Angel Bite 3 Chapters

Watchers and Warriors, Book II

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Chapter One

Claire Thordis pinched the bridge of her nose, squeezing her eyelids shut. The scent of cosmopolitans and sweat-soaked lust filled the air.

Ladies' night at Nitro always drew a large crowd.

A pendulum of pain tapped behind one pupil. Prying her eyes open, squinting through a blur of neon lights and pyrotechnic smoke, she refocused on tonight's target.

Still there. Worrying her bottom lip, the pulse in her veins raced in time to the electronic beats of deadmau5.

"Need that topped off, Claire?" Thursday night's bartender held up a water tap, interrupting her thoughts.

She waved him off, shaking her head, not wanting the distraction. "No, I'm good, Donnie."

Several days ago, she'd been stupid. She'd allowed chaos to rip an angel-sized hole through her routine. And now she needed to get control back. *Grab routine by the horns.*

Two days had passed since Devin's disappearance in Sedona.

Claire had spent the first twenty-four hours on the sofa in what felt like a catatonic state. This morning, a floodgate of emotion threatened to explode. Something Claire couldn't allow. Before losing all control, she'd sprung from the sofa cushions, gone to work, and decided it was time to rein it in.

But that plan backfired. Her boss kicked her out, waggling a scornful finger up and down. *"You're too unfocused. The last thing I need is a medical examiner who can't do her job. Out, Claire. Out now. Go home. And don't come back until you're feeling better."*

Phil thought she still suffered from the side effects of food poisoning. Claire couldn't tell him the truth. She *needed* to work. And because her boss ruined that plan for distraction, she needed another. Claire peeked left again. A sandy-haired, blue-eyed distraction who might be two years younger. Maybe twenty-seven? She cursed under her breath. "Stop stalling. Get on with it already."

Yep, she'd been fine up until six days ago. Life had been normal. Quiet. *Routine.* That was until two bodies in her morgue got up and walked away, spurring that whirlwind of chaos.

Perhaps she should have distanced herself from the entire mess. But her best friend, who was more like a sister, was involved. So she'd jumped into a rabbit hole, searching for the Mad Hatter, knowing full well it'd screw her over in the end. If she'd foreseen how much, would she do it again? Blowing out a dramatic breath, Claire dropped her chin on an open palm. "Yeah, probably."

Still, she'd been *too damned* stupid. She dove deep into that rabbit hole. Let her guard down. She'd let a hot angel kiss her silly.

Kiss her.

Touch her.

Lick her.

Dammit! She'd all but opened the door to chaos and invited it in! And now, her emotions were twisted out of control. Like a damned poltergeist in a horror movie, everything flew around inside by an unseen force. She couldn't sleep. Couldn't eat. Her stomach knotted. On those rare occasions she did sleep, Devin's disappearance plagued her nightmares.

She needed information. Needed to know the plan. Yet, for some reason, she couldn't bring herself to call Marco or Elias. Every time she tried, her finger hovered over the screen, frozen in place. Hell, she'd never been this indecisive. She'd been fine until that damned angel entered her life. "Stop thinking about him!" Slamming her grenadine-based drink down, she cursed again.

Why can't I get him off my mind?

That's why you're here. Time to exorcise the emotional poltergeist.

Determination straightened Claire's spine. Her watchful eyes again zeroed in on tonight's target. Spears of red and purple light flickered across long brown hair and tanned skin, highlighting prominent cheekbones and a strong jaw. The hot undercover officer she met through a colleague now propped at the end of the bar *should* be sending her hormones into overdrive. Yet, she felt nothing. No tingles. No flutters. Nothing for Dillon... Dillon... *something*. *What the hell is his last name?*

For the life of her, she couldn't remember. She gave a mental shake. What did it matter? He was a means to an end. An attempt to erase the tornado of memories threatening to burst through a floodgate wall. Dillon Something's purpose was a necessary evil. A routine distraction, plain and simple.

Prior to meeting the fallen angel who now haunted her dreams, she'd already experienced a problem getting her *fuck-em and leave-em* routine back. But now? Claire slammed a fist on the bar's acrylic neon surface. "Dammit!" Now, no other man turned her on.

Next to her, Missy flinched. Her coworker's gaze tore sideways, away from the surfer she'd been talking to since arrival. And seriously, where was Salt-Life guy surfing? The Missouri River? Missy leaned in, bumping Claire's shoulder with her own. One pierced eyebrow raised. "You okay?"

"Fine. I'm fine." Claire shrugged. Circling the rim of her glass with one manicured, champagne pink nail, she followed a drop of condensation. She should be happy that Dillon eye-fucked her. A heated stare that made all the women in the bar drop their cheeky lace panties. Hell, a week ago, hers would have flown off as well. Lifting her chin, she nudged Missy, reluctance clawing at her. "You ready? I want to hit the dance floor."

The bubbly laughter erupting from Missy's wine-colored lips grated on Claire's nerves. Like fingernails on a chalkboard. Pulling away once more, Missy held up a finger and lowered her voice. "Give me ten minutes. Kai's about to ask for my number."

