

The
Record Boss

The
Lincolns

DAYO BENSON



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By

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From the Back Cover

How far should you go for success?

Starlet, Andie Rose, knows a lot about the dark side of the music industry. She's happy to use this knowledge to her advantage until she finds herself in dangerous territory.

How far should you go for love?

Nigel Lincoln has been drawn to Andie since the day he set eyes on her at an audition, but he's her manager, so there are lines that shouldn't be crossed.

When danger comes knocking on Andie's door, Nigel decides to intervene, but it may be at his own expense.

True love is sacrificial, but if it came down to it, could he really lay down his life for her?

Dedication

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

(Romans 12:1).

Dedicated to you!

Prologue

RED ROBE MEETINGS WERE not for the faint-hearted.

Jared Lincoln tried to block out the smell of blood and death. His eyes stung from the smoke in the air, but it was nothing compared to the ache in his heart at the cries of the victims. Bile churned in his belly.

There was a tickle around his head, accompanied by a mental image of Abha. Jared looked across the shadowy altar room at Abha who was standing opposite him, on the other side of the altar.

Jared granted him access.

Juda was stronger than you, came Abha's voice in his mind.

Jared clenched his teeth. It wasn't the first time Abha had said that. Did he know how soul-destroying Jared found it? He'd thought that becoming a red robe would ensure that he'd be respected. Yet, he still lived in the shadows cast by his half-brother Juda and his father Luke. Never mind that Luke was dead and Juda might as well be dead now that he'd become a Christian.

Jared pushed Abha out of his mind. It was disconcerting that Abha could tell that he was uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable was putting it lightly. He was sickened.

The rituals and killing seemed to take forever. The red-robed seemed to relish taking the lives of others. Especially the lives of the innocent.

As soon as the final recital of oaths was finished, Jared turned to leave.

"Jared."

He stopped. That was Kani Orenstein's voice. He closed his stinging eyes briefly, and then turned around.

None of the other red robes had stepped away from the altar yet. They all hung out for at least a few minutes after rituals, talking and catching up. Maybe Jared should have made more of an effort to pretend to be into what they were doing.

But more and more, he was beginning to consider his red-robed status less of a privilege and more of a curse. Worst of all, he'd brought it upon himself. He'd applied to join. He hadn't

realized it would just mean more of the same bondage and heartache he'd endured all his life as an ordinary level occult practitioner.

Kani was staring at him.

Jared hoped with all his heart that the man wasn't reading his mind. He couldn't feel any of the things that accompanied a mind-reading—tickles around the head, itches across the skin—but Kani was so powerful that his infiltration would be undetectable.

Everyone was silent as Kani observed Jared coolly from across the altar.

"Who are you bringing to the Lilk Festival?" Kani asked, just when the silence was getting unbearable.

Jared swallowed. "As a guest?"

"As a sacrifice. I don't care about your guests."

Jared felt itchy all over. Suddenly, his red robe felt like a mantle of lead around his shoulders.

"You are aware that you must bring a sacrifice?" Kani asked.

"Yes, sir." Being the youngest red robe and also the newest in the organization, Jared knew his place.

Firelight from the incense bowl flickered in Kani's eyes. "May I ask how many sacrifices you have made since becoming a red robe?"

Jared glanced at Abha. There was no way for Kani to know that he hadn't been making sacrifices. Abha, who had made it his duty to watch him like the red robe police, must have told him.

Frowns settled over the faces of the other red robes as Jared hesitated.

"None," Kani said with a sly smile that didn't look like a smile at all.

Jared opened his mouth to lie, and then thought better of it. Kani would know he was lying and punish him. "It...is not for want of trying," he said instead.

"Please enlighten us as to what that means."

Jared glanced at Abha again.

Abha shook his head almost imperceptibly, and then mind-linked him. "If you mention *Him* here you'll only anger everybody and end up in torture for three nights."

