



Promises in the Dark

Book 4: Angelfire II Quartet

Excerpt

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One

At two a.m. on the dot, the head of security initiated last call in the usual pull-the-plug way that provided plenty of grumbling among Knuckleheads' rowdy crowd of biker patrons packed to the rafters. Sapphire Stephenson knew despite the "quiet" without music and television and the shutting down of the kitchen and last-round drinks, it would take a good two hours to get everyone out so the staff could begin closing procedures.

Almost as if she was targeting with a heat-seeking missile, she turned, scanned the low-lit bar and locked on to William Decker. While he was six foot four inches of pure, bronzed muscle--someone who would have stood out in any throng--that wasn't the reason she'd spotted him so easily. He'd deliberately put himself in her line of sight.

Across the space separating them, their eyes locked and Sapphire found herself unable to breathe. She'd been off the last two days, as he had been since their schedules were the same, and they hadn't seen each other since the close-down early Monday morning. *Two days of lecturing myself about this, and I'm right back where I started. I want him so badly, there's no way I'll be able to refuse when he reaches for me the second the doors are locked and we're finally alone--just like last time and the time before and...*

She swallowed in shame and desire, willing herself to break away from his intensely potent, dark eyes telling her the same thing they had since they'd both showed up at six p.m. for their shifts. *He's missed me as badly as I've missed him these past two days.*

Sapphire felt choked by her derision to the understatement. *Missed?* She'd *ached* for him, *bled* for him, felt like she might die if she didn't see him soon, immediately. This went so far beyond *missing*. Her throat tightened. She could no longer deny she was in such trouble this time, it'd be a miracle if she could get herself out unscathed.

Ironic what had brought them together in the first place. Two months ago, same old same old, she'd had a big, hairy dude spend an entire shift coming on to her, gunning for what he believed he deserved after all his persistence. Usually, she could handle herself. And, for the times when situations inevitably got tough, she'd taken self-defense classes and kept herself in shape to be able to handle the overzealous creeps that came through the biker bar on a nightly basis. But against one with three-hundred pounds of passion that absolutely refused to be denied, she'd had little chance of escaping on her own. If not for Deck, one of Knucklehead's most loyal patrons, returning because he'd been worried about her, she would have been brutally raped by the a@#hole, too. Deck had said later he'd noticed the guy hovering around her all night, and it'd occurred to him just after he left that he hadn't seen her get in her car and drive away. So he'd turned around to check on her.

As his bartender for at least a decade, Sapphire knew best Deck had been blind-drunk that night, every night. Even still, he'd thought about her, worried, come back to make sure she was safe. He'd shown up in the nick of time, too. As soon as he was off his motorcycle, he'd shouted for her to get out of there, and Sapphire had found out later he'd not only beat her would-be rapist to within an inch of his life but he'd gone to the police and told them everything, describing her attacker in detail. The jerk had been picked up and arrested not long afterward on the basis of Deck's thorough testimony. Though she'd been reeling at what'd almost happened to her, she'd given a statement when the police showed up to talk to her, too.

The next night, when she'd come in to work her shift, she'd found out that her boss Duff, the owner of Knuckleheads, had hired Deck as his head of security. His shifts matched hers every night. Anticipating her insistence that she could handle herself, Duff had given her some story about the fact that Deck had been drifting since his career as the personal bodyguard of former-supermodel Roxanne Hart had ended and she'd cut him loose.

Point in fact, Duff hadn't been bulls@#g about Deck. While William Decker was a man of few words usually, when he was beyond-drunk, he talked. He talked to *Sapphire*. He'd been divulging his heartaches about Roxanne for years--specifically, his protectiveness toward her, maybe warranted by her self-defeating ways as well as the fact that her second bout with cancer was in remission. He talked about the guy Roxanne had been in love with, stupidly, most of her life, how Deck hated Jamie, didn't think this dude was worthy of her.