Kai? The surfer's name was Kai? Good God, what a d-bag name. Fine. Ten minutes. Enough time to reel in the distraction. Well, maybe. Claire felt like shit. Looked like shit, too. She prayed the thick layer of concealer masking the under-eye circles she'd awakened with worked as promised.

Spine straightening, Claire raised her gaze to the mirror at the back of the bar, eying the distraction's reflection. With a slow, deliberate move, she lifted the maraschino cherry from her drink. Sucking and rolling the rounded fruit between her lips, she used the tip of her tongue to lick it, then plucked its sweet essence from the stem with her teeth.

And yep. She had him. Dillon Something watched the entire action. With even more reluctance, Claire rotated her head to latch onto his gaze. A sultry smile lifted her lips. Though she knew it didn't reach her eyes, it worked. Dillon stared back. One of those I'm-gonna-rail-you-real-good stares. *Perfect.*

Keeping the fake-as-fuck smile plastered to her lips, Claire slid off the stool and grabbed Missy's elbow, pulling her to the dance floor. The corners of Dillon's mouth lifted in response. A week ago, that

smile and those lips would have been her move-in-and-pounce trigger. Now, her heart just wasn't in it. Then again, *that* was precisely the problem, wasn't it? "Suck it up. He wants you, and dammit, you will complete tonight's task."

Claire dragged Missy to the middle of the dance floor, the swing of their hips catching the attention of more than a few men. Dillon included, and Kai, the d-bag already on Missy's heels. Claire lifted her arms. Her eyelids fluttered shut as she let the music take control. David Guetta and Bebe Rexha's "I'm Good" pulsed through the nightclub like a sonic wave, a nearly deafening euphoric tune on the dance floor.

Above the pounding base, Missy squealed. "I love this song!"

"It's perfect," Claire agreed. Because she was good, *right?* The words bounced around her skull like a Sanskrit mantra. *I'm good. I'm good. I'm good.*

Like a demonic force, the melody took possession. The pulsating vibration started in Claire's toes, traveled through her limbs and torso, then exploded from the top of her skull. Dancing equaled freedom. A way to escape.

Claire's hips rocked back and forth. With calculating precision, she dragged flat palms over her curves, inching the blue dress up to reveal more thigh. The tilt of her head moved in perfect time with the gyrations of her hips. Weaving fingertips through the loose strands of her perfectly wind-blown hair, she lifted the tips. A purposeful, seductive move to reveal the curve of her neck. Chancing a peek over one shoulder, she caught Dillon prowling her way, weaving through the writhing bodies, eyes drilling into her.

When they first met, Dillon came on strong. Flirted to no end. But his cocky arrogance reminded her of Michael, her ex. Someone worth forgetting. Michael reinforced the reason she lacked trust in men. Once she recognized the signs in Dillon, the flirting stopped.

But this time, Dillon's arrogance didn't matter. And if things went as planned, she'd spend less than an hour in his company. Then she'd disappear like a ghost.

Dillon squared up behind her. The heat of his body bled into hers as she felt each mimicking sway. Latching onto his gaze over a shoulder, she spun around. He inched closer. Mere centimeters separated their bodies from touching in a provocative way.

Men weren't allowed to touch Claire without permission. *Except the angel.* He touched her from the beginning. Yet somehow, she'd been okay with it. She shoved the thought aside with ruthless intention and moved closer to the distraction, throwing an arm over his shoulder, issuing an invitation to touch. Dillon's warm palm slid to the small of her back, their hips mimicking what would come next.

Twenty minutes later, Dillon pressed Claire to the wall in the unisex bathroom. She flipped the lock, the plan for distraction well on its way.

"Damn, Claire. I've wanted you since we met." Dillon's strained whisper vibrated her jugular where his lips dragged upward.

When his tongue slid inside her mouth, she jerked back, flinching. "No kissing!" For unknown reasons, the kiss felt repulsive. Why, she had no idea. He smelled good. Had minty mojito-flavored breath. She should welcome it. Yet her stomach churned. A vile, bitter taste rose in her mouth. Instead, she lifted her chin, giving him a silent order to move back down.

One muscular thigh slipped between her legs, pinning her to the wall. Dillon's rock-hard erection prodded her abdomen. She should be relishing in how much this virile man with a body toned enough to rival an Olympic swimmer's wanted her. Yet somehow, his hands, now cupping her ass, lifting and drawing the apex of her thighs against the bulge in his pants, felt all wrong.

"Just fuck me, Dillon." Claire shoved him off and spun around to face the wall, lifting her skirt, presenting her ass as if it were a Sunday dinner ham. She leaned forward, letting both arms rest against the sludge-covered wall. Yeah, it might be gross, but for some reason, the entire interaction made her feel as filthy as a two-bit whore on nickel night.

