

CHAPTER 1

Kris approached the doorway, hesitating before walking through it. Waking up was not what it used to be, and he hadn't grown accustomed to the new way just yet.

Girding himself against the confusing wash of colors and sound, he closed his eyes as he stepped through. Some of the Guides said it was like being born; Kris didn't remember being born, and he suspected the Guides didn't either. It was darkness and it was light and it was neither and it was both. It somehow swirled through him till he felt he had forgotten himself, or the Universe had. Then it was a kaleidoscope of colors and a rushing river of sound, even when he woke to a dark and quiet room.

The feeling was even more explosive and sudden than before, as his consciousness permeated his dead body. Every cell of his ghostly form crackled with sensation, with aliveness.

He was through the doorway.

Kris felt the weight of Jessica's head on his chest as she slept. Flowers and strawberries filled his nose pleasantly, tied together in a sweet sultry sulfur scent. Tangling his fingers in her honeyed blonde hair, the Guide smiled softly.

Since he had died, everything had just gotten better for him.

He'd never felt so alive as he did in death.

Now he just needed to get used to sleeping, and waking up.

He could feel her hand moving before he realized her breathing had shifted. It drifted from where it lay on his chest slowly down his torso. Light and aimless, her touch delighted his tickled abdomen like her scent delighted his nose, like her closeness delighted his heart. As her hand found what he had hoped she was reaching for, she opened her eyes and turned her head slightly to look up at him.

Her eyes were big and round and blue and beautiful, and Kris let his heart sing the only song it knew as he lost himself in them.

Jessica's hand moved with curious certainty under the sheets, and her bright blue eyes began to swirl seductively with deep crimson smokiness as she watched him.

“I have never felt so satisfied and so full of desire all at the same time,” the Guide murmured, not breaking the sacred eye contact. “I’ve wanted you so much for so long, I thought it would be impossible for you to live up to my hopeful imaginings about you.”

He paused as she kneaded him gently beneath the covers in a particularly pleasurable way. A low moan escaped his dead lips.

Then her hand was still, her eyes expectant.

“And now...?” she prompted.

Smiling at her with all the love that burst in brilliant colors in his heart like an eternal fireworks finale, Kris replied, “Now I realize you are so much more incredible than I ever imagined, or ever could have hoped or dreamed.”

Sighing softly, Jessica closed her eyes and kneaded his flesh again, smiling as he moaned.

“There’s something you said to me,” she spoke softly into his chest, her eyes still closed. “It was not the night I finally told you, you know, that I could see you and hear you.”

“That was last night, Jess,” he reminded her, his words more moan than words.

She giggled, and Kris closed his eyes to listen to one of his favorite sounds in the world since he had first heard it.

“It’s been a long night, lover,” she responded, her touch changing as she felt his body move, and his voice moaned and sighed. It was a long sweet moment before he could link enough thoughts to form a coherent sentence. He was happy, though, and she was the reason why. He thought she should know that.

“Last night was the most incredible night of my life,” Kris said honestly. “I feel like I have lived my whole life in black and white, my soul longing for color.”

When he opened his eyes she was looking at him earnestly, her eyes sky blue and human and vulnerable and brimming with tears.

Gazing at her, smiling softly, Kris whispered, “Last night you brought color to my life, to my heart and my mind, to my body and my soul. You woke my slumbering heart from a long dull nightmare to a love like I never imagined.”

He watched her as closely as she did him, and when her eyes went wide he remembered why they had gone from touching to talking. Smoothing her hair lovingly, Kris felt his soft smile turn to a look of seriousness. He narrowed his eyes as they held her gaze.

“The other night I told you something, not knowing you could hear it,”

he murmured. "I said that I may sound a fool for what I am about to say, but if you can't hear me it doesn't matter and if you can I need to say it."

Her body relaxed against him, her hand kneading him gently and her eyes so open and vulnerable it might well have been her speaking.

Struggling mentally to keep his train of thought from derailing at her loving touch, Kris went on. "From the moment I first saw you I thought you were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I told Paul when we were leaving that I was no longer agnostic, because I had just seen an angel."

Jessica giggled. "I'm not an angel, silly," she whispered, like it was a secret. "I'm your horny little devil. Sorry to disappoint."

Her hand held hard evidence that the Guide was far from disappointed, and he laughed.

"What did Paul say?" she asked him.

