

A movie poster for the film 'Trinity'. The top half features a woman with long dark hair, Deena Remiel, looking to the right. The bottom half features a shirtless, muscular man, Si Brethren Ngcwe, looking forward. The background is a dramatic, cloudy sky. The title 'TRINITY' is written in large, stylized letters, with 'DEENA REMIEL' above it and 'SI BRETHREN NGCWEI' below it. The entire poster is framed by a decorative black border.

DEENA REMIEL
TRINITY
SI BRETHREN NGCWEI

Trinity

A Brethren Novel

By Deena Remiel

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~DEDICATION~

To my husband and children, who are my real-life angels.

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—*Deena*

Prologue

Ever since the dawn of man, a war has waged between Good and Evil. Good has tried to claim supreme eternal victory, but like the ebb and flow of the tides, Evil rises up periodically trying to usurp Good's reign over the mortal world. Evil has its minions, immortal and mortal alike. Good has the Brethren, angels who were hired by an enigmatic leader to manifest on Earth as men, to fight against Evil, and protect and heal the human race. Time and again they have clashed over the centuries, both suffering great losses, yet Good has always come away triumphant and maintained its sovereignty.

It was during a time of economic and political turmoil that Satan had begun quietly amassing his minions once again. Letting the good and the righteous settle into a comfortable existence, unaware of how tenuous their lives really were.

But not everyone was oblivious. Doomsayers flooded the streets in the larger cities; cults arose in smaller towns promising salvation. And in one of those small towns, a child was born to a mother. Not just any child and her mother, but both born to an ancient, powerful lineage. Fated to fulfill prophecy, both were a part of the key to securing a lasting victory against Evil.

And neither of them knew it.

Chapter One

I'm dead. Emma yawned and rubbed at her dry, bloodshot eyes. *I must be dead. Or maybe I've become one of the living dead.* How else could she explain her zombie-like manner as she walked through her house at nine o'clock in the evening, locking windows and doors, shutting off lights, and nearly passing out at the foot of her bed? At the very least, she was one extremely sleep-deprived single mom who hadn't become so due to an overactive sex life, that's for sure. Oh, she had a night ritual, all right, one that starved her body of the healing affects a full night's sleep could offer. And she was certain as she plunged into a deep, dreamless sleep that the ritual would likely continue through the very evening.

A blood-curdling scream shattered the peaceful silence of the wee hours. She roused, instantly alert. Her soul, rocked by the echoing scream, seized up like a blown car engine.

"Ow! Son of a bitch!" Emma swore under her breath. She kicked aside the inconsiderate Malibu Barbie. "Hannah, I'm coming! Mama's coming!"

Her stomach roiled at the terror and desperation in her daughter's panic-stricken voice echoing through the hallway.

"I won't go! I won't go! No! I'll never let you take me! I won't do it! You can't make me do it! Mama! Help me! Mama!"

Well hell, this is something new. Usually, when Hannah was having one of her nightmares, she shrieked until Emma talked her out of it and put her back to sleep. Now she's talking in her nightmares too? Completely at a loss, she raked her hands through her hair as she rushed to her daughter, writhing on the bed.

"Hannah, I'm here. You're okay. Mama's here. Wake up, honey. Sweetie? Mama's here." She repeated these phrases like a mantra, trying to keep her voice as calm and soothing as possible. But who was she kidding? This newly added dimension of these nightmares was sending her over the deep end herself. She hoped her little one couldn't sense it.

"Mama! He's got me! Save me, Mama!" Hannah pleaded in a frenzy of emotion. It looked as though something was tugging on her arms and she was trying to pull them back. And her eyes were open.

Crap! She's never had her eyes open before, either. What the hell was going on?

She sat next to her jerking body and waved a hand in front of her face. Hannah looked at and then past her, as though there really was someone else in the room—someone seated right next to her. *Crap, crap, crap!* As she turned to look beside her, she saw a hint of a shadow, but then figured it to be her own. *Get a hold of yourself.*

"Honey, wake up. It's only a dream. You're okay. You're safe."

Hannah looked back again at her, and foretold in a chilling tone, "I'll never be safe, Mama. Not anymore." And with that, her little angel flopped back onto her pillow and was instantly asleep. What the hell was going on here? She acted as though possessed. Emma stood at the bedside, paralyzed, and stared at her daughter. Utter helplessness invaded her soul. Completely unnerved and sick to her stomach, she dropped to the floor like a rag doll and sobbed until she was spent.

What had happened to her baby girl? Almost six months ago, she had been a carefree, charismatic girl of five. And, for a little girl whose birthday was a week away, anyone would expect her to be bouncing out of her skin with excitement. Now, to look at her these days, she was anxious, withdrawn, and simply drained. Doctors hadn't been any help so far.

Change her routine. Okay.

Don't let her watch scary shows. Fine.

Let's try medication. Well, all right.

All of their suggestions proved fruitless, and left her completely alone with more questions than answers. What was she going to do now? There was no chance in hell that she would tell the doctors about this latest episode. They'd want to put her baby in a psychiatric facility, and she drew the line at that. There had to be another way to stop this nightly assault. But how?

Emma gathered the energy to drag herself onto Hannah's bed. She snuggled close to her baby girl's fragile body, and sank into the nest of Care Bear blankets. As she dropped off to sleep, she prayed, "Please, for heaven's sake, someone help my baby. End this madness."

Chapter Two

“Well, Agremon? Have you brought me the child?”

“Mr. Namirha, sir, I’d like to say yes, but I can’t. You know I’ve been trying for so long now, My Lord, and tonight I got the closest yet to grabbing her, but....”

Namirha scowled and tossed the newspaper he’d been reading to the floor. “Agremon, remind me why do I keep you alive? Why do I keep your worthless ass around here if I never see results from your supposed gift? Hmm?”

“Well, Mr. Namirha, sir, you must know my gift for terror is truly great and none can match it. Why, I’ve kept your followers in line for years now.” Agremon puffed out his chest like a preening gorilla. “But I think it’s the girl’s mother that’s causing the problem here. My Lord, there’s something about her that’s shielding her daughter from me.”

“Is that so?”

“I can’t put my finger on it, but every time I get to the point where I’m about to take her, the mother comes in and is able to push me away. I don’t know how or why. But I’ll get to the bottom of it and make sure it doesn’t happen again!”

Agremon stood a good distance away from Namirha, not quite trusting the look in the eyes of his Lord and master. He’d worked for him very successfully for centuries, but at the moment, his repeated failures left him open to Namirha’s wrath.

Knowing what Namirha was capable of was definitely cause for alarm.

“Excuses, excuses! I’m done with excuses, Agremon. Her birthday is a week away for Hell’s sake. I need her, and I need her now!” Namirha bellowed. “You get that girl and bring her to me, or I’ll have your body roasting on a spit while your head watches from a poleax! Now leave and find a way to get that girl here. Your life depends on it!”