It took considerable effort not to shove Dillon away as his smooth palms dragged up her thighs, lingering over the cheeks of her backside. She stared at the floor, a feeling of nausea churning in her stomach. She knew she used Dillon. That he may deserve better. Though cocky, he'd always treated her with respect. Still, she needed to rid herself of emotion. If nothing else, get back to being numb. Claire pressed her cheek against the cool tile and closed her eyes, trying hard not to imagine the man wrenching her V-string down her thighs was someone else.

Do not think about him.

The hiss of leather sweeping across metal echoed in the small room as Dillion flicked open his belt buckle. She swallowed hard, pinching her eyelids tighter.

Do not think about him.

The pull tab of a zipper lowered. The clickity-clack of each zipper tooth triggered a shudder to snake down Claire's spine.

She inhaled and cringed.

Her eyes snapped open, realization hitting like blunt force trauma. *I don't want to do this.* "Wait, Dillon." On the tail end of his name, she realized nothing happened. Dillon-the-distraction no longer touched her. She peeked over a shoulder. Dillon stood a few feet back, running a tattooed hand through the silky strands of his long brown hair. What the hell was he doing?

"Dammit, Claire." Shaking his head, a long exhale rolled out of his mouth. "I don't know what you're into, but when the woman

I'm trying to get naked is crying, well, it's kind of a boner killer, you know?" He let loose a low curse. "You're beautiful, and I'd love to continue this another time, but I'm just not into"—he waved a hand through the air—"sadism, or whatever this is. I can't get into crying. I'm sorry."

Claire gaped. What the hell was he talking about? She lifted a finger to her cheek. Wet. *Oh, hell no!* The floodgate cracked! Dillon zipped up his pants and reengaged the belt. Through a blurry haze, he stepped closer. With much more care than she would have expected from a cocky patrol officer, he tugged her panties back in place, then lowered the skirt of her dress.

Leaning forward, he used a soft tone. "Listen, Claire, feel free to give me a call whenever you work through whatever this is, okay?" A feathery kiss brushed her cheek a moment before Dillon exited the bathroom, leaving her alone.

***

Claire said goodbye to Missy, and all but ran from Nitro, pushing through the heavy metal door and almost running someone over. "I'm sorry. Excuse me." She stumbled into the cool night air onto a well-lit sidewalk. Gathering herself, she pulled the lapels of her leather jacket tighter, tucked her chin, and hurried to the darkness of the next block, not wanting to be seen.

Despite the short three-block route from the club to her apartment, the walk proved difficult. Though she'd managed to say goodbye to Missy without sobbing, the crack in the floodgate widened. Trying to focus through a blurry haze, Claire's stride slowed to a crawl. She shivered, hugging herself. A twinge of pain shot through her left tri-

cep. A memory of the tall, dark angel taking two bullets in the chest flashed like lightning through her mind. Bullets meant for her. "Oh God, this isn't good." She felt it. More cracks penetrated the floodgate. An emotional tornado threatened to burst through. "Why can't I stop thinking about him?"

The historic brick walls of her building came into view. Relief filled her veins. Checking the street left and right, she cut across diagonally from one corner to the next. Two buildings away, Claire felt it. A strange sense of being followed. The back of her neck prickled. Furtive glances left, right, and behind revealed no one. Still, the oily feeling crawling along her spine remained. Her fingers tightened over the pepper spray lodged in one jacket pocket. Cold metal chilled her calf from the butterfly knife clipped to the liner of her knee-high boot.

At the edge of Claire's building, alarm weighed down her legs like two sandbags, making it difficult to trudge forward. The icy tingle racing up and down her spine triggered fight-or-flight. And though flight tended to be her go-to, an overwhelming urge to fight consumed Claire. Mid-step, she backed into a dark pocket of shadows.

Flattening her back to the brick wall, she lifted the pepper spray, primed and ready. *Get a grip. Slow your breathing.* Claire's chest rose and fell. She inhaled through her nose, then blew out a steady breath from her mouth. An old tactic for quieting her breathing. Something learned long ago to disappear. Soon, she stilled, stiff as a statue. Cocking her head, she listened.

Claire's gaze swept the dim street, probing for something sinister. It was nearly midnight in downtown Kansas City, yet the surrounding streets remained desolate. Granted, weeknights tended to be less populated. Still, a Thursday night in downtown KC wouldn't be this quiet. This dead. A strange energy permeated the air.

There. She almost missed it. An imperceptible movement. Swiping at wet eyes, Claire tried to focus. Something moved in the dark alcove of the building catty-corner to hers. Narrowing her gaze, she zeroed in on what looked like the outline of a man's arm, with long fingers gripping the decorative brick corner. They slipped away into the darkness. Claire sucked in a ragged breath and covered her mouth with a cupped palm, stifling the whimper threatening to burst free. A low, animalistic growl rustled the air. Coming from one direction, then another. Claire's breath hitched. Her pulse kicked up.

What the hell is that?

A bone-chilling howl rose from the back of a pitch-dark alley to her left. A cry so loud it threatened to pop her eardrums. A wretched smell filled her nostrils—rotting eggs, gangrene infection, and wet dog. Stifling an overpowering gag, Claire took less than a second to think.