"He said, 'You mean the blonde? Sorry, buddy, I didn't notice.'" Kris laughed quietly again. "Paul never liked blonde girls, and he had just gotten with Brenna anyway. Since they met she may as well be the only girl in the world, as far as Paul is concerned."

He shrugged awkwardly, lying there with his arm under her and his hand tangled in her honeyed tresses.

Her pretty unlined forehead crinkled in a pretty little frown. "The way you feel about me?"

"Precisely," he responded, smiling.

"Awww..." Jessica brightened. "You're so sweet."

Kris nodded, then let his fingers run gently through her hair along her skull. Closing his fist around a handful of her thick soft mane, he pulled back her hair until he saw her eyes widen and flash with fire. One night had been enough to learn much of what she wanted from her lover, and he was happy to be playful and serious and dedicated and occasionally a little obsessed and forceful.

Her playful hand got serious again in response, and he had to fight the urge to let his eyes roll back into his head as all linear thought exploded from his mind.

"Since that day," he went on, narrowing his eyes again with a sober look that held hers, "I have woken every morning thinking of you. Each night as I drifted off to sleep I would wonder if you were awake, what you were doing. I would promise myself that I was going to ask you out the next day, and that was the only way I could get to sleep. Even when I was sleeping with another girl I would promise myself that I would ask you out the next day, and break it off with her if you said yes."

She made a moue, an adorably furious and vulnerable swirl of red and blue in her eyes.

“Next time you tell this story you can leave out the other girls.” Her hand did not squeeze him hard enough to hurt him, just hard enough to let him know that she could if she wanted to.

Letting go his firm grasp, he petted her hair soothingly.

“As you wish,” he smiled. “I watched you, I thought of you, I suffered merciless teasing from Matt, and over time I realized I was not going to stop feeling this way.”

He let his hand drift from her hair to alight on her cheek as tears welled in his eyes.

“It may sound silly, I barely know you despite all the time I’ve spent stalking you. But I love you, Jessica. I love the way you smile and the way you laugh. I love how every time you move it is with a sweet grace that delights my eyes to watch. I love your body, so sexy and perfect and always modestly but attractively dressed. I love how you frown just a little tiny bit when you say ‘good morning’ to someone and they don’t respond. I love how sometimes your eyes are dark blue pools of stormy sea and how other times they are beautiful chips of ice, light blue sky stretching vast into eternity. I love you, Jessica. I love everything about you. Everything I learn about you makes me love you more, and I would give anything to have the chance to make you the happiest and most loved girl in the world.” He stroked her cheek as he spoke, brushing away half of her happy tears while the rest puddled on his chest.

Her eyes were huge and blue and luminous with tears.

“Would you say it again?” Her voice was thick with emotion.

Letting his hand fall gently to her jaw, he tilted her chin slightly to make his serious words more serious.

“I love you, Jessica.” Kris held her gaze as he uttered the words.

She blinked through the tears that still fell.

“I love you too, Kris,” she whispered. Then her eyes swirled red and black and blue as she climbed on top of him, a grin on her tear-stained face. They sighed together a moment later, and her sigh carried the sweet words to his ears again. “I love you.”

When the cell phone started buzzing and playing Katy Perry’s ‘E.T.’, there was only a moment’s hesitation before Kris felt her grind against him again in sweet desperation.

The song played on, the rise and fall of her hips keeping time with the music.

CHAPTER 2

Roche hung up the phone without leaving a message. Much as he wanted to get the machine moving, he'd rather the cogs and sprockets be happy and late than on time and miserable.

He tried Paul again, hanging up at the beginning of his long but pleasant message prompt. "Hi, this is Paul. Sorry I can't—"

Slipping his phone in the pocket of his dark slacks, the devil turned to Matt with a frown.

"This place needs to be ready in thirty-six hours," he growled darkly.

Matt let his gaze wander a slow circle around the room. All the furniture had been cleared to one side and stacked, save one table in the center of the floor flanked by two simple straight-backed chairs. Wood of all lengths and sizes were stacked in random haphazard piles, filling the space with the fresh scent of cut lumber. Table saw and a nail gun were cast with a crew of circular saws and belt sanders and hammers to make the production seem possible. The boxes of unopened nails and complete lack of sawdust told the truth of the matter, however, as did the papered unchanged windows and stark bare walls. The place was a shambles, gutted but for the coffee bar and the disarray of tables and chairs.

Matt gave a low whistle and grinned, unconcerned.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen," he mused.

