was she mad to let him have such power? All the same, her hands skated feverishly down his back, feeling the muscles bunch and release as he thrust into her again and again. Weakness lapped at all her limbs. His kisses along her throat crossed the threshold into pain as his teeth sank into her. She only wanted more, turning her head away, giving him access. Helpless, she wrapped her legs around his waist, hanging on to him as the only reality in this wild new world he was leading her through.

"Please," she whispered, raising her hands to grab silky fistfuls of his hair. She didn't know what she was asking him for, couldn't gather her thoughts that far.

But he seemed to know. His mouth released its feral grip on her throat and moved to her lips, and it was difficult to fathom a kiss so gentle and reassuring could come from the same being that ravaged her body. She moaned, melting into it, giving him what he asked for even if it was at her own peril. She did trust him, whether it meant she was insane or not.

A heaven she'd never known before glimmered just beyond her reach. He brought it closer with every movement, every kiss. A moment later, with the barest stroke of his finger over her clitoris, he brought it crashing down over her.

She cried out as her body arched taut as a bowstring under him, and he let out a purr and another rush of words she couldn't decipher. She was beyond caring. The stars were raining down over her. Somehow, in the midst of it all, she felt him shudder, and curse, and release inside her. Every contraction of her internal muscles was met with a hot gush of his seed, as if she milked it from him. She tightened her legs

behind him so that she received every drop he had to give her. It only seemed to drive her pleasure higher and higher. The first syllable of his name caught on her breath.

“Say it,” he said when she stopped, nothing demanding or severe about his tone. He was pleading.

“Damael!”

His head dropped to her shoulder, tremors wracking him. She caught him in her arms, held him close and fought not to sob. For him, for herself, for what they’d just done, what they’d just brought upon themselves.

But he’d kept his promise. He’d made it worth her while.

It seemed forever passed before they emerged from their cocoon of post-apocalyptic bliss. Hours, surely. Damael seemed content to lie on his back while she rested her head on his shoulder, one wing draped across him. He also seemed particularly fond of stroking the feathers.

Celeste had often been envious of the demons for not having to carry their wings while walking the earth. But unlike that hideous webbed monstrosity on their backs, an angel’s wings were a status symbol and always represented, nuisance or no. She’d worked hard for hers, so she really shouldn’t complain. But she certainly didn’t think she’d enjoyed them this much since she’d first earned them. A wry smile touched her lips at the thought.

Damael shifted under her to get a better look at her face. “What’s that for?”

She lifted her head, resting one cheek in her hand. He immediately reached up to push a curl of hair away from her face. “Can’t I smile?” she asked teasingly. “Or am I supposed to be eternally downhearted at the plight of the world?”

“Perhaps if you smiled more often, the world would be a brighter place.”

Celeste felt her expression darken. “If only it were that simple.”

His fingers trailed down to trace her cheek, the line of her jaw. His dark gaze followed the progression, then lifted to meet her own. As always, those black eyes ate up what little light the moon cast, letting none of it escape. “Tell me about your home. What do you *do* there?”

“What do you think?”

“I’ve always imagined it as one big never-ending choir practice.”

“It’s not like that at all. It’s beautiful. A lot like earth, only more vivid. More...perfect, and completely peaceful.” Absently, she traced the line of one of his markings where it snaked over his shoulder. “I suppose that sounds insufferable to you.”

“You might be surprised,” he muttered. Silence stretched out for a moment. “Aren’t you going to ask me what it’s like where I’m from?”

Celeste chuckled. “Actually, no. I apologize if that offends you. But I don’t really want to know where all those souls I’ve lost have gone.”

His hand fell away from her face. It disturbed her how much she missed that touch once it was gone, and when he moved to sit up, an empty hollow yawned wide in the pit of her stomach.

“Fair enough. I’m sure it wouldn’t make you feel any better.” The bitter edge in his voice hurt, and just then she thought she might pay any price to ease his suffering.

Their new position gave her a full view of his back, with its intricate, swirling black patterns. She put her arms around his waist and dropped her lips to his shoulder. “When must you go?”

“Soon.”

“And I won’t see you again?”

“I don’t know.” He turned to look at her, half his face silvered by moonlight. “Perhaps you will, eventually.”

She didn’t want to think about all those tasks ahead of her, struggling for souls against his colleagues. She would be missing him the whole time. And when they finally faced each other again years from now—centuries even? What then?

Of course, she was assuming she wouldn’t be reassigned for this little excursion.

Distressed, she squeezed her eyes shut and pressed closer to him, breathing the fiery, exotic scent of his skin.

She didn’t want to go home. The swift, sudden knowledge shook her to the core.

Damael turned back to look out over the ocean, his hair a brush of silk against her cheek.

His fingertips trailed along her arm, and then his hand grasped it hard. Lifting her head with a frown, she followed his gaze to see an eerie, wavering orange glow burning under the swells of the ocean.

“It’s a portal.” Damael stood abruptly, pulling her with him and exhorting her to put on her robes. She did so quickly, fear thrumming through her.

“Are they coming for you?”

“Most likely. I need you to go.”

“No—”

He finished shrugging into his shirt, leaving it open, and took her by the arms. His dark eyes burned into hers. “Celeste, listen to me. You and I, our job is done. Go home. If they want to hurt you, I don’t know that I can stop them.”

“I can,” she insisted. “Do you really think I can’t take care of myself?”

His eyes narrowed. “Because you did so well against Nax.”

“She caught me by surprise. It won’t happen again.”

“Dammit, you’re not a fighter. *Go*. It’s not worth you staying here and risking—”

“It’s not?” she interrupted, hearing an unaccustomed hard edge in her voice. “What we just shared isn’t worth it, isn’t worth fighting for?”

“Pointless is what it is. It can never be, don’t you understand? Now go, before I’m forced to send you back myself. And that won’t be pleasant.”

“Damn you, Damael. I should have known you were nothing but the heartless, merciless, cruel minion of Hell I’ve always taken you for.”

Something dangerous flared in those eyes. “When have I ever professed differently? Now—”

Whatever he’d been about to say was cut off by a crashing of waves, and Celeste felt Damael jerk her behind him as he turned to face the demon that coalesced on the sand next to them. She had no urge to cower, even though he was somehow far more frightening a specimen than her lover. His hair was a swirl of gold under the moonlight and his eyes might have matched had the sun been reflected in them. But the evil that came off him was palpable, battering against her in waves. She doubted he was even trying to project that malice. It just *was*.

“Saklon.” Damael’s greeting was tight and cold.

The golden-haired demon didn’t return the greeting. His gaze settled on Celeste over Damael’s shoulder. She glared back.

“I would say congratulations, job well done,” Saklon said. He spoke to Damael, but he wouldn’t stop looking at her. She shifted her feet in the sand, uneasy now. “But there’s that pesky matter of you releasing souls that rightfully belong to us.”

“I’ll gladly suffer the consequences. If you’ve come to drag me kicking and screaming back to Hell, I’m sorry, but you’ll be disappointed. I’ll go willingly.”

The faintest hint of a sinister smile curved Saklon’s lips. Finally, his gaze flickered away from her face to Damael’s. “That was exactly what I’d intended, until I had a much better idea. We’ve a plane to catch, you and I.”

Celeste felt the confusion filter through the body in front of her, and her hands clenched involuntarily on his shirt. What...?

“Our rock star’s time is up in twenty-eight minutes,” Saklon said. “If you will not collect him, then I will...and trust me when I say that won’t end well for you.”

Ice flooded Celeste’s entire being, and her voice rang out of its own volition. “The contract was destroyed. Adam has been released.” Damael snapped a sharp look in her direction, one she interpreted as imploring her to keep quiet.

Saklon frowned at her as if he’d just discovered something filthy stuck to the bottom of his shoe. “This one doesn’t have the final say, angel.” He spat the final word like a curse.

“The hell I don’t,” Damael said. “I make them, and I break them. If I fail to deliver, I’m the one who suffers the consequences. I told you, I’ll suffer these. Let this one go.”

Those steady golden eyes locked on Damael again. “That might have been the way of it before *I* ascended, but no longer. I don’t like it when our acquisitions are tossed away arbitrarily. And I won’t stand for it, especially not with this one.” Saklon’s pale hands shimmered in the light of the moon as he made a quick motion. A sudden puff of fire in the air formed into the hated scroll, which he brandished in front of them. “It’s been reinstated as previously written.”

She surged forward, unsure of what she’d do if she got her hands on that scroll, but its very existence was an abomination at this point. Damael caught her and held her. “You can’t do that!” she cried.

“I just did. And we’ll have him, Damael, if I have to rip his soul out myself. If it comes to that, you’ll be lucky to ever find yourself free of the shackles in the deepest torture dungeon for your disobedience. It’s your choice.”

