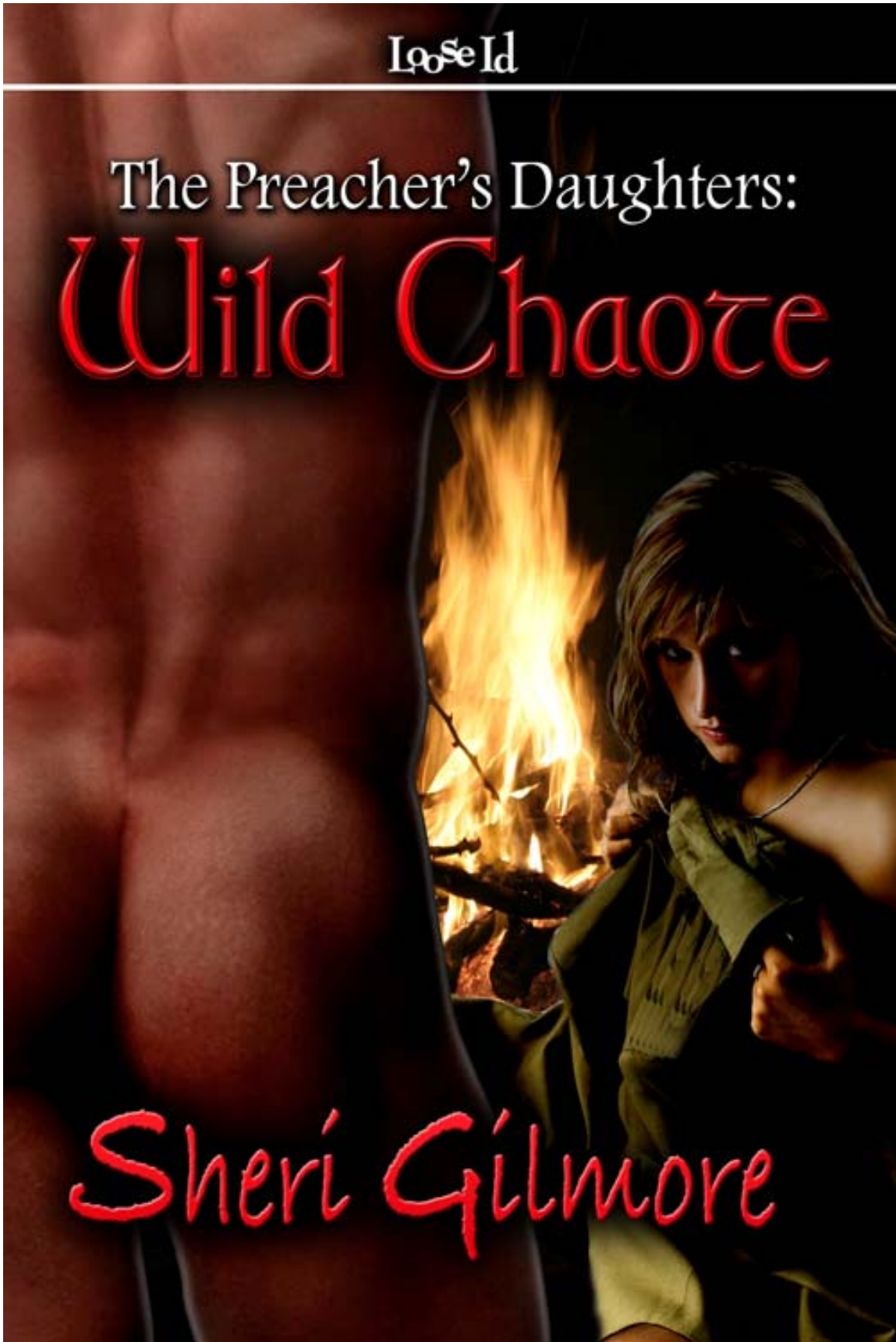


Loose Id

The Preacher's Daughters:  
**Wild Chaoze**

**Sheri Gilmore**



# THE PREACHER'S DAUGHTERS: WILD CHAOTE

Sheri Gilmore

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Sheri Gilmore

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## Note from Author

*Special thanks to Jeff Davis for his musical expertise and assistance.*

*Hels Grimoire is not a real book. It is a figment of my imagination, just as the Necronomicon was a figment of H.P. Lovecraft's.*

*I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone in the writing community: readers, publishers, and fellow authors for all their heartfelt wishes of well-being and the gracious thoughts, gifts, and support that I personally received during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She was truly a Bitch and I hope I never have to experience any of her kind again.*

*Although this was a devastating event and many people suffered in this catastrophe, it was also an opportunity for change and new growth. Some of that wasn't pleasant, but in the long run -- for me anyway -- it proved necessary and beneficial.*

*With that said, I want everyone to know that my family and I are back in our house, which has finally been repaired after over a year and a half of hard work (mental and physical). We've replaced all of our belongings that we could and keep very fond memories of the personal items that held a special, sentimental value that could not be replaced.*

*There are many along the Gulf Coast who are still without permanent homes and jobs and I ask that you keep them in your thoughts. This will be a long road for them to travel.*

*Peace and Love to All,*

*Sheri*

## Prologue

The old black book slid from the shelf for the fiftieth time that night. The cover was torn and faded from the years of use it had received. Flipping through the pages, one could find pages earmarked and notes written by several hands in various colored inks. Becky had seen Starr refer to it on various occasions throughout the years.

Becky bit her lip, not sure she could do what she might find in those aged pages. Holding the book, staring into space, Becky stood in the center of the den in the house she shared with her sister. “Hell, she was the one who told me to read this.” It had to contain something she could use to get a man. Any man ... She didn’t care any more. It’d been so long.

Choking back the tears of pity she’d cried for too long, she sipped her third glass of wine. *Hiccup!*

Third? Hmm, maybe this was the fifth. She wasn’t counting tonight. The alcohol dulled the pain of being alone and continually bored with life. It would give her the strength to attempt something she’d always been taught was dangerous and evil.

Did she really have the guts to do it? Her gaze studied the book -- weighing heavier by the minute -- within her hands. She closed her eyes, as the faded silver letters on the front of the tome swam in and out of focus. Opening her lids, slowly, she read the title.

"Helms Griswold." No, that wasn't it! "Harry's Grimace." She blinked. "Fuck! Oops." Giggling, Becky slapped her hand over her mouth, almost dropping the book. Apparently, her mind wasn't the only thing the wine was loosening.

Her giggle turned into a snort. Grasping the book firmly, she held it close to her face, positioning it until she could read the letters.

*"Hels Grimoire,"* she said. "That's it! *Hels Grimoire.*"

She frowned, dropping the book to the desk. What the hell did that mean? *Hels Grimoire*? Standing, she grabbed the edge of the desk. The room swirled around her. A tight, uncomfortable queasiness churned throughout her abdomen, rising slowly. "I feel sick."

Thumping her chest with her fist, she belched long and loud.

"Oh ... that's so much better." Releasing the desk, she staggered around to stand in front of the computer. Leaning close, she moved the mouse to click onto Starr's favorite search engine and typed the name of the book. She felt a stab of disappointment when only three hits were displayed.

She sighed. The first link gave reference to spells that led the user to certain death.

"That's nice." Although she admitted to being a bit drunk, her senses weren't dulled enough not to experience a touch of fear mingled with fascination. She clicked onto the next link.

*This site is no longer available.*

"Cripes! I just want to know where the book came from." She hit the third link.

*Hels Grimoire is reportedly an ancient tome written by Satan. While scholars debate its actual existence, numerous occult experts proclaim its power and authenticity. There are*

*reportedly only three copies (all handwritten) known to be in circulation, although the owners have not been forthcoming with that information.*

“So, how on earth does Starr have a copy?” Becky asked. Running her fingers over the cover, she examined the book in her lap. The binding appeared to be strong and made of leather. The pigmentation and striations were strange, though.

She picked it up and sniffed the leather. Thumbing the pages, she breathed in the scent of old paper and ink. “Um, I love the smell of books,” she said. This one had a trace of sandalwood and ... She frowned.

“Burnt hair?” She shook her head, trying to clear the alcoholic haze. Surely she was imagining things. “Okay, what else does the article say?”

*Along with the fabled Necronomicon from Lovecraft lore, Hels Grimoire has long been a favorite among Chaos magicians. Chaotes worldwide have searched for the coveted book in hopes of acquiring the secrets to the Black Magic that is contained within the human flesh-bound pages written, purportedly, in the blood of the damned.*

*It has long been a practice of ancient magicians to bind their books of spells with the flesh of specially chosen individuals to possess and combine the power of that person with the power of the spells. Any spell or pact written in blood cannot be broken without dire consequences. Hels Grimoire is such a book. “Hel” is the name of the Underworld in Norse mythology. “Grimoires” were the notes and spells of sorcerers during the Middle Ages. Many scholars believe Hels Grimoire to be the “Key to Hell.”*

“Holy shit!” Becky pushed away from the desk, shoving the book from her lap at the same time. “It’s made from blood and ... human skin.”

Watching the faded black tome skid across the wooden floor, Becky fought the sudden rise of bile in her throat. *Believed to be the Key to Hell.* Putting a hand over her mouth, she rushed from the room to the kitchen behind her.



Reaching the trashcan, she leaned over and vomited. The smell of burnt flesh was fresh in her mind and nostrils. Wiping her forehead, she sank to her knees. Her hair lay plastered against the clammy feel of her skin.

With her back pressed against the cool cabinet, she took slow, deep breaths, fighting the urge to dry heave. Through the archway leading into the den, she could see the culprit of her distress nestled so peacefully against the leg of the coffee table. Harmless.

“Yeah, right. That’s why they burned thousands and thousands of witches and sorcerers who dabbled with those contents over the ages.” Becky shifted her gaze from the book to the computer screen, and back. Flashes of the last ten years appeared in her mind, followed by the lonely expanse of the future stretching before her.

Her bottom lip trembled. She only wanted to see if it had a spell to get a boyfriend. It was just a book. What could be the harm in reading it? Besides, Starr used the thing all the time and she’d never harmed anyone.

The nausea gone, Becky stood slowly. The earlier dizziness had disappeared and in its place was a type of clarity that was almost tangible. Holding her hand up to the light of the computer screen, she turned it this way and that.

