

RETRIEVAL
BY
JEANIE LONDON

PRAYER TO ST. MICHAEL

St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in the day of Battle. Be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. May God rebuke Him, we humbly pray, and do Thou, O Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the power of God, cast into Hell, Satan and all the other evil spirits who prowl through the world, seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

-Pope Leo XIII

PROLOGUE

SHOTS rang out in simultaneous succession. Not the staccato rounds of automatic gunfire, but the precision blasts of high-powered sniper rifles. One, two, three.

Separate shots from rifles trained on individual targets in an area so heavily populated by Secret Service that no sniper should have penetrated the perimeter.

Let alone three.

The blasts shocked the otherwise normal sounds of a busy Washington, D.C., afternoon. Roman Barrymore reacted instantly, as did the two protection operatives flanking him. Standard protocol. Assassination attempts were part of their jobs; evasive maneuvers were carried out by rote.

But the white heat scalding flesh and everything vital in his chest proved the effort was too little, too late.

The protection operatives on both sides of the limo door collapsed almost in unison. Secret Service

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swarmed like bees shocked from a hive, attempting to contain damage that had already been done. As Roman sank to his knees, he could almost hear the newscaster's soundbite.

"Breaking news. . . High-ranking government official assassinated on the White House lawn. . ."

Then his life flashed before his eyes, frame by frame, glutted with a meaning he only now identified, the significance of choices he'd made over a lifetime that had brought him to the moment of his death-choices that would either bring him to salvation or condemn him in the upcoming battle for his soul. . . Father Leo inside his office at the school, a place as old and revered as the priest himself, a man who could encourage with a smile or shame with a glance.

"You know you shouldn't fight, Roman."

"They ganged up on John."

"You could have gone inside and told Sister Gemma."

"They were hurting him." Roman had no other explanation, no second choice. Father Leo's gaze seemed to burn through him, making it hard for Roman to breathe as those dark eyes sought, found.

"Then you did what you had to do," Father Leo finally said. "You stood up for your classmate and helped him when he needed your help."

"Greater love than this no man has, that a man lays down his life for his friend."

Standing between his parents' caskets in the funeral home. People filing through in a bizarre conga line to offer condolences, their voices blurring together into a drone he only caught fragments of.

"Such a tragic accident"

"Far too young."

"At least they were together."

"What will you do now, Roman? Will you change your plans for college?"

He didn't know. College was still five months away and he couldn't even answer the questions the funeral director had been throwing at him ever since this whole nightmare began.

How the hell was he supposed to know how thick his parents wanted the concrete vault around their caskets? If they'd had a choice that really mattered, they wouldn't be dead right now.

"You're not alone, never alone. Don't give into despair."

Roman's surprise at the springy give to his target's skin beneath the pistol. The feel of the trigger under his finger. The blind recognition in the man's eyes at facing death, at facing Roman. If he pulled the trigger, he would be death. There would be no turning back. Never any turning back. Not for his target, or for himself.

There were so many other careers that didn't involve killing.

Yes, there were, but. . . .

"With power comes great responsibility. Don't let power harden your heart."

Then came death, and the battle for his soul. Evil tried to sink vicious talons deep, to rob his salvation, to claim his eternity, but for the choices already made. . . .

Enough good choices and Roman earned a trip straight into heaven. Too many bad choices and he'd get the fast track to hell for an eternity of fire, pain, and suffering.

Then there was the other choice: to repent. But not everyone's eternity was so simple, so clear cut. . . .

Roman hadn't given much thought to what would

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happen after he died, despite a deep respect that death honored no man's timetable, only its own.

Light so radiant it blinded, not comforting but glaring, ruthless. Light and shadow collided in striking violence, an otherworldly ferocity that pitted a blast furnace of evil against the flashing brilliance.

And finally. . . dominion.

He'd made enough good choices during his life to throw off the demons of death. They grudgingly abandoned the battle for his soul and receded in a violent hiss of writhing blackness.

The angels left Roman, too, ascending in a luminous cloud of light; until he thought he'd be left alone in the void.

Then another angel appeared, burning so bright the light seared Roman's vision, forced him to shield his face. Before he closed his eyes though, he caught a glimpse of flaming eyes and a radiant sword.

"I am the captain of the angelic warriors, and you have a choice before you, Roman Barrymore. You can atone in purgatory, the threshold of heaven," the angel said in an otherworldly voice that swelled with goodness and strength, and sounded oddly familiar. "Or you can delay eternity and accept a special task."

Roman wanted to face the owner of that voice, but the light blinded and burned even through the shield of his raised hands and could he only ask, "What task?"

"A necessary one," the angelic captain said. "'And a difficult one. A battle must be fought for the passage between life and death. Someone must rally forces to fight. . ."

CHAPTER ONE

WAS there any good way to tell a woman she's dead?

Roman Barrymore didn't think so, which left him facing an interesting dilemma. Once he confirmed the identity of the woman running through the park after her fugitive dog, he would have to decide how best to break the news.

The woman was Nina de Lacy. In life, she'd been the Lady of Kirkby, a Brit from a holding near the Welsh border. In death, she was a lost soul, who'd shifted out of the afterlife back into the living world, where she currently existed as if alive.

She wasn't.

Roman had come to reconnoiter and formulate a strategy to achieve mission objective: Retrieval.

Nina couldn't remain in the land of the living. There were any number of reasons why, but most important to Roman was that only she possessed the skill necessary to help him win the battle for dominion of the passage.

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Convincing her to do that job would be a challenge, no doubt. In the short weeks since Roman had agreed to rally an army, he'd learned death wasn't any simpler than life had been. In fact, in some ways, death was proving more complicated.

There was nothing simple about retrieving Nina.

In life, he'd established a reputation by tackling challenges most people had considered impossible. While he was uniquely qualified to tackle the obstacles ahead, even Roman had to admit he'd never had so much riding on the outcome. Alive, he'd been the director of Sanctus, a covert national security organization whose name was only whispered in the shadows by the handful of political power brokers who knew of its existence. Funded by the Black Budget, Sanctus operated without oversight or presidential sanction.

The position of director was a lifelong appointment that endured the rise and fall of presidential regimes.

As director, Roman had dealt in life and death achieve mission objective and he saved lives. Fail, and people died.

Now Roman would deal in eternities.

He'd had to die to understand the difference--death was only a passing from physical life.

Eternity meant forever.

Settling in to reconnoiter, Roman glanced around the familiar city park. Sanctus Command was only three blocks away, and he'd often escaped the elaborate maze of secured corridors and monitoring stations to walk and clear his head.

When Roman had been alive, the terrain had been lush with the new green of spring. April marked the onset of city maintenance crews who transformed the

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landscape to reflect the strength and beauty of the nation's capital. One day winter had bleached the city to monochrome with gray skies and dirty streaks of snow. He had awakened the next to find the world altered with neatly planted sod and bright blossoms as if the president had dictated a memo and declared winter officially over.

To all appearances, he had.

But from Roman's vantage in the afterlife, the park was still steeped in drowsy shades of gray, as if the president's memo hadn't yet made it off his assistant's desk. The grass and the blossoms were there; Roman just couldn't see the colors.

Only black. White. Shades of gray.

Like the woman herself. Roman only knew she was alive because she ran after her dog. He couldn't sense the life pulsing through her veins. He couldn't feel the warmth of her skin if he touched her. He couldn't feel the breeze whipping hair around her face.

He couldn't feel anything at all.

Such was death. No tactile senses. No connection to humanity. He could see the scene playing out before him, but couldn't affect it, or be affected by it. The passage between life and death separated the existences absolutely. He now resided in the afterlife.

Turning his attention back to the woman, he watched as she made a mad dash for her dog, which placed her directly in the path of a bicycle rider who swerved to avoid her.

"Sorry," she yelled over her shoulder.

Her dog, a mixed breed that was an interesting combination of rottweiler and

something smaller. . . beagle, maybe, bounded toward the ducks Inilling around the pond's edge.

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"Oodles Marie!" she demanded, her tone a fierce mix of horror and frustration. "Come. Now!"

Oodles Marie hurtled toward the ducks, gaining momentum like a bowling ball about to break pin formation.

With keen internal radar, the ducks launched into flight with a frenzy of squawking leaps and flapping wings. They landed in the water with rapid-fire splashes as if someone had rained automatic gunfire over the pond.

As the dog sprang off the ground to follow, the woman made an athletic leap for the leash. She caught it in mid-air and jerked the dog to a stop. The dog landed on all fours but bounded up as if on springs, ready to go again at the ducks. Now the owner had control.

She stood frozen on the edge of the pond with the leash clutched in a death grip, her eyes tightly shut, chest rising and falling on rapid breaths. All striking signs of physical life from a woman who wasn't.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. The woman dressed in neat jeans and a hooded sweatshirt was alive enough. But she'd unwittingly become the living host for the dead soul that had taken up residence inside her.

Roman had seen portraits of Nina before and knew her to be an exquisitely beautiful woman with honeyed hair and gold-flecked eyes. The woman clutching her dog was attractive in an earthy way, but very different from his target with her waving brown hair and dark eyes. She was a shade too thin, a shade too anxious, and the effect combined to make her look tired.

One body. Two women.

Good thing Roman enjoyed challenges. He had a mission to accomplish and only select pieces of intelligence

about a situation that resembled a puzzle scattered across life and the afterlife. The success of his mission depended upon a woman who didn't remember she was dead.

A very good thing he liked challenges.

Roman honestly hadn't given much thought to what would happen after death. Since he hadn't planned on dying any time soon, he'd been content with the explanations taught at the Jesuit academy he'd attended in his youth.

But now that he'd experienced the event firsthand, he knew he would have never even come close to guessing the truth.

Souls went to heaven or hell. Or they repented and moved on to the threshold. That's what he'd always heard, but now he knew things weren't quite so clear cut. Some souls took longer to accept death and wound up lingering in the passage between life and death.

But for those who lingered, the passage created a different level of existence. Lingering souls still retained an echo of their humanity, which allowed them to use the passage as a place to shift between the living world and the afterlife. This made the passage attractive to demons that would abuse the privilege. And plunged a willing Roman into the middle of a conflict to pursue a woman who didn't remember she was dead.

A beautiful woman who was uniquely talented and critical to winning this battle between good and evil.

And Roman would know, as he'd spent every moment since his death learning about her.

He observed two men coming toward him, crossing a path without slowing for runners who approached at collision speed. They were clearly unconcerned by the

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commotion happening in a realm no longer theirs and moved at an effortless pace, out of sync with the surrounding activity, a stride that propelled them forward yet didn't appear to involve flexing muscle or effort.

These were the men who could help him retrieve Nina.

Roman wondered if he would eventually move as these men did. Effortless. Not a glide exactly, yet a sinuous motion that appeared to be a hallmark of the long dead, as if physical memory had been forgotten and only thought powered their progress.

These men had been dead a very long time. They were Nina's protectors in life and death.

Though distinctly different in features, these men were similar in age, size, and attitude. Mid-thirties.

Powerful. Grim. They struck Roman as converse forces. Two sides of the same coin, the light and dark reflections of the same soul. One man was more muscularly built with a somber expression.

Gray Talbot, Earl of Westbury, a British nobleman.

The other was taller, leaner with distinctive hair that rebelliously escaped a long queue.

Damian Hart, an artist of Scottish descent.

The men stood a little too close, giving Roman the impression they were wary, perhaps defensive. Why?

Because a stranger had contacted them about their missing companion.

And exactly who were they to Nina?

He'd been told Gray Talbot had been her guardian in life, a necessity of an era when a young unmarried woman didn't operate independently of a man.

So who was Damian Hart?

A family friend? Her betrothed? Roman knew only that they'd all died together and had shared a long and

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busy death ever since. Other than that he didn't have a clue, and there were only three people who could clarify the matter for him--two of whom were standing right here.

Roman was surprised by how much he wanted to know.

Nina had blazed a trail through the afterlife for nearly three centuries. He didn't know half of her story, but from what he'd heard, she was an interesting woman of unique ability and great courage.

He'd looked for that kind of woman during his life.

A woman strong enough to fit into his work with Sanctus. A woman with her own interests that he could admire and respect. An equal.

A woman he'd never found.

Catching Gray Talbot's gaze, Roman inclined his head in greeting. Instantly, he found himself eye to eye with the somber men. Again that effortless movement.

They didn't disappear and reappear. Nor did they flash forward in a rush of motion. They simply repositioned themselves in tandem, proving the laws of time and space didn't bind this realm.

Roman resisted the impulse to extend his hand. The dead didn't observe the civilities of the living. He'd been told they avoided contact, but the memory of his life still pulsed strong inside him, a recollection he guessed would fade only with time.

"You sent the message?" Gray Talbot spoke with the clipped authority of an English nobleman.

Roman held the lord's gaze steadily. "I did."
There was no need for introductions. These men would have investigated the newcomer who'd contacted them with a claim they would never have been able to ignore.

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I've found her.

In the afterlife, Gray Talbot and Damian Hart had the advantage of an extensive network of resources.

They might not have been able to locate the missing Nina, but would surely know everything there was to know about Roman Barrymore, newly-dead soul.

"That's impossible," Damian Hart said in a voice that held the mellowed burr of Scotland. "The man who sent that message hasn't been dead a month."

"I look as if I've been dead longer." Not a question.

"What are you trying to pull?"

"Nothing, I assure you." Roman spread his hands in entreaty. "I sent that message and died less than a month ago."

"Look around you." Damian swept a hand around to indicate several lingering souls flitting past, their motion erratic as if controlled by someone gone wild with the fast-forward button on a remote. "See them? You can almost see through them. They're newly dead. Takes a while to learn how to hold an echo together." He raked a narrowed gaze pointedly over Roman. "I can't see through you."

Death gifted souls with new abilities, angelic abilities, and Roman understood the longer a soul lingered in the passage, the stronger and more effective it became. The process had been sped up in his case to help him accomplish mission objective and he'd been given skills no newly dead soul should possess.

"I can't explain why I don't appear like other newly dead," he said simply. The truth.

"How did you know to contact us?" Gray asked.

"Your answer had better be good or else this conversation ends right now." Roman understood their hesitation, and respected

their wariness, so he weighed his words carefully. He only had pieces of the overall situation and some need-to-know information, most of which these men didn't need to know yet.

"Let me tell you about the day I died." He paused and glanced between the men for effect. "I assume you investigated me after receiving my message, so you know I directed a covert national security organization while I was alive." Gray inclined his head. "Sanctus."

"People called you 'The Saint,' " Damian added.

"Not to my face," Roman informed them. "My operations were covert, but occasionally a threat arose requiring more resources than I had available. I'd be forced to involve more conventional channels while maintaining the secrecy of my organization.

"Shortly before I died, I'd learned of such a threat. A possible connection between a deep-seated terrorist cell and a person of profound international significance. If my intel was correct, and I believed it was, the association demanded an explanation. Further investigation required a level of delicacy I could provide, but would place my people inside the most visible political circles with no margin for error. Should something go wrong--and in my line of work, gentlemen, something always goes wrong--the exposure to my agency and the United States would be unacceptable.

"I decided the way to proceed was to gather intel through the existing diplomatic network I was returning to D.C. to lay my cover with the president when I stopped in a town on the Eastern shore, a quiet place where I could clear my thoughts. While I was there, I happened across an antique store. You'll be interested to know what I found there."

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"My guess would be antiques." Damian delivered that in an ironic tone characteristic of the exact sort of smart ass Roman had never had any use for in life.

And in death it would seem.

"Obviously, Mr. Hart, but there was a gallery, too. Art, as it happens. Does that interest you?"

Damian's deepening scowl assured Roman it did, but he didn't allow time for a response.

"There was a portrait inside this gallery of a young woman. It was unfinished and unsigned, so I questioned the owner. There was speculation that you had painted her. Then the owner invited me to look at another painting, one she claimed was unusual--"

"Unusual or . . . magic?" Gray spat out the word.

Good, he had the men's attention. "She did claim the painting was magic, Lord Westbury."

"Did you look? What did you see?"

Damian eyed Roman closely, the gaze of a man who noticed details. "He saw us."

Roman nodded, impressed. "With the woman from the unfinished portrait."

He could still see those paintings in memory and was glad he'd seen images of Nina in life, when he'd been able to appreciate her golden glory and creamy skin, the gold-flecked eyes and lashes.

By any standards, she was a beauty, the type of woman who managed to look both alluring and pure at the same time. There'd been an eagerness about her, an impatience that Roman hadn't understood at the time, but learning the circumstances of her life placed his impressions in a new light.

Her likeness had intrigued him on the canvas. Natural. Earthy. Enticing, although she looked nothing like the sophisticated beauties he'd found himself attracted

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to in life. Her honeyed hair framed a heart-shaped face that was graceful of feature and marvelously expressive.

She'd been a yearning young girl in the unfinished portrait, a slightly more mature woman in the painting with her protective companions. Gray Talbot and Damian Hart had flanked her like bodyguards in that allegedly magic painting, as forbidding and unfriendly as they were now. They appeared to have protected her as fiercely in life as they did in death.

So why did she need so much protection?

"I was intrigued," Roman admitted. "I promised myself to make time to find out more about your art and your subject."

"A promise kept unto death," Gray said. "You must have been very intrigued."

"I was, but given a choice, I wouldn't have died to meet you. But I never made it to the White House that day. I was assassinated on Pennsylvania Avenue with two of my operatives."

"Tragic."

"Indeed. At the time, I thought I'd simply chanced across that gallery. Now I know there is no chance."

"What do you call it?" Gray asked.

"I was meant to find that gallery as I was meant to see your portraits."

"Why?"

"Identification," Roman said. "If I hadn't seen your likenesses while I was alive, I might not have been convinced of our connection in death. Nor would I have been able to convince you of our connection."

Damian scowled. "You haven't convinced us yet."
"What's your interest in Nina?" Gray asked.
Roman wasn't sure why the question irked him.

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He'd expected an interrogation, had prepared for it. But he felt like he was fighting for information about the woman he needed by his side to win the battle. He didn't like going through these men for that information. "My business is with Ms. de Lacy." Damian gave a snort of disgust.

Gray drilled Roman with that hard stare. "You're sure you've located her?" "I'd like confirmation as a formality. But yes, I'm sure." Gray and Damian exchanged glances of such profound familiarity and understanding that Roman couldn't tell whether or not he'd surprised them.

"You want us to confirm her identity," Gray said.

"Yet you won't tell us what you want with her?"

"I thought providing her location would be enough incentive, since it's my understanding you haven't been able to locate her yourselves."

His words fell heavily, emphasizing how quiet the afterlife was. Not the sort of collective breath that happened in an auditorium before a presidential address.

This was a true absence of sound. No vibrations. No acoustics. As if they stood inside a vacuum.

Both men squared off in a way that suggested neither liked the reminder that they'd lost their companion and hadn't been able to find her. It also suggested they'd do whatever it took to retrieve her--perhaps even deal with a newly-dead stranger who didn't look newly dead.

Exactly what Roman had been hoping for.

He possessed a skill for assessing people, a skill he'd relied heavily upon in his work. Clearly that skill had followed him into the afterlife. He knew he was dealing with two strong, smart men, who were obviously loyal to their lost companion, which made him

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wonder about the kind of woman who had earned this devotion, had proven worthy.

Damian Hart looked resentful when he said, "This sounds like extortion. If you've already found Nina, why involve us?" His gaze widened, and he gave a sharp laugh. "Oh, I get it. She's in the living world, and you're newly dead so you can't get there to talk to her. You need our help."

Roman nodded. Not all of the reason, but enough for now.

"What aren't you telling us?" Gray demanded.

"Very good, Lord Westbury." Clearly he had no idea why Nina resided in the living world. Clearly the man knew Roman had the advantage. "I propose a mutual exchange of information."

"Mutual," Damian said. "Sounds like you want more information than you want to give."

"As I said, I thought knowing Ms. de Lacy's whereabouts would give me the upper hand."

Gray gestured to stop the conversation as if a question had just occurred to him. "How do you know this? For a man who claims to have just died you're displaying remarkable knowledge about what's happening in this realm."

"You must make friends fast," Damian agreed. "I thought we lingering souls were a cautious bunch, or pathetic. Pick one."

That assessment revealed a lot about this arrogant Scot, but Roman kept his opinion to himself. Instead he debated how best to reply, how much to reveal to these men. He could have taken the noble route to win their cooperation--Nina was in trouble and needed help.

It was the truth.

But Roman chose a different truth instead. After all,

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his reasons for wanting to retrieve his target weren't altruistic. "Ms. de Lacy possesses an ability I need. I'm hoping to convince her to work with me on an important project."

"You were assassinated," Damian said. "Is this about some unfinished business you left behind?"

"Of a sort, Mr. Hart." Gray frowned.

"Vengeance?"

"Justice. People died with me. I left behind a lot more. If there's a threat to my organization, I need to know about it."

"Did someone forget to mention you're dead?" Damian asked. "What do you think you can do?"

"I don't know yet," Roman admitted. Another truth. "I intend to find out." Gray eyed him as if trying to fill in the blanks to this story. "Why do you think Nina will help you?"

"I don't, but I can't even present the situation to her until we're in the same place." Roman shifted his gaze between the men. "I can convince her that my cause is worthy."

Silence fell again, complete. These men had no reason to trust him. Roman understood that. He respected that. He wasn't surprised when Gray said, "Excuse us."

Nodding, Roman watched his guests relocate out of earshot in that swift, impossible move. Scanning the park, he located the living host who'd secured her errant dog to a bench where she sat to open a folder filled with documents.

He imagined Nina. An unusual woman in an unusual situation. Did she have any awareness that she existed inside another woman's body? Or did she believe she was this living woman? Roman didn't have enough

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intel to form an opinion, needed more information about this woman he'd been sent to retrieve.

A glance told him that Gray and Damian were still locked in debate, likely weighing the pros and the cons of trusting a stranger. Gray Talbot appeared the more reasonable and urbane of the two, while Damian's irreverence mirrored his appearance. The Scot wore his hair long, his stare bold, his posture defensive. Though he was now dressed in modern clothing as opposed to the period costume of the portrait, Damian Hart had obviously had centuries to hone his attitude to a sharp edge.

Both these men were so long dead that if Roman touched either, he'd have expected to feel warm skin testimony to the strength a soul could gather while lingering inside the passage.

Strength Roman hoped to put to good use.

These men would be formidable assets to his team if he could convince them to sign on. He'd been told Gray Talbot and Damian Hart's cooperation would depend on Ms. de Lacy's: a package deal as it was.

Gray surveyed the park as if looking for where among these living souls his missing companion might be hiding. He'd guessed that Roman had arranged their meeting here for a reason.

Roman wondered how long it would take for them to accept that they didn't have another choice but to trust him. Not if they wanted to retrieve their lost companion.

No question there. If nothing else Roman liked what that sort of loyalty said about all of them. The same kind of loyalty he'd always demanded from his operatives.

"What we need from you is a show of faith, Barrymore." Damian reappeared beside Roman.

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Gray followed.

Good. Roman had convinced them of his identity at least, another step in the right direction. "What sort of show?" "Tell us where Nina is so we can confirm her identity." Gray met Roman's gaze, the knowledge of what the request implied passing between them in a glance.

Stalemate.

Roman's respect for these men .upped another notch.

To confirm Nina's identity, Gray and Damian would need to shift into the living world, and shifting was a neat trick, from what Roman had heard. Angels could shift between the realms. So could demons. Roman wasn't clear on how souls managed the shift, but he knew the process could only take place from inside the passage, where lingering souls still retained an echo of their humanity. Precisely why the passage had become such hot real estate and he was assembling a team to defend it.

'All right, gentlemen. You may have your show of faith." He turned. "'That woman sitting on the bench with the dog. Her name is Katie McGuire. Ms. de Lacy is crowding her." He might have shouted an obscenity. Damian bristled. Gray let his eyes flutter shut for an instant before declaring, "You must be mistaken. Nina would never crowd a soul."

Roman shrugged. "That was the intel I received."

"From whom?" Damian demanded. "A demon?"

"Not a demon, Mr. Hart," was all he said, but he understood his guests' desire to shoot the messenger. In the afterlife, crowding a living soul was tantamount to conviction of murdering a child and a terrorist act rolled into one. Unpardonable to souls who'd

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already repented, no matter how long they might choose to linger in the passage.

"Confirm Ms. de Lacy's identity, gentlemen," he said. "Then we'll discuss exchanging information." Damian and Gray disappeared.

Roman blinked and found himself staring at the empty place they'd been. From this vantage, the shift seemed deceptively simple. He turned his attention to Katie McGuire, a living soul hosting a dead one. Were Gray Talbot and Damian Hart with her right now? Roman couldn't see them from the afterlife. Seeing dead souls that harbored among the living wasn't possible.

Except for Nina de Lacy.

From his vantage in the afterlife with no clue whether or not Gray and Damian were extricating her in the living world, Roman could see how her ability to see dead souls in the living world might. come in handy.

Especially as he no longer had Sanctus's extensive network of satellites to give him the ability to see around the globe. .

Now he was blind. If Gray and Damian retrieved their lost companion and returned to the afterlife with her, they could all easily disappear and cost Roman time he didn't have tracking them down again.

Unbeknownst to either of the men, Roman's resources in the passage were limited. He might look as if he'd been dead awhile, but he'd needed the weeks since his arrival just to familiarize himself with the rudiments of death enough to track them down. That was also need-to-know information.

But Roman didn't think retrieval would be so easily achieved. Why else would he have been advised to make Nina mission priority? He'd been told that she was in trouble--how much trouble was the question.

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He didn't have enough intel to evaluate. Nor did he have a strong enough grasp on existence within the passage to guess. Quite simply, there was too much he didn't know, and he'd never liked being in the dark.

Death hadn't changed that.

When Gray and Damian reappeared as suddenly as they'd disappeared, Roman admitted, "I'm surprised. I thought you would have tried to get Ms. de Lacy to leave with you." Damian's smile didn't reach his eyes. "We did."

"And failed," Gray added.

Both men kept looking at Nina's living host, who still sat on the bench with documents spread around her. Roman recognized the longing in their glances. He wondered if their lost companion felt the same.

"I suggest we form an alliance, gentlemen," he said, confident that these men would accept that they had no other choice but to trust him. "We need to work together for the mutual goal of retrieving Ms. de Lacy."

"Your price?" Gray asked.

"The chance to present my case to her alone. It's not a high price, but it is non-negotiable."

"You haven't been dead four weeks, Barrymore," Damian shot back. "What do you think you can do that we can't?" He motioned toward Katie McGuire. "Besides providing Ms. de Lacy's location, I have other intel that might prove useful. Not to mention, I'm a strategist."

"In the living world," Gray pointed out.

"My skills will translate." "I want to know who told you where to find her," Damian said.

Roman decided to part with some information now,

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to weight his side of the scale and help convince these men to trust him. "An angel."

"Now you're asking us to make a leap of faith, Mr. Barrymore," Gray said.

"Then return the favor." Roman exhaled hard, a habit that had no place in this realm. but somehow dispelled his tension.

Damian wasn't buying. "How do you know this was a good angel, Barrymore? Ever hear of the Fallen?"

"Good overcame evil at my death, Mr. Hart. The Burning Ones overtook the shadows." There was no arguing that point. Had evil won, Roman would have been dragged into the abyss.

"You looked at this angel?" Gray asked. "You could actually see it?"

"Not exactly," he answered honestly. "The light blinded me. But it was a messenger from the Angelic Warriors, gentlemen. It told me where to find Ms. de Lacy."

The men appeared to consider his words, and seemed willing to accept when Gray said, "Why is an angel interested in Nina?"

The only thing stopping Roman from explaining the whole situation was his gut instinct. He hadn't been sure how these men would react to learning about the battle for dominion of the passage. He suspected these men wouldn't want to see Nina at risk.

After meeting them, Roman knew he'd been right.

By definition battle was risky. Especially here in the afterlife, where a loss could mean a fate that lasted far longer than life. The simple fact was that neither Gray Talbot, Damian Hart, nor Nina had to fight unless they wanted to. They could move on to the threshold at any

time, and Roman had been told that the only thing keeping the men in the passage was their companion's desire to use her special ability.

Roman hadn't wanted to risk a change of heart at this late date. He needed Nina on his team. If he could convince her to sign on then her companions would likely follow suit.

And he would have the start of a strong team.

Roman changed tactics. "I heard that Ms. de Lacy is in an interesting line of work."

"She helps souls make peace with their deaths so they move on to the threshold," Damian said. "Nothing wrong with that."

"You don't think angels would be interested?"

"She's been at this a long time," Gray said. "Why now?" Roman spread his hands in entreaty. "Gentlemen, I'll tell you everything I know--after I've spoken with Ms. de Lacy. Right now she needs our help. That needs to be priority." Damian glanced at Gray who, after a long moment, nodded.

"You've got your deal, Barrymore," Damian said. "When we get Nina back."

"Good," Roman said. "Then let's start with what just happened. You tried to retrieve Ms. de Lacy, but failed. Why?"

"She didn't recognize us," Gray admitted. "We whispered to her, but she didn't seem to have a clue who we were."

That seemed to answer Roman's earlier question about whether or not Nina knew she was crowding a living soul, but he didn't understand why she would

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have developed what amounted to a case of amnesia. He did understand what Damian meant by whispering.

Roman had been told that a soul could whisper to another whether they were living or dead. He knew Nina and her companions had become quite adept at the skill in their efforts to help lingering souls move on.

"You're sure she could hear you?" he asked. "I was told she's been crowding that woman longer than I've been dead."

Damian snorted. "Trust me. If you had a clue what was going on around here, you'd know the answer to that."

Roman didn't give him the satisfaction of a response.

Ignorance of the fundamentals notwithstanding, he still held some high cards, whether or not this man had realized it yet. "Is it possible to crowd her and force her out?"

Both men stared.

"Demons crowd, Barrymore," Damian said. "Not anyone who wants to make it into heaven one day."

Following his gaze to where the living host sat, Roman considered the available intel in an exercise familiar from years of briefings at Sanctus.

"Demons, and Ms. de Lacy, apparently. So, tell me, you don't crowd or you can't crowd?"

There was a distinct difference to Roman's way of thinking, especially when he was evaluating skills for a new team.

Damian gave an impatient toss of his head, sending the long queue whipping behind him. "Didn't you hear what I said?"

"We've never had cause to try it," Grey admitted.

"I assume Ms. de Lacy hasn't abandoned all desire

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to reach heaven one day. So why didn't she recognize you?"

"There's only one explanation," Gray said gravely. "A shroud."

"That's the ability to shroud reality behind some evil--like despair, guilt, or anger. Do I have that right, gentlemen?"

Damian nodded. "Nasty mojo. But it explains why she didn't respond to us. Nina thinks she is Katie McGuire." "You don't look so certain, Lord Westbury." Gray shook his head, clearly troubled, but he said, "I'm certain. Nothing would possess Nina to crowd the living. Not of her own free will. And she isn't exactly newly dead."

"Only a powerful demon could cast her back and shroud her memory," Damian insisted. "What in hell is she caught up in?"

Hell, precisely. This strong woman had made some equally strong enemies. "It's my understanding Ms. de Lacy got in the way of some unsavory demons. They want her out of the way."

"Whoa. Whoa." Damian held up his hand as if to halt an oncoming train. "Out of the way of what?"

"Why would any demon care about Nina?" Gray demanded.

Nina possessed a skill that could tip the scales in the battle for the passage. But that was need-to-know information, so Roman simply said, "Perhaps the demons are interested in Ms. de Lacy for the same reason an angel is."

CHAPTER TWO

HAD she finally cracked, or what?

Katie McGuire wished she could dismiss the idea offhand. She couldn't. Life had been turning end over end lately. She felt like a completely new person in her body and didn't know why. Not that she was complaining. Not by a long shot.

But even all the changes she'd been making didn't explain why everything felt so new. Things she hadn't noticed before. How the warm sun felt on her skin. The way the air smelled as if it hadn't let go of that crisp edge of winter. The whine of the hydraulics on a city bus stopping across the street. Voices that didn't sound quite real.

Yet someone had spoken to her. More than one someone. A quick glance revealed only the dog around, and she knew Oodles Marie hadn't suddenly learned to talk.

Katie hadn't understood the voices, but she sensed

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urgency, frantic voices rising in pitch, urging her to do . . . what?

She didn't know. But she was left questioning her sanity. Her adrenaline spiked. Her heartbeat throbbed in her ears, drowning out the real sounds of the busy afternoon: kids shrieking when a melodic jingle signaled an approaching ice cream truck, teens from the nearby high school pounding over the path in expensive running shoes.

Not even the sunny afternoon warmed her chill.

Had she imagined those voices?

Maybe, but Katie sure wasn't imagining the way she felt right now. Weird. Like an alien in her own skin.

Her counselor had told her that she would need time to adjust to the changes she'd been making, but those changes had all been good. Right?

"Yes," Katie said sternly, both a reminder and the comforting sound of a real voice.

The dog sidled up against her legs, as if sensing her disquiet. She reached down to scrub the furry head before remembering why Oodles Marie was cinched to the bench. She aimed a glare at the dog but couldn't keep scowling with that big wet tongue licking her hand.

"I know what you're doing, young lady," she said.

"You think if you make nice I'll forgive you. Chasing those ducks. . . honestly. I can't trust you out of the house." But Oodles Marie was only a product of her environment--a street dog that Katie and her girls had given a home. Another castaway adrift in life, who only wanted to be loved and safe. Was it really Oodles Marie's fault she hadn't yet realized that every' small animal to happen by didn't need to be her next meal?

How could Katie ground the dog, anyway? They'd

just moved into a five-floor walk-up with no back yard.

She worked long hours at the dry cleaner, and though the girls walked Oodles Marie after school, for a dog used to running the streets, any day spent inside was a long one.

"You caught yourself a sucker, and you know it." Katie finally gave in and petted the furry head, which made the dog preen in pleasure, tail wagging. Katie understood being cooped up too well to force another to endure the same fate. Not even this little carnivore.

And definitely not her two beautiful daughters.

Things were going to be different. Now that she'd finally broken free of Shea, she could see how horribly destructive life had become, all the fighting and screaming, the hostility and fear. . . Shea had made his choices, but she couldn't, wouldn't, let him continue choosing for them all.

Another chill blasted down her spine when she thought about how long Shea had been on the crash and burn course that had landed him in jail on armed robbery charges. Again.

Did she really want the girls to think the way their father lived was the way they should choose to live?

No.

Did she really want them to think they had to remain emotional hostages to a man gone out of control?

No.

Katie just wasn't sure why it had taken her this long to see the destructive situation for what it was. Why had she let Shea treat her--all of them--badly

for so long?

Those were questions she'd been trying to answer recently. And with the help of her counselor at Fairwinds Women's Center, she'd been finding the answers.

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And taking control of her life again.

So then why, with all these positive changes in her life, was she sitting here on this beautiful day, hearing voices that pitched her into full-fledged anxiety mode?

Glancing at the legal documents spread around her, Katie decided the counselor was right. The finality of ending her marriage must be working her nerves. She wasn't cracking up--wouldn't--not when she had the chance to live the life she'd always wanted to live.

With a renewed burst of determination, she clutched the pen in her hand and scrawled her name across the first flagged line on the divorce papers.

Good-bye, Shea. She wasn't going to play the dutiful wife and ride out his latest stilit in jail.

She had a new job, a new place to live, and a new lease on life. With the help of the caring people at Fairwinds Women's Center, she was showing her girls that life meant growing and changing and learning. . . and putting mistakes in the past.

Flipping to the next flag, she signed.

Just because she'd gotten caught up with Shea when she'd been too young to know better didn't mean she had to continue compounding the mistake. Her daughters deserved a mother who could demand more out of life, a mother who could turn things around when they needed turning, a mother smart enough to find new options.

And if she didn't find the strength to fix things now, how could she show the girls that love shouldn't be frightening? They didn't deserve to be screamed at and threatened just because their father was drinking.

School should be a place of possibilities and opportunity, not a refuge because they were scared of what awaited them at home.

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Staring at the last blank line, she poised her pen over the documents and very deliberately signed her name.

Kathleen Kennedy McGuire.

Free.

Finally free.

Gathering the documents, she slipped them in the folder, inhaling to dispel the last of her uneasiness.

She wouldn't let anything spoil her only day off after an eight-day run.

Especially not imaginary voices.

After checking her watch, she untied the dog. She still had to drop off the divorce papers at Fairwinds before the girls got home from school.

No, she wasn't cracking up. She was coming to her senses.

After delivering the dog back to the apartment for fresh water and a treat, Katie hopped the bus, opened a book and wound up so engrossed in a new blockbuster she almost missed her stop.

"Damn." The book slipped off her lap and her purse upended when she hopped up to alert the driver.

Gathering up her things, she rushed off the bus, juggling her hastily-repacked purse and book.

"Do you need a hand?" a familiar male voice asked.

Katie was smiling even before she turned to find Luke Robinson smiling back.

"Hi, Luke."

"How are you today, Katie?"

"Never better."

"Glad to hear it."

Maybe it was his smile or the pleased tone of his voice that made her believe him. She liked the feeling. "So how's your day going? Keeping the crazies in line?"

"Haven't been any crazies." He glanced down at his watch.. "Not since lunch, anyway."

'That's good, right?' She didn't have a clue what would be a good day for a security guard. Did he want his days to be quiet or filled with bad guys and excitement?

Nodding, he plucked the book from her arms, freeing her up to get her purse back in order.

'Thanks,' she said.

"I don't think you dropped anything." He scanned the sidewalk then turned over the book. "Hey, is this Fairweather's new one? I've been meaning to pick it up. How is it? Any good?"

"His books are always good. I'm not the only one who thinks so. It took me three months to get this at the library."

"Let me know what you think," he said. "Then I'll know if I should buy it now or wait until the paperback comes out."

"You don't have to wait quite so long at the library, Luke. And you can't beat the price."

He chuckled, and Katie zipped her purse shut with a little laugh herself. She liked Luke. A guard who worked for the company that provided security for Fairwinds, he'd become an unexpected acquaintance after Shea had learned she had been coming in for regular counseling sessions.

Outraged at what he'd called "her defection," Shea had ambushed her at a scheduled appointment. Luke had witnessed the whole ugly scene before escorting her hostile husband off the premises. Ever since then, Luke had made it a point to chat with her whenever she came in.

Katie wasn't sure if he was worried that her crazy

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husband might show up again, but he'd been so consistently kind that she'd finally gotten over her embarrassment and chatted back.

He was around forty, an attractive if not striking man with a quality she valued--kindness. The sort of man she guessed would go home after work to be with his family and not have to be dragged stinking drunk and cursing out of a bar.

If Luke had a family. She didn't think so because he'd never mentioned one, only nephews and nieces.

"Got it?" he asked.

Slinging her purse over her shoulder, she accepted her book and bag. "Thanks again."

"My pleasure," he said in that voice that meant it. "Here, let me get the door." He escorted her up the walkway, asked after the girls, whom he'd met several times when Katie had brought them in for group sessions, then whisked the door open with gentlemanly pride.

"See you later." He smiled.

"Don't work too hard."

"You know it." Then Katie swept inside, all thoughts of her earlier anxiety fading beneath the promise she always felt whenever walking through these doors into a place where anything seemed possible and everyone cared.

She had a future to look forward to, and she wasn't going to let anything or anyone stop her from living life to the fullest.

Roman assessed Nina's living host as she chatted with the security guard. Katie McGuire was an attractive woman, but hard living had etched lines that

shouldn't

be on any thirty-year-old's face. Yet when she smiled, a caring heart and generous spirit shone through the world weariness. A smile like hers brightened a room, impossible to ignore.

Luke Robinson seemed as transformed by that smile as Katie. His gaze clung to her face as if he'd been waiting to see her, and he rushed ahead to open the door, eagerness in every step. His smile didn't fade even after Katie said a warm good-bye and disappeared inside Fairwinds Women's Center.

"Go ahead, gentlemen." Roman motioned Gray and Damian to follow. "See what she's up to. I'll be there."

His two new compatriots took off, leaving him on the portico to consider the security guard. He assessed Luke Robinson, who appeared to be close in age to Roman himself. Forty. . . maybe forty-two on the outside. His neatly-pressed uniform displayed a quiet pride in his vocation. He wore no wedding ring. That was what Roman wanted to know.

Heading into the facility, he found Gray and Damian inside the legal department, while Katie talked with a woman behind a desk. Gray stood just inside the doorway, arms folded over his chest. Damian sat on the desk, nearly close enough to brush the secretary's elbow when she reached' out to accept the file folder from Katie.

From Roman's newly-dead perspective, the scene was surreal to say the least. Two men so solid they could have been alive, who seemed a part of the unfolding events, but weren't.

Except for the way they hovered over Katie McGuire, watching her as if they sensed the woman harboring inside.

Could they?

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Roman stared hard. He'd only seen images of Nina when she'd been alive. What would she be like after spending nearly three hundred years dead? And why was he so taken with the thought. He'd never obsessed about a target before, and could only assume that death had changed things. Since death had robbed him of the physical, Roman thought he might be paying more attention to the mental, much like a man who has lost his sight and finds his remaining senses sharper. Gray caught sight of him. "Our host is filing divorce papers. She doesn't look too upset."

"Did you miss the sign on the door?" Damian commented dryly. "Happily married women don't usually spend time at women's shelters. Who's the bum?"

"Shea McGuire," Roman said. "Thirty-four. Welder. Married fifteen years. Two children."

"Not what you might consider your typical candidate to host a lost soul," Gray observed. "You'd think a demon would want someone a little less. . . normal."

"Maybe he specifically wanted normal," Damian suggested. "Someone who wouldn't be quickly noticed." Frowning at Katie, he added, "Or cared about." These men seemed to be grasping the concept of situation assessment. Roman was pleased. They'd formed a team--albeit a grudging one--but it was a start.

"We have to fill in some blanks about Katie McGuire," he said. "'That's the only way we can determine how best to infiltrate her life to retrieve Ms. de Lacy. And while we're at it, we need more information on Luke Robinson."

"Who the hell is Luke Robinson?" Damian asked.

"The security guard outside."

Roman instinctively stepped away from the door when a small woman slipped into the room, earning a

snort of laughter from Damian. "Afraid she'll bump into you, dead man?" Roman ignored the sarcasm and watched the woman as she smiled absently at Katie and the secretary before dropping a stack of mail on the desk and departing with as little fanfare as she'd arrived.

Katie and the secretary went back to their conversation, and Roman said, "I've spotted a potential point of entry."

"The security guard?" Gray asked.

Roman nodded. "He's interested in our target, and I want to know why. How do we get this information?"

"We eavesdrop on conversations like we're doing," Damian said. "You're dead now, Barrymore. You can be a fly on the wall just about anywhere. And if that doesn't turn up anything good, you can always shift into the living world and snoop around." He bit back a smile. "Well, we can anyway."

Damn straight, Roman thought. Shifting between the realms aside, death sounded better than any listening device he'd ever had at Sanctus, and he'd possessed the very top of the line technology had to offer.

"We need to know everything we can about the people impacting Katie McGuire's life. Like Luke Robinson." Waving a hand, he indicated the office surrounding them. "About what these people do for her here."

"I don't know a damn thing about Luke Robinson, but I can tell you that Fairwinds Women's Center is funded by Humanity United, a non-profit organization with a worldwide presence." Damian pointed at a brochure on the desk then continued reading. "Humanity United funds women's centers and offers resources to regions tom by war or catastrophe. They

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also establish programs to feed, clothe, and educate starving children in poverty-stricken countries. Serious do-gooders."

"Indeed they are, Mr. Hart," Roman said. "And you've just provided our first item of note. Humanity United supports human rights of the any-race-or-creed variety. This organization is run by a man whom I happen to know about--Nathanial Rush."

"These two were talking about him." Damian motioned to Katie and the secretary. "People call him 'the angel.'"

"Not to his face." That earned a laugh, but Roman didn't reply as he considered Humanity United.

A coincidence, or a connection?

Once, he might have considered coincidence, but death seemed to be proving chance a purely human device.

In the days preceding his death, Roman had uncovered a connection between apparently paradoxical organizations--a well-funded terrorist cell and Humanity United, whose influence had skyrocketed in recent years. The connection had been tenuous, but had left him with a question.

Was charity the only reason Nathanial Rush wanted a foothold in so many regions around the world?

Roman had run simulations and hadn't been satisfied with the results. One possible scenario: arming third world regimes could create a shift in the global power base.

The scenario was wildly ambitious, so ambitious in fact that prior to Roman's death he hadn't given the idea much credence, unable to see how anyone man--no

matter how well--funded his organization--could expect to pull off such a coup beneath the watchful eyes of the media.

The media never stopped watching Nathaniel Rush.

The man was news-worthy. Not only did his unceasing humanitarianism offer segues for networks to present situations happening all over the globe, Nathaniel Rush's good looks and charm made him a celebrity.

But Roman had always trusted his instincts, and debriefing a captured terrorist inside a Maryland safe house had made his instincts go live. Before he'd had a chance to implement an investigation, he'd been assassinated. Game over.

Returning his attention to the scene playing out in the living world, Roman heard Katie McGuire ask the secretary, "And you think Shea will sign these papers?" "Trust me on this." The secretary smiled reassuringly. "Our lawyers will contact his counsel. This is pretty standard stuff in cases like these. Once Fairwinds becomes involved, your husband is up against pretty stiff charges. He'll fare much better with the judge if he cooperates with us. His counsel will explain all this. I don't foresee any problems."

Katie looked eager to be convinced. "I wonder how responsible Ms. de Lacy is for the changes happening in Katie McGuire's life," he said.

"Are you wondering why she's suddenly filing for divorce?" Gray asked.

"I am indeed, Lord Westbury." Damian cocked a head, considering. "Well, I don't

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know a damn thing about Katie, but I do know Nina wouldn't sit by and let anyone bully her."

Gray nodded.

Three hundred years was a long time to be involved with a man. Or two men as appeared to be the case. .

These men would surely know Nina well enough to speculate on her actions. How well remained a question Roman was surprised by how much he wanted to answer. He simply had no knowledge of what would constitute a relationship in the afterlife. Obviously not a physical one. So who were these men to Nina? Friends? Protectors?

Who had they been to her in life?

"You'll call me when the divorce is final?" Katie asked, drawing his wandering thoughts back to the here and now.

The secretary nodded. "Do you want me to leave a message or call you at work?"

"At work. The girls check the recorder when they get home from school. I'd rather tell them."

Roman watched Katie fold her arms across her chest and lean against the desk as the secretary stopped their conversation to answer the ringing phone.

He wanted to know why Katie McGuire was involved with Humanity United. He wanted to know if he stood a better chance of making contact with Nina if they were together in the same realm. And he couldn't answer either of these questions from the afterlife.

"How do you shift into the living world?" he asked.

Damian gave a harsh laugh. "Planning to give it a go?"

"Yes."

Gray met his gaze, surprised. "What makes you think you can shift? Or can't you explain that, either."

"I won't know if I can until I try."

"Jumping in feet first. I admire that trait, Barrymore." Damian smirked. "Good luck. You'll need it."

"What do I do?"

"Have you ever prayed?" Gray asked.

Roman wouldn't have won any man-of-God awards, but he'd been educated in parochial schools. "I get the concept."

"You surrender your will," Gray explained. "When you believe in your ability to bridge the realms, faith moves you--"

"Naturally, there's a downside." Damian braced himself on his hands and leaned casually across the desk.

"Lose faith. for an instant, and your ass belongs to the demons. For ever and ever, amen."

"Remember that battle that happened after you died?" Gray asked, and at a nod from Roman, he continued. "It happens every time you travel between life and death. Only no one's around to help you fight this time, Mr. Barrymore. Not another soul. Not even your angels."

Roman hadn't expected that. "Why not?"

"Other souls will be busy shifting thelllSelves. The angels fought for you the first go around. If you're given the chance to move on to the threshold, you're supposed to go. If you hang around then you're on your own. Angels respect free will."

"Makes the passage an interesting place," Damian agreed. "Bet no one told you death has a bunch of new rules and a lot more interesting ways to cause trouble." "No, Mr. Hart. No one mentioned that." And Roman had to respect the fact that these men had been

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working beside Nina for centuries, risking their eternities with every shift. Nobility—a quality he demanded of his operatives.

Nina had taken her special ability and channeled it into a crusade.

Resourcefulness and initiative were two more qualities Roman considered essential in a good operative.

And the woman who would help him win this battle.

"How does Ms. de Lacy use her skill to steer these souls to the threshold?"

His companions exchanged a glance, and Roman noted how Damian deferred to Gray again—as if rational explanations were Lord Westbury's exclusive domain.

"She shifts into the living world to deliver messages, resolve unfinished business, chase off temptation demons. Those sorts of things." The woman

chased off demons? Roman couldn't help but smile. How could he not be impressed? She sounded like a superhero from a thriller. "I understand she can

see between the reallllS. When I look around me, I see you in this realm and the living in theirs. I've been told Ms. de Lacy can see both interact." "She

can, but it's m()re than that." Gray turned to face him. "Nina sees souls. She possessed the ability even when she was alive. She sees the things the rest of

us don't." "Sees what specifically?" "We possess free will, Mr. Barrymore.

Nina has always called that humanity's blessing and curse. We make choices over our lifetimes that can lead us closer to our salvation or farther away.

It's in constant motion, an ebb and flow." "Until death."

Gray shook his head. "If we go on to our eternities. But those of us who linger are still making those choices--"

'And Ms. de Lacy can still see how those choices impact us." Roman digested this new piece of information, amazed by the implications. A superhero, indeed.

"So she can not only see between the realms, but-" "Whether a soul is good or evil," Gray confirmed.

A very formidable weapon wielded by a woman who struck Roman as equally formidable. "And you both assist her work?"

"Yes." Then Gray added, "Every situation is different, of course. But we help how we can. Sometimes things even work out."

"Meaning sometimes they don't?" Roman asked.

"Not always, unfortunately."