*Torture dungeon?* Dear God. She didn’t have time for the roaring weakness that rushed over her at those words. “I demand to see—” she began, her eyes still on the parchment, but Damael cut her off.

“No need. I can assure you it’s real.”

Helplessly, she clutched him tighter, trying to read something in his etched-in-stone profile. Completely and utterly still, he watched his general, but even the eye she could see was emotionless. No compassion lurked anywhere behind that gaze. “Go on, Saklon,” he said quietly.

“Adam is midflight on his way home now. You’ll take him to Hell, or I’ll see that you regret it for eternity.”

“No.” Celeste tried to break Damael’s grip, to face his master herself, but he held her fast. “For once in your wretched existence, show mercy.”

Saklon’s eyes narrowed on her. He opened his mouth and drew a breath, seeming to choose his words carefully. “If you address me again,” finally came the casual, almost pleasant reply, “I shall blast you back to your maker with your wings ablaze.”

“I’ll get your *acquisition*,” Damael snapped, his voice a savage hiss. Celeste looked up at him, shocked. “But if you cause any harm to come to her, I’ll shove a fucking pitchfork up your golden ass. Are we quite clear?”

Saklon burst out laughing as Celeste twisted in Damael’s arms and grasped his shirt in her fists. “*No*,” she pleaded, hearing her heartbreak in her own voice. “You can’t take Adam, not now.”

The flat, emotionless void was still in his eyes. She couldn’t see a flicker, not one *flicker* of anything that might restore her faith in him. “What choice do I have? Either I do it or *he* will, and Adam is only one soul. One, among the thousands you’ve lost before. What difference does it make?”

“They all make a difference!” She couldn’t control the high, wild pitch in her voice. She’d told Adam he would be okay, and she’d lied. This was the worst of it. She’d never falsely assured one of them of their safety before, only to lose them later. “They *all* do. They all wrenched my heart. I would give up my place



in Heaven to save any one of them, but I can't. You were there as I lost so many; didn't you see what it did to me? Don't you understand?"

No, he didn't, she realized as he stared silently at her. He couldn't. Because his heart was as cold, as black, as she'd always accused.

"How sweet," Saklon mocked. "I wonder, would you even bother trying to reason with him if you knew his plan was to get between your angelic thighs and then take the wretched mortal's soul anyway? Didn't tell you that, did he?"

She wanted to snap at him that he was a liar, only she feared him meting out the punishment he'd promised. Then she realized something far more horrifying than Saklon's words: Damael wasn't denying them, nor did he even look vaguely appalled by them.

"He's lying, isn't he?" she asked softly, searching Damael's face. Even her immense shame couldn't stop the words. "Please tell me he is."

"Well, that wasn't the way it happened, was it?"

"Well, what's happening now?"

Her biting words gained her no ground. His expression was closed off from her, empty. Whatever false emotions he'd poured into it during their time here, they had run out. "Go home, Celeste. This is my job, nothing more. You did all you could."

Tanan's exact words from earlier. It was the story of her existence. Doing all she could. Hardly doing anything at all. She was so tired, so heartsick. So through with this, with everything.

"If you go near Adam now, after all that's happened..." she said, thinking the low, shaking voice that came out of her couldn't possibly be her own, nor the words. They tore at her heart like teeth and claws. "I *will* stop you. By whatever means necessary."

For the first time since Saklon's arrival, she saw a faint flare of emotion on Damael's stony features. A spark lit in his eyes. She couldn't help but think it was one of challenge. "You do that, and you'll face judgment."

"I face judgment already. What's one more transgression?"

A wretched sound from behind her caused them both to look. Saklon had rolled his eyes heavenward. "I am fucking *bored* with this. Come, Damael. You have a soul to reap, and time grows short."

*Time.* Adam's twenty years were up in twenty or so minutes. They only had those few minutes to take him, or else a second past his deadline he would be freed by default. The contract had been reinstated, but if they tried to change the terms, she'd drag them both in front of Nicolae by their scaly black tails.

Damael removed her hands from his shirt and gently pushed her back a step. "I have to go."

"Please *don't*," she ground out, and she knew he understood she wasn't talking about him leaving.

"I wouldn't follow, if I were you." One minute more his gaze held hers, searching her face as if committing it to memory. His mouth was set in a grave line, his jaw clenched. She poured every ounce of

pleading she possessed into her expression, every last drop of her longing for him and his redemption. Praying it would get through to him somehow.

But his face only blurred and then vanished altogether, the firm hands clasping her arms dissolving into the humid night air. Turning, she saw Saklon was gone too, leaving her alone on the empty beach with no sound but the mournful rhythm of the waves.

## Chapter Six

The Gulfstream V jet carrying Adam home was well on its way to Los Angeles. Damael and Saklon materialized in the plush cabin, where the doomed man sat sipping a drink and staring out the window at the newly darkened sky. He couldn't see them for the moment. Across the aisle from him, his girlfriend dozed. No one else was in sight.

Damael shook his head without looking at Saklon. "I hate you for this."

"You *should* thank me, being that I just saved your ass. Like you told your angelpuff, this is your job. It's what you do. I didn't think when I gave you your orders they would cause you to take complete leave of your senses. Was she really worth losing everything?"

She was worth every damn horror Hell had to offer, but he wasn't about to tell Saklon that.

"Now take him, before I'm forced to do it. You won't find the consequences of lying down on the job again so pleasant."

"Do you think if you say that a few more times, I might believe it?"

Saklon crossed his arms and smirked. "I'm done talking. It's time for action, yours or mine." The golden eyes smoldered. "I suggest it's yours."

Saklon was right—it was only a job. Damael didn't give a damn about the throngs of blundering mortals. He didn't give a damn about the one in front of him now, the sitting duck who foolishly signed away eternity.

But knowing Celeste thought badly of him ate into his heart like acid. She'd seduced it into beating again; now she was trying to tear it into pieces. As much as he tried to deny it, she was at the forefront of his thoughts, and the way she'd stared at him as he left her had his hands clenching into fists as he watched the oblivious Adam.

Well...perhaps not quite so oblivious, Damael thought. Adam set his drink down and leaned his head back against the seat. There was a pinch to the man's mouth, and his knuckles were white as he gripped the armrests. The dread he'd described to his girlfriend must have returned, sitting heavy in his chest. Every turbulent jerk of the plane made him jump, and a fine sheen of perspiration had sprung on his brow.

Damn it. If not for Celeste, Damael would be standing here salivating with anticipation. What had that angel done to him?

Whatever it was, he only wanted her to do it again.

*If you go near Adam now, after all that's happened...I will stop you. By whatever means necessary.*

He would almost welcome her intervention at this point, but he didn't think she would dare. Those words had been driven by nothing more than hurt and anger. Right now she was most likely sitting alone on that forlorn beach crying those same tears that had burned him, just like he was burning now...

Ah, to Hell with it. He'd known from the start it was impossible, because of what they were. She should have known it too, and if she hadn't, then she was more naïve than even he had thought. Their time together had been...miraculous, for lack of a better word, but then he didn't believe in miracles. People created their own realities and destinies. Adam had created his.

Dropping the shields that concealed his presence from the mortals, Damael watched Adam closely as the man's eyelids lifted and then snapped open wide when he saw him standing there. He attempted to scramble out of his seat, almost climbing over the armrest, before Damael grabbed his arms and planted him firmly back in it. Melody went on sleeping, and she would until this was over. He sent out a wave of power that rendered everyone else on the plane unconscious, save for the pilots. They were rather necessary.

"You!" Adam panted, his eyes showing white all around the irises. Vainly, he struggled against Damael's grip.

Damael tightened his hands in a show of strength, not that he needed any more to pin the mortal's thrashing. He allowed a slow grin to unfurl across his lips. "I thought you might remember."

"No man, no, that was a bad fucking trip—"

"You know better. You've felt it. The constant dread, the darkness that haunts you? The happiness you could never quite attain no matter how often your dreams came true? It was me. I own you. I've only come to collect what's mine." The words rang hollow even to his own ears. He'd used them countless times to work himself into a feverish frenzy and stoke the terror of his victims. Only they sounded flat to him now.

"Please, I'll give you anything—"

Damael had almost forgotten Saklon's presence. "Anything?" the other demon asked, his voice the embodiment of all the slimy, slithering things in Hell. "I must say this looks to be a tasty morsel right here." Damael glanced back to see him lifting the blanket off Melody, licking his top lip in a lascivious sweep as his gaze traveled over her curves.

"No!" Adam cried. "Not her, don't touch her..."