It was her hand, but ... it was different. Glancing around the room, objects that she took for granted everyday stood out, richer in depth and color. Vibrant. The skin on her hand and arm tingled with an electrical-type of excitement she’d never noticed. She shifted her focus back to the book.

The silver lettering glowed! Not only that, there was a dull vibration throughout the room for which Becky couldn’t place the origin. She walked to the computer, leaned over the unit, but didn’t hear anything. Nor did she feel anything when she placed her palm flat against it. She gasped. “This is great. I’m going to have to get drunk more often.”

Taking a step back, her heart rate increased. She swallowed and cut her gaze to her left without moving her head. It had to be an optical illusion. "I'm drunk and all of this is just a hallucination."

Starr had given her the book. If there was any danger, her sister wouldn't have done that. Besides, Becky didn't believe in magick. Did she?

"No. I do not." Marching over to the book, she picked it up. The letters no longer had that glowing quality of a few seconds earlier. She released a shaky breath. "I will not fall for this crap like Starr. I'm a member of the local church. It is an affront to my religion to participate in this nonsense."

She turned to replace the book onto the shelf Starr had removed it from the day before with the words, "Here, read this, and maybe you'll get a better feel for what a magician does."

As Becky was about to release the book, her hand and fingers grew warm. A tingling sensation surged through her arm and into her body, reminding her of the orgasm she had wished for with her spell.

Her clit tightened as she pulled the book back out from the stack. With a self-conscious glance around the room, she also removed another book that she'd read several days ago on sigil magick. Flipping through the pages, she eased back into the computer chair. Finally, she found the dog-eared page, and scanned the passages that her sister had underlined.

*A sigil is made personal by the chaote's unique creation. The chaote further increases his chances of success with the sigil by charging his creation with his own power. This is usually done by ecstatic release -- such as orgasm, and applying the discharged secretions directly onto the sigil before releasing it into the void.*

Orgasm. She groaned, hugging both books to her bosom. Such a wonderful enticing word. If she was going to masturbate anyway, she may as well try some of Starr's magickal techniques. Glancing down at the crumpled pages of the one book and the black cover of the

other, she shrugged. "What the hell. I don't believe in this stuff anyway. It can't hurt to try it, and it'll be fun."

So ... Becky twirled the office chair around in a circle. What kind of man to wish for? Her mind pictured her baby sister's husband, Quin.

"Nah," she said, blushing, even though she was alone. "He's a bit on the rough side." Although as soon as she said the words, she knew deep down, she wouldn't turn a man like Quin Tertulliano down if he wanted to crawl into her bed.

The heat in her cheeks increased. Really, decent girls didn't lust after their sister's husband. Her thoughts then centered on Preacher Mason. A muscle along her jaw tightened. "No."

Even though she was fond of him and enjoyed his company very much, Mason was too nice. Plus, she'd noticed the way he and Starr threw sparks off each other whenever they were in the same room. They might not realize it yet, but those two had something special going on between them.

"What kind of man do I want?" Becky asked, idly doodling on a piece of notebook paper lying on the desk. Her ex-fiance's face emerged in her mind. "No!"

When she glanced down at the random design she'd created, a slow, warm frisson crept up her spine. Her nipples hardened as if they'd been stroked by a lover's admiring tongue. Warm juices coated her panties and her clit tightened. Here was her sigil. Within its design was her perfect lover.

She laughed, uneasily. The last time she'd had that kind of a response had been when Adrian looked her way and she'd recognized him as her lover. She closed her eyes on repressed memories that rushed forward, drowning her in their bitter sweetness.

Her jaw tightened. "No," she said, pushing the past back where it belonged -- dead and buried. Picking up a red pen, she said, "Tonight is for the future and new beginnings." She drew a circle around her odd doodling and tore it from the page.

She smiled, holding up her sigil. "Let's make some magick."

\* \* \* \* \*

The flame of the candle glimmered in the darkness of her bedroom. Becky shivered, naked, in the cool, air-conditioned air. Opening her drapes, the light of the full moon flooded through the window into the room, illuminating an irregular pattern onto the rug.

Positioning the black candle she'd found in Starr's supplies on the cedar chest at the end of her bed, Becky shifted her weight on the mattress before striking a match. The smell of sulfur filled the night air along with the sudden flame.

Again, the illumination fell to the rug beside the bed, and her gaze was drawn to the odd pattern created by the panes of the window and the moonlight. Blowing the match out, she grabbed the candle, the paper, and the bell from the chest.

Stepping onto the rug and into the nocturnal glow, the moonlight bathed her bare legs with caressing silvery fingers, cool but exciting. She shivered; her nipples hardened. Not knowing why, exactly, she said, "This is where I need to perform the spell."

Trying to remember all the instructions she'd read, she placed the items within an outline of the individual panes and drew an imaginary pentagram. Finally, she enclosed the entire setup within a circle. Taking care not to step outside the circle, she knelt and lit the candle.

For a moment, she didn't know what to say. Passages from *Hels Grimoire* filtered through her mind. The spells had been a mixture of different traditions and they had all been dark and frightening. The one, pertaining to what she wanted to accomplish, stood dominant in her mind's eye. Taking a deep breath, she proceeded with an improvised version of some of what she remembered reading.

"Oh, great Universe, hear me. I am not a daughter of the dark, but I have a great need that my normal channels have not answered." Becky hesitated, as a wave of sadness swept

through her, but she continued, "Maybe I am unworthy because I desired the love from one who belonged to another."

A mental picture of her mother's laughing face appeared, quickly replaced by another, brutal picture of passion, betrayal, and death. Clenching her hands into fists, Becky closed her eyes and continued in a firmer voice. "I don't know any more."

Opening her eyes, she raised her face to the moon's calming rays. "I only know I still need and desire the touch of a man. A man who can give me the kind of love that I witness in other couples. A man who can quench these wild, brutal desires I keep hidden in the deepest part of my mind."

Her voice quavered. "Surely, with all the passion I have within me, there is someone out there in the universe who can share it with me and teach me what to do with the chaos that burns within my heart ..."

She dropped her chin to her chest. Tears, fat with inner torment, dropped from her cheeks and pounded the carpet like small torpedoes. "... and within my soul," she whispered.

Several minutes passed with Becky in that position, still as a statue. Not a sound echoed throughout the house. Calm returned. She lifted her head. Holding the scrap of paper she'd cut down to size in the shape of a circle around the sigil she'd designed, she offered it to the unknown powers with which her sister communed on a regular basis.

"The energy I create tonight, I offer to you. With this sigil, create one who hears my need and knows my loneliness."

Placing the scrap beside the candle, Becky sat back upon the rug. With grim determination, she pushed what nervousness and reserve she still harbored at what she was about to do down. She was tired of waiting for Prince Charming to ride up on his trusty steed, like all those sweet, magical fairy tales told her about. If white magic couldn't give her what she needed, she was in such a state of mind that she'd try anything, including reaching

out through a darker form of magick and grabbing what she wanted. The time for waiting was past.

With legs spread wide, Becky circled her clit with her fingers. A deep sigh of relief rose from within her chest, as spirals of need and pleasure spread throughout her body. Tense muscles relaxed and her vagina opened with a rush of juices that trickled down her cheeks onto the rug beneath her where she sat in the center of the pentagram.

Her tempo increased; her pelvic muscles clenched tight, released, and repeated. A shudder shook her body; her mouth parted on a moan of desire. Closing her eyes, a form in the shape of her sigil rose in her mind -- dark and masculine. She couldn't see a face or features, but it didn't matter.

Dipping her fingers into her pussy, she pushed as deeply as she could, feeling not her own hand, but a cock of the male-image in her mind. He was with her, possessing her, taking what he wanted and giving her what she needed -- fulfillment, union.

Strong hands gripped her shoulders, pushing her back against the carpet, as he thrust into her over and over. Her skin burned with the sensation of his mouth and teeth upon her skin.

A moment of fear speared through her, but Becky forced herself to relax and let what was happening happen. She tossed her head back and forth, writhing upon the carpet, allowing the figure from her mind to take control. She couldn't move anything below her shoulders. It was as if something of great power held her down, keeping her in a position of his choosing. Taking what he wanted of her. She should scream, or fight, but, God ... it was so good.

The momentary fear of being restrained evaporated as wave upon wave of pure ecstasy pulsed through her body. It was unlike any orgasm she'd ever experienced, going through her entire body from head to toes and she wanted it to go on forever.

When it ended, her body relaxed and she lay exhausted, curled into a ball of feminine content, tracing the illuminated pattern of the rug with her fingertip.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

After several minutes she shivered, realizing that she lay naked and exposed. Rising up onto her elbow, she noticed that she had never moved outside the security of the circle. Here she had been safe from the past, wrapped in the arms of a demon, for that was surely what had just happened.

Her smile turned to laughter. Wrapping her arms around her, she laughed long and loud. It had been so grand. So wonderful. So ... wrong and demented according to everything she had ever believed in. The joyous sound was replaced by sobs. The fear and horror of what she'd just done consumed her.

This is what she'd finally come to. A woman so lonely and desiring of a man so badly, she let her imagination con her into thinking she'd had the best sex of her life with a ... with a ... “Demon,” she whispered, curling further into a fetal position and crying herself to sleep. Tomorrow would be here soon and this would all be gone. She wouldn't think of it any more. No one would ever know what happened. She would never touch that book again.

As the moon made her way across the night sky, the black candle that had lain between Becky's legs slowly burned its way down.

The air conditioner kicked on again, blowing the sigil now coated with the dried secretions of her body, against the flickering flame where the tiny scrap of paper, holding Becky's deepest desire, quickly incinerated into the darkness with a stream of smoke, winding and spiraling into the ether of the universe.

The candle's flame dwindled and extinguished as the wax melted into an amorphous, black mass on the carpeted floor.

