

Blood Promise



by
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Bonus Content



Blood Promise Blurb



The angel of harmony is about to become a warrior of destruction.

It's been sixty-seven years since a spell gone wrong devastated the planet. All that is left of humanity exists in the demon-ruled, sinking ruins of what was once New York and New Jersey—home to fallen angel, Charmaine.

Now, by the grace of God, she has been given the chance to save the world and her angelic standing. All she needs do is work with a deplorable witch and condemn her fallen brother, the demon lord, to eternal imprisonment.

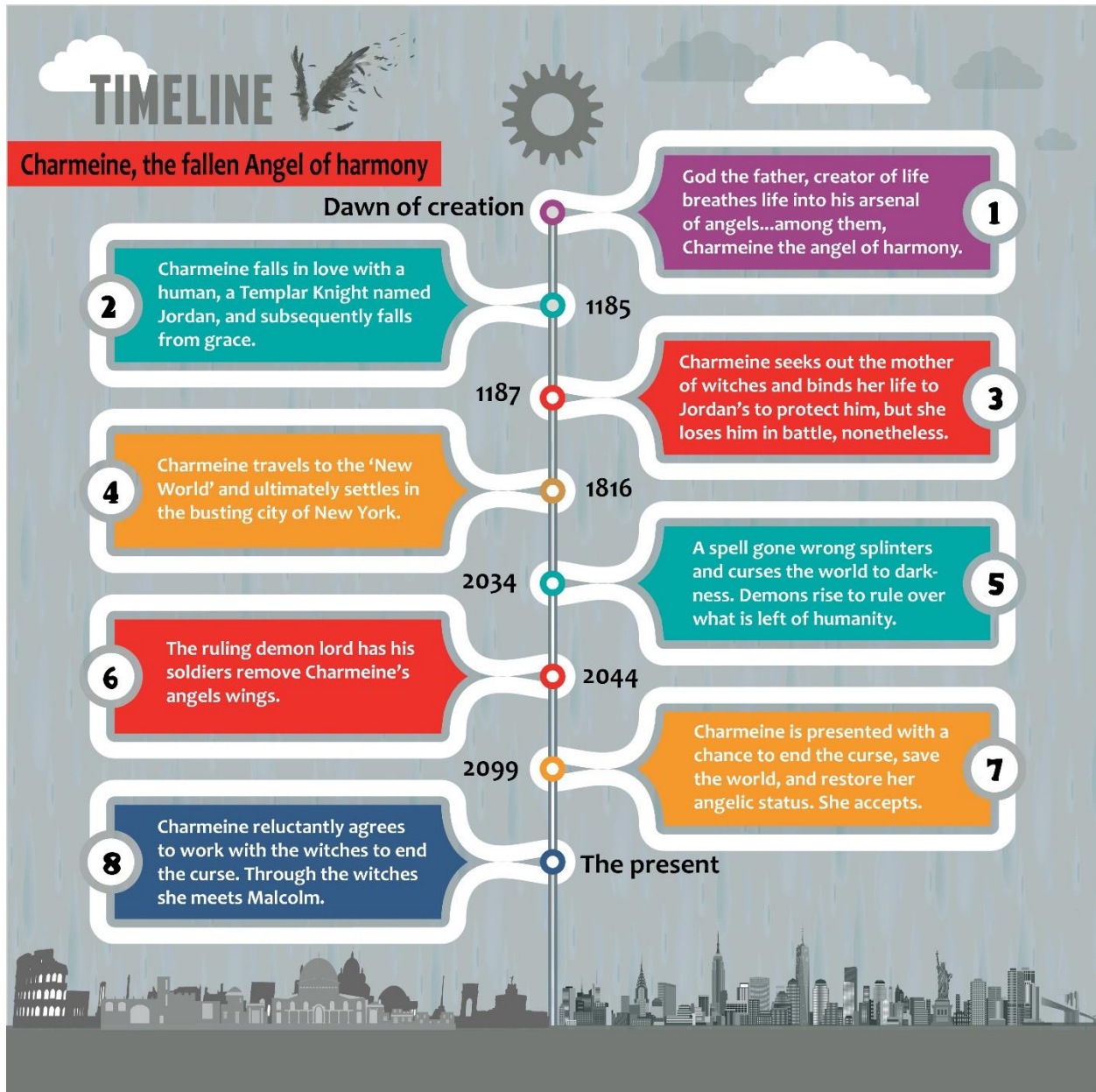
Charmaine would do anything to earn back her wings. But when she does, who will be there to save her humanity?

This fast-paced, action-packed, dystopian, paranormal romance about a cursed world and a biblically entangled war between family loyalties and age-old love is a **STANDALONE** contribution to the Charmed Legacy Cursed Angel Watchtowers collection.

Stories can be read in any order.



Fallen Angel Charmeine's Timeline



Timeline Story Bites

*Story bites are tasty, little events that took place before the start of Charmaine's dystopian, paranormal romance story, *Blood Promise*. The quick story shares are numbered to correspond with points on the previous timeline. Enjoy a deeper exploration into the fall of the Angel of Harmony with shares 1–6. You may recall points 7 and 8 as read in the novel.



ONE – Creation

The Dawn of Time

From nothing bloomed light. Eternal, glorious illumination. Energy thrummed and expanded, oscillated immeasurably fast, driving sensations throughout my new, conscious self.

I was vigorous vibration.

I am.

“I am...” a key thought within the new awareness I possessed. Moments before, I simply wasn't. Now I was. I was aware. I was conscious. I was alive.

Something fluttered through me, roiling and expanding and tingling...quickening. A sensation for which I had no name and no words.

Euphoria?

I tasted the impression of the word. It felt...correct.

Euphoria, giddiness, excitement, amusement, amazement, purpose, appreciation, disorientation. An overwhelming abundance of emotions existed in that moment, all of them dwelling within me, and none of the words that popped to mind quite fit all that I was feeling. I was dizzy, relaxed, ultra-focused.

“Welcome, my children.” The voice of my creator, my Father, my God resonated within me.

But, what am I?

“You, my beautiful Charmaine, are my child, and I am pleased to have you...all of you...here with me.”

Charmaine. Is that what I am, or who I am?

As soon as the thought formed, I already knew the answer. I was Charmaine, an angel created and brought to life by my Father, creator-of-all, God. It wasn't just me that had been created but many brothers and sisters as well. Their voices whispered through my thoughts like the gentle current of a celestial body slipping through space.

The sound was welcoming. A grand, glorious choir. My being warmed with the knowledge that I was one of many, a part of an immense family. All of us interconnected through the infinite ribbon of existence and energy. Our thoughts, our desires, our creations, all shared.

The outpour of glowing emotions from my core was intense, and it pained me. Love. So much love. Endless love. Yet, larger, more expansive than love.

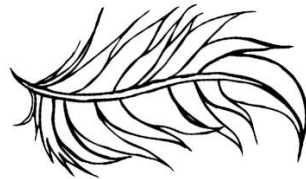
We existed in a nebula of light and color. Waves, ribbons, shimmering spots, all oscillating in shifting frequencies of paints and stains. Everything was fluid and in constant motion.

We were the then, the now, the forevermore. All of time was folded in upon itself, existing at once, exposing God's magnificent plan to us angels. The plan was brilliant and risky...the creation of new worlds, new creatures, and free will for them all.

Potent power pulses moved through me, rising, rising, rising. Pure joy and gratitude for myself, the universe, and the beings within my ever-expanding circle. I swelled with warmth.

“Charmeine,” my Father’s voice whispered in my mind. “You shall be my Angel of Harmony. You shall walk among my beloved humans, unseen, gifting them with peace and tranquility.”

My focus shifted, my gaze dropping down upon my Father’s most recent creation—gangly and dirty, funny-looking things, crawling upon a wet and muddy rock spinning through our Heaven—a place they called Earth. My resonance flipped, dipped, then surged. My consciousness erupted with such an overabundance of affection that I sensed it exploding from my being, my vibrational, energetic self. Eagerness took root and bloomed, flooding my every sense. I couldn’t wait to share my Father’s love with those simple creatures.



TWO – (Part One) Charmeine’s Fall from Grace

The Year 1185

My brother Xaphan and I turned away from the River Thames and made our way toward the New Temple Church. The archbishop had come to London in order to consecrate the temple’s construction. I had decided to witness the event...and to keep the crowds pleasant and agreeable.

My wings were settled snugly at my back, my soft silks hugged the curves of my body, and my bare feet made not a mark upon the ground on which I walked. Neither did Xaphan’s heavy boots leave a trace.

The air was heavy with dew and the ground thick with mud, neither of which bothered me, for I could get neither wet nor dirty. I did not hunger or thirst. Such things were for the humans to endure throughout their long life lessons designed for internal growth. As a higher being, I was not plagued to suffer such plights.

But just as I did not suffer, neither did I celebrate the same freedoms.

I don’t mind, I reminded myself. I enjoyed serving my Father and watching over the humans for whom he held such a keen affection. For countless centuries, I’d walked among them, influencing them, and, in all that time, my emotions had not waned. I, too, loved the confused, glorious beings.

Any feelings to the contrary were merely the effect of Xaphan and his attempts to influence me. He talked far too often about the glories of things not permitted.

A couple yards ahead along our path, a woman stepped into the street and tossed out a bucket of dirty water.

“Disgusting creatures,” Xaphan mumbled, twitching his wings and shaking his head. His blond ponytail swung in accentuation of his irritation. I tossed him a sideways flicker of disapproval. Even though he was a literal warrior of God, geared for battle in armor and weapons, and he had seen or endured many things I chose not to dwell upon, it was not our way to look upon the past or the unsettling. We

were to walk in praise and appreciation of all things, including the humans and their less-than-heavenly ways.

Since Xaphan's arrival in London, most of his actions and comments lead me to believe his only reason for having joined me was merely to be annoying. Although, deep down, I suspected the truth he kept ever so private was his desire for my angelic calming effect, as my gifted Angel of Harmony ability extended beyond mere human influence. The agitation within Xaphan's soul was barely detectible, but it was undoubtably present. Had his position among the soldier ranks left him that troubled?

The human woman, having tossed out her dirty water and showing no signs of acknowledging our presence, stepped back into the shadows of the building. By her perception, we weren't there. We didn't exist. As was the case with all humans. They were all unaware of the two angels walking the streets amongst them.

A passing man stumbled on the uneven road. His body tipped forward and leaned dangerously close, but before I could step out of his way, my brother Xaphan shoved the man aside. The man righted himself and, with wide eyes and a stiff jaw, surveyed the area. Again, we angels were not seen. The man shook his head and staggered away.

"Why did you do that?" I asked and continued my stroll along the path. "You know he wouldn't have hurt me, nor sensed my presence. His energy would have simply passed through mine."

Xaphan huffed. "After all these endless years of walking among these creatures, how can you still hold such affection for them?" Xaphan fired back.

I glanced at my brother and considered his inquiry before returning my gaze to the many men and women moving about their day. *How could I not?* I silently answered. Humans were works of vibrational art. Capable of a plethora of emotions, many of which they could experience in a mere moment of time. I had become all too familiar and comfortable with their highs and lows. After all, it was my charge to nudge them toward the higher vibrations of peace and tranquility.

And there was much need for peace and tranquility in London that day. In the hours preceding the temple's consecration, my attention had been held by the

rushed and anxious individuals. It wasn't so much the temple that had London residents uneasy, but rather, the growing numbers of Templars.

"Do you not get bored?" Xaphan questioned. "Every day, watching these lesser beings partake in merriments we are denied?"

