

Chapter 1

Temptation... it comes in many forms. It whispers its sweet seduction in your ears, tangling honeyed thoughts with yours like a lovers' embrace.

They say the devil is a master at luring the young and innocent away from the shimmering path of virtue and into dark, slippery sin. He should have embodied that horror. He should have looked ravaged and stained with the smear of fallen souls. The crisp, acidic scent of death should have choked the air around him. With all that he had done, he should have never looked like that.

"Angel," came the silky croon of his voice. Obsidian black wings skimmed the midnight floor, framing his impossible beauty. I had heard about those wings, those night-drenched wings. Seeing them up close was equally terrifying and fascinating.

"Lucifer." Was that parched voice mine? I willed it not to tremble.

We were in Kryptos, the neutral realm of both light and dark beings, which was created for both sides to negotiate and trade without the beginnings of a violent battle. The idea of safe passage was an unspoken rule that had been kept and respected, but that didn't mean it couldn't be broken. And if it was Lucifer – The Death Bringer, The God of Darkness, The Forsaken – who shredded the rules and burnt them to a crisp... well, who was going to challenge him?

Only one Archangel had that power, and he wasn't here. I was alone, and I couldn't leave unless he allowed it.

Hellfire eyes studied me with deliberate sensuality and were set in a face almost indescribably beautiful. Lips curved as he stalked forward like the king of all predators, which I suppose he was.

"Heaven made an interesting choice this time. The last angel bored me with spiritual platitudes. Perhaps he thought I wasn't beyond saving. Do you think so?"

Adathan was the previous angel who had stood in my place. I hadn't seen him return to The City of Light, but I heard he had been in the healing chambers for some time. There were rumours of a missing eye. They said he was lucky to have returned at all.

"I'm not here to indulge in games."

The Devil loved his games. He usually ensnared his prey with sweet, decadent words and enticing promises. Like a butterfly, the seduced were drawn to the lure of the rose, only to discover that underneath those soft, silky petals were razor-sharp teeth. On other occasions,

he befuddled your mind until you ended up answering questions you had no intention of responding to.

I had been warned, but warnings could only prepare you so much.

I moved around to keep some distance between us. My steps were light, my body alert, poised to move at the merest hint of danger. Trouble was, I was in danger the moment he entered the room.

"No?" he mocked. There was a cruel cast to his features as he regarded me. His wings flexed once like a heartbeat, and the reddish light of the torches glinted off the burnished gold that wrapped around his arms. "What then, little angel, did you come here for?"

I responded coolly. "You know why. To negotiate." Heaven had failed time and time again, but for some reason, the Archangels thought sending me would move the unmovable. I still failed to grasp why, and now even more so.

Lucifer circled lazily around, and I turned to face his movements. Never show the Devil your back. The room we were in wasn't as large as some of the meeting rooms in Kryptos, but it was the most barren one I had ever been in, lacking any furnishing or decorations. Usually, you could request a room with a specific landscape or setting to make negotiations more comfortable for specific races and beings. Clearly, Lucifer preferred to do the opposite.

Shadowed hands caressed my spirit, looking for any weakness to use against me. "Stop that," I said.

"Why?"

Why? "It's impolite."

Lucifer's teeth glinted in the dim lighting and, with the speed of a corrupt thought, gripped the side of my neck tightly, sending sparks of pain shooting under my skin. I sucked in a sharp breath.

"Is this also impolite?" he asked silkily, the subtle pressure of his hand reminding me how easily he could destroy this form of mine and send my energy back to the heavens.

I was tall in my angelic incarnation, but he was just over a head taller than me. Looking up into those dark eyes, they heated like banked embers and seemed to flare when I raised my hand to close over his wrist. Was it somewhere that I heard that Lucifer's eyes were once a cerulean blue? The thought shifted in and faded out gently.

Suddenly, light pooled out from my fingers, its pure, white essence illuminating the space between us.

Like with all negotiations, one needed to establish a position of power. Lucifer was used to beings submitting out of fear. I would never be able to bargain for anything if I proved to be easy prey. I had to show some spine. Otherwise, this meeting would end even before it really began.

Dark eyes glinted with interest, and lips curved up a fraction.

Love sparked the light between us, flowing from me to him like a flash fire. It was the purest emotion in existence, one that bound every atom, every life force together. It was the origin of every thought and the end of every existence. I fused Light with the love of the Creator, combined with every good feeling I had, every dream realised, and every moment of joy I had felt since my angelic incarnation. The sheer force of it shoved him backwards, breaking the physical contact between us.

Lucifer straightened slowly, and when his gaze snapped on mine, I expected a furious rage. Yes, I saw the anger unravelling in black coils, but another emotion tempered it. An emotion I didn't understand.

Confusion.

When he moved towards me once more, I raised my hand again in warning. Light flared again between my fingers. He ignored me. At the time, I had believed my power was significant, that the slight victory I gained gave me some power over him.

A novice mistake.

Lucifer bent the laws of space with alarming ease, and before I knew it, my Light-filled hand was smothered in his and my jaw clenched in a bruising grip. "That might have worked once, angel, but try it again, and I will crush the Light right out of you."

Fear crept through me, eating away at the courage that brought me here. This was not a being who used empty threats. Could he take my Light from me? I wasn't about to test that theory.

Satisfied at the expressions that flicked through my face, he leaned down even closer until his scent invaded my lungs, smoky and exotic with just the hint of something sweet. Apple?

"Now," Lucifer commanded silkily, "What is your name?"

I swallowed and forced myself to focus. "Sandriel." I tried to jerk my head back, but he held me fast.

"Sandriel..." He rolled my name in his mouth, pronouncing each syllable until it sounded vaguely erotic. His hand released its hold on my face only to slide into my long silvery, blonde hair. Lucifer studied my countenance leisurely but with an intensity I couldn't fathom.

"I came here to negotiate."

He smiled. The effect was devastating and oddly familiar. "And how do you think you are doing, Sandriel?"

Spirits, my name. It sounded like he licked up one side of it and kissed his way down the other. "Stop doing that."

"Stop doing what?" came the velvet reply.

"You know what!"

Desperate, I pushed him with my body, with my will and my Light. It either must have worked, or he let me go because, in the next moment, Lucifer was a good distance away, crossing his arms against his chest. His wings fell around him, concealing parts of his body like a great, ebony cloak.

He frowned at me briefly, and then his expression cleared and cooled like winter's night. "You speak of negotiation. Negotiation for what, little angel?"

It was sudden, the shift from heat to cold. I tried to adjust and straighten myself up to look more composed and less flustered. Suppressing the urge to mirror him and cross my arms, I clasped my hands in front of me and eased the lines of my face into smooth, calm contours.

"I came here to negotiate for Devros, Elindara, and Rushton."

"Ah, the warrior angels."

I nodded. "Yes, for their release."

Lucifer had captured many of our warrior angels in battle. I had heard about the horrible ways some of them had been tortured and transitioned by his hand. He was vicious and effective with the pain he inflicted, and it felt as though many angels took centuries to recover from the time spent in Hell, on the rare occasion they managed to leave.

He flashed me a contemptuous look. "And what is Heaven offering me this time? Another offer of peace?"

"Don't you want peace?"

He laughed, rich and dark. The sound echoed through the room, making me feel like I was surrounded by him. Trapped.

Just make the deal and leave, I told myself. "What do you want, then?" I countered.

His laughter faded, and he paused, tilting his head at me in consideration. It made me nervous. The fire had crept back in.

"What are you willing to give me?"

I stared at him. "Me?"

"Yes, little angel. Is it not you whom I'm negotiating with?"

"On behalf of Heaven," I said firmly.

He shook his head slowly, making the glow of the torches play bewitchingly with the angles of his face. "No, I think not. They sent you, so it is you I will negotiate with."

My eyes narrowed. "That is not how it works."

"If you want to free them, then that is how it's going to work."

How did I think that by making a deal with the Devil, I would come out unscathed? "Fine. What do you want from me, Lucifer?"