Without restraint when he was wasted out of his mind, Deck talked about his love for Roxanne, a love that would never die, even if she didn't and would never return his feelings and hitched herself for life to someone else, the way she would soon. She and Jamie Dubois had sent out their wedding invitations not long ago, and somehow Sapphire had warranted one probably because her cousin Cherish was a close friend of Roxanne's and the two of them had been trying to draw Sapphire into their tight-knit circle of friends for the past year.

More than once, Sapphire suspected Deck didn't remember confiding in her about his feelings for Roxanne. *Admitting to me what I don't believe he's ever admitted to himself, sober or drunk.*

After Sapphire's near-rape that first night back in the bar, Deck had sobered up, not

touching so much as a drop of alcohol, the way most of the staff did as if they were here for the party instead of to work. He personally escorted all female staff to their vehicles at the end of a shift, and Sapphire, as night bar manager, was usually the last employee to leave. They'd been alone the night after Duff hired Deck, once the place was cleared out. She'd intended to tell him she was grateful for his intervention, for thinking about her for some unfathomable reason after he'd left. But he'd reached for her almost as if they'd planned it beforehand.

To this day, she didn't know what he'd intended. Up until that moment, she'd resisted the truth she hadn't wanted to face for years. Attraction had sparked between them long ago, as long as she could remember, maybe from their first meeting. Deck was the very picture of masculinity, of bad-boy mystery. Despite or maybe *because of* his infatuation with an unavailable woman, Sapphire would have had to be dead not to notice him as a man. But she'd been very careful not to let her own attraction become known to him or anyone else. She refused to be with any guy who drank the way Deck did. *And if he's obsessed with another woman... No. No way. I won't compete. I don't share. I don't have the confidence.*

His drinking was an issue that'd bothered her more and more since he sobered up and started working officially for Duff. She'd never met a man like Deck. He drank ten times what most people did yet he didn't "show" it the way other people did. Instead of becoming incapacitated or violent, hard drinking turned him inward and contradictorily seemed to make him *more* sober than the few times he actually was teetotaling. But she knew Deck sober and she knew him dead-drunk. He'd been sober for the past few months, since her rape. *And the protectiveness he's always shown the female staff and patrons, especially me, has been ruling him. That and...*

Though it'd been a long, draining shift and all she wanted to do was collapse, she couldn't seem to look away from him, fully aware what would happen as soon as everyone cleared out of here and the doors were locked behind them. His gaze was telling her in graphic detail that he'd spent every second of this damn long shift thinking about her and the intimate moments they'd spent alone together in the past two months, so hungry for each other their lovemaking had been shockingly swift each time. Almost before it started each time, the reckless act was over and all she could do was sit in the ashes of what had gone far beyond impulsive pleasure. With Deck, she was so easily aroused, both turned on and turned inside out, so contradictorily satisfied and ravenous each time they came together. What could ever be enough?

What does he think of me? I was almost raped that night he saved me. Yet the very next night, all he had to do was reach for me, I was kissing him and damnably out-of-my-mind eager for anything and everything he did to me, then, every single time since...

Her face burning, her body liquid under his scorching gaze, she forced herself to look away and get back to work. *What did he intend that night, that first night? All the ones since? He reached for me. Sure, when I kissed him, the rest just rocketed and he took over, but what did he initially intend? A hug?* Sapphire didn't know, couldn't guess, and the past weekend had been torment for her because she'd been in a tug of war with herself. Whatever was between her and Deck couldn't continue. She had a sixteen-year-old daughter she'd spent most of her life trying to be a good role model to. She'd failed often, but it'd been almost a decade since she'd stumbled into a bad romance simply because she ached for physical and emotional intimacy. The shadows of love had somehow convinced her these men had real

feelings for her, too, that they weren't just enjoying what she gave freely without sparing a consideration about the future, about her heart when it ended. She hadn't brought home a man since Yasmine was five. Two years after that, she'd stopped getting involved with anyone, period. She'd decided secret trysts were as bad as the blatant ones she'd had when her daughter was too young to understand who the strangers in their apartment were.

