

Christine McKay



# CARNAL MAGIC

Spice **BRIEFS**



# Carnal Magic

Spice



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# Chapter One

Elaine Feller glanced at the moonlit sky and cursed the falling snow. Snow on Halloween? It seemed blasphemous. Snow was for St. Nick's and Christmas. Just because the stores couldn't keep the holidays separate didn't mean Mother Nature needed to jump on the bandwagon, as well.

There was a blessing to the wintry weather, though. It kept all but the most determined off the streets. In St. Beatrice's Cemetery, even the dead lay quiet beneath the blanket of snow.

If she had her way, she'd be disturbing one dead man's rest.

It'd been two years since her Tom had died and of all the inconsiderate things to do, left her behind. She'd gone through the normal stages of grief. To everyone around her, she'd moved on. If she didn't have a boyfriend, well, it was because she was so immersed in life there was no time for another man.

What she'd failed to tell them was if it was up to her and she didn't see why it wasn't there wouldn't be another man. Tom Vaughn had been the love of her life, her childhood sweetheart, her best friend, the man who made her laugh at herself but adored her peculiarities. Her soul.

God, she sounded like she should be a heroine in some over-the-top Shakespearean drama. Too bad she got stage fright.

Fear wouldn't stop her tonight.

Hefting her shoulder bag, she walked down the cemetery path. She didn't need a flashlight. She could find his grave blindfolded. Shadows writhed across the sheet of snow, a twisted bit of branch here, a stone cherub's distorted outline there. Beneath her winter coat, her skin was cold. She'd spent two years as a solitary studying the occult, haunting The Covenant's aisles. Victoria Ramlin, the shop owner, high priestess and queen many times over, had taken her under her wing when she'd needed guidance. The woman had never once refused to answer to Elaine's questions, nor had she asked any of her own.

Elaine almost wished she had.

Tom's grave was nestled in a newer portion of the cemetery, beneath the branches of a weeping willow tree. The tree wasn't actually owned by the cemetery, but bordered the back lot. Much to the caretaker's dismay, the messy willow was allowed to live. Repeated discipline by the pruner kept it in check on his side of the fence. On nights like tonight, though, the wind whipped its spidery arms over the lot line, taunting.

She set her bag down behind Tom's stone. Out came a runner of black fabric, cut from the dress she'd been wearing the night he died. The dry cleaner never could get all the blood out. Might as well put the dress to good use. She draped the runner over his stone, anchoring each side with a fat pillar candle, one black and one



white. Next came a fir branch. The wind played with it, scraping its needles fingers across the smooth granite. Nestling a small vase between the branches, she filled it with a white iris, a red rose and a chunk of clematis vine.

Swallowing hard, she stepped away and walked a small circle around the grave. It was more oblong than completely spherical. She hoped it didn't matter. When she reached the front of the site, she paused, fingers itching to trace the name carved there. She bit back a small sob, tears stinging her eyes. She'd shed too many tears already. Now was the time for action, not misery. Finishing the circle, she returned to the altar.

Shrouded in leather, her fingers were still cold. Pulling off her gloves, she tucked them in her coat and retrieved Tom's cigarette lighter. It was a simple silver rectangle, worn smooth by his touch. She used it to light the candles. They flickered and guttered, nearly going out when a gust of wind swept through. She'd anticipated the wind, though, and carved a depression around each wick, providing a shelter of wax for the flame.

It was now or never. She shucked her coat and mules, standing nude and barefoot in the snow.

She faced the north. "I invoke Earth, Mother of mystery and growth. Guard me tonight." With a trembling finger, she sketched a pentagram in the air. She turned. "I invoke Air. Give breath to that which I seek to create." Another pentagram drawn, another turn.

God, it was friggin' cold. Her breath came out in a puff of white air. She fought the urge to shiver. "I invoke Fire. May I have success in my endeavor tonight." Her hand again trembled as she drew her pentagram.

Last turn. Last pentagram. "I invoke Water. Bring him back on a tide of love." She was facing the back of the gravestone again. Maybe she should have stood in the front. Maybe she should have stayed the fuck home and not tried to tackle what no one else had ever successfully done. Who did she think she was? A voodoo priestess? A witch queen?

Taking a deep breath, she tried to block out all the distracting thoughts. In theory, it sounded simple. But in reality, her brain was accustomed to the constant stream-of-consciousness bombardment of life. Keeping still was like trying to pry the needle out of an addict's hand. Again, in theory, possible, but more likely than not someone was going to get stabbed.

"I, Elaine Feller, align myself with Persephone, Goddess of the Underworld. I ask you to bring Tom Vaughn back to me."

Kneeling in the snow, she pulled a pretty cut-crystal container of crimson fluid out of her bag. She lifted it over her head. The moonlight kissed its facets. "Blood of my love." Lowering it, she pricked her finger with a needle and squeezed the skin until a drop of blood formed. Her hands were shaking so badly she was afraid the drop might fall on the snow, instead of in the glass. "Blood of his love." Her blood dripped into the glass, smearing the rim. She bowed her head. "Please bring him back," she whispered.

On Samhain, the beginning of the witches' New Year, the veil between the worlds was at its thinnest. She prayed it'd be enough. There was no room for failure. She didn't care how he came forth, be it zombie or spirit or whole. She just couldn't live without him. Hot tears spilled over her hands, which were clutching the glass.

“Please.”

Willow branches flogged the cemetery fence. The candle flames guttered and nearly went out. Her vase toppled, the sound of glass breaking loud in her ears. Her flowers plunged over the edge of the gravestone.

She didn't know what she should have expected, but it was too damn cold to kneel for long in the snow. Standing, she started to follow her footsteps counterclockwise around the grave. Breaking the circle. Breaking her heart, as well.

“You're more likely to catch pneumonia than a spirit that way.”

She froze, glancing around wildly. The wind chased clouds across the star-spattered sky. Shadows danced on the snow, grotesque parodies of the cherubs and angels guarding their sleepers. “Who's there?” She was fairly certain it was a man's voice, not Tom's, but then again, it'd been so long since she'd heard it.

A human shape disentangled itself from the shadows near the willow, one hand resting on the waist-high wrought-iron fence. Someone from the Historical Society, no doubt. She didn't think any functions were planned tonight at the old church sharing the cemetery border.

She needed to finish breaking her circle, shadow person or not. Whoever it was had already seen her nude. Why hide now? She stepped in her former footprint.

“Don't move.” Definitely a man's voice. Hopping the fence, he started toward her.

She hurried to finish her circuit. The thought of waiting another year to attempt her spell was inconceivable.

His hand caught her elbow. How the hell had he moved so fast? One more step and she'd be finished. One more step and she'd scream bloody murder and hope to God there was someone at the old church. The stranger stepped in her last track, completing the circuit.

“This circle is open, but never broken,” he said.

She jerked her arm free. Great, just great. Another witch had stumbled over her rite. “Damn it. What are you doing? Go away.”

Stepping into her circle, he knelt down and picked up her coat. He held it out to her. She wrapped her arms around her chest and glared at him. He wasn't a big man, but then again, she wasn't exactly tiny, either. He wore all black, from the upturned collar of his leather duster to the toes of his boots peeking from beneath the well-cut fabric of his pants. In the moonlight, his hair and eyes appeared black, as well. Stubble dusted his jaw and chin.

“You're intruding on a private ceremony.”

He held his gloved hands apart, her coat still dangling from one. "You called. I came."

Her cheeks burned. He'd watched the whole thing. A thousand curses came to mind, each one worse than the last. "You're not my lover."

He tipped his head. "Are you certain?"

Unsure, she snagged her coat from his outstretched hand. Her fingers were too numb to work the buttons. She wanted to scream in frustration. "Tell me something only he would know."

"He died in your arms, head resting in your lap. The driver that hit your car was drunk. Didn't even know he hit anything." He fingered the black cloth fluttering on the gravestone. "This is from the dress you were wearing."

That knowledge elevated him from common peeper to stalker. She didn't even have her pepper spray on her. It was locked with her purse in the car. "Get away from me." Her voice was hoarse. "I have a knife. I'll scream."

He ignored her threats. "Your mentor should have taught you to clear your circle better." Kneeling in the snow, he dug at the base of the gravestone.

"Stay away from that."

He held up a limp plant, leaves shriveled with frostbite. "Nightshade." He offered it to her.

*Death.* She clutched her coat more tightly around her, teeth chattering. "What do you want?"

He scooped up her flowers, strewn across the snow. Breaking the stem of the iris, he tossed it over his shoulder. "Reincarnation is overrated." The clump of clematis was discarded next. "Soul mate. There's no such thing." Twirling the rose's stem between his thumb and fingers, he studied it. "Ah, passion. There's a thing every creature understands."

She should run. The ceremony was probably ruined, circle marred by another's footsteps. Everything in her shoulder bag could be replaced. She tried to take a step. Her feet were frozen to the ground. A low whimper escaped from between her chattering teeth.

"You noticed that? I apologize. I hate chasing, brings to mind the analogy of predator and prey." He wrinkled his nose. "Most distasteful. And your circle's not truly open yet." He nodded toward the guttering candles.

Victoria must have guessed her intentions. She'd been so careful, so certain she'd asked random innocuous questions. She'd never mentioned Tom, never spoke of the cemetery. "Did Victoria send you?"

"Who?"

"Victoria Ramlin. She owns The Coven."

Another nose wrinkle. "Ah, the witch queen. I told you, you called me."

"I don't believe you."

"Just as you don't believe I'm your lover reincarnated."

"No."

â€œHe has no unfinished business, your Tom. You cannot call back those who do not wish to come.â€

â€œHe left me behind.â€ Her nerves shattered. Hands clenched at her side, she screamed, â€œhis unfinished business!â€ Her voice was swallowed by the night. Shards of the vase scraped the edge of the granite, tinkling as they fell.

