

CHAPTER I

The street's drier than the desert tonight.

After hours of trawling downtown, Blaéz drew to a halt at the East River. A couple of gulls screeched over the horn of a tugboat in the distance. Not even the sulfuric whiff of demoniis fouled the briny, humid air of late July.

The turned brethren of demons usually hunted at night, needing new souls to prolong their own decaying lives. Tonight. Nothing. With no fight in sight, restlessness crawled through Blaéz again, and had him straddling a blade's edge into darkness. Only a slight twinge remained from breaking his ribs and cracking his ulna earlier that day. He was healing too fast. The ache that had been grounding him was slowly fading and like an addict, he needed more.

Blaéz dematerialized to a backstreet in the Bowery. The stench of rotting fish was a familiar welcome. From the shadows, he eyed the scarred, dingy building opposite with crude graffiti scrawled across the brick walls and metal door.

Headlights flashed, brightening the narrow alley. A cab crept to a halt and spewed out its contents of adrenaline-jacked humans and their demon pal. Their excitement stirring the air as they scurried to the graffitied entrance. The heavy metal door opened then clanged shut behind them, releasing the scent of copper, sweat, and something more.

A whisper of seduction, it brushed Blaéz's senses and took ahold of him in a hypnotic lure, drawing him across the grimy asphalt.

He shoved the steel door open and headed down the stairs to the basement beneath the warehouse. The place operated as a fish market during the day, but at night, something darker took place. Two burly human guards at the foot of the stairs manned the entrance through a camera and computer.

Ignoring them, Blaéz made his way through the dank, narrow passage snaking deeper into the bowels of New York, and into a brightly lit arena swamped with humans and demons. A multitude of sensations stroked his mind, along with the smell of cold cement, sweat, blood, and agony. He inhaled harshly, absorbing just one.

The sweet, brutal song of pain.

It seeped into him and saturated his being. A shuddering breath wracked his body, a momentary touch of sheer, overwhelming feelings, once again gone too fast.

There, in the center of the floor, spotlighted with daylight intensity bulbs, stood a thirty-foot circular, steel mesh cage, four feet above the ground. The thinly padded bars were a mockery at safety. He ought to know. Inside, two males fought, the thud of fists striking flesh echoing in the quiet.

Blaéz scanned the crowd, keeping to the edges. His skin prickled with a familiar itch. His babysitter had arrived. Maybe he'd have cursed if he gave a damn. He didn't. If Michael thought to send Dagan to babysit him, they were wasting their time. Not like their leader could kick Blaéz out of his job as a Guardian.

As a warrior of Gaia, he remained as such for eternity, no matter what he did to himself. This was his great life; to protect this fragile species that didn't give a rat's furry arse about the dangers of the activities they pursued. Like fighting for money in this hellhole.

On the upside, the fact the fights had no rules suited him. Brutal. Deadly. Precisely how he preferred his fights.

A body hit the cage bars hard, making them shudder.

A bald, tattooed, heavy-set demon with beefy arms and thighs pounded a human foolish enough to be trapped with him.

Demons lived among mortals on this realm, and while most preferred a quiet life, there were those ones drawn to these brutal activities. They never lost a fight, unless *he* showed up. But recently, he didn't care about the wins, cared only for what the fights gave him—a way to fill the emptiness inside and stop the voices from completely pulling him down under.

As the cheers grew, Blaéz narrowed his eyes, his mind registering something else.

The demon fought not a full grown male, but a teen—a boy, too tall and too foolish for his own good. The demon hammered the lad. Chances were he wouldn't last long.

Another vicious punch and the boy went flying back, crashing into the bars again. A pained grunt escaped him. He pushed up, holding his arm at an awkward angle. Blood gushed from his nose. Two minutes tops, Blaéz wagered, before the lad went horizontal. The kid was going to be in a body cast for the next couple of months...if he were that lucky.

Blaéz usually preferred the last fight. Then he could go to the castle and crash in his quarters. No dreams, no voices, just unending pain that kept him locked in place.