What the hell am I doing now? Why can't I stop this? But Sapphire couldn't deny the answer to that. The past two days refused to allow her to hide from the truth. She was already half in love with Deck, despite not having the slightest clue how he felt about her...beyond obviously wanting what they shared together, that was.

Facing that she was in love didn't help, given that things had been so crazy between her and her daughter in the last year. She'd always told herself it wouldn't happen between the two of them. She and Yasmine had been impossibly close. But since her daughter turned fifteen, they fought all the time. They'd become more like mortal enemies than mother and daughter. *She's too much like me, like I was when I was her age. Independent. Rebellious. So sure I was right and the rest of the world was wrong--especially my own mom. But I got pregnant when I was fifteen. I can never forget that, even if I equally can't regret it. Given Yasmine's penchant for choosing all the wrong boyfriends, she could easily do the same sooner or later. She won't let me talk about sex, birth control. She absolutely refuses to let me be a mother to her.*

A knife twisted in Sapphire's heart as she washed glasses with single-minded focus on what she had to do as soon as the bar was closed. *God, do I need to be a good example to Yasmine, now more than ever. But...how can I give this up?* She'd known Deck for so long, more than a decade, yet she'd realized in the last couple days she didn't really know him at all. Not in the definable way she desperately needed right now to justify her feelings. *I'm not ready to give this up, give him up. Even if it's wrong, even if he doesn't feel anything for me beyond protectiveness and sexual desire...how can I turn away from him? Why do I want what's happening here to be more? Can it be? Why does it have to feel so damn intense? I was sick, missing him these past two days. Why? Why should that have been the case? We don't have a relationship beyond coworkers and incredible, obsessive sex. Not anything romantic, tender. Bottom line, I'm hooked. I'm so hooked, I can't get myself to break away even when I don't have a choice about it.*

Last call was greeted grudgingly, but Deck was decisive and few dared challenge him. Sapphire could feel herself growing anxious as the bouncers escorted clients out, the wait staff cleaned up, and she and the barbacks reviewed receipts, distributed tips, closed out the register, melted the ice in the bin, cleaned the glassware, and put caps back on the bottles. Deck had an easier time of getting the staff out than she ever had, when they all seemed to want a drink or ten for the road after their shifts.

When the door was finally locked, the bar empty save for the two of them, she sensed Deck even before she turned to see him leaning against the wall next to the front door, looking at her with an expression she wanted to translate straight from his mouth. She could hardly catch her breath at the fierce arousal in his eyes. *What would he have done if I'd actually called him the times I picked up the phone to do just that these past two days? Was he thinking about me, too? Wanting to be together?*

She couldn't get herself to believe anything but that he would have met her anywhere, anytime if she had called him. *Why? And what would have I said? That what we have isn't enough for me? Or the opposite--that it's over and we can't continue a purely sexual*

relationship because...because I'm in love and I don't know what he feels for me...

Sapphire tried desperately to draw in oxygen, but he was smiling, shy and sexy when he reached for her. "Hey, beautiful," he murmured in that sandpaper rumble that she sometimes felt right down inside her like a kick to her nerve ending.

God, he was handsome and intensely masculine--from his thick, closely-cropped dark hair and jet-black bedroom eyes--all the way down his trim, muscular body she couldn't imagine ever getting enough of with her eyes, her fingers, her own body.

Tears stung her eyes painfully. She wanted him to tell her something, *anything*, personal so badly, she could hardly stand it. The touch of his well-shaped, full mouth against hers--sweet and soft and so vital, she felt injected with a drug--sent her straight out of her head. She barely registered what she was doing or thinking or longing for. She only kissed him back, grateful that he still wanted her. She'd yearned for him, for this perfection of body on body, clawing for both during her days off. Without inhibition, she gave of herself, reveling in his stoned gazes, words, and groans.