The combination spurred her legs into motion. She shrieked and ran. Arms and legs pumping empty air, she fled from whatever hellspawn released that cry, hot on her heels, breathing putrid breath down the back of her satin dress. Only the rhythmic pounding of Claire's low-heeled boots hitting pavement pierced the night air.

She made it to the lobby of her building, heart hammering so hard beneath her breastbone, it threatened to punch through. Now safe inside, behind locked doors, Claire leaned forward and settled both hands on her thighs, one hand still clutching the pepper spray. Dipping her chin, she sucked in rapid bursts of air, wheezing and just a little dizzy. Her gaze shifted right, checking the large glass doors. Both the street and the lobby remained empty.

"Claire?"

Claire spun on a scream, her thumb twitching over the trigger. Somehow, she managed to resist assaulting her eighty-year-old neigh-

bor with a fiery mist. Clutching the satiny material over her chest, Claire blew out a harsh breath. "Good God, Mrs. Giannetti!" Her arm fell as her body crumpled. "Where did you come from? You scared the hell out of me."

The elderly woman's eyes widened. "Oh, dear. I'm sorry. I thought I'd check my mail. I can't sleep at night, only during the day. I didn't mean to scare you. You okay?"

"I... I'm fine. Just getting in. Thank you for asking." Claire's breaths slowed. She straightened and turned away, using the back of a trembling hand to pat at more tears. "Um... goodnight, Mrs. Giannetti."

Claire's body slacked against the elevator wall on the ride to the fifth floor. Once she crossed the apartment's threshold, an emotional tidal wave took hold. She'd had enough. Enough pretending. Enough trying to remain calm. Enough of everything. Thoughts of Devin, Seung, and long-repressed memories blasted through her like a torrid wave. A crushing weight fell across her chest. Claire walked to the sofa and collapsed, letting loose her own mournful howl.

When the floodgate broke, the wall disintegrated.

Chapter Two

As far as experiences went, regeneration had to be one of the strangest. An odd physical phenomenon. Of course, without the curative skill, Seung Moon would still be dead. Or dead-like.

At some point, consciousness resurfaced before the physical ability to awaken. The knitting of muscles, tendons, and arteries tended to be painful. To what extent depended on which body part had been damaged. Most of the time, the annoyance of a dull ache arose. Unless, of course, a large bone or important organ like the heart suffered injury.

Seung bolted upright, gasping for a breath and lifting a palm to cover his chest. A low growl vibrated his lips as the last of a searing pain shot through the organ beneath his left pec. The top of his head smacked rounded plexiglass. *Mwoya!* His brow wrinkled. Glancing around, he rubbed the top of his skull, absorbing his surroundings. *Headquarters. London. Incubated.*

Falling back to a horizontal position, his fingers lingered over newly knitted skin. The pads grazed a circular puckered mark. The flesh healed, leaving behind two new scars. Fuzzy visions tugged at the corners of his memory. A flash of flaxen hair. A full, kissable mouth. Memories that made his body ache in a different way. Letting his eyes close, he dropped his hand, one word escaping his lips. "Claire."

"Elias!" The shout came from outside the incubator. He rotated his head to see Gladys, the on-site nurse practitioner, pressing the intercom button with one hand. She reached for the incubator handle with the other hand. "He's awake."

***

According to Gladys, regeneration took nine days. Seung stared straight ahead while the blood pressure cuff surrounding his upper arm squeezed tighter and tighter. It released with a poof of air. Gladys, an attractive, forty-something NP he'd always liked, released the inflation bulb. Reading the gauge, she slipped the apparatus from his arm. "One seventeen over seventy-eight." She peeked sideways through loose white waves. "Perfect. How do you feel?"

Sitting on the examination table, paper crinkling beneath his buttocks, Seung straightened his spine. He inhaled. The scent of antiseptic filled his nostrils. Placing fingertips on the sides of the table, he stretched, twisting his torso side to side, spine popping. "Pretty good. Not at all like I caught two bullets in the chest nine days ago."

Gladys chuckled, revealing a few endearing lines at the corner of each eye. Her head tilted. "Well, you have two new scars to prove you did."

Seung returned the grin. His relationship with Gladys went way back. She'd been the first to examine the mystical tattoo a *manyeo* named Seraista fused to his spine at eighteen. The heat-etched spell kept his more sinister side subdued. Something he'd demonstrated difficulty with since adolescence. *The understatement of the century.*

Elias hired him not long after the Zen monks who raised him brought Seraista in.

Seung had always found Gladys interesting. He suspected she was some sort of mage. Maybe a shamanka. She looked mid-forties, yet never seemed to age. Sort of like those glamorous Hollywood actresses from the 1950s who aged with grace and no alteration, yet continued looking young. He doubted the NP was entirely human, which meant she could be closer to one hundred years old, for all he knew.

