

ARCHANGEL'S KISS

Nalini Singh



BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK

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Nalini Singh

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PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF NALINI SINGH

Angels' Blood

“It is amazing in every way!!!”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Gena Showalter

“This is probably one of the best stories I have ever read and will be one that I will rave about for quite a while. Not only was the world just completely awe-inspiring, but the characters and the story line are evocative and a pure pleasure to read.”

—*Fallen Angel Reviews*

“Amazing. Fantastic. Darker than her Psy-Changelings, simmering with both violence and sexual tension, and with vivid world building that blew my socks off.”

—*National bestselling author Meljean Brook*

“Incredibly original and beautiful.”

—*Errant Dreams Reviews*

“A refreshing twist on vampire and angel lore combined with sizzling sexual tension make this paranormal romance a winner.”

—*Monsters and Critics*

“A fantastically, amazingly, good read and it gets the Guild Hunter series off to a great start . . . If you like paranormal romance, you want to read this book.”

—*Love Vampires*

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—*Night Owl Romance (reviewer top pick)*

“Nalini Singh's Guild Hunter series is a fabulous addition to the paranormal world . . . A definite must read.”

—*Fresh Fiction*

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—*Romance Junkies*

“Fans will relish Nalini Singh's excellent first Guild Hunter thriller.”

—*Midwest Book Review*

Branded by Fire

“An emotional masterpiece.”

—*Romance Junkies*

“Another superb entry in what is easily my favorite paranormal series in romance.”

—*Romance Novel TV*

“Singh has a rare talent for impressive world building, intricate plotting, and riveting characterization . . . Singh delivers excellence every single time!”

—*Romantic Times (top pick)*

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—*Night Owl Romance*

Hostage to Pleasure

“Singh is on the fast track to becoming a genre giant!”

—*Romantic Times (top pick)*

“Nalini Singh has penned another keeper . . . If you want a thrilling read with action, danger, passion, and drama, don’t miss Nalini Singh’s *Hostage to Pleasure*.”

—*Romance Junkies*

“An intriguing world that’s sure to keep readers coming back for more.”

—*Darque Reviews*

Mine to Possess

“Fierce . . . Paranormal romance at its best.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“With its intense characters, story line, and scenery, *Mine to Possess* is quite a read. It showcases Singh’s talent and shows her to be a writer that will no doubt shine for some time.”

—*Romance Reader at Heart*

“If you’ve been looking for a book that will entice and entrance, look no further. The very talented Nalini Singh has yet again proven that her books are gems, true treasures that are intriguing, multifaceted creations that just get better and better . . . Don’t miss *Mine to Possess*!”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

Caressed by Ice

“A fast-paced, edge-of-your-seat romantic paranormal that will pull you straight into the story and into the amazing *Psy-Changeling* world!”

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“The paranormal romance of the year.”

—*Romance Junkies*

“Craving the passionate and electrifying world created by the mega-talented Singh? Your next fix is here! . . . One of the most original and thrilling paranormal series on the market . . . Mind-blowing!”

—*Romantic Times* (4½ stars, top pick)

Visions of Heat

“Breathtaking blend of passion, adventure, and the paranormal. I wished I lived in the world Singh has created. This is a keeper!”

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“This author just moved to the top of my auto-buy list.”

—*All About Romance*

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—*Romance Junkies*

Slave to Sensation

“I LOVE this book! It’s a must read for all of my fans. Nalini Singh is a major new talent.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Christine Feehan

“An electrifying collision of logic and emotion . . . An incredible world where fire and ice mix to create an unforgettable sensual eruption. *Slave to Sensation* is a volcanic start to a new series that’ll leave you craving more.”

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“AWESOME! . . . A purely mesmerizing book that surely stands out among the other paranormal books out there. *Slave to Sensation* is captivating from beginning to end. It’s a must read for any paranormal fan!”

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Genesis

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

“Come here, little hunter. Taste.”

Blood in the air, on the walls, under her feet. “Ari?”

“Ari’s having a nice nap.” A giggling laugh that made her want to run, run, RUN! “Mmm, I think I prefer Belle.” A red-dipped finger lifted to her mouth, pressed against her lips.

Blood seeping onto her tongue.