"Your time."

I jerked back, startled. My time? "Why?"

Lucifer shrugged indifferently. "My reasons are my own."

Floundering, I responded, "Well, if I don't like your reasons, I might not agree."

He arched an eyebrow. "Really? You would say no and leave the warrior angels you so bravely came all the way down here for just because of my *reasons*?"

I blinked. "Well..."

"As I said, little angel, my reasons are my own. If that's a deal breaker, go back to your City of Light and tell those who sent you to stop wasting my time."

I frowned at him. He was manipulating me. I knew it, yet I lacked the foresight to manoeuvre my way out. For the second time, I wondered why the Archangels sent me. "How... much of my time?"

His voice caressed the space between us. "A week."

"Three hours." This was not happening.

He raised an eyebrow. "Surely a life is worth more than three hours, little angel. Eight hours for each."

"Five for each."

"Done."

My wings drooped slightly. If there had been an ominous sound of thunder after he said that, I wouldn't have been surprised. He had agreed too easily, which obviously meant I was the loser in this negotiation. I just didn't know how. There was nothing I could do now. "Fine, five hours each for the release of the angels."

"Excellent. You will pay off one of your hours tomorrow."

What did I get myself into? My heart started to pound. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes, or would you like to make it sooner? Maybe you would like to stay here a little longer?"

"No," I said quickly. "Tomorrow is fine. Where do I meet you?"

"Here," he crooned softly. "You can meet me here."

"And... what are we going to do?" I stuttered slightly.

His lips lifted, but he said nothing.

I left as fast as the Light could take me.

Chapter 2

I went straight from the darkest of angels to the lightest. The City of Light flew past me in a hazy, white blur as I headed towards the Archangel, who seemed to have all the answers, and, God willing, would help me endure this impossible situation. I ignored the picturesque views that humans only glimpsed in their imagination, skimmed past the healing pools of water, disregarded the beautiful, celestial music that would usually make me pause and absorb the thrumming, light-filled notes.

The darkness had cast its shadow upon me and no matter how much I tried, I couldn't fly fast or far enough.

The doors opened as I approached, and Archangel Michael stood in the centre of the room, waiting for me. Like always, I resisted the urge to drop to my knees before him in absolute devotion. Archangel Michael was everything an angel should be. He was beautiful, incredibly wise, strong, and righteous. I could completely understand why he was said to be the Hand of God. He was the best of us, what we all aspired to be, and from what I heard, the only one powerful enough to battle Lucifer.

They had fought once before, an eon ago. The battle was said to have raged many days and nights, causing the elementals to explode across the heavens and rain down upon the Earth. Suffocating smoke, screaming winds, and acid rain accompanied the flashes of light that cut across the sky and the sound of thunder as their blades crossed.

It was an epic battle, one between two of the most powerful beings that had ever existed. No one knew exactly how it started or how it ended, only that Archangel Michael returned to the heavens, and Lucifer established a new domain in the Underworld.

"Sandriel." His voice was soft and brushed over me like a calming wave.

I walked until I stood before him and bowed my head respectfully. "Archangel Michael."

He looked down at me, face serene and framed by a cloud of rich, golden hair. "Are you well?"

I nodded. "I am now that I am back here, in The City."

He smiled back at me softly. "How did your meeting go?"

Jerking my eyes up to his, I tried to find the right words. "I... I don't think I was prepared." I shifted on my feet. "It didn't go the way I thought it would." Involuntarily, my mind flashed back to those inky, black wings and that wicked voice which could tempt a statue to bend to his desires.

"Is Lucifer going to release our warrior angels?"

I twisted my hair and pulled its length in front of me. The air was soothingly cool against the back of my neck. "Yes."

"Then I would consider that an enormous success, beyond what many hoped for. You did well, Sandriel."

"I have to see him again," I blurted out in one breath, like trying to dislodge an obstruction in my throat. "It was part of the negotiation. He wants five hours from me. That is, five hours for each angel released."

Violet blue eyes held my gaze with strength and compassion.

My fear was tempered under the temple's healing vibrations, but I knew once I left The City of Light, it would reach out with thick, rough hands and choke me. "I'm terrified," I whispered. Emotions churned like a brewing storm inside me.

"What terrifies you?"

What didn't terrify me? I swallowed. "Him... and what he wants from me."

There was a soft pause. "And what does he want from you?"

Sandriel... I could hear him whisper my name like a sweet caress. The memory heated my skin like summer's touch, and I waited, almost frantically, for disgust to take its place, but I couldn't feel it. Why couldn't I feel it?

I turned my head slightly and avoided Archangel Michael's eyes, looking instead at one of his broad shoulders. "I'm not exactly sure... he wasn't very specific."

I took a deep breath and tilted my chin up. "Why me? Why did you choose me to negotiate with him?"

He moved then, his royal purple robe brushing the floor slightly as he walked to the side of the room. The wall shimmered and disappeared, and suddenly, I could see The City of Light spread out before me like a glorious carpet of intricately exquisite structures. Some of them pulsed and glowed, creating rainbow hues in the sky.

"Because you are the only one who can." He said it like it carried the weight of something I couldn't understand.

I stared at his back, half concealed by the shiny length of his hair. Archangel Michael's wings were within his form, but I knew if they were stretched out, they would take up the width of the room. White, radiant wings that so many great painters and renowned sculptors had tried in vain to capture.

Archangel Michael knew so many things. Many of us believed he got messages straight from the Source. Was this one of those things? It still made no sense to me.

"Why is this so?" I implored.

He turned back to me, hands clasped behind him. "It will be revealed to you in time, Sandriel. You must trust that the path you are on is meant for you. Have faith that you have the strength needed to walk down it. It wouldn't have been given to you if you didn't."

I wrung my hands together. The strength to deal with the Devil, the Eater of Worlds? Who was I to even attempt such a thing? "But I feel so lost."

Michael's eyes unfocused for a second, as if listening to a song that only he could hear. "Meditate," he finally said. "Perhaps some answers lie there."

I closed my eyes in the Crystal Room and started to go through the familiar exercises to prepare my mind and body for meditation. It should have been easy for one such as I, but in my mind, I saw flashing, dark eyes instead of the white light that was supposed to soothe me. It took time and some considerable effort, but finally, I felt myself touch that river of peace that passed through my soul and wound its way through every atom in the Universe.

Connected, weightless, light, free...

The memory surfaced from the depths of my mind like it was waiting for me. Impressions, thoughts and feelings slid through, and they weren't pleasant. Despair, bleak, and unyielding saturated the room I was in, shaking me to my core.

He was in pain. Oh, he was in so much pain. I would have done anything, anything for him, but I could not fix this. I could feel his silent screams, his turbulent rage, and I knew others would be able to feel it soon. They would come for him. He was not safe. I would have gone to him, but this body would not obey my will. The darkness that seeped through my...

I couldn't bear the agony. I tore past that memory and into another one that was hovering just behind the first.

I pressed my hands to my warm cheeks. I shouldn't be doing this, but still, I peeked out from behind the tree.

He was having a bath. What unattached woman would have been able to turn away? The excuse sounded pitiful even to me. I crouched down low and tried to angle the shrubbery in front of me to conceal my rose-coloured gown. It seemed my dignity had kicked up its heels and fled, and now I had reduced myself to a common Peeping Tom.

My eyes widened, but how glorious he looked.

Water sluiced down hardened muscle over tantalising indents and contours. His skin practically glowed in the fading light. I thought him a dream when I first saw him, but now he was more akin to a wild, untamed fantasy. He stood with most of his back to me, and I could see that the water just barely covered firm... I blushed.

I didn't know a man could possess such a form!

But he wasn't a man, that much I knew. He was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at him. My heart raced in my chest.

I watched as he ducked down into the lake like a creature born from the waters and emerged dripping, running a hand through that silky, dark hair. I often wondered what it would feel like to touch it. Would it feel as soft as it looked? I tugged on my own auburn locks that had now collected bits of foliage.