Setting the rose on the gravestone, he stepped to her side. She had to tip her head backâ€”she could at least move thatâ€”to gaze into his eyes. They werenâ€™t really black, more a storm-ridden gray.

â€œI'm afraid he doesnâ€™t see it that way.â€ He reached for the edges of her coat and slowly did up the buttons. His gloved fingers brushed her throat as he secured the last button.

â€œYou lie.â€

For a moment, anger flashed, but it was quickly controlled. â€œThat is one thing I do not do.â€ Stepping back, he picked up the cut-crystal glass. â€œHis and your blood mingled. How trite.â€ He tipped the container upside down, spilling the liquid onto the snow.

Her heart sank. Thereâ€™d be no re-do. Everything sheâ€™d practiced and trained for was useless without his blood. â€œWhy are you doing this?â€ she whispered.

â€œIt was your botch, not mine,â€ he retorted, a hint of heat in his voice. He examined the crystal. â€œThough I'm not certain it was entirely your fault.â€ Walking around her, he studied her. Her face burned.

â€œYou've kept yourself for him.â€

â€œThere's money in my purse. In my car, in the parking lot. The keys are in my bag.â€

He folded his hands, returning to stand in front of her. â€œI have no need of money.â€

â€œThen what in God's name do you want?â€ She was crying now, shaking from fear and the cold.

â€œI believe you invoked Persephone, not the Bright Lord or Lady.â€ He picked up the rose again, then executed a formal bow before her, at odds with his appearance. â€œI have a proposition for you. You seek passion. I am willing to offer it.â€

Her lip curled. â€œThe love I knew died with Tom.â€

â€œI beg to differ. Three nights, Elaine Feller. For three nights I will pull passion from your veins. If, at its end, you can honestly say your Tom still arouses you as no other can, I will take you to him.â€ She started to speak, but he held up his hand. â€œBut if I kindle that flame within you, you stay here and make no more futile attempts at resurrecting that which should be left to sleep.â€

â€œHave sex with you or be murdered? Gee, thanks, what a choice.â€

â€œIt's your death you seek on a night like this standing skyclad in a cemetery.â€

â€œHow do I know you can do what you say you can?â€

He stepped behind her, leaning over her to whisper in her ear, â€œWhat

assurances do you need?â€ His arms circled her shoulders, one hand plucking the leather glove off the other, finger by finger, in front of her.

She stared at his now bared hand. It was nothing but bone. A scream lodged in her throat, but she fought for control. â€œNeat trick.â€

â€œTouch it.â€

She raised a trembling hand. He linked his bony fingers with hers. The noise that escaped from her throat was part whimper, part moan. She could feel every joint, every bone. The skeletal hand closed around hers and brought both to her face. Bone brushed her numb lips.

â€œDear God,â€ she breathed.

â€œGod has nothing to do with this proposition.â€ His breath whispered across her cheek, warm despite the cold emanating from his hand.

â€œYou swear youâ€™ll take me to Tom?â€

He released her hand. â€œelf I fail.â€ It didnâ€™t sound as if he thought failure a possibility.

â€œAnd in return?â€

â€œBeg pardon?â€

â€œWhat do you get out of this little deal?â€

His eyes gleamed. He picked up the rose with his gloved hand and touched the petals with the skeletal one. All the petals dropped off the stem, spattering the snow like drops of blood. â€œThe attentions of someone willing to die for her one true love.â€

Her jaw dropped open.

â€œAh, I may mock it, humansâ€™ melodramatic nature, but there is a certain appeal.â€ His lips quirked. â€œTo be loved so completely that another is willing to exchange her life for yours. You cannot fail to see the fairy-tale quality to it.â€

She remained silent, shocked.

â€œWell,â€ he said a bit gruffly, â€œwhat will it be?â€

She was certifiably insane. â€œYes.â€

Taking one step backward, he snuffed out the white candle with his thumb and forefinger. â€œYes?â€

â€œYes,â€ she repeated.

He snuffed out the other candle. â€œThe circle is truly open.â€ He sighed. â€œWell then, a more eventful night than I first expected. You, too?â€

As if the candlesâ€™ flames had been all that were anchoring her, she stumbled to her knees. She put her fingertips to her throat, her pulse thready beneath her clammy skin. Things were happening too fast. Her head hurt. Her throat was raw. Sheâ€™d just made a deal with something not of this worldâ€”demon, angel or deity. He offered her his gloved hand.

She carefully took it, watching as the leather folded around her frozen skin. He drew her up. â€œel think tonight would be suitable.â€

â€œT-tonight?â€ she stuttered. â€œButâ€—â€ She trailed off. She couldnâ€™t

think of a single reason not to start tonight. Her eyes teared. Three nights. In three nights sheâ€™d be with Tom.

Her tormentor packed her candles into her bag, then carefully folded the black runner. He paused as if reading her thoughts. Maybe they were that apparent on her face. â€œYou will not win.â€

For the first time, she offered him a genuine smile. â€œYou should have checked with my friends before you made the bet. Theyâ€™d have told you how stubborn I can be.â€

â€œI did check,â€ he said quietly. â€œWith your dearest friend.â€

Tears sprang free, the smile wiped from her face. â€œDamn you.â€

He cupped her cheek. She turned away from him, trying to back away, but he gripped her shoulder with the other hand. A gloved thumb wiped the tears from her cheek.

â€œI apologize. That was insensitive. Forgive me?â€

She nodded her head.

â€œGood,â€ he said briskly. He dropped his hand. â€œI admit Iâ€™m a bit out of practice, but I think a date should begin with dinner. Donâ€™t you?â€ He offered Elaine her shoulder bag.

Sniffing, she took it and looped it over her shoulder. â€œIâ€™m not really hungry.â€

He looked momentarily stumped. One elegant black brow rose. â€œDancing, then?â€

â€œSure, I guess.â€ She looked down at her mules, wondering if sheâ€™d break his toe squashing it with the solid heel. Sheâ€™d made a deal with some supernatural creature and all it wanted to do was dance? How come she didnâ€™t feel lucky?

He offered her his arm. â€œAll set?â€

She bit her lip, studying his arm and not his face. â€œWhat should I call you?â€

There was a long pause. She glanced at him through her lashes. He looked stupefied. â€œHow about Ell?â€

She frowned. â€œShort for Ellis? You donâ€™t look like an Ell.â€

â€œRay?â€ he offered.

Her frown deepened.

He folded his arms across his chest. â€œPick one, then.â€

It was her turn to do the studying. Deity or demon? Or something in between? Despite his imperialness, there was a hint of desperation to his gaze, a bottomless hunger. For the first time in a very long time, her heart struggled out of its vat of self-pity. â€œHow about your given name?â€ she suggested.

â€œNo.â€ An answer as solid as stone.

â€œHow about Bob?â€

His brows knit. â€œBob?â€ Putting his hands on his hips, he glared at her. â€œDo I look like a Bob?â€

â€œAbout as much as a Ray,â€ she muttered. â€œBert?â€ Color crept up his

neck. She masked a giggle with a cough. "Tristan?"

"Do I appear Scottish?"

"No, but I bet you'd look good in a kilt." That hit a little too close to the truth. She hurried on. "Maddog?"

"I fear I left my eye patch and parrot in my other coat."

"Why *not* your given name?" she grumped. "You know mine."

He met her defiant gaze. "It's Azrael."

"Oh." And she'd complained her name was old-fashioned. She chewed on her lip, then said, "Ell's not bad."

"I thought not." He offered her his arm and this time she took it.





## Chapter Two

“Where are we going?”

He was steering her toward the parking lot. “Dancing.”

Not exactly a talker, was he. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m naked under this coat.”

He gave her a quick glance, eyes gleaming. “I had noticed and it will not be a problem.”

She colored, the heat of his look warming her more quickly than a shot of Jack Daniel’s. “Warn you, I’m a foot masher.”

“I will make note of that.”

She searched her brain for another excuse, then settled on the truth. “I don’t know how to dance.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

This from a man with skeleton hands? They’d reached her car. Fumbling with her keys, she opened her door. “Um, am I driving someplace?”

“No, you are leaving your belongings here. The dance is elsewhere.”

She eyed him warily. “Everything?”

His lips curved. “Then we might not make it to the dance. Just your bag of magicks. I thought perhaps you would like to know they are safe.”

“Of course.” The look he’d given her could melt stone. Fortunately she was mostly frozen flesh. The marble rubble of her heart remained untouched. With her shoulder bag safely stowed, she turned toward him. “Now what?”

He offered her his arm again. “We dance.”

Some of his gestures seemed so at odds with his modern appearance. “I’m not going to damn my soul doing this, am I?”

“A bit late to ask.”

She blanched. He took her hand and laid it on his arm. “No. I am neither good nor evil.”

“Must be nice,” she muttered.

“Beg pardon?”

“To think you are completely impartial.”

“I don’t think. I know.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mr. Ego. Less talk, more seduction. You’re burning moonlight.”

He rewarded her with a wide white grin, steering her toward the cemetery gates. “As you wish, my lady.”

A thick fog descended on the cemetery, masking everything beyond the wrought-iron fence line in a wet ashen mist. She could just distinguish the jagged edge of the gates from the silhouette of trees. The parking lot itself remained fog-free, though a

haze clung to the single streetlight like a twist of supernatural garland.

“You’re not going to resurrect the dead and make me a part of some macabre death dance, are you?”

His eyes sparkled with amusement. “Where do you get such ridiculous ideas?”

“Blame television and an overactive imagination.”

“I think we can put that imagination to better use.”

She shivered. She needed to remember no matter how attractive he was, he was not part of the human race. She’d summoned him. He had no business in her world. No good could come of him being here.

At their approach, the graveyard’s double gates swung open. As they stepped through them, Azrael covered her hand with his. One moment they were facing the cemetery, stones arranged in military precision, the next, they were in a warmly lit room filled with music and the murmur of voices.