"Brother, you are viewing our existence and the world around us in an improper light," I responded. "We are blessed in the highest, communing with God, entrusted by him to guide and care for these sweet simpletons."

Xaphan grunted and glared forward. "I think it is you who sees things unclearly."

A few yards ahead, two men began to push and shove one another. Words, ugly words, flew from their lips and pushed at the air. Onlookers began to gather, some merely watching the fight unfold and others adding their voice to the disagreement.

"Take that for example." Xaphan waved his hand toward the argument. "These humans are rife with conflict."

"At times, yes," I quipped and quickened my steps toward the bickering. "But it is not their default state. Love glows within them, and it is our job to help them tap into that core source." I sent waves of harmony forth and reached for the nearest human, but before I made contact, Xaphan grabbed my arms and spun me to meet his gaze.

"You miss my point, sister. Can you not hear the thrum of their blood beating in time with the excitement? Feel the elated energy vibrating all around us? Taste the flavor of their freedom?"

It was not freedom that I tasted in the air, but dew and excrement and rotten food.

Xaphan grabbed the sides of my face. "Do you not want such privileges for yourself? You and I, we are more powerful, more intelligent..."

I knocked his hands free and took a step back. "You should watch yourself. You are sounding far too similar to Lucifer. Would you wish the same fate befall you?"

He snorted. "Have you seen Lucifer lately? He doesn't appear to be hurting. In fact, I'd go as far as to say the split from our Father has been good for him." Xaphan smirked. "Imagine how his new freedoms could benefit you and your unspoken

obsession.” Waves of prized satisfaction rolled off Xaphan and permeated the surrounding environment.

My energy hiccupped, and my focus upon my brother froze, then tightened. Thoughts swirled, and I vibrated at triple speed. *What does Xaphan know? What had I given away, and how had I done so?*

My brother glanced over me. “And there it is,” he said with a cocky grin. “The whole reason you continue to endure these flawed creatures is because of your interest in one.” His gaze narrowed. “And you thought no one knew.” Xaphan barked a quick laugh.

No one was supposed to know. I’m completely aware such interests are forbidden.

“Speaking of the human.” Xaphan gazed past me. “There he is now.”

I jerked and glanced over my shoulder. Xaphan had spoken the truth. A couple Templar Knights had stepped in to break up the brewing dispute on the street. Their red-cross-emblazoned white surcoats stood out in the dingy, earthen-toned crowd.

One of the knights was Jordan, a man with one of the purest hearts I had ever had the privilege to behold. The shimmer of his inner energy was enough by which to identify him. Nevertheless, I enjoyed taking in his sun-darkened skin, the curly wisps of his chestnut hair, and the unnatural slight of his nose—the result of an improper set and heal of a long-ago break.

Over the ages, I had come to adore the awkward human form in more ways than I had expected. Their diverse appearances and spiritual matrix always managed to capture my wonderment.

My energy held for a breath, until I remembered Xaphan and returned my attention back to him. Only, he no longer stood before me. He had repositioned himself closer to the argument. Following his lead, I too worked my way around the crowd. In so doing, I brought myself closer to the human holding my curiosity, Jordan.

The bickering and hollering escalated to harsh pushes and shoves, causing the festering bubble of energy to pulse and shift.

“Excuse me, m’lady. It would be safer if you stepped away.”

I snapped to attention and whipped around to stare at the human addressing me, Jordan. His blue eyes were trained on me.

“Are you talking to me?” I asked.

“Why yes,” he said with a gentle smile. “I would hate to see you hurt by this growing, ugly mob.”

My eyes widened. “You can see me?”

Jordan’s face wrinkled, and his head jerked back. “That’s a strange question. Of course, I can see you.

“Really? And how do I look to you?” *My wings, my glow, my unhuman nature. How can he speak so calmly to me?*

“I’ve seen you many times. It’s a strange blessing that someone as beautiful as you would frequently find themselves on a parallel path to my own.” His lips twerked, hinting to a smile.

The crowd thumped against us, shifting us sideways. He raised a finger, signaling me to wait a moment, and he turned back toward the crowd.

He’d called me beautiful but made no mention of my appearance looking odd or out of place. Did I not look angelic, but rather like every other girl within the city?

Xaphan leaned into my ear. “You see?” he said. “Your surprise tells all. You may not have fooled me, but you were fooling yourself. He would have never seen you unless you wanted it to be so. You desire to be seen by him even against our Father’s wishes.”

I inhaled deeply and stepped away from Jordan, pushing back into Xaphan. Pressing my eyes tight, I wished to be invisible. I wished things as they should be—separation of humans and angels.

“M’lady?” Jordan’s voice broke through my concentration.

I opened my eyes to find him looking, searching, straight through me. I had wished myself unseen, and it had become so. Even though I stood directly before him, Jordan’s searching gaze was unable to locate me.

“Where did you go?” He asked, a whisper at my ear.

My energy jumped, engaged my heart, and blocked my throat. I turned and ran. Ran. Then flew. Away from the crowd and away from Jordan. Flew from the cascade of Xaphan's laughter.

Time ticked by without Xaphan or Jordan in my orbit. I lingered at the back of the modest crowd when the archbishop consecrated the New Temple Church's construction. Jordan was among the gathering of Templars in attendance. He never turned his gaze from the crowd, and I allowed myself to believe it was me for whom he searched.

When the ceremony was done and the people disbursed, returning to their normal daily routines, I remained, alone and unseen. Never before had I experienced such a weight upon my being. Heavy was my energy, my soul, and I wanted for things I couldn't describe or fully understood. But instinctively, I knew that Jordan was the key to my understanding.

I remained in the shadows, watching him day after day, as he attended to his duties or chores and his holy enrichment. My thoughts remained weighted and unsettled. My vibration and emotions, my overall energy, had taken on a human quality—chaotic, a total absence of serenity. I couldn't stop thinking about the moment Jordan had acknowledged my presence.

What was happening to me? What was I becoming?

On the seventh night, when Jordan retired to the stillness of his chambers, I followed in hopes he would somehow be able to clarify what I failed to comprehend—my current state of being. I stood silent in the doorway and watched as he removed his cumbersome gloves, cloak, and mesh coif. He laid each item on a small table at the end of his bed, taking the time to neatly fold the cloak.

He knelt beside the bed, bowed his head, and whispered words of love and hope in prayer to our Father. When he had finished, he took a seat upon the cot and began removing his boots. His motions spoke of a weary man, but his heart continued to sing an energetic tune of love and prosperity.

I exhaled any and all apprehension, allowing my energy to relax. Whenever I was in the presence of Jordan's inspiring emotions, I couldn't help but beam.

“Despite all the small life-course defeats and your internal resistance, you always remain emotionally uplifted. You may not know it or feel it now, but it is souls like your own that will someday secure this world’s salvation,” I whispered.

Jordan’s head snapped up, and his gaze locked upon mine.

He heard me. And...He sees me.

He dropped his boots to the floor and stood. “You’re here.” His voice was thick with astonishment and his features painted in confusion. “Where did you go the other day? And why are you here now?” He took a tentative step toward me. One, then another and another. His eyes were bright, his stare, intense.

“I. I don’t know,” I stammered. “I thought, maybe...” I sighed, and my shoulders dropped.

“What are you?” he asked, stepping closer. Too close. “How did you vanish like you did?”

His heat wafted over me, a mingling of adrenaline and human aroma. The scent of perspiration, earth, carrots, peas, ginger, and saffron. Never had I been inundated with such fierce sensory intake. A swirling in my being yearned. Pushed and pulled me toward Jordan. My chest was heavy, as if his palm was pressing into me, crushing me, and I couldn’t...couldn’t...

“I don’t understand why I am here or what it is I am feeling,” I said and silently prayed Jordan would understand and would somehow help me do the same.

The room brightened.

Was I the source? I appeared to be.

Jordan sucked back a breath, and his ocean blue eyes widened like a full moon. “You are glorious,” he muttered and dropped to his knees before me. As if he were standing before Jesus himself, he bowed his head and kissed my feet. In my current state, I was unworthy of his devotion.

Something new was taking place within my core being. A change was happening. A change that was altering my grace. My worthiness of God. A change that was affecting my thoughts, my wants, my desires. I was experiencing human senses.

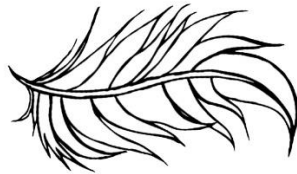
I was seen. I was chaos. I was falling. Falling from grace...over him.

“Please. Don’t.” I pressed my palm to his arm in a request for him to stand. The tingle of human skin against my own was unexpected. I yanked my hand away and sucked back a breath.

Jordan stood before me—raised by my request or my reaction, I did not know, but the call of his gaze, his gasp, his glorious fragile grace, was sharp and substantial. In an instant, I committed to the fall and pulled his body to mine, pressed my lips to his own, and dove headfirst into a new world of overpowering sensations.

The angel in me had been degraded and demoted.

I had become love—human love—and I was loving and loved and it was intoxicating.



TWO – (Part Two) For Love of a Human

The Year 1185

Although I was not human, I lived as one. I required rest and food, though not nearly as often. I also experienced the effects of temperature change. I gained a better understanding of humidity, frostbite, and the unpleasantness of filth.

The elements no longer bent to my whims or desires, nor did they spare me their discomfort. I suffered similar hardships as the humans and, in so doing, came to comprehend why humans often got confused and lost sight of their truth and purpose. The world was theirs for the creating, the enjoying, the indulging, but too often they chose to wallow in frustrations and pain. Because of their fragile insecurities, such emotions were easier to accept.

But unlike the humans around me, I chose not to lose sight of that which brought me happiness. I stayed close to Jordan, day and night, living as a Templar Sister. I made the best of my situation and of both worlds—Heaven and Earth. I served my Father through the church and enjoyed daily interactions with Jordan, even if few words were spoken between us.

Six months had passed, and I had fallen, with ease, into the daily routine of a Templar. I cared for the chickens, tended to the laundry, and cleared the dining hall after supper. I cared not for a position of power or authority and found myself content in the tending to the little, but not so mundane, things.

“Sister Charmaine.”

I spun, dirty dishes in hand, to face Livia. She approached with the stance of a woman heavily weighted by burden and fatigue. Her shoulders slumped, and her eyes drooped.

“I couldn’t help but notice that you are embracingly shy in chaplain counseling hours.”

I sighed and set the dishes upon the nearest table. I had been waiting for someone to notice. "I'm sorry, Sister Livia, but the men don't appear to be comfortable confiding in me. I would like to help them, if they would so allow, but few to none will open up to me." I bowed my head.

"I see." Her gaze swept over me, and she released a sigh. "Too enamored or intimidated by your..." She paused, and her brows raised. "uniqueness," she finished.

That was a nice way of stating the unspoken truth...until now. I was different from all those around me, and it hadn't gone unnoticed. Some ogled me, while others averted their gaze and attempted to avoid me. They couldn't quite pinpoint what it was about me that was different, but they sensed it and that was all they needed to act differently around me, or altogether avoid me.

"I want to help our brothers and sisters," I said. "Tell me how to do so when they don't trust me?"

"I think." She bounced a finger to her lips. "That you are not ideally suited for the nunnery."

Me, an angel, not suited for serving the Lord? I tilted my head. *Ex-angel.*

"I see that you take your vow to the church seriously. I know that you do, but maybe you would better serve the cause as a Daughter of Tsion."

I sucked back a breath.

A gentle smile graced her face. "I've seen the way you look at Brother Jordan. And he, too, seems to hold a special place for you in his affections. He's one of the good ones and has yet to be assigned a sister with whom he can find balance in the protective magick."