I knew I shouldn't be indulging in such thoughts, and often I'd force myself to think of God and helping other people, but here I was, crawling through the dirt and... oh my....

He walked out of the water. Naked.

My eyes widened further.

Casually, he draped on the white and gold cloth he wore around his waist. Absently, I wondered how it never managed to get dirty. Otherwise, I would have offered to wash it for him.

Water still glistened off his large shoulders and across the sweeping planes of his chest. The setting sun worshipped his body as it slipped below the horizon. He watched it for a few moments, enjoying the last rays of light before turning and disappearing into the tree line.

I let out a wheezing breath of air I had been holding. I hadn't meant to watch. Really, I hadn't.

"Nadia, you are so, so bad," I whispered to myself.

"Yes, you are," came a smooth, velvet voice.

I screamed and tumbled sideways, looking up. Oh god, no.

Amused, cerulean blue eyes looked down at me. "Did you enjoy the view?"

I managed to get his name out in a strangled, mortified moan. "Lucifer."

Lucifer.

My eyes snapped open.

Chapter 3

I had forgotten about my past lives.

Yes, we have many lives and are called many names. Each life we live is given to us to re-remember that we are spiritual, divine beings living in a human body. We forget that we are capable of so much love and goodness, and some of us slide down a darker path, giving in to anger, fear, and unloving behaviour. Our lifetimes that follow set us up to improve on the areas we were weakest in, so we can continue to grow and become the best version of ourselves.

I knew there was a spiritual harmony in all things, but I was still desperately recovering from the shock that I had known Lucifer in a life where I was called Nadia. Were the events of that lifetime the reason the Creator had placed me on his path now? To the best of my knowledge, angels didn't mix with humans, not in the way that I saw in my vision.

In Archangel Michael's temple, we guided the humans on Earth by sending them thoughts, feelings, and intuitive nudges in answer to their prayers. In very rare cases, we would go down and physically lend a helping hand if it was for their highest good, but only for a few moments and never for an extended period of time.

Nadia, my previous incarnation, seemed to know Lucifer very well. Not many beings remembered what Lucifer was before he descended into the Underworld. He was the first amongst the angels and was said to be the most beautiful example of God's perfection. Nadia's glimpse of him in the lake with that angelic shimmer along his skin and the warm amusement in his vibrant, blue eyes was a complete contrast to the creature I had seen a few hours ago.

Everything in me wanted to deny our connection, but the memories still played out before me, imbued with the fascination I had felt, wonder, and, worst of all, that deep current of attraction.

What in the heavens happened to him?

The presence of another angel in the Crystal Room distracted me from my musings. I looked up to see Lycindra, a healing angel from Archangel Raphael's temple and someone I had grown close to.

Her dark, wavy brown hair caressed the sides of a sweetly shaped face. "Sandriel, I heard you were in here. Are you well?"

There was no simple answer to her question, and I hadn't told her about my mission. Archangel Michael had wanted me to keep it to myself for now. I smiled and stood up slowly. "I was meditating and enjoying the peace of the Crystal Room."

Her green dress swirled around her feet as she stopped. "Oh, I hope I didn't disturb you, but I thought you would want to know that Rushton and the warrior angels are back!" Lycindra's face lit up with joy.

I understood her mood. The warrior angels risked themselves greatly by battling the demonic energies in the realms. Many had to go through long bouts of healing just to eliminate all the negativity absorbed into their energy field. The warriors also knew that if one of them were captured, there was no certainty they would come back for a long time. Many hadn't so far, so this was a rare event.

Lucifer had released the warrior angels as promised, but before our agreement had even begun. He probably knew I wouldn't renege on our deal, no matter how much I yearned to. It was against our nature not to keep our word, though I was surprised that he had kept his. I would even say he was being... generous. That alone should have warned me, like the scent of smoke in the air before your house catches on fire.

"They are? Where? Can I see them?" I asked eagerly.

Her smile dimmed. "They are in the healing chambers. We can look but can't go in until they're finished."

I should have known. There was always a catch with the High Lord of Hell.

The warrior angels were spread out on the healing tables, with what was left of their wings also fanned out from their body in ragged pieces. I could see the bones sticking out, piercing the membrane of their wings and cutting through the bloody feathers. Devros only had one of his left. The other had been hacked off, leaving a mutilated stump. Claw marks marred the beauty of his dark skin, slicing deep towards the bone. They had been butchered, there was no other way to describe it.

"Dear Creator..." I whispered. "Can we rebuild his wings?"

Lycindra looked pale, despite being bathed in the warm crystal glow of the healing chamber. "Yes, eventually we can reconstruct their wings back to their original form. It will take time. Damage of this magnitude..." she trailed off for a few seconds. "I'd be more worried about their emotional state. Time moves differently in the Underworld. They could have been down there for years."

"Years?" I echoed. According to Archangel Michael, they had left for Earth two months ago. Sometime during that period they had been captured.

Rushton was closest to where I stood behind the clear, crystal glass. Strips of skin hung off him like peeling wallpaper, revealing raw flesh underneath. I could see the healing angels carefully place them back, waiting for the crystals to take effect. His face was a swollen mess, but his eyes were closed in deep sleep, thankfully not feeling any more pain. Normally, angels could heal almost instantly as our light regenerated us at incredible speeds. The only exception was if we were hurt by dark energy. Somehow the dark energy made our vibration lower, more physical and dense.

I had seen Rushton a few times in The City of Light. He always had a calm, confidence about him and was a well respected warrior of the Earth Angels. It was hard seeing him like this, so broken and hurt.

I noticed another tall, imposing angel enter the other side of the healing chamber that was also cordoned off by clear crystal. With his dark hair tied back and his sharp, princely features, I recognized him instantly as Raznoul, the unofficial leader of the warrior angels. From the little I knew, he was rumoured to work alone, but Archangel Michael appointed him to assist the warrior angels and they seemed to be following his lead. I could also tell he was very powerful. His aura was similar to the Archangels but lacked the colour that associated them with their temple. He wore very little expression on his face, but I knew he must be taking the condition of one of his own very personally.

I looked over to where Elindara was twitching on the table. There were more than a few female warrior angels, and Elindara was a fierce one. Her once beautiful, long red hair was now shorn off, close to her scalp. Nail marks scored over her cheeks and down the slim column of her neck in harsh red lines. She twisted her head from side to side and moaned, arching her back off the quartz slab. Some of the healers glided over to her and channelled a stronger current of healing energy into her body.

"She has been psychically attacked," Lycindra said, her voice shaky. "Look at her aura, I've never seen anything like it."

Lycindra was right, her aura looked like someone doused acid over a rainbow. Black, gaping holes punctured her energy field in various places, warping colours that normally would have blended beautifully together. As an angel, Elindara would be surrounded by white angelic light, but instead, brown streaks dampened her glow like a layer of thick mud. I didn't have a vast knowledge of healing, but I knew the holes in her aura were openings for other demonic energies to seep through, affecting her spirit and mind.

This was a whole new form of torture.

"He is a monster." My fingers curled into a fist.

"Who?" Lycindra asked. She stared at the warrior angels, unable to look away.

"Lucifer," I swallowed. "He did this."

"He is a Fallen," she said as if that explained everything.

I reached out and touched the glass with my fingertips, watching the angels activate a set of prism-shaped crystals above Devros. "He was one of us in the beginning."

Lycindra sighed. "That was a long time ago, Sandriel. Now he hates us."

"Why?" I asked, not really expecting an answer.

She shook her head. "No one knows, or no one I've talked to."

Something must have twisted Lucifer in such epic proportions to make him torture his own kind in such a malevolent fashion. Maybe I was wrong, and this was a warning to me if I disobeyed him. Or maybe he was hinting at what he had planned for me. He didn't say he wouldn't hurt me. Oh, what a novice I was! I never even thought to negotiate that!

"I wish someone would stop him. I don't understand why the other Archangels don't just go down together and make sure this doesn't happen again."

