

## Chapter One

Here's the thing. Every two-bit Tom and Dick on this glorified mudflat thought prostitution was legal in Las Vegas, but that's never been true.

Least, not when Grif was alive.

Maybe times had changed—plenty on the Surface had—but it was more likely that the johns were too lazy to trek out to Nye County for a sampling from the legal sexual menu. No, there was too much premeditation in that. But score a lay in some trucker-heavy roach-motel, and a man could tell himself he was the victim of impulse. Caught up in the moment. Just a little ol' fly snared in Sin City's glinting web.

Grif knew different. People created chaos, not places, and they were damned good at it no matter where they lived. And when this glittering gem of a city teamed up with the world's oldest profession, fantasy piled atop fantasy; it could convince anyone that impulse was a virtue, not a vice.

Just one roll of the dice, he thought, checking the number on the warped motel door against the entry in his notebook. Just one sip, make sure to tip. Play hard, enjoy the ride, and be certain to take your secrets with you when you leave.

Nicole Rockwell's last john, however, had taken a bit more.

"Help me!" she was yelling as Grif came through the door. Impressive, since she was missing her larynx. "There's been a terrible crime!"

Can't argue that, Grif thought, gaze skimming the hem of her cheap vinyl skirt. "You Nicole Elizabeth Rockwell?"

"Wh-what?" She looked from Grif to the fresh corpse on the bed—her own—then back again. "Yes."

"Right." He shut his notebook, returning it to his suit pocket. "Come with me."

Rockwell took one good look at his quasi-transparent form and promptly collapsed on the bed. "Wh-who are you?"

"Griffin Shaw. I'm here to help." He hesitated, then jerked his head at her remains. "Sorry I couldn't get here sooner."

Her expression, blasted and constricted all at once, made his jaw twitch, but he shrugged it off. Guardian wasn't his beat. As a Centurion, he merely assisted the recently, and violently, deceased

into the Everlast. Those who'd been clipped early often had trouble getting there on their own. As Grif well knew.

He explained all of this to Nicole quickly, flatly, hoping it would keep the hysterics to a minimum. Given half a chance, females were always either jawing or at the waterworks. Dead or alive.

"But I can't just *leave*," she protested when he was finished. "I'm going to a bonfire this weekend, the first one of the spring. And my best friend is waiting outside. We're gonna chill downtown at the Beauty Bar tonight. Unwind a bit, ya know?" She glanced down at Grif's proffered cigarette. A calming tactic. "Oh . . . thanks, honey."

Something stirred Grif as he bent down and lit her smoke. Probably the shake in her voice, though she talked like a lady, too. Not like most of the rabble he'd been picking up this decade. He snapped the Zippo shut. "Look, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, kid. But you've been rooked."

"What?"

"You know, you got the dust-off. Killed. Murdered. Clipped. It's a rough deal, but you've had some good times, right? Some wild rides?" He gave a little hip thrust to illuminate the point.

"I'm not a hooker," she said evenly.

He let his eyes roam around the sex flop. "'Course you're not."

Blowing out a stream of smoke, Nicole returned his flat stare. "So where exactly is this . . . Everlast?"

"Now you're choosy?" Grif muttered, glancing at his watch. He would've turned away, but the walls were mirrored and their reflections overlapped, her horrified heat wrapped over his impassive ice. Sighing heavily, he motioned her to the door.

Nicole didn't move. "What if I wanna do it all over?"

"What over?" he mumbled, lighting his own stick.

"You know. Life. Earth. Humanity. Come back until I get it right."

"Relax, sweetheart. Mattress time don't count against you."

That got her back on her feet. "I told you! I'm not a hooker! I'm a photographer—"

"Where's your camera?"

"Well, it's not here, but I have this notebook—" She pointed at the dresser bearing a crappy twenty-inch television and a Moleskine identical to his. Except for the blood splatter.

"Sure," he said. "A photographer's best friend."

The fight drained from Rockwell then, and she slumped where she stood, falling so still the only sound in the room was the soft drip, drip of her arterial blood as it fell from the bed to the floor. "But I'm not done here."

