



The Devil's

*Plaything*

Eve Vaughn

Loose Id

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## Dedication

*To a really great editor. O, this one is for you.*

## Prologue

Descendants of fallen angels, the demons' offspring were doomed to wander the Earth, aware that they harbored a genetic anomaly that was a danger to both themselves and to others -- if they were crossed. Indeed, the simplest thing could set them off. They were the damned. The unblessed.

This, then, was the legacy of Maxwell Sterling, a curse he'd lived with his entire life. He was a prisoner of his own birthright.

The devil gene.

To the world, it appeared he had it all. Max was related to the ruling family of Zandrinia, a small principality off the coast of France; he was the head of a multibillion dollar conglomerate; and he had a bevy of international beauties who threw themselves at his feet wherever he went. Yes, in everyone else's eyes, he lived a charmed life.

If they only knew the daily struggle he underwent to contain the beast within. With each passing day, it was growing harder for him to hold his feelings in check. It was difficult to go through the normal functions of the day when there was always the possibility that the slightest upset could affect the environment around him. Max was afraid that one day soon,

he wouldn't be able to control himself -- and when that happened, God help anyone who got in his way.

For years, he'd devoted his life to finding a cure for the enemy lurking inside his very cells. But for every serum, antiviral, et cetera that was developed in one of his secret pharmaceutical labs, he faced disappointment time and again. Some of the results would only temporarily stave off the effects of the devil gene, like the sudden bursts of power that often shuddered through his body and the bouts of uncontrollable rage, whereas other products did nothing at all. And then there were the end products that had magnified his problem, driving him back to square one.

Only a few years ago, after watching a horror movie, of all things, had it occurred to Max that for every bad in the world, there had to be a good to balance it, just as for every action, there was an equal and opposite reaction. What was the opposite of the Devil, he wondered. God? And Heaven for Hell, angels for demons? He'd theorized that there had to be people with what he termed the angel gene and wondered how he would find them and harness such genes for his benefit. In his lifetime, he'd met a rare few others who suffered from his ailment, so why wouldn't there be people with an opposing gene? It made sense to Max that they must exist.

Since then, Max had obtained all of his family's records and books of the occult he'd purchased or collected over the years -- anything that might possibly refer to his condition. Many, many months of intensive research had finally led him to an understanding of how his condition had come to exist.

Before it had been forbidden, angels and fallen angels -- the latter were known as demons -- had walked the earth with man and mated with humans. The issue from those unions were the blessed and the damned, respectively, better known as the akin. The akin weren't completely angels nor were they fully human, and their powers soon manifested. Some received the gift of prophecy, others were telekinetic, and still more had such strong

abilities that they could destroy objects with their minds -- hence the origin of the name given the devil gene.

Following the creation of the akin, it had become taboo for both angels and demons to mate with humans. The akin were left without guidance about who, and the nature of what, they were. They soon became a threat to humans, who, of course, didn't understand what the akin were or their abilities. Hunted down and tortured, most went into hiding, while some tried to blend in, denying their heritage. What Max had found particularly interesting was that a few of the akin had somehow joined with their apparent opposites, forming a so-called soul bond. The bond seemed to stabilize the akins' powers, helping them to lead normal lives.

It was clear there were still carriers of the devil gene as he and some others were affected; the possibility of two carriers with the devil gene or the angel gene having a child who was also a carrier of the devil or angel gene was fifty percent. Which meant the remaining fifty-percent would be divided between the possibility of a child not having either gene at all, or that the child would inherit both sets of the gene from his or her parents. Thus, it made sense that Max was the only one in his family with his affliction. And because he had manifested the gene's full effects, the chances of his offspring having the gene were also higher.

The primary question he became intent on solving was how he would find a carrier of the angel gene.

Fortunately, during Max's search, he had stumbled on an artifact, a bloodstone once owned by a powerful family. According to legend, when a carrier of the angel gene was close to the bloodstone, it would glow a bright blue; in the proximity of one of Max's ilk, the artifact would shine a deep red. In the ensuing years, Max filled his hours overseeing his empire and cutting a rapid path through women in the hopes that one of them would be his salvation. The woman who would form the soul bond with him.



It was the night he attended a Valentine's ball that the bloodstone he wore discreetly on a platinum chain around his neck grew warm. He was in the hotel lobby by the private elevator and barely noticed the heat against his flesh at first, but the artifact became hotter as the seconds passed, until it seemed to nearly burn his skin. When he removed it from beneath his shirt, the charm shimmered an iridescent blue. Immediately, his gaze fell on the only other people near him, two women whose backs were turned. Instinctively, urgently, he willed the one who was causing his bloodstone to react to turn around.

She did.

Max's breath caught in his throat.

Stunning. She was absolutely lovely.

His mind triumphantly cataloged what his eyes so eagerly saw. Medium height. A classic but toned hourglass figure most women worked hard in the gym to achieve. A tilt-tipped nose. Short, chin-length hair tucked casually behind her ears. And large, dark brown eyes. The woman, *his* woman, had a pixieish look that suited her. He wondered if her silky brown skin felt as smooth as it appeared, and his body tightened, his cock stirring as he stared at her full, bow-shaped lips.

Max barely acknowledged the blaze that continued to flare through the bloodstone, especially when the beauty's eyes widened -- as if she, too, recognized something in him. Then she quickly averted her gaze and, without giving him a backward glance, dragged her companion into the elevator when it arrived.

Max chuckled. "You can run, but now that I've found you, there's no hiding from me."

## Chapter One

“That’s it! I’m calling off the ceremony, and we’re eloping!” Alex Harrison announced with her usual dramatic flair, before she plopped onto the sofa.

Olivia Watts grinned at her younger sister, not paying much attention. After all, it wasn’t the first time, nor would it be the last time, she’d hear this declaration. “What would Tag say? You know he wants to parade you down the aisle and show you off to the world. You wouldn’t deny a man that, would you? Especially when you were the one who badgered the poor guy for marriage in the first place.”

Alex gave her a look of mock outrage. “Badgered?! Are you kidding me? I simply nudged him in the right direction. He may have thought he didn’t have to buy the cow because he was getting the milk for free, but he soon learned the beef was very expensive -- but well worth it.”

Olivia giggled at her sister’s crazy words. “You’re too much, Alex. Anyway, you should be happy. You’re finally going to have the wedding you wanted.”

“This isn’t the wedding I want. It’s what Mom wants. She’s determined to turn me into one of those frou-frou brides, and I can’t take another minute of it. I’d much rather run off to Las Vegas and get hitched by an Elvis impersonator.”

Olivia crinkled her nose at the visual. Somehow that idea didn't sound very appealing. "The wedding is only six months away. I think you'll make it. Besides, Mom will be heartbroken if she doesn't get the big church wedding this time around."

Alex shrugged. "At least you didn't have to go through this drama. You and Bill did the smart thing by going to the justice of the peace."

"As pregnant as I was, it would have looked pretty silly for me to waddle down the aisle," Olivia returned softly.

Alex's palm flew over her mouth, her eyes widening with horror. "Oh, sis, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so callous. I --"

Olivia held up her hand, silencing Alex's apology. She knew her sister hadn't meant anything malicious. "No harm done. It's not such an ordeal to talk about anymore. I made some mistakes in my life, and I handled the consequences. Despite what happened between me and Bill, I can never regret meeting him -- without him, I wouldn't have Tiffany."

A smile tugged the corners of her lips as she thought of her seven-year-old, who was currently spending the weekend with her grandparents and getting thoroughly spoiled. Had it not been for Tiffany, Olivia never would have found the courage to leave her abusive marriage. Sure, the two of them had barely had anything to their names, and life had been a struggle these past few years, but with her daughter by her side, Olivia had strived to do a little better every day. "She's worth every bit of pain I've suffered. I draw strength from her; I honestly don't know what I'd do without her."

Olivia's smile broadened as she reflected on her current circumstances. Things were starting to look up already. One of the jobs she'd been temping with as a receptionist had offered her a full-time position. The pay wasn't outstanding, but the health benefits more than made up for it. Not only that, but the company had an onsite daycare center that was offered for free to its employees. With Tiffany's school only a few blocks away from the office, Olivia could pick her up in the afternoon and bring the child back to the office until

she got off work. By saving babysitting money, she could quit her other part-time job at the diner. Yes, things were definitely starting to come around.

Olivia gave her sister a wink of reassurance. "What's with the long face? There's no need to be upset for me. It is what it is."

Alex pouted her contrition. "I'm being a pain in the butt with all my complaining, aren't I?"

"I wouldn't exactly call you bridezilla, but I think every prospective bride gets pre-wedding jitters."

"And Mom isn't helping. She calls ten times a day with her helpful hints, and she keeps adding people I've never heard of to the invitation list. The small, intimate affair I wanted is turning into a three-ring circus. Do you even know who Great-uncle Cleotis is?"

Olivia tried to hold back a snicker. "Isn't he the one who's always asking people to pull his finger?"

"No, that's Uncle Harold. I don't think I've even met half the people on Mom's guest list, but she insists I include all the family. I feel so bad, because Tag's list is really short. Just his mother, siblings, and a few of his colleagues. It seems terribly one-sided."

"Look at it this way, Alex. Tag didn't set a budget, and Mom and Dad are gifting you two with a large sum of money for expenses and the honeymoon, so there shouldn't be a problem. Just smile, nod, and look pretty. On the big day, I'm sure no one else will exist for you, except Tag."

With a grin that would have made the Cheshire Cat jealous, Alex sighed, a dreamy expression entering her eyes. "You're probably right. God, I love that man."

"And he loves you."

Alex's smile grew wider. "He does, doesn't he? You're right, O. What am I worried about? So what if Mom wants to invite the entire Western Hemisphere? It will be a glorious day when I finally become Mrs. Taggart Webster."

Olivia was happy at her sister's enthusiasm. It pleased her to see Alex finally get the things she'd really wanted -- a new beauty salon and marriage to a wonderful man. Still, she tried to suppress a twinge of envy. "Uh, you do plan to change your last name, don't you? So much for being an independent woman."

"I suppose I'm more of a traditionalist than I'd thought. Why get married and commit without changing your name? Besides, when we have children, I'd like to have the same name as my kids."

"I would have changed back to my maiden name after the divorce if not for Tiffany. Not that it matters anyway, since Bill doesn't seem to want anything to do with her." The pain and suffering she'd been through because of that man was nothing compared to the despair she felt on her daughter's behalf.

"Mommy, why doesn't Daddy love me?" Tiffany had asked one night. It had cut Olivia deeply, bitterly, making her hate Bill for what he had done and continued to do.

"Baby, it has nothing to do with you at all. Your father is going through a difficult time right now." As lame as that explanation had been, it had seemed to soothe the little girl at the time -- but Olivia knew the question would crop up again. She'd have to come up with a better answer, then.

"Oh, honey." Alex stood up, walked to the loveseat where Olivia sat, and knelt in front of her. "You can't let a bad experience sour you on men forever."

"I'm not soured on men, just Bill. Not that I want a relationship right now, anyway. Things are hectic enough without the complications of a man in my life."

"But a lot of Tag's single male friends will be at the wedding. I bet they'll be rooting for you to catch the bouquet."

Olivia glared as she spied the mischievous gleam in her sister's eyes. "Don't you dare think of throwing the bouquet my way because I'm not participating. Forget it."

"Aww, come on."

“Look, I’m not interested. I wish you and everyone else would just take my word when I say I’m not on the market for a relationship. Besides, I’m obviously not very good at them.”

“Not all men are jerks, sweetie. I know Bill did a number on you, but you have a lot to offer in a relationship. Besides being gorgeous, you’re compassionate, friendly, and an excellent mother and sister. Sis, men fall at your feet wherever you go.”

“You’re exaggerating.” Olivia laughed to drive away the irritation she felt whenever the entire topic of dating and her looks were brought up. She knew that she was attractive, but it was frustrating that most of the men she met couldn’t get past her appearance, that they didn’t bother to try to know the person she was inside. Maybe that had been the problem with her ex, too. She’d been so enamored of him that she hadn’t realized he’d only been infatuated with the surface of her.

“No, I’m not. You’re beautiful. Men act like idiots around you. Even Tag thinks you’re hot.”

Rolling her eyes in disbelief, Olivia waved her hand dismissively. “Puhleeze. Now I know you’re pulling my leg. Tag only has eyes for you. And I do not have a drove of men chasing me around, as you always like to put it.”

“What about Maxwell Sterling? It’s not every day a girl gets hit on by a mega-rich hunk like that. I still can’t believe you turned him down flat. He’s hot with a capital ‘H.’”

Olivia stiffened, a cold chill running through her. Alex must have picked up on her unease because she placed a hand on Olivia’s knee in a comforting gesture. “What is it?”

Olivia shook her head, not wanting to relive that night...or the ones that had followed. Not daring to think about them. “Nothing.”

Maxwell Sterling had been a force to be reckoned with. Olivia had known he’d be trouble the minute she’d set eyes on him at the Valentine’s ball a few weeks ago. For one thing, his dominant presence had intimidated her. He was the kind of man who could

command attention without uttering a single word. The kind of man she wanted nothing to do with.

She could see a man like him try to rule her, but her years with Bill had made Olivia determined not to ever cower again in front of any man. Unfortunately, despite her careful plans to avoid him, he'd sought her out, asked -- no, demanded -- a dance. Though his words had been spoken softly enough and had been carefully crafted to sound like a request, she'd known it was anything but. Still, once she'd looked into his mesmerizing eyes, she felt as though she'd fallen into a hypnotic spell. Her last coherent thought had been of drifting into his arms.

"It's more than nothing," Alex insisted. "You've been tight-lipped about your encounter ever since it happened. You're breaking the sister code, you know."

Lifting a brow, Olivia stared, dumbfounded, at Alex. "The sister code? And what might that be? To tell you everything your nosy little heart desires?"

Alex grinned sheepishly. "You know me so well."

"Nice try, but no dice. I would rather not talk about it at all, thank you very much."

"How can you expect me not to be curious? Only you could be hit on by a billionaire and not be affected. If it were me, I'd be telling the whole world."

"But it wasn't you; it was me. I wish you'd let this subject drop."

Alex looked like she wanted to protest but apparently thought better of it. "Fine, but if you want to discuss it later --"

"I won't."

Alex narrowed her eyes and continued as if Olivia hadn't interrupted her. "-- I'm here for you."

Olivia felt like strangling her sister. What exactly was there to tell? She'd danced with the man; then she'd left the hotel after it became clear that he wanted to spend time with her. She'd known Alex would be fine with Tag, so she hadn't felt any qualms about going

home and falling into her own bed. The next thing she remembered, it was morning and she'd been on her back in bed, her body drenched in a cold sweat, and her pussy tingling with arousal. Somehow, she had lost the rest of the night, couldn't remember a damn thing.

Thankfully, there had been no signs of struggle, bruising, or soreness anywhere on her body to indicate someone had entered her home and forced her, but the situation had still left her uneasy. What was worse, since meeting the man, she'd begun to have strange feelings. Almost like premonitions of danger. How in the world was she supposed to convey all that to Alex?

"I appreciate it, sis, but I'd appreciate it even more if we move on to the next subject." Deciding it would be best to bring the conversation back to the wedding, Olivia said, "So, have you decided on the music yet? I've always been partial to *Canon in D* for the processional, instead of the traditional *Here Comes the Bride*."

Alex nodded vigorously. "It's a toss-up between that and Vivaldi's *Spring*."

"I think *Spring* would be more appropriate for the recessional."

"Hmm, you could be right. I'll have to ask Tag what he thinks, but you know how men are about planning weddings. Still, I run things by him anyway to make him feel like he's a part of the process."

"Even though you're running the show?"

Alex laughed. "You know me so well, O."

\* \* \* \* \*

Olivia lay awake, thumbing through James Patterson's latest thriller. Normally, his books were hard to put down once she got into them, and she could finish the stories in one sitting. Tonight, however, she'd had to struggle to even get past the first few pages and had found herself re-reading passages despite the fact that the book was really quite good.



The problem was that she was too distracted to properly concentrate. She didn't want to sleep, didn't dare try. If she allowed herself to drop off, the dreams would come -- but were they really just fantasies?

Why was it that when she woke up in the mornings she felt as if she'd been thoroughly ravaged? What about her kiss-swollen lips or the subtle ache between her thighs or the tenderness of her breasts? How was it possible to awake in such a state if she'd simply dreamed? "Stop it, Olivia, you're imagining things. It's all in your head," she'd tried to tell herself.

Olivia placed the novel face down on her nightstand, realizing it was useless to try to finish it when her mind was somewhere else. Despite her efforts to stay alert, her eyelids were becoming heavier by the minute, and she found it difficult to keep her head up.

"I'll just watch a little television," she muttered, reaching for her remote control and flipping on the TV. The nightly news was airing, but she wasn't in the mood to hear about another murder or robbery or any other crime, for that matter. It seemed the only news that got reported these days were of the bad variety.

She changed channels and found an old re-run of *Three's Company*, one of her favorite shows when she was growing up. This was the episode where Jack had made more than one date and then had arranged to meet both women at the Regal Beagle restaurant. The hijinx that had followed usually made her laugh. But after watching for fifteen minutes, Olivia found herself nodding off, abruptly jerking herself awake for several minutes at a stretch.

She heard a loud thud. *What the heck was that?*

She didn't have time to wonder; her bedroom door suddenly flew open, and her shocked gaze met Maxwell Sterling's intent stare as he stood in the entrance.

"I told you I'd be back, Olivia. You knew I wouldn't stay away -- and you don't want me to, though you try to pretend otherwise."

She gulped, mesmerized by the intensity of his green eyes, her heart beating erratically. She couldn't move a muscle to save her life, but was it fear that kept her immobile or the strength of his gaze? Either way, her eyes widened with each step he took toward her bed.

"Please." Although she knew it was pointless, she begged, but her voice came out as a whispered croak that wasn't convincing even to her own ears. "I don't want this." But as had happened the night before and the ones preceding that, he didn't heed her words. To make matters worse, her traitorous body heated up in anticipation as she watched him shrug off his shirt. She licked suddenly dry lips.

His black hair was slightly longer than fashionable, touching his awesomely broad shoulders. He stared at her from a chiseled, rough-hewn face that should have seemed harsh, but somehow it suited him, his features the kind that would make women look more than twice. Momentarily distracted by a brilliant blue pendant around Max's neck, Olivia nearly didn't notice the rest of him. Which would have been a tragedy. A lean chest with a dusting of dark hair tapered to a ripped and flat abdomen, all serving to enhance his maleness. The outline of his erection pressed against pants that clung to his hips. She wondered why he didn't remove the rest of his clothes but wasn't allowed to dwell on it as the bed depressed under his weight.

"Olivia, you may be in denial still, but I won't play your game of make-believe. Let there be no doubt in your mind that we will be together. Your responses prove my point."

"Because you make me. I can't want this; I don't want it."

He tugged off her reading glasses and carefully placed them on her nightstand. A shiver of desire ran up her spine, and she silently cursed her body's weakness, railed at herself for caving so easily to this man. Heat continued to course through her, making her tremble for his touch... and all the while he studied her as though he was looking directly into her soul.

Finally, Max cupped her cheeks between calloused palms, reminding her that he'd worked hard for his living, that he wasn't one of the idle rich. His hands were large and strong, almost engulfing her entire face.

Much to her secret and shameful delight, he brought his lips down to hers. The kiss started out as a gentle pressing of lips, but mere seconds later, a groan escaped his mouth, and his embrace turned almost savage. He pressed his tongue against the seam of her lips, tracing the soft flesh and sending pulses of delight shooting to her very core.

Resistance wasn't an option, because Max would not be denied. He grasped a handful of her hair, tugging it as the kiss transformed yet again into a blatant stamp of possession. Olivia gasped; her parted lips gave him room to slide his tongue into the cavern of her mouth. Then she whimpered at the forcefulness of his sweeping exploration.

"So sweet," he whispered. Max's thumb circled her jaw, massaging it in a sensual motion. Abruptly, he released his grip on her hair and pushed her against the pillows, settling his powerful, broad body over hers.

Unable to help herself, Olivia slid her fingers through the strands of his thick hair, reveling in the silky texture. His taste, scent, and touch were so wonderfully male, titillating all her senses and making her aware of the contrast between her femininity and his masculinity. She squirmed beneath him, trying to temper the fire inside her wet, pulsing pussy. Her panties grew moist and her nipples drew to painfully tight tips, straining against the satiny material of her nightgown. Wanting him like she'd never desired anyone else, she pushed her own tongue out to meet his, licking and doing some exploring of her own.

Max caressed her shoulders, then pushed away the straps of her gown. The top fell into a puddle at her waist, revealing her bare breasts. He cupped her sensitive breasts, squeezing the furled nubbins at the apices between his thumbs and forefingers.

"Yes," she moaned, not caring about anything except how he made her feel. Gone was her uncertainty. She'd worry about that later. For now, she'd take the pleasure he offered so freely.

"That's right, my angel, give in to me completely," he commanded softly as he lowered his head and took one waiting peak between his teeth. Max nipped, sucked, and laved it with ferocious strokes of his tongue, driving Olivia to the point of insanity.

She didn't know how much sensual torture she could handle, nor did she know what she would do if he stopped. Digging her fingers into his hair, she held his head against her chest. "God, yes," she groaned. She couldn't believe how he'd transformed her into a mindless bundle of nerves in such a short period of time.

