

CAROL LYNNE



Storming Hell's Gate

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC

<http://www.resplendencepublishing.com>

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2665 N Atlantic Avenue #349
Daytona Beach, FL 32118

Storming Hell's Gate
Copyright © 2010, Carol Lynne
Edited by Jessica Berry
Cover art by Les Byerly

Electronic format ISBN: 978-1-60735-182-5

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Electronic release: August 2010

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Hell *aka* "The City"

n.

- any place of pain and turmoil
- the home created for Lucifer and those forced from Heaven
- a world in which only the dead may reside
- a world where sin is commonplace

Chapter One

Michael paced the scorching surface of The Between in sandaled feet. Why was the bargain with the human, Draco, affecting him so much? When he'd felt his brother's urgent plea to meet him in The Between, Michael knew it concerned the human.

Lucifer appeared in front of him, his expression grim. "So you know already?"

"Know what?" Michael asked.

Lu gestured to the surrounding desolate world. "The Between's a reflection of our thoughts. I take it yours are not at peace."

Michael didn't have the time or temperament for his fallen brother's psychoanalysis. "Why have you summoned me? You know I prefer you to deal with Gabriel."

Crossing his arms, Lu narrowed his dark eyes. "Because you're the one who owes me an explanation, not Gabriel. What kind of deal did you make with Draco?"

"Did the man Nelson and your friend Cory make it out of Old Town?" Michael asked. Justifying his actions to Lu wasn't a concern for Michael, but finding out what happened to the human was for some reason. Why? He still didn't know, but he couldn't allow the human to plague his thoughts.

"Yes, but Draco didn't. So, I'll ask again. What deal did you make with him?"

Michael's wings unfurled from their position at his back to rise above both of them. It was a direct extension of his temper, a side-effect Lu would be well aware of. "Do not accuse me of wrongdoing. I merely granted a favor to the human. You should be thanking me."

"Thanking you? We both know what—or should I say, who—resides in Old Town. You would condemn Draco to a life as Kael's puppet?"

The thought of the handsome human anywhere near their brother Kael, one of the Angels

of Death, unexpectedly tore at Michael's chest. Michael's wings began to flap, creating winds that could topple stone buildings. "Kael has better things to do than to waste his time on one human."

"Open your eyes, Michael. The earth's population is out of control. Kael hasn't done his job correctly in well over two thousand years. He's been relying on disease and war to do what he's been too preoccupied to take care of himself. I don't know why Azrael has done nothing about it, but then again, he's another of my brothers who refuses to speak to me."

"Does Father know this?" Michael asked.

"Gee, I don't know. I don't exactly have our Father's ear anymore. You tell me. I was promised that Kael would stay out of my business if I stayed out of his."

"Why do you believe Kael is involved in this matter?" Michael refused to acknowledge he hadn't given Kael a thought since he chose to leave Heaven."

Lu began to pace, fighting the wind caused by Michael's anger. "Put the wings away. They don't impress me anymore."

"Answer my question," Michael demanded. He concentrated on settling his wings. The display of his emotional state would only give Lucifer the advantage. He schooled his expression to one of indifference, something he'd become extremely good at over the years.

"Draco lived in Old Town for two thousand years, on and off, yet he's still in possession of his soul. We both know what that means, and why he would be valuable to Kael."

Michael shook his head and stepped to the edge of the imaginary cliff his emotions had conjured. "You, most of all, should not listen to the rumored whisperings of Angels."

"I may no longer have wings, but I am still an Angel, *brother*, and not everyone in Heaven hates me."

Michael spun around. He wouldn't deny his feelings towards Lucifer, but he wouldn't reveal to Lu why he felt the way he did, either. "Are you telling me you have spies in Heaven?"

"Spies?" Lu asked before obnoxious laughter filled the air.

Michael narrowed his eyes, his brother's amusement raising his anger once more.

"Only you would think of friends as spies." Lu shook his head and clicked his tongue. "No wonder you're forever in a sour mood."

"Why should I put my faith and trust in friends when my own brother thinks nothing of betraying me?" Tired of the present conversation, Michael stilled further lashes from Lu's whipping tongue.

"Notify me when you learn of the human's whereabouts." He left The Between with

Lucifer's answer ringing in his ears.

"We both know Draco isn't a true human."

* * * *

Michael strode toward the archives with purpose, ignoring everyone in his path. He threw open the doors and approached the desk of his brother, Jeremiel. "I require your knowledge."

Jeremiel set down the pen he'd been recording human deeds with and regarded Michael with amusement. "I believe this is the first time you've visited the archives. Why do you seek my help now?"

"I don't get involved with humans as individuals, but an issue has been raised that requires my attention," Michael explained.

"And what is this human's name?"

"Draco of Sparta, that's all I know."

"Surely the man has a last name," Jeremiel said with a sigh.

"I don't know. All I know of him is that he lived in The City and Old Town as Bruga for over two thousand years."

Jeremiel's blond eyebrows rose in surprise. "He's not listed."

"That's absurd. Of course he's listed, all humans are."

His younger brother said nothing, his expression impassive.

"How can this be?" Michael demanded.

"It just is."

"But you have to have something...", Michael tried again.

"No. If you seek answers, seek out Raphael or better yet, Gabriel," Jeremiel said, picking up his pen once again.

Michael stared at his obstinate brother. He had two choices: remove Jeremiel's head or do what was suggested and find his answers elsewhere.

"Fine," he said, storming out of the archive vault.

It was a rare occurrence when Michael was refused anything. Being thwarted in his attempts to gain information about the human he couldn't get off his mind only made his temper rise. Pushing open the gilded doors of Raphael's suite, Michael found his brother at his worktable sharpening his sword.

"You take your life in your hands barging in like that," Raphael growled. Of all his brothers, Michael found Raphael the most even-tempered, so the vehemence surprised him.

“What do you know about Draco of Sparta?”

Raphael returned his attention to his sword and shook his head.

Michael slammed his fist on the table in front of his brother. “Why isn’t he listed in the archives?”

Raphael calmly glanced up at Michael. “Because Draco does not exist. That’s all I will tell you. Now, if you are finished throwing your tantrum, please leave me in peace.”

“Where’s Gabriel?” Michael bellowed.

“Busy, but if he weren’t, he would tell you the same thing I did. If you want answers, seek the truth yourself.”

Michael threw up his hands in frustration. “If I thought I could find the truth on my own do you think I would humble myself by asking you for help?”

Raphael set down his sword and stood to regard Michael. “Perhaps if you humbled yourself more often, help wouldn’t be so hard to find. I’m not refusing you out of anger, Michael. It is a forbidden answer to a question you should have asked long ago.”

“Riddles. I need answers and all I’m getting in return is riddles.” Michael adjusted his ever-present breast plate and left the room. He started towards his suite, but decided he was better off in The Between instead. In the blink of an eye, Michael stood in a void of white, no ground, no sky, nothing.

Lucifer appeared, his dark coloring a stark contrast to his surroundings. “What did you find out?”

“Nothing. Draco is not in the archives. According to Raphael, Draco isn’t listed because he never existed. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Lu’s head tilted to the side as a grin transformed his face, taking Michael back to the days they trained together. “Are you asking me to help you?”

“What is it with everyone? Yes! I’m asking for your help.”

Lu closed his eyes and hummed. “Just let me savor this moment, will you?”

“Knock it off and tell me what you know.”

Lu’s eyes popped open. “I don’t know anything about Draco. I’ve heard whispers, but as I recall, you aren’t interested in gossip.”

“You know something! Spill it!” Although Michael’s wings were puffing up, he’d managed to keep them furled at his back.

Lu held his hands in front of him in an apparent attempt to calm Michael’s rage. “I don’t

even know if what I overheard means anything, but I remember walking in on an argument between Raphael, Gabriel and Raguel. Before they noticed me, I heard Raguel say, "Father has promised a Bruggata for Michael."

"What does that mean?" Michael asked.

"I don't know, but I'm beginning to wonder if Kael does. Could it have anything to do with his apparent obsession with Draco? Kael was the one to retrieve Draco from his life on earth, and he's been fighting to hold onto him ever since."

The thought of Draco being enfolded within the black, leathery wings of Kael made Michael shudder in disgust. "Has Draco ever talked about Kael? Are they lovers?"

Lu shrugged. "He's mentioned Kael on several occasions but he always stops himself before he says too much. I have a feeling Draco can't stand him, but Kael has some kind of hold on Draco that he won't talk about."

"Use your connections. I want to know where in Old Town Draco is being held," Michael informed Lu. His hand automatically sought the comfort of his sword. "I'll retrieve the human myself if I have to."

"That's not possible and we both know it," Lu shot back.

"I'll go over Kael's head if I have to. Just find the human."

* * * *

Huddled in the corner of the room, Draco was forced to witness yet another of Kael's seductions. The woman on the bed appeared blissful, but Draco knew what would come as soon as she relinquished her soul to Kael.

"Bruga! Bring me some wine," Kael ordered as he switched from his cock to a large vibrator.

"Yes, sir," Draco answered immediately. He reached up and pulled himself to his feet, using the table he'd taken refuge beside for leverage. Reaching for the bottle of wine, Draco caught his reflection in the large oval mirror. The scars he'd finally rid himself of were starting to reappear.

Kael called him Bruga, short for Bruggata. According to Kael, the name meant God's Biggest Mistake. Looking into the mirror, Draco had to agree.

Returning his attention to the task at hand, he filled the large wineglass and carried it across the room to Kael's bed.

Kael drained the contents in one gulp before handing it back. "I'll be done here in plenty

of time to take that pretty ass of yours before my midnight snack.”

Cringing at the thought, Draco went back to his spot in the corner with a sinking heart. He knew Kael’s words were meant to taunt, not arouse. The sonofabitch was smart enough to know how much Draco detested his touch. Yet, after all the years of trying, Kael was still convinced he could gain control of Draco’s soul.

Draco sighed and fingered one of the jagged scars on his face. If only he could give Kael what he wanted. He’d tried more than once, but for reasons unknown to him, his soul remained intact, inside of him. He glanced at the rutting couple on the bed. Kael’s bat-like wings were quivering, a sure sign he was close to climax. Draco’s entire body gave an involuntary shudder at the thought of Kael’s seed being dispelled into the woman.

There was a time when Kael’s gray-feathered wings made Draco feel safe. When he’d taken his own life, it was Kael who was with him in his last moments before death. The Angel of Death encapsulated him within his wings and carried him over the threshold to the land of the dead, and in Draco’s case, Old Town. But like Kael himself, soon the beautiful wings began to change.

Draco squeezed his eyes shut as bright light filled the room, signaling the voluntary handover of a soul.

Stupid woman.

Mentally escaping to a better place, Draco clung to the image of Michael, standing proudly before him. His biggest regret was not seeing the magnificent white with brown-tipped wings unfurl. What would it be like to be held within their safety? It was the first and last time he’d ever lay eyes on the Archangel he’d endured Kael’s touch for, and Draco had fallen instantly in love.

“Peabody!” Kael yelled.

Spell broken, Draco opened his eyes just as Kael’s right hand man came into the room.

“Yes, Master?”

“Take out the garbage,” Kael instructed, kicking the woman out of his bed.

Peabody scooped the limp-bodied woman from the floor and slung her over his shoulder. The woman’s soulless eyes stared at nothing as Peabody carried her from the room. Draco knew from witnessing it countless times that the woman would eventually begin to function again, even without her soul, but with one whisper of yes, she had forever given away her ability to experience happiness. Oh, she would try. Draco had no doubts about that. She’d willingly hop

into bed with any man who asked, just for the chance to feel...something.

* * * *

Curled onto his side, Draco continued to suffer Kael's post-fucking touches. Although he wanted nothing more than to run to the restroom and vomit the contents of his stomach, Kael was in a talkative mood and Draco hoped to glean some much-needed information.

"This is where you belong," Kael crooned. "You've been away from me for far too long."

Not long enough, Draco thought to himself. When Kael started to drift off, Draco decided it was time to make a bold move. "I met Michael."

Kael grabbed Draco's wrist and pulled him onto his back. Immediately, the Angel of Death sat astride Draco's chest, wings spread in anger. The perfect auburn curls Kael seemed so proud of stuck out at odd angles as he bristled with barely controlled rage. "I told you what the consequences would be should you ever seek him out, didn't I?"

"Yes, but I don't believe he's afraid of you. The question is, why are you afraid of him?"

Actually Draco hadn't had time to bring up Kael to Michael, but Kael didn't need to know that. From the incredibly chiseled muscles on display when he'd met Michael, Draco doubted anyone could take on the Archangel and win. At least that was Draco's hope. He only wished he'd met Michael two thousand years earlier.

Kael's dark green eyes narrowed. "You dare to question me?!" he bellowed.

Draco stared up at Kael. The pain would come next, quickly followed by the apologies as he lay soaking the bed in blood. It was the same each time Draco tried to challenge the Angel of Death. At the moment, Draco welcomed the pain. It would give him a few days reprieve from being fucked.

He still wasn't sure why Kael hated Michael. Maybe it was because Michael was above Kael in status. Whatever it was, Michael had always been Draco's patron saint. When he was found living in the hills surrounding Sparta, his only possession was the medallion of Michael around his neck. The fact that a child of four had managed to survive on his own through a harsher than normal winter had convinced a passing Spartan nobleman to rescue Draco and raise him as his own son.

The first slice of flesh as the tip of Kael's pointed wing carved across Draco's chest caused him to cry out.

No more.

Draco stared into Kael's green eyes and refused to give the sonofabitch the satisfaction of

another sound of his misery.

Instead he turned his thoughts back to Michael, his patron, his savior. How was it possible to truly love from afar? Draco had pondered that very question since he began his boyhood training to be a soldier.

He never married, and his father had never pushed him toward it. To his credit, his adopted father was a wise man who had traveled extensively, though it was rare to do so in those days. The Archangel Michael was unknown to most Greeks. It was Draco's father, Calibis, who taught him about the image Draco wore around his neck. For hours at a time, Calibis would listen to Draco's dreams of someday fighting at the side of the Christian God's finest soldier.

It wasn't until Draco had reached his thirteenth year that his dreams took on a sexual nature. It was the added dimension of their fantasy sexual relationship that fed the growing love between a boy and his patron saint. How many times had Draco gone into battle knowing Michael would protect him?

Spit landed on Draco's face as Kael gazed down on him. "I will rip Michael's sword from his hand and cut off his head with it."

With blood running from his tattered body, Draco smiled. "You don't really believe that, do you?" He shook his head. "No, I didn't think so. Michael is the finest soldier in all the Heavens. If you were so sure you could win, there would be no reason for you to hide me down here. You shy away from the light like a *bug* in a cellar."

Kael used his superior strength to backhand Draco. "Careful, lover, or I may have to remove your head once I'm finished with Michael."

Draco said nothing more as the blood loss became too great and he sank into darkness.

* * * *

After summoning Lucifer, Michael once again stood in the white world of The Between. Weeks that had once felt like seconds now crawled by. How long since he'd eaten or slept? Never in his existence had he dwelled on something so trivial as a single human, but try as he might, he couldn't get the man who had stood before him only weeks earlier out of his mind.

"You called?" Lu asked from behind Michael.

"What have you discovered?"

"I have received confirmation that Draco is indeed being kept as a plaything by Kael."

Michael spun around in time to see his fallen brother shift uncomfortably. "What else? What aren't you telling me?"

“A woman who works in the laundry of Kael’s home suggested all was not well by the look of the sheets. And no, it is not the stains of cum she was referring to. That would be commonplace in any home in The City or Old Town. Kael’s sheets are soaked in blood.

“How do you know this woman?”

“I don’t, but I paid a man very well to risk his soul by entering Kael’s house.”

“And the human? Did your man see or hear him?”

Lu’s hands fisted at his sides. “Draco. He has a name. Why do you refuse to use it?”

Because it hurts less. “Just answer my question.”

“No. Clancy didn’t see Draco, but it is said his whimpers can be heard through the door when Kael is not around.” Lu dragged his fingers through his hair. “Dammit, we’ve got to do something.”

“I agree. Why have you not headed a rescue mission?”

“Because I can’t! I’ve told you this before. To do anything to disrupt the running of Old Town is to break the treaty between our two cities. It may seem like a small price to pay for the life of a dear friend, but I can’t risk the souls my people have fought so hard to keep. Lu slumped to the ground. “Believe me, I wish I could.”