"Just take my hand, kid. It'll be all right."

She looked at him dubiously. Grif frowned. Sure, his suit was ruffled, but it was clean enough, and his pomade had held at his time of death, though it was hidden beneath the brim of his fedora. A little ginger stubble had sprouted—he'd been offed after five—but if his eyes were hard, they were

also clear. All in all, not too bad for fifty years dead.

Yet Rockwell remained unconvinced. “How do I know you’re not tricking me? You could latch on and suck my soul down to hell, like in that movie.”

“You mean *Ghost*, right?” A couple of the younger Centurions had explained about that. Some sleeper flick that hit it big a couple decades ago. Now he had to explain himself to every corpse that walked his way. “Look, I’m not a demon, and I’m no ghost. I’m a . . . gentleman.”

Nicole blinked.

“Lots of firsts for you today, eh, Ms. Rockwell?”

Eyes narrowed, she crossed her arms. “Piss off, Shaw. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Grif fought not to grind his teeth. He’d get hell from Sarge if she took it in her mind to hang out here and haunt the place. And he’d be damned—figuratively speaking, of course—if he was going to let her sully his perfect Take record. Besides, she’d been dead all of five minutes. She didn’t yet know what was good for her.

Grinding his cigarette beneath his heel, Grif said, “What are you going to do, honey? Throw down the ménage in this joint for the rest of eternity? Though . . . I guess it does beat sizzling.”

“Sizzling?”

“One wrong turn outta here, and . . .” He made a sound, trout frying in a pan. It was a rotten trick but it worked.

Nicole shuddered in her demi-cups, then stood and slowly glanced around. “So, that’s it, huh? Twenty-six years of—”

“Twenty-nine,” Grif corrected.

“—of mortal struggle, and this is how it ends.”

Grif made another show of looking at his watch, while peering at Nicole from the corner of his eye. She didn’t look like she was going to leak, he decided gratefully. Instead, she looked like she was going to kick something.

She did . . . then dropped back to the bed, and put her head in her hands while Grif began hopping around.

“Damn it, lady!” He glared, cradling his throbbing shin. “I’ve had enough of this postmortem crap! Get your lifeless, flabby backside off that bed and follow me!”

Now she began to cry.

The recently murdered were so *sensitive*.

Sighing, Grif lifted his hat and ran a hand over the top of his head. He could practically hear Sarge’s barked reprimand. *Patch it up, Shaw.*

“Sorry,” he muttered, stealing another glance at his watch.

“Fuck you, Mr. Sensitivity!” she yelled. “I’m not following your washed-out, B-movie, pseudo-Five-O ass anywhere!”

“Careful, peach. Look how you get to spend eternity.” Grif showed his teeth, and though there

wasn't any blood in her ethereal body, Nicole blanched. Then her outline began to shimmer. Not much time left. "That's right. We're all stuck in the clothing worn when we die. Kinda makes you wish you'd overcome that latex fetish, huh?"

"Oh, God." Nicole looked up at the mirrored ceiling and fussed with her hair, but it sprang back into the deflowered do she'd been sporting at the time of her death. "Oh, God!"

"She's on her lunch break," Grif muttered, but his heart softened anyway. He couldn't help it. He was lucky to have been offed in 1960. He'd watched too many Centurions shy away from mirrors in the Everlast in the decades since.

"All right, I have an idea." It was technically against the rules, but the girl was looking at him with those tearful eyes, and he was looking back, really seeing her for once. Helpless females always got to him. And though Rockwell was a lady of the night here on the Surface, there could be someone waiting for her on the other side. They might not recognize her like this . . . or want to.

Besides, he'd been blood and bone once, just like her. In the end, and that's what this was, they were exactly the same. "All right, listen up. There are some clothes in that dresser over there—"

"How do you know—?"

"I just do," he interrupted, "and you'll move fast if you know what's good for you. You're starting the Fade. I can send you back into your body long enough to change your clothes and do something with that mop on your head. But you gotta keep quiet. Your E.T.D. is twelve fifty. If someone hears you rummaging around at one, my superiors will know I interfered."

