



*Araton's
Destiny*
CELESTIAL JUSTICE 1
Serena Yates

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DEDICATION:

To those who believe there is more to justice
than the strict interpretation of the law
—whether in Heaven or on Earth.

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CHAPTER ONE

A woman's high-pitched scream tore through the cold winter air of the small town's busy main street. Screeching car tires and the sound of a vehicle sliding across an icy-wet surface followed. A sick thud and a low groan were next. The subsequent silence was deafening.

Araton opened his eyes and expanded his wings, just in case his human charge needed protection. He had only been distracted for a moment, thinking about an idea for one of the stories he was working on. Christmas was coming up in a few weeks, and for some reason he was always more inspired around that time. Now, startled back into reality, his eyes widened with dread at the scene before him.

Dexter, the human male whose guardian angel Araton had been for twenty-two Earth years, was lying on the road, bleeding into the thin cover of snow from a head wound. He was deathly pale, his eyes were closed, and he was not moving other than to breathe. The car had stopped a few yards farther down the busy street, its driver as pale as Dexter as she frantically pushed the door open.

Shit!

In the blink of an eye Araton was next to his charge.

He put his hand on the man's coat covered chest to check for damage. There was a weak heartbeat, but Araton could also feel that Dexter's spinal cord was severed. In a flash, one of those rare moments of insight granted even to junior guardian angels, he realized Dexter was most likely going to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair.

Araton swallowed heavily. Had he been human, bile would have risen in his throat. Being an angel, he did not have a physical reaction to deal with, but the emotional effect was just as devastating. What had he done?

Dexter had always been accident-prone and had never been an easy assignment. Not that Araton had asked for 'easy'. He was one of Heaven's youngest guardian angels and coping well with difficult assignments was a good way to get noticed and hopefully move up in rank. But today, the combination of Dexter's fate as a klutz and Araton's inability to focus had now cost the young man dearly.

There was nothing Araton was allowed to do.

Feeling helpless and disgusted with himself he watched chaos ensue as passersby screamed for someone to call 911.

A doctor struggled forward through the crowd, clearly intent on helping. After a brief examination he told

people to back off and not to move the victim; they needed to wait for the paramedics to arrive.

A nearby cop took charge of holding people back.

The car's driver was mumbling something about "He just walked out onto the street, I never even saw him" as she slowly sank to the ground next to her vehicle.

Araton had moved back. Even though nobody could see him, it was easier for him not to touch anyone. Any unwanted or surprising contact between his celestial body and a living human one always caused cold chills or worse, for both parties.

Over an hour later he still stood there, knowing his failure had caused him to be replaced as Dexter's guardian angel already. He felt heavy; as if he had a body that could be dragged down by gravity. Dexter had been picked up by an ambulance, the street cleared, and all the witnesses had given their statements to the police and left.

Araton was going to have to make an official report and face his punishment. But nothing could ever be as bad as the realization that his lack of ability to do his job had caused a human being's life to be ruined.

* * * *

"They are going to find me guilty, I just know it. I will never forgive myself, so whatever punishment they will come up with, I fully deserve." Araton slumped even lower on his stool, his unkempt wings scraping against the rough surface of the low-level energy containing the waiting area.

"Whoa, buddy, not so fast." Zuriel put a reassuring hand on his thigh, making Araton look up into the dark green eyes of his best friend. "They know you have tried your best. And you have only had this job for less than a century. There has to be some sort of leniency."

"There is only one problem." Araton sighed, glancing at the imposing energy barrier behind which the judicial panel for celestial-human affairs deliberated. He did not want any of them to hear him. "This is a really serious case of failure, caused by distraction. They are going to want to make an example of me."

"Okay, so you are having some unusual problems with doing this job." Zuriel smiled the kind of beatific smile Araton had always aspired to but never quite managed to master.

"That must be the understatement of the century." Araton snorted and shook his head. "No, I think I just was not meant to be a guardian angel in the first place. And

definitely not for humans, since they are one of the most difficult species to protect."

"Careful!" This time it was Zuriel who checked the barrier with a quick look. "Do not let them add subversion to the charges. You know *that* will get you into trouble faster than anything they have accused you of so far."

"I know." Araton almost felt sorrier for himself than for his former human charge. And that was something they could never find out, or he would be banished for sure.

"You will be fine." Zuriel squeezed his thigh before withdrawing his hand, leaving Araton feeling isolated once more.

Why did that make him feel so alone? He should not have had those feelings at all. He was an angel, for Heaven's sake. Maybe it had something to do with his close identification with humans? He snorted. That alone was close to sacrilege. Since humans were such tactile creatures, it seemed to make sense to him. But, even among his colleagues in the Human Division, he was the only one who seemed to need touch.

Angels were not supposed to crave physical contact, even though their celestial bodies were made of a type of energy that allowed sensation to be given and received. Araton had been told it was necessary to ensure a degree of

understanding for their charges, be they human or another species. It was the same reason their celestial bodies bore at least a vague resemblance to whichever species they were assigned to.

Zuriel was pretty much the only angel in his division who understood and accepted that Araton wanted, even needed, to be touched. He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the pressure of his predicament. Officially, the Big Guy did not make any mistakes, but Araton's existence sure felt like a few things had been overlooked.

He was such a miserable failure; it was pathetic.

A loud crackling from the barrier between the waiting area and the judicial panel's place of deliberation made Araton open his eyes. The barrier was now transparent, and an usher moved toward them; dressed entirely in the green of celestial justice officials, his wings were neatly folded at his back. He looked at Araton with an expression of careful neutrality.

"The panel is ready for you now, Junior Guardian Araton." The usher stepped aside to reveal the brightly lit area behind him.

Araton got up and, with a last glance at Zuriel, he walked toward what he was sure was his doom.

His friend followed him inside. He would not be

able to interfere in the proceedings, but even though there was no defense as such, accused angels were allowed some moral support. Araton had never been more grateful for that small favor than today.

He came to a stop at the center of the green circle in the middle of the room, facing the seven archangels who were going to decide his fate. He sensed Zuriel behind him, slightly to his right.

Raguel himself presided today, a sign of the seriousness of the case. The other six members of the judicial panel were grouped three each to Raguel's sides; all of them perched on golden stools that allowed their imposing wings free rein. Bright white light poured in from the transparent ceiling, reflecting from the mirrored walls and creating a feeling of being exposed.

"Junior Guardian Araton, you stand accused of failing to protect your human charge, Dexter Smith, throughout most of his life." Raguel did not move a single muscle as he spoke, his ruby red eyes focused on Araton. "Not only did Dexter get injured multiple times during his life, his recent accident led to the spinal injury that means he will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. I am sure you realize the seriousness of your failing."

Araton looked down and winced. The memory of

that day would haunt him for the centuries to come. He would have done anything to be able to turn back time and avoid the costly moment of distraction. However, that was not an ability given to any angel.

"The judicial panel is ready to hear your defense against the charges of repeated and gross negligence, should you have one." Raguel tilted his head, not looking like he expected anything of value to be brought forward.

"I have no defense." Araton did not dare look up.

He did not fit into the celestial community any way he looked at it, and he never had. Add to that his total failure as a guardian angel, and his case was quite obviously hopeless. Raguel knew, and those burning eyes were too awful to face.

"So noted." The head archangel's voice was neutral.

The lack of emotion grated on Araton's nerves worse than anger would have.

"Are you ready to hear your judgment?" Raguel had raised his voice enough to have everyone take notice.

Araton nodded, closing his downcast eyes for good measure. He had no idea what happened to guardian angels who failed as spectacularly as he had. The last case was rumored to have been just over two millennia ago. He was not old enough to remember, and nobody talked about one

of the most embarrassing incidents in celestial history.

"All rise." Raguel and the other judges stood, wings rustling. "It is this panel's considered judgment that Junior Guardian Angel Araton is guilty as charged. His membership of the guardian angel class is herewith revoked, his punishment is the eviction from Heaven and banishment into the void."

Araton's head snapped up of its own accord. All seven archangels stared at him with an expression of severity that would have made him tremble if the devastating judgment had not already numbed him. To be outcast was bad enough, but to be denied access to the only home he had known since his creation was unimaginable. He had not even been banished to hell, something he had almost expected. Although that would have been bad, he imagined he could have found a way to deal with it. At least there would have been other beings with him.

Instead, they had just pushed him away without anywhere specific to go. What was he supposed to do now? Heck, what was he going to be able to do?

"I invoke the right of an appeal for leniency."
Zuriel's voice sounded sure and steady.

Raguel blanched, and several of the other archangels gasped as the words echoed in the large room.

"Leniency?" Raguel's facial expression made it clear he did not like that concept.

"Yes." Zuriel stepped forward. "According to celestial law, any angel accused of wrongdoing and sentenced by the judicial panel, no matter how severe the charge, has the right to appeal that decision."

"What are you doing?" Araton hissed at his friend, trying to keep his voice down so the archangels would not hear. "I do not want you to be pulled into this as well. It could damage your career!"

"I do not care about my career!" Zuriel looked furious. "This is your entire existence we are talking about. I think they are being overly harsh in their punishment, and I want the decision to be reviewed by someone who is going to be less inclined to try and make an example of you."

"And who might that be?" Araton had never been very interested in celestial politics, so he did not have a clue what, or maybe whom, Zuriel was talking about. "Surely everyone in the judicial system will have the same opinion?"

"No, they will not. I have done quite some research into this. You will see." Zuriel grinned and patted Araton's shoulder, much to the audible shock of a few panel

members. "Trust me."

* * * *

"'Trust me', he said," Araton mumbled as he paced outside the councilor's office, waiting for his turn. "Of course I trust him, but that is not the point. Or is it?"

Araton stopped and stared at the energy painting, registering the blue sky with its painted on white clouds with only half his attention.

The uproar caused by Zuriel's request had been short, intense, and had ended abruptly when Raguel reluctantly declared the request valid. Next thing Araton knew, he had been given an office number and an order to see the councilor who had apparently already been assigned to his case. He had said goodbye to his smiling friend, thanking him for his help, before the powers that be had snapped him up, moving him to this wide corridor right in front of the office he needed to be at.

Celestial appeals were apparently as quickly arranged as panels for hearings and trials. The energy barrier to Councilor Nathaniel's office was opaque, though. Based on the muffled voices coming from behind it, Araton had decided it was better not to interrupt whatever was

going on inside. He wanted the councilor in a good mood, so he was going to wait his turn.

"Junior Guardian Araton?" The voice was deep and right behind him.

Araton spun around, disoriented from being pulled out of his musings. No wonder he had failed to protect Dexter. He shook his head. He was far too easily distracted.

"No?" The tall angel with the wingspan of two normal archangels grinned. "I was sure they told me your name was Araton."

"It is." Araton nodded. Shit, could he not do anything right?

"I am glad there was no clerical error. My name is Nathaniel." The beautiful creature held out his hand.

Araton was shocked by this very human gesture, but automatically reached out to shake Nathaniel's hand. It was much larger than his, and the warmth flooding his body from just that brief touch helped him relax a little.

"Will you come to my office so we can get comfortable and talk about your concerns?" Nathaniel stepped aside and pointed at the now transparent energy barrier.

"S-sure." Araton was still too stunned to do anything more than follow directions.

The office was brightly lit, with a huge desk in one corner and a very comfortable group of leather sofas and easy chairs in another. One wall was covered in bookshelves filled to overflowing with a mixture of books and scrolls. There was colorful art on the walls, a few potted plants in various places, and two mugs of steaming hot cocoa on the low coffee table in front of the largest sofa.

It seemed that Nathaniel had taken the permission to adapt to certain aspects of the species they were guarding to its extremes. Araton had never been in a space this reminiscent of human nature outside of Earth.

"Please, have a seat." Nathaniel waived the barrier opaque and followed Araton to the sofa, sitting down next to him.

"How did you know...?" Araton stopped speaking so he wouldn't make an even bigger ass of himself. An angel with an office as luxurious as this would certainly be able to read him. Clearly, the archangel had access to his most secret desires.

"It is part of my job to know." Nathaniel winked and sipped his cocoa. "When an angel comes here for a discussion of his future, I make sure he feels as comfortable as possible. Knowing what he likes and wants is just a

small part of that."

"What is your job— exactly?" Araton couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. "I do not mean any disrespect, but everyone knows about judicial panels. Appeals and the job of councilor, on the other hand, are far less well known."

"Indeed." Nathaniel had finished his hot drink and set the empty mug back onto the coffee table. "The job of councilor goes back to the same time that the judicial panels were established untold millennia ago. It was a time of great upheaval and many changes. One of them was the granting of more responsibility for running Heaven to the archangels. While the judicial panels were needed to ensure justice was done, the job of councilor was established to balance some of the potentially damaging consequences of a system running without prosecution or defense."

"Why did they not add those job functions to the new system?" Araton was fascinated. He had never paid great attention during his celestial history lessons, but he was sure these details had never been mentioned.