"But I thought you said *anything*." The jet suddenly bumped wildly. Saklon made a show of steadying himself and looking around in mock terror. "Oops. You know, your careless bargain may have just doomed not only you, but the only other mortal stupid enough to genuinely love you. And a few innocents, for good measure."

"Stop it," Damael growled. "We've come for him, and him alone."

“Really. Whatever happened to your sense of *adventure*, Damael? You’re no fun anymore. Did some of the angel’s sunshine and rainbows rub off on you? Shall I buy you a kitten?” Saklon straightened, all hints of amusement gone from his features. “I say we reap them all. I would consider it compensation, more or less, for the soul you tried to deny me.”

“You’re not being denied anything, you bastard. I’m here now, aren’t I? You’re getting what you want.”

Saklon’s eyes burned like metal in a forge. “I notice I still haven’t gotten it yet.”

Damael turned back to Adam, who’d blanched whiter than Celeste’s robes. “I was a stupid kid,” he said, his terrified gaze searching Damael’s face. For what? A hint of compassion? “I didn’t know what I was doing, I didn’t know it was real. I would never have—”

“Enough. Have you any idea how many of you say that? ‘I was stupid, I was desperate, I had nowhere to turn’... It gets tiresome after a while. You made the choice. All you mortals, so caught up in your personal dramas, not realizing you’re the lucky ones.” Damael felt his lips twist bitterly with sudden, scathing jealousy. “You have options.”

“So do you,” Adam said softly, his sudden bravery startling Damael so that he nearly recoiled. “I can see it. You don’t want to do this—”

He was silenced by the hand that shot down to grasp his throat, cutting off even a thin whistle of air, planting him hard against the seatback. “I can’t hear any more,” Damael grated. “I tried to let you go, and I failed. If I don’t take you, *he* will. So it’s all the same.” Now that Adam was in his death grip, it was better to get the entire affair over with. So he could go home and try to find himself again without that angel hounding him, stirring up emotions he shouldn’t even have.

Dispassionately watching Adam struggle and tear at the marmoreal hand around his throat, Damael put his other hand flat on the man’s chest. But the dark magic that would loosen the soul and suck it free from the husk of his mortal body wouldn’t gather beneath his palm.

Frowning, he focused and tried again, more an experiment than any attempt to actually succeed. When he felt nothing yet again, he slackened his crushing grip on Adam’s throat. Adam, whose face had been turning purple, sucked in a desperate breath.

The power wouldn’t come. He didn’t know if it was gone, if it really was some case of Celeste’s divinity “rubbing off” on him, or if he simply didn’t have the will to summon it any longer. Either way, he wouldn’t be the one to take this man down. That time had passed the moment he’d ripped up the contract. He should have known.

“I can’t,” he said aloud to Saklon, though he didn’t take his eyes off the wheezing Adam.

“For fuck’s sake. Step aside.”

“I don’t think so. I released this one, and I say he’s still free. If you try to defy me on this, I’ll rip you to pieces.”

He'd been prepared for more of Saklon's babbling; what he hadn't anticipated was the sudden, violent blast of power that wrenched him sideways and flung him across the plane's cabin. Pain radiated through him as he was pinned against the cockpit wall, momentarily blinding him and invoking a cold blast of rage he could scarcely contain. If the bastard wanted to play dirty, Damael could give as well as he got. The counterattack spell he unleashed was meant to be catastrophic, aimed straight at the demon who fancied himself a superior. Even with his senses mostly immobilized, he felt it hit its target.

But the cry that rent the air wasn't Saklon's roar of answering fury. It was high and feminine, and Damael wrenched his eyes open just in time to see Celeste crumple to the ground, wisps of smoke rising from her. As the source of the power that had hit him full blast was severed, he could move again.

Horror lanced through him. She'd been the one to attack him, not Saklon. Where the hell had she even come from?

He peeled himself from the wall and dove toward her. Saklon was nowhere to be seen, but there was a massive scorch mark on the floor. Apparently his little non-fighter angel had banished his colleague straight back to Hell, and good riddance. She hadn't made Damael suffer the same fate. He'd nearly killed her for it.

"*Shit*. Celeste?" She flopped limply in his grip as he pulled her up and cradled her in his arms. Like a ragdoll. A ragdoll with black fluid trickling from her eyes and nose, streaking her terribly pale face. If only she'd paused for a second to listen to what he'd been saying...but all she'd seen, surely, was him standing over a very terrified Adam. And she'd struck.

He'd retaliated with *everything*. Could she possibly survive that? The horror lodged in the pit of his stomach yawned wide, engulfing him whole. She was lifeless. Something as simple as a kiss couldn't undo this.

"Will she be all right?"

He'd nearly forgotten the human. In his agitation, he almost killed the man on the spot for daring to speak. Instead, he lifted his desperate gaze to Adam's face. "What difference does it make to you?"

"I remember her," Adam said. "I dreamed about her last night. She said she was going to help me." He narrowed his eyes on Damael. "What difference does it make to *you*?"

That mortal was either very brave or very stupid.

He was also very safe. Ten seconds ago, Adam's deadline had passed. Damael could tempt him, entice him, whisper in his ear to do the dastardly things humans sometimes did, but he couldn't take him. Not anymore.

He lowered his gaze to the angel in his arms, but spoke to Adam. "This no longer concerns you. She saved you. That's all you need to know. Now go, live your life, and remember none of this."

"But how will I know if she's all ri—" The sentence trailed away, and Adam looked around in bewilderment as Damael raised the shields protecting them from mortal eyes. After a moment, the human

dropped into his seat and sighed, settling back to admire the starry expanse outside the window again. As if nothing had ever happened to him.

He was the lucky one.

“Please speak to me,” Damael whispered, stroking the hair away from Celeste’s forehead. It felt brittle and dry, nothing like the cool slide of silk it had once been. As he went on touching the strands, they began to break between his fingers. Her skin was growing more ashen by the minute. “Tell me how loathsome and hateful I am for what I’ve done, tell me how much you hate me, how you hope to never see me again...*anything*, so long as you speak to me.”

She didn’t move. His poison had infiltrated her. A trickle of blood slipped from her mouth, and this more than anything else spurred him to action. He leapt to his feet, taking her shriveling body with him. The body that had once been so soft and delicate and eager to be pressed against his. There was no time to waste. But what did he do? How did he fix this?

Only one answer came to him. He had to take her home. Surely they would know there if anything could be done.

Both Heaven and Hell possessed amulets that protected its bearer from the hostile atmosphere of the opposing land. They were kept well hidden and used only to conduct the most crucial business. He didn’t have time for that. Even if the journey killed him, better he should be unmade than Celeste. She was selfless and brave and *good*. He was nothing. He had nothing to exist for.

Gathering her close, he pressed a kiss to her cold forehead and shot through the heavens. The journey didn’t prove a smooth one. He breached the veil between worlds, and almost immediately felt life begin to ebb away from him. The very environment here seemed intent upon stamping him out, and by the time the fabled gates came into view, he was weak enough to collapse. No longer able to sustain the magic that kept his humanlike veneer in place, he felt it bleed away, and the beast emerged.

Which only made it worse. He could’ve been plunged into a vat of Celeste’s tears for the pain that sluiced over him. Holding her protectively close, he trudged nearer, but it was like making his way through quicksand. The brightness became more blinding with every step. He kept his gaze steady on her face, looking for any sign of awakening as she drew closer to home.

If there was any, he could no longer see it. His vision winked out, and he staggered to his knees. But his presence had been noticed at last. Raised voices greeted him, all of them like wind chimes, alien voices, at once beautiful and terrible. Someone removed his burden from his arms—she’d grown so heavy he could hardly hold on to her any longer—and he let himself pitch forward onto the ground. He’d hoped to find relief there somehow, but even the grass beneath him seemed to reject him, stabbing painfully into his flesh. He only had time for one whispered plea before unconsciousness took him, and he managed to lift his head to utter it.

“*Save her.*”

## Chapter Seven

*Two years later...*

No one noticed the angel in the corner.

This time, they could all see her. She wore torn jeans and a sheer white blouse under a black leather jacket. Her auburn hair spiraled down her back. But there was too much excitement, too much adrenaline in the air, for the mortals to notice she was a little different than they were, with an otherworldly sheen to her complexion and eyes that were a little too bright. Too knowing.

The exhilaration positively scented the air in the arena. Celeste deftly maneuvered her way through the crowd, heading for the nearest exit. Adam had first walked out onto the stage well over an hour ago, sending the crowd into a frenzy. It had yet to subside. He was still there now, working the stage like a whirlwind. His vocals were incredible. She didn't care for the growling, roaring and screaming, but when he truly let go and let his voice soar, it could bring a tear to the eye. Apparently Damael's contract had dictated people would love him, but that was all over now, Adam's soul was free...and they still showed up night after night to adore him. His faithful minions.

