



His Redeemer's Kiss
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HIS REDEEMER'S KISS

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Chapter One

Joaquin made his decision.

He crouched in the thickening darkness like a silent wraith, unmoving beneath the extended arms of the shadow-laden trees, listening to the mockery of life all around him. His lip lifted with a derisive snarl as the single word knifed through him. *Life*. He had none. His had ceased to have meaning more than three hundred years ago. At this point, he didn't even know why he was still paying his penance. After three centuries, he was sure God, himself, would forgive him.

There was no joy on his features, no anticipation, not even the etched sadness he'd worn for decades. Now, there was nothing. Nothing in his heart. He was cold; existing, but not living.

He watched with unblinking attention from the shifting shadows as the young couple disembarked the horse-drawn carriage in the verdant public park. The man held his date tightly in the cooling night air, their heads together in quiet, tender conversation as they strolled the cobbled walkways arm in arm. The gesture meant nothing to Joaquin. Ironwork lampposts created a romantic ambiance, showering golden light onto the flowered trails, the perfect setting for a couple in love. Unfortunately, there were no feelings filling the frozen abyss in his heart as he watched the couple walk through the pools of light. To him, they were his subsistence, nothing more. Tonight, they would be his last.

With the ease of those endless centuries empowering him, he beckoned the couple from the path and into the tree line of the park with a simple command. The closer they came, the more the scent of hot blood raked his senses, and his hungers blazed to match it. Joaquin knew that same fire would shine in his eyes. It was part of his curse, a part of him. Yet, in all of his lonely, silent years stalking the night, he had never taken a life. He'd never cursed another with the cruel and cold creature consuming his soul one endless night at a time. Now, when he'd made his decision to accept whatever judgment waited for him on the other side of the sunrise, he was careful to keep a firm hand on those driving and demanding hungers. He knew if he failed to win the battle tonight, all the years of brutal penance, all the years of his own living hell, would be for nothing.

A firm mental push sent the couple safely on their way after sating his bitter appetite. Neither would ever know the travesty performed on their unsuspecting bodies, or how close to death they had stood.

With a leap, he shot into the night sky, changing his shape to fit into the nighttime world as easily as nature itself, unseen yet in plain sight. The trees of the park melted away as he rose above the earth, slipping through the breezes to leave it all behind. All he had to do was wait for the rising sun. He had no one to tell. There was no one left who knew he even existed. He guessed there should be sadness in that knowledge somewhere, but if there was, Joaquin couldn't find it.

He had no reason to continue this imitation of living any longer and hadn't for decades, but he had held out hope that God, someone, would show him why this abysmal hell had been laid at his door. Eventually, even hope dies. Coldness seeped into his skin the further he flew. It forced his concentration to his surroundings where he could easily push away the evening chill with a dismissive thought, recreating the blanket of warmth that would protect him in any form. The northern wilderness cooled faster once the sun had gone down, but he hated staying within the cities. It invariably

caused him trouble.

Woods sprawled like a green jeweled sea beneath the beat of his long wings, with some glittering, faceless city left behind. He was sure another city lay somewhere ahead. Was this all there was giving him hope? The knowledge that another warm body could keep him alive for one more night? That some city's deep streets or the wide open countryside would offer up some treasure, a wisdom he had never been lucky enough to find? A peace of mind that had eluded him for these many centuries? Was this why he'd risen night after endless night? These eternal ages of silence weren't how he'd wanted to spend his lifetime. More than one lifetime. He released a rare, deep sigh into the silent chill.

This was why Joaquin knew it was time. There wasn't anything living left inside of him. His heart beat because he made it. He breathed because he could. He didn't have to do either if he didn't want to. He had become an emotionless void, no joy in life, nothing to inspire him to *feel*, to live as the man he had once been. This was not living. This was where he believed he should care, but he couldn't. Not even a trickled sense of resignation as he searched one last time and found no argument to negate his final decision. He would die in the morning.

"Stop!"

The sudden mental bark knocked him from the sky with the force of flying full speed into a brick wall. For the first time in at least a century, Joaquin lost his shape in mid-flight.

Tumbling, he caught his balance before impaling himself on one of the large trees beneath him. He floated downward, agape with stunned shock. His feet reached the leaf-marbled ground, instantly wary of the voice and of the power it held. Surprise widened his eyes when he realized she wasn't finished with him, either.