Through narrowed slits, he watched Gladys use a stethoscope to listen to his heart. Rumor had it that she and Elias were more than coworkers. Then again, too many tales had been fabricated about his boss. So many, in fact, no one knew which to believe. Elias could do a lot worse. Gladys was damned good at her job, and her motherly instincts offered many an orphaned Watcher comfort. Him included.

She pushed back on the wheeled stool to reach for a thermometer and a small gadget, shoving it over his index finger. "Let me get your pulse and temperature so I can fill in the rest of these blanks." The cool plastic tip of the thermometer pushed inside his ear. "Once that's done, you're free to leave the medical unit. Elias left some clothing and a key card for you there." She inclined her head toward the counter.

The contraption on his finger beeped. He dropped his chin, seeing it flashed *sixty-seven.* In his ear, the thermometer set off an alert. Removing both devices, Gladys tapped on a keyboard connected to an iPad. "One-ten. All normal. Okay, hon, you're done here. I'll leave you to it." Throwing him a final reassuring nod, she closed the iPad and left the room.

Seung lifted his arms above his head for a final stretch, then pushed off the examination table. Despite the lengthy regeneration, he hadn't lied. He felt good. A quick skim through the clothing revealed jeans, boxer briefs, and a lightweight black T-shirt. Socks tucked into black motorcycle boots sat on the floor. The corners of his lips lifted. His boss knew him too well.

Seung discarded the thin hospital gown. As he tugged the cotton briefs up his legs, his thoughts drifted to the day that landed him in the medical unit.

Nine days ago, he died for a woman. If asked to do it again, he would. Born a Nephilim, half angel, half human, he was not a normal man. He'd been sired by the fallen angel Kasedeja. Both a gift and a curse. He snorted out loud. *A literal inherited curse.*

And if not for the curse that plagued all the Nephilim, not to mention his father's bloodline, he wouldn't mind his origin. In all honesty, having a range of supernatural skills tended to be useful. Regeneration was possibly the coolest. But his father had also been obsessed with the spirits of the dead. And though Kasedeja hadn't been a vampire, Seung inherited a demonic desire to consume blood. The reason a *manyeo's* otherworldly tattoo was now decorated on his spine. The reason he felt more like a demon than an angel.

Thanks to Seraista's divine intervention, nothing had triggered Seung's bloodlust since that disturbing incident in adolescence. Nothing until Claire, anyway. A flaxen-haired, enchanted human who triggered both the angel and demon blood in his veins to run hot with equal voracity.

Claire tested all his limits and control. Deciding to take two bullets for her had been easy, despite one hitting his heart and blowing it to pieces. Once damaged, the heart and the brain took longer to heal as a lot of intricate parts knitted back together. If not for that one bullet, he might have been discharged from the medical unit seven days earlier.

Inspecting the fresh pink scars, he pulled the T-shirt down over his torso.

Finding his cell phone in a pocket of his Levi's, Seung tipped a hip against the counter and brought it to life. A notification revealed one text from Elias. Skipping it, he scrolled through the contact list,

stopping on the name of the woman who ignited a spark deep inside his chest. *Claire*.

During their second day in Amarillo, he insisted they share phone numbers for safety. The feisty blonde balked about it, saying he didn't need her number since he already held her hostage in a hotel room.

His lips quirked up at the memory of Claire's fiery outbursts. The way her cheeks first turned pink, then grew beet red. He stared out the window, all thoughts again drifting to that day.

Moments before all hell broke loose, Devin caught his attention with her intense lavender gaze. And though his talent for reading emotions in the eyes of others didn't extend to direct thoughts, what he saw in Devin's irises suggested she might do something to trigger Rafe.

Seung had known all along Claire was his duty. He'd been tasked to save her. In truth, she was so much more. No one else knew Claire carried an enchantment. Not even Claire. What it was, he had no idea, but it made her alluring as hell. So much so, his demon side became infatuated. To the point, it caused the spell along his spine to work overtime when they were near.

The monks who raised him through adolescence in the mountains outside Gyeongju instilled patience, selflessness, and tolerance in all their students. Him included. And before meeting Claire, he'd rarely experienced any emotion to its fullest. Born calm and stoic, his natural demeanor only enhanced under the tutelage of the monks.

But after knowing Claire, he realized she triggered emotions he'd never known. Frustration, lust, jealousy. Not to mention a few he couldn't name. And until Rafe, a Rogue demon Watcher, shot her, grazing one arm, he'd never felt pure rage. A molten fire rose within him now, triggering the memory from that day to replay like the footage of an old movie reel.

Devin met his gaze. Her irises issued a silent plea to save Claire. He turned away, keeping a watchful eye on Rafe, allowing himself a glimpse at Claire while Devin kept the Rogue Watcher distracted. Claire straightened, holding her injured arm. Her teary-eyed gaze met his, issuing a silent order not to risk himself. An order he ignored.

Claire cried out the final words of the ritual, triggering a whirlwind of events to follow. He'd barely heard Devin and Marco's exchange of words. By that time, he'd zeroed in on Rafe. With the patience of a jaguar, Seung calculated the precise moment to pounce. Using his supernatural strength, he pushed off the Arizona red rock, leaping through the air, intent on stopping the Rogue Watcher.