She blinked. It was like being at the mercy of a TV remote, only the people remained when the scene shifted.

Dropping his arm, she spun around. Parquet floors marched beneath her feet. A chandelier the size of a VW Beetle glittered overhead, dripping crystals and prisms. Her footfalls clicked rather than thumped. She glanced at her feet, hidden beneath a froth of gold and white skirts. Grabbing a fistful of skirt in each hand, she simultaneously lifted the copious amounts of fabric and stuck out her foot. She was wearing friggin’ glass slippers!

At her panicked look, Azrael said, “I did not trust glass to a self-proclaimed foot masher. They are Lucite.” He was resplendent in a long blue velvet coat with gold braid and buttons. Snugly fit white pants and black boots completed the ensemble.

She found her voice. “Where are we?” She held out her hands in front of her. They were encased in white satin elbow-length gloves. She raised a hand to her hair, feeling it curled and coiled on her head. One curl trailed down her neck to tickle the tops of her breasts. Speaking of which, her breasts apparently had their own invitation to the event. The corset of the dress pushed them up, cradling them in a perfect double curve of white flesh. She wasn’t sure they’d stay put, but groping herself in public to double-check was out of the question. “I need to use the ladies’ room.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously.” People moved around them, women in elaborate wigs and even more elaborate gowns, glittering jewels at their throats and wrists. The men were equally coiffed, some wearing wigs, others with as much bling on their coats as their women had draped around their necks. Heaving bosoms also seemed to be a theme of the night. Big or little, apple-blushed or chocolate, their rounded contours decorated every gown.

Compared to those of some women, her breasts’ bared curves were downright discreet.

Somewhere in the ballroom, an orchestra began a slow waltz. Azrael gave her a low formal bow. "Care to dance?" He straightened, watching indecision flash across her face. "Under that skirt no one will see you step on my feet. Or do you still feel the need to flee?"

Her chin rose. "You asked for it, mister." She wasn't one to step back from a challenge. Besides, what did dancing have to do with passion? Unless he was capable of out-of-body experiences, they couldn't share a dance floor and a bed at the same time.

Taking his hand, she let him pull her into the throng of dancers. His hand settled at her waist, hers demurely on his shoulder. He made it seem effortless, floating across the floor, his hand carefully guiding her. The sheer volume of skirts acted as a natural barrier between them, though she did catch his eyes flicking to her breasts once or twice.

"Where are we?" she asked again as he spun her beneath the chandelier. She caught the glitter of crystal rainbows dancing across her arms and his shoulders.

"Does it matter?"

She bit her lip. "I guess not, as long as you can get me home. Why the Cinderella theme?"

"Do not all women secretly wish to be princesses?"

"Yes, but not if they knew they had to cart all this fabric around. These skirts are like one giant anchor." He spun her and she accidentally crushed his foot.

He winced.

"Sorry."

"It's nothing."

Rhythm broken, she crushed his other foot.

His beautiful face crumpled. "Perhaps I should have stuck to something without heels."

"Perhaps you should have left me in the cemetery parking lot and went along your merry way."

"I believe that is the first time anyone has referred to me as merry."

Dance finished, he pulled her out a side door. The patio overlooked a formal garden glittering under the twinkle of a million white lights. Beside the stiff evergreen hedge, the flower beds had been laid to rest for the season. Though the grass leaned toward a sickly frostbitten color of yucky green, there was no evidence of snow. Somewhere off to her right, she heard the trickle of water. Wherever he'd whisked her to, it wasn't in the same climate zone she'd left.

She'd never been good at small talk, but she suspected even the smoothest talker would have had a hard time coming up with topics interesting to a denizen of the underworld. "So how long has it been since Satan let you out to wreak havoc on humankind?"

"You speak too much."

"And you're quite the ladies' man."

That earned her a frown. "Is this setting romantic?"  
"Romantic, yes. Seductive, no. And no matter the location, you're still required to be enchanting."

Snorting, he gave her a dismissive glance. "I intended to take you in this garden. Given my nature, perhaps the cemetery would be more appropriate."

"Take me?" Arching a brow, she put her hand flat on his chest. "Whoa. You haven't even kissed me."

His hands rested momentarily on her waist. *Hot, so hot*, was all she could think. God, there was so much need in his eyes. What had she gotten herself into? Would she survive three nights?

The heat of his skin burned through the layers of corset and fabric. He jerked her to him, crushing her breasts against his velvet coat. His splayed hands skimmed up her sides, thumbs outlining the curves of her breasts a moment before his fingers found their undersides. Cupping her breasts, he teased her nipples until they jutted through the fabric like jeweled accents. He lowered his lips to the valley between her breasts, but instead of bestowing kisses, he blew a stream of warm air across the tops of her breasts.

Too bad there wasn't a contest for perkiest breasts at the ball. She'd win, hands down.

His tongue flicked out, leaving a wet trail over the curve of one breast. Her hands fisted in the fabric of her skirts. She wouldn't touch him. Let him be the seducer. Let him burn for her. She was going to get Tom back.

Then his lips and teeth fastened on a nipple and she whimpered. God, it'd been so long since someone had worshiped her breasts. His hands crept to the gown's lacings and undid them. One less layer of fabric separated his mouth and teeth from her skin. He kissed a path from nipple to shoulder, traveling over satin, lace and skin. His nose nudged the puff of sleeve off her shoulder. Warm lips found the sensitive dip where neck met collarbone.

His hands moved to the pink satin corset, undoing each hook, from the bottom to the top. He kissed her exposed belly button, undid the next hook and pressed his lips to the newly bared flesh. She whimpered. When the lower arcs of her breasts were revealed, he licked them, kissing up the curves of flesh, teasing her breasts' aureoles with a flick of his tongue.

With Tom, it had been tangled sheets and fevered kisses. Neither had time for seduction. This was a slow burn.

They sank onto a bench. Undoing the last three hooks in quick succession, he held her exposed breasts in his hands. The outside air was cool on her nipples. Her aureoles contracted, begging to be warmed. He blew a breath of air over them, watching the flushed skin tighten. Her nerve endings smoldered, skin scorching under the touch of his lips and teeth.

She was dressed in nothing but a fluff of skirts. She tried to draw the shreds of her self-control around her, but all reservations had fled along with her corset.

Her eyelids fluttered at half-mast. Grabbing the lapels of his coat, she demanded, "Kiss me."

His mouth lowered, breath whispering against her cheeks. Lips hovered just out of reach. She opened her eyes. His gray eyes stared back at her.

She mouthed, "What?"

He smiled, sheepish. "It has been a long time since I—"

She jerked him close and kissed him, eyes open and watching his reaction. She saw his startled look, the melt from muted gray to storm-ridden seas. The hunger behind his kiss, the hum of pleasure, both urged her to take rather than receive.

As she leaned forward, her breasts scraped against velvet and braid. The juxtaposition of soft and rough made her gasp. Her arms wound around his neck, fingers of one hand teasing the curl of hair at his nape, the other twisting in his hair. Her lips seized his. His hesitancy was like gas to a lit flame. Need exploded in the pit of her stomach, surprising her with its intensity. Then his lips parted and his tongue flicked out to trace the upper edge of her mouth. She feathered kisses along his jaw, his stubble tickling her skin.

Her mouth returned to his, drawing in his tongue, sucking the life from him and returning it with her own breath. Suddenly she pulled back. "This isn't passion."

He made a choked noise, neither denial nor agreement. His hands kneaded her breasts. He brushed his thumbs over her aureoles, teasing the rosy skin with the sporadic scrape of his nails.

"I mean it."

His thick black lashes framed the seascape of his eyes. His throat worked but he made no sound. It didn't matter. Her purr was enough for both of them.

"This is lust, pure and simple." She kissed him again.

His hand burrowed in her hair, spilling pins across the gravel path. They shimmered there like pearls washed ashore. Her hair tumbled down her bare back, a riot of curls.

They slipped off the bench and she felt a blanket beneath her back, her head cushioned by his hands and a roll of velvet. She stared up at him, her own need reflected in his eyes.

"You're magic," she breathed. "You're not real."

His hand caressed her calf while the other removed her shoe. He tossed it over his shoulder. It spun and fell, a shooting star illuminated by moonlight. She'd lost the other when she toppled off the bench. His hands slid up her legs. He teased the triangle of silk covering her twitching nerves, the heat of his skin scalding her.

"Say something," she pleaded.

He sat back. "I am going to tear your skirts off you one by one."

Her heart stopped beating. She knew it stopped because so did her breath and every other function in her body. In the lingering silence, an owl hooted and was answered. The fountain bubbled and chattered to itself. Her heart cobbled itself together and began to beat, jackrabbit fast.

Shucking coat and undershirt, he revealed a long pale expanse of flesh dusted with dark hairs. The march of hair and muscle vanished beneath his waistband.

She took a ragged breath and reached out. Those pants had to come off.

He had other ideas. Fabric ripped. Hundreds of sparkling beads showered her skin. Tearing the skirt to her waist, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to her bellybutton. It gave her a fine view of his smooth back, the arch of his spine and the muscles guarding it.

Her arm dropped, task forgotten.

The fancy underskirt was next. Chiffon made a wet noise as it tore, its frayed ends fluttering like butterfly wings. There were layers and layers of crinoline underskirts. Grabbing a fistful in each hand, he shredded the material. Bits tore off. He threw them away. She felt a bit like an elegantly wrapped present, her skirts but tissue paper covering the real gift. The tattered remains of her skirts coated the ground like snow. By the time he finished, it was his breathing that was ragged, not that hers had improved any, either.

Settling his hands on her hips, he pulled her across the blanket to him. She marshaled enough of her brain cells and synapses to force her arms to move. Her hands fumbled with the button on his waistband. She wanted to scream in frustration. He paused long enough to help her remove his breeches. Then her hands were skating over the delicious curve of his ass.