A familiar brush of potent power—though tamped down—zinged him. Followed by a tinge of annoyance. Humans wouldn't sense the approaching male, but Blaéz sure did.

“Get him outta there.”

At the direct order, Blaéz glanced at the stone-cold features of the Guardians' leader.

Aviator shades concealed eyes Michael never revealed to mortals. Ebony strands escaped his haphazardly tied hair and hung around his unshaven jaw. Clad in black jeans and a faded black tee with ripped-off sleeves, his biceps bulged as he folded his arms over a wide chest, his attention on the fight.

None would suspect an all-powerful archangel stood among them. With his roughed up biker appearance, he appeared in dire need of some serious crib downtime.

Blaéz turned back to the fight. “Why? He chose this.”

“You're a slip away from going off rotation and into a session with Lore,” Michael warned, his tone flat.

At mention of the pain-in-the-arse angel, who probably waited to poke into their heads, Blaéz got moving. Psychobabble bullshit wasn't his deal. As if he'd ever spew out his life story to anyone. He pushed through the masses and headed toward the cage. A touch of his hand and the door unlocked and squeaked opened. The roars of excitement rocked the arena when the crowd spotted him. Their chants grew, “*Kill him, Warrior. Kill him. Kill the Demolisher!*”

Warrior? Yes, that's what he was. A warrior of Gaia's and an unacknowledged champion of these foolish, bloodthirsty mortals. And to think he had to protect them.

The demon grinned, recognizing him. “You want to take me on, *warrior?*”

Blaéz ignored the derision as he pulled off his tee and tossed it aside. If Michael wanted him to save the lad, then it would be on his terms. It was the reason he was here anyway.

He glanced at the boy on the cement floor, sliding in and out of consciousness. Swollen eyes flickered open and suddenly widened, darting behind Blaéz. His mouth worked, but only a garbled sound escaped.

Blaéz didn't need the warning, his senses tuned to the demon that came at him like a Mack truck. He sidestepped, spun around, and elbowed him in the belly. A brutal kick followed, the force sending the Demolisher flying into the bars. The cage shuddered. The crowd cheers amplified. Furious, the demon shot up.

“Seriously?” Blaéz taunted. “Did you learn nothing yet? I’m going wipe the floor with your arse.”

It was all he needed, a trigger, and the demon rushed him like a mad bull. He head-butted Blaéz in the abs, knocked the air flat out of his lungs. Blaéz wheezed. Blessed pain sang through his gut. Good thing, he didn't have to hold back his punches with this piece of crap. He went in hard so he'd get all the pounding he wanted...

Time passed. Blaéz had no idea how much, only knew he was in a shitload of agony. And he was losing, his mind gone a thick, hazy red. Maybe this way he could blank out his personal hell, too. The innocent lives he'd taken. The punishment he'd meted out, only to do it all over again in a never-ending cycle.

Rip open his belly, you'll get more of what you crave...

Blaéz shook his head at the sly voices prodding him. He *wanted* to hurt, he *needed* pain.

A fist smashed into his face. Blood sprayed. Agony exploded in a starburst of colors. Perfect.

What the hell are you doing? Michael snapped in his head.

At the unwanted mental intrusion, Blaéz shut down his mind-link and ignored his leader as another blow in the belly sent him reeling into the metal bars. This was his penance, his cross to bear.

Then the very air around him froze. All went still. As did his opponent.

Well, fuck. Playtime's over.

Michael strode through the statue-like crowd toward the cage. The gate flung open. He entered and crouched near the unconscious lad. His expression grim, he laid an open palm on the boy's chest. A silvery healing light emerged from Michael, encompassing the human's entire being.

Moments later, Michael dropped his hand and rose to his feet. “He'll live. I'll see you back at the castle.”

Which meant time for a one-on-one chat. Yeah, something he really looked forward to. Not. Blaéz pushed away from the bars and shook his head to clear the fog. Chest heaving, he picked up his shirt. Pain rippled across his ribs. He had to have fractured some.