"It is, though," the devil insisted. "I just need a good cup of coffee and a little help."

Spreading his hands, Matt arched an eyebrow at Roche. "Are you kidding? It's not humanly possible."

His clouded countenance cleared, and the devil grinned.

"Good thing I'm not human," he said through pointed canines. "And neither is my help." Digging his phone impatiently from his pocket, he frowned as his beefy fingers punched buttons.

"You still have the Walker's key?" Roche snapped.

Matt's eyes narrowed as he remembered, narrowing further as he dug in his pockets with a frantic lack of success. The devil held up his free hand between them, his meaty thumb and forefinger pinching a thin platinum

chain dangling a glinting platinum key.

“You should keep better track of that,” Roche reprimanded Matt as his hand curled about the key. He hung up again without leaving a message.

He sighed. The devil needed a cup of coffee.

Opening his mouth to speak, Matt closed it again as Roche barked at him angrily.

“Take it!” the devil shouted. “Get Paul! Hurry! Why are you still here?”

Matt examined the object for another moment.

“That’s not my key,” he protested. “It’s gold, not silver.”

“Paul got an upgrade,” Roche growled through clenched teeth. “It’s platinum.”

“Cool.” Matt palmed the key and headed for the front door, moving with casual slowness.

“Don’t walk, jackass!” the devil took up shouting again. “Use the key! Close your eyes and think of the Walker! Engage your imagination! It’s all you’ve got!”

Roche shouted until he was yelling at an empty room, then quieted and crossed his arms across his broad chest in satisfaction. Eyeing the coffee bar warily as he approached it, he slipped through the swinging door and stood before the great holy machines of mystery that turned bean to brew. Just as he was considering crushing a handful of beans in his beefy paw and heating a pot of water with a small fireball, the door that had been frustratingly closed all morning opened.

Jessica stepped into the cafe, disheveled blonde hair over penguin pajamas over penguin slippers. She was adorably cute and beautiful all at the same time, wearing a happy soft smile that reminded the devil why life is worth loving. Kris came in behind her, looking happy and a little sheepish as his robed frame floated soundlessly into view. At the sight of the pair the devil felt anger and frustration and impatience drain out of him, and he grinned broadly at them.

“There’s the happy couple!” The devil was happy to hear happiness in his own voice.

They both flushed, and Kris stepped forward to put his arm around her shoulders and pull her close.

Roche nodded his satisfaction. “Good morning, you two. Jessica, would you be a dear and make a pot of coffee?”

She kissed the Guide’s cheek and stepped away, leaving Kris to accept the devil’s happy nod of approval.

“I sent Matt after Paul,” Roche said. “Would you find out what’s taking them so long?”

CHAPTER 3

Kris appeared in the familiar living room, a silly, sleepy, satisfied smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth. As the scene coalesced into his reality, his eyes grew round and his lips tightened to the thin line of a fierce frown.

“Paul!” he cried. “Paul, what are you doing?”

The Walker had Matt pinned to the wall with his forearm at his throat. He was naked, every muscle in his body taut with fury as Matt’s feet kicked helplessly at the wall inches from the carpeted floor. A spray of dried purple blood was splashed across his darkened visage. Ignoring the Guide, Paul glared at Matt as he struggled for breath.

“What are you?” Paul demanded, his short sword appearing suddenly in his free hand.

His eyes bugging out of his head, Matt gasped wordlessly and spread his hands.

“Paul. Paul!” The Guide finally got the Walker to turn his head. “You’re killing him. Let him go!”

Kris felt a chill as he looked into Paul’s eyes, cold and full of rage. Then he blinked and stepped toward Kris, letting his short sword go back to wherever it came from as Matt crumpled to the floor. The Guide took an instinctive step back, but Paul just turned and collapsed to the couch. His bloodied face watched his gasping friend warily as he absently tossed the throw from the back of the sofa over his lap, somewhat covering his nakedness.

“Brenna.” Paul’s voice was suddenly loud, angry again. “Brenna is a devil. You’re her brother.” He looked past Kris to peg Matt with his furious gaze.

“What are you?” Paul demanded again.

Kris had to turn to see Matt’s reaction, and was surprised that he was squirming uncomfortably under the Walker’s accusing stare.

He turned again to Paul.

“What happened?” Kris asked.

“She came at me,” Paul responded, his voice flat and toneless. “She came at me and I killed her.”