He pressed himself to her. Heat flooded her senses, a long line of sweltering skin. Kissing the dip between her jaw and neck, he teased her, rubbing his shaft against her inner thighs. The fire built, a conflagration only an orgasm could douse. The muscles of his ass tensed as her fingers trailed lower, stroking the juncture of thigh and ass cheek.

Her hands slid over the swell of curved muscle and clutched his buttocks. Arching up, she impaled herself. The swiftness, the sweet invasion, left her writhing. He slid the rest of the way into her and slowly pulled out, a lazy withdrawal that sent her nerves shrilling like a bow swept across a violin's strings.

Another swift thrust had her back bowing and her whimpering. The conflagration burst into a full-blown firestorm. There was no time to breathe, to plead, to savor. The fire consumed her muscles and bones and left her limp. A single trembling finger stroked the sweat-slick dip in his back.

God, he was still moving. His ragged thrusts refused her labias' slow kisses. Burrowed in the shreds of her skirts, his hands closed into fists. His head tipped back and he murmured a stream of words in a foreign language. A chant, a prayer, a plea, a curse, she didn't know. Muscles tightened. Nerves sang. Her vision blurred, the bubbling in her ears replacing the fountain's playful chatter. A second maelstrom swept through her. She moaned and flung up a hand. Catching it, he pressed his lips to her gloved knuckles. She swore she died. Blood curdled. Bone and tissue dissolved into one tear-jerking clench of bliss.

"Forgive me," she whispered, Azrael echoing her words.

She bolted upright in bed, sheet clutched to her chest. God, what an erotic dream! She wondered if she could pull the pillow over her head and return to right where sheâ€™d left off. Glancing at her clock, she swore softly. Ten a.m. Sheâ€™d overslept. Something tickled her face. She put a hand to her hair. Tugging it in front of her, she blinked. She was holding a fistful of blonde curls.

Her hair was naturally straight.

Standing, she padded across the room to stare at her reflection in the dresser mirror.

Cinderellaâ€™s high-heeled shoe waited for her in the center of her dressing table.





## Chapter Three

Victoria Ramlin wasn't available at The Coven. The gum-popping Goth teenager behind the cash register informed Elaine that yesterday had been Samhain. After a night of celebrating, no self-respecting witch would be up before noon.

Elaine left a note.

She desperately needed to talk to someone. The rational part of her conveniently ignored when she decided to dabble in the occult insisted last night never happened. The irrational part of her was still frozen in an Edward Munch version of a scream of horror.

With the exception of the shoe, she could easily dismiss last night as a hallucination, a bad combination of migraine and anti-depressant drugs. She was pining for her lover. She'd conjured up another, instead. Only she didn't remember taking either prescription. The curls were just rumpled bed head, the result of going to bed with wet hair, a lazy habit acquired from Tom. The beads and sequins and whatnot that trailed through her entire house, from her front door to her bedroom, well, she was working on a theory for them.

She did not summon a demon lover on Samhain. She did not agree to any sort of deal with it. And she most definitely did not have the best sex of her entire existence with it.

On her way home, she swung past St. Beatrice's cemetery. The presence of cars in the parking lot surprised her. Though she'd never given it much thought, she supposed even cemeteries got their share of visitors. Especially graveyards as old as St. Beatrice's. When Tom died, she'd taken to stopping by at night, when the only car sharing the lot with hers was either filled with necking teenagers or broken-down, or both.

She made an unconscious decision, pulling into the lot and getting out before her brain kicked in and halted her. The graveyard's gates guarded the entrance, crystal clear in the midmorning sunlight. There was the streetlight she'd seen last night, blessedly normal-looking. Her feet moved, propelling her toward the gates. Snow crunched underfoot.

This was insane. What did she hope to find by coming here?

She crossed through the gates unscathed. No lightning strike by the Almighty was a good sign, wasn't it? But the people congregating near Tom's grave couldn't be. She stopped. The nearly silver blonde hair, carefully pulled into a chignon, belonged to Victoria Ramlin. What was she doing here? Elaine backed away, tucking herself behind a crumbling old stone with a one-armed angel tottering at its tip.

Her back pressed against the granite. *Think, damn it, think!*

Azrael said she'd summoned him. That meant she'd screwed up her

spell. Conclusion? Either she missed a step or Victoria had given her the wrong information. The perfectionist side of her immediately pointed a finger at Victoria. But that wasn't fair. Granted, Elaine had consulted her whenever she was stumped, but she'd never given Victoria the whole picture. Bits and pieces gleaned from conversations over the year did not translate into a smoothly working spell, nor could it point to sabotage.

However, Victoria standing at Tom's gravesite wasn't just a coincidence. It meant Elaine had failed to disguise her intentions.

She hopped from stone to stone until she was close enough to hear them. She didn't recognize the three men Victoria was with, but then, she didn't know all the members of the witch queen's coven.

Victoria held a red rose in one hand. Elaine's heart skipped a beat. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She should have made this her first stop and made sure she hadn't left anything behind. Then again, it wasn't like it was uncommon to leave flowers on a gravesite.

"Passion is as individual as palate. Until we meet tonight," Victoria said, reading from a bit of paper. "What do you think it means?"

Her companion's voice was a low rumble.

Elaine shivered. She hadn't left Tom any sort of note.

"It's certainly not part of any lingering spell, although the rose is," Victoria tucked the note in her coat pocket. "The rose is vibrating with power." Her elegant forehead wrinkled. "It feels masculine. Do you think she really succeeded? Duped us all with her presumed naivety?" The rose twirled between her fingers. "Let's give her a call, shall we? Just a concerned queen checking on a local solitary. Samhain can be a lonely time of year." Her words held no hint of kindness.

One of her companions murmured a response and Victoria laughed, a tinkling sound like a crystal vase shattering.

Setting the rose on top of the gravestone, Victoria pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. Elaine's phone started vibrating. She retraced her route from stone to stone until she was almost to the gate. Then she answered. "Hello?"

"Elaine? I'm sorry for disturbing you. I didn't get you out of bed, did I?" Victoria's voice was appropriately worried.

"No. Is there something wrong?"

"My sixth sense told me you were going to perform powerful magic last night. I was just calling to make sure all went well."

*Liar,* Elaine thought. "Ah, yes. I feel much more at peace." Two could play Victoria's game. Technically she did feel better. Sated. Focused. Senses alert. Completely insane.

Victoria was silent on the other end of the line.

"Thank you so much for helping me," Elaine added.

"Of course," Victoria replied, smoothly recovering. "Blessed New Year to

you.â€

â€œAnd you. Oh, Victoria? I ran across a name while I was reading an old book. Do you know who Azrael is?â€

â€œAzrael? Of course.â€ Victoria laughed, the same tinkling sound. â€œI would have thought youâ€™d have heard his name sooner, but then, a solitaryâ€™s study is not as structured as oneâ€™s in a coven.â€ The subtle dig struck its mark. â€œHeâ€™s the Angel of Death.â€

Â

How did one dress for a date with Death? All black? Her hair wasnâ€™t the ethereal shade of blonde Victoriaâ€™s was. Pulling black off without looking like death-warmed-over wasnâ€™t in her bag of tricks. She held a red strapless dress up and looked at herself in the mirror. Her friend Kirsten had convinced her to buy it. *Ick*, was all she could think. Tossing it on the bed with the growing mound of rejects, she burrowed in the closet for something else. A tiny part of her wondered why she cared what she looked like. She shoved the thought away, along with a puce sweater dress her mother had bought her.

â€œYou look lovely this evening, Elaine.â€

She spun around, sweater clutched to her chest. She was in nothing but jeans and a plain white bra.

Azrael leaned in her doorway, arms folded across his chest. He was dressed in all black from his crisp shirt to his butt-hugging black jeans.

â€œDonâ€™t you knock?â€ she exclaimed.

â€œI didnâ€™t come through the door.â€

â€œWell, go back and knock.â€

He raised an eyebrow. â€œYou cannot be serious.â€

She clutched the sweater to her more tightly. â€œAt least get out while I dress,â€ she pleaded.

His eyes gleamed. â€œI like watching a woman dress.â€

â€œIf you donâ€™t get out, Iâ€™ll put on that!â€ She stabbed her finger at the discarded red dress.

He eyed it critically. â€œNice, but not exactly flattering. How about this?â€ He held up a delicate bit of black lace and satin between his thumb and forefinger.

She colored. The garment had been a victim of the underwear toss, held just prior to the in-progress rummage-through-the-closet drama. â€œThat isnâ€™t a dress. Thatâ€™s an invitation to be fucked.â€

His eyebrows rose.

She raised her chin. â€œIâ€™d like at least the semblance of propriety.â€

â€œWhy bother?â€

Since that brought up all sorts of disturbing thoughts, notably the she-liked-him-too-much-for-her-own-good card, she shrugged and settled for a lie. â€œCall me old-fashioned.â€ Clothes were as good a defense as any. She should be wearing snow pants and a down jacket.

â€œFine.â€ He bunched the fabric in his hand and turned around.

â€œHey! Where are you going with that?â€

â€œThink of it as a battle casualty.â€ And with that, he shut the bedroom door behind him.

Dropping the sweater, she gritted her teeth. â€œYou havenâ€™t been exactly honest, either!â€ she yelled at him.