"It was seen as too... human." Nathaniel grinned. "First, we are not the only division in charge of a species, and the celestial justice system has to be applicable for all races in the universe. However, some similarities were seen

as acceptable. After all, the human justice system is based on celestial principles, even if the actual execution has gotten off track of what was originally intended. Second, many in the human division wanted to make sure that we are different from what some see as a flawed human interpretation of the law and its applications."

"Even if what they came up with makes more sense?" Araton clapped a hand in front of his mouth. Nathaniel seemed open enough, but saying something so outrageously revolutionary was still risky.

"Especially in that case." Nathaniel sighed. "Needless to say, I have a different point of view. If a species we are in charge of comes up with an improvement, why not accept it into our own system? But that idea has been successfully ignored for many centuries, and I do not expect it to change any time soon."

Wow, there were others in Heaven who doubted that the current way of running things was the best possible method?

"So, to balance the blatant injustices that might have happened, had the system run unchecked, they established the position of councilor." Nathaniel leaned back and smiled. "Angels who were otherwise 'inconvenient' due to their political views were placed in this position. Even the

hard-nosed traditionalists saw that we could do a lot of good here."

"And that is what?" Araton put his now empty mug beside Nathaniel's.

"Basically I look at a case and reevaluate the panel's decision." Nathaniel grimaced. "We have not had many appeals in the last few hundred years, but the ones we have had were just as important as yours."

"My case is important?" Araton was not sure that was a good thing. He did not want more attention from the powers that be than he already had. On the other hand, how much worse could it get?

"Every life, whether it be human, non-human, celestial, or even demonic, is important. Each has a purpose and a part to play in the universe's development." Nathaniel frowned. "I have looked at your file, and I believe that your assignment as a guardian angel was, let us say, less than ideal. That does not mean that you are incapable of doing the job. After all, you have done well so far. But looking at your profile a little more closely has made it clear to me that there are other jobs you might be a lot better at."

Araton just stared at the other angel. To hear his innermost thoughts repeated out loud, by someone who clearly had a very powerful and senior position, was mind-

boggling.

"Now, your failure to protect Dexter from harm is very serious." Nathaniel raised his eyebrows. "You do understand that?"

"Yes, I do." Araton swallowed. "I will never forgive myself for it, and I understand that I need to be punished."

"But punishing you by sending you into the void is far too harsh." Nathaniel shook his head. "It would not accomplish anything, other than making sure you were never given another human life to guard."

"I would not want that anyway." Araton looked at the floor. "I would be too scared of making another mistake. I would rather face the void."

"There is no need for that." Nathaniel paused.

Araton finally looked up when the silence became oppressive. The other angel's eyes were full of compassion.

"I have a much better solution for you, if you are willing to accept a slightly different job." Nathaniel grinned. "In fact, looking at how much you like Christmas, I do not know why they did not give you this assignment in the first place."

"A different job?" If it had to do with Christmas, Araton was all for it. "But what about my punishment?"

"Your memory of failing Dexter will be punishment

enough. You are a very sensitive soul, and do not take a responsibility like that lightly." Nathaniel lifted his index finger. "And that is my professional opinion."

Nathaniel was right. Araton only hoped that nobody was going to appeal *this* decision.

"So, to give you a new chance, you are hereby assigned to the Division of Christmas Angels." Nathaniel leaned forward. "It is a somewhat less well-known group, and you are not to tell anyone about it. Is that understood?"

"But Zuriel—" Araton winced. Zuriel had been such a good friend and he would be worried.

"Zuriel will be informed, of course." Nathaniel smiled. "After all, he was the one who initiated the appeal, so he has an official right to know. But he will be sworn to secrecy."

"Thank you." Araton breathed a sigh of relief.

Now all he needed to find out was what his new job actually entailed. He had no idea that Christmas angels even existed, never mind what they did.

"You do not need to worry." Nathaniel grinned. "Well, not much anyway. Your new job is to teach your assigned human about the spirit of Christmas. It is a very important job, since there are many humans who have forgotten what it is all about. Some are too bitter or

disappointed about something in their lives, others have never really believed since they were children."

"How do I do that?" Araton felt dread rise inside him. "I thought we were not supposed to have any contact with humans?"

"As a guardian angel, that is true. But Christmas angels operate under slightly different conditions. You will see." Nathaniel smiled, showing dimples. "You will see."

CHAPTER TWO

Jake Danis winced as he followed the rest of his team into the huge stadium. His ribs still hurt from the tackle he'd endured during last week's home game in Dallas. The additional bruises received since then in that stupid fall in the locker room didn't make his task of pretending everything was okay any easier. But there was no way out. This was only his second season in the pros. He'd been moved up from his position as third string quarterback because the other two had been hurt earlier in the season. He was nervous, but determined to prove himself in his new position of responsibility.

This week, the Cowboys were at an away game in Seattle. Qwest Field was relatively new, but the crushing noise coming from all the Seahawks fans was as overwhelming as ever. All of that was quickly forgotten as everyone took their positions and the game kicked off.

By half-time his whole body ached, and it took more than the usual effort to make it back onto the field after the much-too-short break.

Seconds into the second half he caught the snap and dropped back, searching for his wide receiver on the right, when the Seahawks' Pro Bowl defensive end forced his

way through the line of scrimmage on his left. Jake was now frantically looking for his wide receiver, trying to get the pass off before the inevitable hit came. But there was no safe throw to make.

Jake turned and ran out of the pocket, hoping to at least make the line of scrimmage and avoid losing yards. Still, there was no one open to throw to. He was almost to the line but the six foot seven defensive end was on him. *Shit!* No man that large should be able to move that quickly. Jake curled his arms around the ball and dropped into his slide, knowing the hit would be hard and determined not to lose possession. His breath left him in a rush as he was tackled from behind, and he felt his curled leg collapse as the weight of both his body and the other man's crushed it at an odd angle beneath him.

The ball bounced loose. Bodies went flying as both teams tried to gain possession. Whistles were blowing and the crowd was roaring.

He needed to get back into the game, but when he tried to get up it turned out that he was totally helpless. The other guy still lay on top of him and made any significant movement impossible. The pain was indescribable. He dropped his head back. His breath came in shallow gasps, and staying conscious took all his attention for a few

moments.

When the man who'd almost crushed him finally got up, Jake tried to follow. But more pain shot up his leg and straight into his brain. He felt nauseous.

Fuck!

There was no way he was going to be able to stand.

He raised his head again, trying to see if they'd at least gained any yardage out of the play. But the stars he saw and the stabbing pain in his head made him close his eyes and sink back before he'd been able to figure it out.

Before he knew it, he'd been loaded onto a stretcher and was being carried off the field. He could only hope that the injury wasn't as serious as it felt right now. Pro-football had been his dream since he was five years old and went to his first live game with his father. What the hell was he going to do if he was no longer able to play?

* * * *

Jake kept walking, stubbornly limping ahead in the white wilderness despite the icy tendrils of wind the ever intensifying blizzard sent his way. They curled around him as though they were trying to stop him. Not that he had anything to get back to, not really. But giving up just wasn't

in his nature.

He'd made it to Torrey's Peak alone, definitely a stupid thing to do in December if he was being honest with himself. Which he hadn't been for a very long time. That awful so-called accident four years ago had ruined his knee so badly that the doctors had told him in no uncertain terms that he'd never be able to play in the pros again. According to them, he'd be lucky if he ever walked without a cane.

He'd sure shown them. He was walking fine. As for the pro-football? That had remained out of his reach because no team had wanted to touch him. The risk of another injury to a knee that would always remain slightly weaker than normal had been too great. As a consequence of being shut out, he'd stopped caring for his own safety.

What was the point?

He could no longer play football, the only thing he'd ever wanted to do.

He didn't have anyone to come back to since he wasn't interested in women, never had been, and coming out while a pro-footballer had been out of the question. He'd been too bitter and self-absorbed to try to start a new relationship. He hated his own company, so there was no way he could expect another man to be interested.

A year after the accident his best friend Mike had

pushed him into coming out of his self-imposed isolation. Mike had insisted that Jake's degree in social sciences was ideal background to start working at a shelter for the homeless. He now ran a rehabilitation program, helping people find jobs and somewhere to live. It may have given him something to do, it was certainly useful and changed a lot of people's lives for the better, but it didn't make the gnawing need for excitement at the heart of his being go away.

Since he was without a partner and in a job he didn't like all that much, there had been nothing to look forward to. So, he'd come up with his own challenges. At first it was all mental because his body took much longer to fully heal than he'd have believed possible. He'd spent hours playing chess in a club, as well as over the Internet. A little over two years ago he was finally physically recovered enough to be considered fit, and he'd become an avid participant in every type of extreme sport he could find.

Mountain climbing, in this case snow and ice climbing, to be more exact, was only the latest in a series of experiments. He liked the solitude, the silence, and the majestic beauty of snow-covered forests and icy waterfalls.

Now though, he'd taken a bad fall off the last ridge coming down and sprained his ankle. He grimaced with the

pain as he half-walked, half-slid down the slope. Cracking ice warned him to stop moving, but it was too late. He tried to grab onto the edge of the fissure that was fast growing into a crack but his gloved hands were unable to hold onto anything solid, and he tumbled into the dark cavity, hitting the walls on each side as he fell.

When he hit the bottom there was only a tiny sliver of daylight left far above. His head hurt, he surely had bruises all over his body, and the leg that had so far been uninjured was now throbbing with pain. He'd lost his equipment, and without ice screws and rope there was no way out. Worse than that, he'd lost his backpack with his cell in it. No backpack also meant his food was gone, but without a way to stay warm that would hardly matter. The cold would get to him long before hunger could do any real damage.

He stretched his arms to his sides and touched hard rock with his fingertips. He reached above his head. More rock there. With an effort he sat up and moved forward only to find more slippery rock.

This was it. End of the road. He lay back down and closed his eyes. Freezing to death wasn't the worst way to go, or so he'd been told. Supposedly it was just like falling asleep. He could deal with that.

A while later he opened his eyes to total darkness. He lay on his side, with his back to one of the walls. His injured leg was away from the floor. He had no idea how much time had passed, but it must have been several hours because even the little light from above was gone. The air around him seemed even colder than before. Why had he woken up?

Something soft and warm brushed his cheek. What the hell? He lifted his hands to his face trying to feel what it was that was touching him.

But he found nothing. *Of course not.* He snorted. There was hardly enough space in here for someone else. And how would they have come down here anyway, without falling on top of him?

He relaxed and closed his eyes again. Seconds later the warm feeling was back, and his eyes flew open as whatever it was brushed across his cheek again.

"Shit! What the hell *is* that?" Jake sat up, grimacing as a stabbing pain shot from his leg up his spine.

But there was no response. Wide awake now, Jake stared into the darkness even though he knew it was pointless. There was no way his eyes could pick up anything. No sound had accompanied the weird feeling of someone or something touching him. There was a faint

smell of cinnamon and vanilla, but Jake shrugged that off as a hallucination.

Just when he was ready to lie back again, not knowing what else to do, the soft brushing was back. This time both his cheeks were caressed. He bolted up, back against the wall. The pain in his leg and head only intensified.

"What the hell? Who *are* you?" Jake shook his head at his own stupidity. It was impossible for anyone to be here. He was probably dreaming it all up.

"Shhh, you will be okay." The voice was deep and smooth, definitely male.

"Fuck!" This was just too weird.

"Do not worry. I will take care of you." That voice travelled straight to his gut and made him want to know what the other guy looked like.

Why was he even thinking about the other guy's looks? He was hearing a voice in the darkness— surely he should be more concerned for his sanity than some stranger's appearance?

"Who are you?" Jake lifted his hands, and he fumbled around to try and determine the other guy's position. But there was nothing there. "Where are you?"

"That is not important." The voice sounded almost

sad. "I am here to help you, to make sure you are safe."

"It sure as hell *is* important." Jake snorted. "Look, I'm not even sure you're real at this point. I'll need a little more information if you don't want me to believe that I'm going crazy here."

Silence. It made the darkness feel heavy and threatening. Jake started to sweat despite the freezing cold. Had he chased whoever or whatever had been with him away? He'd never been good at keeping himself safe. Chasing away his only hope of rescue would be typical.

"Are you still here?" Jake desperately hoped so.

After a long silence there was a deep sigh.

"Okay, at least you haven't left. Guess you just don't want to talk to me." Jake smiled. Even if this was a hallucination, at least it was an entertaining one. He loved riddles, and this must have been the biggest of his life.

"I am sorry." The voice was low and quiet.

"Nothing to be sorry for. I'm the one who's in trouble, so I should be grateful for any help I can get. I shouldn't be making any demands, and I'm sorry if I said something to offend you." Jake held his breath, not sure what the man's reaction would be.

"It is not your fault." The other guy took a deep breath. "If I had done my job, made you realize the

stupidity of this solitary excursion into the wilderness, none of this would have happened. It is entirely my fault. So I will make sure you are safe, but no gratitude is required."