It was then Michael noticed Lucifer’s gaunt appearance. Obviously Michael wasn’t the only one still affected by the human’s situation. “I’ll speak with Azrael. Perhaps he can convince his underling to release the hu...Draco without bloodshed.”

Lu nodded. “Hurry. Every moment Draco spends in Old Town...”

“Yes. I’m perfectly aware of the effect Old Town has on humans.”

In the blink of an eye, Lu disappeared. Gone back to his home, to the human he loved. Michael stared at the spot his fallen brother had recently occupied with longing. In Heaven, it was forbidden for Angels to fall in love with humans, not that any of that mattered to Lucifer.

One more reason Michael wished he could get Draco rescued, and then banish the human from his thoughts forever.

Chapter Two

Michael bided his time in the anti-chamber waiting for Azrael, the true Angel of Death, to finish his daily meeting with The Father. As he paced the marble floor, he wondered what lengths he'd go to for Draco. Would he go over Azrael's head if he didn't get the answer he sought?

The guards opened the over-sized doors as Azrael strode from the Heavenly Chamber. Scroll in hand, he stopped and regarded Michael. "Yes?"

"I'd like a word with you in private." Michael held his breath.

Although Azrael was usually cordial, he seldom spoke with Michael unless absolutely necessary. Michael had never asked, but he assumed his brother had a lot on his mind. The strength and energy required to listen to The Holy Father recite the names of the humans to be carried home that day would kill a thousand mortal men at the first whispered word.

"I'm extremely busy. What is it that you want?" Azrael asked.

"Kael. Have you heard from him? I have information that he is holding a human in Old Town against his will."

Azrael shook his head and went to step past Michael. "Kael has asked for a break in his duties. I've not been in contact with him."

"A break? According to my sources, Kael hasn't done his job in over two thousand years!"

Azrael stopped and spun around. "Years? Since when have you started using mortal terms? We both know time is irrelevant."

With his hand on the hilt of his sword, Michael took a step toward his brother. "All I'm asking of you is permission to retrieve the human. Lucifer is afraid of putting his people in jeopardy by entering Old Town and rescuing the man. I thought perhaps Kael's superior would

be willing to speak to him.”

Azrael’s eyes narrowed. “I have no say in the treaty signed between *Lucifer* and Old Town. Do not bother me with this again.”

Azrael walked away, and Michael was left with a heavy heart. Had he really made so many enemies within his own home? His entire existence had been spent protecting his home and family. Why then, when he needed the aid of his brothers, did they all turn their backs on him?

* * * *

Dressed in full armor, Michael stood before his brothers Raphael and Gabriel.

“You’re mad!” Raphael shouted.

“Crazy or not, I can think of nothing else but getting the human away from Kael,” Michael explained.

“And you’re willing to give up your position for this man?” Gabriel asked. He stepped forward and put a hand on Michael’s shoulder. “You know the law. You won’t be allowed to return if you enter Old Town.”

For only the second time in his existence, Michael felt the burn of tears fill his eyes. “I have given everything of myself to ensure Heaven’s safety, and this is the first thing I’ve asked for in return. If rescuing the human negates all the good I’ve done...so be it.”

“Why?” Gabriel asked as his eyes also filled with tears. “Why would you risk everything for this man?”

Michael had asked himself the same question more times than he could count. “I don’t know.” He swiped at his eyes to clear them. “He has taken over my thoughts to the point of madness, yet I can’t explain why.”

Gabriel’s hand moved from Michael’s shoulder to his breastplate. “Perhaps you’ve fallen in love.”

“It is forbidden,” Michael said.

“Yes. For an Archangel it is forbidden, but if you do this, you will lose your place in Heaven. Our laws will no longer be of consequence.”

“It seems you have more to think about,” Raphael added. “Perhaps you should not rush to a decision.”

“Every moment I spend trying to get my once-loyal brothers to help me is another moment of torture for Draco.” As soon as he said the name aloud to his brothers, the invisible

band that had been squeezing his chest began to loosen.

"It isn't that we aren't loyal to you, Michael. This simply is not our fight." Gabriel stepped back, breaking their physical connection. "Godspeed, brother."

* * * *

After another round of torturous sex, Draco woke to find fresh wounds on his legs and abdomen. Although the cuts would heal quickly, the scars left behind refused to diminish. For the first two thousand years spent at the sadistic hands of Kael, his wounds healed without leaving a mark on his skin. Draco's old friend, Lysander, had been the first to leave scars on his body, scars that disappeared once Lysander ceased to exist.

Glancing down at his nude body, Draco shook his head. Now he was covered with the red puckered skin of a tortured man. He was thankful he'd been given the chance to meet Michael before he'd been turned into Bruga again.

"You're awake," Kael said, striding into the room.

Draco stared at the beast before him with pure hatred. "Please kill me."

Kael's head dropped back as laughter filled the large room. "What do you think I've been trying to do for over two thousand years?"

Although the news shouldn't have come as a shock to Draco, it did. "Why? Why do you hate me so much?"

Kael sat on the side of the bed and reached for Draco.

Flinching at Kael's touch, Draco closed his eyes as gentle fingers pushed the shoulder-length hair from Draco's face.

"I don't hate you. I love you. I always have. You're the reason I'm no longer allowed to do what I was created for."

"Then why?" Draco asked, opening his eyes.

"Because you love Michael, and I won't let him have you."

* * * *

Battle ready, Michael stood facing Lucifer in The Between. "After I retrieve Draco, I will need refuge for us."

Lu's brown eyes rounded. "Refuge? In The City?"

Michael nodded. "I will eventually bring him to The Between to live out our existence, but he won't survive the transition from Old Town to The Between, not after what he's been subjected to."

"Of course. You're welcome in The City." Lucifer's head lowered, his chin resting on his chest. "I'm sorry I've let you down once again, brother."

"You haven't. You've done more than anyone else, no matter their station. For that I will be forever grateful."

For the first time since his brother's fall from Heaven, Michael reached out and laid a hand on Lucifer's shoulder. "I would like to apologize to you."

Lucifer's head snapped up.

"In destroying Atlantis, you went against the laws we are bound to. I refused to understand how you could go against everything that we had been taught for the sake of humans."

Michael shook his head. "Things have changed. I have changed. I understand the need to do as your heart tells you even if you know you'll be paying the ultimate price for it."

Lucifer lurched toward Michael. Before Michael could unsheathe his sword, Lucifer's arms enveloped him in a hug. The gesture was uncomfortable to Michael. Never had he been embraced in such a way.

"Thank you. I've missed you so much," Lucifer confessed.

Michael extricated himself from his brother's touch. "Perhaps feelings between us will begin to mend."

Lucifer nodded. "I'd like that." He handed Michael a sheet of paper. "Here's a basic layout of Old Town. Kael's home is marked with the X. I'd suggest entering through the south gate."

Michael shook his head. "I don't plan on walking through the gate. I'll just fly over it."

"You can't. Although you will always retain your celestial powers, flying is a gift granted to all Angels from Father. If you enter Old Town, he will take that gift from you." Lucifer said it with such remorse Michael wondered how much giving up his wings had truly affected his brother.

It was one more thing Michael hadn't considered until faced with it himself. *Have I always been so selfish?* He studied the map in his hand once more. "Where can I find you once I have Draco?"

"Waiting for you outside the gate. I only wish I could fight at your side once more."

"You already are...brother."

* * * *

The moment Michael materialized outside what Lucifer referred to as the true Gates of

Hell, he felt Draco's pain like a physical touch. The intense reaction nearly dropped him to his knees. With a sound of fury, Michael unsheathed his sword and lifted his arms, reducing the gate to a pile of rubble that exploded inward.

Michael refused to give the bodies he stepped over a second thought as he tore through the streets, cutting down anyone who attempted to stop him.

As he wove his way through Old Town, the silent cries from Draco pulled him in the right direction.

I'm coming.

The scent of evil clung to each building he passed. It hung in the air, attempting to enter every pore on his skin. He now understood why Lucifer didn't enter Old Town. How had Draco managed to survive as long as he had in the wretched wasteland?

Arriving at Kael's door, he was not surprised to find the entrance heavily guarded. "Be gone!" he ordered, unfurling his wings.

One of the men stepped forward, no, not a man at all. It was Eric, yet another Angel who had fallen from Heaven. "You no longer command us, Michael. We're not afraid of you anymore."

Michael lifted his sword. "That would be your mistake." With one strike, Eric's head rolled onto the street below. He looked at the other guards. "Do you all wish to meet Eric's fate?"

The men scattered, save one. The brave guard stepped forward and unsheathed his sword. "Your powers are of no use to you in Kael's home."

"Maybe so, but my skills as a soldier are still intact." It took only a moment to finish off the foolish man. Michael entered Kael's home unopposed and followed Draco's mysterious pull to the back of the house.

Entering a large chamber, Michael laid eyes on Kael for the first time in over two millennia. To say the years had not been kind to the once handsome Angel would be an understatement. Gone were the feathered wings Kael had once taken such pride in. He'd heard tales about what living in Old Town had done to Kael's wings, but the sight was more gruesome than he'd imagined. It also seemed Kael had aged, which wasn't something Angels normally had issues with. His brother's skin appeared dry and cracked, like Old Town was literally sucking the moisture from Kael's body.

Michael quickly scanned the room in search of Draco, wanting the injured man out of the way before he dealt with Kael. There was a huddled figure on the floor in front of Kael. Michael prayed the tortured man wasn't Draco. As if he had eyes in the back of his head, Kael suddenly

spun around to face Michael.

“How dare you invade my home,” Kael spat, holding a knife that dripped with blood.

“How dare you try to take what isn’t yours!” Michael demanded as he advanced on his enemy.

Kael laughed and spread his wings, slapping at Michael as he neared.

Although Michael was used to evading the sword of an adversary, the unexpected scrape of Kael’s wing across his face momentarily stunned him. Whether it was the evil that had invaded Kael’s body or a premeditated poison applied to the wing, the cut felt like acid, burning into his skin.

The guards had been correct. Inside Kael’s home, his powers were reduced to those of the superb soldier that he was. His sword sliced through the air, cutting through one of Kael’s wings. Before Kael could attack again, Michael went for the other leather-like appendage.

“No!” Kael raged, frantically trying to seek refuge from Michael’s sword.

The steel blade cut through Kael’s remaining wing with ease.

Fight forgotten, Kael dropped to the floor in pain. His screams as he attempted to gather his fallen wings echoed off the walls.

Without sheathing his sword, Michael scooped the bloodied body of Draco into his arms and rushed out of the house. He prayed he would make it out of Old Town without further confrontation. The importance of getting the limp body in his arms out of harm’s way meant more to him than the destruction of the entire population of Old Town.

As he neared the destroyed gate, Kael’s cries of fury could be heard. The injured Angel was gaining on him. He prayed he had enough time to hand Draco off to Lucifer before Kael reached them. Ten feet. Eight. Six. Four. Two. Michael burst through the open gate, relieved to see Lucifer just where he said he’d be.

“Michael!” Lucifer yelled, reaching for the still unconscious Draco.

For some reason foreign to Michael, he hesitated in handing Draco over. Even though danger was at his back, Michael needed a few more seconds before giving the bloody human to his brother.

“Get him to safety!” Michael warned as he turned, ready to finish Kael.

“No need. Kael isn’t allowed in The City and he knows it,” Lucifer answered.

“I don’t think he cares about politics at the moment.”

“Michael!” Kael screeched, nearing the gate.

Michael lifted his sword, once again ready to do battle. The creature that appeared through the archway looked nothing like Kael. Michael glanced over his shoulder to make certain Draco was out of harm's way before regarding Lucifer.

"What has happened to him?" he asked.

Tears filled Lucifer's eyes. "You've just witnessed the birth of a demon. Kael is no longer. Hate and revenge have replaced his soul." Lucifer shook his head. "There is no hope for him now."

Without another word, Lucifer turned and carried Draco to a waiting car. Michael's attention went back to the gate. Six robed men appeared, blocking the gate and Michael's view of Kael.

"Nooooo!" Kael shrieked, the sound so loud Michael was forced to cover his ears.

It seemed Lucifer's prediction had come true: Kael would not be allowed out of Old Town. Michael turned his attention to Draco. Sheathing his sword he caught up with Lucifer.

"Here, give him to me," he ordered.

"We need to get him to the Temple," Lu tried to argue.

"Fine. I'll carry him there myself." Michael lifted Draco out of Lucifer's arms. Spreading his wings, Michael tried to take to the air, but nothing happened.

"Draco isn't the only one who needs the Temple. You're tainted with the evil of Old Town. Flying is a gift from God. You must begin to make amends and pray he forgives you."

Michael looked at the waiting car. He recognized the broad-shouldered man leaning against it. Dominic had been a favorite guard at the Heavenly Gates until Lucifer lured him to The City.

"I've never been in a car," he admitted with a heavy heart.

"Then you're in for a treat." Lu picked up his pace.

Dominic opened the back door before reaching to pull Lucifer into his arms. Lu stopped his partner by holding up his bloodied hands.

"You think that'll stop me?" Dominic asked, wrapping his arms around Lucifer's waist and kissing him.

Michael tried to work out the best way to enter the car. He curled his wings around Draco's body, cocooning the human from the outside world and climbed into the backseat. "Is there someone here to offer medical assistance?"

Lu settled into the front seat and chuckled. "Oh, there're plenty of doctors in The City, but they can't help Draco. Only Draco can heal his wounds."

* * * *

"This is my private room. No one will bother you here," Lu said.

Still cradling Draco, Michael studied the Temple room, ensuring that no danger lurked. His gaze stopped on the statues, the one of him in particular. Michael turned to Lucifer. "Why? I turned my back on you."

Lu shrugged, and with a wave of his hand, a large bed appeared in the back of the room as well as an over-sized washtub. "Don't read too much into it. It kinda went with the set."

Michael glanced at the statue once more before carrying Draco to the tub. How many times had he thought he'd heard Lucifer's whispered prayers along with so many others? The idea of his fallen brother speaking to him even after everything that had happened bothered Michael.

With another wave of his hand, what little remained of Draco's clothes disappeared. The thought of Lucifer seeing Draco nude didn't sit well. Michael spun around, shielding Draco's body from Lucifer's sight.

"Don't be an ass, Michael."

"I'll wash him," Michael declared, ignoring Lu's comment.

Lu sighed. "And I suppose you want me to wait outside with Dominic?"

"Yes. I'll retrieve you if I need you."

"I won't hold my breath," Lucifer mumbled. "I'll go to Ice Water with Dominic and bring the two of you back something to eat."

"Ice Water?"

"Dominic and Nick's nightclub. You remember Nick, don't you?"

"Yes. They were good men."

"They still are. Maybe someday you'll climb off that pedestal you've put yourself on and realize that."

Lucifer left without another word and Michael didn't offer comment. He glanced down at his battle gear. In the blink of an eye, he was without his armor. It felt odd being unprotected around another.

He carried Draco to the tub and gently lowered him into the warm, shallow water. Michael used a rolled towel to prop Draco's head up out of the water and picked up a cloth made of a soft material. Running the wet cloth over Draco's face, Michael was able to see the full extent of the torture Kael had inflicted. The extremely handsome man he'd met weeks earlier was nowhere to be seen.

Michael ran his finger across the tattered flesh of an open wound. Although the glow of healing was present and the wound closed beautifully, a thick scar remained. Surprised, Michael sat back on his heels. "Why do you not heal properly?"

He sat back up and tried again on another of the open wounds, this time a particularly nasty cut that ran the length of Draco's torso from neck to... Michael gasped. "How is this possible?"

He summoned Lucifer with his thoughts and his brother soon answered.

"What? Decide you needed me after all?" Lu asked.

"Draco has no navel. I thought all humans had them."

Lucifer's laughter filled Michael's head. *"I told you there had to be a reason he wasn't on the list."*

"What're you saying?"

"I don't believe Draco was born, but rather created."

"That's preposterous!" Michael refused to believe such a thing. Draco had lived on earth, as a man until his death. He knew of several Angel's who had once been mortal but even they had navels.

"Perhaps once you leave The City you'll be able to get answers. Until then, concentrate on getting Draco well."

Michael shut down the connection. He refused to acknowledge how good it felt to communicate with his brother again after so long. Returning his attention to Draco, he began systematically closing the wounds above the waterline.