The door opened just far enough for him to poke his head in. â€œExplain.â€

She didnâ€™t bother picking up her sweater this time. â€œYou didnâ€™t tell me you were the Angel of Death.â€

He looked momentarily startled, but he didnâ€™t deny it. â€œYou did not ask. Is it important?â€

â€œOf course it is!â€

The door creaked open wide enough for her to see him cross his arms. â€œVery well. I am Azrael, Angel of Death.â€ Her overhead lights flickered at his announcement. â€œSatisfied?â€

â€œNo!â€ On second thought, the sweater she dropped wasnâ€™t that bad. She plucked an ivory cami off her mound of clothes and pulled it on. The caramel-colored sweater followed. â€œYou know how many questions that raises?â€

He sighed. â€œI omitted my job title for just that reason.â€

â€œOh.â€ He looked as if he was waiting for the firing squad. Damn him. It took the fight out of her. She turned in a small circle. â€œIs this all right?â€

â€œSince I plan on getting you naked shortly, yes.â€ He raked his fingers through his hair, unconsciously spiking it. He hesitated. â€œYou arenâ€™t going to bombard me with questions?â€

Stepping forward, she pulled the door open all the way and took his hand. â€œNo. Iâ€™m going to give you a break.â€

His delighted grin made her heart splinter.

Bringing her hand to his lips, he kissed the back of it. â€œThank you.â€

â€œSo what do you have in store for me?â€

Tucking her arm in his, he led her toward the front room. â€œI thought we might enjoy a meal together.â€

â€œYou eat?â€

A pained look crossed his face.

â€œSorry, no questions,â€ she said.

â€œEating is not necessary, but I can take pleasure in the act.â€

She froze in the doorway. Her condo was small, the kitchen, dining and living rooms rolled into one open space, bedroom and bath connected by a narrow hallway. Every flat surface in the shared area was covered with white candles. Squat, pillar, pencilâ€”all sizes and shapes jostled for space. Her coffee table had been pushed to one side, couch shoved to the wall and rug rolled up. The removal of the rug revealed the large white circle sheâ€™d painted on the floor for spell-working. A miniature version of a cauldron was perched on clawed legs in the center of the circle. Something bubbled and chattered in its depths. She inhaled. Chocolate? What spell

involved chocolate?

Twisted shadow versions of her furniture and doodads climbed the walls. Classical musical was generally not on her playlist, but she heard strains of what she thought was Beethoven. She stepped into the circle.

Stumped, she looked back at him. "Are we performing magic?"

"Every act of intercourse freely shared is magic."

Her brows furrowed. "To what end?"

"Life."

At her confused look, he continued, "Every act of love, of pursuing life, is a slap in the face to the dark forces." Taking her hand, he joined her in the circle. "Sit." He sank into a cross-legged pose.

She copied him, wishing she'd worn looser jeans. "But aren't you evil?"

"One of the dark forces? No, Death is a mirror of life." His hands closed as if he was praying, then swung open, hinged by his thumbs. "Two halves." Behind him, she saw the shadow of a butterfly made by his fingers. She smiled, understanding. "I like your smile," he added.

"Yours isn't bad, either."

Leaning over the pot, he stirred its contents.

"What's in the cauldron?"

"Supper." Sitting back, he started undoing the buttons on his shirt.

She had an instant hot flash. Torn between fanning herself and stopping him, she decided on the latter. She seized his wrists and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Undressing."

She rolled her eyes. "You can't just get naked. Where's the seduction?"

His hands folded in his lap. "Very well. Undress me."

Her jaw dropped.

He continued to patiently stare at her, an angel of shadow and mist.

"O-kay." On her hands and knees now, she started on the middle button of his shirt, ignoring the glimpse of tensed stomach muscle peeking through the already parted folds of cloth.

"But when you remove one of my garments, you must remove one of your own."

"You're making the rules up as you go."

"My wager. My right."

She was going to make certain he regretted that decision. Her hands slipped beneath his shirt, circling his waist and meeting in the center of his back. Her fingers played up his spine. He sucked in a breath. She smiled, a predatory gleam in her eye. One hand rested on his breastbone while the other toyed with the next button. Undoing a button with one hand was harder than it looked. The pained expression on Azrael's face was worth the effort.

â€œI can help,â€ he whispered.

â€œNot a chance.â€ She nosed the fabric apart. Beneath her palm, his heart stuttered. Two buttons left.

She worked on the second-last button with her teeth, one hand still on his chest, the other supporting her weight. Clever placement of her hand between his crossed legs made his misty eyes swirl black.

The button sprang free, thread nipped by her teeth. She heard it strike the floor. Their eyes met. â€œOops,â€ she whispered. God, there was so much heat there *Passion*, her mind traitorously whispered. His head dipped. She shifted just enough for his lips to brush her forehead, instead of their intended destination.

She was in over her head. She needed a distraction: a life preserver, a boat, some sort of supernatural flotation device, cold water, an ice bath. Hell, even a shot of tequila wouldnâ€™t be out of line. That brought images of licking salt off his stomach to mind. She shuddered.

The last button fell off before she could touch it with teeth or fingers.

â€œCheater.â€ The word ground out, hoarse. She was panting.

His eyebrows raised. â€œNever.â€ The rapid flicker of his pulse at the base of his throat belied that irritatingly calm voice.

Nosing open the shirt, she licked a path from his bellybutton to the hollow at his throat. She pressed her lips there, inhaling. He smelled like apple pie. If his cooking tasted as good as he smelled, she was a goner.

Her hands crept to his shoulders, slipping the shirt down his arms.

â€œYour turn,â€ he whispered.

Sitting back, she pulled her sweater over her head and tossed it aside. She stared at him defiantly. The thin cami and her bra werenâ€™t enough to camouflage her nipplesâ€™ interest. Hell, the sweater had had a hard time hiding them.

His gaze flicked to her chest and back to her face. He licked his lips.

â€œYouâ€™re going to lose,â€ she said. â€œI have more clothes on.â€

â€œThat can be remedied.â€ He moved so fast she had little time to do anything but squeak. His hands closed around her wrists, his momentum tipping her backward and taking him with her.

When they crashed on the floor, the cauldron shuddered in its iron cage. She felt the heat of his skin burning through her thin layers of silk. He pressed his lips to her hair, her forehead, her cheeks, her neck, any bit of flesh he could reach, leaving a trail of heated kisses and flushed skin.

She whimpered.

His fingers skimmed her sides as the cami was tugged over her breasts. When he drew it across her face, he kissed her. Blindfolded and mute, she could only lie there. Her lips parted. He dipped a silk-wrapped tongue into her mouth. He continued kissing her face, the silk separating their skin but doing nothing to repel the heat of their touch. His hands worked on the button of her jeans. Waistband loosened, he slid his hands into her pants, stroking her ass, pausing when his fingers met bare skin.

It didnâ€™t take much to surprise Death. Just a simple thong.

He tossed aside the cami. She met his fevered look while his hands cupped her ass, pressing their bodies together.

When he gave her a chance to breathe, she murmured, â€œAre we skipping supper?â€

He shook his head in mute denial.

â€œThen you better slow down.â€

With a growl, he jerked down her pants. She heard fabric rip. Heâ€™d snagged her panties with the denim. He lowered his face to her curls. Eyes watched her from between her swell of breasts. â€œYou smell like cinnamon.â€

Apple pie and cinnamon. Oh, they made a great combination. Who was more delusional?

He dipped lower, planting kisses on her inner thighs.

â€œI think your chocolateâ€™s boiling over.â€

Cursing, he sat back, redirecting his attention to the foaming pot. It gave her a moment to catch her breath and marshal her thoughts.

Thoughts? What thoughts?

He turned to her, chocolate-covered strawberry in one hand, a wicked grin on his face.

â€œOh, dear Lord.â€

â€œI am told the way to a womanâ€™s heart is paved in chocolate.â€

â€œItâ€™s a helluva good start.â€ She opened her mouth, taking the strawberryâ€™s chocolate tip between her lips. The sweet fruit exploded on her tongue. Her eyes rolled back in her head. â€œThis is supper?â€

â€œYours,â€ he agreed. Warmth spattered her skin. Her eyes flicked open. He was drizzling chocolate over her breasts. His gaze met hers. â€œAnd mine.â€

His lips lowered to her breasts and he lapped at a patch of chocolate. Every muscle in her body tightened as his tongue scrubbed her skin.

He looked up. He knew exactly what he was doing to her. *The sneaky bastard.*

â€œWould you like another?â€

â€œYes.â€

A silver tray heaped with slices of fruit manifested itself beside the cauldron. â€œI canâ€™t eat all that.â€ She glanced from tray to cauldron. She was looking at Deathâ€™s version of a fondue pot. Clutching her stomach, she doubled over with laughter.

â€œWhat is so amusing?â€ he asked.

She heard irritation and a heap of indignation. She raised a hand, wiping tears from her eyes. â€œSorry. Something struck me as funny.â€

â€œChocolate incites laughter?â€

â€œThe Angel of Death having a fondue pot is hilarious.â€

He grinned. â€œThere are many varied uses for kitchen implements.â€ He sobered. â€œLie back. I hunger.â€

She obliged, grumbling, "Perhaps I have hungers, too."

He raised his brows. "It is *my* fondue pot."

"Lovers share!" Hey! That's not fair! While she spoke, he'd drizzled chocolate across her stomach.

She sucked in a breath as he licked her stomach clean, tickling her as his stubbled cheek grazed her skin. More chocolate coated her, a mudslide sweeping through the valley of her breasts.

She accepted another strawberry, biting away at it until she could pull his fingers into her mouth and wipe the chocolate off his skin with her tongue. His head dropped to her breasts. Lips latched onto her nipple. Startled, she yelped.

Hand pressed to her chest, he held her down. He drew more of her breast into his mouth, sucking hard at the skin, coaxing the nipple to harden. Teeth and lips slid lower, nipping the underside of her breast. His hands, one chocolate-covered from holding her down, the other relatively clean, skimmed down her sides.

He raised his head. Chocolate flecked his lips.

"Azrael?"

Covering her lips, he kissed her. Sweetness mingled with heat. There was no gentleness in the gesture. Demand. Need. Possession. He took the air from her lungs and gave her his, instead.

Hands slid to her ass, cupping her cheeks and arching her spine. His shaft rubbed against her leg, then her parted thighs. Her eyes popped open. How the hell had he gotten nude so quickly? His storm-ridden eyes watched her through their prison of dark lashes.