"How can this mess be your fault? I'm the one who took the risk. I'm the one who messed up." Jake frowned.

"I am not doing this right. I should not even be talking to you, not like this. Once more I have let what I wanted guide me rather than what I should be doing." The man sighed again. "Will I ever learn?"

"Well, I don't know why you're here, or what you're supposed to be doing. And I certainly don't much care if someone else thinks you shouldn't be talking to me. It's none of their business, as far as I'm concerned." Even if the guy sounded oddly formal, at least he gave Jake a voice to cling to, a sign that someone else was in here with him. "I appreciate having some company, and I'm glad you're here with me."

"You are?" There was a strange rustling sound, like feathers scraping the icy surface. *Feathers?*

"Yeah, I mean, I kind of feel sorry for you being in the same predicament, being stuck here and everything, but it's better than dying alone, you know?" Jake closed his eyes.

Ever since he'd heard that voice, he wasn't so sure

that he wanted to die after all. There was just something about this man that drew him, made him curious to find out more.

"Dying?" The other man sounded shocked. "Who said anything about dying?"

"Strictly speaking you're right; I didn't say anything about it before." The surprised outrage in the man's voice made him chuckle. "But I thought it was sort of obvious. I mean, we're I-don't-know-how-many feet away from the surface, surrounded by rock and ice. There is no way out that I can detect down here and, wounded as I am, it doesn't look likely that I'll be able to make my way up these walls to climb to the semi-safety of the glacier. Because even if a miracle happens and I *do* make it up there, it's another four-hour walk to the nearest sign of civilization and the medical help I need."

"But that does not mean you will die." The man sounded very certain.

"Do you know something I don't?" Which part of *no way out* was so difficult to understand?

"Maybe." The man cleared his throat. "Well, it is not so much that I *know* something you do not, but I am determined to help you survive this. I cannot allow you to die here."

Huh. That left him speechless, for once.

"Are you still with me?" The voice sounded worried and there was another fleeting warm touch on his cheek.

"Yeah, I'm still here." Jake shook his head. "It's not like I can leave, is it?"

"No, I guess not." It was the man's turn to chuckle. "Okay, sitting around and talking with you is very nice, but if we do not move, the cold is going to get to you soon. I think it is time we leave."

"How do you want to do that?" Jake was getting curious against his better judgment.

"Well, let me make sure I understand this." The man took a deep breath, "You are sure that there is no way out of the cave down here."

"Pretty sure, yes. I wasn't able to get up to try the walls higher up, but there seems to be no inflow of fresh air, so I suspect there aren't any tunnels." Jake still had no clue where this was going.

"You do not think that you can climb up these walls?" The man sounded almost amused, damn him.

"Not in my current condition. My left leg is probably broken and my right ankle was sprained before I fell in here." It would be swollen to twice its normal size by now, despite the cold.

"And you do not believe you would be able to walk back to civilization." The man sounded smug now.

What the hell?

"No, I do not believe I would." Jake gritted his teeth in angry frustration.

"In that case, I do believe it is time for a miracle." The man was definitely amused.

"A *miracle*?" Jake started laughing. That was the most ridiculous thing he'd heard in a long time.

"Yes, a miracle. It is, after all, almost Christmas." The man laughed softly. "And that is the time of miracles on Earth, is it not?"

"What? There's no such thing as Christmas miracles. Shit, the whole idea of Christmas is ridiculous. It's some stupid excuse for buying unnecessary presents and seeing relatives you don't see the rest of the year and would be better off without." The man was clearly not right in the head. He still had no idea how the guy had made it in here, but he'd obviously lost his marbles.

"We are going to have a discussion about Christmas and what it means some other time." The man sounded determined. "For now, you better hold on, I will get you out of here."

Before Jake could open his mouth to protest, a

warm arm slid under his shoulders and another under his thighs. He was lifted up as if he didn't weigh well over two hundred pounds. There was a soft jolt, and his stomach told him they'd started to ascend. Even though he was determined to stay awake to find out what the hell was going on, the warmth that surrounded him was too much. His head dropped onto the other guy's shoulder, his eyes closed, and he drifted into a relaxing sleep.

* * * *

Araton watched Jake sleep in his arms as he flew across the snowy wilderness toward the isolated cabin he had discovered earlier. The human was as good looking as any angel in his division. His dark brown hair was wavy and his face well proportioned with a strong nose and a square jaw. His body was that of an athlete with well-developed muscles that Araton could feel even through the thick clothing.

When they arrived at the cabin Araton opened the door since he could not take Jake through it with him. Having remembered to close it again behind them, he put Jake down in front of the fireplace. He used his angelic energy to light a fire, clean up the cabin, and put some food

into the cabinets, accomplishing everything in a few seconds. Seeing the fridge made him realize they would need electricity as well, and he quickly located and switched on the propane-powered generator outside.

He was relieved that he was now allowed to use his powers like this. Christmas angels had so much more leeway than guardians.

Fixing Jake's injuries and making sure that he was well healed took only another few moments. He made sure Jake was comfortable and covered him with a soft blanket for good measure.

When he was done he realized he was far more tired than expected. A sudden wave of dizziness surprised him, and he barely made it to the sofa before blackness descended and he lost consciousness.

Next time he opened his eyes he lay on his back, still on the sofa, and couldn't feel his wings. His head hurt and he was cold. None of this was possible, of course, since angels didn't have a body capable of feeling physical discomfort. He had the distinct feeling that had changed. For the first time in his existence, he was intensely uncomfortable.

He lifted his head to look around. The fire had almost gone out, and Jake was still asleep. All the colors

were muted, he couldn't feel the heat from the flames, and his sense of smell had deteriorated to the point where he had no idea what was happening outside the cabin. He lay back, still a little dizzy.

What was wrong with him?

Had he been human he would have suspected he'd come down with the flu.

But he wasn't human, was he?

Then it hit him. Nathaniel had mentioned that Christmas angels —how had he put it?— *"operate under slightly different conditions"*. Araton snorted softly. Slightly different was right. It felt as if he'd turned at least partly human. He frowned. He could only hope that he'd kept some of his abilities, even if his wings and senses seemed to be gone. If he were completely human, certain parts of his task had just become almost impossible to achieve. How was he going to convince Jake that Christmas was a time for celebration and renewal if he couldn't throw in the odd miracle here or there?

"Oh man, I must be dreaming! I'm warm, the pain's gone, and I'm in a cabin instead of the ice cave." Jake's voice made Araton turn his head toward the other man.

Blue. Jake's eyes were the deep blue of a summer sky.

"This being a dream would explain a few things."

Araton checked his new body a bit more thoroughly.

None of his angelic energies were present, his wings were definitely gone, and he couldn't see through the walls. He was also wearing clothes.

It looked as though he was partly human. It would certainly make interacting with Jake a lot easier. At least the man wouldn't become immediately suspicious.

"Huh? You also think this is a dream?" Jake sat up and rubbed his temples. "You're the guy who saved me, right? How the hell did you do that? And doesn't that mean you're supposed to know what's going on?"

"How do you know that I'm the person who saved you?" Araton sat up as well, the movement feeling strange without his wings to balance him.

"Your voice. I'll never forget your voice." Jake grinned. "I have no idea how you did it, but I'm not going to complain. This is the first thing that's gone right for me in over four years and I'm really grateful."

"So you believe in miracles now?" Araton narrowed his eyes.

That would've been much too easy. Besides, Araton didn't want his assignment to be over yet. He wanted to spend time with this man, even though it looked like he was

going to be entirely human for the experience.

"Miracles?" Jake's eyes widened. "No, there must be another explanation. Like I told you before, miracles don't exist."

Yep, it looked like there was some work still left to do until Jake became a believer. Good. Araton couldn't wait to keep trying. With any luck, this assignment would last several years. *Hold on*. What was going on here? He was definitely attracted to Jake, which couldn't happen. Angels and humans weren't supposed to mix. He was sure that was as true for Christmas angels as it had been for guardians.

Why then was he so tempted?

CHAPTER THREE

"So, if miracles don't exist, how is it that I managed to get you out of the ice cave and into this cabin?" Araton suppressed a grin. This was going to be fun.

Jake frowned and shrugged.

"You're not curious?" Araton wondered whether the man had hit his head harder than he'd suspected, or maybe he hadn't succeeded in completely healing him?

"Of course I'm curious! It's hard not to be. But from your reaction I figure you don't know any more about what's going on than I do. Using a miracle as an explanation, I mean, really. If that is the best you can come up with, there doesn't seem to be much point in discussing it." Jake rubbed his softly rumbling stomach. "I know that I'll want to come back to it, but I can't think on an empty stomach. At this point, I'd much rather we focus on finding something to eat and figuring out where we are so that we can get back home."

"That's very practical of you." Araton wasn't ready to give up so easily, but there wasn't anything Jake could do to help him figure out what was going on. And how could he tell Jake he was an angel? While Nathaniel had explained that a Christmas angel wasn't forbidden to reveal

himself, the archangel had also emphasized that it should never be the first option. On top of that, Jake was already pretty dismissive of the idea of miracles, so there might not be any point. He needed to find out more about Jake before he knew whether being honest with him would help or hinder his case.

There was also the fact that he didn't think he'd be able to prove it anymore. Or would he? He hadn't had the time to try anything other than using his angelic senses, and they were definitely gone. As for his other abilities, that remained to be seen. Suddenly being mostly human had not been what he'd expected. He missed his sense of orientation the most right now. He had no idea where they were, not having paid attention when he still had his senses, but he suspected they hadn't left Colorado since the flight to the cabin hadn't taken all that long. But the real problem was that he had no idea how to get them back to Jake's condo in Flagstaff.

"Yep, practical, that's me. So, since you brought me here, I assume you know if there is any food around." Jake slowly rose and took a moment to find his balance.

He was even more magnificent now that he stood. Jake had broad shoulders, well muscled arms and a strong chest. His waist was slim and his jeans-covered legs long

and strong. Araton had no idea where the dry clothes had come from, he couldn't remember having done anything to get the thick outdoor clothing off Jake. It was the one thing he hadn't had time for before the strange dizzy spell had made him faint. But he was grateful that someone had taken care of it to avoid Jake being chilled and getting sick.

"Before we take this any further, can you at least tell me your name?" Jake shook out the blanket, folded it and put it on the sofa. "I can't really call you 'mysterious stranger', now, can I?"

"My name is Araton." He was pretty sure that hadn't changed. And Jake could call him anything he wanted.

"I'm Jake." The man held out his hand and they shook for a moment.

Jake's hand was slightly calloused and warm. Araton didn't want to let go. From the look on Jake's face and his slightly widened eyes, neither did Jake. Was this what physical attraction felt like? If so, Araton was ready for more. But he couldn't give in to those feelings. Cool detachment and professional distance was what he needed to practice.

A most interesting blush colored Jake's cheeks, and the other man withdrew his hand. What did that mean? Was Jake attracted to him? Was the man embarrassed about it?

Damn, there he went again.

"Right. Food." Jake turned away and walked toward the kitchen area which was next to the door leading outside.

"Food." Araton followed the other man, admiring how his ass moved in his pants. That was one attractive behind.

He was still trying to recover from the slight jolt he'd felt when touching Jake. The soft tingling was very distracting. Araton was sure he blushed as well when he realized his hands weren't his only body parts that were tingling. He was glad Jake had his back to him as he tried to figure out how to bring his suddenly wayward body back under control.

They quickly found the canned stew. Not being really sure how to actually heat it, Araton let Jake lead. The other man looked at him strangely when he put the sliced bread on the table, and pointed at one of the machines next to the fridge.

"Since we have a toaster, I assume there is electricity. That's a good thing. I like bread a lot better when it's toasted." Jake turned back to stirring the soup on the stove.

Toasted? Araton approached the machine Jake had indicated and stared at it. Then he remembered seeing

something similar on TV, while he'd been watching over Dexter. If he was right, the bread was supposed to go into the large slits. Yes, it fit. Now, how to turn the thing on?

"Hey, what's wrong?" Jake reached over from the stove and pushed a small handle downward. "It's almost like you've never seen a toaster."

"Of course I've seen toasters!" *Just never had to use them.*

Jake raised his eyebrows but didn't comment further.

When they sat down to eat, Araton paused for a moment. He'd never had food before, and the moment seemed somehow momentous. Following Jake's lead he took the large spoon, heaped some stew on it, and moved it toward his mouth.

Ouch! Hot food on lips apparently wasn't a good thing.

"You must be hungrier than you thought if you don't have time to blow on your food first." Jake smiled and chewed, having been more successful at not hurting himself.

Araton rolled his eyes, tried again, and had to close his eyes when the rich flavor flooded his taste buds. The contrast between the softer and the chewier parts of the

stew on his tongue and between his teeth was exquisite. When he was done and opened his eyes, Jake was staring at him.

"What?" Had he done something wrong?