A questing hand slid up her thigh, pushing up her gown and stopping only when his fingertips touched the edge of her panties. He raised his head long enough to shoot her a grin. "You're sopping wet and hot as hell. There's no way you can continue to deny what we share."

Caught up in the whirl of lust, Olivia lost all shame. She parted her thighs, desperately eager for his touch. She could only focus on feeling his fingers sliding over her panties.

He ran his long digits over her mound, rubbing her pussy through the soaked cloth covering it. "Mmm, you're so wet for me, you can barely stand it, isn't that right? It would take nothing for me to glide straight into this tight little cunt, don't you agree, angel?"

Olivia was too far gone to verbally agree or disagree with him. She raised her pelvis against his hand, silently demanding more of his masterful caresses. Finally, when she thought he'd never give her what she wanted, Max slipped his fingers inside her underwear and found her clit.

He twirled and squeezed the nub until Olivia thought she'd pass out from the sensations he evoked. And when she believed she couldn't take anymore, he suckled her breast; the tugging motion of his mouth sent shockwaves of delight racing through her.

“Oh, Max,” she groaned, unable to get enough of him.

He lifted his head, his eyes locking with hers. “Tell me you belong to me and me alone.”

Olivia was much too high from the sultry heat consuming her to think clearly; still, something held her back from saying the words he wanted to hear. She moaned again. “Max.”

His bright green eyes went dark, and his brows knitted together, almost as though he was angry. He growled, “Say it, dammit!”

She thrashed her head from side to side, not daring to give in to his demand.

“Olivia,” he repeated in a warning tone, pinching her clit so hard it was almost painful -- yet it was an erotic hurt that only heightened the sensations she felt.

“Oh,” she sighed.

“If you don’t tell me what I want to hear, I’ll stop.”

She captured her bottom lip between her teeth. Would he? Surely, he was bluffing. There was no way he could do something so beastly, especially as his erection was pressing into her thigh. His cock was certainly hard and ready to take her. Olivia panted, thrusting her pussy against his fingers. “Don’t stop.”

Max’s face grew even more stormy; his eyes were now as black as onyx and eerie, the whites of his eyes completely disappearing.

A new emotion ripped through her body. Fear.

“Say it,” he commanded.

She shook her head, somehow knowing her life would irrevocably change if she voiced the words.

Suddenly, the bed began to shake, and the mood in the room changed drastically. Terror welled within her heart; a scream tore from her mouth. The next thing she knew, Olivia found herself alone in her bed, sitting up and breathing hard.

Wide awake.

She'd had that dream again, but this time, it had gone further than it ever had before. Not only that, but she'd imagined something wasn't normal about Maxwell Sterling. For one thing, his eyes were green, not black. He also made her feel things that no other man had ever made her feel, not even her ex-husband. But it wasn't just sexual attraction. During the dreams, she felt...like they fit together somehow.

No! That wasn't it. It couldn't be.

Could it?

Besides, his reaction tonight when he hadn't gotten what he'd wanted had been scary. What would have happened if she hadn't been jolted out of the dream?

"Dear God, don't let there be a next time."

## Chapter Two

“Dammit, why doesn’t she just give in?”

Max could tell she wanted him as much as he desired her, so why was it such a struggle for her to admit what they both already knew?

Olivia Watts belonged to him.

From the moment he’d laid eyes on her, Max had known he’d have to have her, regardless of whether or not she had the angel gene. The fact that she *was* the one he’d been looking for merely served as an added bonus. Yes, he’d found the woman he could soul bond with, but that was only half the battle. To seal the pact and the initial step of the soul-bonding process, she had to accept him verbally, had to tell him she belonged solely to him.

His cock stiffened when he thought of how she’d felt in his arms tonight, how she always felt to him -- her skin smooth, rich, and supple, the fullness of her soft breasts pressed so lovingly against his chest. She was the epitome of perfection to him, a dark goddess to be worshiped with his mouth, hands, body, and cock.

He had to have her soon.

His impulses were getting out of control. The fiery rage within him was building to the point that he didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to stave it off. His telekinetic

powers were also stronger, but the increase came with a price. Every little thing seemed to set him off lately, and then there was the unfortunate result of the earth shaking whenever he was in a temper.

Like a caged jungle beast, he strode across the length of his office, trying to figure out a way he could solve his problem and get what he wanted. Clearly, Olivia wasn't bending to his will -- and if he was being completely honest with himself, he respected her for it. He admired her strength, but eventually she'd have to succumb to him.

No doubt she believed his nightly visits to her were figments of her imagination. For now, it suited his purpose not to disabuse her of the notion.

A few years ago, Max had found he had the power of teleportation, but he could only travel for short distances and to places he'd been before. Despite these limitations, one night after they'd met at the Valentine's ball and he was brooding over what his next move with Olivia would be, he'd abruptly found himself in her bedroom. She'd been sleeping but woke up when he appeared. While he hadn't known at first how he'd come to be there, he'd taken advantage of the situation and had been able to keep her in a semi-entranced state. She could make her own decisions, but she was also still asleep on another level.

Max was then able to learn the reason he'd been able reach her: they'd both thought of the other at the same time, albeit Olivia had been asleep. Once he'd learned that, he'd formulated a plan to visit her each night until she gave in to what they both desired. And once he'd figured out the time she usually went to bed, it became easier for him. Yet, almost three weeks had passed, and he'd made no progress.

Sure, he got to hold her in his arms, touch her all over, but it was doing him no good. Damn, she was a stubborn thing.

Perhaps he was taking the wrong approach with her. Maybe trying to make her say the words of surrender while she lay in a near dream state was cheating a bit. It wasn't something he'd given a lot of thought to in the beginning, but now it made him wonder.



Yet how else would he be able to go to her and demand she did as he wanted, when she seemed hell-bent on denying their passion for one another. Guilt pierced his already black soul, but he quickly pushed it away. He had to persist or something terrible could happen. Once the soul bonding had taken place, he'd make things right for Olivia, take care of her, and give her the life she deserved.

He picked up the file from his desk and glanced through its contents again. Weeks ago, Max had hired a private detective agency to get as much information about her as possible. He had used G & T Associates's services in the past and Oliver Townsend, his contact, had yet to let Max down.

*Olivia Candace Watts, née Harrison, twenty-nine years old, divorced mother of one. Daughter, Tiffany Sherrell Watts, age seven.*

Max wondered if Tiffany carried the angel gene as well. Alexandra Harrison, Olivia's sister did not. He'd already known that about her, courtesy of the bloodstone, when he'd first run into both ladies at the hotel hosting the Valentine's Day ball. Not that it mattered whether the child did or not; she would fall under his care soon, so his interest was focused solely on the mother at present.

Max frowned, noticing something he'd overlooked in the file. Olivia had recently started a new position as a receptionist at DyoTech, which happened to be the company that was handling the upgrade of the computer systems in his D.C. offices. Perhaps he had found a way to get more up close and personal with the lovely Mrs. Watts.

A knock on his door brought Max out of his musings. There was only one person it could be, as Max's secretary let no one else past her without alerting him. Erik Van Deen, his cousin and the president of Max's American holdings. Erik was the only other person who knew Max's secret besides himself.

"Come in," he said, setting the file down and sliding into the large brown swivel chair behind his desk.

Erik poked his fair head inside, a look of uncertainty on his face. "Are you sure it's okay for me to come in? I hear you made quite a scene this morning in the boardroom."

Max narrowed his eyes. There was nothing more annoying than office gossip or the face that Erik was actually listening to it. "Enter, or don't, but I'm sure it must be something important if you've decided to trek from all the way across the building instead of calling me as you normally do."

"I thought I'd see you in person."

"Then, by all means, step in and stop acting like I'm going to bite. You know that's not my style...that is, unless you are of the female persuasion."

Erik visibly relaxed, a tentative smile spreading his lips before he strode into the office. Max gave his cousin the once-over. Erik seemed paler than usual, tired even. Was he working too hard? He knew the other man had recently negotiated a huge deal that involved expanding their southern units, but it seemed to be taking a bigger toll on him than it should.

"How are you doing, Erik?"

"I'm fine. Why do you ask?" The blond suddenly looked defensive.

"You look a little peaked. Aren't you supposed to be taking a vacation? I thought you would when this deal went through."

Erik shrugged. "I'd planned on it, but I'm far too busy to take off the entire month you suggested."

"You're a valuable asset to the Sterling Group, but it won't crumble to the ground if you take some time for yourself. Besides, no one deserves it as much as you."

"Except you. I think you should take your own advice. You work a ridiculous amount of hours with very little rest. And when you're not working, you're in the labs trying to..."

Max lifted a brow when Erik trailed off. He knew where this was going. What he considered a curse, Erik considered a blessing. Well, blessing be damned; his cousin didn't have to live with the constant struggle, day in and day out.

“Never mind,” Erik finished lamely.

“No, by all means, finish what you were going to say.”

The other man muttered something incoherent under his breath.

“Oh, I’m sure it was something or you wouldn’t have brought it up.”

Erik glared. “Fine. You want to know what I think? I just don’t understand why you’re trying so hard to get rid of this gift. If it were me --”

“But it’s not you, and my search is over.”

Bright blue eyes darkened slightly. “What do you mean? You’ve finally created an antidote or something?”

“You could say that. Yin and yang is the answer to my dilemma.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“It’s quite simple, actually. If there are people like me, there has to be someone with the opposite gene.”

“A God gene?”

“Something like that. I prefer to call it the angel gene.” Max then brought his cousin up to speed on his theory and findings...and Olivia.

Erik listened with his usual intentness, not speaking until Max was done. “It sounds like you’ve known about this for a while. Why are telling me only now?” The hurt was evident in Erik’s voice.

“I wasn’t trying to shut you out. I needed to make sure my theory was correct. There was no point in bringing it up in case it didn’t work out.”

“How do you propose to get her to say what you want if she hasn’t thus far? Perhaps you’re going about this the wrong way.”

“I’m doing the best I can.”

Erik snorted. "I doubt that. You're the king of pussy. You have a new piece every week. Women have thrown themselves at you in droves since you were in the cradle. Since when have you ever had a problem getting the woman you wanted?"

Max wasn't sure that he liked Olivia being referred to as a piece of pussy, however indirectly it was done. Since Erik didn't know any better, he'd let the comment slide -- this once. "Now," he answered. "When I met her at the ball a few weeks ago, I tried the normal route by asking her out, but it didn't work."

Erik chuckled. "Don't tell me she rejected you. If the papers were to find out the devil is having problems getting a date, they'd have a field day."

Max wasn't amused. "You know I hate it when you use that asinine nickname." Max's rapid rise in the business world by the age of thirty had drawn much attention from the press. Several had said he had the devil's own luck. During a media interview after his company had gone public, some jokester had cried out, "Maybe he *is* the devil." The room had erupted in laughter -- and the moniker had stuck.

"What would you suggest I do, Erik?"

"Maybe that's the problem. She's not an inanimate object for you to toy with. You should probably slow down or you'll end up pushing her further away."

Max pounded his fist on the table, and the old rumbling of rage welled up, threatening to rear its head. "Time isn't something I have. The soul bonding must happen soon, goddammit."

Erik held up his hands in a defensive gesture. "Easy, cousin."

Seeing the worry on his cousin's face, Max inhaled deeply, trying to get his trigger temper back under control. "You see? The slightest things are beginning to set me off. I want her *now*."

"But she doesn't necessarily need you. May I take a look at the file?"

Max raked his fingers through his hair, biting back frustration. “Be my guest.” Unable to remain still, he paced his office while Erik scanned the papers.

“She’s very beautiful. I prefer a blue-eyed blonde myself, but if I were inclined to date a black woman, she’d definitely be the type I’d go for.”

“As long as it *isn’t* her,” Max warned, feeling a sudden possessiveness. Where had this jealousy come from? It wasn’t an emotion he usually experienced where woman were concerned.

“I’m just making an observation, is all. Besides, she’s way out of my league.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If she’s not interested in you, I don’t stand a chance.”

Max clenched his hand into a fist until his knuckles whitened. “You sound like you’d actually make a place for her.”

“And risk your wrath? No, thanks, man. I want to live. I do have a suggestion, but you won’t like it.”

Max sighed, already sure he wasn’t going to enjoy his cousin’s comments. “What?”

“Somehow you have to give her the breathing room she needs. Her file says she’s been through a nasty divorce. She’s probably mistrustful of men.”

“I have no idea how much longer this thing within me can be contained, nor do I have the patience to play romantic suitor. A real courtship takes the time I don’t have,” he reiterated

“Then get some. Do you think she’ll appreciate it when she learns you’ve been visiting her at night?”

Erik had a point.

Dammit. Maybe it was the only way for now. “Fine,” Max conceded. “But it has to happen sooner rather than later. It’s more and more difficult for me to control these blasted powers.”

"I know, but you're strong. You can fight this thing for as long as you must until she's yours"

"I'll try, but it won't be easy."

"Tell me."

"You're being very inquisitive today."

"Excuse me for being concerned, Max."

Again, Max had said the wrong thing. He apologized, which usually didn't come easy to him. "I'm sorry. I told you I've been on edge lately. Yesterday, I nicked myself shaving and accidentally shattered the mirrors in the house -- the entire house. A few of the windows broke as well. This shit is getting expensive."

"It isn't like you can't afford it."

"Money is beside the point. How does it look when someone has to come into my house and fix it? If the person had recognized me, who knows what kind of stories he'd have fed to the tabloids. I have to figure out a way to stop this. Today, it's the mirrors; tomorrow, it could be something else, something that can't be easily replaced."

Erik gave him a sympathetic smile. "Just hold on a little longer. I'm sure Olivia will come around. Most women who come in contact with you do."

"I hope you're right, or we could all be doomed."

### Chapter Three

On the way home, Olivia was hard-pressed to focus on the road and listen to what her daughter was saying. She still couldn't get last night's dream out of her mind. Everything had seemed more real than ever, and what was up with the glowing blue amulet?

The way he'd touched, tasted, and said her name hadn't felt like any dream she'd ever had before. Then, when she'd awakened, why had her body seemed to burn, aching for promises of passion unfulfilled. And she couldn't understand the significance of his insistence that she declare she belonged to him. Did she *want* to belong to him? Is that why she'd dreamt his urgency? The only thing she knew for certain was that it scared her.

All day, Olivia had been distracted, even missed a call while she'd sat daydreaming about her nocturnal activities. If she wanted to get her life back on track, she decided, she'd have to dispel Max from her head somehow.

The problem was, he was somewhat of a celebrity, especially in the business circles, and he seemed to be everywhere, in the papers, on the news...and in her dreams. There were so many reasons she couldn't get involved with him, not least of all their worlds were far too different. He was caviar, and she, hotdogs.

"Mommy, did you hear what I said?" Tiffany demanded.

Olivia shook her head to rid herself of the thoughts plaguing her mind. "I'm sorry, sweetie, what did you say?"

The little girl sighed in apparent exasperation. "I was saying that Jamie made fun of me today because I took Ashley to school for show and tell. He said she's stupid. He's just mad because no one clapped for his dumb old rock. You don't think Ashley is stupid, do you?" Tiffany held her much-loved doll protectively against her body.

Since Uncle Tag had given it to her, Tiffany never wanted to leave the house without the toy. Olivia had only allowed her daughter to take it to school because today was show and tell, and the doll was one of those high-end, custom-made jobs. It looked like Tiffany from the nut-brown skin, button nose, and pigtails. Girl and doll even shared a couple of matching outfits that Tiffany would soon outgrow.

Olivia would never have been able to afford Ashley herself and was glad Tiffany had it. She was very grateful to her future brother-in-law for gifting her little girl with something so special, and she knew her daughter understood this as well -- yet another reason why the toy was so treasured.

"No, I don't think dolls are stupid, especially Ashley. It sounds like Jamie was jealous."

"He's a jerk."

"Honey, it's not nice to call people names."

"But he does it to me all the time. He pulled my hair and called me 'scarface.' I hate him."

Olivia's lips tightened. Her daughter had been the victim of a vicious dog bite. Were it not for Tag's expert skills as a plastic surgeon, Tiffany would have been terribly disfigured. Now there was only a small scar that was barely noticeable and would eventually heal with time.

Kids could be so cruel. It made Olivia want to take that Jamie kid and shake him until his teeth rattled. Realizing that that wasn't possible, she did make a mental note to set up an



appointment with Tiffany's teacher. She didn't like the sound of this little boy. "Well, if you can help it, you should avoid him."

"I try," Tiffany protested. "But he follows me. I don't know what I did to him, but he picks on me for no reason."

"Does he bully the other kids in your class?"

Tiffany scrunched up her face in thought. "No. He's okay with everyone else. It's just me he picks on."

Olivia was beginning to suspect Jamie had a crush on her daughter and was acting on it the only way he knew how, just like most kids his age. Nonetheless, she'd still visit the school to make sure their teacher was made aware of the situation. Knowing her daughter, Olivia figured Tiffany wouldn't have told on her classmate. For one so young, her daughter possessed a compassion that was rare in a lot of people -- adults and children alike. Tiffany never wanted anyone to be hurt or get into trouble or suffer, even if a wrong was done to her. Olivia supposed her daughter was a lot like her.

"Don't take it personally. This kid sounds like he has some issues. Other than Jamie, did you have a good day at school?"

"Yes. I got to hand out the balls at recess, and we finger-painted in art class. Mr. Scott said mine was so good, he was going to hang it up in the hall."

"Well, I hope you'll get to bring it home so I can place it on the refrigerator."

Tiffany giggled. "There's no space."

"We'll make room." Olivia was relieved when she turned onto their block. The rush-hour traffic had been worse than usual due to an accident, and all the rubber-necking certainly hadn't helped, either. It had been a long time getting home. Her head throbbed a little; once she helped Tiffany with her homework, cooked dinner, and tucked her daughter in bed, she'd take a long hot bath.

As they gathered their belongings from the car, Olivia felt a chill run down her spine. She had the eerie feeling they were being watched, but when she looked over her shoulder, she saw no one. Yet she couldn't shake the sensation that came over her.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Tiffany's voice was full of concern as she adjusted her backpack's straps on her shoulders.

"Nothing, honey. Mommy is just tired."

"I can make dinner tonight," Tiffany offered.

Olivia smiled at the child's thoughtfulness. "That would be terrific, but there's only one problem. You're not allowed to use the stove."

"But I can make cereal. Bologna sandwiches, too."

Olivia's stomach turned at the idea of that combination, but her heart flipped with love for her daughter. Everything she'd been through with Bill didn't matter during moments like this. Tiffany was worth everything.

"As sweet as that is of you to offer, I think we should eat something a little more substantial. I can whip up a tuna casserole in half an hour. How does that sound?"

"Yummy. I love your cooking. I'm going to learn how to cook just like you. Can I help?"

"Of course. I couldn't do it without my little helper." Olivia walked around her car to collect Tiffany and took her hand before they ventured to cross the street together.

The second they took a few steps onto the road, however, the loud roar of an engine filled the evening air; then a large black car with tinted windows appeared. And it was barreling down toward them. The blasted thing wasn't slowing down -- in fact, it sped up. What the hell?

Acting instinctively, she pushed her daughter out of the way, barely escaping herself. Just as Olivia made her way to the safety of the pavement, she tripped and fell. The vehicle missed her, but her ankle twisted beneath her.

“Mommy!” Tiffany screamed as the car shrieked past, then turned around at the end of the street. The damned thing looked as though it was going to make another run at them. Dear Lord, there was a maniac on the loose!

Tiffany rushed to help her up, and Olivia hobbled to the sidewalk -- just before the car burned rubber down the road again. Olivia wished she could see more than the bare shape of the driver behind the dark windshield. It figured the license plate would be missing, she thought bitterly. As the vehicle tore toward them, this time there was a casualty -- Ashley must have fallen in the street when Olivia had pushed Tiffany to safety. The toy was destroyed with a loud crunch as the car zoomed by and disappeared.

“Let’s go, baby.” Olivia took her daughter’s hand, ignoring the pain in her ankle, and didn’t stop until they were inside their apartment building. At a time like this, why did they have to live on the top floor of a three-story building? Not that it mattered; she’d crawl if she had to.

“Why did they do that?” Tiffany asked in a trembling whisper.

Fortunately, the security door wouldn’t allow anyone in without a key or being buzzed in. “Shh. Let’s get into the apartment first.” She got them past the entrance, then hobbled up the stairs, gritting her teeth. The pain was almost excruciating, but she couldn’t stop. Her thoughts reflected Tiffany’s question -- who would do something like this, and why?

Finally, when they were inside the sanctuary of their apartment, Olivia allowed herself to collapse on the living room sofa, but she couldn’t completely fall apart. She had to stay strong, at least while her child was right there.

Tiffany threw her arms around Olivia’s neck. “Why?” the little girl asked again, her face a picture of bewildered innocence before she burst into tears.

Olivia held her child close, stroking Tiffany’s head to comfort her. “I...I don’t know, baby. There are some really sick people out in the world. That’s why I tell you not to talk to strangers. I’m sorry about Ashley, honey. I’ll get you another doll.”

Tiffany shook her head, pigtails flying, face wet. "No, it's okay. I know they cost a lot of money. I'm getting too old for dolls, anyway."