She liked to peek in from time to time, check up on him. He was looking well—most likely because he had no memory of the ordeal on the plane. He and Melody had married, and he spent far more time with his daughter than he used to.

Just now, Melody stood in the shadows at the side of the stage, stroking her swollen belly as she watched her husband with a gaze of pure love and delight. Every night, he sang for the crowd as if grateful to each and every person in the audience for the life he had. Now, it would be a long one. A good one.

Celeste had sacrificed her wings and her home in Heaven to make it so.

Of course, she'd rather the human not know what she'd been through on his account. Adam seemed to sense something had changed in his life, and that was enough. He'd been placed under divine protection in case the demons ever tried to strike at him again. It was something she'd fought hard for during her tribunal. Saklon and his cohorts had called for the forfeiture of Adam's soul because she'd attacked him and Damael first. Nicolae had shrugged and pointed out that Damael had offered a compromise for Adam's soul, and it was fairly common knowledge Celeste had accepted. So as far as he was concerned, no matter what the demons' secret intentions had been, Adam was free.

Damael was nowhere to be found, and if anyone knew where he was, they weren't telling. Many times she'd been sent from the room while secret conversations took place. She'd been afraid to ask too



many questions. She could still recall Tanan's stern disapproval as he'd informed her after she awoke from that horrible ordeal that she often cried out Damael's name in her sleep. His wasn't a name they liked to hear spoken aloud in their territory.

It had been a very scary time as she'd awaited her final judgment. The demons had wanted her. They had demanded atonement, and she'd loved one of them, so shouldn't she belong with them? Their sly arguments had repulsed her, and she hadn't been foolish enough to think she'd have ever laid eyes on Damael if she'd been banished to Hell. Most likely she would have become a concubine to any of the devils who desired her.

Thankfully, her superiors were nowhere near as cruel as his. The archangels had been shocked, stricken by everything she'd done, but they hadn't thought she'd damned herself simply by protecting someone. Or by loving someone she shouldn't.

So she was still favored in Heaven. But her job now was to roam the earth, helping people when she could. Completing small assignments and moving on. She would live out a life cycle and then go home again, at which time her case would be reevaluated. In some ways it was a relief, really—not nearly as heartbreaking as her former position. She also didn't mind spending time among the mortals. But sometimes she got lonely.

Humans were inquisitive by nature, and any of them who got close asked too many questions. What did she do for a living? Where was she from? Where was her family? She couldn't very well tell them the truth, that there were earthbound angels among them *everywhere*, and their secret society saw she had every need met. Her true family wasn't of the earthly variety—even if at the moment she was their black sheep. So she went her way mostly alone.

"Fallen" wasn't a word she liked, but it fit better than anything else. She just hadn't fallen as far as she could have. She was lucky she hadn't earned herself a one-way ticket. That didn't stop her from thinking about *him*, and wondering if...

*No. You've moved past all that. It's over. He's everything you knew he was from the start, and you'll never see him again.*

As people bumped and jostled past her, laughing and shouting, she coursed deftly through the steady stream and slipped out through the main gates. But not before she glimpsed a face in the crowd.

Stopping dead in her tracks regardless of the people who plowed into her from behind, she stood on tiptoe trying to see over the tops of heads. Her attempt was futile. She was frustratingly short and lacked many of her old powers...levitation and flying being among them. Could that have been...?

It was probably her imagination. She saw him everywhere she looked, after all, no matter how she tried to exorcise those final moments on the beach from her mind. They replayed in her head every night as she laid her head down to sleep. Even if she did see him again somehow, she might want to run in the other direction. He'd already tried to kill her once.

Sighing, Celeste continued on, her sense of sound bombarded on all sides even in the parking lot. Cars crept by with music blaring, people chattered with excited intensity about the show. Overhead, a full moon swiftly rose, orange and bloated. She pulled her jacket closer against a sudden blast of biting autumn wind. The temperature affected her more now that she was earthbound.

Her apartment was within walking distance of the arena—a long walk, but manageable. Her legs ate up the distance quickly, the boisterous sounds of the post-concert buzz receding until the clack-clack of her boot heels was all that filled the night aside from an occasional honk and the gentle rush of faraway traffic. The side streets were mostly empty.

A clatter sounded from behind her, and she whirled to see an empty can roll across the pavement. A sheet of paper scratched lightly down the sidewalk beside her boot, propelled by a sudden blast of wind. Casting a glance around and shoving her hands deep in her pockets, she suppressed a chill and dashed up the steps into the warmth of her apartment building.

Ah, relief. She slammed her door behind her and stripped on the way to her bedroom, eager to put this strange, haunted night behind her. It had rubbed her raw, brought everything rushing back. She should stay away and let the wounds heal, but without fail, when she heard Adam's band was coming to whatever town she was living in, she couldn't help herself. She had to go see him and marvel that he was still here.

Whatever else she'd lost, at least she'd won that battle. She hadn't had to watch another one perish. She never would again.

Bed felt wonderful as she slid under the covers wearing only her underwear. Closing her eyes, she snuggled under the covers.

The dream came hot and fast and staggeringly vivid. She and Damael, making love with a passion to rival what they'd generated on the beach. She twisted in the sheets and arched, breaking out in a sweat, as she imagined him taking her in those long, relentless thrusts she remembered. "You're mine," he breathed against her ear. Her own hands drifted over her breasts, her fingers teasing her nipples until he grasped her hands and slammed them back on the mattress with a growl, replacing them with his lips. His teeth. "*Mine.*"

She cried out and struggled awake, sobbing into the empty silence of her room. Only the dim glow from the streetlights poured through her small window. Nothing was out of sorts, no black-eyed demon hovering in the corner, no dream lover by her side.

Wiping sweat from her brow, she swung her feet to the floor. How could she forget, how could she push him from her thoughts when he haunted her dreams like this? It was asking the impossible. Seeing Adam might bring everything back with a vengeance, but she had to be honest with herself: it never truly left her. And she hated Damael for that, for everything—lying to her, trying to trick her. She even hated him for the torment of not knowing where he was, what was happening to him right now—and the guilt for caring.

He'd almost *killed* her. Would she have to keep reminding herself of that forever to keep this infernal longing for him at bay?

She trudged into her bathroom, flipped on the light switch and nearly cried out when she saw her reflection in the mirror. Hollow, sorrow-filled eyes, mussed hair. She looked like...

*Like you've just taken a tumble with the man you love, who then left you heartbroken. Does that cover it?*

Yep. It did.

"You're going to be okay," she muttered to her reflection. Then, resolving not to meet that broken girl's gaze in the mirror again, she busied herself filling a glass with water and taking several desperate gulps. It cleared some of the fog from her mind. Not all of it, but enough. Sighing, she flipped the light off and reentered her bedroom.

"Hello, sweet angel."

Her heart nearly burst in her chest as the voice spoke, and she almost dove back into her bathroom to lock herself in. That was before her gaze caught the shadowed figure sitting on her bed, and she froze to the spot.

Damael. Even though he was only backlit by light filtering through the window behind him, she would know those shoulders anywhere. And the voice, the deep, smoothly ironic voice.

Was she still dreaming? It didn't matter. First instinct took over, and she scrambled back against the wall, vainly trying to cover her near-nakedness and searching for something, anything, to put between them. As if that would stop him from...whatever he meant to do.

"Oh my God..."

"Well, no, unfortunately. Do you realize you didn't lock your door? *Tsk*. Anyone could come creeping in, you know. *Anything*."

What should she do? Run and hide? Grab her crucifix? Jump him?

Every movement as precise and graceful as she remembered, he stood and stepped toward her. Given the small area of her bedroom, that brought him almost close enough to touch.

Seemingly from nowhere, the hazy pleasure of her dream drifted over her again. Tears filled her eyes. Damael's gaze roamed her face, her body. Irrationally she worried that he might not find her as attractive as he once had.

Was she mad? He could be here to finish the job he'd begun on the jet, and she was worried he was mourning the loss of her wings.

He stepped even closer, crowding her against the wall. Something soft brushed her skin: a sweater. His scent filled her nostrils. Exotic and fiery and... Oh, God, she couldn't help it. She moaned and let her eyes fall closed as desire pooled between her thighs, dampening her panties. His hands met the wall on either side of her head, trapping her. His lips trailed down her hair.

The sound that came from deep in her throat was almost a purr. She forced it to form into words, any words. “Where...where have you...?”

“Shhh.”

“I can’t...”

His knee slipped between her legs. Every nerve in her body jumped, and she almost collapsed. Her heart was racing—such an odd sensation *that* was—and her mouth ran dry. “You can,” he murmured. Those lips were sliding dangerously close to her own now.