## Chapter One

*“This radio broadcast is live from Bay St. Louis on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Hurricane force winds gusting over one-hundred seventy-five miles per hour hit the Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama Gulf Coasts three days ago, causing damage estimated in the billions of dollars.*

*“Behind me, you can see the devastation left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Wait... here’s a local now. Sir. Sir, how does this make you feel at the moment?”*

*“Are you fucking crazy? How do you think I feel? I’ve lost everything I own. My house is gone, my vehicles, my -- my wife is missing.” Sniff, sniff. “How do you think I feel? Get outta my way. Why don’t you put that goddamned microphone and camera down and help us locate the people who washed away. Damn news media ...”*

*“Well, there you have it, Steve. Total chaos and mayhem down here in the deep south.”*  
*Click.*

“Jesus. I’ve heard enough, Hades. Sounds like everyone is in the same boat we are.”

“Meow.”

“Yeah, I love you, too.” Rebecca Chappell stroked the soft black fur.



A deep purr vibrated through the animal into her hand. Easing the giant fur-ball from her lap, she stood, wincing at the stabbing pain in her right leg. Glancing down, she could see fresh blood oozing from the homemade bandage she'd created the day before. A wave of despair crept from deep within her gut. She clutched the board jutting from what once had been her living room wall and stared through the remains of her house.

The front walls were gone, collapsed from the tidal surge that had pounded the coast for hours on end. Looking down the street, she could see that most of her neighbors' houses were either like hers, or completely washed away. There was nothing left but the concrete slabs. Debris littered tops of trees where the tide and waves had risen.

A long, cold shudder swept through Becky's body at the memory of clinging to the top of the roof after spending hours in the attic with Hades. The moans and groans of the old house had been terrifying, mingled with the howl of the winds and the crashing of the waves. In the distance, she thought she'd heard people screaming, calling for their loved ones.

She had huddled as long as possible inside the attic. At one point a tree crashed into the roof above her, allowing the rain to pour in from above just as the tide rose from below.

Clutching the cat in his carrier, she'd climbed through the opening, like a great wound, and clung to the giant tree, sandwiched between a large branch and the roof. Rain had pelted her face and body like razor blades.

The low, fast-moving clouds were as dark and angry as the tumultuous waves. At one point, she looked across the horizon, but couldn't tell where the sea ended and the sky began. It was all one huge gray, watery Hell.

A sob escaped her throat.

Becky gasped for air through a dry mouth and throat to push the remembered terror of the past three days behind her. Her grip eased against the board. Her heartbeat settled. She

was alive. That's what mattered. Any second Starr and Regina would be here with food and water. "Any second, they'll be here."

Lifting the plastic container, she shook it. A small amount of water sloshed across the bottom. Any second wasn't good enough any more. After three days with no contact from any of her family, she knew she had to find water and food. The last of the meager supplies she'd carried to the attic on her hasty retreat were gone.

She picked up a heavy grocery bag. "At least we have batteries for the radio." Moving slowly, she took the bag upstairs and into the attic where she had been staying at night. The wooden stairs creaked under her weight, but she made it to the upper room without the structure giving way.

Throwing the bag into a corner, she pulled the door shut. It squeaked on the hinges, already rusty from exposure to the salt-water. Her fingers shook as she shoved a metal rod through the bolt. If she was going in search of food, she didn't want what was left of her belongings to be stolen. Yesterday from the security of the attic window, she'd watched three men loading a three-wheeler with booty from what remained of her neighbors' houses.

She sighed.

If anyone really wanted into this room, the bolt wouldn't stop them.

"It makes me feel more secure, though."

Picking up a long, thick stick, Becky leaned on it heavily. Maybe she could find someone in town who had food and water they'd be willing to give her. There was no money, no credit cards, nothing. It had all washed away -- a lifetime gone in a flash.

The scene didn't get any better the closer to Main Street she got. The historical area of Bay St. Louis was gone. Becky bit back the tears at the destruction.

A pile of debris caught her attention. Wandering closer, she spotted a faded sign. "No, not Starr's store, too!"

Hobbling as fast as she could and gritting her teeth against the searing pain shooting up her leg into her hip, she rushed over to the debris. The sign that read *Blue Moon Boutique & Gifts* lay, cracked and faded, half buried in sand, seaweed, and rubble.

Placing her weight on her good leg, Becky dug the heavy wooden plaque from beneath the pile. When she had removed over half of the trash that pinned it down, she grasped with both hands and yanked the sign free. The weight forced her backwards to the ground.

A shaft of excruciating pain wracked her body. Nausea rose into the back of her throat. She clutched the wood tighter to her chest.

A sob she couldn't hold back escaped into the hot, humid air where it mingled with the cries of seagulls and the roar of the Gulf winds. Becky rocked back and forth. Everything was gone.

She didn't know how long she sat there, but a movement to her left caught her attention. She froze.

A young man in his twenties stared at her. His clothes were tattered and torn and his face was lean with hunger and another expression Becky didn't want to acknowledge.

Her heartbeat accelerated, and even with the day's heat beating down on her head, she experienced a cold deep inside that she had never known existed before the storm. But here it was again, staring her in the face -- the cold, dead grip of fear.

"What you got there, pretty girl?" The voice was coaxing, but wary.

"Nothing." She clutched the sign tighter. Quickly, she glanced around, but what was left of the street was bare. It was as if she and the young man were the only two people left in the world.

The fear skittered up and down her spine. When she swallowed, the sour taste of her earlier nausea rose to choke her.

The man's smile disappeared to be replaced by a snarl. "I asked you a question, bitch." The once soothing tone was cold and angry. "Did you find some food you gonna share with me?"

He stepped closer, darting his gaze around like a wild animal, expecting a trap. Becky tried to get up, but her leg refused to accept her weight. She fell back on the ground with a cry.

The man lunged forward, grabbing the sign.

Becky held tight. "No! It's mine."

"Let go, bitch, before I --"

*Thump.*

Becky fell backwards in a heap at the man's sudden release of the sign. She watched in fascinated horror as his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell ... toward her.

Realization came too slowly. His weight crushed her as she tried to scramble back. With the board between her and the man's body, pushing the air from her lungs, she couldn't scream.

Sunlight blinded her as she blinked up at the bright blue sky. She opened her mouth to breathe, but couldn't.

Footsteps crunched close by.

The stench of her fear and the body odor of the unconscious man on top of her seeped into her nostrils. If there was another attacker, she was dead. There was no way to defend herself. She tried to speak. "No ... money."

She tried to shake her head, but it was too much effort. Vertical lines of blackness closed in on either side of her vision, turning the daylight to night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The smell of fish grilling tickled her nose. Becky moaned and frowned. Her stomach rumbled. When had she last eaten a decent meal, or anything for that matter?

She smacked her lips, but was too dehydrated to produce any saliva. The dry, chapped skin cracked from the effort. Her moan turned into a whimper.

Immediately, a strong arm pushed beneath her shoulders, lifting her into a semi-sitting position. Something cold and metallic pressed against her mouth.

Struggling to open her eyes enough to focus, Becky saw a male chest. Remembering her attacker, she fought against this man's hold and the tepid liquid he was forcing down her throat.

Water!

Grabbing the cup with both hands, she gulped the elixir of life, choking as it went down her windpipe. Water sloshed onto her chest.

The man made a disgusted sound and tried to pry the cup from her hands. "You're wasting it."

Becky held on, growling, like a rabid animal.

The man stilled, but kept his grip on her hand and wrist. Slowly, Becky looked up, blinking. The haze of hunger and thirst rose and she gazed at the man beside her, taking in the sight of him for the first time.

Kneeling, his bared knees and legs were tanned and muscled. Sliding further up his torso, her gaze revealed an equally fit abdomen and chest. A long, puckered scar sliced across his left shoulder where dark hair streaked with blond tangled down onto his back.

Her lips parted and her now moistened tongue sneaked out to swipe her still cracked lips. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her gaze to his face and gasped.

Firm, but shapely, lips were pressed into a thin line of irritation, verified by the fierce scowl on his forehead and drawn eyebrows. Long dark lashes hid the full force of his gaze, but the intensity of his dark eyes cut through her.

“Are you going to eat me?” he asked.

Becky released a small, helpless pant at the sound of his deep voice, angry and disbelieving. His provocative words and resonant tones slithered over her skin and pooled low in her abdomen. Moisture gathered between her legs. She nodded slowly.

The dark eyebrows rose, disappearing beneath the shock of hair across his brow.

Realizing what she'd done, she shook her head. “No! I'm just ... thirsty,” she said in a croaking voice.

Heat rushed into her cheeks and she hoped that in the dim light he wouldn't see her embarrassment at acting like a wild animal. “I'm sorry.”

His shoulders lifted in a shrug. “It's okay.”

A bare thigh flashed across Becky's line of vision, as he turned toward the fire. Her eyes widened, becoming very aware of how close they were. “You're naked.”

Again, the careless shrug. “Yeah. I woke up this way earlier.” When he released her and turned away, his back revealed lean contours angling down to the most perfect ass Becky had ever seen.

She tried not to stare, but couldn't help her body's response to the nude god before her. Biting her lip, she allowed her gaze to devour every inch that was available for view. There were valleys and ridges formed from the intricate musculature of his form. Perfect in the way the first men on earth must have been. Primal, sleek animals made for hunting, fighting, and ... other ... things.

He turned; her mouth opened.

His chest was as chiseled as the back of him, but not with a body-builder's overdone proportions. The flat planes of his abdomen blended into the darkened hollows created by his kneeling position. There was a sharp arrow of dark hair that disappeared into the shadowed area covering the part of his anatomy she hadn't seen yet. She angled her head, slightly, hoping to get a better look without him noticing she was checking him out.

"I came with all my parts, and they're fully functional, as far as I can remember."

She glanced up sharply to catch the twitch of his lips. The heat spread further up her face. "I wasn't --"

He snorted, forking a fish from the metal grating that lay across the fire. "Sure you were." Lifting what looked like a piece of siding off a house, he placed the meat on it and offered it to her. "Eat this. You need the protein."

Becky ignored her growing discomfiture at her response to him. He was so casual about it all. She sat up. Well, if he can act so nonchalantly about his nudity, so could she.

"Nice plate," she said, taking the shingle he offered.

He grunted, forking the other fish with his knife.

She watched in fascination as he ate the meat directly from the knife. He was barbaric, but beautiful. Again, the idea of primal man arising from some chaotic ooze sprang into her mind.

She shook her head and focused on her utensils -- a shingle for a plate and ...