Her sister’s blood.

That was when she screamed.

Elena gripped the balcony railing and stared down at the gorge that fell away with jagged promise beneath. From here, the rocks looked like sharp teeth, ready to bite and tear and rip. She tightened her hold as the icy wind threatened to tumble her into the unforgiving jaws. “A year ago,” she murmured, “I didn’t know the Refuge existed, and today, here I stand.”

A sprawling city of marble and glass spread out in every direction; its elegant lines exquisite under the razor-sharp burn of the sun. Dark-leaved trees provided soothing patches of green on both sides of the gorge that cut a massive divide through the city, while snow-capped mountains ruled the skyline. There were no roads, no high-rises, nothing to disturb the otherworldly grace of it.

Yet, for all its beauty, there was something alien about this place, a vague sense that darkness lurked beneath the gilded surface. Drawing in a breath laced with the biting freshness of the mountain winds, she looked up . . . at the angels. So many angels. Their wings filled the skies above this city that seemed to have grown out of the rock itself.

The angelstruck, those mortals who were literally enthralled by the sight of angelic wings, would weep to be in this place filled with the beings they worshipped. But Elena had seen an archangel laugh as he plucked the eyes out of a vampire’s skull, as he pretended to eat, then crush the pulpy mass. This, she thought with a shiver, was not her idea of heaven.

A rustle of wings from behind her, a squeeze from the powerful hands on her hips. “You’re tiring Elena. Come inside.”

She held her position, though the feel of him—strong, dangerous, uncompromisingly masculine—against the sensitive surface of her wings made her want to shudder in ecstasy. “Do you think you have the right to give me orders now?”

The Archangel of New York, a creature so lethal that part of her feared him even now, lifted her hand off her nape, brushed his lips across her skin. “Of course. You are mine.” No hint of humor, nothing but stark possession.

“I don’t think you’ve quite got the hang of this true love thing.” He’d fed ambrosia into her mouth, changed her from mortal to immortal, given her wings—*wings!*—all because of love. For her, hunter, a mortal . . . no longer mortal.

“Be that as it may, it’s time you return to bed.”

And then she was in his arms, though she had no memory of having released the railing—but she must have, because her hands were filling with blood again, her skin tight. It hurt. Even as she tried to ride out the slow, hot burn, Raphael carried her through the sliding doors and into the magnificent glass room that sat atop a fortress of marble and quartz, as solid and immovable as the mountains around them.

Fury arced through her bloodstream. “Out of my mind, Raphael!”

Why?

“Because, as I’ve told you more than once, I’m not your puppet.” She grit her teeth as he laid her on the cloud-soft bedding, the pillows lush. But the mattress held firm under her palms when she pulled herself up into a sitting position. “A lover”—God, she could still barely believe she’d gone and fallen for an archangel—“should be a partner, not a toy to manipulate.”

Cobalt eyes in a face that turned humans into slaves, that sweep of night-dark hair framing a face

perfect grace . . . and more than a little cruelty. “You’ve been awake exactly three days after spending a year in a coma,” he told her. “I’ve lived for more than a thousand years. You’re no more my equal now than you were before I Made you immortal.”

Anger was a wall of white noise in her ears. She wanted to shoot him as she’d done once before. Her mind cascaded with a waterfall of images on the heels of that thought—the wetly crimson spray of blood, a torn wing, Raphael’s eyes glazed with shock. No . . . she wouldn’t shoot him again, but he drove her to violence. “Then what am I?”

“Mine.”

Was it wrong that sparks sizzled along her spine at hearing that, at seeing the utter possession in his voice, the dark passion on his face? Probably. But she didn’t care. The only thing she cared about was the fact that she was now tied to an archangel who thought the ground rules had changed. “Yes,” she agreed. “My heart is yours.”

A flash of satisfaction in his eyes.

“But nothing else.” She locked gazes with him, refusing to back down. “So, I’m a baby immortal. Fine—but I’m also still a hunter. One good enough that you hired me.”

Annoyance replaced the passion. “You’re an angel.”

“With magic angel money?”

“Money is no object.”

“Of course not—you’re richer than Midas himself,” she muttered. “But I’m not going to be your little chew-toy—”

“Chew-toy?” A gleam of amusement.