I sighed, thinking about my conversation with Archangel Michael. "It might not be their destiny."

She turned to look at me, full of sorrow. "Then whose is it? Heaven needs to send somebody."

They sent me. Taking in the scene before me, I felt more and more inadequate for the task.

I wanted to rest before my first hour with Lucifer began, so I headed to my chamber in Archangel Michael's temple. It was a space that I used to meditate, relax, or contemplate the lessons we had learned. It was a simple room with a bed and a healing pool of water. The water could also be used to check in on our charges on Earth, but currently, all my assignments were on hold until my current 'project' was finished. I hoped that the rest might reveal more of my past life. If I was going to face Lucifer again, I needed to know more about him, and Nadia was the key.

Resting my head on the soft creamy bedding, I allowed myself to drift off into nothingness...

It was going to storm tonight. I peered up into the sky and noticed the thick, grey clouds rolling above. I shouldn't have been dawdling out by the lake, but then I saw the apple tree, and I knew I could make an apple pie from one of my mother's old recipes to sell at the market tomorrow. I almost had enough to buy a goat, so anything extra would help.

The red apples rolled around in the folds of my dress that I had lifted up to make an impromptu sack. I was indecently exposing my legs, but no one came up this path anymore, not since my parents passed away. It had been two years, and I was finally doing well on my own. Humming softly, I could just see the roof of my cottage over the hill. As the first drops of rain hit my arm, I increased my pace. I might just make it before the storm hit.

Just before I started up the hill, an odd sound behind me made me stop. I paused, then continued to walk, dismissing it from my mind. The noise came again, but louder... a slithering sound...

My intuition kicked in, and I knew without a doubt that something terrifying was behind me. My shoulders tensed, and I gripped my dress tighter until my knuckles turned white. Slowly, I turned around.

At first, my mind couldn't grasp what I saw. It looked like a man, tall and shadowy, except for the large tentacles that were rapidly moving towards me, curling through the grass like snakes.

Demon!

I screamed, and the apples hit the ground, tumbling forward. Spinning around, I almost tripped on the hem of my dress as I ran up the hill as fast as my legs would take me. We had heard about demons and creatures that existed in nightmares, but never in my life did I actually believe they were true! Anything I conjured up in my imagination could not equal the manifestation of horror behind me.

Did I call it to myself? What had I done that was so bad?

Terror gave me speed, and the muscles in my legs shrieked as I pushed them harder.

I wasn't fast enough.

A thick, slimy tentacle wrapped around my waist, and pain exploded as I crashed face first into the ground. I tasted blood. My fingers ripped into the ground as thin needles pierced my flesh beneath the demon's limb. A wave of nausea swept through me, and I felt weak and lethargic. I was dragged over grass and twigs at a rapid pace back towards that thing waiting in the dark. I was going to die, and somehow the most distressing thing that came to mind was not making that apple pie.

Lightning flashed, and the sky wept harder around me. It took a minute before I realised I had stopped moving. The choking grasp around me was loose, and I managed, with effort, to shakily roll over on my back. Lifting my head, I looked around with blurred vision and tried to breathe slowly as my heart struggled to escape from my chest.

There had been no lightning; the light I thought I'd seen was coming from a man, or what I thought was a man. He glowed like a bright star, casting the darkness back into its shadowy corners. Enormous white wings swept out behind him in graceful arches as he moved with a fluidity that wasn't human. I watched as he sliced through the demon with a great golden sword, ducking and weaving around its monstrous limbs. He had severed the tentacle that had been wrapped around me, and the amputated limb had shrivelled like a dying vine. The thing hissed and spat spurts of fluid from its mouth, but nothing touched him. I vaguely wondered if I was dreaming.

One second, the demon was upright, and the next, after a glint of gold, its head left its body. It rolled down the hill in the same direction as my apples.

Exhaustion claimed me. Rain ran down my face, soaking my clothes. I couldn't hold my head up any longer, so I let myself sink back down onto the grass. I was cold; it felt like ice had been injected into my veins and was slowly travelling through my body, leaching all the heat.

Something soft skimmed my leg, and I looked up and saw God.

"Are you God?" At least, that's what I thought I said, but it came out more like a strangled moan.

God kneeled down before me. Dark hair framed eyes that were a shade of blue I had never seen before, like crushed sapphires mixed with twilight. He ran his perfect hand over my face, and I felt a warm hum run over my skin. A flash of surprise flickered in his eyes before I turned my face into his palm, seeking more of his touch. The warmth felt like pure bliss. I could stay like this forever.

Are you going to take me to heaven? I thought.

God smiled, and his beauty was blinding. "No, little one." His voice was musical and lovely. The fact that he could hear my thoughts wasn't strange. This was God.

"I'm not God," the winged man said.

You're not? He shook his head.

What are you?

Warm, cerulean blue eyes looked down at me. "An angel," came the silky reply.

I felt myself being lifted, and then I was in his arms, and the rain touched me no more.

I awoke slowly, the memories settling in my head. It took me a while to separate myself from what I had seen. It was like slowly and carefully peeling back a glove, ensuring the fragile material didn't get damaged in the process.

Not moving, I contemplated my recent memory. Lucifer had once saved me from a demon. I could scarcely believe it. I could still feel the overwhelming fear, then the awe and gratitude when I saw him kneeling over me.

Lucifer... in the old tongue, it meant Bringer of Dawn. Now, ironically, one of his many names was Bringer of Death. As I thought about the warrior angels still healing in Raphael's Temple, I couldn't help but agree.

Nadia once thought he was a God, but I knew what he was now. I wondered at the karmic tie that linked us. What debts did I still owe him, or what did he owe me? We clearly had unfinished business in this incarnation, and I dreaded finding out exactly what that was. No good could come from being linked to Lucifer in any way. But unfortunately, I couldn't put off this meeting any longer.

It was time to see the Devil.

Chapter 4

I entered the meeting hall in Kryptos and immediately thought I was in the wrong place. It looked like the inside of an Arabian Palace. Gone were the black marble floors and dusty torches. Instead, rich tapestries draped the walls in sensual designs, beckoning for a closer inspection. A plush-looking carpet of scarlet and gold flowed beneath my feet, and large, decadent pillows were strewn about in a careless fashion. The scent of honey and cinnamon twined together from long incense sticks, and I felt that if I parted my lips just a little, I could actually taste the flavours on my tongue.

It was a lavish feast for the senses.

Unfortunately, the room's splendour could not compete with the creature within.

Lucifer reclined against one of two ornate couches, holding a jewelled goblet in one hand. He wore loose black pants worked with gold thread and a sleeveless carmine vest embellished with jet buttons. Dark hair brushed a high collar and gleamed in the flickering light. I noticed his ebony wings were hidden, folded into his body. He looked exotic and dangerous. Lucifer had dressed like a Persian Prince and I like a virgin sacrifice.

Mind games. I had just walked in, and the game had already begun.

The fallen angel studied me over the rim of his cup, dark eyes piercing. I already felt the pull towards him, an inexplicable thread connecting us. I attributed this to my visions. How was I supposed to look at him knowing what I knew now? My past had linked us, whether he was aware of it or not. I felt a sense of familiarity, which I knew was incredibly unwise.

You approach the Devil with caution, not camaraderie.

Taking a deep breath, I made my way over to the couches. The God of Darkness had no equals, and sitting opposite him invited me to his level. I would have been less surprised if he gestured for me to sit at his feet amongst the many colourful cushions. Not that I would. Though, if he insisted, what would I say? I doubted many beings said no to Lucifer and survived the experience.

Better to play this game of his and see what he reveals.

He continued to watch me as I sat down opposite him and clasped my hands neatly on my lap. We stared at each other for a few long moments. Fear and anticipation licked their way along my spine.

Finally, I broke the silence. "Why does everything look different?"

His eyes ran slowly over my modest white attire, then to my hands. I struggled not to unclasp them and fidget with my dress. "Because I will it so." His voice was soft, almost relaxed, as if he were trying to put me at ease. My fear went up another notch.