That hadn't been her story less than an hour ago, Olivia thought. It was heartbreaking to be told something like that by your own seven-year-old. She suspected Tiffany was more concerned about their tight budget than the idea she was outgrowing dolls. As much Olivia tried to shield her daughter about her financial woes, the little girl was more acutely sensitive to their situation than Olivia wanted.

Maybe the loss of her most-prized possession hadn't sunk in yet for the child because the shock of nearly being run over was still fresh. But, eventually, Tiffany would miss Ashley.

Olivia wisely decided not to bring up the subject again.

First, there was her ankle to deal with. "Go get cleaned up, and start on your homework. We're not going to let some psycho ruin our night."

"But you're hurt. I can help you."

Olivia touched her daughter's face, her heart overflowing with love. "You'd be a huge help if you do as I ask. I'll be okay, I promise."

Tiffany looked uncertain. "Okay, but if you need me..."

"I'll let you know. Thank you, sweetheart."

Once her daughter was out of sight, Olivia allowed her own tears to fall. What in the world had happened out there? For that matter, why would someone want to harm her or Tiffany? If, that is, they'd been targeted and weren't just the victims of some psycho.

For a fleeting moment, she thought of Bill and all the times he'd hit, punched, and choked her, but would even he do something this blatant? And what reason would he have? He'd ignored her and their daughter for quite a while now. No. It hadn't been him. The one thing her ex cared for more than himself was his car. If Bill ever tried to kill her, it wouldn't

be with his vehicle. Well, whoever the driver had been clearly had major issues if he got his jollies by trying to mow people down.

Olivia wiped away her tears, wobbled to her feet, and tested her ankle with some weight. "Ow!" She groaned as she stood on the aching and swollen joint. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but she didn't think it was broken. Some aspirin and a hot soak would likely do the trick.

She managed to fix dinner and help Tiffany with her homework, although they were both in somber moods and didn't say much. It took them longer than usual to get things done. Her daughter, usually chatty, was distracted and had a difficult time concentrating on subtraction problems.

Olivia somehow made it through their nightly routine, but it was only by sheer determination. Once Tiffany was in bed, Olivia made a call to the police department. It took nearly an hour for a cop to come over in order for her give a full report, and then another hour went by before he left. Afterward, she was more exhausted than ever.

Though the officer had been sympathetic to her plight, he'd made it clear there wasn't much he could do without a license plate, the make or model of the vehicle, and no proper description of the driver. When put like that, she felt like a fool for even bothering to report the incident. She should have been paying more attention to the details, but at the time, Olivia had been too busy trying to stay alive. The officer had assured her, however, that he'd come around the next day to interview her neighbors in case there had been some witnesses.

That bath she'd longed for couldn't have come soon enough. Soaking her ankle had eased it, but there was still some throbbing. Unfortunately, she couldn't even think of taking a day off from work after starting so soon on staff. Besides, she couldn't give Tiffany more cause to worry.

Olivia stayed in the water until all the warmth had seeped out. When she finally made it to bed, she tossed and turned, unable to get to sleep after her experience. She would like to

think it had been just a random act of violence, but a sinking feeling had told her it was something more.

Someone had tried to kill her and her daughter.

What was she going to do?

## Chapter Four

It was nearly a week before she was able to get her life back into some semblance of its former self. Her ankle hardly gave her any trouble now, although she still couldn't stand on it for too long without it giving her some twinges, but things were pretty much back to normal.

Tiffany didn't hover over her like a shadow as much as she'd done, and Olivia was beginning to calm down. Other than the trouble she had sleeping over the near-miss and the fact the police hadn't been able to find any witnesses, she had no complaints. She could count on both hands how many hours she'd been able to sleep in the past few days. Most nights, she'd read until she got bored, and then she'd watch old reruns until she couldn't take them anymore.

Sure, she'd been able to doze every now and then, but it wasn't the much needed rest her body should have had. This was starting to affect her performance at work; she had difficulty focusing and, worse, it was making her irritable. She'd even snapped at Tiffany for no real reason.

The only bright side to these bouts of insomnia was that her sexy dreams had stopped. She didn't know which was worse, suffering this way or dreaming of Max. Did she actually miss her imagined interludes?

As soon as that thought entered her mind, she realized she needed rest more than she'd believed.

Olivia glanced at the desk clock as she felt a yawn move through her body. It was time for her mid-morning break, and it was a welcome relief. Chris, one of the administrative assistants, came by to fill in for the fifteen minutes Olivia was allowed.

"Hey, Olivia. Are you okay?"

She smoothed her skirt in a self-conscious gesture and tried to dodge the question. "What do you mean? I'm fine."

"You don't seem like yourself, and you have large bags under your eyes. I noticed them a couple of days ago and didn't want to say anything, but now I'm worried."

Olivia stifled another yawn. "Really, I'm okay."

"Honey, you look like a puff of wind could blow you over. Have you lost weight?"

Her clothes *had* been a little loose. Food hadn't interested her since her life-threatening experience. "Maybe. I guess I have had a lot on my mind lately, but it's not something a strong cup of coffee won't help."

"Are you the one making the extra-strong brew? That stuff had me going for hours. It's like liquid crack."

"Guilty as charged. It's probably not the healthiest thing, but the coffee keeps me alert through the day."

"And the night, I suspect. Just be careful with that stuff, because it can trick your body into thinking you don't need sleep...until you crash and burn one day. Believe me, I know. My husband used to be a ten-cup-a-day coffeeholic. He couldn't function without it."



Olivia nodded, warmed by her coworker's concern but thankful Chris didn't pry any further. "I'll be careful."

She made her way to the office break room and saw another group of her coworkers standing around the water cooler, talking and giggling. Chris was one of the few women she was on friendly terms with so far, but that was only because they interacted the most. During the time she'd been a temp there, Olivia had discovered the rest of the office workers were cliquish, preferring to socialize within their own groups. Which suited her just fine. This was a job, merely a means to an end.

Noticing that the coffee level was low, she emptied out the pot and made a fresh batch. Not bothering to add cream and sugar when she poured her own cup, Olivia leaned against the counter and welcomed the taste of the hot, bitter brew trickling down her throat. It gave her a sudden jolt of energy that hadn't been there minutes earlier and was much needed. This would sustain her for another few hours.

"I can't believe he's actually coming here today. I wonder if he's as hot in person as he is on TV and in the papers," one of the ladies said to another as they sat huddled together at a table. She recognized the woman as Lola Piper, the office gossip. Lola barely glanced in Olivia's direction and only spoke to her when she seemed to be in a good mood.

What were they going on about? Olivia wondered. It was probably better to mind her own business. Sometimes it was safer that way.

Nursing her cup of coffee, she took a seat away from the women but continued to pick up snippets of the conversation while immersed in her own thoughts. Not that she was eavesdropping, but it was hard not to hear what was being said, given the women's giggling and wild declarations of what they'd do to the mystery man if they had a chance with him.

"He's only thirty-nine, you know, and a billionaire to boot," Selma Norton, Lola's fellow gossip, cooed. "He's so hot, he makes my teeth sweat."

"And he's never been married," Lola said knowingly.

"You don't think he's gay, do you?" Carmen Ruiz asked.

"Oh, no, darling," Lola said coyly. "He's as straight as you and me. He's always pictured with one bombshell after another."

Carmen snorted. "That doesn't mean anything. They could be a cover-up."

Apparently, Lola wasn't discouraged. "No way. The man is just too dishy and too blatantly male to not be into women."

"That's what they said about Rock Hudson," Selma teased.

Against her will, Olivia found herself dragged into the conversation when Lola turned feline-like eyes her way. "What do you think?"

Olivia focused fully on the three women for the first time. "About what?"

Lola rolled her eyes, flipping a long strand of flame-red hair over her shoulder. "About representatives from the Sterling Group coming to visit the office this morning. Didn't you read your e-mail? The office has been in a frenzy trying to get everything together for them. What's more, the big man himself is rumored to be coming."

Olivia froze. "The big man? As in...Maxwell Sterling?"

Lola laughed at Olivia's astonishment. "Well, duh! Why else would everyone go to so much trouble? It was a total surprise that he's going to be here himself. Usually, he just sends his people to deal with business matters. I can't wait to meet him face-to-face. I wonder if his eyes are as green as they say they are."

Lola could have been speaking pig Latin for all Olivia understood. Max was coming to DyoTech? Was this a coincidence? After their encounter at the ball and the erotic dreams she'd had of him, she couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't.

She squirmed inside. How could she face him again, especially when her feelings were in such turmoil? Her only saving grace was that the dreams had ceased, which meant that she was forgetting him.

Maybe.

But now he was coming back into her life with a vengeance. What was she going to do? Maybe she could tell her supervisor she wasn't feeling well, and he'd let her go home. Yes, that's what she'd do.

"Wh-what time are they supposed to show up?"

Lola shook her head. "You most definitely didn't read your e-mail. They'll be here any moment now. They were supposed to arrive a half-hour ago, but I overheard my boss talking about the delay. It seems dishy Mr. Sterling was stuck in another meeting that took longer than he'd anticipated."

"I see." Olivia was barely able to get the words out of her mouth. Her thoughts were in a jumble, and her heart was beating out of control. Was it already too late? "Excuse me."

Going on auto-pilot, she quickly moved to the sink, emptied her mug, and washed it out, then placed it on the sideboard.

"She's a weird one," Olivia heard one of the women whisper as she left the room.

If only she could get to her supervisor's office, she'd be able to take some sick hours, but then she realized it wouldn't be fair to Chris. There had to be a way out of this. How could she possibly face Max again?

Just as she made it to the front of the office, Mr. Phillips, the company president, and his executive vice-presidents, Mr. Gallo and Mr. Sloan, gathered in the reception area.

Oh, God, was the Sterling group already on their way up? A woozy feeling took over, and Olivia found herself swaying slightly as she went toward her desk.

Chris rose when she saw Olivia approach. "They're downstairs," she whispered.

"You could have warned me," Olivia hissed back.

"Didn't you read the e-mail?"

She wished people would stop asking her that when it was obvious she hadn't. "No. I wasn't aware we were having visitors today."

Chris's eyes widened in surprise. "How could you not have known? All everyone has been talking about is this visit."

"Not to me, apparently." Olivia sighed. "I guess, I'll..." She trailed off and nearly lost her footing as another wave of dizziness hit her.

Chris grabbed her arm and guided Olivia to the chair. "You need to sit down, hon. I thought you were going to get some coffee."

"I didn't finish it."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so. Don't worry about me."

The other woman looked uncertain. "If you're sure..."

"I am. Please don't fuss. I'm sure you have a lot of things you need to do."

"Okay," Chris said with obvious reluctance, making Olivia wonder if she was stalling out of concern or in the hopes to catch a glimpse of "the devil."

She shuddered at the moniker, but somehow it was fitting. Olivia wasn't given time to dwell on the thought.

Mr. Phillips was all smiles when the guests finally arrived.

As the receptionist, Olivia saw all the employees come and go daily, and most of them were friendly enough to greet her, some even stopping by her desk to chitchat -- the men more so than the women -- but not the president.

Mr. Phillips barely spared her a glance, not bothering with a "good morning" when he walked in the office, or a "good-bye" when he walked out. When he did lower himself to talk to her, it was because he wanted something -- which was never followed with a "please" or "thank you," as if common courtesy was not something he wasted on the lower masses.

Olivia hadn't let it bother her, but it was interesting to watch him now fall all over himself when Max stepped into the office. She didn't really pay attention to what was being said because she couldn't tear her eyes away from *him*.

Lord have mercy, he was still gorgeous, more than any man had a right to be. His tailored suit only served to emphasize those impossibly broad shoulders of his. She tried to drag her gaze away from him as he shook hands with all the men who greeted him.

To her surprise, Mr. Phillips turned to her with a pleasant smile, although his eyes didn't quite meet hers. "Olivia, would you please check on the conference room and see that everything is set up." His tone made it a command rather than a request. "And do make sure there's a fresh pot of coffee on the brewer."

"Right away," she murmured. Though she spoke to him, she couldn't stop looking at Max, who had now turned his attention in her direction. For some reason, there was a stormy look in the depths of that penetrating green gaze. Why did he seem angry with her?

Needing to get out of his presence, she stood up, perhaps a little too fast because her world began to spin. Clutching her head to stop the vertigo, she steadied herself against the desk. Maybe she should have added sugar to her coffee and finished drinking it. She promised herself that as soon as she left the office today, she'd make sure she ate and slept more.

"Olivia, I would like you to check on the conference room immediately," Mr. Phillips repeated, injecting some ice into his voice.

"She doesn't look well." Max's own voice was casual, but there was an underlying resonance of authority.

"I'm fine," she protested, feeling like she'd gotten the dizziness under enough control to make it to the boardroom. It was therefore unfortunate that when she took a few steps, she felt like she was falling. The room began to whirl more out of control than before, but not before she heard the frantic scrambling of feet. Strong, sinewy arms encircled her as she slid into darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Max had barely caught Olivia before she hit the floor. Thankfully, his reflexes were quick enough that he'd made the distance to her. Cradling her limp form against him, he lifted her into his arms. "Get some water," he ordered briskly, not caring who jumped as long as they did as he said.

One of the men who'd greeted him, Phillips, he thought, gave him a toad-eating smile. "I'll call one of my secretaries to take care of this. You needn't worry about the receptionist. Perhaps she skipped breakfast. You know how women are always watching their figures."

Max's eyebrows shot up at the man's callous and sexist remarks. Was this the attitude DyoTech held toward its employees? Not only that, but it had been obvious when he'd entered the office that Olivia wasn't well. She'd lost weight since his last visit to her, and the dark circles under her eyes announced her lack of sleep.

"Mr. Phillips --" Max began only to be cut off.

The pompous ass shook his head. "Please call me Dan."

Thankfully, Erik was next to him. His cousin placed a firm hand on his arm, reminding him where they were. He couldn't very well lose his temper and cause a commotion, but he wouldn't bite his tongue either. "I said to get her some water. You're closest."

Dan flushed. One of the other men must have realized Max meant business because he immediately volunteered. "I'll take care of that."

"Well, I could easily have one of my..."

Max narrowed his eyes, daring the man to finish his statement. "If your company treats our systems as nonchalantly as you do your employees, I wonder if we chose the right people to do business with."

"I-I..." Dan turned beet red.

The remaining vice-president tried a little damage control. "Of course we care about each member of our staff. Her fainting shocked us, that's all. We appreciate your quick

thinking in making sure she didn't fall and hurt herself. I'll call 9-1-1 to ensure she gets the proper medical attention."

It was then that Olivia reminded them of her presence. She groaned, and her head moved slowly from side to side. Max held her tighter, feeling protective.

"That won't be necessary," he countered, making a mental note to seek out DyoTech's competition once the terms of their contract were up. The damage to their image had already been done.

Olivia's eyes fluttered open. At first, she seemed disoriented, as if she couldn't quite figure out where she was. Then she focused her lovely gaze on him. "You!" she said accusingly, before trying to wiggle out of his grasp.

"Be still," he ordered, wishing they were anywhere but under the scrutiny of watchful eyes. "You fainted, and if you keep squirming around like this, you'll make yourself light-headed again."

Olivia protested. "I'm perfectly capable of standing on my own two feet."

Max liked her spirit, even though they both knew her pathetic struggles were useless.

Sloan returned with the water. "Here you go." As Max's hands were full, Sloan handed the cup to Erik.

Olivia trembled against him, her head down. He could practically feel the waves of embarrassment course through her. He carried her the short distance to her desk and placed her gently in the chair. Then he took the water from Erik and gave it to her.

Her hands were shaking as she received it without argument. She wouldn't meet his gaze, though. He wished she would. Olivia drank the cup's contents, then returned the cup.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly. Her nearness was driving him insane. It was difficult being so close to her when all he wanted to do was drag her into his arms and bury his cock deep inside of her tight, wet pussy.

"Better. Thank you, Mr. Sterling."

He lifted a brow. So, she wanted to pretend they were strangers, despite that telling “You!” she’d uttered earlier? Max would allow her this game for now, or at least until his meeting was concluded. He wondered why none of the bosses suggested she take the rest of the day off and go home. Another strike against them. He would have brought it up himself if he didn’t have other plans for her.

Once Max was assured she’d be okay, he turned to the three stooges -- as he now thought of them -- and said, as though they were the cause of the delay, “If you gentlemen are ready, perhaps we can get started?”

Max spared Olivia one last glance before following the group to the boardroom. She didn’t bother to look in his direction.



## Chapter Five

“Okay, spill it, Olivia,” Lola demanded an hour later, as she approached the reception area. The redhead was flanked by Chris and Selma.

Olivia groaned inwardly. Had word already gotten out about what had happened? That was one of the bad things about working in an office environment, the gossip. Deciding to play dumb, Olivia concentrated on her computer screen as if she had something pressing to take care of. She did, actually, because she had some letters to type for one of the admins, but it wasn’t something she couldn’t finish quickly.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about. Spill what?”

Lola glared, her mouth twisting into a nasty snarl. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Did you do it on purpose? Pass out, I mean? The entire office is wondering.”

Olivia had been afraid of this when she’d come to in Max’s arms. Damn him for embarrassing her in front of the bosses and, worse yet, making her fodder for the office grapevine.

Thank goodness Chris stood up for her. “She didn’t do it on purpose, Lola. Not everyone is a conniving sneak like you. Besides, look at her; it’s clear she’s not feeling well.”

Olivia didn’t know whether to be pleased or insulted. “Uh, thank you?”

"Watch it, Chris," Lola warned, before giving Olivia her full attention. Catlike, amber eyes thoroughly scrutinized Olivia. "Are you going to tell us or just sit there?"

Olivia shrugged. "There's nothing to tell." She wished the wretched woman would go away. She could handle Selma and Chris, but Lola was like a pit bull with raw meat. Once the woman set her teeth into something, she refused to let go.

"Look, Olivia, I'm just trying to get the story firsthand. You know how things are around here. Rumors get spread, and the next thing you know, everyone is talking about your inappropriate behavior. You're a nice lady, and none of us want that to happen." Crimson-painted lips widened to reveal small white teeth. That mockery of a smile didn't fool Olivia for a second.

The bitch was threatening her -- and not very subtly, either.

Chris spoke up again while Selma continued to stare. "Lola, you're being an ass. She obviously doesn't want to talk about it."

"But she can't keep something this juicy to herself. Inquiring minds want to know," the redhead insisted. Then she gave another false smile to Olivia. "Don't you care about your reputation? I'd hate for everyone to start whispering behind your back."

Olivia closed her eyes briefly and took a deep breath; she could practically feel her blood pressure rising. Normally, she didn't let much get under her skin, but coupled with her lack of sleep and the fainting spell, Olivia wasn't in the mood to deal with this bull. "Let them say what they want. What a few small-minded people choose to think doesn't concern me. On that note, I really need to finish these letters, so I hope you'll understand when I ask you to let me get on with my work, please."

Lola's jaw dropped, obviously taken aback that her little attempt at blackmail hadn't worked. Olivia had no doubt more rumors would circulate, but at least she'd know the source.

"Fine. If that's how you want it. Don't say I didn't warn you." Lola stomped off.

Selma gave Olivia an apologetic look, before scurrying after her buddy.

Chris, however, stuck around. “Don’t pay Lola any attention. She’s full of hot air, and no one puts much store into anything she says.”

“How did this get around so fast? It only happened a little while ago.”

“Never underestimate the time it takes for a juicy story to spread in this office. Unfortunately for you, Lola and her cronies were still in the break room when Mr. Sloan quickly came in and got your water. Lola was probably being her nosy self and asked him what was the rush was. I guess he must have told her. Hon, you need to take better care of yourself. Are you okay now?”

This time, Olivia was pretty sure Chris only asked out of genuine concern rather than the need to get to the bottom of a good scoop, so she didn’t mind answering. “I’m fine. I just got a little dizzy. Mr. Sterling happened to be the one to catch me when I passed out. That’s all it was.”

Chris gave her an assessing look before she nodded. “Okay, but if you need someone to cover for you because you have to go home early, I’m here for you.”

Olivia smiled her first genuine smile of the day. Chris was really a nice person, unlike that gossipmonger, Lola, who was another headache she’d probably have to deal with.

When she was alone at last, she immersed herself in typing the letters, pushing away all thoughts of her worries, especially those of Max. There was no point in pondering on why he was here, especially when she couldn’t possibly be anything to him. She finished the last keystroke and saved her data, then heard voices coming toward her. Mr. Phillips’s high-pitched whine carried through the halls.

“But we had planned on having lunch here in the office. The caterers should be arriving any minute. Besides, we’ve yet to show you our proposal about providing our services to your other offices.”

"I've seen enough." Max's tone of finality evidently cut off any more protest that might have been offered.

Olivia kept her head down, refusing to look up in case her eyes met Max's. However, the gods were clearly conspiring against her because a shadow fell across her desk. She didn't have to glance up to know who stood before her; she could feel his presence compelling her to acknowledge him. Something within her seemed to react to him, almost as though relieved that he was there. Or was she just imagining things?

"Get your things, Mrs. Watts. We're going to lunch."

Olivia raised her eyes, then. "I beg your pardon?"

"You already have my pardon. Now gather your purse, and let's go."

"No," she whispered, with a shake of her head.

He placed his palms on her desk and leaned forward until their faces nearly touched. "I don't make a habit of repeating myself. Would you like to walk out of here of your own volition, or would you rather I carried you?"