Daughters of the Tsion were paired with Templar Knights. When the men went into battle, the women offered songs and prayers of protection. But what prayers could I offer that my Father would chose to hear?

"Think about it, Sister Charmaine," Livia said. "It's quite clear that this path isn't working to the best advantage of your talents." She turned and marched from the dining hall.

“Talents.” The word rang with sarcasm. “She makes a divine connection with God sound so sinful.”

I jerked, swung around, and came face to face with my glorious brother Jehudiel. The room was alight with the fire of his splendor. Every air molecule sang of his magnificence. Not since my fall had I seen any of my brethren. Never had I beheld the angelic form from the perspective of a fallen. The human world paled in his presence.

The desire to throw my arms around him and hug him close burned strong within my gut, but I refrained, uncertain of how I would be received given the circumstance. After all, six months had passed, and this was the first visit from any of my siblings.

I bent a knee and bowed.

“What is this, sister. We shan’t have that.” Jehudiel touched my elbow and nudged me to a stand. I raised my gaze to meet his. “What is this I hear of a fall?” He cocked his head to the side.

“It is true.” I nodded, dropped my gaze to the floor. “But that should be old news now. That was six months ago.”

Jehudiel huffed. A second later, I was held tight within his embrace. He squeezed until I feared my bones might crack. Then, as quick as he had enfolded me, he released me. “Time is all relative, sister. What has been six human months to you has been a mere fold in time for me.”

My shoulders dropped, matching the frown upon my face. “What brings you to see me? Have I served my time? Has Father forgiven me?”

“He has not.”

“Then why?” I crossed my arms and hugged myself.

“I needed to understand,” Jehudiel replied. “Humans are so far below our level of existence. Why fall for one?”

My body relaxed, and I reflected upon the question. “I suppose I don’t see them in the same light as you do, brother. It could be because I was tasked with bringing harmony, or it could be for another reason entirely. Their constant blooming and evolving is gorgeous. They are gorgeous. They may be young and have much to

learn, and yet so many of them hold limitless potential and endless love. And Jordan, well..."

"Ah." Jehudiel's face lit up. "This is the one for whom you have sacrificed your grace, is he not? Jordan is his name?" My brother took a step closer. "Is he worthy of your penance?"

"I don't think it's your place..."

Jehudiel pressed his splayed hand to my head, driving his thumb into my forehead. In a crimp of time, he was privy to all that I had experienced since my fall.

My brother was there beside me, in the past, when I shivered with my first chill. Jordan wrapped a cloak around me for warmth. Jehudiel stood in the shadows, watching when I was hot and twisting my hair up over my head in an attempt to escape the unpleasantness of sweating. Jordan brought me a glass of water, cooled me with a *borrowed* handheld fan, and made ridiculous jokes until I was laughing enough to—temporarily—forget my discomfort.

With the memories, came a flood of emotions, leaving me warm and weightless. I didn't need my wings when I could float on the emotions stirred by Jordan. With him, it wasn't one big gesture that drew me in, but a daily supply of little things. Uplifting comments, thoughtful shares, judge-free guidance or advice.

"He is good to you," Jehudiel said. "But is it enough to have forsaken your angelic oath?"

"Does it matter?" I replied. "What's done is done."

"Indeed." Jehudiel's head bowed. "But what is to come?" His hands pressed to the side of my head, and he bowed his forehead to mine.

The tickle of endless cupid wings fluttered deeper into my mind. Things yet to come popped in and out of view at the speed of a finger snap.

"Too fast, Jehudiel," I said. "I can't grasp anything at this speed."

"You are slower now. Now that you are no longer among our ranks," he responded without moving a muscle or easing the pace. "It is for the best. You shouldn't know all that is to come, now that you are forced to live as one of them." His chest heaved. "But this, dear sister..." The indistinguishable flashes of memories slowed and focused in on one. "You may benefit from observing."

Jordan and I stood upon a hilltop, his horse shifting with unease at our side. A mild breeze wafted over us, and I shivered. Not from the cold but as a result of my heightened emotion. We were one pairing of many gathered Knights and Daughters of Tsion preparing for the Templars to ride into battle. The smell of fear and anxiety was strong among the crowd.

Jordan held my hands, his rough skin warm against my own. His heart beat a calm and steady rhythm. My heart was heavy and my limbs, weak.

“It’s not good.” I shook my head. “You would fare better to have another pray for you. Sing for you. My father has turned his ear away from me, and thus, my prayers are fruitless.” I closed my eyes and bowed my head. My body fought to quake with tremors, but I pushed against the desire, willing myself to stand strong.

Jordan leaned in close. “Your prayers hold every bit as much weight as the prayers of those around you, Charmeine. Your father still loves you. He never stopped. Our Lord is a merciful God. You know that. He loves you every bit as much today as he did when he created you. You simply need to learn to hear him with your new receptors. You are not as directly connected as you once were.”

I raised my gaze to meet his. A warm smile graced his face, lighting his eyes. “With the magick of your prayers of protection, I couldn’t be prouder or feel more secure.” His words warmed my entire body and being. A single tear escaped the edge of my eye and Jordan softly swept it away. “We couldn’t be more blessed than having our own Templar angel.”

I resisted a frown. I didn’t want to be the Templar’s angel. I wanted to be Jordan’s angel. Of course, I didn’t say as much. I simply lifted the corners of my lips in a weak and uncommitted smile.

Jordan grabbed my upper arms and pressed his forehead to mine, leaving barely a breath of air between us. “You are the most magnificent miracle to ever mark my world.” His breath washed over me, tasting of apples and almonds, and snapped my self-perception steady and strong.

Jehudiel released me and stepped back, ceasing the glimpse forward into time. “And so it is, sister. You have made your choice. You shall be missed.”

In a blazing burst of light, Jehudiel vanished from my sight. The room gloomed, and I was alone, once more. My bones ached from the tension I had held them

within during my brother's visit. I released a deep breath I hadn't realized I was holding and leaned against the table at my back. My palm dropped upon the edge of a discarded dish, causing it to jump and bump into another plate. I jerked.

With Jehudiel's visit and the things he had shown me, I had forgotten my duty of retrieving the dirty dishes. I spun around to face the table. My arm inadvertently knocking one piece, and then another, to the floor. The dropped with a clatter turned crash.

A small group of Templars passed by the open door. They spared me the slightest of glances. I paid them no mind and busied myself with the task of cleaning the mess I had made.

One of the dishes had broken when it had hit the ground. Bit by bit, I began gathering the remnants. A sharp pain, a rush of warmth, and a yelp from my lips. I dropped the broken plate pieces upon the ground and stared at the glob of red bubbling and running down my finger.

I was bleeding. I had cut myself, and I was bleeding. *I can bleed?*

There was movement at my side, but I didn't investigate. I kept staring at the blood running down my finger.

"Let me take a look." The sound of Jordan's voice tore my gaze from my injury. "It isn't bad," he said, pulling my finger closer. He dabbed at the cut with a wet cloth. "Could have been a lot worse. You're lucky you didn't lose a finger." His eyes twinkled with humor.

I scoffed. "You jest. Surely, these bodies are not that fragile?"

He laughed. "I suppose not." He pulled a bowl from the table and filled it with water from the pitcher. He dipped the cloth, rung out the excess liquid, and tenderly wiped my injured hand. "Look at that. You're already doing better. Your wound has stopped bleeding."

My gaze dropped to my finger. He was correct. The blood had stopped flowing. In fact, it appeared as if the wound was already closing. Clearly not a human healing rate. In addition to not needing to eat and sleep as often, I had a regenerative advantage.

“Good as new,” Jordan said, acting as if my quick healing was a normal every day event. “Now, what would you say to me helping you clean up this mess?”

“I would be most grateful,” I responded, wiping my hands upon my skirt and rising to my feet.

Jordan met my stand and glanced around the room, taking in all the tables of dishes awaiting pickup. “Where is your help? Isn’t this job usually handled by three or four?”

With a long sigh, I survived the room. “It appears Sister Livia thought it best I have some alone time with the task so that I might contemplate her proposal.”

“Proposal. That sounds provocative.” Jordan gathered the broken plate pieces and dumped them on the collection tray. Following suit, I began clustering the dirty dishes and moving them to the tray for removal.

“It would appear, I am failing in my nunnery duties.”

Jordan stopped what he was doing and stared at me. “I can’t believe it is so.”

“People don’t feel comfortable confiding in me, much less seeking my help. I intimidate them.” I dropped another stack of plates onto the tray.

Jordan stepped beside me, dumped dishes on the tray, and then lightly touched my hand. “Don’t take it personally. It’s just, when they look at you, they are reminded of their weaknesses and failings, and most here would prefer to turn a blind eye to such things rather than to face them.”

I pondered his hand upon mine and then turned my gaze to meet his. “Is that what you see when you look at me? A reminder of your shortcomings?”

A smile lit his face, and he shook his head, ever so slightly. “Not at all. When I look at you, I see everything that is beautiful in this world.”

The sound of the world beyond fell away, and for a breath of a moment, there was only the two of us existing in time. My body radiated and tingled with warmth.

I bit my lip. Sucked back a breath. Blinked clarity back into my thoughts. “Sister Livia suggested I join the Daughters of TSION.” I stared at Jordan, studying his every muscle response.

His back straightened, and his brow arched. “She did, did she?”

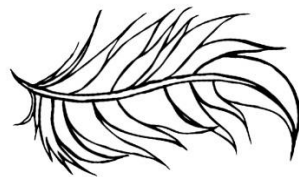
“She hinted, not so lightly, that you might be a good pairing.” A tepid grin struggled to control my lips.

His head pulled back, and both his brows jumped to an arch. His free hand slipped beneath mine, enfolding me in his glow. Minutes, decades, passed before he spoke.

“I can’t think of anything more welcoming than for us to work together and to have you looking out for me.” His voice was soft and melodic. It moved me to the core.

In that moment, all that I had lost, that I had left behind, was forgotten. A new future was unfolding before me. One filled with love and value. My heart swelled until it pressed firmly against my ribcage, and my energy vibrated with unrestrained furor.

“Then so it shall be,” I said, laying my free hand upon his and squeezing a forever-together clench. I was to become his Daughter of Tsion, and he was to be my knight.



THREE – Charmaine’s Blood Bind & Promise

The Year 1187

“Hello. Is anyone here?” I pushed open the door of the small home and stepped inside.

I had traveled far to find the strongest of witches, and, given the current political climate, I feared I was running out of time to locate and procure her help.

“Hello?” I called out and pulled the cloak from my shoulders. It was warm within the walls of the home. Warm enough that no cloak was needed. On the far side of the room, a healthy fire burned in the hearth, the flames chasing away any chills. Colorful tapestries wrapping the walls held the comfy temperature within. No paintings hung upon the wall, and no personal items adorned the room, but several surfaces hosted vases overflowing with vibrant and fragrant flowers. The space, with its chunky and overstuffed furniture, colorful tapestries, and flowers, was tidy, cozy, and as quiet as the night before battle.

It also appeared as if no one was home.

My chest hammered and squeezed, constricting my breath. I had been told this was the place. The home of the most powerful of all witches. Only, there was no one to be found.

My memories swept back to Jordan’s return from the Battle of Cresson. The Templars had suffered horrendous losses. Too many men had died. Jordan had survived but at what cost? His body had been injured, yes, but his mind and heart had been devastated. Now, he’d once more been called into service, and I wanted...needed...to protect him against the brewing battle the king of Jerusalem would foolishly lead the crusaders into against Saladin.