It was Matt the Guide ended up restraining, standing to catch him as he launched himself unthinking at the Walker. Whatever Matt was, he wasn't any stronger or faster than the Guide, and Kris was learning to think success into his movements.

Holding him, his mouth right next to the Guide's ear as Matt shouted, "You killed my sister? You killed my sister!" Kris tossed him back into the chair he had sprung from. It rocked back precariously, and then fell forward to land with a loud thump.

Kris moved before the chair, blocking him from standing. He could hear Paul's low chuckle behind him as the Walker sat fearless, not even bothering to manifest a weapon.

His back to the Walker's dark laughter, Kris watched the man before him deflate from rage to bewilderment. Matt looked helplessly up at the Guide, whose gray eyes went from demanding peace to demanding answers.

"What are you?" he echoed the Walker's question.

Matt stirred uncomfortably in the chair, opening his mouth to speak only to shut it again. Finally his handsome mien relaxed, he sunk deep into the cushioned chair, and he shrugged.

"I don't know," he said simply.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Paul was standing suddenly beside him, glowering down at Matt. He clutched the blanket over his bare belly, so it covered him to the floor.

The Guide nudged his naked shoulder.

"Put something on, would you?" he asked. "And maybe clean up the, uh..." Kris circled a finger round his face, not wanting to point out the blood to either of them.

Turning his head slowly to land his dark gaze on Kris, the Walker's face was suddenly clean over the collar of his leather duster.

They both turned their attention back to Matt.

"I don't know," he said again, squirming uncomfortable under their combined curiosity.

"Let's find out," the Walker snarled.

There was a glint of steel and a blur of leather, all too fast for the Guide to see.

He did see the light gash that appeared suddenly on Matt's naked forearm, welling red blood before he realized he'd been cut.

"Hey!" Matt jerked his arm away far too late, succeeding only in getting a few droplets of blood on his shirt.

"You cut me!" He covered the cut with his hand, glaring up at Paul.

“He’s human,” the Walker said to Kris, ignoring him. “Or at least his blood looks human.”

Holding Paul’s gaze long enough to let him know he did not approve of his methods, the Guide knelt beside Matt.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“He’ll be fine,” Paul said dismissively. “It’s just a scratch. There might be some bandages in the bathroom. I don’t need them anymore.”

Matt shook his head.

“It’s okay,” he said, though he still clutched his arm. “Would you guys please sit down? I don’t know much, but I’ll tell you what I do know.”

The supernatural duo exchanged a glance and a shrug then sat again. Matt ran his fingers through his dark hair and sighed.

“You guys remember the accident?” he asked.

They both nodded.

“Well, up until then I thought I was living a pretty normal life.” Matt grinned, forgetting himself. “Charmed, but normal.”

“And since the accident?” Kris prompted.

“During the accident,” Matt clarified. “Something happened, I don’t know what. Brenna and I were...I guess, transported. To another place. Another world, really. I don’t know.”

“I remember that!” Paul snapped his fingers, and Matt started at the Walker’s sudden movement. “There was, like, a wave of energy that swept over everybody. It was strange. It was like you and Brenna disappeared for a second. Then you were back. Then...”

Paul frowned, remembering.

“No,” Matt shook his head. “It wasn’t for a second. It was like an hour.”

The Guide turned to Paul. “It sounds like they went above.”

“No.” The Walker spoke firmly. “Brenna is a devil. They went below.”

Matt nodded agreement. “Yeah, someone asked what she was doing below. Some weird dude in a monster costume.”

He frowned. “A devil. I’m so stupid.”

“What happened?” Paul pressed him.

“Brenna said she needed to see someone, some lady’s name.”

“Was it Lilia?” The Walker asked.

Kris turned to look at him curiously.

“Yeah. Yeah it was. Lilia.” Matt’s response transformed his curious look into a questioning scowl, but the Guide turned back as he went on. “We went down this long hallway, and Brenna told me to wait outside. She went into a room and came out a long time later. Then we were back.”

“That’s it?” the Walker frowned. “That’s all that happened?”

Matt shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“Well, no.” He glanced between them, looking for sympathetic eyes, settled on the Guide. “I kind of made a deal. The guy...the devil that met us said he could help me, that all I had to do was one little thing.”

They both spoke at once.

“Help you with what?” Kris asked.

“What one little thing?” the Walker demanded.

“He said he could help with, you know, money. Success. He said he could turn my bad luck around,” Matt shrugged. “It’s what I’ve always wanted, to show Brenna and everyone that I can do it.”