Thankfully, his voice had dropped to a level low enough for only her to hear it, but still, he was nuts if he believed she'd go anywhere with him. Especially with her bosses and Max's group staring at them.

"You wouldn't dare."

"I don't issue empty threats, angel. You have until the count of three to get up and come with me."

"You're being ridiculous," she said, louder than she meant to.

Each of her three bosses glared at her and wore a ferocious frown.

"One."

"Stop this right now," she hissed.

“Two.” His intense gaze remained steady, and she knew he’d do as he’d threatened. Her day was getting worse by the minute. If he carried her out of here, she might as well kiss this job good-bye, because not only would she have the office gossip to contend with, but quite possibly the hostility of the three men giving her the evil eye as well. On the other hand, what excuse could he have given them for taking her with him?

Feeling resentful at his high-handedness, she grabbed her purse and logged off her computer. “Okay, but someone has to cover the phone for me.”

“It’s been taken care of.” Max straightened to his impressive height. How could she be attracted to such a domineering man? After Bill, Olivia had promised herself to never allow a man to take over her life as completely as her ex-husband had done. It caused her too much pain and heartache, and she couldn’t deal with that again. Though she thought Max would never physically hurt her as Bill had, this man somehow had the power to wound her in a way Bill never could.

When she came from behind her desk, she was surprised to see her direct supervisor had joined the crowd in the lobby.

“Take as much time as you need for lunch, Olivia,” he said cordially enough, but there was a hint of censure in his eyes.

Oh, great. Now she was in for it, and it was all Maxwell Sterling’s fault. The damned man was turning out to be trouble with a capital “T.” It was too bad her body went into overdrive when he touched her.

## Chapter Six

Olivia remained silent during the entire car ride despite Max's efforts to drag her into conversation. She was obviously upset at being railroaded into lunch with him, but what other choice did he have? Still, the more time he spent with her, the more that wasn't the way he wanted things to be. No, it would be infinitely more satisfying to have her complete surrender, given freely.

The silence was uncomfortable as they sat in the back seat of his Town Car. He longed to touch her, feel her body pressed against his, but she kept her attention focused on whatever was going on outside. The scent of her perfume titillated his senses, and the soft curve of her breast tempted him over the V-cut of her blouse. Though the trip to the restaurant took only minutes, they seemed to be the longest ten minutes of his life.

Olivia refused to look at him even when they were settled at their table. Her only words had been a protest when he'd ignored her lunch choice and ordered for her.

"I wish you had let me order for myself. I'm not a child."

"Then stop acting like one."

She raised her lovely gaze to meet his. "What?"

“You’ve been sulking for the past half hour -- at the office, during the ride here, and through the ordering. The least you could do is stop pouting and answer me when I speak to you or ask a question.”

“I didn’t want to be here in the first place. If you haven’t forgotten, you forced me to come with the threat of humiliation. What do you think my coworkers will think and say when I go back to the office? Or what my bosses and supervisor are already thinking and saying? I need this job, dammit. Not everyone is a billionaire with tons of servants and fancy cars.” Her eyes filled with angry tears, and for the first time, Max questioned his actions that day. He’d been so intent on what he wanted that he hadn’t given her the consideration she deserved. This wasn’t turning out the way he’d envisioned it.

His need for her had driven him to extreme measures. So used to being the one who was pursued, the about-face was new to him. “Olivia, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking clearly, and I have a bit of a confession to make. My coming to your office today was solely a ploy to see you again. I hadn’t planned on you fainting.”

She gasped. “But...why?”

He couldn’t reveal the truth to her just yet. She wasn’t ready for it.

“Why not? The moment I set eyes on you at the Valentine’s ball, I knew you were the woman I’ve been looking for nearly all my life.” Incredible and clichéd as that might sound to her, it was true, of course. She was his answer to what he carried within him. And while he’d sought her out in the beginning for his own selfish purposes, now the stakes were higher because he genuinely cared for, wanted, lusted, and desired her. Maybe he was even beginning to love her.

Max reached across the table and took her hand in his, reveling in its softness. She was so beautiful, staring back at him with wide-eyed wonder and disbelief. His gaze dropped to her lips, so full and luscious. His cock stiffened, straining against his pants, wanting to break free.

How much longer would he have to wait for her? What would she think if she knew what was on his mind? If she was aware that he wanted nothing more than to clear this table, throw her on it, and fuck her senseless until she screamed for mercy? And maybe not even then.

“Look, Mr. Sterling, I --”

“Max. You had no problem calling me that at the ball.”

A frown turned her lips down, crinkling her forehead. “That was different.”

“Why?”

She tried to tug her hand away from his, but he held it firm. “Because it just is. Would you please let go of my hand?”

Max grinned, loving the way she wiggled in her seat. The heat he could feel generating from her told Max she wasn't as indifferent to him as she pretended, but then she'd never been indifferent to him when he'd come to her in the guise of her dreams. There was hope, after all, but first, he'd have to get to the root of her reluctance. He kept hold of her and massaged the top of her hand with his thumb, eliciting a shiver from her.

“Please don't.”

“Don't touch you? I can't. You're so touchable.”

“This isn't funny.”

“I'm not laughing. Ah, here comes our food. Now, you can eat.” Finally he released her, wishing he could linger over her hand a little longer.

She scowled at the sight of all the dishes. “I'm not that hungry. What I'd have ordered would have been more than enough.”

“You obviously haven't been eating properly, and it's starting to show. A small house salad wouldn't be substantial enough. You need something to stick to your ribs.”

She looked at her plate with uncertainty. He'd remembered reading in her file that she liked seafood, so he'd ordered her tilapia stuffed with crab and lobster meat, dressed with



fresh vegetables and garlic-braised potatoes. “But this is so much food. I couldn’t possibly finish it.”

“I’m not asking you to. Just eat what you can,” he said easily enough, but they both knew it was a command. Max waited until she’d lifted her fork to take a bite before he picked up his own utensil.

“Mmm, this is delicious. I’ve always wanted try this place,” she finally said after a few bites. Obviously, she was hungrier than she’d thought.

“Why haven’t you?”

“Are you kidding me? With prices like these, I couldn’t justify spending this much money just for a meal. It must be nice to have the means to enjoy the finer things in life.”

Max didn’t think he detected any rancor in her comment. “Money has its advantages.”

“But I imagine it can be a burden as well.”

“How so?” Although he secretly agreed with her, he was surprised by her words and wanted to hear her reasoning.

“Well, you never really know who your friends are, do you? Look at how Mr. Phillips acted toward you when you walked into the office. His lips were practically chapped from kissing your butt. On the other hand, he probably wouldn’t bother spitting on me if I were on fire. Imagine if I had money, but you didn’t. How different would people treat each of us then? While it would be nice not to live from paycheck to paycheck, I would probably hate constantly having to wonder who really liked me for myself and who for the things I have.”

Maxwell couldn’t keep the smile from his face. He appreciated her candor. Most of the women he’d dated had tried to play coy with him where his money was concerned, pretending his wealth didn’t impress them, when all they wanted was to get their hands on it. There were also those who hadn’t bothered to hide their avarice, and still others who’d enjoyed him in their bed, with his generosity an added bonus. Olivia, however, didn’t tease or flirt or play games. She acted naturally toward him. He knew not all women were gold-

diggers, of course, but somehow the circles he'd grown up in and moved around in seemed to foster them.

"I believe people would love you whether you were rich or poor."

Olivia laughed, finally letting her guard down. "Well, I've certainly got the poor part covered."

His grin widened. She was utterly refreshing. "I do have a problem with toadies and freeloaders, which is why I don't have too many friends."

"I would think you'd have lots."

"Not as many as you think. Maybe I'm a little jaded, but it's a deal-breaker when people are so easily impressed by my wealth, my title."

"Your title?" she asked in between bites of her meal.

"My father was a prince of Zandrinia, but it's a cursory title there, sort of like a British earl. The principality is so small that, historically, as with many European titles, there was only ever enough money for the oldest heir. Any other heirs had to fend for themselves. I hardly ever visit, and I was born and raised in New York, so I never understand why people make such a big deal about the title."

"So that would make you a..."

"Prince. As I've said, the title is meaningless here and becoming so in Zandrinia as well. The royal family is basically a figurehead."

"I see. So, you weren't born with a silver spoon in your mouth?"

"No at all. Everything I have, I worked hard to get. I've just been extremely lucky in my business dealings."

"Luck of the devil?" she teased.

Max stiffened. He realized she didn't understand the impact of her words, but they gave him pause all the same. Olivia must have picked up on his discomfort because she suddenly looked contrite.

“I’m sorry if I’ve offended you. That nickname must be annoying.”

He relaxed, leaning back in his chair. “It can be. My cousin Erik gets a kick out of it, though.”

“Erik?”

“Yes. Cousin, business associate, and one of the few friends I spoke of. He was with me at the office and left with the others. The fair-haired man.”

“I didn’t notice him. I only saw you.” She seemed to have caught what she’d said because she lowered her lashes. A deep red undertone spread over her brown cheeks.

That confession did his heart more good than she could possibly know. She’d be his soon, so he could afford to put her at ease again. “Tell me about you. Do you have a lot of friends?”

“To be honest, I don’t have many, either. I’m too busy to socialize, but my sister is my best friend,” she said with a sigh. A faraway look entered her dark eyes.

“But?” he prompted.

“What?”

“I sensed a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

“Well, lately, I’ve felt a little guilty. I’ve been a little envious of her. She’s so together, and everything in her life seems to be going perfectly. She’s engaged to a really great guy who’s crazy about her, and she recently opened her own beauty salon. While things are so well for her, my world is still on shaky ground.” She took a deep breath. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for her. No one deserves happiness more than she does.”

“Except you, perhaps.”

“I *am* happy. I mean, I have worries like everyone else, but my life is starting to smooth out. The job at DyoTech isn’t the best by any means, but it pays the bills, and it offers free after-school daycare for my daughter, definitely lifting a huge financial burden. After my divorce...things were a bit tight.”

Max took a sip of his club soda, intent on what she was telling him, despite the fact that most of it was in her file. He liked that she had opened up enough to share these things with him. "Your marriage was a difficult one, wasn't it?"

She lowered her lids, seemingly not surprised at his acuity, but not before he caught a glimpse of the pain in her eyes. "Yes. At first everything was peachy. Bill was a charmer, and I fell hard, but I realized too late that what I felt was just infatuation. I got pregnant with our daughter. I think he sensed that I didn't love him, and it made him mean. He...he expressed that anger with his fists a lot of times."

Max wanted to meet this man and expose Bill to *his* fists for daring to harm Olivia. A real man would never lay hands on a woman, but Olivia seemed to blame herself for the way her ex had been. He hated it. "It wasn't your fault, Olivia. The man obviously had anger issues."

"I know that now, but at the time, I thought I was in the wrong. I stayed with him for my daughter's sake, but I finally realized that not only was he a lousy husband, he was a lousy father as well. I didn't want Tiffany to grow up in that environment. She deserves better."

Max was interested in hearing about Olivia's child; after all, one day she, too, would fall under his care. "Tell me about Tiffany," he requested softly.

Olivia's face lit up, all sparkling eyes and huge smile. "She recently turned seven, and she's in the first grade. She's an awesome kid."

"I can tell you really love her."

"More than life."

"I'd like to meet her one day." It was evidently the wrong thing to say because Olivia's expression closed once again, and she didn't respond. She concentrated on her plate before picking up her utensils and toying with her food.

“Olivia, don’t shut me out. You must know that this lunch is only the beginning of you and me.”

She continued to keep quiet, ignoring him. With a frustrated curse under his breath, he dug into his meal, but his eyes remained on her. Despite the fine cuisine, he tasted nothing. The woman was infuriating the hell out of him, but as Erik had told him, these things would take time.

They finished their meal in silence. When the bill came, Olivia reached for her purse.

“For God’s sake, put that thing away. Surely you didn’t think I’d expect you to pay?”

“I don’t know what you were expecting, but I won’t be beholden to you for anything.”

Max wasn’t sure whether he wanted to strangle her or shake her until her teeth rattled. “I invited you to lunch, so I’ll pay. As a matter of fact, I insist. If you really want to make it up to me, you can invite me to your place for a meal.”

Olivia looked aghast. “I’ll do no such thing!”

“You did say you didn’t want to owe me anything. Make it up to me by cooking dinner for me.”

“Tiffany --”

“Hire a babysitter. I’ll pay for it, or perhaps your sister or parents could watch her,” he suggested.

“Don’t you understand? I can’t get involved with you.”

“Why? You’re single, as am I, and I know you’re attracted to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s awfully conceited of you.”

“It isn’t conceit when it’s the truth. Listen, I know you may be reluctant to get involved with anyone because your marriage left a rough taste in your mouth, but you can’t deny what’s between us.”

“There’s nothing,” she declared, but she avoided his eyes.

“Prove it.” Her expression grew stormy. “Okay, you’re right, Olivia. You don’t need to prove a single thing to me, because I already know, but perhaps you’d like to allay your own fears,” he murmured.

Her nostrils flared as she whipped the napkin from her lap and threw it down on the table. She stood up, full of righteous indignation. “I don’t have to listen to anymore of this. I’ve already told you I’m not interested, but you persist in this nonsense.”

Max gave no credence to her words or stance, calmly taking another sip of his drink and uncaring of the eyes focused on their table. “Did you know, angel, the more a woman runs, the more a man wants to chase her?”

“I don’t give a damn what you do as long as you leave me alone.” Turning on her heels, she stormed off.

Max sighed with a shake of his head. He fished some bills from his wallet and tossed them on the table before going after her.

He saw that she hadn’t gotten far because she was standing outside the restaurant and glaring at a tall, dark-skinned black man who was companioned by a stunning redhead.

“Olivia,” the man said through gritted teeth, “Now isn’t the time or place to discuss this.

The redhead pouted. “Who is this woman?” she demanded, shooting Olivia a glance of distaste.

“No one. Go wait for me at the bar, sweetheart. And order me a martini, extra dry.” The woman flicked a last hostile look at Olivia, a come-hither one at Max, then sauntered off, wiggling her hips more than necessary.

“No one?” Olivia screamed. Max would never have thought Olivia was capable of such anger, but she was practically spitting fire. He watched the scene unfold, waiting for the right opportunity to step in.

“I’m not only your ex-wife, but also the mother of your child, whom you haven’t seen or sent a check for in months, you deadbeat. The last time we went to court, you claimed to be broke, yet you have the money to come to a restaurant like this? You lying son of a bitch!”

“Lower your goddamn voice,” Bill hissed, grabbing Olivia’s arm and shaking her.

“Take your hands off her.” Max didn’t raise his voice, but the underlying threat was there all the same.

Olivia’s ex turned hazel eyes in his direction. “Stay the fuck out of this. It doesn’t concern you.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong. I’ll ask you one more time to let her go, or I won’t be held accountable for my actions. Right now, I’d like nothing more than to knock out every single one of your teeth.” Max drew closer to the man, standing over him by at least three inches.

Bill raised his chin defiantly, then released Olivia, but Max wasn’t through with him yet.

“I suggest you see to your financial responsibilities. I’m quite sure the courts would be interested to know how you can afford Chez Monet, this obviously tailored suit, and equally extravagant...friend.” All while he said this, Max’s temper raged. The ground beneath his feet rumbled, and Olivia’s gasp barely registered.

Max wanted nothing more than to tear this bastard to shreds. Bill must have seen something in his eyes because he backed away.

“You...you can’t...this is between me and her.”

“And me,” Max contradicted. On the verge of reaching out and punching the man, Olivia grabbed his arm. A soothing burst of coolness shot through his body at the contact.

“He’s not worth it, Max.”

Slowly his temper began to ebb away. She pulled her hand away, clearly almost as surprised as he was at what had just happened, at how her touch eased his tension.

Bill shot an angry glare in Olivia's direction before storming in the restaurant.

"Wh-what was that, Max? It felt like I...you..."

"You simply proved what I knew all along." He pulled her against him and dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. "We belong together." Now that his ire was under control, he could think of nothing else but getting her alone and proving it to her. Slowly, deliciously. With an urgent groan, he lowered his head.

Unfortunately, a photographer chose that moment to pop out of nowhere and snapped their picture as Max took her lips with his.



## Chapter Seven

*The Devil's New Plaything. The Devil's Next Lady. The Devil's Angel.* The headlines had been filled with ridiculous plays on Max's nickname and had dredged up photos of him and his previous companions. More recently, the gossip sections had posted pictures of Olivia and Max dining and smiling at each other, the image of the kiss they'd shared in front of Chez Monet a couple of weeks ago a virtual staple. Somehow, someone had even unearthed a picture of them dancing at the Valentine's ball, although in that particular photo she looked as though she were in a trance.

If Olivia had known how getting involved with Maxwell Sterling would irrevocably change her life, she would have fought harder, would've made it undeniably -- albeit falsely -- clear that she didn't want a relationship with him. Instead, she'd caved under her body's wicked clamoring. Hell, if she was honest, Olivia did want to know him better. He intrigued her, she enjoyed his company, and she found herself wanting to be around him.

In two weeks, he'd somehow managed to insinuate himself into her life to the point where they were actually labeled a couple. At her insistence, they'd kept their meetings discreet -- after all, Olivia didn't want to rush into anything -- not that it had done much

good, if the papers were any way to judge. It was a miracle that no was parked out in front of her place. Yet.

Max visited her at night after Tiffany was in bed. They'd sit and talk or play silly board games, do something completely mundane, but she looked forward to those times. He was the perfect gentleman; he kept his hands to himself and never pressed her for anything more than a goodnight kiss when he left.

Olivia might have begun to believe that she and Max could try to make things work, were it not for the complications of dating such a prominent man. The gossip columns were having a field day concerning their relationship, random people were popping up wanting to interview her, and she was getting phone calls from strangers. She'd been forced to change her phone number.

Worse, her coworkers had started treating her differently since her lunch with Max. Lola gave her nasty looks whenever she walked by Olivia's desk, no one wanted to talk to her -- even when they did, it was to ask what it was like to date Max -- and the bosses had become completely unrecognizable. Mr. Phillips himself couldn't seem to do enough to make sure her day was going well.

The people in her office were becoming unbearable to deal with, and it was all Max's fault. The friendship she'd been developing with Chris had come to an abrupt halt. The other woman was still pleasant, but now there was a distance in her eyes and tone that hadn't been there before.

Then, there was her family. Her parents were dying to meet him, and Alex wouldn't stop teasing her. Even Tiffany was being affected by this. Some of the children in her daughter's school must have overheard their parents talk about the situation, because she was being teased and asked about it.

She'd been forced to explain to her daughter that Mommy had a new friend, but it wasn't anything shameful. Tiffany had asked if Mr. Sterling was a nice man. When Olivia

had answered in the affirmative, it had seemed to satisfy the child at the time. Olivia was sure it wouldn't be long before her daughter asked to meet Max, but she would cross that bridge if it ever came to that.

Olivia stared at the newspapers again in disgust. Things had definitely gone too far. She just wasn't cut out to be in the public eye like this. Even though a twinge of pain shot through her at the thought, she'd decided she had to break things off with Max.

Olivia paced the room, waiting for her sister and Tag to arrive at her place. Tiffany had just gone to bed, and Olivia had called Max earlier to let him know she'd be going to him tonight instead. As soon as Alex and Tag got there, she could leave for his home.

The phone rang shrilly. She hadn't been expecting a call at this hour. She glanced at the caller ID; it displayed "private number." Though it was late for them to call, she had no doubt it was her parents; their unlisted number never showed up on the device.

"Hello?"

"Leave Max alone if you know what's good for you," a deep, raspy voice hissed on the other end of the line. A chill sped down her spine.

"Who is this?" she demanded.

"I missed the last time, but I won't again." The menacing voice cackled. "By the way, how's that ankle?"

Olivia's heart plummeted. "You...you're...you tried to run me and my daughter over! You sick maniac --"

"Heed my words, Olivia. Stay away from him if you want to live. Or if you care about your daughter."

A loud click in her ear indicated the caller had hung up.

This was getting out of hand. Now, more than ever, it was important she get Max out of her life. The call had only strengthened her resolve. It wasn't just herself she had to worry about, but Tiffany as well.

Olivia was on edge by the time her sister and Tag arrived. She was jumping at every little sound and creak.

“O, are you okay?” Alex asked with concern once she walked into the apartment. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It’s nothing. I...I got a prank call that rattled me a bit. I really appreciate you two coming over on such short notice. What’s with the overnight bags?” she asked. “I won’t be out that long.”

Alex gave Tag a knowing look, then grinned at Olivia with smug satisfaction curling her lips. “Says you. We came prepared. Anyway, it’s Friday night. Stay as late as you like. If you don’t come home until tomorrow, you don’t have to worry about Tiffany. She’s in good hands.”

If Olivia wasn’t so distracted over the phone call, she might’ve given Alex a piece of her mind. She decided to wait until she returned to let her sister have it. “Thank you, guys, so much. I owe you big time.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Tag said easily. “She’s great practice for when we have our own.”

Olivia lifted her brow. “Are you two trying to tell me something?”

“Whoa.” Tag laughed. “There’s no bun in the oven yet, but let’s just say we’re not doing anything to prevent it.” He threw his arm around Alex and gave her a wink. It was obvious these two were madly in love.

“Well, a word of warning, then. As cute and lovable as my daughter is, she can be quite a handful, like the time she decided she’d eat nothing but things that were yellow. And once you have your own kids, say good-bye to any romantic evenings for a very long time.”