“You...” she began before he kissed the life from her, so hot and desperate that she ceased meeting him halfway and simply let him ravish her mouth with his. She hadn’t the strength, anyway—it had all fled her the moment she saw him. The hands beside her head clenched into fists, but he made no move to touch her with them. He let his mouth and his tongue and his teeth take complete possession of her senses.

“You missed me,” he murmured with arrogant assurance that should have made her scoff. But those warm, wet kisses just kept going on and on, and...

“You hurt me.” The words finally wrenched themselves from her throat before she could stop them. More anger sparked, boiling up from the cold, empty, dead-until-now places in her soul. Damael froze against her, then pulled back, his brow furrowed. “You said you would never hurt me, and you did. You nearly killed me and you *left*.”

“They didn’t tell you...?” His voice trailed away and he shook his head at the ceiling as if addressing someone up there directly. She watched him, trying to pinpoint the difference she discerned in him. Something subtle, but definitely there. “Celeste, I thought I was attacking Saklon. I’d just told him I wasn’t handing Adam over to him, and I thought he’d been the one to hit me, not you. I swear it.” He did touch her now, his hands cupping her cheeks as his gaze held hers with burning intensity. “If you believe nothing else I’ve ever said to you, believe that, and one other thing as well...I was the one who took you home again.”

Oh, such a skilled and perfect liar. She might have believed his first statement—it made sense, and his attack had seemed more reactionary than anything. She could still recall the horror of realizing what was about to happen to her as she’d felt the flare of power from him, aimed in her direction. After that, everything had been a muddle of pain and darkness until she woke in her bed at home surrounded by friends. The idea that Damael had taken her there was preposterous. As if he would ever step foot in Heaven, even if he could.

“I know you’re lying, and not just because your lips are moving. I wouldn’t be speaking to you right now if that were the truth.”

“It was quite unpleasant, I assure you. Rather like a fish out of water. But if you throw him back soon enough, he might just make it.”

“I’m to believe they bothered to throw you back?”

“They were grateful. I returned something very dear to them. And it cost me...dearly.” He stepped away from her, his eyes hard and...angry? “But I’m not here to talk about what I gave up. I don’t care about that. You’ve given up more than I can possibly imagine.”

The tears that had been brimming in her eyes spilled over. He stared at them as if transfixed, then reached up to touch one, hesitating before allowing his fingertip to meet her flesh. When it did, he sighed, his shoulders relaxing. With both thumbs, he began caressing the droplets from her face as they fell.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t count on...all this. Yes, I lied to you. I made the offer never intending to give up Adam’s soul. For that you can torture me until Armageddon if you wish.”

“How do I know the entire thing wasn’t an elaborate set-up between you and that other devil? It was all so sickeningly convenient, his showing up after you got what you wanted from me, to whisk you off to get what you’d *really* wanted all along.”

“You can know it wasn’t that way because we wouldn’t have bothered, Celeste. If I didn’t care about you, I’d have taken my pleasure, laughed at you and sucked out Adam’s soul right in front of your eyes. It’s simple fact. Can you honestly dispute that, knowing me as you do?”

She was loath to admit it—and it didn’t make her feel much better—but he had a point. Why would he bother to save face? The Damael she knew lived to please no one but himself. Until now, at least. “You were really trying to save Adam?”

“At that point, I wouldn’t have let Saklon take him. I’d have fought him until the deadline passed. The fact you’ve been allowed all this time to think I deliberately hurt you makes me want to pluck every last feather from those bastards you call friends.”

“Speaking of which, I tried to pretend it didn’t hurt when they stripped my wings. Or when they cast me out. Physically, it didn’t.” The words tumbled out in a rush, aimed at him like daggers. But she didn’t have the strength to sustain her anger any longer. Not with him looking at her with such regret in his eyes. “The humiliation of it—that was another matter entirely. The only thing that got me through it all was thinking about you and how you made me feel when we were together. And how, for the time I was in your arms, it was worth it. I was even stupid enough to think if they could have only sent me to you, I’d have happily suffered whatever other punishments they saw fit to mete out.” Damael began shaking his head, opening his mouth to speak. She laid her fingers on it. “Anything would have been worth enduring if I could have stayed with you, but suffering that humiliation when I didn’t know where you were or if you even cared...”

He caught her hand gently and pulled it away, lacing his fingers through hers. “Believe me, I cared. But you wouldn’t have been with me if they’d cast you under.”

“I thought as much. All I’m trying to tell you is that...” She drew a breath, dropping her gaze because she couldn’t look at him as she made the confession. “I love you. I don’t know how it happened, or why, but I can’t deny it any longer.”

The silence that stretched out was catastrophic. But what had she expected? Did he even have the capacity to love her in return?

“I suppose that makes me a fool. It can never be, can it? Just as you said before. They’ll never let us be together.” She hated herself for how small her voice sounded. Hated herself for the tears that wouldn’t stop falling.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because of what they did to me for loving you. I’m not here only because I broke a rule saving Adam’s soul.”

The hand that wasn’t holding hers skimmed up her naked back, his touch feather-light. His fingertips traced the scar inside her left shoulder blade, where one of her wings used to be. There was an identical one on the right.

“Did they give you any stipulations?” he asked.

“Well, no, but...you’re a demon, and—”

He shook his head, gaze steady upon her own. “No, Celeste. I’m mortal.”

## Chapter Eight

*Mortal?*

If the wall hadn't been behind her, she might have fallen backwards. "How...?"

"It was the only way your kin could save me. They gave me a choice. I could be cast down to earth as a human being with a clean slate, or I could...fade away. I had to choose fast. I chose this." His gaze searched her face, and she could only imagine the breathless shock he saw there. No wonder she didn't sense the familiar malevolence rising off him. No wonder what little light infiltrated her room was reflected in his eyes. She should have noticed that from the start.

"So you see, Celeste, they still love you, no matter what you did. If they didn't, they would have let us both shrivel and die right there. But they thought enough of you to show mercy to me, their mortal enemy."

"I never doubted they love me. But I don't understand. Why would you agree to become mortal? You seemed to glory in the darker side of your nature. I would think you'd rather not exist than be stripped of your power."

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked. "This way, there was at least a chance, miniscule as it was, that I might see you again someday."

She could only stare, surprise giving way to dawning, impossible joy. One corner of his mouth tugged upward in a self-deprecating twist.

"Say something, Celeste. Tell me I didn't act in vain. You just said you loved me as I was. Now say you love me as I am. If I'd thought you would turn me away, I would have chosen differently."

"I love you." The words burst forth, bypassing her mind. They came straight from her heart, which was pounding in her ears. "I loved you then, I love you now, and I'll love you always."

"Then it was worth it." He drew her gently into his arms, the only place she'd wanted to be over the past two years. Warmth suffused her, chasing out all the cold, dark places that had settled in. She held him as if he might disappear if she let go.

"What took you so long to find me?"

He chuckled. "As grateful as they were, they didn't see fit to supply me with a road map to get to you. But it seems I have other angelic connections."

Celeste lifted her head to look at him. "What?"

"Your friend appeared to me a week ago. Tanan, I believe? He's been watching over you. And me too, it seems. He told me where you live. Said he was tired of us both wallowing in misery and grief. I

didn't know angels could be so *hostile*. He described in great detail exactly what he'd do to me if I hurt you. It sounded most unpleasant. I told him I've had worse, but he didn't have to worry."

Tanan, the cad. He could have warned her. "That *was* you I saw at the concert tonight."

"I thought you might be checking up on your charge. It's really too bad I didn't manage to reap that one. He would've been splendid entertainment for our halls—"

Laughing, she planted a swift kiss on his lips before he could finish that thought. She couldn't last one second longer without that sensual mouth on hers, anyway. His tongue quested for entrance, and she gave it, rejoicing in the reactions of her body to his nearness. Just as potent, but earthier, more carnal than she'd known as a spiritual being. Arousal bloomed through her sex, a searing need that demanded to be assuaged.

He didn't make her wait, cupping her aching breasts in his palms before bending to draw a peaked nipple into his mouth. Her body could have been made for him, she fit him so perfectly. Clasping his head to her, she tilted hers back against the wall and moaned, arching her body against his.

One of his fingertips slipped between her legs, stroking too gently over the damp silk of her panties and wringing an anguished cry from her lips. Damael groaned against her, the vibrations of it shivering across her skin. "So wet for me," he murmured. "You are so beautiful, Celeste, so beautiful it drove me mad. It hurt to look at you and know you couldn't be mine."

But she was his, oh, she was. She couldn't reply. She was too near coming just from the light pressure of his finger on her clit and the shuddery breath of his words cooling the moisture he'd left on her nipple. He gave the turgid crest another lick and then grasped her hips, whipping her around to face the wall.