As does yours, Agremon snickered inwardly.

“Yes, my Lord. I’ll get her. I promise. Don’t worry. All will be as you wish, My Lord, or my name isn’t Agremon the Terrible.” He bowed and made a quick exit from the throne room.

Agremon knew Namirha’s patience was running out. The look of admiration he’d once enjoyed from his Lord had withered to one of downright disappointment. The clock was ticking. If he didn’t produce the child soon, he was a total goner. He could kill that mother! If she would have stayed out of the damn room he could have taken the child a while ago. But the damn shrieking always brought her! What could he do?

Maybe if he visited the mother first he could do some damage. And then he could get the girl while the mother is cowering in her own nightmares.

Yes! That’s it! It would be a most auspicious evening.

Tomorrow night he’d try again, and this time he’d be damned if he failed.

Chapter Three

“Mama, wake up, we have to get ready for school. Come on, Mama, wake up. Your alarm is going off and I don’t know how to stop it.”

“Mmmm...okay, honey, okay. I’m up.” Bleary-eyed and stiff, Emma slowly moved each limb, testing to see that they were still in working order. “Oh, my word!” she groaned as she tried to sit up, her back screaming with resistance. *Was it seven o’clock already?* She slunk her way back to her own bedroom and turned off the offending alarm that was pounding nails straight through her skull with every beep. Her personal alarm clock followed timidly behind.

“Are you tired, Mama?” Hannah asked. She nodded grimly and patted her back. “I’m sorry I woke you up again.”

“Don’t be sorry, sugar. I know you can’t help these nightmares from coming anymore than I can. I just wish we could get a break from them every now and again.” She sighed guiltily and caressed Hannah’s face.

“But it wasn’t a dream this time, Mama! It wasn’t! You saved me. You really did. If you hadn’t come, that awful, scary man would have taken me to Him forever.”

Emma was trying her best to will away any outward signs of frustration and knew it wasn’t working. She felt like the absolute worst mother in the world! “Honey, I know it felt real to you, but trust me. It was only a nightmare. Tell me something, though. What did you mean when you said the scary man was going to take you to Him? Who’s Him?”

“The scary man who is always in my dream, his name is Agremon. He keeps trying to take me to a man named Mr. Namirha. He wants me to become his daughter. But I’m already yours, Mama. I don’t want to be his. That’s kidnapping or stealing. Isn’t it? And last night, Agremon was really angry with me for fighting him. He grabbed me and was pulling me from my bed, but then you came in and pushed him away. You saved me, Mama!” Hannah cried out and grabbed her so fiercely she thought she’d cracked a couple of ribs.

“Whoa! Anytime, Angel. You know I wouldn’t let anyone or anything hurt you or take you away from me.” Despite the aching ribs, Emma hugged her tighter, not quite sure at the moment if it was for the comfort of the grateful child or herself, and then kneeled down to speak to her face to face. “You know sometimes our dreams can feel so real to us. Sometimes we can convince ourselves that what happened in them really happened. It takes a great mind with a great imagination to think so. You, my dear, have a great imagination. And now that you’ve shared this dream, you don’t have to think about it anymore. You can take a deep breath, knowing it wasn’t real, and let it go.” She stroked her daughter’s long, jet-black hair and kissed her pixie nose. “So, why don’t we start getting ready for school now, okay? We’ll have a good hearty breakfast, and I’ll tell jokes on the way to school. How does that sound?”

“Well, okay, I guess. Do you think I could sleep with you tonight, though?” Hannah asked tentatively. Emma’s sleep-deprived brain was no match for the doe eyes peering up at her, nor her trembling mouth.

“Sure, Hannah,” she caved. Maybe she would get a better night’s sleep if she didn’t have to actually get out of bed and run down the hall to deal with the nightmares. And maybe she wouldn’t feel like the worst mother in the world for one night.

As Emma drove her ancient pickup truck down the school’s dirt road, she paid little attention to the striking, craggy mountains rising up to kiss the sky. She didn’t feel the hot breeze wafting through the

opened windows, causing sweat to gather around her neck and trickle down between her breasts. Not what she felt was relief washing over her.

She had jokingly called Prophet's Point Elementary School her second home for six years now, but it had only felt like one since Michael D'Angelo, the school's principal, came on board. He was a breath of fresh air for the school and had become a good friend. Once at school, she thought maybe Hannah would forget about last night and concentrate on her day, her friends, and her schoolwork. The jokes she told on the way to school hadn't gone over so well. Hannah had given her usual polite smile but that's as far as it went. Was last night's nightmare now going to affect her daughter during school hours, too? How was she to explain it away? *Damn it all if today wasn't going to be a good day for her!*

Living in such a small town made it difficult for anyone to keep secrets. The two of them had kept the nightmare issue a private matter, knowing it would be completely humiliating if any of her friends found out about it. She knew they would be relentless with their questions and their teasing, and she needed an escape. School was that escape.

Emma, on the other hand, was at her wit's end. She needed to confide in someone or she would have a nervous breakdown herself. Only thing was, she didn't know who. Admittedly, she had major trust issues. Once burned, twice shy, as the saying went. But closing herself off to any kind of relationship, be it friend or lover, left her severely lacking in the confidant department. She had vowed never again to desire the pajama party friendships she used to have, or trust her heart to a man, but she reluctantly acknowledged that without opening herself up a little bit right now, she would implode.

The truck now sat under a shade tree, and the two of them held hands while walking into the school building.

"Okay, Angel. I love you. Have a super day learning and playing with your friends. If you need me, you know you can tell Mrs. McNamara, and she'll let you come to my classroom. But, I think you're going to have a really good day. Right?"

"I'll try, Mama. Really, I will. I won't even come to your classroom today," Hannah promised with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. She gave her mother a kiss on the cheek, turned around every few steps and waved goodbye. Emma waved back with a smile that she hoped didn't appear as forced as she knew it was. As the classroom door closed, her smile drooped. How could such a tiny girl battle such a big problem...and win?

She walked down the hall a bit further to her own classroom. Leaning against the door, she closed her eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. How was she supposed to focus on today's computer lessons when all she could think about was her little, broken angel?

"Hey, Emma, have you not woken up yet or are you tired from a hot night of steamy sex with a new boyfriend?" joked Maddie as she walked up to her.

"Hey, Ms. Stewart." She waved to her friend and colleague. "Door Number One, please. Late night couldn't sleep, so I read 'til God knows when." The lie was as good as it was going to get with fatigue keeping her at her breaking point. Since the divorce, lying had become an automatic reflex. She felt a bit guilty but was too exhausted to care.

"So, no real sex for the Mama. Well then, the novel had better have been hot and steamy at the very least," she chided.

"For heaven's sake, girl! Sometimes you can be so brazen!" Emma giggled. Whether she knew it or not, Maddie always had a way of putting a smile on her face, and she sent a silent blessing while she turned and opened her classroom door. "See you at lunch, my friend."