Paul snorted derisively. “By making a deal with a devil? You’re a cliché, jackass.”

“What did you have to do?” Kris asked calmly, trying to ignore the Walker.

“Nothing,” Matt shrugged. “I mean, hardly anything. I just had to give her something and say that it was from me. It was just a pair of earrings, and they were pretty. I didn’t see the harm in it.”

Paul shook his head slowly, recalling his final seconds as a human being. “You didn’t look real peaceful when you came back.”

“No, no I wasn’t,” Matt agreed. “I remembered something, I remembered everything, and I was shocked stupid by the possibility of unintended consequences.”

Kris and Paul exchanged a bemused look. It was not like their friend to consider unintended consequences at all, much less be emotionally distraught by them.

“What did you remember?” Kris asked.

“I don’t remember,” Matt replied. “The feeling passed and when I found the earrings in my pocket later at the hospital I gave them to Brenna.”

“And then your luck changed,” Paul said.

Matt nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, it did. I told you guys about that stock, but that wasn’t all. I can’t buy a lottery ticket without winning something. A few hundred here, a few thousand there, I can’t miss.”

“So Roche hitched his wagon to your rising star,” Paul mused. He arched an eyebrow at Kris. “Do you think he knew?”

CHAPTER 4

“Look at you, such a sweet pretty human.” Her voice was beautiful and mocking, cruel and flinted. She stood with her hands on her hips, the curves of her full breasts and thin waist and rounded hips accentuated by her stance and the scant scrap of material barely covering it all. Flaming red hair and swirling eyes of orange and crimson and black animated the cold smooth breathtaking countenance of scarlet skin.

Looking down, hate burning in her heart and in her eyes, she glared at the head of dark silky hair hanging over the woman’s face. Slender, delicate hands hung limp above her head on either side, a sturdy wooden stock closed around her slim and graceful neck and wrists. The thick grained frame and base of the simple restraining device blocked the view of the rest of her body, and for her lack of responsiveness she might have been a disembodied head and hands.

“Ximena!” the devil hissed.

Still the hands hung limp, the long dark hair unmoving. Lilia crossed her arms across her abdomen, squeezing her ample breasts together in a deep valley of cleavage. She sighed and smiled.

“Brenna,” she said quietly.

The girl looked up, big dark eyes under a slight vertical line creasing the smooth pale skin of her forehead. She met the devil’s eyes, unflinching and unfamiliar. Drawn and tired, her face was all the more beautiful for the dark circles under her eyes and the dark hollows under her high cheekbones. Her thick, full lips were parched and chapped, and she moistened them so they gleamed full and red before she spoke.

“I don’t know where I am,” she said calmly. “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know why you’re doing this to me. I don’t know how many times I have to repeat myself for you to hear me.”

Brenna held the devil’s eyes the whole time she spoke. After, she let her gaze wander the small stuffy room that seemed carved from reddish-brown rock. Awful things hung on the walls, sharp daggers and wrought iron pokers filed to a dull point. There were clamps and manacles and vices of all sizes. A long handled single-head battle axe that looked clean and

sharp glinted in the guttering light of the torches that punctuated the walls regularly and spewed out black smoke interminably. There was no door, only rock walls and ceiling and floor discolored by the gathering smoke. Her round dark eyes watched the devil take the axe down and heft the weight of it as she turned.

“Please don’t.” They were two simple words, formed carefully by her thick glistening lips. The words held no fear, no anxiety, and no tone of supplication. She may well have been answering someone asking if she’d like them to add pickles to her sandwich.

The devil scowled, the sharp striking features of her face twisted but no less beautiful. “Tell me who I am. Tell me who you are. Tell me why you are here.”

She shook her head as much as the thick wooden crosspiece would allow, long thick silky waves of inky black hair swaying lightly back and forth. “I told you. I don’t know who you are. My name is Brenna Blanco. I don’t know why I am here. I don’t even know where I am. Please let me go.”

Raising the glinting curved blade, the devil’s eyes held hers. Her pupils were slits, and the slits widened as the arc reached its zenith.

“Tell me who you are,” she hissed.

“My name is Brenna Bl—”

The blade swung, a spray of red blood splashed the devil’s dainty scarlet feet, and the pretty little human head struck the floor and rolled. Big dark eyes stared lifeless up at the devil, a strand of hair across Brenna’s face as a bloody puddle formed under her lifeless visage.