"No, sorry for staring." Jake blushed and looked away. "I've just never seen anyone enjoy simple stew that much."

"Oh." Araton smiled. It *had* been his first food, so he guessed he was entitled to some enjoyment.

The rest of the meal was silent, each intent on filling their belly. Finally they were done and Araton leaned back in his chair. He felt full and happy. He couldn't believe how sensitive this human body apparently was to being supplied with new energy.

"What time is it anyway?" Jake cleared away their dishes while Araton tried to remember if there was a clock somewhere.

"It's after eleven p.m." Araton had found a small clock next to the DVD player under the TV. Luckily it must have set itself when he turned the power on. This cabin was better equipped than he'd expected.

"Time to go to sleep then. I guess we're both tired and there'll be time to check where to go from here tomorrow." Jake dried his hands after finishing the cleanup.

"There's a bedroom at the end of the corridor. Why don't you sleep in there and I'll take the sofa." Araton didn't really want to sleep on the sofa, but he was sure it was the right thing to offer.

After a token protest Jake agreed. He was clearly still exhausted and quietly made his way into the back of the cabin after saying goodnight.

Araton lay down on the sofa, covered by a blanket, and expected nothing much to happen. Sleep wasn't something he'd experienced before today so he didn't really know what to do. The slow fading of consciousness was strange but nice and Araton drifted into sleep thinking of Jake.

Araton couldn't help wondering, now that he had a human body, what it would feel like to be touched by this human? What it would feel like to touch him back? Despite all his misgivings about any type of involvement, he'd never been so tempted. He couldn't help but hope there would be time to explore the physical aspect of his new existence. As long as he didn't let it go too far, what was the harm?

* * * *

Jake woke to soft winter sunlight streaming into the window and a stomach growling with hunger. He looked around, confused for a few seconds. Right, he'd been mysteriously brought here yesterday. Not that he was able to explain his miraculous rescue, but he wasn't going to worry about the hows and whys. He didn't think it would solve anything. The situation was just too strange, and he'd have to take it at face value.

Until he could figure out what was actually going on, rather than what it looked like at the moment. Namely, a miracle. Which wasn't even close to a satisfactory explanation.

At least he was alive. And being stranded in a deserted cabin with the most attractive man he had ever met wasn't all bad now, was it? Surely they couldn't be too far from Torrey's Peak. Reaching the rental car he'd left behind, then the motel in Georgetown shouldn't be a problem.

Grinning as he looked forward to seeing Araton again he got up, dressed in his old clothes, and quietly opened the door to the main room. Sneaking into the bathroom to do his business he briefly wondered where they would go from here. He shook his head. No point in wasting time on thinking about it. He was going to talk to

Araton and find out.

When he was done, he quietly made his way into the living room where Araton was still asleep on the sofa. Strawberry blonde hair peaked out from under the blanket, falling in tousled waves and making Jake want to run his hands through it to find out if it was as soft as it looked. The rest of the body was unfortunately totally covered, but Jake still remembered it well. Who was this man? Where did he come from? How had he managed to 'appear' in the ice fissure, and how the hell had he managed to get both of them out of there and into this small but comfortable cabin?

Just then Araton moved, stretching his arms above his head and making the blanket slip down his chest. Jake's breath hitched. He was naked underneath the cover. His skin was a soft gold, his chest and arms well toned, and a wave of vanilla and cinnamon scent made Jake's nostrils flare. He took a deep breath to try and calm down his suddenly rising libido. Man, Araton was beautiful.

Araton stopped mid-yawn and looked up at Jake standing right next to the sofa. His deep chocolate brown eyes blinked twice, long eyelashes throwing shadows on his high cheekbones, and a slow smile made his deep red lips curl upward.

"Good morning." Araton lowered his arms and sat

up, muscles moving under the flawless skin, apparently totally unconcerned with his nakedness.

"Good... good morning." Jake took another deep breath, but it didn't help. He desperately wanted to touch and kiss the other man, explore that lean body with his hands and tongue. For hours, if possible.

"Did you sleep okay?" Araton tilted his head.

"I... I slept fine, thank you." He had, despite his recent injuries. They'd been completely, if somewhat mysteriously, healed by the time he went to bed— but still.

"What about you? Was the sofa okay?"

"The sofa was fine." Araton frowned as if questioning his own answer. "I've never slept... on a sofa before, but it was okay."

Araton started to get up but looked wobbly for a moment. Without thinking, Jake stepped closer to catch and stabilize him. When his hands touched the skin on Araton's upper arms it was as if an electric current ran between them. Rather than shocking him like a real current would have, this feeling was making him tingle all over his body.

The blanket slid to the floor, revealing the most perfect male body Jake had ever seen. The hairless chest tapered into a slim waist, Araton's abdominal muscles were well defined, and his legs long and slender. His cock was

perfectly formed and pointed straight up. Jake had already been half hard before, just from watching the other man wake up, but this sight made him come to full attention.

"Oh, fuck!" Jake held onto those arms as if his life depended on it, not wanting to let go for fear of losing the wonderful sensations coursing through his body. "Who are you that you can do this to me?"

"I don't... I'm not doing anything." Araton's wide eyes and helpless expression convinced Jake that he was speaking the truth. "But whatever it is, I can feel it too."

Slowly the tingling eased, leaving behind the most intense need to touch. Jake didn't move his hands, and when Araton started leaning toward him he no longer hesitated.

His lips brushed Araton's in a careful gesture of tender exploration. The soft touch of his lips was electrifying. Jake pulled back to watch for any sign of discomfort on the other man's face. Araton had closed his eyes, and his lips were now slightly parted. Jake smiled. It looked like the other man had enjoyed the initial contact as much as he had.

Jake slowly slid his hands down Araton's arms, and he entwined their fingers. He bent down and kissed each of Araton's eyelids, making the other man smile. He kissed the

tip of his nose, each cheek and his chin before moving back to his lips. A soft kiss was greeted with a low moan, so he lingered longer next time, just touching their lips together and breathing slowly. The longer he lingered the more difficult it was to ignore the need to take this further.

With an effort he pulled back again and waited for Araton to open his eyes.

"Why did you stop?" Araton looked almost hurt.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you didn't do anything wrong. I want to make sure that you're okay with this. We've only just met and I don't want to do anything that you're not ready for." Jake took a step back to give Araton more space.

"I'm okay with this." Araton took a step forward as if to make perfectly clear that he was telling the truth. "I need you to know that I've never done this before, but I like the way you make me feel. I don't want to stop, but I do want you to take the lead. This time."

"You've never... that's amazing." Jake couldn't believe his luck.

"I don't know about amazing, I just never had an opportunity." Araton blushed.

"It's hard to believe that a gorgeous guy like you hasn't been snapped up long ago. But I'm not going to

complain because it means that I get you all to myself." At the very least for now, and hopefully for a lot longer.

* * * *

Araton looked at Jake. How was he going to stop himself from taking the next step? His whole body was humming with need. Jake's kisses had awakened something inside him that made him feel more alive than he'd imagined possible. Surely there was no harm in exploring this a little further? He needed to get it out of his system once and for all, and this was the ideal opportunity.

He liked the thought that this was possibly as new for Jake as it was for him. He had the strangest feeling in his stomach when he thought about the things that might happen next. Having a physical body definitely had its advantages.

"So, now that you've got me 'all to yourself', what are you going to do about it?" Araton wanted more kisses and more touching.

"First I'd like us to be more comfortable." Jake let go of one of his hands and pointed to the back of the cabin. "Do you mind if we take this to the bedroom?"

Araton shook his head. He didn't mind where they

went, as long as Jake didn't stop touching him. He'd craved touch even as an angel, but now that he was human the need was becoming more urgent by the minute. Since he wasn't sure if Jake would ever be able to accept him, he was going to make the most of it while he could. He pulled Jake with him, making the other man laugh.

"I'm glad you're as enthusiastic about this as I am." Jake pulled the door closed behind them and took Araton into his arms.

"You're going to make me even more enthusiastic in a minute." Touching from chest to knees for the first time was nice... but something was missing. Araton didn't want to feel Jake's clothes; he wanted to feel the other man's skin.

"I am?" Jake grinned.

"Oh yes, you are. Because taking off your clothes is going to make me very happy." Araton stepped back with difficulty. He didn't want to lose the feeling of being pressed against the other man's body, but he figured he'd be back soon enough.

"Your wish is my command." Jake undressed slowly, never losing eye contact.

Araton admired Jake's broad shoulders and well muscled chest once they appeared from under the sweater.

There was a light dusting of dark hair on Jake's chest, but his dark brown nipples were clearly visible and hardened when he touched them with careful fingers.

Once Jake had pushed off his boots and socks, jeans and underwear followed quickly. Jake was beautiful, all strength and muscles, not like an angel's celestial body at all. His cock was long and thick, a shade or two darker than the rest of Jake's skin. This was the real definition of Heaven as far as Araton was concerned.

"Is this better?" Jake held out his hand and Araton stepped closer.

"Much better." The heat from Jake's body made Araton shiver with anticipation.

When they touched this time, skin to skin, Araton sighed with contentment. This was the best feeling ever. He was quickly proven wrong when Jake's arms slid around his middle and the other man kissed him again. No small hesitant touches of lips this time. Jake's hot mouth placed small kisses along Araton's lips before he licked his way back. It made Araton open his mouth to try and explore more.

Their tongues touched and Araton's cock twitched between their bodies, making him moan. He'd never been hard in his entire existence. It was a little strange, but he

liked the shivers of excitement that traveled from his swollen cock into his balls. A sense of warmth and well being spread through his whole body. His hips moved of their own accord, increasing the pressure on his cock and he moaned again. Their tongues tangled in a dance that had them both breathing faster and needing to come up for air a lot sooner than Araton wanted.

"Don't stop!" Araton was scared this would end before he had time to enjoy it all.

"Not stopping." Jake slid a hand up his back and cupped Araton's neck to hold him still for the next kiss.

They devoured each other's mouths, and small moans soon filled the room. Araton felt as though he might burst and started rubbing himself against Jake's cock as best he could. The feelings this caused in his balls, his ass, and all the way up his spine were indescribable. This was far better than heavenly bliss. Not that he'd ever been a good enough angel to experience this highest form of reward, but he'd heard that it was pretty amazing. No way was it more amazing than this.

By the time Jake slowly pushed him back onto the bed Araton was ready to scream with the desperate need for some sort of relief. He hadn't known coupling could feel this intense.

"Please, Jake." Araton relaxed into the soft mattress and tried to get hold of himself. "Please, I need you to do something."

"I will, baby, don't worry. I'm going to make it so good for you." Jake's eyes were a deeper blue than before, and his pupils were dilated. "Just lay back and relax for me."

"Relax? How? You're driving me absolutely crazy!" Araton lifted his hands and used them to pull Jake's head down toward him.

He kissed the other man with all he had, putting the urgency of his emerging emotions into the exchange. It was Jake's turn to moan, and he soon pushed a hand between their sweat-slicked bodies to grasp both their cocks. Araton pushed his head back into the pillow and started thrusting into the other man's hand with abandon.

"That's it, baby. Go for it." Jake tightened his grip on their throbbing cocks and started moving with him to increase the friction.

It was too much. Araton's balls tightened and he came in glorious spurts, making his entire body shake. He closed his eyes with the intensity of the release and tried to remain conscious. Within seconds more heat splashed against his abdomen, and Jake grunted his orgasm into

Araton's ear.

Jake collapsed on top of him, and quickly tried to roll onto his side. Araton would have none of that and held on, making Jake stay where he was.

"Wow!" It had been so much better than Araton had expected, but he couldn't find the words to express what he was feeling.

A strange tiredness spread in his limbs, and he felt like sleeping even though he had just gotten up. He didn't want to sleep, but it looked like he had no choice. Reluctantly he gave in and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Araton awoke, the sun was halfway up the sky. He shook his head, confused by his body's need to sleep in the middle of the day. Wasn't it enough if he rested at night? The warm arms around his chest and middle tightened and he realized Jake was spooning him. His entire back was touching the other man's front. He sighed. Maybe sleeping more than he'd expected wasn't so bad, as long as he got to wake up like this.

"Did you have a nice nap?" Jake's voice was rough with sleep.

"Yeah." It has been another strange first experience, but refreshing. "You?"

"Sure." Jake kissed Araton's nape and pulled back. "As nice as it is to lie in bed with you, I think it's time we faced reality."

"Oh?" That was the one thing Araton just *knew* he wouldn't be much good at. Human reality totally eluded him, at least for now.

"Yes." Jake loosened his grip, pushing lightly until Araton turned toward him. "I really need to get back to my rental car which I left near the hotel in Georgetown. I fly back to Flagstaff, which is where I live, in two day's time."

So I need to be in Denver pretty soon."

"Okay." Araton was about to be in really deep trouble.

"Okay?" Jake frowned. "What do you mean *okay*? I need you to tell me where we are, and we have to find a way to get to Georgetown."