What felt like only moments later, she was spiraling back to earth, lying naked beneath him on the sofa in the locked office. For a long time, they tried to catch their breath. The only sound was their heartbeats and panting.

Surprising her because it wasn't his *modus operandi*, he kissed her throat, her chin, the line of her jaw lingeringly. Under his breath, he muttered, "Don't rush off, babe."

She always did. *Like this is the scene of our crime*. She couldn't get away fast enough because she knew if she dawdled she wouldn't be able to get herself to leave him. She'd beg him to tell her he loved her, too. And because she usually cried all the way home, sometimes longer. Those tears wouldn't be denied for long. He'd always allowed her to flee. They'd wordlessly get dressed. He'd follow her out to her car to make sure she left his sight safe and sound. Before he put her in her car, he kissed her tenderly until she wanted to weep--and she barely made it until she was inside the driver's seat, pulling away, helplessly looking back at him standing firmly in place until she was gone. He always let her go without protest when she said, "I have to go."

Deck kissed her again before nuzzling her cheek with his nose, pressing his forehead to hers until their eyelashes all but merged with their eyes closed, their lips mere millimeters apart. Sapphire opened her mouth, a sob so close to the surface, only a miracle following desperate prayer kept it in check. Why was he being so gentle, like he didn't want this to end, didn't want her to leave him even for a few hours? He'd always let her go before. Maybe his eyes had been saying something else, but he hadn't voiced what she'd wanted to believe his gaze spoke louder than words: *Don't go. Don't leave me. Ever.*

Equally unexpected was the sentence coming out of her mouth when he drew back and she opened her eyes to see him looking down into her face. "What you must think of me."

He frowned, his thick brows furrowing above his sexy eyes. Why wouldn't he be confused? Her sentiment wasn't exactly appropriate after what they'd just done. "What do you mean?"

"This whole thing started..." Her face filled with lava-like heat. "...'cause some a@#hole almost raped me. You stopped him. And the next night, I... *This...*"

If possible, he seemed more bewildered, even a little concerned. "Your choice, baby. That's the point, isn't it?"

"He wasn't my choice," she said, as if that fact wasn't obvious--and just what Deck said:

the point.

"I could see that from the first. You fought him. Did your damndest, too."

Sapphire held her breath, irrationally hoping he would follow the logic through to its conclusion. Miraculously, he did. "I assumed you chose what happened between us, Sapphire. You didn't fight. If you had..."

"I didn't. I couldn't. I don't want to. Not with you."

His hand cradled the side of her face and a shy, sexy grin lifted the corners of his mouth until she wanted to scream out loud that she loved him. "Then it's all good, babe," he said softly and kissed her, his mouth unhurried.

She wanted to say, "Don't make me love you more." Instead, she swallowed the lump in her throat at his unexpected after-sex affection that felt more like love than a bid for more of the same. "What about you, Deck?" she whispered. "What do you want?"

He smiled at her again, no subterfuge in his eyes. "Missed you, baby. Last two days were an eternity. Thought about you. So damn much, I didn't think I was gonna make it until we were alone tonight."

I wasn't alone, alone in my feelings. I wasn't...

Deck swore when the tears she could no longer dam up behind the protective wall she couldn't seem to shore up for long around him broke free in a flood. "What? What's this? What's going on, honey?"

"I don't know," she said, barely coherent and gasping, partially because he was so much bigger than her and suddenly his weight on her was suffocating.

Seeming to realize, he shifted so they were laying side by side, his arms around her so she couldn't have broken free even if she wanted to. "Tell me, Sapphire. Do you not want me to miss you?"

If you wanted an opening to end this, here it is. You've been down this road too many times to count. All this will come to is a bad ending, now or later. Might as well get it over with. Regret is all that's left now.

Sapphire realized she was out of control when she opened her mouth to say one thing and the opposite issued forth unbidden again. "I missed you. Days off... *Hell*. You probably don't wanna hear this."

He laughed in disbelief. "Lady, why *wouldn't* I wanna hear that?"