Gazes locked, he entered her, a violent thrust of skin and bone that jarred her to her core.

She gasped. Muscles clenched. A spasm danced through her, a warning of what was to come.

He spun them in a swift roll of motion so she now straddled him. His hands closed over her breasts. Dipping her head, she licked chocolate off one of his fingertips. He moved inside her, touching and teasing her core, tinder to flame. Her arms twined through his, fingers splayed on his chest. Her vagina feasted, clenching around his hard length.

His eyes closed. Hands slipped to her hips. Leaning over his body, she brushed her nipple across his parted lips. He latched on, tongue laving her nipple. She cradled his head to her breast as she rocked against him.

The explosion of heat and tremors, pleas and protests, shook them both at the same time. Her body tightened, kissing his shaft as he stroked her secret lips. He buried his face in her breasts, murmuring foreign words that sounded like prayers. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

They stayed that way for a long time, a messy chocolate embrace, legs and arms twined, he inside her. Her skin drank in his warmth, his touch. It'd been so long since she'd let another be this close. The feel of his hair brushing her breasts, the



weight of a solid male body parts draped over hers, brought tears to her eyes. Finally she lifted her head off of his chest. "We should get cleaned up."

He opened one eye. "What do you mean? That was only the hors d'oeuvres."

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She lay alone in bed, unable to sleep. Dawn crept to her windowpane, balanced like a ballerina on silken-toed slippers. Despite his nature, despite Tom, despite all she worked for, she wanted Azrael. She'd denied herself for too long and by doing so, denied her femininity, that part of her that made her feel. She'd been moving through life on autopilot the past couple of years. And that wasn't fair. Not to herself. Not to those who loved her—including Tom.

Had she been too infatuated, too in love with the notion of being in love, to notice that something had been missing? Was there more she'd missed out on?

Was it traitorous to think such thoughts?

She fell into an uneasy sleep.



## Chapter Four

Elaine woke up to the sound of someone pounding on her door. Her first thought was she had a perfectly working doorbell. There should be laws against beating on the door atâ€”she pulled the pillow off her head and glanced at the clockâ€”oops. 1:00 p.m.

The pounding ceased. Raised voices took its place, male and female. Slipping on her bathrobe, she raked her hair back into a messy ponytail and headed for the door.

She opened it with so much force it struck the wall and trembled in its frame. â€œWhat is going on?â€

Two people stared at her in openmouthed shock. One was Victoria Ramlin, the other, judging by his uniform, a police officer.

â€œElaine, are you all right?â€ Victoria took her hand, tears glinting in her eyes.

Elaine took half a step back, startled. There was a practiced glimmer in Victoriaâ€™s gaze; sheâ€™d given a theater-worthy performance. Elaine kept the urge to clap in check. Extricating her hand from Victoriaâ€™s grip, she turned to the officer. â€œIs something wrong?â€

â€œAre you Elaine Feller?â€ he asked.

She nodded. God, the man smelled like freshly ground coffee. Sheâ€™d kill for a cup about now. He looked middle-aged, a hint of gray in his mustache and over his ears. His middle showed the start of a paunch, though he managed to control it with belt and waistband.

He eyed her mussed hair and bathrobe. â€œDo you work nights?â€

She tightened the belt on her robe. â€œWhatâ€™s this about?â€

His eyes narrowed. â€œThere was a disturbance at St. Beatriceâ€™s Cemetery last night. Some neighborhood cats were killed and a grave vandalized. Because of the particular grave, Ms. Ramlin was concerned you might be a victim.â€ He looked as if he thought otherwise.

â€œTom Vaughnâ€™s grave.â€ Victoria dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a tissue, careful to not smear her makeup. â€œIâ€™m so sorry, Elaine.â€

Elaine glanced from one to the other. â€œWhy would you think I was in trouble?â€

â€œBecause he was your fianc ,â€ Victoria blurted out.

â€œOver two years ago!â€

Victoriaâ€™s eyes widened. Her delicate brown-black lashes fluttered. She opened her mouth and closed it. â€œOh.â€ The word slid out on a breath of air.

If Victoriaâ€™s reaction was contrived, she really did belong on the stage. Elaine was a bit surprised by the vehemence in her own outburst.

The officer pulled out a notepad and pen. â€œMiss Feller, where were you last evening?â€

â€œI had a date, Officer.â€

“McDougal. He didn’t bother to glance up from his notepad. “And your date’s name?”

“I’d really rather talk to him first. It was only our second date.”

Both Officer McDougal and Victoria stared at her bathrobe, then found other things to look at. McDougal focused on his notepad. Victoria plucked a few dead mums from nearby window box.

“Oh, pul-leeze, people sleep with each other on second dates all the time.”

Officer McDougal cleared his throat. “Could you come down to the station later on and sign a statement? Have a chat with your boyfriend beforehand. We’d like his name and statement, too. Just protocol, Miss Feller. You’re not in any trouble. People have a tendency to get all worked up over animal mutilations, and some of these were pets.”

“Sure.” She waved her hand. She didn’t want to hear any more details.

He nodded and headed for his squad car, parked at the curb.

“Would you have any tea to settle my nerves?” Victoria asked when Officer McDougal had gone.

“No.” Elaine crossed her arms. “What’s this about?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I was worried about you. You haven’t been the same since Samhain. Sleeping late, not dropping by the store. Apparently Elaine had stopped by the store more often than she thought.

“I was there yesterday.”

“And your note. Asking about the Angel of Death. The supplies you bought over the last couple months. I’m concerned for your well-being.”

“Can the act.”

Victoria straightened.

“You set my spell up to fail. You took advantage of my naïveté. You’re lucky it’s not my blood spattered all over Tom’s gravestone.”

Victoria’s lips pressed so tight they lost their color. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Tom is dead. No amount of conjuring or sacrifices will bring him back. I was foolish to think so.”

“Then who are you sleeping with?” Victoria reached for Elaine’s neck. “He’s marked you.”

She put a hand over her throat, feeling the heat of the bruise, and backed into her house. “Stay away from me.”

“What did you summon? Do you serve the Dark Lord now?”

“Goodbye, Victoria.” She started to close the door.

Victoria put her hand in the doorjamb. “Answer me!”

“The door’s old, but it’ll still break your fingers when I slam it.”

Victoria quickly withdrew her hand. “This is not over,” she said through the door. “I will have what’s mine. You will give it to me.”

Elaine slid the security latch in place. “Over my dead body.”

“Of course she did,” Azrael said reasonably.

Elaine blinked. “Well, I’m glad we got that settled. Thanks for sharing. You wouldn’t, by chance, know why she’d do something like that?”

“Blood and hopelessness attracts the attention of minor demons.”

Victoria was too chicken-shit to risk her own soul so she chose to compromise Elaine’s, instead? Her eyes widened. “But you came.” *Thank God he came.* She wouldn’t give his ego any more of a boost by mentioning that little blessing, but she didn’t want to dwell on what might have happened if he hadn’t.

“My presence chased off the pests.”

She cleared her throat. She didn’t think she’d ever be brave or powerful enough to place demons at the same level as vermin. “Thank you.” She hesitated. “Why did you come?”

His lips curved, but there wasn’t any humor in his gaze. “You’re a poor grave tender. You closed the circle around a patch of nightshade.”

She opened her mouth, about to retort, then closed it. “Ah. Again, thank you.”

He gave her an elegant bow, one that reminded her of French courts and men in smartly fitting jackets. God help her, it made her heart flutter.

“So what are we doing tonight?”

His eyes twinkled. “You do not concede defeat?”

“No!”

“Good.” He hesitated, glancing around her apartment. When she’d awakened this afternoon, it was returned to normalcy, all trace of chocolate spatters, hand and ass prints vanished. “I thought I’d take you to my home.”

“You have a home?”

“I do not spend every waking moment raping civilization of its brilliant minds, for that’s what you think.”

“I’m trying not to think about your occupation at all.”

“Good.” Taking her hand, he tucked it through his arm. “Ready?”

“As I ever be.”

He reached for her pantry door.

“That’s not the way.”

The door opened. They were bathed in a bright white light. *There really was a light and a tunnel.*

“Oh, good Lord,” she breathed. Her arm still his prisoner, he pulled her in after him.

They were standing in what looked like a castle room. The walls were built of gray stone blocks. A set of arched windows shuttered against who-knew-what stood opposite her. Flames from an ornate and completely out of place white marble fireplace winked merrily at her, warming the space. There was a bed, a four-poster

monstrosity made of dark wood, which took up the entire length of one wall. A writing desk sat in another corner. Two chairs, mini-versions of thrones really, were in front of the fireplace, a small table between them. An exotic silver fur the size of a grizzly bear was splayed on the hearth.

He dropped her hand. She wandered around the room, touching the pieces of furniture. Everything seemed substantial.

She turned to him. "Where are we? I mean, where as in Heaven, Hell or someplace in between?"

"Someplace in between," he confirmed.

"Gee, thanks for the solid coordinates." She pulled her cell phone out of her purse. "Figures. You get better reception here than at my condo."

Tucking her phone away, she glanced up. Tonight, if she managed to convince both herself and him that what she felt paled to what Tom had made her feel, would be their last night. She was going to miss him. His Old World charm married with the modern wasn't something she'd seen before in a man. Hell, who was she kidding? His sexual prowess wasn't something to be sneezed at, either.

"What are you thinking?" he asked quietly. His eyes were rough-seas gray again.

"Tonight's our last night."

"Ah. Soon you'll be free of me and with your beloved Tom."

Stepping toward him, she took his hands. "This hasn't been as big a burden as I thought it'd be."

"I hope you enjoyed yourself."

"Very much." Standing on tiptoe, she kissed him. His hands clenched in hers.

"Elaine"

"Shh." She put a finger over his lips. Tugging his hand, she drew him toward the fireplace. "Sit."