"I don't know." Araton lowered his eyes, embarrassed.

"You don't *know*?" Jake pulled farther back, his frown deepening. "But you brought me here. How can you not know?"

"It's a long story." Araton hated the distance that was suddenly between their bodies. He wanted Jake's arms back around him. The way Jake suddenly looked at him wasn't what Araton wanted either.

"Well, I'd like to hear it." Jake left the bed and got dressed. "Since we seem to have nothing better to do, you might as well start talking."

Araton swallowed. With Jake now looking at him with a healthy dose of skepticism, he was suddenly very self-conscious about the fact that he was still naked. He blushed. His clothes were in the bathroom where he'd left them last night.

"I'll see what I can do about some food while you

get dressed, all right?" Jake's gaze softened and he left the bedroom.

Thank Heaven for that small favor. Once Araton was dressed, he made his way to the small kitchen area where Jake had put bread, ingredients for sandwiches, and some orange juice on the small table. They each added a plate, glasses, and knives, and Araton quietly followed Jake's lead again as they put together their meal.

"You haven't done this very often, have you?" Jake's gaze was intent when Araton looked up from struggling with his small tower of food.

"What?" Araton clamped down on the bread, trying to keep the whole thing from falling apart.

"Making sandwiches." Jake waved at the crumbs around Araton's plate, the mess he'd left with the slices of ham that hadn't wanted to come apart and the squashed tomatoes that hadn't quite made it into the final product.

"Uhm, no." Araton took a quick bite, remembering how the stew had helped fill him up last night. His stomach was decidedly empty again, and he was beginning to understand why humans spent so much time eating. Feeling almost hollow wasn't his idea of fun either.

"Hm." Jake started eating his food.

They chewed in silence for a while, but they were

done all too soon. Jake wiped his mouth and hands with a paper towel, then leaned back in his chair. The request couldn't have been clearer.

"You said you were curious about me being in that ice cave with you." Araton leaned back as well, feeling less hungry than before. He'd wanted to eat more, but being nervous apparently interfered with human digestion.

"Yes." Jake nodded. "I still am."

"Okay, well, I'm going to tell you the truth, but you may not believe me." Araton smiled. "In fact, you probably won't. I have no idea if I can prove anything I say, but I'd like you to listen to the whole story before you start asking questions. Can you do that?"

"I'll try." Jake smiled, but it was a strained movement.

"I was in the cave with you because my boss put me there. Until I brought you here yesterday I was an angel. I was assigned to... help you." There was no point in getting into *all* of the details. He'd just reveal enough to make Jake believe him.

"You were an *angel*?" Jake's eyebrows rose. "Sent to help me? With what?"

"Getting your life back." It was impossible for Araton to lie.

"Getting my *life* back?" Jack jumped up from his chair and backed away. "Is this some kind of cruel joke?"

"No joke." Why was the other man so upset?

"Look, I don't know who sent you, but I'll never be able to get back the life I really want to have. So let's not go there." Jake fisted his hands.

"Okay." Araton figured Jake still hadn't accepted the fact that he wasn't going to play football anymore. But if it was this important to him, maybe he could find another way of bringing the game back into Jake's life? Maybe that was the way to fulfill his mission?

"You saved my life and that was very nice of you. I have no idea how you did it, but I'm grateful. As for this angel stuff? I can't believe that just because you say so." Jake started pacing. "I guess I'll never know how I got out of that cave, and I can live with that. Hell, I've learned to live without football, so I should be able to manage this."

Araton nodded, not sure what to say.

"So if you're an angel, why can't you get us out of here and back to my car?" Jake stopped pacing and stared at Araton.

"I'm not an angel anymore. At least I'm pretty sure I'm not." He didn't want to lie, but he really had no idea how many of his abilities were still within his grasp. He *did*

know that flying them out of here was no longer possible since his wings were definitely gone.

"Huh? How can you be an angel one moment and then stop being one the next? And shouldn't you know either way? I mean, either you think you *are* an angel or you think you're not." Jake's eyebrows almost touched his hairline.

"I don't know. I didn't think it was possible to stop being one, but when I woke up after flying you here and healing you, my wings were gone. My senses are also different, and I can't automatically tell where I am any longer. There may be other abilities left, but I won't know which ones they are until I try." Araton sighed.

"Your *wings* were gone?" Jake collapsed into his chair and had trouble closing his mouth. "That sounds almost as though you believe what you're saying."

"I cannot lie." Araton shrugged. "Must be a leftover from my time in Heaven."

"Right." Jake rolled his eyes.

"I'm sorry this is so difficult for you." Araton could feel Jake withdrawing from him. It hurt, and he already missed the other man's closeness. He could only hope that Jake would get over this eventually.

"Try impossible." Jake rubbed his face with his

hands. "I'm a pretty down to earth guy, Araton. This all sounds very mysterious and strange to me. Even though you seem to believe it, I can't quite get myself there."

"I understand that." Araton smiled.

"Okay, all of that aside, we still need to find a way out of here." Jake got up and peered out of the window.

"There's a lot of snow, but someone built this cabin, so there's probably a road or at least a path somewhere. If we follow that, we should be able to find a larger road, and eventually, civilization."

"That makes sense." Araton looked down at the only clothes he owned. Jeans and a sweatshirt weren't exactly right for hours of walking in cold temperatures, were they?

"Yeah, I'm a bit worried about that as well." Jake had followed his gaze. "We'll need to find warmer clothes for you, or you'll freeze to death."

"I'd rather not stay behind either." In fact, Araton was determined not to let Jake out of his sight.

But a search of the cabin turned up nothing more useful than some extra socks and an old leather jacket. Nothing that was really helpful. Lacking anything better to do, they washed the dishes and put the leftover food away. Making the bed and restoring everything else to its

previous condition didn't take long. Araton could feel Jake's determination to get out of here, and the man still had his protective clothing, so he'd be able to leave, at least.

They stood facing each other when they were done.

"I'll go get help." Jake reached out to pat Araton's shoulder. "I'll send them to come and get you, don't worry."

"I don't want you to go." Araton lifted his hand to hold Jake's where it still rested on his shoulder. He'd really grown to like the man and didn't want to be separated from him. It felt wrong.

"I don't think we have a choice." Jake looked regretful but determined.

"I just don't want you to have to go out into the freezing cold on your own." Araton closed his eyes and let every ounce of emotion and need bubble up in his heart as he spoke. "I wish we were at your condo already."

There was a flash of blinding white light, harsh enough he could see it through his closed eyelids.

Then there was complete darkness.

* * * *

"What the *fuck* just happened?" Jake stood in the center of what he thought might be his living room. He

rubbed his eyes, irritated at the after effects of that weird flash. It had almost blinded him, and he still couldn't see right.

Araton started to collapse, and Jake barely managed to catch him. He was holding him tightly against his own body to stop the man from sliding to the floor. Then he closed his eyes to rest them before he attempted to confirm what he thought he'd seen. When Jake opened them again his eyesight was fine. Shocked to his core, he stared at the undeniable evidence of his own four walls around him. His knees buckled, and he barely managed to make it to the sofa where he sank down with an inarticulate groan.

"This isn't possible!" Jake pulled Araton into his lap and closed his eyes again. Maybe the mirage would be gone when he opened them again.

"What's going on?" Araton's voice was rough.

The other man tried to get up, but Jake held onto him. Having Araton in his arms felt wonderful, and he wasn't ready to let him go. They needed to stick together at least until he could figure out what was going on. He ignored the little voice at the back of his head that insisted he knew exactly what was going on. It was just too fantastical.

Jake waved his hand in the air, making Araton look

around the room.

The other man blinked a few times before turning his head to take in their surroundings. His eyes widened with surprise, and he started grinning.

"What's so funny?" Jake growled.

"I guess I haven't lost all my angelic abilities." Araton looked smug. "It'll be interesting to see exactly which ones are left."

"You seriously believe all that stuff you were talking about is true, don't you?" Jake sank back against the sofa, letting Araton go.

"Well, I hate to tell you this, but we aren't in the cabin anymore, are we?" Araton looked around again. "I like it here. I assume this is your home?"

"Yes, this is my home." Jake narrowed his eyes. "That was what you wished for, right, that we were at my condo?"

"It was." Araton nodded. "That's how it used to work. I wanted something, focused on it and it would be done. This time I basically did the same, but it was a lot harder. And the light made me black out. I'm not sure I'm meant to do this on a regular basis."

"I'm sure you're not." Jake shook his head. "I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I've got to admit that I'm

beginning to believe your story."

"Thank you." Araton leaned into him to place a chaste kiss on his cheek.

"You're welcome." Jake slid his arms around Araton and held on.

Maybe this was all happening to confirm his recent thoughts about letting the past go and take charge of his life again? Whether or not Araton had been, or still was, an angel was almost irrelevant. Almost losing his life in that cave, followed by the miraculous rescue, and the irresistible attraction he felt toward Araton were big enough hints for him to see that something had changed.

"Now all I need to do is sort out the rental car, the hotel bill and getting my suitcase sent to me." Jake chuckled. "It should cause at least a few raised eyebrows once they realize I just left without taking any of it with me. I might even be able to get a refund on the unused return flight of my ticket."

"I could sort it out for you, but I have a feeling that I'm not supposed to use whatever power I have left in that way." Araton looked thoughtful as he leaned into Jake. "Actually, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do at all."

"Oh, that is simple; you said it yourself, a little earlier. You're supposed to stay with me and help me get

my life back." Jake grinned.

"Oh, I am, am I?" Araton looked up at him with big innocent eyes.

"Yep, I'm pretty sure I'll need lots of help in that department." And once everything had worked out, he'd just have to come up with another reason for Araton to stay around.

* * * *

Two days later the remainder of his stuff had been dispatched to him. The rental car and hotel bills had been sorted out, and Jake realized he'd have to go back to his job on Monday. He didn't want to leave Araton behind on his own. The other man was still getting used to being human, or part human, whatever that meant. It was also why he'd given him the guest room. As much as he wanted to sleep with the gorgeous man, he didn't want to put any pressure on Araton. The other man had enough to deal with.

It was Sunday morning and he was alone in his bed.

Jake sighed. He felt miserable without Araton there. That one night they'd shared at the cabin, even if nothing beyond a hand job had happened between them, had been the most wonderful night of his life. Sleeping next to

another man, waking up to a warm body in his arms — he wanted that again. But he wasn't going to push Araton, he'd promised himself. What if Araton gave in now and later regretted it? This was all so new to him, Jake was sure he could do without another problem.

He got up, got dressed and padded to the kitchen in stocking feet. Coffee first, then he'd start to figure out what to do about getting Araton back into his bed.

"Good morning." Araton sat at the kitchen table, already dressed in the new jeans and pullover he'd bought the man yesterday. His knees were drawn up to his chest. Pale and miserable were what came to mind.

"Good morning." Jake blinked. "You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep." Araton shrugged but didn't look up.

"Is something wrong with the guest room?" Jake grabbed a mug and poured himself some of the extra coffee Araton had made.

Araton's head shot up. For a moment it looked as if he was going to nod, then he shook his head and resumed his examination of the floor.

Damn!

Araton looked as awful as Jake felt. He was going to do something about this.

"I thought we could explore the city a little today." He sat down, holding on to his coffee and trying very hard for a casual appearance. "It'll be Christmas in a few days and the decorations are always beautiful to look at."

"But you don't like Christmas." Araton's eyes had widened.

"It's not like I *hate* it or anything. I just don't see the point of it." Jake shrugged, secretly elated that he'd gotten such a reaction out of Araton. He hadn't seen him this animated since their time in the cabin. "My parents didn't believe in it, and they never had any money to spend anyway, being poor immigrants and all. So I guess I just never understood what all the fuss was about."

"So why are you offering?" Araton looked puzzled.

"I thought you might like it. You know, being an angel and all." Jake held his breath, hoping he'd said the right thing.

"You don't know the half of it." Araton sat up. "Were you serious? I would love to go with you, show you what it can be like."

"Sure I was serious." *Yes!* "We can leave right now and find a place to have breakfast, or we can have some food first."

"I'm not that hungry." Araton suddenly looked very

enthusiastic.

"Okay, let's go then." Jake finished his coffee, got his keys, wallet, a warm jacket, and followed Araton to the garage.

Breakfast at Brandy's was always an event, but with Araton cheering up even more as soon as he saw the Christmas tree in the corner, Jake had the best time ever. After they'd finished the food, they went to the Historic Railroad District next and spent hours wandering around admiring the little shops, cafes, and artist places. By the early afternoon Jake was exhausted from all the walking, but the festive spirit was contagious. He was much happier than he'd been in a long time, and so was Araton. His eyes shone and his smile was dazzling.

When they got home after an early dinner, Jake lit a fire in the fireplace, got some soft blankets, and they sat down to share the cookies he'd bought them as dessert. Araton sat very close to him, their thighs touching. Jake held out his cookie for Araton to try, and the other man leaned closer.