All things were made up of energy. As a result, practically anything could be manipulated and changed to form something new. The continual thought and intention on a formless substance could create. It was another name for 'manifesting.' Some people called it magic, but it was just another Law of the Universe. Those who were more adept at this art could take what was already formed and transform it. Lucifer had recreated a whole chamber. It was another demonstration of his power.

"So, I'm here now." My fingers twitched. There was no point in pleasantries, but did I really want to head straight to the main course?

Lucifer glanced back up at me, and the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Yes, yes, you are." It sounded alarmingly like a threat.

He took a sip from his goblet and stretched out his long legs. Heaven knew what was in that thing. It could have been blood or fruit juice. I shifted uncomfortably. He noticed, tracking my movements.

"You sent the warrior angels back, " I narrowed my eyes, "in pieces."

"So I did." His lips curved up at the edge. "Are you not glad they are back, little one?"

Little one. Lucifer used that same phrase in my past. My heart jumped in alarm. Did he know who I was? "Ahhh..." Distracted, I blinked rapidly. "You *tortured* them."

"I've been known to do that from time to time."

"Why?" I questioned with intensity. Maybe I could finally learn how this all happened. "Why do you hurt them? You were one of them."

The air suddenly chilled, and inky black liquid bled across the tapestries, marring their beauty. The splendour of the place dimmed as if the taint underneath was finally revealed. I froze.

Lucifer looked me straight in the eyes and said quietly, "They displeased me."

Everything stilled, and for a few moments, I hardly dared to breathe. Then I whispered, "You cut off Devros' wing."

A razor edge crept into his voice, and he leaned forward in his seat. "Does he need it back?" Lucifer gestured with his hand.

Energy prickled along my skin, and I saw a flash of light accompanied by the scent of something burning. To the left, something hit the floor. It was bloody and white, and it only took a second to recognise the remains of a large, angelic wing.

"By all means, return it to him."

I shot up straight off the couch. "You—"

"Demon? Beast?" His eyes gleamed red. "I am all those things and more."

My mouth opened and closed. Horror, anger, and fear waged a war within me. They were dangerous emotions, moving me further away from my angelic centre.

"Sit down, Sandriel," he said mildly. A side table manifested before him, and he set his cup down.

"What is wrong with you? How did you end up like this?" The words just flew out of my mouth. "You were *never* this way before!" I shouted at him. In the back of my mind, I knew it was suicidal. In our game of chess, I just hurled my pieces on the floor, but with all the feelings churning inside, a part of me didn't care.

In an instant, Lucifer was before me, a hand tangled in my hair, pulling me close. "How would you know what I was like before?" he asked savagely.

And there it was, that feeling of connection, of familiarity. I wanted to hate him. I wanted... I wanted...

"I... they speak about you in The City of Light." I needed to calm down. Taking another deep breath, I let it out slowly, willing serenity to my mind. Sometimes in the dark, you are your own worst enemy, and I was becoming mine. He was riling me up. Deliberate or not, I was stepping away from what I needed to be.

"And what do they say?" Lucifer purred. Those sensual lips grazed my ear, and I shivered involuntarily. His energy didn't harm, but it bound us together in dark, silky threads. Tensing, I brought my hands up against his chest, preparing to push him away.

"That you used to be good. That you saved people."

The hand in my hair softened, and the other slid across my hip. The hold that he had on me turned slowly into an embrace. His rich scent invaded me, entwining seductively with my thoughts. Fire sparked in his eyes, and I couldn't help but watch the light dance.

"There was once an angel who followed the Light, but he soon realised that the Light was filtered and weak." Lucifer brushed my jaw lightly with his knuckles, "The Dark, though... the darkness was wild and untamed, and it didn't discriminate. So, he turned to the Dark, and the darkness welcomed him warmly." His voice caressed my mind like velvet, and I felt his thumb brush the curve of my lower lip. Shivers of heat spiralled down under my skin, and my eyelids drooped. "The Light was beautiful, but it distracted him with all its colours. The angel didn't realise what was underneath its pretty facade until it was stripped away. Whereas the darkness didn't need to hide. It is what it is... powerful, electrifying, and free. You accept it..." Lucifer kissed the side of my neck and left a sweet, pleasurable burn, "and it accepts you."

Sweet Goddess, give me strength.

"Let go of me," I whispered.

A trail of heat followed his lips as they continued to skim my throat, finally resting on my pulse. "Are you sure, little angel? I can feel your heart racing. Is that fear you feel?"

Yes. No. "Yes."

I felt his lips curve against my skin, "Liar," he crooned.

"What do you want from me?"

He dropped his eyes to my lips. "Well, I wanted you to sit down, but you seemed rather resistant. Do you find your seat uncomfortable? Perhaps you'd rather share mine?" he asked.

"No," I said abruptly. Then followed it with a, "Thank you."

Amusement softened his features in a stunning way, and I struggled not to stare. I took a step back, and surprisingly he let me go. Hastily, I sat down. I didn't like the look he gave me. Which was worse, having the Devil's anger directed at you or his interest? A sudden thought crossed my mind. He couldn't hear what I was thinking like before, could he? No one knew the extent of the powers Lucifer possessed. When he had become a Fallen, he would have collected a whole new range of abilities. Though, he seemed to have this mind-reading skill before. Maybe he had lost it.

I looked up at him with wide eyes. *You can't hear me, can you? Can you?*

Tendrils of fire burnt the carpet in front of me in swirling patterns. Another flash of light and a golden cup suddenly appeared and floated in front of me. "Drink," he commanded. He lowered himself down to the couch and watched me like a coiled panther. I felt a current of alarm run through my body.

I shook my head. "I'd rather not."

"I said drink," Lucifer said very softly. He picked up his own cup and brought it to his lips.

It was a command, and I tempted fate by still resisting. "Why? What's in it?"

"Why don't you try it and find out?" The air chilled slightly. "If I wanted to harm you, little angel, I wouldn't need a drink to do it."

Well, did I really have a choice? I debated my options, and I didn't seem to have very many. I curled my hand around the goblet, and whatever magic held it up disappeared at my touch. The contents were too dark to make out an actual colour. I looked back at him hesitantly. His face was expressionless. Tentatively, I brought it to my lips and took a sip.

Life exploded along my tongue. I tasted Earth's seasons mixed in with sweetly scented flowers and warm, happy thoughts. I took another sip just to be sure, then stared in amazement.

"It's called Ambrosia. It is supposed to taste different for everyone."

"How did you get it?"

"I killed a God."

I started. "You killed God?"

He bared his teeth. "Not the Creator, little one. That would surely be a feat. There is a race of beings that some humans label as God. They have many interesting things tucked up in their realm."

"I'm drinking something from a dead God?"

"And enjoying it from the looks of things." Lucifer stroked the arm of the couch with his fingers. "You are the only angel that has tasted its sweet delights."

I tilted my head at him. "Except you."

"If you think that, Sandriel, I urge you to look again."

I felt bold. "Why do you deny who you were?"

"I don't indulge in denial. My past is irrelevant." He cast me a wicked look from beneath his lashes. "I could describe some things I would like to indulge in."

I blinked at him. How does one respond to that? "Well... no, that is unnecessary," I replied awkwardly and took another sip of Ambrosia. "Are you going to let the other warrior angels go?" I diverted.

"No."

"Not even if we made another agreement?" So far, this meeting hadn't involved any pain. Perhaps I could endure a few more hours for the release of more warrior angels.

"No," came the silky reply.

"Why not?" I asked curiously.

He smiled savagely. "Because I enjoy their pain." Lucifer looked at my expression and laughed. The beautiful sound was almost mocking in light of what he said.

I glared. "Then why bother releasing the angels I asked for? Why bother with any of this!"

Lucifer leaned forward and rested his forearms on the top of his knees. Power rolled out from him in waves, and I realised how much of himself he had held back to make me comfortable. "Because I was curious... and now I've decided I want something else."