"It means nothing," Jared told Kani quickly. Jared had been tortured many times at Luke's hands, but all of those times paled in comparison to the torture administered by the council of the red-robed upon erring members.

Jared had resisted making sacrifices for his first year as a red robe, but a few months ago he'd attempted one and made his brothers participate. Unfortunately, the woman they captured to sacrifice had been a Christian, and the power of God had filled the forest and disabled them all to the point that they couldn't even stand.

Abha was right. Kani wouldn't want to hear that. Practitioners hated to hear about God and His power. However, Jared was beginning to entertain questions.

Questions are dangerous, he berated himself immediately.

"Your sacrifice for the Lilk Festival must be somebody close to you," Kani told him. "Somebody you love."

Jared's heart skipped a beat.

Kani's sly smile reappeared. "You should have no problem finding such a person."

Jared locked his knees to keep them from trembling. Kani couldn't mean that. He couldn't expect Jared to sacrifice one of his brothers. He couldn't. He *wouldn't*.

Kani's gaze narrowed.

"Yes, sir," Jared said quickly. "I will...bring somebody." He'd have to capture some random person. At the Lilk Festival, he could pretend he hadn't realized that Kani meant one of his brothers.

"We want the brother you are closest to," Kani said lightly, as though he were discussing volunteers for a football team, rather than candidates for human sacrifice.

Jared forced himself not to react in any way. He'd been close to only two of his brothers: his full brother, Junior, who had died at the hands of the Capellos, and Ash, who had become a Christian after Junior's death.

He was close to none of the others. In fact, they aggravated him to no end. But he still couldn't bring himself to offer up any of them for sacrifice. Not even Hades and Taye who hated his guts.

"None of my brothers mean anything to me," Jared said as calmly as he could manage. He needed to act nonchalant about it. If he betrayed his reluctance, Kani would push the issue.

Jared's mind clicked into overdrive. Since Ash left, Jared had been talking to Nigel more, despite Nigel being one of the younger brothers—seventh out of twelve, to be precise. Nigel managed Lincoln Entertainment and often ran business decisions by him.

"Family isn't that important to me," Jared continued. "But money is. May I offer one of Lincoln Entertainment's biggest moneymakers?"

Kani raised his brows.

"We have singers and other public figures whose deaths would release a tremendous amount of energy worldwide and please the spirits."

"That's acceptable, Jared, but there must be a personal cost to you."

"The personal cost to me is the money that person would have made had I not marked them for sacrifice."

Kani inclined his head. "That is acceptable to me. However, you must still offer a blood relative."

Great. He'd only succeeded in increasing his quota from one sacrifice to two.

Jared opened his mouth to respond, but a sudden pain lanced through his head, burning across his temples.

You will bring your brother, Nigel, came Kani's voice in his mind. And he will bring one of Lincoln Entertainment's artists.

Jared gritted his teeth against the pain of the mental attack. So Kani had been reading his thoughts.

I will invite Nigel to our Geneva rituals next weekend, Kani said into his mind, so that we may assess which of his artists is most suitable for the Lilk Festival.

A dark sense of helplessness wrapped around Jared, smothering his heart and numbing him to his core.

The Lilk Festival was two weeks away. He didn't have much time to convince Kani and the others that Nigel meant nothing to him, and to conjure up someone else that he could convince them meant everything to him.

A woman.

I have two weeks to find a woman and convince Kani that I'm in love with her.

Anything short of that would result in the death of another of his brothers.

Jared couldn't handle another death.

Chapter 1

NIGEL LINCOLN HATED THE heavy atmosphere that hung in the air at the Lincoln mansion these days.

The heaviness had settled over the house when Junior died. None of them had been the same since it happened.

Annoyance crackled inside him as he made his way to Taye's wing for dinner. Jared still insisted that they all have dinner together every evening. One evening a week would be enough. Every evening was too much.