Pure white rage filled his veins when Rafe's trigger finger squeezed. And though he'd been suppressing his demonic side for three days, Seung let it loose. Set it free, shifting the bone structure of his face and shooting his sharp canines down.

Landing in front of Rafe, he wrapped his fingers around the barrel of the gun, placing himself between it and Claire. Bringing the muzzle to his own chest, his body captured the bullet already leaving the chamber. At the same time, he latched onto Rafe's neck with his fangs, sinking the razor-sharp teeth into the Rogue Watcher's pulsating jugular. Seung took the largest pull he'd ever taken from an artery, draining as much blood from Rafe as possible. Not since the incident with Lilly had he consumed another's blood. Rafe slacked, but not enough. A second squeeze of the trigger sent another bullet surging into Seung's chest.

Seung cringed. The first bullet felt like metal on fire when it entered his chest cavity. But it was the second round that nearly buckled his knees, feeling as if his heart had stopped. Hell, maybe it had. And for a moment, after stumbling, he feared that hit rendered him useless to Claire. Somehow, he'd managed to tear the gun from Rafe's grip at the same time he tore the flesh from his throat.

Stumbling back, he fell to one knee, his hand landing on the tang of Rafe's sword. With a final burst of energy, he turned, swinging the blade around to Rafe's neck, decapitating the semi-immortal Rogue.

Seung glanced at the examination room door, wondering if Rafe had been admitted—to the morgue. The last thing he remembered seeing that day was the adorable freckles sprayed across Claire's nose.

His gaze lifted to her aquamarine irises, pupils blown wide.

Claire's warm hand cocooned his. Bringing it closer to her chest, the fast beats of her heart hammered through his palm. "You'll be okay." The tears streaking her cheeks glistened like diamonds in the single ray of light that speared the shelter of the red rock cavern. Could the tears be for him? "You'll regenerate in a few days."

He'd wanted to know the extent of Claire's injury, but when his mouth opened to form the words, his gaze fell to the curve of her nose, and everything went black.

Seung lifted the phone, tapping Claire's name. It went straight to voicemail. He ended the call. After reading the text from Elias, he pocketed the phone and key card and pushed off the counter.

Seung traveled the brightly lit halls of headquarters, entering the small grab-and-go cafeteria. Grueling moans churned in his stomach, hunger pangs being a common side effect of regeneration. He chose black coffee, a bottle of water, and a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit. The java's bitter taste heated his esophagus while waiting for the microwave to warm the sandwich. Kicking back his head, Seung emptied the paper cup, pitching it before moving farther into the hall, meal in hand.

The immense deserted building reminded him of the opening scene in a zombie apocalypse movie. If not for the bustling cars outside, one might suspect society had ceased.

Crossing into the waiting room outside Elias's office, he knocked on his boss's door. It swung open at the same time Seung unwrapped the breakfast sandwich. Stepping aside, Elias opened the door wider to allow entry. "Welcome back, Moon. Come in." One big hand clapped Seung's shoulder.

He lowered to the plush chair across from Elias. A lit-up wall of technology blinked and beeped behind his boss's head. All foreign to Seung. Multiple screens revealed hacked footage from all over the planet. He took a bite of the biscuit, then chewed and shifted his gaze back to his boss.

Elias leaned back in his oversized office chair. He eyed Seung, steepling all fingers beneath his chin. "Still a man of few words, I see."

Seung lifted his shoulders and let them fall before taking another bite. The wrapper crinkled between his fingers.

Elias chuckled. "You did good in Sedona, Moon. You and Ash are my two best rookies." He paused, watching Seung swallow, as if calculating. "But we aren't quite done with the job. I still need you."

Seung let one eyebrow climb up his forehead. Anticipation rushed into his veins. He listened to Elias repeat what he'd apparently told Marco several days ago.

According to his boss, a talented Szendori and historian in Egypt deciphered more of Hathor's myth, determining they had forty-five days to bring Devin back from the Realm. "Marco left last night on a Nightshade red-eye to meet with Azeem. We had to wait until they dug out Hathor's tomb. Ash and Traal are searching for Ross and Baby Boi in the States." Elias threw him a shrewd glance. "In the meantime, we need Claire. She's our best hope since we don't have Ross." He paused before adding, "We may even need her to lure Ross out."

Seung swallowed the last bite of the sandwich, sweeping crumbs from his lap and suppressing a twinge of irritation rising within. "You

want to use her as bait?" Wadding the wrapper, he tossed it into a nearby waste basket.

Elias rocked in his oversized chair, still resting all fingers beneath his chin. "Bait insinuates Ross wants to harm her. He doesn't. He likes her. If anyone can get information from him other than Devin, it's Claire." Elias dropped his hands. "Probably more."