I stepped deeper into the home. A mug and pot sat upon the otherwise bare table. I raised the pot’s lid, freeing a fresh whiff of peppermint. No steam accompanied the aroma. Softly touching my palm to the pot’s exterior, I peered within and verified

the container was not empty. A half-pot of peppermint tea. Tea that had gone cold. I draped my cloak over one of the chairs pushed against the table and studied the room, searching for any clue as to where the witch might have gone.

At my right stood an open door to another room. An unoccupied room with a small bed pushed into the corner. The minimalist décor reminded me of the Templars and Jordan, his simple sleeping accommodations. At the end of each long day, he would sit upon his meager bed and quietly reflect upon the day. It was from a bed, all too similar to the one before me, that Jordan had risen when he first saw the truth of me, that fated night. The night I fell.

The night he found me.

I recalled the flavor of my lips upon his when I'd kissed him like it was the end of me. In a way, it had been. Despite it having been the end of everything I'd ever known, I'd kissed him with my entire heart and soul. And, oh, how he'd kissed me in return—releasing all inner conflict and giving in, giving all, to the moment.

We had only ever kissed. I wanted for more, and I feared having more, for it had always been forbidden to angels. Even our kisses were questionable. But I couldn't imagine suffering this human world without the slight brush of his skin against mine. Or a gentle word from his lips to my ear. I wanted him close. I wanted him alive.

My chest squeezed tighter, and I feared my bones might crack. I needed the witch. I needed to protect Jordan.

It had been two years, four months, and seventeen days since I'd fallen. That time spent with Jordan wasn't nearly enough. I wanted more. I wanted forever. For forever to be possible, I had to find the witch.

"What are you doing here?"

I spun around to face an unassuming woman with a lengthy braid of raven hair dropping over her shoulder and past her waist. Although I had never met the woman, something about her was oddly familiar.

"Devil got your tongue? Speak your business?" she snapped.

"I am sorry to have come into your home uninvited," I said, stepping away from the smaller room and back into the main area. "It was rude of me. But if you are who I think you are, I am in need of your help."

The woman stared at me, the lines on her face hinting to impossible age and knowledge.

I shifted my weight. Rubbed the back of my neck. When I had taken up the search for a powerful witch, I had not considered she would be anything other than human.

The hard lines of her face crinkled into a smirk. "Isn't this an ironic twist of fate. An angel asking for my help." She stepped into the home, closing the door behind her, then glanced over me once more. "Fallen angel," she added, then walked to the table and set upon it a bundled cloth.

She saw me for what I was. No human had managed to see through my guise, other than Jordan...and that was because I had wanted him to see the true me. Standing in this woman's presence, I did not believe I wanted the same of her. She had to have extraordinary power coursing through her veins.

"And who is it you think I am?" she asked, rolling out her bundled cloth to expose a collection of herbs. Their mild perfume danced in the air at my nose, tickling my senses.

"I came here under the impression that you were a strong witch." I stepped up to the opposite side of the table. "Now that I am here, standing in your presence, I see that you are more than a witch. More than human."

Her smirk widened into a full grin. "Yes. Far more powerful than you ever were and ever will be." She gathered like-herbs and began twining them together.

I had only ever dealt with humans and angels. I had managed to stay out of demon affairs, but this woman was clearly something other. Neither human, nor angel, nor demon. I inhaled a deep breath and released it slowly. "Will you help me?" I asked.

"And why should I help you?" She placed an herb bundle aside and turned her full attention on me, meeting my gaze with a firm stance.

"Because it is the kind thing to do? The godly thing?" I replied.

She laughed and looked to her hands, vigorously wiped them clean on the side of her gown. "Poor fallen angel of harmony. Even now you only manage to see the good in people. I suspect you have many lessons of hardship in your future." She dropped her palms flat upon the table, and the smile slid from her face. "Why should I help you?" she asked again.

My mouth hung open, but my mind was slow to fill the void with words. I was trapped in an endless, spinning search for the right thing to say. I had told her my reasoning, and she had swept it aside like it was dust upon her furniture. I needed something more. Something that would move her to action.

“What is it that brought you all this way in search of me, Charmaine?”

I blinked. Stood a tad taller. She knew who I was. Not only my previous angelic position but my name, and I had yet to place her truth.

“Don’t look so confused. The angels talk. The demons listen. My parents hear all and keep me informed.” She returned to her work with the herbs.

Angels. Demons. Parents of a powerful witch.

My thoughts snapped to the stories of the light and the dark. My fallen brother, Lucifer, and his relationship with the moon deity, Diana. My shoulders straightened, and my mind cleared. I was standing in the company of Adaria, the first witch...or partial-angel. I wasn’t sure what her origins made her, other than powerful and dangerous.

“You are Lucifer’s daughter,” I stated.

“I am,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You do realize, he, too, is a fallen angel?” I pressed my palms onto the table’s surface and leaned forward.

“The king of all Fallen,” she replied. “I believe my situation has granted me a rather unique view of family politics.” Having finished with her herb binding, she pushed them aside and locked her gaze upon me. “So please, leave me in suspense no longer. Tell me what so important that it would prompt you to seek my help?”

I stepped back from the table and studied her. Lucifer may have once been an angel, but he was no longer. And Diana, well, I could neither confirm nor deny her deity status. I knew not how Adaria’s parentage contributed to her disposition. Did she care about the world in which she lived? Did she care about the people with whom she shared the world?

“Adaria?” A young maiden pushed open the front door. We both turned our attention to the new arrival. Her eyes locked on me, and she startled. “I’m sorry,” she said, glancing from me to Adaria. “I didn’t realize you had company.”

“It’s fine,” Adaria said. “This shouldn’t take too much longer. Tell the women I shall join them shortly.”

The young maiden half nodded, half bowed, and backed out, closing the door. Although short, the interaction was enough to inform me of Adaria’s tendency toward the humans. She was kind and caring. Soft in manner. Nicer to them than she was toward me.

“It is for the life of another,” I blurted.

Adaria turned to face me. The edges of her eyes lifted in question. “The life of a human?” she asked.

“Yes.” I dropped my head. “A soldier. A Templar knight, to be precise.”

In that moment, I was no longer standing in Adaria’s stone cottage, but I was back at the Temple Church, sitting across the table from Jordan, quietly eating. I was not scheduled to take my meals at the same time as Jordan, and yet, I somehow always found a way to make it happen. The knights were silent in their partaking of food. It was only with our eyes, our energy, by which we communicated. And Jordan’s energy always told me thousands of things his lips always failed to translate. His gaze, like his aura, was always soft, welcoming, and blissful. He appreciated and glorified everything he set his sights upon.

Adaria chortled, and my memory faded, my gaze rising.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deep. With my exhale, I trained my focus upon the task at hand. I couldn’t afford to lose myself to memories and daydreams. Not now. Jordan’s future depended upon my success.

Adaria was smiling, as if my plight had her oddly delighted. “Is this human the reason for your fallen status?” she asked with a slight giggle.

“He is.” My skin began to warm. Almost burn.

“And how long ago was that?” She leaned into the table.

“I do not see the relevance of these questions.” I crossed my arms.

She shrugged. “If you want my help, you will answer my questions, no matter how irrelevant you deem them.”

I narrowed my gaze upon her. If Jordan's life didn't depend upon her help, I'd have stormed from her home that moment. But as it was, I needed her more than I wanted to admit. "Two years, four months, and..."

She raised her palm, halting me mid-answer. "So long in the company of a man that you find so divine that you would fall from grace and yet, not enjoy the pleasures his flesh has to offer you?"

I flinched, and my face pinched into what I assumed was a look of horror.

The first time I had felt Jordan's skin upon mine, the night I had appeared before him, pressed myself upon him, and preceded to fall, I had wanted to know all the things...experience the sins of the flesh...the lust of love, but he had stopped us. Stopped me. Stating that his human nature deemed him unworthy of a celestial being such as myself, and if he were to break his Templar vow of celibacy, then he would only slip farther down the ladder of worthiness.

I didn't believe he was unworthy, but what mattered was that he believed in his vow and what actions deemed him an honorable soldier of the church and God. I respected his decision then and now, as he still felt the same way.

Adaria dismissed my shock with a wave of the hand. "Don't be so shy. You were created to love. Maybe not make love, but who's judging? Love is love." She turned away, carried her twined herbs to a cupboard across the room.

My status as a fallen angel spoke clearly to who had judged me. I doubted she was oblivious to the invisible heavenly ghost she had placed forefront in my mind. It was her intentions that I found unclear.

She opened the cupboard and placed the herbs upon a shelf, then, one-by-one, hung them upon a string affixed within the space. Silence had devoured the space within the cozy home. Adaria had launched her emotional strafe and had left me to fume and sweat within its vapors.

"I honor and respect him," I said, willing my words to work once more. "I will not devalue his purpose here on Earth."

She spun to face me. "And you think your love, your physical love, would do such a thing?" Her eyes were wide. "My dear Charmaine, you are sadly misguided."

“I am not misguided.” My face flushed. “I am fallen. I am less than. And he is good and pure of heart...”

Her splayed palm struck the space between us, and my words died. “If you care not to have your way with him, then what more could you possibly want?” she asked.

My head jerked back with a gasp. How could she not see the situation as I did? “I want to save him, of course. Protect him from injury and death.”

“Even though you would not choose to enjoy his *gifts*,” she taunted.

“Even so,” I deadpanned.

She sighed. “Humans were created to live and die, Charmaine. It is unnatural to want anything different for them.” She returned to her position opposite me at the table.

“Maybe so,” I conceded and studied my fingertips where they brushed lightly against the table top. “But can I not protect him against premature death?” I returned my gaze to her. “Protect him against the loss of a limb or a large hole through his abdomen?”

Adaria’s lips dropped into a downward curve. “And how would you propose to accomplish this feat?” she asked. “Turn his skin into diamonds? He is human. It is within their weakness that the humans find their strength. You cannot take from him the chance to discover his own strength in all things. In the case of humans, immortality is purely nonphysical and shall never extend to the physical realm.”

Purely nonphysical, she says. But I can no longer venture into the nonphysical.

“Please.” I reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “Bind his blood to mine,” I pleaded. “Make my immortality his so that it might protect him and heal him and give him strength when he is in need.”

“Do you not hear what you are asking?” She yanked her hand free of my grasp.

“Please,” I repeated.

Adaria closed her eyes and breathed deep. When she once more opened her eyes and gazed upon me, the windows to her soul were dark and heavily burdened. “Although I do not agree with your request, I shall help you.”

“Praise God!” I rushed around the table and threw my arms around her, hugging her tight. “Thank you. Thank you,” I said with hardly a breath.

“Enough.” She extracted herself from my hold and brushed at her upper body as if cleaning away my dander.

“What must we do?” I asked. “How do we protect him?”

“Do you have anything that belongs to him?” she asked.

“Only this.” I tugged at the cloak I had dropped over one of the chairs.

On the same day that I had set out to find the witch, the Templars had left for La Saphoire. In the early predawn hours, Jordan and I had hidden in the shadows, exchanging our whispered goodbye-for-nows. The air had been chilly and, despite being dressed like one of the Templar Sisters, I had shivered. Jordan had draped the cloak over my shoulders to help keep me warm. He had told me he would collect the cloak when next we met.

During my travels to find Adaria, the cloak had warmed my skin against the night chill. And outside Adaria’s homestead, it had protected me from the harsh coastal wind.

“It will do,” she said, moving around the table and snagging the cloak from where it hung. “Shall we?”