Their father, Luke, had died two years ago. His death had caused some fear, as Luke had always dictated everything they did. However, it had also filled them all with excitement and anticipation. For the first time in their lives, they were free.

But Jared, their eldest brother, had stepped into Luke's shoes. He wasn't as stifling as Luke, but he was still way too heavy-handed and controlling.

When Junior died, it scared them all to no end. It wouldn't have happened if Luke were still alive. It made them feel like they still needed a father figure. Consequently, they all looked up to Jared even more.

Then Ash and Locke went and got saved, and left them all. It was yet another thing that would never have happened if Luke was still alive. At first, Nigel had been hopeful that they would return. But it had now been two months since they left. Maybe they were serious about their decision.

The smell of pizza assaulted him as he entered Taye's wing. Taye was pretty lazy about cooking. It was always readymade meals when they had dinner at his wing. Others, like Ash, Locke, and Solomon made more of an effort.

But what did that matter? Ash and Locke had left.

Ash.

Nigel clenched his jaw. Of all his brothers, Nigel had been closest to Ash. He took his leaving personally.

Nigel entered the den. Saul and Solomon were playing chess. Everyone else was gathered around them, except for Taye, who was probably in the kitchen, and Jared, who was standing at the window, gazing out.

Junior's death had hit Jared the hardest. Partly because they were full brothers, and partly because Jared considered himself responsible for the rest of them.

Jared had always been a pretty quiet person, but now, he was silent.

Nigel figured Ash and Locke's leaving was a huge blow to Jared too. He must feel like a failed guardian. Jared used to talk to Ash the most out of all of them, since they were the eldest two. Now, he talked to no one.

Nigel had been trying to build rapport with him over the past month, but hadn't made much progress. It would probably take longer than a month for him to establish a relationship with Jared. After all, they'd never really had much of a relationship before.

Nigel decided to leave Jared to his thoughts and joined the crowd around the chess game. Saul was about to capture Solomon's queen. Nigel didn't know why Solomon would even bother playing Saul. Of all their brothers, Saul was one of the smartest, along with Rebel.

He glanced at Salem, who was sitting beside Saul, a vacant look in his eyes. If he was concerned about Jared, he was worried out of his mind for Salem.

"Dinner is served," Taye called, walking through the door, balancing in his hands three large plates piled high with pizza. "There are sixty slices of pizza here. That's five slices each, so don't tell me you're still hungry afterwards. We shouldn't even really be eating pizza. Luke is probably turning over in his grave."

Rebel looked up from the chess game. "It's 6.6 slices each."

Taye gave him a blank look. "Huh?"

"Sixty slices of pizza means we get 6.6 slices each."

Nigel went to relieve Taye of one of the plates before he dropped it. He set it on the table and helped himself to two slices.

"No, smartass," Taye replied, setting his plates on the table too. "Sixty divided by twelve is five. I did the math, okay."

Rebel opened his mouth.

Taye slapped a hand over Rebel's mouth. "Does sixty divided by twelve equal five?"

"It does," Rebel said, his voice muffled by Taye's hand, "but—"

"But nothing. Five slices each." Taye snorted. "What's point six of a pizza slice anyway? I swear too much geekiness gets in the way of good sense."

Saul looked over at Taye. "Hey, Taye."

"What?"

"Your math is correct. But what Rebel is trying to tell you is that there are nine of us now, not twelve."

Taye stilled. The room went quiet.

"Good," Hades said, breaking the silence after a moment. He grabbed three slices of pizza. "That means more food for the rest of us."

"Yeah," Solomon agreed. "6.6 slices it is."

"Good riddance, to the others," Xy added. He paused. "Except for Junior."

Jared turned away from the window and glared at them all. Everyone fell silent.

But Solomon, as usual, didn't get that he should just keep his mouth shut. "Can you believe that Ash and Locke still haven't come back? I thought they'd be back by now—especially since Jared suspended their money and they're broke."