Off balance, she shot her hands out to brace herself. His arms went around her waist from behind, one hand roaming down to cup her mound. Warm lips trailed down her left wing scar. "I'll spend this lifetime and beyond making this up to you, if you'll allow me," he whispered, moving to give the same treatment to the opposite side.

Twin tears slipped down her cheeks. "I'll hold you to that."

"Hold me to it. And I'll hold you to me. I love you, Celeste."

She could only sob with emotion and anticipation as he knelt behind her, slipping his fingers into the lace edge of her panties and slowly drawing them down over her buttocks as her knees went weak. A trail of kisses followed the panties' descent, over her cheek and down the back of one thigh. She could hardly stand any longer, trembling with longing and the need for completion. For him. Hard and thrusting into her, filling the emptiness between her legs. Cool air swirled over her newly naked flesh, and at last she stepped out of her underwear only to feel both his hands trail leisurely up the back of her legs. Knowing he was there looking at her so intimately...

"Damael, please."

"Oh, no, sweet angel. We've waited too long for this for it to be over too soon."

"I know, but...please, I need you. Close to me. Inside me."



“And you’ll have me. Don’t move.”

His hands abandoned her and she glanced back to see him undressing, sweater and jeans flying this way and that. His winding black markings were gone, but other than that he was exactly the same. Lean, toned, breathtaking. She licked her lips at the sight of his cock, erect and ready to fill her up just as she craved. He came back to her and knelt again, putting both hands on her thighs and urging them apart.

“Have you dreamt of this?” he asked. “I have. Every night since I tasted you for the first time. I couldn’t wait to feel you flowing across my tongue again, so sweet.”

“Just tonight I was dreaming of you.” She moaned and nearly hyperventilated when his thumbs slipped up between her legs and separated her folds, baring her throbbing core to his sight.

“What were you dreaming?”

“We were...*oh*...” The first flicker of his tongue almost caused her to tumble down on top of him. His grip tightened, at once holding her up and holding her open. But when she stopped speaking, he stopped licking.

“We were...?” he prompted.

Damn him. She could hardly catch her breath. Her hips involuntarily thrust back toward him, seeking to regain that lost contact. “We were making love.” He rewarded her with another slow, wet sweep, the stiff tip probing between the lips of her pussy. Just at her entrance, he paused. She shuddered.

“You were inside me, and it was so good, as good as it was on the beach. I could feel you everywhere. I *needed* you everywhere. I tried to touch myself and you held my hands down. You bit me. You said I was yours. But I woke up before I came.” Her words had been punctuated with gasps and sighs because he hadn’t stopped again as she spoke.

“No fear of that last part this time,” he murmured, and having mercy on her, continued to lave her with a precision that left her decimated. He left no millimeter of her untouched by the wicked skill of his tongue. The precariousness of their position made it all the more exciting, and she leaned her forehead against the wall and bit down on a knuckle. The tip of his tongue continued tormenting her, curling through her slit, lapping at the juices she wept for him. One hand released its grip on her and a second later, a fingertip gently entered her.

She tossed her head back and gasped, lifting the leg he’d let go to give him better access. He rewarded her by slipping in a second finger and sinking his teeth into her buttock. Her body drew him in desperately, gripping and contracting as he slowly thrust in, pulled out. Again. And again. Stretching her. His tongue licked away the sting his teeth had left. He twisted his fingers inside her and curled them forward ever so slightly, brushing something that wrung a choked sound from her throat.

Startled, she tried to shy away from that sensation, but he held her fast and rubbed the spot with an accuracy that left her in ruins. All at once she was trying to open wider to him, to get more of him inside her, rolling her hips and writhing and oh, God, she was going to...

The eruption was swift and only seemed to escalate. She quaked and gasped as he slowly continued to work her in deliberate contrast to the frenzied demand of her orgasm. “Deeper,” she cried out. “Please, I need more—”

“Fuck.” Suddenly, he was standing behind her, urging her legs farther apart. With one ruthless thrust, he drove his cock deep into her shivering depths, wrenching another cry from her lips as her emptiness, her longing, her hunger for him, was at last fulfilled. Words tumbled from her mouth she wouldn’t later remember. His thrusts only spurred her climax higher, and higher, until she leaned her head back against his shoulder and feared she might depart this life right now. Surely no one could feel this way and live. His teeth scored her throat and she reached up to grab a fistful of his silky hair, panting and riding out the earth-shattering pleasure until at last, mercifully, it began to wane.

Damael tightened his arms around her as she went limp, gently withdrawing from her slick heat. He wasn’t done with her yet—nowhere near it—so he gathered her up and laid her on the bed. Her eyelids cracked open and she sighed as he lowered himself over her, nestling between her thighs.

“Okay?” he asked, swiping damp strands of hair from her forehead. She nodded languidly, and he aligned his cock with her entrance again. He was still coated and glistening with her wetness, and more of it met him when he pressed forward into her. She gave way so sweetly, gripped him so tightly. Her legs and arms went around him, and she moaned, coming more alive beneath him with each inch he gained. He set the slow pace he’d wanted earlier, sinking all the way to the hilt in the tight squeeze of her drenched pussy, pulling all the way out again. A groan tore itself from his throat, and she answered with a sweet coo, stroking her fingers lightly down his back.

It was really the only heaven he’d ever need.

When he’d first awakened alone on the earth, there had been only one thought burning in his mind. *Find her.* She was the only thing he had to live for. Earthbound angels had come in swiftly to set up his place in the world. He’d kept waiting for them to bring her to him, or at least give him some information about her—did she live? Was she back to work on earth? In Heaven?—but he’d never met more tight-lipped beings in his entire existence. It became very apparent very fast if he wanted her, he was going to have to find her.

As time wore on, he’d grown more and more frustrated, but he hadn’t given up. She was all that mattered. Tanan had finally appeared to him because in a moment of desperation, he’d stood outside in an empty field and screamed and cursed at the heavens to give her back to him until he’d hardly any voice left. Until the moment that damn angel appeared with the news he wanted to hear, he’d truly begun to think he’d made the wrong choice, doomed to live out his life here without her.

And he'd meant every word he'd said about spending the rest of his life and beyond making it up to her. She hadn't deserved a single thing that happened, but they were together now, and he wouldn't be able to stand it if she had any regrets.

"Celeste?" he whispered.

Her eyes opened. They were no less blue than they had ever been. He could see that even in the scant light from outside her window, and the look he saw there stole what breath he had left. "This was the only way. I wish it could have been different."

Her hands gently captured his face. She could still his very heart with that one gesture, calm all of his normally raging senses until every iota of his being was under her thrall. Somehow he knew that gaze could read every thought, every doubt in his head. "It was all worth it, Damael."

It was all he needed to know. He slid his arms under her, holding her close and brushing her lips with his as her slick, needy warmth began to milk him of his hard-won control. She was going with him, the sharpness of her nails digging into his back, her kiss deepening so that he could feel her mouth was as hot as her pussy, and both drew him in mercilessly. Every thrust drove a cry from her mouth into his.

Release built in his shaft, swelling him inside her already impossible tightness. He held it in, a feat more agonizing than many of the tortures he'd faced over the centuries, until he heard her cries reach a fierce, musical crescendo again. As she began to flow and ripple around him like lava, he thrust deep and erupted, overflowing her with his seed. She gripped his hair and cried out his name, sounding for all the world like one of the pagan priestesses of old calling out to him for power or favor. Only she was crying out to him in pleasure, in love.

There was still a soul at stake here. It was his. But she could have it, and everything else he was, if only she would stay with him forever.

It occurred to him as he floated back down to earth that he had no idea if they were able to procreate. He would bet she hadn't thought to ask that question, either. So far his new body seemed as biologically functional as a normal man's, so he didn't see why not.

He rained little kisses along her lips, her cheeks, as her breathing calmed and her eyes opened to reveal a satisfaction and contentment only that kind of rapture could leave in its wake.

"Worth it, indeed," she murmured, and smiled.

"Do you think we can create life now?"

She blinked. Her eyebrows rose in her smooth forehead as she thought about it. "Um...maybe. Oops."

"Don't you like the idea of bearing my spawn?"

She burst out laughing. "Could you maybe put it a different way? Then we'll talk."

"Very well. But be warned, I'm a master at negotiation."

"As if I didn't already know it."

Gently, he traced a finger across her cheek, over her lovely, still swollen lips. “But I’m looking forward to only negotiating what movie we’re going to watch or what we’re going to eat for dinner every night.”

“Or which drapes complement the sofa, or which tile to get for—”

“Okay, I give, I’ll leave all that stuff up to you. I’ll never win.” He eased over and drew her against him, cradling her in his arms. She snuggled sweetly against him, her head resting under his chin.