"How do souls know Ms. de Lacy can help them?"

Damian sat up, propped his elbows on his knees and looked interested. "Souls hear about her. She's been at this a long time."

With these men beside her for the duration, risking their lives to help Nina help others. Roman could barely comprehend that sort of devotion. What would keep these men with her for so long? Belief in the work she did? Belief in the woman herself?

'Why does she do this?" he asked.

Judging by their continued silence, the question didn't appear to have an easy answer.

Roman tried again. "Steering souls to the threshold.

That's an interesting vocation for someone who might have moved on a long time ago. She obviously believes in what she's doing. You and Mr. Hart, too."

"Nina is using her gift, Mr. Barrymore," Gray finally said. "In a way she didn't in life."

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"Didn't or couldn't?"

Gray's gaze cut sharp, a physical trick that had power even in this dead realm. "You must understand that Nina wasn't like other women."

A feint, interesting. "How was she different? I can only speculate what might motivate a woman with her unique ability. How did seeing souls impact her life while she was alive?"

Gray nodded. "When Nina touched a person, she could feel the choices they made during their lifetimes and see how they would die. It wasn't pleasant."

"Everyone she touched?" Roman was intrigued.

'Except me and Damian."

"Why not you two?"

"We died with her, Mr. Barrymore. To touch our deaths would have meant touching her own."

Damian gave a wry laugh. "Of course, we had to die to figure that out." The ability to touch death.

Roman tried to imagine the effects of such an ability on a woman who lived in the early seventeen hundreds--a time of religious fanaticism and superstition. The most obvious effect would be accusations of witchcraft, social ostracism, maybe even fear of discovery.

The most discreet would be that his target was a woman who hadn't known much physical intimacy during her life, a woman who, by default, remained distanced from all but these two men.

Suddenly, Roman remembered the paintings he'd seen in the antique gallery on the day he'd died. The men flanking Nina like bodyguards. The yearning on her beautiful face.

His target was a woman who'd never really lived

when she'd been alive, which cast three centuries of lingering in the passage in an entirely new light.

"How did you die?" he asked.

"A fire," Gray said simply.

Damian gave a short laugh. "'Zealots wanted to rid the world of a witch, and her protectors."

His admission faded to a silence so weighted with emotion that Roman sensed neither of these men was at peace. With death? Or with Nina, whose unusual ability had dictated the course of her life and death, and those who cared for her?

Roman had come across her likeness mere weeks ago, but he was touched that such a fascinating woman had been struck down by misunderstanding, and fear. Perhaps even hatred.

"How old was she when she died?" he asked.

"Twenty-five." A shadow passed over Gray's expression.

Young, yet Roman wasn't surprised. These men didn't appear much older than they had been in the painting.

A magic painting he'd been told, one that offered the gift of a second chance. He'd thought the legend fanciful, but learning what was on the other side of death opened his mind to unexpected and unimagined possibilities.

"The magic painting," he said. "Then Ms. de Lacy didn't get her second chance."

Roman didn't really expect an answer and was mildly surprised when Gray replied, "She did. Of a sort, I suppose. That's probably what she'd tell you." Damian eyed the secretary who replaced the telephone receiver just inches from his leg. "That painting turned all our lives around."

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"So you believe the legend, Mr. Hart?"

"It wasn't a legend, but. fact. An artist painted 'Midnight Magic' as a gateway to worlds where people could live different lives." Something about that amused Damian, and he stroked his chin, smiling. "Nina wanted a second chance. She went to the painting. Gray and I went after her and brought her back. Our lives changed after that."

Damian eyed Roman closely. "Why didn't you go after your second chance, Barrymore?"

Roman considered his reply before answering. "At the time, I found it hard to take claims of magic seriously. But I saw you both inside that painting when I was alive and here we are now. I'll have to reassess my opinion."

They lapsed back into that silence again, filled only with the renewed chatter of Katie and the secretary.

"I find Ms. de Lacy's efforts, and your own, admirable," he finally said. "How do I make contact with her once I shift?"

"If you shift," Damian said.

Gray frowned. "Touch Nina's host and whisper."

"How is that different from crowding?"

Damian snorted. "You're just whispering, Barrymore, not moving in and taking over."

"I see."

"Pay attention to where you arrive," Gray advised.

"Some living souls are more aware than others. I've heard some say they've seen a shimmer, even an apparition. Since you're more solid than most newly dead, you might be noticed, and you don't want to attract attention."

"Ever heard of ghosts?" Damian asked.

"Souls shifting between the realms?"

'Not always." Damian shrugged. "There are nutcases who just think they see ghosts."

"And aliens," Gray added. "They seem to be gaining popularity lately." Roman supposed lately would be a relative term to men who'd been around as long as these two. "All right, gentlemen. Anything else I need to know?" "You're sure you're ready for this?" Gray asked.

No, Roman wasn't sure. But he needed information, and there appeared to be only one way to get it.

CHAPTER THREE

"GOD damn it, Katie," Shea blasted through the answering machine. "What is this shit? I'm in jail, and you serve me with divorce papers? You'd better hope they don't let me out--"

For a moment, Katie stood with her hand frozen over the receiver, ready to pick up, an instinctive response to the familiar demand in this man's voice. But Katie was no longer a frightened woman with no options. This new and improved version wasn't going to let herself be intimidated by a bully, especially not over a telephone. Forcing herself to breathe deeply, she resisted the urge of reacting to his anger with panic and fear and asked herself for what seemed like the hundredth time why she'd never found the strength to stand up to him before now.

Depressing the recorder's volume button down to blessed silence, she cut off the voice pouring through the speaker.

Free.

Finally free.

Oodles Marie showed up, as if sensing the time was right to offer moral support. She brushed up against Katie's legs in a bid for attention, till wagging. Katie scratched behind the soft ears, trying in vain to dodge slurpy licks of gratitude.

She hadn't yet replaced the receiver when she heard a voice. Goose bumps sprayed up her arms. This time she didn't glance around for the origin of the voice.

She didn't wonder about the dog sitting at her feet.

This wasn't a voice inside the room, but inside her.

The sound wove through her—only one voice this time. Not frenzied, urgent blasts of sound as in the park, but an insistent, persuasive voice, so clear that the tone filtered through her like the cleansing warmth of a summer rain. If this were a real voice, Katie might have found the sound soothing, almost hypnotic. But this voice wasn't real. Neither was this feeling. She felt drawn to the sound, as if she wanted to curl up inside it and let the low warm tone pour over her.

Was she cracking up?

The thought paralyzed her, and had she not been trapped within the prison of that voice, she might have panicked. But that deep-silk whisper continued to coax her from fear, to ease her anxieties and command her to . . . listen. This time she understood the voice, not the words but the tone. Seductive. A soul-deep compulsion that warned she hadn't been living her life, but hiding from it.

This voice persuaded her to trust, to respond.

But after burying herself inside her life with Shea, a place where fear of the known had been preferable to

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fear of the unknown, Katie wasn't having any part of imaginary voices or cracking up.

She had a new life for herself and her girls, and would 'grab this second chance with both hands. She'd wasted enough time already, too much. . . And she had the odd thought that she'd wasted more than one lifetime.

Roman managed the shift into the living world, and arrived inside Katie McGuire's apartment while she was talking with her teenage daughters. He also wasn't surprised that Gray and Damian hadn't volunteered information about what to expect when he touched the living. What did they care if he got dragged to hell?

Now that they knew Nina's location and were unconvinced he could help, they wanted to test him. He'd been testing them.

Quid pro quo.

Nothing they could have said would have prepared Roman for the soul dragging pull he felt when touching Katie McGuire's arm, anyway. A purely physical sensation as if his insides were being sucked through a wind tunnel. Life pulsed through her, vibrant, alive, the warm throb of blood with each heartbeat.

Familiar. Sensual. Then he felt her.

Nina.

Roman wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. More than one life force pulsed inside this living woman, one dominant, the other fainter. Maybe the dead could sense the dead. Maybe the reaction was simply a response unique to such a unique woman. Roman had no answers. He only knew he sensed Nina.

Excitement filtered through him, and there was

substance to the sensation. Her life force pulsed powerfully, enticing. Until that very moment, Roman hadn't even realized how much he'd missed the physical, but when he touched her, senses that had been dead reawakened. As if he blinked open his eyes, not from slumber but a coma. He'd been completely unaware of life in the passage and now was aware of the nuances all around him.

The silk-soft feel of a woman's skin.

A hint of indistinct floral mingled with an underlying feminine essence.

The hushed echo of a sigh.

The taste of a breath, warm and velvet.

Roman was so caught up in his awareness that he only vaguely noticed the life beyond her, but he could see through eyes that had been reduced to shadows.

Feel the airlessness of a late afternoon heat baking in a low-rent apartment.

Smell the trace of animal reek from the carpet.

And hear the sound of a voice, alive, rising and falling as it rode on the crest of high emotion.

Roman recognized the corporeal familiarities of the living world, yet he found the sensations manageable, .

as if the intensity came with the distance of death.

But that realization came with the suspicion that if he moved closer to this woman, moved inside to merge their souls, he would feel alive.

Crowding?

Tempting. Not only life, but Nina.

Through an effort of will, Roman resisted, muscled his focus back to mission objective. Forcing a word through vocal chords grown rusted from disuse, he whispered her name.

He'd spoken since arriving on the other side of life,

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but his efforts had been purely intellectual. No longer.

The living realm made everything real. Even through the distance of death, he sensed the real woman along with the lost soul inside her. He felt the faint heat that rose off her skin, smelled the lingering scent of shampoo, something citrus and clean.

From somewhere deep, memory awoke, and he recalled the intimacy of closeness, remembered the feel of two bodies aligned together, the silken warmth of skin against skin, the clash of breaths when two mouths drew close enough to kiss. She seemed to sense his presence. Or perhaps the lost soul inside her did. But she stood unnaturally still, caught in the grip of such a simple touch--his fingers on her arm.

Roman's grip on Nina slipped as he got caught in the sight of wavy hair, the shades of brown he could just make out, the rise and fall of a chest on breaths that filtered through the muted quiet. He tried to look past the reality of this living body to hang onto the woman within. Remembered that his living woman only hosted the soul he must reach.

But the call of humanity was so real in that moment, so gripping, he couldn't withstand the effects of this contact that bridged the chasm between life and death.

"Look into her eyes," a voice said sharply.

The sound broke the spell, and Roman turned to find Gray beside him, solid and real.

"Look into her eyes," Gray repeated, less strongly this time. "Resist."

Roman needed no further explanation. The lure of life was obviously a side effect of shifting.

Perhaps a test.

Forcing his gaze to focus, Roman peered into eyes

fringed with dark lashes, past weariness, despair and surprise, past the fear galvanizing those eyes into unseeing depths that reflected the soul of this woman, her essence, her spirit.

Into eyes as fiery as molten amber.

Nina.

Roman reeled, stunned by the gaze staring back, a purely physical reaction for a body only quasi real—a dead man playing at life.

His grip tightened on her arm, and suddenly he could imagine Nina's skin beneath his touch, not her living host's, skin as smooth and pale as wet silk. He could see her standing before him, every curve a sleek study in perfection. Her honeyed hair and lips so sensual against the fair beauty of her face, the molten eyes that gleamed with knowing.

Nina . . . exquisite Nina, the connection between them was so unexpected, so intense. Roman could feel her as if she were an ache inside him, a promise. "Resist." Gray Talbot's command anchored Roman, and he steered the shards of his concentration onto that voice again, bullied himself to remember that he'd come to this realm with a purpose, to accomplish a task: Retrieval.

Roman whispered, "Nina, remember." The words came easier this time, and he delivered his messages--the first to Katie McGuire. Well-chosen words to remind her of all the joys in life she'd been missing, trapped inside an unhealthy marriage. But the underlying message was for Nina. He prompted her lost soul to remember the life she'd lived so long ago, another woman trapped by unique circumstances.

Roman had no way, of knowing whether or not Nina would hear him, but he had no other means to reach

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her. No choice but to make this attempt, to search for a point of entry, to resist the draw of life that lured his awareness back to the physical. Those amber-gold eyes held his, unblinking and curious, yet no recognition that she was a dead soul harboring inside the living. But when he ended his message and his whisper faded to silence, he sensed a change between them, felt a ripple in the strength of her presence. Her steady gaze narrowed as if she sensed him. Suddenly, Roman felt her resistance crash over him like a surging wave that forced him to recoil.

Instinctively, he removed his hand from Katie's arm, breaking contact with both the living woman and the dead soul crowded within. Relief and disappointment collided as sensation faded, and his tenuous grip on Nina slipped away. But then a sound swelled around him, unexpected, striking in clarity, and an image of her exploded in his mind. . . .

Nina, her beautiful face alight with expectation, filled with promise. Her laughter sparkled, a melodic sound like the chiming of silver against fine crystal. Her honeyed hair tumbled over across her shoulders as she reached for the champagne flute, shining as the long tresses caught the chandelier light overhead. Raising the flute in salute, she brought it to her lips, kissing lips, and he could only watch as she sipped, imagine the taste of that mouth against his.

Roman stood frozen until a movement in his periphery jerked him back from the moment, and Roman realized belatedly that Damian was also in the living world with them, had likely been all along.

Roman blinked stupidly, still caught in the thrall of that unexpected image, a connection with Nina that didn't make sense. How could he see her memory?

Was this another side effect of shifting into the living world? What else could it be?

He didn't ask. A glance between the two men, Nina's guardians in life and death, revealed their stoic, watchful expressions. Roman didn't think either man would want to hear that he'd connected with Nina. He wouldn't risk alienating them, not when he needed their help.

"Thank you," he recovered himself enough to say to Gray, who only inclined his head in silent acknowledgment, letting the exchange between Katie and her daughters fill the silence.

Roman forced his attention to them, pleased when they decided to attend a food festival for dinner. Katie, at least, had heard his message.

He wasn't the only one who thought so.

"Who in hell are you?" Damian demanded. "Newly dead can't shift, let alone make someone respond to a soul whisper."

Roman had no answer. He'd agreed to fight this battle and been told he would be provided with tools enough to accomplish mission objective. He could only assume his ability to shift and whisper, like his solid appearance, were more of those tools.

"Gentlemen, I need a point of entry," he said. "I chose the most obvious course of action."

"Suggesting that Nina didn't make the most of her own life," Gray said.

"Neither has her living host," Roman explained. "It seems the obvious course of action."

Damian sat on the sofa arm. "A food festival? Is that what you had in mind?" Not exactly. "I'm encouraged one of them heard me."

"Just a guess, but I'd say more than one did."

"What makes you think that, Mr. Hart?"

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"Listen to those kids. They can't believe their mother is willing to spend the money she's been saving for a vacuum cleaner to eat out. Doesn't sound like blowing their savings is something Katie would normally do."

"You think Ms. de Lacy is imposing her will?"

"So it would seem."

Roman wanted more information about Nina and her host. Had he been alive, he would have used his Sanctus resources to assess available intel, run simulations and projections to narrow possibilities and focus his own thoughts. But he wasn't alive and those resources were beyond him now. Even his skill at assessing people wasn't much help.

Projecting the actions of a twenty-five year old that had been sheltered by necessity from life wasn't hard. But a twenty-five year old who'd existed in the passage for three hundred years?

He had no frame of reference for Nina, but she fascinated him. In life, he'd measured a person's strength by the strength of their allies and adversaries. What sort of woman drew the attention of angels and demons?

The image of her in a bath flashed in his head again.

An intimate glimpse of the woman. What would he have given to have known her when she'd been alive?

Would she have bold or timid? Prone to laughter or contemplative? These men might tell him. Who had they been to her?

Guardians? Friends? Lovers?

"I'm going to Sanctus," Roman said.

"Why?" Gray looked puzzled.

"I need my resources. Any reason I shouldn't use them?"

"You can't tamper with the living world," Gray warned. "Whispering messages to

the living is risky

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enough. You can't interfere. That'll get your invitation to purgatory revoked."

Nina might be a woman worth getting kicked out for.

"If you can manipulate things in the living world, will you be able to use your resources without being noticed?"

Roman smiled, and couldn't remember having felt like smiling since he'd died.

"Not a problem, gentlemen.

Trust me. I helped write every subroutine in the place. If I can access my system, I should be able to make it work without detection."

Neither man looked convinced. But even in the inception of this idea, Roman recognized that the possibilities were endless. He was indeed a fly on the wall. Protocol would have dictated system access be changed after his assassination, but he could stand over an operative's shoulder and read inputted pass codes. If he shifted into the living world to gather intel from the systems, he'd need to be cautious, sure, but systems glitched all the time. Roman knew those glitches intimately.

Getting information to retrieve Nina was all that mattered now.

Fixing his gaze on Katie, he watched her rummage through a kitchen cabinet for the coveted vacuum cleaner stash while chatting with her daughters.

"Mr. Hart," he said. "May I recruit you to surveillance? I need someone on Katie. I want to know if any other lost souls show up interested in her.

Protect her if anything threatening comes up."

"Are you expecting threats?" Damian asked.

"No. Ms. de Lacy has been crowding her host for a while. But until we retrieve her, I want to err on the side of caution."

He wouldn't take chances with Nina.

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Neither would Damian Hart. The man would join forces for the sake of his missing companion. And Damian Hart was smart enough to know, dead or alive, they were all playing Roman's game now, because they all wanted Nina for their own reasons.

"I'm on it," Damian said.

"You'll join me?" Roman asked Gray, who accepted the invitation with a nod.

"Then good luck, Mr. Hart. I'll be interested to hear what you learn."

Damian gave a snort of laughter. "A cooking lesson from the sound of it."

Gray smiled, and Roman believed that despite the grim news of Nina's situation and questions about his own character, these men felt relieved to finally be taking action to retrieve her.

"Let's go," he said.

How to move through the passage had been one of the first skills Roman had learned after his death. Or stumbled across, as it were. He'd been thinking about the active missions he'd left behind at Sanctus. When he'd visualized the inside of Systems Ops, he'd suddenly found himself in the midst of the ordered chaos of a mission upgrade.

"Get team one on the G-4 sat and monitor on A channel," Magdalene, a senior command staff operative, started issuing orders while sweeping inside Systems Ops. "I received new intel. We're upgrading mission status. Where are they?"

"Moving to the second mark," a tech op shot back.

"Patch me in." Magdalene came to a stop at the monitoring station and gazed up at the wall-sized display that reflected the changing imagery as the G-4 satellite zeroed in on its target. "James, new ELINT. I don't want this mission turning into a wet job. . . ."

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As Roman had watched the action from his vantage on the other side of death, he'd realized that visualizing a location turned it into an anchor he could travel to. So now he produced an image of system ops inside his mind and willed himself there.

In the afterlife, Roman had never felt anything at all when moving from one place to another, no matter what the physical distance might have been in the living world. But now, he felt a curious yawning sensation, as if his whole body were inhaled through a constricted airway.

Instantly, his location changed as if someone had pressed a button and fast-forwarded him into Command. Roman hadn't noticed before, but Systems Ops wasn't so different from the afterlife. Shadowed and low-lit save for the glare of electronic displays monitoring reconnaissance satellites, photographic and audio surveillance equipment that scanned the globe 24/7, and communications systems that kept Command in contact with every operative no matter how deep the cover.

Gray appeared beside Roman, taking in this electronically-lit realm where technology and highlytrained operatives marshaled the globe around the clock. Blips and beeps played into the pulsing quiet--the vital signs of recon satellites, mainframes, sound surveillance scanners, spot photographic equipment, and systems so technologically advanced they would have been sci-fi to the public sector.

Roman followed each instrument in this symphony of electronic sound, the music oddly melodious, reassuring in that each tone represented a function that meant the world wasn't left to run unchecked.

From this hidden command center not far from the

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White House, Roman had once monitored the rise and fall of regimes, terrorist factions, every political, economic, and scientific development that might impact the United States and its allies.

Not that one man, or one country for that matter, could effectively police the globe, but he'd always felt encouraged to know someone was paying attention, ready and willing. to act if any threat spiraled out of control.

Roman headed toward Kennedy, who ran routine systems checks from the comm station known as Station Siberia for its isolated location on the fringes of the action and the mundane operations performed there.

Glancing at the log, Roman noted the times of the upcoming systems diagnostics.

He laid his hand on Kennedy's arm, resisted flinching as the once familiar sensation of life poured through him. "Run the scheduled diagnostic over the V-4 sector." Kennedy never blinked an eye. He .inputted his pass codes and began maneuvering toward the requested data with an ease Roman found disturbing. If alllingering souls could demonstrate so much influence over the living, then all the evil running through the world suddenly took on a whole new light.

While fighting terror from within Sanctus, he'd never considered spiritual warfare as a possible explanation for the death and destruction running rampant over the globe.

Evil people were simply people gone bad. Clearly, there were other reasons as well.

Roman helped himself to the vacated keyboard and scanned information on the employees of the Golden Hawk Security company affiliated with Fairwinds

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Women's Center. He used Kennedy's diagnostic to conceal his access into the system.

Information on the current guards stationed at Fairwinds started scrolling across the display with the bio and personal information for Luke Robinson among it.

Roman fixed his gaze on the moving data and used the glowing text to anchor him from being distracted by the temptation of sensation.

"Keep your eyes on your diagnostic," Damian said, placing a hand on Kennedy's shoulder when the operative started to turn around. Kennedy returned his gaze to the monitor. "And you shouldn't be able to do that, Barrymore. Do you have any idea how long it took us to be strong enough to touch life?"

"I'm guessing a lot longer than I've been dead."

"You're sure no one will know what you're doing?" Gray asked. "You'll create trouble if they do, and I don't think you'll want to live with the consequences.

We've already been given a second chance to earn our way into glory. I don't think we'll get a second second chance."

"Which makes me wonder why you've risked so much for so long," countered Roman.

Gray didn't reply, which Roman thought spoke volumes about the man's commitment to Ms. de Lacy.

"Don't worry, Lord Westbury. As long as I sanitize the system, no one will know where I've been." Roman could only assume the consequences of causing trouble between life and death had been decidedly understated.

But Gray didn't question him further, and together they scanned the information appearing on the display.

Luke Robinson, widower. Late wife died of ovarian cancer five years ago. No children.

The security guard lived in .the northwest part of

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town, a place where large homes were passed down through the generations. A stable address that might or might not reflect the man who paid the mortgage. More surveillance was in order.

Roman wondered how he could find out if a person still lingered in the passage. Not that the late Annie Robinson would be a potential candidate for helping Roman decide if Luke was a viable point of entry into Katie McGuire's life. Roman didn't think even a dead wife would be his best bet for fixing up her late husband with another woman. But he filed away the thought. Another question with an answer that had the potential to become a tool in his arsenal.

He checked financial institutions, credit reporting companies, even schools with Luke Robinson's transcripts, and pieced together a picture of the security guard to decide if there was enough to invest more time pursuing intel!

Affirmative.

"I've got everything I need here for now," he finally told Gray. "The next step will be to conduct surveillance. I still don't have enough to pull together a viable scenario."

"What else do you need?"

"Data about Ms. de Lacy."

Gray let his gaze trail to where Roman still held his hands poised over the keyboard. "What more do you need to know?"

Roman didn't reply immediately. Instead, he completed the manual sanitize. Backing away from Station Siberia, he said, "I'll need details to help me get to know Ms. de Lacy. The more I understand what makes her tick, the better my chances at pinpointing how to get her attention through the shroud."

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'We generally try to avoid demons around here," Gray said dryly. "I don't know much about sidestepping their abilities, but I do know some souls who might have more information."

'When can we talk with them?" If demons used negative emotions to shroud a soul's memory then theoretically, the way to contact the woman beneath the shroud would be to break through the negative emotions. And retrieving Nina meant not only succeeding in the first stage of his mission, but a reward for him. He wanted to find out what she was really like instead of having impressions filtered through Gray and Damian.

'We'll have to shift back to the passage," Gray said.

Roman mentally prioritized his objectives.

Gather intel on Nina.

Evaluate Luke Robinson's life for point of entry.

Discover how to penetrate a demon's shroud.

If nothing else, Roman was redefining what constituted a normal day at work.

"Let's go," he said, ready for the return trip. At least, he hoped he was--which wasn't the way he normally conducted business. Death was definitely broadening his horizons.

Inhaling deeply in an old exercise, he cleared his thoughts of distractions and doubts. He abandoned himself to the belief that he could cross the realms. Thought was followed by a constricted sensation and . . . darkness.

Roman opened his eyes to the sight of Systems Ops.

Instead of the pulsing energy of electronics an unnatural silence reigned, and the colors of life, veiled as they'd been, faded to the monochrome world of colorless shadows. Death.

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"Impressive again, Mr. Barrymore." Gray was already there, watching him with a curious expression.

The tension over Nina now masked.

Roman didn't acknowledge the compliment. Whatever abilities he possessed were simply tools to arm him for the job ahead.

"Took him long enough, don't you think?" a familiar female voice asked.

Roman turned toward the sound to find Magdalene, propped as was her habit with a hip against comm one, arms folded over her chest, surveying the activity around her with a critical eye.

Magdalene was a brilliant strategist and his righthand person who'd forsaken a last name, choosing an alias that would force Roman to call her by her first name, which she considered a mark of respect to a lady.

He could still remember the day she'd explained her choice of alias during their official interview for placement on the command staff. She'd chosen a biblical name because she would be working for the Saint the only person at Sanctus with balls enough to call him the name to his face.

He'd advanced her onto his staff on the spot.

A petite woman, she was exquisitely feminine with her stylishly cropped black hair and deep blue eyes that he'd always been struck by the disparity between her ultra-feminine appearance and ruthless streetwise manner.

James Atticus LaTortue, by comparison, was a mountain of a man, as unusual in appearance as his alias was regal. His Haitian and French ancestry had granted him striking features, including mahogany skin and pale eyes. A smile played around his mouth, and he admitted, "I am a little surprised."

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"A little?" Magdalene scoffed. "I'm crushed. I really am. You were my hero, Roman, and we've been waiting for you for. . ." She glanced at James. "How long has it been?"

"Three days."

Roman was so used to seeing these two in Systems Ops that he didn't immediately grasp the wrong of their being here.

Until Magdalene began to fade.

"Son of a bitch." Her curse rang out in the unnatural quiet, a gunshot of sound that made James laugh.

Roman could only stare, precious moments slipping past as his mind rebelled against the sight, refused to accept a truth so stark before his eyes, so irrefutable.

Denial was instinct, a gut-wrenching mutiny against a reality he couldn't accept. But as he shifted his gaze between them, took in how he could see Fleishman seated at comm one through the semi-transparent bulk of James's six-foot-four frame, Roman couldn't deny the obvious. .

So what the hell had gone wrong that his two most trusted operatives had wound up dead?

CHAPTER FOUR

"FRIENDS of yours, I presume." Gray inclined his head at Magdalene and James, forcing Roman to shove past his shock and get a grip on his emotions.

"Gray Talbot, Earl of Westbury;" Roman forced out.

"Magdalene, my senior strategist, and James Atticus LaTortue, my chief tactical officer."

When James extended his hand, Gray quickly withdrew with a shake of his head.

"Not necessary. Not here."

James frowned, eyes reflecting mild curiosity. "Why's that?"

"You're dead, Mr. LaTortue," Gray said. "And you're here in the passage, which means like the rest of us you're not pure spirit. You still retain an echo of your humanity, and I'd prefer not to merge any of you with me."

James didn't get a chance to reply before Magdalene raised her hand to pat him on the back. "Don't be offended, James. Nothing personal, I'm sure. Lord Westbury doesn't know you yet."

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"If that's the way things work around here then you're leaking you all over me. Hands off, Mags." He brushed her away as if he might catch something then turned back to Gray. "Call me James."

"Gray."

Roman watched the exchange and scratched off another question from his list. He'd been told lingering souls avoided contact. Now he knew why. Touching meant merging the remnants of life, which sounded permanent. He didn't need more explanation to know why merging wouldn't be optimal.

And there was no getting around the fact that Magdalene and James were newly dead. If Gray and Damian had been expecting Roman to look as transparent as these two, it was no wonder they'd gotten off to a difficult start.

"Oh, come on, Roman," Magdalene said. "Have we stunned you speechless? Hell, I could be in purgatory right now putting my time to some use. Trust me, atoning doesn't sound half bad compared to being bored out of my skull waiting for you."

"Cut him a break, Mags," James said. "He wasn't expecting to run into us."

"No," Roman forced the word out. "I wasn't. What happened?"

"Do you want the good, the bad, and the ugly?" Magdalene asked. "Or would you rather I pour on some syrup to make the facts more palatable? You don't seem quite yourself today."

That was sarcasm at its finest since Magdalene didn't sugarcoat anything for anyone. She called things as she saw them, and he'd always indulged her. She had such a gift for running operations that she'd become queen to his king within Sanctus. Magdalene's rough and tumble

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youth had made her the perfect foil to Roman with his own privileged upbringing. She frequently helped him view angles he might have otherwise missed. She played devil's advocate when he reviewed situations, was always the first in the chain of command to implement his orders.

When Roman didn't reply, she shrugged. "Remember our Islamic friend you thought was so hot that you holed him up in the Maryland safe house instead of bringing him into Containment?"

"What about him?"

"He turned up dead about twenty minutes after you went down on the president's doorstep."

"Inside the safe house? How?"

Magdalene nodded. "The million dollar question. Had forensics do an autopsy and they couldn't determine a cause of death. No tox. No heart attack. No nothing. He was alone in an interrogation room that was monitored. One minute he's sitting there looking like he'll live another hundred years. The next he goes stiff. Then he vibrates a little and slumps in the chair as dead as we are. Twenty seconds later, he was stone cold, like something sucked the life right out of him. Completely weird."

Roman didn't like the timing at all.

"Gets even stranger, Roman," James said quietly. "We investigated your death. New director Hood was all over it before you were even cold. Won him a lot of respect with the troops." Roman nodded. "What did you find out?"

"There were three snipers," Magdalene explained.

That much he'd known. "How did they infiltrate Secret Service?"

"They were Secret Service. Three agents with no

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prior connections. We conducted the interrogations inside Command. These agents had only started working the same detail just days before you died. I sat in on the sessions, and I'm telling you these dudes had no clue why they armed themselves and took you and your protection ops out. It was beyond surreal. I went behind the Hood's back and had Rodriguez and Osterman drug them to get to the truth."

She lifted her gaze to his, and despite the colorless place they now inhabited, Roman recognized her troubled expression, knew her deep blue eyes would appear almost black.

"Roman, there wasn't any truth. The shootings appeared to be absolutely spontaneous. But how could three Secret Service agents with no traceable connections hatch an impromptu assassination plot? It was bizarre. I kept thinking about pod people in those old movies. They were acting beyond their control, like they'd been brainwashed or something."

"Or crowded," Gray suggested.

Roman knew if he'd been alive, the hairs on the back of his neck would be on end. As it was, his thoughts raced with Gray's implication, and how easily the explanation fit.

"Did you continue the investigation into the terrorist's connection to Nathaniel Rush?"

She grimaced. "What do you think?"

"And?"

"And," she said with emphasis. "I wasn't able to corroborate any connection because I wound up dead."

She sounded greatly inconvenienced, as if death was no more than a traffic jam when she was already running late, but as she explained the events leading to the car that had run her down in Sanctus Command's

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secured parking facility, she started to fade. Perhaps it was a trick of her dark hair and fair skin, but the transformation bleached her as pale and brittle as a shell too long on the sand.

She gave an exasperated snort. "Damn it. Would someone mind telling me why this keeps happening?"

Gray smiled. "Have patience. Holding your echo together requires concentration. The longer you linger, the more instinctive it'll become."

"You don't know Mags," James said. "She's got the attention span of a gnat on the best of days."

Magdalene tossed her hands in the air and turned her back with an exasperated, "Great. Just great."

Roman knew this woman. She didn't let emotion leak through. But she was visibly upset now and fighting it. Had they been alive, he'd have caught her against him and wrapped her in a hug until she was bristling and bitching and breaking away-back to normal.

Now Roman had to watch her slim shoulders rise and fall sharply, pained by the sight and unsure what to do to help. He wasn't the only one watching. James looked nearly as undone as Magdalene-their dynamic was off. She pushed everyone away, but James never went far for long, camaraderie they'd shared as long as Roman had known them.

"We apprehended a suspected terrorist and uncovered unexpected intel," Roman said slowly. "Now we're all dead, including the terrorist. I'd say you corroborated a connection."

No coincidences here. Their deaths were a cover up.

She gave a huff, but didn't turn back around.
"What about you, James?" Perhaps the best way to

help Magdalene was to give her the only privacy he could by directing the attention elsewhere. "You died with her?"

He shook his head. "Bangkok. One minute I'm point on a mission getting ready to lead the team to the first mark. The next, my second is aiming his Sig at my temple. Boom."

"Your second?" Roman asked incredulously. "Who?"

"Lakewood."

Roman had to swallow back the urge to say, "You're kidding?" Eugene Lakewood was a top-notch operative. He was skilled, trustworthy and courageous, a strong team player.

"What happened?"

"Don't know, can't ask. He shot me in the head then turned the gun on himself. Mission went balls up from there."

No doubt. "Any sign of him in this realm?"

James shook his head. "Haven't been here long enough to find out. If I even knew how."

"Chances are he went on," Gray said. "Most souls do. We could ask around, though."

"Thanks." Roman appreciated Gray's offer to help on what was turning into a day filled with the unexpected. His head raced with new information. He needed time to sort through it, to analyze the possibilities.

"Is that what happened to Marstiller and Grant? They moved on?" James referred to the operatives that had died with Roman.

"Grant did. Marstiller is lingering. He wanted to spend some time with his family." Roman hadn't seen him since. He made a mental note to check on his operative. "So how did you and Magdalene hook up?"

"Ran into her here," James replied. "I was hoping

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you'd stop by. Had no clue where else to look for you. And like I said, I haven't even figured out how to look yet."

Roman could relate. He also knew that something was very wrong here. But the question that felt most important right now had nothing to do with the life they'd left behind.

"Why did you think I'd be here? Why are you lingering?"

Magdalene turned back around, and the hard edges of her expression softened in a look Roman couldn't remember ever seeing in all the years they'd worked together. His senior strategist didn't let her guard down, and whenever it slipped, she hauled it back up fast.

It was completely gone now, and the vulnerability on her strangely translucent face had him by the throat.

"We were told you needed our help," she said quietly. "Something told us that you were here and we should stay if we wanted to help you."

"Something?" James chuckled. "It was an angel, Mags. Go on, you can say it. You're on the other end of the satellite signal now, not tucked away safe inside Command. This is a ringside seat to what happens after you die, and it looks like there really are angels. What do you say, Gray?"

"Indeed there are," Lord Westbury replied. "And there's a variety--good or fallen. Warrior or guardian. Whom did you meet?"

"He was so bright I couldn't even look at him," James said, and Magdalene nodded. "But I did see a sword."

"The good kind then. A warrior."

Magdalene looked skeptical. "You're sure about that?"

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"Of course he's sure," James retorted. "Why would he lie?" Since Magdalene and James had gone round for round in life, Roman wasn't surprised that death hadn't changed that aspect of their relationship. And now James's teasing snapped Magdalene back. She sliced him a glance that should have shredded him.

"Fallen angels might be able to fool people in the living world," Gray explained. "But they can't quite pull it off in the passage. Only the good angels burn with a light that blinds. That's why they're called the Burning Ones. If the light doesn't blind then you've got a fallen angel trying to fake it."

Roman had to wonder how many newly-dead souls found out that information the hard way.

"What did this warrior angel tell your Gray asked.

Roman opened his mouth to run interference. He didn't want his people giving information he wanted to conceal. But Magdalene's scowl cued him that she had none to give away.

"That angel didn't tell me a damn thing except that Roman was still hanging around and might need help."

James nodded. "Said the choice was mine. Of course, I chose to stay."

Roman looked at James and Magdalene, and said, "Thanks."

James only inclined his head, but Magdalene shrugged. "Actually, I lied.

Atoning doesn't really sound all that great."

Roman laughed, a feeling he remembered. He wouldn't have chosen for Magdalene and James to die until they'd lived out long and satisfying lives, but if he'd had to pick two people that he'd have wanted by

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his side as he tackled his next mission, he'd have picked these two.

Already Magdalene and James's appearances were winning Roman credibility with Gray. And he was feeling more confident than he had since accepting the challenge of this battle.

"There's a lot going on," he said. "But we've got to exfiltrate a key player before we can brief."

"Who?" Magdalene asked.

"Lord Westbury's companion." He turned to Gray. "Will you help me explain?"

Gray nodded, and together, they detailed the unfolding events with Katie McGuire and the search for a point of entry to retrieve Nina.

"Demons got her? Demons?" Magdalene sounded incredulous. "You've got to be kidding me, Roman. Didn't we already deal with those? Wasn't that what those angels were doing when I died?"

James moved to clap her on the back, but she deftly dodged him with a scowl.

"Not having second thoughts, are you, Mags? Angels don't sound like such a big deal now, do they?"

"Shiiiiit." She sank back against a corom station and eyed Roman with bravado.

"Now you're fighting demons. I shouldn't be surprised. You've always been a crazy bastard."

Roman wanted to reach out and take her hand, to bridge the distance between her show of bravado and the very real fear he sensed below. "This is an opt-in.

Remember that you can move on at any time."

She ran a hand through her hair, a habit that no longer set the silky spikes up on end. "Opt-in? Damn terrorists were boring the hell out of me anyway."

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James chuckled. "We signed on for the long haul, Roman. You know that. 'Til death do us part. Or not."

Roman didn't get a chance to reply because Damian Hart appeared. He gave a fast glance around then addressed Roman. "Guess who showed up at the food festival?"

"Who?"

"Luke Robinson. Some coincidence, don't you think?" Damian rolled his eyes.

"He just ran into Katie in front of the Chinese food booth. Seemed opportune so I thought I'd pop over to let you know."

"Excellent." Roman gestured toward his newlyarrived team and made the introductions.

"More newly dead, great," Damian said, but at Gray's frown added a more civil, "Welcome to our little corner of eternity."

"Shall we head over to the food festival and see what's happening there?"

Roman suggested.

"Are you going for point of entry?" James asked.

"Perhaps. We'll assess. I'd like your input."

Magdalene raised her hand. "Uh, question? Just how are we getting to a food festival? Do buses run in this dead zone?"

Damian gave an ironic laugh that would have done Magdalene proud had she not been the butt of his humor.

"Focus on Mr. Barrymore;" Gray said. "Just think that you want to follow him and you will."

"Are you coming with us?" Roman asked Damian.

"No, I'll head back over and keep an eye out on Nina."

"Back over where?" James asked.

"You explain it," Damian said to Roman and disappeared.

"He's a friend?" Magdalene asked Gray. "I'm sur-

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prised. Here I was thinking you were such a civil chap for a dead guy."

"I am." Gray turned to Roman. "What do you make of Luke Robinson showing up where Katie and Nina are?"

"It doesn't feel like coincidence."

Gray inclined his head. "I don't think Nina's the only one who has demons after her."

"I agree with you, Lord Westbury, and thank you for sharing your insights. I believe we're going to find that there's much more going on than we can even guess right now."

"Call me Gray." Roman nodded. And for the first time he felt encouraged about tackling the challenge ahead. He wasn't alone.

He hadn't been all along.

If not for the smile, Katie might not have recognized Luke out of uniform. He looked less official and more like any guy in his faded jeans and sneakers, an Orioles cap backward on his head. But that smile of his lit up his face, twinkled in his blue eyes, and made her smile back.

"What a small world," she said. "This festival is crowded. I can't believe I ran into you."

"Lucky me. Are you enjoying yourself tonight?"

"Sure are. How about you?" she asked. "Having fun?"

He shrugged. "Just wanted to get out of the house. Got the whole weekend off and no plans."

That struck her as lonely. She wasn't sure why because nothing about Luke looked or sounded lonely, but she suddenly envisioned the weekend looming ahead,

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hour after hour strung together with nothing to do or look forward to. The thought made her sad, as if she'd lived many long and lonely hours herself. She hadn't, and Katie wasn't sure why she felt that way. She honestly couldn't remember an empty weekend. Between the girls and her job at the dry cleaners, there simply weren't enough hours in the day. She wanted to ask him to join her, but didn't want to put him on the spot or seem too forward. But she hated the thought of him heading back into the crowd all alone.

"Have you eaten yet?" she gave in and asked.

"Not yet. Just been checking things out, trying to decide what I'm in the mood for."

"I'm going for egg rolls myself. The girls headed down to the Mexican booth." Luke stroked his chin, drawing her attention to the strong angle of his jaw, the carved lines of his cheeks.

She wondered why she hadn't noticed how handsome he was before.

"Egg rolls?" he said. "That has possibilities. I haven't had Chinese in a while." "'Then come on. Let's go grab something."

It was exactly the right thing to say. Luke's smile widened until it crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Chinese it is."

He was a great dinner companion. After insisting on buying her meal, he found a table. The band played a variety of music from pop tunes and ballads to jazz.

The girls only sat down long enough to eat before joining some friends on the grassy clearing in front of the stage to dance, leaving Katie and Luke to eat and chat while the sun went down.

"You sure you don't mind me crashing your party?" he asked.

"I invited you, remember? And it's been nice to exchange more than a few sentences as I'm walking inside Fairwinds."

"I agree," he said. "So, how's everything going, Katie? Everything all right?"

She sat back on the bench, removed the napkin from her lap and folded it neatly. Setting it on the table, she met his gaze. "Is that code for 'where's Katie's crazy husband?'" .

Luke's eyes twinkled. "Yep. Sure is." "We're getting a divorce," she said matter-of-factly. "I turned in the papers today."

He didn't offer any condolences, and Katie thought that said a bunch.

"How are the girls holding up?" he asked.

"They're troopers. The situation hasn't been easy, and I think they're more relieved than anything else."

"Ending a marriage is always hard." There was something in his voice that made her think he was remembering his late wife.

They shared a companionable silence as Luke sipped his coffee and stared out into the crowd of dancers. She was surprised by how comfortable she felt with him, even when they weren't talking. He was an easy man to be around.

So easy, in fact, that she never noticed the time until it was well after ten.

"Ohmigosh." She popped up off the bench. "I had no idea it was so late. The girls can sleep in tomorrow, but I've got to be at work at six. By the time we catch the bus--"

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"It's late. I'll give you a ride home." Luke hesitated. "I mean, that is, if you're comfortable?"

"Oh," Katie exclaimed, surprised. "I wouldn't want to put you out of your way. We live on the other side of town."

Shrugging, he gave her a crooked half-smile. "Not a problem for me. I can sleep in late tomorrow, too."

Live life, that voice inside reminded her.

'Then, thanks. We'd appreciate a ride home."

CHAPTER FIVE

ROMAN watched Luke's car drive off. He considered following and assessed the possibility of accomplishing anything further between Luke and Katie tonight. After Damian had reported the events happening at the food festival, Roman had asked Gray to learn what he could about how to penetrate a shroud. Then he'd shifted into the living world.

Whispering to Luke, he dissuaded the security guard from bidding Katie good-bye to continue his solo journey through the festival. He'd suggested Luke buy Katie dinner, instead.

Accomplished.

Then Roman had whispered to Katie, encouraging her to accept Luke's offer to pay for her meal.

Accomplished.

He'd suggested Luke ask Katie to dance then vice versa.

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Failed.

But he had convinced Katie to accept Luke's offer of a ride home, so overall, Roman considered his efforts a success. If nothing else, he'd honed his whispering skills and practiced resisting life when it rushed him, so familiar and tempting.

"Man, you were this close." Damian held his thumb and forefinger up to gesture a small amount. "I'm impressed. That was a nice save at the end and you almost talked her into asking him to dance."

"Why did I fail?"

"Demon of Doubt got Katie, definitely. And Guilt.

Insecurity too, maybe. She probably doesn't want to rush into anything until her divorce is final."

"Only Nina could tell you for sure."

Both men turned to find Gray, who'd appeared.

Damian glanced back to Roman. "Insecurity, trust me. I'm betting Sorrow and Disloyalty got Luke. The guy's obviously still broken up about his wife."

Roman nodded, trying to pull together the pieces in his head. What these men accepted so casually still sounded mind-boggling---fantasy at its finest, something out of a movie he might have seen in a theater when he'd been alive. As he'd been whispering to Katie to get his message to Nina, so had demons. Likely the ones Damian had mentioned---Doubt, Guilt, Insecurity, Sorrow, Disloyalty.

Roman might not have seen them, but he'd felt them. All it had taken was a hand on Katie's arm, and he'd sensed the conflict as demons had battled to influence her soul.

Only Nina could see the demons, to know which

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ones she fought against. She carried a unique burden, and he suspected that burden had honed her strength of will. How else had she survived in this place for so long, crusading for her cause with only her companions by her side? How did a woman who gave so freely of herself feel about those who gave to her? Did she revel in their devotion, or had the passing of time taught her to expect such commitment?

Roman could speculate all he wanted, but he wouldn't know until he freed Nina and got to know her himself.

"How did the demons know what I was doing?" he asked.

"Proud, aren't you?" Damian scoffed. "Had nothing to do with you, Barrymore. That's the battle. It's waging on every soul in the living world every day, day in and day out."

"Every day?"

Gray arched an eyebrow in a look that made Roman feel as if he'd missed the obvious. "'To turn a soul away from heaven."

This concept wasn't new. He'd grown up learning about spiritual warfare.

The ravages of sinfulness.

The battle between good and evil.

The devil trying to steal souls.

Roman had learned these things from birth--but he hadn't really understood, or taken the battle literally.

The concepts of good battling evil sounded unbelievable in an age of space travel, satellite surveillance, biotechnology, and nuclear weaponry. The world

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was accessible through the media. Terrorism ran rampant. Religious fanaticism had become an anathema.

At Sanctus he'd fought evil daily, had routinely made small sacrifices for the greater good of the overall goal.

Perhaps he was simply a product of his generation.

The focus seemed to have shifted from saving one's soul for eternity to saving one's ass in the here and now. Now Roman was left to rethink that stance, and reassess.

"Did you learn anything?" he asked Gray.

"I did, but we should shift back before we talk. We can't see who's around and might be listening here." "Back to Sanctus Command, if you will." Shifting didn't get easier; rather, Roman became more confident in his ability to accomplish the shift.

"Lose your faith for even an instant and your ass belongs to the demons."

Damian's warning still echoed in Roman's head.

When he opened his eyes to find himself back on the spiritual side of System Ops, he was relieved he'd made it.

After recapping events to Magdalene and James, Roman asked Gray to share what he'd learned about penetrating a shroud.

"I have it on good authority it has been done before," Gray said. "Not often, though. And not a shroud as powerful as we suspect this one is." "Who'd you see?" Damian asked.

"Swamp Man."

"If anyone would know, he would. How'd you get him to talk?"

"I asked politely. Most people respond to that."

"So you keep telling me," Damian said dryly. .

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As Roman watched the exchange, questions ran through his head. So many questions. Too few answers.

He picked one. "Who's Swamp Man?"

"Someone who's been around a lot longer than we have," Damian said.

Gray nodded. "No one knows much about him. Not when he got here or why he's been lingering. He stays in the Louisiana bayou. I think that's where he lived when he was alive. But he's around longer than anyone and has fought some battles of his own."

"He answered your questions?"

Gray shook his head. "He likes Nina. She's helped him out before. Otherwise, he wouldn't have given me the time of day."

Roman supposed he shouldn't be surprised. Collecting loyal men seemed to be a hobby of Nina's. And Roman thought the quality of the men who'd befriended her spoke highly of the woman herself. He filed away the information. A contact in the Louisiana bayou could prove useful.

Gray explained the only way to penetrate a shroud was to make Nina remember something good about her own life, something pleasurable enough to counter the negative emotions shrouding her identity and memorable enough to break her free.

"Swamp Man said he'd never heard of a shroud powerful enough to take out someone as strong as Nina for so long," he added. "He warned us to be careful."

"What aren't you telling me, Gray?" Roman asked. "Because what you are telling me sounds straightforward enough. Yet you look worried."

Gray exchanged a look with Damian, who in turn narrowed his gaze at Magdalene

and James. Never one

to back down from any opposition, Magdalene glared right back. .
 "We're professionals, gentlemen," Roman assured them. "Feel free to talk openly. Magdalene and James are on my team, and I need their input."
 Damian clearly wasn't happy and remained silent, but Gray said, "What you're saying sounds easier said than done. We might find Nina. . . unwilling."
 "Are you worried she might be enjoying this life?" Roman had sensed resistance and wasn't surprised by this revelation.
 "She wouldn't be if she remembered who she was." Damian sounded defensive.
 "Nina would never crowd a soul. Not even for a chance to live a normal life." Gray nodded. "You have to understand the significance of what's happening here. Her ability to touch death isolated her. Living as Katie, she's enjoying the sort of life she always wanted--one where she can interact with people, hug her kids, and doesn't have to hide who she is."
 Roman could only imagine what life in Nina's time might have been like. Had she lived in fear of discovery or grown numb to the point of indifference? Had she valued awakening each day, or found each sunrise a burden? "I'm curious to know how a woman in her circumstances wound up on a crusade to help others."
 "She had to die to decide whether she'd been blessed by God or cursed," Gray said.
 "So she's trying to make amends?"
 Gray frowned. "More like making up for missed opportunity."
 "So we'll have to work a little harder to retrieve her. That's acceptable."