"Yeah, I know. That's kind of the problem." Seung bit the words out, not liking the idea, despite knowing Elias spoke the truth. Ross's infatuation with Claire didn't alter the fugitive's psychosis. "He's a convicted murderer." Against his better judgment, Seung blew out a breath, scrubbed his jaw, and shrugged. "What do you want me to do?" Protesting would do no good. Both Elias's and Claire's stubbornness equaled that of a rhino. They'd plow forward whether Seung agreed or not. So, he'd do his job. Protect her. Be her Watcher. A job he welcomed.

Elias cocked his head. "Have you talked to Claire yet?"

"No. I called once, but it went straight to voicemail. I didn't leave a message. I'll try again later. She might be working."

A muscle in Elias's jaw ticked. His blue-eyed gaze lifted to the large plate glass window. "Yeah, well, she hasn't answered any of our calls. Both Marco and I have tried. I left one message." Elias's fingers drummed along the mahogany desktop. His chin dropped to pin Seung with a stare. "If you can't reach her in twenty-four hours, I think you need to fly back to the States. Simon said she was on the verge of shock in Sedona. Traal hacked the morgue's database a few days ago. She took a lengthy leave of absence, so she isn't working."

Seung scrubbed his jaw again, feeling patches of new stubble. A reminder that he needed to shower and shave. "Do you know where she is?"

Elias's shoulders lifted, then fell. "I had a man watch her apartment for a couple of days after arriving home. She said she was fine, but I worried about her." Elias stood and crossed the room to stare out the window. He shoved both hands in the pockets of his linen pants. "My guy watched her enter the building, saw her go to work the second day, then return home. After that, I let him go. Her leave started the next day." He turned, peering at Seung. "Claire's still there. I hacked her building's security camera yesterday and caught her walking through the lobby. I think"—his lips pursed—"I think she's ignoring us."

Seung lifted his chin, furrowing his brow. "Why would she do that?"

Elias returned to his chair and leaned forward, resting both elbows on his knees. "Moon, do you know who Claire is?"

He lifted a shoulder. "I'm not sure what you're asking."

"I researched Claire after the four of you flew to Sedona. Had to enlist Traal's help. I needed him to do a deep dive. I'm asking if you know what happened to her as a child?"

Seung shook his head. "No. Devin made a comment about her having a terrible childhood, but neither she nor Claire elaborated. I know she's been shot before, but that's it."

Elias sighed, running a hand from the top of his head to his chin, as if contemplating his next words. After hesitating, he continued. "Grief is a complicated emotion, Moon. Claire's obviously a strong woman, but even the best of us have weak moments. What happened in Sedona would've affected her in a more complicated way than most would know." He paused as if deciding whether to continue.

The supernatural skill that allowed Seung to read emotions in a person's irises revealed a smoky mix of apprehension and reservation swirling in his boss's eyes.

"Claire's last name was legally changed when she was twelve. When you get some time, look up Claire Rosedale. The rest she should tell you." He waved a dismissive hand in the air. "That's all I got. Try calling her a few more times. If she doesn't answer, I'm putting you on a plane back to Kansas City. Are you okay with that?"

Adrenaline surged into Seung's veins, his pulse quickening at the thought of seeing Claire again so soon. His stare leveled on Elias. "Definitely."

Chapter Three

Claire lay on the sofa, channel surfing, her cheek burrowed deep in a balled-up pillow. Her open concept living room flickered between darkness and luminescent blue light. Beyond the industrial-sized windows, a million stars set the sky aglow, glittering like rows of diamonds in a midnight blue sky. On any other night, Claire might have appreciated the breathtaking skyline. Tonight, she couldn't care less.

At least the tears stopped. Thankfully, she'd returned to feeling numb, despite repeated nightmares starring Devin, Seung, her sisters, and her mother. Though Claire overcame survivor's guilt long ago, that dark-haired angel rattled her box of memories. Now she couldn't erase the image of her mother lying in a pool of blood as it replayed over and over in her head, as if a restoration expert repaired a once foggy photo.

Claire's lashes lowered. All fingers tightened around the remote. She hadn't experienced depression since childhood, yet a sense of hopelessness filled her. Problem was, she had no idea how to climb out of the spiral she continued sliding down. Truth be told, it wasn't depression then or now. It was grief.

If she were honest with herself, some of the problem revolved around that tall dark-haired angel. "Seung Moon, son of Kasedeja,"

she spoke aloud to no one, recalling his odd introduction the day they met.

He is odd. And beautiful. And intense.

She cursed herself. "Stop it." Although she'd do it over again, Seung triggered memories she'd locked away long ago. And now the box wouldn't close. Somehow, that angel yanked open her temporal lobe like a cork holding back carbonated liquid.

Knowing she needed to do something, Claire blew out a resigned breath. "Lying here like a grieving lump of clay isn't helping."

She tapped her lower lip, feeling cracked flesh beneath the smooth pad. Seven days ago, she'd turned off her phone, wanting to eliminate all visual and auditory triggers. But now? She *should* turn it back on. What if Elias or Marco called? She needed to know the plan to bring Devin back. Not to mention, they may need her help.