“Is the cloak all we need?” I stood facing her, the cloak held between us. Softly, I rested my palm against the folds of the garment’s rough fabric and recalled Jordan’s strong resolve and gentle manner. *I miss him.*

“The two of you will provide the rest,” Adaria said with a tease in her voice and then slapped her hand against my upper arm.

The air rushed from the room and from my lungs. The world swooned, faded to particles of dust, breaking into barely-there bits and pieces. Energy shattered. My bones and blood turned to sheets of ice, and my view grew heavy, heavy, heavy. Adaria’s little home vanished.

Darkness consumed all.

“You don’t travel well, do you?” Adaria’s voice broke through my oblivion, and she nudged my side. Or actually, kicked my ribs. “Wake up, weakling.”

I sucked back a breath, deep into my core. *Breathe*, I thought. *Breathe*. Had Adaria knocked me sideways with magic? My eyelids remained cumbersome and uncooperative, but my other senses were awakening.

The ground was hard and the air dry, drenched in the stink of sulfur. Voices raged with anger or horror or turmoil. Had Adaria not only knocked me sideways with magic but also dragged me to hell?

“Charmeine!” The words, not spoken by Adaria, were whispered yet urgent. “Charmeine. What are you doing here? It isn’t safe for you here.”

My eyes fluttered open, and before me hovered Jordan’s beautiful, dirt-smudged face. My hands flew to the curve of his cheekbone and cupped his chiseled jaw. “Jordan.” Every fiber of my being screamed at me to kiss him, but not since that first day had I been so bold. Seeing him alive and safe was all I needed in that moment.

I glanced to either side of us. The sun-scorched dirt beneath me was barren and bone-dry. Soot and fumes clogged the air, and somewhere nearby, a fire raged, as evidenced by the thick smoke clouding the sky. The fumes caused my eyes to water. Made my throat dry and scratchy. And left the taste of ash upon the air. The hollers I’d awoken to were not the screams of sinners in Hell, but rather Jordan’s fellow crusaders. Events did not appear to be unfolding in their favor.

Jordan’s palm wrapped over my hand and squeezed. “As happy as I am to see you, you shouldn’t be here.” His expression was a mix of concern and steel. “The battle field is no place for one such as yourself.”

I huffed. It was likely several of my brothers and sisters walked the battlefield, unseen by human eyes. Since I was fallen, there was no hiding my presence. Of course, I knew that wasn’t what Jordan meant. Over the last two years, I had sensed a protective feeling blooming in him. A protective feeling that was directed at me. It warmed my soul to know he felt that way toward me, even if I didn’t require any protection.

“You needn’t worry,” I said. “These weapons of man cannot hurt me.” My fingers traced the worry lines pressed into his forehead.

He sighed, and his breath washed over me, immediately making me aware of his body’s extreme dehydration. “If you are impervious, then why were you laid out unconscious on the ground?”

Adaria dropped into a crouch at our side. “Because she is clearly a lousy traveler who is easily overwhelmed by my magic.”

Jordan’s gaze snapped to Adaria. “And who are you?”

“She’s with me,” I said. “She helped me find you.”

His lips pressed into a tight line. “Still doesn’t explain why you are here. Especially now. The battlefield is no place for an angel.” A line of flaming arrows flew over our heads. Jordan’s head snapped up, and he studied the projectory of the attack. A second later, he returned his attention to Adaria and me. “As you can see, it is not a good time.”

“Indeed,” Adaria said. “As Charmeine here feared.”

“Charmeine?” Jordan turned the full force of his soul-piercing gaze upon me. My muscles melted, their reactions becoming slack. His strong hands slipped beneath me and cradled my head and back. With the gentle hand of a healer, he helped me sit up. “What is this about?”

“I wanted...” My words stopped, those left unsaid tangled and knotted in my throat. My jaw hung open.

“Charmeine is concerned for your safety.” Adaria cut into the conversation. “Men. You continue to war over land. Such a pointless conflict. And this particular conflict...” She raised her head and surveyed our surroundings. “I don’t foresee your side emerging as champion.”

Jordan dropped his head. I pressed my head to his own and listened to the slow, steady beat of his heart. It beat, not with adrenaline, but with the thrum of resolve. He knew the battle was already lost. Now, I needed to see him walk away unscathed.

My fingers raked through the damp curls of his crown, and I kissed the top of his skull. He raised his head to meet my gaze.

“Let me protect you, Jordan?” I whispered.

“I cannot leave my crew, if that is what you are asking.” His eyes darkened, and his brow wrinkled. “My duty is here.”

“I know.” I nodded. “But what if you could stay true to your Templar duties while also knowing, without a doubt, that we will see each other after this is over?”

Jordan's knees collapsed, and he dropped to his butt. The lines on his face pressed heavily into his flesh, and his gaze bored through me, stirring my every emotion. *What if he says no and then dies on this battlefield today? What if he doesn't say no but while taking too long to make a decision is killed by the opposition? What if...*

"What is it you are asking?" Jordan glanced between Adaria and me. "What do you want from me?"

"We merely want to give you a divine edge by binding your blood with Charmaine's," Adaria said.

"And what will that do?" His hand reached out and found mine. Squeezed.

"Protect you. Heal you. Give you strength," I said.

"I have to be honest," Adaria uttered. "Magic, no matter how divine, can sometimes be unpredictable, as it is sensitive to the core intentions of those involved in the making. The binding could protect you, heal you, give you strength. Or it could morph into something we haven't yet conceived." A semi-wicked smile crept across her face. "Sounds rather human in nature, doesn't it?"

"A binding of our blood?" Jordan stared at me, and his emotions were unreadable. "Are you asking me to promise myself to you, always?" A smirk curled the edge of his lips.

My mouth popped open. "I. I." I blinked and dug to the crux of my request. "Yes. I guess I am."

"I've been yours since first we met." He glanced between me and Adaria. "But we both know I can never be all that you need."

My fingers pressed against his mouth, stopping the nonsense dripping from his lips. I shook my head, making my disapproval clear.

Jordan sighed. Smiled, albeit, infinitely slightly. "What shall you have of me to make this commitment official?"

"Hand me your knife." Adaria pointed to the knife strapped to Jordan's leg.

Without question, Jordan slid his sword to the side so that he could easily slip the knife free from its sheath. He handed the knife to Adaria.

"Show me your palms," she said to both Jordan and me.

I splayed my palm flat before me, and Jordan did the same, his thumb softly rubbing against my own. Adaria studied the knife, massaging the curve of the handle between her thin fingers. Her gaze wandered toward the sky, and, as if pulled by an unseen string, the knife followed.

“As the heavens above are forever more, so is this promise these two before me now make.” Her gaze dropped upon us, and, with a firm grasp upon the knife, she sliced a quick cut into each of our palms. She dropped the knife and grabbed hold of our hands. “The binding of blood shall connect them as one. Her blood belongs to him, and his blood belongs to her.” She pressed our palms together, folding them around each other into a fistful hold. The wet of Jordan’s cut mingled with the damp of mine. “From this day forward, never shall a one be lost. Always, shall they be connected heart, mind, and soul. As I have said these words, so it shall be so.”

Adaria inhaled deep and exhaled slowly. Her body relaxed into a slump. Her head dropped. I awaited a sign, an electrical charge in the air, a strange sensation through my body, but I felt nothing. Nothing at all. Had the magic worked?

“Are we done?” Jordan asked.

“It is done,” Adaria said without shifting her gaze from the earth at her knees.

Jordan shifted, pulled himself closer to me. Tiny cherubs chaotically fluttered in my chest, and my muscles tightened. He reached across my body and collected his knife from where Adaria had dropped it upon the ground. My body relaxed, even as my skin adopted a fever.

I internally pressed against my emotional reactions, attempting to wrap myself in a calm, unreadable appearance.

Jordan slipped the knife into its sheath, then took my hand in his. I gazed into his eyes, my breath seemingly forever caught in my throat. His enchanting presence...or maybe it was my fascination with him...had caused the world to fade away. And within his gaze, I could see Heaven and Earth and all of eternity.

It was the shirttails of magic. Adaria’s magic. Now, our magic.

I knew then that our bind was solid and true and that the magic had worked.

“This has been a defining moment far beyond my wildest of hopes.” Jordan’s palm caressed my cheek. “Thank you for choosing me.” I opened my mouth to speak, but

Jordan's finger touched my lips, hushing me. "There could never be another for me. There will only ever be you. That is my blood promise to you."

I stared deep into his eyes and wished his words to become our forever truth. Never, in all of my existence, had I felt the way I felt when I was with Jordan, and I never wanted to let that feeling go. Adaria's tease about my relationship with Jordan sprang to my mind, and, with the contemplation of possibilities, electricity raced over my muscles and through my nerves.

The heat of Jordan's body crashed into me, turning my body into wet sand. His lips pressed to mine, and I gave to him, willingly, all of me. I was butter beneath his touch. Clay to be crushed and molded. I was everything I never thought I would be and everything I was afraid to ever wish I'd be.

And then he was gone, rushing into battle and yelling over his shoulder at me. "Get to safety. I'll see you on the other side of this thing."

I remained laid out upon the hard ground, staring at the smoke-filled sky and listening to shouts and screams of men. My fingers covered my mouth and attempted to hold the feeling of his kiss in place upon my lips.

Jordan had kissed me. Despite his vow to the Templar and his concerns regarding his worthiness, he had kissed me.

"Time to go. I've got things to do." Adaria's grip encircled my wrist, and once more, the air was sucked away from me and the world around me. This time, I closed my eyes and rode out the sensation of the magical transportation to the recall of all that had just transpired...especially Jordan's admission.

A sharp pain twisted through my side. Had Adaria kicked me again? My head swooned, and nausea churned in my belly. I must have passed out during the travel for when I awoke, I was on the floor of Adaria's home, alone. She had folded Jordan's cloak and left it on the floor at my side, along with a note. I sat up, stretched, and unfolded the note. Began reading.

I would like to say it has been a pleasure...

There is always something of the positive to be gained in every encounter. In time, the positive in this meeting will be made clear. Until then, may our discoveries continue to be enlightening and uplifting.

Safe travels, Charmaine. I left you some tea for your journey.

I glanced up at the table upon which sat a small, two-handled, glass urn affixed with a shoulder strap. I grinned and returned my attention to the note.

I do hope the magic works in your favor. I honestly do. But should it not, remember magic is fueled by the intentions of all involved in the making. That includes both you and your knight. Only the two of you know the truth you harbor within your hearts. If he is not bound to the same physical state as you, then the magic we worked today may have condemned a human—a transitioning physical, nonphysical being—to be forever enslaved to an Earth-bound being. Thus meaning, he may never know love.

My skin chilled, and my muscles petrified. I crushed the note, crumbled it tight, and tossed it across the room. I took the cloak, the tea, and my leave. I refused to believe that Jordan was in any way cursed. I had protected him. Saved him.

Adaria was with an intimate gathering of woman outside her home. When I stepped outside, she looked my way, as I did hers, but I did not wave or call out any salutations.

I immediately set my course toward Jerusalem and Jordan. Why I had not asked to be left at the battlefield upon completion of the magic, I could not fathom. By foot, Jerusalem was close to a forty-day journey. That was too long for me. I'd left Jordan rushing into battle, and I now needed to hold his face in my hands once more. I had to know that he was safe. Alive.

Requiring less sleep or nutrients than humans, I could walk day and night, reducing the travel time. Better yet, I could procure a horse, a new horse for each day.

I was tireless in my efforts, reducing the distance between Jordan and me as quickly as possible. In the dark of night, I even spread my wings and took to the sky.