A can ... for a cup. "Are you an ex-scout?"

His eyes glittered in the firelight as he shifted his gaze from his meal to her. "If you haven't noticed, we're survivors of a major catastrophe." He waved his hand around the darkness. "I do what I have to do to survive."

The hair on her arms rose; she shivered. The words had been spoken quietly, but she heard the deadly determination and steel in each one. This man was dangerous, but he apparently knew how to cope in a rough situation, and he'd saved her life. She had no doubt that the young man earlier would have raped and killed her, sooner or later.

"Yes, I had noticed." Suddenly, the food, which had been manna from heaven a few minutes before, tasted like cardboard.

"You're not eating. Is it too raw?" he asked.

"You saved my life."

"I heard your call." He stared at her without blinking or smiling. "I had to answer."

Becky frowned at his strange choice of words. "Thank you. I'm Rebecca Chappel. My friends call me 'Becky'."

He nodded, but didn't offer his name. "You should eat."

It was Becky's turn to nod. Taking another bite, she had to admit it wasn't the tastiest meal she'd ever had, but it was better than nothing. "Where did you find the water? It's been three days since the storm and what little I had in my attic is gone."

"There was an old tub on top of one of the buildings that didn't get washed away that was holding rainwater left from the storm. I found a milk carton and filled it up."

"Amazing."

"What?"

"You're a regular MacGyver. Are you in the military?" It wasn't too unreasonable with Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi and the Naval Station in Pascagoula. There were people from everywhere in the world living along the Gulf Coast.

"Maybe." His gaze shifted to the fire.

"W-What do you mean, 'maybe'?" she asked, trepidation replacing the admiration she'd been experiencing toward her rescuer. This new statement forced goose bumps across her skin again. He could be a criminal with skills learned and honed in prison.

He finally met her gaze. The angry, tortured expression in his eyes gripped her heart. She reached out to him, unconsciously offering comfort, but didn't touch him.

"I don't remember anything -- who I am, where I come from -- past waking naked and hearing you scream." He glanced into the darkness for several minutes, as if he could find the answers to his questions of who he was and what he was doing here from the night. "Before that is just a big, black void."

Becky dropped her hand, not sure what to say. Obviously, he'd been through the storm. She'd heard reports on the radio about victims being found naked, their clothes ripped



and torn from their bodies by the ferocity of the storm's waves and the debris in the churning waters. Many had been found stranded miles from their homes.

She frowned, letting her glance slide over the exposed portions of his body. There weren't any cuts or bruises indicative of what riding the waves of Katrina would have caused. She winced at her own bandaged leg.

When he looked back at her, his features were composed, like he'd gathered strength and comfort from the blackness. Without electricity, the darkness lay heavy around them, like a blanket. Although she'd never cared for complete darkness, this was peaceful. The only light for miles was from their campfire and the stars far above.

"All I know for certain is that I need to stick with you."

"With me? Why?" she asked unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. "You're stronger than I am."

"Physically, yes." He glanced back into the night. "Psychically, no."

## Chapter Two

"Psychically?" Becky asked. What was he talking about? "Like in ESP?"

He frowned. "E ... S ... what?"

The guy had lost his memory! "You know. Extra Sensory Perception."

His frown deepened.

"A person's supposedly sixth sense."

He seemed to think about that for a second, then nodded. "That's what I mean."

Becky shook her head. "You've got the wrong sister. Starr is the Chappel sister with all the witchy-vibes. Not me."

"You're wrong. I can feel your energy and it's very powerful."

"Look, I've only ever tried one spell in my life and it didn't ..." Her voice trailed off for a few seconds, as she looked at the man in front of her. "... work."

The last ended in a whisper, as a sudden suspicion crossed her mind.

No way!

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

Becky nodded unable to speak. Her mind was racing with all the events of the past week since she'd cast her sigil. She ran a trembling hand through her tangled hair. The portion of *Hels Grimoire* that she'd been playing with had been about "servitors." Beings who were created to carry out a specific purpose, or tasks, for their creators -- magicians. Black magicians, to be exact, who used something the book had called Chaos magick.

Could it be possible that she'd caused all this with a few words? "Oh, my God."

Immediately, he was beside her, easing her down to the sand. "Just lay back. You've had a traumatic few days and it's all coming home, now."

"You could say that," she said, trying to joke, but failing miserably. Nothing made sense any more. Her entire world had been turned upside down and sideways, completely destroyed and all she could think of was she'd caused it with some little spell she'd cast to find a boyfriend!

Becky lay on her side, staring into the fire, as her companion stroked her hair and back. His nudity seemed almost familiar. "We have to call you something."

He laughed. "Like what?"

She yawned. "I always liked the name 'Ben'."

His fingers feathered softly through her hair. "Then, 'Ben' it is."

Smiling, she said, sleepily, "Ben Chaote. That's your name, now."

Her eyes drifted closed several times, but she managed to ask him, "Do you believe in magick?"

With a final downward sweep, her lashes closed for the last time, but not before she thought she heard his reply.

"Don't you?" he asked. His voice sounded far away, drowned out by the sound of the ocean's waves.

\* \* \* \* \*

Magick. Did she believe in it?

Becky sat up, looking around. The debris was gone and in its place was crystal-clean sand. The sun set on the horizon, and a light, warm breeze lifted her hair. Glancing down, she wondered at the airy, gauze dress she wore.

She stood. There was nothing beneath the dress and the sense of freedom was exhilarating. Laughing and twirling, she lifted her arms to the waning sun and suddenly knew she was dreaming.

"You look beautiful."

The warm male appreciation she heard in Ben's voice tingled along her spine. The skin between her thighs grew moist with a surge of feminine juices. Her body recognized him.

Becky frowned. How was that? She'd just met him.

*It's a dream.* Anything could happen in a dream.

She turned and saw the most mouth-watering sight she'd ever seen -- Ben standing with the Gulf behind him. Low tide had taken the waters out, leaving wet patches of sand and distant waters as a backdrop below a darkened, starlit night.

His chest and feet were bare, but he wore faded cut-offs, low slung upon his hips with the button undone above his fly. Becky bit her lip at the sight of six feet of tanned skin beckoning her closer.

A foot from him, she stopped. "No, you're the one who's beautiful." She reached out and ran her hands over his shoulders and down both arms, loving the sensation of muscles rippling beneath hot, smooth skin.

An arm snaked around her waist, pulling her close. The gauze bunched in his other hand, as he slowly pulled the hem over her thighs and buttocks. The gauze tickled and tantalized her skin, intensifying the throb between her legs. If she touched her clit right now, she'd come.

His gaze locked onto hers; she couldn't look away. A small quirk of his mouth told her he could read her thoughts.

Fingers slid over her buttocks, kneading and pinching.

Becky closed her eyes with a moan.

"Look at me," he said. The commanding tone warned her he wouldn't accept any refusal. Taking a step closer, his bare chest brushed against her hardened and sensitive nipples.

Becky drew a sharp breath, digging her fingernails into his biceps. His hands cupped her ass, lifting her and wrapping her legs around his waist. With a hard tug, her pelvis was flush with his. The throb of his cock through the thin denim vibrated into her pussy. She squirmed to get even closer.

One arm cradled her bottom for support, while the other hand slid up her back beneath the hair covering her neck where he grasped her head. "Kiss me," he said.

Becky didn't hesitate. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she lowered her mouth to his, and for once, took what she wanted, controlling the pressure and length of the kiss. At one point, she traced his lips with her tongue and was rewarded with a jump from his cock.

Ben lowered them onto the sand, holding her in place. Lying back, he stretched his legs out while Becky knelt on either side of his hips.

"Take your pants off," she said, pulling the dress over her head and letting it fall carelessly to the sand.

He grinned up at her. "They're already gone."

Becky gasped at the skin to skin sensation. A fresh rush of juices coated his cock, allowing her to slide back and forth over his flesh without allowing him to enter her.

Ben groaned and gripped her hips harder. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her thighs and hips, but Becky didn't care. The slight pain sharpened her pleasure, as did the knowledge that Ben was losing control.

Becky ground her pelvic bone over his cock.

"Enough!" Ben grasped her hips, holding her still. Lifting up on the balls of his feet, he thrust his cock into her pussy.

Her head snapped back; her mouth opened in a silent scream; her eyes closed with the surprise.

After three hard thrusts, Ben laid back. His hands caressed and massaged her breasts, neck, and face. "Ride me, Rebecca. Create the energy we need to battle what lies ahead of us."

Becky didn't need additional coaxing. She was already moving her hips up and down, back and forth, rotating in a hard grind that had Ben panting.

The pressure built deep inside her abdomen. The muscles around his cock flexed and gripped, until she flew apart with her orgasm on top of him. "Ben!" she cried, collapsing on his chest.

"It's okay, babe, I've got you," he said, but the voice had changed.

Pushing up, Becky opened her eyes. Her heart stopped.

It couldn't be. Her beautiful dream had turned into a nightmare. "Adrian!"

She tried to pull free, but the man beneath her held her tight.

"I've come back for you, Rebecca. Everything will be the way it should have been."

"No!" Becky pulled free, turning to make her escape. She tried to scramble away, but hands grasped her ankles, pulling her down ... down beneath the sands.

\* \* \* \* \*

The squawk of a seagull roused her from a deep sleep. Her head ached and her body felt bruised. She remembered the dream. "Wow. What a nightmare." She hadn't dreamed of Adrian Tullos in years, and wondered what had brought him back.

Rolling onto her side, she realized two things. One -- sand could make quite a soft bed. Two -- she was nestled close against Ben's back, warm and snug. How had that happened?

Thinking over the night before she'd had the horrible dream, she knew she'd fallen asleep before him with the magic of his hands easing her to sleep. He must have gotten cold and snuggled against her. Instead of being shocked, though, Becky rather liked the idea. Especially after that dream!

Lying there on her back, she listened to the rhythmic sound of his breathing, deep and even. The sun's rays weren't hot enough to burn yet, so she sat up, gingerly avoiding moving her leg as much as possible.

The campfire had died sometime during the night, but the smell of burned wood lingered in the dampness of the early morning. The water lay calm, lapping gently along the shore. Crabs scuttled sideways to avoid the waves, as they searched for their breakfast amongst the storm debris that littered the once pristine beach.