After the majority of blood was rinsed from Draco's skin, Michael changed the water with a wave of his hand. He'd never thought himself shy, but the thought of inspecting and healing the cuts on Draco's lower body made him uneasy.

This is absurd, he told himself. Reaching under the water, chose to concentrate on the wounds on Draco's legs first and work his way upward. He tried to keep his eyes off the man's private area but often found his gaze straying to the flaccid cock that occasionally bobbed with the movement of the water. Although slightly smaller than his own, Draco's uncut cock began to fascinate Michael.

His attention moved to the area surrounding Draco's testicles. Kael had obviously enjoyed inflicting a few of the wounds with his teeth as well as the knife. Michael's wings unfurled as he sealed a particularly nasty bite at the base of Draco's penis. How could Azrael not have known

the depths of Kael's madness?

Although scars were evident on Draco's shaft, there weren't any fresh wounds to be seen. Michael cupped the flaccid penis in his hand, gently petting the velvety skin with his thumb. When he felt his own cock begin to stir, Michael quickly released Draco and stood. Shame filled him as he realized what he'd just done.

Looking down at the unconscious man, Michael bit his lip.

What's happening to me?

* * * *

Draco opened his eyes to filtered light streaming through...what? He lifted his hand and touched the shielding veil. Feathers? He knew Kael had long ago lost his soft grey feathers, and these were snow white.

Without realizing what he did, Draco continued to pet the soft wings that had enfolded him. Michael's magnificent wings came to mind. Draco's hand stilled.

Michael? It had to be a dream, one he never wanted to wake from.

Settling further against the warm body at his back, Draco sighed. "I've waited so long," he whispered.

"You're awake," a deep voice answered.

"No. I never want to wake," he answered the Michael from his dream.

"I've worried. You have been asleep for almost twelve hours. Surely you must be hungry."

The wings began to open. Afraid of losing his dream, Draco reached out with both hands in an attempt to keep the wings where they were. "Please. Don't leave me, not yet."

"I have no plans of leaving you, but you need to eat something."

The safety of his shelter parted for the first time, revealing a room filled with lit candles. "Where am I?" he asked his dream Michael.

"Lucifer's private chamber in the Temple. He thought it best for you to heal here as opposed to your home."

The warmth at his back moved away as the mattress under Draco shook. Taking a chance, Draco rolled to his back and noticed the soft sheet that rode low on his hips.

"Do you like soup?"

Draco's gaze followed the voice. There, across the room, stood the magnificent Archangel Draco had carried upon his heart since he was a boy. Why would a manifestation of his subconscious ask him about soup?

Licking his lips, Draco fought for the words he'd longed to say to his patron saint. "I know you're not really here, but I want to tell you how much you mean to me."

Turning around, Michael held up one hand, the other cupping a bowl. "Do not say anything you will regret. I am indeed standing before you. I rescued you from Kael's clutches."

Draco stared into the startling blue eyes. He didn't know if it was a product of his dream or the candlelit room, but Michael's long brown hair seemed to glow, further illuminating the chamber.

Suddenly he remembered his scars and reached for the sheet, pulling it up to cover his face. "Don't look at me. I'm a monster."

The bed dipped. "You're not the monster, Kael is." Michael put a hand on Draco's thigh. "Please don't hide from me. I won't lie. The scars are disconcerting, but not for the reason you think."

Draco squeezed his eyes shut. Why now? How many years had he prayed to have Michael at his side, in his bed? The idea that Michael had spent the previous hours staring at his destroyed face and body gutted Draco.

"Are you planning to eat this soup through the sheet?" Michael asked, a combination of amusement and sincerity in his rumbling voice.

Testing his strength, Draco sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, facing away from Michael. Although his back had a few scars, Kael preferred to torture him face to face. "Put it there. On that bench, please."

"You've lost a lot of blood. I think it best you stay in bed."

Did he dare argue with an Archangel? "Then could I please have a few moments alone?"

"I don't..." Michael began but stopped. "Very well. If you don't mind, I shall try to update Lucifer on your condition."

"Lu," Draco corrected.

"Excuse me?"

"It hurts his feelings when you call him Lucifer. He much prefers Lu," Draco mumbled. He couldn't believe he was sitting there correcting an Archangel—and not just any Archangel, *the* Archangel.

"I'll try to remember that," Michael said with a chuckle in his voice.

Starving, Draco reached for the bowl of warm soup. Before Michael could disappear behind one of the large marble statues, Draco called out to him. "Would you ask Lu when I can

go home?"

"Yes," Michael answered without turning around.

Was he trying to be kind, or was he merely saving himself from looking upon Draco's mutilated face?

* * * *

"Draco's awake," Michael told Lucifer through their newly reconnected thoughts.

"How is he?"

"He won't let me look upon him."

"That doesn't surprise me. The last time Draco managed to get away from Kael, he clung to the shadows for five hundred years."

"But his face was without scars when I met him," Michael observed.

"Yes. The scars won't fade until he forgives himself. At least that's the way it was last time."

"What does he have to forgive himself for?" Michael leaned back against his own likeness.

"I don't know. He's not much of a talker, not about himself anyway."

"How can I help him?" Michael asked.

"Don't push him, but don't let him hide."

Michael nodded. *"He wants to go home."*

Lu sighed. *"I was afraid of that. Okay, tell him it's important that he not be left alone."*

Michael straightened. *"Do you think Kael will try for him once more?"*

"No. I think if he's allowed to go home alone, he'll never step foot out of his house again. You have to make sure that doesn't happen."

"How do I do that?" Michael asked.

"I don't know. Give him a few days and then invite him out to dinner. Or better yet, ask him to show you Ice Water."

"Do you think he would go?" Michael had his doubts.

"If you asked him? Definitely. I don't know if you've noticed but the man has a bit of a crush on you."

"Crush?" Michael wasn't sure what that meant but it didn't sound good.

"You can be so dense sometimes. Evidently Draco isn't the only one who needs to get out more. He likes you. A lot. As in he probably has sexual dreams about you."

Michael's jaw dropped. Had Draco been dreaming of him earlier before he woke? *"Why would he dream of me in that way? I'm an Archangel."*

"Yeah, and you're fucking hot."

Lu began to laugh as Michael tried to figure out what that meant. He refused to sound ignorant again.

"You're extremely handsome, Michael. Surely you know that?"

"Yes, but I don't believe anyone has ever commented on my appearance before. Are my looks that important? They do not help me in battle."

"Are you telling me you've never had a lover tell you how handsome you are?"

"I'm a soldier. I have many responsibilities. There's been no time for such things as lovers."

Lu laughed again. *"You'd better get your rest, Michael. I have a feeling The City's going to open your eyes to all kinds of things."*

Chapter Three

Michael stared at the feather in his hand. *Am I to be like Kael?* Shuffling feet on the hardwood floor got his attention. "Good morning," he greeted without turning around.

"Morning," Draco mumbled, heading for the coffee pot.

It had been two days since they had returned to Draco's home and still the man refused to look at Michael when he spoke. For the first few hours, Michael had done as Draco wished and looked away from his scarred face, but he soon realized the senselessness of his actions. Whether or not Draco would continue to carry his scars was yet to be determined, but Michael refused to allow such a good man to live in the shadows again.

Draco turned, cup in hand. "What's that?"

Michael held up the object that had kept him on edge for hours. "I found another feather on the floor." He shook his head. "I'm afraid my wings will look like Kael's soon."

Draco surprised Michael by coming to sit with him at the table, cup still in hand. "Even if you are molting, isn't that a normal thing?"

Offended by the comment, Michael stood and carried the feather to the trash can. "Of course it's not normal. I'm not a bird."

"No...uh...of course not. I'm sorry."

Michael refilled his cup and stared out the window over the sink. "Lu thinks we still have another week here before we can go to The Between. What will they look like by then?"

"I thought you told me looks didn't matter." Draco said.

Michael spun around, sloshing coffee over his hand and onto the floor. "Would you have me comfort you with wings like Kael's?"

Draco immediately twisted his face away from Michael.

"Don't. Don't turn away from me like that," he said.

Draco slowly faced Michael again, tears in his eyes. "Why would you want to comfort someone who looks like this?"

Michael sighed. They'd been over this numerous times. Michael wondered how many ways he could say the same thing. "Your scars do not sicken me. They do not detract from the man I believe you to be."

"And feathers don't make the Archangel," Draco shot back. It was the first time Michael had witnessed the fire he knew to be inside Draco. "I hated the touch of Kael's wings because they were attached to a sadistic bastard, not because they were without feathers."

"Why did you spend so many years with him?" Michael asked, resuming his seat at the table. It was the opening he'd been hoping for. "Was he always so cruel to you?"

Draco shook his head. "I guess I just accepted my fate at first. Kael explained that I would never be welcomed into Heaven. He offered me refuge with him. He said he could protect me. My heart was broken. What else could I do?"

"When did you change your mind? How long did it take for Kael to change?"

Draco's hand went to his breastbone as if he searched for something. It settled on an oval scar that appeared to be from a burn rather than a cut. "I had a medallion that gave me strength throughout my life. Kael caught me kissing it after my evening prayer." Draco averted his gaze. "That's when it started."

Michael wasn't a scholar on human history, but he knew enough. "Who were you praying to?"

Draco's head snapped up. "God, of course."

The answer surprised Michael. "You were Christian? I didn't think Spartans..."

"I was," Draco cut Michael off. "My father raised me in the faith. We worshipped at home, in secret."

"Who was your father?" Michael wondered if the identity of the man who had introduced Draco to God could hold the answer as to why Draco wasn't on Heaven's list.

"A nobleman. Well, he wasn't really my father, but I have no memory of where I came from before I was rescued by such a kind, gentle man," Draco began. For the first time since Michael had carried Draco from Old Town, Draco opened up. He spoke at length, giving Michael a peek at his life before his death.

Michael listened to the fascinating account of Draco's early life. "So you have no memories

of before you were rescued by your father?"

"No."

"And you never married?" Michael knew the importance of bearing children in Sparta. It was hard to believe Draco would go against the wishes of society.

Draco shook his head. "Lying with a woman held no interest for me, but I did try several times. My father was the one to excuse me from my obligation to marry. His wife left him long before he found me while he was off fighting."

The scarred face softened. "He knew my heart would never belong to a woman."

"How did he know?" Michael needed to know.

Once again, Draco's fingertips brushed over the scar high on his chest. "I was already in love with another, and for that, I was cursed to walk the earth alone."

"Why do you do that?" Michael asked.

"What?"

Michael reached out and brushed Draco's hand aside before running his own fingers over the scar. "Touch this when you're troubled?"

"The medallion I told you about gave me strength. This is all I have left of it. Kael pressed a hot poker to it before taking it from me, and a piece of me has been missing ever since."

"Maybe we can find one to take its place. What was on the medallion?"

Draco shook his head. "I can't tell you that. Besides, everything's changed. I've changed."

Michael continued to finger the scar. Small bumps began to appear on Draco's skin. "Am I hurting you?"

Draco cleared his throat. "No."

There was something about the design burned into Draco's skin that was familiar. "Please tell me what was on your medallion."

Draco covered Michael's hand, stilling the movement. Michael looked up into Draco's eyes in question.

"It was a protection medal, my patron saint."

Michael nodded. He'd heard of such things but had never actually seen one. His suspicion rose. "And who was your patron saint?"

Draco's fingers curled around Michael's hand. "You."

* * * *

"Help me," Michael mentally begged Lu.

"I'm kinda in the middle of something. Is it an emergency?" Lu asked in return.

"I wanted to touch him. I almost did, but then..."

"What? What did you do?" Lu asked.

"I ran," Michael admitted. Draco's admission had stirred something deep within him yet he was too afraid to act on his feelings.

"Oh, shit. Draco probably thinks it's because of the way he looks."

"No. That wasn't the reason at all. I felt like doing things that I don't know how to do. For some reason, I think he feels something for me, and I don't want to change that by making a fool of myself."

"Bring him to Mesopotamia for dinner. Dominic and I will meet you there."

"He refuses to leave the house. He won't go to a restaurant."

"Mesopotamia is his favorite place. Tell him we'll be dining in my private room. He'll come. Now, can I get back to enjoying the fucking I'm receiving?"

Michael's eyes rounded. Although he was embarrassed at his intrusion, he was also curious. *"Forgive me."*

"No need for forgiveness. Dominic's so into it, I don't think he's noticed yet. I'll expect the two of you for dinner at eight."

The connection was broken and Michael was left standing in the middle of Draco's backyard with an erection that was impossible to ignore. "Now what do I do?"

* * * *

Michael adjusted himself once more. It would be his first time dining in a public place, so he tried to mimic the clothes Draco wore. "How do you wear these on a daily basis?"

Draco's brows drew together as he continued to maneuver the car through traffic. "Are you talking about pants? I never said you had to wear them."

"I didn't want to embarrass you," Michael admitted.

The car slowed and turned down an alley to a back parking lot. "Look at me. You could wear nothing at all and you wouldn't embarrass me." Draco dipped his head. "I may embarrass myself because of the way I look, but that's my problem."

Michael shifted again as he tried to pull the heavy material away from his groin. "I feel suffocated."

"So change back. Once we're inside no one will see us anyway—well, except for Lu, Dominic and the waiter." Draco opened the door and got out.

By the time Draco rounded the car, Michael had changed back into the short, loose-fitting garment he preferred. He breathed a sigh of relief as his cock was freed of the constraints.

"Better?" Draco asked, opening the door.

"Yes. Thank you for understanding."

Draco's gaze raked its way from Michael's sandaled feet to his eyes. "It's been a long time since I've worn something similar. I'll admit to being a bit envious."

Michael gestured to Draco's suit. "Would you like me to...?"

"No thank you. I left that part of my life behind long ago. I'm perfectly comfortable in a suit." Draco turned and began walking toward the building. "Lu has a private entrance."

"Why?" Michael asked.

Draco pushed the small button beside the door. "Because he's Lu. You'll soon find out how loved your brother is here in The City."

Michael was still pondering the statement when a uniformed man allowed them entrance into the building. A large table sat low to the ground with red and black cushions lining the sides. The table had been set, but there was no one else in the room except he and Draco.

"Where are they?" Michael asked.

Draco removed his shoes and settled them on a low shelf. "He'll be late. He always is. I think he enjoys making a grand entrance." Draco gestured to Michael's feet. "You'll be more comfortable sitting if you take those off."

Michael did as instructed before settling on one of the cushions. He tried several positions before finding a comfortable one that also allowed a bit of modesty. Perhaps Draco wore pants for that reason.

He watched Draco walk toward the wall of curtains. "Would you like some wine?"

"Yes."

Draco pressed a button and spoke into a small box. "Someone will bring it right away," he said, sitting beside Michael.

"You move with ease," Michael observed. "This place makes you comfortable?"

Although the scars on Draco's face twisted, Michael could tell the man was trying to smile. "I've spent many nights in this very room. Observing, not necessarily participating."

"Observing what?" Michael asked. The room appeared void of entertainment. Michael wondered if perhaps dancers would appear once Lu arrived. He'd always enjoyed the celebrations after a well-earned victory. Perhaps Lu carried on the tradition even after his fall from grace.

The door to Michael's side opened, and Dominic and Lu stepped inside. Both men wore suits. Michael glanced down at his simple white garment.

Draco leaned against Michael and spoke in his ear. "Don't worry. You look fine."

Michael turned his head to regard Draco. Could the man read his mind like his brothers could? "How did you know what I was thinking?"

Draco shrugged. "By the expression on your face when you looked down."

The answer set Michael's mind at ease. There were far too many thoughts in his head to share.

"Sorry we're late," Lu said, kicking off his shoes.

"No you're not," Draco challenged.

Lu grinned. "You're right. I'm not."

Michael moved to stand as Lu neared the table.

"Sit. Sit." Lu waved. Before seating himself, Lu walked to the curtain and spread the heavy red and gold fabric, revealing a wall of glass. Beyond the glass, diners seemed to be enjoying their meals.

Michael noticed several openly touching each other. He watched with rapt attention as one couple in particular caught his eye. It was two men, each with their hand on the other's private parts.

"Watch and learn," Lu said in Michael's mind.

"Is that normal?" Michael asked.

"No, but the night is young. Things will begin to pick up as the meal progresses." Lu left the pillow adjacent to Michael empty and sat on the next as Dominic settled close to Lu.