"Mhmm, good." Araton looked up at him, a few errant crumbs on his chin.

"Yeah, it is." Jake leaned down and licked the crumbs away. "Very good."

Araton held out his cookie and Jake took a bite, making sure there were plenty of crumbs, and not just on his face. With a happy grin, Araton started cleaning his face, then followed the trail of crumbs down his neck.

"I think it might be safer if I took off my pullover." Araton grinned and sat back. "Wouldn't want to get any crumbs or chocolate stains on it."

"Excellent point." Jake took off his sweatshirt and the T-shirt for good measure.

The remaining cookies were shared amongst laughter, tickling tongues on naked skin, and crumbs being chased all the way down to the waistband of their jeans. When they were done they lay down on their sides, Jake behind Araton, and watched the fire. Araton's scent was better than any cookie's, and Jake took full advantage. His hand was on the other man's stomach, making small circles on the soft skin.

"This is nice." Araton sighed and leaned back into Jake.

"Yeah." Jake planted a soft kiss on Araton's head.

"Can we stay here all night?" Araton sounded hopeful.

"Uhm, I think it would be very uncomfortable after a while." The floor was too hard for his taste.

"Forget it." Araton stiffened and tried to pull away.

"Hey." Jake held onto the other man and buried his face in the soft space between neck and shoulder. "Don't go."

"But you just said it was going to be uncomfortable. So I don't want to fall asleep here and make you suffer." Araton turned his head toward Jake. His eyes were suspiciously bright.

"Are you ready to go to sleep?" Jake still didn't relax his grip around the other man's middle. He had no intention of letting him go and every signal Araton had sent before this had meant that he didn't really want to go.

"Yeah, I'm tired." Araton closed his eyes.

"Does that have to mean that you go?" Jake held his breath.

"Well, you sent me to sleep in the guest room, so yeah, I guess it does." When Araton opened his eyes there was so much pain in them that Jake almost lost his grip.

"Is that what you thought I did?" Oh, shit, was this all a misunderstanding?

"Of course." Araton frowned. "Why would you show me the guest room if you didn't want me to sleep there?"

"I wanted to give you a choice." Jake took a deep

breath. "I didn't want you to feel that you *had* to sleep in my bed."

"But it was okay in the cabin?" Araton looked more confused than ever.

"It sort of *happened* in the cabin." And he would do anything to make it happen here as well.

"But it was nice. I liked it." Araton smiled.

"Yeah, me too." Jake smiled back. "I'll be honest. I loved it and I've missed it. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do, but I would love us to share a bed. Just so we can be together and share warmth."

"I would like that." Araton's relief was almost palpable. "I would like that a lot."

That night Jake slept better than he had in a long time. Araton had cuddled right into him when they'd made it under the covers, and the other man's soft breathing was an ideal background noise to relax Jake like nothing else could. Finally, all was right with the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

The loud beeping was highly annoying. Araton tried to ignore it, and it finally stopped. Just as he was about to drift back into sleep, it started up again.

"What *is* that infernal noise?" He slowly opened one eye, only to discover that he wasn't in the guest room.

He smiled as he closed his eyes again, snuggling back into Jake who had hit the electrical alarm clock on his nightstand. Apparently that had shut it up. They hadn't done anything other than kiss and cuddle last night, but he'd slept so much better with Jake next to him. Lying here with the other man's arms around him made him feel all warm and fuzzy. His fully human body appreciated the contact even more than his celestial body would have.

He just wished he could ask Nathaniel or someone about his exact status. The more he'd thought about it, the surer he'd become that his body being human combined with his mental abilities still being intact was the normal state of being for Christmas angels. But it sure would have been nice to get that confirmed or denied.

"Now, now, are you becoming impatient already?" Nathaniel's voice came from the direction of the door.

Araton opened his eyes so quickly it made them

hurt. Nathaniel was sitting on one of the chairs next to Jake's dresser, relaxed as can be, and smiled.

"Nathaniel?" Araton stared at the archangel in mute disbelief. Had his vague wish to talk to him brought him here?

"Not entirely, but close." Nathaniel sobered. "The fact is that you need some answers, and we need to discuss a few things."

"But Jake..." Araton turned around to see Jake still sleeping.

"He will not hear us." Nathaniel chuckled. "He would not even see me if his eyes were open. I have stopped time for him, so we can talk."

"You've *stopped time*?" Araton turned back to stare at his savior.

"Sure. It is all relative anyway." Nathaniel cleared his throat. "Now, as for your question. The answer is that it depends on the case."

"What?" Araton scratched his head. What had been the question again?

"Do pay attention, Araton." Nathaniel shook his head. "Each case that is assigned to a Christmas angel requires a different set of abilities. In Jake's case, he needed proof that miracles exist before his healing can start. He has

that, so now all you need to do is figure out how to give him his life back."

"Oh, is that all?" Araton felt dizzy. He didn't want to fail another assignment. "I have no idea how to do that, Nathaniel."

"I think you do." Nathaniel pointed at Jake. "Just think about it. What is his greatest desire?"

"He wants to play football again." Araton felt miserable.

If he made that possible, Jake wouldn't want anything to do with Araton anymore. A male partner in that world was still pretty much unthinkable. And how selfish was that? Araton wouldn't be able to stay with him anyway once his task here was accomplished.

"Ideally, yes. But even he recognizes that is close to impossible. At this point, having been out of the game for four years, even if he could get the medical support to say that he was perfectly healthy, he might never get a team to agree to take him on. Definitely not as a quarterback, and that is his real dream." Nathaniel looked back at Araton. "So, if that is not possible, what do you think is the next best thing?"

"Well, he said it himself the other day. He wants the game back in his life." Araton frowned. "But I don't think

that means the occasional weekend game with friends."

"No, I do not think it does. This is where your creativity as a Christmas angel will have to help you figure out what will make Jake happy again." Nathaniel smiled. "Give him that for Christmas, and he will believe in the Christmas spirit like he used to when he was a little boy. Before his parents' behavior disillusioned him. That is the objective of this assignment."

Get the game back into Jake's life? How was he supposed to do that without getting Jake to play again? He needed to figure out who was involved in the game but didn't play themselves, well, not competitively?

A coach!

"Now you have got it." Nathaniel grinned.

"Okay, so I need to find someone who can offer him a position as football coach. Ideally someone who is grateful to Jake." How was he going to do that? "Hold on, are any of the people whom Jake helped at the shelter teachers who might know about open positions?"

"That is the way to go." Nathaniel nodded. "In fact one of them just woke up realizing the solution to understaffing at his high school is to ask Jake to help out."

"Thank you!" Araton felt elated.

"It was a pleasure. You did most of the work on this

one. Now all you have to make sure is that Jake takes the offer." Nathaniel paused. "There is a second reason why I am here."

"You said something like that." Araton wasn't looking forward to this part.

He was sure to be given another assignment once Jake was settled into his new life. He could just see it coming. The problem was that he didn't want to leave Jake. Not now and maybe not ever. His grand plan on getting Jake 'out of his system' had backfired in the most spectacular way possible.

"You have a decision to make." Nathaniel's voice sounded ominous.

"I get a say in this?" Wow, Christmas angels sure had a different life if they got to choose their own assignments.

"Of course you do. Free choice was not invented for humans, nor are they the only species that it applies to." Nathaniel frowned. "But you need to understand that whatever choice you make will be permanent. The consequences of your actions will be with you for eternity."

"Okay." That didn't sound good at all.

"I believe you are aware that your increasing attraction to Jake is against the rules." Nathaniel had never

looked so serious.

"Yes." He hated those rules, he'd done his best to forget about them over the last few days, but he was aware of them.

"Even though your leeway as a Christmas angel is larger, there will be no way to continue your involvement beyond the current assignment and keep your job."

Nathaniel raised his eyebrows. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." Araton's stomach was doing flip-flops. He didn't want to let Jake go. He was already halfway in love with the man; how was he supposed to let go?

"It will be your decision, but remember, there will be consequences either way." Nathaniel rose from his chair.

"I will leave you to it now. Good luck."

And with a very elegant flash of white light the archangel was gone.

Holy shit.

The alarm clock beeping for the third time almost made Araton jump out of bed.

"Damn, I guess that means I really have to get up now." Jake hit the thing again, and slowly sat up, trying to blink himself awake.

"Good morning." Araton loved the tousled look of Jake first thing in the morning. There was no way he could

let the other man go. He wanted to experience everything with him, and if they banned him into the void after all, then so be it. At least he would have found out what it was like to be loved.

"Are you a morning person?" Jake opened both eyes. "You are way too awake for this time of day."

"I've been thinking." And that wasn't even a lie.

"Even worse," Jake groaned. "A man who thinks before he's had coffee."

"I'll make you coffee and breakfast, how's that?" Araton grinned at Jake's delighted look. "I guess morning people do have their uses?"

Jake's emphatic nodding was all the answer he needed. Araton got cleaned up and dressed in the second bathroom, then made breakfast. As he looked around the kitchen and into the living room through the open door, he decided this house was in dire need of some Christmas decorations. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and if he only got one Christmas to celebrate with Jake, he wanted to make it count.

"Good morning." Jake still looked a little crumpled around the edges, but he was more awake after his shower than he's been earlier. His hair was still damp, his shirt unbuttoned, and Araton felt very tempted to run his hand

over all the muscles that stretched the white T-shirt to capacity. "Thank you for making me coffee."

Jake poured himself a cup, drained it, and only sat down to eat his cereal after refilling it and pouring Araton another one. They ate in silence until Jake was done.

"I've been thinking." Jake leaned back. "I'd really like you to come to the shelter with me. I have a feeling that you need to be there today. Don't ask me why."

"You would?" Araton couldn't believe his luck. This was going to be a lot easier than he'd thought. He certainly wouldn't ask, but he sent a silent 'thank you' in Nathaniel's direction.

"Sure. It's not like I'm doing a top secret job, and we can always use an extra hand." Jake kissed his cheek as he got up.

"Okay." Araton wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else.

* * * *

Christmas Morning. Jake kept his eyes closed, focusing on the deep sense of happiness that had taken hold of him sometime yesterday. He hoped it would never let him go again. Whether or not Araton had anything to do

with the miraculous turn his life had taken was up for debate. Jake didn't really care. His life had started changing for the better with Araton's arrival. That was all he needed to know.

Greg Willesden, a man he had helped reclaim his life about six months ago, had walked into the shelter to let him know that there was a position as football coach at his high school. While it wasn't the pros, Jake was elated to be involved in football again. With none of the professional teams willing to take him on, teaching the young about the game he loved was a great alternative. Looking at it now, he had no idea why he hadn't come up with the idea himself.

They'd gone to check out Saguaro High School, and the principal had hired him on the spot. He was going to start as an assistant coach after the Christmas holidays, and the only provision was that he needed to take a couple of education science classes at a community college within the next six months. Until then, a colleague was going to mentor him regarding teaching plans and other administrative details.

With that sorted out, Jake had suddenly begun to understand, for the first time in his adult life, that maybe this was what Christmas was all about. Good things

happening, the sharing of joy with friends, and maybe even a little love.

He had gladly given in to Araton's plea to have some Christmas decorations in the house. Before he knew it, the whole house had been decked out more thoroughly than the North Pole. They'd even managed to find a real Christmas tree.

Now there was only one thing left on Jake's wish list.

He opened his eyes to bright morning sunshine streaming in through the window on his left. Araton was still asleep in his arms. He had a sneaky suspicion that the man, angel, whatever, would be gone very soon unless he did something about it. He wasn't sure he could do anything to stop him from leaving, if that was how these things worked, but he was going to try. He cared too much for Araton to just let him go. He wanted to find out if his feelings could grow into love, as he suspected they would, given half a chance.

Araton slowly opened his eyes. The smile on his face when he saw Jake was dazzling. Jake could spend years looking at him.

"Merry Christmas." Araton rubbed his eyes. "Did I oversleep?"

"Merry Christmas. No, you didn't. I was just up earlier than usual." And a lot more excited.

Jake reached into his nightstand and pulled out the little box he'd wrapped and hidden in there last night. His heart was beating so hard he thought Araton was sure to hear it. He turned back to Araton and held out the little package.

"For you." Jake had a hard time not to add the 'baby' that kept wanting to escape his mouth when he addresses Araton.

"You got me a gift?" Araton's eyes widened. "I never got a Christmas gift before."

"It's high time, then." Jake smiled. "And maybe those guys up there need to check their rules and regulations. I mean, how can you have Christmas angels who don't exchange gifts?"

"That is an excellent point." Araton laughed.

"Come on, unwrap it." Jake was shaking with nerves, but he needed to know what Araton's reaction was. One way or the other.

Araton smiled, sat up, and slowly unwrapped the gift. He frowned a little when the black velvet box emerged, clearly unsure what to do next.

"May I?" Jake reached over and helped him open it.