I looked at him again and realised my body couldn't move. Air held me immobile. "What are you doing?" I hissed.

The room started to shift, and the Arabian splendour shimmered away. I was back in the obsidian hall with its endless marble floors. The only thing that remained were the couches. The goblet disappeared from my hand, and Lucifer moved in front of me. As I stared into his dark bottomless eyes, I started to feel myself fade into the darkness.

"You're breaking our deal!" I managed to get out.

"Am I?" he asked. "Perhaps you weren't specific."

The air bonds released me, and I sagged on the couch. I attempted to unfurl my wings, but they only fluttered uselessly. My head rolled back, and my blonde hair slid across my face. Gentle fingers pulled them back and curved the strands behind my ear.

"Did you really think this was how it was going to end, little angel?" the Devil whispered. "Welcome to my world."

Chapter 5

In the darkness of my mind, Nadia called to me...

He was waiting by the apple tree.

"Hi, " I said shyly as I made my way towards him.

I had taken my time getting out here, but the idea of meeting Lucifer in my torn grey dress that I had thrown on while I was sweeping the house was unimaginable. I had taken the time to wash my face and run a brush through my long, auburn hair, so it didn't look like the tangled mane I often saw when I glanced in the mirror. I knew it was completely idiotic to fuss about my appearance in the presence of an angel, especially one that looked like him.

The forest green dress I now wore was one of my best, and I had been told it brought out the colour of my eyes. I imagined Lucifer would be too busy thinking about more important things like the state of the world and how to save souls than the colour of my dress.

I had put it on anyway.

We had met twice now by the apple tree since that night he first saved me. Every time I saw him, the urge to get to know him became stronger and stronger. He had no idea, but he had completely ruined me. I used to find many men handsome and charming, and afterwards a spark of interest would follow me home with thoughts of the future.

Then I met him.

There were moments when we were together when I felt the pieces in my life fit together, like I had only started truly living the day I met him. I had bathed in the glory of the sun, so how could I now live a life by candlelight?

"Nadia."

That voice. I would never get used to that voice. Lucifer leaned against the trunk of the apple tree, his large, white wings out. His open robe highlighted his broad shoulders and framed an enticing expanse of golden skin. How was anyone supposed to concentrate on day-to-day chores with this image floating around in their brain?

I stopped a few feet away from him. "I didn't expect you to be back so soon." That probably didn't sound right. "Not that I'm disappointed or anything. I'm happy, glad, that you came." There I went again, tripping over my tongue and sounding like a complete fool.

He smiled softly. "How are you feeling?"

"Still drained like before, but manageable." I tucked some hair behind my ear.

Lucifer's eyes clouded with concern. "You should be feeling better by now."

I gave him a wry smile. "Considering I almost got eaten by a demon, I feel amazing."

Reaching out with his hand, he curled it lightly around my wrist. He didn't touch me often, but when he did, I could feel the warmth flow right through my body, lighting me up from within. Every part of me was aware of those beautiful fingers. His eyes half closed, and a slight frown appeared shortly after. To my disappointment, he pulled his hand away, but his frown remained.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He shook his head, dark hair brushing his shoulders. "You have a lingering residue of dark energy." At the alarm on my face, he hastened to reassure me, "It's not unusual after what you've been through, but I shall watch it just in case."

"Watch it?" I asked curiously. "How are you going to watch it?"

He paused. "I suppose I would need to check in on you from time to time."

My smile bloomed. "That would be lovely!" I sounded too excited. "I mean, nice. That would be nice." I cleared my throat. "Do all humans who have been assaulted by demonic forces get this level of angelic service?"

Another pause.

"No, they don't," he said softly, looking into my eyes.

We stared at each other for a humming moment.

My brain stuttered for a few seconds, then I replied. "Well, I'm very grateful. Should I be worried about them coming back? Is it usual for demons to be on Earth?"

"There is chaos in hell. As a result, the barrier between the Underworld and Earth is weak, and fissions can appear. When that happens, stronger demons can escape."

My eyes widened. "Are you saying there is a demonic hole near my house?"

"There was, but I sealed it with Light."

Oh, well then. I breathed out a sigh of relief. "That's good. It took me a whole week to leave my house. I don't want to lock myself back in there."

"You have nothing to fear, Nadia," Lucifer said with such calm confidence that I had to believe him.

He was going to check in on me! I suppressed the urge to dance, as now was not exactly the most appropriate time. I could dance later in my cottage. How could I not feel like the luckiest female alive? He also implied that he didn't check on people very often. Did that mean anything? Of course it didn't mean anything! He is an angel who works for Heaven, and you work at a food stall.

A slight smile graced Lucifer's lips. What was he smiling at? I smiled back.

"So, do you talk to God?"

He laughed. "Yes, I talk to the Creator often, little one."

For some reason, Lucifer had taken to calling me 'little one.' I suppose I was by comparison. I kind of liked it. It sounded affectionate. Dare I even say... endearing? Though, I probably would have liked anything he called me. He could have called me 'chair' and I'd be overjoyed.

Fascinated, I moved closer. "What does he sound like?"

"The Creator is not a He."

I stepped back in shock. "The Creator is a She?"

He shook his head again, amusement lighting his face. "The Creator is neither He nor She, though sometimes we use those terms interchangeably. The Creator is just pure energy. Pure love."

I wrinkled my nose. "Energy? What is that?"

"Energy is everything. Everything is made up of energy."

I looked at him, confused.

"The Creator is everywhere, in everything. In the wind, in the trees, the light of the sun, in the animals, in everything."

Putting a hand on my hip, I stared at him. "So when you said you talked to God, did you mean you talked to the trees and the animals?"

Lucifer smiled again. "No, I can talk to God by meditating or just centering myself. The Creator is also inside me." A warm breeze tickled my skin. "In you, too, little one."

"So, I can talk to God."

He nodded.

Interesting. I talked to myself often – in fact, on a regular basis – but never once did I hear a response. I intended to question him further on the topic, but a beautiful red apple caught my eye, hanging an arm's length away. I caught hold of it and pulled it off the tree. He watched me as I took a bite.

After I swallowed the juicy piece, I spoke. "Do angels eat?"

Still watching me, he replied softly. "Sometimes, if they have been on Earth long enough. Then they develop a craving."

"Have you eaten an apple before?"

He shook his head.

He had never tasted an apple? Apples were my favourite. I stepped closer to him, stretched out my hand, and offered the apple. "Do you want to try?"

Lucifer's eyes trailed down my arm to the glossy, red fruit. After a moment, he cupped his hand over mine and brought the apple to his lips. With my hand still in his, he took a slow bite, chewed, and swallowed. The warm, golden connection between us intensified. We were inches apart, close enough for me to see the glimmer of juice on his bottom lip. Utterly entranced, my breath tangled in my lungs. Surely, he was God's most beautiful creation. Without conscious thought, almost as if I lost any will of my own, I leaned up, bringing our faces closer.

Then I blinked and stopped. By the spirits, what was I doing? I blinked up at him, mortified. I can't believe I almost...

I started to pull back, but warm, sure fingers touched me under my chin, pulling me closer. When I was lost in the warm, drowning blue of his eyes, he kissed me. Lips caressed mine with a slow sweetness, and I was undone. He explored the curve of my lips with his, and learned its texture and shape as if he had all the time in the world. He tasted like apples and sunlight, and the combination was so potent and addictive that I wanted to roll in it. Drown in it. I trembled from the maelstrom of sensations he created within me. I never wanted it to end, yet I wanted it to stop just so it could begin again.

When he finally pulled back, I was left reeling. Cerulean blue eyes looked down at me with a curious wonder.

A thumb brushed my cheek. "I should go," he said softly.

I nodded dumbly.

The smile he gave me transformed his face into a work of art. He stepped away and opened up his glorious, white wings.

"By the way," came the smooth, silken voice. "Your dress is lovely."

My mouth dropped open.