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Gray and Damian exchanged a doubtful look.
 Roman sighed. "Gentlemen, clearly Nina is a very caring person and that's a choice one doesn't make without reason. Surely there must have been something good about her life. What about her family? Friends? A special pet? Sounds like we just need one solid thing to target."
 The silence only grew heavier, and it touched Roman in places he hadn't realized he could still feel. Had Nina truly known so little joy when she'd been alive?
 He was staring at the only men who could tell him, the only men she'd been able to touch: How had that affected their relationships? Roman understood their loyalty--these were honorable men. But who else had they been to Nina? And why did Roman care?
 "Gentlemen, I've got a point of entry into Katie McGuire's life with Luke Robinson," he said. "Now I need one to Nina. Only you can give it to me. I need something pleasant and memorable."
 Roman wouldn't have thought it possible in this dead realm, but Gray actually paled. His expression closed off like a fist, and he turned away from Damian, as if shielding himself from what he knew was coming.
 Damian seemed to appreciate his reaction and gave a short laugh. "Sex, Barrymore."
 "Sex?" Roman could practically taste the word.
 Damian nodded. "Nina found it pleasant and memorable."
 Magdalene made a move in Roman's periphery, but he cut off any smart ass remark with a sharp glance, warning her to keep her comments to herself.
 They'd

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been professionals in life. Death wasn't going to change that. And he was struggling hard enough with his own reaction, his mind conjuring images of the yearning on her face in the unfinished portrait. He tried to imagine a life barren of touch, of physical closeness or intimacy, of bearing the responsibility of seeing death in every person she touched.

But for these 'two men.

Sex made brutal sense.

Roman knew Gray had been her guardian. So had Damian been her lover? He had no right to ask, but found himself unable to meet Damian's gaze, not with his head filled with the memory of Nina's beautiful face, the knowledge that she might have been yearning for this man.

"If sex is a possible point of entry then how do we go about using it?" He delivered the question matter-of-factly, managed to sound the part of professional, though he felt anything but. "Did your contact explain the logistics?"

Gray didn't turn around. "We'll have to prompt her memory. Whisper to her, do what we can to remind her of what we shared."

"We, as in both of you?" The words were out of Roman's mouth before he had even registered the question, a stunning lapse of impulse control from a man who didn't lose control.

James glanced his way, composing his expression against laughter. Magdalene didn't bother. She just smiled broadly, clearly enjoying herself.

"Yes," Damian said. One curt word that ricocheted like a bullet.

"I see." And Roman did.

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He had no right to a reaction, no right to formulate any opinion. Right apparently had no place in the afterlife. Nina had consumed his thoughts since his death.

She was his target, his mission objective, the woman who'd captured his imagination.

Folding his hands behind his back, he braced his legs apart and forced himself to ask, "We need to decide how to work this to our benefit."

His calm words shocked the silence. The moment passed.

Damian shrugged. "One of us can work on Nina when Katie's awake, and the other while she's asleep.

Living souls are much more susceptible to whispers when their defenses are down."

"That's good information to know, Mr. Hart." Roman forced aside speculation about what sorts of encounters these men would fill Nina's dreams with. Would remembering her life with these men draw them even closer in death?

He squelched the thought with effort. His preoccupation with Nina was growing into a distraction. "It's a viable plan, gentlemen. If you both strike from the afterlife, I can strike from the living world."

"Through Luke Robinson?" Gray asked.

Magdalene raised her hand and drew all gazes to her. "If Luke's your point of entry you'll be getting no place fast."

"He and Katie are attracted to each other," Roman said.

James shook his head. "But Luke's playing Mr. Nice Guy. He wouldn't even ask her to dance."

"But he did offer her a ride home, and she accepted. We've got to start somewhere," Roman pointed out. "Katie- hasn't been apart from her husband long, and

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Luke seems to respect that. I don't see another option given the parameters of Ms. de Lacy's point of entry."

Gray's expression tightened. Whether from having his dirty laundry aired or from the unsettling reality of the task ahead, Roman couldn't say, but there was no getting around the fact that using sex to break through to their target in this place wasn't optimum. Not in the afterlife. They were walking a thin line with this plan of action, a really thin one.

But Nina's circumstances were unique. If sex was their only way to her, then sex it would be. Roman would just hope for opportunities to implement damage control along the way. It was a risk they would have to take.

"You know, Barrymore," Damian said offhand. "If you can't persuade Luke to get this show on the road by whispering, you can always crowd him. You could make him do whatever you want."

Roman didn't miss that Damian didn't offer to do the job himself.

"Sweet Jesus," Gray exploded, drawing up to full height, every inch a regal British lord when he demanded, "What's wrong with you?"

Damian only leveled a cool stare. "I want her back. If it wasn't for Nina, I wouldn't still be here. Neither would you."

"Then go," Gray said. "No one's keeping you here. Least of all Nina."

"I want her back," was all Damian said in reply.

Roman was surprised by the intensity of emotion between these men, by the disapproval and conflict. He was also surprised by his own satisfaction at a hint that all might not be well between them, two men who were so very different.

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Damian Hart, reckless, passionate, willing to sacrifice himself and others to achieve his goal.

Gray Talbot, rational, protective, a natural leader.

Each man with his own particular skill set and strengths to help Roman retrieve the woman who was so vital to them all.

"Gentlemen," he said. "I'll do what it takes to retrieve Ms. de Lacy. That was my commitment to you."

"Whatever it takes?" Damian asked.

"We'll retrieve Nina," he said simply. "You have my word."

Magdalene made a move toward him. "Roman--"

"Excuse me," Gray interrupted, eyeing Roman as if gauging whether or not he was ruthless enough, or foolish enough to crowd a living soul. "Nina doesn't need your soul on her conscience. She already feels enough anguish over the choices she made in life."

"I appreciate the warning," Roman told him. "If you have another suggestion then now's the time."

Apparently Gray didn't.

"Be prepared then," he warned. "Nina isn't going to like this one bit."

"Unfortunate. But I'd prefer to deal with Ms. de Lacy's response after we've retrieved her."

Damian gave a grim smile. "Easy for you to say, Barrymore. You don't know Nina."

Not yet, perhaps. But Roman looked forward to meeting her.

Gray heard their laughter mingling on the breeze. Nina's clear and silvery, so

joyous the very sound ached to his soul. Damian's low and amused. Satisfied.
They were together again. and that knowledge ached. too.

He should have turned and walked in the opposite direction, put this courtyard and their laughter behind him. But Gray couldn't fault them, though he yearned to.

They'd been so careful, so painfully respectful to never flaunt their passions, to conceal their longing glances, and the adventure in their eyes as they gazed across the dining table, the coach, the chapel.

Arousal reeked off them like the fust of refuse too long in the sun. They hadn't expected his return this morn, should have had the entire day to indulge the desires of their flesh.

Nina's voice anchored him to the spot, though, and Gray stood rooted in the tangle of hawthorn and rose, listening to the lilting sounds of her voice as she read from a book of John Donne:

Sweetest love, I do not go, For weariness of thee, Nor in hope the world can show A fitter love for me . . .

The scent of brine from the bay caught him as a breeze swept through the trellis, and Gray shifted into the draft, intent upon distraction, upon cooling the heat that made him clammy with the sweat of disquieting thoughts. And he saw her.

They'd left the doors to her room opened to the Bay, believing themselves alone. Nina lay stretched out on the bed with a book propped before her, her body long and pale and sleek, gloriously and unabashedly naked.

The sight of her felt like a stab wound to his gut, and Gray squeezed his eyes shut, cursed himself for the hundredth . . . nay, thousandth time, that he'd ever followed her inside that bedeviled painting. Nina had chosen her fate. He should have respected her wishes and left

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Damian to chase her. His own days and nights would have been much better spent in prayer for their souls.

Alas, he'd been arrogant, bent on saving the world, so he'd gone inside that cursed painting to retrieve Nina, and Damian along with her. He'd brought them back to the real world of St. Michaels, Maryland, where they'd been forced to face life beneath the watchful eyes of Colonial' society, knowing the unusual circumstances of their relationship would be noticed and misunderstood.

And now lived within a hell of his own making.

Then fear not me, But believe that I shall make Speedier journeys, since I take More wings and spurs than he.

His chest heaved on labored breaths. The sound of her voice was a lure he struggled to resist, a battle he was losing as the sight of her pale, naked curves seemed burned into his mind until it mattered not whether he stood with eyes opened or closed.

Either way the ache in his groin shamed him.

Reason demanded he fight his impulses, back away from temptation, and but for the sound of her voice, he might have prevailed. . .

And that damned ache between his thighs.

O how feeble is man's power, That if good fortune fall, Cannot add another hour, Nor a lost hour recall!

The vision of her pale loveliness burned so brightly that he wasn't sure when he opened his eyes in truth, so caught up was he in the sight of her.

His beloved Nina... sleek and lovely, all smooth skin and long slender curves. Her unbound hair cascaded down her back in honeyed waves, teasing him with

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glimpses of her graceful throat, a creamy shoulder, a rounded breast. Her voice trembled with lazy pleasure as she took poetry he and she had discovered together and gifted the verse to her lover.

A part of him was thankful that she had found some joy in her world, a place bereft of simple touches and so lacking in peace.

While another part of him; a greater, darker, twisted part, ached that he had denied her. It was all she had ever wanted. To share physical closeness. To be held. Desired.

Loved. For so long, he had been the only man with the privilege to touch her.

Yet he'd squandered his chance, arrogant, believing the timetable his own.

Nina had never asked; indeed, she had convinced herself he'd already sacrificed too much on her behalf, when he had sacrificed naught. She had been such a comfort to him in the black days after Juliette's death, a beacon leading him from the depths of despair toward life again.

She had never asked, yet she had been so grateful for his every stingy touch .

. . a clasped hand, a fast embrace, a chaste kiss.

Now, as he watched her, Gray understood he had denied her selfishly. To give into his desire would mean letting go of his cherished Juliette.

His wants, his needs, his desires.

But come bad chance, And we join to it our strength, And we teach it art and length, Itself o'er us to advance.

Damian lay stretched out beside her, molded so closely the bright cape of his hair draped over them both. And his hands. . . his hands roved over her possessively, molded a

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round shoulder, glanced splay-fingered over her chest, tweaked a rosy nipple of a pale breast.

Nina's voice faltered in its rhythm. Indeed, Gray's heartbeat stalled apace as Damian idly rolled that greedy peak between his thumb and forefinger.

The melting expression on Nina's face was almost Gray's undoing. Lids fluttered shut over amber eyes, her full mouth parted around a breath. Her words trailed off to gentle silence as she gave herself over to pleasure, so utterly captivating in her desire, the want on her face, the blushing glow tinting her skin.

Gray cautioned himself to back away, to leave this courtyard and these lovers to explore the joy that they'd found together. He had made his choices, would abide by them, no matter how much he yearned.

He chided himself when he couldn't take even one step.

Damian watched Nina with a possessive gaze, a look that was all male pride, and he swept aside the flowing drape of their hair, honeyed waves twining so seductively around his fiery Scots' red, revealing her breasts in all their glory.

Her chest rose and fell on a sharp breath as she arched her back, thrust forward eagerly for Damian's attention, those blushing peaks visibly gathering and tightening as he caught the swelling fullness within his palms, and Nina's sigh caught on the edge of the breeze.

And in that instant, Gray doubted.

Katie erupted in bed, heart throbbing. She stared into the dark, keenly aware of the sweat cooling on her skin,

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the shadows of her bedroom that suddenly seemed to be aching with a longing that felt so real.

Her ears adjusted to the night quiet, strained to hear if either of the girls had called out. Nothing but the familiar sounds of the old apartment building settling.

But she could still feel a gaze on her as she remembered the dream. a gaze that made her wonder why such heartfelt longing felt so familiar.

CHAPTER SIX

NINA stood in the open doorway, staring into the courtyard, unaware of his arrival. He moved stealthily across the room and came up behind her, slipping his hands over her shoulders, enjoying her quiver of surprise, savoring the feel of her beneath his touch.

She sank back against him, body suddenly warm and close. "Damian."

He let his eyes fall shut, heedless of the beauty of the courtyard in bloom. It had been so long since he'd held Nina. "Gray does not leave us alone of a purpose." She just rested her head back against his shoulder, until his every breath carried the familiar floral scent of her hair, fired his imagination with..the promise of the silky tresses unbound. Too long.

"His eyes follow you always. He covets you."

"You are mistaken." Her voice filtered through the sounds of life in the courtyard, mysterious scurryings in the foliage, gulls crying out sharply overhead, waves breaking rhythmically on the shore. "I was Gray's. He

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could have had me if he wished. He is not interested. He never was."
"You deceive yourself rather than feel guilt for wanting me."
She sighed, her slender body gathering with tension, attempting to break away from his, if he would but let her go.
He would not.

Gripping her shoulders to stay her movement, he anchored her close. She tipped her head back until she could peer in his face, and asked dryly, "Did you wish to argue or enjoy these hours alone?"

"We can do both, Nina sweet."

She hissed impatiently, and he chuckled. But the memory of Gray's brooding glances writhed inside him, poison that laced the blood in his veins. Gray coveted what Damian had found with Nina, and that would not be a trouble easily reconciled.

Gray was too conflicted, too proud, too noble. Yet he ached for the woman in Damian's arms. Nina might deny the truth, but he could not share peaceful denial. Not when Gray's dark gaze followed him, too. Enviously.

"Argue. Is that truly what you want to do when we have so few moments together?"

There was truth. "I enjoy you in your anger, Nina sweet. You are fiery and demanding."

"So you would provoke me?"

"Only so you will pleasure me." Pressing a kiss to the top of her head, he slid his fingers beneath the robe's collar and forced the gown to part. She did not resist as the sash at her waist tugged loose, and he peeled the sleeves down her arms until the whole slipped to her feet in a murmur of silk.

She was naked, creamy skin radiant in the blush of sunrise, slender curves proud, welcoming, as he ground his crotch against her backside, the ache that had simmered there for too long suddenly flaring to life.

"Ah, Nina sweet. I have missed you so."

"And I you."

Raising her arms, she placed her hands around his neck, a posture that arched her back against him, thrust her breasts outward enticingly. He dragged his hands over her, committed each curve to memory. . . the delicate sweep of her throat, the handfuls of velvety breasts, the smooth expanse of her stomach, the way she trembled as he reacquainted himself with the feel of her skin. Confirmation of her need fueled the heat inside him. They might have the day stretched before them, blessedly, finally alone again, but Damian's impatience for her would not be easily satisfied. He'd waited too long, fought a battle to contain his desire too fiercely. Unleashing himself from the prison of his pants, he settled between her warm cheeks and exhaled a sigh of contentment. 'Twas an innocent stance, but he began to move against her, just enough to ride the need that had been mounting for so long.

Pressing open-mouthed kisses along her temple, down her cheek, he braced his legs apart to support them, when she began a sultry motion with her delicious body, hips swaying back and forth to join his efforts, his erection tantalizing her most private places in a sheath of wet heat.

Their tongues sparred in greedy half-kisses when he couldn't quite reach her mouth. He feasted on the feel of her body beneath his hands, her responses welcoming and eager, unabashedly and delightfully needy.

He slipped a hand down her stomach toward the V at

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the juncture of her thighs. Seeking the pearl of her desire hidden within her moist folds, he started up a pace that soon had her arching against him, had him riding her as if they were truly joined as one.

They could be if only he pressed inside. . .

Her low moans carried on the bay breeze. They were both impatient, eager. They had been denied too long.

Their bodies had grown hungry for each other. They had needs that must be sated, and only once they satisfied this craving would they settle down enough to enjoy the true beauty of spending their day together.

He arched his hips, repositioning until he was poised at her entrance.

Nina gave a throaty laugh. Rising up on tiptoes, she teased him as he pressed inside only the slightest bit. She arched her bottom again, this time taking him enough to feel her stretch around him, make his whole body jerk violently as the promise of the moment, the pleasure surged through him.

She laughed again, the sound rolling through the courtyard.

His eyes shot open as the feeling gripped him, made standing an effort of will, and then through the drape of wisteria, he saw Gray walking along the shore.

No sound could have carried the distance, yet in that moment Gray looked up, and their gazes collided. Gray's tortured with want. Damian's surely shocked. He should have stopped. He should have dragged Nina inside to spare her from prying eyes, from a situation that was spiraling out of control, but poised as he was between her warm thighs, Damian could only ease inside.. .

* * *

Steam rose from the press, searing Katie's skin, startling her to jerk away the collar. Waving the shirt to cool it, she inspected the fabric, relieved not to have caused any damage.

Wouldn't her boss just love a good reason to go off all over her?

She'd been lucky that he hadn't already. She'd been edgy all day, distracted. . . and what was going on inside her head? Voices yesterday. A dream last night.

And today this. . . Katie honestly didn't know what this had been.

Images kept flashing in her head. Sexy images that made her heart pound too fast, made sweat pour off her skin more than the rising steam from the press should allow. Even more unexpected was the feeling, like when she'd awakened from that dream last night. A longing, so intense it became a physical ache, an ache that felt so familiar when there was no reason why it should.

* * *

Roman appeared in Systems Ops to find Magdalene running his protocols at Station Siberia. "Got the station to yourself?"

"Greaves began a level two then left."

Under Roman's rule, the operative would have been required to monitor the process. "But you're not having any trouble operating the equipment, are you?"

"I'm just doing what you said, and it seems to be working."

"Good. Status."

"We're investigating the alleged connection between Nathaniel Rush and our dead terrorist."

He nodded. "What about maneuvering through the systems? Any firewalls or shut downs?"

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"Nope. This is an impressive program, Roman. I'm sure glad I wasn't up to any hanky panky when I was alive. You'd have been all over my ass."

Roman smiled.

"You're lucky they didn't manually rebuild the systems and ditch this program when Hood took over the directorship."

"All that work when I'm dead? They'd lose too much data. Maybe it'll become a tradition. Dying is the only way to quit the job, so my subroutine becomes a virtual legacy."

"What, you think a historian is going to unravel this nightmare one day to write biographies on Sanctus directors?"

Roman knew Sanctus Command, with all its hidden safety parameters, would implement a self-destruct sequence before media exposure would be allowed to happen. "I hope not. Although, I suppose our programs would tell quite a story."

Magdalene laughed. "Damned straight. But I've got to know... Is this how you nailed Klonowski on hooking up with those Sunni rebels? Come on, we're dead. You can tell me now."

Roman had never considered it good business practice to let his operatives think he didn't trust them. But he didn't. Sanctus operated without direct oversight, which meant all responsibility fell onto his shoulders.

Power was a burden he'd chosen to respect. And while he'd surrounded himself with the very best, people were only human. He was only human.

That was a truth that had weighed heavily in life.

When he thought about Katie and Luke, it was a truth that had followed him into the afterlife. "Yes."

Magdalene nodded and let the subject drop,

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recognizing he'd offered all he would on the subject.

Again, Roman was pleased to have her on his team.

And James. They worked well together and were both adaptable enough to learn the new rules of this game.

His opinion had already borne out when they'd faced their first training obstacle--teaching his operatives to shift. Roman had been unwilling to risk his newlydead operatives until they'd mastered enough of the basics to stand a chance at shifting between the realms and making it back again.

Magdalene and James appeared to have been gifted with a few angelic abilities of their own. If not as many as Roman, at least enough to cover the basics. With Gray and Damian's help, he'd taught Magdalene and James the essentials and gave them explicit orders to avoid touching the living under any circumstances.

Roman had barely withstood the temptation of life. He didn't want his people to face that test yet.

"So how's it going on your end?" Magdalene asked.

"Proceeding, from what I can tell. Gray and Damian are taking turns blasting Ms. de Lacy and her host with memories. Gray has taken the night shift and Damian the day. I've been investigating opportunities to get Katie and Luke together."

"Come up with anything?"

He nodded. "A local church is hosting a carnivaltype fund-raiser this weekend, and Fairwinds Women's Center is one of the benefiting charities."

"Good call. Not so much pressure when there are a lot of people around. Think you might be able to convince Luke to ask Katie to dance this time?"

"I'm hoping to skip a few bases, actually."

"Bold man. Good luck."

"I'll need it. I'm knee-deep in Katie's daughters'

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social lives at the moment. Teenagers are a truly interesting species."

"Looking to get them out of the way, so Mom's free to play ball?"

"You got it." Roman glanced around. "Where's James?"

"Sent him to the Maryland safe house to help me run all this stuff."

"How are you covering his operations?"

"They're conducting scheduled maintenance this week. Just one operative, so it's nice and quiet. The diagnostics are covering James's tracks."

"Good work, but this whole arrangement isn't optimum."

"Tell me about it. Greaves almost parked his butt right on top of me before. My new improved seethrough body is good for something, though. I can move fast."

"I'll consider alternatives."

"You do that because Nathaniel Rush is the media's darling, so trust me when I say the data pit is bottomless. You're lucky I don't get tired anymore, or else I'd need a month in Maui to recover." Leaning back in the chair, Magdalene hiked her feet onto the comm station to emphasize her point.

Roman resisted a smile at the way he could see the illuminated display of the air mobility and smart weapons command blinking through her transparent self.

"Good work."

"Well, we obviously can't share this lone ranger comm station, and since we're fully loaded in all the safe houses, and on your jet, too, incidentally, I thought it would be less risky if he stepped out for a while.

Didn't think you'd mind since travel time is no longer

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an issue." She shrugged. "Besides, he was getting antsy. You know James."

Roman did indeed. Not only was James Atticus LaTortue a stellar tactical officer, but one of the best field ops Roman had ever seen. "Come up with anything yet?" "Hate to burst your bubble, but I'm running into dead end after dead end with this investigation. James, too, the last I heard. We're running everything on this guy, Roman. Today I'm trailing his global movements during the time frame. James is covering involvement with Fairwinds. He's gone back to the planning stages of the place and run board meetings, media appearances, ribbon-cutting ceremonies. You name it."

"Good."

"Not if we don't come up with anything, and I'm not seeing even a possible connection to our dead terrorist. Damn shame the little murderer didn't hang around in the passage for a while. I've got a bunch of new questions to ask him."

Folding her arms across her chest, Magdalene met his gaze with a thoughtful expression. "Do you really think this connection between Rush and our terrorist is the reason we're all dead? I mean, if that's the case, we need to be investigating both sides of life and death. I only have a clue how to work one."

Leaning back against the station, Roman nodded. "Which is why we're bringing in new team players who know how to work death. I might disIniss your hit and run, but I can't come up with another explanation for why three Secret Service agents would suddenly join forces in an assassination. Or why Lakewood would murder James then turn the gun on himself. And what happened to our terrorist is suspect, too. Knowing

what I know now. . . Crowding these souls could explain everything."

"No argument there." She frowned. "But I've got so many questions, Roman. Why can't we brief?"

He considered, shook his head. He was just beginning to see the big picture, glimpse how events were affecting both realms. Until he understood clearly, he couldn't ascertain mission parameters. "I'm new to the idea of spiritual warfare. I don't have all the pieces yet or understand the rules. We'll brief after we retrieve Ms. de Lacy. I can't risk a leak because of my ignorance, not with the stakes so high."

As always, Magdalene proved herself the epitome of a team player. Sliding her feet off the station, she sat up and said, "Then let's go over what we've got, which isn't much. Fingers crossed James stumbles across more than I have."

Just as Katie reached the Fairwinds front entrance, the door swung wide. . .

"Luke, I thought you might be off today. I missed you on my way in."

And she'd been looking forward to seeing him. So much, in fact, that she'd reapplied her makeup on the bus ride over.

"I was making my rounds." He escorted her outside, that dashing smile in place, as if he was just as pleased to see her. "Glad I made it back before you left. I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed spending time with you and the girls the other night. That was nice of you to let me tag along."

"I enjoyed visiting." She shot for casual. "And dinner, too. I'd been wanting those egg rolls for a while."

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"Did you hear about the Spring Fling over at the Potomac Christian Church?"

"No."

"They're hosting a carnival this weekend. A fundraiser for Fairwinds and some other charities. I'd like to invite you and the girls, if you've got some free time."

"Oh, really." She sounded as breathless as she felt. "It's all weekend?"

"Friday night through Sunday. I'm off. How about you?"

"I'm off on Sunday, so Saturday night would work. Oh, wait. The girls already have plans for that night."

"How about you? I'd still like to take you, if you'd like to go." Luke's voice dropped a sexy octave, and his warm eyes twinkled.

Her breath hitched in her throat, and Katie-couldn't remember the last time she had felt so excited, as if she'd felt as if she'd lived her whole life wanting and waiting and yearning for something she couldn't have.

The feeling didn't make sense at all, but she liked the way she felt. As if the past was behind her and the future swelled with possibilities. She'd been spending more time laughing with the girls. She looked forward to awakening each morning, to reading on the bus ride to work. She hadn't even minded such long days at the dry cleaners when her imagination had been running wild with fantasies.

Her whole life felt like it was shiny and new, and she was determined to make the most of every moment.

"I'd like to go to the carnival, Luke."

"Roman, we got something," Magdalene told him when he appeared inside Sanctus

Command. ''Not Nathaniel

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Rush, but his right-hand man--or woman in this case.

It's the only connection James could find."

Roman had left Damian with Katie, whispering into her thoughts to make contact with Nina, while Gray had accompanied Roman to assist his team in shifting back to the passage.

Gray had cautioned against letting Magdalene and James spend too much time in the living world. The newly dead still retained strong memories of physical life and prolonged contact with the quasi-life they experienced when shifting could become a temptation.

So Roman had reconciled their problem by using a variation of Magdalene's safe house solution--the vault. Beneath Sanctus Command, seven levels of subterranean vaults housed archived data. Programs constantly monitored the archives, and by accessing the main systems through these programs, they could run searches in the relative isolation of any of the sublevels. They could easily sanitize the system, leaving access the only vulnerable point in the process.

James had resolved that problem by suggesting they enter the system through the security loop. Every four minutes surveillance cameras rotated position to sweep every level in a continuous live digital feed. Cameras didn't record dead souls. The sweeps created continual access points, which minimized the risk of having their system infiltration detected. Relocation to the vault also minimized the risk of exposing his newlydead team to unintentional physical contact.

"What have you got?" he asked James.

"Lilith Archambault. She was in town during the time frame Nina was shrouded. She met with Katie and a few other Fairwinds' patients for a publicity shot promoting Humanity United's Unity Day."

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"I've heard of that. It's some sort of goodwill movement, isn't it?"

"Goodwill movement or latest promotional stunt, depending on your point of view," Magdalene said.

"Right around the corner--May first," James continued. "Rush will be here in D.C. to kick off a media circus. He's got supporters all over the globe scheduled to join hands in a mass demonstration to symbolize how people of any race, creed, and religion can join forces to make our world a better place. He wants to end racial and religious discrimination. You won't believe the media coverage this guy's got lined up. He's got the major networks covering cities from Amsterdam to New Zealand."

Magdalene scrolled through images on the display. "'The media is soaking this up. They call Nathaniel Rush an angel, but if he's connected to what's been happening, he might just be the fallen variety."

Gray nodded. "Lilith Archambault. Sounds like she could be the fallen variety, too."

Roman was glad to see another connection forming between his people and those he hoped to form into a strong team.

He turned to James. "Any information on why Lilith Archambault chose Katie for her poster child?"

"Looked fairly random," James replied. "Katie had a counseling session scheduled for that day. So did the others in the shot. I'm still working on confirming whether Lilith's trip was scheduled before or after Katie's appointment. Maybe that'll shed a little more light."

"What do we know about this woman?"

Magdalene typed out a series of keystrokes and an image appeared on the display and she read, "Lilith

Archambault. Thirty-four. Born in Montreal, Canada. Employed by Humanity United since 1996, when she began her affiliation as an assistant to a regional director. During her ten-year tenure, she has served the organization in a variety of public relations capacities until becoming Rush's general assistant two years ago."

The woman on the screen was infinitely marketable, and Roman wasn't surprised she'd earned her way to Nathaniel Rush's attention. Lilith Archambault was a beautiful foil to the Angel's golden beauty, with jet black hair and a shrewd intelligence in her dark eyes.

Magdalene scrolled through the woman's bio, proving her roster within the organization was impressive.

She'd coordinated disaster relief, emergency aid, fundraising projects, promotional campaigns, peace rallies, and a variety of other activities turning goodwill into media-worthy news.

Just this month alone, Lilith Archambault had arranged and accompanied Rush to a press conference addressing the first anniversary of a siege upon a Russian school by Chechen rebels.

A peace rally in Israel.

A region devastated by an earthquake in South Korea.

The release of British hostages in Iraq.

A tour of an area ravaged by land mines in Vietnam.

Delivering aid to orphanages in Moscow.

Nathaniel Rush maneuvered around the globe and among the world's rulers, exempt from confining political alliances that hindered other well-known personages like the president of the United States or the Queen of England. Free from religious affiliation as well, he had more autonomy than even the Pope.

Roman remembered his disturbing simulations based on an alleged connection between Humanity United and

a terrorist cell. Nathaniel Rush had potential access to the sort of resources it would take to arm enough third world nations to create a shift in the global power base.

When he'd been alive, Roman couldn't credit any one man with pulling off such a coup beneath the glare of the ever-present media. But dead, he knew this war didn't have to be played out on a living battlefield. And that changed the rules of possible and impossible completely.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHY couldn't Katie ever remember feeling this way before?

Luke's grip was strong as they danced, his motion steady. He was the perfect gentleman, keeping all his parts from touching her except the ones that should be touching. But it was there, an eagerness between them that felt brand new. Resting her face on his shoulder, she gave into the sensation, wanting to remember how good it felt to feel good. Why did the feeling feel so new? Once upon a time, she'd been a young girl who'd gotten giddy and silly when her almost-ex husband had charmed her with smiles and kissed away all her reservations and good sense.

But for some reason that feeling might have happened to another person in another lifetime.

Katie rose up on her tiptoes so Luke would hear her whisper, "I wanted to dance with you at the food festival."

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"Me, too," Luke admitted. "Could have kicked myself for a fool. I had the perfect chance and let it pass me by. Didn't want to seem pushy."

"That's exactly why I didn't ask you."

He chuckled, and sensation filtered through her, slow and momentous, a lazy wave that brushed every nerve ending.

A voice inside her whispered, "Live." Luke held her a little closer, resting his cheek on the top of her head and proving they fit neatly together.

They wound up dancing all night, and only after the neon lights flickered to darkness did they head to the car. They chatted and laughed on the ride home, and when they made it to her door, Katie's heart raced, wondering if he might kiss her good night.

Live, that voice inside urged.

"It's just me and the dog tonight." She wasn't sure what made the words pop out, but an invitation seemed a good next step. "Want to come in for some coffee before you head home?"

He smiled that pleased smile. "I'd like that."

She brewed coffee and carried mugs into the living room.

Luke dropped onto the couch with an appreciative sigh. "Man, I'm going to feel all that dancing tomorrow. Not as young as I used to be."

Having felt the effects of his toned body up close, Katie didn't think age was having such a bad effect, but she kept her opinion to herself. She eyed the room's one and only other chair and heard that voice again.

Live.

Setting her mug beside his, she sat beside him. Not too close, but not too far either. A respectable distance.

"Tonight was worth every sore muscle," she said.

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"I haven't had so much fun in forever. Thanks for inviting me."

"Thanks for coming." He reached out to take her hands in his, sounded so earnest when he said, "Katie, I haven't been interested in any woman since Annie died. I always figured I'd meet someone if and when I was supposed to." A soft smile touched his lips and his gaze poured over her. "I have."

"Luke, I--"

"Listen, I know our circumstances are unusual. You're coming out of a marriage that didn't work out. But I'm just glad you're giving me the chance to get to know you. And you seem to enjoy getting to know me, too."

She smiled. "I am."

"I'm not looking to rush anything, but I wanted you to know how I felt."

Roman wanted to rush something, though. He had Nina to retrieve and eternities to consider. Should he encourage Luke and Katie to explore their attraction? Luke wanted Katie. No question. With one touch, Roman sensed how hard the man was fighting his body's urges, heightened to a fevered pitch after a night on the dance floor with a woman in his arms that he found attractive.

The poor guy hadn't had sex since his wife had passed five years ago. And while Roman respected Luke's moral fiber and concern for Katie's recovery, the simple fact was he needed to get through to the woman inside Katie.

Nina.

That wouldn't happen with any respectable courtship,

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but was he willing to live with the consequences if the situation got out of control?

Tightening his grip on Luke's arm, Roman felt a renewed surge of life, crashing in on him like a wave, so intense that Roman sensed the demons whispering to Luke, too.

"It's been so long since you had sex. You're attracted to Katie and she's attracted to you. Why shouldn't you seduce her?"

"You showed her a good time, you should be rewarded."

Demons tried to rob Luke of the simple pleasure of sitting beside Katie with his arm around her. To Luke's credit, his will held steady under the assault, and Roman admired the man's strength, even though it didn't suit his own purposes right now.

How easy it would have been to add his own voice to the chorus, to urge Luke to give into the demons' rationale and speed this seduction along. But then Roman would be no better than the demons. He was already treading a fine line. He needed to prompt Nina's memory of pleasure, but he didn't want to push Luke and Katie into a relationship they weren't ready for.

With those demons hard at work, he didn't have much room to maneuver. He needed another solution that wouldn't plunge him into operating on the same level as the enemy.

And from somewhere in his memory, he heard Father Leo's voice, tossing him a lifeline from the past. ..

The teacher pulled Roman aside as the class filed from the science lab. He handed Roman a blue sheet of paper that Roman immediately recognized as a hall pass to . . .

Father Leo's office.

Roman nodded, wondering what in hell he'd done wrong now, but he couldn't think of a thing as he traveled the familiar halls of the school, from the third floor to the first.

He hadn't missed a football practice or even cut up with his friends. All he'd been doing was catching up on the mounds of missed work from his time off for his parents' funeral.

Sister Annunciata knocked on the door to Father Leo's office before ushering him inside without a word.

Not good

Father Leo rose from his chair and circled the desk. He extended his hand.

"Thanks for coming, Roman."

As if he'd had a choice. "Good afternoon, Father."

"Come on, have a seat." Father motioned to a chair in front of the desk, and to Roman's surprise, Father Leo took the one next to him. "[wanted to find out how things are going."

Damn, but he should have seen this coming. An obligatory how's-Roman-holding-up-after-the-tragedy talk.

He cut Father Leo off at the pass. "Fine, thanks. I'm catching up on the work [missed when [was away.

Turned in my last Latin assignment yesterday. And football practice has been keeping me busy when I'm not in the library."

Father Leo just watched with those eyes that always saw too much. "Glad to hear it. Never crossed my mind you wouldn't catch up again."

If that was the case, then why was Roman missing calculus for a visit to this office?

"How about emotionally, Roman? How are you adjusting to being back after everything that's gone on?"

"Everything that's gone on, Father?" Talk about

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skirting the issue. . . "Do you mean my parents dying? "

Something flickered inside that dark gaze. "Yes, that's what [mean. Some of your teachers have shared some concern about the way you're handling the situation."

Roman bit back a defense. The way he'd been handling the situation? He'd returned to school right after the funeral, jumped back on the field and had been playing the game ever since. What more did these people want?

"I'm fine, sir."

To Roman's surprise, Father Leo smiled "That was never a question."

"Then what concern?"

"That you're too fine. That you're' not dealing with your grief but avoiding how you feel under lots of har:d work and catching up. Not so difficult to do when you're away from home."

Roman had no rebuttal, nor any desire to explain himself. His grief was his own. The people at this school might run his life-for another few months, anywaybut they had no right whatsoever to pry into his personallife.

"I'm fine, sir."

"So you've said."

Father Leo leaned back in his chair, steepling his hands in front of him as he considered Roman. Finally he said, "Father Joseph said he saw you react quite strongly between classes when Timmy Decker stumbled on the stairs in front of you. He said you almost knocked him down again trying to get past."

"I was almost late to European History." No need to explain that Father Angelo was a total nightmare

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whenever a student walked in late to class. Half the student body was afraid to sneeze inside his classes. The other half did just to watch the old priest's blood pressure rise until it looked like the top of his head would blow off.

"Just sounded out of character for you, that's all. So I thought I'd mention it. Are you angry, Roman?"

Psychoanalysis from a priest. This day was going to hell fast. "About what, sir?"

"Your parents' accident comes to mind."

Yeah, it came to Roman's mind, too. But there was no way he was going there with Father Leo. Did they even teach psychology in seminaries?

"It's natural to feel anger," Father Leo continued, clearly not getting the hint. "What happened to your parents was tragic. But that's exactly when you need to rely most heavily on your faith to get you through--"

"Get me through? This should never have happened." His outburst seemed to resound off these hallowed old walls, echoing with the sort of pain that was eating him from the inside out.

"We don't always understand--"

"No damn doubt," Roman shot back. "I'll never understand why my parents are dead."

Then to his complete horror, tears sprang to his eyes, sudden, hot, unexpected. He blinked them back fiercely.

But Father Leo just held his gaze, as if encouraging him to give in, as if crying was natural under the circumstances. "You're allowed to feel anger. You can even be angry with God. He understands and will help you understand. Just don't let your anger take over. Don't let the evil one in."

The evil one? Roman couldn't believe with everything

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going on his life, the old man was starting down this road.

But wasn't that exactly what it felt like? a still voice inside him asked. As if something evil had gotten inside and was slowly, firmly taking root.

Roman shot up from the chair so fast he knocked it over. The clatter of wood against wood echoed off those walls.

Father Leo only got up and calmly righted the chair again, not saying a word when Roman backed away.

And those tears broke free, hot, undeniable.

Father Leo placed a hand on his back. "Come on, Roman. Just sit beside me while I pray."

Again, Roman didn't see that he had much choice, and he found himself back in the chair, with a wad of tissues this time, as Father Leo clasped his hands, bowed his head, and began to pray.

Roman hadn't thought about that incident in a long time but, looking back now, he couldn't deny his meeting with Father Leo had been a turning point in learning to cope with the loss of his parents. Now remembering the incident, he had to wonder whether the priest had successfully rebuked some demons.

And wondered whether or not he might do the same.

If he opened a door for Damian and Gray to blast Nina with memories, could he keep the demons from rushing through that door, too?

Roman didn't know, but it was worth a shot.

Damian might have joked about crowding the living to get this job done, but

with his hand on Luke's arm, feeling the life pulsing within, the onslaught of evil impulses, Roman knew there was nothing to joke about. He also remembered what Gray had told him about

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shifting. "You surrender your will. When you believe in your ability to bridge the realms, your faith moves you--"

Roman believed. Placing both his hands on Luke, he emptied his mind of doubts and willed the demons to leave.

For a moment, he couldn't tell if anything had happened. He was too busy struggling against the energy of the living world, the distance so narrow now, his whole being centered on the physical, the dull throb of a living heart, the thready rush of blood through veins.

Then all went quiet. Turmoil and conflict slipped away until the only thing left was arousal, contentment.

Peace.

"You don't have to rush into anything or go too far," Roman whispered to Luke. "You and Katie can take your time to explore these feelings. You want to feel good. You know Katie does, too. Don't deny yourself love. You have the power to love, Luke. Take it and be happy."

Roman waited, the feeling of that pseudo-breath coming hard in his chest, almost real, physical, distracting, almost drowning out the sound of Luke's voice when he said, "I'd like to kiss you, Katie. If you'd like to kiss me back."

Every needy little nerve ending inside urged Katie to say yes. She didn't understand the urgency, when a voice of reason from somewhere deep inside countered with the reminder that she wasn't divorced yet even if her marriage had been effectively over for a long time.

Suddenly, she remembered her Baltimore Catechism,

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the primer she'd studied in preparation for her confirmation. Her grandmother had been thrilled when Katie had been scheduled to interview with the monsignor. But Katie had been terrified. Monsignor Harper's spindly appearance and stem manner had always intimidated her, and now she could practically hear his voice reciting the part about 'til death do you part.

Live. Love.

Then again, it wasn't exactly her fault Shea had made the choices he'd made. She'd married him in good faith. She'd spent their entire marriage trying to help him make better choices. She'd suggested counseling to help him learn to manage his anger. She'd worked longer hours to take off some of the financial pressure. She'd done everything with the girls and had never asked anything from him except a roof above their heads and food on the table. On and on and on.

Nothing had helped.

So why should she feel guilty now when a healthy relationship was finally happening in her life? Sure, the timetable wasn't the best, but as long as she didn't move too fast and was reasonable about how she involved Luke in the girls' lives, didn't she deserve a nice man to spend time with for a change? To kiss?

Live. Love.

"Katie," Luke exhaled her name on a sigh that did more to convince her of his hunger than anything he might have said. "I know we have the brakes on, but I don't want to let you go. How is it that you can feel so right?"

"I don't know, but I feel it, too." Lifting her head, she stared into his face, such a handsome face that her heart gave a squeeze. "My divorce isn't final yet."

"You're divorced," he said firmly, his frown revealing

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everything he felt about her husband. "You're only talking about papers, and they just make things legal."

There was so much emotion behind his words. She understood what he wasn't saying, too. There could be no marriage if two people weren't committed. Marriage meant love and respect and a good bit of work.

She only nodded, overwhelmed by the moment, by the need coiling inside her, by the knowledge that she could feel this way with Luke's arm around her.

She felt like a teenager again, those long-ago forbidden days when she'd sneak home after school to make out on the sofa with Shea while her grandmother was still at work.

And that was about the last time Katie had felt this excited. Or close to it. God, she couldn't even remember. She hadn't made love to her husband in so long, and even before that lovemaking had become just one more chore, another sink filled with dishes, another load of laundry.

But now ...

A long-forgotten flame kindled inside her, a heat that coiled from her breasts to her belly, made her sway against Luke to feel his hard body against all her soft places. He ground out a moan low in his throat, and suddenly his tongue tangled with hers. Their breaths collided, proving that she wasn't the only one being dragged into the magic of the moment.

And need became a hunger that she'd never known.

They sat in bed, resisting the need to give into the explosive lovemaking that always happened when they first got together. Nina read from a book of her favorite poems as

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she sat tucked neatly between his thighs, her beautiful body folded perfectly within the curve of his own. Her unbound hair cascaded over her shoulders and his bare chest, and he could feel her everywhere, his fading erection cradled against her warm bottom.

Damian couldn't stop touching her. Her body was a canvas of response, his every caress a brushstroke that inspired some new reaction. It was always this way. Fire and need raged unchecked when they came together.

They could barely wait long enough to strip off their garments.

But they'd learned that resisting their need only made giving into it sweeter.

Then they could enjoy long hours of lazy exploration, the beauty of discovering what caresses made Nina melt underneath him, the challenge of making her swoon with pleasure.

The delight of teaching her to make him swoon.

She was such an eager pupil, so passionate and willing, boldly adventurous for such a genteel young miss. But Damian understood. Nina appreciated touch and sensation in a way he had no ken-no man or woman could.

He just thanked God for the miracle that had made him the man she could touch. One of them.

Life would have been perfect if not for the other who held the distinction, the brooding lord who haunted their lives with his torment, forcing them to hide their passion, to feel guilt when they should have gloried in such

ecstasy in a world so often bereft of joy. Nina was finally experiencing life. Damian was painting again, inspired by the love he'd found in her arms, fueled by new inspiration. He and Nina could do naught but continue coaxing Westbury into their lives. But he seemed determined to

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remain the odd-man out even though he was growing more withdrawn, more sullen, openly envious.

And Nina despaired.

She'd grown thinner of late, her smiles not so often breaking through her worry. Damian was not surprised.

The situation had been building toward a breaking point for so long. He didn't know how to make it better.

So he listened to the melodious sound of her voice, tried to forget everything, to savor these few stolen hours before they were forced back into their tense roles when Westbury arrived home again.

Resting his cheek on the top of her head, he inhaled her familiar gardenia fragrance, kissed the downy hairs at her temple. "What is it you like again about this Donne character?"

"His wit. His wry view on life."

Seeking her nipple, he caught it and squeezed hard, enough until he made her shiver. "You know what I like about him?"

"What?"

"Hearing you recite him."

"Damian, you're not even listening to this poem, are you?"

"Only to the sound of your lovely voice."

She laughed a silvery laugh that sparked. new life inside him.

"Ah, Nina sweet. You bring me such joy. Do you feel how much I want you?" He ground against her, swelled with awareness.

She wiggled around to earn another surge, and he retaliated by plucking her other nipple. She heaved such a satisfied sigh that he rolled both greedy nipples, teasing until she could barely sit still.

Settling against his shoulder, she pressed lazy kisses

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along his throat, flicked her tongue over his pulse then blew tiny breaths against his damp skin.

His breath caught, and he felt her smile against his neck. "Minx."

"You love it."

"I do."

Slithering a hand down the smooth terrain of her belly, he speared his fingers into the hair at the apex between her legs. "Shall I prove, to you how much?"

"Please do."

He parted the wet folds of her sex, eased his finger inside, gratified when her thighs parted eagerly.

"Ah, you are my delight, Nina sweet."

"I could say the same about you."

He chuckled, pressing his palm down until she lifted her hips into his touch seductively. "Feel good?"

"You know it does."

He arched his own hips until she was trapped between his body and his hand.

Her sex clenched in sultry bursts. His erection grew hard against her bottom.

Her book dropped to her bed forgotten, as they were captured by the promise of the moment, the sweep of raw sensation that made concentration impossible.

"Shall I make you come like this?" he asked.

"Do you think you can?"

"Is that a challenge?"

She chuckled silkily, stretching her long, long legs, twining them with his, all the while never stopping the seductive motion of her hips, riding his

finger and his hand without ceasing, proving he did indeed control the moment. Burying his face in her hair, Damian closed his eyes and focused on caressing her body, savoring the mounting tension in his own. They rocked together, pleasure growing

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languorously, an unhurried exploration of the senses. The gentle hush of their breathing. The silken caress of the bay breeze on their skin.

It wasn't until Damian opened his eyes that he realized they weren't alone. Again.

Damn Westbury for his cursed pride! Nina would have welcomed him with joy. Damian had already consented to be a part of their lives in whatever way he could.

What was so wrong about knowing love, and sharing pleasure?

Three times this had occurred. Westbury would not remain, only torture himself with a glimpse of seeing them together. Damian had not told Nina, knew she would be devastated to learn her lord struggled much harder than she knew. For that moral, upstanding man to be drawn to them. . .

Yet Damian could harbor no resentment, not when he was at the mercy of this noble lord. Westbury was Nina's guardian and one word could send Damian from her life forever. Nina would not leave Westbury, so running away together was no option. Yet compliance could be so bloody difficult. . .

Westbury watched them through heavy-lidded eyes, and the yearning on his face tugged at Damian's heart, even as he cursed the lord's foolishness. All he had to do was put aside his pride and his prosaic ideals and move through the open doors.

He would be welcomed.

But, nay, the lord would rather lurk in the shadows instead, tormented and tormenting, because his mood affected the entire household.

Westbury's stubbornness irked Damian. Suddenly

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feeling mutinous to be at the mercy of such a selfish, stupid man. . .

Slipping his finger from Nina, Damian nibbled the length of her throat when she moaned, freeing his hands to roam over her beautiful body, to spread those silken waves of honeyed hair over their bodies, to arouse her with skilled caresses, to show Westbury the pleasures that he'd declined to enjoy.

Let the brooding lord roast in his own private hell if that was his choice.

Nina raised her hands to stroke Damian's face, arching her body and unwittingly presenting herself to generous display when she spread her thighs wide. Damian toyed with her breasts until she arched into his hands, greedy for more. But he dragged his hands down the length of her waist, braced her rocking hips, anchoring her close so he could grind his cock against her softness.

His own body began to ache as his need grew, and it was only when Nina suddenly went rigid in his arms that he was torn from his pleased daze to realize something was wrong. . .

The agony in Westbury's face nearly undid Damian who didn't care for the man. Not as Nina did. She stiffened in Damian's arms, all pleasure vanquished as she stared across the distance at her guardian. Damian wished he could spare her this heartache, bolster her spirit with anger, save her from torment because of the righteous path Westbury had chosen.

Damian could not.

Nor could he save himself.

"Go, Nina sweet. Bring your lord to us." he said. "If you are persuasive, he may yet overcome his objections and allow himself to know love. 'Twill be a start."

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She twisted around to face Damian, amber gaze disbelieving, almost wary, as if unsure whether to commit them all to such a course. A part of him wanted her to declare her heart belonged only to him, but he squelched the feeling cruelly. For once in his miserable life, he would place another's happiness before his own.

Nina needed Westbury.

Westbury needed Nina.

He must help them find each other. It was as noble as he knew how to be.

Urging her forward, he fought the wild tangle of rebellion and despair when she slid from his arms, all liquid motion and slender grace. She inhaled deeply, bracing herself, then strode proudly from the room, leaving him to mark the growing distance, each step that took her from him.

Sinking back against the pillows, Damian willed his heart to stop racing, forced his gaze from the sight of Nina's bare body in motion to the stricken look on Westbury's face.

The lord had been caught and would now pay the piper.

"Beloved Gray;" was all Nina said, her voice breaking softly.

Westbury could not seem to meet Nina's gaze as she came to stand boldly before him, her delectable naked beauty such a foil to the brooding lord's powerful presence that Damian couldn't suppress a surge of guilty pleasure at the sight they made when Nina rose on tiptoe, grasping the lapels of Westbury's waistcoat and pressing her lips to his mouth.

Westbury stood immobile, unyielding, unmoved, and time hung suspended as Nina kissed him again, clearly trapped in the glare of her lord's torment. Damian's heart hung in his chest, too, waiting, hoping Westbury would not deny her.

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But surrender finally came, fierce in intensity and awesome to behold. It was as if something snapped inside Westbury, for he snared Nina in his embrace, dragged her full against him so fast that she gasped.

Then his mouth was on hers in truth, and Nina, beautiful, accommodating, yearning Nina, wrapped her arms around Westbury's neck and abandoned herself to this man she had yearned for since long before Damian had known them. His heart ached to watch Westbury claim what was his. As he watched Westbury lift Nina into his arms, cradle her against him with a caring so fiercely tender, Damian knew the relationship he'd shared with Nina all these precious months would change irrevocably.

But he would never yield her--never--even if forced to stand aside for the moment with the sounds of Nina's excitement ringing in his ears.

Katie wasn't sure when she and Luke had worked their way into lying on the sofa side by side, arms wrapped around each other, hands exploring. But suddenly they were stretched out full length, passion claiming the moment. She didn't understand what was happening. She barely knew this man, but she felt as if she'd known him forever. He seemed to know her every desire, as if they'd been intimate before, as if some magic connection let him anticipate her reactions.