Becky's stomach growled.

The man she'd named "Ben" beside her shifted. "You're hungry."

The sound of his voice, gruff from sleep, stirred something deep within her that wasn't hunger for food. It'd been a long time since she'd wakened beside a naked man.

Her gaze slid over his back and hip. As he rested on his buttocks, she fought the temptation to reach out and cup his ass. She bit her lip.

"I'm a little hungry," she said when her stomach growled again. Food was not what was on her mind, though.

Ben turned toward her. Sand sprayed lightly over her skin, but she barely noticed with the front of his anatomy facing her and within touching distance. The heat of his groin radiated into her abdomen. What she hadn't seen last night stood, proud and hard, for morning inspection. Her mouth felt as if she'd eaten a handful of sand.

Nestled in a curl of dark hair, his cock was long and thick. The head, dark purple, formed in the shape of a bulbous mushroom.

Becky squeezed her thighs together at the sudden quivering of her clit and pussy. "What would you like to eat?"

Becky swallowed, forcing herself not to look back down. "What did you have in mind?" she asked, hating the husky note of her voice. This wasn't the time for this.

His gaze held a teasing note. He knew exactly how much discomfort his nudity caused her. When he took her hand, placing her palm on his chest, she stopped breathing.

"Oh, I don't know." His hand over hers, he guided her fingers down his chest, releasing her when she reached the hair below his navel. He was giving her the option to continue or not.

Her gaze left his to study the area her fingers itched to explore. Dark, wiry hairs and hot male flesh teased her palm. She licked her lips, curling her fingers into her palm.

*Hiss.* His eyes closed and his head angled back. His cock flexed forward, bumping into her hand.

Amazement that she'd caused the reaction made her eyes widen. A sense of power rushed through her. Could she cause the same reaction again?

Slowly, she trailed the backs of her fingers up to his chest, then down again with the pads, venturing past the line of demarcation just below his navel.

A firm hand wrapped around hers, stopping her progress. His eyes opened, pinning her with an intensity that took her breath. The brown-eyed gaze wasn't just warm, it scorched her skin as he raked his gaze over her face and neck. The muscles along his neck worked convulsively and his grip tightened. "Be careful, Rebecca. You may unleash something that you can't control later."

She froze at his choice of words, wondering if she hadn't already done just that with the storm that had destroyed everything she'd ever known and thrown this man into her



path. Maybe she'd gone mad. Moving closer to him, she flexed her fingers, liking the wiry scratch of his hair against her skin. Maybe she wanted to.

"What if I said that's what I want?" she asked, not recognizing the voice that emanated from her. She, Rebecca Chappel, church secretary and organist, sounded like some seasoned seductress. But it was the raw need she also heard that made her burn with mortification.

Ben's jaw tightened, and she could see the throbbing vein in his temple jump at her words. Again, she experienced a surge of power at the effect she was having on this god of a man. Nothing like him had ever noticed her in all her thirty years. Even Adrian, who had been a fine-looking man, had not compared to what stood before her. She decided that she didn't care if her need caused her humiliation. Everything she'd ever known had been destroyed. She could die at any minute without knowing the kind of passion she craved.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a tiny voice was screaming that this wasn't a god, but a demon. One she'd created with her own imagination and magickal words. She shook her head against the insanity that any of that could have been real. Angling her head and mouth in perfect alignment, she offered the only thing she had to give -- herself.

His grip tightened. "If you play with the devil, Rebecca, sooner or later, you're going to get burned."

Her heart raced again at his choice of words. She licked her lips, aware that other lips were moistening with each second that passed in this man's contact. Lifting her head, her mouth was mere centimeters from his. She could feel his breath tickle the strands of hair that floated around her face.

"Are you the devil?" she asked, half afraid of his answer and half excited that she might have brought him to her from out of the ocean with some tiny obscure, arcane spell, like one of the Lovecraftian novels she loved to read.

He frowned. His gaze wandered beyond her, searching the horizon. He shook his head. After a second a small, devious smile teased his lips. He looked down at her before brushing

her mouth in a brief kiss. "I don't remember what I am, yet. I can only tell you that I'll be what you desire and need me to be, now."

Before she could respond to that cryptic statement, his mouth covered hers and everything disappeared from her mind, except the sensations he created within her with his lips, tongue and teeth. Flashes of her ritual swirled through her thoughts mingled with the vision of their bodies entwined in the age-old embrace of sexual ecstasy.

He brought her body flush with his and the area she'd itched to explore throbbed against her abdomen, hot and fully erect.

Becky groaned, trying to break away from his kiss so she could breathe, but he held the back of her neck with one hand, while the other arm wrapped around her waist, locking her to him.

His hand moved from her neck to her blouse, impatiently popping buttons loose.

"Ben." She reached out to stop him, but he grabbed her hand with his left hand, pulling her arm above her head. Her other arm lay sandwiched between him and the sand, unable to move. She twisted her head, breaking free for a second from his questing lips. "W-Wait."

He ground his hips into her pelvic region, pressing his cock against her clit. Becky's body shuddered in response. With the rest of the buttons undone, Ben lowered his head to her breasts, lathing her nipples one at a time.

She squirmed her hips against his, not fighting what she wanted any longer. As if he'd read her mind, her demon released her hand. Reaching down, he pulled her shorts down with fast, jerky movements until she lay exposed to him and the elements.

They stared at each other. Their chests heaved with arousal. A moment of fear speared through her at what they were about to do. She didn't know him, but ... she did. A flash of a dark male form entered her mind that she remembered from the night of her ritual. Besides - she shook her head of the image -- he'd saved her life. They could die out here today and she'd never know what it was like to have him inside her.

She reached out with a trembling hand and traced his jaw with her fingers, burying her hand beneath his hair. Without releasing his gaze, she brought his mouth to hers, whispering, "Do it, please. I have to know."

"Not yet. I want to explore the terrain a bit." Ben eased his shoulders between her legs, nibbling slowly along the valley of her breasts.

Becky clutched his shoulders, digging her nails deep to match the tightening of her nipples at the flick of his tongue over her skin.

He traveled all the way down her cleavage, nipping and sucking at the undersides of her breast. Reaching her abdomen, he slowed his pace even further, driving her wild. The sharp, little bites zinged from her nipples to her clit.

She tightened and released her pelvic muscles, her juices coating the outside of her pussy and between her ass cheeks as they ran to the sand below.

Eyes shut, Becky arched her neck and circled her hips against Ben's chest. She was so empty. She needed something inside her. "Please ..."

Immediately, his fingers dipped into her pussy hair, circling her clit.

Becky arched her back as he continued biting his way down her abdomen and playing with that one spot that could send her over the edge.

One finger ventured downwards, spreading her juices along her slit. Wiggling her hips, she was rewarded when the tip of his finger entered her vagina. She sighed, then gasped as Ben plunged his finger all the way into her body.

"Like that?" he asked. The hot breath against her belly fanned out in erotic waves.

"Oh, yeah." She gripped his hair, pushing and pulling his head in indecision as her body fought for some kind of equilibrium.

On the brink of orgasm, he pulled his finger out.

"No!" She gripped his hair harder.

She was silenced when he traced her lips with her own juices. Becky opened her eyes to see him staring at her, waiting for her response. Tentatively, she circled her lips with her tongue. Her mouth opened in surprise. "I never knew --"

His mouth covered hers as he tasted what she'd tasted. He grasped her hips and shifted her beneath him further. She winced from the pain in her leg, but refused to tell him to stop. Pushing with the balls of her feet, she angled her pelvis to meet his downward thrust.

Searing heat and pain had her sucking in a deep gasp and biting her lip. It had been a long time since she'd had a man, and even then Adrian hadn't been this large. Ben filled her body to the max, invading space that had never been occupied.

She thrashed her head against the sand, as Ben's body pumped into hers, spreading her wider for his invasion. Even though it hurt, she acknowledged the pleasure that rose within her. Spreading her legs wider, she cried out as he sank deeper into the folds of her cunt.

"I needed this. You just don't know." He groaned. "Jesus, you feel so good." His praise brought a rush of juices that lubricated her pussy, allowing him to penetrate her body further with each thrust.

When his pubic bone rested against hers, they lay quietly for a second, breathing and savoring the feel of their bodies throbbing in and around each other.

He lifted his weight onto his elbows, allowing the gulf wind to rush across her. The sweat that covered her skin cooled and she shivered in the growing heat of the day. Looking up into his eyes, she saw desire, but concern in his gaze.

"What?" she asked.

He cradled her face with both hands. "I want to fuck you. Lose myself in you and forget the images in my nightmares, but ... you're really tight. You believe me when I say I don't want to hurt you, don't you?"

Another rush of juices coated his cock at the image his words created. She grasped his wrists, meeting his gaze. "I want you to fuck me. I've been waiting for a long time for this opportunity."

His jaw tightened and his lips thinned, turning white around the edges. "How long has it been since you've had sex?"

She knew what he was thinking. "I'm not some virgin that hasn't ever been screwed. I want this."

His grasp tightened around her face. "How long, Rebecca?"

She closed her eyes, recognizing his determination to have the truth. "Twelve years," she whispered.

"Twelve years?" Anger and disbelief mingled in his question. "Why?"

A tear escaped from the corner of her eye and trickled down her temple to her ear. She felt his thumb wipe it away. "The man I loved left me for someone else."

"Don't cry. I wouldn't have been so rough if I'd known it'd been that long for you."

Becky pushed his hands away. "You ass, I'm not crying from pain. I'm pissed!"

She almost laughed at the surprise on his face. "I want you to fuck me. Goddammit, I *need* you to fuck me." She punched him in the arm, but once wasn't enough.

The dam burst and with tears streaming down her face, she screamed. All the frustration of the last twelve years combined with the shock and trauma of the last several days, and she was hitting him over and over on any part of his body she could reach.

"Rebecca!" He grabbed her wrists, wrestling her squirming body to a halt, where he pushed his entire weight onto her. His cock pulsed within her.

"I hate you!" She tried to claw him with her fingernails, but all she could reach was his fingers. Bucking and twisting against his larger frame, she fought his mouth taking hers in a punishing, brutal kiss. She tasted blood -- hers -- as he ravaged her mouth with a hunger she'd never experienced from a man. Dammit, it made her want him more. She bit him.