"Have you ordered?" Lu asked.

"Only wine," Draco said. He gestured to a man in nothing but a small garment covering his groin. "Here it comes now."

Michael was so busy watching the nearly naked man fawn all over Lu that it took him a moment to realize Draco had turned to the side, away from the waiter's gaze. Michael lifted the wineglass and held it out to Draco.

"Do not worry. His attentions are elsewhere," he whispered.

Draco glanced over his shoulder. "Would you order for me?"

The man who had moved with such fluidity only a few moments earlier was suddenly gone. Michael yearned for the return of Draco's ease. Without thought, he brushed his lips across

the puckered skin of Draco's cheek.

"I will." Michael's lips began to tingle and he wondered if kissing someone always had that effect.

Draco's fingers lifted to brush across the skin where Michael's lips had touched. "I would like the lamb, please."

There was something about the soft answering voice that caused a lump to form in Michael's throat. He nodded and turned to the waiter, catching Lu's grin in the process. "I'll have the chicken."

"That was cute."

"Shut up," Michael told his brother. He lifted his glass of wine and took a generous gulp, trying to dispel the lump still in his throat.

* * * *

"That's it," Lu mentally encouraged Michael when he placed his hand on Draco's leg. *"Now, move your hand in small circles."*

Why?"

"Because it feels good."

Michael did as instructed, moving his hand on Draco's thigh, pausing only long enough for the waiter to remove his empty plate. He wasn't sure what it felt like to Draco, but the action was starting to make his shaft harden. His gaze drifted to the restaurant patrons beyond the glass. *"Can they see us?"*

"No, not unless I want them to," Lu answered.

The ongoing conversation with Lu in his head didn't disrupt his verbal discussion with Dominic at all. Michael had forgotten how easy it was to focus on more than one conversation at a time. His other brothers rarely engaged him in such a way. To be honest, they rarely spoke to him at all. It was enjoyable to have the once-severed connection back with Lu. Although before his fall, Lu wasn't nearly as talkative. Michael wondered what had changed his brother into the social being he'd become.

After several moments of caressing Draco's leg, he felt a soft hand land on his bare thigh. *"He's touching me."*

"Good. That was the whole idea," Lu answered.

"It was?"

"Of course. Let him get comfortable for a few minutes and then you'll turn to him and kiss

him again, only this time aim for the lips."

"Then what?" Michael asked.

"Depends. If he wants more, he'll probably lick your lips to try and get you to open your mouth."

"Why would I do that?" Michael was grateful for the private conversation. He never could have asked Lu the questions aloud.

Lu laughed, reached over and slapped Michael on the back. The verbal conversation didn't fit with the action and Dominic narrowed his eyes at Lu, apparently aware of what was going on.

"Trust me. You'll like it. Just let Draco do what feels good and you do the same in return."

"Shall we order dessert?" Lu asked, breaking into Michael and Dominic's discussion.

Michael nearly gasped when Draco's hand inched higher on his thigh. "Yes," he answered Lu to get his mind off the fingers brushing back and forth just under the hem of his garment.

After placing their order, Dominic engaged Lu in a quiet conversation, leaving Michael with nothing to concentrate on but Draco's touch. With a deep breath, he turned and looked at Draco. There was something different about him, but he couldn't figure out what it was.

"Am I bothering you?" Draco lowered his gaze and started to pull his hand away.

Something instinctual overcame Michael. With his free hand, he reached down to hold Draco's hand in place. "Leave it."

Draco nodded but didn't look up.

"Kiss him, you fool!" Lu shouted in Michael's head.

"Back off!" Michael turned enough to block Lu's view with his back before leaning in to brush his lips over Draco's cheek once again. This time, he allowed his mouth to linger, slowly kissing his way to Draco's lips. With each touch, the vibrations against his lips seemed to grow stronger. Was this desire?

With his eyes closed, Draco lifted his head and captured Michael's mouth with his own. Just like Lu had said, Michael felt Draco's tongue press against the seam of his lips. Michael opened his mouth and Draco's tongue slid inside.

Glorious! The sensation was like nothing he'd ever experienced. The taste of mint and fig clung to Draco's tongue from his earlier meal, making the experience a true treat for the senses. Michael lifted his hands and cradled the beautiful tortured face of the man who suddenly made him feel like he could do anything.

When Draco's teeth scraped against Michael's lower lip, he couldn't stop a moan from

erupting. Draco soothed the action by sucking at the swollen lip. Michael wanted more. His body craved to be closer.

He wrapped his arms around Draco and pulled him off his pillow, settling the smaller man on his lap. There was no doubt Draco could feel Michael's hardness through the thin material of his garment, but Lu had told him to do what made him feel good. Holding Draco definitely made him feel good. Better than good. Great, actually.

Draco turned to straddle Michael's lap, wrapping his legs around Michael's waist. When Michael's eyes drifted open, Draco pulled out of the kiss and put his hands over Michael's eyes.

"Close them. Please see me as I used to be."

Michael shook away Draco's hands. He'd meant to reassure Draco that the scars didn't matter to him, but when he looked at Draco he gasped.

Draco stiffened and tried to push his way out of Michael's arms and off his lap.

"No," Michael held on, using his superior strength. "Your face. It's different."

Tears filled Draco's eyes. "Please, let me go."

Michael knew Draco didn't understand. "Listen to me. The scars. They're...healing."

Draco stopped struggling. "What?"

Michael reached down and lifted Draco's hand to his cheek. "Feel."

Although there were still scars, Michael knew Draco could tell they were smaller. "Why is that happening?"

"I don't know," Draco answered. "Earlier, after you kissed me the first time, my skin seemed to tingle, but I thought it was my imagination."

"Lu," Michael said, glancing over his shoulder.

"They left," Draco said.

"You saw them?" Michael questioned. Had Draco been watching him while his eyes were shut?

"No, but I heard the door. I was too busy to say goodbye." The broad smile on Draco's face was infectious, and soon Michael joined him. They stared at each other for several moments before Draco climbed from Michael's lap.

"I need to go to the restroom," Draco said. "I'll be right back."

Michael watched Draco leave the room with mixed feelings. He longed to follow the man, to never again be parted from him, but on the other hand, Michael needed to gain control of his emotions. Why did he feel this way?

He closed his eyes and summoned Lu. *"You should have said goodbye,"* he admonished.

"You were busy. Finally." Lu chuckled.

"I think there's something wrong with me," Michael admitted.

"Why do you say that?"

Michael thought of the kisses earlier. *"I want to consume him. To take everything he offers and more. To lie with him like I saw others do through the glass partition. Only I don't want to stop there. I want to mark him as mine."*

Michael squeezed his eyes shut. *"I'm afraid of turning into Kael."*

Chapter Four

"Don't be ridiculous. What you're feeling is desire not insanity." Lu chuckled again. "Although the two are closely related."

"So this feeling of being completely out of control is normal?" Michael asked.

"Only if you're lucky enough to find it." Lu sighed. "This is your first real taste of wanting someone to the edge of madness. Enjoy it. Revel in it. I have faith you won't go too far."

"Why do people search for this? To give control of your emotions to another is to be weak."

"That's why it's so important to choose your partners wisely. I'm not talking about a simple fuck here. I would consider that late-night lust, not desire. True desire, the kind you're feeling, doesn't come often."

"How do you know what I'm feeling?" Michael asked. He straightened his garment, pulling it down as far as he could.

"Because it's the way I feel with Dominic. For us, it's not touching that requires work. Wanting him inside of me is like breathing, the need for it doesn't go away. If the two of us lived in a vacuum, we'd go to bed and never get out. I feel it will be the same for you and Draco if you trust yourself enough to put faith in him."

Michael was afraid to tell Lu his biggest fear in letting go and acting on his desire, but who else could possibly understand if not Lu? *"Will this keep me from earning Father's forgiveness? My place is in Heaven, not here."*

"You don't think they're fucking like rabbits in Heaven? Damn, Michael, you really are out of touch with your surroundings."

"So you don't think it will matter if I take Draco to my bed?"

"No."

Michael detected a slight hesitation in Lu's answer. *"What aren't you telling me?"*

Lu sighed in that dramatic fashion Michael had grown accustomed to. *"What if Draco doesn't want to live in Heaven, or worse yet, what if they don't allow him to follow you? Which choice will you make, brother? I'm not saying you have to decide before you lay with him, but it's a question that must be answered before things progress too far between the two of you."*

Michael looked toward the restroom door. *"Nothing will keep me from returning to my rightful place. I would hope if feelings deepen between me and Draco, he would understand that."*

"Sometimes you have to give up everything for what you believe."

Michael wondered if Lu was referring to his own fall from Heaven. Before he could ask, Lu cut off his train of thought.

"You'll be fine. I trust Draco with everything I have, including my love for a brother that once hated me. I need to go. There's a representative from Old Town downstairs waiting to speak to me. No doubt it has something to do with Draco. Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

With those words, Lu ended their connection, leaving Michael feeling more lost than he'd ever been. Before he could dwell on their conversation, the restroom door opened and Draco stepped back into the dining room. The transformation of the man's face was astonishing. Although not completely healed, the scars were mere shadows of what they had been only hours earlier.

"Thank you," Draco whispered, still standing.

Michael shook his head. "I didn't do anything."

Draco's eyes filled with tears. "Yes, you did. You kissed a grotesque man. For some reason I've yet to figure out, you saw beyond the scars, and for that, I will be forever grateful."

Michael stood. The simple action dislodged a great number of his precious feathers, but he was more concerned with the sadness present in Draco's expression. Something about the man's tears ate at Michael's heart, something he wasn't used to.

"Please, don't," Michael whispered, wiping away the tears from Draco's cheek. He enfolded Draco in his arms and wings, knowing the action seemed to soothe the other man.

Draco placed a soft kiss on Michael's neck. "For so long I've dreamt of this."

"You're not dreaming," Michael reminded Draco.

"Is it wrong for me to want you as much as I do?"

"I hope not." Michael's eyes drifted shut as Draco's hands moved to his chest.

"I want to touch you." Draco licked Michael's exposed collarbone. "To taste you." Draco

tugged at Michael's garment.

With a simple thought from Michael, the two of them were nude, and Draco began kissing and licking Michael's chest. Michael's skin came alive with gooseflesh when Draco's mouth covered his nipple. His knees grew weak at the attention he'd never known.

Unfurling his wings, Michael moved away long enough to assemble large pillows into a makeshift bed. He draped himself over the pillows and held out his hand. He stared up at Draco's graceful lean body and felt like he was truly seeing a man for the first time.

"Please." Although Michael wasn't accustomed to asking for anything, this particular request he'd gladly beg for if he had to.

Before joining him, Draco's hands and gaze roamed his own body. He didn't say it, but Michael knew Draco was assessing the condition of his skin.

"You're perfect the way you are," Michael said. The lesions that remained were some of the worst but even before the miraculous fading, Michael had thought Draco perfect.

With a simple nod, Draco knelt on the makeshift bed at Michael's feet. He stretched out his arm before pulling it back, his hand fisting against his chest. "Sorry. I'm nervous."

"I'm the one who should be nervous. You've done this before, but I haven't," Michael confessed. It would become evident to Draco soon enough as Michael fumbled his way through doing the things he'd seen others do that evening.

Draco shook his head. "You're wrong. I've never done this before either, because I've never done it with you."

Michael pulled Draco down beside him. "Then we shall experience our firsts together."

A sweet smile split Draco's face. "I'd like that."

"Good." Michael moved Draco to lie on his back. "Would you mind if I touched you the way you did me earlier?"

"No," Draco answered in a soft, almost shy, voice.

Michael started with his hands, fingering the soft black curls of Draco's hair as he roamed the handsome man's face with his gaze. "Scars could never hide the perfection God has created," he whispered.

The back of Draco's hand brushed the length of Michael's hard shaft. "All others pale in comparison to you, Michael. Your body must have been chiseled by the finest craftsman."

Unused to such praise, Michael's face heated. Giving in to the temptation Draco's body provided, Michael's hand moved down Draco's face and neck to land on the muscled chest. "You,

too, have the body of a soldier.”

He traced the individual muscles that stood in relief on Draco’s chest and abdomen. Despite the weeks in Old Town, Draco’s skin was still a sun-kissed bronze that seemed to beg for Michael’s lips.

“It’s been a long time since I was a soldier. My time spent with Kael all but destroyed that part of me. I became weak with fear,” Draco confessed. “I’m no longer worthy of the title of soldier.”

The reminder of what Draco had been through at the hands of Kael kicked Michael’s jealousy into overdrive. He reached to Draco’s cock and took it in his hand, feeling another man’s private parts for the first time in his existence.

“The fact that you were able to hold onto your humanity despite the torture you suffered proves that you are a soldier to me. Not every battle is fought with swords.”

Draco reached to his own cock and covered Michael’s hand, teaching Michael without words how he desired to be touched. Draco mimicked the action on Michael’s length.

“I’ll never allow another to take you against your will,” Michael promised.

“Yours is the only touch I’ve ever truly wanted,” Draco answered.

Michael leaned down and traced the pebbled skin of Draco’s nipple with the tip of his tongue. “Then allow me to give what you’ve waited so long for.”

At the first real taste of Draco’s skin, Michael knew he would be addicted to the man’s flavor for the remainder of his existence. He lapped at both nipples before trailing his tongue down the center of Draco’s chest, stopping to pay homage to the thin trail of black hair that seemed to lead to the manly offering in his hand.

Once again, it was the lack of a bellybutton which made Michael pause. He buried his face against Draco’s flat lower abdomen. As sensitive as Draco seemed to be about his body, Michael refused to bring up the abnormality, but it did make him wonder. The term Bruggata came to mind. What did it mean? He knew the answer was an important step to figuring out why his feelings for the human were so sudden and intense.

“Is there something wrong?” Draco asked, his hand releasing Michael’s cock to sift through his long hair.

“No.” Michael shook his head. “I wish to put my mouth on you, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

Draco chuckled. “As long as you keep your teeth away from the sensitive tip, you can’t go

wrong, believe me.”

Michael moved further down until his entire focus was on the cock in his hand. He moved the foreskin up to cover the dark, flared head. When he pulled the skin back down, a large drop of fluid appeared on the tip. Michael quickly licked the drop before it had a chance to drip down the side.

He couldn't stop the moan as the pre-come coated his tongue, waking his taste buds from their long slumber. Needing more, Michael put the entire crown in his mouth and suckled like an infant at his mother's breast for the first time.

“Aaahhh,” Draco moaned, tightening his grip in Michael's hair.

Afraid he was causing Draco pain, Michael released the soft skin in his mouth. “Am I hurting you?”

“No. Fuck I've never felt anything as good as the warmth of your mouth.”

“Really?” Michael was pleased by the compliment.

“Really. Turn around and let me return the favor.”

Michael sat up. “I don't understand.”

Draco nodded. “Okay. Stay right there, I'll show you.” He moved on the pillows until his face was directly under Michael's heavy sac. “Now, go back to what you were doing, and I'll do the same to you.”

It wasn't until he felt Draco's tongue on his balls that Michael understood. He squeezed his eyes shut as a tremor seemed to work its way up his body, threatening his control over his seed. The question as to why he'd waited so long to experience such a grand feeling was answered when his length was enveloped by Draco's mouth.

Michael's body shook in an effort to control his need to thrust his entire cock down Draco's throat.

“Put me back in your mouth,” Draco said, momentarily releasing Michael's length.

Michael wondered if he could pleasure Draco while trying to stave off his eminent climax. *Yes.* He would give Draco the same courtesy he was receiving. With iron will, Michael took the dark pink head into his mouth once again. As before, the taste was intoxicating. The wines of Heaven had never tasted half as good.

He concentrated on Draco's movements, trying to copy the pleasures he felt on his own cock. When Draco's tongue swirled soon after, so did Michael's. A sound from Draco indicated pleasure, so he continued. It was the tip of Draco's tongue delving into the slit on Michael's

crown that was ultimately his undoing. Before he could warn Draco, Michael's seed shot forth in copious amounts.

Michael's first ever climax with the aid of another was too much for him to keep his head. He released the cock in his mouth and cried his joy to the room.

Something thick and wet hit his face. Michael opened his eyes in time to see another stream of thick white cum burst from Draco's cock. He quickly recaptured the head in hopes of truly tasting the offering Draco had gifted.