“Why do you think we’re trying to get in as much quality time as possible, sis? Now, shoo. We’ll be fine.” Alex hustled her to the door.

“Wait. I want to look in on Tiffany one last time before I take my leave of you horny teenagers.” She walked to her daughter’s bedroom and assured herself that the little girl was sleeping soundly.

Minutes later, armed with the directions Max had given her to his house in Springfield, Olivia was finally on her way. As she drove, her mind wandered to that unsettling phone call.

What had she done by getting involved with Max? Why would anyone want to hurt her or Tiffany? There had to be some underlying reason behind the stranger’s threat. If the call had been from another woman, Olivia might have been able to put it down to a jealous ex-lover, but would someone really go as far as attempted murder? Then again, the man had confirmed he’d already tried to do as much -- she and Tiffany had had a very lucky escape.

She wondered once more if Bill could do something this heinous, but decided against it. He simply wasn’t that smart; she would’ve known it was him on the phone right away. No. It was someone else. But who?

She was only a few miles from Max’s house when the hair rose on the back of her neck. She looked in the rearview mirror but didn’t notice anything. It didn’t ease her mind that she was the only one on the dark road. A few minutes passed; the feeling that something was very wrong only grew stronger.

Olivia contemplated turning around and going home, but no sooner had the thought entered her mind, when she was suddenly rammed from behind. “Oh, my God!” She was jerked forward, and though the strap dug into her, she thanked her lucky stars she was wearing her seatbelt.

She glanced at her rearview mirror again. At first, she couldn’t see anything, but then she realized she’d been hit by a vehicle whose lights were off and it was still behind her.

She sped up in an attempt to get away from the car, but the maniac increased his speed as well. A loud crunch of metal splintered the air as her assailant rammed her again.

The force of the impact sent Olivia's head into the steering wheel. Thankful that Tiffany wasn't with her this time, and knowing she'd have to do some fast thinking if she wanted to make it out of this situation alive and intact, she stomped on the gas pedal, put some distance between the cars, cut her lights, and then made a sharp right turn, hoping to catch her would-be killer off guard.

It must have worked because he shot straight past her turnoff. Not content to stay put till he'd wised up to her trick, she randomly made another quick turn, and then another, drove aimlessly for a while, before slowing at last. She had no idea where the hell she was now. This neighborhood was like a maze, and it would take her forever to get out. On the other hand, it would be that much harder for the psycho to track her, too.

After a few more minutes of travel and checking her mirrors every few seconds, she was sure that she was no longer being followed. She stopped and shut down the engine.

Her heart was still in her throat, and she couldn't halt its erratic, frantic beating. Her hands shook, and her breathing was ragged. She couldn't calm down. The throbbing in her head further assured Olivia that this wasn't just a horrible dream, that someone had indeed tried to kill her yet again.

She wanted to cry and scream, do anything but feel this terror. Taking deep breaths, she closed her eyes for a few seconds and waited until she felt a semblance of control. Then she turned the ignition. It took a few tries to get the engine started, but that wasn't unusual; she couldn't believe her car hadn't stalled with her wild maneuvering. And Heaven only knew what the back of her vehicle looked like.

She didn't know how long it took for her to wind her way out of the godforsaken development, but when she finally saw a familiar street sign, Olivia decided she had no choice but still head to Max's place to tell him that their relationship, such as it was, was definitely over. She couldn't deal with the crazed attempts on her life, threatening calls, gossip rags.

The closer she got to his place, the angrier she grew by the minute. This was all Max's fault. Every single strange thing that had happened to her was because of him.

At last, she pulled up to the front of his place, which was more like an estate, really. He had the kind of gates that only opened when someone on the inside buzzed you in. Olivia pressed the button on the intercom.

Max's voice addressed her. "Olivia, I was beginning to wonder where you were."

She didn't respond, couldn't. She was a taut mass of rage and fear. When the gates opened, she drove her car through. It seemed like it took several years to even reach the front of his house. On another occasion, she might have been able to appreciate the plantation manor style home in all its opulence, but her mind was on her most-recent terrifying experience.

Olivia had been ready to tell Max off the minute he came to the door, but when she saw him, his look of concern was her undoing. All the words she'd rehearsed in her mind disappeared.

"Angel, what's wrong?"

Her lips trembled, as she fought the tears stinging the back of her eyes.

He pulled her inside and shut the door behind them. "Olivia, tell me what's the matter. Something's obviously upset you, and your forehead has a lump on it."

"That's nothing. I-I..." A floodgate burst open and violent sobs wracked her body. Max instantly gathered her in his arms and lifted her up, carrying her further into his home. Then he settled onto a nearby couch with her on his lap.

"S-someone tried t-t-to r-run me off the road on the w-way o-over here, and b-before t-that they a-almost ran me and m-my baby down and b-br-broke her doll. Sh-she loved that doll!" By the time Olivia had gotten all this out, she was crying uncontrollably. Her fear, anger, and sadness all erupted at once in a torrent.

Max held on to the sobbing woman in his arms, cradling and rocking her gently, despite his anger. The chandelier shook and the coffee table clattered as he tried to rein his temper in. He had to for Olivia's sake. He dropped soothing kisses on her forehead, carefully avoiding her injury, letting his angel know that she was safe.

When she hadn't come when she'd said she would, Max had phoned her home, only to be informed that she'd left a while ago. He'd tried not to worry, thinking she might have stopped off somewhere, but never would he have imagined her late arrival was because someone had tried to kill her. What the hell had happened? And why? What could Olivia have possibly done that would make someone want to harm her, frighten her? If he found out that her ex-husband was behind this, he would murder that motherfucker.

As things stood, he was beyond furious. Not only had some scumbag tried to hurt Olivia, but he'd attempted to harm her daughter as well. He vowed to keep them safe, even if it meant bringing mother and daughter to stay with him.

"Shh," he whispered against her ear. "It's okay. You're here with me now, and I won't let anything happen to you again."

Olivia wailed even harder, and he worried she'd make herself sick. He stroked her back, her arms.

"Angel, did you hear me? Everything will be fine. I will keep you and Tiffany safe."

"I-I just w-want to be f-free of you. W-why did you c-come into m-my life? They want me d-d-dead because of y-you."

He froze. "Because of me." His tone was flat.

"Someone called m-me." She hiccupped. He was relieved to note she was slowly getting herself under control. "He told me t-to stay away from you if-if I wanted to live. And people at work treat me funny, reporters have been hounding me, and you -- I don't know what you want from me. Why did you choose me? Why c-can't I just...you...why won't you leave me be?"



He gripped her chin, wiped her cheeks, and tilted her head so their eyes could meet. “Angel, there are many reasons you and I belong together. I promise I’ll explain it all to you when the time is right, but the most fundamental reason, the most important one, is this.”

Max covered her quivering lips with his. Olivia attempted to turn her head away from him, but he wouldn’t allow it. He wanted her, needed her too much to deny himself or her any longer. There was no way he would be stopped from making her his right here and right now. The fact that he hadn’t known he could have lost her, not once, but twice, strengthened his decision to not spend another night without making love to her.

His mouth moved over hers, sampling its sweetness. Her lips were so soft beneath his own. Although she remained unresponsive, she didn’t try to fight him, either. Max refused to have her feign indifference. By the time he was finished with her, she’d be an active participant.

His cock grew painfully hard. Max had denied himself where Olivia was concerned for so long that he swore he’d take her in every hole -- pussy, mouth, and ass -- and she would love it. He’d see to that.

With a quiet moan, Olivia parted her lips beneath his and returned his kiss, her tongue pressing forward in a shy, questing motion. She tasted of paradise, and he wanted more, craved it.

She wiggled on his lap, making his cock more swollen. Never had he been so frantic to possess a woman as much as he did her. How had he been able to control himself as he’d courted her? How many cold showers had he taken? How, in fact, had he been able to contain the beast? Could it be possible that simply being with Olivia had such a calming effect on him that she’d helped stave off the symptoms of the gene?

Max had been tempted to visit her late at night, as he’d done in the beginning, but he’d known he couldn’t. Not if he wanted her to trust him, to love him. His tongue swept past hers, tasting every single nook and cranny of her mouth, almost savaging her. He had to

make sure she knew from here on out that he would be the only want to kiss her like this, hold her like this.

He had to ease the ache she'd created in his loins. Max lifted her and then positioned them both on the carpet. He stretched out beside her, his mouth never leaving hers.

Olivia squirmed onto her side and pushed her soft body against his. The supple swell of her breasts pressed against his chest. She was so wonderfully responsive and so eager for him.

Fire raged within him like the bowels of hell, the flames threatening to consume them both. He raised his head to stare into her gorgeous face; she stared back with passion-glazed eyes.

"Max, we shouldn't be doing this," she murmured unconvincingly.

He chuckled softly at her token protest. "We can't *not* do this. Neither of us can fight what's been between us since the beginning -- no more than the sun can stop shining. Let it happen, my angel. I promise you won't forget this experience." He fumbled with the button of her jeans and undid the zipper, then slid his hand inside her panties.

"Oh, God," she whispered.

"He can't help you now, my sweet." He parted the damp folds of her labia before inserting a finger into her tight cunt. "Ahh, yes, you're ready for me. You're so wet, your panties are soaked. Why deny the obvious?"

"Because it's wrong to feel this way." But the way her hands clung to his shoulders made a lie out of her words. "I shouldn't want you. You're dangerous."

Max brushed his lips against hers. "No, angel. Nothing has ever felt so right, and I'll make you admit it. You will give in to what you desire." He slipped another finger into her pussy, stretching her and sinking deeply, then pulled out to the tips of his nails. His dew-soaked digits slid in and out easily.

Olivia lifted her hips as he continued to finger-fuck her. His actions made her moan and cry out. "Max, please. Oh, please."

“That’s what I intend to do.” He pushed yet another finger into her, preparing her for his straining dick. “Please you, that is.”

He loved watching her reaction to what he was doing to her; it made him even more aroused to know he could bring her to the point of mindless, incoherent passion.

Max wasn’t content with simply fingering her. He wanted her completely naked. Thankfully, she wore a blouse with buttons; he quickly undid them, revealing her lacey bra. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the kind that opened in the front, but that didn’t stop him from one-handedly ripping it open -- without bothering with the clasps.

Olivia gasped. “That was...one of my expensive bras.” She moaned as he shifted his other hand below.

“I’ll buy you a dozen more to replace it,” he said impatiently, his hungry gaze raking the lovely brown globes he’d bared.

“That’s beside, the point, you -- oh!”

Her words were abruptly cut off when he lowered his head and captured one blackberry-colored nipple between his teeth, nipping it, and applying just enough pressure make her hurt -- and like it.

Olivia arched her back, forcing her breast against his mouth. He licked the taut peak, circling and tracing it with his tongue. The delicious scent of her pussy thickened the air, filled his nostrils.

She was so passionate and needy. He loved it.

He loved her.

There. He’d finally admitted it to himself. This was what had set her apart from the other women who’d flitted in and out of his life. She was his woman, and he was in love with her. Loved everything about her. He lived for her smile, her laughter, her joy. He should have known from the start that she would make him feel like this.

Max could feel Olivia's inner heat rising. The way her body shook and her head twisted restlessly made him realize she was close to orgasm -- the first of many he planned to give her tonight. His fingers fucked her harder, deeper, faster, made her scream his name.

"Max!"

"That's it. Give in to me. Tell me you want this."

"I do. I want this. Badly."

"Who do you belong to?" he asked softly.

"I..."

He plunged his fingers into her tight box. "Say it."

"I..."

His fingers slowed. "Would you rather I stopped?"

"You! I belong to you," she screamed. Then, a gush of cream flowed from her pussy, and her body spasmed uncontrollably.

That was what he'd been waiting for. Finally. The time was near.

## Chapter Eight

Olivia couldn't fight him even if she'd wanted to. Never in her life had she been so turned on. Her climax had come powerfully and quick, but she suspected more was to follow. If he could bring her to such a pass with only his fingers, she could only imagine what he would do with his mouth and cock.

Max slowly withdrew his digits from her hot sheath, before smearing her juices on her bottom lip. "Go ahead. Lick it," he ordered softly. Then he put his own fingers into his mouth and sucked off her juices as if he was savoring the most exquisite ambrosia. "Delicious. You are absolutely tasty. Come on. Try it."

Hesitantly, she ran her tongue across her lip. Olivia had never done something so kinky before, but the taste of herself wasn't unpleasant. Her flavor was tangy and strong. Somehow it heightened the almost wild and ungovernable passion flowing through her.

Max smiled. "I told you it was good. And before this evening is out, you'll taste me as well -- and then us, together."

The meaning of his words weren't lost on her. She knew things had gone further than they should have, but at this point, Olivia no longer cared about anything except how he made her feel. She'd been through so much over the course of these past weeks that all she

wanted to do was surrender to the heady sensations his touch created. Not thinking, just feeling.

“I want you naked. I’ve been aching to do this for a long time.”

When she would have shrugged out of the clothing that he’d already loosened or destroyed, Max pushed her back down to the floor. “No. This pleasure belongs exclusively to me.”

He plucked at her clothing, disrobing her with purposeful movements. The look of intense concentration on his face made her shiver. Max was relentless in his task. With each inch of skin he revealed, he pressed a kiss against her heated flesh, driving Olivia closer and closer to the brink of insanity.

Then, when she lay completely nude beneath his gaze, she felt a little self-conscious because he was still fully dressed. She made a move to cover her breasts, but he pinned her arms over her head.

“No. Don’t shield your beautiful body from me. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You are perfection.”

She laughed nervously. “This is hardly fair. You still have all *your* clothes on.”

His eyes twinkled with amusement. Then he released her wrists and pulled his shirt off, revealing his muscular upper body. She reached out to touch the hard ridges and valleys of his abdomen. Max looked just as she’d pictured him in her dreams, except there was no brilliant blue pendant. It almost seemed like she was reliving them all over again. But that couldn’t be.

He moaned, obviously enjoying the feel of her hands on his skin, but when she reached for the buttons of his slacks, he pulled away. “Not yet, my eager angel. If you touch me there, we’ll be finished sooner than I’d like. I want to spend the night getting acquainted with your lovely body.” With those words, he guided her to her feet.

She didn't know what Max was up to until he'd positioned her hands on the couch and bent her over. "While I love looking at your front, I want to see your beautiful back, too." He started dropping kisses on the side and back of her neck, teasing her with his petting.

Olivia shivered with each erotic caress, could barely contain herself as his lips trailed a path of flame along her spine. Max grasped her bottom and squeezed, kneading her sensitive flesh with his palms, then spread the cheeks apart, as though examining her.

She stiffened, not used to attention to this part of her. Bill had been her only lover, and he'd taken her in the ass once, but it had been painful. She'd vowed never to let anyone through that entrance again.

Max leaned forward and kissed her shoulder blade. "Relax, angel. I won't do anything you don't want me to. But I promise you'll love this."

She was surprised when he brushed her anus with his fingertips, shocked at how it made her feel. She wiggled her hips for more, although she had no idea what he would do next.

He lowered himself onto his back and slid between her thighs, tugging on her hips until his mouth was buried deep in her pussy. She thought she'd go insane, faint with desire for him. Just when she believed he couldn't surprise her anymore, make her any hotter than she was, he did -- with a vengeance.

His tongue flicked the swollen tissue of her pussy, sending jolts of pulsing heat to every nerve in her entire body. His tongue circled her clit, and then he suckled the inflamed button into his mouth, nipping and milking it. She gripped the sofa cushion, clawing it as a wave of rapture flowed through her very core.

"Oh, God, Max, what are you doing to me?" She groaned her elation; a heady rush like nothing she'd ever experienced took over. This felt so damn good, Olivia almost felt guilty. She wasn't supposed to be this turned on or enjoy something so carnal and decadent with this man. But he was taking her to the brink of yet another mind-shattering climax.

He sucked on her labia, pressing her lower lips together until the sensation stimulated her to the tips of her toes. Max suddenly shoved his tongue into her dripping box, slipping in and out, imitating the act of love.

Unable to remain still, she gripped the couch and rode Max's face, bouncing up and down to meet the thrusts of his tongue. Max grasped her hips more tightly.

Olivia was delirious with lust. The pulsing need he'd aroused in her had made her weak. When she reached her peak again, it was more powerful than the ones that had come before. She shuddered, her upper body heaving against the sofa cushions. She couldn't remember a time when she'd experienced such ecstasy.

She'd thought Max was finally finished, but he lapped at her cleft with long, broad strokes, licking her from clit to anus. She cried out. Despite everything he'd just done to her, a yearning for something she couldn't quite put her fingers on filled her.

"Max, please. I can't take any more." Surely, if he gave her any more pleasure, she'd die. But her weak protests did not curb the animalist actions of his mouth.

Olivia tried to pull away from him, unable to endure the exquisite ache any longer. The man was more than her nervous system could handle.

"No," he growled beneath her, holding her to him. The sensual torture continued. He drew still another orgasm from her; this time, when her climax came, Olivia passed out.

Max slipped from beneath her with a wide smile. Beyond a doubt, she was his. He'd even removed his bloodstone weeks ago, no longer needing or caring what it showed.

And if Olivia thought this was the last of the joys he meant to deliver tonight, she was sadly mistaken. Bringing himself to his feet, he gathered her up -- he loved the feel of her naked body pressed against his -- and brought her to his bedroom. Instead of placing her on the bed, however, he bypassed it and went into the bathroom.



The chamber was twice the size of his bedroom. When Max had had this house built, he'd had a whirlpool bath installed that could easily fit five or six people. In anticipation of her visit earlier, he'd run the tub with bubbles in it, aware that the temperature control would keep the water warm until they were ready to use it.

Max had been confident that he'd have her tonight, and he'd been right. She'd been so wet and hot. And even though his cock had been near to bursting -- still was, for that matter -- Max had known her pleasure must come first.

Olivia began to wiggle in his arms, clearly waking. "Mmm, I think I must have had the most delicious dream," she murmured.

"It was no dream, angel, and there is more to come."

She shook her head as though coming out of a trance. "Where are we?"

"In my bathroom."

"Your bathroom?" She looked around with a bewildered expression. "Why?"

"One thing you'll learn about me, angel, is that I love my creature comforts; I also enjoy sharing them."

Olivia giggled, squirming in his arms. "You can put me down you know."

"You're right. I can, but I don't want to." He gave her a long, lingering kiss before walking to the tub. Gently, he lowered her into the hot water.

"Oh, my God." She groaned with obvious delight. "This is heavenly, and the tub is much deeper than regular ones."

"Yes, I had it designed that way." He undid his belt buckle.

Olivia turned her head away suddenly.

"It's okay, angel. Don't be afraid to look. I'm not ashamed of my body." He took pride in his appearance, working out in his private gym to stay fit.

She slowly raised her head and studied at him, licked her lips. Max found himself enjoying the way she watched him, the way her gaze devoured him.

Once he'd removed his pants and kicked them aside, he made short order of stepping out of his boxers. He stood naked and grew stiffer under her avid gaze.

Then she gasped, a wary look entering her eyes.

"What's wrong, angel?"

"You...you're so big. That thing has got to be nearly a foot long."

Max chuckled. "Hardly, though I stopped measuring when I hit my teens. I imagine it's somewhere between eight and nine inches. Not so large as you seem to imagine. Would you like to touch it?"

With uncertainty written all over her face, she opened her mouth but closed it again.

Max strode to the edge of the tub and entered the bubbly water. "Go, ahead. It won't bite, I promise."

Olivia nibbled her bottom lip, a nervous habit he'd noticed before. Eventually, she knelt before him as he planted his feet solidly and braced himself.

His breath caught in his throat as she reached out and ran her fingers along his turgid length, then rubbed the heel of her palm against him. More than anything, he wanted her to take him into her mouth, but it had to be her decision.

She caressed his cock head, then cupped his balls, giving them a gentle squeeze. Finally, she gave in to his silent wish and replaced her hands with her mouth. She sucked his balls between her lips and wrapped her fingers around his dick.

"Yes, just like that." He groaned. Placing his hands on the sides of her head, he guided her away from his balls to his cock. When she swallowed his shaft, his knees went weak. Her mouth engulfed him an inch at time until the tip of his cock hit the back of her throat. Then she pulled back and repeated the motion over and over again.

Max had been with women who'd had far more experience and knowledge of the art of fellatio, but Olivia's loving caresses made them all pale in comparison. The feel of her tongue gliding along his member made him want to thrust deeper into her mouth, but he held back, not wanting to hurt her. Max wasn't sure how much more he could handle, though; he needed to be inside her pussy, and soon.

On the other hand, she seemed to take as much pleasure from going down on him as he was receiving from the act. She raised her eyes to him then, as though seeking his approval. She must have liked what she saw on his face because she dove back into her motions. Her head bobbed back and forth along his prick. He couldn't have loved her more than he did at that moment.

Max knew he was about to spill. When that happened, he wanted to be between her other lips, so he gently withdrew from her throat.

Olivia frowned. "D-didn't you like it?"

Max knelt in front of her. "I loved it. Thank you." He kissed the tip of her nose.

"Then why did you stop me?"

"Because I couldn't wait any longer. I want to fuck you."

"Shouldn't we go to your bedroom?"

"I think right here is just fine."

"But how..."

"Let me handle that." He gave her a wicked look. "There's nothing more arousing than being inside a beautiful woman while sucking on her breasts."