He reluctantly sat in one of the thrones. The flickering flames from the fireplace cast shadows on his face, the hard profile at odds with his expressive eyes. She thread her legs through the arms of the chair and sat on his lap, facing him. Her fingertips traced his jaw, from the dip in his chin to the base of his ear. Sliding her hand into his hair, she twirled a tuft between her thumb and forefinger. The strands were baby-fine. Thousands formed that thick mass of black silk she enjoyed immersing her hands in.

Her other hand cupped his cheek. He turned his head and pressed a kiss to her palm.

"You look at me and don't see a monster," he whispered, lips sliding to her wrist.

Cradling his head to her chest, she kissed the top of his head. "No." She saw a man whose loneliness echoed her own.

His arms circled her waist.

She drew back, teardrops decorating the tips of her lashes. "I will miss you."

She kissed him quickly before he could reply. Her lashes whispered across his skin, sharing her tears.

She quickly undid the buttons on his shirt. She rubbed her face on his chest, feeling the fine hairs tickle her cheeks and lips. Scooting as far out as she dared, she pressed a row of kisses down his breastbone. Her hands trembled at his waistband. The funnel of hairs dipped beneath the denim, arrowing to his cock. She unbuckled his belt and drew down his zipper.

“This is easier.” Snapping his fingers, his pants and shirt vanished.

In another time, another life, another screwup, she’d have fallen for him. Hard. Slipping off the chair, she dropped to her knees.

His fingers tangled in her hair, tugging it free of its loose knot. “Don’t do this if you don’t want to.”

She leaned up and kissed him. She couldn’t stand the sound of his voice just now. It felt as if her heart were splintering. How much loss could one person endure?

“I want to.” She needed to taste him.

She nosed his curls, an artistry of dark whorls against smooth skin. The sea of skin split, flat sculpted abdomen flowing into powerful thighs. Between muscle, bone, curl and sinew, his cock bobbed. Stroking his inner thighs with both hands, she let her wrists and forearms brush against the velvety skin of his shaft. Each casual touch made him jolt.

A pearl of fluid glistened on its head.

Her tongue claimed it. Azrael groaned. And she thought *she* had it bad? How long had it been since he’d been caressed this way?

She licked up one side of his shaft and down the other. His hands clawed the arms of the chair.

“Careful, you’ll scar the leather.” She took the entire length of his cock into her mouth.

“Christus!” He tried to bolt upright, but she’d anticipated that. Her hand pressed against his abdomen, keeping him seated. The delicious ripple of trapped muscle beneath flesh made her shiver.

She redoubled her efforts.

“Elaine,” he groaned. His hands fisted in her hair. He tipped her head back, forcing her to stop. “You’ll kill me.”

She paused long enough to bat her eyelashes at him. “I’ll give me one helluva reputation.” Her hand picked up where her tongue left off, stroking his length. Cupping his sac with the other hand, she gently teased his balls, like a magician’s fingers playing with a coin.

“If you insist on continuing, I cannot guarantee my actions.” The words grated out.

She snickered. Dropping her head to his shaft, she teased its tip with tongue and teeth while her hands continued their ministrations. She knew when she’d crossed the threshold, the point of no return. His body stiffened, muscles turned to

steel, skin to molten metal. She heard the chair's arm crack under his grip. Sweetness transformed into salt. She pulled him out of her mouth, letting her hands guide him the last millimeter over the edge.

She wanted to see his face, to know that what she did could drive a man crazy. His eyes flicked from gray to black in one blink. A groan turned to a cry as she continued to stroke skin over his shaft's head, blurring the line between pleasure and exquisite pain.

Taking pity on him, her hands let his cock lie and, instead, skated up his sides, tickling his rib cage. His breath caught, a mix of gasp and giggle.

"Are you ticklish?" She planted a kiss on his jaw and continued the tickling.

"Have you no fear? I am the Angel of Death!" It didn't sound nearly as impressive when his breath hitched on a laugh.

She ignored the protest. "How sensitive are your feet?"

He seized her beneath her arms before she could sink lower. His eyes gleamed silver in the firelight. "How ticklish are *you*?"

Yelping, she tried to escape, but he was quicker and stronger. They tumbled onto the hearth, the fur cushioning their fall.

God, she wished she'd taken time to peel off her clothes. The thought barely crossed her mind when she felt her breasts press, skin to skin, to his chest.

"What the hell?" She glanced around. No clothes were in sight. He made them vanish. "That's not fair!" She liked those jeans. That thought fled when his head dipped to a bared breast.

Seizing her wrists in one hand, he clamped them above her head. "You didn't answer me. Are you ticklish?"

She shook her head. "No. Not the least bit."

"Little liar," he whispered. He trailed his fingertips up her side and she convulsed in laughter.

"Quit it!"

His eyes had gone storm gray again. "Do you give up?"

She writhed in his grip. "I like your privates a lot, but I won't hesitate to take them hostage." Her knee came up in slow warning.

He quickly moved to her side.

"Let. Me. Go."

"As you wish." There was a click of sound, the brush of metal against stone, then he released her wrists and sat back.

She tried to sit up. Her hands seemed to be connected to the floor. She craned her head back and glimpsed metal and fur. Oh, dear Lord, he'd handcuffed her to the floor. The traitorously soft fur had hidden a set of recessed cuffs. Or maybe he'd just conjured them up. "Absolutely not."

"I'm going to show you what passion is about, Ms. Feller, and I don't want your hands interfering."

"I never agreed to bondage. Just three nights." God, why couldn't it have



been a week or maybe a fortnight?

“Here there is no day. Just infinite night.”

The blood froze in her veins. He couldn't mean to keep her here indefinitely. As much as the thought scared her, she felt her vagina do a happy dance. She clenched her teeth until the delicious tremor passed. “I have a life.”

“Do you?” There was a ragged edge to his words. “I think you quit trying a long time ago.”

Her throat was tight. Damn it, why did he always have to be right? “Keeping me tied up here won't help either of us.”

He made a noncommittal noise.

“I mean it.”

Picking up her foot, he cradled it in his lap. His hands traced its contours, kneading her instep.

“Azrael?”

He studied her foot, finger traveling over the curves of her toes. He lingered on her little toe, bent funny from repeated unrepaired breaks. One had been with Tom on his motorcycle. Blame dead-end jobs and a failed health system for its current asymmetrical status. Taking the toe, he wiggled it.

“Azrael, come back to me.”

“I'm jealous of him.” He didn't meet her gaze. His hand slid a bit farther, massaging her calf, teasing the tender skin behind her knee.

She didn't need him to say Tom's name. “Right now, there's just you and me.”

The firelight clung to his form, draping him in an aura of reds and oranges. His eyes wouldn't meet hers. He couldn't stop touching her and she wouldn't give voice to the words to make him stop.

It was as if he was a sculptor and she, his masterpiece. Only, flesh and bone couldn't remain stone-still beneath his scalding touch. He was on his knees now, her legs parted to tacitly accept his invasion. Hands stroked her thighs, tickling the long taut muscle running from hip to knee.

“You can't keep me here.”

“You think I don't know that?” He placed a kiss on her mons, nose sliding lower to nudge aside her labial folds. His tongue flicked over her clitoris. Arching her back, she whimpered.

He raised his head. “But I can make you dream of me.”

His fingers parted her folds and he licked a long slow path up the length of her labia and down the other side. She throbbed. God, if he wouldn't touch her there, she would take matters into her own hands. She jerked on the cuffs. Damning him might be redundant but she did, anyway.

A tongue traced wet circles on her clitoris. Fingers found her vulva.

He lifted his head. “You're wet,” he whispered. His lips glistened with her moisture.

Two fingers plunged inside her.

She gasped.

His fingers rubbed her tunnel's slick interior. She clenched around them, trying to keep them prisoner, but he only chuckled and deliberately withdrew them. Then just as achingly slow, he slid them back in. His tongue and lips returned to her throbbing bud.

“Let me go! I want to touch you.”

He ignored her plea. A third finger joined its comrades. All her blood *whooshed* from her head to that tiny pulse of tissue. His tongue swirled around it, then drew it into his mouth. Her vagina contracted in unison with his mouth's sucking.

Her hands closed into fists. “Azrael, please!”

The sucking increased. She arched her back, toes curling. The tension built until she thought something might snap. Then the orgasm washed through her, wringing a long moan from her throat.

He gave her no moment of peace. Sitting up, he straddled her, knees trapping her hips. Catching her legs, he yanked her to him, her knees resting on his shoulders. He replaced his fingers with his cock, driving himself into her. Stomach muscles rippled and danced.

Had her hands not been bound, she would have bolted upright. Instead, she whimpered and swore.

Her vagina eagerly gobbled his shaft, a long pulsing clench that sent aftershocks shivering through her. He stretched her to her limits, fingers playing around the rim of her oversensitive vagina. His thumb found her clitoris. Her eyes glazed.

His control shredded. He drove himself into her, over and over. No sweet caution. No teasing strokes. Like steel bands, his arms pinned her thighs to the sides of his chest. Sweat glistened on his pecs. She wanted to lick the salt from his muscles, savor the taste of him. She struggled against her restraints.

The next orgasm descended, crushing everything in its path. It attacked her nerves like a wind-driven firestorm, stealing the air from her lungs. Her blood pooled in the lower half of her body, molten hot. When the after tremors struck, they drove the lava through her veins, searing her flesh from the inside out. Her back arched. A scream tore from her throat, primal and victorious.

God help her. She was dying.

He exploded inside her, his arms gripping her legs. His nails dug into her calves. And still her hips moved. She didn't know how they possessed any verve yet. Her brain certainly wasn't giving any encouragement. Her greedy vagina wanted more, sucking the last drop of fluid from his cock. Her clit rubbed against his softening shaft, stoking the remnants of the blaze to life.

She cried out. She couldn't endure another full-out assault.