"Would you stop? I'm almost in tears over your self-pity. You have emotions. Good God! They're so strong, I can't stand to listen anymore. You've been at it for three nights. Just stop!"

He traced the path to the sender, completely shaken by the strength she wielded, and by the sheer power of her voice. *Her voice*. A woman. He stood in bewildered silence for several seconds, blocking out everything else around him.

Joaquin stared daggers in the direction her rich voice came from in the next instant as shock morphed into anger, not only for the invasion of his inner thoughts, but at the direct command in her voice. *"You've been listening to me?"* he demanded, outraged at the invasion of his privacy. His thoughts whirled with the implications that she could hear him, had been listening and could apparently touch his mind with hers, rather easily at that—without any bonding between them. The realization tore through him, shaking him to his core. Only a few had broken his mental silence over the centuries, and none had been human, or female.

Who was this person who arrived at his darkest hour? How could he hear her when he hadn't heard another who wasn't like him since his conversion?

"You haven't exactly been quiet about it," she informed him with a tart rebuke, breaking his dissection of their mental path into mere wisps of puzzlement to concentrate on later.

He shook his head at the curtness of her response. *"How can you hear me? I haven't spoken to anyone in years."* *Understatement of the century*, he thought to himself with a grim frown.

“That I don’t know, but you’re very disruptive. I’m trying to read and then I pick you up like a radio talk show.” He knew he heard a sigh of frustration. *“You’ve made it rather difficult to concentrate.”*

This didn’t make any sense. *“Who are you?”* Silence met his question. Joaquin waited, and with a touch of fear that she had disappeared, demanded her attention. He whipped an energy pulse through the air.

“Hey! Don’t do that. I’m here.”

“Why didn’t you answer me?” Something was happening inside of him. He didn’t want to lose the unique connection with her. Over only minutes, it had become imperative. He wasn’t sure why, wasn’t sure of anything, only that he needed to hear more of her voice.

“Maybe I have my reasons.”

Joaquin launched into the sky with a powerful rush of energy. He had to know who this woman was. No reason anywhere could remove the burning necessity to know who she was, where she was, or how she could touch his mind. He discovered the wood-framed cabin nestled in the abundant artwork of trees and nature a few miles away from where she’d knocked him to the ground, out in the wilderness, but nearly imperceptible to a wandering eye. His heart beat like a wild horse on the run as rare anticipation flooded his body.

To mortal eyes, the wooden shape would have been invisible. Even for him, had he not been openly searching for it, he could have overlooked the seemingly natural structure easily. It blended with the surroundings, the wildness of the landscape, as if it had been chiseled from the trees and nature itself. A muted light detectable through a few tinted windows was all there was to hint to those living within its walls. Dark shadows and creative camouflage literally buried the cabin into the landscape.

He settled into the trees a distance from the home, cautious and confused. There was something about this house that didn’t fit. Becoming more comfortable in his spot, he took a moment to study the home and the surrounding protective walls of forest. There was a scent... Shock ripped through him when he took a deeper breath. *Brethren*. Several, if he hadn’t lost his senses. And as many humans. He shook his head. This picture made absolutely no sense whatsoever.

He scanned the home and found several sleeping bodies in the rooms of the house, and... He froze, narrowing his gaze, silencing everything about himself. He was getting careless in his curiosity. There was someone inside, not Brethren—he wasn’t sure what he was, but he was awake and aware. A guard? It was too hard to tell for certain as far as he was from the structure to make out all the details. He only knew this was not a normal home, and one of the males inside was not Brethren or human. Shaking his head in deepening confusion, he remained a safe distance away, pondering the significance of this situation.

The tale of the house itself was difficult to unravel. With another sweeping search, he located a hollowed chamber in the soil beneath it and knew his first assumption had been right. There were Brethren living in this home. The woman he had discovered created a larger mystery. He sensed she wasn’t bound, but resting. She was cared for, not wasting away as he had first assumed knowing Brethren were keeping humans in the house, but her pain was unmistakable. Even in the few traded words, the discordant tones had hummed on his nerves along with her voice.

Humans living with Brethren? The discovery left him puzzled, edgy and very

cautious. He focused his attention to remain as unseen as possible.