She ignored him. “Sara says I can walk back into the job anytime I want.”

“Your loyalty to the angels now overwhelms your loyalty to the Hunters Guild.”

“Michaela, Sara, Michaela, Sara,” she murmured in a mock-thoughtful voice. “Bitch Goddess angel versus my best friend, gee, which side do you think I’ll choose?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” He raised an eyebrow.

She had the feeling he knew something she didn’t. “Why not?”

“You can’t put any of your plans in action until you can fly.”

That shut her up. Glaring at him, she slumped back against the pillows, her wings spread out on the sheets in a slow sweep of midnight shading to indigo and darkest blue before falling into dawn and finally, a brilliant white-gold. Her attempt at a sulk lasted approximately two seconds. Elena and sulking had never gone well together. Even Jeffrey Deveraux, who despised everything about her “abomination” of a daughter, had been unable to lay that sin at her feet.

“Then teach me,” she said, straightening. “I’m ready.” The ache to fly was a fist in her throat, a ravaging need in her soul.

Raphael’s expression didn’t change. “You can’t even walk to the balcony without help. You’re weaker than the fledglings.”

She’d seen the smaller wings, smaller bodies, watched over by bigger ones. Not many, but enough.

“The Refuge,” she asked, “is it a place of safety for your young?”

“It’s everything we need it to be.” Those eyes of purest sin shifted toward the door. “Dmitri comes

She sucked in a breath as she felt the temptation of Dmitri’s scent wrap around her in a glide of fire and sex and wanton indulgence. Unfortunately, she hadn’t gained immunity to that particular vampire trick with her transformation. The flip side was also true. “One thing you can’t argue with—I can track vampires by scent.” And that made her hunter-born.

“You have the potential to be of real use to us, Elena.”

She wondered if Raphael even knew how arrogant he sounded. She didn't think so. Being invincible for more years than she could imagine had made that arrogance part of his nature . . . But no, she thought. He could be hurt. When hell broke and an Angel of Blood tried to destroy New York, Raphael had chosen to die with Elena rather than abandon her broken body on that ledge high above Manhattan.

Her memories were cloudy, but she remembered shredded wings, a bleeding face, hands that had held her protectively as they descended to the adamantine hardness of the city streets below. Her head clenched. "Tell me something, Raphael?"

He was already turning, heading to the door. "What is it you'd like to know, Guild Hunter?"

She hid her smile at his slip. "What do I call you? Husband? Mate? Boyfriend?"

Stopping with his hand on the doorknob, he shot her an inscrutable look. "You can call me 'Master'."

Elena stared at the closed door, wondering if he'd been playing with her. She couldn't tell, didn't know him well enough to read his moods, his truths and lies. They'd come together in an agony of pain and fear, pushed by the specter of death into a union that might have been years in the making had Uram not decided to turn bloodborn and tear a murderous path through the world.

Raphael had told her that according to legend, only true love allowed ambrosia to bloom on an archangel's tongue, to turn human to angel, but perhaps her metamorphosis owed nothing to the deepest of emotions and everything to a very rare biological symbiosis? After all, vampires were made by angels, and biological compatibility played an integral part in that transformation.

"Damn it." She rubbed the heel of one hand over her heart, trying to wipe away the sudden twist of pain.

"You intrigue me."

He'd said that at the start. So perhaps, there was a component of fascination. "Be honest, Elena," she whispered, running her fingers over the magnificent wings that were his gift to her, "you're the one who fell into fascination."

But she would not fall into slavery.

"Master, my ass." She stared at the foreign sky outside the balcony doors and felt her resolve turn iron-hard—no more waiting. Unlike if she'd still been human, the coma hadn't wasted away her muscles. But those muscles had gone through a transformation she couldn't imagine—everything felt weak, new. So while she didn't need rehab, she did need exercise. Especially when it came to her wings. "No time like the present." Lifting herself up into a proper sitting position, she took a deep, calming breath . . . and spread out her wings.

"Christ, that hurts!" Teeth gritted, tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes, she kept stretching the unused, unfamiliar muscles, folding her new-formed wings in slowly before expanding them outward. Three repetitions later and the tears had soaked into her lips until the salt of them was all she could taste, her skin covered by a layer of perspiration that shimmered in the sunlight streaming through the glass.