And let her anticipate his.

Suddenly her body was on fire with need, and the hunger felt familiar though she couldn't remember from when. When Luke worked his leg between hers, catching her in just the right spot to make her squirm,

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Katie rode his muscled thigh and fed the ache growing within. .
His crotch swelled in his jeans, and she reached down to sink her fingers into his butt, to ride him a little harder, a little faster, to coax another of those groans from his lips.

There was such power in knowing how much Luke wanted her, feeling how he reacted to her touch, how she gave and he gave more back, a beautiful sharing of pleasure.

It felt so new, so promising, and Katie didn't want to stop, even though a voice of reason deep inside screamed warnings that she could barely hear through the pleasure.

First date.

Rebound.

Luke hasn't made love in a long time, either.

All true, but arguments without any power to make her break their kiss or pull out of his arms. Not when she was warm and moist, and they were still safely dressed.

As Gray lowered Nina to the bed, he accepted that he would yield to temptation, his yielding all the worse for knowing that he had failed. He would make no excuses, nor attempt to deceive himself by rationalizing his actions.

He had failed. It was simple.

Neither could he summon any regret, or shame, as Nina rose to her knees before him in all her glory, skin as pale silk, beckoning him to touch. .

He had yearned for so long, stood aside for so long.

But Damian had gone now and Nina was his.

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Her hands trembled as she slid them around his neck. and her lips parted around shallow breaths. Gray could only take in her melting expression, the tenderness in her gaze. She had yearned and waited for so long also, mayhap even longer than he. She had stood aside while he had grieved, ever respectful, ever understanding, ever patient, though he had been the only man in her world.

Had he made Nina his own, he might not now be forced to turn away from his honor. But after Damian had entered their lives, this situation had become a test. He had believed he could step aside, but had failed dismally had envied their joy, longed to share their love and laughter, desired the unholy pleasure they had found in each other's arms.

Nina, who knew him so well, must have seen his grim thoughts, for she tipped her lovely face to his and whispered, "Always, my beloved Gray." Her longing undid him, and as he pulled. her onto the bed, Gray could hear the memory of her lilting voice from some shared verse:

Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find the eagle and the dove.
The Phoenix riddle hath more wit

By us; we two being one, are it
So to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

Now Nina was finally his. They would fulfill what so long ago should have been theirs, but for his arrogance and pride. He would taste his name on her lips, drive out any memory of the man who had come between them.

He would be the one to touch her, to arouse her, to satisfy her. . . Pressing her back into the pillows, Gray kneed his way between her thighs, poised over top of her, and savored the sight of her naked beneath him. "Oh, my dear. . ." He had no words for her beauty, for his excitement at being able to touch her. Finally.

Need knotted his insides into a fist, until just reaching out made him tremble. He had coveted this moment. . . would savor it fully. Tracing his fingertips over the familiar curves of her cheeks, he explored the feel of her smooth skin, felt the warmth of her blush when he thumbed her lower lip. She grew shy beneath his gaze, and her response made him smile. He knew Nina in every other way save intimately. No doubt she would have preferred he kiss her, rather than watch her so closely, but Gray had claimed this moment by right. He would enjoy the sight of her at his leisure, learn what made her respond.

To him.

Easing his hands down the length of her throat, he found the pulse beating softly there, paused as he silently marked the passage from familiar territory to uncharted. He had adored outfitting her in stylish gowns, so admired her honeyed beauty, and how her beauty reflected upon him, truth be told. How long had he forbidden himself to wonder what lay beneath those gowns? Never In his wildest imaginings had he envisioned such perfection. His breath caught hard, a solid lump in his throat, as he dragged his hands down her chest, over the rise of her breasts, crushing them gently within his palms.

She arched slightly, her gaze lingering on his face, lips parting in a breathless O. He idly thumbed her nipples, felt

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the ripe buds pucker against his fingertips and watched as her gold-flecked lashes fluttered over molten eyes.

"'Tis from a dream, my beloved." Her whisper caressed his heart in ways he had never thought to feel again. "I longed for you in the darkness of night then tormented myself with guilt."

Reaching for his hands, she slipped hers over his, uniting them in a simple touch. Yet touching Nina had never been simple. Even a handclasp was momentous, an occasion to experience, a joining unique.

"Would that I had spared us both the torture." He brought her hands to his lips, rained kisses over her slim fingers, held her gaze as her molten eyes grew misty. "But I could not. I battled my own demons and sacrificed you." Such pain crossed her face, deep-felt and earnest, as if heartache rose visibly as a vapor inside her. Yet even in sorrow, Nina remained exquisitely lovely. Sorrow transformed her, but it did not mar. She wanted to deny him, yet both knew 'twas the truth of things.

They had always had truth between them.

"Shh, my beloved." was all she said, her tone bittersweet.

"We have a second chance, my dear." Such irony for a man who had never believed in the need for second chances. "I would make the most of it."

Pressing a kiss to her knuckles, he raised her clasped hands over her head and loomed above. She stretched to accommodate him, gifted him with her acquiescence. The sight from this vantage fair staggered him.

He wanted to touch and sample her everywhere. Yet as a starving man at a feast, he could not decide where to begin. Her sweet mouth, caught between sorrow and excitement? Her throat where her pulse beat quickly in expectation? Or her breasts that rose and fell on each shallow breath, proving she

responded to him alone?

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Bowing low, Gray drew one rosy peak between his lips. Nina inhaled sharply, a whisper that echoed over the rhythm of the surf upon the shore. Her slender body arched like a bow, and he savored her taste, her response, one simple touch that seemed a touchstone for her arousal.

He weighed the soft fullness of her breasts within his palms, lifted each in turn to draw the tight tips inside his mouth with slow, wet pulls. She made no sound, only lifted into his touch, encouraging him to greater privilege.

Gray denied himself naught. His soul was damned, for he could only repent and beg mercy if he meant to resist temptation.

He did not.

'Twas no rebellion, but acceptance of a simple truth.

Indeed, when he dragged his open mouth down the smooth expanse of her stomach, he found himself amazed that he had resisted this long. His body ached in a way he had long forgotten. Nina's every tremble lanced a spear of desire through him. His muscles grew taut with need, and he was soon grateful for the clothing that held him in check, lest he lose his restraint and hasten this exploration to satisfy the demands of his flesh.

Gray preferred to savor their first joining. 'Twas a gift rightfully Nina's. She had awaited him so long, until she could wait no longer. He could only fault himself. He who knew her best had understood her struggle, how the weight of her differences -had isolated her from everyone save him. He had known how desperately she yearned to be a normal woman who knew love. Yet he had denied her. He had placed his grief before his desire and left her, to the whim of temptation, to Damian.

This moment belonged to Nina by right, and he would

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hear her cry out his name in pleasure before surrendering to his own.

Dragging his hands along her hips, he dipped his fingers between her thighs, followed the trail with openmouthed kisses. Nina came up off the bed with a gasp, and Gray smiled against the satin skin of her parted thighs, held her firmly beneath him. Lowering his face, he dragged his tongue through her sweetness, satisfied when she shied as a startled colt, and hissed, "Gray." "Shh." he whispered against her most private places.

He anchored her fast beneath him with bold caresses of his mouth and tongue and fingers. He pleased her until her thighs quaked with excitement, and she speared her hands into his hair to hold on. Her hips swayed beneath him, and her breath came shallow and broken. Until she sobbed aloud his name as he brought her to fulfillment.

Then Gray cradled her in his arms and savored the satisfaction of making her swoon. He molded her trembling and pliant body against him, pressed tender kisses into her hair. From someplace deep within, he recalled the joy of loving, of being loved in return, the intimacies and the sweetness. But he buried those thoughts of the woman he'd loved and lost, locked his memories tight within his heart, as precious as treasure. And for the first time since he'd lost his cherished Juliette, he allowed himself to feel as if he wasn't all alone in the world anymore.

Then, and only then, did he let Nina undress him, to stroke his body with that breathless jumble of eager excitement and shy novelty. She respected touch in a way no other could, and her hands wove over his skin almost reverently, such a tantalizing harmony of innocence and boldness.

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"You are more beautiful than in my most secret imaginings." she breathed the words out on an awed sigh, and her pleasure humbled him. .

"Nina, my delight." He laughed, and 'twas such a welcome feeling that he gave way to it, let himself feel a joy he had denied himself for so long. "I thought exactly the same of you."

"Did you now?" She sounded sultry, yet her gaze and shy smile betrayed her eagerness.

"I did, my dear." Threading his hands into her hair, he tipped her face until their mouths came together, somehow more intimate than tangled legs and bare skin.

The taste of her pleasure on his lips. The sweetest.

And it was her longing that finally undid him, sabotaged all his careful plans beneath the heat of desire. She was so eager to know him and he so eager to know her that need soon pushed them beyond all restraint.

Climbing atop her, Gray eased inside, and the feel of her wet heat unfolding around him stole the breath from his lungs. He knew not how long he lay there, relishing the feel of their bodies joined, the way she aligned so perfectly against him, all smooth curves and warm satin softness.

She clung to him as if she would never let go, and her simple honesty destroyed the last barriers between them. He began to move, at first pressing into her deeply, allowing the fire between them to build until their hips met in time, each thrust so enticing. He struggled not to lose himself in the rhythm of their bodies straining together, of the tension mounting, of the soft sighs breaking on her lips as he plunged deeper, harder, faster.

She met him stroke for stroke, a demand of her own in each thrust, and he clung to his tenuous grip on restraint

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when her body gathered. a tremor starting from deep within. But all her sleek, warm curves gathered around him, pushed him that final bit. She went wild beneath him, a low moan tumbling from her lips, her pleasure so consuming that she dragged him over the edge with her. . .

Standing behind the couch, Roman watched Luke and Katie, struggling with an onslaught of memory and physical sensation. Gray poured his memories into Katie, starting up a chain of contact that filtered through Luke, and ultimately to Roman.

Through that connection, he could feel another life force inside Katie.

Nina.

He recognized the intensity of her spirit, the strength.

Even through the distance of a chain of souls, she was a vibrant presence, and he struggled to remember his task. He needed to keep the demons at bay, to allow these living souls to explore their passion yet not lose themselves completely.

Tightening his grip on Luke's shoulder, Roman whispered, "You have all the control. Remember."

He hoped a soul whisper would be enough. He didn't want to be responsible for causing Luke and Katie to rush into sex if he could help it. But he wouldn't let this opportunity pass. Not when he could feel Nina, could sense her yearning.

They needed to move this show along before Luke and Katie gave in to their pleasure or the connection with Nina was lost.

"We need to touch Gray," he told Damian. "The three of us together can help him get through to Nina."

Damian eyed Roman's extended hand like an explosive. Roman understood the taboo about the dead touching dead--or thought he did. But this couldn't be about what each of them might or might not inadvertently leak on each other. They must create a triumvirate of touch that would span the realms, combine their strong wills with Gray's living memory to break. past the shroud keeping Nina from recognizing them.

He wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did.

Gray was already touching Katie, so when Roman stretched his hands between Gray and Damian, he made contact simultaneously. . . and was blasted with sensation.

This was neither life nor anything resembling living memory. It was essence, the very life force of a person-or two people in this instance. A sensation so intense it became oddly sonorous, hurtling through him, harmonious and discordant all at once, exposing pieces of him to merge with pieces of them--their souls, their hopes and dreams. . . their memories.

Nina, naked, arching over Gray who lay stretched out beneath her, long blonde hair tumbling down her back, breasts swaying provocatively as she set a sensual pace, the drowning pleasure on her face when Damian moved behind her to sweep aside her hair and rain kisses along her neck.

Roman forced himself from the grip of the erotic image. He dragged his mental gaze from the cascading image of long hair, honeyed waves twining with bright red to spill in a shocking display over Gray's bare chest, the motion of thrusting hips.

By sheer will, he resisted the sweep of tempting sensation and stared into the face of the woman before

him, Katie's face, to see past the excited expression, the dark smiling eyes. . . into the clear amber gaze within.

Then he joined his voice in chorus with the others and called, "Nina."

CHAPTER EIGHT

NINA felt as if she'd been shot from a cannon. The imprint of physical memory still clung to her like sweat. Muscles that had been languid in pleasure suddenly wrenched painfully as though she collided with a wall. The jarring impact told her where she was--the living world--but didn't explain what she was doing here. Blinking stupidly, she took in the unfamiliar surroundings. A room with worn furniture, bare walls, dim light, and people. . . Then death settled firmly back in place, chasing away the remnant of life, letting physical memory fade.

Nina didn't recognize the man who extended a hand as if to help her stand, a tall, raven-haired man with crystal green eyes. The strongly cut lines of his face made him beautiful in a stark way. His fierce expression was both knowing and curious.

It was the knowing that got her.

Nina in the drowsy moments before slumber, eyes

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heavy, body languid, molded comfortably against Damian's back. His tight

bottom fitted neatly into the curve of her lap. Their bare legs entwined. His hair tickled her nose as she nuzzled his shoulder sleepily, a smile touching her lips as another warm body slid in behind her. Gray, more heavily muscled, so perfect to snuggle with, his strong arms wrapped around her protectively. Gentle lips pressed a kiss on her temple.

The image exploded in Nina's memory, a backlash of physical memory, an assault that she didn't understand. Recoiling from the stranger's outstretched hand, she willed herself to shift across the passage to a familiar place.

Away from this stranger.

She sliced across the realms with reassuring speed, her will steady, her faith firmly in place, though nothing else seemed to be. The remnant of sensation fell into nothingness, until she was quiet again, comfortable, at peace.

Dead.

Who was the man who had brought her back? She had touched his soul. That much she remembered.

With a possessive touch and commanding voice, the stranger had been the one to drag her to awareness.

But how? She didn't know. She couldn't remember where she'd been, couldn't seem to collect her thoughts.

Who was the powerful stranger and what did he have to do with her?

The vista of Maryland's Eastern Shore suddenly surrounded her, eclipsed of the living, all drowsy shadow and dusk, a twilight realm that anchored her back to reality.

Gazing at the water, she watched the wind whip at

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the hair and clothing of some passersby walking in the surf.

St Michael's, Maryland.

She'd been happy here once. Nina remembered that, too. On this very shore, where Chesapeake Bay rippled beneath the ocean breezes. To that couple walking in the living world, the water sparkled like diamonds beneath the bright sun. To Nina, the calm of the gray water felt soothing as she tried to sort through her fuzzy memory.

Only bits and pieces were coming back, and she had to fight hard even for those. She didn't understand what had just happened, did not like the little she understood.

She'd been in the living world. Life had surged through her as if she'd been alive again. That part was wrong. Brushing a living soul only created an impression, hinted at life. She shouldn't have felt alive--not unless she'd been doing something she wasn't supposed to . . .

Then Gray was there, like he always was, so solid and real. His gaze shot to her, searching, and the relief that collapsed his expression was so humbling that Nina called out his name. For one aching instant, she wanted to hurl herself against him like she had in life, feel his strong arms around her, so warm and reassuring, so beloved.

They did not touch in death the way they had in life, though, a willing sacrifice, a necessary one, a penance.

She remembered that part, too.

"My dear." He was beside her, so close she could have so easily given into her need. "Thank God."

'What's happening, Gray? I've got clouds in my head. Nothing's making sense."

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"It's a shroud, my dear. A very powerful one. It will take time to clear away. Have patience."

Patience appeared to be in short supply today. Sinking to the shore, she sat and rubbed her temples, feeling as weak as the newly dead. She wanted answers and her fuzzy memory wasn't serving them up fast enough. She was even struggling to think of what questions to ask.

"Tell me," she said.

Before Gray had the chance to fill in the blanks, Damian arrived, and Nina drank in the familiar sight of him. The relief that overtook him at the sight of her made his broad shoulders sag slightly, his lashes flutter over dark, dark eyes. Another piece of her world set to rights.

Then the stranger arrived.

Nina was struck by how beautiful he was. How male. Tall and muscular in an athletic way. Shiny hair and eyes so crystalline his gaze sliced right through her. The man radiated authority, as if he had every right to see things she might not share willingly.

But Nina, too, could see things--things this stranger might not share. When she looked at him, she saw much more than an attractive dead man.

His essence glowed inside him, a glow she yearned to touch, to let the power of this man pour through her.

She shook off the thought, shocked by the intensity of the connection she felt with him, forced herself to focus on what she could see, not what she wanted to feel.

His soul was luminous, a force that was neither vapor nor liquid yet somehow both, a gentle miasma marked by gossamer threads depicting the choices he'd

made over his life. They intensified in some places, dimmed in others. Good choices. Bad choices. Monumental choices. Subtle choices. All leading his soul to . . . her.

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She could see that whatever else this stranger might be, he wasn't evil.

"Who are you?" No problem coming up with that question.

Before the stranger could answer, Damian pressed his fingers to his mouth and blew her a kiss. "Welcome back, Nina sweet. You were missed." "She's still feeling the effects," Gray said.

Damian's gaze traveled over her, a caress. "I'm not surprised. It'll probably take a while. Otherwise, how do you feel? Okay?"

"Weak."

"Better than alive I suppose."

Once Nina might have smiled. Damian was nothing if not entertaining. A ray of sunshine that managed to shine through the gloom that had clouded her world. But nothing felt particularly funny as she sat here with the stranger watching her as if everything was of interest.

"Roman Barrymore," he said.

Which told her nothing but his name. Yet his essence revealed that in life he'd been a man who wielded power. So many momentous choices. He was powerful in death, too. Powerful enough to break a shroud. She could still feel their connection, though she willed it to fade, knew the feel of him was distracting her from recovering.

"What do you see when you look at me, Ms. de Lacy?"

Nina supposed the question shouldn't have surprised her. Maybe it was his frankness that did. Lifting her face to his, she met that clear gaze steadily, felt a tremor that could be nothing but a clinging awareness of physical life.

"You're a riptide, Mr. Barrymore. You

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know you're dead, but you don't seem to think it matters. Now answer a question for me."

He inclined his head, his expression unreadable, and she couldn't tell if he'd been satisfied by her answer.

"Why were you in my memories?"

Damian snorted. "What did I tell you?"

"It would seem you were right," Roman Barrymore said.

"About what?" Nina asked.

"That you weren't going to be happy when we got you back," Damian offered.

That only emphasized the worry gnawing at the fringes of her thoughts.

"Listen, I'm not feeling my best right now, so will someone please jump to the punch line." Gray did the honors, explaining how she'd disappeared one day and not returned, how he and Damian had been searching but unable to find her, believing she had shifted into the living world, where they had no way to track her.

Enter Roman Barrymore.

This man had appeared out of nowhere, possessing a lot more information than he should for a stranger. With knowledge obtained in a Louisiana bayou, this mystery man had put together a plan to penetrate the shroud and retrieve her. She might have found his ability to problem solve impressive had more urgent matters not claimed the barely functioning parts of her brain.

"How long was I crowding that woman?" The words tasted as impossible as they sounded, and she tried to fight back a growing horror when Damian said,

"Nearly two months."

Good thing Nina was sitting. If her blood had still

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been flowing, every drop would have just drained to her feet.

"How is that possible? Who could shroud my memory? And why?" The questions jumbled in her head.

All except one. She faced Roman Barrymore, flinched when his clear gaze raked over her, a bold gaze as if he'd been waiting forever to see her. "How did you know where I was?"

"I was provided the information by an interested party."

That didn't really answer her question, and she tried not to sound impatient.

"What interested party?"

"An angel, Nina." Damian's tone revealed exactly where he stood on the issue.

"An angel angel?" Roman nodded, and there was something about his expression that gave her the impression he couldn't quite make out why they were all so surprised by the mention of angels.

"Why would an angel be interested in me?"

"I'll explain the situation as soon as you're feeling I up to it, Ms. de Lacy. We'll need to speak privately."

Nina was getting the feeling that anything this man had to say wasn't something she wanted to hear. She was reacting to him when she shouldn't be.

"You can talk in front of my friends. We have no secrets."

Roman Barrymore held her gaze until Nina could clearly recall what blushing felt like and how uncomfortable it had been with hot prickling cheeks and thoughts of feeling foolish. That in itself was no small feat given how many years had passed since she'd blushed.

"No dice. Barrymore made sure he doesn't have to talk in front of us," Damian explained. "He insisted it

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was a term of our arrangement. He only agreed to help retrieve you if we agreed to let him talk to you alone."

"Now I'm really curious, Mr. Barrymore." Actually, the term freaked much better described how she felt.

Who was this man to make demands of her? And why could she still feel him as if there were a presence inside her? "Shrouds and angels. Wow. Duck out of here for a bit and the natives get restless."

She gave a laugh that didn't feel remotely funny. All she could think about was the woman she'd crowded.

Bits and pieces were coming back, but not enough to paint the whole picture.

Nina needed to know what she'd done to her host. Had she bled the woman's life the way demons did?

Was there any way to repair the damage if she had?

No need to ask Gray or Damian to know their thoughts were running in the same direction. She knew these men. Whatever they'd all been to each other once, they were still loyal, her champions in life and death. They would never have obligated her to this stranger unless they'd been desperate.

"I need to speak privately with Gray and Damian. I have a lot of questions that need answering." Not the least of which was why out of three centuries brimming with memories, they had chosen sexual ones to share with Roman Barrymore. Honestly. "So if you don't mind, I'd like to get our talk out of the way."

"At your convenience, of course, Ms. de Lacy," Roman Barrymore said.

"Nina." No sense worrying about propriety when the man had already had a front row seat to her sins.

"Nina," he said in a throaty rich voice that made her name practically melt on

his tongue. "Roman, please."

"Roman." Somehow the name managed to melt on

hers, which wouldn't have been so odd had she been alive. But Nina was dead, and reacting to him.

Hm.

And Damian would be the one to notice, of course.

He narrowed his gaze as if guessing she might still be suffering the effects of remembering their more adventurous escapades in life.

He'd be right. She'd lived those events, and even the peace of being dead couldn't erase the lingering imprint of corporeal sensation, the memories of all the earthly pleasures they'd shared during their years alive together. She hoped Gray and Damian had a good explanation. She wouldn't ask in present company and cautioned herself to remember when she got them alone.

Her memory wasn't functioning properly just yet.

For all intents and purposes, she could have been newly dead right now. Weak. Muzzy-headed. The memories of her physical life were still fresh and real. And she wasn't even remembering everyday things like food or activity. No, she was being treated to tingles and shivers and orgasms that had made her toes curl. And not only about the men she had been involved with in life, but a total stranger.

Make that a really good explanation.

"Gentlemen, if you'll excuse us," Roman said to Gray and Damian, who each made eye contact with her in turn.

She motioned them off with a nod.

They actually left, which Nina thought said a lot about how seriously they took their obligation to Roman Barrymore.

Gray and Damian had remained by her side for centuries, even after they'd died and the physical aspect of

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their relationship had ended. They'd stayed with her, even when both men had wanted to move on, because they cared. Desperate or not, they would never abandon her to any man that hadn't proven himself worthy of their trust. Nina knew that without question, and thought that said a lot about Roman Barrymore. His soul looked pretty good, but the road to salvation didn't end with death. Not if a soul didn't go on to eternity right away.

"I'd like to walk," she said "I need to clear my head."

"Physical activity will help?"

"Ah, no. But I know this area. I'm hoping that seeing familiar places will help clear the clouds away. I don't like struggling so hard to think. I feel ineffective." "Understandable."

No doubt. Judging by what she could see of this man, he was someone used to being effective, but she thought it very polite of him to agree. Perhaps it was his way of facilitating an amiable start to their conversation. Which is why she didn't ask how long he'd been dead.

One polite turn deserved another, Nina thought, but she would have loved to know. He moved so physically.

Not at all like a soul who'd been lingering a while. Masculine and sensual, and she hadn't been aware of a man like that in forever.

The shroud was making it difficult to clear away the memory of physical life.

At least she hoped so. Just the thought of bleeding too much life from her host made her faint--another thing she hadn't felt in forever.

Nina tried to focus on the man himself. Not the way he looked, but on what she knew. There were inconsistencies. From what Gray had said, Roman had

shifted from the passage, had brushed living souls and whispered. Yet he moved along beside her in that same physical way, as if he really was strolling along the beach, the sun beating down on his head and the surf breaking around his feet. Being so aware of this man shouldn't be possible.

But Nina was, and didn't know why. Perhaps the remnants of physical memory or . . . another piece of the puzzle fell into place. "Did you merge with me and Gray and Damian?"

'Merge?'

Okay. Enough was enough. "How long have you been dead?"

He arched a dark brow, and she got the impression that he'd have rather kept the answer to himself.

Or maybe he just thought her rude for asking.

"Almost a month."

"Oh, please." The exclamation just popped out. Looked like her impulse control had taken a hit from the shroud, too.

"Your companions can confirm, if you'd like confirmation. They checked me out before we met."

Her companions. Now there was a diplomatic way to phrase it. But Nina had no doubt Gray and Damian would have found out everything they could about Roman Barrymore before involving themselves for any reason. Especially a reason to do with her.

'Merge, Roman, as in touch us.' Something only a newly-dead soul would be ridiculous enough to do.

He met her gaze, the expression in those unusual eyes so compelling. He liked looking at her. Why? Because he'd managed to break through the shroud and retrieve her. Or because he'd been treated to a front row seat in her memories?

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"I did touch your companions as Gray made contact with you. It was necessary to release you from the shroud."

Her companions? As in both of them?

When lingering souls touched, they shared remnants of their humanity. Exactly what those remnants would be was anyone's guess, which was one of the reasons Nina had refrained from touching. She had enough quirks of her own without picking up Gray's overprotectiveness or Damian's sarcasm.

But for some reason she found the thought of touching Roman intriguing. He looked so confident and determined. What secrets did a man like him have? The thought shocked her. The shroud must have warped her reasoning. Merging wasn't something any soul took lightly. If Roman had merged with Gray and Damian to retrieve her, Nina had no clue what might have passed between them, and stuck. The only thing that should intrigue her right now was understanding why a soul that had been dead barely a month could do some of the things this one could.

"What's your deal?" she asked. "Why all the inconsistencies and secrecy? You don't look newly dead and from what I'm hearing you don't act it, either. So what's really going on? What do you need to say to me that you can't say in front of my companions?"

Roman held her gaze as though taking her measure, but he didn't reply right away. Clasping his hands behind his back, he strolled beside her, as if considering the best way to begin.

Okay, so he was thoughtful, not inclined to be rushed into an answer just to appease her or fill the quiet. Nina could respect that.

She lapsed back into silence, taking his measure as

well, valiantly trying to find him ordinary--and finding it impossible. He'd intruded in places in her memory where he'd simply had no business intruding, and she was obligated to not only dismiss his intrusion as necessary, but feel grateful for his help in retrieving her.

More inconsistency. It made her edgy. Or perhaps the obligation was to blame. Either way, she kept her mouth shut and waited. .

'I felt the secrecy was necessary," he said.

"I'm listening."

'I wanted you to understand the situation in its entirety, so you could make your choices based on the, facts, and not be influenced by your companions."

Well, he got points for honesty. But his honesty was seriously spiking that feeling she wasn't going to like what he had to say. Between the clinging effects of the shroud and the memory of the physical life that wasn't fading nearly fast enough, Nina felt too connected, too aware, too fascinated.

"I'm still listening." One sidelong glance assured Nina that Roman didn't appreciate her humor.

"I'll start from the beginning," he said.

He did, telling her about seeing her unfinished portrait in an antique gallery and the image inside the magic painting. That more than anything convinced her Roman told the truth.

Those paintings had changed the course of her life, and her death. The fact that Roman had come across them so recently was a connection that she couldn't dispute.

Nina wondered what Gray and Damian had thought

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about that painting showing up again and guessed it had probably gone a long way toward convincing them--as Roman claimed it had done for him--of their connection. Damian would have found the humor in the situation. But Gray hated any mention of that painting.

She wondered how much Roman knew about the events of her life, but she didn't ask. Death was the only thing to concern her now, and she couldn't help but be impressed by Roman's delivery of his assassination.

Most dead souls got choked up when discussing their deaths. After three hundred years, Nina could barely think about her own. . . Of course, her death hadn't exactly been her own. She'd been responsible for Gray and Damian's, too. Two more people she loved harmed by fallout from her unique ability. All these years of death and she still hadn't managed to make peace.

Roman, on the other hand, didn't seem to think death counted for much. As far as she could tell, he seemed to be carrying on business as usual.

"After I died, there was a battle for my soul," Roman explained. "Which I'm told is standard procedure. But afterward, I found myself facing light so bright I was blinded, but I could hear a voice--"

"Your angel."

He nodded. "My angel."

"Forgive me, Roman, but so far your death sounds pretty routine."

"I was given an unusual choice."

Okay, he had her attention. "What other choice?"

"To fight a battle."

"A battle for what?"

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"Dominion of the passage."

Even knowing she wasn't going to like it didn't take the edge off of hearing it.

Nina would have liked to dismiss Roman as a nut job. She'd come across some real characters through the years. But she'd never come across anyone nutty enough to fabricate stories about angels in the very place angels could show up, call the lie, and exact swift justice. .

All those paintings of angels as warm and fuzzy little cherubs didn't describe the real angels. In the passage they were known as the Burning Ones, beings not to be messed with. They were ruthless, mysterious, more frightening than the demons because they had righteousness on their side.

That knowledge prompted her to say, "If you want to fight a battle then good for you, but I still don't understand why we're having this conversation. Where do I fit in? Besides that you saw my portrait in an antique gallery on the day you died."

A hint of a smile played around his mouth, a charming expression that softened the lines of his face. "We're having this conversation because you possess a special ability that can help me win this battle. Apparently the demons think so, too."

"That's why I was cast back?"

Roman nodded, and she got the distinct impression that he was enjoying her surprise. She was glad he saw humor in the situation. Nina wasn't sure which part should amuse her. The part where her whole existence was turned upside down yet again because of this ability she possessed. Or the part where this man wanted to use her as a weapon to fight his battle.

"Since the passage is the only place where souls can

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shift between the realms, it's become a hot commodity." He explained. "Some demons have been watching you work and decided you'd be an asset to their side." "Great."

"Now bear in mind that some of this is guesswork," he admitted. "I wasn't given a lot of information, so I've been piecing together connections as I go."

That, more than anything else he'd said, sounded as if he spoke the truth. "No surprise there. Angels can be damned cryptic. They don't show up very often, but when they do, they drop hints and leave us all scratching our heads trying to figure out what to do."

"I heard they respect free will." His eyebrows rose in challenge.

Was he trying to be funny? "What do you want from me?"

"I told you--to help me mobilize my forces to fight."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because an angel recommended you for the job."

"I only have your word on that."

He shrugged, clearly not feeling the need to convince her, and for some reason she found his confidence appealing.

And to her surprise she found that she really didn't need convincing. She was still suffering the effects of a shroud so powerful not her, or Gray and Damian, had been able to penetrate it. That alone assured her something big was going on. "Tell me why you're not like any other newly-dead soul I've met."

"You want to know how I'm different?" That hint of a smile suggested the answer should have been obvious.

Oh, please. Did he think she was a pushover? "Yes, I would."

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"I retrieved you, didn't I?"

No argument there. Nina sank: to the sand, suddenly too weak to keep moving. Her head was still a jumble of fragmented memories and she wished she could reclaim enough clarity of thought. She felt connected to Roman and inclined to trust him. But could she trust herself right now?

She didn't think he was lying. On the contrary.

Even if she hadn't been able to see his soul and know he was prone to good, she would still entertain what he said as truth. His unique abilities were only a part of it.

That angels and demons would target her skill made sense. The more Nina thought about it, the more surprised she was that something like this hadn't happened sooner.

When Nina had been alive, she'd tried to hide from life. Hiding wasn't always possible. But she had wasted the ability she'd been given. She'd thought only of herself and the normal life she'd been denied.

She'd been so selfish, not only given to earthly desires, but dragging Gray and Damian along for the ride.

Like her parents, who'd been killed trying to protect her from religious zealots, Gray and Damian had both wound up dead because of her. No matter how hard she'd tried to hide from life, her ability had drawn attention. So had the relationship they'd all been involved in.

Nina was still dragging them along in death. Both men hadn't moved on to their eternities to stay with her. Not because she'd asked them to. Not because they wanted to linger. But Gray and Damian understood that she needed a purpose for her existence.

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They knew she needed to put her ability to some good use to make amends for her selfishness and finally feel as if she could accomplish something good. And now Roman offered exactly that chance, to provide a perspective that only she could.

Roman sat down beside her, hooked his hands over his knees and managed to look at one with the blustery backdrop of his surroundings despite the tailored suit he wore.

A man in command even in death.

"You thought Gray and Damian would talk me into moving on if you told them about the battle?" she said.

"I didn't want to take the chance. They obviously care for your safety and wouldn't want to see you in harm's way."

She nodded. "So you retrieved me so they'd feel obligated to let you talk to me and I'd feel obligated to listen. Stacked the deck, hm?"

Roman only nodded, his eyes sparkling with approval.

"So you want me to use my ability to see souls like. . . what?" she asked.

"Your secret weapon?"

Roman cocked his head to the side, and smiled. Not a hint of a smile this time, but the real deal.

The effect was, quite simply, breathtaking.

Had Nina had breath, of course. As it was, her gaze was locked on to the sight of one smile that softened all the hard edges of his face and melted away all the sternness. The smile sparkled inside his clear eyes, transformed a very intense and commanding man into a man. But not just any man.

A leader.

"Yes, Nina. I'd like you to be my secret weapon."

Nina would have liked not to feel this man's dusky voice in the pit of her stomach. She was dead, for heaven's sake. She couldn't feel. So what was this fluttery sensation deep inside making her remember how it felt to be alive? To remember desire.

Remnants of physical memory of those dreams and visions Gray and Damian had bombarded her with?

She sincerely hoped.

Because if this connection she felt with Roman Barrymore was a permanent side effect of his merge to retrieve her, Nina wasn't sure what to think. She'd spent most of her life yearning for a normal relationship with a man. She'd gotten her wish-the relationship part, if not the normal part. The last thing she needed was to throw another man into the mix at this late date. Even if he did make her feel desired and necessary.

Especially since he made her feel desired, necessary.

Gray and Damian had made her feel that way once, too. That feeling had been a temptation she'd been unable to resist.

"What do you say?" Roman asked. "I've got the start of a strong team. I need you on it."

"Team?" She liked the sound of that, much more reassuring when one was talking about battling demons.

"Did your angel happen to mention anything about giving help along the way?"

Roman shook his head. "But I think we've gotten some already."

He told her about opportune timing in his efforts to retrieve her. An attraction between Katie and Luke that had already been in motion before Nina had come on the scene. Luke showing up at the food festival to give

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Roman a chance to implement his plan. How Roman had known when to penetrate the shroud.

"Does any of this sound angelic?" he asked.

"Could be. Angels like that subtle, behind-the-scenes sort of stuff. Like moving men around a chess board." She wished Gray and Damian were here now. They'd been together so long she could barely remember a time when they hadn't been. True, they weren't togethertogether, but she'd grown so accustomed to having them close at hand, to share her thoughts, to mark their opinions. She was alone right now, with a stranger and a question. And more interest in a man than a dead woman had a right to.

'Nina.' He spoke her name in a throaty voice, a man who still appreciated the physical impact of sound.

"Let me ask you a question."

"Shoot." Questions were good right now because they bought her time to think.

"You don't seem surprised about the battle. Why is that?"

It was an astute question because Nina wasn't surprised. "When I look at you, I can see the choices you made during your lifetime. Good choices. Bad choices.

Sometimes moving you closer to salvation, sometimes farther away. It's an ebb and flow over a life that's always in motion.

"Life and death are like that, too. Together all our lives keep the living world and the passage in constant motion. There's always good and evil happening. Sometimes good has dominion. Other times evil takes the lead. It's a balancing act, but one never long outbalances the other." She gave a shrug.

"At least it's not supposed to."

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"But. . ." Roman prompted, intense in his zeal, attractive.

"But before I disappeared the balance was off. Too many souls have been falling to temptation in the living world and in the passage. There's been concern about what might happen if the balance didn't swing back toward good soon."

"You think that's why I'm here to lead this battle." There was zero question in his voice. .

"Can't really blame heaven for not sitting by while hell takes over."

He chuckled, a sound so rich and appealing that she was glad she'd made him laugh. "So you didn't know about the battle, but you're not surprised."

' 'There's been speculation going on now for a while."

"Has anyone discussed how to swing the balance back?"

"Not that I know of." She had to give the guy credithe didn't waste time. It had never once occurred to her that she might actually take action.

"What's everyone waiting for?"

Good question. "You know how it is. Lots of talk but no one willing to step up to the plate. Lots of speculation and. . ." She let her voice trail off, as another thought occurred to her.

She stared at Roman, who stared back, obviously intrigued.

"And what?" he asked.

"Rumor." She turned the idea over in her mind, trying to see if it fit. ' 'The dead aren't so different from the living in that regard. Sometimes we're even worse since we have more time on our hands. Most rumors

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are easily dismissed, but one in particular has gained momentum."

"What?"

Nina had first heard the tale from Mouse, a kid who'd lived on the streets of New York City in life and in death had seemed to find the companionship she'd always wanted in Nina. Despite her best attempts to get Mouse to move on to eternity, Mouse seemed determined to hang around.

Gray and Damian found the situation entertaining.

Nina had grown fond of the kid and found her useful.

Mouse was a constant source of surprising information, which often made Nina's job easier when helping souls deal with death. Mouse had been the one to first reveal the rumor currently making its way around the passage.

' 'The Burning Ones promised to send someone with a charism, a special gift to swing the balance back where it belongs."

Something about that appeared to amuse Roman, who smiled broadly. "Really. Any idea who?"

She shook her head. "{ haven't heard. I don't think anyone knows anything, not even if this soul will be dead or alive."

"Nothing like playing guessing games with the fate of eternity hanging in the balance."

Amusement wasn't the reaction Nina expected, and she watched him, an idea taking hold in her mind. "According to a friend of mine, there are a bunch of wild theories."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and she hears them all. The latest involves a living soul named Nathaniel Rush. He's some sort of

goodwill ambassador who's been doing his bit to swing the balance of his realm back toward good."

As Nina watched the play of emotions across Roman's face, the amusement fading to surprise, she considered his recruitment to fight this battle and unusual abilities, and had to wonder if a dead soul with a special charism hadn't been sent, after all.

CHAPTER NINE

NATHANIAL Rush. Roman had been hearing that name a lot lately and shouldn't be surprised to hear it again, but from this woman's lips. . . Nina was not what he'd expected. He wasn't sure what a woman who'd existed for so long should be like, someone who possessed such a unique ability and an interesting story. Maybe it was the three centuries that kept throwing him. Rationally, three centuries should equal old.

There was nothing old about Nina.

She managed to breathe life into this shadow world of death. She wasn't the cool beauty of the paintings, either, but animated and exquisite, all long slim curves and creamy skin that glowed with impossible life. The sight of her, coupled with the memory of her honeycolored hair and molten eyes, and the sound of her, animated and more modern than seemed rational, were having a disturbing effect.

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He noticed everything about her with an almost obsession for detail. Her manner bristled with impatience. Her wit was both fast and irreverent. She had an expressive face that shared emotions she didn't bother hiding--or else he just found her particularly easy to read. He felt connected in a way he couldn't explain. There was a beauty and sadness about her that made him ache to fix the world for her.

The British in her voice betrayed her origin, yet her speech patterns didn't mark her as a woman born of a bygone era. And when Roman thought about it, he supposed that made sense. She'd been around long enough to master her speech. She dressed modern too, the one-piece outfit so dark and unremarkable that her curves were rendered very remarkable by comparison.

Perhaps Roman just hadn't been dead long enough to control his reaction, but his awareness seemed so extreme, as if his memory was still caught up in the visions of her pleasure he'd shared in the living world.

He could practically see Nina in memory, eyes heavy lidded with desire, magnificent body swaying to the rhythm of sex.

You still retain an echo of your humanity, and I'd prefer not to merge any of you with me, Gray had said.

Could a soul retain sensual memories? If so, that might explain why he found the recollections so distracting.

He didn't need distractions right now. But his head felt cluttered with thoughts of Nina and her past. The fallout from experiencing her memories. She was a passionate woman. There were only two men who'd been able to touch her in life. Was it really such a surprise she'd become involved with them? Had she refused to

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choose between them? Or had she been involved with one before the other? Roman knew the answers didn't really matter. What did matter was whether or not they were involved now..

Had emotional commitments deepened through the centuries after the ability to share a physical relationship had ended with death? .

More questions. He was surprised by how many kept popping up in rapid-fire succession. Distraction, indeed. The only thing that didn't surprise him was Gray and Damian. Had they been faced with the choice of sharing Nina or giving her up?

"Are we almost through here?" she asked in a clear, hint-of-Britain voice.

"We are."

She inclined her head, a subtle move that conveyed so much, and he noticed that there was a bit of drama about her, too, as if she'd mastered the fundamentals of death and had long since stopped thinking about them.

He couldn't tear his gaze from her, still awed by the sight of the inanimate woman come to life. So to speak, anyway. He wanted to see her through living eyes, see the hues of her honey-colored hair, the flecks of gold in her eyes. One question that didn't need answering was why Nina collected such devoted men. Even he'd been growing obsessed before they'd ever met.

"Shall we go then, Nina?" he suggested.

"Lead the way." She rose to her feet in a burst of that unnatural grace, then followed Roman to Sanctus Command.

They shifted into the living world and convened inside sub-level four. Roman knew Magdalene and James would be awaiting them in the passage, likely displeased

when they found out they hadn't been invited to this get together.

But Roman preferred not to tax their abilities without true cause. His people were stellar in the living world, but they would need time to master the rudiments of death, and he could not afford to lose them.

"What is this place?" In a glance, Nina took in the towering ranks of glowing drawers of the sub-level archives and the elaborate retrieval stations positioned at intervals along the seemingly endless corridors.

"The vault at Sanctus Command," he said. "Subterranean levels where we archive data."

"Secret agents keep the world within easy reach." Damian appeared and trailed his gaze around their surroundings.

Roman saw the hint of amusement that Nina didn't bother to hide. "Black ops would be the proper term, Mr. Hart."

"Excuse me." Damian folded his arms across his chest, and gave a curt nod.

"Black ops keep the world within easy reach, Nina. Even dead ones."

"Since I'm signing on." She forced a smile to face Damian's growing frown. "I suppose I'll find out why soon enough."

'What the hell--'

"Damian," she said in a silken whisper that stopped Damian in his tracks.

Raising a finger to her lips, she gestured him to silence with a gentle "shh" that managed to look and sound like a kiss. "Let me explain what's been happening."

Her action had the desired effect. Damian fell silent, which appeared to require some effort.

Gray came to stand beside them, and Roman took the

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opportunity to seat himself before the comm station and begin waiting for his access point into the system.

Listening with half an ear as Nina relayed their conversation to her companions, he heard her explain the available details of the battle and Roman's intention to pull together a team to fight.

"To fight demons?" Damian demanded incredulously.

"I don't like your tactics." Gray moved to stand behind Roman, waiting until he looked up to continue.

"We dealt with you in good faith and expected the same courtesy in return."

"I was up front from the start. I told you I had information I could only share with Nina."

"I see what you're doing. You were afraid we'd talk her out of this nonsense."

"This battle is all too real." Roman's life had already been forfeit, along with the lives of five operatives. Not to mention various Secret Service agents, and even a terrorist.

"You're manipulating her," Gray said. "You hoped she'd feel obligated to you after you helped retrieve her."

Nina narrowed her gaze at Gray, clearly not caring for the idea that she could be so easily maneuvered.

"I need her help," Roman said simply. "Yours and Mr. Hart's, too, if you're so inclined. I told you that, and I presented my needs in a way that would give me the best chance of having them met."

"Be reasonable about this," Damian appealed to Nina, his tone impatient and short. "You're talking about demons here. Powerful ones, too, as if you need reminding."

Nina didn't flinch, and Damian's earlier words about her not being easily pushed around came to mind. That

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seemed to hold true when she was dealing with her nearest and dearest, too. Roman liked that about her, suspected that life and death had dealt her enough twists and turns that she'd learned to stand up for what she believed in. He found himself fascinated by the idea of how centuries of death might craft a person's character. Especially a passionate woman's.

"My dear," Gray said. "What have we been doing all this time if we're going to risk everything so late in the game?"

"We aren't doing anything, Gray. I spoke only for myself."

She was magnificent with her chin high and her shoulders back, determined through and through. Her.

declaration chilled the dead air like a sudden plunge in temperature, leaving Roman amazed by the amount of emotion flying around sub-level four. Death might rob souls of the more corporeal aspects of the flesh, but emotions were apparently alive and well. And Nina's companions obviously didn't like being left out of the loop.

"This doesn't have to be your fight."

She shook her head, and her expression softened just enough so Roman thought she looked sad. "Anyone who lingers is obligated, Gray. The balance has been swinging the wrong way for a while now. We're losing too many souls to temptation. We've all known that. We just haven't done anything to counter it."

"I know why you're agreeing," Gray entreated gravely. "Don't. It's unnecessary."

Her tone was just as grave. "I'm the only one who can help this way. You know that."

Ah, there it was, Roman thought, the heart of the

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issue. Nina hadn't used her gift in life, so she would use it in death. He'd hoped she would feel that way. Honor was another quality Roman demanded from his operatives, and from the people in his life, which is why there had been so few.

Again the silence swelled with the emotion of all the things that weren't being said, reminding Roman of the film noir his mother had watched voraciously while he'd been growing up. Black and white movies that had seemed primitive to his more technologically-savvy senses, but a venue that forced actors to demonstrate an extreme level of skill to convey emotion on sets devoid of special effects.

Nina and her companions were fine actors, infusing living emotion into the colorless world of the dead.

"Take a look, Nina." Roman's voice shocked the quiet, a segue from the conflict back to the business at hand. "We've established a link between your host and this woman."

Lilith Archambault's promotional photo appeared on the display, her determined expression and cool dark beauty airbrushed to likeable perfection.

The ideal envoy of an angel.

"Who is she?" Nina studied the image.

"I take that to mean you haven't seen her before?"

"If I have, I don't remember."

"Lilith Archambault," Roman said. "She's one of Humanity United's powers-that-be and Nathaniel Rush's general assistant."

"We're back to Humanity United again," Damian offered.

"I hadn't realized Rush's popularity extended into the afterlife," Roman

admitted, wondering why neither man had mentioned him before. Roman didn't ask, though.

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Neither Damian nor Gray had signed on yet, despite Nina's declaration. But they hadn't left yet either, which seemed like a step in the right direction. "It's only speculation," Damian said. "But Rush seems as good a choice as any to save the world."

"The living world," Nina corrected.

"My dear," Gray began. "Surely you're not suggesting--"

"The living world isn't the only world that needs saving now, is it?"

Her declaration drew surprised glances from both men, and Roman let his gaze trail over her where she leaned casually against the wall, so the glow emitting from the archive drawers illuminated her in a distinctly unearthly, alluring way that silhouetted her curves and made Roman think he'd never seen a more attractive sight. He had to drag his gaze away when he realized that Gray and Damian had turned to stare at him. .

"No one knows who this person is or what their charism might be," Nina said.

"Maybe it will be someone in the living world. Maybe not."

"Is this why you've agreed to this madness?" Damian demanded.

Nina nodded. "One of the reasons."

Gray was scowling now, but Roman's instincts were alive. A lot more was going on here than he understood.

Then it hit him.

Souls were expecting a special gift to be given to someone who could make a difference. They'd targeted Nathaniel Rush because he was a visible man with the resources to affect a change for the better in the world.

But when Roman thought about it, the description could fit someone else as well.

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He'd shown up, sharing knowledge he shouldn't have known, demonstrating abilities he shouldn't have had, sent by an angel to assemble a team to fight a battle against evil.

Did Nina think he had the charism?

Which left him with a problem.

True, he'd been given some abilities to help achieve mission objective, but he wasn't the man they sought.

Neither was Nathaniel Rush.

That much Roman knew for certain, but he had to consider how the truth would impact the creation of his team. He needed all the strong souls he could rally. He needed Nina. Would she be less apt to fight if she knew he didn't have the charism?

Did he want to start their relationship by misleading her?

But as he watched the interplay between Nina and her companions, Roman knew the time to reveal the truth simply hadn't come yet. He had a mission to accomplish, and that mission must remain top priority, no matter how much he didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with Nina.

A no-win situation, if ever Roman saw one. Keying in the pass code, he followed Magdalene's trail into the system, bullying his thoughts back on his job. He needed to store data for faster access, but he couldn't risk any traceable link in the system, no matter how well buried inside Sanctus's vast mainframe. One small file would be so easy to hide, but on the off-chance it was discovered, the content contained therein would raise too many unanswerable questions for the folks in the living world--and answer too many for his enemies in the afterlife.

"As Mr. Hart pointed out," Roman said. "We're back to Humanity United again." "What's this Lilith Archambault's connection to my living host?" Nina asked. "Fairwinds?" .

"She's connected to Humanity United, and my only connection between the realms is Nathania! Rush. No coincidence."

Roman explained the circumstances of his death and the deaths of his operatives, then the trail leading back to a Maryland safe house and a terrorist cell.

"Sounds like something to worry about," Nina said.

Damian gave a short laugh. "The Saint's investigating the Angel. Should we be amused?"

Roman wasn't. Neither was Gray, apparently, who frowned. "Might I point out that the body count keeps rising with every piece of information you decide to share with us."

"Which doesn't bode well for us," Damian pointed out. "The living only die. We suffer forever."

"Yes, the stakes are high." Nina and Gray exchanged a look.

"That's it, Barrymore?" Damian said. "That's all you've got to say?"

"What else would you like me to say, Mr. Hart? We all seem clear on the specifics."