Olivia's eyes widened, and she shivered, her lust evident.

He sat down with his back against a back rest and urged her toward him. "Straddle my thighs," he whispered.

As she complied, he positioned his cock against her slit. "Easy, now. Lower yourself," he said with a groan. "Yes, angel. Take me inside of you." He exhaled deeply once he was

planted deeply inside of her. For a brief moment, he closed his eyes and savored the sensations sweeping through him. Like a tight, wet glove, she fit snugly around him, as though her channel had been made especially for his cock. But then again, he'd already known they were perfect for each other.

Max reared up, his hips pushing him further into her. He reveled in the total oneness he felt with the woman he loved. Leaning forward, he sealed his lips against her -- even as he continued to grind into her pussy.

Olivia moaned into his mouth and clutched his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh. Then she began to gyrate her hips, meeting him thrust for thrust.

Max reluctantly tore his mouth away, panting for breath. "That's it, my angel. Move with me. I'll take us both to heaven."

She threw her head back, exposing the hollow of her lovely brown throat. He couldn't resist pressing his lips against the damp skin, trailing kisses down to the valley of her breasts. Max cupped a chocolate mound in his palm before teasing her puckered nipple with his tongue.

"Oh, God, yes. Max, that feels so good." Her words were almost incoherent.

He allowed a smile to shape his lips. "And I intend to make you feel even better," he murmured. Then he took the tip fully into his mouth, sucking voraciously.

Olivia held his head against her chest as they continued to move together in a frenzied motion. She dug her nails fiercely into his shoulders, breaking skin, but Max was too damned engrossed to mind. Her passionate responses were sending him to the brink of all reason.

Max shifted his head just enough to give her other breast the same passionate treatment. He was close to reaching his peak; he knew when it finally came, his climax would be earth-shattering.

Olivia's inner muscles clamped around his member. Her cunt became impossibly tight. So tight, in fact, that Max almost burst. He continued to thrust into her, knowing she was

also close by the mewling sounds in the back of her throat and the trembling of her body. “That’s it, angel. Don’t hold back,” he whispered against her mouth, nibbling on her bottom lip.

“I’m going to come.” Olivia gasped, turning her face away from his and clinging tightly to his neck.

“Then we’ll do it together.” And with a series of short, hard thrusts, he shattered. An incendiary wave blasted through his body, and he roared, his thrusting becoming wild. Max grasped her waist and pounded into her. Water splashed all around them and spilled out of the tub. He didn’t care about the mess they made. All that mattered was this moment and how they felt in it.

His seed shot into her channel. Distantly, he heard Olivia scream her own release, her body shuddering against his. His body, too, wouldn’t stop shaking as he crushed her against him.

In all his years, Max had never felt anything remotely like this... and he wanted her again.

Olivia panted harshly, trying to come to terms with the past few hours. She’d never thought sex could be so exhilarating, so liberating. Bill had been such a selfish lover that the majority of the time, she’d had to reach for completion herself. Her ex would roll over and go to sleep, but not Max. No, he’d made damn sure she was thoroughly pleased.

If someone had told her earlier tonight that she’d have the most incredible sex of her life with Max, let alone umpteen times, Olivia would have laughed. The man had obviously cast a spell on her. Why else was it so hard for her to walk away when she knew she should? Why else did she melt with just the slightest touch from him? And why else did her heart pound fit to bursting whenever he looked her way?

What she'd thought she'd once felt for Bill didn't approach what she felt for Max at this moment. Quickly, she pushed that thought away. She'd live in the here and now and deal with her turbulent emotions later.

She was content to rest against him, straddling his thighs. His cock remained seated deep inside of her, deliciously stretching her pussy to its limit.

Max, on the other hand, seemed to have other ideas than relaxation. "Need you," he practically growled, raising her off his still hard member.

"Again?" She groaned. "I'm not sure my body can take any more." Though she protested, Olivia anticipated his next move, ready again for his wild possession.

Max positioned her on her knees facing away from him, then pressed his cock against her rump. He nipped her ear, making her arch her head closer to his seductive mouth. "You're so damn sweet, I can't get enough of you."

When he rubbed his erection along the crevasse of her ass, she stiffened. "Max..."

"Just relax, angel."

"But I...I can't take you that way. I don't like it, and you're too big."

He chuckled softly. "Thank you for the compliment. Have no worries, you'll be able to take me, every single inch. And by the time we're finished, you'll be begging me to do it." She doubted that very much, but he hadn't let her down so far. He kissed her back. "Give me a moment and I'll make it easier for you." He reached past her and across the tub to the shelf of toiletries and retrieved a small tube.

Olivia remained tense as he parted her cheeks and rubbed two gel-slicked fingers against her anus.

"Relax." He reached around with his other hand to finger her clit, coaxing her heat to rise yet again. Max slipped two fingers into her front passage and worked them in and out. So caught up in what he was doing to her, she barely felt him ease past the ring of her rectum.

Then she balked, but only momentarily, because he continued to finger-fuck her and placed kisses along her neck. He gradually slid his thick length inside her ass, one bit a time. At last, he stilled. He'd gone as far as he could, she thought.

"How does this feel, angel?"

She took a moment to consider. This act wasn't one she'd ever believed would be arousing, but once he was inside of her, it wasn't so unpleasant.

Slowly, he began to move in and out of her, pushing and straining against her soft tissues. He pulled his fingers from her damp heat and used both hands to cup her breasts, molding and squeezing them with his work-roughened palms.

Olivia found herself enjoying the anal play more and more with each stroke. She shoved her ass against his cock, losing herself in the blaze he'd evoked.

"That's it, angel," Max whispered against her hot flesh as he increased the pace, plowing into her rear, branding her his woman.

Already, she'd had more orgasms than she'd have thought was possible to experience in such a short space of time. Yet, when the next one came, it was an explosion from the depths of her very being. Her muscles went weak from the exquisite overload. "Oh, God!"

Max held her firm against him and yelled, pumping hard and shooting another load into her. Their breathing was ragged for several minutes. Then Max eased out of her. He sat back in the water, pulling her between his thighs and lightly caressing her breasts. Neither of them spoke, enjoying the silence and the communion of being together.

At some point, her skin began to pucker from being in the water so long. She shivered as she shifted against him.

"Are you cold, angel?" He pushed aside a damp lock of hair from her forehead.

"A little. I probably look like a prune." She giggled.

"A very beautiful prune. Okay, we can get out."

He extended an arm and pushed a button on a control panel, opening the drain. Then he stood up and tugged her along with him. When they stepped out of the tub, he grabbed a large, fluffy towel and commenced drying her off.

She grinned at him. "I can do this myself, you know."

"I know you can, but I enjoy pampering you. Just consider me your humble servant."

Olivia laughed again. "Humble servant, eh? Hmm...will you feed me grapes and fan me with palm leaves?"

"Your slightest wish is my command."

"I think I could get used to that."

Max scooped her up and entered what appeared to be his bedroom.

"You're going to get quite a workout from carrying me around all the time."

He grinned at her wolfishly. "I had another type of workout in mind." As he laid her down on his California king-sized bed, something caught her eye. There was a glowing blue stone connected to a silver or platinum chain on the bedside table. It looked familiar.

Max must have noticed her looking at it because he stiffened.

"What...is...that?" she whispered. "And why is it shining?"

"It's nothing, I --"

"I've seen it before. I know I have."

He picked it and enclosed it in his palm, hiding it from her gaze. Then he placed it within the table drawer. Max was obviously didn't want her to know something.

Suddenly it hit her. Her dreams! Olivia felt a chill run through her body. She'd seen the same gleaming pendant in her dreams. Only...

"They weren't dreams at all, were they?" She slid away from him, hurt beyond belief. Everything that had happened between them tonight meant absolutely nothing. He'd tricked her! Somehow, he'd come to her those nights she'd thought she'd fantasized.



The muscle in his jaw twitched. "Let me explain."

"How were you able to...all those things I dismissed because they couldn't be explained... What are you?"

"I'm the devil."

## Chapter Nine

Olivia tried desperately to concentrate on her task, but she still couldn't wrap her head around what Max had told her that night. Devil and angel genes. Demons. The akin. His explanations had seemed like something out of a horror or sci-fi movie, even after her earlier experience with the psycho driver. Yet, what else could account for the things she'd been through and that feeling of peace and completeness when she was with him, even when she knew he wasn't good for her?

Of course, all these things confirmed how wrong he was for her.

She also wasn't certain what she was more upset about, the fact that he'd made her believe she was crazy by his nocturnal visits, that he was only using her to cure himself, or, lest anyone forgot, that some maniac was after her and her daughter.

Oh, sure, Max had said all the right things to make her believe he genuinely cared, but his words were not enough. She couldn't trust him.

She forced herself to the present. A few of the admins were out today, and there was a laundry list of items that needed to be taken care of in their absence. Despite her best efforts, though, her mind drifted back to the moment Max had made that asinine statement about being the devil.

“This isn’t time for jokes, Max.” She had slid out of bed, grabbed the comforter, and wrapped the material around her.

His eyes had seemed to take on an unearthly brilliance. “There’s no need to shield yourself from me. There’s no longer any part of you that’s a secret to me, angel.”

“Stop calling me that!” she yelled, wishing her body didn’t still yearn for his touch...and that her heart wasn’t breaking to bits.

“You didn’t seem to mind a short while ago.”

“That was before I knew you were some psycho stalker. Who the hell do you think you are to just come into my home uninvited? My child was there, you bastard.”

Again that muscle twitched within his jaw. He was clearly trying to rein in his temper, but Olivia didn’t give a damn. He’d gone too far.

“Are you finished?” His tone was quietly menacing.

“Far from it. I think you’re a sick, depraved man who could benefit from some counseling.”

“I begin to wonder, angel, if you’re more upset because of what I did or because you wanted it. Don’t bother to insult both our intelligences by denying you enjoyed every moment.”

Her face grew hot. There was no way she could dispute his claim because it was true, unfortunately. “That doesn’t mean I want to continue being the object of your obsession.”

Max was in front of her in a flash, hauling her against his taut frame. She shoved against the hard wall of his chest, but his corded arms wrapped tightly around her like steel bands. She kicked and struggled to free herself but soon realized how futile her efforts were. All she’d done was exhaust herself.

“Just let me go,” she said tiredly, refusing to give in to the warmth engulfing her. To that feeling she got whenever Max held her.

“Only if you promise you’ll listen.”

She narrowed her eyes. "Um, I already tried to get answers, and all I got was your sarcasm and lies. If you want to play games, I don't have to stick around and listen."

A fleeting expression she couldn't read flickered in the depths of his eyes like green fire. Mesmerized, she couldn't look away. "I need you," he said.

A swift blaze of desire burned within her. No! She wouldn't allow him to manipulate her any longer. She shook her head, trying to dispel these unwanted emotions. "You may need me, but I...don't...need...you," she hissed, putting as much venom in her words as possible. She wanted to hurt him as much as he had her.

Max flinched, before he glared back. "I might have believed that, but after all we've done, the only person you're kidding is yourself if you believe that bull." He sighed impatiently. "I'll let you go, but only if you listen to me."

"And once you've explained, you'll leave me alone?"

"I can't make such a promise."

"You've got a lot of damn nerve. You might be able to make me want to fuck you," she said crudely -- her sister would be proud of how easily the word slipped past her lips, and it was better this way, because the truth was far more terrifying. "But that's all you'll ever have of me...my body."

To her surprise, Max released her, his expression stony. "Sit down, and I'll give you your explanation."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "I'd rather stand, thank you very much."

"Sit down!" he roared and the entire room seemed to tremble with the force of his rage. Had he done that? His anger was so palpable she thought she could almost touch it, but the fire in his eyes sent her scrambling to sit on the bed.

"Okay, fine. Tell me. Not that it will make much difference where you and I are concerned."

Max's face went a deeper shade of red as the room continued to rumble. She eyed the walls, ceiling, and floor warily. Suddenly, he turned his back to her, his shoulders lifting and falling as he evidently took some huge breaths. When he faced her once more, it seemed as though he'd gotten his temper under control. "I apologize for shouting. I don't have much of an excuse but, as you can imagine, things have been stressful of late."

Olivia snorted in an unladylike manner, seriously doubting he was as stressed as she was, especially when someone wanted her and Tiffany dead. But she'd keep what she had to say to herself until he finished.

Max leaned against a wall, raking his fingers through his thick hair. "I'm not sure quite where to begin, but I'll start by saying that I love you, Olivia. I never realized how much until now, when I face the prospect of losing you. I never realized my quest to get rid this curse would put you in danger. In fact, now that I'm thinking more clearly, I won't put you through this. I alone must bear the burden of the curse."

She knitted her brows in her confusion. Why did he have to tell her he loved her and sound so damned sincere about it, then turn around and say something absurd? "Curse? What are you talking about?" Olivia had blurted out the words before she remembered she wasn't going to say anything until he was done. She wanted to stay angry at him, but the barriers she'd attempted to build around her heart wouldn't solidify.

With a sigh, Max told her the tale of a dark legacy, of his heritage and his struggle to deal with the sleeping beast within. During most of the unfolding of his story, Olivia listened with her mouth agape, almost incredulous, but some instinct seemed to insist Max spoke the truth.

After all, there were the mini-earthquakes, his apparent ability to pop in and out of her apartment -- he said he'd teleported -- and the way he managed to keep her entranced with him. His words might also explain why she felt the way she did whenever they touched...

He was right; they were made for each other. She was his other half, but for the sake of her child, she would have to stay away from him.

By the time his monologue ended, tears were swimming in her eyes for what wasn't to be. "So, you mean if you soul bond with me, you'll be cured forever?" She clarified. "The first step was taken when I admitted my feelings for you; the second would be when we...if we make love under the light of the new moon and chant the sacred words?"

"Yes, but once that happens, our souls will be connected, and you and I will be irrevocably locked to each other for all eternity. I couldn't go long periods without being with you, and there would be a physical ache at your absence; the same would apply to you."

Though they had yet to soul bond, why did she already feel a deep sense of desolation at their impending separation? "I see." Olivia paused for a moment, struggling to understand the enormity of what Max had gone through and what he'd attempted to achieve. Finally, she said quietly, "Thank you for telling me."

He lifted met her gaze with obvious surprise. "You don't hate me?"

She shook her head mutely. "No. I've occasionally gotten strange premonitions, and I'd wondered if there was something a little different about me. Now that I know the truth, it puts my mind to rest about certain issues. I *am* still a little ticked at your underhanded tactics in coming to me via my supposed dreams, but I can understand why you did it. I can't begin to imagine what it must have been like for you to deal with this for so long."

His lips curled with evident self-derision. "Spoken like a true angel. I'm so sorry, Olivia, for putting you through this. I know I don't have the right to ask you to be with me, to bond with me. Especially when it appears someone is after you and I'm the reason. I will, of course, hire someone to make sure you and Tiffany remain safe."

Though she knew this was the best solution, Olivia couldn't help the piercing sadness within her. "That won't be necessary. I'm capable of keeping my daughter safe."

"I insist. It's my fault you're in this mess."

“But whoever it was that threatened me said if I leave you alone, everything will be okay.”

He raised a dark brow. “Were those his exact words?”

She frowned, trying to clearly recall the situation. “No, but it was something to that effect. I...I’m sorry for what you’re going through, but I do have Tiffany’s safety to consider. Once you’re out of our lives, we’ll be fine.”

“Yes.” He nodded, frowning. “Of course you will.”

“I...I guess I should get dressed.”

Once she was dressed, Max called his driver to take her home, although she’d protested about leaving her car behind. Their good-byes were awkward and brief.

When she got home near dawn, waking her sister and Tag who were sleeping on the foldout sofa bed, she refused to talk about it with Alex and went straight to her room, still numb from the night’s events, what she’d learned, and leaving Max for good.

After she’d gotten some rest, Alex and Tag, bless their hearts, volunteered to take Tiffany for the weekend, giving Olivia much-needed time to adjust and process her feelings.

That Sunday, her car had been delivered as good as new. All the dents and dings the maniac had subjected the vehicle to had been fixed, along with some that had been there before. It had also received a new paint job. Olivia appreciated Max’s gesture, glad that he understood her enough to not replace her vehicle with a new one.

To her further surprise, later that same day after Tiffany had returned home, a box had arrived in the child’s name. To the girl’s utter delight, it contained several dolls, at least ten of them, each one more expensive than the last. Though there was no sender’s name attached, Olivia knew where they’d come from and had scrambled for an explanation to her daughter. Finally, she’d told Tiffany that Mr. Sterling was sorry he hadn’t had a chance to meet her yet and that he hoped she’d accept the dolls as his apologies. Later, Olivia would

find an acceptable excuse for why Max never appeared. She'd found it difficult to hold back the tears at his thoughtful gesture.

Now, Olivia seemed to be living her life in limbo. She still saw Max in the papers but, thankfully, he was never with another woman. And she hadn't received any more ominous calls or met any more wackos trying to kill her and Tiffany

"Damn." She cursed under her breath as she deleted a paragraph of the letter she'd been trying to type for the past hour. She had to concentrate, or she'd never get it and the rest of her work done.

"So, Olivia, how are you?" The coy voice purred with a smug satisfaction that made her heart fall. She didn't have to look up to know that Lola stood in front of her desk. This was the last thing she needed.

With a sigh, she met Lola's gaze, nearly gasping at the malice shining in the other woman's eyes. Of course the redhead was flanked by her cronies, Selma and Carmen. That's what most wolves did, travel in packs. "I'm fine, Lola, and yourself?"

"Oh, I can't complain. I just wanted to stop by and show my support during what must be a difficult time for you." Her voice was full of mock sympathy that instantly raised Olivia's hackles. She willed herself to stay calm instead of telling the redhead what she really thought of her.

"I'm not quite sure what you're getting at as I'm not aware of going through a particularly difficult time."

Lola's eyes widened, and she placed her hand over her mouth as if she'd made a faux pas. "Oh, then I guess you haven't read the papers lately."

Olivia's patience was beginning to ebb. Not getting caught up in office minutia was something she'd prided herself on. She didn't intend to get involved now. "Not lately, I haven't, so I guess your *concern* is lost on me."



Lola produced a newspaper from behind her back and plopped it in front of Olivia. “It’s probably better that you hear it from your friends instead of finding out some other way.”

Olivia looked at the paper that was turned back to the gossip column. Right in the middle of the page was a picture of Max escorting a raven-haired beauty, their heads tilted intimately toward each other, as they exited a fancy restaurant.

A slow numbness coursed through her. Being jealous when she had no rights to him was irrational, but Olivia felt it all the same. Max had obviously moved on...and to someone far more glamorous than herself.

The three vultures before her watched her expectantly, obviously waiting for a reaction, probably hoping she’d burst into tears and cause a scene. Well, she’d give them nothing. In fact, she realized the best reaction was to show none at all. “I can’t imagine why you’re showing me this, Lola. If you thought this would cause me distress, then I appreciate the *kind* gesture, but it was really unnecessary. I already knew.” Olivia crossed her fingers beneath her desk.

Lola’s gaze narrowed, no doubt disappointed at the tame results of her plan. “So you don’t care about being yesterday’s news? I mean if it were me, I’d be embarrassed at being so publicly humiliated.”

Olivia mentally counted to ten so she wouldn’t jump across the desk and smack the viper viciously across the face. Instead, she kept her expression as impassive as she could. “But it wasn’t you, and I have enough going on in my life without having to worry about what other people think about me. I’m sorry if *you* do, though, because that’s a pretty sad way to live. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a lot of letters to type, and they won’t get done if I’m chitchatting with you.” She turned back to her computer screen and began tapping away. The monitor was filling with jumbled letters, but the other women wouldn’t know that.

"There's no need to be nasty. Besides, you should have known a gorgeous, wealthy man like that would never settle for someone like you." Lola's voice was saccharine sweet, poisonous.

Olivia raised a brow. "Like me?"

"Such men might amuse themselves with black girls, but they only stick around long enough to get what they want. Even black men prefer woman a little more...polished." Lola's eyes twinkled with malicious glee. Olivia fought hard to hold on to her temper. Decking the bitch would have been satisfying, but this was their workplace, and the harridan was not worth losing her job over.

Olivia challenged her instead. "Does it eat you up inside because he was interested in me? Did you want him for yourself?"

She should have known Lola wouldn't give up so easily. "You think you're so much better than everyone, walking around here with your nose in the air like your stuff doesn't stink, but I have news for you. Everyone here is laughing behind your back."

Olivia pasted a smile on her lips and locked gazes with the spiteful woman. "Are they, now? Well, I guess you would know all about that, wouldn't you? No wonder you offered your support."

Lola's expression grew stormy. "What are you talking about? I'm not the office joke."

She shouldn't stoop to such a low level as the other woman, but Lola's snide comments and whispers under her breath whenever Olivia was around had to stop. The only way to get rid of bullies was to stand up to them. "No? But you are the office slut, isn't that right? I may not pay much attention to gossip, but even I've heard that your thighs have been getting quite a workout lately. If you don't believe me, why don't you ask your companions?" Olivia looked meaningfully at the silent women at Lola's side; they refused to meet her gaze -- or Lola's. "Selma? Carmen? Care to refute what I just said?"

Lola glanced at her friends for support, but when neither one of them spoke up, her face went a brick red. Then an ugly snarl curled her upper lip. She raised her hand.