That was when Raphael walked back in. She expected an explosion, but he just took a seat in a chair opposite the bed, his eyes never leaving her. As she watched, wary, he hooked one ankle over a knee and began to tap a heavy white envelope bordered with gilt against the top of his boot.

She held his gaze, did another two stretches. Her back felt like jelly, her stomach muscles so tight they hurt. "What's"—a pause to draw breath—"in the envelope?"

Her wings snapped shut behind her, and she found herself leaning against the headboard. It took her several seconds to realize what he'd done. Something cold unfurled within the core of her soul even

he got up and dropped a towel on the bed, then retook his seat. No fucking way was this going to keep happening.

However, in spite of the turbulent fury of her anger, she wiped off her face and kept her mouth shut. Because he was right—she wasn't his equal, not by a long shot. And the coma had messed her up some. But as of now, she was going to work on those shields she'd started to develop back before becoming an angel. There was a chance that—given the changes in her—she could learn to hold them for longer.

Forcing her rigid shoulder muscles to loosen, she picked up a knife she'd left on the bedside table and began to clean the pristine blade with the edge of the towel. "Feeling better?"

"No." His mouth firmed. "You need to listen to me, Elena. I won't hurt you, but I can't have you acting in ways that bring my control over you in question."

What? "Exactly what kind of relationships do archangels have?" she asked, genuinely curious.

That made him pause for a minute. "I know of only one stable relationship now that Michaela and Uram's is broken."

"And the Bitch Goddess is another archangel, so they *were* equals."

A nod of his head that was more thought than movement. He was so damn beautiful that it made thinking difficult, even when she knew he possessed a vein of ruthlessness that was sewn into the fabric of his very soul. That ruthlessness translated into a furious kind of control in bed, the kind that made a woman scream, her skin too tight across a body that knew only hunger.

"Who are the other two?" she asked, swallowing the spike of gut-deep need. He'd held her since she woke, his embrace strong, powerful, and at times, heartbreakingly tender. But today, her body craved a far darker touch.

"Elijah and Hannah." His eyes glittered, turning to a shade she'd once seen in an artist's studio. *Prussian*. That's what it was called, Prussian blue. Rich. Exotic. Earthy in a way she'd never have believed an angel to be until she found herself taken by the Archangel of New York.

"You will heal, Elena. Then I will teach you how angels dance."

Her mouth dried up at the slumbering heat in that outwardly calm statement. "Elijah?" she prompted, her voice husky, an invitation.

He continued to hold her gaze, his lips at once sensual and without pity. "He and Hannah have been together centuries. Though she's grown in power over time, it is said that she's content to be his helpmeet."

She had to think for a while about that old-fashioned expression. "The wind beneath his wings?"

"If you like." His face was suddenly all hard lines and angles—male beauty in its purest, most merciless form. "You will not fade."

She didn't know if that was an accusation or an order. "No, I won't." Even as she spoke, she was vividly conscious that she'd have to use every ounce of her will to maintain her personality against the incredible strength of Raphael's.

He began tapping that envelope again, the action precise, deliberate. "As of today, you're on a deadline. You need to be on your feet and in the air in just over two months' time."

"Why?" she asked, even as delight bubbled through her bloodstream.

Prussian blue froze into black ice. "Lijuan is giving a ball in your honor."

"We're talking about Zhou Lijuan, the oldest of the archangels?" The bubbles went flat, lifeless. "She's . . . different."

"Yes. She has evolved." A hint of midnight whispered through his tone; shadows so thick they were almost corporeal. "She's no longer wholly of this world."

Her skin prickled, because for an immortal to say that . . . “Why would she hold a ball for me? She doesn’t know me from Adam.”

“On the contrary, Elena. The entire Cadre of Ten knows who you are—we hired you after all.”

The idea of the most powerful body in the world being interested in her made her break out in a cold sweat. It didn’t help that Raphael was one of them. She knew what he was capable of, the power he wielded, how easy it would be for him to cross the line into true evil. “Only nine now,” she said.

“Uram’s dead. Unless you found a replacement while I was in a coma?”