He longed to praise God for making such a man. It was only fear of sacrilege that kept him from it, but oh, did his heart sing with praises to Heaven.

Afraid of dropping his full weight onto Draco, Michael rolled to the side. He reached down and pulled Draco around and against his chest. Draco's tongue began lapping at the spilled cum on Michael's face.

For millennia he had been worshipped but never had he felt more loved than at that moment.

"Are you done yet?" Lu asked, interrupting Michael's peace.

"I doubt that I will ever be. What do you want?"

Lu's laughter rang in Michael's head. *"I told you."*

"What do you want?" Michael asked again.

"I need to talk to you and Draco about the visitors that just left Ice Water."

"Can it wait?" Michael asked as Draco settled against his chest.

"No. I'm sorry but it can't."

Michael lifted his head and kissed the top of Draco's. "Lu needs to see us. Do you know how to get to Ice Water?"

"Of course, but you're not going there." Draco said, sitting up. He reached for his discarded pants and pulled out his phone.

"Who're you calling?" Michael asked.

"Lu."

Michael ran his hand down Draco's nude back, already missing the closeness they'd just enjoyed. *"Draco's calling you,"* he told Lu. *"I need to tell him I'm already talking to you."*

"Good luck with that. Dominic's still having a hard time accepting it."

"Why're you calling Lu?" Michael asked Draco once he'd ended the connection with his brother.

"Because your...", Draco began to answer, but was evidently cut off by Lu's answer. "It's, Draco. If you need to talk to us, come to my place."

Draco rolled his eyes and shook his head. "No. Michael needs to get back to Heaven and Ice Water is definitely not the road to that."

Michael wondered what was so bad with the club Dominic and Nick owned.

"Sorry, but I care more about what's best for Michael than anything a representative from Old Town has to say."

"I don't mind meeting Lu at Ice Water," Michael tried to interject.

"Fine. I'll stay up as late as I need to." Draco hung up and started pulling his pants on. "Lu and probably Dominic will meet us at my place as soon as they can get away from the club."

"What's wrong with Ice Water? I thought you said it was a nice place."

"It's a great place for The City, but there's too much that goes on there for you to be subjected to it," Draco explained.

Michael gestured to the wall of glass. "I've watched couples in different states of undress all evening. What's so different about Ice Water?"

Draco paused in the process of zipping his pants. "What you've seen in the restaurant tonight is nothing compared to what couples and even groups do on the dance floor and at their tables at Ice Water. It's all perfectly acceptable here, but if the idea is to start cleansing the taint of sin from you..." Draco once again shook his head. "Please, just trust me on this one."

Michael could tell how strongly Draco felt on the subject. Since The City was still foreign to him, he decided to go with his heart and do what Draco asked. "Okay."

* * * *

After hanging up his suit jacket and tie, Draco returned to the living room. Michael was seated on the edge of the sofa, picking up stray feathers from the rich burgundy fabric. Draco leaned against the doorjamb out of sight and studied the changing expressions on Michael's face. It was obvious the loss of even more feathers was unsettling for Michael.

What if being with me is the cause?

Draco had always known he'd never be good enough to even meet Michael, let alone enjoy the same bed with him. Feeling responsible for Michael's worsening condition, Draco finally found the strength to speak. "I'm sorry."

Michael's head snapped up. He stared at the fistful of brown-tipped white feathers in his hand and shrugged. "Nothing to be done about it now."

"What if there was? Would you do it?" Draco asked.

"Depends on what it was." Michael carried the feathers to the trash can beside the entry table and disposed of them.

"Maybe if you left and tried to get to The Between it would stop." The thought of losing Michael gutted Draco, but it would hurt him more to see Michael unhappy.

Michael shook his head and carried a straight-back chair into the room from the dining room. He sat gingerly, as if afraid of dislodging more of his magnificent feathers. "Lu said it would be several weeks before you could attempt to get in to The Between."

Draco went to kneel at Michael's feet. "I know I can't go with you, but if it will save..."

"No!" Michael barked, cutting Draco off. "I won't leave you here."

"But..." Draco started.

"No buts."

Draco had never considered himself a small man, but Michael easily plucked him off the floor and onto his lap, one leg on either side of Michael's.

"I worry," Draco whispered as he stared into Michael's eyes.

"Don't. I spend every moment I'm not with you begging for forgiveness. If that's not good enough, if I'm not good enough, another week in The City won't make a difference."

Closing his eyes, Draco rested his cheek against Michael's. Eventually Michael would have to return to his rightful place in Heaven. With luck, the two of them would still be able to see each other from time to time, but the job Michael performed was far more important than spending time with Draco.

He sighed as Michael's arms tightened around him. For now he'd enjoy the time they had together. He didn't know if it was the taint of evil still clinging to Michael or a momentary lapse of judgment, but for some reason Michael seemed to want him. Draco may be many things but a fool wasn't one of them. He intended to relish every moment he had with the Archangel.

* * * *

Hours later, a knock at the door woke Michael from a peaceful slumber. Instead of dislodging Draco from his position against his chest, Michael mentally told Lu to enter.

Despite being locked, the door opened and Lu and Dominic stepped into the room. Lu was all smiles as he took in the scene of Draco sleeping in Michael's arms. "How cute."

At the sound of Lu's voice, Draco woke with a start. He blinked several times. "Sorry," he mumbled, wiping a small amount of drool from Michael's shoulder. "You should've woken me."

Michael wouldn't tell Draco in front of Lu and Dominic, but he found the fact that Draco drooled in his sleep to be a very endearing quality. "They just got here."

Draco started to climb from Michael's lap, but Michael was having none of it. He didn't know how much longer he'd be allowed to hold the man of his heart, but he refused to relinquish him before he was forced to.

Still chuckling, Lu sat beside Dominic on the sofa. "I spoke with Julian this evening," Lu began.

"And?" Michael might not know the ins and outs of Old Town but he had no trouble recognizing the name of another of his fallen brothers.

"Azrael is demanding answers. Julian tried to explain the situation, but Azrael's raising quite a stink with Father. He's insisting on a formal hearing to determine blame in the fall of yet another Angel."

"Fine. The sooner the better," Michael said.

Lu glanced at Dominic before returning his attention to Michael and Draco. "The hearing is to determine rights to Draco. According to Azrael, if Draco was already Kael's property, it was you who caused his descent into the realm of the demon by taking him."

"That's bullshit!" Draco jumped to his feet. "I've never *belonged* to anyone, especially Kael, and I'll gladly tell that to whomever I need to."

"If you lose, you could be ordered to live out eternity in Old Town," Lu further explained.

"No!" Michael joined in Draco's outrage. "I'll find somewhere to hide him before I'll let that happen."

"And go against Father?" Lu asked, his eyes wide.

Michael swallowed around the lump in his throat. He'd done so many things he didn't like or approve of because he'd been ordered to do so. Always, no matter what, Michael had put his faith in God. "What does Father say?"

Lu chuckled. "Azrael has Father's ear, you know that. However, according to Julian, Azrael would rather handle this situation without troubling Father."

"Then I shall refuse Azrael's request for a hearing." Michael sat back down and pulled Draco protectively into his arms.

"I wouldn't do that," Lu said.

"Are you saying you would stand by and allow Azrael to determine Dominic's fate?" Michael couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"No, but if you bring Father into this, you'll forever live with his decision. However, if Azrael's decision doesn't go Draco's way, you can throw yourself on Father's mercy. You're his favorite, you know that."

"It wasn't always that way," Michael mumbled. He'd always come second to Lucifer until his brother had broken their law. *What if I'm to suffer the same fate?*

"If Azrael judges against Draco, I'll take him away," Michael told Lu.

Lu nodded. "And I'll help you all I can, but first let's play Azrael's power game. One look at Kael's reaction to you and Draco being together should sway our brother into our way of thinking."

"I have to be in the same room with Kael?" Draco asked, his face pale.

Michael kissed Draco's temple. "You won't be without protection. I've risked everything to see you away from him, that hasn't changed."

Draco stared into Michael's eyes, his own brimming with moisture. "I won't let you risk any more for me than you already have. If it comes to me or your place in Heaven, you have to know I'm not worth it."

Michael wasn't sure that even his place in Heaven was worth living one day without the man in his arms, but he refused to make promises that he may be unable to keep. "Do not worry about me, love. The most important thing is keeping you as far away from Kael as possible."

Once Draco nodded, Michael returned his attention to Lu. "Where is this hearing to take place? The Between is out because Kael would never be allowed there, and I don't see Azrael coming to The City."

Lu worried his black hair with his fingers for several moments before answering. "I've agreed to hold it at The Temple. Azrael agreed as long as he didn't have to step outside of it."

"You're going to let Kael in The Temple?" Michael asked. He'd come to understand how important Lu's faith still was to him. Defiling such a place with a demon spirit was unthinkable.

"What else would you have me do? The alternative is to have the hearing in The Between without Kael present, and we need him there to prove he's beyond insane."

Draco leaned toward Lu. "But your temple?" He shook his head. "You would do that for me?"

Michael noticed the way Dominic reached out to thread his fingers through Lu's. Evidently the choice of location had not been an easy one for Lu to make.

"It's a building. Whether or not Kael enters it won't change my love for my Father." Lu

looked at Michael. "Or my brother."

"Thank you," Michael whispered, ashamed for the many years he'd held a grudge against Lu. He'd always known Lu had done what his heart told him to do, but Michael hadn't understood until he'd met Draco. Lu's love for the human race was apparent in the city he had built for them. Shame settled deep in Michael's soul for their lost time. Lu didn't need to reside in Heaven to be his brother. It was a lesson he'd never forget.

"When will this be taking place?" Michael asked.

"One week. Azrael has prior commitments, and I think it would be best for you to take Draco to The Between until then."

Something in the way Lu squirmed in his seat told Michael his brother knew something he didn't. "What's wrong with staying here until then?"

"Julian said they were having trouble keeping Kael in Old Town. We both know he can't enter The Between, so I think that's where you should take Draco."

"I've never run from a fight in my existence," Michael began.

"This isn't about you. It's about keeping Draco away from Kael until the hearing," Lu cut him off.

"Listen to Lu," Dominic added. "Use the time you've been given without looking over your shoulder every moment. Just enjoy each other for the next week."

Michael rather liked the idea of doing nothing but holding Draco for the next seven days. "Okay, but promise me you'll contact me if anything changes."

"I promise," Lu answered.

Kissing Draco's cheek, Michael ran his hand in circles over the man's hip. "I guess the only thing we have left to decide is what kind of vacation we'd like to take."

"What?" Draco asked.

Michael smiled. "The Between can be anything you imagine it to be. Whatever's in your heart will appear as real as the chair I'm sitting on."

Draco chuckled. "In that case, let me surprise you."

Chapter Five

Once they were alone, Michael squeezed Draco's thigh. "So, let me in on the surprise. What kind of surroundings will we find once we get to The Between?"

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I'm not telling."

"Just a hint?"

How could he refuse such a handsome man? Draco wrapped his arms around Michael's neck. "It's the only memory I have before my father rescued me from the mountain."

Michael nodded. "Good, so we're going to Greece."

"I don't know where it is," Draco said with a shrug. "But it's where I go to in my mind when I need comfort." Draco bit his bottom lip. "I never told my father that. I didn't want him to know I had to go somewhere else to seek comfort."

"Have you seen your father since your death?"

"No. He wouldn't approve of the man I've become." Draco climbed off Michael's lap. Thoughts of his father always soured his mood. The man who'd taken him in, fed him, raised him and most important, loved him, deserved more than the man Draco had become after his death. All the teachings and understanding he'd been afforded during life had been lost on him.

"Can we just go?" Draco asked. He held out his hand in hopes Michael would drop the subject of his father.

"Yes." Michael stood and took both of Draco's hands in his. "Close your eyes and think of your peaceful place, and I'll get us there."

Draco nodded and did as instructed. A sudden gust of wind ruffled his hair moments before he heard...birds. Smiling, he inhaled the smell of sweet honeysuckle. *Yes.* He dared to open his eyes, praying everything would be exactly as he remembered. The lush landscape, the

gently rolling hills, trees and plenty of flowers was an exact duplicate of his dreams. *Perfect.*

"I did it." Draco released Michael's hands and spun around in circles with his arms stretched out. For the first time in over two millennia, he laughed from the depths of his soul.

It was Michael who stopped him, stepping in to wrap an arm around his waist. "This is the place you remember?"

"Yes. It's perfect, isn't it?" Draco couldn't wait to roam the hills or soak his feet in the lake.

"But this is Father's workshop. How could you remember it?"

Draco had no idea what Michael was talking about. The tranquil surroundings hardly resembled a dirty workshop. "Are we seeing the same thing?"

"Yes. Eden."

"Eden? No. This is where I was born. My true home," he tried to explain.

Michael diverted his gaze to the lush landscape. "This is Eden, the place where all souls are created. You must have read about it and become confused."

Draco refused to let Michael ruin this memory for him. "No!" he shouted and pushed out of Michael's embrace. "If I read about it, would I know there's a lake with crystal clear water just down and around that hill?"

"The Lake of Purity," Michael mumbled. "But how...?"

"I told you. I've been here," Draco tried to explain once more. He took off at a run towards the lake, slipping out of his clothes as he did. With each step he took, his soul felt lighter. Without explanation, tears began to cloud his vision. It had been too long since he'd felt such peace.

He glanced over his shoulder to find Michael still standing in the same spot. Why didn't Michael believe him? The notion hurt, but he refused to let it dampen his spirit. For the first time since he'd been plucked out of the wilderness by his father, Draco felt alive.

* * * *

Michael waited until Draco was out of sight before summoning Raphael. His brother appeared within moments, sword in hand.

"What's wrong with you? Your wings look like you've fought a war." Raphael said.

"It doesn't matter. That's not why I called you here." Michael gestured to their surroundings. "Do you recognize this place?"

"Of course. It's where we were created. What's this about?" Raphael sheathed his sword.

"This isn't my memory. It's Draco's. How can that be?" Michael asked as he bent to pluck

a field daisy.

Raphael chuckled. "Did you think we were the only beings created here? You're even more conceited than I thought."

Michael shook his head. "I know Adam and Eve were created here, but they were then transplanted to earth. How could Draco have seen this place?"

"Perhaps he's not descended from Adam and Eve. Perhaps he's a unique being."

It was obvious by Raphael's rakish grin that he knew more. Michael took a step toward his brother. He pulled a term Lu had used to describe Draco from his memories. "What is a Bruggata?"

Laughing, Raphael dropped to the ground and stretched out comfortably. "Why do you ask?"

Michael knelt. He needed to look into his brother's eyes when he questioned him. "I've heard the term, but I don't know what it means. Lu told me he heard you and Gabriel discussing a Bruggata, so don't play dumb."

Raphael sighed. "I've told you before, I'm not allowed to discuss your friend with you."

"So you're saying Draco is a Bruggata?"

"Perhaps," Raphael said with a grin. "But that's all you'll get from me."

Raphael disappeared before Michael could ask anything more. Michael finished the childish game of *He loves me, He loves me not* with the daisy's petals before going in search of Draco.

* * * *

The lake was neither hot nor cold as Draco closed his eyes and floated, letting the slight current take him where it wanted. Even the sound of splashing water as someone joined him didn't disrupt the moment.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you earlier," Michael's deep voice said.

Cracking one eyelid open, Draco looked at his beloved. "I can't explain why I know this place, only that I do."

"I know that now."

There was something in Michael's voice that troubled Draco. He forced his feet under the water and swam to the edge of the lake before pulling himself up to sit on the moss-covered bank. "Why now and not earlier?"

"I spoke to Raphael," Michael said, joining Draco on the bank.

“And?”

“He wouldn’t confirm or deny anything. Typical of him.”

“What’re you talking about, Michael? Confirm or deny what?” Draco didn’t need anyone to tell him what he already knew, nor did he need anyone to believe him, not even Michael.

“That you’re not human.”

The idea was preposterous. Perhaps Michael was trying to convince himself of something that wasn’t true. Draco supposed it would be difficult for an Archangel to admit he’d fallen for a simple human.

“I lived almost forty-seven years with the ability to feel pain and bleed. Believe me, I’m as human as they come.”

Michael shook his head and reached out to cup Draco’s cheek. “The term Bruggata keeps coming up around you. I still don’t know what it means, but I believe it refers to you and how you know this place.”