Michael strode out from the cage. Seconds later, the din resumed as his hold on the crowd vanished. The demon stumbled several feet. Eyes flaring, irises sparking red, he attacked. Blaéz shoved into the demon's mind and knocked him out cold. “Playtime's over, dumbass.”

Pulling on his tee, he turned. The boy's eyelids flickered open, his disoriented gaze settling on Blaéz.

Michael, it appeared, had only healed his more serious wounds. Bruises remained around his right eye and jaw. With his mind, Blaéz pushed into the lad's memories, cleared out the last two hours and instructed him to leave the arena then he followed. The

boy staggered down the corridor. Using his tee, he wiped the blood from his nose. As he took the stairs to the exit, he missed one and stumbled back, knocking into Blaéz.

At the contact, a timeless haze took hold of Blaéz. He could do little to stop his precognition from kicking in. The mist parted, images formed...

Shadowy figures...a body crumpling into a heap, blood seeping from a torn throat...a rock group...

The vision faded. He always got these short flashes a few minutes before things happened. Instantly, Blaéz scanned, but he got no whiff of demoniis, and the mystical tattoo on his biceps remained still. What was with the rock group?

His gaze locked on the fair-haired boy lurching up the alley with the Metallica logo emblazoned on the back of his tee. Right. He'd just saved the little idiot's life. He wasn't going to let those dead scourges take it.

Darci Callahan rubbed her tired eyes and forced her achy limbs downstairs to her sparkling kitchen.

When she was upset, she cleaned. And watching one of her much younger coworkers get hitched the day before was a guaranteed way to get her brownstone in a tip-top, shiny-clean condition. More, it drove home the fact that she was almost twenty-seven, single, and fast on her way to acquiring a litter of cats at her impending spinster state.

At the thought, she blew out a disgusted breath.

Looping her hair into a topknot, she secured the heavy, curly strands with a chopstick she found in a drawer then put some milk on the stove. While she waited for it to heat, she leaned against the counter and gazed through the window.

The neighbor's cat slinked past the flowerpots in the small courtyard. Insects buzzed in a frenzy around the single garden light... Life as a moth must be far more interesting than hers, she mused. The only thing in the plus column of her life, she had a job she adored, but on the personal side? It remained as empty as her heart with several big, fat zeros at her failed relationships. She sighed. It wasn't as if she hadn't tried.

Her last one had ended because *she* couldn't "commit." Ben had flung that word at her before he'd walked out. Two years later, it still stung because she'd thought it so often. It left an achy pit in her stomach. She'd cared about Ben, but as much as she tried, she just couldn't connect on that necessary, intimate level in their relationship—from her heart. She'd felt so removed from it all.

She must have been born with a defective love gene. Why else was it so hard to fall in love? Find a little happiness? Everyone did it at the drop of a hat. And those dinners Declan had invited her to with his friends in tow. Her own brother setting her up—God, *that* was just so wrong.

Her cell beeped, shattering her morose thoughts. Her heart tripping, she snatched it off the counter and prayed nothing was wrong with Grace. After her sister-in-law's previous miscarriages and now this difficult pregnancy, Darci jumped every time her phone beeped.

Except, it was just some spam message. Did she look like she wanted more wallpaper?

Scowling, she dropped her cell on the counter and rolled her neck then stopped, unease prickling her skin. She rubbed her arms and glanced around the quiet stamp-sized kitchen and adjoining living room. Nothing. Yet the sensation of being watched grew.

Her gaze rushed back to the window. A black bird swooped down and perched on the sill. Its head cocked and bright blue eyes stared at her.

What the heck? Darci blinked. But the avian had hidden its head beneath its wing and settled for the night. A blue-eyed bird? Seriously? She must be losing her eyesight in her old age.