Nicole nodded vigorously.

"All right. Get back in."

"In?"

"Your body. You gotta line up those pulse points over your earthly remains. Then I can fuel them."

It wasn't technically necessary, but using her remains was a way to ground her both mentally and physically, giving her the impression of purchase on the Surface even though her spirit was already free. It was like tying a boat to a dock, securing it there even as waves crested around it.

Rockwell did as told, carefully settling her ethereal energy atop her body so that it looked like a shimmering chalk outline. Grif listened for a faint click in the etheric, her final pulse point snapping into place, before echoing the action, positioning his translucent body above hers so their chakras aligned. It required submission on her part, and a smothering of her energy with his own. It was a sensation most loose souls found claustrophobic, but Rockwell didn't even flinch.

Probably used to it, Grif thought, letting himself sink.

Vacuumed silence overran the room, blunting even Grif's celestial senses. Shape and form and sensation blurred as their energies melded as one, and they fell together, burrowing back into skin and cells and tissue and blood. By the time they fully occupied Nicole's body, her life energy was cocooned safely inside of his.

The blood in her core was not entirely still. Her sluggish pulse still lapped like low tide at the

shore, not yet aware its efforts were futile. Grif was, though, which was why the sudden explosion of color behind the dead woman's eyelids rocked him. Then the tang of blood and saliva invaded his mouth, followed by the ache of mortal injury—dulled by shock but still keen—and Rockwell's gaping wounds were suddenly his. Stinging fingertips—she had fought—were also his. The clamminess seeping in to claim the once-warm body made him want to gasp and struggle, and the ache that swelled inside him wasn't from injury but from a long-forgotten, yet familiar, desire.

*Life.*

Grif clenched his jaw, and felt foreign teeth grind together in an unfamiliar way. Pushing that discomfort away, he forced his energy down, past cells and tissue and the molecules that made everything on the Surface so tangible. An instant later, he was facedown beneath Rockwell's deathbed, alone in spirit, lying in a sticky pool of blood. When he slid out from under the bed, Nicole was already sitting up, literally holding her head.

"I feel like shit," she gurgled.

"Well, keep your eyes on the floor, honey, 'cuz you look even worse."

She did, though glared at him first. "And keep yours to yourself."

"Not a show I care to see," he muttered, but crossed to the window to wait. Clumsy rummaging followed, silence, then exhausted groans and more silence.

Grif needed a moment to recover anyway. Rubbing his aching chest, he pulled back one grungy curtain panel. He'd left the pain of mortality behind long ago, and the suggestion of skin over his soul smothered and burned, like he'd been dipped in hot wax.

How could he have forgotten this?

A movement outside the window caught his eye, and he focused on it like an alley cat spying a rat. He tried to zoom in, but Nicole's humanity blunted his vision. He'd gotten so used to telescopic eyesight—to all the gifts afforded a Centurion—that he was unaccustomed to limited senses. Yet there was just enough residue from the Everlast to see clearly into the blackened winter night, and when Grif finally focused, he couldn't help but wish for full celestial vision again.

If Grif was a B-movie version of an old-school P.I., then this woman was a full-fledged screen siren. Even from a distance, he could make out silky sable hair pulled back from sky-high cheekbones. They rode a round, sculpted face with lips tucked at the center of it like full, pink cushions. And that shape, he thought, as she stepped from the car. Curves like he hadn't seen on a woman in decades. More hairpins than Mulholland Drive, every sweeping stretch draped in red silk, shimmering in places that made his mouth go dry.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but the outfit looked like a throwback to his time, when women wore clothes that made them look like walking gifts instead of unwrapped packages. Mirage or not, he thought, rubbing at his eyes, she was the prettiest woman he'd ever seen.

Yet even from a distance, even as she angled her head to reveal a neck as smooth and creamy and inviting as the rest of her, there was a sharpness to her, an awareness of her surroundings as she

squinted . . . then looked directly at him.