Lucifer's voice caressed my mind. ~ You think very loudly. ~

He flexed his wings and launched into the sky. I stared after him until his form got smaller, and I couldn't see him anymore.

"Did that really happen?" I murmured over the erratic beat of my heart. I touched my fingers to my lips dreamily. "I just got kissed by an angel."

My other hand was still holding the apple we had both eaten. I brought it to my mouth and ate some more, closing my eyes and savouring the taste.

I was never going to look at apples the same way again.

I woke to the taste of apples and sunshine still lingering on my lips. Smiling, I stretched my arms out on the soft bedding under me and opened my eyes.

Reality hit me like an arctic splash of water.

I was in a room with glowing walls. It seemed to be made of dark stone but with flecks of light embedded within, casting the room in a muted golden glow. From where I was lying, I could see a table in the far corner with a tray of food and a large silver pitcher.

Where in the Heavens was I? Or was I even in Heaven? That was a terrifying thought.

I felt him before I saw him. As soon as I was aware of that electric current running along my skin, I knew. Turning my head slowly to the right, I saw Lucifer sitting on an armchair next to the bed. The strange, golden lights played along his form, unveiling him from where he

would have been concealed in the shadows. It seemed the Prince of Darkness had been waiting for me to wake up.

"Pleasant dreams, little angel?" Heat layered his voice like hot coals.

Sitting up cautiously, I moved across the midnight sheets towards the edge of the bed on the other side of him. "Where am I, Lucifer?"

He smiled slowly. "Where do you think?"

I paused with one foot off the bed. *Oh, please, no. Please, please, please, no...* "I'm in Hell! You brought me to Hell!"

"To my realm in Hell."

I took a deep breath and looked around. This wasn't the fiery pit I imagined. My hands tightened into fists as I stood up. "Take me back. Now. This wasn't our deal."

"Now, why would I do that when we haven't completed our bargain?" He gestured casually with his hand. "I've held up my end, you have yet to hold up yours."

"Coming to Hell wasn't in the deal!"

Lucifer's voice purred out. "Hmm, yes... a pity."

I glared at him. It wasn't *not* in the deal, either. I had already established I was a terrible negotiator. "And once my fifteen hours are up?"

"Well, then, you are free to go," he replied magnanimously.

I narrowed my eyes. I might not know the multifarious ways his mind worked, but I knew it was never going to be that simple. "So you will take me back?"

He smiled again, and this time the effect was frightening. Lucifer stood up and eclipsed the room with his sheer presence. "Do I look like your transport service?" he crooned.

I gestured wildly with my hand. "So how then am I supposed to get back?"

"There is a portal in my home that can transport you to the centre of Hell. From there, you can make your way to the Underworld. If you get lost, I'm sure Hades can point you in the direction of Earth."

My jaw worked. "You can't do this."

"I already have."

He turned, and the wall opened before him like a black hole. Turning his head to look back at me once more, he said, "By the way, little angel, I'd be careful of the Dragarth if I were you."

Fury burned brightly within me. "What is the Dragarth?" I spat out.

As I said that, the wall suddenly rippled, curving like an enormous snake. Something sinister rolled under the surface along the circumference of the room before sliding back beneath its depths. I stepped back in alarm.

Lucifer's smile flashed like lightning before the black hole he stepped through consumed him.

I was left in my dungeon.

Chapter 6

Time stretched endlessly as I sat and contemplated my predicament. I tried not to let the feeling of hopelessness overwhelm me, as the realisation that I was in Hell finally settled past my skin, down to the depths of my bones.

What in the Heavens was I supposed to do now? Eventually, I stood up and paced around my deceptively comfortable room, making sure I stayed as far away as I possibly could from the walls. The serpentine creature lurking within hadn't emerged again, but I wasn't taking any chances.

My own naivety had been my undoing. I had been ridiculously unprepared to engage with Lucifer from the start. Though, now I knew why Archangel Michael had sent me. What did he expect me to do? Just because I had been infatuated with Lucifer in my past didn't mean I could change him now.

Was that even possible? For aeons, he had terrorised the angels and a host of other beings. His malevolent ripple of darkness infected everything it touched. The burgeoning taint had risen from Hell, rolled like a dark mist through the underworld, and found its way to the surface of Earth. The angels could see the effect Lucifer had on humans, and despite their influence, his song of darkness found many ears.

Lucifer couldn't control men's minds or make them do bad things. People were responsible for their own actions, and their choices were their own. Though, the ones who were fascinated with the dark, who opened up their senses to nighttime's lullaby and embraced their lower desires of ego and self, left an echo of invitation. And it was the Devil that answered.

Those who were predisposed to power, greed, and violence became more ambitious in their grapple for glory. It was a gentle guidance towards their own destruction. He was an unrivalled seducer and a master of manipulation. Those who crossed his path were never the same again.

I, too, had crossed his path a very long time ago. What did that say about me? "But he was different then," I said aloud.

Is that why you kissed him? my inner voice whispered.

Oh yes, that. I'd been unsuccessfully trying to forget the way it had felt. "So," I threw up my hands. "That doesn't have to mean anything." That was Nadia. That was her feelings and her thoughts. It didn't have to be mine.

Are you so sure? my mind countered. *Maybe you don't want to admit it.*

"Admit what?" I knew I was talking to myself, but at the moment, I didn't want to look too closely at that.

That he might have left an imprint on you, too. You know you feel a pull towards him.

I tensed, not happy about where my thoughts were going. "He's Lucifer. That's just him. It's his..." I made circles with my hands.

Seductiveness?

"No!" Appalled at the first word that came to mind, I scrambled for another. "His... his..."

Magnetism?

"His energy!" I finally said, exasperated. "It's just his energy." I crossed my arms over my chest.

He affects you more than that, and you're starting to think you affect him just as much.

Lucifer had been acting completely different from what I had heard about him. No one had managed to bargain with him before. Yet, despite my horrid attempt, he had indulged me. Instead of physically harming me, he had chosen the path of seduction. Instead of throwing me in a torture chamber, he had locked me in his home. This, of course, could change in an instant, but so far, his behaviour was unusual.

Somehow Archangel Michael believed I was his weakness.

"Even if that was true," I implored the imaginary image of my Archangel teacher, "look where I am now. I have achieved nothing."

The silence of my mind spoke again. *You know better. Where there is a will, there is a way. Stop seeing the improbable and start looking for the possible.*

I cast my gaze around the sparse but comfortable quarters. The floor was smooth, polished, and made out of an unfamiliar black stone. It was so shiny it looked like liquid, almost as if I was walking on water. I stomped my foot against the surface. I was getting paranoid, but images of me sinking through the floor flashed in my head. Who knew what was in this house of horrors?

There were also no windows and no door. Lucifer had left through a gaping black hole.

"Ok, Sandriel. Anything is possible, right?" I called a ball of white Light to my palm. Its purity seemed vastly out of place, and I noticed the size of the Light was smaller than normal. I guess being in a realm within Hell seemed to be having an effect.

Steeling myself, I crept towards the spot he had left. I was very, very concerned about the creature inside these walls. The Dragarth, Lucifer called it. Who knew what it was capable of and, more importantly, what would set it off? The ball of light energy might not inflict much damage, but it was my only protection. Very carefully, I placed my right hand against the wall where Lucifer had left, then jumped back a few good feet.

Nothing happened.

I let out a huge breath.

That was good. Touching the wall didn't seem to set off the Dragarth. Slightly more at ease, I moved back and examined the spot. It wasn't warmer than the rest of the wall, and it didn't seem to have any grooves, ridges, or anything else unusual about it.

I chucked my ball of Light at it.

I saw a ripple in the wall, moving fast. I scrambled back, bringing up another ball of white energy. The current made its way sinuously around the perimeter of my quarters before once again disappearing from sight.

I clutched my hand over my chest.

Ok, don't try that again unless I have to.

I let my light dissipate. Frowning, I backed up towards the table in the far corner of the room. I distractedly grabbed a fruit off the platter as I studied the wall. As I brought it to my lips, I almost dropped it when I realised what I had unconsciously selected. I glared at the apple in my hand.