Snorting, she pulled out a half-eaten slab of plain Cadbury's from her tote, unwrapped and dropped the chocolate into a mug, then poured the steaming milk over it. Spoon and mug in hand, she headed to the lounge. From her collection of DVDs, she selected her favorite Buffy episode and slipped it into the digital player.

"Okay, Angel, let's see what you're up to tonight?" She settled on the couch with her chocolaty drink and propped her feet up on the large wooden crate she'd painted black which now masqueraded as a coffee table. Licking the melting chocolate off her spoon, she watched Angel make Buffy's life a living hell by leaving her gifts of drained bodies...

A sharp rap on the door and she jumped up, pulled out of her Buffy haze.

Christ on a crutch! "Still too edgy, Callahan," she muttered, heart in her throat. Her gaze darted to the wall clock. 1:47 AM.

It couldn't be Nora. Her friend was overseas visiting family.

Daniel? Her nephew sometimes stayed overnight with her when he was in town, but he usually called and warned her. Smoothing her lemon-colored tank top over pale blue pajama bottoms, she padded barefoot to the front door and peered through the security hole. At the flash of familiar blond hair, she threw the door open.

"Daniel..." Her worried voice trailed off as her gaze zipped straight past her nephew to the stranger behind. Predator-still, he blended into the night, dressed entirely in black.

The man was tall, his shoulders double the size of hers. Brutally cropped dark hair plastered his skull. He sported an awful shiner around his left eye, and his cheek bore a red welt. Even battered and bruised, the man was impossibly good-looking.

Leathers hugged his muscular thighs. A t-shirt stretched over his broad chest. He sported some kind of sword tattoo on his right biceps. At five foot nine, Darci was tall enough to look most men in the eyes without straining her neck. But *he* forced her gaze waaaay up until she bumped into his empty, pale blue stare. And felt as if she'd been sucked into a void.

"This juvenile belongs to you, I believe?" He thrust Daniel forward by the arm.

Her gaze dropped to her nephew and widened in horror. "Daniel! Dear God, what happened?"

Smears of dirt and dried blood marred his face; the discolorations on his right cheekbone were turning a horrible shade of purple. Darci reached for him, accidentally brushing the cold man's arm as he dropped his hand. A zip of electricity darted through her body. Awareness stirred. She ignored the eerie sensation as Daniel stumbled into the living room.

"You were in a fight? Again? Darn it, Dan, what were you thinking?" she snapped.

"I'm fine. I'm fine—" Confused blue eyes bounced all around the room before settling on her. "Please don't call Dad. Please, Darci?"

Darci didn't know whether to hug him because he was all right or yell at him for making her worry. She pinned him with a gimlet stare. "You hooked up with those loser friends of yours, didn't you? Christ in heaven, Dan, what were you thinking? How is this

supposed to work when you won't follow the few simple rules your dad's set for you, huh?"

His chin lowered and his shoulders sank. Feeling his embarrassment, Darci sighed and abandoned the hardcore aunt. "Go clean yourself up. We'll talk later."

Daniel trailed upstairs. Once he'd disappeared out of sight, she turned to the stranger on her front porch. Her breath caught at his unwavering stare. So intense. It made her uneasy, her inner alarm shooting all sorts of warnings through her head. *Thug. Assassin.*

Ugh, no, she dismissed that. He'd brought Daniel home. He couldn't be that dangerous, could he?

Darci hooked a coil of loose hair behind her ear to hide her nervousness. Those piercing pale eyes followed the movement. She had to force out the words through a suddenly dry throat. "What happened?"

"I suggest you keep him leashed." Ice edged his lightly accented voice. "He gets into fights in places he shouldn't be."

Darci scowled, her wariness morphing into irritation. No matter what trouble Daniel got into, no one spoke about her nephew in that manner. "I asked what happened, not your opinion."

Those eerie, empty eyes narrowed. No, not empty, something deeper—darker stirred within those frozen depths. Wariness crawled up her spine, chasing away her belligerence. *Déjà vu* settled over her in a haze.