The silver ring with the narrow gold insert blinked in the morning sun.

"A ring?" Araton looked at him, his eyes big and questioning.

"It's a friendship ring." Jake took it from its box and held it out for Araton to see. "It expresses how much I feel for you already. I would like you to stay with me, if you can, and explore what we mean to each other. I really like you and I wanted to give you this ring so you'd know I'm serious. It's my promise to you that I'll do my best to get to know you and to find out if we are meant to be together."

"Oh, Jake." Araton lifted his hand and stroked his cheek. "I love the ring. But what you said about what it means is even more beautiful. I want that as well. But it will mean that I can no longer be an angel."

"Is that a problem for you?" He hoped not, he wanted Araton to stay, the longer he looked into those chocolate eyes, the more certain he was.

"I don't think so. At least, they didn't say anything about it being a problem. Just that it would be my choice." Araton frowned. "But it would mean I'd be completely human. No more little miracles."

"I don't want the miracles." Jake's heart was going a mile a minute now. Everything he'd ever wanted was

within his grasp. "I want you."

"You have me." Araton smiled.

"Will you wear the ring for me?" Jake had never been as relieved as when Araton nodded and held out his hand.

He slid the ring onto his finger and admired it for a few moments. It looked darned good there. Araton was staring at it as well, but he was smiling, so Jake was going to take it as a good sign.

"Will you wear my ring as well?" Araton suddenly looked very unsure. "I'm not sure how this friendship ring stuff works..."

"It's the same as with any other type of ring, I guess." Jake grinned. "And yes, of course I will wear your ring. We can go get one when the shops are open again, if you want."

"I would like that." Araton smiled. "It makes me feel all warm inside to think of our promises to each other like that."

"Same here." Jake smiled back as he pulled Araton closer for a kiss.

After all, they needed to seal the deal, right?

* * * *

Araton felt Jake's arms around him and melted into the warmth. This was true Heaven as far as he was concerned. Consequences be damned.

Jake's mouth was on his, a soft tongue licked along his lips, and he opened himself up to the other man's caresses. Their tongues touched and he had to moan with how good it felt. One of Jake's big hands slid behind his head and caressed his nape while Jake kissed him to within an inch of his life. His cock was so hard already; he had no idea how he was going to hold back his orgasm. It felt so good just to be kissing. He only knew he had to hold on, because he didn't want to come until their bodies were completely joined.

A joining that he was sure would seal his fate, would somehow make him human. He'd made the decision already. Jake offering the ring and opening up to him like that had only confirmed that what he wanted to do was the right thing.

"I want you inside me, Jake." Araton pulled back, needing to let the other man —*his lover*— know what he wanted while he was still able to speak. The whirlwind of emotions and feelings was growing so quickly, he wasn't sure how long he'd remain coherent.

"Are you sure?" Jake's pupils were dilated. "We don't have to..."

"I'm sure." Araton smiled. "I've never done this before, so I want you to show me how to do it right."

"And you'll do me next time?" Jake's eyes glazed over and his arms tightened for a moment as his hips bumped a very hard cock against Araton's thigh. "That turns me on so much, baby."

"It does, huh?" Araton grinned. "I promise to pay attention, then."

"Ugh." Jake took a deep breath and pulled back. "You're going to make me come before we get started."

"Can't have that." Araton pulled back and Jake shook his head trying to keep him in his arms. "Just want to get naked."

"Oh, yeah." Jake pulled down his own boxers at the same time. "Naked is good."

Araton pushed the blankets back and spread himself out on the bed.

"All yours." He grinned when Jake's breath hitched.

"Just let me get the supplies while I can still think." Jake reached toward the nightstand and pulled out a small foil packed and a plastic bottle, dumping both on the bed as he crawled back toward Araton.

"You're so gorgeous." Jake settled next to him, his hand on Araton's chest making small circles.

"So are you." Araton hissed with pleasure when first one, then the other nipple was softly stroked.

"Want to eat you up." Jake bent his head and licked Araton's quickly hardening nipple, teasing it with his teeth.

Araton arched his back. *So good!* There seemed to be a direct link between his nipple and his cock, because each caress, each stroke up here made his cock harden more. When Jake changed nipples, it was almost too much, and Araton whimpered.

"Good?" Jake looked up.

"Amazing." Araton smiled.

He took Jake's head between his hands and pulled him up for a long, passionate kiss that made his toes curl. Jake trailed his free hand down his stomach, *past* his straining cock, and stroked his inner thighs.

Araton spread his legs farther apart. Could he make this any clearer?

"You really want me, don't you?" Jake pulled back, a mixture of laughter and desire in his eyes that Araton found irresistible.

"Yes. Please. *Now* would be good." Araton grabbed the condom. Maybe if he put it on Jake it would speed

things up?

"Not this time." Jake's large hand stopped him, took the little package away. "If you touch my cock I'll come, and you won't get what you want."

"It's more than want, Jake." Araton felt this growing ache inside. "I *need* you."

"You'll have me, baby. Just give me a second."

Jake fumbled the package open with shaking fingers and pulled the condom over his thick, long cock. It was beautiful, and Araton hated to see it covered. But he'd been around humans long enough to know that Jake would think it necessary. He didn't want to derail the other man with a discussion about his lack of an STD, having been an angel. But talking about it so they wouldn't have to worry again had just moved to the top of his to-do list.

Next, Jake opened the bottle and drizzled lube over his fingers. Rubbing them together to warm it, he bent back over Araton's body, kissing him as he slid slick fingers from behind his balls —man, that felt good— straight across his waiting opening and all along his crease. On the way back Jake circled Araton's hole until he whimpered his need into Jake's mouth and finally got what he wanted.

The first finger felt strange, the second added a little burn. By the time Jake added the third, Araton was too far

gone to feel anything other than the aching emptiness inside that he knew only Jake could fill.

"Please?" Araton looked up.

Jake nodded, moved between his legs and pushed a pillow under his hips. When he put the head of his cock against Araton's hole, it was his turn to nod. Thankfully Jake took him by his word and started pushing inside.

The feeling of their bodies merging made Araton's heart speed up with joy. This was what he'd waited his entire existence for. Jake looking at him like this, with awe and the first traces of love — that was what life was all about. The farther Jake made it into his body, the more certain Araton was that he'd made the right decision.

Nothing could be better than this.

Jake bottomed out and held still for a moment.

"Okay?" Pearls of sweat had formed on the other man's forehead, and he was trembling with the effort of holding back.

"Perfect." Araton pulled the man down, so they could kiss.

Jake slowly pulled back out, making Araton gasp for air. When he pushed back in it got even better. Long, deep thrusts made his skin tingle and his balls draw up. Jake matched the movements of his tongue to those of his

lower body, and Araton thought he might die from the pleasure.

Jake drove them higher and higher, maintaining the agonizingly slow pace until Araton couldn't hold back any longer.

"Jake!" Araton arched his back, pressing up and erupting in spurts of pleasure that made his spine tingle and his entire body shake in ecstasy.

"Fuck! Araton!" Jake lost his rhythm.

He pounded Araton's still clenching channel, chasing his own orgasm. He threw back his head, tendons standing out along his neck, and grunted his release as he emptied his balls into the condom.

Totally spent, Araton dropped his head back onto the pillow and looked up at the man who had just made love to him for the first time. Jake was sweaty, out of breath, and absolutely magnificent. He couldn't have made a better choice for a partner if he'd tried.

Jake pulled out carefully, got rid of the condom, took a small hand towel from the ever useful nightstand drawer and cleaned them both up. He pulled the blankets back over their sated bodies, took Araton into his arms, and kissed him slowly and tenderly.

"Thank you," Jake whispered.

Araton smiled and pressed his face against his lover's sweaty chest. He was too exhausted to speak, but he cuddled in. Jake's musky scent calmed him now as much as it had excited him earlier. He had no idea how long he was going to be allowed to stay, now that his mission had been accomplished. But he was going to enjoy every second of being with Jake as if it was the last.

CHAPTER SIX

Jake watched Araton fall asleep. His blond hair was even more tousled than usual and small beads of sweat stood on his forehead. He'd never had a more responsive lover, and he was beginning to wonder what would become of them once he went back to work after the holidays. What was Araton going to do? Did he want a job? Was he going to perform another miracle to get around administrative red tape and acquire a birth certificate and a social security number?

Waking a little while later from Araton's panicked breathing, he opened his eyes and looked into the warm brown ones of his startled-looking lover.

"What's wrong?" Automatically tightening his arms around Araton's body he checked if anything was out of order, but everything looked and sounded fine.

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong. Well, not exactly." Araton shook his head. "I don't know, Jake. I just had this awful dream..."

"It was just a dream, right?" Jake was beginning to feel worried, not to mention confused by his lover's strange behavior.

"But it felt real." Araton swallowed. "They took me

away from you."

"Who exactly are 'they' and why would they want to take you away?" Jake's eyes widened with realization.

"Your assignment is completed now, isn't it?"

Araton nodded, tears in his eyes.

"And they want you to move on?" Jake's heartbeat sped up and he tightened his embrace.

"I think so," Araton whispered, cuddling closer.

"But I don't want to go."

Suddenly a bright white light filled the room. It came from nowhere specific and spread into every corner.

"What the hell?" Jake sat up with his back to the headboard and pulled a shaking Araton up between his legs and into a protective embrace.

"Araton." The deep voice came from all around them and made Jake tremble even though there was no discernible threat.

"Y-yes?" Araton started shaking and clung to Jake's arm, his knuckles white from holding on so tightly.

"You know why I am here." The voice was even, almost unemotional.

"I do?" Araton pushed back further into Jake's body.

"You have a decision to make." The voice sighed.

"Actually, you need to confirm the decision you have

already made. I need to hear it from you so that it becomes final."

"For the record, huh?" Jake clapped a hand over his mouth. He hadn't intended to speak out loud.

"Indeed. Some things are universally true, and having things on file is one of them." The voice sounded as though its owner was smiling. "So, Araton, what is your decision?"

"I want to stay here, with Jake." Araton took Jake's hand.

"You realize that you will cease to be an angel, that you will become as mortal as any natural-born human?" The voice was back to being neutral.

"I do." Araton looked up at Jake.

Jake squeezed his hand. Whatever happened next didn't really matter. Hearing those words from Araton's lips, understanding the sacrifice he was making to be with him, made Jake happier than he could have ever expected to be.

"Then so shall it be." The light brightened.

Araton cried out, curling in on himself.

Jake had never felt so helpless. He pulled the other man closer, trying to protect him, but whatever was wrong with him came from inside the man's body.

"Do not worry, Jake. He will be fine."

"What do you mean 'do not worry'?" Jake was ready to attack, if there'd only been someone to go up against.

"Are you doing this to him?"

"Araton is becoming fully human. There is some pain but it will be over in a few seconds." The light level came back to what it had been before.

Araton relaxed in Jake's arms, and Jake felt more relieved than he could say.

"Are you okay?" Jake pushed a strand of hair back from Araton's forehead and placed a tender kiss on his temple.

"Yes, I am now." Araton smiled up at him. "Doesn't feel all that different. I think the biggest adjustment was when my wings and angelic senses went."

"I'm glad you're okay." Jake relaxed back against the headboard, leaving his arms around Araton just to be sure. The light was still there and he didn't trust it.

"So this is permanent? Nobody can call me back?" Araton straightened his back.

"Yes, this is permanent. The lower echelons will call this a punishment for giving into the temptation of carnal pleasures." The voice sounded amused.

"The lower echelons? You mean the judicial panel

that convicted me? Have they been called in again?" Araton tensed.

"Yes, they have. But your friend Nathaniel intervened on your behalf to avoid you being called back." There was a brief chuckle. "They really did not appreciate having another case overturned in such a short time period."

"But they represent celestial justice, don't they? How can they be wrong?" Araton tilted his head.

"They may represent celestial justice but they are not infallible." The voice sounded indignant. "They think that their existence is far better than anything available here on Earth. They too still have a lot to learn. Including the fact that some angels are simply not cut out to be angels. They should have seen that you were not meant for Heaven, but they did not. So I have intervened to make sure your existence is not wasted."

"Wow." Araton smiled. "That's excellent news."

"Is there anything you wish to ask me before I leave you to your new existence?" The voice was much softer than before.

"Actually, there is." Araton swallowed. "Is there any way, I mean, can you do something about Dexter?"

"Dexter Smith?" The voice was neutral, as if

holding back.

"Yes." Araton bowed his head. Something was obviously bothering him. "It was my fault that he was injured so badly. They said he was going to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. I just don't think it's fair for him to have to pay for my inattention. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"If it worries you that much..." The voice hesitated. "I was not going to tell you about it, but I can see that the lower echelons were wrong here too. You are taking this much harder than they expected. I will send him the most talented Christmas angel with a special mission to ensure there is a miraculous recovery."

"You will?" Araton looked up at the ceiling. His smile was relieved and happy.

"It is done." The voice chuckled.