"Later, gator! Hey, one more day until summer vacation! Wahoo!" Maddie shouted as she flitted down the hall to her classroom.

Emma shook her head and sighed. As long as she'd lived here, there had never been the hint of

man around her to stoke the flames of gossip. That's the way she liked it. Everyone knowing your business...she was still getting used to that. Plus, the small town limited one's options where love was concerned. Now Maddie, she hooked a keeper before she moved to Prophet's Point. But Emma had arrived with a baby in her arms and a tan line where a wedding ring used to be. *Don't go there. Not today.*

She unlocked her door and began her daily routine of turning on the Computer Lab's computers and printers, checking the servers, and looking over her lesson plans for the day.

Emma noticed her computer was booting up slower than usual. She looked around the room at the other computers and found they were taking longer as well. Suddenly, a horrifying image of a creature's face appeared on all of the screens; bubbling skin all mottled red and black, eyes that glowed with fire, teeth that looked as though they were made from needle-like shards of glass, and a mouth that was dripping with blood. She jumped back and cracked her elbows against her filing cabinet.

"Ow! Oh my freakin' God!" she cried out. "What the hell is that?"

It was speaking and oddly enough, she could understand it. She inched her way back to the computer, morbid curiosity getting the better of her, to get a better listen.

"Hello, Emma. Why, you get more beautiful the more tired you are. I love the way the dark circles play on your face. I'm coming for you, lovey. I'll see you in your dreams tonight, my precious."

Her eyes widened and she grabbed the back of her chair for purchase.

"You look puzzled, frightened even. Don't you know who I am? Why, I'm Agremon, my precious Hannah's friend, and now the suitor of your dreams. Until tonight." The computer screens went black and so did the lights, on Emma.

Chapter Four

Blackness slowly faded into light. Why was she lying down? She blinked her eyes a few times and realized she was on the floor of her classroom. There was someone with her, by her side, urging her to wake up.

“Come on, Emma, wake up. Wake up, please.” Michael D’Angelo was gently whisking her waist-length, ebony curtain of hair away from her face when she slowly stirred. “There you go. That’s it. Wake up now. Emma, do you know who I am?”

“Yes, I know who you are. You’re my principal. Oh God! Did I faint or something?” She struggled to sit up, but he put a firm yet gentle hand on her shoulder that held her in place.

“It seems like it. Now don’t get up yet. Just relax while I get you some water.” He hopped up, took a bottle of water from her mini-fridge and returned to hand it to her. “Now sit up slowly, that’s it. Lean up against your desk here. Take a sip, not too much.”

Emma felt embarrassed as all hell, but obliged the man who looked like he’d lost ten years off his life. And then she remembered what led up to her fainting. She trembled as the memories flooded back to her, and she dropped the bottle.

He immediately knelt down next to her and enclosed her hands in his. “Whoa, whoa there, Emma. What’s got you all in a fright? What the hell happened here?”

“I-I-I think someone’s gotten to the computers to play a terrible trick on me, or my imagination is getting the better of me. I’m not sure which. Would-would you please check the computers and tell me what you see, Michael?”

He glanced around. “Well, it looks like the computers are all booted up, ready for your first class. What did you think I’d see?”

“You know what? It was nothing. A silly prank, really, I’m sure of it. Class is going to start soon and I need to be ready for the kids. So, if you’d help me up, I’ll get on with my day, and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t say anything about this to anyone. It’s rather embarrassing, you know? Me fainting and you, well...you know the rest.” Jesus! She was so undone she was rambling on and on, making a bigger ass out of herself than she already felt.

“You know, I don’t like this one bit. The school has an alarm system. It never went off between yesterday and today, and you’re saying someone tampered with your computers enough to make you faint. I’m going to have someone from the district office come over and check things out. For now, the computers are off limits.”

“Now wait a minute. You’re overreacting. Let me check things out on my own first before you call in the technology cavalry. Besides, what the heck do you expect me to do if you close this room down? Sit around and twiddle my thumbs all day?” There was no way Emma was going to have her routine changed in any way. She couldn’t handle it. This was all she could cling to for sanity’s sake.

“Okay. Then at least cancel your first couple of periods today so you can look things over. I don’t want any surprises when it comes to the kids’ safety.” With his hands firmly supporting her elbows, Michael helped her to her feet and watched as she tried to hide the extreme effort it took to make herself appear reasonably stable.

“I agree, and thanks for everything. Hello?” she joked, knocking on his forehead. *Why is he staring at me with that goofy look on his face?* “Are you in there?”

“What? Oh,” his voice cracked, “you’re welcome. Listen, how about I come by after school and you can give me an update on this computer thing you got going on here? I won’t be free until then, with all the closeout procedures and final meetings I’ve got scheduled. You can put Hannah in the After School program, no charge.”

“Sounds like a plan. See you later, then.” And with that, Emma walked her fearless leader to the

door. He narrowed his eyes and gave her one lingering glance that she met boldly with a show of confidence she didn't nearly possess, and closed the door. When her heart stopped pounding and her knees stopped feeling like jelly, she planned on finding out exactly what the hell was going on around here.

But first, she gave herself permission to freak out.

Wasn't Agremon the name of the scary man Hannah had spoken about from her nightmares? If it was one and the same, no wonder she had been having such a horrible time of it lately. That man or creature was downright gruesome. And why did he appear on the school's computers? How could something from her imagination show up like this and be so threatening to Emma as well? It didn't seem possible.

A thorough scan of the computers showed nothing irregular at all. No one had tampered or hacked into the system. Maybe it was her imagination working on overdrive, since last night's episode was so different from all the others.

The bell rang, ushering in a swarm of students to the building. Their buzzing voices felt like jackhammers drilling holes in her head. She decided to take her first two periods off, like Michael had wanted her to do in the first place. The kids' homeroom teachers wouldn't mind keeping them. They could use the extra help preparing the classrooms for the summer. She took a couple of aspirin and tried to calm herself down. She looked out the window. The sun was shining and it was a beautiful day. Why let a little techno-horror get in the way, right?

No further incidents occurred except, of course, for the inevitable visit she got from Hannah an hour before the ending bell was to ring. And what was more, she had come bearing pictures she had drawn today during her art rotation; disturbing pictures of demons and devils crudely drawn, but clearly identifiable. Emma knew it was time to share this whole ordeal with someone, and that someone, she felt was definitely Michael D'Angelo. She couldn't put her finger on the why of it, but after this morning, she felt a curious and unexpected magnetic pull towards him. *Imagine, opening up to a man again. After all these years.* She shook her head, nonplussed. Could she truly trust him enough to share such a private and painful piece of herself? And would he be able to do anything to help?

Prayers did get answered, didn't they?