"How about telling us why Nathaniel Rush would be involved with terrorists," Nina suggested. "The man helps people. That's why souls think he has the charism." Roman again explained the seemingly impossible connection to the terrorist cell and the ensuing simulations that pointed to a potential to arm third world countries and create a shift in the global power base.

"With the limited information I had while I was

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alive, I simply couldn't credit the scenario," Roman admitted. "It was too far-fetched. There was no feasible way for a man who is watched as closely as Rush is by the media to stage a coup of this magnitude no matter what his resources."

"I hear a but in there," Damian said.

"But if both realms are involved, he would have different resources. It could explain why he needs dominion of the passage."

"So souls can shift back and forth?" Nina asked.

Roman nodded, liking how quickly Nina caught on.

She would be a strong ally. "A potential way to increase the size of his army, don't you think?"

Judging by Damian's laughter, he wasn't buying into any of this. "So you think Nathaniel Rush wants to . . . what, take over the world?"

"Sounds far-fetched even for our realm," Gray said.

Nina eyed him doubtfully. "Is dominion of the passage even possible?"

"I honestly don't know," Roman said. "This is so far beyond the scope of my experience that everything I come up with sounds wildly implausible. I dismissed the idea when I was alive."

"But you think it deserves a second look now," Nina said. It wasn't a question.

"I do."

"How could Nathaniel Rush communicate with the dead?" Gray stopped them all short in mid-speculation.

"He couldn't, unless he was dead himself."

"He's not dead if he's playing Mr. Save the World," Damian succinctly pointed out the illogic of that theory.

"What if he's being crowded?" Nina asked.

Gray nodded. "Only a serious demon could have cast you back under such a powerful shroud. I don't think

any but a serious demon could pull off crowding someone as famous as Nathania! Rush while the whole world's watching."

"All right, that at least makes sense." Damian sidled closer to Nina and propped a hand on the comm. station. "And we've got our girl back."

"You could tell if Rush is being crowded by seeing him?" Roman asked. She nodded.

Sounded simple enough. Too simple, in fact, which made Roman nervous.

With Roman at the helm, Sanctus Command's systems could easily target Nathaniel Rush, who was in northern Nigeria where talks between two warring tribes were currently taking place. Humanity United had been invited to send a peace envoy as a thank you for the organization's aid to both sides in their efforts to facilitate peace.

"That was easy enough." He cleared away the imprint of his search. "'Nina, you can see what you need from this side?"

"I can. But you said Rush is in Nigeria. As in Africa?"

Roman glanced up from the comm station to find her standing close by, arms clasped behind her back in a pose that invited his gaze to roam the lush terrain of her body.

If his awareness of Nina was a side effect of spending time in the living world, he thought his physical reaction to her should be fading soon. He couldn't think of any way to ask that wouldn't reveal he was struggling with the problem. Instinct warned that this news wouldn't be well received. Roman was unclear on the current status

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of Nina's relationship with Gray and Damian. He only knew what he saw--they were still close, protective of each other. They clearly cared, which was all Roman knew for certain. He shouldn't be interested, but he didn't lie to himself. He was very interested.

With effort, he lifted his gaze to her face, and to the frown there.

'Problem?'

"Not if you've ever been to Nigeria."

"This particular region?"

She nodded.

'No, I haven't.'

"Me either. Or Gray and Damian."

Roman still wasn't grasping the trouble.

"Dead people 101, Barrymore." Damian eyed Nina, clearly amused. "'He doesn't understand how we travel."

Roman curtailed a reaction. At Sanctus, there'd been a clear chain of command with him at the top, but as Damian had pointed out, death had new rules. Roman would have to earn his way back into power. That journey must begin somewhere. He recognized a theme here--humility. Power had a way of growing comfortable, of breeding a desire for more, and he could only guess he was being reminded for a reason.

A reminder he needed to accept.

"Will you explain the process?" he asked Nina, fairly confident he'd get a coherent answer without the sarcasm.

"We can travel anywhere as IQng as we've been there, or can follow someone who has been," she explained.

"But we've got to have an anchor, something familiar to hang on to, to steer us."

"I understand." Roman hadn't been too far off base, for what that was worth.
Scanning his own mental

archives, he reviewed the available resources. "I've got LaTortue and Marstiller. Both have worked in this region. Marstiller's out for the time being, so that leaves James. Do we have everything we need from here?"

Nina tilted her head to the side, considering, sending waves of hair that shone in light and shadow over her shoulder. "I do. Gray, Damian?"

Both men nodded.

And Roman was relieved to empty his mind in . preparation for the shift back into the passage.

A few minutes of blessed reprieve from the relentless bombardment of his unexpected awareness of Nina, thankfully.

He found Magdalene and James on sub-level four, looking bored. "Status."

"Life is happening in Command." Magdalene took in Nina with a glance. "Five active missions. One mission upgraded in priority. The Halo sat is being powered down for routine maintenance. And not a damn bit of this concerns us."

"Your point?"

"This is getting tedious." Magdalene sank back in her chair, fading out slightly as she glared at him. "I thought you wanted me to see what I could find out about the car that ran me down, but we can't run the Systems from the afterlife. I know you're feeling protective, Roman, but it's counterproductive to leave us here doing nothing because you're worned about us shifting."

"Practice makes perfect," James said. "This vault is closing in. I'm starting to think we're really in hell."

Roman glanced between his operatives to assess their condition, decided they'd be all right. "Noted."

"These souls haven't been dead long enough to hold

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their echoes together but you've taught them to shift?" Nina's eyes widened.

"Isn't that a little. . . risky?"

"We're Sanctus operatives." Magdalene's tone dripped disdain, as if their specialized training had cornered the market on risk whether they were in life or the afterlife.

Nina, Gray, and Damian looked unconvinced.

Magdalene and James looked confident.

Roman observed the exchange, wondering how to combine the two factions--the long dead and the newly dead.

He made the introductions, then briefed Magdalene and James on the battle.

"Now that we're all current," he said, "we each bring necessary skills to the table. Magdalene and James, you each have specific expertise in black ops.

Gray and Mr. Hart--and this presupposes you sign on--you both have the skills and resources to maneuver death. Nina, you're our secret weapon."

That won a quiet laugh from Nina, who met his gaze with amusement and curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

Tipping her face upward, she peered out from beneath thick lashes, eyes ablaze with fire, heart-shaped face set in a tantalizing expression of anticipation and suggestion as she pressed a finger to her lips.

"Shh." The sound slid out in a sultry breath.

Roman had to force himself to look away and say, "Gray, Mr. Hart, what do you say? Are you in?"

A long moment passed as the men exchanged glances with Nina, perhaps evaluating their chances of yet talking her out of this nonsense.

Nina simply clasped her hands behind her back, tipped her chin defiantly and held their gazes.

Damian turned. "Why don't you call me Damian?"

A consenting nod from Gray and Roman said, "Welcome, gentlemen."

Nina fell into quiet conversation with the newest official members of the team, and Roman asked Magdalene, "Why are you still scowling? Don't you like our newest addition?"

"Of course I don't like her, Roman. Look at her. She's tall, fair, and gorgeous. I'm short, dark; and seethrough."

"Not see-through enough," James added. "Or else I'd be able to see some skin."

"Pervert."

"Just lusting after the hottest babe in the place."

Roman ignored the exchange. Not even death had changed Magdalene and James's dynamic, and he found that reassuring. His new team was coming together.

Magdalene followed his gaze and gestured to the occupants of sub-level four.

"So what are we calling ourselves: Sanctus, the other side?"

Roman considered. He had operatives skilled in the rules of the living, and those skilled in the rules of the dead. A worilan whose unique ability would give him an edge. His team, all united toward one common purpose.

He glanced around, meeting each gaze, assessing the commitment in each face, sharing his own conviction when he smiled. "We'll be the Soul Retrieval Unit."

CHAPTER TEN

SOUL Retrieval Unit.

Nina liked it: focused, purposeful. And "unit" implied a lot of souls, which sounded reassuring given what they were getting involved in. She also liked Roman, the man who'd suggested the name. She liked his sense of purpose, his willingness to learn.

"You don't have to do this, my dear," Gray said.

"Haven't you done enough already?" Enough? Was there such a thing? Nina honestly didn't know.

But this was an old argument. She loved Gray with all her heart and hated holding him back. He'd have gone to his eternity long ago to find his late wife and infant son if not for Nina.

He had been her guardian in life and took the role no less seriously in death. No matter how hard she'd tried to convince him, he wouldn't move on until she did. Nina wasn't ready.

It wasn't until after she'd died that she understood

how far she'd fallen into temptation, how she'd hidden' from her gift in life, blinding herself to any good she might have done. Her gift had the ability to bring out the best in people, and the worst. .

A blessing and a curse.

So she'd hidden those terrible feelings of unworthiness beneath selfishness. Death had shown her the truth with such painful clarity, how far she'd gone astray and wasted her precious gift.

Gray understood that better than anyone, even Damian. Gray had been the one to support her through her life, to help her accept such a gift could be used for good. He'd always tried to help her see past herself, to help her accept that she would only find peace when she used her gift to serve others. She'd never learned the lesson in life, and had been trying to make amends in death. Even now Gray played the role of guardian and supporter. And as much as she wanted him to move on and find the woman who'd been taken from him in life, a guilty part of her remained grateful that he stayed.

"Surely you understand what's happening here, Gray," she said. "Everyone has a reason for their existence. Not me. I wasted the chance to use my unique ability when I was alive. Sure, since I died, I've been helping out however I can, but this is something only I can do. How can I ignore that?"

"But the consequences, Nina--" Damian broke off, and she felt humbled by how much he cared.

"I've spent enough time running from the consequences, don't you think?" As they both knew full well.

They looked at her as only two men who'd known her intimately could, men who even now, after so many

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centuries without the physical pleasures they'd once shared, could still see her thoughts so easily.

"Nina sweet, we made our choices," Damian said in that husky bedroom voice that still made her think of sex.

And damn if she didn't blush. Really blush. The heat prickled her cheeks uncomfortably, a long-forgotten reaction.

Not all things in life were missed.

Gray, on the other hand, was positively scowling. "You shouldn't be able to do that."

"I think it's an aftereffect of the shroud."

"I think it's an aftereffect of the merge."

Which would mean permanent. Perish the thought.

They all exchanged glances, but only Gray was bold enough to place that fear on the table between them.

"He's newly dead," Gray said gravely. "His physical memories are fresh. Even I can feel it, an awareness that wasn't there before."

Nina couldn't deny it. She was so aware of Roman standing nearby, deep in conversation with his people.

She was aware of the way his gaze kept trailing to her, as if she was the topic of his conversation.

Or was he as aware of her as she was of him?

"It's the shroud." She refused to consider the alternative. "When we merged, we all felt it. Trust me, it'll pass." Neither man looked convinced.

But Nina wasn't about to be distracted from what she needed to be doing--finally putting her ability to use.

Only she could.

And she was aware of something else, too. The woman named Magdalene kept

shooting black looks Nina's way. "I don't think Roman's friend likes me."

Gray and Damian both glanced to the friend in question.

"Magdalene?" Damian asked.

Nina nodded.

Gray frowned. "Anything to worry about?" "No. Her essence isn't that far off from Roman and their friend. These are noble people. They face life and death a lot. They usually make good choices."

"I suppose that's something." Damian shrugged. "Maybe she's jealous. Here you are looking good enough to eat, while she keeps fading in and out."

"Very good," Nina said with a smile. "There's the demon of Vanity."

"Oh, you of little faith." Damian shot a look at Gray, long queue swinging against his back.

Suddenly, a lanky teen appeared.

"Mouse!" Nina laughed, surprised. With as many times as this kid had sneaked up on her, she should have been used to her by now. "I swear I need to put a bell around your neck."

"Bite me."

"Tee hee." Nina had been dead a long time, familiar with the lack of physical presence in a way that had taken Gray and Damian far longer to make peace with.

Perhaps because she'd lived with physical limitations in life, too. But there were times, like now, when the urge to wrap her arms around someone and give a squeeze felt so real, the memory of yearning to touch almost alive again . . . Instead, Nina drank in the sight of someone she'd grown fond of. Not exactly a friend, as Mouse had never revealed enough about herself to allow much closeness, but their long-time companionship had made her a welcomed face.

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Today, Mouse wore a do-rag to hold back wispy curls that could have been blonde, brown, red, or any shade in between. Nina would have had to see through living eyes to be sure because each time she'd asked, Mouse had given her a different answer. It had become sort of a game between them.

She had a pretty face made memorable by multiple piercings and the thick eyeliner that turned her eyes into narrow slits. Wide-legged jeans, sizes too big, dwarfed her slight frame. .

Nina had no clue how the girl had come by the nom de plume, or what her real name might be. It didn't matter. Nina had lived her life as a lost soul, and recognized one in death.

"How'd you find us?" she asked.

Mouse tipped her pointy chin toward Gray and Damian. "I've been stringing along after these two while they've been trying to find you."

"Damn it, Mouse." There was no bite to Damian's voice. "That's stalking. I could have you arrested."

"Only if you can find a cop," she shot back.

Damian laughed. Roman and his friends headed over, drawing Mouse's notice with their newly-dead stride.

"Should have said hello," Gray said. "We could have used your help finding Nina."

Mouse shrugged. "Didn't have any help to give. Not a word on the streets, man. Not a peep. It was weird, like you just dissolved or something."

"Or something," Nina said dryly. "But thanks for trying to find out. You been okay?"

The attitude that was bigger than she was seemed firmly in place, but there was something else. . . Nina waited, conscious of Roman watching the exchange,

probably assessing another potential black op.

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'Like I said, I've been following these two." Mouse shifted from foot to foot, suddenly looking uncomfortable. She cocked her head toward Roman. "He okay?"

He was something. "Yeah, he's okay."

Nina made the introductions.

"I can talk in front of them?" Mouse asked, and when Nina nodded, she said, 'Well, you know that chick you guys been going to visit lately, the one with the kids?" "Katie McGuire," Gray said.

Mouse nodded.

'What about her?" Nina asked.

"I dropped by trying to find you guys to see if you'd found Nina yet You weren't there, but some guy was. I think your friend might be in some trouble. The guy had a gun."

'The ex-bum, I'll bet," Damian said. "But wasn't he supposed to be in jail for a while?" .

Roman nodded.

"I need to see what's going on." Nina turned to Mouse. "Thanks for finding me. It's good to see you again."

'No more disappearing acts, okay?"

"Okay."

With a thought, Nina appeared inside Katie's apartment to find everyone had accompanied her, including Mouse.

Katie was seated at the dining room table, straightbacked and clearly nervous, while a wiry, broad-shouldered man paced the path separating the dining and living areas.

The man might have been good looking, but anger twisted features that could have been roguishly charming, and quickened his moves until he seemed manic.

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He thrust unsteady fingers through his short hair, barely disturbing the bristly spikes.

Shea McGuire, who should be in jail.

Nina didn't need to see this man's essence, riddled with shadow and veined with threads like congealed blood, to know his choices had been leading him farther from salvation.

Yet she did see, and noticed that nearly hidden beneath the gloom of this man's soul were soft places where light still shone. He hadn't always been on the wrong path.

Once, the love he had for the woman at the table had been pure, a beacon in tough circumstances and earthly trials, before the demons of Unworthiness, Jealousy and Bitterness had sunk talons deep into his spirit.

That light didn't appear to have shone through in quite some time, definitely wasn't enough to stave off the demons, dark maggots writhing around him, sinking poisoned talons inside him, like corruption squirming through rotted meat.

The gun he had tucked into the waistband of his jeans was all too real.

"You're my family, Katie," Shea raged. "This is such bullshit, do you hear me? Bullshit! I'm not putting up with this crap from you. Start packing your things. We're leaving town."

Katie made no reply, only sat rigid and staring, an odd expression of shock and resignation on her face.

Until a knock sounded at the door.

She startled, shooting a gaze to her almost-ex-husband as he scowled at the door.

"Is that the guy you're screwing behind my back?" From what Nina had heard, Katie hadn't screwed

anyone, but she clearly knew better than to argue with her almost-ex. "I don't know." Katie was forcing a calm that wasn't translating to her expression, and Nina ached for the woman. "Just ignore the door. Whoever it is will go away." Shea obviously wasn't willing to accept her answer and peered through the peep hole in the door, his face twisting in anger. In two strides he was on her, catching a fistful of long hair and yanking Katie's head back until she winced. "You want to try again? What's he doing here?" "We had plans," she hissed through a constricted airway. Shea hoisted her up from the chair with a wiry strength made potent with rage, propelling her toward the door so roughly that she stumbled. "Cancel them." "Luke, listen," Katie called through the closed door. "Now's not a good time. I'm . . . I'm not feeling well. I'm sorry you made the trip." Silence, then, "No problem, Katie, but is there anything I can do? You need me to run to the store for something? I'd like to help if I can." Tears suddenly glistened in Katie's eyes, and she swallowed hard when Shea jerked her head back even harder. "Get rid of him," he hissed. "'No, thanks." Her voice broke, from emotion or the rough handling, Nina didn't know. "I'll call you, okay?" No, this wasn't okay. Nina shifted into the living realm, appearing inside the living room, close enough to the couple to feel the clawing evil of the swarming demons as Shea hauled Katie back from the door.

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Raising her hands over Shea, she commanded in a strong, ringing voice, "Leave, Demon of Anger." Gray and Damian were suddenly beside her, lending their strength of will to her command. Roman came, too, but he only watched them for an instant before disappearing through the doorway. "Leave this man in peace, Demon of Anger." The demons raised their voices in chorus, a hideous shriek of noise, swarming around Shea frenetically as they resisted, as they fought to keep their grip on his spirit. Nina prayed harder. "Leave this man in peace. . . ." The demons shrieks grew frenzied in an earsplitting crescendo before they burst in an explosion of coiling darkness and scattered like irritated vultures chased off their carrion. But Gray and Damian followed, driving them from the apartment. Shea seemed to recover himself, if only temporarily. He thrust Katie away so hard that she went down on a knee before catching herself on the coffee table. He strode back to the door, and peered through again. "'He's still there, damn it." "Shea, please," Katie entreated. "He'll hear you." There was a beat of silence, and then Luke called through the door, "All right, Katie. Just give me a call when you're feeling better." "I will." Her tears began to flow in earnest as her only hope of rescue seemed prepared to leave, and she swiped at her face, as if fearful of further provoking her almost-ex. Nina stood there, unsure whether whispering would have any impact on a man so out of his head. Should she have a neighbor call the police? Luke. He wanted to help.

Another layer of the shroud evaporated inside her.

Nina could recall the warmth of Luke's gaze when he'd looked at Katie, the pleasure in his laughter, the desire in his kisses.

Nina shot from the apartment, to catch him before he left.

She found Roman already there, his hand on Luke's shoulder, and she could hear him saying, "Call 9-1-1 and report the trouble, Luke. Tell the dispatcher that Shea McGuire is armed. But you're not going to wait. Katie's girls are hiding in the bedroom. They're scared. You're going to circle the building and get them out through the fire escape. You want to avoid a stand-off. If Shea knows his whole family is in that apartment, he might resist the police. We can only get to Katie if the girls are out of reach."

Roman lifted his hand away, and Luke's expression transformed, fiercely determined. Spinning on his heels, he headed toward the stairs, yanking the cell phone from his belt.

"How did you know about Katie's daughters?" she asked, surprised and relieved that he'd protected her children.

"I assessed the apartment." Black op, indeed.

"Will Luke be able to get them out without that nut job in there hearing?" She motioned back to the apartment.

"If we help."

Nina streaked back inside the apartment behind Roman. Mouse had shown up in the living room and made herself comfortable on the sofa, seemingly oblivious to a tense Katie seated beside her as she inspected the

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nails on one hand that had been painted a dark color that might have been black.

"Keep your eyes peeled out here, please," Nina asked. "Come and get me if there's any more trouble, will you?"

Mouse shrugged, either unconvinced any of this qualified as trouble or that it could get much worse. "Sure."

Nina found Roman inside a bedroom. Well, she found half of him. He was leaning inside a closet, the top part of him hidden beyond the wooden door. His bottom, however, was displayed as if he'd bent over for a portrait, an exceptionally attractive portrait that made her notice the nice curve of his backside and how long and strong his legs were--damn that clinging shroud, anyway. It was the middle of an emergency, and she was still noticing the man and his tight butt.

Plunging into the darkness, she joined him inside the closet, finding herself suddenly so close that she could see his nostrils flare, newly-dead soul that he was. For a split second, she felt snared by the sight until the two young girls cowering on the floor erased all disturbing thoughts of him. Claire and Violet, Katie's daughters.

Roman's hand rested on top of the older girl's head, as he whispered to get her sister out through the fire escape where help would be waiting.

Nina waited to see the result of his soul whisper, couldn't help but be impressed when the girl nudged her younger sister and said quietly, "Come on. We've got to get out."

The younger one shook her head. "No. Mom, told us to stay here."

"Listen. Hear the window? It's Luke. He's here to help us."

"But Mom--"

Claire gave her sister a hard shake. "'This is like a fire, idiot Mom says to get out and not worry about her. She'll take care of herself."

Still unconvinced, Violet wedged tighter inside the corner of that closet, shying from the rough hands her sister tried to force her with.

Nina touched the younger girl's head. "Don't be afraid, Violet. Your sister loves you. Listen to her. She'll take care of you."

Violet didn't resist as Claire eased open the door and peered out just as Luke appeared at the window. He put a hand to his lips to gesture for silence, but Claire was already ahead of him. Clamping a hand over her sister's mouth, she glared a warning that translated into, "Keep your mouth shut."

Nina headed to the bedroom door, prepared to run interference if necessary, while Roman assisted the girls. Trained black op that he was, he placed his hand on the window to keep the old casing from making noise. Nina was surprised he'd known he could mute the sound by touch. Death did have some advantages and Roman seemed to have a bead on them.

"I'll go see what I can do to get Katie out," Nina said as the older girl climbed through the window behind her sister, and their escape seemed assured. Moving back inside the living room, she found Katie still on the sofa beside Mouse.

"Everyone's still alive out here," Mouse said. "'Except us, of course. Loon. Like you've got things in hand. Glad I could help. Have fun."

She disappeared.

"Thanks, Mouse," Nina called after her.

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"We've got to get out of here." Shea was back to pacing that path between the living and dining rooms, effectively blocking off any bids for freedom. Nina wanted to know how he'd gotten from the jail to this apartment. Surely he hadn't been released.

Moving behind the sofa, she touched Katie's shoulder.

"It's time to leave now. The police are on the way. Luke got your girls out safely. They're with him outside. Tell Shea you need to use the bathroom."

"Shea, I need to go to the bathroom.?' Katie rose to her feet unsteadily, but didn't move until Shea grabbed her arm and accompanied her from the room.

Nina rested a hand over his. "Give her a few minutes to pull herself together."

They arrived at the bathroom, and he shoved open the door and peered inside as if looking for escape routes. Finding not so much as a small window, he said, "Don't try anything stupid."

Katie nodded and slipped past him, but he grabbed the knob before she could shut the door.

"And don't lock the door," he said.

If Nina still breathed, she would have exhaled a sigh of relief when Katie pulled the door shut behind her.

"Now get inside the shower stall. Don't come out until the police come to get you," Nina whispered, giving Katie's hand a reassuring squeeze.

Katie did as directed and only then did Nina head back out into the hallway to find Shea. She debated where to send him, but a knock sounded at the front door.

"God damn it" He growled and headed back into the living room, where he peered through the peephole.

"Claire?"

'Is that you, Dad?" Claire called through the door. "Open up, I forgot my key."

Nina watched as he reached for the chain lock and slid it home. He twisted the dead bolt and no sooner did he reach for the knob did the door explode open, and he staggered backward. The man had incredible instincts, though, and had the gun in his hand instantly.

But not soon enough, as an officer knocked it from his grip as another subdued him with a fiercely barked, "Freeze."

The automatic pistol aimed at Shea's temple was enough to convince him to obey.

Nina left the apartment and found Claire safely ensconced inside the emergency stairwell with a female uniformed officer, Violet, and Luke, protected from the grim reality of watching Shea McGuire handcuffed and read his rights before being escorted to the main stairs by four officers.

Two more headed inside the apartment, looking for Katie.

"He escaped when they were moving him from the local lock-up to the jail," Roman said, appearing beside her.

Nina had no reply, was just staggered by his calm handling of the situation, by his skill at knowing how best to avert more trouble. Had Roman been responsible for the police officers using Claire to get her father to open the door? Something about that seemed too risky, too unorthodox. And after watching him whisper without hesitation to maneuver the situation to advantage, she had to wonder.

"For the record," he said, a thoughtful expression easing his features. "I'd say you did Katie McGuire a favor by helping her get away from her husband."

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Then he vanished, leaving Nina staring after him, feeling as if something good had come out of crowding, after all.

* * *

After stopping by Sanctus Command to pick up James to act as guide into the region of Nigeria where Nathaniel Rush was, Nina was ready to put her unique skills to use.

The diocese headquarters where the Nigerian peace talks were taking place were as grand as the tribal villages were rustic. The headquarters symbolized hope to the people of Africa's most populous country. But Nina wouldn't say the people sitting inside the lavish room shared that hope for the negotiations. There were seven people, several wearing beautiful tribal garb, seated around a conference-style table.

"Oh, I like this." Magdalene leaned close to the conference room window. "I can understand what they're saying and I don't even speak this dialect."

Damian smiled. "An angelic perk."

"Works all over the world?"

He nodded, and Magdalene smiled back.

Niila wasn't smiling. She sensed Roman's gaze on her as she peered through the window at the man of the hour.

Nathaniel Rush.

He was an angel of a man. Tall, golden-haired, tan.

Nina had no trouble imagining why people in the living world were speeding him along the path to canonization with his any-race-creed-or-religion-goes revolt against immorality. The dead, too, could be as easily influenced. Quite simply, Nathaniel Rush looked the part.

In her mind, Nina could envision the angels of so

many artist masters, tall, fair, and majestic winged creatures. She could see why a special charism might be given to a man who not only seemed detennined to change the course of history with goodwill, but looked as if he'd modeled for those artists.

Which only left the question about why, out of seven people seated at the negotiation table, essences gently glowing in myriad fusings of shadow and light, gossamer threads twining, Nathaniel Rush's essence was the only one she couldn't see.

'Well?' Roman surveyed the scene, every inch the analytical strategist when he had to be burning up with curiosity.

"I can't see him." Her words fell heavily in the quiet, a momentous admission that quickly brought Gray and Damian's surprised gazes.

They just stared at her, both understanding the significance. Up until this very moment, only Gray and Damian had held the distinction of being souls that Nina couldn't see.

"You don't know if he's being crowded?" Roman asked.

'Don't have a clue. I can see everyone else. That one tribal chief has been making stellar choices, probably does want peace between the tribes. But whoever that one is over there--the one that looks like a politician or a diplomat--he's headed for trouble unless he shapes up. There are demons all over the table, but I can't see a thing around your guy."

Her whole life, and death, had been influenced by her ability to see souls. Wouldn't it just figure that after all this time, when she actually needed to see one, she couldn't?

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Roman stood there, staring at the table with an intensely thoughtful expression.

'Are you sure you're working okay?" Damian asked. "I mean, after the shroud." "No, I'm not sure." If she'd been working properly, she wouldn't be standing here noticing the tiny indentation in Roman's cheek when he flexed his jaw. She wouldn't be imagining that one tiny step would bring her so close that she would feel his body warmth if they'd been alive. She was done with temptation, had been for a long time. "I'm definitely not right. I can't be sure if that's affecting my ability to see. It's not like I've ever been under a shroud before."

"Wait a second," Magdalene said. "Maybe I don't understand all this, but you crowded a living person for two months. Wouldn't you have sucked up some life?"

"You have a good bead," Damian said.

"Okay, then doesn't that technically mean she should be more alive than before?"

Nina frowned, unsure why Magdalene was referring to her as if she, wasn't here. "Regardless, the effect wouldn't be permanent. I'm not sure what you're getting at." "Neither am I," Magdalene admitted. "But it should mean something, don't you think?"

"It means I'm stronger." For all the good it did her when she was still struggling to think clearly. But Nina explained anyway, choosing not to let this woman's rudeness bother her. "When I shift into the living world my senses are sharper. I have more control of my echo. Of course, since I've been around a while, the difference isn't as noticeable as it would be on someone newly dead."

She did not look at Magdalene who wasn't holding her echo together enough to even be uniformly transparent. "But remember, I wasn't intentionally sucking the life from my host. Souls gone bad can do a lot of damage."

"In nearly three hundred years of lingering in the passage, you've seen the essence of every soul you've seen?" Roman asked.

"Except for Gray, Damian, and that man in there."

James gave a low whistle. "Woo, that's a lot of souls."

"Yes, it is," she agreed. "And you're looking pretty ship-shape there, too, FYI."

He howled with laughter, earning a smile from everyone except Roman, who asked, "'What do you see when you look at a demon?"

"I see a demon." When his brow furrowed, she added, "I see demons as exactly what they are-squirmy black maggots. Nothing but evil. They're usually so dark they look solid."

"Have you seen an angel?" he asked.

She nodded. "Like demons, only the light is so white it's blinding. Demons trying to look like angels never get it quite right. Not in the passage, anyway. Dead souls are in between, and we're all different because of the choices we make. Dark and light."

"The ultimate combo platter," Magdalene said.

Roman looked distracted. "I need reasons why you might not be able to see Nathaniel Rush."

Nina looked at the man in question. Intelligent. Beautiful. Determined.

Unusual. "I think we can safely rule out that I'll die with him."

James chuckled. But Magdalene only narrowed her gaze, looking about as impressed as Roman did. Or didn't.

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Nina tried to push past her frustration and remain professionally detached as the three of them began to bounce around ideas, most of which simply weren't possible in this realm. But this was an exercise they had clearly conducted before, tossing out ideas randomly, only pausing when Roman flagged them to stop with a raised hand.

She found detachment difficult. This had been her chance to contribute, to help. Like her, Gray and Damian watched rather than participated, until Damian finally asked, "'What if the charism is something that lets Rush hide his soul? To protect it from the demons?"

That got Roman's attention. "Very good, Damian. Let's explore that reasoning and see where it leads. What are some reasons a soul might need to be hidden?" Nina saw a few problems with this theory, the first that she wasn't convinced Nathania! Rush had the charism.

The second. . . "If a soul can manage to hide itself, it might be able to deceive me into believing it's working toward good when it's not."

And if that was the case, then so much for detachment, or contributing with her ability.

So much for the Soul Retrieval Unit's secret weapon.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ROMAN was bothered by more than the obvious problem of being unable to establish whether or not Nathaniel Rush was good or evil. For the first time in nearly three hundred years, Nina couldn't see a soul. There was no explanation, only disturbing possibilities. He'd gotten a lock on his enemy--and tracked that lead straight to a dead end.

He observed Humanity United's leader, seated inside the conference room, a familiar figure, voice wellknown from sound bites and news flashes. The media loved to play Rush's comments, snippets that were always succinct and designed to have an impact. Roman himself remembered thinking the President would do well to find out who wrote Rush's speeches and offer the writer whatever it took to make him a part of the White House staff.

Rush sat at ease among the diversity represented in that intimate group around the table: politicians from

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Nigeria's civilian state, tribal leaders, religious representatives from each warring faction.

His demeanor was the perfect blend of contemplative and resolute. He appeared to follow the discourse, asked questions or interjected comments periodically, made constructive points that seemed well-received by the group.

All in all, Nathaniel Rush put on a good show.

Roman wasn't sure why he always got the feeling Rush was playing to an audience--but he knew from experience that his instinct didn't lie. And instinct told him Rush was involved now. He was the only thread linking too many deaths. He had a strong foothold in the living world and was whispered about in the afterlife.

Roman needed to know what was inside this man's soul.

'Let's go," he told his team. .

Visualizing the softly-glowing interior of sub-level four, he appeared there, his team surrounding him, all looking to him for direction.

He had none to give.

Roman needed to clear his head, to reevaluate the leads and reassess the plan, which was part of his problem--he didn't have one. At least, not in a conventional sense.

Most importantly, he needed a reprieve from Nina, the onslaught of her on his senses, constant, unrelenting.

She sat perched on the four-Jay data retrieval station, long legs crossed, dangling foot swaying to some unheard rhythm. With her elbows propped on her knees and long hair tumbling around her shoulders, she managed to look both restless and bored as she awaited some instruction from him.

Without a word, Roman left the vault, appearing on the main level then striding through the secured maze of corridors that made up Sanctus Command. He could have simply visualized his destination and arrived there, but he needed the familiar activity of moving through these halls to smooth away the edges of his mood, the pressure and anxiety that had always been a part of his life, grown so magnified in his death.

Or perhaps the distractions were troubling him.

Making his way to the director's office, he found it unoccupied by the man who now held the post. He'd always been able to think clearly here, a function more emotional than anything else. This office marked the place where he confronted the demands of national security. Security breaches. Terrorist threats. Political coups. Arms dealing. The list had been endless.

He'd confronted the problems here, but Roman had often left Sanctus Command entirely to cipher through potential resolutions to those problems. The city's many parks. The National Gallery. Washington National Cathedral. The Eastern Shore. He had an endless list of favored places.

Standing in front of the desk, he gazed around a vantage as familiar as that from behind the desk, even now when his vision was obscured by death, transforming what had once been a rich theme of deep neutrals and computerized wall displays into a black and white photograph.

While the office felt the same, things had changed. His personal items were gone, likely packed and put into storage while his attorneys untangled the web of probate to see his last wishes carried out.

Roman had no living family. His art collection would be distributed between his two favorite museums, his

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estate bestowed upon the Jesuit school where he'd spent so much of his youth and where his father and grandfather had spent theirs.

Only the furnishings were left—functional desk, wingback chairs, ornamental coat rack his secretary had insisted made his operatives feel welcomed in the intimidating inner sanctum.

That memory made Roman smile. All he saw was a room. Four walls, with one computerized to connect him to the world, now displaying the sweeping panorama of the Nation's Capital, blanketed in the monochrome shades of death. The White House. The Treasury. Lafayette Park.

Once this had been his city, his room.

He had been able to see the cherry blossoms, a pinkish-white profusion that steeped the majestic buildings, the breathtaking monuments, the hub of a superpower, with the whimsy of nature, miraculous and fragile among the strong, invincible.

The United States of America.

Now Roman was .changed too. His vantage had gro\YIl, his scope widened. The living world had become only one part of a larger place. In his monochrome sight, he suddenly saw the age of the historic buildings, the frailty of the cherry blossoms and lush foliage that would soon scorch beneath the summer sun.

A city looming beneath an unknown threat.

"Let's hope you're working better now." Damian grinned. "'This trip will be a waste if you can't see souls anymore."

"Heaven forbid," Nina said, glad someone was in the mood to joke.

Neither he nor Gray had suggested they move on, though she knew both had considered it. They wouldn't move on until Nina was ready. She wondered when that might happen, wondered if it ever would. Such a move would separate them permanently, alter their eternities forever, and after so many years of sharing life and death, the very thought of separation had become daunting. Inevitable, perhaps, yet still daunting.

So as usual, she kept working, and they supported her--not because they believed in her cause, but because they cared, and were convinced she couldn't manage without them.

Good-hearted Damian, who cared enough to make her smile even when he would rather not be heading to Fairwinds Women's Center to follow up another of Roman's leads.

And she was glad for Damian's goodness, so carefully hidden behind a devil-may-care attitude. He claimed to be selfish, yet Nina had never seen it as such--more as desperate to hang on to whatever joys he could grasp.

As the youngest of three sons, and a gifted artist in a family of shipwrights, Damian had never walked an easy path.

She worried for him. Gray would seek out his beloved late wife once they moved on, but Damian had only ever had Nina in life, and he hadn't even possessed her' whole heart because she'd loved Gray for years before they'd ever met. But her sweet Damian had deserved someone special, someone to call his own. And now they were all dead.

She supposed everyone walked a tough path in life, and death. The real differences lay in how a soul handled the path, how well one put aside cares and selfish needs to care for another. She hadn't understood that

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in life, and wondered how much she'd really grasped in all the years since. The choice she'd made to help Roman was as much about wanting to feel as if she had a purpose as it was about offering a skill only she could to benefit others. Or was it a desire to join with him in the only way open to a dead woman?

"Ready?" Roman appeared and gazed down at her with stern eyes, no hint of emotion that she could see.

No reassurance to make her feel better.

Nina wondered why she wanted him to make the attempt, why she cared. He might have gone through a good bit of trouble to retrieve her, but that didn't obligate her in any way. She shouldn't be thinking about disappointing him--whether or not she'd had anything valuable to offer yet. She was trying to help, not impress the man. .

At least she shouldn't be.

"Fairwinds Women's Center, here we come." She didn't wait, but moved through the passage and then was surrounded by the busy daytime activity in the reception area.

The rest of the team appeared, with Roman in the middle, the master of the moment, issuing clear commands in that rich voice that she still could feel low in her belly.

"I need information on the promotional photo shoot involving Lilith Archambault and Katie McGuire. Dates. Times. Particularly when the shoot was originally scheduled and whether or not either of their schedules was rearranged to accommodate that shoot. Unless we luck out, I expect we'll need to shift into their world to find anything." He turned to Magdalene and James.

"You up to it?"

"Don't sweat it," Magdalene said, while James helped himself to the desk the receptionist had just vacated to escort a patient out of reception and down a corridor.

"Make a right at the end of the hall," she said. "It'll be the third door on your left."

James glanced at the desk then at the computer display. He backed away just as the receptionist slid into her seat again. "The person who handles the promotion for this center is on site."

"That's the place to start, then," Roman said.

"Come on." James led everyone into a spacious suite of offices on an upper-story. "Here we go. Marketing department. Dude we're looking for is named David Samper."

"Nina, Gray, and Damian, you go at your convenience. Magdalene and James, I'll follow after you. All set?"

Roman would wait until after his black ops shifted, and Nina guessed he entertained some hope that if either Magdalene or James ran into trouble shifting from death to life he'd be able to swoop along behind them and help out.

She didn't have the heart to tell him it didn't work that way. He was protective of his people, and she liked that, another quality that made her admire and respect him. But all the protective instincts in the world couldn't help Roman's people if they ran into trouble shifting.

"Wait." She raised a hand to halt the team. "Don't shift."

A man had entered the room. David Samper presumably, judging by the name plate on the desk. He was crawling with demons, and not just the garden-variety,

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lead-us-not-into-temptation kind. The last thing Nina wanted was for all these newly dead to pop in on what appeared to be a heated argument.

Many of the demons she immediately recognized--Deception, Greed, Envy, Pride--but two she didn't.

They were bigger than the others, the scales of their thick, shapeless bodies sooty and slimy. One had strands of hair clinging to its skull-like head. The other a jaw that looked like it had been broken more than once.

"He screwed up royally," the one with the hair said. "He let her get away."

"It's not my fault, Ueland. He had his orders."

"It is your fault, because you gave those orders. Make no mistake about that, Gide. It'll all come to rest on your pointy head. I'll make sure of it."

Uh-oh. Things got ugly when demons had names. That meant they were smart enough and nasty enough to break the ranks of the temptation-brokers and earn themselves a little renown.

Or a lot of renown, as was the case with some of the more powerful demons. Whoever had cast her into Katie McGuire's body must have been on the fast track to becoming one of Satan's private stock.

"We won't be shifting here today," Nina said.

"Demons?" Gray asked.

"With names."

Damian scowled at Roman. "Are you a trouble magnet, or what?"

Roman opened his mouth to reply, but Nina cut him off.

"All newly dead need to leave now. You won't want to be here if these two decide to pop into the passage. Trust me." She turned to Gray and Damian.

"Will you

please explain to them what names mean while you're on your way?"

"What about you?" Roman asked.

Nina smiled, trying not to read too much into his concern. "I'll be along. I want to hear what these demons are arguing about. They look pretty at home on this guy." "If you can, find out about the appointments, too." Roman watched David Samper sift through his faxes.

Her fellow teammates disappeared, and Nina moved in close to eavesdrop.

"Don't try to pin this on me to cover your ass:" the demon named Gide said.

"It was a stupid idea from the start."

Ueland gave a watery laugh. "Tell that to Italo. It was his idea."

'Why didn't he just kill her if he was so worried about her interfering?"

Ueland slammed a taloned hand against the back of gide's skull, hard enough to make the other's fangs clunk loudly. "Maybe because she's already dead, you think?"

Gide snarled one of those guttural snarls that still had the power to make Nina wince even though this was obviously not a demon of the top water. David Samper just moved around his office unaware.

"He didn't have to cast her back into the living world where she could escape," Gide said. "He should have thrown her into the abyss. Any of the big boys would have had some fun making her shriek until the coup is over."

"No, this one can do things no other soul can. They're trying to find a way to recruit her to our side.

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Italo's an overachiever, you know that. Wants to make himself look good."

Physical memory left Nina with an icy chill.

Cast back. Escape. Can do things no other can.

They were talking about her.

What coup?

For a moment, that wave of cold claimed her, distracted her from the demons, from the questions racing through her mind, a physical reaction she hadn't felt in so long. The feeling was almost as reassuring as the news was frightening.

Mastering the sensation, she forced her focus back onto the job at hand.

Making sense of what she'd heard, and worrying about it, would have to wait.

She had a chance to accomplish something here, and she intended to.

She followed the two demons as they continued after David Samper, who moved from the copy machine back to the fax. Temptation demons writhed all over him. He didn't seem to notice, which came as no great surprise--his essence revealed his world to be a very dark place.

"I'll find her," Gide said. "I promise. Just give me some time until you go to Italo."

Ueland made a barking sound that Nina thought might be a chuckle. "You want me to risk myself to buy you time?"

"Has Italo figured out how to recruit her, anyway?" Gide clearly recognized his demon buddy wasn't going to cut him any slack and started fishing for information. "I heard this one's a do-good."

"Italo's always got a plan. He wanted her to suck the life from her host to make her strong, and give her a taste for the real world again, the physical temptations."

JEANIE LONDON

'Fattening her up?'

Ueland licked a rope of spittle from wet lips. "She's a do-good now, but when she was alive, this one liked her pleasures. Italo wanted to make her remember being alive so he'd have something to manipulate her with."

"Pleasures?"

"Sex: the kinky kind."

Gide chortled, a phlegmy rolling laugh that shouldn't have been loud enough to almost split Nina's head in two. But as she struggled against a feeling she hadn't felt in so long, a feeling she honestly hadn't remembered, she thought that's exactly what might happen.

Nausea was another condition she could have done without.

In life, she, Gray, and Damian had been three needy souls who'd been there for each other. The situation had been unconventional, but that had been circumstance, not depravity.

And there'd been such beauty in accepting each other unconditionally, in learning to recognize and meet each other's needs, in helping to overcome heartache and loss and fear . . .

The need for touch had been hers alone.

In death they still loved each other and shared a closeness she cherished, but the physical abandon they'd once known was left unspoken between them. They'd never merged in all these years, though the temptation had been great in the beginning.

Her death was as barren of touch as much of her life had been--but she was grateful for the love of the two wonderful men she shared life and death with, and the opportunity to finally use her gift to help others.

But now, hearing her past summed up in such a freakish way, as though she were shameless, wanton, kinky,

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depraved... Was that what Roman thought about her, too? She nearly shivered, could feel the faintest trace of a vibration deep inside.

"I just need a little time, Ueland. I know many places where souls with special interests get together. If she's developed a taste for the physical again, I can track her down."

"I can't keep this information secret for even a day or it'll be my hide.

Italo can't leave this one around to learn about the coup. Esherick told him to take care of her." Gide let out a choking wheeze at the sound of that name. No doubt whoever Esherick was, he was a big bad demon, somewhere up in the chain of command.

"Then it'll be Italo's hide if this whole stupid idea fails," Gide said hopefully. "Not mine."

Ueland sank a vicious talon into Gide's chest, nicking the hide with a slimy sound as he pushed hard to make a point. "Yours: You assigned Samper to watch over the host."

"He's a greedy little bastard. He does what he's told."

Ueland poked his talon harder. "He's obviously not too smart if the woman got away."

"But I've been patrolling, watching for months now--"

"You were told to assign someone in the living world, too. You both let your guards down. Both your hides. Both."

"Should have thrown her into the abyss," Gide grumbled.

"Maybe Italo still will. If he can find her." Ueland gave a gravelly chuckle.
"If you want to disappear, I'll tell Italo you ran away before I got to you."
"He'll think I'm a coward."

'Fine, then. Tell him what happened yourself."

Gide vanished so fast Nina thought she saw a shimmer between the realms where he'd been.

"Coward," Ueland shouted after him, then placed a taloned claw on his shapeless belly and guffawed heartily. .

Nina didn't leave the office like Gide, even though she'd gotten more information than she'd bargained for. A lot more.

No, she stood there watching David Samper circle his desk and sit, take a swig from a coffee mug that, judging by the stains on the blotter, permanently resided near his left elbow. She was stunned to think straight. She wanted to talk to Roman. They worked well together, and she wanted his take on what to do, had come to value his opinion.

Nina thought he valued hers, too.

Once he'd been certain she could handle herself around these demons, he'd let her do her thing. He respected her, and she liked the feeling. Not that Gray and Damian didn't respect her, of course, but they'd played her protectors for far too long to change their roles now.

And they already knew all the sordid details of her life. She didn't think Roman would appreciate having her past used as a weapon to thwart the Soul Retrieval Unit's efforts.

And she wouldn't blame him. So she stood there, watching the demons of Deception, Greed, Envy, and Pride infuse David Samper with their poison.

"That coffee is stone cold," Greed said silkily. "'Looks like it's time for a trip to Starbucks. Go on, you've earned a latte. With extra shots. No one will notice if you slip away for a few minutes."

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"You deserve it," Envy piped up. "Look at that bitch Cindy. She makes a trip every day at three o'clock for an espresso fudge brownie, and they still gave her your promotion."

"Yes, please go," Nina whispered into the quiet, though from this realm no one would hear.

But she needed to look through his desk and file cabinet, and she couldn't do that with these demons around.

Demons who wanted to find her.

Nor could she face the Soul Retrieval Unit without the information Roman requested. Not when she'd have to reveal what she'd just overheard, explain how her darkest sins were being used as a weapon against her. Not so differently than Roman had convinced Gray and Damian to use her sins to retrieve her.

The past was rearing its ugly head to haunt them all simply because she hadn't resigned herself to her fate and graciously accepted a life without touch.

And how long had that life been anyway?

Twenty-five years. A silly drop in the bucket compared to eternity.

She'd made so many mistakes in life. In death, too.

If she hadn't decided to linger, she wouldn't be standing here feeling guilty for all she'd cost the men she loved, and angsting about what another man must think about her--a man she definitely shouldn't be angsting about. But she really did like working with Roman, wanted to play her part with the Soul Retrieval Unit.

And she was back to facing temptation again, the temptations of guilt, of pride, of desire.

One more swig of cold coffee and a tag-team assault by Greed and Envy were enough to convince David Samper to make his way to the nearest Starbucks.

Nina waited until he disappeared inside the elevator,

all his demons in tow, before she shifted into the living world. But before she could pass from death to life, she had to stop and mentally clear her thoughts. Her ability to shift, an action that had become as natural as breathing was to the living, was suddenly impaired by the lingering sound of Ueland's laughter.

* * *

Roman knew the instant Nina appeared inside sublevel four that something wasn't right. Instinct? Or was he simply so in tune with this woman he could sense her emotions?

She appeared in the midst of them, her beautiful features set, her expression resolute. There was nothing about her outwardly to suggest she might be rattled, yet Roman sensed she was. It was a singular feeling, one he hadn't experienced on a personal level before.

Gray and Damian seemed to be inspecting her for some damage, too, and as Nina wasn't a woman who rattled easily, his concern escalated.

"Status?" he asked.

"David Samper rescheduled Katie's appointment so she was at Fairwinds when Lilith Archambault came to town. He was the one to suggest her for the photo shoot."

"We have confirmation. Good work. What about the demons?"

Nina met his gaze. Her wide eyes only revealed what she wanted him to see. And perhaps it was that utter stillness about her, as if she'd somehow disconnected from her emotions, that assured him something significant had happened.

A very real need to touch her struck him, the need to smooth away the tight lines from her mouth, coax a

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smile, reassure her, although he didn't know why she might need reassurance.. Physical memory?

Did it matter when she was a distraction on so many levels that he could only feel relief when she finally stepped away?

Relief proved short-lived as Nina outlined a situation that fitted pieces neatly in place and revealed a scenario made even more disturbing as he identified the implications.

She was a target.

Gray and Damian must have drawn a similar conclusion because they drew in, flanking her as they had in the painting Roman had seen inside a St. Michaels antique shop. It appeared so instinctive from Roman's vantage that he felt jealous by the bond between them.

If Nina noticed, she gave no sign. She only delivered the facts of her encounter with the demons in that same steady voice, the voice of a woman with so much emotion she'd battened the hatches tight.

Roman shouldn't feel compassion, shouldn't feel anything at all. But Nina's vulnerabilities were being manipulated, her past used against her. He knew she would hate the lack of control, the helplessness. He had played upon those reactions himself to retrieve her.

And hadn't considered the cost.

Now he saw what his efforts had wrought, felt responsible for stealing the sparkle from her eyes. He'd cast himself into a role no different than his enemy, manipulating her to achieve mission objective.

His only saving grace--he felt bad.

Did that make any difference when Roman knew he would make the same choice again to retrieve her? No,

Roman decided, not when he couldn't say anything to soothe away her hurt, or do anything to make any difference. Not when all he had to offer was returning some control to Nina through action.

He couldn't deny that he cared, too much.

"We had a connection to a terrorist." He met her gaze, silently willed her to resist letting past mistakes choke her spirit, not to let him or anyone else question the magnificent woman she was. "Now we have intel on a coup.

Nathaniel Rush is our only common denominator. It would seem that we weren't as far off as we thought."