Nigel noticed Saul glaring at him, but Solomon didn't see.

"Ash was in GQ magazine last week though," he continued. "So I guess he's making money again. He was modeling Alejandro Sanchez's autumn-winter collection of menswear."

Nigel had seen it, too, and sent Ash a text saying how disappointed he was. Ash had replied with just five words: "Sorry you feel that way."

Alejandro Sanchez, an ex-model turned fashion designer, had been part of the team that killed Luke. He was almost as despicable as Crystal, who had led the team, and their half-brother, Juda, whom Nigel didn't really consider related to them since they'd rarely seen him growing up. He'd lived in the Cayman Islands for most of his early life and returned to New York in his twenties. He was supposed to be one of the finest practitioners ever, but he was a Christian now and had married Crystal. If Nigel counted Juda, that was four practitioner Lincolns who had become Christians.

Scary.

"Christianity is like this poison that everyone—even solid practitioners—are getting injected with," Solomon continued. "Maybe it's the Capellos behind it. Maybe they did something to our brothers. Was it a normal bullet that they shot Junior with, or was it craft-

enhanced with something that weakens our reptilian DNA? Maybe Junior got infected and passed it on to Ash and Locke—"

"Shut up," Hades said.

"Enough, Solomon," Rebel snapped.

Saul slapped Solomon over the head.

Solomon seemed to realize his mistake. He quickly looked at Jared.

Jared was frowning darkly. "What are you talking about? Junior would never become a Christian."

Everyone was quiet. The tense kind of silence that would make Jared smell a rat.

"You talk some bull, Solomon," Nigel said quickly. He needed to change the subject.

"Has Saul captured your queen yet?"

Everyone took the cue to start talking about the chess game. Nigel glanced at Jared. He was staring unseeingly into space, probably meditating. Nigel caught Solomon's eye and glared at him.

Solomon gave him an apologetic look.

Junior had become a Christian before he died. But on his death bed, he'd made them all promise not to tell Jared. They'd all promised.

Over the next ten minutes, they all ate and watched Saul trash Solomon in chess.

Soon, all the pizza was gone. They'd had seven and a half slices each since Jared hadn't eaten.

Nigel moved across the room to talk to Jared who was still quiet. "I take it you've eaten already?"

Jared's eyes became alert. "I am fasting." He eyed the empty dishes on the table, and then eyed Saul who was doing a jig around the room, flaunting his chess victory over Solomon.

"Okay, you beat me in chess, but I'd beat you in one-on-one on the basketball court any day," Solomon said sourly.

"I'd like us to have a feedback session," Jared said.

Everyone fell silent and looked at him.

"The next one is supposed to be on Friday," Rebel told him.

"Yeah, we can't have it now," Taye said. "We're not prepared."

Jared's gaze narrowed. "All you have to do is tell me what you've been working on. I won't be around on Friday."

"Why?" Solomon asked.

"I'll tell you after I hear your feedback."

Nigel frowned as an image of Andie Rose, one of his singers, floated into his mind. He didn't want to talk about work right now, because it would mean thinking about her. Her image lodged itself in his mind: her pretty brown eyes, honey-toned skin, and wavy hair. He groaned internally. For some reason, he couldn't help being distracted by that woman. Worst of all, she knew it. There was nothing worse than someone you didn't want to be attracted to knowing that you were attracted to them.

Jared looked at Nigel. "How are things at Lincoln Entertainment?"

Nigel snapped away from his thoughts about Andie. He didn't know where to start. There was so much going on, most days he didn't know whether he was coming or going. As the CEO, he should only oversee the various arms of the company, but he cared too much. Not that the men and women employed to manage the different aspects of the company weren't competent, but given the way Christianity was spreading through the nation like some kind of epidemic, it was his personal passion to see the occult maintain its hold on the media. It was the one aspect of Luke's legacy that he felt an affinity with.