Chapter Five

It wasn't until an hour after school let out that her principal showed up at Emma's door. But that was okay with her. She'd needed that time to build up her courage. Luckily, Hannah went without a fuss over to the Aftercare Program. With that concern out of the way, she now prayed Michael wouldn't think she was nuts and reconsider continuing her contract for next year. He wouldn't let that interfere, would he? She'd known him for six years now. They had a great professional relationship. He'd always been kind to anyone having a problem and was always willing to help in any way he could. But this, this wasn't your average "run of the mill, hey, can-you-help-change-a-flat-tire problem."

She was taking a huge risk now. This was definitely an issue that crossed over the line from professional to personal. Emma shook her head and rested her forehead on her desk, confidence deflated. What exactly did she expect him to do about her beleaguered daughter's nightmares that anyone else hadn't already tried? He could listen, she reminded herself. Just listen. Wasn't that what she needed right now? Someone to listen to her fears and frustrations about her daughter's well being?

As if on cue, she heard a light rap on her door, and in he walked. Regret and concern furrowed his brow.

"I'm so sorry it's taken me this long to get to you. We had some bus issues that needed immediate attention. So, what'd you find out about your computers?"

He leaned casually against her filing cabinet looking, well, absolutely scrumptious, like a model for Ralph Lauren. He was a giant, she'd always thought, at six-foot-four or five. He dwarfed her five-foot-two petite frame. Broad shoulders and a narrow waist made him appear like a Greek god. With that relaxed, bohemian nature Prophet's Point was known for, he tended to wear jeans that always hugged perfectly in all the right places and polo shirts that accentuated the fact that he must work out on his time off. With a touch of salt sprinkled through his wavy, shoulder-length black hair, it begged to have her hands—her hands—run through it. And his face, well, she mused, it could have rivaled Michelangelo's David. She studied his strong jaw line and high cheekbones, his straight nose and perfectly bowed lips. Six years had done very nice things to Mr. D'Angelo. If only she had the courage to show him she was interested. If only she didn't carry this burden right now. Suddenly, she was aware that he had finished speaking and he'd caught her gazing at him. She blushed from head to toe. His drop-dead smile had her reddening even more.

"Oh, um, I haven't found out much, I'm afraid. But that's actually good news. It means that nobody's tampered with anything here. The bad news is I'm going crazy," Emma quipped, knowing how true those words had become. Her nerves were getting the best of her.

"Hey, no secret there. We've known you were crazy for years." His eyes sparkled as he teased her.

"Ha ha, very funny. Listen, I wanted to thank you for everything you did for me this morning."

Emma hadn't noticed till now how stunning his eyes were. In fact, they were a spectacular blue, azure to be precise, with gold around the rims. How unusual, how distracting.

It was now or never. If she didn't ask him, she'd spend another day with no one to understand what it had been like for her these past six months. "Why don't you come over for some dinner tonight? I'll make a mean chicken stir-fry. Hannah would be thrilled to see that you exist outside of the school building. You know, even though I teach here, she thinks everyone else evaporates into thin air when school's out for the day. So, what do you say?"

She nibbled nervously at her lower lip. God! What was wrong with her? Why did Michael suddenly have such a strange affect on her? She really didn't need this kind of emotional complication right now. She needed someone to talk to, that's all.

"You know what? I'd like that, actually. Thanks for the invitation."

“Perfect. Well, I’d better shut the computer lab down and head on out ahead of you. You know, tidy up the place.” Emma turned to her desktop computer to initiate the shutdown process. Agremon’s face popped into view for the briefest of moments, his arrogant gaze threatening his intent. She nearly jumped into Michael’s arms with a shriek.

“Oh, my God! Did you see him? Did you see him?” she cried out, grabbing a fistful of Michael’s shirt in the process. He immediately wrapped his powerful arms like a cage around her trembling body and rubbed her back reassuringly.

“Yeah, I did. I did, damn it,” he muttered angrily. “We need to talk, Emma. Your invitation to dinner is perfectly timed.”

Something had changed about him in those few moments. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it, but something had definitely changed. There was a tension she could feel rippling through his arms that concerned her. But they also felt right around her, and were the only things keeping her standing. So for now, she threw concern out the window. *God, but his body feels so good, so solid, so strong!*

“We’ve got to get your daughter right now and go straight to your house. You’re in no condition to drive, so let me, and I can pick you up in the morning for work.”

“I’m going to take you up on that offer. Thanks, again.” There was awkwardness as he released her from his arms, but they both left it unspoken.

Once she was steady on her feet and the computers were shut down, they picked Hannah up from the After School program. Michael locked his office, and they were ready to go.

“Wow!” Hannah bubbled, bouncing up and down on the back seat. “This is the coolest thing I’ve ever done, Mama. Why are we riding in Mr. D’Angelo’s car?” Emma laughed at how such a little thing, like a car ride from a principal, could make her little girl so excited.

“It’s because the truck is having engine trouble, sweetie. Right, Mr. D’Angelo?” She gave him a warning glance. “Now buckle up.” *One little white lie won’t hurt.* Emma made a concerted effort during the ride home to act normal, and thanked God her principal had followed her lead.

As they pulled up the long driveway to the house, she saw a polite, quiet child transform into a fidgety, argumentative one right before her eyes. Every suggestion she had for her daughter to do or eat for snack was met with whines and complaints, so she gave up. Of course Emma knew why she was being so oppositional, but Michael didn’t, and if he was perplexed, he kept quiet about it.

The ranch house, inherited from Emma’s parents, was small but sat on six acres of prime real estate with mature palm trees lining the drive and desert landscaping around the perimeter. The rest of the lot was left in nature’s hands. The view was spectacular with vistas of the mountains near everywhere you turned. She always enjoyed the quiet serenity surrounding her home. As she opened the door and entered the house, though, it was a completely different story. Recently, she had been feeling anything but serene inside. Maybe she was sleep-deprived and imagining things, however, she felt as though all the good vibes that used to be there had been sucked out.

Michael walked in and quickly retreated, bumping into Hannah. “Oof! Oh, I’m so sorry! Are you okay? I must have tripped on the threshold here.”

“Oh, I’m okay, Mr. D’Angelo. Don’t worry.” She ran past him to the playroom. Emma went directly to the kitchen, washed up, and put on an apron. She returned to the foyer a moment later with a glass in her hand and stared. There Michael stood, like a statue in the doorway.

Geez, what’s up with him? Has he changed his mind about dinner? Or is he feeling the same shroud of negative energy in here as I have for months?

“It’ll be easier to have dinner with us if you come on in, Michael,” Emma joked. “Why don’t you take a load off and have something cool to drink while I get it started?”

“Right, yes, that sounds good, thanks,” he stammered, and took the glass of iced tea she offered. Their fingertips touched, sending an unexpected bolt of energy between them. Their eyes immediately

connected in surprise and puzzlement.

“Wow! The air must be very dry in here.”