Grif jumped. Did she actually *see* him?

“Shit,” he muttered, letting the curtain fall. It was Nicole’s humanity. He was wearing her life-force, sharing it, as much as she was his.

“What?” asked Nicole, sounding startled.

“Nothing,” he muttered. They needed to move anyway. “You ready yet?”

“Not quite,” she said quickly, halting his turn. “You’re not peeking, are you?”

Grif just made a sizzling sound through his teeth. The rummaging started up again, more frantic.

“Can I ask you something?” she managed, though breathing hard. Each exhalation jerked at Grif’s chest, like someone was cross-stitching his heart. He’d have to return to the Everlast for a jolt of energy before his next Take. “Why can’t I remember who . . . My death?”

“Because it was violent,” he said shortly. No need to sugarcoat it. She knew, even if she didn’t want to say it. “It’s the Everlast’s way of protecting your soul so you don’t relive it over and again. You’ll go through a process called incubation, which will rehabilitate you to forget your earthly years.” And, he didn’t add, forever conceal the horrors associated with her brutal death. “Then you can move on to Paradise. It’s all meant to keep you focused on moving forward, not looking back.”

“Like you?”

No. Not like him at all. “You done?”

She blew out a breath, causing a particularly hard jerk on his heart, and made a sound of assent. He turned to find her in front of the dresser, leaning against it, looking uncertain. She’d replaced her hooker-wear with jeans and a tee. Both were still too tight in Grif’s opinion, but classic enough to defy most eras. Her hair had been tamed into a style that made her look only half-dead, and at Grif’s half-hearted thumbs-up, she staggered back to the bed, exhausted from the blood loss.

“More to the left,” Grif instructed, squinting one eye as she attempted to resume her previous pose. “Perfect.”

He climbed aboard once again, inhaled deeply, and withdrew his own energy, the needle in his heart disappearing instantaneously. Solitary silence reigned inside of him again, though it brought with it an unexpected sidekick: loneliness.

Damn it, he thought, as he stood, wiping at his mouth to hide his shaky breath. He’d have left her as she was if he’d known he’d have to feel *that*. But as he rubbed his chest, the last of the energy tethering Nicole’s soul to her body fell away, and she rose again from her deathbed.

“Better?” he asked, swallowing hard.

If she heard the shake in his voice, she didn’t show it. “Much.”

Then, though she hesitated, she reached out and put her still-warm hand in his. “Thanks.”

“All in a day’s work.” And despite the ache in his heart, and the ghostly memory of all his mortal pain, he shook it off and led her away.

Proof that he really was an angel.

Though ostensibly leading the way, Grif allowed Rockwell to go first. As he'd told her, he was a gentleman, and though he was careful to keep her close—last thing he needed was for the kid to get lost in the moon shadows—he gave her enough space to keep her from feeling flanked, like a dead woman walking.

Another calming tactic: the use of doorways to pass from the Surface and into the Everlast. Or if a door wasn't available, a window. Some sort of passageway a human mind could latch onto to ease the transition. Opening the door to find the cosmos splayed before you like a celestial buffet was shock enough, so it was best if the Take didn't notice it until it was too late. So Grif kept his hand at Rockwell's back, and waited for her gasp as he used his celestial power to will the door open at her touch.

Yet Grif was the one who jolted at the sight of the grungy hallway. He jumped again when it began to bend, rippling in the same way pinned sheets moved in the wind.

That wasn't right. In fact, it was all wrong.

"Get back," Grif told Rockwell, as the ripples merged across from them to form a giant, diaphanous bubble. Features began emerging in the bulge of that apex, pressing through wood grain and peeling wallpaper until they became recognizable as an enormous face.

Rockwell stared at the emerging face like it was part of a magic show, wonder and delight replacing wariness. After all, it was her first glimpse of sinless sentience. All she saw was a brilliant smile forming in the wood chips. A nod of welcome in the dip of the giant head. A shimmering film of gauzy Everlast to mask the staggering appearance of one of God's most awesome creatures.