"We have dozens of motion pictures in the works," he told Jared. "We're breaking new ground in children's television and entertainment. Two of our kids' TV shows are being merchandized now. I'm still working to re-establish our dominance in the music industry. There is so much going on."

Taye shook his head. "That's a very vague overview that didn't do justice to the great work Nigel is doing."

Nigel shrugged. He worked hard, rarely having a spare moment for anything else, but he liked it that way. The more free time he had, the more opportunity he'd have to think about his life. He didn't want to think about himself or his life. He wanted to focus on tasks and outcomes.

"How are you working to re-establish Lincoln Entertainment's dominance in the music industry?" Jared asked.

"We're still the biggest player," Nigel replied. "But Crystal Records has stolen a huge portion of the market share."

Jared's face soured at the mention of Crystal Records. Okay, Crystal had led the team that killed their father, Luke, and had converted their estranged half-brother, Juda Lincoln, to Christianity, but Nigel knew that Jared's hatred towards Crystal went beyond that. He seemed to be on some personal vendetta against women right now, just because he'd been hurt by his fiancée and betrayed by some other girl who'd pretended to like him but was monitoring him for the FBI.

Just because? Nigel snorted internally. What had happened to Jared was enough to turn any man bitter. And Jared was decidedly bitter. That was why Nigel wasn't going to give in to his feelings for Andie. He'd made enough mistakes where she was concerned. He wasn't making any more. She didn't strike him as a woman he could trust, and Lincoln men had a lot to hide. They didn't need untrustworthy women in their lives.

"Nigel?" Jared snapped.

Nigel blinked, realizing he'd spaced out. "Despite the success of Crystal Records, Lincoln Entertainment is still doing well financially."

"It's about more than just money," Jared replied.

"Yes," Nigel agreed. "That's why I personally manage a group of six artists, an elite group whom I expect to change the world, re-establish the secular pagan era we were in before Luke died, and lead the world to new heights of paganism and occultism."

"Are they all practitioners?" Jared asked.

"Three are not." One of the three was Andie. Nigel pushed her out of his mind. She shouldn't still dominate his mind so much. He'd been avoiding her. He hadn't laid eyes on her for two months.

Jared shook his head. "Your artists are not having the spiritual impact they ought to. They're making money but they need more of a spiritual impact."

Nigel agreed, but he didn't want his artists to be too blatant about their allegiance to the occult. After what had happened to Luke, and the suspicion with which practitioners were now viewed, they had to be careful.

He had, however, been considering spirit guides. Luke used to fix each of his best artists up with one. Maybe he could do that for his elite group. It would enable them to be more effective. More spiritually powerful.

"Have you considered spirit guides?" Jared asked.

"Yes," Nigel replied. "I was just thinking about it."

"I am meeting with the council of the red robes on Friday. You will accompany me since they want feedback on what you're doing, and they have an assignment for you."

Nigel frowned. "Me?"

"Yes. Lucifer loves music. It's one of his biggest weapons. The red robes have been watching you. They want to empower you to do greater things."

Nigel felt his pulse quicken. He exchanged a look with Taye.

Taye grinned.

Nigel figured he should feel honored. But a part of him was terrified. He didn't belong among such accomplished practitioners. He'd rather keep a low profile and just work hard. He looked at Jared. Jared looked like he was waiting for a response from him. "I'll clear my schedule."

"Good." Jared's eyes glazed over momentarily. No doubt he was letting someone know that Nigel would be coming on Friday. His eyes refocused. "You will receive a mind-message."

No sooner had Jared said it, than an image of an envelope popped into Nigel's mind. Startled, Nigel immediately pushed it out. He checked that his mind was still cloaked. It was. So how had the message come in like that? They should only be able to probe him and then send him the message when he gave them access.

"Receive it," Jared told him. "Red robes do not add harmful things to their messages. We have a code of conduct that demands integrity and good ethics."