"Cause..." She couldn't speak through the tears. She felt anger rise inside her at her own inability to stop.

"You just told me what I wanna hear, honey," he said, his smile tentative and unsure. "Don't change your mind now."

He'd said exactly what she wanted to hear, even if she shouldn't, but her overemotional state only intensified at this perfect balm. The way he held her, cradling her face and kissing her like he wanted to make everything better...*like he loves me... Why does he feel so right? Only him?*

She'd never known how to handle an excess of feelings like this, so she did what she knew. She kissed him, stroked him, but he surprised her with his reaction even then. He halted her seductive hand on him. "Did somebody hurt you, Sapphire? Tell me."

She swallowed, allowing him to hold her hand. "I'm not the type for one-night stands. You don't have to believe me..."

"Of course I believe you."

"Why 'of course'?"

"Baby, I've been coming to this joint for a long time. No man gets the time of day with you. You're willing to be friendly. Line in the sand. Nobody dares cross."

"You noticed?"

"I'm a lotta things, but I'm not blind."

Even before he'd officially started working for Duff, that had been his strength. He saw trouble in advance and he dispelled it. He was good at noticing everything around him, despite the crowded room. He was damn good at his job. "Deck...you...and I...are you just...?" She sucked air like grasping for courage. "...taking what you can get with me?"

Almost sheepishly, he admitted, "Yeah. Hell, yeah."

She reeled back. "You are?"

"I'm taking what you're giving. *Whatever* you're giving, as long as you're giving it, babe."

It wasn't exactly a declaration of love, nor was it the "player" response she'd anticipated because she'd heard it so many times before. "What's happening between us?" she asked, reaching up to wipe her cheeks.

"Hell if I know."

"You don't know?"

"Do you?" he returned.

"No." How could she hold his confusion against him?

"That mean we have to stop?" he asked point-blank.

She hadn't expected the question, let alone the obvious agony behind it, matching his expression.

"I'm... Deck, I'm a mother. I have a daughter. A teenage daughter. I can't be doing this. I have to be an example. *A good one.*" *Who are you kidding? That ship has sailed.*

"So you wanna stop?"

The opening was there a second time. To end it. Do what she knew she needed to. She'd always chosen the wrong guys. Bouncers were the worst. They were corrupt, taking drugs from customers, keeping it for themselves, spending their whole shift drunk, banging every woman they could get while they were supposed to be working. She'd never known one of them to have morals. They cheated and lied right to everyone's faces. But the whole bar scene was made up of people like them. Maybe bouncers were the worst, but they were just part of the ensemble. *Until Deck. He's the head bouncer, but he's nothing like them.*

She found herself lifting her hands to stroke the carve-in-marble cheekbones, the thicker-on-top silken hair on his head, the muscled cords in his neck. *I don't want to go back. To being bartender and counselor to this big-tipping drunk. But even then he was my protector.*

"Damn that I can't read your mind, honey," he muttered almost savagely.

"Join the club."

Despite a ghost of a smile crossing his face, the question was out there, larger than life, screaming between them. *Do you wanna stop?*

"I don't want to have an affair. I...I don't know what's going on. But I don't want it to stop."

He grinned. "You're reading my mind."

"Yeah?" she asked.

"Yeah."

He sighed, shifting again so this time she was over him. His mouth was an inch away,

close enough to make her crazy as their bodies settled together like pieces of a puzzle. Just like that, he was rock hard again. "I want you, Sapphire. Hell, that's about all I know these days. All I can think about is the way you kissed me that first time. And all the times afterward. You're so damn beautiful. So hot. Can't believe you even looked at a guy like me."

"You're not oblivious to your effect on the women around you," she insisted.

He shrugged them off. "You're not like them. Tell me what you want, babe. That's what I want."