“Are you still going by your name? No offense, but it’s sort of dramatic.”

“I have many names—” A sharp pinch in his side caused him to yelp. He had to try to restrain both her hands as she continued to pinch and tickle him, but she was a nimble little thing. She ended up straddling him, pinning his hands down. Be damned if his cock didn’t respond to the damp rub of her pussy against his lower belly. She gave him a feral grin as he laughed. “Easy, woman. Damn.”

“Oh, *please*. Henceforth, consider yourself punished for any demonic statements, actions or proclivities. I’ll have a hard enough time as it is convincing them to let you past the gates when the time comes.”

“I’m entirely in your hands, sweet angel.” He stared up at her, taking the measure of her lovely face. Her hair cascaded in silken spirals around him, her eyes twinkled. Every time he looked at her was almost like seeing her for the first time again. And yes, he remembered the exact moment that was. “It’s the only place I’ve ever wanted to be.”

She leaned down to kiss him, her wicked smile turning sweet. “From now on, it’s the only place you’ll ever be.”

## About the Author

To learn more about Cherrie Lynn, please visit [www.cherrielynn.com](http://www.cherrielynn.com). Send an email to Cherrie at [cherrie@cherrielynn.com](mailto:cherrie@cherrielynn.com). She loves hearing from readers!

Look for these titles by Cherrie Lynn

*Now Available:*

Unleashed  
Rock Me

*Loving him couldn't be worse than losing him... Could it?*

## Rock Me

© 2010 Cherrie Lynn

Candace Andrews has had enough of pleasing others. In an act of birthday rebellion, she sets out to please herself—by walking into the tattoo parlor owned by her cousin's ex-boyfriend. All she wants is a little ink, and Brian's just the guy to give it to her.

As soon as she submits to his masterful hands, though, the forbidden attraction she's always felt for him resurfaces...and she realizes the devilishly sexy artist could give her so much more.

Sweet, innocent Candace is the last person Brian expected to see again. She's everything he's not, and her family despises him. He doesn't need the hassle, but he needs *her*, and this time no one is taking her away. Not even those who threaten to make his life a living hell.

Backed into a corner, Candace faces the worst kind of choice. Cave in to those who think Brian is a living nightmare...or hold her ground and risk it all for the one man who rocks her world.

*Warning: This book contains explicit sex, naughty language, tattoos aplenty, family drama, a hot rock concert...and a bad boy hero who's pierced in all the right places.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Rock Me:*

Candace closed her eyes as Brian's finger traveled gently up her nape, raising gooseflesh on her arms. "Maybe you had a point, as far as how my parents are going to react to you. Maybe it'll always be that way."

"Does it have to be?"

"How else could it ever be? There's no changing my situation."

"Sweetie, there's no way to say this without sounding condescending, but you're young. Right now this is all you can see, but trust me, this won't always be your reality. Pretty soon you'll be able to make your own way in the world no matter what they think."

"You don't know them very well, do you," she said flatly.

He cupped the back of her neck in his hand, bringing his other over to tilt her chin toward him, trapping her for the kiss she knew was coming if she didn't do something fast. But he just held her that way, stroking her cheek with his thumb, his gaze searching hers as if all the answers were inside her somewhere.

If only that could be the truth.

"I don't. But I think I have a pretty good handle on *you*. You're going to be okay."

He stared at her so intently. His eyes were a dark, turbulent ocean, and she wanted to drown in it. Suddenly she became aware of the aching fullness of her lips and the weight of her breasts pushing against her bra.

This skirt was so short, and she'd chosen it for that reason alone, but maybe it had been a huge mistake. Reaching under it *and* her black G-string would take absolutely no effort on his part. Not good, though she wanted that so, so badly, she couldn't resist rubbing her bare thighs together as his gaze continued to melt through all of her defenses.

Just when he knew she was about to go up in flames or melt right there in his truck, he leaned in. Warm lips slanted over hers as a breathless cry rushed from her mouth into his. She brought up her hands, clenching his shirt in her fists as his tongue stole past her teeth and plundered her mouth. His was the kiss she had dreamed of all her life, deep and somehow as fierce as it was gentle. It opened the gates to a flood of emotion and erotic sensation that had her almost writhing against the seat.

His hand finding her breast seemed the most natural thing in the world. Even through two frustrating layers of fabric, she could feel his heat as he palmed her and circled the tight bud of her nipple with his thumb, forcing it to pull even tauter. When he pinched it, she moaned into his mouth, clasping his wrist in her hand. But not to stop him. To make sure he didn't stop. The little jolts of pleasure/pain sent lightning zipping all through her body, striking at the juncture of her thighs. Her skimpy underwear was no barrier to the growing wetness there. She began to fear making a mess on his seats.

She pulled away from his mouth to breathe, and he attacked her throat with his lips, his heavy breathing the sexiest sound she had ever heard. He was shuddering as hard as she was. His teeth raked her throat and an involuntary "Oh" slipped out before she could stop it. It seemed to only enflame him further, and he plunged a hand under her top, pushing up the cup of her bra as he finally brought his fingers flesh-to-feverish-flesh with her aching nipple.

She had no anchor, nothing to buffer her from these insane sensations. The worry of getting caught was only a minor flicker in the back of her mind...they were in the back of the lot, it was dark, and his windows were tinted. She turned into him as much as she could, trying to bring her right leg over his, to straddle him. If he would only pull her into his lap so she could grind against him...

He got the hint. Almost before she could cry out in frustration, he pulled his hand out of her shirt and plunged it beneath her ass, yanking her hard over him as if she weighed nothing. The new position, legs splayed over him, pushed her skirt the rest of the way up over her hips. She was bare except for a scrap of fabric he could easily rip. Instead, he ran both hands down the small of her back, allowing his fingers to become entangled in the strings as he cupped both her bare cheeks in his palms.

"Jesus Christ, Candace," he groaned, leaning his forehead against her shoulder as his hands massaged, soothed, played and tantalized. It felt so good, so good...



“Oh, God.” The words were a shuddery sigh. Spread open this way, with his fingers only inches away. “Please.”

“Please what?”

She ground her pelvis into him hard, so that her clit barely rasped across the fabric of his jeans. She couldn’t get close enough. His hands continued tormenting her, squeezing her ass, tugging her panties, but making no move to address the need burning hot and wet at her center. “Touch me.”

“Where? Let me hear you say it.”

He didn’t have to ask twice, but her mouth—so squeaky clean until she’d started hanging out with him—tripped over the word she didn’t think she’d ever uttered out loud in her entire life. “My…pussy.”

Pressed cheek-to-cheek with him, she felt him smile. He ran one fingertip lightly down the crease of her bottom, reaching under her until he found the source of all her torment. His other hand wandered up to her breast again, still bare under her shirt.

She wrapped her arms tight around his neck and sobbed as two of his fingertips trailed through her wetness, finding her entrance and nestling there until she wiggled and pushed down against him. He evaded her, chuckled maddeningly. She was caught, and it was torture. Did she push back and give him easier access to her slick channel, or lean her hips into his and grind her clitoris against him?

“Hasty little thing. I’ve got to teach you to slow down and savor this.”

She didn’t want to savor it. Not now. He couldn’t understand. She’d denied herself this for so long, too long. She’d bought this skimpy freaking underwear dreaming of the day some guy would rip it off her in crazed lust. Her pent-up frustration had her running in the red, and she was about to burn down.

He had mercy on her, snuggling his fingers into her tight passage as she let her head fall back, groaning as loudly as he did. He withdrew and reentered, slicking through her, soothing the sting that was briefer and much less intense than it had been last night. She rocked her hips gently against his hand, bringing her head forward again to kiss him and struggling to open wider to his invasion of both her mouth and her pussy. He thrust his tongue between her lips in the same rhythm that his fingers plundered her body, and she nearly flew apart. “Ohhh, Brian.”

His answering sigh formed into the most beautiful words she’d ever heard. “Candace. Come home with me right now and I’ll give you everything you need, sugar. Everything you want. If it takes all night.” His fingers plunged deep, as if to show her exactly what he meant, and she cried out.

But Samantha’s earlier words were somehow filtering through her frenzied thoughts, making her want to scream. *Make him sweat.* Then Macy’s, telling her how insane she was. Her mother’s haughty, disapproving face.

Michelle’s expression softening with yearning and traveling a million miles away at the memories of him.

All at once, she was barraged with all the voices of reason in her life, every one in direct opposition to what her body was begging her to do right now.

“I can’t,” she whispered, pulling away from his lips to cram her face into his neck. Praying he would understand, but that he wouldn’t stop. Selfishly trying to claim what she couldn’t have.