Nina shifted her weight against the archival wall, and seemed to relax a little. Roman scanned his team, took in the grave expressions, drew encouragement from the sheer conviction and skill among them, by the loyalty of his people, and of Nina's. "Now we begin investigating in earnest until we unravel the details. Nina, you've confirmed that both realms are involved. Do you have any idea how they might be communicating?"

"What about Nina?" Damian ignored her when she waved him off.

"I'll bring in Marstiller to cover her," Roman said.

Magdalene nodded. "That's a good idea."

Nina pushed away from the wall, a move that broke her free of her companions.

"Who's Marstiller?"

"A protection op, trained to provide security."

"In the living world, maybe, but it's not good enough here." Gray shook his head. "My dear, we should go."

Nina looked startled. "Where?"

"Any place but where they'll expect you to be."

"He's right, Nina." Damian said. "You're at risk here. If demons are still looking for you then you need to hide."

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Nina considered them, and Roman resented the sway these men held over her life. She was such a beautiful, independent woman, using her unique gift to help others in the centuries since her death, boldly signing onto his team to fight a risky battle. Yet now, in a moment of uncertainty, when she seemed vulnerable and unsure, she turned to the men who had stood beside her through life and death.

Their opinions would carry so much more weight than his own. Roman had known that from the start.

He resented having so little to compete with, nothing to offer except a reminder to do what was right: use her ability to fight for the passage.

"I need her here," Roman said simply. It was all he had to offer against these men.

Gray's expression clouded. "You would risk her safety?"

"Your new team members aren't grasping the whole concept of black ops."

Magdalene gave a short, unamused laugh. "Maybe you should rethink the training program. You missed something."

"Like the training itself," James added. "Mags, why don't you write up a new program in your spare time? We don't have training personal, but we could cover Covert Ops 101 and they could cover Dead Guys 101. I have lots of questions."

"Then you should ask them as they come up." Roman brought an end to the exchange, although he appreciated his operatives' efforts to dispel the tension, to buy Nina some time to think. "Nina's intel suggests we're on a time limit. We need to know what it is. I'm assigning you two back into the living world to find out everything you can about Humanity United's

schedule."

Roman felt the weight of the battle ahead and the

eternities hanging in the balance. Not those of the people both lingering and living who were a mass of nameless, faceless souls, but of the people in front of him., operatives so loyal, they'd followed him from life to death, a woman who risked her eternity to help others with her special ability, the companions who wanted to protect her.

Roman knew this feeling, the frustration of one man trying to police the globe, the feeling that nothing he could possibly do would ever be enough. And the determination to keep doing what he could anyway. "If Nina's agreeable, I'll take over her protection around the clock."

His suggestion appeared to surprise Nina. She tilted her head to stare up at him, and Roman wondered what she thought in that moment, what she saw when she looked at his soul.

Could she see how much he wanted her to agree?

He wondered if the Divine beings that had recruited him to this post had foreseen the connection that would bind him to Nina, wondered how they had expected him to resist.

Was Nina his test?

Would she be one of those choices that would move him closer to salvation--or would he backslide? Would the consequences be steeper now that he'd been asked to do battle for the good side? Would the price of his failure be more far reaching than he could even comprehend?

"Not your protection op, and not you," Gray said with a growl. "I know who Nina thinks you are, Roman. You haven't convinced me. Not by a long shot. Not when you're willing to sacrifice her to win your fight."

"I am not willing to sacrifice her." The truth.

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"You might not be willing, but you would."

"What do you think you can do against demons?" Damian demanded. "Do you have any idea of what happens if she's thrown into the abyss?"

Paul Gustave Dore had been a French painter who illustrated many literary masterpieces, including Dante's Divine Comedy which Roman had seen displayed in an exhibit. Now those fierce images of a hell filled with striking agony came to mind, eternity a concept no soul, dead or alive, could ever grasp.

He recalled that glaring light and shattering voice, so beautiful, so ruthless, offering him a chance.

"I do," was all he could say.

"Yet you would risk her?"

Roman met both men's gazes, the weight of his reply heavy, yet the knowledge that he was not alone in this fight, gave him the strength to say, "There is no way to win any battle without risk, gentlemen. Particularly a battle against demons. But it is Nina's choice."

CHAPTER TWELVE

NINA stood in the middle of dozens, no, hundreds of glowing drawers in Sanctus's archive. Each looked the same on the outside. A rectangle that was three feet wide and two feet high. An iridescent glow from some technology she didn't understand outlined the edges in what would have been an eerie green if she shifted out of this realm.

She didn't know what stored the data inside, but each drawer contained information as vastly individual as there were souls in the passage, people in the living world.

The souls in this underground maze were the same.

The Soul Retrieval Unit. Her teammates. All lingering souls united in one purpose, but each bringing such completely different abilities to the team, different loyalties, different beliefs.

Those drawers mocked Nina.

The sum of her life and death came down to hundreds

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of drawers where she tucked things away that she couldn't deal with, memories that were too painful to relive, problems she needed to solve, feelings she didn't want to feel.

Nearly three hundred years of existence had stuffed her internal drawers filled to brimming, yet she still felt like the same young girl from those few short years of life, always trying to outrun her troubles.

From Kirkby after her parents had died protecting her from religious zealots who wanted to end her cursed existence.

From London after her desperate aunt brought the Anglican Church down upon Nina's head to exorcise her demons.

From St. Michael's when fear of being discovered had isolated her from life until each dawn became a burden.

From the threshold when death revealed how grievously she'd wasted her gift and she'd scrambled for time to make amends.

Running, always running.

Nina could have run again. But her physical awareness of Roman made yearning to touch a temptation she must face again.

Nina refused to run this time.

Even though it meant facing Gray and Damian, so beloved and dear, and standing tall beneath the crushing knowledge that they would remain beside her even now, even though they would view her decision as a betrayal of sorts--and they would, she knew--yet they would still risk the cost.

She would stand and fight for what she believed in, for what she wanted. Even if it meant trusting for the

first time in all the long years of her existence that being true to herself would work out best for all those she cared for.

Her beloved Gray and Damian. And Roman.

"I must." Small words that changed everything.

A storm waged in Gray's eyes, his inability to protect her from herself weighed as heavy as Nina's burdens ever had.

Damian, dear Damian, would save her by making the world right again with his gift for laughter.

His dashing grin lit the shadows. "Personally, I've been bored for a while." And now Roman, new to the equation, watching her with eyes that saw through her, a trick unique to him.

He inclined his head in a nod of approval that meant so much more than she could explain, so much more than was reasonable, but one that filled some of the empty places in her soul. .

She cared what he thought, and she shouldn't.

"Then I will assume your protection." His grave tone assured her that no matter what else he might be, he would protect her eternity to the limits of his ability.

She would not question what those limits would be. She would simply have faith.

Then the moment was over with no fanfare to mark the occasion, the facing of a difficult decision. Only silence. And the quiet of knowing she'd made the right choice, no matter what the cost might prove to be.

'This intel gives us new leads to follow up," Roman .

said. "We've got a lot to do, no clue how much time we have, and not nearly enough people to handle the job."

James laughed. "Sounds just like your thing."

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Nina agreed. Roman assumed command as naturally as she opened and closed her eyes.

"Magdalene and James, you'll shift into sub-level four. Find a safe place for James to gain system access then both of you can find out about Humanity United's upcoming events. I'm particularly interested in Unity Day."

"You thinking that might be a good time to stage a coup?" Magdalene asked.

"Rush is coordinating an event in a specific time frame involving people all over the globe. I can't conceive of the particulars--I simply don't have a frame of reference--but I don't buy into coincidences."

'That's all you need, then," James said. "'That instinct of yours has saved my butt in the field during more missions than I care to recall."

A look of understanding passed between the men before Roman turned to Gray and Damian.

"I need you both to use your resources to learn what you can about Italo and Esherick. They seem to be in positions of authority, and we need to know who we're dealing with, so we can assess the threat against Nina."

"What we're dealing with," Damian corrected, always eager to point out the pitfalls. "'There's no who to these demons. Trust me."

"I need to pick up Marsteller." Roman addressed Gray, ever-stalwart protector.

"I don't see a way to avoid splitting up. We've got too much to accomplish.

The best I can offer is to catch up with you as soon as I pick up my man."

Gray obviously didn't have an alternative and wasn't happy in the least. He met Nina's gaze, and she could only force a smile she hoped would reassure him. It

didn't reassure her. Quite simply, she was leaving her comfort zone to trust her eternity to a man she didn't entirely trust.

She believed in Roman's ability to lead the team, but Gray was right. Roman had proven he would do whatever it took to accomplish a goal. He made split-second decisions. He whispered and manipulated souls. She believed he tried to play fair, but she'd also seen him place souls in harm's way like he had with Katie's daughter. He risked himself and his people by crossing the realms.

God help her, but she was willing to help him anyway. She was on his side because he'd won her over.

He needed her to see the things he couldn't. He might not be willing to sacrifice her, but he had to do whatever it took to win. She understood that. No one had ever said doing what was right would be easy.

"It'll be fine, Gray." She forced steel into her voice.

"Have faith and don't worry." She'd worry enough for the both of them.

* * *

Roman wasn't sure what he'd expected Marstilller to be doing during his self-imposed leave. Dropping out of sight after death wasn't exactly like taking a vacation. But Roman found his operative sitting on the kitchen counter in his parents' home, doing precisely what he'd said--visiting his family:

Apparently the elder Marstillers had retired to a townhouse in south Florida, and the decor of the place reflected a breezy tropical look with lots of windows and plantation shutters to let in the sun.

Night had fallen in Florida now. Marstilller sat in the glow of the overhead fluorescent light, quietly watching

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his parents, both well into their eighties, if Roman were to guess, who worked at the dining room table at some sort of project with scissors, tape, and wrapping paper.

"We've got demons," Nina whispered.

Roman glanced around the room, could see only shadows beyond the lighted fixtures on the ceiling.

"What do we do?"

"Nothing, I think. That elderly couple has a lot of faith. They're keeping the demons on the fringes. But Despair's looking for a way in. Grief and Sorrow, too. Your man's vulnerable. If he leaves here, those demons will be all over him."

Physically, Marstilller looked none the worse for the wear after taking a cold shot to the heart. Had muscle had the ability to deflect a bullet, he'd have survived the sniper's site on the White House lawn. He was a protection op that looked the part with his broad shoulders and obsessively-toned bulk. Despite the transparency of the newly-dead, he still managed to look fit and impressive. .

"Marstilller," Roman greeted him.

"Oh, hey, Roman. How's it going?"

"Good, thanks. And you?"

"Yeah, fine. Sure."

"I want you to meet Nina de Lacy." Roman motioned to Nina who appeared in front of the refrigerator. "She and some friends of hers just signed onto our

team."

"A pleasure," Marstiller said absently, gaze trailing back to his parents. "Do you know what they're doing right now?"

Roman followed Marstiller's gaze to the elderly couple at the table. "No. I don't."

"They got that sweatshirt embroidered with my son's name. It's from my alma mater."

"That was nice of them," he said.

"Yeah, they've been doing lots of stuff like that since I died. Helping my ex-wife out. Talking to my son on the phone. Sending him letters. Not just my parents, but my sister, too." He smiled. "She's a little more with the times. She hooked up with him on the computer and has been telling stories about what a maniac I was as a kid. Scanning pictures and stuff." He gave a laugh. "She was the maniac."

Roman's instincts went live. Something was off with Marstiller. He wasn't sure what, so he held back the news that Magdalene and James had made the trip to the afterlife, too, and settled for a harmless, "Sounds like you have a great family."

Marstiller seemed to consider that. "My parents have been lighting candles for me. Their church has the small votives that only last a few hours, so they found a parish across town with candles that last all week. It's in the damn hood, but they don't seem to mind. My dad has been driving my mother there every week. And trust me when I say he shouldn't be on the road. I don't think he ever breaks twenty-five. But they light a candle and say a rosary. I didn't even know my father prayed."

Roman couldn't think of a reply. But Marstiller seemed to need to talk, so Roman would make time to listen, even though the clock was ticking.

But a hard silence fell between them, and Marstiller dropped his face into his hands. Roman couldn't be sure, but he thought his operative might be crying. Had he been at Sanctus, Roman would have called in Westmoreland, his team interrogations expert and a woman with an extensive background in psychology.

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As it was, he debated his response. Would some platitude about grief help or upset Marstiller even more?

Or should Roman not touch the subject of death at all, which seemed a little tough to avoid given the circumstances?

The only thing he knew for sure was that he was down a man. Marstiller wasn't in any condition to work.

Nina leaned close and whispered, "What's his name?"

"Gregory."

"Your son doesn't live close to your parents, does he, Gregory?" she asked.

"Sounds like there's a little distance."

Marstiller raised his head. He hadn't been crying, but close. Damn close. "My ex re-married about a year ago and took my son to the West Coast. The new husband's military. Not a bad guy."

"How old is your son?"

"He'll be eight next week. Already bought his gift" Marstiller gave a broken laugh. "Didn't get to mail it."

"Wow. I bet he's a great kid. You must have gone to see him since you've been here, right?"

Nina was pushing Marstiller, but Roman kept his mouth shut, trusting that she had a reason, even though his operative's gaze trailed back to the table, where his mother was putting the final touches on the package.

"I've seen him," Marstiller said.

"He must miss his dad a lot."

That did it. All that emotional intensity radiating off Marstiller seemed to gather until Roman's operative was sobbing in earnest.

Roman had seen men cry before, during interrogations in containment, during difficult debriefings, and

he was surprised to feel a certain cringe factor to watching Marstiller now. He frowned at Nina and wondered what she was trying to do. It didn't seem to be helping, yet he trusted her instincts.

"I haven't seen them since the divorce," Marstiller said. "I thought they blamed me for screwing up my family just like I screwed up everything else. I never lived up, man. Not once."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Gregory," Nina said kindly, "but from where I'm standing it looks like your parents love you a lot. Sounds like your sister does, too. Am I missing something?"

Marstiller shook his head.

"It sucks, doesn't it?" she asked.

"What?"

"That understanding we get when we die," she said.

"When we can suddenly see the choices we made in our lives for what they really were. It's actually an angelic ability, did you know?"

Marstiller shook his head. Roman hadn't known either.

"Sure is." She nodded, sending her hair tumbling around her face. "Angelic abilities can be used for good or evil--no surprises there. Big difference between angels and demons. But understanding is supposed to be a good ability. It lets us know what we need to so we can move on. But I never thought it felt very good. What about you?"

"I was so off base." His voice ached. "I was the only one who ever felt like I didn't live up. Neither of my parents was disappointed. Not even my father, and I could have sworn. . . I blew off their calls, never went to see them. I kept pushing them away." He dropped his face in his hands again.

RETRIEVAL 225

Roman motioned Nina toward him, lured her far enough away to ask, "Is this constructive?"

"He needs help."

"We don't have time--"

"Make time. Otherwise, those demons will be all over him. They'll play on his emotions and turn him to despair and sorrow." Her expression tightened, the soft lines of her face sharpening in a formidable look he found lovely for its strength. A side of Nina he hadn't yet seen. Here was a woman who just wanted to help.

"If you lose your man to the darkness, you won't get him back."

Roman watched Marstiller, broad shoulders shaking as he fought off his turmoil. "Can you help?"

"Yes."

He nodded, and her eyes sparkled, making him feel good that he'd won her approval, even if he didn't think anyone so sad could recover that quickly. She returned to Marstiller, leaving Roman feeling as if his response was exactly what she'd hoped for. She was good at winning what she wanted from men, from him.. He admired that about her.

"Gregory, what would you tell your parents if you could send them a message?" she asked.

He shrugged, didn't look up. "Does it really matter now?"

"If it can help them understand how you feel and comfort them in their grief, I'd say it matters, wouldn't you?"

Marstiller looked up, hopeful. "That's not possible."

"Trust me, Gregory. I've been around here a long time. I've learned to do lots of things. Delivering messages is only one of them. I'd be happy to deliver one if you'd like."

Roman followed Marstiller's glassy gaze to his parents, two frail old people doing what they could to help keep their son alive in a young boy's memory. To care for him when his father wasn't around to do it anymore.

"Does everyone go through this?" Marstiller asked.

"No, not everyone," Nina replied. "There are as many different reactions to death as there are people. That's why some of us linger and others don't. Like you, some find they have unfinished business they left behind. Maybe they want to comfort someone or make amends. Some have control issues. If they didn't leave behind many people who cared for them, they might be afraid of moving on. I hear it can help a lot when people pmy for you, like your parents are doing."

She smiled softly, a smile that chased away the shadows of death and softened her expression again, a look that reminded Roman of the unfinished portrait.

"Sometimes people feel guilty. They can't seem to accept they've already been forgiven and they only need to forgive themselves."

Roman thought she might be referring to herself, and despite the room filled with people on both sides of life, the moment felt intimate. A glimpse inside Nina, a glimpse that let him see that guilt wasn't the only reason she'd lingered.

Nina cared. It was in the thoughtful smile on her face, the soft sound of her voice, the gentle gaze she rested on Marstiller, who looked like she'd 'tossed him a lifeline when he was drowning.

"There are other not-so-good reasons people linger," she continued. "But the point is that God loves each of us, so He gives us a chance to sort it all out before we move on."

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And here was yet another reason why Nina had chosen to join his team--she understood that not everyone was ready to give up life right away, she understood in ways most never could.

Silence fell again, only more peaceful this time.

Nina folded her arms across her chest, her gaze on Marstiller as he watched his father address the box and say, "We can take this to the post office first thing in the morning."

"Tommy should have it by the end of the week, don't you think?" his mother asked.

"I think so." Marstiller's father sounded reassuring as he settled the box on the desk with caring hands.

"I'm sure he'll tell us when we call on Sunday."

Nina smiled. "Gregory, how about I deliver a message to your parents while they're sleeping. They'll wake up thinking they've had dreams about you."

Roman suspected that Nina didn't want to risk frightening the elderly coliple by whispering to them while they were awake, and as he watched Marstiller's father help his mother from her seat at the table, Roman thought the idea a good one.

Marstiller didn't take his eyes off his parents, but said, "Yeah, that'll work."

Roman smiled as Nina helped his opemtive find the words to comfort his parents, and find peace for himself. He hadn't ever realized how much strength there was in giving.

* * *

The night had been well spent as far as Nina was concerned. She wasn't sure Roman felt the same, given they were leaving without the opemtive they'd come

to

collect. Gregory had a strong essence, had made his fair share of good choices in life, and would no doubt be an asset to the team, but delivering his messages had been a necessary step to help him accept death.

His parents had strong faith, so upon awakening from Nina's whispers, they'd attributed their son's messages as blessings. They hadn't even waited until dawn to call their daughter and share how much Gregory appreciated her efforts with his son, to tell her where to find the birthday gift and to give his opinion about who'd been the real maniac of their childhood.

While Roman might not yet have his operative in tow, Nina felt confident Gregory would soon be ready to face the decision between moving onto his eternity or signing onto the Soul Retrieval Unit. First, he needed to reassure himself that his son was adjusting okay and his mother would continue allowing him to stay in contact with the Marstillers family.

Roman had consented to let Gregory stay behind with his parents, and Nina had promised to return soon, to see how he was feeling and deliver more messages should anything else need to be said.

She hoped she could keep that promise.

But whatever uncertainty laid ahead, Nina thought helping people who mourned welcome dawn with joyous tears was a great way to start her day.

Healing, for all of them.

She hadn't realized how badly she'd needed a reminder that things could still turn out well until Roman cornered her in the Marstillers' foyer and said, "Good job."

"I think he'll be fine."

"Thanks to you." Roman's voice was throaty and low, filled with approval.

RETRIEVAL 229

He stared into her face as if he was studying what he saw there, making her notice the close quarters. Not that they were bound by anything but the need to avoid touching, but suddenly Nina couldn't miss how close they were actually standing.

"I need to touch base with Magdalene and James to see what they turned up before we track down Gray."

"Could we pop in on Katie McGuire first? Just a quick visit since we're out already."

Her words tumbled out in a rush, and she had the striking image of leaning into Roman, of pressing her body close. What would he feel like beneath the suit that draped the hard lines of his body so neatly?

The look in his eyes assured her that he was noticing their closeness, too. Temptation.

Nina didn't wait for his reply. She just whispered Katie McGuire's name, sounding too breathless, too affected. Then she sliced across the passage, her awareness yielding to the familiar sense of nothingness.

She arrived in a workroom of sorts with conveyor poles lining the walls and machines draped with plastic sheeting. Katie worked in front of a station where she hung garments on hangars, looking no worse for the wear with her upswept hair curling around her face from the steam in the place.

"She looks fine," Roman said, and Nina turned to find him standing too close again.

She nodded, refused to back away and let him know he was getting to her.

An older woman popped her head through the open doorway and said to Katie, "Aren't you going to take your break yet?"

Katie paused in her efforts: arranging a dress on a

hanger and glanced at a wall clock. "Luke will be by in another fifteen minutes. May I wait until then?"

The older woman laughed a knowing laugh. "Sure you can, honey. The longer we wait, the shorter the rest of the day is."

"Amen." Katie smiled, not looking any worse for having harbored an uninvited soul for so long.

Nina smiled, too, grateful. Katie McGuire deserved some happiness in her life.

"See everything you needed to?" Roman asked.

"For now," she said and followed him back to Sanctus.

"About time you showed up for the party," Magdalene's voice jarred Nina from her thoughts when they arrived.

"Party--" was the only word Roman got out of his mouth before discovering his headquarters looked like a morning traffic jam.

Every square inch of the place was packed with souls. Long-dead souls who looked nearly alive compared to the array of newly dead in all stages of transparency. They filled the vault, and wound down the halls and around both comers like a parade.

Nina laughed, recognizing many of the faces. Close to Magdalene stood Mouse.

"What's going on?" Nina asked.

With any luck the answer would be a good one because Roman stood beside her, looking as if he'd been shot again. Nina suspected that might be because the location of his top-secret headquarters wasn't so secret anymore.

Magdalene met Roman's gaze wryly. "We have a few volunteers for the Soul Retrieval Unit."

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Roman just stood there, so still he might have been frozen, the only indication he'd even heard was the way he blinked as if unable to believe what he was seeing, or hearing.

Nina glanced around the outer ranks, recognized familiar faces. She met gazes of those she'd known a long time and those newly acquainted. She shared smiles with many whom she'd been helping to find peace with the lives they'd left behind.

All she could say was, "Whoa."

"Yeah, whoa," James agreed. "I'm thinking Mags better get on that training program."

"Word's out on the streets that someone's after you, Nina," Mouse said. and a few nearby souls nodded in agreement.

Roman leveled that clear stare at Mouse. "You have information?"

She rocked back on her heels. "Might."

Nina recognized non-committal when she heard it and knew Mouse wouldn't say another word until she got something in return. What?

To join the Soul Retrieval Unit and risk her eternity, along with everyone else's? None of them even had a clue what they were really up against. Not even Nina.

"I'm willing to deal, Mouse. Let's talk terms," Roman said with a pointed glance at the crowd around them. "Magdalene, you and Nina are with me. James, you stay and find out who can do what around here."

James scowled. but before he had a chance to protest, Roman took off. Nina followed and they arrived in front of an identical work station on sub-level three.

Magdalene helped herself to the computer station, which appeared to be her designated throne no matter what their level.

Roman got straight to business. "What can you offer, Mouse? And what do you want in return?"

This was just the sort of negotiation Mouse appreciated, and Nina couldn't help but be impressed-not only because Roman recognized how to handle her friend but because so many had rallied behind Mouse to let her act as spokesperson. That was a social circle that would certainly explain all the helpful hints Mouse had provided through the years.

Mouse glanced over her shoulder at Nina. "She'll tell you, I know how to find out things."

Nina nodded. "She's got it down to a science. You'd be amazed at the things this one comes up with."

'Aw, I'm getting all warm and fuzzy." Mouse rolled her eyes. "'And I know people, too. I brought some of them along. At least the ones who want to fight the evil that's been taking over. We heard about your team and figured that since you did such a good job retrieving Nina we'd help out, too."

"How'd you hear all this?" Roman wanted to know.

"Told you, I've been following Nina's friends. And they've been out strong for the past day asking all kinds of questions about demons."

'Roman, I don't think I'd let those two out of your sight again without a shadow," snapped Magdalene. "'They don't seem to understand the meaning of covert."

Nina bit back a smile, suspecting the problem wasn't all Gray and Damian's.

"Mouse isn't kidding when she says she gets around. She's got that down to a science, too."

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Roman agreed. "That's a fast pipeline for information. I'm impressed."

Mouse accepted the praise with a nod.

"But offering your services. . . this is a serious business. I know you must have investigated," Roman continued. "'What have you heard about me and my team?" "That an angel sent you to get Nina back. Heard you can do things no newly dead should be able to do, and that you're getting a team together to fight a battle." "That was enough to make you want to get your friends together and sign up?"

Mouse scoffed, "Not hardly. But a few of us have been watching pretty close, and when we heard that Nina signed on because she thinks you have the charism, well, that was good enough for us."

Nina turned to Roman and found him watching her. They exchanged a long look, but she didn't allow herself a reaction, not when she was getting a really uncomfortable feeling about - all this. Surely all these souls wouldn't risk themselves just because she was.

The thought alone was ridiculous. Nina didn't even know them all.

Roman sliced his gaze her way as if he was wondering what she thought about all this, too. "I didn't think everyone was buying into the rumors."

"They're not."

"What about Nathaniel Rush?" Magdalene asked. "Lots of folks think he's the one with the charism."

"Some do."

"But you don't?"

"Dude's alive," Mouse said, as if that explained it. "Now you answer some questions for me. Did an angel really send you?"

Roman nodded.

"That mean you got the charism?"

Nina watched Roman closely, and she wasn't the only one. Magdalene had leaned back in the chair, looking just as interested, which made Nina suspect Magdalene had heard the rumor but didn't know the truth, either.

Roman frowned. "I can't say right now, Mouse."

"Why's that?"

"It's not time. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you."

She narrowed her thickly-lined eyes shrewdly. "So you're saying the charism isn't a rumor. Someone does have it. You just can't tell me who it is?"

Had this been the living world, all three of them, Nina, Mouse, and Magdalene, would have been breathless from hanging on to Roman's every word. It was humiliating, really. .

He didn't seem to notice. "No, it's not a rumor."

'The angel tell you that? A good angel?"

He nodded.

Mouse raised a hand, a halting gesture. "All right. Fair enough. If Nina's willing to accept that, then so am I. But just for now."

"Just for now," Roman agreed.

Nina debated the best way to address the issue that seemed even more pressing than finding out if the rumor was real--according to Roman Barrymore.

She settled on the truth. "Mouse, I don't think you all should be signing on based on what I think. What if I'm wrong?"

Mouse shook her head, unconvinced. "Willing to take the chance."

Roman, thankfully, backed her up. "I understand

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you want to help, Mouse, but Nina's right. There's a lot of risk involved, and the consequences of failure are heavy."

Mouse pulled a face that showed just how unimpressed she was with Roman's logic. "I didn't die yesterday, Mr. Director Man. I know bad juju when I see it.

It's all over this place. Evil is kicking good's ass. Demons are freaking everywhere turning souls to their side left and right, and now they're messing with Nina. I think we got a good enough bead on what's happening."

Roman inclined his head, but a smile played around his mouth. "I see."

"Then what are you saying? That you got things under control and don't need any help."

"On the contrary." All trace of that smile vanished, so quickly. "I need all the help I can get."

"Well then, you want our help or not?"

Roman drilled her with that penetrating stare. "I've got two questions'for you."

"Shoot."

"Do you know what a chain of command is--and are you willing to work under one?"

Mouse bristled. "I am so not big on authority."

Nina thought that much was obvious. Magdalene chuckled, but Roman didn't flinch.

"Non-negotiable," he said. "I can't do my job unless I know I can count on my people."

'If he's going to trust us then we've got to trust him;' Magdalene said with a grin. "I've worked for this man a lot of years, Mouse. He never once made me

regret it.

There's a reason people called him 'the Saint.' "

Roman's stoic stare melted into a frown, but Magdalene didn't seem to notice, or care.

Nina didn't point out that people called Nathaniel Rush "the Angel" when the Soul Retrieval Unit was currently trying to find out if the man was one of Satan's minions.

"Can we win this battle?" Mouse asked. "Can we keep the passage away from them?"

"I was told we stand a fighting chance. No guarantees, just a fair shot." That seemed to be good enough for Mouse, who nodded. "All right then. You got a deal."

Nina wasn't quite sure she'd have believed that Mouse was capable of handling authority, but as no one asked for her opinion, she didn't offer it. In fact, everyone seemed quite content to formulate their own opinions around here. And their own interpretations of her actions.

Even Roman seemed willing enough to take the plunge. "Welcome aboard then, Mouse. I appreciate the help."

No, Nina didn't say another word. She had no words, just a really bad feeling at how many people were rallying behind Roman just because she had. What if she was wrong about him? Was her attraction to him altering her good sense? Leading Gray and Damian down the garden path was one thing, but Mouse and the rest of these souls were another entirely.

Placing herself at risk was her prerogative. It was her eternity. She could deal with knowing Gray and Damian would stand beside her, respected and understood their choices and would handle the guilt should this prove a bad choice.

But what of the others?

Roman might be working for good, leading this battle with the right intentions. He might even have the

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charism--whether or not he chose to reveal it-but he was still. a man who took risks, who used people, a man who could fall to temptation. A man who tempted her.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

IN the span of a night, Roman jumped from concern about losing Marstiller to believing his team was still in the game. The Soul Retrieval Unit had grown from his personal team to a true unit with specialized teams to carry out a variety of functions. What those functions were still remained to be seen. But with James on point, and Magdalene and Mouse to support him, they continued to compile what was proving to be an impressive list of raw talent. Most souls had careers in life, and, to Roman's satisfaction, he'd learned many had been in various areas of law enforcement, both civilian and militarydetectives, beat cops, representatives of the FBI and the Marshal's office, ranking officers from the Marines, Air Force, and Navy. Of course, he also had a newly-dead granny from Paducah, who didn't trust her grandkids to take care of her fourteen cats. She'd hung around after death just to

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make sure. But Roman would eventually find a use for everyone. He didn't think even demons would suspect an elderly lady in a housecoat and slippers of conducting surveillance.

He'd posted Nina on reception detail to greet the fan club she obviously hadn't realized she'd had, and unless Roman missed his guess, wasn't comfortable with. He sensed her disquiet, a turbulence that filtered through him without hesitation or reserve. It was that connection between them again. After a while of meet and greet, he'd pulled her down to sub-level three to give her a break while he spoke privately with a former instructor from Marine special forces training at Quantico. Roman wouldn't let Nina out of his sight. Mer concluding his interview, he went to her, where she'd been pacing in front of the three-Kay retrieval station, clearly tense.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We were supposed to touch base with Gray and Damian a long time ago. I haven't heard from them."

' 'Worried?'

"They're tracking demons. What if they ran into trouble?"

Roman wanted to point out that Gray and Damian were grown men who'd been around a long time and were capable of caring for themselves. He wasn't sure whether he meant to reassure her or stop her from dwelling on her absent companions. His motivation was suspect, so he settled on, "Things are almost in check here. Give me some time to brief with Magdalene and James and we can go find out. Will that work?"

"It will." Nina smiled her thanks, a smile that seemed to brighten the shadows of their realm and catch him hard in his gut when he shouldn't have been able to feel anything.

Then her mouth was drawn into a tight line, worry for Gray and Damian etched on her exquisite face, a face that seemed so alive beneath the hint of color in her cheeks.

Her blush deepened, and Roman realized with surprise that he'd been staring. "You feel it, too." She breathed the words out, and they weren't a question. "I do."

Awareness flared in her wide gaze, a connection between them that felt so real in the unnatural quiet. The silence should have been filled with the enduring resonance of their words, the whisper of their breathing, shallow, affected by their nearness. He could imagine the sound, remember it, the hush of each inhalation, the sigh of exhalation.

Had Roman been thinking, he would have resisted the urge to lift his hand, to reach out . . . But he wasn't thinking of anything but smoothing away those lines from her mouth, of wiping away thoughts of any man except the one standing in front of her. She had such a beautiful mouth, lush, expressive, made for kissing, not frowning.

Her eyes widened in the last possible second, just as his fingers came to rest against her lips. . .

Her skin was warm, yet not quite. Real, yet not. For the span of an instant, the contact almost felt natural, fingers against full lips, skin against skin. Then Roman could feel her essence, her life force, her soul. That odd, resonant hum filtered through him,

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swelled inside, bringing to life sensations that should only be memory. Intense. Staggering. A rush of emotion that coiled inside him, reached out to her. . . a blending of feelings, of need and yearning, of an ache so deep it pulsed through his whole body as though it could start his dead heart beating again.

A sharing of images, each flashing in fast progression: two bodies twined close, hips swaying, skin slick with sweat, fingers threading inside golden hair, forcing her head back until he could drag his mouth over hers, breaths colliding, tongues tangling.

A merging . . .

She glanced back over her shoulder, amber eyes calm beneath half-closed lids. Her golden hair had been plied high on her head, leaving the graceful lines of her chin and neck exposed, the creamy expanse of a bare shoulder and a tantalizing sweep of her back beneath the linen she held wrapped loosely around her. Tendrils had escaped to frame her beautiful face, curling in the steam.

Her skin glowed with fresh dew of a bath.

A smile played around her mouth, the smile of a woman who knew she was being watched, admired.

The smile of a woman who wanted.

Then a sharp sob that tore him from the image they shared. Nina broke away, leaving Roman standing there with his arm outstretched.

Just a finger on her lips.

He met her gaze, her wild eyes.

"I can't be here with you." Her words came hard, broken, as if she fought with her breath to get them out.

He struggled to restrain the need flaring through him, potent, almost uncontrollable, the impulse to pull her

against him; lower his mouth to hers, make her his.

"I need to go."

"Gray and Damian?"

She nodded, and behind his need came a fury so white hot it scorched him. Not even in life had he ever felt such intensity, such power. Jealousy. For this woman, a woman he had no claim on in a place where he shouldn't be thinking about romance, or anything but saving his soul and everyone else's.

"Why are you running?"

"I'll be safe."

"Not from the demons."

"You're temptation."

Her words staggered him, a blow that shouldn't have felt physical, yet in the wake of those vulnerable moments since touching. . . Roman realized he wasn't the only one struggling. He fought for his control degree by degree, so hard won, sensation fading slowly. "That scares you?"

"I'm. . ." her voice trailed off as if remembering. Then her expression transformed, suddenly resolved, resigned. She gave a wry smile. "I'm not good at resisting temptation. Touch seems to be a weakness for me."

Then she disappeared, leaving him stunned and still feeling the receding ache of their merge. Such a small touch. Yet the fallout was far from small, and in those fierce, forsaken moments, Roman only knew he couldn't let her get away. Not for safe harbor from him. Not with other men.

Gray and Damian had been the only men in her life she could touch without an overload of someone's death. Was it any wonder she'd given into temptation? But what if she chose a man of her own will? Then who would she choose?

* * *

"Gray." Nina left Sanctus Command, as if she could escape the crush of sensation inside her, the desire so familiar, so forbidden. But living sensation still coiled within, just as it had when she was newly dead. She should have been able to control her reactions by now. Physical sensation should have been nothing more than a memory, but to her horror and humiliation, Nina could no longer claim her connection with Roman was an after-effect of the shroud.

There was no more denying that Roman's newlydead senses hadn't imprinted themselves on her longdead self. She'd felt the man's desire, so eager, so intense. He'd slipped inside her memories with almost no effort, had sought answers to questions no soul should be thinking about.

She was being tempted. Again. Now that she finally had a chance to use her gift to help, to make amends by accomplishing something real.

Nina hurtled through the void of the passage toward Gray, propelled by a panic she hadn't experienced in so long.

Then she was beside him, standing in some upscale office with windows overlooking the familiar cityscape of a post-Katrina New Orleans. She'd never seen this city when she was alive--only Damian had. It was one of his favorites, and with his artist's gift for detail, he'd described the lazy stretch of river beyond the rise, dotted by water traffic like she'd seen in Maryland, a working river. A busy city.

She had always easily imagined the vibrant colors of blooms spilling over balconies, the sheen of rain-soaked

streets, the haze swelling in courtyards and narrow alleys beneath burdened clouds, all somehow fresher in her memory.

Nina could also see devastation, the shadows lingering in the fringes of the city, darting through the streets, lingering outside doorways and windows, swarming around souls that hurned through the city trying to reclaim their lives.

So many. Too many.

New Orleans had become a feasting place for demons of Despair, Futility, and Hopelessness. The realization jolted Nina back to the reality outside her body, drew her from the feelings that were still so tantalizing, seductive. Damian was with Gray, but before she rallied the sense to ask whose office this was or whether or not they'd intruded on a demon convention, both sensed her presence and turned . . .

'What's wrong?' Gray asked.

Damian hopped off the desk. "Are you all right?"

Nina tried to switch gears, but found her thoughts still caught in the thrall of sensation, so alike the remnants of the shroud that had made mental clarity a struggle.

Then Roman arrived.

For a man who normally seemed composed to the point of somber, he looked exactly as she felt-frayed around the edges, assaulted by sensations that neither of them had any business feeling.

Gray and Damian obviously drew their own conclusions about what might be wrong, and one glimpse of their expressions warned Nina to get a grip.

As much as she needed Gray's calm rationality right

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now, and Damian's uplifting humor, she would accomplish nothing by revealing they'd been right about the merge all along. She would only raise their protective instincts, concern over what ill effects Roman's touch might mean. The last thing she needed was three dead men squaring off in the middle of this office.

Not when they had more important things to worry about. .

"Where are we?" She fought to keep her voice level and calm, not to betray herself.

But these men knew her too well.

Their concerned expressions might have undone her, for something was wrong, they knew, but Nina braced herself to calm their worries and sidestep questions.

In that moment, she understood this was her battle to fight, one she must face without the support and comfort of these men, though they'd always been such a part of her.

This battle she must face alone.

Gray must have seen something of her struggle and, rather than humble her more on a day she'd already been leveled, he raised a hand to halt Damian's interrogation.

He would let her keep her secrets. For now, anyway.

"Lilith Archambault," he said. "She set up an office for the Hurncane Katrina recovery efforts. Humanity United supports several ministries in town, and there was lot of damage in the storm. A shelter in the Ninth Ward was completely wiped out, so she's been overseeing support to the area."

"We left you tracking demons." Roman sounded much more together than she felt. That shouldn't bother her, but it did.

'Took some work, but we tracked ltalo here." Damian came to stand beside Nina. She met his gaze to reassure him, and his hard look softened. 'He's been busy, from what we've heard. We're trying to figure out why."

'Good work, gentlemen," Roman said. "You've established a hard connection between David Samper at Fairwinds and Nathaniel Rush's general assistant. Any word on Esherick?"

Gray shook his head. "We're trying to find out why ltalo is interested in Lilith Archambault."

"Something's going on. That's for sure." Nina forced a casual expression when Roman sliced his gaze her way, refused to let the man think she still suffered any effect of his touch.

He might be able to shrug off the physical so quickly, newly dead that he was, but she wasn't so lucky. Even now those clear eyes looked deep inside her, into places she hadn't given him permission to look, hadn't known would feel so vulnerable.

Turning to the window, Nina stared at the busy city, found the sight of the demons less unsettling than his diamond gaze. "I hate to be the one to break the news, but this place is crawling with demons. I've never seen so many."

'We'll leave Gray and Damian to continue their work then," Roman said. "You don't need to be here."

"Agreed," Gray added.

Damian turned, too, and stared into the city, a quiet, solid presence beside her. She might have found solace in his closeness, but now everything seemed changed.

Yet perhaps nothing more than too much time had passed. Her relationship with Damian had grown through the years from the wild love and abandon of life to an abiding friendship in death.

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It had only taken one newly-dead man who couldn't keep his hands to himself to prove how far from passion they'd actually traveled. She thought she'd lost the ability to experience such intensity over the years.

How wrong she'd been.

"Let's go," Roman told her, his voice a quiet demand.

It obviously hadn't occurred to him that she might question his authority. Not with Gray readily jumping to his side and making the whole situation feel like mutiny.

"Weren't you the one who said we couldn't do battle without risk?" She sounded like she felt: irritable.

Roman arched a dark eyebrow. "Exposing our secret weapon wouldn't be risky, it would be foolish."

Nina was spared having to reply when the door opened and a woman walked into the room.

Lilith Archambault.

Nathaniel Rush's general assistant looked as polished and impeccable as her promotional photos, with long dark hair pulled neatly back from her face, and a stylish suit that had been fitted to her trim figure.

"Call it risky or foolish," Nina said matter-of-factly. "But it's good timing either way."

"Why's that?" Roman asked.

"Because that woman's like Nathaniel Rush. I can't see her. Not a spark of life. Not a hovering demon. Not a bloody thing."

Her words fell heavily between them, and her companions--all three--darted

gazes between her and the woman in question. None seemed to know what to say, and some part of her, an absurdly human part that three centuries of death had not snuffed out-enjoyed their surprise, enjoyed knowing that they needed her, whether they'd rather tuck her safely away or not. Her moment of pride was short-lived, forgotten

when Lilith Archambault came to an abrupt stop in the middle of her office, turned and marched right back out the door again. The woman had no sooner vanished into an adjoining room when the door exploded back against the wall, and demons poured through, writhing, shadowy shapes that streaked across the office. . . toward them. A shriek pierced the silence as the first demons burst through the realms, creating a rupture between life and the afterlife wide enough to accommodate the twisting column of evil they made, so swift, moving and vile in contrast to the glimpses of living color through narrow breaches in the tear. For the few stunned seconds it took to react, Nina recognized Ueland with his incongruous wisps of slimy hair among the indistinct shapes surging toward them.

Demons with names.

"Damn." Damian lunged for Nina.

Roman was ahead of him though, almost brushing against her in his haste to shield her with his body.

"Go!" Gray shot headlong across the room, forcing the demons to split ranks to avoid him as he started to glow with a luminous intensity, to burn as the angels did, a fire from inside that radiated all the good that evil couldn't touch--righteousness, virtue, and justice.

But while three centuries of death had given Gray a chance to hone his angelic abilities, he was no angel, and Nina knew he wouldn't hold so many demons off for long.

Damian knew it, too, and joined him, but his faith had never been as strong as Gray's, and he only managed enough of a glare to force another opening in the ranks, an opening wide enough for Roman to thrust her through.

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The contact of his hands made all those fading physical sensations flare to life again as Nina shot into the void, and the whining shriek of the rupture started to fade.

"No!" She twisted around to go back, but found Roman blocking her.

She avoided the contact. "I can't leave them."

"They're creating a diversion so you can get away." His calm voice was a blanket over her panic. Gray and Damian would be furious if she went back, Nina knew, but in that instant before acceptance, before resignation, every newly-awakened feeling inside rebelled.

"They'll be able to escape without you." Roman's deep voice was an anchor to cling to in the storm of her turmoil, his logic a beacon leading her back to reason.

He was right. Gray and Damian were safer without her, and in that moment. She had a simple choice to make: the past or the future. Roman had been sent to lead this battle. Keeping him safe was priority.

"Where can we hide so the demons won't find us?" he asked.

Nina faced him, recognized only cool professionalism in his eyes, although she felt poised on the edge of the panic, her eternity stretching out before her as dark and uncertain as life had once felt. There was oily one place they could go where demons couldn't follow.

The threshold. And as angels were already interested enough in the happenings around here to send Roman to do battle. . . .

The dark of the passage yielded to an unearthly radiance as Nina led Roman to the plain wooden doors that only opened one way. They glowed around the edges, much like the archives in the Sanctus vaults, and Nina

found the sight comforting. She'd never been this close before, didn't know of any soul who had.

Roman appeared beside her. "Are we going to knock?"

"I don't think we should get that close. I don't know the details of moving on and we don't want to be sucked inside without a chance to explain why we're here."

He stared at the doors with a furrowed brow, and that small show of emotion unnerved her further. She could hear the shriek of the demons renew its intensity.

Nina opened her mouth to call out for help, but just then the light glowing around the doors magnified, a seam of growing radiance as the door began to open.

She froze in place, Roman beside her, unable to do anything but shield her face as the light swelled so bright it scalded. An otherworldly illumination that seared the soul in a way that burned far hotter than any flames on flesh. The fire of virtue. Before Nina could avert her gaze, she caught sight of flaming eyes and a huge sword. There was no mistaking that sword.

The captain who led the host of warrior angels.

For a blind moment, she could only cover her face, fearing the situation had progressed far beyond her control.

"We don't want to move on yet," she called out over the snapping and crackling of angelic fire. "We only came for help."

The heat was so intense that she could no longer sense Roman beside her, only the angel's scalding glory.

"This way is shut to you." The voice was deep and potent, riding over the fire, and unexpectedly familiar.

Nina knew the voice, but couldn't place it, and for a moment, shock muddled her thoughts, made it an effort of will to grasp the angel's denial.

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"You won't help us?"

"Only the one who is free may seek our help."

Free of what? Sin? Selfishness? Nina wanted an answer, couldn't even open her eyes beneath the glare, couldn't face the angel that had denied her so completely.

Urgency spurred her to ask, "What about Roman?"

"He has a task yet."

Which was precisely why he needed help, but Nina didn't get a chance to point that out. The light dimmed, and the blaze of angelic fire faded almost to silence before the frenzied beating of wings filled the void.

"Alternate plan B," Roman suggested.

She turned to face him, the jumble of emotions inside shaming her, anger at such curt rejection, fear because she didn't have an alternate plan. But Roman only watched her as if he wasn't surprised. He looked so damn calm.

"If you've got a charisma," she snapped. "Now would be a good time to see what you can do."

He only shrugged. "Lead the way."

"Some protection you are." The words were out before she could stop them, and Nina had the thought that she might have gotten some help had she been free of frustration.

Willing herself across the passage, she left Roman to follow. She could only think of one place where she might not be refused help.

Suddenly, the gloom of the void lifted. Nina stood on a marshy shore. In the living world, ducks paddled the muddy depths of this bayou. Live oaks stretched branches draped in moss to block the sun. It was a lazy place that

came alive in her imagination only because of the stories she'd heard from the man who lived here.

"Swamp Man," she called out, pointedly ignoring Roman and taking off toward the cottage nestled comfortably in the scrub.

Swamp Man's place wasn't exactly a cottage in the sense that Nina had known cottages in life, more a small frame house made of logs and a tin roof. But large windows on all sides had been designed to create cross ventilation for scented bayou breezes, and a broad porch blocked the sun.

Candles set in dishes of sand had been placed on the railing, the window sills, even on the porch steps, and Swamp Man had once told her they'd been used to attract and burn moths so those in residence could enjoy sitting outdoors to watch a glorious bayou sunset. As Swamp Man was as dead as she, Nina assumed he'd died like she had--long ago, before the days of spraypump insect repellent.

She hadn't asked. Swamp Man offered snippets about a variety of topics on whim. His own.

He appeared on the porch. There was no other way to describe him except that he was a big black man. He had to stand close to seven feet tall; but he was not long-boned or lanky. Every inch of him was hulking, as if God had decided to dole out extra-large helpings the day Swamp Man had been born. His skin was so dark his teeth flashed a burning, almost angelic white on the rare occasions she'd seen him smile.

But there was something rough, almost hard-bitten about his face. Nina suspected most souls, living or dead, would think twice about crossing him. Demons, too, she hoped.

"I'm sorry I came," she said. "I had no other choice. We need to hide." Swamp Man's tiny black eyes cut across Roman

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curiously. Nina didn't usually bring company when she came to the bayou, not even Gray or Damian, although Swamp Man had met both.

"This here your friend?" His voice boomed up from deep inside his barrel chest like the rumble of far-off thunder.

Nina nodded. The term worked better than any she might use to describe Roman at the moment, while her body still hummed with the fading echoes of too much contact. "Roman Barrymore."

Roman only acknowledged Swamp Man with a nod, seemingly content to let her arrange their protection despite her failure at the threshold.

"Demons?" Swamp Man asked.

"A whole damn herd." A beat of silence stretched between them. Time moved to the lazy rhythm of the bayou here, no matter how much Nina wanted to hurry it along.

"All right," Swamp Man said in his distinctive drawl. "You and your friend come with me. I got a place to go.

If your herd can't stampede you, maybe they'll get bored and head home."

"Thanks." She sighed. "Owe you."

Those beady eyes twinkled.

And Nina felt better. She and Roman might actually stand a chance of dodging those demons with Swamp Man's help.

Following Swamp Man, they headed to an idyllic bayou nook, where trees towered about deeper-running waters, an airy place where the sun adorned the world in a glow that nearly blinded her death-dulled vision. She knew they weren't in the living world, as the colors weren't alive, yet the sun managed to shine through the realms to cast the world in a glittering gold haze.

Fleecy clouds rode low in the sky, silhouettes as brilliant

as marble against the sun-drenched sky, and as her sight adjusted, Nina could make out a ramshackle fishing boat riding at anchor near a dock, a low-slung shack nestled in the palmettos, close to shore.

"What is this place?" Roman asked.

"Oh my," Nina said. "How did you--"

"You'll be safe here." Swamp Man gave Nina the only answer she was likely to get right now. "Rest and refresh yourselves. Those demons might pass, but they'll be back. Don't you know it."

That statement implied all sorts of things Swamp Man wasn't saying. Roman must have thought so, too, because he asked, "What do you know about the demons?" Swamp Man shrugged. "You just rest up. You're going to need to be strong. That much I can tell you. I heard all about your Soul Retrieval Unit. You're in for a fight." Then he disappeared, leaving Nina alone with Roman.

Dropping to the sandy bank, she folded her arms over her knees and hid her face, willing that bright sun to warm the dead places inside her.

Strong? Right.

Some black op she was, safe and sound while Gray and Damian were fighting off a legion of demons. Had they escaped, or were they being dragged off into the abyss right now?

This must be a test of her faith. In her mind, Nina knew she wasn't responsible for the choices other souls made. Not Gray and Damian for remaining with her, not Mouse and the others who'd signed onto the Soul Retrieval Unit. Not even Roman, who seemed content to let her do the protecting at the moment.