Olivia rose from her seat and glared, daring the woman to touch her. “Try it and you’ll be in a world of hurt.”

Lola wavered for a moment; then a blaze of pure hatred filled her eyes. She slowly dropped her hand. “Bitch,” she hissed. She spun on her heels and left.

Selma and Carmen went after her, probably to say more nasty things, but Olivia couldn’t care less. Her gaze strayed to the newspaper as she collapsed in her chair. For a brief moment, she let her head fall to the desk.

Then she got on with her job.

## Chapter Ten

“Okay, spill it, O. What’s wrong?” Alex asked later that night when she came over to show Olivia possible choices for wedding favors.

Olivia shrugged dismissively with a laugh that sounded false even to her ears. “Nothing. Everything couldn’t be better.”

Alex folded her arms across her chest and gave Olivia her patented “bullshit” look.

Olivia sighed, realizing there wasn’t much she could get past her little sister -- the brat. “If I tell you, promise me you won’t say I was making it up?” Her gaze cut to her daughter who lay on her stomach on the floor, coloring. “Baby, why don’t you go watch TV in Mommy’s room.”

Tiffany lifted her head to look at the adults curiously before nodding. “Okay. But don’t let Auntie Alex leave without saying goodbye.”

Alex smiled at her niece. “I wouldn’t dream of it, kiddo.” When the women were alone, she turned back to her sister. “Okay, tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s...it’s about Max.”

“I thought things were over between the two of you?”

“They are, but that doesn’t mean I can stop thinking about him just like that.” She snapped her fingers to emphasize her point.

Alex’s eyes narrowed as she gave Olivia a shrewd look. “You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

“I never mentioned love.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s obvious. And from what you’ve told me, it sounds like the man was crazy about you, probably still is; you seem to feel the same way. Why won’t you tell me what happened? Did he hurt you? Because if he did, I’ll --”

Olivia held up her hand. “Before you threaten him with bodily harm, *I* ended the relationship. It’s too risky to be with him.”

“Why? Because he’s rich or because he’s white?”

“Neither, although I’m sure his wealth would intimidate anyone. As far as his race, you know I don’t think like that.”

“Then what was the deal? I hope you don’t make me play twenty questions before you decide to share.”

“You’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“Well, I can’t form an opinion until you tell me.”

Olivia took a deep breath and explained everything to Alex, from her first meeting with Max up until their parting. By the time she finished, Olivia could barely believe the events herself...even though they’d happened to her.

For once her outspoken sister was silent.

“Say something, Alex.”

Alex opened her mouth and then closed it before attempting to speak again. “What exactly do you want me to say? That story is...whoa.”

“I said it would be hard for you to believe.”

“Well, I...considering what happened to Tag, I suppose this isn't so incredible.”

Olivia frowned. “What do you mean? Something happened to Tag?”

Alex snorted. “I'll tell you about it another time, but let's just say Tag had a little intervention before he saw the light about us getting married. But enough about that. What does soul bonding entail other than admitting you belong to him?”

“Max said it's a sexual act of total surrender. We both hold on to the bloodstone while making love and he chants some kind of spell he's memorized from an ancient scroll. It's a little more complicated than that, but I think...if he would have asked me to go through the process, I would've done it.”

“Because you love him, too?” Alex asked softly.

“Yes.” There was no point in denying it.

“And since the two of you broke up, have you received anymore threats?”

“Not a one, but still...”

“You think about him.” Olivia nodded. “I understand, honey, but you're doing the right thing by keeping your distance until Max finds out who was behind those attempts on you and Tiffany.” Alex engulfed her in a quick, tight embrace. “Oh, my God! It just hit me. I could've lost you and never known it.” She pulled back with tears in her eyes.

Olivia grazed her sister's cheek with the back of her hand. “I'm safe now.”

“But what if that psycho takes it in his head to come after you anyway?”

“I told you, there hasn't been anything since I stopped seeing Max. Besides, Max has moved on.” She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“I'm quite sure those other women don't mean a thing to him. Don't forget, I saw how he was practically all over you at the ball.”

“Was' being the operative word.”

“Maybe he’s trying to show whoever it is that things are over between you two so they’ll leave you alone.”

“I don’t know. He looked pretty cozy in that last picture I saw of him, the one with the gorgeous brunette.”

“But he must be in love with you. Who wouldn’t love you?”

Olivia sighed. “He may have wanted me sexually, but ultimately, he chose me because he needed the soul bonding.”

“But think about it, O. He needed you to counter the effects of the devil gene, yet he let you go anyway. Only a man in love would do something like that.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. That man is no longer in my life.”

“What does Tiffany think about all this?”

“She hasn’t met him.”

“We both know how intelligent she is. She would have picked up something of your feelings.”

Olivia wished her sister wasn’t so damn perceptive but knew there was no point in pretending Alex wasn’t right. “She didn’t understand why she couldn’t meet him. I would have eventually introduced him to her, but I needed to be absolutely sure there would be a long-term commitment. Now I’m...I’m g-glad I didn’t.” Her head dropped into her hands, and her shoulders shook with her silent sobs.

Alex rested her head against Olivia’s shoulder and cried with her. “Oh, sis. I’m so sorry.”

Olivia sniffed. “I’m zero for two in the relationship department.”

“Hon, I know things look bleak, but things will eventually work. You’ll soon find the man of your dreams. After all, I did.”

Olivia didn’t bother to point out that finding such a man wasn’t possible for her because she’d already done so. And lost him.

\* \* \* \* \*

After her sister left, Olivia couldn't get to sleep. No amount of tossing and turning, reading or watching television had done the trick. Why couldn't she get him out of her mind and heart?

Tears crested down her face in the dark. "Please let me forget him."

"Don't cry, angel. It breaks my heart to see you like this."

She lifted her head to see a shadowy figure standing in the corner of her bedroom.

*Max!*

"You shouldn't be here," she whispered, scared this was a dream and he'd disappear.

"I know, but I couldn't ignore your pain. It tore at me. Besides, I told myself if I could just hold you one last time, it might get me through another day. Please, angel. Don't send me away; I need you so badly -- we need each other right now." His harsh whisper was full of grief and agony, too.

She didn't want to tell him to go, but the memory of the pictures in the newspapers filled her with doubt. "What about all those women?"

"I did it for you. I thought if I was seen in public with them, your attacker would be thrown off the trail."

That confirmed what Alex had suggested. "Did...did you enjoy your dates?"

He stepped out of the shadows and sat next to her on the bed. "How could I, when all I could think of was you? I know I said I'd leave you alone, and I will, but I need this. I need you."

"But --"

He halted her words by pressing his lips against hers. "Please."

With him so close to her, she couldn't think clearly. "Yes," she whispered, desperate to be with him again.



Max encased her in his hard, muscled arms, holding her tight. For a moment they hung onto each other, not saying anything, but no words were needed. This felt right, what they'd both been missing since their separation.

Max was the first to move when he began to kiss the wet trail along her face. "You have no idea how much I missed being close to you, kissing you, making love to you," he muttered against her skin.

Olivia clung to him as she tilted her head back to receive his mouth over hers. "Then make love to me again, Max. I want this last night to be special."

His eyes searched her face, longing filling their depths. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Yes. Very much."

Releasing a groan, he lowered his head and captured her lips with his with hungry and stark possession. His lifted his hands to cup her face as he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue between her lips.

Olivia wasn't going to take a backseat to her passion; she wanted this as much as he did. Her tongue met his, swirling and dancing with it as she clawed at his shoulders, trying to pull him closer. She pressed her sensitive breasts against the firm wall of his broad chest.

Her pussy gushed slippery wet; she was burning for him. She thought she'd combust if she didn't have his cock inside of her soon, filling her and stretching her vaginal walls to their limits.

Olivia tore her mouth from his to catch her breath. "Now, Max," she whispered breathlessly, yanking at his shirt, not caring if she broke his buttons. She reveled in the sensation of his heated skin beneath her palms and placed impatient kisses against his torso, gliding her tongue along his taut nipple.

"Oh, God, woman. I'm not going to last very long if you continue on this way." He groaned, belying his words by holding her head against his chest.

Olivia licked his flesh as she pushed him to his back against the bed and straddled him. "I missed you so much." She sighed, savoring the taste of him while her hands worked on the buckle of his belt. "You're wearing too many clothes."

He chuckled softly. "Isn't that my line? What happened to my shy, sweet angel; who is this aggressive vixen who's taken her place?"

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. "Do you like this?"

"You know I do." He reached up to caress her cheek. "Tonight is yours, my angel. I'm yours to do with as you wish."

She shivered as she thought of the power he'd yielded to her, knowing that he was a man who liked to be in control. She was touched to her very core that Max trusted her enough to let her take charge. Her gaze roamed his perfect body; this gorgeous man was hers for the night.

Olivia pulled his pants down his lean hips and sculpted legs before discarding them, then slid his boxers off to reveal his long, thick cock.

Max stilled, his breathing shallow as he waited for her next move.

"You're so beautiful," she breathed, wrapping her fingers around the turgid length.

"Again, isn't that my line?"

She could hear the smile in his voice, but her attention was focused on his hard cock, so she didn't answer. Instead, she settled her body between his legs and brought her mouth to the tip of his cock. Rubbing her lips against the mushroom head, she savored the feel of his velvet skin against her mouth.

"Oh, God, Olivia." Max moaned. He lifted his hips as though begging her to take him fully into her mouth.

Olivia decided to put him out of his misery. She slipped her lips around his thickness and took his cock an inch at a time.

The sharp intake of Max's breath reached her ears as he dug his fingers into her hair. Olivia moaned around his cock, bobbing her head up and down, trying to take in as much of him as possible.

"Olivia."

She loved the way he groaned her name. Knowing that she was turning him on this much was a heady feeling. Heat flooded between her thighs. She needed him inside of her now!

Releasing his dick with a pop, she pulled away from him and gave his cock one last lick. "I need you," she whispered.

"Then have me."

Olivia slid off the bed, pulled off her nightgown, and got rid of her panties.

Max's hungry gaze never left her body. His hands and body shook as if he wanted to leap off the bed and grab her, but for once, she was in the role of the seductress while he lay in wait for her. She'd never been more aware of her sexuality than right now.

Stalking toward him, she crawled over his body and straddled him once more. Max grasped his cock, steadying the hard rod as Olivia spread her labia and she lowered herself to receive him. She gasped with pleasure when he bucked, pushing his cock head inside of her wet channel. Moving down further, she clenched her pussy around him. He went deeper still.

"Oh." She moaned. "Max, that feels so good. I've missed this so much." How could she have forgotten the delicious sensation of being filled by him?

"You're so damn tight." He grunted through gritted teeth, then reached out to cup her breasts in his palms. His thumbs grazed the tightened tips of her nipples.

Bursts of flame shot along every nerve ending in her body as she moved, raising and lowering her hips.

"That's it, angel, ride me."

Leaning forward, Olivia pressed her lips against his throat as she ground and mashed her pussy against him. Max released her breasts and held on to her hips, guiding her as she bounced up and down on his cock. She arched her back, lost in the wondrous sensations coursing through her, and increased the speed, even as Max met her thrust for thrust, matching her intensity.

“I must have been crazy to think I could stay away from you.”

Olivia was too caught up in the moment to reply. She placed her hands against his chest, her nails digging into his skin as she came, hard and fast.

Max's gripped her hips tightly as he reached his own climax, his seed shooting deep into her pussy. She clenched her muscles around his cock, milking him, taking all he had to give, before collapsing against his chest.

Max turned her over until he was on top of her. “That was wonderful, angel.”

She had the sudden urge to cry, knew that if she looked into his eyes, she'd lose it. She turned her head away.

He caught her chin in his hand. “What's the matter, Olivia?”

“This...this is it. You'll go, and I'll never see you again.”

He closed his eyes, as though suffering a private pain of his own. “I know, but we have right now. I wish I could keep you with me always, but I...I won't place you in any more danger. At least by teleporting here, no one will know I was with you. Unfortunately, if I continued to visit you like this, there'd be no way to hide my presence from your daughter or...others.”

The allusion to her predator sent a shiver down her spine. “Hold me, Max.”

“I will until you fall asleep.”

Olivia nodded, clinging to him as though her life depended on it. Lethargy tugged at her body and sleep threatened to take over, but she fought them, tried to prolong her time together with Max.

He pressed an occasional kiss on her face as he held her.

Olivia's last coherent thought was Max's whispered words of love.

## Chapter Eleven

Max took another sip of vodka straight from the bottle, wishing he could turn time back to the day of the Valentine's ball where he'd met Olivia. If he'd only declined the invitation, he wouldn't now be feeling this empty despair gnawing in his gut and in his mind, taunting and torturing him with thoughts of her. Her beautiful face. The scent of her passion. How she'd felt in his arms. Their last night together, when he'd entered her room knowing he shouldn't be there, had only made things worse. It had ensured that he'd never stop thinking about her.

She'd ruined him for other women.

Try as he might, nothing wiped the memory of their night away. He'd tried dating; his last failed attempt had been with the daughter of one of his business colleagues. Though Gina was lovely, poised, and sophisticated, he hadn't been able to get past the fact that she wasn't Olivia.

Drinking didn't chase away the pain, but it numbed him for a while. He was halfway through this fifth of liquor; if he was lucky, he'd be stinking drunk before the night was over and have a blissfully dreamless sleep.

Caught up in his thoughts, he didn't hear footsteps approach until his cousin spoke.

“You can’t spend the rest of your nights like this,” Erik said softly as he stepped into the living room and halted a few feet away from Max.

“No one asked your opinion. And if you’re going to use my goddamn key, at least announce yourself before you enter my house.”

The color drained from Erik’s face. “I didn’t realize I needed an invitation.”

Shame washed over Max. He realized his cousin was only here because he was concerned. Erik had been there for him from the beginning, during the lean times, and he’d been there to cheer Max on during the triumphant ones.

“My words were uncalled for. Of course you’re welcome here anytime you wish to come. I’ve been acting like a bear with a sore head.”

“I’m well aware of that. In fact, everyone in the office is afraid to go near you. You haven’t been to the New York or Chicago offices in weeks, and you’re delegating more work than usual as well. Not that you don’t have the right to do so, but this behavior isn’t you. Normally, you’re not happy unless you’re working twelve hours or more a day. What happened to the workaholic cousin I once knew?”

Max gulped his vodka once more, uncaring of the mess he must appear. “Aren’t you the one who said I shouldn’t work so hard, that I should allow my executives to show what they can do?” He spread his arms wide, spilling some of the liquor. “Well, now you have your wish.”

“I didn’t want it to happen this way. You’ve always been so well put together. Now, you’re unkempt and...” Erik sniffed the air. “Have you even showered recently? You stink of liquor and self-pity. What has this woman done to you?”

“Her name is Olivia, and she’s the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Not from where I’m standing. You’ve never allowed a woman to drive you to this state.”

“I’ve never been in love before, either.”

"You can't love her! You're just obsessed because she has that blasted gene you've been hunting for. Or, perhaps you do love her...but she doesn't seem to return your feelings. If she did, she would have remained by your side."

"I could hardly fault her. Someone was sending her death threats; what was she supposed to do? She has a daughter."

Erik frowned. "Someone tried to kill her? I hope both of them are all right."

"Fortunately, they're fine, but I can't allow them to be in harm's way on my account. And I won't rest till I've found the culprit. Maybe then she and I will have a chance."

Erik remained silent for a moment. "Would you like me to hire someone to take care of that for you?"

Max shook his head. "I've got a man from our usual agency looking into it."

Erik walked over to him and gripped his shoulder. "If you need me for anything..."

A brief smile tugged the corners of Max's lips. "I know. Thanks. You're a true friend."

"What is family for?"

"You know you're more to me than that, Erik. I may not tell you often, but I do appreciate you. You're my best friend."

"And I plan on proving just how good a friend I am to you. I'll see you through this until the very end. There's no way we'll fail."

Max sighed, finally placing the bottle down. "I certainly hope so."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I think you look beautiful, honey." Olivia admired her daughter as she twirled around in her junior bridesmaid dress. Alex had ordered a replica of her own wedding gown for Tiffany, tiara and all.

"Do I look like a fairy princess?" Tiffany asked, clearly unable to tear her gaze away from the mirror.



“Oh, you’re much prettier than a princess; you look like an ang -- an angel.” Olivia realized what she’d said the minute the words escaped her mouth. Max had called her *his* angel. The memory reminded her of how barren her soul was. It remained a constant struggle to forget him.

“I can’t wait for the wedding.” Tiffany sighed, turning to face her. “You look pretty, too, Mommy.”

Olivia grimaced. The silver gown was a bit too monochromatic for her taste, but at least the cut was flattering. Alex had wanted to get a dress that would complement the body types of all four of her bridesmaids. Olivia’s gown was the only strapless one of the lot to set her apart as the maid of honor.

“Thank you, sweetie. Now that we’ve tried these on, let’s get out of here. I’ll drop you off at Grandma and Grandpa’s.”

Tiffany grasped her hand. “I want to stay with you.”

Olivia was taken aback. Her daughter was usually excited about spending a weekend with her grandparents because they let her get away with murder. “I thought you were looking forward to being with them.”

“Well, I can go over there anytime, but I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“You’ve never had that problem before. Besides, I’m alone often enough.”

“But you’ve been sad.”

Olivia wondered, not for the first time, how she’d gotten so lucky when the time had come to hand out kids. She knelt down to her daughter’s eye level and then cupped Tiffany’s face in her palms.

“Sweetie, I’ll be happy knowing that you’re having a good time. I remember how thrilled you were about going to the zoo with Grandma and Grandpa, and they’re anticipating taking you. I’ll be okay, I promise. I won’t be completely alone. Don’t forget, Auntie Alex will be coming over for a visit to talk more about her wedding.”

"But you've been sad for a long time now," Tiffany said solemnly. Olivia had a feeling her daughter wanted to ask about Max, was probably aware they were no longer seeing each other but hadn't said anything out of sensitivity for her. Olivia was grateful for such mercy.

"I know, but I'll snap out of it. With a sweetheart of a daughter like you, how could I not? As a matter of fact, I'm starting to feel a little better already. How about we get out of these dresses? Then we'll stop by Cold Stone to get some ice cream."

"Yummy! You're an awesome mom."

"And you're an awesome kid."

As Olivia promised, she took Tiffany for ice cream as the shop was on the way to her parents. She half-listened as her daughter chattered the entire drive and nodded or murmured encouragement at appropriate intervals. Her thoughts were intent on her earlier conversation with Tiffany; she hadn't realized how her mood had been affecting her child and vowed she'd find some way to get out of the funk she'd been in.

Forgetting Max was something else altogether. Absence might make the heart grow fonder, but it also made it hurt harder. She constantly had to resist the urge to go see him, or even to avoid looking up his pictures in the news, on TV, on the Internet. The need and compulsion for him was reaching the point of absurdity and wasn't helped by the fact that she worried about him, wondering how he was handling things. Handling the devil gene. Did he have it under control? Was it getting worse?

It came as somewhat of a relief when she finally dropped Tiffany off. Olivia resisted her parents' insistence that she stick around for a while; there was no way she'd be able to keep her happy face on in front of them for more than a few hours.

She ran a few errands, picked up her dry cleaning, and shopped for groceries. It was while she was in the supermarket that Olivia had that feeling again of being watched. The last couple of times she'd had that sensation, someone had tried to kill her.

She immediately examined the area around her, studied the faces of those closest to her, but no one seemed to be paying her any extra attention, and she saw nothing out of the ordinary. Then again, that had also been true on the other occasions when she'd known something was off.

Her paranoia took over, and she decided to get the hell out of there. She left her partially filled cart where it stood and hurried through the store. Unfortunately, when she got outside, her foreboding increased.

She'd made it to her car and was digging her keys from her purse, when someone shoved something hard and cold into her side.

"If you make any sudden moves, I'll blow you to confetti-like pieces."

That voice sounded...familiar.

"Now, open the door," the menacing voice commanded. It was the one she'd heard on the phone threatening her.

Olivia had never been more scared in her life. Her fingers trembled so hard, she dropped her keys. She would have looked around for help, but fear kept her eyes fixed in front of her.

"Pick them up," he hissed.

Olivia felt faint as she straightened with the keys clutched tightly. "Why are you doing this? I...I did what you said and left him alone."

"I've discovered, Olivia, that it isn't enough. Max persists in hoping that you and he can get back together. I'm going to make sure that doesn't happen." The barrel of the gun pressed harder into her. "Get in."

She didn't want to give this bastard the satisfaction of begging for her life, but she was terrified for Tiffany. "Please, don't do this. I promise I'll stay away from him. Just let me go."

"Not good enough. The only way I can be certain you and he keep separated is if you're dead. Now, get in the damn car before I make you regret it."

She set her jaw. "If you're going to kill me anyway, why should I?" Desperation and panic made her strike out. She elbowed her assailant in the stomach and simultaneously kicked his shin, making him grunt. Then she fled.

*"Bitch. I was going to make your death quick and painless. Now, I'm going to make sure you hurt."*

As she ran, Olivia saw a few people walking to their cars, but when she opened her mouth to scream for help, something struck the back of her head, sending her flying to the ground. She tried to scramble up, away, anywhere, but another blow to her head made her reel.

The world tilted, and pinpoints of light danced in front of her eyes. A large shadow appeared.

Her attacker stood over her.