“I feel how wet you are,” he murmured sinfully in her ear. “How much you need this. To hell with everyone else. Let me give you what you need.” His tongue flickered against the soft shell, and she moaned as his talented fingers continued to work their magic. But he was slowing his pace, touching her too shallowly, holding her teetering on the edge of a devastating orgasm. Trying to make her give in. And she couldn’t. “No one has to know,” he cajoled.

“Please don’t do this to me,” she cried, fearing the dam stopping up her emotions was about to burst. She couldn’t let it, couldn’t do this. And Brian froze, pulling his hands away from her as if she’d seared him.

*Two wrongs don't make a right, but they might just make the perfect match.*

## **The Matchmakers**

© 2009 Jennifer Colgan

Nick Garret is flypaper for females, and he likes it that way. Women stick for a while, and when it's over they fly away. So does he. Then one rain-slick night a young woman steps in front of his pickup truck, and his jaded, cynical life takes a sharp swerve toward trouble.

Calliope did the only thing she could think to get Nick to steer his truck—and his life—in a new direction. Banished from the Fae realm for granting a wish gone bad, her punishment is an impossible task; redeem the unredeemable Nick Garret. If she fails to help him pair three couples in everlasting bliss, he's doomed to never experience real love. And she will share his fate—as a mortal.

Nick can't decide if this charming, exasperating woman is a dream come true, or a saucy, sexy nightmare sent to drive him insane. Yet something about her makes him want to rise to her challenge. He'll do anything to make her stick around a while.

Besides, how much trouble can one half-naked, seemingly wingless faerie be?

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Matchmakers:*

Nick stole glances at his passenger while he followed the winding mountain roads toward the state forest. The views from the Appalachian foothills were spectacular this time of year, and he'd been itching to get out in the cool autumn air and fill his lungs with freedom.

Unfortunately, the view in the car was equally distracting. Callie had traded her pink satin pajamas for faded jeans and hiking boots. Under a matching denim jacket, she wore a fluffy sweater the color of caramel. It looked soft as a kitten, and Nick's fingers ached to touch it.

He'd asked himself over and over why he wanted to do this—why he wanted to be with her today. The easy answer was, why not? She was beautiful, vivacious and when she wasn't driving him crazy, she left him breathless. Loony or not, she was nice to look at and maybe, if he could figure out how to draw her out, he'd learn a little more about her. He needed a better explanation as to why she seemed more and more like a magical creature and less and less like an escaped mental patient.

“Oh look! Pumpkins!”

Nick smiled at her delighted cry. Mounds of brilliant orange pumpkins, some plain and others painted with goofy neon faces, spilled over wooden tables and out of huge crates at a roadside stand. A rocky gravel lot served as a parking area, and Nick pulled in between another pickup and an SUV.

“They've got cider. I haven't had cider in years,” he said as he rounded the back of the truck and helped Callie out.

She breezed past him and immediately wrapped her arms around a twenty-pound pumpkin, hugging it like a long lost friend. “Look at this one! He’s beautiful.”

“It looks like all the other ones, only bigger.”

“It’s perfect for a centerpiece for the bar.”

“Oh. Can’t Farley get his own pumpkins? He hasn’t even agreed to have the party yet.”

Her face fell, and once again, Nick felt like a monster. Why did her smile suddenly mean so much to him? He thumped the pumpkin’s unblemished hide and reached for his wallet. Callie rewarded him with a triumphant grin as she hauled the huge gourd off its table.

Nick pulled out his wallet and paid for the pumpkin and two cups of fresh cider. He leaned against the truck, grinning into his cup while Callie hoisted her prize into the back of the flat bed.

She glared at him when he handed her the cider. “You could have helped.”

He shook his head. “You could’ve popped that thing back to the apartment or right to the bar.”

“Not in front of everybody,” she whispered between sips of cider.

Nick shrugged. “You could’ve made it weigh less.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but no words came out. Her expression told him he’d pay for his cheeky comments later, and he relished the challenge.

They finished their cider in silence and climbed back in the truck. Callie immediately twisted around in her seat to check on their new passenger. “Will he be all right back there?”

“He?”

“It’s a male pumpkin.”

“Of course. Pumpkins have gender?”

“Everything has an essence that defines its sex.”

Nick struggled not to laugh. Her serious expression forbade it. “I see. It’ll—*he’ll* be fine. Are you sure you don’t want to buy him a lady friend before we go?”

“I’m sure.”

Nick just shook his head. Faerie logic would be the death of him yet.

The morning’s destination was a scenic overlook abutted by a crumbling, moss-covered stone wall. The view rivaled anything visible in the Fae realm and made Callie homesick. She shivered in the autumn breeze. Nick put his own jacket around her shoulders, and her heart thumped wildly.

“It’s colder than I expected up here.” He stood close, and Callie leaned into his warmth, wishing for the endless summer of her world. “There’s the road back to Bayerville. If you look past that farm and along the tree line, you can see the hiking trail that leads to the skating pond.”

Callie followed Nick's tour of the fiery landscape lit with brilliant gold and orange foliage. Country traffic meandered along thin ribbons of road that wound through the hills. Here and there, the familiar shapes of grazing horses and cows dotted the hillsides, and not a single cloud interrupted the endless blue of the October sky.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, fighting to keep her voice light. "It reminds me of home."

"What's your world like? Do the seasons change?"

"Not like they do here. We have a time when the leaves change color and a time when the flowers bloom, but it never becomes unbearably hot or cold. We don't get rain...unless we want to create some. It never gets dark."

Nick surveyed the land spread out before them. "Rain isn't so bad. Sometimes it can be...sort of comforting."

"You love it here, don't you?"

Nick seemed reluctant to answer, but Callie felt his thoughts. He wanted this to be his home, but he didn't want to need it so badly.

"It's nice here. It's nice in a lot of places I've been."

"You love open space. You hated the time you spent in the cities, didn't you?"

He nodded, snaking his arm around Callie's waist, making her stomach flutter. "I hate smog. Traffic. Subways."

"I bet you love snow, don't you?"

He grinned. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Snow is nice. It's a little too cold for me. What else do you love?"

"I love sleeping in hammocks and cold lemonade and..."

"What else?"

His eyes narrowed on her, and she sensed his discontent. "I can see right through you, Tinkerbell. This is some kind of lesson, isn't it?"

Callie feigned innocence. "I just want to know more about you."

"I hate mind games and psychobabble."

Callie pulled away from him, though she was reluctant to leave the safe circle of his arms. "It's not a game, Nick. When love is gone—it's all gone. You'll lose it all."

"I said I'd help you with this mission of yours—"

"It's for both of us, Nick. Not just me. I want you to understand that."

"I'm trying." He stepped forward and tilted her chin up with his fingers. "Tell me what you love."

His lips hovered close to hers, and Callie's breath caught. She could kiss him now and make him feel something he wouldn't want to lose. But that wasn't her mission. She moved back just enough to break the hypnotic pull between them.

“I love helping people fall in love. And I don’t want to lose that.”

The rest of the day passed in a blur of crimson leaves and blue sky. They drove through the forest and back and had dinner in a small café that sold hand-churned ice cream and dusty antiques.

Nick stayed close to Callie, aware of the glances of other men and feeling proprietary. By the time they returned home, the buzz of arousal had replaced the light mood of their afternoon.

He followed her up the stairs and hesitated before unlocking the door. “Did you have a good time today?”

“I did. Maybe we can do this again sometime before...”

“Before what?”

“Before I go.”

“We don’t have to think about you going right now, do we?”

“No.”

He centered his gaze on her lips, pink and moist, still sweet from the peach ice cream he’d bought for her. He wanted a taste, and the sleepy-sultry look in her green eyes told him she did too.

He leaned in, his fingers creeping up under her jacket. A second later his lips nearly collided with the doorframe, and his hands closed on empty air. He caught himself before he stumbled, face first, through the door as she opened it from the inside.

“Hi, Nick.”

“What was that about?” He leaned one arm above her head on the doorframe. “I almost kissed a brick.”

“I’m sorry about that, but we’re not here to fool around.”

“I wasn’t fooling.”

“Nick.” She put a soft finger across his lips and leaned close. The faint smell of roses teased him. “No distractions.” She turned and walked into the apartment, disappearing into the kitchen.

Nick watched her go. He’d been shot down before, not often, of course, but there were certain women on which the Garrett charm just didn’t work. Somehow, his borrowed intuition told him Calliope was not one of them. He’d seen desire in her eyes, felt it each time their fingers touched. Something held her back, though, and he vowed to figure out what it was. He needed to uncover all her secrets, and he wasn’t going to let her disappear without knowing exactly what she was all about.

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