Nigel felt like snorting. If that was true, why had Jared attacked the mind of Matias Capello three months ago? That incident had resulted in Junior's death.

The envelope image popped back into Nigel's mind, startling him again. This time, he didn't push it out. He opened it and scanned the message. The red robes wanted him to attend a meeting with them on Friday in Geneva. He was to bring his three best artists.

Nigel wasn't sure what they meant by his three best artists. Did they mean in terms of revenue, units sold, or raw talent?

Another envelope popped into his mind.

He opened it and read the message: *Your three best artists are Andie Rose, Kallee Croft, and Chase Rueben.*

They'd heard his question. Nigel tried not to let that freak him out. He pushed the envelopes out of his mind and looked at Jared.

Jared nodded once. "Don't worry. We're out of your mind now."

So they'd all been in his mind? The whole council of the red-robed? He hadn't sensed the infiltration at all.

As Jared moved on to Taye to ask for feedback on how his fashion house was doing, Nigel thought about the three artists the red robes had selected. Somehow, he'd known that Andie Rose would be one of them. She wasn't a practitioner yet, but she was deeply spiritual and was already sensing things, spirits, whenever she was on stage. The spirits were interested in her. She had reptilian DNA, and her grandmother had been a fine practitioner who had dedicated her to the occult as a baby.

Unease gripped Nigel. After successfully avoiding Andie for two months, the thought of seeing her again on Friday was both thrilling and terrifying. Actually, he'd have to see her before Friday since he would need to meet with her and the other chosen artists to let them know about the meeting and prepare them for it.

A headache started up in his temples. This was what Andie Rose did to him. She made him feel all kinds of unwanted feelings—gave him banging headaches.

So why on earth had he slept with her two months ago?

Okay, he knew why. He'd been in a bad place with all the things going on in his family. But that was no excuse. He should never have crossed that line.

He hadn't seen her since then, deliberately avoiding her, so he didn't know what she thought of what had happened. But she'd never had a high opinion of him anyway.

The next few days were going to be interesting.

Chapter 2

ANDIE ROSE LIVED FOR the beat of the music and the screaming of the crowd. She belted out the lead single from her second album, unable to contain her shock at the fact that so many people in the crowd already knew it and were singing along. The album wasn't even out yet. This new song had only just started getting airplay three days ago.

She danced around the stage, amongst her host of male backup dancers who wore only torn pants that hung precariously at the lowest points of their waists as they danced. She avoided the gaze of one of her dancers, Joe. Joe was cute, and things that shouldn't have happened had happened. That seemed to be the story of her life right now. Joe, her backup dancer, shouldn't have happened. Ray, her drummer, shouldn't have happened. Most of all, Nigel, her manager, shouldn't have happened.

She should feel guilty, but she was a single woman. She was currently 'off' with Damian, her on-off boyfriend, although he did still stay over at her place a few nights a week, if she was feeling lonely.

An image of Nigel's ruggedly handsome face began to form in her mind. She squeezed her eyes closed, shutting it out. She belted her ad libs into the microphone with more power than necessary, hitting a C₆ clean with chest voice. Her vocal coach would be livid. She was always insisting that Andie switch to head voice to hit those high notes, but wasn't the fact that she could hit them with all the power and force of chest voice testament to her talent?

When she opened her eyes, her vision was blurry. She blinked, but it didn't clear. Her head went light and she had to stop singing. Thankfully, they were on the hook, and her backup singers had her covered.

As the hook came to an end, she tried to draw in breath to sing the second verse. She couldn't. It was like her lungs were frozen and her airways were stuffed with cotton balls. She quickly held her microphone out to the crowd as she missed her cue to sing. The crowd hollered out the lyrics.

Oh my gosh, why can't I breathe?

Andie doubled over on the stage, still holding out the microphone. Just when she thought her lungs were going to burst and she would collapse from lack of air, she managed a gasp. She

drew in the air, breathing deeply, inhaling too fast. A choking sound escaped her lips but it was swallowed by the music.