Ben ground his hips into her cunt, and the claiming soothed her, comforted her raging anger at not only the total devastation of her home, but the murder and loss of her mother and the betrayal by her lover years ago.

Something deep within Becky knew the man who possessed her and she responded with the same primal passion. Teeth bit into her neck and shoulder; she arched into the pain with a moan, biting him in return. When he released her hands, she raked his back with her fingernails, glorying in the way he arched and hissed in response, fucking her harder.

“Is this what you want?” he asked.

“No. It’s what I need.”

He rose on his forearms, thrusting into her deeper. “You look so delicate, but --” His teeth were clenched and sweat poured from his forehead down his face and neck. “-- you like it hard, don’t you?”

The black of his pupils covered most of the blue of his iris, attesting to his aroused state.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and arched into his thrust. “Yes!”

The force was so strong, it scooted them further beneath the shanty and crashing into one of the logs supporting the roof. The building shook and shuddered, like her body, as her orgasm consumed her.

Riding wave after wave, her eyes closed and her arms and legs tightened around him. The overhead blue of the sky turned black as night and the sound of waves and birds stilled into nothingness. The only thing that existed was that moment of pleasure and release. Release from her body and mind.

A pinpoint of light appeared in the distance. Becky moved toward it, slowly at first, then faster. Somehow, she knew she had to reach that light, but the more she struggled to reach it the more difficult it became to move. Unseen hands grasped her, holding her back. She reached toward the light, straining to touch what she thought was a hand extended to

her, beckoning her to move forward and warning her if she didn't, she would lose what she loved the most.

She frowned. What did she love the most?

The light moved further away.

*I can't reach you! Wait, don't leave me. Don't leave!*

"Rebecca!"

The sound of her name crashed around her through the stillness of the void. Seagull cries screeched overhead and the darkness exploded into the brilliance of the morning sky. She opened her mouth and gasped, taking in gulps of air.

Ben's hands were rubbing her arms, up and down. "Are you okay?"

"I-I'm so ... cold." She shivered, curling into a ball. "What ... happened?"

"I don't know, but you're back."

"There was this light. I tried to reach it, but couldn't. These ... things ... were restraining me, but I fought them."

He pulled her into his arms, rocking her back and forth. "That was me. You had some kind of seizure when you came. Scared the hell out of me the way your eyes rolled back into your head, all white. You started speaking gibberish in this god-forsaken monotone voice."

His hands dug into her upper arms, as he put her away from him a bit and shook her.

"Don't *ever* do that to me again! It reminds me of ... of ... Hell, I don't remember what it reminds me of, just don't go there again."

Before she could respond, he snatched her closer against his chest, rocking her as before. After a few minutes, she shifted, conscious of the stickiness on her skin from dried perspiration and between her legs from his cum.

Shit! She jerked out of his arms, grimacing at the sudden stab of pain in her hip.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing." She couldn't tell him. Silently, she kicked herself. How could she have been so stupid? "I have to get my cat. We need to get moving."

"First things first," he said. "We have to change your bandage and clean that wound. In this heat and all the waste materials churning in that water the other night you could get a really nasty infection." He stoked the fire after placing a can of water on the perimeter.

Becky nodded, trying to remember when her next period was due. "I thought I'd already thought of that. Hepatitis, tetanus, and a few other diseases I don't want."

She felt his gaze on her, studying her intently.

"We didn't use protection," he said.

Surprised as his astuteness, she gave a nervous laugh. "Yes."

"You don't want any children?"

"Not really. I helped raise my sisters. That was enough motherhood for me." She waved her hand at the current situation around them. "I really don't want any ... diseases."

"Don't worry. I don't have any and I'm sterile."

"How do you remember that and not remember your name?"

He smiled. "I remember my name. It's Ben. Ben Chaote."

She stretched out her leg, and gritting her teeth, gingerly peeled the bandage from her thigh. "Well, you have comforted my fears," she said, letting her sarcasm seep out.

A slight sickening odor rose from the rags; she bit her lip. "It doesn't look too good." A red ring surrounded the jagged wound and in the center yellow pus oozed. She glanced at her companion.

His lips thinned and his eyebrows pulled down into a dark frown. "That's an understatement. It looks like shit."



“Gee, make a girl feel good, why don’t you.” She tried to make a joke out of what they both knew was a very serious matter. Their gazes met, and she knew he wouldn’t lie to her. No matter how dire the circumstances, he would tell her the truth.

“It’s bad, Rebecca.”

She swallowed the lump that sat like a boulder in her throat. “I need antibiotics.”

“Yes, and that’s where we’re going right after we clean this.”

“But --” She frowned, glancing at the mass of destruction from one end of the beach to the other. “-- where? Everyone was affected. We don’t know how far we’ll have to walk. I’m not able, and you can’t carry me that far.”

“I’ll figure out a way to carry you,” he said gathering what meager supplies he had acquired -- a knife, a shingle, a jug of water, and a can.

“I-I can’t leave my cat.” Hysteria rose within her at the thought of leaving the area without Hades. “He doesn’t have any food or water. He survived the storm just like me. He goes with us, or I stay.”

“To hell with the cat, woman! You could lose your leg at least, and your life at most, if we don’t get you to a medical facility.”

“My sisters will be looking for me at the house. I can’t just go off and let them think I was swept away with ... with --” She took a deep breath, remembering the screams and cries for help as she’d wedged herself between the roof and the oak tree. “-- all those other people.”

A cold sweat broke across her forehead even though the day was hot and sunny. Her breathing sounded ragged, growing louder and louder.

“Rebecca!” Strong hands gripped her upper arms, shaking her back to the present. “It’s over. You’re alive.”

“And, they’re not.” Pulling away from his painful grip, she stared up at him. “Why? Why did I live and they didn’t?”

"Don't talk like that. It won't bring them back. You're here and you have to keep yourself alive any way you can."

"I grew up with all of these people." She waved her hand behind her, encompassing the piles of debris that had once been homes. "Am I the only one still alive?"

He knelt down in front of her and took her arms, rubbing her flesh gently this time. "There are others, but they've gone in search of shelter, food, and medical help. That's what we have to do."

"But, my sisters."

He sighed. "Where were they when the storm hit?"

Becky shook her head, trying to remember. "The last time I spoke to Starr and Mason, before the storm hit, they were up at the old house. Gina and Quin were in New Orleans, so I don't know where they ended up. Gina said they were going to try to make it to Jackson."

As she spoke, she noticed that he concentrated on everything she said and seemed to know where New Orleans and Jackson were. Could you remember specific places and how to perform specialized things, but forget who you were?

"They'll be looking for me."

"Where is the 'old house'?" he asked.

"On the north side of town toward the country."

"Would it have flooded there?" he asked.

"N-Not normally, but ..." She shrugged. "We've never experienced anything of this magnitude."

"We'll head there, then, on the off-chance that the house is still standing and your sister and her husband are still there." He grabbed several more items and stuffed them in a makeshift sack.

"Okay, but after we get Hades."

Ben didn't respond. Becky wanted to scream. One way or the other, she wasn't leaving without her cat, but harassing Ben wouldn't endear him to her demands.

"Mason's not my sister's husband," she said after several seconds of silence.

"Oh?" he asked in an offhanded tone.

"I- He's the preacher of my church." She watched a seagull circle low over the waves. She'd thought herself attracted to Mason for a while, but had realized he only had eyes for Starr, the town witch.

Becky's mouth quirked at the irony of that situation. The town preacher cohabiting with the town's biggest pagan. Oh, how the gossip would fly. Of course, with the current events no one would really notice who was sleeping with whom. At least for a while.

She shivered at the memory of Ben's hands on her body. Ben had stopped rummaging; Becky turned toward him and found him watching her with a curious expression on his face. She frowned. "What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. It's just that you called the preacher by his first name."

"Well, actually, that's his last name, but that's what he likes his close friends to call him."

"And, you're one?" he asked, resuming his packing with a frown.

"One what?" she asked, more confused.

"One of his *special* friends."

*He* was jealous? Becky couldn't believe what she heard in his voice. She bit back a laugh at the thought that Mason could ever have shown the remotest sign of interest in plain-Jane her when the cream of Bay St. Louis's single female population had been paraded in front of him for his pick of the crop.

She hesitated for a second, but decided to enjoy the moment for a bit longer before she destroyed Ben's illusion of her as some *femme fatale*.

“Well, we were quite close for a while.” She stretched her legs out further in front of her, ignoring the pulling of her wound. “I think he’s an extraordinary man -- intelligent, gifted with his way with people, and just drop-dead gorgeous for a man of the cloth.”

*Snort.* “He might be a *man of the cloth*, but let’s not forget the keyword is *man*.”

That forced Becky into a moment of silence. Ben didn’t know James Mason from Adam, but he was passing judgment on a person whom she considered a friend and who was probably going to be her future brother-in-law.

Becky forced her anger down, trying to focus on the fact that she had allowed the misrepresentation. Leaning back on her elbows, she let her head fall back. Her hair skimmed the sand, in what she hoped was a sexy pose. Dropping her voice an octave, she tried to imitate the sultry tones she’d heard Starr use on occasion with men. “Oh, I don’t forget. *Believe* me. That preacher is melt-in-your-mouth all man.” *Crash!*

Becky jumped; her head snapped forward.

The pile of driftwood that Ben had stacked the night before to provide them with protection from the wind lay flattened on the ground.

Becky’s gaze shifted between the wood and the man standing beside her. He looked mad as hell. Had he shoved the wood?

“What happened?” she asked. He couldn’t have. He was too far away from the pile. It had to have been the wind --

“Must’ve been the wind,” he said with narrowed eyes and tightened jaw.

Becky nodded, not bothering to point out what she’d realized a few seconds before.

There was no wind.

## Chapter Three

“How’s that feel?”

Becky released a pent-up breath and nodded. “Fine.”

He might have been angry about his misconceived impressions, but Ben definitely knew how to calm down when it came to medicine. He’d cleaned and dressed her wound with a professional demeanor and familiarity that only one with training could perform.

“Are you a doctor or paramedic?”