Grif saw fangs and a predatory gleam in an incendiary eye. "Get back!"

But Rockwell had already forgotten him. Once a newly gleaned soul glimpsed a Pure—in any form—the Centurion who guided them to the Everlast was just a leaf in the forest of their memory. Utterly forgotten.

"Do you know who I am?" The voice ground deep and low with the sinew of the splintering walls.

"No," Nicole said dreamily, stepping forward.

"Yes," Grif replied and reached out to grip Rockwell's arm, but she'd begun the Fade and merely shuddered as his energy invaded hers. Gaze locked on the Pure, she stepped directly into the undulating hall.

*This wasn't right.* "Stop, Nicole! It's an angel!"

The hallway cocked sharply at that, casting Rockwell to one bowing side. The face grew more prominent, as if pressing against a thinning membrane . . . and Grif realized that was exactly what was happening. The Pure wanted something, but wouldn't, or couldn't, breach worlds to get it.

Its chin sharpened. "Use my proper title," it said in that slivered voice.

Grif swallowed hard. "A Pure."

"I am of the order of the Powers," it hissed. "The first of the created angels, kin to the Dominations and Virtues, controller of demons, and guardian of the heavenly pathways."

“Whoa,” said Rockwell.

But the voice, with breath as hot as a furnace, was directed at Grif. So was the fiery gaze. “Do you know who I am now?”

Grif knew only one angel in the order of the Powers. “Anas.”

Keeper of the Gates, the chosen Pure who shepherded mortal spirits into Paradise proper. It was said Anas was the first angel that uninjured souls saw after death, though to say she welcomed them into heaven was giving her too much credit. From what he’d seen, she mostly ignored the human souls, chin high and gaze distant as they passed through the Gates.

But Grif wasn’t at the Gates. Anas—and her big, bulging forehead—was on mortal turf, so he reached forward to pull Rockwell back.

But the mouth opened, and the Pure inhaled, lifting Nicole Rockwell from her feet. The woman was like a rag doll sucked into a tornado, gone in an instant, jerked into the fanged mouth, and a throat that was black and specked with burning stars.

Grif stepped into the hallway to follow after her.

“Not you.”

And the walls shifted with a whipping exhalation. Blown from his feet, Grif tumbled back into the mirrored motel room, and the door rocketed shut.

Heart pounding, Grif just lay there for long seconds.

When nothing else happened, he wiped at his eyes, which were suddenly gritty and dry. In fact, his whole etheric form felt like it’d been sandblasted by the hot, needled breath. Even still, instinct and stubbornness had him stupidly rising to the fight. Rockwell was *his* Take.

Crossing the room, Grif motioned to the door again, willing it open with his celestial power. The door didn’t budge. The cosmos didn’t appear.

“Fine.”

And dropping his head and arms, Grif fisted his hands so that his wings flared with a rip of the silky air. Gossamer-black, dripping dew, sprung directly from the Everlast itself, the wings rose and plunged like a waterfall of spears. He whirled, propelling himself forward until the wingtips caught the door and sliced it from existence.

Anas awaited.

“Disobedient! Child of wrath!” Her face was inches away, contorted with rage.

“No need to get personal,” Grif told her evenly, though the membrane between worlds was now stretched so tight she looked like she was being smothered in plastic.

Anas hissed, and her fangs elongated, the sound of wood stretching. “Breath . . .”

“Oh, *that*?” Grif got it now. He was in trouble for joining his energies to Rockwell’s, for reanimating her body with his. He shrugged it off. “That wasn’t breathing. I was just trying to help.”

“You donned the sinful flesh—”

“It wasn’t really a sin. More like a lapse of judgment—”



“You have breath!”

“I gave it back.”

“And now flesh!”

He drew a blank until he recalled the grit in his eyes when she blew him back. He looked down, panicking. “You gave me . . . skin?”

Her snarl grew to a fanged smile. “You cannot enter the gloaming, Child of Sin. You have no place in the Everlast.”

“That’s Child of God to you.” Grif’s eyes narrowed. “And I have wings.”