“Of course,” Michael agreed a little too quickly. “Happens all the time at my house. It’s the carpeting.” He sat down at the kitchen table and silently watched while she cooked dinner. And as they sat for their meal, they stared at Hannah as she pushed the various morsels of food around her plate with little actually making it to her mouth.

Emma tried small talk, but Michael appeared preoccupied. He did however offer his compliments to the chef. So she gave up on prying any more conversation out of him and turned to Hannah instead to ask what she’d done in school that day. The perennial, “Nothing,” was her reply, and she asked to be excused from the table. There was an hour left before her bedtime, so Emma let her go play in the playroom. She wouldn’t dare go into her bedroom until she absolutely had to.

Emma was a little concerned. She knew what she wanted to talk about, but what on earth did Michael have to say? He’d been so different since he’d seen Agremon on the computer screen. His mood had darkened. There was a quiet ferocity brewing that cast a vibrating aura over him. It unsettled her. This was definitely a side of him she’d never seen before. But then again, nothing these days was as it had been before.

Rather than barreling into their discussion, they settled into a silent rhythm of washing and drying the dishes. With the last dish washed and the last drop of moisture dried, there was no more they could do to stall the inevitable. They had to talk and they had to talk now. Michael followed her to the room next to the kitchen that she used as a study. He sat on the loveseat that faced a stone fireplace. She closed the French doors so they could be seen from across the hall, but not heard.

Emma crossed over to the fireplace and studied the photographs resting on the mantle. She lightly touched the picture frame containing a photograph of her and Hannah covered in finger-paint and she smiled, then flitted her hand onto another one of them sharing a swing and jumping off together. She rested her hand on the largest in the bunch: a black and white image in a thick, black frame. They were facing each other, forehead to forehead and nose to nose, with beautiful expressions of love on both of their faces. She lost herself for a moment in the fond memory the picture elicited before she turned and joined Michael on the loveseat.

His deep voice dissolved any comfort the pictures had provided. “That face we saw on the screen this afternoon, did you see that this morning as well, when you fainted?” His grave tone sent waves of shivers up her spine.

“Yes, actually. But it wasn’t just the horrible face. I know it’s going to sound crazy, but he spoke to me. He told me his name was Agremon, Hannah’s friend. He isn’t a friend, because she told me he’d been terrorizing her in her nightmares for months now.” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment. “He said he would visit me in my dreams tonight. And this afternoon, he flat out taunted me.”

Michael put a welcomed hand on hers. What she heard herself saying out loud sounded absolutely absurd. But he had seen it, too. And he didn’t seem to think she was nuts, so far.

Interesting. Thank goodness he doesn’t seem to think I need to be committed.

“Hannah’s been having nightmares for months?”

She nodded silently.

“No wonder she seems so withdrawn and anxious all the time. And now the object of her nightmares is after you.” He paused. “Listen to me. I need to ask you some questions and I need you to answer them honestly.”

“Okay, but really, let’s get one thing straight here. If you’re going to ask if I’ve been doing drugs or drinking too heavily, let me stop you right there. I don’t do either, ever. And there’s no history of psychosis in the family. My imagination is probably on overdrive after all these months of getting

little sleep. I'm sure that after hearing about my daughter's nightmares for so long now, maybe they've become mine as well. But I'm an adult and I can handle it. I just need to get some solid sleep. She hesitated. "But, then again, it doesn't explain why you saw this Agremon creature as well, and seem to know something about him." As she began to think on this very troubling idea, she pulled her hand away from his and grabbed hold of the loveseat's armrest instead, as though she were clinging to the edge of a cliff.

"I'll explain everything as soon as I get some answers to some very important questions. First all, I need to know when you and Hannah were born."

"When we were born? Well, we actually share the same birth date, June sixth." They both loved the coincidence and since it was just the two of them, it made it extra special. "Come to think of it, my mother's birthday is June sixth as well."

"And what time were you both born?" he urged on.

"Well, let me think about that one a minute. Hmm. I think I remember my mother saying when I was a little girl that I was born at 6:06 a.m. and Hannah was born at...you're never going to believe this, but she was born at 6:06 p.m. Isn't that interesting?" She paused, suddenly uncomfortable about the peculiarity and where this conversation was headed. "I never really noticed the coincidence before. Why do you need to know this?" She shifted uneasily.

"Where's your mother now? She should be here, too."

"I wish she could be, God knows, but she's passed on. My father, as well. So that's going to be a little difficult," she replied quietly.

"God, I'm so sorry. I-I didn't know. Forgive my abrasiveness. How long has it been?"

"They both died before my sixth birthday, actually. There was a terrible skiing accident. An avalanche wiped out an entire group of skiers in Colorado." She shook her head, still amazed after all these years. "My parents were among them. My grandmother took care of me until she passed away unexpectedly a few months after my parents' deaths. I was placed in foster care until I was eighteen. She stood abruptly, smoothed down her shorts, and walked to the fireplace. "And that's where the story is ending. Let's just say they're not memories I'd wish on my worst enemy. So now you know my tragic past. It's time for some answers from you, Michael. You know, ever since this afternoon you've been acting very strangely. You're not yourself. So come clean. What the hell is going on here?"

Chapter Six

There was a silence as thick as molasses. No, Michael wasn't himself. Not at all. Not since he found Emma lying unconscious on her classroom floor earlier this morning. Disquieting thoughts had been swimming through his mind all day unbidden, and served as frequent distractions. Like how God awful beautiful she was with that long, wavy, dark-as-midnight hair he could easily imagine brushing across his bare skin. And how her almond-shaped eyes were made for seduction. And her lips. Every time she nibbled on the bottom one, he had wanted to help her. How many times had he thought of her like this since the day they'd met six years ago? He figured he had the longest running crush on a woman in history.

He'd never acted on those feelings, though. It was completely unprofessional, and with these late developments, it was especially awkward. Although he had to admit, for the first time in the six years he'd known her, he felt consumed beyond measure by her raspy voice, her sensuous body, and her strength of character. He found himself totally enthralled and disarmed.

And then, looking at all the pictures on the mantle tonight added to his discomfort. They were pictures of family, of closeness, of an impenetrable bond, and something he knew he would never experience again. A dull ache welled in his heart he quickly suppressed.

How was he supposed to explain who he really was, and where did he begin to explain who he suspected she really was, who her daughter really was? It was obvious that she'd never been told what she needed to know about herself and her family lineage. Her mother would have done that on her sixth birthday. What about her grandmother, though? Why hadn't she told her? She probably never got the chance.

It was vital that she knew now, or else, Hannah's nightmares wouldn't solely be her own; they would be shared by every mortal on this Earth.

"Okay, I need you to sit down and listen to me very carefully. What I have to tell you isn't going to be easy to hear. It isn't easy to say. I want you to promise that you'll give me a chance to explain, that you won't throw me out or call the police."