Was he so willing? *How can I live without him? Without these caresses that get me through my dull, pointless life? Fill my every waking and dreaming thought? Even when he's not close to me, I'm thinking about him, whether he's at the back of my mind or at the front.* "Will you give me what I want, Deck?" she asked in a mere whisper.

"Anything."

He spoke without hesitation, without reluctance, with a kind of tormented passion that made her weak and needy. *He said he's taking what I'm giving--whatever I'm giving, as long as I'm giving it. But he didn't say that like he was playing me. He said it like he's loving me.*

When he kissed her again, Sapphire thought of love. She felt love. His mouth was tender, sweet. *He's not like so many other guys that drift into Knuckleheads. He's not smooth. He's awkward, if anything, especially around beautiful women. Around me...*

If the thought of ending this whatever-they-were-doing made her cry, the way he made love to her only solidified that urge. Instead of burning them both out in a blaze of glory, he kissed her, caressed her, put his imprint on every part of her body, savoring her as much as he seemed to be memorizing her. The things he whispered--urging her to lose herself in his erotic attention--freed her, made her burn, brought her to shattering culmination over and over. His kisses felt like a demarcation that she wanted more than anything in the world. *I already belong to you, the way I've never belonged to anyone else because this only comes from something mutual and right, something perfect. But is it love? What the hell is love? How should I know? But I know it's not about sneaking around, stealing something we shouldn't let ourselves give or take.*

When he finally gave in to his own gratification, he pulled her tightly down to him, groaning in her ear, "Come home with me, Sapphire. I want you in my bed. I wanna hold you all night...morning, whatever. I don't wanna let you go."

The back of her eyes felt hot again. Even as she thought, *Tell me you love me*, she knew he had. He just had, in a way she couldn't refute. When she pressed her face against him, closing her eyes tightly against the raging storm behind them, he held her even tighter, stealing her breath from her lungs, and said, "You have to go, don't you? Your daughter?"

She nodded even as she wanted him to try talking her out of leaving him instead of going home with him where they could hold each other for all the hours they had off-shift.

They got dressed and he walked her to her car, kissing her lingeringly there, obviously not wanting to release her for anything in the world. Once she was behind her steering wheel, the window rolled down, he leaned in and said that maddening thing: "Whatever you want, honey."

He's taking what he can get with me, whatever I'll give him. Because the sex is so damn good between us, and there's no reason he shouldn't take what I'm giving him so freely? It was more than that for him. The last few hours proved that.

Maybe he loves me, too. Never mind that there were so many obstacles that needed to

be considered if whatever-this-was extended into more than an undefined affair. She didn't want to think about that future--not yet. Not until he stopped insisting he'd give her "whatever you want, honey" and told her straight out what *he* wanted from *her*.

Two

What the hell did any of it mean? William Decker reeled mentally as Sapphire drove away. The last hour played itself back, shredding him again at her tears, the physical mind-blow of the sex, her unsatisfying illusions that didn't give him anywhere the amount of comfort and promise he hadn't realized until the past two, lonely-as-hell days that he'd been looking for from her. That Sapphire and Sapphire alone did this to him shouldn't have surprised him. Something about the woman had left him unhinged, exposed, without a prayer since he met her more than ten years ago.

The night she'd almost been raped, he'd realized so poignantly that he'd used his feelings for Rox to shut everyone else out. Black and white, he'd faced that night that he didn't want to keep holding the world at arms' length. Not with Sapphire anyhow. Maybe he should have run from her when he woke up after every drunken stupor and wondered if he'd said more than he should, a hell of a lot more--to Sapphire, his own personal shrink slash bartender.

He'd followed her home after beating the crap out of her attacker and then set the police on the bastard's trail. During those hours he kept secret watch over her inside her apartment building, he'd been bombarded to the point where he'd felt eaten alive by his need for her--to see her, touch her, make sure she was okay. He would have given anything just to catch a glimpse. And, hell, he'd told himself he'd be grateful if she gave him verbal confirmation she was intact, but even then it wouldn't have been nearly enough.