“Ah, that’s right.” She grinned so widely that wood grain punctured the plastic. “I’ll take those.”

And she plucked his wings from his body—his *flesh*—then pushed him so hard that decades rushed by, along with burning stars and rioting universes that roiled around him like debris as he fell . . . fell . . . then landed with a jarring thud.

Rockwell’s corpse bounced as he landed on his back, on the bed. Unmistakably, *on the Surface*. It shocked Grif into losing the breath he didn’t even know he possessed. Then the pounding began in earnest, starting at his shoulder blades, where his wings should have been. It spread like lava through his core and into his limbs, nothing like the lapping low tide of the pulse he’d shared with Rockwell. This was a red monsoon. His veins throbbed and surged as they . . . what?

*What?*

“Fill with blood.”

Grif turned his head and found Nicole Rockwell’s eyes fixed on him, though her pupils were overtaken by surging flame as Anas stared from the dead girl’s body. His heart leaped again, and his veins pulsed and rushed and, yes . . .

*Filled with blood.*

And the yearning ache he’d felt while inhabiting Rockwell’s body crested in his chest. Rearing against the pain, Grif felt new flesh stretching over bone. A scream lodged against his unused vocal cords, and he fell still, closing his eyes, trying to hold it all back.

“Breathe,” Anas instructed through Rockwell’s corpse.

Grif gasped and shivered. This was the animation of skin coupled with life force. This wasn’t just the innate desire to live. This was rebirth. This was *life*.

Clamminess lunged to seize the new oxygen in his lungs. It was only the experience of having been alive for thirty-three years once before that kept the confining flesh from being revolting. Maybe when it warmed, Grif thought, he wouldn’t feel such a need to run from himself.

But blood still clotted most of the virgin veins, and his heart had to struggle to move it. Its amplified thump hammered like the lead bass in a marching band.

“Breathe.”

The word banged like a pot off Grif’s competing thoughts. Worse were the spasms ripping through his chest. Fear, insecurity, guilt, and sorrow all huddled in newly exposed corners, naked, cowering

things, frightened children trying to pull the covers of the Everlast up to their chins.

But the protective coating was slipping away. He knew it, and it was why—even without a true heartbeat or thawed blood or a sense of self and place in the universe—he began to shake in his new flesh. “No . . .”

“Breathe,” Anas hissed again.

“It hurts,” he managed, squinting into her fiery gaze.

“Being clothed in sin does, yes.”

“I can’t . . .” The shake of his head, side to side, set the pots to clanging again. He had no idea how he heard Anas’s voice above them, only knew that she said, “It will hurt more when you die again.”

And a knock sounded at the door.

He stilled, looking at Anas.

“You must flee,” she said, eyes still burning, breath still scalding. Still merciless.

“Why—”

She cut him off. “There’s a window in the bathroom. Go while you can.”

“But I—”

“But you’re lying next to a murdered woman. And you, Griffin Shaw, are *alive*.”

He couldn’t comprehend it, but the burning skin, the pulsing blood, the breath in his chest . . . “It’s too much.”

It was all too much.

Another knock at the door, louder, accompanied by annoyed voices on the other side.

Anas was right; the time for privacy was over.

“Just enough then,” Anas said impatiently when he still didn’t move. She pursed Rockwell’s blue lips. Everlast washed over him in a cooling balm and he could sit, and then stand.

“It won’t last.” And the burning eyes dulled, then snuffed out completely, leaving behind Rockwell’s black, sightless pupils.

Yet the small hint of Everlast had cleared his mind and Grif could see what Anas had, and what anyone else would when they entered this room: a man standing over a woman’s blood-splattered body.

Whirling, he darted into the bathroom, and wedged open the small, single-paned window. He heard the door to the room open just as he clambered through, and reached the rusting ladder right before screams sounded behind him. Half-falling, half-jumping, Grif hit the ground seconds later, and ran from the voices and the building. He ran blindly. He ran until the sliver of Everlast wore off.

He ran until he could run no more.