“No. Human time means little to us.” The casual indifference of an immortal. “As for Lijuan, it’s about power—she wants to see my little pet, see my weakness.”

His pet. His weakness.

“Her words or yours?”

“Does it matter?” A negligent shrug. “It’s true.”

She threw the knife with deadly accuracy. Raphael caught it in midair—by the blade. His blood flowed scarlet against the gold of his skin. “Was it not you who bled the last time?” he asked conversationally as he dropped the knife to the formerly pristine white carpet and tightened his hand into a fist. The blood flow halted within a single second.

“You made me close my hand over a blade.” Her heart was still racing from witnessing the sheer speed of him. Dear God. And she’d taken this man to her bed. Craved him even now.

“Hmm.” He rose to his feet, walked to her.

At that moment, though he’d said he’d never hurt her, she wasn’t so sure. Her fingers clenched on the sheets as he came to sit in front of her, one of his wings lying over her legs. It was a warm, surprisingly heavy weight. Angel wings weren’t for show—as she was beginning to learn, they were pure muscle and tendon over bone, and like any other muscle, they had to be strengthened prior to use. Before, she’d only had to worry about tripping if she overtired herself. Now, she had to worry about falling out of the sky.

But that wasn’t the danger that danced in front of her eyes right then.

No, all she saw was blue.

Never before Raphael had blue meant the color of sin, of seduction. Of pain.

He leaned in, brushed her hair from her neck with fingers that could bring pleasure so excruciating it hurt . . . and pressed a kiss to the ragged beat of her pulse. It made her shiver, and she found she tangled her hands in his hair. He kissed her again, causing the warmth in her stomach to uncoil with lazy grace through her body, demand in every slow pulse.

When something glittered at the edge of her vision, she realized he was covering her in angel dust, decadent, delicious substance that mortals paid enormous amounts to possess. But Raphael had a special blend just for her. As she breathed in the motes, the seduction intensified, until all she could think of was sex, the ache in her wings, even her anger, forgotten.

“Yes,” he whispered against her mouth. “I think you’ll intrigue me through eternity.”

It should’ve shattered the moment, but it didn’t. Not when there was such erotic promise in his eyes, in the tone of his voice. She found herself trying to draw him closer, but his jaw tightened. “Not Elena. I’ll break you.” A blunt statement. A truth. “Read this.” Dropping the envelope onto the sheets, he rose, those magnificent wings of white—every filament tipped with luminous gold—flaring out to dust her in ecstasy.

“Stop that.” Her voice was breathy, her mouth filled with the hotly masculine taste of him. “What will I be able to do that?”

“It’s an ability that develops over time, and not every angel gains it.” He folded back his wings. “Perhaps in four hundred years’ time, you’ll know.”

She stared. “Four hundred? Years?”

“You’re immortal now.”

“How immortal?” It wasn’t a stupid question. As she’d learned too well, even archangels could die

“Immortality takes time to grow—to set—and you’re barely formed. Even a strong vampire could kill you right now.” Tilting his head slightly to the side, he turned his attention to the sky beyond the glass he’d told her was reflective, affording her privacy to study the Refuge without worrying about being watched in turn.

“It seems the Refuge is a popular place today.” With that, he strode to the balcony doors. “We must go to this ball, Elena. To do any less would be a sign of fatal weakness.” Closing the doors behind himself, he spread his wings and took off in a straight vertical flight.

Elena gasped at the unintentional show of strength. Now that she’d felt the weight of the wings on her back, she’d realized the extraordinary nature of Raphael’s vertical takeoffs. As she watched, he swept in front of the balcony and away. Her heart was still pounding from the combination of his kindness and the display of aerial brilliance when she finally glanced down at the envelope.

The fine hairs on her arms stood up the instant she grazed the thick white paper with her fingertip. The sensation was eerie—as if the envelope had been somewhere so cold, it wouldn’t warm up, no matter what. Some would call it the chill of the grave.

Goose bumps broke out over her skin.

Shaking them off, she turned the envelope over. The seal had been broken, but she could see the image once she lined up the edges. An angel. Of course, she thought, unable to stop staring at it. It was inked in black but why that should disturb her, she didn’t know. Frowning, she brought it closer to her face.