She felt as if she'd looked into those eyes before.

A brush of her hand, that was all it took.

A roar built in Blaéz's head. The air rushed out of his body like he'd been on the receiving end of a deathblow. His senses flowed awake as if from a long drought. He drank her in like a man dying of thirst. And desperately inhaled another lungful of her scent.

Did he look as shell-shocked as he felt?

She smelled like sunshine and some flower—at that moment, he had no clue what the hell it was, just knew he'd smelled it before. It grew abundantly around the castle.

She spoke. He answered. Had no idea what he'd said or if he'd said anything at all. Only knew this human with her creamy coffee skin tone and sultry, slanted eyes damn near blew his mind apart. Her curly honey-brown hair was held up with a...chopstick? It revealed high cheekbones and a delectable pair of lips.

The combination of her scent, her mesmerizing stare, and the delicious scatter of freckles across her nose became his siren's call.

He wanted to leave, walk out. But held there by some impossible force, he reached out and gently stroked her petal smooth cheek instead. Her eyes widened in surprise. Her warmth seeped through the husk of him and his formidable control cracked.

In a move so fast he crowded her against the door, his hands braced on the wood beside her head. Powerless to stop himself, he lowered his head and trailed his nose down her neck. Her soft, feminine scent filled his lungs. His heart pounded in his ears. Blood buzzed, and desire like a tidal wave crashed through him.

"Hey." She shoved at his chest. "Wh-what are you're doing?"

"Be still."

At his rough tone, she stiffened and pressed her back into the door. Her striking eyes, a deep brown with spiky bouts of pure yellow edged with green glowered in annoyance.

Sunflowers. That's what they reminded him of.

"I'm grateful you brought Daniel home. But not *that* grateful. You're sadly mistaken if you think I'm going to let you..." Her gaze settled on his lips. "Kiss me."

"You would if I were of a mind to."

Her seductive mouth dropped open. Her irises turned fully citron, irritation flaring across her gorgeous face.

Emotions charging through him like a livewire, Blaéz forced himself to step back, despite wanting to taste her so badly. He struggled to find an off switch. Struggled not to touch her. If he did, he doubted he'd stop at just a kiss.

And you can't be trusted, the sly voices in his head whispered.

Yeah, got it. She's human—an innocent, and he was a fucked-up deviant.

He had to get the hell out of here. He drank in one last look before he took off down the street. At a shady building some distance from her home, he dematerialized. Back on the familiar grounds of the Lower East Side, he took form in an alley, his groin heavy and aching with impossible need. Blaéz ran agitated fingers through his clipped hair.

His gaze lit on the busy entrance to Club Anarchy. He needed a drink—needed to think. Bypassing the crowd there and the demon bouncers, he made his way inside the nightspot.

Heavy metal music crashed around him. Sweat, liquor, and perfume wafted in the air. Strobe lights in multihued patterns buzzed around him like pesky flies. Nothing registered in his hazy thoughts as he headed for the VIP section upstairs, not even the humans who parted, giving him way.

As he ordered his preferred whiskey from the waitress there, the sensation of absolute nothingness, of emptiness returned. He looked up into the mirror behind the bar. And the same expression he'd seen for eons stared back at him. Cold. Emotionless. Colorless eyes. The eyes of a killer. Once, in another life, they'd been as blue as the Pacific, until the day it had all gotten shot to hell and he'd been thrown in Tartarus for several brutal centuries.

His thoughts went on automatic lock-down.

A female in skyscraper heels tottered over to his side. Her vacuous gaze skimmed over him. "Lookin' for a good time, handsome?"

But it wasn't the whore's heavily made-up, spaced out grays he saw, but *hers*, those extraordinary hazel ones now imprinted on his mind. Drink forgotten, he headed downstairs and through the dimly lit passageway toward the exit.

He had to see her again. Why only with her did his heart react as if it had been attached to a defibrillator? Why only with her did he feel?

He was a soulless bastard. Emotions weren't his deal.