He glanced up from throwing sand onto what remained of the fire. His gaze drifted out to sea as before, but didn’t linger as long. He shook his head. “No.”

“You remember who you are?” she asked, sitting straighter, smiling that it was coming back to him.

He shifted his feet, turning his gaze to the area around them. “Not much. Just bits and pieces.”

“Well, it will take time for...” She was going to say, “for your memory to return,” but he cut her off.

“Yeah. Speaking of time, it’s time we left here.”

Holding onto the makeshift hut, Becky stood, putting weight on her good leg. "If you'll hand me that stick over there, I'll use it as a crutch."

"Forget that." Ben walked over and scooped her up into his arms. "We'll make better time if I carry you."

"Are you crazy?" she asked, half-heartedly pounding on his chest with her fist. "You might be some kind of He-man, but I doubt you can carry me several miles without hurting yourself."

He angled his head to her; her breath caught at what looked like twin flames burning deeply within each of his eyes. She blinked; the flames were gone.

"You'd be surprised what I can do." He shifted her higher, closer to his chest, as he set off at a steady pace.

"I bet," was all the response she could give. Closing her eyes, she thought back over the night of the ritual, but could only remember bits and pieces. Damnation! Why had she drunk so much? *Why* had she ever considered playing with magick?

She sighed. *Because you're a weak, sad fool, looking for something that doesn't exist.*

After several minutes, she recognized they were heading toward her house and her cat, not north. "How did you know my house was this way?"

"You pointed in this direction earlier. Are we close?" he asked, taking a break and sitting her down on an old log.

Becky glanced around, looking for any familiar landmarks. Spotting the remains of the Deleaux's pier, she nodded. "Yes, just a bit further."

"Good. Let's get going." He scooped her up into his arms.

"Thank you," she whispered. He really was a nice guy --

He grunted. "You'll pay me later for my service."

The tingling in her cunt told her he wasn't that nice, but she didn't think it was going to be such a difficult trade.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Here, kitty-kitty.”

“Meow.” The cat raced from beneath the abandoned car between Ben’s legs and up the frame of a storage building.

“Goddammit! You black furball from Hell. You’re going to make me chase you, aren’t you?” Ben glanced around, looking for something he could use to climb the outside of the rickety structure.

“How’s it going?” Rebecca asked from beneath the shade of what was left of a carport.

She couldn’t see him or the cat, and that’s exactly how Ben wanted to keep it. “Cause when I get my hands on you, I’m going to snap your neck,” he mumbled, stacking another piece of junk onto the growing pile he was using for a ladder.

“Ben?”

“It’s going great. I can see him right up here.”

“Is he okay?”

*Not for long.* His jaw tightened at the note of worry in Becky’s voice. “Yeah, baby, he’s fine. He’s just frightened of me being a stranger.”

*Hiss!* “Rrrooww ...”

Ben glanced up, finding Hades on a ledge with his tail whipping around him in a frenzy. Fangs flashed in the glare of the sun, and one paw shot out with claws extended to ward off any attempt to touch him.

Ben’s eyebrow rose. Frightened, his ass. This beast was going to eat him alive if he got a sliver of a chance.

Rebecca’s voice held more concern. “I don’t understand. He’s usually so calm with people that he doesn’t know. It shouldn’t matter who you are.”

How about “what they are?” Ben ran a hand through his hair. Ever since he and Rebecca had had sex, “things” were coming back to him in flashes -- some kind of ritual, the moon, a watery cavern or tomb, the storm, being spewed from the bottom of the ocean floor. None of it made any sense yet, but he knew something was “different” about him.

The cat knew it, too. That’s why it was freaking out whenever Ben got too close. The second they’d arrived with him carrying Rebecca, the animal had growled, hunched its back in attack mode, and zeroed in on him, as if it was protecting his mistress.

Ben didn’t blame Hades a bit for that. He wanted to protect her, too. In fact, that was the only thing he was sure of. He was here to protect her, to serve her ... His gaze shifted back to Hades. Even if it meant fighting doped up thugs and demon cats to do it. He belonged to her, somehow. He didn’t have enough pieces of the puzzle to figure the entire picture out yet, but ... he would. The more he was around her, especially when they were having sex, the more memories fell into place.

*Will you protect her, even if you have to die to do so?*

Ben stopped with one foot on the debris. His hand clenched into a fist. The sight of Rebecca’s leg reflected in the broken glass of the window beside him. Her foot was tapping to the snappy little tune she was humming.

“Yes.” His cock hardened beneath the pair of jeans he’d found on their way here and pulled on. The memory of holding her while her body cradled his deep within rushed forward. He closed his eyes with a shudder at the sheer ecstasy he’d experienced in her arms earlier. When he’d come, he’d known such an utter sense of peace, as if he’d known her forever. All the noise that swirled throughout his mind had stilled at that moment, and he’d grown stronger.

The flashes had taken more form with images of his being submerged in a blackened abyss. Whatever state he’d come from, he didn’t want to return in any fashion -- water or earth. Buried was buried, as far as he was concerned.



“Ben? How’s it going with the spawn of Hell?” she asked with a light-hearted laugh.

Again, his cock hardened at the sound. Becky had been his salvation from the chaos that tormented his mind since he’d awakened in a pile of debris, hearing her scream for help. “As soon as I get him down, I’ll let you lick my wounds and bring me to life.”

“Okay,” she said, but the laughter was gone, and he heard uncertainty. It had the same feel as her reaction last night at who he was and where he’d come from.

In that second, he knew she knew where he came from. Anger rose from within him along with the memory of some ritual she had performed in the moonlight, calling him from his watery prison. He hung his head.

He wanted to scream against the truth that stared him in the face. He wasn’t real; wasn’t alive. He was her creation, her slave, her servitor.

Climbing up the pile of debris, he ignored the cat’s claws. Grabbing Hades by the back of the neck, Ben hauled the growling creature to the ground and shoved him into a cat carrier he’d found in the attic.

Breathing was an effort. He marched to stand in front of Rebecca, practically throwing the carrier at her feet. The look of surprise on her face was almost enough to make him laugh, but if he did, he might not stop. Hysteria abounded where he came from -- the abyss, the never-ending void of chaos.

“Ben, what’s wrong? What --” Her eyes widened and she crossed her arms over her chest in a protective gesture. “You’ve remembered ... something.”

*Snort.* “You could say that.”

She sighed, but he refused to respond to the feminine sound. Turning from the sight of her pouting lips, he pointed to the remains of the house. “Tell me about the ritual.”

She glanced quickly at the cat and plucked nervously at some invisible thread on her shirt. “What ritual?”

He leaned closer. “You know *what* ritual. Tell me.”

"I ... I was lonely. And drunk. My sister had shown me a book to use for magick." She shrugged. "I didn't really think anything would happen."

"Well, it did. I'm here and all I can remember before hearing you is being entombed somewhere in the water. In the dark. There was nothing but screaming and impressions of creatures, like being trapped in other people's nightmares. Then, there was you."

Her eyes had grown to the size of saucers, petrified by his words. He watched her throat work convulsively as she swallowed. Her fear was tangible, and it called to him as much as her loneliness had. He frowned.

She had called and he had been the one to answer, but there had been others where he came from ... No, no. He couldn't have volunteered. She had forced him to come here with her magick.

He glanced around, knowing there was a reason he didn't want to be here, but not able to find the answer. Ben stepped closer with his hand extended. Maybe if he touched her, he'd pick up something.

When she moved against the back of the tree she'd been leaning on, he didn't experience guilt or regret at her fear. Only attraction and power.

Kneeling in front of her, he leaned into her personal space, breathing in the waves of terror radiating from her. "The longer I'm with you, the more I'm starting to know why I'm here."

"A-And why are you here?"

Ben reached out, tugging at the ragged hem of her shirt. Slipping his fingers beneath, he felt the muscles in her abdomen quiver and heard the tiny catch in her breath.

Beside them Hades hissed and growled. The cat knew what he was. Cats were good "watchdogs" for the things that humans swore didn't exist.

His index finger traced the curve of her breast. A burst of hot breath fanned his cheek. She turned her head when he moved closer to kiss her. Instead of her mouth, he kissed her

ear, biting the lobe and tugging it into his mouth where he sucked it gently. "I'm here to serve you and show you what you're missing in life."

Becky gasped and jerked out of his grasp. "How ...? That's the exact words that --"

Ben smiled, advancing on her again. "The exact words you used the night of your ritual." He spread his hands wide. "So what's the problem? You asked for me; you got me."

She shook her head. "It's not possible."

He reached out, grabbing her by the upper arms, and pulled her up with him where they stood face to face. "Apparently, it is, or else we're sharing the same delusion. I don't know how you did it, but you brought me here to serve you sexually." He smiled, and by the look on her face, he knew it was a nasty one. "If that's what you want, that's what you'll get."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut off any words she might have said with his lips, teeth, and tongue.

All the anger he was experiencing focused into that one kiss. She had so casually used forces she knew nothing about. He had been ripped from whatever existence had been his and thrown into this dimension, in the midst of a raging storm, just to be her sex slave. It infuriated him.

If she turned her head one way, he followed, forcing her to accept his passion -- his rage into lust and back again. Tiny hands tipped with claws raked the skin of his chest over and over, but the pain just added to his lust. She'd done this to him -- brought him here against his will on some half-cocked, drunken hoax of a spell.

Her whimper signaled her submission to his greater strength. It was also the moment he released her from her punishment.

Looking down at her, trembling with the back of her hand over her mouth, he wanted to say he was sorry, but couldn't. There was a reason he shouldn't be here. The anger was still too great. "I've got work to do."

Becky watched him leave. Gathering limbs of differing lengths, he walked further and further away from her. She wanted to say she was sorry, but the painful throb of her lips reminded her of his repressed anger.

Sighing, she said, "I'd hate to see him when he really loses it."

She bent to check on Hades, who cowered in the back of his travel box. "That is one intense ... whatever he is."

She couldn't say "demon." The idea was too ludicrous, but she couldn't say "man" either. Not after the nightmare of events this week and some of the tales her sister had shared with her about Gina's husband's Voudon adventures and being possessed by a Santerian god.