God’s biggest mistake. Kael’s words came back to haunt Draco. No. He refused to dwell on anything Kael said while under the madman’s knife, not here. Not in his homeland.

“Have you ever fished?” Draco asked, trying to change the subject.

“Why would I do that? I’ve always had plenty to eat.”

Draco rested his forearms on his raised knees and gazed out over the pristine lake. “Because sometimes life is about more than survival. Sure, catching fish may feed your body, but the act of fishing feeds your soul.”

“Show me,” Michael whispered as he kissed Draco’s neck.

* * * *

Michael fell to the ground in an effort to untangle himself from the fishing line. He stared up at Draco who held his stomach as he continued to laugh.

“Fuck that’s funny,” Draco said, wiping tears from his eyes.

“I’m glad you find my predicament amusing,” Michael growled. He finally gave up on the line and willed it to disappear.

Standing, he settled his hands on his hips. “Why do you do that?”

“Sorry. It was funny,” Draco said, obviously making an effort to stop laughing.

“Not that. Cuss. Why do you feel the need to say such things?” There had been times when an expletive escaped Michael but it was usually in great times of trouble, never over something as petty as someone getting caught up in fishing line.

“Because it’s fun and sometimes it fits the situation. Try it. You’ll see.”

“No,” Michael said with a shake to his head.

Draco walked toward Michael and pressed his nude body against Michael’s. Reaching between them, Draco began to fondle Michael’s sac. “Come on. Please? For me? Just say *Fuck* for no reason at all.”

Although Draco was clearly trying to manipulate him into doing something he didn’t want to do, Michael couldn’t refuse the man who was currently giving his cock quite a hand job. “I want to *fuck* you,” he finally said.

Draco chuckled. “Close. And I promise we’ll get to that soon enough, but I want you to say it for no reason at all.”

Draco released Michael’s cock and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Fuck!” he screamed to the sky.

Michael tried. He opened his mouth to scream the word, hoping it would get Draco’s hand back to his cock sooner, but nothing came out. “I can’t. Isn’t it enough that I’m fishing? That I’m naked and wanting you although I’ve come to know this place as sacred? Must you try and change everything about me!”

The longer he talked, the angrier he became. Michael pulled away from Draco and turned his back. “How much of myself do I have to give up to please you?”

Michael waited for an answer for several long, torturous moments. When none came, he turned around and found only himself, alone beside the lake, Draco’s fishing pole on the ground in front of him.

His first thought was for Draco’s safety. He quickly scanned the area, his heart in his throat until he spotted Draco’s bronzed back disappearing through the trees. Was this to be their first fight?

* * * *

Draco paced around the living room, worrying the rising scar on his face. He was beyond ashamed of himself. How could he have forgotten what Michael truly was? He deserved to have his distorted features back. He’d committed a terrible act against everything he’d believed holy and God was punishing him for it.

The door opened, and Draco stopped in his tracks as Michael strode into the room. Draco fell at the Archangel’s feet and wept. “Please forgive me. I know what I did was blasphemous. I have no excuse, only that I forgot who you were for a moment. I promise I won’t make the same

mistake twice.”

Michael sat on the floor in front of Draco. “I like that you treat me as an equal. I only ask that you not ask me to perform tricks for you. Especially ones that go against my beliefs, not as an Archangel but as a person.”

Draco dried his eyes and shook his head. “That wasn’t my intention. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I get the impression that everything we do together is new for you. I was just trying to...” Draco shook his head. “I don’t know anymore what I was trying to do.”

Michael opened his arms and Draco hesitated for only a moment before clinging to Michael’s muscular chest. Michael reached down and tilted Draco’s face up with a finger under the chin. “What happened? Why are the scars returning?”

Draco fingered the most prominent. “Because God’s ashamed of the man I’ve become.”

“No. I refuse to believe that.” Michael stood and carried Draco to the sofa. “I think you, alone, are responsible for them. For some reason, you feel the need to continually punish yourself. I believe the scars are a manifestation of those feelings.”

Draco started to argue but stopped himself before he could utter a denial. He thought back at the years spent at the cruel hands of Kael. Never had he been forced to seek Kael out. Upon his death, Draco had gone willingly with Kael to Old Town. He’d stayed for years even after the torture began because he felt he deserved such treatment.

The one time he’d left and tried living in The City, he’d kept to the shadows in an effort to hide his mangled face from those around him. When Lu came to ask help in defeating one of Draco’s enemies, he couldn’t refuse. The chance to put an end to Lysander was far too appealing. In the process, he’d been reintroduced to two men from his past, Baz and Galen. His scars began to fade when Galen, a young soldier he’d known from his days in Sparta, had seen beyond the pink puckered skin to the man he had once been. For Draco, having friends who liked him despite his appearance erased some of the damage Kael had wrought. For a time, he’d forgiven himself for the shame he’d carried into the afterlife. With his face healed, Draco had attempted to reconnect with his friends from Sparta, Baz and Galen and their partner, Nick.

And then, after meeting Michael for the first time, the shame had once again enveloped him. That alone was the reason he’d sought Kael out the moment he’d stepped through the gates of Old Town.

“What’re you thinking about?” Michael asked.

Draco wrapped his arms around his mid-section and closed his eyes. “My self-hatred is

doing this to me.”

“How in God’s name could you hate such a divine creature?”

“Don’t.” Draco pulled away from Michael’s gentle touch. “You were my patron saint. The one I looked to for guidance and protection. I allowed myself to cross a line when I began to dream of you in terms of a friend and lover, and for that I will always make myself pay. If the cost is in scars, so be it.”

“Then I should share in those scars,” Michael whispered. “Because I think of you as a friend and lover. Because I’m grateful beyond words that you’ve come into my life. For millennia I’ve fought for man because I was told to do so. It wasn’t until I met you that I began to understand the importance of what I’d been fighting for.”

Draco uncurled himself and glanced up as Michael continued.

“You’ve brought more into my existence than I can ever repay. I see now that my soul was never complete. Because until you, I’d never truly loved anything.”

Draco leaned in and kissed Michael, daring to slip his tongue inside for just a moment. “If being with me compromises your position in Heaven, I can’t continue this. I love you too much to take something so special away from the millions of people who need you to do your job.”

Michael brushed his lips across Draco’s mouth once more before standing. “There’s something I need to do. Will you be okay here by yourself for awhile?”

“Yes.” Draco gazed at Michael, knowing it may very well be the last time he saw him.

Michael’s fingers ruffled Draco’s hair. “Time is different where I’m going. If I’m not back before the hearing, Lu will get you there. But have no fear. I promised I’d protect you, and I’ll not go back on my word.”

Before Michael could vanish, Draco reached out for him. “Wait!”

Michael looked at him with a question in his eyes.

“Make love to me. Please. Just once I want to experience true love expressed the way God intended.”

Michael took Draco’s hand and led him toward the bedroom. “Why did you conjure your bungalow? I would have thought perhaps the house you grew up in, but I never considered your home in The City to be your fantasy.”

Draco lay on the bed and studied his simple bedroom before answering. “Because this is the place I’ll have to go back to eventually. I guess I wanted memories of you in the place I’ll live out my existence.”

Michael rested his knee on the foot of the bed. "Then we'd better make use of our time. We have a lot of memories to make."

Nodding, Draco welcomed the weight of Michael's body with open arms. As their lips touched, Draco tried to push all negative thoughts away. It was obvious Michael was also worried about their future together. The pressure riding squarely on Michael's wide shoulders had to be insurmountable.

If anyone deserved a moment to forget who they were and what lay ahead, it was Michael. Draco wrapped his arms and legs around Michael's powerful body and opened his mouth, happy to receive everything Michael was willing to give.

With a groan, Michael broke the kiss and began licking his way down Draco's neck to his chest. He lapped at a pebbled nipple while grinding his cock against Draco's thigh.

There were so many things Draco wished they had time for. If only he could keep Michael in his bed for the next two hundred years or so. By the way Michael's cock was producing pre-cum, Draco was afraid his inexperienced lover would finish before they had a chance to truly make love for the first time.

"Get back up here and kiss me," Draco said when Michael began to hump his leg.

Michael released Draco's nipple and moved up until they were once again face to face. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all. Too right, if anything. I just need to feel you inside of me before it's too late."

Sad was the only way to describe the expression that crossed Michael's face. "Tell me what to do. What do you need?"

Hoping his conjured home was the same as his house in The City, Draco reached into the bedside drawer. With a triumphant smile, he held up a bottle of lube. "I want you inside of me, so I need you to stretch me out using this."

Draco glanced down at the large cock bobbing between them. "It might take a lot of stretching."

Michael sat back on his heels and took the bottle from Draco. He stared at it for several seconds before popping the top. Putting it up to his nose, he inhaled. "What is it?"

"Lubrication. My body doesn't have the ability to produce its own, at least not there, so you'll have to use that to ease the way."

The confused look on Michael's face almost broke his heart. What would it be like to have lived so long yet lived so little? Draco reached for the bottle. "May I?"

Draco poured several large drops onto his fingers and reached between his legs. It never felt the same when he did it himself, but this wasn't just about him. He circled his hole several times with Michael's big blue eyes watching every move.

After Draco inserted a single finger, Michael took back the lube. "I'll do it."

Confident he'd left Michael's pride intact, Draco removed his finger and relaxed back on the pillows. He smiled when Michael poured lube onto his fingers and spent several moments playing with the slippery liquid.

Michael suddenly looked sheepish as he looked at Draco. "Sorry. I've just never felt anything like this."

"No. It's good. You're warming it up. It'll feel that much better."

With a relieved expression, Michael lowered his hand to Draco's hole. The first brush of Michael's finger had gooseflesh breaking out over Draco's skin.

"Yes, like that," Draco moaned when Michael pushed inside.

"I'm inside of you," Michael said, awe in his voice.

"Yes," Draco whispered.

"Another?" Michael asked.

"Yes. Please," he begged. "I hope someday I'll have a chance to show you all the joys to be found in foreplay."

"I'd like that."

Mentally, Draco went through a list of positions while Michael continued. Of course his choice would've been missionary but for Michael's first time, Draco thought better of it. His decision made, he reached down and stilled Michael's hand.

"That's enough. Lay down." Draco rolled out of the way, leaving the center of the bed empty.

With the enthusiasm of a child and the needs of a man, Michael did as asked. "Now what do I do?"

"Hold your cock by the base to steady it for me," Draco instructed, applying lube to the length of Michael's erection.

In position, Draco reached back and guided Michael's cock to his hole. He winced as the head pushed through the outer ring of muscles.

"Stop. I'm hurting you," Michael said. He wrapped his hands around Draco's hips and stilled his downward progression.

Draco shook his head. "I'm fine. It's hard to describe but it's a welcomed kind of discomfort. It'll pass."

He stared into Michael's eyes. The need to express what was in his heart at that moment was overwhelming. "I may be fated to a life in Hell, but I don't care because having you inside of me is worth everything."

The grip on Draco's hips relaxed, but Michael seemed to watch him like a hawk. Draco schooled his features while trying to keep his body relaxed. Michael's cock was bigger than any he'd taken before but Draco wouldn't let his worried lover know that.

Fully seated at last, Draco smiled down at Michael. "You're truly inside of me now."

Draco allowed himself several moments before leaning forward, drawing Michael's cock out of his body. Before Michael had a chance to protest, Draco rocked back, once again impaling himself.

Michael's bright blue eyes lit up as Draco began a smooth, slow rhythm. "I didn't know..."

Although being Michael's first was a powerful feeling, it also worried Draco. What if he'd just opened the door for Michael's future lovers? If, as he feared, this was their one and only time together, would Michael begin to take others to his bed?

No! Draco tried to push the thought away. He readjusted himself to plant his feet on the mattress. He was determined to give Michael the best experience of his life. Just let another man try and please Michael. With luck, by the time Michael came he would know the truth, just as Draco already knew it. There was no other for him, ever. If he was forced to live out his existence without Michael, he'd live it alone.

"Something's happening," Michael groaned, his face contorting in a painful expression.

Draco reached down and moved one of Michael's hands to his leaking cock, wrapping the long fingers around his length. It wouldn't take long for either of them. He ground his ass against Michael and moaned.

"Don't hold back. Just let yourself fly," Draco panted as the first string of cum shot from his cock.

Michael's cries sounded like those of an animal as his body began to vibrate with the force of his climax. Draco collapsed against his lover's chest as Michael thrust deeper with every spasm. With each shot of Michael's seed Draco's shame began to fall away. Yes, some may say what he was doing was wrong, but no longer did he question his reasons for loving Michael. What he felt was pure and no judgment against him could change that.

“Is that what it feels like to fly?” Draco asked around panting breaths.

Michael groaned. “No. That was so much better.”

Wrapped tight in Michael’s arms, Draco tried to calm his breathing. There was so much he wanted to say to Michael before he left but settled on three simple words. “I love you.”

Michael’s arms tightened even more, threatening to cut off Draco’s breath. “I can’t give you up.”

Chapter Six

Draco gently pushed himself back and forth on the porch swing of his house in The Between. It had been four days since Michael left, determined to find a way for them to be together. "Have you heard from Michael?"

"No," Lu said from his chair across from Draco. "But I have a favor to ask you."

Only twice had Lu ever asked Draco for a favor. The first time it had been his pleasure to put an end to Lysander. The second favor hadn't gone as well with him ending up in Kael's sadistic clutches once again. However, with Michael gone and no idea when or if his lover would return, Draco decided he needed the distraction.

"As long as it has nothing to do with Old Town, I'm all ears," he finally answered.

"I need you to spend some time with Cory. He's back to work and even living with Tao, but he's still blaming himself for what happened. He believes if you hadn't gone into Old Town to rescue him from his father, you wouldn't have once again, suffered at Kael's hands."

"That's ridiculous."

"I know," Lu agreed. "But he won't listen to anyone. I was hoping he'd listen to you."

"Bring him here. If Tao needs to come with him, that's fine." Draco couldn't believe Lu had waited so long to ask for his help. Cory should be reveling in the love he'd found with the big doorman, not worrying about a man who went to Kael with the intent to further punish himself.

"Thank you." Lu stood and stretched his arms over his head. "And thanks for bringing me here. I know it's not the real thing, but it's been a long time since I've allowed myself to remember where I came from."

Draco waved as Lu disappeared. Once again he was alone with nothing else to do but worry about Michael. He had no idea where Michael had gone and he hadn't asked. It was

enough to know that wherever his beloved went it was to fight for them.

* * * *

Leaving Tao back on the front porch with Lu and Dominic, Draco led Cory away from the house. "I'd forgotten how damn big Tao is. Will he snap me like a twig if I show you the lake?"

Cory chuckled, although the action didn't reach his eyes. "Don't let his size intimidate you. He's the gentlest man I've ever known. I love him more than anything."

Draco smiled. "Then it's time you embraced it fully."

"I do," Cory said.

"You may think you do, but you would have so much more to give if you released the shame and worry you seem to carry around like an old friend."

"I guess the two of us are alike in that respect, huh?" Cory glanced up at Draco. "I'm glad to see you're okay."

"I'm better than okay, but even if I weren't it wouldn't be your fault."

"But that stuff with Kael...", Cory began.

Draco stopped walking and turned Cory to face him. "What happened with Kael had absolutely nothing to do with you. That's what I need to get through that pretty head of yours. I've been torturing myself at Kael's hands for over two thousand years."

"Why?"

Draco shrugged. "Because I felt it was wrong to want Michael the way I did. Because I let Kael brainwash me into believing he'd kill Michael if I ever attempted to act on my desire for him."

Draco turned and began walking again. He looked up into the sky as a brightly colored parrot flew overhead towards the garden.

"You didn't think you deserved him," Cory said, his voice so soft Draco barely heard him.

"Yes, exactly. I still don't, but I've learned not to question Michael's love for me."

"I have trouble with that sometimes," Cory admitted. "I know Tao loves me, and I know I love him, but sometimes I worry that he'll discover I'm not worth it."

Draco nodded his understanding. "If I had to guess, I'd say most people feel the same way about the one they love. We're always hardest on ourselves, ya know? I'm sure what you consider a major flaw about yourself, Tao finds endearing."

"So if you know all this, why're you worried about Michael?" Cory asked.

How did he explain? "It's...different with Michael. Tao's finished with his time on earth, but Michael's work has just begun. Sadly, it's not whether Michael believes I'm worthy of his love. That decision is up to God."