Duff had offered him the job of head of security as soon as Decker told him what'd happened, and he'd seen his way clear to watching Sapphire Stephenson like a hawk from then on. The money didn't hurt. Hell, he'd been aware he couldn't keep pissing his savings away on booze for a while. He had an incentive to make good on the idea of a change. He'd never cared much about having a career per se. He worked because he had to, because no damn way he'd ever let himself be a burden on anyone. That wasn't his way. The fact of the matter was, Duff and his wife loved Sapphire like a daughter and Duff had been trying to get Decker on board as an official, paid, head bouncer for years--mainly to watch over Sapphire, who drew attention as much because she was drop-dead gorgeous as because she was hard to get.

His first night on the job, the night after Sapphire's near rape, Decker found himself alone with her. About all he could remember now about the *before* was that he'd intended to tell her he was glad she was okay, glad her would-be rapist was behind bars. The words had flew from his mind, long gone, at the look in her eyes. He'd reached for her. She'd kissed him. That was all, all it took. After, he'd been floored, through and through.

He decided to give up the booze. That was the hell of the whole thing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd gone a single day without ending it face-down, skunk-drunk. With new incentive, he'd barely thought about Rox and the job he'd been paid for and would've done for free all those years as her bodyguard. She had Doobs, the sorry bastard

who was finally treating her the way she deserved and they were getting married. She'd live, she'd beat cancer a second time, and Decker had had nothing for himself. Nothing but the booze, and a s@#load of it, at that. He'd used most of his savings to keep himself sauced. But that night when Sapphire had almost come to harm... *Hell, I knew she was inside me. I wasn't a mile from the bar before I realized I hadn't seen her get in her car and drive away. I couldn't get the thought out of my head. So I turned around. God, thank God I did.*

She's always been inside me. I knew it then. Now, I crave her like a damn drug. She's all I want, all I think about. I go to work, sober the way I haven't been for most of my life and not missing the juice one damn bit, just to see her, to see her after everybody else is gone. I'll take everything she gives me. I'd sell my soul for a glimpse of her, not that my soul is worth much.

S@#t, why'd I have to be right? He'd suspected for a while now that whatever they were doing wouldn't last much longer. She was coming to her senses, discovering he wasn't what she wanted...

Decker turned and walked to his motorcycle when Sapphire's car disappeared and there was nothing left for him to look after. If he was a stupid man, he'd let himself believe her tears meant she wanted what they had to last, not end, just like he did and didn't feel he had a right to push for. He wasn't in her league, but it hadn't stopped himself from wanting every piece of her. The past two days were still too fresh. He might have been going through the DTs for how bad he'd missed her. Waking or sleeping, the memory of her low, husky voice, the scent of sesame oil she spread all over her body made him insane. He couldn't stop remembering the look in her sultry, indigo blue eyes. He'd forgotten how to sleep without dreaming of her, how to be awake without longing for her.

What the hell would she have done if he'd called her during their time off work, apart, told her the truth? He hadn't taken the risk because he'd rather have something than nothing with her, even if it wasn't everything he wanted.

"I missed you. Days off... Hell."

Decker braced himself against his Harley. The memory of those words had the same impact on him in recall as when she'd first said them tonight and made him so damn happy.

"I don't want to have an affair. I don't know what's going on. But I don't want it to stop."

She'd given him exactly what he wanted, yet... *Not enough. What could be enough with her?*

Deck raised his hand and the scent of her slammed into him, blowing him apart all over again. His whole body reacted viscerally. He felt like a damn fool because he'd been through this before. And it'd shattered him the first time so he was almost beyond recognition--even to himself. With Rox, he'd been vaguely aware he'd purposely set his heart on an unavailable woman, all because his life mottos were so ingrained, he acted on them without conscious thought. He couldn't be hurt by something he hadn't invested himself in and better to not love, to lose what he never had to begin with.