The spasm rolled through her like a lazy cat stretching. Toes curled, calves clenched. Thighs trembled. Her stomach muscles contracted, nipples tightened to dagger points. His hands crept to her breasts, tracing their sensitive undersides, then he rolled her nipples between thumbs and fingers.

She walked the fine line between insanity and mind-numbing pleasure. Her heart tumbled into the orgasmic fray. If this wasn't passion, she had no idea what was.

She dimly felt the cuffs loosen their grip on her wrists. He pressed his lips to the fluttering pulse at her throat.

“Forgive me,” he whispered against her skin.

“For what?”

He sat back, silent.

Too deliciously sated to do much of anything else, she opened one eye.

“Azrael?”

His gaze was tortured. “I'm sorry. I have to kill you if you still wish to be joined with your Tom.”



# Chapter Five

What the fuck? She didn't want to die. She wanted Tom back. That thought scored a second to her fear of dying. Didn't she want Tom back?

What exactly did she want?

To be loved. To be touched. To be treasured.

They were in the cemetery again, dressed as they were earlier in the evening. Damn it, how did he manage to do that? She eyed Tom's grave and thought traitorous thoughts.

"You tricked me."

Azrael sighed. "I did nothing of the kind. I agreed to take you to Tom. I did not mention animating a corpse or dragging a soul back."

She was too angry for tears. "What good will being dead do me?"

He shrugged. "It is you who agreed to the bargain without specifying the terms."

Her hands balled into fists. She pummeled his chest. "I hate you!"

Catching her wrists, he kissed each of her fists. "Good. Hate is better than apathy."

She jerked herself free. "You had no right to mess in my life."

"May I remind you that you called me? I had no previous inclination to bother you."

"I screwed up."

"If it is any consolation, Victoria Ramlin's soul is forfeit because of the matter."

She froze. "What?"

"I took her soul." His face was a mask.

She remembered the skeletal hands she saw on her first night and shuddered. "When? Here? You can't just kill people!"

His lips twitched, but remained in a flat line. "It is my job."

"But it wasn't her time. Was it?"

He seized Elaine's chin, fingers cold. "Someone's soul was needed to offset the balance. You offered yours when you bungled. I was more selective."

"Please don't," she whispered.

He dropped his hand and turned away. "It's already done."

She put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, God."

"I am not God. What I can and cannot offer is bound by ironclad rules."

"So you baited me with a chance to see Tom. What you really meant to do was take my soul." Instead, she'd changed his mind and he'd taken Victoria's.

"Yes."

â€œNo apologies? No regrets?â€

His eyes held pain. â€œI offered you what I could. Be thankful.â€

Where was the man whoâ€™d waltzed her around a ballroom? Who owned a fondue pot? Who made her body clench and buck? â€œJustify it however you need to.â€

He remained silent.

She folded her arms across her chest. â€œFine! You win. You made me feel again. Happy? Tom isnâ€™t the only one who can make my heart race and my circuits fry.â€

He didnâ€™t move.

She turned her back to him. â€œYou heard me. You win. Now go away and leave me to my new misery.â€

He blew out a breath, watching it coalesce on the air. â€œThere is another option.â€

She didnâ€™t dare move. â€œOh?â€

â€œI could stay.â€

Hope surged. She savagely stuffed it back down. â€œAt what price?â€

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pulled her to his chest. His chin rested on her shoulder. She kept her back stiff. â€œSomeone volunteered to take my post. Itâ€™s not a bad job. Good fringe benefits. Travel. Work magic. Master foreign languages. Dawdle with novice witches in cemeteries.â€

â€œWhoâ€™d want a job like that?â€

â€œOh, youâ€™d be surprised.â€

A familiar shape freed itself from the shadow of the willow branches.

â€œTom,â€ she breathed.

He still possessed his comfortable bad boy look, the one thatâ€™d drawn her to him. The tattoo on his neck peeked over the collar of his beat-up leather jacket, his diamond stud winking in the moonlight. A chain ran from his belt to his keys. No one but her knew that heâ€™d been attending night classes for a criminal justice degree.

Heâ€™d make one kick-ass Angel of Death.

A wash of emotions wiped away all trace of conscious thought. She ran toward him and he swept her off her feet, crushing her in an embrace. God, he even smelled the same. Oil and gas fumes, not exactly pleasant, but so much a part of him it made her heart ache all over again.

â€œLaine,â€ he whispered. He gently extricated himself, holding her at armâ€™s length. The smile on his face was close-lipped, minimal. Heâ€™d broken a tooth in a bar brawl as a teenager and was self-conscious. â€œAre you crying?â€

â€œNo.â€

His smile widened, a white flash of teeth. â€œThe Laine I knew never cried.â€

â€œIâ€™ve had practice.â€

The smile dimmed a bit. â€œLetâ€™s hope you donâ€™t have to put it to use for a while.â€

Something about the way he looked at her made her shiver. â€œYou wonâ€™t

stay, will you?â€ All her delirious happy thoughts fled.

He met her angry gaze head-on, unruffled. That had always infuriated her more, his calm rationalization in the face of her meltdowns. â€Thereâ€™s rules, Laine, and weâ€™re skating the line.â€

â€œI donâ€™t care!â€

â€œListen.â€ He gave her a shake. â€œI donâ€™t belong here anymore. I crossed over.â€ He hesitated, torn between what to say and what not. â€œSomeday youâ€™ll understand, but for now, realize that people canâ€™t come back from the dead. At least, not without disrupting the balance.â€

â€œIâ€™ll pay any priceâ€”â€

He put a finger on her lips. â€œNo, you wonâ€™t.â€ His knuckles slid up her jaw, fingers tangling in her hair. â€œI wonâ€™t pick apart what we hadâ€”have,â€ he corrected. â€œBut we were young. Love like that flashes and burnsâ€”itâ€™s too much, too intense. I love my bike, but riding it in winterâ€™s plain stupid. Youâ€™re asking for trouble.â€

She bit her lip to keep from swearing or, worse, crying.

Pain flashed across his face. â€œI asked to come back to say goodbye, not hurt you.â€

â€œBastard.â€

He ignored her comment. â€œItâ€™s time for you to move on. You have your whole life ahead of you.â€

Her hands balled into fists. Tom was smarter than Azrael and kept a hold on her arms. â€œIt should have been with you.â€

â€œThings donâ€™t always work out the way you plan.â€ He glanced over her shoulder, at Azrael. â€œSometimes, though, you get a second chance. I want you to have that. Grab it and hold on tight. Iâ€™m sure itâ€™ll be one helluva ride.â€ He paused, collecting himself. â€œYou deserve it, Laine.â€

When had he become the more articulate one in their relationship? She wanted to rail against the unfairness of it all, and yet, how many people got the chance they had? One more touch. One more word. One more look. Sighing, she cupped his cheek, her anger extinguished by regret. â€œDonâ€™t do this for me.â€

His gaze was fierce. â€œIâ€™m not.â€ Pulling her close, he buried his face in her hair. â€œGod, Laine, I thought I had a lot more to say to you. I donâ€™t know where the words went.â€

â€œMe, too,â€ she breathed. â€œYou idiot. Why did you have to die?â€

Laughter bubbled from his chest. â€œI love you, too,â€ he muttered.

She clung to him a long time, breathing in his scent and memorizing the feel of his arms wrapped around her.

He broke their embrace again. â€œI gotta get going. So do you.â€

Nodding, she tried to stem the tide of tears. Blinded, she pressed her hand over her mouth to trap the accompanying sob. She heard him walk awayâ€”heâ€™d never been comfortable with the touchy-feely side of emotionsâ€”and she couldnâ€™t

make herself run after him. He was right. Sheâ€™d changed. Both of them needed to move on. Dropping to her knees, she wrapped her arms around herself.

Her tears spattered the snow.

Â

â€œYou take care of her,â€ Tom said, hands balled into fists, jaw stiff. His eyes sparked with unshed tears.

â€œWith all my heart,â€ Azrael promised.

Tom looked away and when he looked back, his gaze was sheepish. â€œJeez, Iâ€™d never have picked a pretty boy like you for her.â€

Azraelâ€™s lips quirked. â€œLooks are deceiving. Iâ€™ve learned a trick or two during my post.â€

â€œSheâ€™s cried enough for a lifetime. If you donâ€™t keep her happy, Iâ€™ll come for you.â€ Tom held out his hand.

Azrael took it and more than simple understanding passed between the two.

She thought she felt lips pressed to the top of her head before the wind waltzed a cluster of dead leaves over the crusty snow. She knew Tomâ€™d left.

Azraelâ€™s shoes stepped into her line of sight. â€œHeâ€™s gone.â€ She sighed raggedly. Raising her head, she stared at the man in front of her. â€œAnd heâ€™s at peace.â€ The words came slow. â€œI should be happy for him. I am.â€ A bit of wonder accompanied those words. She glanced at Azrael through her lashes, suddenly shy. Having spent all her waking moments and much of her sleeping ones the past two years obsessing over what couldnâ€™t be, sheâ€™d forgotten what it was like to live. â€œI havenâ€™t had a lot of practice living my own life.â€ She suspected Azrael was in the same camp.

He offered her his hand. â€œWe have a lifetime to learn.â€

Taking it, she stood and wiped the tears away with the backs of her hands. â€œDid you have a name before you became Azrael, Angel of Death?â€

He frowned. â€œYes, but Iâ€™m afraid Iâ€™ve forgotten it. Youâ€™ll have to rename me.â€

Her lips quirked. â€œHow about Bob?â€

Wincing, he said, â€œIf that is what you desire.â€

â€œWhat I desire,â€ she murmured, standing on tiptoe to touch her lips to his, â€œhas no place in a cemetery.â€

His arms wrapped around her waist. â€œThen letâ€™s get out of here.â€ Scooping her up, he carried her through the gates.



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Carnal Magic

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