"That sucks."

"Yeah," Draco agreed.

"So you don't think Michael would choose you over God?" Cory asked.

"I wouldn't let him. I can be a selfish prick from time to time, but my love and happiness can't outweigh the importance of Michael's duty to the world."

Cory nodded. "I see what you're saying."

Draco bumped Cory with his shoulder. "So you'll let me worry about me, right?"

"I don't know. I mean, I've carried these feelings for so long that I doubt I'd know how to live without them."

Draco thought of the moment when he'd given up the shame he'd carried for so long and the freedom it had allowed. "You'll be surprised how quickly that space will be filled with something else."

"Like what?"

"Love. Not only Tao's love, but love for yourself." Draco sighed, realizing he did love himself for the first time since he'd been plucked from the side of the mountain. Even if he was forced to give Michael up, nothing could make him ashamed of his feelings. Shame simply no longer had a place in his life.

* * * *

"Michael, you need to eat something," Gabriel said.

From his position of prayer in front of the closed doors, Michael shook his head. "Go away."

"No. I won't watch you do this to yourself anymore."

For the first time in days, Michael stopped praying and sat up to look at his brother. "Then you'd better go away. Because for the first time in my existence I'm in love, and there's nothing you can say or do to change that."

Gabriel threw up his hands. "Is it worth this? Look at yourself. You're Michael, the fiercest Archangel in Heaven. Just look at what love has reduced you to, begging at God's door like a common man."

"There's nothing wrong with the common man. Like you, I used to believe I was better

than humans, but I was wrong. Before I met Draco, I believed emotions to be messy. I did my job because it was mine to do. I did it because it was the right thing to do. But never once did I find the joy in it that I've found in a simple smile from Draco. So yes, brother, I would gladly beg for the next ten thousand years if it would allow me the chance to be with a common man."

Michael's entire body vibrated with anger as Gabriel continued to stare at him like he was a weak-minded fool. He was a heartbeat away from cutting the smug grin from his brother's face when Gabriel started to clap his hands.

"It's about time, brother. We were beginning to think your heart was made of the same stone as the statues that bear your likeness."

In the blink of an eye, Gabriel was flanked by Raphael, Azrael, Jeremiel and several others that had fought beside him through time.

"What is this about?" Michael stood and drew his sword.

"Sheath your sword," Gabriel growled.

For the first time in memory, Michael truly felt the weight of his sword. He knew to draw on a brother was a declaration of war, much like the war raised with Kael. It was only out of respect for his brothers that he eventually did as asked.

"There. Now answer my question," he demanded.

"The Bruggata," Raphael spoke. "Is he worth giving up everything for?"

There was that term again. "If by Bruggata, you mean Draco, then the answer is yes. But I would hope Father would allow me to continue serving him. I now understand the importance of what I do. It would be a shame to waste the knowledge Draco has helped me to acquire."

The large doors at Michael's back opened.

"Then speak your case," Gabriel said, gesturing to their father's realm.

* * * *

"Where's Michael?" Draco asked Lu as Gabriel, Raphael and Azrael entered the temple without Michael.

"I don't know. Stay here." Lu turned to Julian. "Protect him at all costs."

The Archangel charged with maintaining peace between Heaven and Hell nodded. Draco watched as Lu crossed the room to speak to the Archangels. Draco had been led to believe that only Azrael would preside over the hearing. Did Gabriel and Raphael's appearance mean he'd be judged by all of them?

Within moments, Lu began shaking his head vehemently. "No! This is absurd!"

Draco glanced at Dominic. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, but evidently Lu doesn't like it," Dominic said from between clenched jaws.

Draco's nerves were close to getting the better of him when Lu broke away from the three Archangels. Red-faced, Lu walked back across the room. Draco couldn't remember ever seeing his friend so angry.

"What's going on?" Draco asked.

Lu said nothing for several seconds. Draco was about to ask again when Lu finally spoke. "You don't have to worry about Kael. Father has already addressed that situation."

Relief filled Draco. "That's good though, right?"

"Yes. That part's good."

"What else?" Dominic asked.

"The hearing will continue. Only it's Draco they are here to assess."

Draco stumbled backward. "Is that why Michael isn't here?"

Lu nodded. "He's being held pending the outcome."

"Being held?" Draco shook his head. "Fuck that." Before Lu could try to stop him, Draco marched over to the group of Archangels. "Let Michael go!"

"We can't do that until we determine your worth."

"My worth? Are you asking if I'm worthy of Michael? The answer is no. I'll never be worthy of him, but I'll spend every day trying to live up to the man he deserves." Draco did something he'd rarely ever done. He dropped to his knees and clasped his hands in front of him.

"Even if you find me unfit for such a great warrior, release him. Please, I'm begging you."

"It's not that simple," Raphael said, glancing at his brothers. Gabriel nodded and Raphael continued. "Michael has made it clear that, if forced, he will give up everything for you."

Draco shook his head. "I don't want that. I told him that."

Raphael grinned. "That won't stop him." Raphael's expression turned sober. "The problem is Michael has enemies, even in Heaven."

"Like Kael?" Draco asked.

Azrael cleared his throat. "Not any longer. The problem is that you should have never been taken to Old Town in the first place and Kael knew that, but he coveted what was not his and for that he has paid."

"I killed myself," Draco admitted. "Old Town was where I belonged."

"Your time in Old Town has tainted your memories, Bruggata." Gabriel motioned for Draco to stand. "Until you revisit your life on earth, you will be of no use to Michael."

Draco rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. None of this made sense. "I don't understand," he finally admitted.

"We know," Gabriel said, gesturing to his brothers. "We were remiss in your care while on earth. I'm ashamed to say it was jealousy on our part, sins for which we've already atoned. With your permission, I can help you remember."

"My life was an unhappy one. Why would I want to remember it?" Draco asked.

"Because it holds the key to who you are," Gabriel explained.

Draco's hand immediately went to his midsection and the missing bellybutton that should be there but wasn't. He remembered few things about his childhood, but he did remember asking his father once. The answer had been simple and Draco had never asked again. *"Because God made you that way."*

He thought of Michael's muscled stomach. Of course he'd noticed Michael also didn't have a bellybutton, but Draco didn't dare compare himself to an Archangel.

"Does this have something to do with where I came from?" Draco finally asked.

"Yes. The answers are there. You just need to remember them." Gabriel held out both hands. "Will you let me help you?"

Draco looked over his shoulder to where Lu paced back and forth across the marble floor. He knew in his heart that his friend wouldn't put him in danger, even at the hands of his brothers.

"Okay," he agreed, reaching out with shaking hands to clasp Gabriel's.

"Close your eyes," Gabriel instructed.

* * * *

"Do you recognize this place?" Gabriel asked.

Draco opened his eyes and studied the surrounding landscape. "It's the mountain where my father found me."

"Concentrate. Tell me what you see?"

Not sure what he should be searching for, Draco's gaze landed on three people. They were hazy at first, but the more he concentrated, the clearer they became. He recognized his father right away, though he looked so much younger than Draco remembered him to be. "My father."

"Yes. Who else?" Gabriel asked.

"Me," Draco said, recognizing the small boy. He gasped when he realized who the third person was. "And you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't I remember that?" Draco started to walk toward the apparition but a hand on his arm stopped him.

"Your father didn't happen by. He was called to this location by my father and given an important task."

Draco spun back around to question Gabriel and found himself in his childhood home. Once again he concentrated on the shadows seated at the small wooden table. The boy had to be around seven, the age Spartan boys began their military training.

"I don't understand. What's so special about studying with my father?" Draco whispered to Gabriel.

"Shhh. Concentrate and listen."

"Tomorrow you will start your training. It is very important that you listen to your instructors and become the best soldier you can be," his father said.

"So I can protect Sparta?" a young Draco asked.

"So you can protect the world at Michael's side."

The boy's hand clutched the medal around his neck. "My Michael?"

"Yes. This life is merely training for your next life," Calibis answered with a ruffle to the boy's black curls.

Hungry for more knowledge, Draco skipped ahead to his twentieth year. Like every year, Calibis celebrated the day he'd rescued Draco from the mountain. Only Draco now knew it was the day Gabriel had given his father Draco to raise. What he still didn't understand was why.

"The others are choosing wives, father. Must I?" the young man Draco had become asked.

"No. I have spoken to the King and explained that you are unable to father children. Because of this, a woman will not be wasted on you."

Young Draco chuckled. "'Tis a good thing, for I would not know what to do with such a soft creature."

Calibis thumped him on the shoulder. "Yours is a match made in Heaven, so it's best you feel that way."

Draco couldn't help but laugh at the young man he'd once been. He turned to Gabriel. "I

think I understand now. I was always meant for Michael, wasn't I?"

"Yes, but you aren't finished yet."

Once again time skipped ahead. The man he saw in front of him was an older version of himself. The hair on Draco's neck stood on end. "This is the day I killed myself."

"Yes."

Draco turned away. "I don't want to be here anymore. Take me back."

"This is important. It's the reason you gave yourself to Kael for so long. It's time you faced what you did." Although Gabriel said the words in a monotone, the comforting hand on Draco's back told him the Archangel was not unaffected by the situation.

"Please, Michael. Please talk to me," the Draco of the vision begged. "All my life I've trained for you. Waited for you. Why now when my heart is empty, and I reach for you, do you shun me?"

Laughter echoed in the room. Draco turned to find Kael and his magnificent wings watching him from the doorway.

"Michael does not hear you because he does not care," Kael said.

"No. I'm to fight by his side...", Draco began.

"Michael fights with no one. You were a failed experiment, Bruggata. God's biggest mistake."

Draco reached for the dagger at his waist. "Take it back."

"It wouldn't help if I did. They're just words, but you know the truth. How long have you prayed to Michael? Have you even once felt his presence?"

Sobbing, Draco sunk to the floor. "But I love him."

"You love a dream, nothing more. Come with me, and your life will not have been in vain." Kael moved to kneel at Draco's side. Those soft wings wrapped around him and for the first time in his life he felt comforted.

"Why?" Draco cried. "Why would Michael do this to me? Why would God do this to me?"

"Because you're not worth it. As I have told you. It was an experiment, nothing more." Kael ran a sharp fingernail down the length of Draco's forearm. *"I'm all you have. The only one who truly loves you."*

Draco watched as blood flowed from the wound to the floor. "I tried so hard to be good enough for him."

Covering his ears, Draco closed his eyes and screamed. "Stop it! I can't do this anymore!"

"Draco!" Lu yelled as he shook him by the shoulders.

Draco opened his eyes to find himself in the temple, surrounded by confused and worried

expressions. "It was my fault. All of it." He wiped at his eyes. "I didn't have enough faith in Michael, right?" he asked Gabriel.

Gabriel nodded. "You are the Bruggata. The best of Heaven and Earth. You were created to bring humanity to Michael but before you could do that, you had to live the life of a human. Because you allowed that lifetime to be cut short, Michael never learned of your existence."

Draco nodded. Now that it was too late to go back and finish his life, he finally understood. Wiping at his eyes, he turned to Lu. "Please take me home."

* * * *

"How could you do that to him?!" Michael yelled at Gabriel.

"I'm sorry, Michael. It was the only way."

In full battle mode, Michael grabbed Gabriel around the neck. "This was your fault. Father put you in charge of such a precious gift and you allowed jealousy to cloud your judgment. I should have been told when Draco became a man, at least."

Gabriel didn't even try to fight Michael. He simply nodded. "Yes, but I wasn't the only one. We all coveted the gift Father had given you."

"So beg for your own fucking Bruggata but leave mine alone!" Michael growled.

Gabriel's eyes rounded at Michael's profanity. "It seems some of the Bruggata's less than spiritual traits have rubbed off on you."

Michael released Gabriel. "That was the point, wasn't it?"

Gabriel straightened his garment. "I'm sure Father explained to you why Draco won't be allowed to dwell in our house."

"Yes," Michael ground out between clenched jaws. "That's why I'm moving out."

Gabriel gasped. "There's no need for that. You may still visit your Bruggata in The Between."

For the first time in his existence, Michael actually felt sorry for Gabriel. He couldn't judge his brother too harshly. Like him only a short time ago, Gabriel had never known love, so it was natural for him not to understand.

"I'll never again feel at home unless Draco is at my side. If leaving this house is the only way to accomplish that, so be it."

Gabriel nodded. "He asked Lu to take him home, but you're not allowed to enter The City again. I thought Father made that quite clear."

Perhaps one day Michael would be able to forgive Gabriel but that day would probably

be years away. "Father made a lot of things clear. None of which I plan to discuss with you."

* * * *

The moment Michael pushed through the doors of Ice Water in full armor, his sword unsheathed, the club began to empty in a panic. "Where is he?"

Lu strolled toward him, shaking his head. "He's not here. He's at home. And thank you ever so much for scaring our customers away."

"I was just at Draco's house and it was empty," Michael growled. He was sick of getting the runaround. "Now, you've got one more chance to tell me the truth or I'll run you through."

Lu laughed. "You old blow-hard. Your masculine display of strength does absolutely nothing for me anymore." Lu glanced at Dominic and winked.

"Tell me," Michael yelled.

"Use your head. We both know The City isn't the place that brings Draco peace. After Gabriel finished with him, Draco was gutted. He asked me to take him home so I did." Lu stretched his arms out to the side. "Slay me if you must."

Without dignifying Lu's dramatic response, Michael disappeared.

* * * *

Draco was sitting on the front porch, in the same position he'd been in for almost two weeks, when Michael appeared. At first, he didn't believe his own eyes. How many times over the last few days had he seen a shadow out of the corner of his vision and believed it to be the man he loved?

"Is it really you?" Draco asked.

Michael tossed his shield and sword to the ground and slowly climbed the steps. "Yes. I would have been here sooner, but I couldn't find you. I searched every inch of Eden, believing you were there."

Draco stood and shook his head. He still felt numb. It would be easier if he knew where he stood with Michael. "I asked Lu to bring me back to The Between. My hope is that you'll be able to visit me here as well as my friends from The City."

"Visits? Is that all you want from me?" Michael reached out and cupped Draco's cheek.

Closing his eyes, Draco leaned into Michael's touch. "You know better than that, but the situation was made quite clear to me."

Draco turned his head to kiss Michael's palm. "I've done a lot of thinking, remembering." He shook his head. "If I had it to do all over again, I probably would."

"Don't say that." Michael pulled Draco against his chest.

"I didn't belong there. Whatever part of me that isn't human, didn't fit in. Once my father died I was alone," Draco explained as he gazed up into Michael's eyes.

"I should have been there for you. Gabriel should've told me."

Draco swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I know I'll never be allowed to fight beside you because of what I did. I'm sorry."

Michael leaned down and kissed Draco, plunging his tongue deep. Draco held on, needing the strength and comfort only Michael could give. With each sweep of Michael's tongue, Draco hoped things didn't have to end between them.

"None of this was your fault. You have to understand that. You were let down on so many levels it breaks my heart." Michael kissed Draco's forehead. "And even though you can't battle at my side in Heaven, you'll always be the man at my side everywhere else."

Michael smiled. "That is if you don't mind a roommate."

Tears of gratitude filled Draco's vision. *Please, God, don't let this be a dream.* "It's more than I could've ever hoped for. Can you really live here with me and still hold your position in Heaven?"

Michael nodded and led Draco into the house. "Father and I came to an agreement. Don't worry."

Epilogue

The Between - Fifteen Years Later

Panting, Draco dropped his shield and reached out to help Galen to his feet. “Good workout.”

Galen wiped the sweat from his forehead with the towel Baz tossed him. “Good for you, maybe. I’ll be bruised again tomorrow.”

Draco shrugged before dropping onto the grass beside his group of friends. The Saturday training sessions they’d started almost fourteen years earlier had gone a long way in keeping them in shape. Though, Draco knew his friends had started the sessions to keep him company while Michael was away.

It had taken some time to get used to, but Draco had found a new respect for the women of Sparta who waited for their men to come home from war. He spent most of his time working in his garden. Lu thought it was funny that Draco toiled in the dirt day in and day out, but Draco had discovered he didn’t have one green thumb, he had two.

Most of what he grew Lu took to The City to use at Babylon, the new restaurant the group of them had opened nine years earlier.

“Are you rested yet?” Lu asked Draco.

Draco chuckled. The previous week Draco had bested Lu in a mock-battle, and his friend had been fired up ever since. “Can’t I just lay here and declare you the winner?”