But my wings were unreliable, and as quickly as I moved, news of the crusaders' defeat moved more swiftly, rushing to meet me mid-journey.

The majority of the army had been slaughtered, and nearly all of the Knights Templar were lost.

I fought the desire to scream, break everything in sight. I would not breakdown. Nor would I believe Jordan was lost to me. After all, Adaria had bound us with powerful magic. Jordan was protected. I merely needed to find him. And so, I continued moving forward, toward the last place where I'd seen him—somewhere between the Horns of Hattin and the Sea of Galilee at Tiberias.

My bones ached with tension, barely bridled anguish, and yet, I moved forward, clinging to hope and thoughts of a long future together.

Tens of thousands of men had lost their lives, on both sides of the conflict. The battle may have ended days, even a week earlier, but the dead still littered the battlefield. Naked and mangled and rich with decay. Bodies had been savaged and any items of worth looted. Pyres burned. Holes were dug, and piles were created. Any and all bodies were slowly being dragged or directed to various holes for mass burial or toward the piles that fueled the pyres.

Not a single soul that I spoke with knew of Jordan or his situation. And so, I prayed, and I prayed, and I prayed. Although, I had no guarantee that my Father would answer, much less hear me. Not anymore. Not since I'd fallen. But answer me or not, I refused to give up on Jordan. I walked the battlefield debris, studying every face of every transitioned soul. With each face, my chest warmed, fueling my hope that Jordan was somewhere in hiding, waiting until it was safe to find me.

I walked and walked and walked and searched and searched and searched. No Jordan. When the battlefield had been checked and double-checked. I moved to the piles beside the pyres. Bodies piled upon one another without any care. Although the souls were no longer present, respect for the individuals the deceased once were should have commanded a more dignified disposal.

I checked the first pile and was overcome with a new sensation. Loss. Never before had I experienced loss, but then never before had I been tethered to the physical world. I used to be able to follow souls through transition into their next phase of existence. In my current state, I was left behind. Left to wonder.

Within the pile of bodies, I spied faces of men I'd somewhat known. Men who had served and fought beside Jordan. Men who had silently eaten their meals in the same hall, slept beneath the same ceiling, and attended the same church services. If only I could have protected them all. My fists clenched. My heart squeezed.

They were gone, but Jordan was not. Jordan was fine.

Jordan was not to be found in the pile.

My chest was tight. Tighter than it had ever been. Everything about my body, my being, was rigid and rough with movement. Still, Jordan was not there. Jordan was fine.

I moved to the second pile.

An emotion unfamiliar to me fluttered rapidly within my gut. My eyes clenched shut, and I mumbled a prayer. My fingers dug into the side of my thighs, and I held myself motionless, immobilized. I realized, with a shiver, that I was frightened, practically panicked, at what I might find in the pile before me.

But there was no reason to panic or be fearful, I reminded myself. I would not find Jordan in the pile. Jordan was fine. He was safe and holed up somewhere, not here.

I opened my eyes.

My feet rooted themselves to the earth. My legs tripled in weight, dragging me downward. My knees buckled, and I dropped to the hard, scorched ground. My gaze was trapped, unable to flinch away from the horror they beheld.

I blinked hard. Rubbed my eyes. What laid out before me was a nightmare. Not the truth. Not the now, nor the future.

I blinked a hundred times, then more. Rubbed at my eyes with such ferocity that my skin became raw. Yet, no amount of blinking or rubbing changed what I saw.

Protruding from a spot near the bottom of the pile, an upward-staring lost hope. Jordan.

The scream of a wounded and dying animal clawed free from my lungs, burst from my lips with the intensity of Hell's fire. My fists slammed to the ground, rocking the hillside, and my wings sprung sharp, thrashed three times.

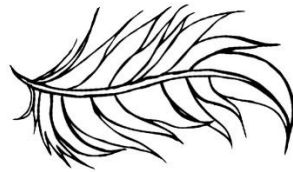
All sensory was sucked into the pulse of my outburst, my emotional outcry. My all-too-human reaction.

A tear rolled down my cheek. I stilled, and the world dropped into silence.

I leaned forward, touched my head to Jordan's. "This was not how we were supposed to end. I made you a promise, in blood," I whispered into his ear, for what little good it did. His soul was no longer there. He had moved on.

We should have been forever. Where did it go wrong?

I kissed his forehead. My muscles snapped, and my bones disintegrated. I fell to the ground in a wreckage of howls and sobs. My love was lost.



FOUR – Charmaine Arrives in the ‘New World’

The Year 1816

Shivering, I pulled my cloak to a tighter close around me. It was unusually chilly considering spring was approaching, and the breeze along the Hudson added an extra bite to the brisk air. Last year’s eruption of Indonesia’s Mount Tambor had thrown the temperatures out of balance across the Northern Hemisphere.

It might not have been the ideal time to travel, but, since the war between Britain and the newly formed sovereign country of America had ended...almost forty years ago now...I had become anxious to return to the continent. My last visit had been before my fall from grace, and so much had changed in the interim years.

I glanced down the line of passengers waiting to disembark. The cluster of people was filled with red noses, rosy cheeks, grumbled conversation, and pushes toward the gangway. The journey had been long and tiresome, and finally, goals were in sight. Everyone’s except mine, because I wasn’t a hundred percent sure what my goal actually was...besides getting to America.

Would I find a comfortable town in which to settle? Or get involved in the local politics in an attempt to steer the human’s toward peace with the indigenous people?

The row jerked and shifted along the ship’s port side, toward our exit. The warmth of bodies pressed against one another and the foul scent of rotten breath wafted among us. It was an experience I would have preferred not to endure, only, as fallen, fewer options were available to me. If I wanted to travel over great spans of land or sea, I would need to travel as a human. My wings no longer carried me far distances.

My limitations were frustrating, but I was grateful that my wings were well hidden, because things could have been far worse. With a deeply inhaled breath and a thrum in my blood, I climbed the wooden steps and traversed the narrow gangway, my sights set on the American soil at the other end.

From the gangway, to the wharf, to the soil. I moved, practically pushed, by the exodus of bodies all around me. My progress slowed where the wood of the wharf met the so-called promised land.

The ground was wet but packed firm, my feet making only the slightest impression upon the soil. I lifted my cloak, nonetheless.

Across the wide avenue before me stood a collection of homes and businesses. To my left, more of the same. To my right, a waterway that continued inland. Somewhere beyond the skyline of buildings at my front, spread the landscape of Manhattan farms of which I'd heard tale.

"Mistress! Mistress!"

I stepped farther onto the avenue. A curly-haired, young lad rushed to my side and grabbed the handle of my bag. A quick survey of the area revealed several children rushing to the aid of newcomers.

I smiled at the boy beside me, and although I sensed no ill will, I did not release my hold upon my luggage. The boy straightened his shoulders and returned my smile. His sky eyes glistened with want...no...need. The seams of his clothing were fraying, and the soles of his leather shoes were separating. His pale and freckled skin, hidden beneath a fine layer of dirt.

I suspected the boy needed a home, a bath, a meal.

"Can I assist you, mistress? What is your destination?" His expression was one of eagerness, and I realized he was hoping for coin in exchange for his assistance.

I released my bag to his care, deciding right then to make a trade—financial help for recommendations and suggestions.

"Where might I carry your luggage, mistress?" the lad asked, in a thick Irish accent.

"I really don't know," I replied. "Might you have a suggestion or two? Some place a tad less busy?"

The lad bit the inside of his cheek and tilted his head, ever so slightly. "Are you looking to head into the new territory?" he asked after a moment of consideration.

He was referring to the westward expansion. A movement that was stealing more land from the indigenous people every day. No doubt, a lot of the newcomers to the

continent were looking to claim their own spot of land through this country's rapid growth.

"Not necessarily," I replied, unsure if I should head that direction or not. I would like to help the people on both sides of the movement avoid bloodshed, but I was one fallen angel, and the land was vast, the number of affected souls, tremendous.

Behind us rose the shouts of men. I glanced over my shoulder. A few of the crew, along with some men on-site, were hassling the other boys who had swooped in to help passengers.

When I turned back toward the boy, his cheeks were flushed. "My apologies, mistress. I must take my leave." He handed my luggage back to me.

"I shall go with you," I said, without a moment's hesitation, and pushed my case into his care, once more.

"But those men." He indiscreetly pointed toward the commotion of men chasing away the other lads.

"Never you mind them." I took the boy's hand and led him several steps away from the dock. "I have a way of calming even the most irate of souls." I smiled down at him, and he stared at me, unblinking. Did he sense the difference in me? The inhumanity? "What may I call you?" I asked.

"Connor," he said. "My name is Conner." He shook his head and appeared to release all tension and uncertainty with the action. He spared a quick glance at the bag held between us. "Need we make any arrangements for any luggage in the cargo hold?"

"Not at this time. Once I get settled some place stable, I'll send for my things."

His eyes widened, and he leaned forward. "You're rich?" he whispered.

"Rich is not the word I would choose," I replied. "Let's just say, I tend to collect things and have trouble letting them go." I winked.

"Hey, you there!" A gruff voice hollered at my back. Connor's gaze shot past me to the ship beyond.

"I think that's our cue to skedaddle," I whispered playfully.

“Come on, then. I shall take you to the finest Inn in town.” His tiny grip in mine tightened, and he yanked me forward at a quickened pace.

We scuttled through the streets of the harbor and beyond, Connor educating me on local businesses and residents every step of the way. I focused on my footing, taking care not to step in puddles or horse manure.

Connor came to a stop beside the local inn. The place appeared adequate enough, although finest was doubtful. The lad glanced between the sign above the door and the luggage in his hand. “You should find comfortable accommodations here, mistress. I have heard many good things.” He set my suitcase down and meagerly splayed his palm between us. “Might you spare some coin for my time and efforts?”

Of course, I will. It had been my intention from the start. And I was about to tell him as such, but then my gaze fell upon the branded ‘B’ upon his hand, and all my words got caught in my throat.

I swallowed hard, allowing the nerves across my shoulder blades to relax, then gently took his hand, twisting to fully expose the branding upon him. “What is this?” I asked.

Connor snatched his hand back. Cradled it to his body. Turned away. “I’m sorry. I had no intentions to displease or deceive.”

I stepped forward and melded my palm to the curve of his shoulder. “I am neither. I simply want to know who would brand a child in such a hideous fashion.”

Connor spun around to face me. “I am not a child. I am a man. I am old enough to travel on my own and earn wages for work rendered.”

“Indeed, you are.” I tilted my head and arched a brow.

“And so...” Connor hesitated. “I am, therefore, old enough to serve a man’s penance.”

My lips pressed into a heavy frown. “You accept being branded a thief?”

“It is an unfortunate truth. I took the bread because my stomach was twisting in upon itself. I did not think I could stand it much longer.” He studied the ground at his feet.

I sighed. “You were starving?”

He nodded without meeting my gaze.

“There is no crime in feeding one’s self if the action does not harm another and taking bread does not hurt anyone. Only in the greedy ideals of men does such an action cause another person harm.”

Connor’s head snapped up, and he stared at me. “You are not like most people I’ve met.”

I laughed. “No. I’m not like anyone you’ve ever met. You can trust on that.” My smile faded. Connor had admitted to his theft, but something continued to simmer deep within him. A truth left unspoken. I dropped to my knees and placed my hands upon his upper arms, directing his attention solely upon me. “You are telling me you were branded a thief for stealing a loaf of bread? It seems an extreme punishment.”

Connor dropped his head, once more. “No.” He reluctantly met my gaze. “I was branded after being caught for the third time.”