Sapphire... S@#t, I'm invested. Before our relationship changed a couple months ago, I was drunk. I was a drunk. That was pretty much my life. Getting soaked, being soaked, on my way to soaked. The few times I wasn't boozing, I worked on my house, my car, my bike. I haven't thought about doing any of that since I reached for Sapphire and she kissed me.

Hell, she's an angel. She's always been so far above anybody who passes through Knuckleheads. I can't have an angel. I'm the devil. It's a miracle I was allowed to touch her once, let alone the countless times in the past two months. Why does it have to be over? Not real? Not permanent? Without her, I'm languishing until she's there, in my sights, and I can

see her again. Can function. I'm alive. Breathing. Happy. Worth something. I love...

Love. He didn't use that word to describe or define anything in his life. Love had meant too little. It was secondary, unimportant. Sure as hell couldn't consider what he felt for Sapphire as something as insignificant and mundane as love. She consumed him to the point where he was used up totally each time they were together and then she left him high and dry. Yet she renewed him, too. She gave him a purpose he'd never had before in his life.

He drove home, thinking about everything, wondering why she'd consider for one minute he'd think badly of *her* because some cretin had tried to take what he didn't deserve from her. Decker had no doubt she'd been treated badly all her life by men just like that one. She didn't trust anybody in Knuckleheads, not that she should. She wouldn't believe a man could be honest, true, loyal. *She's seen the opposite, too much. Why do I want to be different in her book? Why do I think I can be? That I wanna be more than anything?*

The five-minute drive told him what he already knew. He wouldn't be able to sleep. He'd lay there wishing Sapphire was with him, letting him do all the things he'd done to her in Duff's office. There was no peace in this sanctuary he'd built for himself because he'd needed a place to crash when Rox gently told him to go home, get a life--often--all the years he worked for her and she wanted him to face the facts about them ever being together.

He pulled off this jacket, set his cell phone on the counter, wanting to call Sapphire but aware she'd probably do the noble thing next time they talked or saw each other. She thought the best thing was to pull herself out of this fire before she got burned, save herself so she didn't end up being a bad example to her kid. What right did he have to tell her he'd rather die than let her go because it'd be better that way?

"Will you give me what I want?"

Deck reached behind him and pulled down the bottle of whiskey inside the cupboard in front of him. He took a long swig, draining a third of the bottle in one go, barely feeling the kick, then thrust it back and shut the door. He drew in a deep breath, his gaze falling on the invitation in the next room on the coffee table. The rest of his mail from the past week was piled up there. Rox and Doobs' wedding invite was on top. He hadn't even opened it. Just carried it in with the mail one day and dropped the stack there. Though he'd hated the guy she loved, he had to admit that, in the past six months, Doobs--Jamie Dubois--had proved he was loyal to Rox, truly loved her and would take care of her.

She's not my responsibility anymore. I don't want any part of that world anymore. I could have had her once or twice, too, but I always knew it'd be temporary, not worth the hell, heartache and regret I'd live with afterward. Story of my life. Evaluating the potential termination, anticipating a bad end every damn time.

He didn't want to accept that this time, but he already knew he wouldn't come out where he wanted to with Sapphire. Never mind that he'd been happy. Damn strange situation for him. The past couple months, he'd never felt like this before. He had Sapphire to look forward to after long shifts. Their time alone together couldn't be enough, but it was what he wanted. *Be glad. She ends it, I don't walk around like some damned deranged monkey anymore. But... Ahh, it's never mattered what I wanted before, least of all for myself. Why should it matter now?*

It shouldn't have mattered. But it did. Decker couldn't help wondering how much influence he had over the situation. Over Sapphire.

I don't want this to end. I'm not ready to let her go, and I'm not sure I'll ever be. Maybe in our hours apart she'll decide it's time to stop this. My only hope is that she wasn't sure. When

we were together, she seemed uncertain that ending it was for the best. And I'm gonna do everything in my power to sway her toward the other side. If I don't...what the hell else is there for me? She's all I want. She feels like all I've ever wanted.