Joaquin phrased his next question with a calm tone, not wanting to alarm her. If the answer wasn't what he wanted to hear, he'd steal her away without a single regret because he knew what he feared was totally possible. *"Are the people there hurting you?"*

The sharp tone of indignation was as easy to hear as her flung answer. *"No one here would hurt me. I am very safe here. I am protected here."*

He fought against his reawakening male instincts to rush in and pull her out of there. He could clearly see how she may be in danger and not even know it. Mind manipulation, memory control; he knew those ways and more. He didn't know enough right at that minute to do exactly what he wanted—steal her away and keep this woman safe. Caution and patience weren't stopping him by much. *"Protecting you from what?"*

"Why do you want to know?" she shot back. *"I don't even know why you're talking to me."*

"Because you invaded my privacy!"

"Don't even try to pin that on me. You broadcast louder than a water buffalo."

He sagged against the nearest tree limb in astounded silence. How had she heard him, more than once? This had never happened to him. He hadn't been trying to find someone. The effort to remotely try had left him so long ago. He'd been traveling his dark world for centuries alone, and now, without any warning, here was *someone*.

Joaquin relaxed, making himself comfortable once more, projecting an apologetic smile into his next words. *"I'm sorry. This is new to me."* He gentled his voice more, desperate she not sever the connection. Desperate in ways he couldn't name to learn about her, to hear her. *"What have you heard?"*

There was a short hesitation while she considered her answer. He found he was getting better at finding her through the distance, a heartbeat between them, the single sound a beacon making her real. She hadn't left him. He realized how hard his heart was beating to hear her unique voice in his void of quiet and calmed himself, unused to the infrequent reaction.

"You're lonely. You feel you have nothing left to live for. You've been thinking suicide all night, which I might add, only weak men contemplate."

Joaquin glared in her direction. *"Weak men? I assure you, I am not weak."*

"And I'm sure you have a fantabulous excuse for wanting to slit your wrists, then, don't you? Sorry, but being lonely doesn't impress me."

He had no trouble hearing the absolute disdain in her words. *"Rather presumptuous, aren't you? You don't know me. I've lived a very long life, years of pain and silence."* He released a hissed snarl out to the darkened woods. How dare she judge him?

"I'll trade you scar for scar," came the immediate retort. *"Look, if you want to kill yourself, fine, but can you turn down the volume when you do it? I can't read on my shift if I'm talking to you."*

He considered his options. He didn't want to leave her, and for the moment, he didn't want to 'slit his wrists' either. There were so many things puzzling him about this, and about her. He tried to go for the least intrusive to feed his desire to learn more, and to hear her voice. *"What are you reading?"*

"Just poetry for now. Are we trading questions?" she asked suspiciously.

Trading was exactly what he wanted to do, yet something made her very careful in

her answers. *"If you'd like,"* he offered easily, hearing a deep mistrust in her words. He wondered about the echoes of pain laced through the words between them, but knew it would take more than casual conversation for her to divulge anything about that, and the cause. He had to find out more about her. He wanted her to relax so she would tell him what he wanted to know. *"Ask me anything you'd like to know."*

"Where are you?"

He glanced around, taking in his surroundings for the first time. *"I'm sitting in a tree where the leaves are changing colors. Green fading to golden orange and shades of red."* He surprised himself with the colorful description. When was the last time he'd noticed anything as common as when the seasons changed? When had he grown indifferent to the beauty of an elm tree or the color of a leaf as it faded from summer? None of it affected him. He didn't live his life by the seasons the way he once had. There were no foals to care for, no crops to tend, all of which had passed a long time ago into his history. He simply left one place until he found something to interest him if he didn't want to be where he was at any given moment.

"I've always loved the fall colors. So vibrant," she replied, her answer much more mellow to his ears.

On a whim, he sent her a visual of his surroundings with all the luxuriant beauty of the changing colors, adding the sheer shimmer of the pale moonlight shining against the lightly twisting leaves.

"That's beautiful." It was a whispered sound of awe, and it caused tingles from his chest to his toes. *"How did you do that? How gifted are you?"*

He shook his head, gathering his scattered senses. *"I am far from gifted. I am cursed."*

"Is that why you feel so lonely? You're not the only one out there with parapsychology gifts." The sudden shock was impossible to miss when she sliced off her thoughts with a flare of anger aimed at herself.

"No! Don't. Please stay with me a little while longer." He threw his weight behind the words, and pulled her mind to his. It wasn't a hard battle. Surprisingly, wary and cautious, she wasn't fighting his strength.