“All of the thefts for food? Because you were hungry?” My chest tightened. Through the ages, I had seen a multitude of similar scenarios, and they never ceased to disturb me.

Connor’s hands fisted into tight balls, pushing the blood from his fingers. He turned away, trying to hide the tiny tear pressing free from his left eye. “It wasn’t all for food,” he admitted. “But please understand, mistress.” He faced me, his skin flushed in muted crimson. “I wanted to buy passage to find my family.” He wiped at the tears streaking his cheeks.

“Why aren’t you with your family now?” I asked.

“My father and I traveled here together from our homeland. We were in route to meet with my aunt, Jeannie. She is my father’s sister. Her family moved here two years ago. In her last letter to my father, she asked if we might join them here in America, and so we booked passage. Things had been difficult for us since my mother passed last winter, and my father thought being close to Aunt Jeannie might help ease some of the hardship. But my father grew ill during the voyage. When he passed away, the men working the ship took all our coin for the inconvenience of dealing with my father’s corpse.” Connor swiped at his persistent tears.

I pulled the boy to me and smothered him in a loving hug, allowing my angelic serenity to sooth all his senses. His body relaxed, and his sobs ceased. He pushed back, blinking his tears away.

“Why are you so nice to me?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t we all be nice to one another at all times? It is how we perceive the world and choose to treat one another that has the power to ignite positive change.”

Connor frowned. Shook his head ever slightly. “I don’t know.”

I snapped upright, causing Connor to react with a jerk. “Come on,” I said. “Let’s go on an adventure.” I grabbed my luggage with one hand, and the boy with the other, and set out down the street, once more.

“Where are we going?” Connor asked, moving at a half-walk, half-run pace in an attempt to keep up with my long strides.

I glanced over my shoulder at him. “Where is it you said your aunt, Jeannie, lived?”

“I didn’t,” he responded. “She resides in the town of Brooklyn.”

“Then it is to the town of Brooklyn where our adventure shall take us.”

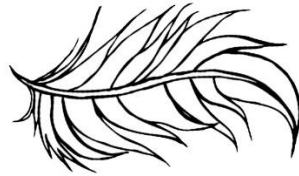
A smile as bright as the heavenly lights lit his face, and a wave of energy jumped into his gait.

Together, we made our way by land and water, traveling with willing families and voyagers. I saw Connor safely to Aunt Jeannie’s doorstep, where she welcomed him into her arms and into her family with unconditional love.

My heart swelled with the accomplishment of reuniting family and finding the boy a safe, healthy, loving environment in which to grow. His companionship had warmed my heart and soul, and so I decided to make the town of Brooklyn my home.

I watched—from afar—as Connor grew into a strong young man, every day looking and seeming more and more familiar to me. His skin darkened from the sun, and his dark curly locks relaxed. But it was less the physical appearance, although that rang with familiarity, too, but the soul of the man that resided behind his ever-clear, sky-blue eyes. It was as if I had known him before.

I waited for Connor to wed. To start a family. But that day never came. Pneumonia took him from the Earth in the year 1828. And when he passed, I felt a piece of me splinter and wash away with him.



FIVE – The World is Splintered

The Year 2034

The barista set two coffees on the counter and nodded in our direction. John was too busy bustling with excitement to notice the exchange. He brushed his black hair from his face and shoved his hands into his jeans' pockets. He glanced every which direction—gazing at me, the floor, the walls, the other patrons—but I doubted he saw anything other than the desires and dreams brewing in his mind.

We had left the jeweler mere moments ago with a new diamond ring in our possession, and John's words were spilling from his mouth at the speed of falling water.

We had popped into the coffee shop for a little warm-me-up and to allow John a chance to wind down. The shop was narrow and bustling with customers, typical of a Manhattan cramped space. It didn't allow for much seating. What few spots there were, pressed up against the wall, were filled. A collection of bodies stood to the side and in the aisle, awaiting their orders.

The paneled walls glowed in the streaming shine from the inset lights above, as well as from the sunlight filtering in through the storefront window. A backlit faux image of nature covered the far wall, and it, too, added to the illumination of the caffeine percolating place.

I reached past John and collected our two coffees, handing one to him.

"On the rooftop, underneath the night sky," he said.

"That would be lovely," I replied, looking up. John had four to five inches on me. He was tall but not intimidating. The smile behind his eyes was always kind.

"Do you think it's good enough? Maybe a night in Manhattan, a visit to the top of the Empire State building."

John was preparing to propose to my neighbor Sophie, the young woman who lived in the apartment below me, and his entire body was buzzing. He had asked me

to come to the jeweler with him and help pick the ideal ring to Sophie's preferred style and taste. He planned on asking for her hand in marriage later in the week.

I took a sip of my coffee and studied the tile at our feet. It was odd spending time with John like I was one of them, human. Most of my neighbors avoided me. They were cordial enough, but it hadn't gone unnoticed by any of them that I never aged. Sophie had been the first in ages to try and befriend me. She was relentless with the visits and the talking. Questions. She had an endless supply of questions. I'd come to know her rather well, despite my lack of returned disclosure.

It was because of Sophie's constant attempts to befriend me that John had decided I might be able to help with the ideal ring purchase. When he had asked for my help, I'd been inclined to say no, but something within me had told me to go on the errand. As if the idea of him being alone in Manhattan frightened me.

It was a silly thought.

I shook my head and took another sip of my coffee. Swallowed. "You're overthinking it," I said. "She loves you. She's going to say yes."

"I just want everything to be perfect." He hugged his warm cup close to his chest.

John kept talking, but I was no longer listening. There was a grumble in the earth that had caught my attention. The sound was rigid and forceful and unlike anything I had ever before heard. An infinitesimal shift moved the floor beneath our feet. The motion was so slight the people around me didn't appear to register the change, but my energy cranked into high gear. My body was thrumming and humming, and my senses screamed for action.

The coffee slipped from my grasp. Hot liquid splashed across the floor and John's legs.

"Ouch!" He jumped back and shook his leg. "What happened?" He gazed at me with wide eyes. I stared through him, allowing my heightened senses to see, hear, smell everything.

Sulfur festered in the soil below, oozed into our environment through quick-forming cracks in the Earth's crust.

A flash of a second after my mind roared, the building quaked, and the lighting beyond the store windows morphed into a perplexing blue glow. The humans

reacted as they often did, with instant fear—crouch or flee. Shouts of “Earthquake!” filled the tiny coffee house. But this was no ordinary quake. Something magical was brewing. That knowledge tingled through every fiber of my being.

Without thought, hesitation, or fear of consequences, I dug my feet into the ground and spread my wings wide. Swooping them around John and any human within my reach, I pulled my wings into a tight cone of protection and ducked my head.

Within the darkness of my winged shelter, three humans shuffled, whimpered, cried.

Three.

Only three.

My chest squeezed. *It's better than none*, I reminded myself.

“You’re going to be alright,” I reassured, not knowing if I spoke the truth or not. Two of the people mumbled about me and the situation, but John was strangely quiet.

Thunder exploded all around us. Only it wasn’t thunder; it was the screams of people and the collapsing of buildings. Across the street. To our side and behind us. The building within which we stood. All of Manhattan was crumbling to the ground.

Destruction suffused my ears, and dust clouds, filled with debris of what was once inhabited structures, engulfed us. The rumble and crash consumed minutes. Long, crawling, heart-pounding minutes.

When the boom of smashing buildings settled, I flared my wings back with a firm wave, fanning away as much dust as possible. Despite my efforts to clear the air, the world remained an ugly, beige haze, with a curious red glow emanating from somewhere above. Visibility was close to nil. Thankfully, I didn’t depend on my sight to know where John was in relation to me. I reached out and grabbed his hand.

“We need to get going,” I said, yanking him to a stand and pulling him forward. He resisted the pull. I paused my flee efforts and studied his dim outline. “Are you hurt?” I asked.

“No.” He made no motion to move.

“It isn’t safe here.” I released his hand and searched the haze for the other two people. “Everyone should get to safety.” I turned toward where the street used to be and took a step, then glanced back at John. “Are you coming? We need to make our way to the bridge...assuming it’s still standing.”

“Do you think it collapsed?” His voice spiked. “Ohmygod, Sophie!”

“Come on,” I said. “Follow me, and be careful. I’ll get you home safe to Sophie.”

Without another word, John started following me, cautiously maneuvering through the wreckage of what was once Lower Manhattan. Any remnants of the city’s history had been demolished. Everywhere we looked, stepped, there was rubble and dust and death. We moved without speaking, helping any distressed individual we stumbled upon during our trek.

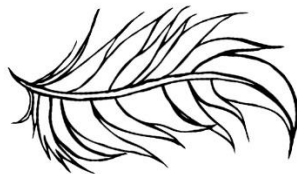
When we reached the bridge, the view of its condition was obscured by the never-ending dust cloud.

“Shall we take our chances?” I asked. “Venture out and see if its crossable?”

“Yeah, I think it will be fine,” John responded.

“Are you sure?” I asked, a hint of sarcastic humor in my tone.

“Definitely.” He grinned and nodded. “We have an angel as an escort.” His grin twisted into a smirk, and, without another word, he stepped onto the bridge and began making his way back to Brooklyn and back to Sophie. “She always insisted there was something special about you,” he mumbled.



SIX – Charméine Physically Loses Her Wings

The Year 2044

I flared my wings high and wide, creating shelter for the humans from the rain. Together, we loaded our small boat with necessary fishing supplies. The mission to fish for meals tended to be a lengthy and sometimes dangerous process, so supplies needed to include extra meals and possible rescue provisions.

Frigid water slushed at our feet, and the rain battered upon us like pebble pellets. The world-shattering curse had taken the sun from the sky and doomed us with constant rain and rising sea levels. Although the event that had destroyed our world had taken place ten years ago, it wasn't until about three years ago that the red algae had become an issue.

Colonies of red algae had overcome the city ruins, and the algae toxins had killed the shellfish, the fish, and made the water unsafe if swallowed. For these reasons, fishing expeditions had been moved farther out, away from the old city borders, into the oceanic zones. But the farther our fishermen wandered from the city borders, the closer they came to the lethal lesion, a highly charged electrical current of dark magic.

The men beside me grumbled and grunted. The curse upon the land had pushed human inclinations to argumentative, with tendencies toward harm to others. No one wanted to get along or play nice anymore. Not like they had done for countless centuries. But, in my small circle of the world—my neighborhood—people managed to be more cordial than residents beyond our section. It was clear to me that even though I was disgraced by God, my fallen status had not wiped clean my harmonic effect on those in my proximity.

Because of my presence, my friends and neighbors managed to work together for the betterment of their life conditions. The world-ending incident had opened all human eyes to the supernatural, and the curse-charged air made sure I could no longer hide my generous wings. So, they knew what I was...Fallen. Yet despite my nature, my neighbors not only tolerated me but welcomed me as family.

“That’s the last of it,” John said, placing a small parcel of stale crackers into the boat.

“You know I won’t need those,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. But Philip here is going to join you, and he might get hungry.” John slapped Philip on the back. Philip threw me an uncommitted smile. “He’s going in my place.”

“Oh. Right then.” I glanced at Philip, then back to John, my usual fishing partner. John had informed me earlier that he wouldn’t be able to make this trip, so I had assumed I would go alone. If alone, food rations would be minimal. I didn’t need for food the way the humans did. Since my fall from grace, I got hungry and needed to feed myself, just not as often as my neighbors did.

“You know I would go with you if Aggie wasn’t so sick,” John added.