Tears stung her eyes. She'd felt this way before, at rituals and a few times during performances, but it had never been this bad. Nigel had told her and the handful of other artists who were experiencing these effects that it was the spirits. The spirits were pleased with what they were doing.

Can't they show their pleasure in a nicer way?

Andie was shaking as she straightened. She made herself dance as the verse ended. Her backup singers picked up the hook. She, however, couldn't compose herself enough to sing. Instead, she sauntered around the stage, shaking her hair, tossing it back and forth like a frenzied rock star.

She began to worry as the interlude approached. The backup singers would stop singing, while she soloed. She caught one of their eyes and nodded at her.

The woman nodded back, understanding, and then began to sing.

One of the dancers danced over to Andie and she remembered she was supposed to dance with him. In her confusion, she couldn't for the life of her remember the dance steps. But he was very professional and just began to dance around her once he realized that she'd forgotten.

As he danced away afterward, the suffocation started again. Tears filled her eyes as she forced herself to move around the stage. She just needed to make it through one more hook and then the performance would be over.

Her knees went weak.

No! she screamed at herself internally. She began to choke. Fear gripped her. Fear more acute than anything she'd ever felt in her life. She could sense something on the stage, but she couldn't see it. A scream rose up her throat. She bit it back in the nick of time.

She held out the microphone to the crowd again, but her hand was shaking so violently that she quickly lowered it before anyone noticed how badly she was trembling.

She blinked back the tears that were threatening, but it was no use. They streamed from her eyes.

I hate this.

I really hate this.

By the time the music stopped, she was completely frozen. She should speak and say 'thank you.' Or 'I love you guys.' She opened her mouth. Her throat closed up. Instead, she blew a kiss.

The lights dimmed, and someone grabbed her and hurried her off the stage. Halfway to her dressing room, she realized it was Joe.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She still couldn't speak. She shook her head. She felt like something was choking her. It was a good thing she'd had only one song to sing tonight.

When she got to her dressing room, Joe made to enter with her, but she slammed the door in his face and locked it. Inside, her image team was packing up.

"Are you okay?" Tamara, her makeup specialist, asked.

"No."

"What happened?" Janetta, the wardrobe girl, asked, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You suddenly looked frozen on stage."

"And you're shaking," Keely, her hairstylist added, her voice filled with concern.

"I just...feel sick all of a sudden." Andie squeezed her eyes shut, willing herself to stop shaking.

Nigel should be here, but ever since she slept with him, he'd shut her out. Danita, his assistant and Andie's image expert, had started managing her instead.

Danita was out of town tonight, so Andie was alone. How was she going to calm down?

Nigel used to cast spells for her when she got like this. Danita called a practitioner that hypnotized her. Andie felt hot tears stream down her cheeks. She was having a meltdown and there was nobody here to help her. Nigel, who was supposed to be her spiritual covering, was avoiding her.

Janetta's hand on her shoulder tightened. "Andie?"

"I'm fine," she choked.

"You're not fine—"

"I will be fine." Andie didn't mean to snap, but fear was wrapping around her heart and squeezing like a boa constrictor. She needed to get help. She grabbed her purse and found her cell phone. Her hands shook as she tried to unlock the screen.

Janetta took the phone from her and unlocked it. "Who do you want to call?"

"Danita." Andie clutched her belly as her stomach heaved. She was going to throw up.

"Voicemail," Janetta said a moment later.

Andie dragged in a deep breath, trying to keep her nausea and shaking at bay. The spirit was still around. She could feel it.

"Anyone else you want to call?" Janetta asked.

Nigel's face formed in her mind for the second time that evening. She'd been very surprised when he hadn't been in touch the day after they did what they did. Her pride wouldn't let her contact him first, so she'd waited, telling herself he must just be busy.