“Hell no. You wouldn’t have won last week if I hadn’t stumbled over that damn rock. Since I see you’ve taken care to remove the offending object, I feel a rematch is in order.”

"You always were a sore loser," a voice said from behind them.

Draco jumped up and turned to face Gabriel. His first thought was Michael. "What's happened?"

Gabriel held up his hand. "Michael's fine. He should finish with his current obligation within the month."

Draco sighed in relief.

"I've come to speak to you. Actually I have a favor to ask."

"You've got a lot of nerve. Does Michael know you're here?" Lu asked from his position in Dominic's embrace.

Draco's ire rose. "I'm not a child, and I do *not* need Michael's permission to talk to Gabriel." He gestured toward the lake. "Let's go for a walk, Gabriel."

Lu's chuckle followed Draco down the hill. "Fucker," he mumbled.

Gabriel cleared his throat in a subtle reprimand, further pissing Draco off. He spun toward Gabriel and pointed his finger in the Archangel's face. "Don't you dare look down your nose at me. What do you want?"

Continuing down the hill, Draco noticed the slight ruffle of Gabriel's golden wings. He shouldn't have felt guilty about the slip but he did. "Sorry. I'll try to refrain from using profanities when you're around."

"I fear it's something I'll have to get used to," Gabriel answered.

"Why's that? You plan on moving in with me?" Draco chuckled.

Gabriel smiled and shook his head. "I need your help with my Bruggata."

"Angelo? Why? He's around fourteen, right?"

"Yes, and I'm afraid he's heading in the wrong direction. I'm limited in my ability to interfere with his life on earth, but I see him traveling a path which worries me," Gabriel explained.

"What path is that?"

Gabriel stopped beside the lake. "The father I chose to raise him has passed away unexpectedly. Without a positive role-model he has begun to seek out other males older than he is." Gabriel shook his head. "Angelo is a born soldier, and his skills are unmatched, even for one so young."

Draco had heard of the groups of young men who wander the streets of cities looking for battle. "He's joined a gang?"

“Yes. As I’ve said, my power where he is concerned is limited. I can council him in prayer, but he seems to pray less and less. I am hoping you will agree to help me in his guidance.”

“Me? What can I do?”

Gabriel appeared confused. “You are a Bruggata. You can visit earth in your physical form whereas I cannot.”

“No.” Draco tried to cut Gabriel off.

“He needs guidance. Who better to lead him than one who has been through it?” Gabriel continued.

“First of all, I did a shitty job with my own life, and secondly, I know nothing about earth as it is today.”

Tears filled Gabriel’s eyes. “Please. I don’t know what else to do. I realize that I let you down when you were on earth, but please don’t make Angelo pay for my mistakes.”

Draco turned away, unable to think while facing the emotional Archangel. It was because of Gabriel’s lack of guidance that Draco was unable to fight at the side of his beloved Michael. Why should he do Gabriel any favors? Sure, Gabriel had reunited him with his father, but that was done out of guilt and at God’s command.

Sitting on a large stone, Draco buried his face in his hands. “Dammit!” How could he live with himself knowing Angelo was paying for Gabriel’s mistakes?

“Fine. But I’ll not allow it to interfere with my time spent with Michael.” Draco stood and faced Gabriel. “How long will this take?”

“Not long. I promise to have you back before Michael’s return.” Gabriel’s hair and wings began to give off a faint glow, a characteristic unique to Gabriel. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, you can thank me by getting me back here before Michael returns. Otherwise I sure wouldn’t want to be you.”

* * * *

Battle weary, Michael appeared at the edge of Draco’s beloved garden. His lover’s tanned and muscled body was a testament to how many hours he put into nurturing the plants to their full productivity.

Draco’s head sprang up from the rich black soil. “Has my wayward warrior decided to come home?”

Michael chuckled and began to remove his armor. “There is no better place in this

warrior's eyes."

They moved at the same time, meeting in the center of the vast garden. Michael wrapped his arms around Draco and immediately took his lover's mouth in a deep kiss. He hated leaving Draco but they had both agreed it was the right thing to do. Michael tasted something on Draco's tongue. Breaking the kiss, he smiled. "Someone's been sampling the radishes again."

With his hands clasped behind Michael's neck, Draco returned the smile. "I didn't know I would be kissing such a handsome man today."

Michael let his hands wander. Clad only in a pair of shorts, Draco's sweat slicked body never failed to arouse Michael. "I have missed you."

Draco released the shoulder fastening that held Michael's garment in place. The soiled cloth dropped to the dirt, leaving Michael completely nude. "I have more than missed you. My garden friends will never take the place of the man I love."

Michael eyed the large cucumbers and zucchini that grew to one side of the garden. The thought of Draco rolling in God's fertile earth while enjoying the company of such a vegetable aroused him further. "Perhaps one day you will show me how the vegetables repay you for your kind attentiveness towards them."

Chuckling, Draco pushed down his shorts before kneeling. "Perhaps."

Michael buried his fingers in Draco's soft black curls as his love licked up the length of his cock. Each brush of his lover's tongue was a caress that went beyond the physical. It was as if Draco was making love to Michael's soul.

When Draco's attention moved to the sensitive head of Michael's cock, his knees threatened to buckle. "Are you sure you haven't also practiced this on your precious vegetables?"

Holding Michael's length at the base, Draco swirled his tongue around the crown several times before releasing him. "I much prefer your taste and texture."

Michael noticed Draco hadn't actually given him an answer to his question. Before he could inquire further, Draco swallowed Michael's cock once more, cutting off any protest.

The attention his lover paid him upon his return was almost worth the long weeks away. The two of them would have nothing to do for the rest of the season but make love and toil in the garden.

Draco's attention turned to Michael's sac, eliciting a deep moan. With the sun beating down on them, Michael wondered if they should move their lovemaking into the house. He gazed down at the enthusiastic way Draco was sucking at his balls and quickly decided against it.

Draco enjoyed making sexual memories in odd places. After the first year when the two of them had made love in every room in every position imaginable, Draco had started taking Michael outside. According to Draco, when Michael was away, he enjoyed visiting the memories they made one by one. Whether it was sitting in the living room, fixing a meal in the kitchen or walking beside the lake, he could see the two of them making love.

Gazing down at his man, Michael realized the garden was one place they'd yet to make memories in. Pulling away, Michael knelt in front of Draco. "How angry will you be if our bodies crush a few of your plants?"

"There's no need to crush anything," Draco moved to rest on his hands and knees. "The height of the lettuce is perfect for brushing against my cock as you fuck me from behind."

Michael chuckled. "You've given this some thought."

"Of course I have," Draco answered over his shoulder while wiggling his ass.

Michael groaned as he leaned in to lick at the puckered hole on display. He used his hands to hold the cheeks of Draco's ass apart as he buried his face further into the lightly furred crevice.

With each swipe of his tongue, Michael felt more at peace. Unfortunately, the battles to be fought between good and evil were coming more frequently. Pushing away the disturbing thoughts, Michael used the tip of his tongue to please Draco. He applied as much saliva as he could before breaking away to spit in his hand. "Would you prefer my fingers or my cock?"

"What do you think?" Draco said with a grunt.

Michael nodded and transferred his spit soaked hand to his cock. Once he was well lubricated, he placed the head of his cock at Draco's hole. The ease in which Draco's body opened gave further evidence of how much time the man had spent in the garden lately.

Steadying himself with hands on Draco's hips, Michael sank slowly into the depths of his lover's body.

"Aahhh," Draco moaned. "So much better than a zucchini."

Chuckling, Michael smacked Draco's ass. "I should hope so. Perhaps I should start traveling with melons to ease my own aches."

Draco's spine stiffened as he turned to look over his shoulder. "Shall I stop growing melons? I'd hate to think you wouldn't hasten your return to me if being pleased by a melon."

Michael withdrew his cock until only the tip remained inside before thrusting forward, once again impaling Draco with his shaft. "A melon would simply be a hole. It could never replace the clinging muscles that hug my cock with each thrust."

“Yeah, well, remember that.”

Still chuckling, Michael began fucking Draco in a hard and fast rhythm. As Draco moaned and groaned at an increasing rate, curiosity got the better of Michael. He reached under his love and felt the stalks of romaine as they caressed Draco’s cock. The two of them had done a variety of things to each other over the years but Michael believed this probably was the strangest. No matter, if fucking the lettuce brought Draco pleasure, so be it.

Michael wrapped his fingers just under the head of Draco’s cock and fucked him harder. “Shall we have salad for dinner?”

With a howl of pleasure, Draco’s cock erupted, shooting thick seed over the pristine leaves of the romaine.

“Yes, I guess we will,” Michael panted. He transferred his hold to wrap around Draco’s mid-section when his lover began to sag in his climactic state.

Michael continued to thrust in and out of Draco for several moments before he too felt the tingle of his balls as they shot their first load. Michael buried himself to the hilt and rested his face against Draco’s sweaty spine as he came.

Exhausted and with nowhere to roll without damaging Draco’s precious vegetables, Michael used his power to transfer them to the bathtub filled with warm water.

“Mmmm, this is one of my favorite tricks of yours,” Draco mumbled, his face now resting against Michael’s chest.

“It does come in handy,” Michael agreed, relaxing against the back of the tub.

“You know I’ll never again be able to garden without getting an erection, right?”

Michael laughed. “And I’ll never again be able to eat lettuce without thinking of the pale green leaves covered in your seed.”

“As long as we’re even.” Draco moved higher to come face to face with Michael. “As much as I would have enjoyed fighting at your side, these homecomings just might be worth the time we’re forced to be apart.”

Resting his hand on Draco’s cheek, Michael gazed into his lover’s eyes. “There will never be a battle important enough to keep me from your side should you ever need me.”

“I know, and that’s why I love you so much and feel so safe while on earth.”

Michael nodded, satisfied that Draco trusted him to always be there. “You will always be my first priority. I love you more than Heaven and earth combined, and I will live out my existence trying to prove myself worthy of the gift God has given me.”

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles life as a full-time mom and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find her either cleaning jelly out of the carpet, or nestled in her favorite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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Extinction

Professor of Environmental Science/Wildlife studies at UNLV, Jack McBain has spent his adult life trying to track a legend overheard during his youth. Born and raised in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland, Jack remembers his grandparents telling stories of a race of people eradicated by European settlers in 1829. According to the legend, the Beothuk people didn't die out as first thought, but were transformed into wolf shifters.

When Newfoundland wolves began to appear in great numbers, the European settlers began killing them under the guise of population control. In 1910, the last of the Newfoundland wolves was shot, making them one of the few extinct species of wolves in the world.

Following spotty leads, Jack begins to track what he believes are Beothuk/Newfoundland shifter wolves. His search leads him to the Lake Mead National Recreational Area outside of Las Vegas. There, on Spirit Mountain, he finally comes face to face with not only the shifter he's been looking for, but the man of his dreams he didn't know he needed.

Retribution

Three lonely souls find each other in the midst of an all out war between the shifters and the Hunters.

Mother Earth gave Ryker Allen rebirth over a century ago, his main purpose to protect Mother's shifter children. Ryker has never begrudged his duties, but the loneliness is something he'll never get used to.

Daniel was the King of the Coyotes until a mistake led to the decimation of his species. Alone and half-dead, he was taken in by a pack of wolf shifters as a pet for the Alpha's mate. When he's given a chance to live as an Alpha once again, he's reluctant to accept, afraid he's no longer worthy to lead.

Hakan is the son of Father Sky. He was awarded rebirth over a thousand years ago to protect the Native American Bird Shifters. When animosity towards Native Americans escalated, Hakan's charges took to the sky permanently, leaving him without a purpose. He's lived his long life alone, waiting for the day he can once again serve his Father.

Three men, three very different backgrounds, one thing in common. Loneliness. Can these three souls come together to form a family?

Evolution

Jarek, a young cougar shifter, arrives at Refuge full of hope. He is finally in a place where he can have a lover and his first-ever home. Meeting Mica feels like icing on the cake, but his dreams are quickly shattered by a night of pain and violence at the hands of his Alpha.

Mica, a stone man, is trying to get his emotions under control. He likes Jarek, but isn't sure what to do with the overwhelming lust he feels whenever Jarek is near. After the two of them are caught in a compromising position, Jarek goes missing, and Mica will do anything in his power to track him down.

Suni, the true-blue Alpha of the cougars, doesn't want anything to do with the rest of his kind. He is perfectly content to live out his life in seclusion. When he stumbles across a young cougar shifter near death, he realizes he's found his mate. When Jarek regains consciousness and tells Suni about Mica, the true Alpha is left wondering where he'll fit in.

Three men, one who wants to feel, one who doesn't know how to feel, and one who refuses to feel, come together on the side of a mountain. The resulting clash of personalities and sexually charged energy will change their lives forever.

Resolution

After an attempt on their lives by an unknown group, the bird shifters are forced to seek shelter at Refuge. Having spent years in their bird-skin, the adjustment for some isn't easy.

Bird shifters Takoda and Enapay have been best friends for years. Enapay knows Takoda is his chosen mate, but Takoda refuses to consider a life living in his man-skin. When Enapay starts to work closely with Dr. Gray Whitmore, he can't understand his overwhelming attraction to the human.

With Takoda's continued rebuffs, Enapay finally gives into his desire for Gray. It is soon apparent, Gray was meant to be Enapay's mate. But when Takoda's health takes a turn for the worse, old feelings resurface. Enapay is left wondering why Father Sky gifted him with two mates, especially when one of them still refuses to live as a man.

*Also Available from
Resplendence Publishing*

***In For a Penny* by Carol Lynne**

What's the old saying...you can never go home again? Raven Black resigned himself to never returning after being ordered from the only real home he'd ever known. Now, seven years later, Raven is back to face the man who sent him away.

Zane Conner is not only Raven's foster brother but the only man Raven ever loved. Despite his mixed feelings about the situation, Raven can't deny Zane when the older man asks for his help in saving the Lazy C Bar Ranch. A boy found dead on the ranch clinches Raven's decision.

Why did the young boy look so much like he had at that age—the same age he'd been when his own father had beaten him and left him for dead?

***Tropical Hedonism* by Dakota Rebel**

After a boating accident, Sean Harris wakes up staring into the eyes of a handsome doctor. Even when he discovers that he is on an island within the Bermuda Triangle, and there is no way for him to get back to his old life, he can't be too disappointed if it means being stuck with the doctor.

Dr. Wesley Carpenter cannot believe that the younger Sean Harris would want anything to do with him. After half-heartedly turning down the advances of his patient, he realizes that resistance is futile.

The men find themselves falling for each other quickly, but ghosts from their pasts and outside influences try to get in the way of their happiness. Sean and Wesley may be on the island forever, but neither is sure if that guarantees they'll be able to continue their *Tropical Hedonism*.

***Mind F*cked* by Mia Watts**

Sage has the ability to read minds, but only in high passion moments when thoughts transmit at a higher frequency. But the gift is double-edged. Sage is inordinately handsome. Some might even say he's a walking orgasm. So what's a half-breed to do when every person he meets seems intent on seducing him, and how will he know if the man he chooses will love him for more than his looks?

Joe has never been the object of anyone's lust before. Now Sage, the hottest guy he's ever laid

eyes on, has Joe starring in his sexual fantasies. It would be perfect if only Sage could shut up for one minute, and quit talking about his own hotness—or about how he can read minds.

Meanwhile, Joe and Sage must secure the last three Zodiac Stones and prevent their theft while they wait for exhibition. Can they put their sexual tension aside long enough to stop a clever thief? And even if they do, will Joe's heart be a casualty of their inevitable fling, or could Sage really be looking for more than a one-night stand?

***Saving Noah* by Carol Lynne and Cash Cole**

Dexter Krispin arrived in the small Kansas town of Schicksal with one thing on his mind: finishing his doctoral thesis. He hoped getting away from his hectic life in Pittsburgh would allow him to concentrate on the long overdue paper and to forget about his last lover.

Life-long Schicksal resident, Noah Stoffel, has managed to keep his sexuality a secret. Yet, after one look at the dark-haired newcomer, he knows his life in the sleepy town will never be the same.

But more than Noah's desire for privacy stands between him and Dexter. For years, the residents of Schicksal have been hiding a horrific secret, one that takes Dexter mere days to uncover and expose...a secret that could destroy—or heal—they all.

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