“Oh Jesus.” The whisper rippled out of her as she glimpsed the secret hidden within the image. It was an illusion, a trick. Looked at one way, the seal was a kneeling angel, his head bowed. But change your focus and that angel stared directly at you, his eye sockets empty, his bones bleached white.

She’s no longer wholly of this world.

All at once, Raphael’s words took on an entirely new meaning.

Shuddering, she lifted the flap and removed the card inside. It was heavy cream-colored stuff reminding her of the expensive note cards her father used in his personal correspondence. The writing scrolled across in antique gold. She rubbed her finger over it—why, she didn’t know—it wasn’t as if she could sense whether it was real gold or not. “Wouldn’t surprise me though.” Lijuan was old, so old. And an ancient being of power could amass a great deal of wealth over a lifetime.

Funny, but though she thought of Raphael as powerful, she’d never thought of him as ancient. There was a sense of life about Raphael that denied that. A sense of . . . humanity? No. Raphael wasn’t human, wasn’t anything close to human.

But he wasn’t like Lijuan.

Her eyes went to the card again.

I invite you to the Forbidden City, Raphael. Come, let us welcome this human you have embraced. Let us see the beauty of this connection between immortal and what was once mortal. I find myself fascinated for the first time in millennia.

~ Zhou Lijuan

Elena didn’t want to fascinate Lijuan. In fact, she wanted nowhere near the rest of the Cadre of Ten. She was pretty sure most of the time that Raphael wouldn’t kill her. But as for the others . . . “Oh hell.”

My little pet.

My weakness.

She might despise the words, but that made them no less accurate. If the Archangel of New York

really did love her, then she might as well be wearing a target on her back.

~~Again she saw him, face bloodied and torn, wings shredded, an archangel choosing death over eternal life. It was a truth she'd never forget, a truth that anchored her even as everything else in her world shifted and changed.~~

“Not everything,” she murmured, reaching for the phone. Because while this place might look as if it existed in some long-ago age of chivalry and grace, the amenities were cutting-edge. Unsurprising when you thought about it—angels didn't survive eons by clinging to the past. New York's Archangel Tower, with its cloud-piercing form, was the perfect example.

As the phone rang on the other end, she found herself staring out through the balcony door, searching for the magnificent being who ruled that Tower, the one she dared call her lover.

The ringing stopped. “Hello, Ellie.” A raspy voice, followed by an audible yawn.

“Crap, I woke you.” She'd forgotten the time difference between wherever the hell she was and New York.

“It's okay—we crashed early. Hold on.” Rustling sounds, a click, and then Sara was back on the line. “I've never seen Deacon go back to sleep that fast—though he did mutter something that sounded vaguely like ‘Hi, Ellie.’ I think our baby girl wore him out today.”

Elena smiled at the thought of Sara's “scary son-of-a-bitch” of a husband being run ragged by little Zoe. “Did I wake her?”

“Nah, she's wiped out, too.” A whisper. “I just peeked. Going into the living room.”

Elena could easily visualize Sara's surroundings, from the elegant sofas in a caramel shade that brought warmth inside, to the large black-and-white portrait of Zoe on the wall, her giggling face covered with bath foam. The gorgeous brown-stone was more home to Elena than any other place except her own apartment. “Sara, my apartment?” She hadn't thought to ask during Sara's visit to the Refuge two days ago, her mind too full of the chaos of dying . . . and waking up with wings at midnight and dawn.

“Sorry, babe.” Sara's voice held the painful echoes of memory. “After . . . everything, Dmitri blocked off access. I was more interested in finding out where they'd put you, so I didn't push too hard.”

The last time Elena had seen her apartment, it had had a huge hole torn out of one wall, blood and water everywhere. “I don't blame you,” she said, burying the hurt that stabbed into her at the thought of her haven being shut up, her treasures broken and lost. “Hell, you probably had more than enough on your plate.” New York had gone pitch-dark during the archangel-to-archangel battle, power lines destroyed and pylons overloading as Uram and Raphael both pulled power from the city below.