"Thank you. I'll do everything in my power to make you proud of me." Araton had never looked so happy.

"I am sure you will. And now it is time for me to leave. One word of advice before I go. Do not waste your life and always remember that love is the most important thing." The voice faded with those last words and the light dimmed until the room was back to its normal brightness.

The silence was deafening. Jake didn't know what

to think, all that talk about celestial justice, angels that should be something other than angels, and punishment had him very confused.

"Who was that?" Jake had felt almost intimidated.

"I think that was the Big Guy himself." Araton's voice shook.

"*The Big Guy?* You mean..." *Surely not.*

"Well, it wasn't Nathaniel, and I don't think an archangel would appear like this. And he did say he'd send a Christmas angel to help Dexter. But I don't really know." Araton shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"No, not really. I was just curious." *Wow.*

"I hope you were serious about wanting me to stay." Araton turned around so they were facing each other. "It looks like you'll be stuck with me now."

"There is nobody on Earth, or anywhere else for that matter, who I'd rather be with!" Jake smiled. "We may have a few issues to deal with, but as long as we're together, I'm sure we'll find a way."

"Whatever it is, it'll have to be the human way now. I won't be able to perform any more miracles." Araton frowned.

"I'm sure we'll be fine. Any problems we have will still be there after the holiday." Jake kissed his lover. "For

now, all I want is to get to the presents."

"There are more presents?" Araton's eyes widened.

"I mean, I put mine for you under the tree, but you've already given me yours, right?"

"Oh, but there are more." Jake grinned. He couldn't wait to see Araton's face when Jake brought out the stack of gifts he'd hidden in the basement. "You can never have enough presents."

* * * *

Araton stared at the pile of presents under the tree. Hadn't Jake said he was going to bring them up from the basement? There were three gold-wrapped parcels there, plus the four he'd wrapped up and put there yesterday. Where had the extras come from?

"Got them." Jake walked back into the room, hidden behind a tower of boxes of all sizes, decorated in red and green gift-wrap. He dropped them next to the tree, looked at the stack already there, and laughed.

"You've added a few more as well since last night, haven't you?" Jake pointed at the mysterious additions.

"They're not mine." Araton stepped closer, his fingers itching with the need to unwrap them.

"But who..." Jake stared at him.

Araton stared back and swallowed.

"You don't think..." Jake sat on the sofa. "Oh, man!"

"Yeah." Araton nodded, not sure what to do.

"You gonna open them?" Jake moved to the edge of the cushions.

"I think I better." Araton lifted the first one. They were all the same size, so there was no hint what might be inside. "Feels light."

He opened the gold paper wrapping carefully, lifted the lid and peered inside.

"What is it?" Jake was bouncing.

"A piece of paper." Araton pulled it out, and the whole box, including the paper, dissolved into thin air. "Oops."

"Let me see." Jake held out his hand.

Araton sat down next to him and held the document so they could both look at it.

"It's a birth certificate for one Araton Angelli." Jake grinned. "This is amazing! It solves one of our biggest problems!"

"It means that I really exist now, doesn't it? And apparently, I'm twenty-one." Araton felt as if an entire

mountain had been lifted from his shoulders.

He tore into the other packages and found a social security number card and a high school diploma. He was all set for an existence as a full member of human society and couldn't have been happier.

"So, now that you really *exist*, what are you going to do with your life?" Jake raised his eyebrows.

"I don't know what I'm even qualified for." Araton stared at the high school diploma and memories of classes taken and exams passed suddenly flooded his brain. His eyes widened as he looked back up at Jake. "But I seem to have... acquired some knowledge that wasn't there before."

"You have?" Jake smiled. "Another miracle?"

"It seems so." Araton nodded. "I can remember the classes and exams I took— except I was never there. That's just too weird."

"But really handy." Jake grinned.

"I guess it is." Araton frowned. "I'm not even sure I'll need any of that, though. The only thing I've ever wanted to be was a writer."

"A writer? Really?" Jake's eyes widened. "That would be so cool."

"It would?" Araton had his doubts. "I mean, I know I can write stories, but obviously I've never even tried to

get them published."

"We'll just have to see, won't we?" Jake opened his arms and Araton gladly moved into the warmth and safety they offered. "At least it gives the perfect explanation of what you've been doing since graduating from high school three and a half years ago."

"I've been writing?" Araton laughed.

"Indeed you have." Jake grinned at him as he slid a hand down Araton's back.

The warmth that flooded his groin had nothing to do with the happiness in his heart, but the feelings combined to make him feel better than he had in a long time. The only thing that had bothered him, Dexter's fate, had now been miraculously solved. For the first time in his existence he felt totally free.

"Are you ready for more presents?" Jake smiled as he pulled back from their embrace.

"Only if you are." Araton got up and picked up one of his to give to Jake.

Jake grinned as he took it and tore into the paper. It was a wall clock in the shape and colors of a football. Jake's eyes lit up as he held it in his hands and just stared at it.

"For your office at school." Araton hadn't been sure

about this.

"It's absolutely stunning! I'll be proud to put that on the wall." Jake put the clock on the coffee table and hugged Araton to within an inch of his life. "Thank you!"

They unwrapped the remaining presents together. There were books, clothes, a few boxes of the chocolates Araton had discovered he loved, and a watch from Jake to help him keep time.

"You spoil me." Araton leaned back into Jake's arms as he pulled up his feet. Cuddling on the sofa while watching the Christmas tree, *their* Christmas tree, had just become one of his favorite activities.

"You're very spoilable." Jake grinned as he leaned back, sliding so they lay next to each other.

"That isn't even a word." Araton frowned. "Is it?"

"Just because you're a writer doesn't mean you're the only one who gets to invent new shit." Jake kissed him on the nose. "I can be creative as well."

"I know you can." Araton buried his face in Jake's wide chest, taking a deep breath to take his lover's scent inside him. "I'm especially fond of your creativity in the bedroom."

"I'm flattered." Jake's hand travelled down Araton's spine and landed square on his ass. "And it's by no means

limited to the bedroom."

"It isn't?" Araton looked up at Jake's laughing eyes and smiling mouth. He was the luckiest ex-angel on the planet, that much was certain.

"In fact, I'd like to get creative with you right here." Jake's hand started kneading Araton's ass cheeks through his pants.

"Yeah?" *Right here's good.*

Araton moaned and pushed back into the touch. He wanted his pants gone. But since he couldn't wish them gone, he was going to have to move away from Jake. How was he going to do that? His cock was already hard, so he pushed forward, only to find a bulge of equal hardness waiting for him.

"Fuck, you make me want." Jake pushed his groin right up against him.

Jake's lips sealed their mouths together in a scorching kiss. Araton ground himself against Jake's hard body. If he'd been able to merge with him, he would have. He just couldn't get close enough. Certain that he was going to explode any second now, he whimpered when Jake pulled back to take a deep breath.

"Shhh, it's okay. I'll take care of you." Jake placed little kisses all over his face, then pushed up. "Why don't

you get naked while I get the stuff from the bedroom?"

"Okay." He could do naked. *Maybe*.

First he had to watch Jake walking away from him. The man's ass was like a work of art. Tight, strong, muscles moved and slid in the tight confines of Jake's pants with every step. He couldn't wait for his lover to return so he could get his hands on those cheeks — without any interference from fabric.

"Naked!" Jake's voice from the direction of the bedroom sounded amused.

Right. There was a plan, and he was going to follow it.

Araton shed his clothes as fast as he was able. He tore the blankets they kept at one end of the sofa down to the floor, using them to make a nest in front of the fireplace. *That* was where he wanted to make love. He stopped what he was doing when it hit him what he'd just thought. But it was more than having sex with Jake. He grinned and looked at his ring. Jake had promised to explore what they felt for each other, but Araton already knew.

Now, all he had to do was show Jake.

* * * *

Jake grabbed the lube, condoms, and a small washcloth. He was almost on his way back when he realized he better get naked while he had the opportunity. He'd never get that done quickly enough to avoid coming in his pants with the distraction of a hopefully naked Araton. When he returned to the living room, the picture of Araton spread out on the blankets in front of the fireplace almost made him stumble.

His lover was breathtakingly gorgeous. His skin had a red-golden hue from the firelight, the blond hair looked like a halo around his head, and his eyes gazed at Jake as if he'd hung the moon. He lay back, supporting himself on his elbows. His legs were spread invitingly, displaying his hard cock which was straining up against his flat abdomen. The soft balls were already drawn up against his body. Apparently Jake wasn't the only one in dire need of release.

It made him tremble to think that Araton was all his to love. The thought of an openly committed same-sex relationship didn't scare him anymore; he just hoped he'd be able to make this beautiful being happy.

Falling to his knees between Araton's thighs, he bent forward so he could kiss his lover. Hot lips met his, and he groaned as he sank his tongue into the softness of

Araton's mouth. He'd never get enough of the sweet, musky flavor, just like he'd never get enough of Araton's scent. He always smelled like vanilla and cinnamon, even now that he was fully human. It was intoxicating.

He pulled back and smiled at the glazed expression in Araton's eyes. He wasn't feeling much more coordinated himself.

Fumbling for the lube he'd dropped when he got distracted by their passionate kiss, he managed to open the bottle and slicked his fingers. He started at the tip of Araton's engorged cock and slid his finger down the sensitive underside, circled his balls once, and continued along the soft skin behind his ball until he reached the puckered hole.

Araton moaned and spread his legs farther apart, opening himself up to Jake's touch. Man, that was hot. When Araton was as open as three fingers could get him, Jake withdrew, wiped his fingers and started to open the foil wrapper.

Araton put a hand on his thigh.

"We don't have to use that, if you don't want to. I want to feel nothing but your skin touching me." Araton smiled.

"You're— of course you're clean." Jake took a deep

breath, fighting for control when the thought of going bareback almost made him come. "I'm clean as well. I still get tested regularly. I guess it's a leftover habit from when I was playing. But... are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Araton took the condom and threw it in the direction of his clothes. "I trust you. And I only want you, so as long as you're okay with it..."

"I'm more than okay with it." Jake moved over Araton, placing his hard cock at his lover's opening.

"Please." Araton nodded and reached out to pull him closer.

Jake slowly pushed inside and groaned when his cock head was enclosed by hot, tight wetness. It felt so different. He stared into Araton's widening eyes as he kept pushing until he was all the way inside.

He slid his arms around Araton's back and held on as he started thrusting. Deep, slow strokes made his lover moan. He increased his speed, and Araton started panting.

"Yes!" Araton writhed underneath him.

His lover's pupils were dilated and Araton's hands gripped his upper arms so hard that he knew there'd be bruises.

He didn't care.

All that mattered was their joint desire to find

release together. They strove to reach that one moment when it felt as if they were both the same person, joined in ecstasy. Araton met his thrusts by pushing up, making the friction more intense for both of them.

Jake's breath came in gasps, his balls were full and heavy with the need to come. Araton squeezed him even more tightly and he lost it. Pounding into his lover while he stared into his eyes, he pushed for completion with all he had.

Araton was with him all the way.

"Fuck. I'm gonna..." Jake grit his teeth. He wanted Araton to come with him.

"Jake!" Araton screamed as he came, white streaks of cum painting his golden skin.

The scent hit Jake's senses, he felt Araton's channel contract with each of his lover's spurts, and that was it. He roared as he let go, filling Araton with his hot seed as he thrust a few more times. When he had no more to give, he sank down, pulling Araton with him so they could stay connected a little longer.

"I love you, my Araton." Jake whispered as soon as he had regained his breath.

He wanted to shout them to the world, but was too exhausted.

"I love you too, Jake." Araton smiled and kissed him. "So much. I'm so lucky to be allowed to stay here with you. I may have been an angel once, supposedly immune to all earthly wants and needs, but I always felt there was something missing in my existence. As if my destiny couldn't be fulfilled without you."

"I don't care why you were sent here, but I feel the same way about our being together. I wasn't complete without you and I'm more grateful than I can say that you're allowed to stay here." Jake bent his head and kissed Araton deeply, making his lover moan again. "I'm never going to let you go. You are my destiny as much as I'm yours."

The smile on Araton's face was positively beatific.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

I'm a night owl who starts writing when everyone else in my time zone is asleep. I've loved reading all my life and spent most of my childhood with my nose buried in a book.

Although I always wanted to be a writer, financial independence came first. Twenty-some years and a successful business career later I took some online writing classes and never looked back.

Living and working in seven countries has taught me that there's more than one way to get things done. It has instilled tremendous respect for the many different cultures, beliefs, attitudes and preferences that exist on our planet.

I like exploring those differences in my stories, most of which happen to be romances. My characters have a tendency to want to do their own thing, so I often have to rein them back in. The one thing we all agree on is the desire for a happy ending.

I currently live in the United Kingdom, sharing my house with a vast collection of books. I like reading, travelling, spending time with my nieces and listening to classical music. I have a passion for science and learning new languages.

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