"Now you're starting to scare me. What, are you some kind of lunatic escaped from a mental hospital, and you've been living a secret life as the favorite principal in a two-bit town?"

"Emma, please, come sit down and I'll try my best to explain. But you have to promise that you'll listen to everything. Please," he pleaded with an outstretched arm.

"All right," she agreed, joining him on the loveseat. "I promise, now tell me."

"My name is Michael, and I really am the principal of Prophet's Point Elementary School. But I also have another job. I was sent here six years ago by the company I work for, Brethren Security and Investigations. There was intelligence gathered alluding to some kind of disturbance here, but nothing specific about who it involved. I've been on alert ever since. I am one of the Protectors of the Good. I am an angel, an immortal."

Emma stared at him, eyes wide as saucers. She opened her mouth as if to respond when he quickly continued, "Uh-uh. You promised you'd hear me out, and I have so much more to tell you." She closed her mouth and Michael could see the cynicism washing over her as she folded her arms and crossed her legs. But he forged ahead undaunted. "This Agremon you're referring to is a really bad guy. He used to be part of the Brethren, but he fell from grace and now works for this Namirha. Dollars and doughnuts, Namirha is an alias for Satan. With what you've told me about your birthdays and Hannah's nightmares, it looks as though Namirha wants her and is using Agremon to get her. Agremon's the perfect guy to get her, too. He's able to turn dreams into nightmares, invade people's imaginations, and take souls while they sleep. When you die in one of his concocted dreams, you die for real. Listen closely. We can't let Agremon get near her again."

“On that I agree.” She unfolded her arms, uncrossed her legs, and scooted to the edge of her seat. ~~“Leaving everything else you’ve told me about yourself aside for the moment, because God knows, I need to; you should know that last night, when I heard her screaming, I walked in to find her in a tangle of war with some kind of invisible force.”~~ She rubbed her hands on her lap. “When I got close to her she stopped. She said I saved her from being taken by Agremon to a Mr. Namirha so she could be his daughter. Are you telling me that all that’s been happening, that Hannah’s nightmares are real?”

“Yes, I am. And it looks like you literally are Hannah’s savior. Agremon couldn’t take her with you there beside her. Now the threat is clear. Namirha wants Hannah, but why as his daughter? That is the question.”

Stunned, Emma sat silent.

“What are you thinking?”

“I think you can obviously understand how all this might sound to me. I don’t know if I can believe it, believe you.” She nervously combed her hands through her hair. “I mean, what am I supposed to do here, Michael? Are you crazy? Am I crazy, too, if I want to believe you? I mean we’re talking about my baby here, my Hannah. She’s all I’ve got in this world.” She was quickly becoming unglued, so she turned her to face him with strong yet gentle hands. He cupped her face and looked at her with those piercing azure eyes.

“First of all, I’m not crazy and neither are you. Secondly, I am not going to let anything happen to Hannah or you. And finally, there’s actually more to tell. About the two of you. When you hear what I have to say, I think you’ll be impressed.” He released his hold on her, and she felt instantly bereft, like a vital connection had been cut off. How strange was it that she could be feeling this way about a man and a seemingly crazy man to boot?

“Okay, okay. Tell me the rest of it. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.” Emma breathed in deeply trying to get a grip on things, but who was she fooling? There were no handholds to be found.

“If my guess is right, and I’m pretty damn sure it is, you come from a long line of extremely powerful and gifted women.”

“Well, I could have told you that,” she joked, desperately trying to lighten up a situation that had become disturbingly dark. She was doing her best to get back on solid ground.

He continued, “When you told me your birthdates, I immediately knew who you were.”

“You’re not making sense. Of course you know who I am. I’ve been working for you for six years.” She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“Yes, I know, that’s a part of you. But the part that was lost to you when your mother died is what I’m referring to. Your lineage, Emma, is ancient. Every generation in your family lineage, for as long as history has been recorded, has had a mother and daughter born on the same date, June 6, precisely the same time 6:06, either a.m. or p.m. Every generation. Usually, on the daughter’s sixteenth birthday, all the knowledge and special gifts are revealed, passed on from mother to daughter.

“Each mother and daughter has had to do battle with evil on a variety of levels. But you didn’t get that chance to learn this. I suspect Namirha had a hand in that. You and your daughter are connected to a source of great ancient power and a prophecy foretelling the salvation of this generation. I may be the Protector, but Hannah,” he explained, pointing in her direction, “I believe, is meant to be the Great Warrior Child, and you, as her mother, are meant to be the Great Savior Mother. With this knowledge comes great strength and gifts that need to be uncovered by each of you and mastered in order to defeat whatever plans Namirha has in mind. I can help you. I must help you. The fate of the mortal world hangs in the balance.”

Conflicting thoughts swirled around in Emma's mind. She stood abruptly and began pacing the floor. Her face flushed and her heart raced. "All right, Michael, I've been very patient, considering I've listened like you asked. You know," she tittered as her eyes snapped to a copy of Alice in Wonderland on the bookshelf. "I had really invited you over here tonight because I had kept Hannah's nightmares a secret, and after last night, well, I couldn't do it anymore.

"I needed to have someone besides me know what was going on around here, so I could look at the person and find the strength to go on. I thought it could be you." A gulp of air, a slow release, and she turned to face him as her body seemed to hum with unrestrained energy. "Now you share with me the story about who you 'really' are, who my daughter 'really' is, and who I 'really' am, and you know what? I'm not buying it. Not at all, buddy. So I'm going to ask you politely to get your 'immortal' ass out of my house before I do call the police. I suggest you forget about your goodbyes to Hannah, and go. Now."

Damn, it was going so well.

She had misjudged him completely. She stalked towards the front door. Michael grabbed her arm. She looked from his hand on her arm to his face. If looks could kill, she was confident hers would kill him good and dead. He let her go.

"I really don't think I should go given the situation with Agremon. I'm a Protector, Emma. I can protect her."

"I'll protect my daughter, thank you very much. I've been doing fine so far. Now get out."

She opened the door and dismissed him like one of her students. He didn't argue any further.

How could he? Emma slammed the door shut behind him. She slumped to the floor, elbows on her knees, forehead leaning heavily on the palms of her hands. How could he do this to me when I'm in such a vulnerable state? Burned again, damn it. I should have known better by now. I should have kept my problems to myself and found a way to solve them that didn't involve others. The man is obviously insane! Immortal, my ass! Special gifts, ancient powers. Fantastical stories...all of it! What drugs has he been taking? But he knows Agremon and Namirha. No, I just can't believe his story is real. And if it is real, well then, I'll find a way to handle it on my own, without him.

It took a few minutes, but Emma gathered herself together, got back up, and went to the kitchen in search of some aspirin. Hell! There were none left. She really was all alone in this. The one person she thought she could trust had gone off the deep end, nearly taking her with him. Thank goodness she had the presence of mind to throw him out.