It hadn't only been the electrical grid that had become collateral damage in the cataclysmic battle between two immortals. Her mind showed her a snapshot of crumbled buildings, crushed cars, and twisted blades that meant at least one heliport had suffered severe damage.

“It was bad,” Sara admitted, “but the majority of the damage has been repaired. Raphael's people organized it all. We even had angels doing construction work—that's not a sight you see every day.”

“Guess they didn't need the cranes.”

“Nope. I never knew how strong angels were until I saw them lift up some of those blocks.” A pause filled with an unspoken depth of emotion that gripped Elena by the throat. “I'll go by your apartment tomorrow morning,” Sara finally said, her voice rigidly controlled, “let you know what's what.”

Elena swallowed, wishing Sara was here again so she could reach out and hug her best friend. “Thanks, I'll tell Dmitri to make sure his hench-people know you're coming.” In spite of her attempt to not let it matter, she couldn't help but wonder if any of her keepsakes, the little things she

collected on her trips as a hunter, had survived.

“Hah! I can take on hench-people with one hand tied behind my back.” A thready laugh. “Go Ellie, I get this wave of relief every time I hear your voice.”

“You’ll be hearing it for a lot longer now—I’m immortal,” she joked, not yet able to truly comprehend the enormity of the change in her life. Hunters in the field died young. They didn’t live forever.

“Yeah. You’ll be around to watch over my baby and her babies long after I’m gone.”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” It made her heart ache to imagine a future without Sara, without Ransom, without Deacon.

“Silly girl. I think it’s wonderful—a gift.”

“I’m not so sure.” She told Sara what she’d been thinking in regard to her value as a hostage. “Am I being paranoid?”

“No.” Now, the other woman sounded like the hard-assed Guild Director she was. “That’s why I packed Vivek’s special gun in the bag of weapons on its way to you.”

Elena’s fingers curled into her palm.

The last time she’d used that weapon, Raphael had bled endless red on her carpet, and Dmitri had almost slit her throat. But none of that, she thought, uncurling her fingers one by one, diminished the value of a weapon meant to disable wings, not when—her gaze went to the skies beyond the window—she was surrounded by immortals in a place that whispered of things no human was supposed to know. “Thanks. Even if you did get me into this in the first place.”

“Hey, I made you filthy rich, too.”

Elena blinked, tried to find her voice.

“You forgot didn’t you?” Sara laughed.

“I was too busy being in a coma,” Elena managed to choke out. “Raphael paid me?”

“Every last penny.”

It took her a second to realize what that meant. “Wow.” The deposit had been more money than she could’ve hoped to make in a lifetime. And it had been a mere twenty-five percent of the total. “I think ‘filthy rich’ might be an understatement.”

“Yeah. But you did complete the job he hired you to do, which I’m guessing had something to do with that fight with Uram?”

Elena bit her lip. Raphael had been explicit in his warning about all information connected to the sadistic monster who’d killed and tortured so many—any mortal she told would die. No exception. Perhaps that had changed now, but she wasn’t going to chance her best friend’s life on the faith of a relationship she barely understood. “I can’t tell you, Sara.”

“You’ll tell me all these other secrets but not this one?” Sara didn’t sound pissed, she sounded intrigued. “Interesting.”

“Don’t go digging that way.” Elena’s stomach pitched as her mind put on a nausea-inducing slideshow of the horror that had been Uram. That last room . . . the stench of rotting flesh, the gleam of blood-soaked bone, the slimy pulp of the eyes he’d dug out of a dying vampire’s skull.

Steeling her spine against the bile burning the back of her throat, she tried to imbue her voice with the depth of her worry. “It’s bad news.”

“I don’t have a death wish—ah, Zoe’s awake.” Maternal love filled every syllable. “And look at that, so is Deacon. Zoe’s daddy wakes to her slightest cry, doesn’t he, sweetie pie?”

Elena drew in a cleansing breath, the loving images created by Sara’s words banishing those of Uram’s depravity. “I think you guys are getting more sickening with each day.”

“My baby’s almost one and a half now, Ellie,” Sara whispered. “I want you to see her.”

“I will.” It was a promise. “I’m going to learn to use these wings if it kills me.” Her eye fell on Lijuan’s invitation as the words left her mouth, death closing a skeletal hand around her throat.

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