I knew his daughter, Aggie, had recently become ill, and it was only proper he remain home to help care for the child and keep his wife calm.

“Don’t worry about anything,” I replied. “Phillip and I got this. Don’t we, Phillip?” I nodded at Phillip, signaling him to respond with something positive and reassuring.

Phillip wrapped the rope tied to the front of the boat around his hand and yanked the vessel forward through the water. “I am going to put your fishing talents to shame, old man,” Phillip boasted.

John chuckled and, grabbing the side of the boat, helped Phillip steer the vessel down the street. “I hope you do,” John said. “I really hope you do.”

Our neighborhood had dwindled, but so had the supply of fish, so this trip was sorely needed. Food was needed.

All three of us maneuvered the boat a few blocks to 6th Street and started toward the East River, into deeper water. It was an easier path to the river than 4th or 5th Street, and a safer route than Broadway.

Once in the river, we would need to sail beyond the bay and Sandy Hook. Because the trip was lengthy and time consuming, we had managed an early start. The skyline was grimmer than usual, due to the lack of sun and the grey storm clouds.

The last building before the river fell away on our left, and Phillip jerked to a stop. John and I followed suit.

“Company alert,” Philip whispered, barely turning his head to deliver the message. He remained still as stone, watching an all-too-close approaching vehicle.

Running vehicles were scarce. With each passing year, fewer and fewer of them remained in operation. But somehow, the demons that had slowly crept into our cursed world had managed to amass a rather large fleet of military aquatic vehicles. They worked both on land and in the water. It was one such vehicle that now approached. On board, several demons.

Demons...their presence was as regular as an unwanted, violent, street gang. It was only a matter of time before one of them would lay waste to the city circle in a play for power. I only hoped that, when that day came, I could keep my friends and neighbors safe.

“Charm,” the demons chanted, pointing at me. They redirected their military vehicle toward us and our tiny boat.

“We’ve been looking for you.” The voice sounded, not from the demons approaching at our front, but from behind me.

I spun around and came face to face with three demons approaching on foot. Xaphan’s men had come at us from both directions, leaving us little room for escape.

“Have you now?” I asked, trying to sound casual, but glanced over my shoulder at John and Phillip and motioned for them to run. John shook his head and stood firm. Phillip glanced between us and remained steadfast.

I heaved a heavy breath and turned to face the approaching demons once more. Behind me, the vehicle stopped, and the splashes of footfalls jumping from the boat-car sounded.

“And why is it you’ve been looking for me?” I added. “You should know, I don’t do demon politics.”

“Xaphan wanted us to deliver a message,” the closest demon said. He stepped into my personal space, putting his body mere inches from mine. Hate and disgust rolled off his skin in waves.

Xaphan is here? My mind swam. Swirled like a whirlpool. When did Xaphan get here? How long has he been here? And why didn’t he tell me himself that he was here?

I released my hold on the boat. “Why didn’t Xaphan come deliver his message in person?”

“That’s a good question. My guess is that he thought I’d do a better job with the delivery.”

I tilted my head and narrowed my gaze. A second later, understanding bloomed...all too late.

The demon’s palm slammed into my ribcage, and I crashed to the ground, was swallowed by the water. Hands, so many hands, grabbed at me, clamped upon me. Water, tainted with toxins, sloshed and frothed and bubbled. All sight of my world was obscured. Muffled sounds of hollers and howls vibrated their way to my ear.

This, right here, an attack on the known fallen angel was stage one in a play for power. I had become a strategic move in Xaphan’s climb for control.

I kicked and jerked, but I was one disgraced angel against many demons and others. I received blow after blow from both feet and fists. My heart crashed in my chest. Did Xaphan want me dead? *He was my brother, had been my friend.*

Trapped within the vile grip of Xaphan’s dutiful brutes, my struggles lost to their beastly strength. A boot pushed into my gut, and I gasped, swallowed red water. Red water that was turning a deeper red by the moment.

I convulsed, coughed, and choked. The hands upon me tightened, dragged me from the water to a stand, and a kick to the back of my legs forced me to my knees. Before me, face down in the water, was John. Blood bloomed and snaked around his body. A few feet away, Philip lay in crimson water, his death stare directed at the stormy sky.

The demons had killed my friends, my family. A wail clawed up my throat and exploded from my lips. The roar filled my mind and soul. It was all I heard, all I knew, all I could comprehend.

Blood on my hands, Xaphan’s hands...God’s hands.

My wings sprung high, stretched for Heaven, pointed upward, accusing my Father for everything. Our cursed world, our poor living conditions, the existing demons, the death of my friends.

My back arched, and I let loose a second thundering roar. My wings flexed and swung toward my captors. Hit a wall. Only, the wall consisted of a line of demons ready for my moves. They captured my wings mid-swing and held them reluctantly steady. My muscles and bones yanked and pushed and twitched, making no progress.

The demons' crushing hold upon my wings tugged and tore unwilling feathers free. Searing stabs cut and carved at my skin, my bones. Lava-hot torment erupted throughout my shoulder blades and coracoid, the anchor of my wings.

Screaming. My entire being was screaming. My molecules were tightening. My bones were cracking. My wings were dying. Being cut and torn, separated from my body.

Red swallowed me. Black engulfed me. And nothingness consumed me.

I fell to the blood-filled water, the ghostly muscles and bones of my wings twitching, twitching, twitching. They were no longer a part of me, my wings. Xaphan had taken them from me. My once elegant, opal, angel wings were now splattered with blood and floated in the water, several feet away from me.

For the first time since Jordan's death, I crumbled and allowed myself to cry...big, ugly sobs filled with every possible low emotion.



SEVEN - Chance to Restore Her Angelic Status

The Year 2099

Is it possible for Charmaine to get her wings back? Charmaine is visited by her brother Jehudiel who presents her with a chance to not only restore her angelic status, but to save humanity and cure the world. You can read this encounter in chapter two of the Blood Promise novel. [CLICK HERE](#) to be transported to your reading platform options for this story.

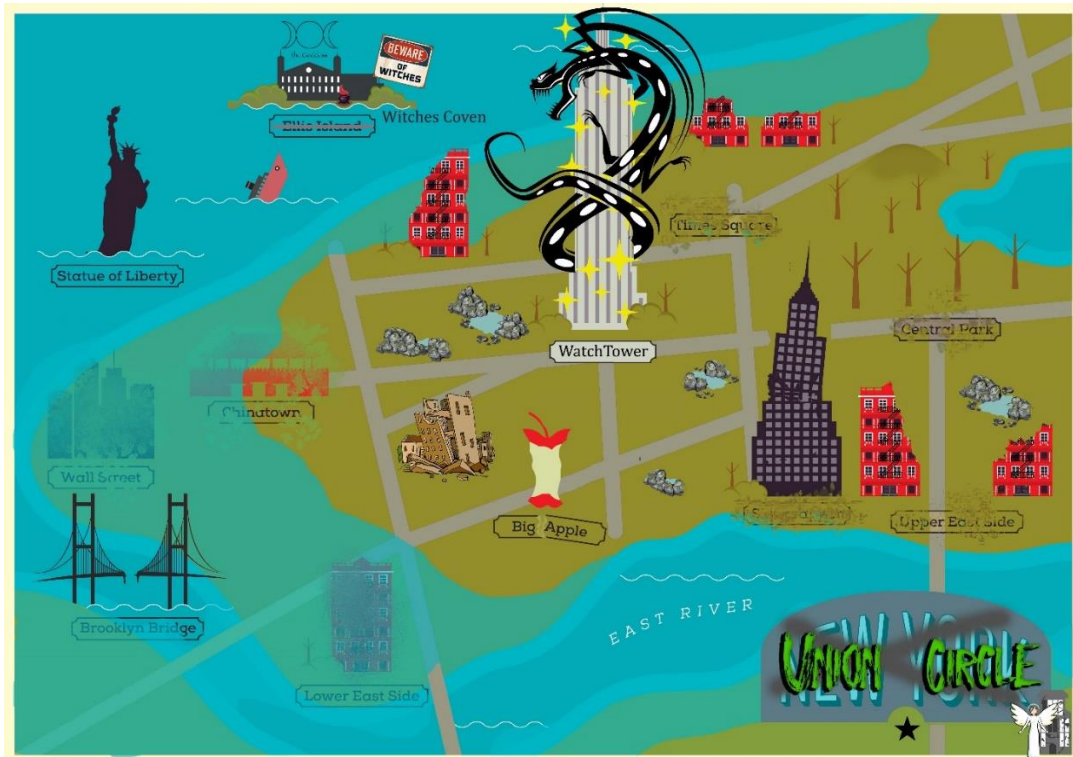


EIGHT - Meeting the Reincarnation of Jordan

This man couldn't possibly be the reincarnation of Jordan, could he? In the first chapter of Blood Promise, Charmaine catches her first glimpse of Malcolm, the man who reminds her of Jordan, her Templar Knight and only love. But it isn't until chapters five and six that Charmaine actually meets and talks to this man. Is Malcolm Jordan or is it merely something about him that stirs Charmaine's memories of her lost love?

[Pick up Blood Promise and devour the story today!](#)

Union Center Map



The above map is of Union Center, the ruling center of Union Circle, which was once the territory of New York and New Jersey. Union Center encompasses what was once know as Manhattan. The majority of the tall buildings have now been turned into rubble. The only true structure standing is the glass tower, home and command center for the ruling demon lord...the fallen angel turned demon, Xaphan.

Much of the land is slowly being retaken by the sea. Ellis Island remains above water because the witches use it as their coven home and have protected the land with magic.

Charmeine resides in what was formerly known as Brooklyn.

Charmeine's story is one of several set in various parts of the cursed world. Keep reading to learn about the full Cursed Angel Collection.

Watchtower World Books

Archangel's Fire
by **LG Castillo**

Blood Promise
by **Debra Kristi**

Forsaken
by **L.B. Gilbert**

Wicked Seduction
by **Genevieve Jack**

Fallen Halos
by **Erin Hayes & Rebecca Hamilton**

Crimson Maic
by **Heather Marie Adkin & Shakuita Johnson**

Demon Kissed
by **Michelle Madow**

Dark Opus
by **Dariel Raye & Muffy Wilson**

Heart Scarab
by **Margo Bond Collins & Blaire Edens**

Magic Currents
by **Jayne Faith**

Three watchtower books are currently unavailable. Those would correspond with the unattached red circles on the map.

World of the Cursed Angel Watchtowers

THE CURSED ANGEL WATCHTOWERS

Angels and Witches must join forces to overcome the Demons that have cursed the Earth.

Many years ago, a demon inhabited a witch's body to cast a spell to open all thirteen dimensions so that the demon spirits trapped there could be unleashed onto Earth. But when the demons were released, the dimensions collided, creating rifts in the earth that re-divided the world into 13 continents, each with its own curse.

In each city, high and protected in the city's Watchtower, the Demon Lord of that dimension resides. And so long as that Demon remains on Earth, his curse will reign over the Circle where he resides. In an attempt to reverse the damage, 13 of the strongest angels were sent to Earth to defeat the Demon Lords. However, their sacrifice came at a price: they would have to take on the curse of the circle they were sent to and would be damned to Earth until the curse was lifted.

Lifting the curse, however, means befriending a witch...which the angels believed to all be as evil as the demons themselves.

These are the stories of the Cursed Angel watchtowers... various novels set in the divided continents of the 'shared' world and written by different authors.

Interested in reading some of the other stories? Pick them up here: <https://bit.ly/2R3t6h2>



Thank you for taking the time to explore the Cursed Angel Collection and Blood Promise with me.

XOXO,

Debra K