"You!" she croaked. The darkness engulfed her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Max realized he was out of time. He had to make it to Olivia before the killer did. He couldn't believe he hadn't realized the truth, but the report from the agency -- coupled with a few things he'd realized on his own suddenly -- made sense of the danger that surrounded her. How had he missed the signs?

He hoped and prayed she'd be safe until he made it to her side.

Trying to channel her thoughts the way he'd done with her dreams, he came up with nothing -- which meant one of two things: she was either unconscious or dead. God, please let it be the former.

"Hold on, angel."

## Chapter Twelve

When Olivia came to, her head throbbed mercilessly and nausea was taking over. She found herself gagged and bound to a chair, with the rope cutting deep and burning her flesh like acid. Her attempt to free herself stopped when it felt like spikes were being driven into her skull and the ropes dug into her skin.

She turned her head gingerly and studied the dim room; it appeared to be someone's basement.

Why was he doing this? She'd barely noticed him and hadn't really interacted with him; what motive could he have for trying to keep her and Max apart? What did he have to gain? The coldness of his methodical actions was incomprehensible.

Suddenly, the lights flicked on. "I see you're awake."

Erik Van Deen walked down the stairs into the room. Olivia's eyes widened as she saw a large knife in one of his hands and a .45 caliber pistol in the other. She renewed her struggles.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. I put a little something special on the ropes. The more you move, the more damage that's done to that pretty skin of yours. Stings a little, doesn't it?"

Olivia glared as hard as she could, full of contempt and hatred. She let her eyes tell him where he could go.

Erik seemed amused, chuckling with malice. "I understand now what my cousin saw in you. You're lovely enough, of course, but I thought you lacked fire. It's there, all right. Believe me when I say I'll enjoy extinguishing it."

Olivia tried to stave off the shiver that shook her at his cruelty, but failed. She grunted curses behind her gag, surprised when he walked behind her and undid it, freeing her mouth. She instantly released a blood-curdling scream.

This only elicited another chuckle. Then he moved in front of her again. "Scream as much as you like. This basement is soundproof. The gag was just to annoy you."

"You are a very sick man."

He advanced on her and lowered his head until their noses touched. "No, Olivia, I'm quite well and, after I get rid of you, I'll be even better."

"Tell me why. I deserve to know the reason I'm going to die."

"I don't give a damn what you feel you're entitled to, but because I'm in such a good mood, because I want you to suffer, I'll share." He smiled and straightened up. "You're standing in the way of what I want the most."

"And what is that?"

Without warning, the hand holding the gun connected with her cheek in a vicious backhand. Her face whipped to one side, the force of the blow adding to the pain already present in her head.

"Shut up, bitch! I'll do the talking. For once I call the shots!" Erik began to pace the room, muttering under his breath. Just when she thought he'd forgotten about her, he faced her again. "This isn't personal."

"I would say murder is very personal." The words were out before she could stop herself. She tensed.

Instead of hitting her, Erik laughed. "I suppose you're right. I don't hate you per se, you understand. But, you've been a thorn in my side for the past several weeks, and my cousin's pining for you like some damn schoolboy." He smiled. "I'm sure he's already told you about his magnificent gift and how he's been trying to get rid of it for years. Well, I'm not about to let that happen, especially when I'm so close to harnessing that power for my own." There was so much venom in his voice, Olivia flinched.

"Max speaks very highly of you, but you almost sound as though you hate him. Why?"

This time, Erik was on her in a flash, delivering another stinging blow. His fist split her bottom lip.

"I told you to keep your damn mouth shut!" Rage filled his bright eyes. "You want to fucking know what he's done to me? Everything! Since we were kids, he could run faster, jump higher, climb further without even trying. He's a fucking success in the business world, and women can't get enough of him. The last straw was when the woman I'd been dating for several months turned down my proposal. She told me she didn't love me, that she had feelings for Max. He didn't even fucking know she was alive."

"Max cares about you," Olivia said stubbornly.

"He can shove it up his ass! I'm tired of being in the background while he gets all the glory. Everyone fawns over him, even the media because of his business acumen and his luck. His goddamn luck. Yet he wants to get rid of the very gift that I should have -- and he was going to use you to do it. Well, won't he be surprised when I take it from him, instead?"

He was insane.

"I bet you want to know how, don't you? While he was doing research to find a cure, I've been doing some of my own. The answer is quite simple, really. It's called soul transference. All I have to do is wait until his power is at its peak, then render him unconscious and perform the sacred chant. In ancient times, this process was apparently done to exorcise the demons of those believed to be carriers of the devil gene. Well, Max will

finally quit whining and get his wish, and so will I." He smiled. "The power will be mine, but I have to get rid of my cousin's cure first...which means you."

A tear slid from her eye as she thought of never seeing her sweet daughter again, of never experiencing the pleasure she'd felt in Max's arms again.

"Should I stab you?" Erik placed the knife against her neck and pushed the tip into her flesh, breaking skin. "Or should I shoot you?" He brandished the gun in her face.

In a last bit of defiance, she spat at him.

Rage filled his eyes, flowed across the surface of his face. He straightened up and slowly wiped the spittle from his skin. "I think I'll shoot you and then stab you."

He aimed the gun at her torso...and fired.

\* \* \* \* \*

Max rushed into Erik's house. Was he already too late?

Fear tore through his heart as he thought he smelled gunpowder. He tracked the faint wisps to his cousin's basement door. When he flung it open, a blinding bright light flashed.

He heard Erik scream.

"Angel, I'm coming," Max whispered. Covering his eyes, he used one hand to track the wall as he ran down the stairs. "Olivia!"

"Max!" She sounded weak, his name slurred.

Slowly the light began to fade, enough for him to focus on the scene. Olivia was tied to a chair, and Erik was holding his hands over his eyes. Max grabbed his cousin and flung him against the wall. Erik slumped to the floor.

Max's fury grew as he quickly freed Olivia and checked her over. Her face was swollen, and the flesh where the rope had pressed against her looked inflamed. "Run, angel, and don't stop until you're outside."

"I thought I'd never see you again."



“I know, but now isn’t the time for this. Get out of here. I --”

“Max, look out!”

Her warning gave him enough time to move as Erik came after him with a large hunting knife, but Max wasn’t quite quick enough. The blade sliced into his arm. Spinning around to face Erik, this time he was ready for his cousin when Erik charged him. The knife was raised high in the air before it came down in a vicious arc.

Max caught Erik’s wrist and slammed his fist into his cousin’s face. Once. Twice. And again. “Why?” he demanded, as Erik flew to one side.

“I hate you. That’s reason enough.”

Though the statement hurt, Max didn’t have time to analyze it. Erik rushed him again, lowering his shoulder and ramming it into Max’s stomach, knocking them both to the ground. Erik was on him before Max could recover his feet, his arm wrapping around Max’s throat.

“You’ve always had everything so easy but, soon, so will I. You --”

Max clutched at the fingers cutting off his air. “T-this...you...O...liv...ia...”

“Oh, yes. And I intend to do the same to you.” Erik produced the knife again, but Max concentrated on a spot on the other end of the room...and teleported.

“No! Fight me like a man, damn you!”

“So you can kill me?” Max sucked in huge gulps of air. “I don’t know how you planned to gain my powers, but I’d destroy us both before I let that happen.” For the first time in his life, Max let go, surrendered to the full strength of the devil gene.

The house rumbled like it lay atop the epicenter of a powerful earthquake. Sections of the walls began to split, crumble.

Erik snarled. “What the hell are you doing? We’ll all be killed.”

“No, just you.” With only the force of his thoughts, he sent Erik crashing against a wall. The impact was accompanied by loud cracking sounds. Erik screamed. But Max wasn't prepared to stop until his cousin was a bloody mass. Until all life had seeped away.

The ceiling splintered even as fissures opened up and more chunks of the walls fractured all around him. He realized the house was going to collapse in on itself. Any second now, the house would completely cave in, but Max's accumulated frustrations over the past weeks had been brought to a boil and amped up with Erik's betrayal. He couldn't stop the flow of his power, not after what Erik had done to the woman he loved.

Max thought once more of how much he'd trusted his cousin, only to discover this treachery. It was too much.

His unleashed powers were in full throttle.

Large pieces of plaster rained down around him, but Max stood his ground, was lost in his rage. Then a hand grasped his shoulder.

“Max.” The soft whisper of his name was followed by a soothing light. Warmth. Love.

Olivia.

“We have to hurry.” She grabbed his hand and held it tight as he stumbled after her. As she led them back outside.

They had made it a short distance across the road when the world finally stopped shaking. Grimly, they watched as the house collapsed.

## Chapter Thirteen

Olivia grinned, although her face still stung; the painkillers she'd taken helped a little. "I'm not sure whether the police completely bought your story." she said as they lay together in Max's bed. "You think they'll believe that, instead of calling him, we were at Erik's house to celebrate our reconciliation, and then we were forced to watch in horror when a sudden earthquake struck -- despite there being no seismic activity in the area before?"

Max had been so tender with her, bringing her back to his home after their ordeal and bathing her, even after she'd explained Erik's behavior. Then Max had called the police. After the cops had gone, he'd tucked her into his bed and slipped in next to her. He'd refused to make love, telling her he wanted her to recover before they went down that road again.

"I don't give a damn what they believe. There will have to be an investigation of some sort, of course, but without evidence that we caused his death or the destruction of his home, this will all eventually end up in a file that gets put on the back burner."

"After you've made a few calls to the appropriate people, right?"

"Perhaps." Max shrugged, unapologetic at his ability to pull strings if necessary. "Sometimes, money has its advantages; I intend to spend a lot of it on you and Tiffany."

Speaking of whom...when do I get the privilege of meeting this sweet young lady whose praises you won't stop singing about?"

Introducing her daughter to Max at last would be the final step to totally committing them both to him. She wanted that very much, and she was sure Tiffany would love him as much as she did. "Tomorrow, if you'd like. I need to pick her up from my sister's, so you're welcome to come with me."

"I'd like nothing more. If she's anything like you, I know I will love her, too."

Olivia cuddled closer to him, resting her head against his chest, reveling in the warmth of his body against hers. "She already loves you. Tiffany was in heaven when she received all those dolls. I told her they were from you, and she's been dying to send you a thank-you card. She drew one herself."

"She sounds like a very thoughtful young lady."

"Oh, she is, much more than I think a lot of children her age are. She's also very sensitive and always puts other people's needs before her own."

"Perhaps she, too, has the angel gene."

Olivia sighed. "Possibly, but it doesn't matter. Even if she doesn't, I know she'd be the same. She's my little angel, regardless of her what her genes may or may not hold."

Max brushed his lips against her earlobe. "And you are mine."

An unbearable heat swept through her core, flooding her pussy. "Make love to me, Max."

"Not now, my sweet. You're not up to it."

"I am; I swear it."

He chuckled, running his fingertips along her bare spine. "Eager, are you?"

"Desperate," she admitted shamelessly.

"I'm still not convinced you are one hundred percent fit."

She pouted. "You're no fun."

"I still remember a couple of times when you wanted nothing to do with me."

Olivia could hardly recall them herself; her thoughts were of wanting him, needing him. "Only because I was scared of what I felt. When I married Bill, I thought I loved him. But I've told you how he was, and he cheated on me, completely destroyed my self-esteem. He made me doubt myself as a woman, and I was terrified to trust again. I initially compared you to him because of your forceful personality, but you're nothing alike. Your confidence comes from an inner strength, while his is from an inherent weakness. I think he realized it, too."

Max nodded. "Your ex isn't worth a damn, and you needn't worry about him for anything ever again, not even financial support. I will always see to your and Tiffany's needs. You'll both want for nothing and, perhaps, in time, we could have some more little angels and devils."

Olivia lifted a brow with a large smile. "Are you by any chance asking me to marry you?"

"No," he said with finality. Her breath froze in her chest. "I'm telling you. We're getting married as soon as the license goes through. I want you as my wife the minute it's possible."

Olivia's heart flip-flopped with love for this man, and tears of happiness welled in her eyes. "Oh, Max. I want nothing more than to be your wife."

"Not that you have much of a choice," he growled, before kissing her neck. She sighed at the gentleness of his caress. He'd been careful all night not to apply too much pressure to her lips, but she wanted him.

"I promise I won't break if you give me a real kiss."

Max pushed her away gently. "Oh, no, you don't. You're not going to tempt me you little she-devil."

Olivia grinned. "She-devil? Hmm, I kind of like the sound of that."

"You'll always be my angel, though." He kissed the tip of her nose. "There's something I wanted to ask you. That bright light when I entered Erik's house...what was it? How did you avoid the shot when you said he was holding the gun point-blank at you?"

She shivered when she remembered that terrifying moment. "I-I'm not quite sure myself what happened. I saw his finger move on the trigger, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I thought about how much I loved you and Tiffany and my family. Then I heard the bullet. When I opened my eyes, Erik was screaming about the light. I don't know why it didn't affect me as it did him."

Max stroked his chin. "It seems your powers are beginning to manifest."

"Powers?" She frowned. "I don't have any. You're the one who created an earthquake and made a house collapse. The scientists will be puzzling over what happened for a long time to come."

"Olivia, everything in the universe seems to have its exact opposite. My powers come out through anger and hatred; yours apparently through love. When you focused on me and your family, you must have effectively built a shield of light around yourself, which is why the bullet didn't hit you." He stroked her hair. "Has there ever been another instance in your life where something similar happened to you?"

"No, nothing, aside from the prickly feeling I got each time Erik was about to attack me. I've -- wait..." She tried to recall. "Yes, there was another time. The night I left Bill. I'd confronted him when returned late and drunk from spending time with one of his little friends, as he called them. We argued, and he backhanded me. The noise must have awoken Tiffany because she came out of her room. Bill yelled at her." Remembering that tore at her heart. Tears streamed down her face.

Max cradled her in the crook of his arm. "You don't have to finish."

“I think I need to get this out and finally move on.” She swiped at her cheeks. “So, Bill yelled at Tiffany; she didn’t understand why and began to cry. He told me to do something about her, then grabbed me off the floor and started shaking me. Tiffany tried to stop him. She was tugging at his leg. I remember him raising his hand; I screamed and then...”

“What?” he prompted softly.

“I...there was a burst of light and Bill flew backward. I didn’t have time to figure out what I’d done; I just knew I had to get the hell out of there. I grabbed Tiffany and the car keys; then we headed out the door in only our pajamas. I drove straight to my parents’ house and never looked back. I’d thought I could shield Tiffany from Bill’s behavior, but when he lifted that hand to her, I knew I couldn’t let her grow up in that environment anymore.”

He squeezed her close. “You were very brave. Trust me; you did the right thing. There are some women who will stay until the man grows tired of her and moves on to another victim...or until she dies. Had I known the full extent of that bastard's actions against you and Tiffany, I’d have gladly killed him.”

Olivia shook her head. “He’s not worth it. Besides, there are more important things to focus on, like you and me.” She hesitated a moment. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“What’s that, angel?”

“How did you know Erik was the one behind everything? You two were close, so what made you suspect him?”

A distant look entered his green eyes, and pain seemed to dull them at his cousin’s betrayal. “Erik began to act differently once I’d started dating you. He kept mentioning the gift I was throwing away by being with you. He thought I was a fool. He’d always been a little fascinated by the gene, you see, especially when lab analyses indicated he was a carrier himself. I never realized just how much it bothered him that he didn’t have the full manifestation of the gene, as I do.”

“But how did you know it was him?”

“When he came over to my house earlier today, I told him about the threats against you. He concluded that someone had already made an attempt on you and Tiffany, said that he hoped you both were okay. Something about that conversation nagged at me, but I’d downed a lot of vodka and couldn’t grasp what it was. It was only after he’d left that I realized why I felt so uneasy. I’d never said anything about the attempts on your life, only that you’d received threats. So, the only way he’d know you had been attacked is if --”

“He was the one behind it. I’m so sorry, Max. I know he meant a lot to you.”

His mouth thinned to a line; she wanted to kiss away his sorrow. “Yes, he did, but he tried to kill you. I can never forgive that.”

“He was your second in command at the Sterling Group. What will you do now? Hire someone in his place, or do you intend to work ridiculous hours?”

“Actually, I intend to resign.”

“What? You love your company. You started it from nothing.”

“You’re partially right. I *loved* the company, but I find I have more important things in my life now to give my attention to.”

“So you’re going to walk away? Just like that?”

“Well, I’ll still be chairman of the board, but no longer the CEO. Basically, it means I only need to attend the monthly meetings with the other shareholders. The business operations will be dealt with by someone else.”

“You don’t seem like the type who’d be content to spend your time sitting at home, twiddling your thumbs.”

“Well, I think being your love slave will take up a great deal of my time.”

She chortled, slapping him playfully on the chest. “Come on, be serious.”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life. I can think of nothing other than devoting the rest of my life to you, Tiffany, and some little ones of our own.”

“How many more?”



Max revealed big white teeth in a mischievous smile. “At least ten, but we’ll take them one at a time. Do you think you could handle that?”

“I may be able to, but my uterus might not.” She chuckled. “Besides, if we have all those children, we’d have virtually no time together.”

He seemed to ponder this for a moment. “You’re right. Maybe we could revise the number down to two.”

Olivia laughed aloud at his quick change of tune. “That’s more like it. Tiffany will be thrilled at the prospect of siblings.”

“I meant what I said about us getting married as soon as we can procure a license. There’s no way I’m waiting.”

“That’s fine with me. Max?”

“Yes, angel?”

“The soul bonding...”

“No longer matters. I thought what I wanted most was to rid myself of the powers I called a burden, but I found something so much better.”

“What?” Olivia asked.

Max dropped a light kiss on her lips. “Love.”

## Epilogue

"Mommy, you look beautiful." Tiffany sighed in awe when Olivia twirled around in her wedding finery.

"Thank you, honey. You're pretty gorgeous yourself. That dress looks even better on you than it did at the shop. Now, do you remember what to do?"

Tiffany rolled her eyes. "Yes, I remember."

"Okay, it's your time to go. Don't forget to smile."

The child sighed again. "I *know*," she replied, before heading down the aisle on cue. Olivia smiled, so proud of her daughter. One day, Tiffany would make a fine young woman.

"Guess it's my turn, sis," Alex said. "I can't believe you made me your matron of honor when I'm six months pregnant. You will pay for this treachery with babysitting duty since you are now a woman of leisure."

Olivia snickered. "I wouldn't want anyone else to be my matron of honor, Mrs. Webster. It's not my fault you got knocked up before my wedding. Not only that, how did you not realize you were four months pregnant?"

Alex glared. "Sheesh, how many times do I have to tell you? I thought the changes in my body were due to stress, not to mention I was still on the pill before Tag and I reconciled.

Now, if you'll excuse me, it's my turn to strut. You look beautiful, by the way. Max won't be able to take his eyes off of you." She winked before following after Tiffany.

A wave of nerves hit Olivia. It was her wedding day, but she couldn't believe it had finally arrived.

She'd introduced Tiffany to Max the very same weekend when everything had come to a head. Fortunately, her daughter had taken to him like a fish to water -- and vice versa. The two had become fast friends, much to Olivia's delight. Her parents had also found Max charming.

Once she and Max had obtained their marriage license, she'd thought it was only fair that she tell her parents of her plans so they wouldn't be surprised over the nuptials, but Alex and Tag had dropped their bombshell, too. Alex had been four months into her pregnancy, and she'd no intention of waiting another three months to get married.

Their mother had cried her eyes out, bemoaning the fact that she'd never get to see either one of her daughters walk down the aisle in a big church wedding. Max, the wonderful man, suggested he and Olivia would stand in for Tag and Alex so that Jacqué's dreams would be realized.

Now, here she was, nervous and standing on the threshold to her new life.

Already, Max had opened her world to possibilities she never would have thought existed. He spoiled her incessantly and encouraged her in her endeavors. At his suggestion, she'd even enrolled at the local university for the following semester.

Tiffany had also benefited from Max's time and attention. Her daughter didn't ask about Bill as much as before, and though it still broke Olivia's heart that there was still virtually no contact between father and child, she knew Tiffany would do just fine without him.

"Are you ready, baby?" her father asked, clearly ready to lead her to Max.

Olivia took a deep breath and nodded; then they were through the doors. She immediately sought out Max, her heart pounding erratically at the sight of him. He was so gorgeous in his tuxedo, and his bright green eyes were sparkling with love.

She hadn't believed it was possible to feel so deeply for someone after her divorce, but she knew that all things were possible with Max.

"Who gives this bride?" the pastor asked.

"I do," her father said proudly. He lifted her veil and kissed her cheek. "I love you, baby girl."

"I love you, too, Daddy," she said softly, before turning to Max, who was holding out his hand to her. She stepped forward with a smile and placed her hand in his.

"You look beautiful, angel."

"And you look like a handsome devil," she whispered back.

He cupped her face and gave her a hungry kiss.

The pastor cleared his throat loudly. "We haven't gotten to that part yet," he said as some people cheered and whistled and whooped. But neither one of them cared.

The devil had finally caught his angel.

 THE END 

## **Eve Vaughn**

Eve Vaughn enjoys writing above all else. She began writing short stories to amuse herself since she could form letters. Mischievous as a child, she lost her television privileges quite a bit and found writing to be her outlet. Besides writing, Eve likes reading, baking, volunteering, traveling, and spending time with her family. She currently resides in the Philadelphia area with her husband and turtle.

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