"Not going there again," I muttered and dropped it back into the bowl.

Then it dawned on me. I was feeling hungry. This place was lowering my vibration, making my body denser and more connected to its needs and desires. I pushed the platter further away from me. It would probably be best to hold out as long as I could. The pitcher on the table caught my eye. I stared at it for a few moments, then finally gave into my curiosity and poured some liquid into a silver chalice. The drink was a familiar, dark colouring.

Ambrosia. Was this Lucifer's idea of a joke? I put the pitcher back down and moved the chalice to the other side of the table.

I still couldn't believe he had brought me here. I rubbed my forehead with my fingertips, remembering his touch before I blacked out. If he wanted me here, why didn't he just take me from the very beginning? Why bother to go through the elaborate display of changing the hall into a sumptuous Arabian...

The realisation hit me hard enough that I gripped the edge of the table in response. Lucifer changed the environment by manipulating energy! I gave an assessing glance around the room. What if I tried something similar? I hadn't had a reason to bend energy to my will before, but it didn't mean I couldn't do it. There was also the danger of the Dragarth, but if I didn't take the chance, who knew how long I'd be stuck here? The longer I stayed, the more this realm would have an effect on me.

Excited by my plan, I moved in front of the golden, flecked wall again. I should try something simple. Placing my fingertips against the surface, I closed my eyes.

Manipulating energy was essentially a state of mind. Everything in the Universe was made up of energy. There was nothing different between the table and the floor, except the arrangement of energy particles and vibration. Everything was an illusion, a creation of intention and belief. Even this wall.

I asserted my will and imagined that the surface beneath my fingertip was soft and pliable like dough. I created the feeling in my mind of the surface shifting and changing, and my fingers sinking slowly into the wall like quicksand.

After a few moments, I opened my eyes and jerked. My hand was in the wall.

Pulling my hand out slowly, the wall rippled then settled back to its solid state. I stared at my hand and flexed my fingers. It tingled.

A huge smile broke out over my face. I clapped my hands together in glee. "I did it!"

I let myself bask in my success for a few seconds, then calmed myself down. There was a huge risk of not knowing what was on the other side. I might end up in a place a thousand times worse than this room. But what else could I do? I couldn't exactly wait for Lucifer to come back and ask him to let me go. How long did he plan to keep me here? No, right now, he didn't know I could leave. This might be my only opportunity to escape.

Resolved, I tried again. When my hand passed through the surface, I kept going, going, and going until my face and the rest of my body sunk into the wall. I felt cold, chilled... then...

I was in a long, dark hallway. Crimson drapes hung from the wall in sections on either side of me. I turned my head and saw the solid wall I had come from.

Well now... this wasn't so bad.

It was eerily quiet as I walked across the smooth, liquid floor. At the end of the hall was a set of elaborately carved double doors that seemed to be made out of dark wood. I peered a little closer at the designs. There were angels carved in the sides, fighting battles with demons and violently losing. I shook my head. If the rest of this place was going to follow a similar theme I might as well get used to it now.

I pushed open the doors and prayed they didn't creak. They opened smoothly to an opulent lounge room. It was also sensually designed with black velvet chaises and gilded gold mirrors all along one wall. There were several enormous, golden statues of hands with claws tipping the ends, starting from the floor and reaching two thirds of the way to the ceiling. Within the claws danced reddish blue flames in an unholy rhythm. On either side of the room I noticed another set of double doors.

This wasn't the decor I imagined Lucifer having. With all the stories I heard about him, I almost expected a throne made out of bones. Well, I hadn't exactly explored the rest of the place, so I couldn't rule that out yet. This wasn't as elaborate as the Arabian setting but it definitely had a lavish elegance about it.

As I moved around the lounges, the mirrors caught my eye. Instead of casting my reflection back at me, they looked cloudy, like fine mist swirling beneath the glass.

"Now, what is this?" I inched closer.

The mirrors, two head spans taller than me, were also four times my width. Their frames were beautiful, spiralling out with swirling designs and inlaid with stones and carved symbols. Hesitantly, I reached out and touched the surface of the mirror closest to me. The mist beneath the glass glowed white before parting to reveal an image within.

It looked like the inside of a cave. A very peculiar cave that had stairs leading down into the inky darkness.

Interesting.

My curiosity piqued, and I moved to the next one.

When the mist parted from the second mirror, my eyes widened as I saw the hall. It was my meeting place with Lucifer.

"Dear Goddess... these are portals!" Hope fired within me in a blazing inferno. I could escape!

Emboldened by my discovery, I cast a quick look around me. Lucifer could emerge from his hellish activities at any moment.

It was almost too easy, and that should have tipped me off. Unfortunately, my desire for escape muted my rational mind.

I raised my right hand and flexed my fingers. "Ok, I can do this." Reaching out, I touched the glass and watched my fingers go through. It was much easier this time. I wasn't manipulating reality, I was just accessing what was already there.

I was so absorbed with what I was doing I didn't see the Dragarth until it was too late.

The wall bent out, and something large, scaly, and covered in razor spines snapped out of the wall and hit me. I flew through the air and crashed into a solid table, toppling it over and smashing the glass goblets and pitcher. Pain stabbed through me as shattered glass pierced my skin. I moaned, shocked. This was the first time in my angelic incarnation that I had experienced severe pain. I didn't like it.

A hissing sound snapped my dazed mind to attention. Dear God, it had three heads. Black scales obstructed my vision of the mirrors, and red eyes stared at me with intense hatred. The Dragarth was an enormous three-headed snake with spikes. One of the snake heads hissed at me again, and the other darted forward and back, its forked tongue flickering in a rapid motion. The last one opened its jaws and revealed sharp fangs dripping with a yellowish substance.

Wonderful, just wonderful.

Blood coated my hands as I pulled myself up into a sitting position. When my leg didn't move properly, I suspected it was broken. I didn't know how long it would take to heal, but I wasn't going to wait. The glass tinkled as I moved through it, inching my way to the set of double doors behind me. I generated a ball of white Light in my hand, just in case. One of the serpents' heads looked at it with interest and moved closer.

Oh, please don't.

I knew if I threw my Light, it could just enrage it further. It was a couple of metres from me by the time I reached the door. With a speed born of self-preservation, I hauled myself up on one leg and slammed the doors open.

Immediately, I wanted to go back out and face the killer three-headed serpent with my tiny mothball of light.

I was in Lucifer's bedroom.

He was standing and talking to another creature out of someone's nightmare. A demon. Its horns arched high above its head, and I could see serrated teeth lining a vicious-looking

mouth. Muscles bunched onto muscles in grotesque shapes, and the ridges on its face moulded a hideous set of features. The demon stared at me with black, bottomless eyes, and the evil in them made me shiver with fear.

And yet, I was still more terrified of the fallen angel that turned his head slowly towards me.

"Angel," he said with terrible softness.

Movement caught his eye behind me, and he moved his head slightly in a dismissive gesture. There was a slithering sound, another tinkle of glass, and then nothing. I didn't dare turn my head away. He had been here the whole time.

The demon growled at me with hunger. "Annnnggeelll....." its voice grated out. Its claws flexed, and it lunged towards me. Then it froze and was lifted in the air like a child. The demon flailed its arms, still desperate to get near me. Suddenly, it howled with such pain that it made what I was feeling equivalent to a bee sting.

Lucifer's voice coiled out with deadly power. "Oh, no, Volac, that one is mine." A black hole opened up beneath him, and whatever magic was holding the creature vanished. Still screaming in agony, it dropped into the abyss. I watched as the floor became smooth once again.

Now I had his full attention. His beautiful face revealed nothing as he took in my appearance. I realised I was dripping blood on his floor.

"I'm sorry, " I stuttered. "I think I got lost."

I turned to flee, and the double doors slammed closed in my face.

His voice was smokey and dark. "You came in here, little angel, and now you have to stay."