"I shouldn't. I don't know you."

"I am Joaquin," he offered without hesitation. *"Now you know me."*

Sparks shot up his spine at the sound of her laughter. Something bloomed inside of his chest, something bright and new. The animated sound was as intense as the brightest sun, sending light and energy rippling throughout his body. He gasped at the sensations, feeling all of them, feeling everything as if he could feel her touch on his skin, the gentle drag of fingers against his flesh. Electric, and so very rare.

"Please, tell me your name." The freshness of her voice, of talking to someone, left him fighting for air when he didn't even have to breathe. He couldn't stop himself from leaning forward, wanting to hear her answer.

After several moments, he realized something was wrong. There was definite hesitation in her answer this time, but he knew she was still with him. He scanned the woods for the other Brethren he knew had to be near, but found he was alone.

His throat tightened even as he asked her, *"Do I frighten you?"* He discovered he didn't like the idea he may scare her at all. He never wanted to cause this person, or any, fear. He forced himself to relax, aware he may be projecting something she could find in the air or feel the same way he sensed her underlying pain.

“I...I have listened to you and know I shouldn't, but... It's hard to explain.”

Something in her answer sounded wounded. He could almost picture her dropping her lashes, trying to hide thoughts he couldn't quite find this far from her. She had surpassed intriguing him.

“Do the ones you stay with control you? Do they monitor you?”

Her reply was again a snapped negative. *“No! They are caring for us, protecting us.”* She sighed, an underlying frustration in the quiet hum, and she wrapped him up in the sound. *“It's very hard to explain. This is unusual for me. I didn't expect for you to hear me.”* It sounded very much like a quiet admission to him.

The next thought occurred to him with no trouble and he found he hated it. *“You don't trust me.”* His frown reappeared. *Why should she?* he wondered. Even though he wanted her trust, it wasn't realistic to expect it blindly, or considering their circumstances. Voices from some dark corner of the night. Hers, offering a comfort he couldn't remember, it had been so long since he'd experienced it. His, hopefully offering something she needed in return.

The sadness coloring her thoughts told him his answer before she ever spoke, but the knowledge he was right didn't ease the ache her answer created. He wanted her trust.

“No, I don't.”

“Tell me what they are protecting you from.” Why would Brethren care for, much less protect, humans? The one who was neither Brethren nor human was still in the house, but his presence only made Joaquin more alert.

He could almost feel her indecision as he waited.

An uncomfortable ripple raked over his senses bare seconds before a shape loomed up from out of the darkness not five feet before him. He didn't flinch, and he didn't run.

Cold, silver-white eyes stared at him from an expressionless face, judging him. This male was easily inches taller than Joaquin, and by the energy crackling about him on the air, much more powerful than any Joaquin could remember meeting. He accepted running would have gained him nothing but his death. As it was, it surprised him Joaquin hadn't been attacked as soon as he'd been discovered. Brethren were not social creatures.

“I greet thee, Brethren,” Joaquin offered in the formal manner of their kind. He waited, holding himself still to not provoke the man who hung effortlessly in the air before him.

“If I had wanted to kill you,” he said in a low-rumbled, disinterested voice, “you would already be dead.”

Joaquin's eyes dropped to slits at the ease his thoughts were violated. If there was a leader to the scene he'd been trying to decipher, then this was him.

“Why are you keeping humans?”

The one hovering before Joaquin barely arched a brow at the question. *“Why does it concern you? If you think the one you have spoken with will come and save you from your own folly, you are wrong. She does not care that you have decided to destroy yourself, nor does she care why you have spoken with her. You have disturbed her nights, and she only wished for you to cease.”*

Joaquin was informed of all of this with hardly a molecule of compassion. He wasn't willing to let it go so easily. *“Why are you protecting her?”*

Fires danced in the silvery eyes, a warning. *“That is less than you need to know.”*

“Why? You are holding her. Is she your prisoner?”

“You are asking questions I have no care to answer. Leave. You are not welcome.” Those chilling eyes narrowed at him. “I do not want to kill you, but I can.”

Joaquin stifled the glare daring to appear at the threat. After centuries of his own living hell, he was not going to be shoved to the side that apathetically. He may not be the warrior this one was, but he did have a few tricks he’d learned over the endlessness of his life. “*Do you welcome me?*” He pinpointed his thoughts to ensure there were no eavesdroppers this time.