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Free will--a blessing and a curse.

But the weight of responsibility sat heavily. The sting of rejection still sharp. Free, the angel had said. Of what? Fear? Guilt? She knew things didn't always work out as planned. If she felt guilty every time a soul went left when she'd steered one right, she would never have attempted to help anyone move on.

But she was obviously missing something important.

"Tell me what this place is." Roman intruded on her pity party uninvited. "I didn't think we shifted into the living world, but I can feel the sun."

"We didn't shift," she said. "We're under a veil."

"A veil?"

"Think shroud. Same premise, but instead, of using negative emotions to mask reality, a veil uses positive." She squinted into the glittering gold sky. "I really can't believe Swamp Man can do this. I knew he'd been around a while, but he must have been around even longer than I thought. Do you know how long I've been trying to master this ability?"

Roman shook his head and sat beside her, a lean unfolding of strong muscles that she had to close her eyes to block out.

"Bloody forever. You have no idea how a little positive reality would help some souls make peace with their deaths."

"Would it?"

She nodded. "When I was cast back, a demon--ltalo, it sounds like--shrouded my memory by using the hurtful things from my life. Yearning. Despair.

Katie McGuire was the perfect host because I could live the normal life I always wanted. I was comfortable inside her. It was clever, really. Well thought out. Had it not been for you, Gray, and Damian, I'd probably

still be bleeding away Katie's life bit by bit until the demons got around to dealing with me. But you broke through the shroud with positive memories. See how it works?"

Roman propped a chin on his hand, considering. "I understand that part. But why can I feel?"

"That's the veil, too. A shroud obscures reality. A veil heals reality. But both affect reality. The demons can't see through Swamp Man's veil because it's made up of all good stuff--pleasant feelings, happy memories, comforting touches, thoughtful acts, those sorts of things. But for us, the veil alters the distance between life and death. That's why you can feel more life through it. Just like you do when you shift, only now we're on the other side."

He appeared to consider that, but didn't comment.

Nina was glad. The veil affected more than the distance between life and death, too. It affected her. She was so aware of this man beside her, more aware than she'd been of Gray and Damian since those early days of death. She guessed that Roman had been athletic in life. He was agile, comfortable in his skin though he was a big man--as tall as Damian. He sat beside her, one leg crooked, hand dangling easily over his knee, clearly enjoying the serenity of the bayou, the warmth of the sun.

She could practically feel the air shimmer in the mere inches where his elbow almost touched her arm. She sat with both knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them to create a place where she might rest her face and hide from the world.

But she couldn't hide from this awareness, from the effects of their latest merging in Lilith Archambault's office, such brief contact, yet so potent. He'd meant to

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touch her then, to protect her in his physical way, but she knew he hadn't meant to touch her in the vaults of Sanctus Command.

He hadn't been able to resist.

Touch, so forbidden, so tempting.

Now the veil only heightened her awareness of him, already made potent by the merge.

She wondered if he could feel it, too.

He must, but then Roman's memory of physical sensation hadn't had time to fade. She'd been around so long that her heightened senses were striking, extraordinary. To him sitting next to her was probably just another day at the bayou.

He proved it when he asked, "How did Lilith Archambault know we were there? I thought you were the only one who could see souls between the realms."

"To my knowledge I am. I haven't heard of anyone else, and certainly not a living soul. Why do you think she could?"

"She knew we were there." That somber expression cast his face in hard lines, so striking, so touchable.

"She walked in, saw or sensed us then turned around and sent those demons in. There was no coincidence."

He seemed so certain that Nina didn't question him further. His reasoning made sense.

"We're missing something," he said. "How could a living woman communicate with demons?" "If she was being crowded-" "But we can't confirm that because you can't see her. There's a connection."

"I see everyone. The only reason I can't see Gray or Damian is because I died with them. I can't die twice."

"Would an eternity in the abyss be considered dying?"

The thought made Nina shiver, a reaction made even

more intense by the veil, an icy feeling of fear. "Of a sort, I suppose. Do you think I'll wind up in the abyss with Nathaniel Rush and Lilith Archambault?"

"I don't know. It seems too convenient, but given the available information, I can't think of another reason why you wouldn't be able to see them."

At least he was honest. Nina had to give him credit for that. But what surprised her was how much she needed reassurance just then, how much she wanted to hear him say he wouldn't let the demons get her and steal away her eternity.

Roman had also been honest about why he needed her-as his secret weapon. He'd proven himself ruthless, willing to risk himself and others to achieve his goal. Gray and Damian might very well be headed into the abyss right now--why should she want reassurances from this man? .

And why should she feel shocked or surprised or hurt when she didn't get them? All these feelings swirling around inside her weren't anything more than the effects of one too many touches.

Or were they?

Nina was on her feet so fast that she was halfway to the shack before Roman called out, "Where are you going?"

Anywhere she could to get away from him.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ROMAN fought the urge to go after Nina, a fight as physical as anything he'd ever felt in life. But he stared into the sun-drenched afternoon instead, forcing himself to remember where they were and who was really calling the shots.

She would be safe, and he needed to think.

He'd known from the start that he needed Nina by his side to win this battle. But touching her had convinced Roman of something else-Nina was meant to stand beside him for longer than this battle.

All during his adult life, he had looked for the woman who would complete him, the woman who was his match, and equal.

He hadn't found her in life, but in death.

Touching Nina had convinced him that she was his soul mate, but after their encounter at the threshold, he understood that she would never be free to love him until she let go of her past. Gray and Damian were only a part of her past.

She needed to be free to love him.

Now he stared out into the veiled bayou, feeling a consuming urgency about a woman he knew better than any other. They'd connected through touch, but he couldn't help her stop running from her past, couldn't tell her how to set herself free. He couldn't guide her, could only walk beside her as she discovered the path for herself.

Nina was right. Free will could be both blessing and curse.

He shouldn't be thinking about anything but his mission objective, but longing couldn't be ignored even when he'd already sent Nina fleeing across the passage into a legion of demons—a danger he couldn't fight, or protect her from. He hadn't even been able to protect her from himself.

But to look at her meant wanting to touch her.

* * *

Nina wasn't sure how much time passed before she felt ready to venture out of the fishing shack. Not until she'd made peace with her fears for Gray and Damian's safety, and for the souls who'd thought so much of her opinion they'd signed on for this battle. What would be would be. Nina couldn't change that. Acceptance helped her manage the wild emotions that kept plunging her from panic for Gray and Damian's safety to yearning for Roman.

Acceptance did not prepare her for the sight of Roman Barrymore stretched out on the grass.

Naked.

Nina stopped. If she'd had a beating heart, it would have stopped, too.

She took him in all at once, and there wasn't a part

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that wasn't a bloody work of art. The striking lines of his face had softened in relaxation, and for once he didn't look like the stoic commander who wore the weight of the world on his shoulders, but a man who might smile and laugh once in a while, one who would enjoy knowing pleasure.

She'd been right. Roman had been athletic in life. Nothing else could account for the perfectly-toned body, for the muscles that didn't bulge unnaturally from overwork, but were hard with a strength that was all healthy male. He'd hooked his hands behind his head, leaving his arms flexed and his broad shoulders displayed to perfection. Silky dark hairs nestled in the hollows of his chest, arched down his tight stomach and lower. His long legs stretched out before him, firmly muscled, as attractive as the rest of him.

Then, there was that neat bundle nestled cozily in the dark hair between his thighs. Nina's gaze snagged there as her imagination and senses combined to remember just how pleasurable pleasure could feel. . .

"Uh, clothes, please." With a hand on her brow, she averted her gaze to the water. "Lady on approach."

"No."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

Roman didn't reply for so long that Nina finally had no choice but to look his way. She found him propped up on an elbow, watching her, a dark eyebrow arched in question.

"Nina, let me ask you something. When was the last time you felt the sun on your skin?"

She replied with a scowl, fixed her gaze on his with brutal precision, refused, absolutely refused to let him know the sight of him was making her insides go soft in a way she'd forgotten.

"No comment," he said. "'Then, let me ask another question. When do you think you'll get another chance to feel that sun?"

"I get your point."

"Do you?"

She strode across the shore and plunked down beside him, so close she could have reached out to touch him. All false bravado, of course. All she really wanted to do was run her gaze over the gorgeous terrain of his body.

"Are you fishing for a compliment?" she asked. "If so, then you're very attractive. I like the sight of you even better than the bayou, and I've always liked Swamp Man's place." He almost smiled. Not quite, though, but she could see humor twinkling in his eyes, knew somehow if he would only let go, the effect would transform him.

She wondered what it would take to make this man smile.

"You're worried about them," he said, not a question.

"You think I want to talk to you about Gray and Damian?"

He inclined his head toward the water. "There's no one else here. Me and the ducks. Take your pick."

"Why do I have to talk?"

"Because I'll feel better."

"You'll feel better?"

He nodded.

"You think I care how you feel?" More false bravado, but she sounded casual and that counted for something.

"I hoped you would. A little at least."

She scowled. "Roman, the point, please."

"You're upset. I want to do something to help. I'm

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just not sure what. Talking makes some people feel better."

"Clothes would work for me." Lowering her gaze, she deliberately took in every masculine inch of him, hoping to provoke some reaction, not really caring if only she proved to this man that she wouldn't run from temptation.

Though she should run, far, far away.

But Nina got her reaction. She lifted her gaze to find Roman smiling, a real smile, and the transformation was as amazing as she'd known it would be.

He was a beautiful man, even more so beneath the veil where the contrast between his clear gaze and dark hair was all the more striking. She wished she'd seen him alive just once, knew life would make those pale green eyes even more potent.

As if she needed more potency from him. Just making him smile felt like an accomplishment, the veil only seemed to heighten the sharpened emotions that were still tumbling around inside her, making her feel so many things.

All emotions that felt good, of course, which left her wondering how anyone could expect her to resist. Not only had she been primed for physical sensation under the shroud, but then Gray and Damian had brought to life memories of pleasure. Then a merge. Now a veil.

Nina was afraid to wonder if things could get any worse.

She didn't have to wonder why she felt the way she did, wanting to know more about the man Roman was, not the director of Sanctus or the leader of the Soul Retrieval Unit. Not the man who placed duty above all--even the eternities of his people.

But the man who stopped in obscure antique stores

to admire art, the man who got naked to feel the sun warm his skin, the man who wanted to help her feel better.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"What?"

"Tempting me."

His smile widened, just enough to sparkle in his eyes. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"Oh please. You saw memories that you had no business seeing and now you think I'm--"

"You're way off base." He interrupted her. "Your memories only showed me how much you care."

"Why does that even matter unless you're looking for some new and improved ways to manipulate me? And Gray, Damian, and everyone else. Aren't we working hard enough for you yet?"

All traces of Roman's smile faded, and Nina felt its loss deep in this muddle of emotion, was sorry she was the cause. Had he needed people to care about him in life? Had he let anyone in or had he pushed everyone away for the sake of his work?

She wanted to know. She shouldn't want from this man.

Pushing into a sitting position, Roman treated her to a spectacular display of gathering muscles that only heightened the need to lash out and defend herself. Otherwise she would fail this test without question.

'This isn't about work, Nina. Each one of us is essential to the team. One person can't fight this battle alone. Especially not me. I just got hold of the rule book and have barely had a chance to crack it open. We wouldn't have gotten out of that office if not for Gray and Damian. We wouldn't be here if not for you

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bringing us to your friend. The angels have a plan. I'm just going along with them."

"Are you sure it's the angels' plan?"

His brows drew together in a deepening frown. "Yes, Nina, I'm sure. But to be honest, I'm also looking for a way to establish myself with you. I'm competing against two men who have been your companions for a lot longer than I've been in existence--alive or dead."

Nina fought the urge to back away, to get as far away as she could. Roman was talking about things that were making her insides melt, forbidden things that definitely wouldn't lead her any closer to salvation. "Roman, you better make time to read that rule book. And you better do it fast because you're breaking rules left and right here, and taking a whole lot of souls along for the ride."

"You're worried about your eternity?"

She nodded. "Don't you think you should be, too?"

"I'm worried about stopping evil from taking over two realms."

Nina did break away then, couldn't face the gravity in his steely gaze, the absolute truth of his admission.

Or her own shame for worrying about herself when so much more was at stake.

"I have a job to do," he said quietly. "I've been given tools to do it. I will."

"But you're talking about competing with Gray and Damian." Her voice broke, a desperate sob in this peaceful place. "How is that work? It's like you're asking me out on a date."

"We haven't moved on yet, Nina. And my eternity has room in it for love." He chuckled softly, and the unexpected sound broke through her turmoil, forced her to turn back to him, disbelieving.

To find his face alive with laughter. "I'm trying to figure out if you're still involved with them. If you are I can't ask you out, can I?"

Nina could only stare. Nothing was making sense in her head, and she didn't think remnants of the shroud were to blame. Her emotions were, and the physical awareness that had been simmering since she'd broken free of her living host, an awareness that flared to life continually around this man. With his laughter still filtering through her, Nina did get up then, as if distance between them would help clear her head.

She went to stand at the shore, willing herself to focus on the serene scene, as if mentally taking deep breaths to calm ragged breathing and a racing pulse.

She never heard Roman move until suddenly he was behind her, not quite touching, but his tall, strong body hovered so close that she could feel him everywhere.

"You're worried, Nina, and upset. I can help. Let me."

"By talking?"

"No, like this." Raising his hands to her face, he poised them over her cheeks, just a breath away from skin touching skin. To Nina's amazement, colors sparked in that bare distance, as if their body heat connected to create shimmers in the veil.

Molding his hands over her jaw, he glided a phantom caress down her throat, still not touching, but in the wake of the motion, color shimmered in a chaotic profusion, sent warm waves of pleasure radiating through her.

"What are you doing?" she gasped aloud.

"Making you feel better, I hope." His voice sounded muffled by that sensual haze. "I noticed it happen when I sat down next to you earlier. My shoulder almost

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touched you. I saw the colors and they felt good. You don't know what's happening?"

"It must be the veil." Her voice sounded languid, drugged with pleasure. "It blurs the distance between the realms. We're retaining more of an echo of life here, that's why we can feel the sun. More life means merging would be different, too."

"Is this why you want to create a veil? To use these good emotions to help a soul heal some of the negative things they might be feeling, like grief?" She nodded, her head so heavy.

"Nina, I think Swamp Man knew. That's why he told us to rest and get strong for the battle. He knew you needed to clear away the shroud. Me, I just need to get stronger."

"Oh, please." Did he really expect her to buy that? There wasn't any rationalization for touching.

"I believe it."

"I won't merge with you. There are long-term consequences. You should know that by now."

"I do, but this is different." He dragged his open mouth along the curve of her neck, just enough so she could feel the burst of an almost breath, the pleasure pouring through her in a shower of molten sparks.

"So tell me. Are you still with them?" He didn't ask, but commanded, and Nina wanted to answer with some remark that would give her back control over the moment.

But the moment was all Roman's. He controlled her with his almost touches,

sending sensation through her, extreme, unlike anything she remembered from life.

This was two essences caressing, not the intense blast of a merge, but a veiled version, prolonged just enough to become pure pleasure, powerful enough to paralyze.

"So are you?" he prompted in that throaty voice. Nina fully intended to lie--what was one more sin at this stage of the game--but the only word to slip out was, "No." And before she could even guess at what one tiny word might set into motion, Roman wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against him. They came together full length, a smooth pairing of perfectly aligned curves. She could feel the imprint of his body with more than an echo of the physical, and for an instant, she felt overwhelmed by the simple feel of him, the strong legs he braced apart to hold her tight, the hard thighs against her backside, the bulge of his groin in the small of her back, the strong arms that anchored her close as he lowered his head to rest his chin in the crook of her neck. Then an otherworldly pleasure poured through her as their essences brushed through the veil, caressing, not quite merging. But along with the sensation came another connection . . . their thoughts brushed, too, all the sensual memories they'd shared and new memories that would be theirs alone to make. "We can't." Nina tried to twist around, wanting to touch him everywhere, willing herself to resist the temptation of him, so forbidden. Roman held her locked against him, strong arms holding her tight, her back to his chest. "I can help." His demand burst against her ear, a gust of warm breath that sent shivers through a body suddenly vibrant and vulnerable with life. "We can't." "Just a kiss." Rocking on his heels, Roman forced her to lean back

for balance. Nina could only melt against him, stunned by the way their bodies came together as if they had substance, as if a pulse beat beneath all that warm, hard muscle, as if his erection swelled against the small of her back. A secret part of her thrilled to the knowledge that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. But Nina had learned the hard way about giving into temptation. Her desires had drawn Gray and Damian into a relationship that had wound up drawing attention and censure, ultimately costing them all their lives. And here she was tempted again. She needed to find the strength to break away, the will to resist. . . . Still holding her firmly with one arm around her waist, Roman brought the other to rest on her chest as if trying to feel her heartbeat, long fingers warm, tantalizingly close to her bodice, where her cleavage swelled as her chest rose and fell on each imagined breath. With agonizing slowness, he dragged his hand over the rise of her breasts then down the expanse of her stomach, and by some trick of magic, her clothing vanished beneath his touch, until she stood exposed to the waist, breasts tightening in the breeze, skin warmed by the sun on this bayou bank. He growled low in his throat, a satisfied sound. "You said a kiss." He only chuckled, an easy sound. "A kiss with skin." Pushy man. "Roman--" "Just a kiss with skin, Nina, you have my word." "The word of a man who doesn't know the meaning of rules." "Tell me you don't want my mouth on you." Before she could get a word out, he'd lowered his face to her shoulder and

pressed his open mouth to the base of her throat.

And Nina could feel him everywhere. Purposeful lips gently sucking the almost pulse beneath her skin. Silky hair tickling her chin. The brush of a stubbled cheek. An iron-thewed arm tightening, pulling her impossibly closer.

The heat of his erection against her bare back.

How could she tell him she didn't want his mouth on her?

She did.

Her senses flooded with awareness as he gently drew on her throat. In this veiled world of pleasure, arousal throbbed through her as though her heart did still beat with life. She could smell his freshly-washed hair, feel the heat radiating off his naked skin, feel his arms tremble with his struggle for restraint. Not so long ago, he'd been a man who could simply make love to a woman. Now he was bound, and his desire like her own kindled, so much more intense than anything they could have ever experienced alive.

How could they resist?

"Tell me you don't want this, Nina:" He trailed his mouth along her shoulder. Kisses, only kisses and skin.

Then he knelt behind her. His mouth traced a moist trail down her back, making her shiver. Settling his hands in the curve of her waist, he worked his way down, undressing her with those slow strokes of his hands, exposing her skin to his open-mouthed kisses. Down her spine, over her bottom, along her thigh, behind her knee.

Each brush of his lips teased her senses to life until Nina had to grip his shoulders and hang on to remain standing.

Then she was naked, too.

"Tell me you don't want this." He gazed up at her with those clear eyes, her own desire mirrored inside his

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gaze, the raw lines of his face revealing his own struggle for control. "Tell me."

His eyes fluttered shut as he pressed his mouth to her stomach, thickly-fringed lashes forming dark halos beneath his eyes. His whole demeanor was a man who yearned. And from her vantage, the sight of this strong, commanding man kneeling before her, so filled with want, flooded her with feelings she didn't know what to do with, a tenderness that brought tears to her eyes. Bittersweet tears for what they might have had together.

"Tell me," he whispered against her skin, a broken sound that echoed in the serene sound of the afternoon.

Nina could tell him nothing. Not even a lie to save them both.

She could only hang on as he dragged his mouth down, down. . . he eased her thighs apart with knowing hands, just enough to press those gentle kisses at the juncture, spear his tongue in the intimate folds there.

More kisses and skin. More kisses.

The pleasure soared through her, stole the strength from her limbs until she collapsed, sinking to the ground, suddenly boneless. With a low moan, he gathered her into his arms, pulling her onto his lap, and she clung to him, their bodies touching everywhere, her breasts to his chest, thigh to thigh, that throbbing male heat between them, an aching reminder of their need. He speared his fingers into her hair, forced her head back until he could search her face.

"Tell me," he whispered the plea against her mouth.

Nina should tell him. This burden was hers. He was newly dead, still driven by physical memory. She knew better. After lingering so long, she should have had so much more control, should have been able to resist.

Lead us not into temptation. . .
Then their mouths found each other and there was nothing but arousal,
yearning, desire.
Just a kiss.

* * *

Roman didn't know when they'd collapsed to the shore, but when he awoke, he was sprawled out on the sand, feeling as if he'd slept the night away. But the sun had only faded to twilight, and the breeze on his skin had barely cooled. He hadn't slept since dying, but he remembered this feeling, the familiar drowsiness. He hadn't realized he would miss something so routine. Nina stretched out beside him, not quite touching, though if she rolled the slightest bit, she'd be in his arms. She slept, too, looked so peaceful. He wondered how peaceful she'd be when she awoke. She was still fully clothed, and he hoped that counted for something. Maybe not. He didn't think she'd appreciate what they'd done, wouldn't be able to see their desire as a way to cherish each other, to love. She would think they hadn't resisted temptation. Watching her sleep, Roman let their interlude replay in his head. They'd been right together, and he'd found something beautiful in her arms. Maybe he should be sorry, but all he felt was grateful, as if death had gifted him with something so precious in a place he hadn't expected to find it. He hadn't realized how much he'd carved out closeness from his life. After losing his parents, he'd drowned himself in school, special forces training, Sanctus. He hadn't let another in because he hadn't met

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a woman he considered his match. He'd carved love out of his life so completely, even forgetting that he'd chosen his career to serve. Until death had reminded him. Until Nina--a striking reminder of why he'd chosen to continue fighting the battle in death. And it hadn't been the power of command, although too many years had passed since he'd questioned his motives. He fought for his fellow men in the living world. For the lingering souls in the passage. For himself and his team. For a woman so generous in spirit, who was still finding her way. Roman wouldn't rationalize his feelings for her. He was connected to her in a way he could never have conceived, but he was. Nina, so right. But not simple, never simple. Unlike Nina, he didn't believe this had been some test. There was no chance. They'd been brought here for a reason. He couldn't know what the consequences would be, could only hope he hadn't jeopardized their mission. The thought helped speed along the process of awakening, and as he came back to himself, Roman realized something else--he felt revitalized, focused, strong. So as the sun set behind the veil, he used the time to review the intel on this mission, to examine the evidence with fresh eyes, seeking new perspective, asking new questions. "The charism of pleasure, Roman?" Nina said sleepily, drawing him from his thoughts. "Is that your special gift?" Tilting his head to face her, he found her watching him, eyes still heavy, beautiful face still reflecting the lingering quiet of peaceful dreams.

"Right now it is." He leaned close, until his mouth almost brushed her cheek, the amazing colors from that phenomenon within the veil shivering like rainbow sparks between them. A small gift of pleasure, like a kiss. "Good morning."

"Looks like night to me."

"It is."

"I honestly can't remember the last time I slept," she said, a wistfulness in her tone, perhaps for unexpected reminders of life.

"How do you feel?"

She met his gaze with an almost shy awareness of the intimacy they'd shared.

"Not awake enough to say yet."

She was avoiding the obvious, which was probably just as well, Roman decided. He wasn't sure how he'd expected her to react to a meeting of their souls when she still needed so much convincing, still had so much to make peace with. But he didn't want to lose this intimacy they'd found, so he would simply continue as if they'd already segued into a new place in their relationship, showing her what he wanted through his actions. She hadn't put distance between them yet, and that much seemed hopeful, at least.

Roman wished he could touch her, settled for tracing a finger a hairsbreadth above her cheek, enjoying the warmth that radiated upward, pleased when she shivered.

"Have you been awake long?" she asked.

"Not too long. Time enough to assess the new intel. This connection between Italo and Lilith opens up new possibilities. I don't think I'm seeing them all."

"Can't stop working for long, can you?"

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"It's my gift, but, Nina, I've been thinking. . . You said you see demons as they are, and angels, too, right?"

"Mm-hm."

"Is it possible for a demon to alter reality like this veil does? Could a demon change its appearance in the living world? Angels have in the Bible." Nina stared up at him, jolted from her drowsy state. "A powerful demon could."

"Then what would you see?" The possibilities gained speed in his head as Nina's expression mirrored comprehension. "If a demon changed its appearance to look like Nathaniel Rush or Lilith Archambault, you wouldn't see their souls--"

"I'd see them exactly as they are."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NINA hadn't argued when Roman insisted they spend the night taking advantage of the opportunity to regain their strength. There was a bed inside the fishing shack, and while climbing in beside him slammed her with the memories of their encounter, she thought more sleep sounded like the perfect escape. A lot of years of death had taught her there wasn't a problem that wouldn't still be around when she got back to it.

Roman Barrymore definitely qualified as a problem.

One she really needed to avoid at the moment. This wasn't life where they might date, become acquainted, and have a future.

Her own life hadn't even been that simple.

She didn't know about Roman's. But from the little she'd glimpsed of the man himself, she didn't think his world had been any simpler, either.

Yet they'd started something in motion when they'd

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merged, and each ensuing touch only seemed to propel them faster and faster toward. . . what?

Hell seemed the obvious answer. All these feelings roiling around inside her could only spell trouble, which was exactly why she, Gray, and Damian had avoided this sort of entanglement. Better to not even travel down the path of quasi-temptations than to take chances. Now Nina had.

Her concern for Gray and Damian's safety wasn't as easily set aside as her dilemma with Roman. She was scared for them. She told herself she'd know in her heart if they were gone, but she didn't believe it any more than she believed this whole situation would turn out right in the end.

All of which made the long-forgotten ordinariness of climbing into a bed beside a man even more bittersweet. But the veil worked yet another miracle, and she actually slept again, a deep slumber free from dreams of lost lovers or an irresistible man who seemed determined to break all the rules.

Swamp Man turned up shortly after dawn.

He tapped politely on the front door then pushed inside, saying, "Coast is clear."

Slicing a black gaze straight to the bed, which occupied a corner in the one-room shack, he smiled one of his dazzling smiles that went a long way toward waking Nina up. "Smart move. You feeling better?"

She nodded. "You're a Godsend."

"Agreed." Roman sat up beside her, running a hand through his hair, tousling the dark strands in a way he never did in death. "Morning would be perfect if you had an espresso machine."

Swamp Man chuckled. "Can't help you there, but I'll remove the veil when you're ready to go."

"If you don't mind, I have a few questions first." Roman was on his feet and back at work so fast that Nina had to wonder if the man had ever actually slept. His rested expression yielded to that sharply-honed intensity not even sleep-ruffled hair could detract from.

And good timing appeared to be Roman's because Swamp Man was chatty. Her big friend took a seat on a stool at the table and said, "Sure, a demon could make itself look like a living soul, but it would have to be a mighty bad demon. From what I hear, Italo might be bad enough. Might not. Can't say for sure. But you're talking big doings with this coup. I hear Italo's clever, but not much of a leader. Might be he's working for someone even badder."

"What about Esherick?" Roman asked. "Ever hear of him? We haven't been able to find out anything at all."

Swamp Man gave a low whistle. "Now there's your demon who would be even badder."

He went on to tell them about this even badder demon, who'd been involved in the fall of not one, but two Biblical cities.

"Esherick's from Satan's own legion, one of his top commanders. They don't get any bigger and badder. He's not going to like hearing about what you got going on."

Nina wasn't exactly thrilled to hear about this, either.

She couldn't imagine how she'd feel without Swamp Man's veil of positive emotions. But the sheer physicality of their altered reality was making her stomach pitch uneasily. Nearly three hundred years of feeling nothing, and here she was nauseous twice in the span of a few days.

"If Roman's right and Italo is masquerading as Lilith Archambault, then I understand why we couldn't

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get close," Nina said. "We hadn't even shifted, Swamp Man, but that demon sent a freaking legion after us, tore right through the realms."

"That shouldn't surprise you none, Nina. You and your friends been around a long time."

He obviously wasn't talking about Roman. "What I don't get then is Nathaniel Rush. If he's really Esherick, how come he didn't sense us? We were all there. Me, Gray, and Damian. I know the lesser demons can't feel us. I was in the same realm as Ueland and Gide. In the same room."

"Same thing there--demon has got to be strong enough to feel you." Swamp Man rubbed his chin with jumbo fingers. "You sure this Rush fellow didn't know?" Roman met her gaze, and everything about the way he looked at her had changed since their arrival in the bayou. Even beneath the intensity of discovery in his eyes, Nina could see pleasure, and possessiveness, a reminder of the unfinished business between them. A promise that they would get around to finishing. And she could feel that promise down to her toes.

"He's right," Roman said. "Nathaniel Rush might have known we were there and simply not reacted. If he told Lilith Archambault to be on the lookout for us, that could explain why she acted as fast as she did."

Swamp Man pushed up from the wooden chair and stood, signaling the end of their chat "Looks like you two are nice and rested. Seems like a good time to bring down the veil."

"One more question." Roman didn't wait for Swamp Man to reply. "If demons can alter their appearances enough to function in the living world then is it safe to say they could also create the appearance of a soul to deceive Nina?"

Nina wasn't sure why that mattered anymore, knowing a powerful enough demon could appear in any form, but the question seemed to tickle Swamp Man, who gave a rolling laugh, "Sounds like a safe bet to me. Only the really strong ones, though, and only supposing they knew they needed to show a soul."

"Of course." And Roman smiled.

"What was that all about?" Nina asked after they'd said their good-byes and were on their way back to Sanctus Command.

"A thought occurred to me," he said. "Wanted to follow up on it while I had the chance."

Nina wasn't satisfied but couldn't come him into further explanation as they arrived in sub-level four.

Gray and Damian were standing at the computer station with Mouse, James, and Magdalene, looking just as they always did, tall and perfectly handsome. Gray, her oh-so-noble guardian. Damian, her dashing artist. Both perfectly fine and, judging from their expressions, as relieved to see her.

"About time," Damian said, and to Nina's disbelief, she started to cry.

The veil, like the shroud, had left behind remnants of its own. This emotional upheaval was another result of the quasi-merging with Roman.

Gray caressed her with a gaze, but there were no words. He would have folded her in his arms if he could, a place where everything had always been made right again.

"Nina sweet, were you worried about us?" Damian hid everything he felt behind a wry smile.

"I didn't know. . . I was so-" Tears that weren't really there but felt so damn real choked her, and she forced herself to stop, to calm herself and try again as

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the two men she'd loved longest watched with amused, and satisfied, expressions.

She waved her hand savagely as if she could brush away all these surplus feelings. "I hate this." Another sob. "I'm positively drenched in emotion."

Gray and Damian exchanged knowing glances then Damian offered, "Can't be worse than PMS."

Magdalene gave a snort of derisive laughter.

Argh!

Turning her back, Nina willed her overwrought emotions under control. She'd never been comfortable drawing attention to herself, and right now everyone in sub-level four was getting a show.

Turning around brought her face to face with Roman.

And he was smiling.

"If you'll excuse me," she managed to say before popping down to the solitary quiet of sub-level three.

Damn men. One would have been more than enough.

But Gray and Damian were safe. For now, anyway.

And that was really all that mattered.

The quiet of the glowing vault helped her focus on the familiar calm of death, and by the time Gray and Damian showed up, she'd almost found her composure again. Almost.

"Are you all right, my dear?" Gray asked.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak when the sight of them together still tugged at places inside she hadn't felt in so long. And they seemed so gratified that she'd been beside herself with worry they graciously stepped into the breach, saying everything that needed to be said.

"Roman told us where you went," Gray said. "Very good thinking. You've made a

good friend in Swamp Man."

"So he hid you under a veil." Damian leaned back against the monitoring station. "Man, I would have liked to see that. Must have been something." She nodded. More something than either of them would care to know about. "But what happened to you?" There, she sounded almost normal again. "How did you get away?"

"Same way you did." Damian wagged his brows. "Ran like hell and hid until it was safe to come out again."

"Where?"

"I was with him." Damian cocked his head toward Gray, long braided queue swinging behind him. "Where do you think we went?"

"Church," she said softly.

Gray leveled a stare at the two of them, clearly not amused, but Nina knew he wasn't offended. "Seemed the best place at the time. We shifted into Manhattan and spent some time at St. Patrick's. Busy place, and you know how prayer shakes up demons. Don't think they could tell who was alive or dead."

"You shifted? Oh, Gray, that was unbelievably risky. What if they'd overtaken you? There were so many."

"Not as bad as it could have been;" Damian said. "I think Gray stunned them stupid with his angel impersonation. We were out of there before they recovered."

Nina laughed. "I'm not surprised. You were very impressive, Gray. And clever."

"Impressive?" Damian rolled his gaze. "Sanctimonious ass looked like a cartoon superhero."

"So did you, Damian," Nina couldn't resist pointing out. "You just didn't glow as bright."

Damian scowled.

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Gray smiled.

And everything was back to normal again-almost.

Except for the man she'd shared pleasure with, the man who'd evoked emotions inside her that she hadn't experienced since life. The man she'd come to respect and care for. Too much.

Even almost normal ended when they reached sublevel four.

"I need a connection, people," Roman was saying.

"My gut is live on this. Unity Day is two days away. Whatever's going to happen will go down then."

There was a crowd gathered around his computer station. Magdalene, James, and Mouse, then several others Nina recognized. The military instructor Roman had spoken privately with. A sheriff from Baltimore. An old lady in slippers. Gregory Marstiller.

Sidling into the group behind him, she whispered a greeting and asked, "Things getting squared away?"

"Sure are. Thanks to you."

Nina smiled.

"Humanity United is on the countdown," Roman said. "We're talking logistics all over the globe. This event isn't happening without a serious amount of involvement from various arenas. Neither is a coup. I need around-the-clock surveillance on all the key players to get some idea of what's happening, so we can implement countermeasures."

"Countermeasures, Roman?" Magdalene scoffed. "Shit. We don't have a clue how they're going to pull this off. How do we formulate countermeasures?"

An excellent question, Nina thought, but Roman didn't look fazed.

"We start with surveillance;" he said. "Unfortunately,

that won't be as simple as it sounds. Our operatives who can move easiest through this realm have been dead so long that our targets sense them when they get close. We'll circumvent the problem by sending in surveillance teams that aren't so noticeably dead."

Noticeably dead?

Nina stood there, mouth open, completely not believing what she was hearing. Surely he didn't mean . . .

"Hallelujah." James stretched his arms heavenward. "I'm finally getting out of this basement. I am getting out of this basement, Roman?"

"You are." He swept a perfunctory gaze over his troops. "Team two--LaTortue and Marstiller. Jamesteam leader. Lilith Archambault is on her way to D.C. as we speak. You'll pick her up at Ronald Reagan."

Glancing at the woman who sat in the chair at the computer station, he continued. "Team one-me and Magdalene. I'm team leader. Nathaniel Rush will be monitoring the event from Humanity United headquarters in Amsterdam."

"Mags in the field. Scary." James turned to Gregory Marstiller. "I'm glad you're my team second."

"And you're about as funny as a gunshot wound to the head," Magdalene shot back. "You're sure about this, Roman?"

"I'm sure," he said decidedly, cutting off James's reply--a cheeky one from the looks of it. "We've confirmed that Lilith Archambault senses the dead, and we can project how she might react. Team two will handle her. Magdalene will provide the locations of all the churches in the area. You both know D.C. well, so implementing the contingency plan shouldn't be difficult in the event you need egress." He paused to make eye contact with team one.

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"Got it, boss," James said, and Gregory nodded.

Damian mouthed the words, "He's kidding, right?"

Nina shook her head and mouthed back, "I don't think so."

"Nathaniel Rush, on the other hand, is an unknown," Roman continued. "We suspect he's actually a powerful demon called Esherick, but haven't confirmed his identity or whether or not he can sense the dead. Unfortunately, I'm also an unknown--newly dead with a few variations. Hopefully those variations won't put me on Rush's radar. If they do, they'll also give me an advantage at egress."

"Remind me again why being on your team is a good thing," Magdalene said.

Roman cut her short with a frown. "With any luck, we'll all be background noise to these demons. After teams one and two make initial contact and we see how that goes, I've got individual assignments for the rest of you with Humanity United coordinators positioned at key points in Unity Day's operation. We've got a lot of ground to cover, people. Mission objective is gathering intel so we can formulate a model on Rush's plan.

That's it. Any questions?"

"Excuse me." Gray spoke in that peer-of-the-realm voice that never failed to get attention. "You're saying that you and all these newly-dead souls are going to follow Nathaniel Rush and Lilith Archambault?"

"I have a question, too," Damian added. "Did that veil wipe out your memory of New Orleans?"

"From what Swamp Man said, the trouble seems to be the length of time we're dead," Roman countered, his expression set in granite. "My teams are made up of people who haven't been dead a month. We should get under the radar."

"Less than a month." Damian cast Nina and Gray a sidelong glance. "'And you don't see that as trouble in itself?" .

Gray moved closer to the computer station, gearing up to be a voice of reason. "You're risking yourself and your people when you're not sUre." Which shouldn't be coming as a surprise to any of them, Nina knew. Roman needed answers and was prepared to do what it took to get them no matter what the potential cost.

'There's got to be some other way," she said. "You know what will happen to you all if the demons rip through the realms. We barely got away."

'We've discussed contingencies," Roman said coolly. "There are churches all over. They'll provide adequate cover should we need it."

Adequate cover? "Roman, surely we can--"

"We're operatives, de Lacy." Magdalene stared her down, even though Nina had a good four inches on her.

"Contingencies are the name of the game. Just relax."

Nina stared back, just emotionally out of control enough to engage in a pissing contest. Magdalene might be nastier, but Nina had been dead longer. Keep the newly dead's attention long enough and. . .

Magdalene started to fade.

"Damn." She narrowed her gaze at Nina, who only smiled.

Unfortunately, they were drawing attention. Souls were moving close to the computer station to hear what was being said, and whispers started filtering through the crowd.

Magdalene and James exchanged a worried glance.

Roman leaned back against the computer station,

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folded his anus over his chest, looking as if he had all the time in the realm to wait for the buzz to die down.

Nina didn't like what she was hearing, though. Whispers about demons. About the swinging balance in the realms. Sure; souls wanted to help, but she could sense the demons.

Worry. Anxiety. Fear. Nina could hear it all in the murmurs. Along with an underlying trace of Resentment about why a man who'd been sent by an angel to fight a battle should need to place his people at such risk.

The questions that she, Gray, and Damian had raised were generating more questions that weren't reflecting kindly on the chain of command, which started and ended with Roman. They'd practically invited temptation demons inside Sanctus. Not smart.

Mouse caught Nina's gaze with a look that demanded: Do something.

But Nina wasn't sure what to do. She understood the time limit, knew the Soul Retrieval Unit couldn't act until they fitted a few more all-important pieces into place. To do that they needed information. But to send newly-dead souls up against one of Satan's own commanders and a powerful minion felt like tossing lambs into a den of hungry lions.

And they hadn't even touched on the subject of eternal damnation.

"Roman, there's got to be a way I can get close without being detected. I'll talk to Swamp Man--"

That clear gaze captured hers.

He strode toward her in that too-physical way, a way that made her so aware of the connection between them, of the forbidden touches that should have never

happened, the feel of his naked skin against hers, his hands on her, his kisses.

"Nina," Roman said, in voice that made everything personal. "I understand your concerns. But you need to trust me to make the right decision, and let my people do their jobs."

She waited, feeling nailed to the floor by everything in his gaze. But he waited, too. He offered no reassurance, no defense. He did nothing but set the decision squarely in her lap because he knew these souls would all follow her lead.

She dragged her gaze from Roman's, to scan the faces that had gathered close, spectators ringside at a prize fight. Everyone looked to her. No one said anything. No one charged her to make the choice for them. They all just waited to see what she would do.

"Nina," he crooned in that throaty low voice. "You know I'll keep my word."

He was on his knees. His dark head against her thigh.

His fingers stroking away her clothes with magical caresses. In the shaded bayou beneath a warm sun, she stood naked. His lips pressed inside the hollow of her lower back. His tongue teasing the cleft between her cheeks. Moist, open-mouthed kisses that trailed down her thigh to that sensitive place behind her knee, made her shiver with want, made him impossible to deny.

Only a kiss.

The scene flashed in Nina's memory, sudden, startling, and as she stared into Roman's face, she knew that he had seen the memory, too, the connection between them only stronger now for all their touches, their quasimerging beneath the veil.

"Jesus," Damian's voice shot out, breaking the spell.

A reminder Roman wasn't the only one connected.

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She didn't know how much Damian could feel of her yearning, or Gray for that matter. Perhaps they just knew her well enough to guess at what might have happened between her and Roman under the veil.

But when she turned to face them, she found them standing shoulder to shoulder, united, their stony gazes .

questioning, their silence charging her with breaking their covenant. .

She could never lie to them.

She hadn't resisted temptation. Not entirely, anyway.

"What are you doing, Nina?" Damian asked, despair aching in his voice.

Gray had no words, would never repay betrayal in kind, but the disappointment in his face weighed far heavier than any weight she thought she could bear.

They'd remained by her side for so long, postponing their eternities, determined to protect her until she was ready to move on. Now she had.

But not to the threshold. To a place where they couldn't follow where she led, to a man they couldn't protect her from.

Nina wanted to disappear, to simply put all this turmoil behind her. For a blind moment she stood on the brink . . .

Running, always running.

Then she saw Roman, his face resolute. He expected so much, yet his clear eyes promised that he wanted only what she could give.

Nina had made her choices.

She wouldn't run again.

Even though she was openly forced to choose between these men in her life, to lead by example when she couldn't be sure if she was moving closer to

satvation or farther away.

Do something, Mouse had charged her.

What? She could argue both sides of this debate. Roman was focused on mission objective. So she stood there, feeling more alone than she'd ever felt. Roman was waiting along with the rest of the Soul Retrieval Unit.

If God had a plan, why didn't He speak up so she had some clue what to do?

"You're a wimp, John," a woman said somewhere behind her. "You never heard of a martyr?" .

"I wouldn't mind dying for the cause," a gruff male voice replied. "But we're talking eternity here."

"Saving the world is bigger than a few eternities."

"Sure. When those eternities are someone else's."

Nina had heard similar words before, and Roman's voice suddenly swelled in her memory, a hard truth veiled beneath beautiful feelings in a Louisiana bayou.

"I'm worried about stopping evil from taking over two realms."

If nothing else, Roman was willing to risk his eternity along with everyone else's.

She met his gaze, faced the expectation there. "What if I wait in the wings near one of the teams? I might be able to help with an escape if we need one."

"You'll back up my team." His voice swelled with everything he didn't say.

And the murmuring souls around them fell silent.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE city of Amsterdam managed to be as picturesque in death as it had been in life, with its historic architecture and bridges crossing the network of canals through the city. As one of the major art centers of the world, Amsterdam was a frequent stop in Roman's travels.

Humanity United's global headquarters resided in an unpretentious building in a section of town not far from the city's seat of government. Roman and Magdalene found Nathaniel Rush emerging from an office while shrugging on a suit jacket, issuing calm-voiced directions to a shirt-sleeved assistant that tagged after him.

Roman directed Magdalene to hang back, poised to react should a legion of demons tear through the realms, but if Rush noticed their arrival, he made no indication.

Which did nothing to reassure Roman.

He could only trust in the fact that Nina was ensconced in a nearby church under the watchful gaze of

a very grim Gray, ready to extricate Magdalene should anything go wrong. Maybe this would be the one time nothing went wrong.

Roman could always hope.

So far things were working out. After a tense briefing in Sanctus Command even Gray and Damian had put aside their questions and worries about Nina to provide assistance.

Fools and idiots. Couldn't live with myself if I didn't, Damian had said, volunteering to go with Mouse to D.C. to cover James and Marsteller while leaving Nina to Gray.

Roman could only feel bad about the pain this rift was causing Nina. He did not regret driving these men from her side.

Nathaniel Rush continued down the hall to a stairwell while speaking to his harried assistant, who galloped beside him with a hand-held recording device. Roman hovered just within earshot, heard Rush say, "Have we found adequate lodging for General Weinberger?"

"Adequate, but not optimum, I'm afraid," the assistant replied apologetically. "A suite at the Leidenfoort.

His people will be able to secure him if nothing else."

"Don't worry, Charles. If the general had been overly concerned about his lodgings, he would have responded to my invitation sooner."

"Yes, sir."

Rush appeared every inch of the marketable persona and goodwill ambassador he was, pulling details out of thin air. If Satan's commander was in there, he was well hidden.

"I've got my meeting with the prime minister to

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discuss his appearance tomorrow, then an interview at the IBC for tonight's advance. I'll be back by three. I want to hear from each of my regional reps by then. I want hard copy confirmation that our chosen representatives are on standby to take their places in each location. I'll review the reports."

"Are you sure, Mr. Rush? I can make--"

"Thank you, Charles. We've got human chains forming in thirty-eight cities in time zones spanning twenty-four hours. I need reliable people to close the ends of these chains, and with such massive media coverage, the timing is critical. I'll review the reports myself." Rush flashed a reassuring smile.

"If there are problems, I want to know while I still have time to do something about them. Once the countdown begins, we're officially out of time."

"Yes, sir."

Rush stepped off the last riser and circled the main floor in long, sure strides, emerging in a reception area where people behind a desk went on red alert, smiling and greeting him as if the king had just strolled into the room. Charles followed.

Roman motioned to Magdalene to join him when he stopped beside the stairwell door to watch Rush pause to interact with his people, every inch the lord of his realm.

Magdalene showed up, and Roman was satisfied to see her looking poised. As his chief strategist, she'd rarely ventured into the field in life except in secured transports to monitor remote missions. She seemed to be holding up well under the pressure of a potential demon attack.

"Did you see all the protection Rush has waiting outside with his limo?"

Magdalene asked.

"No."

"Bird's-eye view from the second floor window. Muscle everywhere. Even his driver."

"Isn't that unusual for him? Or does he usually insulate himself during media events?"

"Not from what I could tell during my research into the life and times of Nathania! Rush. He travels like he's got diplomatic immunity against terrorism. Media loves to play it up. Make him out to be some sort of altruistic deity." She leaned against the doorjamb.

"Thought he was a fool, myself."

"If he's who we think he is then he doesn't need the kind of protection security personnel can provide:" Roman said. "But I think we confirmed whether or not he knew we were in Nigeria."

Magdalene nodded. "If de Lacy could get close, I bet she'd tell us all those bodyguards are crawling with demons."

Roman nodded, waiting as Rush said his good-byes and headed across the reception area, Charles still in tow. The doors swung wide on their approach, but Rush paused before heading through.

"Oh--and, Charles," he said. "Tell Voss to double check that we've added those people I requested in the D.C. North American sector and call to confirm on my private line."

"Voss, sir? I thought Lilith was in charge of the District of Columbia sector?"

"Just have Voss follow up." Rush headed out the door before Charles got a chance to say, "Yes, sir."

"Aren't we going after him?" Magdalene asked.

Roman didn't reply. His instincts were live, and he wasn't sure why. The mention of Lilith Archambault, perhaps. The woman was Rush's general assistant, so hearing about her wasn't suspect, yet without knowing

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for certain whether or not Rush had been aware of their presence, Roman had to entertain that Rush knew he was being tailed and this information was a plant. "Not yet," Roman said. "As long as we're here and no one's coming after us, I want to know more about who Voss is and what Rush has him doing. Extra protection around Rush and now more Humanity United personnel on Lilith Archambault's watch."

"Sure does sound like he expects trouble," Magdalene said. "Lead the way." They followed Charles back upstairs into a modem office that served as reception area and last line of defense for Rush's private sanctum. The assistant tossed his recorder onto the desk and slipped into his chair. Roman and Magdalene eased in behind him, close enough to view the monitor of the computer, where he diligently composed a to-the-point e-mail, requesting immediate confirmation of chain monitors. He sent the e-mail to a list identified only as "Regional directors," then logged into a secured network, and checked the status of employees currently logged in. Harold Voss's flashing icon signaled that he was online, and Charles Webber sent him an invitation to the private chat. Within seconds, another screen name appeared, and Charles relayed Rush's instructions along with a personal question:

What's up Lilith?

HVOSS: The witch's barely hanging on to her broomstick. She's persona non grata around here. Sorry I pulled this detail. Would much rather be sucking down mai-tais in Hawaii.

Who wouldn't? What'd she do?

HVOSS: No clue. All I know is the boss doesn't trust her to wipe her own ass anymore and that's making her

cranky. She'll freak if she finds out I'm walking behind her on the extra manpower.

He's got us posting extra people in our chain here, too. No big deal.

HVOSS: It's a big deal when you're sidestepping the chain of command. What's the problem anyway?

I think he's expecting some kind of trouble and doesn't want the timing thrown off with all the media coverage.

HVOSS: Whatever. Just wish I wasn't in the line of fire.

Look on the up side. Maybe he's grooming you for her job.

HVOSS: A pay raise would come in handy.

Damn straight. Ciao.

Charles logged off and used his administrator privileges to access the system and manually delete the record of his chat.

"Deft bit of hacking," Magdalene observed. "Unless Rush is paranoid enough to run a shadow subroutine.

Then Charles's ass will be grass." Roman didn't bite. Something was bugging him.

"Why does Rush care so much about the timing?"

"He already said--the media."

"But that doesn't make sense. Media crews are going to be on location for coverage. They'll have crews set up at one spot along the chain. So why is he worried about manning both ends? In an event of this magnitude, he can't possibly control the human element."

Or could he?

The thought came at Roman sideways., In the living world, police forces in every city on Humanity United's Unity Day schedule would be hard-pressed to control a chain of people winding through the streets in the event of trouble.

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Rush wasn't only dealing with the living world.

Would demons posted at both ends of a living chain give Rush control over the crowds?

Would posting extra manpower--or demon power in cities where he might expect Nina and her longdead friends to show up somehow protect the chain?

But why? Not so a staged media event could go off without a hitch for a global viewing audience.