But grief made even the simplest of tasks difficult. With every passing day, she found it more challenging to turn the phone back on. What if they had bad news? What if they didn't know *how* to bring Devin back? An overreaction, maybe. Still, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

That said, another reason circled back to Seung, whether she wanted to admit it or not. The tapping finger picked up pace. Had he regenerated? Had he called? What if something went wrong? Again, she cursed aloud. Any relationship with that angel needed to end. "A full-on sexy angel." *Stop it!* Claire chastised herself, dropping her face to both palms.

She'd allowed Seung to burrow in too far. The reason the floodgate opened in the first place. *"I only want one night,"* she'd declared moments before the hot angel gave her the best orgasm of her life. Three, in fact. Now, she had no idea what she wanted from the semi-human.

Even *if* she wanted more with Seung, it didn't matter. Fate promised him to another. A soulmate of a higher power's choosing. Claire possessed enough intelligence to know it couldn't be her. Way too broken and all. Focusing on something she couldn't have would end in heartbreak. The ugly claw of fate would shove its talons through her chest, seize her heart, and rip it out. Something she couldn't allow.

A series of growls erupting from her stomach interrupted the self-deprecating thoughts. Since grief took hold, all simple tasks fell to the wayside. Sustenance included. Hell, she hadn't even showered in days. Not to mention, a headache now formed at the base of her skull. "Quit whining. Get up!" She wanted to kick her own sorry ass. Dragging herself from the sofa, Claire's socked feet made no sound as she crossed the engineered hardwoods to the kitchen.

Leaning over and squinting into the refrigerator, the thin light speared the black room. An array of wonderful options presented themselves as Claire shuffled through the contents. Ketchup, mustard, mayo, two-week-old takeout, a block of cheddar, old-ass eggs, fuzzy fruit, tea, and what she suspected to be spoiled milk. "Hmm. Such a difficult choice. Moldy or spoiled?"

Removing the block of cheddar, she swiped the bunch of grapes as an afterthought. A few looked fuzz-free. Riffling through the crimson seedless, she discarded the moldy remainders in the trash. After slicing two sizable cheddar chunks from the block into smaller pieces, she snagged a sleeve of soda crackers from her pantry and trudged back to the sofa. "Not the most scrumptious dinner, but it works."

Claire crinkled her nose and chewed. A dull taste coated her tongue as the crackers crunched between her teeth. Her stomach roiled after each swallow. To keep it down, she followed each mouthful with large gulps of water, making sure to drink more than desired. Starvation and

dehydration would surely result in a call to EMS, ruining the isolation she desired. So, she continued to shovel in the crackers, water, and cheddar.

With that in mind, she came to a second decision. Time to turn the phone on. Phil might have tried calling. She did *not* need her tightly wound boss checking on her. Emptying the plate, she pushed it onto the coffee table, sliding it between the mini mountain of tissues accumulated over the past several days.

Shoving a hand between the sofa cushions, swiping back and forth in its dark recesses, she searched for her phone. After a few passes, she recovered the device from the middle cushion, along with a piece of popcorn, another tissue, a bobby pin, and fifty-one cents. "Ah, the booty of a couch. I'm a veritable treasure hunter." *Gross.* Swiping sticky fingertips across her Van Halen T-shirt, she wiped away the muck.

Claire lifted the black screen to eye level, blew crumbs from the glass, and depressed the side button. *Nothing.* Leaning sideways, she retrieved a charging cord and plugged it in. A slim red bar appeared, shaming her for letting the smartphone die. After ten minutes of grappling with facial recognition, spitting multiple sharp expletives, and being required to retrieve a password from her sleep-deprived brain, the phone came to life. Claire lifted her eyes to the ceiling with a dramatic roll. "Finally."

All those dings, buzzes, and lighted alerts she wanted to avoid filled her home screen. Using her thumb to scroll, she counted three calls and one voicemail from Elias. Marco made one attempt.

Michael called three times. Her brows knitted together. "What the hell?" She and her ex hadn't spoken in nine months. *He knows better.* With a final scroll, Seung's number popped up on the screen.

A strangled sob lodged in Claire's throat. Slamming her eyelids shut, she stifled a second sob and brought one bent knuckle to her mouth.

Nine days ago, the angel died for her. Though she knew he'd be okay when they parted in Sedona and hadn't actually died by definition, relief filled her. An assurance he lived. Claire let the phone slide from her hand, hugging both knees to her chest and resting a temple on one. A cascade of memories fluttered over her like a sweet lover's caress. Goose bumps formed along her arms. Both nipples puckered. The memory of their last passionate night together surfaced like a steamy X-rated movie.

She'd never wanted a man as much as she wanted Seung. Not to mention, her body never responded to another man like it had to him. Sure, he was skilled, but it was the connection between them that set her on fire. Seung felt it, too, if the way he clutched her the second time, they made love was any indication. As if he might lose her. She drew a finger along her bottom lip, remembering how his tongue dragged across it, tasting her. She snatched a pillow, held it over her face, and wailed. He *would* lose her. Just as she would lose him.

Because neither of them had a choice.