Shocked awareness erupted on his senses as the feminine purity of her voice filled his mind once more. “*I thought you were gone! Diego had said he would find you and make you leave.*”

“*He is trying. I have offered my name and promise you no harm. Do you welcome me?*” he asked again. Silently, he prayed she didn’t deny him this, a single touch of humanity he hadn’t felt since Angelica’s death.

“*They are warning me not to talk to you anymore.*”

Anger made his blood boil, but he showed nothing of it on his face, knowing he was borrowing time to connect with her. “*So they are your keepers then, where you can’t think for yourself, where they guard you as a prisoner.*” It was what he feared. She was being controlled, and the woman behind that lovely voice didn’t even know of the deception being played against her.

“*That isn’t fair! You don’t know what’s going on here.*”

“*I want to,*” he told her, his voice soft and pouring out with compassion. What wasn’t in his voice was the knowledge he would find a way to rescue her from her prison, the sooner the better for the both of them. “*I want to know the lady who has warmed me with nothing more than her voice. Am I a bad man for wanting to merely talk to you?*” He didn’t try to hide the ache of his loneliness from her. He knew on some level they were the same. Her pain had not diminished any either. It bothered him as much as her ‘protector’ staring deadly daggers before him did.

Precious seconds dragged by, but he refused to drop his gaze or attention from Diego. He purposely remained motionless to not miss a single sensation, waiting for her answer.

“*No.*”

The whispered word drifted like a seductive caress into his thoughts, and he swallowed at the aching sound. With his gaze never leaving the vampire in front of him, Joaquin knew his time had run out. He would have to leave or be blown into little vampire bits. “*I will do as your guard asks, and I will leave. For tonight.*” He bowed his head in defeat to Diego, and shifted into a familiar owl to fly away on the night breeze. No sense in letting the powerful man feel Joaquin was more of a threat than he was. It may be his only advantage.

He was positive Diego followed, so he didn’t try to circle around. He would find a place to rest nearby, though. He needed to know more about this woman who could reach him, who could speak to him. He wouldn’t be able to do what he felt compelled to do tonight. Tomorrow, he would get closer to study the home and do as his instincts demanded—remove her from the threats surrounding her. There had never been any of the Brethren he could trust. The long line of mistrust had catapulted from his creator, and he’d learned that lesson all too well.

“*Joaquin?*”

His eyes eased closed in joy at her tentative contact a few moments later. She was reaching for him. It was all that mattered in the darkness surrounding him. *"I am here."*

"You're not still thinking of, you know, killing yourself, are you?"

A knowing smile broke over his lips as he reformed to his natural shape, sliding through the air to fold himself into the V of a branch. Diego had lied, and the truth warmed him as much as her voice did. *"No. I believe I have found a reason to continue, if only for one more night. I will look for you tomorrow, when the sun has set. Will you welcome me?"*

"I shouldn't go against Diego, Joaquin. He's a good friend, and he is protecting us."

"I'm aware of what he is," he offered, wanting to soothe her. Silently, though, he believed she didn't know half the truth about the man she called friend. *"I'm only asking for your conversation, nothing more. And know this, I would never, could not, harm you. I know you are scared. I don't want you to be scared of me."*

Several minutes lingered between them when he heard her voice once more. *"You're pretty mysterious, you know that? I think I can hear an accent, but it's hard to tell this way. And you're talking to me from who knows where."*

Her silent laughter floated between them. It felt to him as if the entire world had changed on its axis. Everything he knew and had accepted had been, in an instant, changed forever. For the moment, he was very willing to see where the next night would take him.

She fell silent as she thought it over. *"I guess this is all right, to talk to you like this."*

"I look forward to tomorrow evening then," he whispered to her, feeling a relieved warmth in the pit of his stomach. *"It would be easier to speak with you if I knew your name."* He prodded her gently, not wanting her to be nervous with the admission. Knowing her name would make it easier to find her voice in the mental openness they seemed to share. The sooner he could pinpoint her in the house hidden in the trees, the sooner she would be out from under the Brethren's controlling deceit.

There was only a slight hesitant pause, a quiet catch in her voice as she offered her name to him, and then like a light snuffed out, he knew she had closed herself off from his searching thoughts.