What she really needed right now was to shake this disaster off. She needed to be with Hannah and do her routine chores. So she went to the playroom to hang out with her best girl, but as she entered she heard her playing with her Barbie dolls. She stopped at the doorway to watch and listen because she was so cute when she role-played with them. It reminded Emma of when she was young and had played with her own dolls. Hannah had a Barbie doll in one hand and a Ken doll in the other. Barbie was dressed in her wedding gown, and Ken was wearing a red satin jumpsuit. They were attached to each other with a string, and Hannah had the Ken doll yanking on the string and the Barbie doll was being thrashed around. As Emma watched, her rosy nostalgia turned to shock and dismay. And then Hannah spoke for the dolls.

In a deep voice, she boomed, "For the last time you are coming with me or I will kill you!"

Then she changed to a high lilt. "I won't go, you evil, evil man! I'm never going to be his daughter ever!"

Hannah used her teeth to rip through the string. "Aha! You see! You can't hold me! And soon, my army of immortals will be here fighting by my side, to send you at last to your total destruction!"

With the deep timber, she responded, "You may have won for now, but you'll never be safe again."

She made the Barbie doll's hands grab the Ken doll and fling him across the room.

“Hannah! What are you doing?”

“~~Oh, Mama! I didn’t know you were there.~~” A blush washed over her face. “I was playing with my Barbie dolls.”

“I see, well, I think I’m going to have to do a better job of monitoring the TV shows you’re watching.” And when had she learned the words immortal and destruction? Emma shook off the unsettling feeling creeping over her. “It’s time to get ready for bed, so why don’t you get in your jammies, brush your teeth and hair, and come to my room? I remember hearing that some really amazing mother gave permission for one amazing kid to sleep in the queen’s bed tonight. Since I am the queen of this house, you must be that amazing kid! So, scoot!”

“Thanks, Mama! I’ll meet you in your room, okay, really fast!” Hannah leaped into her arms and nearly knocked her over, ending the love fest with a bear hug. She sprinted to her bedroom in a flash and was out just as quickly.

Emma staggered to her bedroom, weariness suddenly overtaking her, and turned down the sheets. Hannah appeared by the door and came tentatively into the room. She slid quietly into the bed.

“Hey, Mama, where’s Mr. D’Angelo?”

“Oh, he had to go, sweetie. He said to tell you goodbye and he’d see you in the morning.”

“Oh, okay,” she yawned.

In the morning! Shit! He had to pick them up for school since she’d left her truck there. *Not in this lifetime!* She would call and cancel with him, and have Maddie come pick them up instead. Problem solved.

Liar. Her problems weren’t nearly solved.

Emma ruffled Hannah’s hair and kissed her soundly on the forehead. “Good night, my angel. I’ll be in after I look through my e-mail and do some chores. I love you,” she cooed in her ear.

“I love you more,” Hannah whispered back, and wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck.

“I love you most,” Emma replied, nuzzling her neck.

“You win, Mama.”

“We both do, Angel.”

The nightly ritual always made Hannah smile while drifting off to sleep. It broke Emma’s heart knowing the smile never lasted very long. She made sure to put the bedside table light on before she left and kept the door wide open.

Returning to her study, her favorite place to unwind, she eased into the overstuffed chair by the fireplace and settled her laptop on her knees. She loved this chair. She had a vague memory of sitting in it as a child with her mother. Now, it felt like she received a comforting hug every time she sat down on its downy pillows. Her tensed muscles slowly relaxed. She decided to close her eyes for a couple of minutes while the laptop was booting up.

No harm in doing that.

Chapter Seven

Michael slammed his hands against the steering wheel as he drove back up the driveway to the street. *As if I should have expected Emma to have reacted any differently?*

He understood her anger, her denial. She should have known who she was when she was six years old, not by accident at thirty. Too much time had gone by. Enough time for a child's innocence to have died and an adult's cynicism to set in. But if he looked at this objectively, how could he hold back? Their lives were in danger, as was the fate of the mortal world. There was no time to be gentle and take it slow.

So Satan has re-surfaced, and Agremon is with him. Agremon's presence intrigued Michael more than Satan hanging a shingle. There was a score to be settled with the fallen angel. Brethren weren't usually in the revenge business, but this development called for an exception. It'd been a long time since the forces of Good and Evil collided. It had been a war to rock both mortal and immortal worlds—Michael's specifically. This time, he wagered, wouldn't be any easier. One thing was certain: Agremon would die.

Unwilling to let Emma and her daughter face whatever the demon had in mind for them, he spun the car around, drove back up the driveway, and parked. He would protect them with every ounce of his blessed immortal soul. And this time, he wouldn't fail.

Michael turned on the radio to occupy his time. He didn't know when he would sense Agremon's presence this evening and wished he'd been able to give mother and daughter his Talismans to wear before he'd been thrown out. But he hadn't forgotten the energy flow that occurred between him and Emma. That would help since he could still feel that connection, microscopic as it was, connecting the two of them together. He would have to be extra vigilant tonight at picking up on the particular threads of fear that would be floating through the air like silky energy waves. "Garbage, garbage, ah, the new. That'll work." He eased his seat back, cranked up the volume, and closed his eyes.

"...the Arson Squad is investigating. In other news, the religious cult, The Source, that's been gaining popularity overseas, has reportedly found a new home base in Arizona. The cult's leader, Ahriman Namirha, has been seen all around the state this month recruiting followers...."

Michael's eyes sprung open and he bolted upright in his seat. So this was how Satan's doing things this time around. He had taken on human form and used a cult to insinuate evil into the mortal minds to cultivate his minions. A rather ingenious plan, even if it does lack some inventiveness.

But what did Namirha need from Hannah? He decided to call Gabriel, one of the other Brethren. He couldn't figure it out, no one could. After giving him all the information he had gathered, he put his phone away and began a sweep of the area surrounding the house. It was a mental sweep to pick up on any trail Agremon might be laying down as he came to mother or daughter in their dreams. He felt nothing yet. While part of his brain was doing the incessant sweep, another part was checking all his vital powers, making sure he was armed and ready for whatever was required. He had quite the arsenal of protective gifts, which made him the most powerful Protector out of the three that existed: he, Gabriel, and Urie.

He was going to need his team, as well as the other Brethren teams: the Warriors and the Saviors and their troops, to defeat Evil and keep Emma and Hannah alive.

Agremon sewed his dream-world suggestions in Emma's drowsy mind and watched with wicked pleasure as she succumbed. He sent a warm breeze to caress her face, and implanted sounds of ocean waves lapping upon the shore. Birds sang songs that hypnotized and dolphins played off in the

distance. He massaged her simmering discontent with her life and suggested that this little vacation on the beach was exactly what she needed.