Three days later, Danita showed up for her performance at a music festival and had been managing her ever since. It had hurt, but days had turned into weeks and then months, and she was able to ignore the pain.

She swallowed as she looked up at Janetta. "Nigel."

She watched Janetta find his number and then lift the cell phone to her ear. Her heart began to gallop. Seconds dragged out. He wasn't going to pick up.

Eventually, Janetta lowered the phone. "He's not answering."

It shouldn't hurt, but pain exploded in her heart, more powerful than any pain she'd ever felt over a guy. *Nigel is ignoring me.*

Over the past two months, she'd wondered, numerous times, if she should call him and whether he would answer. She hadn't called because she didn't want to have to deal with the rejection of him not answering.

"Try again," she whispered. At the end of the day, he was her spiritual covering, so he shouldn't be ignoring her. If she reported that he wasn't fulfilling his role, he would be in trouble.

"Still no answer," Janetta said.

More tears streamed down Andie's cheeks. She allowed Janetta to undress her and help her change. Then her bodyguards escorted her to her limo.

As the limo pulled away, her cell phone beeped. She noticed that her hands were shaking less as she checked the message. The spirit must be withdrawing now.

She almost dropped the phone when she saw that the message was from Nigel. Her heart pounded as she opened it. The past two months had felt like an age. Okay, they shouldn't have slept with each other, but it really didn't warrant him cutting her off the way he had. She held her breath as she opened the message: *What do you want?*

Andie stared at the message. Anger filled her. What was his problem? She replied telling him what had happened on stage and that she needed his help with warding off the spirits.

She hated to send such a long message in response to his short, cold message, but it couldn't be helped.

She was reluctant to read his response when it came in. If it was cold again, it would hurt. She opened it: *Just self-hypnotize.*

Andie felt her anger mount as she stared at the words. Self-hypnotize? If she knew how to do that, she wouldn't have bothered him. He was supposed to be her spiritual covering. He was supposed to handle the spiritual things on her behalf.

Her fingers began to tap out a scathing response. Another message came in from him before she could finish it. It contained just a link. She tapped on it and was taken to an Internet page where she could follow the steps required to self-hypnotize.

She growled and tossed the cell phone into her purse. Fine! She would self-hypnotize tonight. But she had another performance tomorrow. She frowned. Not just any performance. A three-hour concert.

She grabbed her cell phone and called him. It rang out. She called again. Annoyance prickled in her chest. She was going to keep calling until he answered.

"Hello?"

Andie jumped. Her heart slammed against her ribs. It seemed like a decade since she'd heard that deep, rumbling voice.

"Andie?"

She collected herself. "I have a three-hour concert tomorrow. I won't be able to do it if what happened tonight happens again tomorrow."

There was silence for a moment.

"I will be in the crowd to cover you spiritually if anything happens."

Andie felt herself relax. She opened her mouth to thank him, but there was a click and the line went dead.

"Whatever," she muttered under her breath.

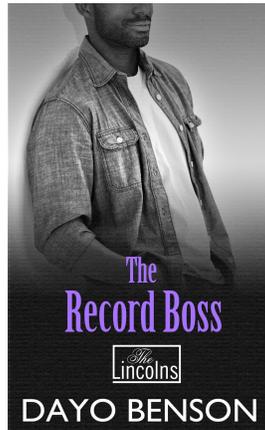
When she got home she would self-hypnotize and calm herself, but she would find time before the end of this week to go to Nigel's office and confront him—let him know that she didn't appreciate being told to self-hypnotize when he was supposed to cover her.

It was about time this silliness stopped.

****End of Sample****

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About Dayo Benson

Dayo Benson is passionate about using fiction to convey powerful messages about redemption and God's love. She is the author of over twenty Christian novels. From sweet contemporary fiction to gritty romantic thrillers, Dayo writes in a wide variety of genres. A message of hope is common to all her books regardless of genre.

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Learn more about Dayo and her upcoming books at www.dayobenson.com.