Roman was missing something integral here. He needed to talk with Nina to figure out how demons and dead souls might factor into this scenario.

"I want to see a list of the chain monitors. We might have to shift--"

"Don't bother." Magdalene pointed to an office door behind Charles's desk.

"Take a stroll inside Rush's office. Popped my head in while you were making me wait before. Huge display board with this whole stunt detailed, complete with colored sticky notes and a boatload of information."

"I'm impressed, Magdalene. Who knew you'd be so proficient in the field? And here I was keeping you tucked inside Command because I thought you liked to control the action rather than be in the thick of it." Roman smiled.

"Recon was a damn sight better than standing around waiting for demons to jump out of the woodwork and eat my ass," she snapped.

They headed inside the office, where a wall-size display map of the world conveniently provided all the details of the various locations and times and the names of the Humanity United personnel who would be coordinating the chains--and the names of those posted at the ends as chain monitors.

Instructing Magdalene to one half of the map, Roman

took the other, noting names and locations. But there was such a surfeit of data that he got a new perspective for the limitations of death--something as simple as a pen would have gone a long way here.

He also got a new perspective on what an ambitious undertaking Unity Day was. Had Rush only been operating in the living world, the intricacies of coordinating the logistics of this event would have been staggering. Locations. Time zones. Securing enough of the general population to participate at what in some countries were very off hours. Scheduling Humanity United personnel out of regional offices all over the world. The media coverage. Involvement from renowned personages from the international arena. A grand-scale attention-grabbing stunt.

Add to that the happenings in the passage, and tomorrow at twelve noon UTC, when people all around the world joined hands in a show of global unity, there would be the makings of a fine coup. If Roman could figure out how Rush would do it.

This lead was hot enough to pursue, so rather than catch back up with Nathaniel Rush during his meeting with the prime minister, Roman and Magdalene went to find Nina.

They appeared in the back of a cathedral crowded with worshipers even though no service currently took place. Roman spotted her instantly, kneeling beside Gray in the front row, their heads bowed in prayer, two souls who'd clearly prayed together before.

He wondered what Nina had told Gray, wouldn't have known how to explain what was happening between them himself.

He wanted more time. He wanted her.

"Think they'd have come if we'd have needed them?" Magdalene asked. "They look pretty wrapped up."

"Praying for us, I hope."

"That's nice and all, but it's a damn shame they don't have a number to call for Divine intervention. You know, like 911."

Roman smiled. "There's a thought."

After genuflecting in front of the altar, he slid into the pew beside Nina, making room for Magdalene, who just plunked down beside him, clearly not up on church decorum.

Nina cast him a sidelong glance, and he was surprised by the relief in her expressive face, glad she didn't bother hiding how she felt.

"Hear anything on team two?" he asked.

"No news is good news. I assume demons aren't hot on your tail?"

He shook his head. "We need to talk."

She glanced back at Gray, who made the sign of the cross and slid out of the pew. "Not here. In back."

Roman nodded, motioning Magdalene to follow as they moved into the sacristy. He made a point of meeting Gray's gaze, a show of respect for his willingness to help, then explained what they'd learned about Lilith Archambault's fall from grace, the increased protection around her and Rush, and the inexplicable need for chain monitors.

"We need to assess." He didn't add that he hadn't been able to conceive of any plausible way to stop demons from doing whatever they wanted. As it stood now his hastily-thrown together Soul Retrieval Unit presented no threat.

"Why did the demons feel the need to get you out of

the way?" He directed the question to Nina, but it was Magdalene who replied, "They wanted to turn her to their side. She told us."

Nina nodded. "But they were also concerned about me interfering. Ueland and Gide were pretty clear on the point, and I got the impression that was top priority." "We've got a lot of unhappy demons because Nina got away,"

Magdalene said. "And Rush upping his security."

"Sounds to me as if he's afraid Nina will see something," Gray added.

"Agreed," Roman said. "So let's start there. How could Nina interfere? I'm drawing a total blank and hoping you two might shed some light--so to speak." Nina hopped up onto a counter, dangling her long legs before her. "I do not like the sound of this at all."

"Why?" Magdalene asked.

"Closing off the ends of a chain implies he's trying to keep something in," Gray explained.

Roman geared up for an answer he wasn't going to like. "What?"

"Something only I see," Nina said quietly. "Souls. Their essence."

Magdalene looked doubtful. "Are you saying that demons on either end of a chain could crowd the living souls in between?"

Nina shook her head. "No, but with everyone holding hands and linked together, demons could crowd lost souls so they bleed the life from the whole chain."

Silence fell on the group, and Roman remembered Nina's concerns about how much life she'd bled from Katie McGuire.

"Talk me through this," he said.

Nina and Gray explained how dead souls could

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crowd the living and bleed away life to make them stronger. Not only to strengthen awareness of physical life, but to boost their life force, making them stronger in the afterlife.

Holding together the echo of life to appear more solid was only a cosmetic effect. Strength would enable souls to shift more easily, to exercise more influence when they whispered, to wield more power over angelic abilities like creating shrouds or veils. . . Proficiency that had taken Nina, Gray, and Damian nearly three hundred years to develop could be had in one media event.

"So we're not talking about demons gaining more power, but lingering souls?" Roman asked.

"Lost souls," Nina corrected. "In order to be in the passage, a soul had to repent. If we fall to temptation before moving on to the threshold all bets are off. We're lost."

Just a kiss...

But Roman didn't think Nina was worrying about how much damage they might have done to their eternities in the bayou, not when he met her gaze and said,

"We've got a terrorist connection in the living world."

Magdalene shook her head, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"You're telling me that noon tomorrow, Amsterdam time, Rush plans to power up his lost souls?"

Roman nodded. "He's recruiting an army."

* * *

Twenty-one hours and counting. . .

For close to 500 years, Moscow's Red Square had been a Russian national forum, where townspeople gathered to watch ceremonies emerging from within

the Kremlin, to hear royal proclamations that dictated their lives, and celebrate various victories won in battle.

In less than a day, townspeople would gather again in a public show of goodwill for Humanity United's Unity Day. They would stand united with family members and friends, with co-workers and acquaintances, with strangers. Society's affluent would stand beside those who lived in deprivation, familiar government officials beside anonymous city workers, educated professionals beside unskilled laborers.

Political affiliations, religious beliefs, and personal codes of ethics would be set aside as one Russian extended a hand to another, and for a brief span of time, all would be one, united in a common cause.

Humanity United's call for unity.

Nina glanced around the square, crowded with traffic as people hurried home from jobs at the end of the business day. She saw wooden sawhorses stored in a roped-off area, guessed they would be distributed to block tomorrow's traffic and make a place for the living chain to wind through the streets.

The reality of the situation had left her alternately frenzied to come up with some plausible way to avoid disaster, worried that nothing they might do could stop events already in motion and numbed by the enormity of what they faced.

Roman had pulled James and Marsteller from surveillance detail in D.C. to assist Damian and Mouse in trying to locate information about any gathering of lost souls that might be happening in the passage.

Someone had to be coordinating events from this side, luring souls into temptation with promises of renewed life and more powerful death, preparing souls

RETRIEVAL 303

that might not have experienced shifting for a trip back into the living realm.

Demons could provide even the most newly-dead souls safe passage across the realms, but that would require demons to assist with the shifts, to keep order among their ranks as those newly dead shifted.

They had to be somewhere, and if they were, someone would have heard of them.

Mouse was the best choice for the job.

Nina, on the other hand, was being put to work checking out the chain monitors to confirm Roman's recruitment theory and Rush's point of entry. She hoped to see whether lost souls were crowding the chain monitors or demons swarming them. They needed confirmation and only information would help them formulate a game plan to stop this mass recruitment.

If they could.

Nina had a really bad feeling.

But they had a place to start. Roman and Magdalene provided names of chain monitors, and after surveilling the site of tomorrow's event in Moscow, they accompanied Nina and Gray to Humanity United's regional office, only blocks from Red Square.

Unsure of what awaited them--powerful demons who would sense their presence or living souls crawling with lesser demons--they made a careful approach to a suite of offices in a modern building, ready to make a hasty retreat.

But no hole ripped open between the realms for demons to pour through and their luck held further because not everyone had left the office for the day yet, apparently working late to wrap up last minute details.

"Did Ivanka call?" a burly-framed man asked. Seated behind a desk, he looked like a grizzly bear that had

been chopped off at the waist. "Is she going to be well enough to show up tomorrow? I've got to know now."

His name plate on the desk identified him as Alek Bolodenka.

"He's a chain monitor," Magdalene said.

"And here's the other one." Roman peered over a low wall forming another cubicle.

Stephen Trofimoff was as nondescript as his partner was memorable. Average height. Average features. He even moved quietly when he parked himself inside Alek Bolodenka's doorway.

But Gray, Roman, and Magdalene only had eyes for Nina, waiting, and in their faces hope that whatever she saw would give them some idea of how best to proceed.

"Haven't heard from Ivanka yet," Stephen said. "Do you want me to give her a call or move on to the backup list?"

"Hell, what back-up list? There are only two people we could possibly call in, and I'm planning to call them anyway if the turn-out is half what we expect tomorrow." Alek puffed out his chest in a dramatic sigh. "If Rush wants our people manning this chain at intervals with us on the ends then he might have at least checked to see how many staff this office."

"Don't worry. He just said to do the best we can. As long as we make sure we're where we're supposed to be then I'm sure there won't be any problem."

"Here's hoping. And why does he even care anyway is my question? The media will be filming Red Square with the Kremlin in the background-not who's at the end of the chain twelve blocks away."

"We're the chain monitors. It's supposed to be an honor."

RETRIEVAL 305

"What's the honor? That I'll only have to hold one hand?" Alek gave a rolling laugh and Stephen Trofimoff just smiled and headed back to his cubicle, shaking his head.

Nina turned to meet expectant gazes, spread her hands in a gesture that looked as helpless as she felt. "They're totally normal. Nothing at all out of the ordinary. Good choices. Bad choices. Pretty balanced. Neither is being crowded by any souls, and the only demons around are the temptation kind Alek's got his fair share riding him--Gluttony, Sloth; Pride, Impatience. Stephen's a bit calmer. Anxiety and Fear, but he seems to be holding them off okay."

Roman remained matter-of-fact, but Nina could see Magdalene's disappointment. And Gray's.

He'd been subjected to her ability for so long, had believed she'd been given a gift when no one else had seen it as one, not even her. And now, when it mattered most, she couldn't seem to put her gift to much good use. One more disappointment when she'd already disappointed him so much lately.

"We've learned Rush is planting more people than we were aware of," Roman said. "That's information we need to know. We'll move on."

Nina appreciated the effort, but couldn't help wondering why an angel had recommended her for this job when all she'd done was eliminate possibilities by what she couldn't see. And by what she couldn't resist.

Looked like she had her own demon of Doubt.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SEVENTEEN hours and counting. . .

The Gulf of Guinea kept Accra, the capital of Ghana, breezier and cooler than the northern part of the country, but the tropical climate instilled all the people in this small West African country with equatorial warmth.

Roman had heard the Ghanaians called some of the friendliest people in the world. He agreed. He'd experienced their hospitality himself while attending a summit only two years back, when the country had applied for a program providing international financial and technical assistance in an effort to transform Ghana's agricultural export sector and ease inflation.

People walked the streets, some wearing Western clothes and others in the brilliant tribal garb of the various regions. Ironically, Roman and his team had hit this time zone during the same time of day as their visit to Moscow. Death has perks, he thought, no jet lag.

RETRIEVAL 307

After leaving Moscow, he'd returned team one to Sanctus Command to touch base with General Keillor, the former instructor from Quantico, whom he'd left in charge during his absence. The general hadn't made contact with team two yet, but had assembled several more teams with familiarity in particular areas, who were willing to head back to their parts of the realm and back up team two's search for intel on lost souls.

Roman had personally briefed the teams and explained the meaning of covert. Only after he'd been satisfied they'd all come to a clear understanding of what was expected, had he authorized their departure and headed back out into the field with team one.

Now they made their way to Humanity United's outreach office, a very low-key affair consisting of two upper story rooms above a thrift store. Their luck held--primarily due to the time of day of their arrival, Roman didn't doubt--and they found the only occupants of the office were those whose names they had from the master display list.

Kwame Ogan was engaged in a lively telephone conversation, which sounded personal from what Roman could hear. Carlton Jimah sat in front of a computer, inputting data from spreadsheets, two neat-looking African men in their mid-thirties to -forties, dressed the part of Humanity United representatives in shirtsleeves and slacks.

"Who'd they get to man their chain here?" Magdalene asked. "This place is microscopic compared to the offices we've seen."

"Good question," Roman said, watching Nina.

He could read nothing on her face, usually so expressive. But she'd shielded her emotions tight behind a look of utter impassivity, an expression that carved

her beautiful features from marble, and made her seem remote, untouchable. The silence felt heavy as all waited for her to use her gift, and when she finally turned their way, her face was expressionless. He didn't miss the steely set to her shoulders, and braced himself for more bad news.

"It's the same here, I'm afraid," she said. "These two look like completely normal people. Neither is being crowded. These look like good men trying to save their corner of the world."

"Couldn't they be really powerful demons putting one over on you?" Magdalene was clearly getting frustrated.

"They could," Nina said simply.

Inside Sanctus Command, Magdalene had license to maneuver situations to her preference and the freedom to vent when things went wrong. Roman could see she'd clearly need to learn the finer points of not undermining an operative. Because that's exactly what she did.

Roman recognized that Nina was feeling the pressure of the ticking clock. She hadn't provided the intel they needed yet. He wished he could reassure her and help her understand that situations rarely unfolded linearly in his line of work. By its very nature covert ops was a speculative and risk venture--even with adequate resources at their disposal.

In the living world, Sanctus Command had had the very best resources. Now they were gathering intelligence largely from open-sources because he hadn't been dead long enough to figure how to work the afterlife to best effect.

Admittedly, Roman couldn't beat the surveillance--when demons weren't flying through the realms after

RETRIEVAL 309

him and his operatives--but if he just had more time to fight this battle, he could train an impressive team with the talent he had, a team that would be effective against the threat.

"We'll move on," Roman said. "Our itinerary looks like the local--"

"The situation looks fine over there," Nina interrupted him. "I want to shift over. I can ask these people some questions. At least find out how they're handling the problem of having enough people to monitor the chain."

"I'll go with you," Roman said, earning a narrowed gaze from Gray.

Nina nodded and vanished.

Roman found Nina behind Carlton Jimah, her hand on his shoulder. Acknowledging her with a nod, he headed to a wall calendar for any information that might be of use.

"Carlton, you need to take a break from that spreadsheet you're working on," Roman heard Nina say. "You want to double check some of the details for tomorrow."

You can pull up any files you have--schedules, itineraries, and e-mail from Humanity United headquarters or anyone in authority."

Nina might be feeling the pressure, but she was still thinking, using her particular skills to advantage.

"Roman, come look at this."

He went to stand behind her, glanced at the display.

SUBJECT: Regarding post dated: 15/5/06.

SENDER: Charles Webber, Humanity United headquarters RECIPIENT: Carlton Jimah, GH West Africa Sector

Carlton,

Disregard the mass post I sent dated 15/5/06. Mr. Rush has informed me

that he is aware of your special

circumstances regarding the size of your outreach station and will send support staff.

'Let's see the other posts, Carlton," Nina said in a calming, almost hypnotic voice.

Carlton pulled up several others, and they scanned posts making and confirming travel arrangements for five additional envoys who would be en route to the destination tonight, arriving on the same flight into Ghana as the media crew.

"Good work, Nina."

"It's something, I guess."

Roman wanted to touch her, to lift her chin and look in her face, to reassure her with a kiss.

But touch was forbidden. Not because he worried about resisting temptation, but they would both lose all clarity of thought beneath the backlash of physical awareness.

He retreated to a safe distance, and Nina cast him a grateful glance before shifting back to their realm.

'What's the take?" Magdalene asked when he arrived.

"Demons didn't come after us," Nina said. "So we could look around."

Roman nodded. "Rush has back-up people arriving on the same flight as the media crew. They should be about four hours out now. Rooms booked at a nearby hotel. The media crew plans to set up their equipment tonight to have time to address any electrical issues in advance."

"I see," Magdalene said, and the fact that was all she had to say assured Roman she did.

They were getting nowhere fast tonight.

* * *

RETRIEVAL 311

Thirteen hours and counting. . .

From the instant Nina arrived in the Auckland, New Zealand, outreach station, she understood why it was known as the "City of Sails." Yachts sliced along in the harbors and the adjoining Gulf; and she wished that Damian could be here to see this. He would have appreciated the magnificent South Pacific Ocean, especially since the weather was moving toward winter and, from what she could tell from this realm, the sailing looked fast and challenging. Exactly what Damian loved.

She hoped she'd get the chance to share this with him, refrained from mentioning anything about it to Gray. For so long she'd wanted him to move on, Damian too, and now when they would finally feel free to follow their own eternities, all their futures were in question.

Nina didn't get her hopes up when they arrived in the small, single-floor residence where Humanity United operated in New Zealand. Like everything else in her existence of late, things were disturbed, out of sync, unusual.

Roman, at least, was pleased by their arrival time, and rightfully so. The administrative staff was just arriving for work, while the outreach coordinators appeared to have spent the night in the bedrooms at the back of the house. The excitement of the day's upcoming event was practically tangible.

Nina had a buffet of souls to check out, as everyone buzzed through the house laughing and recapping details, making driving arrangements to the site at the harbor where the chain would assemble tonight, beneath the light of the moon and stars and the highpowered emergency lamps the police department had already brought out of storage to keep events safe.

They were such an upbeat group that Nina felt her own mood plunging as she watched essences flitting from room to room, choices made, choices missed, the sheer excitement of the staff so contagious that gnarly little demons of Despair, Anxiety, and Melancholy shot through a window like bullets to get away.

She wondered how upbeat these souls would be if they had any clue their eternities were hanging on the actions of the Soul Retrieval Unit and its secret weapon, who couldn't see anything remotely unusual about any one of them, including the chain monitors.

"Enjoy yourselves while you can." Nina saluted them, feeling heartsick.

"Nothing?" Gray asked.

"I'm afraid not." Meeting his gaze, she found understanding there. Dear Gray, never one to hold any grudge no matter how grave the offense. He had always trusted that life, and death, unfolded according to God's will. Somehow that only made her feel worse right now.

As if she'd let more than him down. "We've got to do something. I feel so bad for these poor people."

"Agreed," Roman said. "If the chain monitors aren't being crowded then we'll have to assume Rush plans to send in souls at the last possible minute. Since we can't know that until the time comes, we're back to finding the lost souls."

Which left a question unspoken--if they couldn't know until the last possible minute, why had Rush been worried that she could interfere with his plans?

And how could the Soul Retrieval Unit hope to stop him?

"I've got a question," Magdalene said. "Why do souls have to be connected in a chain?"

"Think time management," Nina said. "Rush can

RETRIEVAL 313

power up his army in one fell swoop rather than sending in souls one on one."

"So what's going to happen to the souls getting their life sucked out of them?"

"Depends on how much life they lose." Gray spared Nina the pain of a grim answer. "If the living aren't bled too much then what they feel will depend on how much life they have in them. Some might feel weak. Others could faint. Some won't notice much at all. Obviously the elderly, the young, and the sick will be the hardest hit."

"What happens if they're bled a lot?"

Nina could only close her eyes to block out the sight of a long chain of living souls, winding along the night-lit shoreline in both directions, people joining hands, smiling and laughing, united for the good of mankind.

"The media will air what looks like a mass suicide."

"Will they look sort of dried out, like someone sucked all the juice out of them?" Magdalene asked.

Gray nodded, and Magdalene turned to Roman with narrowed eyes. "Just like our terrorist in the Maryland safe house."

* * *

Eight hours and counting. . .

Team one caught up with James, Marsteller, Mouse, and Damian in the Philippines, in Metro Manila inside a park known locally as Luneta. Roman had seen the city on several occasions, on layovers between transports during his

stint in the Marines.

He'd wandered this park filled with gardens, playgrounds, fountains, and restaurants. He knew the price of a horse-drawn carriage ride could be negotiated and

the official name--Rizal Park--was a tribute to a doctor who'd been executed by firing squad on the site for rebellion against the Spanish government.

"Well, hey, hey." James spotted them in front of the open-air concert hall.

"If it isn't my favorite dead folks. So what brings you to this hell hole?"

"You do," Roman said. .

Magdalene helped herself to a seat on the stage beside Mouse. "We're pounding sand here and need to know if you've got anything remotely warm."

Damian didn't seem to be paying attention to anything but Nina, who met his gaze evenly but didn't speak.

"Status," Roman said.

"We just so happen to have a scorcher," James told them. "Got a lead on a guy who's been transporting souls to some remote group of islands off the coast of Panama."

"Stupid question alert." Magdalene raised her hand. "How do you transport souls?"

Mouse did the honors. "If you want to have a rave and not everyone has been to the club before--"

"Got it." Magdalene nodded. .

Just then in the living world. two teens dressed like hoods, got angry and loud in front of the stage. One hauled back and punched the other, sending him sprawling right through Damian.

"Good thing I wasn't in his realm. What do you think, Mouse?" Damian asked.

"Delightful part of the world. Loud and rough around the edges--at ten in the morning. My sort of place."

"Mine, too," she shot back just as deadpan. "Be glad you're not there. That greasy do-rag has got to smell like shit."

RETRIEVAL 315

Damian laughed, neatly sidestepping the teens who collapsed to the grass in a tangle of flying fists and curses.

James turned to Roman and explained, "We got a tip that there's a guy who goes by the name of Justiss, who's been leading a convoy of souls all over the passage."

"Wow," Magdalene said. "'The Underground Railroad for dead folks."

"You got it," James said.

"Clever, actually." Gray turned to Roman. "'The souls just need a lift to the islands. They can leave whenever they want."

"Or whenever they're told." Roman could almost hear the ticking clock.

"So what are you planning to do?" Nina asked. "'Talk to this Justiss? Think you can get him to tell you anything?"

Mouse chuckled. "Don't know, don't care. We got the code words to join the convoy."

* * *

Three hours and counting. . .

Justiss turned out to be a small, dark-skinned man of Kuna Indian origin. He'd lived on the San Blas Islands off Panama's coast during his life and hadn't started traveling the world until after his death, when he'd hooked up with an adventurer who'd come to the islands to scuba dive and wound up accidentally dying in the reef.

That was when Justiss had gotten the idea to start up his little side business, as he called it, shuttling souls around the passage for a price. Nina couldn't figure out what the price would be--negotiable favors perhaps,

since money was moot. Apparently, he wasn't choosy about who he worked for either, but Nina had trouble holding that against him since he so clearly enjoyed his work.

Along with the shuttle service, Justiss played tour guide, proudly explaining to his convoy of souls--all forty-three of them--that the Kuna were direct descendents of the Carib Indians that were massacred by real pirates and the invading Spanish.

Night had long ago fallen on the San Bias Islands when Justiss led his convoy into a quaint village of thatched huts shimmering beneath a rain that drizzled over the coastline and up the steep, rugged mountains dark against the starlit night.

They arrived inside a large community hut where the villagers came together for meetings. His people were peaceful. He assured everyone they'd enjoy their stay on the islands for however long they were here.

He would have made a great travel agent, too.

Nina seized the opportunity to turn his friendliness to her advantage when Justiss explained how he would lead smaller groups of souls to the various outlying islands.

"This won't take long, I promise," he said. "Just don't want to leave you all cramped together here when we've got more than three hundred of these lovely islands to choose from. Just pair off with whoever you want to travel with."

"Come on, Mouse," Nina whispered, shooting Roman a sidelong glance and motioning toward their tour guide.

Roman had no clue what she was up to, but he didn't ask questions, only nodded in assent, trusting her judgment.

RETRIEVAL 317

Gray and Damian, though, had something to say, and she could hear Gray grilling Roman about protection before she and Mouse moved beyond earshot. Mouse didn't ask questions either, just stuck close as they made their way to the front of the crowd.

Justiss wasn't much taller than Mouse, and Nina had to look down to meet the Indian's dark stare. Beaming her brightest smile, she said, "Excuse me. But would you mind if my sister and I tagged along with you while you're settling the groups. We'd love to see all the islands."

Justiss's dark gaze lowered to her chest, and suddenly he was smiling even wider than Nina, revealing that he was missing more than a few important teeth.

He shot a quick glance at Mouse who rolled her eyes, a gesture he didn't seem to notice.

"Sure, pretty ladies. You tag along with Justiss. I show you around. The pleasure is all mine."

And it was. He rallied his first group together, and said, "Let's go!" grinning that gap-toothed grin as he kept Nina close enough to keep protective eyes on her chest.

Mouse gave thumbs up to their teammates before they left, and Nina didn't need to turn around to know Gray and Damian would be scowling. Disappointment couldn't erase how much they cared. And that thought kept her going as they toured island after island. They saw so many lost souls that Nina and Mouse eventually lost count. Discovered at least twice as many demons swarming--the garden variety kind, thankfully.

Yet the living inhabitants of this tropical paradise continued to sleep undisturbed, blissfully unaware that their beautiful islands had been turned into a bus depot for souls on the fast track to the abyss.

By the time Nina and Mouse returned to collect their teammates for a jaunt to their own remote island, Nina didn't even care that both Gray and Damian looked like they couldn't decide who to throttle first—Justiss of the grinning leers or Roman whom they'd entrusted with her care.

And as soon as Roman got their news about the congregation on the islands, he looked just as grim. "We'll simply have to proceed based on our suppositions then."

"Proceed with what?" she asked. "Do you have any idea how to stop this? We're almost out of time."

His expression never changed, but the regret in his clear eyes assured Nina he hadn't needed the reminder.

"We'll brief in Sanctus," he said. "If Rush is gathering these lost souls, he's probably coming to get them soon."

* * *

Sixty minutes and counting. . . .

"They've officially begun the countdown, Roman." James returned to sub-level four after a side trip to Systems Ops. "Sixty minutes. People are gathering in all the designated locations. And from the looks of it, everywhere else, too. You got tailgate parties happening in bedroom communities, outside business complexes, on university campuses. Hell, there are nurses wheeling people into the streets. Some of the networks are already airing."

Roman nodded, turned to face his people. He couldn't think of them as operatives. Not while they were untrained, signed on only because they believed he could help them make a difference.

RETRIEVAL 319

They didn't believe now. He could see the doubt in their faces, in the uncertain glances they slanted toward Nina, Gray, Damian, and Mouse. He could hear questions in their whispers. He'd intentionally let them think he possessed a charisma they'd wanted to believe in.

They were waiting for him to pull a rabbit out of his hat.

Roman didn't have one. He never had. He'd been asked to do a job, and he was doing it. He would continue. And keep his faith, hoping to help these souls renew theirs when he was barely hanging on to his own.

"All right, people," he said. "We're between a rock and a hard place. We've got two choices. Retreat or fight."

"Fight what?" A detective from Richmond called out. "We don't know what's really going on out there."

"No, we don't," Roman said honestly. "But we do know enough to guess at the rest. Fact: Rush has staged his Unity Day in thirty-eight different locations. Fact:

he's got chain monitors stationed at each end of the chains. Fact: he's been collecting lost souls in a remote location of Central America. Fact: he's got a terrorist connection in the living world. We can guess he intends to send in lost souls to crowd the living along the chains and bleed their life away."

Roman walked the outer edges of the ranks gathered inside sub-level four, made eye contact with many souls while explaining, "The most likely scenario is that Rush plans to crowd his chain monitors. Given the number of lost souls Nina and Mouse confirmed earlier, it's likely he'll send in souls to crowd all the staff he has in place along the chains, too."

'That sounds like more people than we have here, Roman dear," the granny from' Paducah pointed out.

'What do you think we can do against so many?"

"We can minimize the damage."

"How?" General Keillor asked.

Roman met his former instructor's gaze, saw understanding and a bleak respect for the position Roman now found himself in, a place where he would ask his troops to risk more than their lives. And as that understanding passed between them, Roman was reminded of a scene from one of his mother's favorite black and white movies: a medieval commander had led his tenants, armed with scythes, pick-axes, and determination, into a battle against trained and armored knights.

They'd all died nobly.

Now Roman would do the same, sending souls who were untrained and barely armed into a fight where none of them really understood what they were up against. These souls might not be operatives, but these were most definitely his people. He'd simply run out of time--to learn the ropes, to figure out the situation, to understand his enemy, to train his people.

To get to know the girl.

In a black and white movie, he definitely would have had more time to get to know the girl.

He looked at Nina, saw the anguish in her expression, the guilt that she hadn't managed to pull a rabbit out of her hat either. He wished he could reassure her, had only faith to offer, strained as it was. "We need to break the chains. Any of us who can shift into the living world need to go. We need to brush, whisper, or crowd-whatever it takes to get the living to let go of

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each other. The more chains we break, the more we minimize the damage, and the more souls we save."

"Not all of us can shift," someone said.

Roman nodded. "We each do what we can."

"If we crowd the living, we'll wind up in the abyss," another called out.

"You're asking us to risk our eternities."

Roman held Nina's gaze. "Yes, I am."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THIRTY minutes and counting. . .

Team after team of souls departed sub-level four under Roman's direction, en route to all comers of the world. Nina couldn't help but be touched by their determination to take action. She bid each farewell and wished them Godspeed for what she hoped wasn't the last time.

Roman claimed they could make a difference because the element of surprise was on their side. Rush and his minions would never expect the good guys to risk their eternities by behaving like the bad guys.

A mixed blessing if ever she'd heard one.

She tried not to feel as if she'd led these souls astray with her belief in Roman's charism. Tried not to doubt Roman himself, tried to believe his plan would make a difference.

Tried not to question why her gift--sometimes a blessing, so often a curse--couldn't finally have proven a saving grace.

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Tried, and failed.

Nina wasn't sure that the good any of them might do to stop Rush's coup would balance all they stood to lose, yet she knew they had no choice but to try, so she stood there as team after team was assigned and departed, battling her own temptation demons--Despair, Disbelief, Doubt, Anger, Fear.

Some secret weapon she'd turned out to be.

Self-pity was around, too. And this was not how she wanted to appear around Roman.

Mouse and the little lady in the slippers departed, the final team except for Roman's inner circle--Magdalene, James, Gray, Damian, her.

"I've held us all back to tag team D.C. and Amsterdam, where Rush and Lilith Archambault will be," Roman explained. "James and Damian, you'll be here in D.C. Gray and Nina, you're both with me in Amsterdam."

"What about me?" Magdalene slanted him a defensive gaze.

Roman didn't seem to notice. "You're home base. With any luck, some of us will succeed in breaking the chains and need egress. You'll be the point of contact for whoever does. You direct them to churches where they can hide."

"I was kidding about being in the thick of things."

"Take care of my people," he said simply, but the glance they exchanged was all about trust, working together, and knowing each other's mind. It was a look of respect. A look that Nina wanted from Roman.

Magdalene nodded. "Done."

Roman sliced his gaze over the rest of them, those clear eyes grim, yet assessing, still calculating the abilities before him for ways to narrow the odds.

"James and Damian, we'll drop you off in Lafayette Park before heading to Amsterdam. We have to find a place for you to hide so you can see when the action starts. Since we're not sure how far away you need to be to sidestep Lilith, we'll stick around to assist in case she notices you before you're settled."

"You sure we got time?" James asked.

Roman glanced at the comm station. "We've got time."

They headed to Roman's office to surveil the predawn scene in Lafayette Park on the display monitors, for Nina to pinpoint Lilith's location and see whatever else she might see.

The entire park was jammed with people. Uniformed police officers swarmed through the crowds as thick as demons at the moment of death. They'd parked cruisers to block off access from the side streets. Media crews had vans with various network logos parked at different vantages. Humanity United staff members wearing orange vests directed the crowds from within.

"Our best bet is that media van," James said. "It's parked on the outskirts, but we'll be able to watch the live feed to know when to make our move.

Otherwise we can't see anything until the sun comes up."

As Roman had stressed to each of the teams, the timing was critical. The teams would need to move in just before the chain monitors sealed the ends.

Yet no one could know when the lost souls would arrive--only Nina could see that, and she couldn't be everywhere.

The teams would simply have to hope they could keep the chains broken for. . . how long?

Until people got tired and went home?

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Until the media crews packed up and left?

Until demons dragged her teammates into the abyss?

"Where's Lilith?" Damian asked.

"There by the statue," Roman said.

Nina moved closer to the display as if that would help her see through the dawn to pinpoint a woman in the crowd. Lilith Archambault stood in the midst of the mayhem, holding court with reporters, and overseeing her people from a spot in front of the statue of Andrew Jackson riding his horse.

"Do you see her?" James asked. "With the bull horn."

Oh, Nina could see all right. But Lilith Archambault wasn't all she saw.

"Roman," she hissed. "The reporters."

He turned, his face all striking lines, urgent, his gaze alive with questions.

"I can't see them. Some must be demons. The bad kind."

Hard understaIling dawned on his face. They'd been off base about the threat. Yes, Rush planned to bring in his lost soul army at the last minute, but he'd also made sure no one could interfere by sending in powerful demons with the media crews.

And if he'd sent in demons in all thirty-eight locations then as soon the Soul Retrieval Units made a move toward the chains, they'd be ambushed.

Unity Day wouldn't only be a recruitment of a lost soul army, but a massacre of the good guys.

And not one team from the Soul Retrieval Unit would have warning--no one could see the demons.

Only Nina.

Without a thought, she headed to Red Square. It was almost two in the afternoon in Moscow, and the place

was as crammed as Lafayette Park. Law enforcement officers containing the crowds. Humanity United staff. Unity Day participants. Spectators. The Kremlin rose in the background and camera crews were positioned to make the most of the recognizable shot. Nina spotted a cluster of orange-vested personnel, couldn't find either Bolodenka or Trofimoff. Likely maiming their posts at either end of the chain. She spotted her teammates hidden, awaiting their chance to strike, and the reporters.. ..four were demons.

* * *

Sixteen minutes and counting. . . Morning had dawned breezy and clear in Ghana, a tribute to the joy taking place in the streets, a celebration rather than the tight riot control exhibited by Unity Day's American and Russian counterparts. People wearing bright tribal garb milled through the streets, eating from vendor carts, talking and laughing, dancing. Nina couldn't find Ogan or Jimah among the crowds that filtered off a main thoroughfare in all directions, but she found other orange-vested staff members and reporters. . . Two were demons.

* * *

Fourteen minutes and counting. . . Huge emergency lights illuminated the night in Auckland, where people streamed along the harbor as far as she could see, the starlight casting the ocean into blackness, the stark artificial lighting revealing a

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celebration of a more spiritual sort. A band played on a stage, filled the night with the soothing sound of new age music. People sang, danced, lifted their arms to the sky in thanksgiving. Orange-vested staff milled through the crowds and not far from the stage, the media crews congregated. . . Three were demons.

* * *

Twelve minutes and counting. . . Nina headed back to D.C. asking herself why Lilith Archambault had ever gone to the trouble of casting her into the living world and shrouding her memory. There was nothing Nina could do to interfere with this coup, nothing she could do to help her teammates, nothing to stop the slaughter. She'd been about to reappear inside Roman's office at Sanctus Command when she heard a familiar shriek, a terrifying sound of the realms tearing open. She'd seen the demons. The demons had seen her. And at the last instant, she redirected herself to the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, where a priest was celebrating sunrise mass, casting off the demons and giving Nina a momentary respite within the sacred walls, long enough for Roman, Gray, and Damian to find her. For a blind moment the sight of them rooted her to the spot. She ached to go

to them, hold them, draw strength from their presence, but it was to Roman that

she turned.

"Rush sent in demons with the media crews Moscow, Ghana, New Zealand, probably all the locations," she told them. "They're the bad kind, Roman."

The really bad kind. Our people. . . we've got to call them back." The shrieking grew louder beyond the vaulted roof, a pulsing throb of sound like the beating of heavy wings, as if more demons gathered, poised and waiting, knowing their prey couldn't hide forever. Roman caught her gaze with a calm that bespoke a lifetime of global crises, of a familiarity with ticking clocks and split-second decisions. "We'll handle it," Roman said. "Good work." Nina drew strength from his calm authority, felt her panic recede when he said, "We can split up. Each of us head to a different location, call in our people." Gray pointed to the ceiling. "If we can get anywhere with that crew in tow." "We need help," Nina said. "We can't do this alone." "Help from whom?" Damian demanded, incredulous. Nina scowled, not in the mood. "A prayer would help." "Swamp Man." Roman's gaze snared hers steady, willed her to understand. "I believe he's an angel, Nina. He helped us before, he will again. You go. We'll create a diversion to keep the demons with us." For an instant, Nina could only stand there as she grasped what Roman was saying. He believed she could get help and save them all. She could feel all their gazes upon her, these men that she loved-and, yes, she loved them all, each in such a special way-knowing that to leave them meant the likelihood of never seeing anyone of them again. "Go." Roman caressed her with a gaze that promised they still had unfinished business. He took off. Damian flashed that fast grin, extended a hand as if to touch her face, and vanished.

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Gray dissolved into a glow of light, his voice melting into angelic richness, soothing. "God go with you, my dear."

* * *

Nine minutes and counting. . . Nina arrived in front of Swamp Man's house, unsure if the hounds of hell were at her heels. The abrupt peace of the bayou daybreak was a shock to the turmoil inside her, the frenzy of panic and fear, the urgency. "Swamp Man," she cried. Her voice resounded in the quiet, and each second ticked by like an eternity. She forced herself to remain still, knowing she could only wait, praying that Swamp Man would hear her. An angel? She couldn't quite absorb the why, only knew it could explain so many things. Except why he had helped her when the warrior angel at the threshold had turned her away. She remembered Roman's questions before Swamp Man had brought down the veil, realized Roman must have suspected then. "Swamp Man, please." Her voice broke, filled with despair though she tried to cling to the calm of Roman's revelation. An angel. She hoped he was right. "We need your help." Nothing but silence. Moving inside the cottage, Nina found it empty. She stood there staring into that familiar room, quick images of her night in bed with Roman chasing through her memory, fueling her clarity and purpose through the grim reality

that there was no one here to help her.

If not Swamp Man, then who?

She needed to get help because they would never get to all their people in time.

And just as a demon of Despair was poised to overtake her, she heard a voice, a calming voice that swelled around her. .

"Only the one who is free may seek our help."

* * *

Six minutes and counting. . .

By unspoken consent, Roman, Gray, and Damian gave up the safety of the cathedral to warn as many of their people as they could reach. Together, they shot through the cathedral roof to find the sky storm-cloud black with demons. Gray took the lead, glowing brilliantly to carve open a path.

Damian had followed, not as bright but still keeping the way open for Roman who followed in their wake, wishing he could create even a spark to toss off these demons.

He didn't have a clue.

But Nina had gotten through, leaving the three of them trying to outrun a legion of demons. Hiding hadn't been an option. So they took off in separate directions, making for the cities where the members of the Soul Retrieval Unit were about to walk into an ambush.

The demons split ranks to follow, and Roman led his to Hawaii, to the inky cover of midnight, where people were lining up a sharp mountain slope to the light of burning torches, chanting, their haunting voices echoing off the cliffs, above the crashing surf.

He spotted his people, two newcomers, hiding on the roof of a nearby condominium. But as Roman got

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close, another demon launched off the ground to join those behind him.

* * *

Five minutes and counting. . .

Nina knew that letting so many good souls die so Nathaniel Rush could create an army couldn't be part of the angels' plan.

She knew it, and she needed their help. There was only one place to get it. The threshold.

But the memory of her last visit there still made Nina cringe, disturbing the peace of the Louisiana bayou as the twin demons of Shame and Despair sucked away at her resolve.

Who was she to demand help from the angels? She was someone who'd sinned big-time in life, repented, and fallen again in death. They'd already turned her away once, and she wasn't any freer now than she had been during her last visit.

The thought struck her so hard that she was tempted to head back to Moscow. Maybe if she moved fast, she might recall a few teammates before time was up.

* * *

Four minutes and counting. . .

Roman knew if he sought cover in any church, he would never get out again. He couldn't get close to his people, either. He might have escaped notice of the

demon media crews, newly dead that he was, but not with this legion on his heels, clawing with jagged talons, hissing and shrieking in their guttural voices.

The only thing he could do was try to stay ahead of them, knowing each second he kept them busy was one

more second Nina had to get help, knowing one more second might buy James and Marstiller enough time to get word to another deployed team. Knowing that one more second was all that was between him and the abyss and a future where he might never see Nina again.

* * *

Three minutes and counting. . .

Nina stared into the bayou to see vaguely reflected on the surface the twin demons of Shame and Despair. They writhed around her shoulders, feasting as contentedly as she'd seen temptation demons feast on others during the long years she'd lingered in the passage.

"Leave me, demons of Shame and Despair," Nina said, a half-hearted effort that didn't come close to doing the job.

The demons hissed and scrambled around her in a stubborn burst of renewed energy.

"Leave me in peace," she commanded, and with an impatient shrug, she tossed both demons off.

And heard Roman's voice in her memory.

"I'm worried about stopping evil from taking over two realms."

Nina considered his words, considered the man, and all his contradictions. His ruthlessness and nobility. The special abilities he demonstrated, which should have been impossible for a soul newly dead. His determination to accomplish his goal at seemingly all costs, yet his willingness to leave Marstiller behind to make peace with his death.

She remembered Roman's explanation to Gray and Damian for not telling them about the battle until after he'd retrieved her. Gray and Damian hadn't liked his

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methods, but Roman's honesty had been the start of earning both men's respect. Roman had handled questions about the charism in the same way.

"It's not time," he'd told Mouse. "I'm afraid that's all I can tell you." He'd been up front even when he'd chosen not to expose his hand. Souls may have followed Nina's example to sign onto the Soul Retrieval Unit, but it was respect for Roman that had kept them there when eternities were at stake. Was it any wonder that she'd fallen hard for him, that she'd been unable to resist temptation?

And that's when she finally understood.

She'd been running from temptation, resisting and falling time after time, through life and death, failing the test, time and again.

But temptation had never been the problem.

Forgiveness was.

She never had. Not once in all these years had she allowed herself the forgiveness she'd helped so many others find.

Gray and Damian had known. That's why neither man had moved on. They loved her, and had wanted the same thing in death as they'd wanted in life—for her to find peace.

She suspected Roman knew, too. He'd persisted.

He'd tempted. He'd trusted her even when her ability to see souls had seemed to fail her. Because he knew she could never return his love until she was free to love herself.

Nina stared into the bayou, the water rippling lazily beneath a breeze, and as the surface stilled, she peered hard at her rippling reflection. She could barely see it, but it was there, and had been all along.

"Leave me, demon of Unforgiveness," she commanded with all the conviction she had inside.

Temptation had never been the problem.

"Go and leave me in peace." The demon shrieked wildly, his grip on her soul so deep, but as the last talon slipped away, it burst into a thousand shadowy shards and vanished.

And for the first time in memory, Nina felt peace.

With a smile on her face, she turned from the water, knowing exactly what she must do.

The serenity of the bayou yielded to an unearthly darkness of the passage as Nina took off for the threshold.

As free as she knew how to be.

* * *

One minute and counting. . .

Roman could feel talons sink into his ankles, as if slicing through skin and bone, seeking a vicious grip to drag him into the blast furnace of evil raging behind him.

They were so close now, a firestorm sapping his strength, his will, any hope that Nina might succeed in her quest or that any of his people would escape an ambush.

If he'd only had more time.

Another talon sank in, deep enough to stop him short and drag him backward.

More talons sank deep.

Then Roman was hurtling through the sulfurous blackness, all hope almost gone. Almost.

Nina.

He fought the claws that raked over him, resisted the shrieks that would drive terror into the surrounding

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souls, refused to close his eyes and give way to the blackness, and just as he thought he couldn't strike out one more time, the inky storm clouds parted. A seam of dazzling white melted away the edges until a radiant beam shone through.

An angel with outstretched wings.

It stood poised, its eyes burning, taking stock of all before it, of the strength of its enemy.

Then it raised a mighty sword. . . and the host of warrior angels surged through the rent in the sky, a flash of blinding light that poured over the world.

* * *

When Nina opened her eyes, she found herself back in sub-level four. The archives glowed. The passage was silent. The calm of the dead firmly in place. For a moment, she could only blink stupidly, trying to clear her thoughts, trying to remember.

An ambush.

The threshold.

Gray. Damian.

Roman.

She remembered being sucked inside the glowing doors at the threshold,

recalled a light so bright it scalded. She remembered the voice of the angel captain, that voice she'd heard before but hadn't been able to place. Now Nina knew where she'd heard his voice before. It was the voice she'd heard inside her during every battle she'd ever waged with her conscience. And he hadn't turned her away. Then all thoughts fled as souls began appearing inside sub-level four with her-souls she recognized, souls she knew well.

Mouse. Gray. Damian.

Roman.

They all looked fine, perfectly fine, and Nina let out a sob that broke the quiet and started an avalanche of muttering as everyone glanced around with shocked expressions, as if like her, they were only now recognizing where they were.

Except Roman. His clear gaze swept over her, his expression softening the stark lines of his face. "You did it. You brought help. They're just people holding hands in those cities now. Perfectly safe."

"Esherick?" she asked.

'Went shrieking back to the abyss." He moved between Gray and Damian, and they all came to stand with her, their presences reassuring, their glances relieved.

Fine, all fine.

Nina began to sob softly, unable to move, barely able to comprehend what had happened.

They were all back in Sanctus. Safe. Dead.

Perfectly, peacefully dead.

Only the limitations of death stopped her from hugging them all. Before she could recover herself enough to speak, a light swelled inside the vault, drawing everyone toward it.

And they shielded their eyes.

'The battle for dominion of the passage has only begun." The angel captain's voice was resonant and rich with beauty, so familiar. "Will you stand and fight the war?" "Can we win?" Roman asked.

"You have all you need to claim victory. Time to train, time to understand your enemy." The light flared, radiant, even through shielded eyes. "A team with many talents, and solid faith. And a gift."

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"What gift?" Nina wanted to know, and now seemed the perfect time for an answer.

"A chosen one with a special charism."

"Is it Roman?"

The light dazzled, chasing the shadows away, and Nina felt the warmth of laughter pour through her.

"Roman was sent to retrieve the soul with the special charism--the gift of special sight. The soul who can see other souls. The only soul who could summon the warriors."

Nina heard the words, stood rooted to the spot as sub-level four erupted with whispers, urgent, excited voices that rose on a crescendo. As the angelic light faded, she opened her eyes and saw her teammates on the Soul Retrieval Unit--friends, strangers, acquaintances, their expressions ranging from surprise and wonder to relief and amusement. Gray and Damian were watching her, too, and it wasn't until she saw their knowing looks that understanding began to dawn.

She turned to Roman, and he caught her gaze with those clear eyes that saw everything, a gaze that didn't let go.

And Nina realized they were all looking at her.

EPILOGUE

ROMAN was pleased when most souls chose to stay and fight with the Soul Retrieval Unit. Esherick would be back, and this time they would be ready to fight.

Some had chosen to move on. Gray was one. He would finally go in search of his late wife and infant son. But Damian chose to stay and fight, confiding that he thought Magdalene would need someone to teach her the ins and outs of death.

Roman thought Damian was the perfect man for that job.

Training would begin in earnest soon, but Roman's first order of business was a well-deserved break, which was met with eager approval from his people. In fact, he'd barely gotten the order out of his mouth before everyone had disappeared from sub-level four without finding out when he wanted them back. Well, almost everyone.

Nina was by his side, exactly where she should be.

Roman was looking forward to this down time, so

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he could approach the tasks ahead with an appreciation for the unique challenges they presented. Not only with the Soul Retrieval Unit, but. with this woman, his soul mate.

While Nina was at peace with the fates of her former companions, she hadn't yet come to terms with her new role as chosen one with a charism.

Roman would be with her while she did.

He couldn't help but smile. She looked content to dictate their first order of business.

"I just want to see her again and make sure she's okay." Nina flashed him that high-beam smile. "It won't take long."

"No time limits. We're going to relax and enjoy spending time together."

"Sounds perfect."

And with that Roman found himself back inside the very park where he'd first encountered Nina.

' 'There she is." Nina pointed to a couple strolling beside the lake hand in hand.

Katie and Luke.

Katie's girls were running ahead with the duckchasing dog, and Katie was saying, "It's all good, Luke. Shea's going away to get the help he needs. Sometimes things don't work out like we plan. But God sent me a good guy to make up for the one who didn't work out." She smiled, her heart shining in her eyes.

Luke brought her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss there. "I'm a lucky man, Katie."

"Oh," Nina heaved a huge sigh that made Roman wish he could press a kiss to her hand, too. "She'll be fine. It's all good."

"Yes, it is," Roman agreed.

JEANIE LONDON

"All right. I've seen what I need to see here." She lifted her gaze to him, eyes shining, hair tumbling around her face, and a soft smile on her beautiful mouth, a kissing mouth. "I'm all yours now. So where are we off to?"

"Amsterdam, to my favorite art museum. I was always too busy to do the place justice. But now that we've got a little time, I intend to enjoy it."

"And you want to enjoy it with me. I'm glad."

"I'm glad you agreed to come."

Roman did reach for her hand then. Brushing his mouth across her knuckles, he shivered as their echoes of life merged, an easy flow of sensation that made the moment physical.

Nina ran along the bayou shore beneath a golden sun, wearing only a filmy white shift. She bunched the hem up almost to her knees, and the water broke around her ankles and calves, the spray showering the fabric, so sheer it molded the sensuous outline of her beautiful body.

long, honey-hued hair tousled around her face, whipping out behind her back, a dance of motion as mesmerizing as the clinging shift. She shot a glance back over her shoulder then hiking her shift higher to expose shapely knees and a tantalizing expanse of sleek thigh, she laughed and the sound filled the bright afternoon with a joy brighter than the golden sun.

Roman ran after her.

Nina exhaled another sigh, and Roman smiled.

Death was good.