That's right, just ease into it Emma. No need to rush it. Enjoy your little respite for a few minutes. You look extremely hot in that wisp of a bathing suit I so generously provided for you. Maybe I should have you take a little walk along the shoreline. Mmm. I like the way your sinewy muscles move as you take each step. Yes...just like that.

Emma's body moved like a tigress from her chaise lounge as he compelled her to do his bidding.

Emma walked along the pristine beach, the warm breeze seducing her with its fingers burrowing into her hair and massaging away the months of built-up tension in her shoulders. She was lost in the sensual experience. For an instant, she pictured Michael giving her the massage, and then scowled.

Agremon appeared before her like a gruesome tower of flesh, wearing of all things—surfer shorts.

“Hello, my precious. Well, aren't you looking particularly delectable today? I do have great taste in swimwear, wouldn't you agree?”

“Wh-wh-what? Oh, my God!” Her heart skipped a beat as she stood frozen in place, staring at the behemoth in front of her. His entire body was mottled red and black, and bubbly, like his face, with little thorn-like protrusions all over his arms. He was even more grotesque than he had appeared on the computer screen earlier that day, and she forced the bile back down, scorching her throat in the process.

“Thank the devil I'm not your God, but I could definitely let you worship me like I was. You are one hot mama, you know that? Hey, isn't that what Hannah calls you, Mama? I have a great idea! Why don't I go get her and bring her here with us? We could have a family picnic right here on the beach. It would be so cozy, only the three of us. What do you think?” Fire blazed in his eyes as he ran his tongue over his needle sharp teeth. Blood oozed out of his mouth.

“I'm going to wake up; I'm going to wake up right now. I'm having a nightmare and I'm going to stop it right now,” Emma muttered over and over, squeezing her eyelids shut as her body dropped to the sand beneath her.

“You're pathetic if you think you can wake from this dream, precious. This isn't just any old dream. You've got the Master's Original made especially for you. Now let's get this party started.”

With a mere wave of his hand, Agremon abruptly altered their surroundings to one of a cemetery. A dense fog hung around them like a shroud, and a cold darkness replaced the warmth of the soothing sunshine. Emma shuddered uncontrollably. He compelled her to stand before what appeared to be a centuries old mausoleum. With another wave, he changed their attire. He was decked out in a funeral suit, and she wore a strapless, sheer, black chiffon evening gown. As awareness finally broke through her stupor, she looked around. For a moment, she almost wanted to laugh.

“If you think turning this into one of those old time vampire movies can scare me, you're wrong. I grew up watching those silly movies and loved them.” A spark of confidence ignited inside her. *I might live through this nightmare yet.*

“Don't you think I knew that little detail about you? I research my subjects very carefully, precious. Oh no, you're not starring in a campy vampire movie. I've something very special planned for you. I'll be on my way now. I've a date with a little girl I know who loves when I come to visit.”

“Don't you go near my daughter, you bastard!” Emma shrieked. She lunged towards him with nails ready to rip him to shreds. He simply froze her in place.

“Have fun! Oh, I believe the mausoleum is where your party is.” Agremon raised a finger, spun

around, and pointed to the mausoleum. Her body immediately swung around and began moving jerki
towards the small decrepit building.

“Ooh, you’re a fighter. I like a challenge.”

Michael picked up on something. The microscopic thread that held Emma to him was definite
humming. It seemed too early for her to be asleep. But then again, she hadn’t had much sleep for
long time. If he’d known sooner what was happening to Hannah...what was done was done. All he
could do was protect them as best he could now. He raised his own shields so he couldn’t be detecte
by Agremon and got out of the car. Keys in his pocket, phone on vibrate, he made his way quickly y
cautiously up the dirt driveway.

As he approached the house, the humming got exponentially stronger. Something was definite
happening, and it wasn’t good. He raced up the path to the front door. It was locked. That wouldn
keep him out. He waved his hand over the lock to open it and crossed the threshold. Where was she
His senses drew him to the study. When he entered the room, he stopped short, barely containing h
rage. Her body was crouched in a fetal position on the oversized chair, her laptop broken to pieces o
the floor in front of her. He hustled over and felt her skin. She was ice cold, and there were beads o
sweat on her brow. Her breathing was shallow and her heart raced. *Damned Agremon!* Michael had
get her out of that nightmare, and fast. The quickest way to get her out was for him to go in. But h
had to protect Hannah first.

While reaching into his pocket for a Talisman, he raced to find her bedroom. She wasn’t in there
He tried Emma’s room next and entered silently, relieved to see Hannah unaffected by the demon
Agremon. He wrapped the protective necklace around her neck and sped back to the study.

Swapping places with Emma, he gingerly rested her on his lap. In order to enter her dreams,
much bodily contact as possible was necessary. He placed his right hand on her forehead and slowe
his breathing down considerably.

It took a couple of breaths and he was in. He found himself wading through her past dreams an
thoughts she kept to herself. After passing through dreams about test anxiety, disastrous dates,
marriage gone wrong, and an overwhelming sense of distrust of people, he finally came to her curre
nightmare.

“Agremon certainly has a flair for the dramatic,” he muttered dryly as he glanced around.
cemetery of all places. He heard faint whimpering coming from the mausoleum to his right. “She mu
be in there.” He approached the door and was immediately thrown back, landing with a harsh thud on
gravestone. Agremon had shielded it, barring anyone from entering. As Michael recovered, he notice
her name, *Emma Livingston*, written on the gravestone. In fact, as he looked around, every graveston
had her name on it, even the mausoleum.

“Nice touch, asshole,” he hissed. Calling upon his protective powers, he spoke the sacred wor
Discaoil, and dissolved the shield like it was tissue paper. Michael trudged toward the small doorwa
to the crypt. Of course, it was sealed shut. What would a nightmare be without complications an
roadblocks?

“Emma! It’s me, Michael! I’ve come to get you out of there! Hold on!” he called out, hoping sh
heard him. The seal would take a little longer to dismantle. He reached inward to find the rig
protection key to unlock it. Once found, he spoke those sacred words, and the door crumbled to rubb
on the ground.

Emma lapsed in and out of control. As hard as she fought against going into the mausoleum, she couldn't break free from Agremon's tight reign over her. Her limbs trembled in defiance. Anger was good. She could function with anger, but the fear that followed when the door was sealed shut behind her was crippling.

He knew. The bastard knew.

The dark terrified her. When that mausoleum door closed behind her, she was thrust back in time. She turned into the four-year-old girl who'd gotten stuck in a pitch-black, dank basement closet while playing Hide and Seek with friends. It felt like forever until she was found. Everyone had thought no harm done, but for her, that was the day Darkness became her enemy—an enemy she had yet to defeat.

Emma stood unmoving, paralyzed by her infernal fear, while her scream tried to echo, but came up empty. She had to find a wall, a corner, something to shield her. Being exposed this way in the middle of the room wouldn't be safe. Who knew what could come at her? Agremon did. She knew that now.

He was using her own fears to scare her to death, literally.

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