Wrapping her arms around her mid-section, Becky shivered. "I'm too sensible a person for this stuff. It doesn't make sense." Everything she'd ever been taught would be a lie if she believed that she, an ordinary woman, could have done what Ben had accused her of. But hadn't she already accused herself of the same offenses?

Picking up an old broom handle, she hobbled to the house, using it as a crutch. With one foot on the steps, she stilled when she saw Ben marching around the corner of the house with a look on his face that told her he had more to say. With heart pounding, she waited, meeting his still angry gaze as calmly as possible. If she wasn't crazy, he was. One of them had to be. That was the only explanation for any of this.

"Since you say you didn't mean to bring me here, I'm establishing some ground rules."

Becky nodded. Sounded reasonable.

"First, I saved your life; you owe me."

She raised her eyebrows, but remained silent.

"Second, I'll get you to your sisters, but you better do exactly as I tell you. Understand?"

Becky frowned, but nodded. He was sounding a bit male chauvinistic.

“Third, I’m not some object for you to use sexually and just throw away.”

That’s it! Hands to her hips, Becky stood to face Ben, squarely. “I never thought you were. What happened earlier was a mistake. I shouldn’t have let it go that far, but it did. There’s no excuse. Let’s just pretend it never happened.” Fat chance!

She watched him pace back and forth in front of her.

“What’s your excuse for bringing me here?” he asked.

“Look, I’m sorry. That was a mistake, too. An accident. I was playing around with this book that my sister had pointed out to me. It was a fluke.” Still not sure she had actually done what he suggested, she knew she wasn’t going to tell him he was insane. Just in case he was and decided to lose it completely and kill her.

“How do we fix it?”

Becky shrugged. “I don’t have a clue. My sister might know, if we can get to her. But why would you want to go back to that place? From what you’ve said, it was horrible.” She watched the changing expressions cross his face, but the only one that stood out was fear.

“How did you create me?” he asked, grabbing her arms and pulling her close.

His fingers bit into her flesh, but she didn’t try to pull away, afraid he’d do something more painful. “I don’t know. I followed the instructions in the book.”

“What book? You keep saying there was a book. What was it called?” He released her.

Becky took a step back. Running a hand through her hair, she said, “I think it was called ... *Hels Grimoire*.”

“Jesus.” He stilled while his eyes widened and his tanned complexion paled. She half expected him to cross himself from the look of reverence mingled with fear that raced across his face.

“What? What’s so special about that book?” she asked, whispering.

“It is said to have been written by Satan, himself.”

*"Hmpff... You're just trying to scare me."*

"Depending on how you designed me, I will have either of two choices. One, I will learn and gain power with each successful accomplishment of my task. Or, two, I will perform my task, or tasks, and then self-destruct." His sarcastic tone clearly told her he wasn't kidding.

"Self-destruct. What exactly does that mean?"

Ben glanced down, then back up at her. The look he gave her was totally exasperated. "I'll be dead after fucking your brains out over a given set of times."

Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. She tried again. "Let me get this straight. If I had said, 'I create you for sex with me three days a week, three times a day, for a period of three weeks,' at the end of that three weeks you would die?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"That is the most idiotic thing I have ever heard." There. She'd said it. He was certifiable. "You're as human as I am. Having sex with me isn't going to kill you."

The look of uncertainty in his eyes only lasted a second. "I'm not willing to take that chance. If you created me by accident, then I am not bound to the contract. So, if I don't have sex with you, I can be a free entity within this dimension."

"Wait. What contract? I didn't sign anything."

"Did you create a symbol on a piece of parchment and seal it with blood?"

Becky frowned, thinking back to that night. "I created this little stick man with --" She glanced at Ben's groin and felt the heat rise in her cheeks. "-- a big penis, but I didn't sign it in blood."

She tried to ignore the flare of heat in his gaze at her mention of his anatomy.

"Did you seal, or bind, the sigil with any other bodily fluids?"

The heat increased. "L-Like what?"

“Orgasm, Rebecca. Did you masturbate and coat the sigil with the juices from your orgasm?”

She closed her eyes. “Yes.”

Bile rose in her throat, as the memories of that night rushed forward, shaming her with what she’d done. “I pretended it had never happened, even when I woke on the floor the next day and the black candle had burned to the ground. There was only a small piece of the parchment left melted into the wax.”

Ben shook his head. The anger burning hotter once again in his eyes. “Very good for your first try, Rebecca. I’d say you were a born natural at the art of magick.”

“No, that’s Starr --”

“Deny it all you want, babe, but you are the one who took a black magick ritual and made it ‘come to life’.” Ben held his arms spread out, then hit his chest with his hands twice. “Deal with it.”

“I’m going to hell.”

Ben stepped forward, but didn’t touch her. Lowering his head to the side of hers, he whispered, “Look around. I’d say you were already there.”

## Chapter Four

Becky flipped through the channels on the radio, but they were all the same. She did find where several groups had set up a medical emergency station in the old shopping center on the corner of Highway 90 and Highway 603. Water, food, and medicine were available to any and all who could make it there.

Glancing out the attic window at the pile of debris that she and Ben were going to have to wade through, she wondered how long it would actually take them to make their way to what would normally have taken her ten minutes to drive in her car.

The heat was oppressive, but at least up here there was a slight breeze coming in through the window. Every now and then she would see Ben walk by with another limb and even an old bicycle frame. Glancing around, she picked up a few things that she thought they could use on their trek to the old house -- a blanket, a pillow.

Her foot bumped a dusty box.

Pulling it over, she wiped some of the dirt off the top to expose a dark blue lid. She laughed. "Father's old tackle box."

Flipping the clasp, she stared at the contents. After several seconds of nostalgia, she closed the lid with a snap. "We can go fishing for our supper."



Glancing out of the window again, she couldn't see Ben, but then again, she didn't really want to ask him to do anything more for her than was necessary. The less she was dependent on him, the better off she would be, and apparently, he would be, too. There was chemistry between them, and if she believed what he was saying earlier, that would only lead to his demise. She couldn't accept that responsibility, even if she did want him. Besides ... they hadn't used protection. Could you get pregnant from having sex with a demon?

"Stop it!" She slammed her fist against the tackle box. "It's not true. He's a lunatic." But, lunatic or not, they both needed to eat.

Hobbling down the steps with her homemade crutch, she grasped the tackle box tightly in her left hand. There was a bayou behind the house where she could fish. "I'll show you, Ben Chaote. I can take care of myself."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lashing the two longest limbs at a cross angle, Ben took a moment to wipe the sweat from his forehead. His anger had evaporated within the first five minutes of physical labor. Whoever said work was good for the soul wasn't lying.

"And just how I know that, I don't have a frickin' clue." He shook his head. While he could remember what he was and something of where he came from, he couldn't explain knowing how to do the things he did for their survival. Rebecca's psyche had obviously programmed him with what she was going to need in the here and now.

"Smart girl." He grinned. She didn't have a clue of the psychic power she possessed, or what she was capable of doing. "I'll have to teach her."

That thought brought another wave of erotic images into his mind with her in the leading female role.

The pole slipped from his hand. A jagged cut about two inches long dripped blood onto the ground. "Shit!" He threw the remaining pole onto the earth.

“Hey. What are you doing?”

Ben spun around at the sound of the feminine voice. He blinked.

Rebecca stood there with the crutch under one arm and a pole and tackle box in the other hand. Not only that, but she was carrying fish! “I think that should be my question.” He nodded toward her catch. “You caught those?”

“I did. Do you think you could cook them for us?”

The smile she gave him punched him in the gut. Wide, open, and dazzling, it was the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. He frowned, not sure how, but knowing he had seen that smile before.

“But if you don't want to, since you're busy, I'll do it,” she said. Her own smile had faded fast with the words.

“Rebecca, wait. I wasn't frowning about the fish. You did an excellent job. I was ... just worried about your leg. You should have it propped up.” He walked over and took the fish and gear from her. Her gaze searched his face, but he didn't say anything else that would bring up where he'd come from.

After a few seconds, she nodded. “Okay.” She glanced at the pile of limbs and palm fronds he'd been weaving to make the lashings. “You didn't say what you're doing.”

Ben shrugged. “I'm trying to make a travois, but so far I'm only making a mess.” He walked past her toward the area that was shaded. “Come on. I'll cook these, then get back to work.”

She followed more slowly. The sound of her crutch dragging told him her hobbling was getting more difficult. He turned and watched her progress. She didn't complain, but he could tell she was in pain with each step she took. *Fuck!* He had to get the travois completed, so he could get her to a doctor. “I'm making a travois, so you and Hades can ride on it.”

“The thing that the Indians used to use to carry their supplies?”

“That’s it. I’m having trouble with the thrashing to tie it together. I’ll have to find something stronger.”

Rebecca lowered herself into the lawn chair they had found hanging on the wall of the garage. “There’s some rope in the attic.” She pointed to the space that she and the cat had been camping in since the storm. “If I’d known what you were trying to do, I would have given it to you.”

Ben’s jaw clenched. Figured. “Thanks. That should work wonderfully.”

She ducked her head, but not before he caught a glimpse of her smile.

His irritation evaporated. Here she was, with everything that comprised her entire life gone, eating fish she’d caught in the bayou, wearing the same clothes for several days, no water, practically no shelter, and a painful infection, but she didn’t complain.

She glanced up and their gazes caught for several seconds.

Reaching over, he tousled her sun-streaked hair, curving his fingers down the soft curve of her cheek, which showed signs of sunburn. “You’re a tough lady, Rebecca.”

She smiled that angelic smile. “I’m trying.”

He wanted to kiss her, but knew where that would lead. If he wanted to keep her alive and himself at the same time, they had to avoid any sexual involvement. He dropped his hand.

“I’ll get the fish ready.”

“If you’ll scale them and start the fire, I can grill them while you work on the travois.”

Again, she surprised him at her willingness to share as much as possible in the duties. He nodded, offering her a grin of appreciation. “You’ve got a deal.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Jesus, with a smile like that, he could have any woman he wanted in his bed. Becky closed her eyes and bit an invisible knuckle while chanting *no sex, no sex, no sex*.

She shivered and pulled her shirt closer around her. She didn't want to bother him with the news that she had a fever. He already had enough on his plate and was doing everything in his power to get her some help.

With the fish speared on sticks and cooking over the fire, she pulled some pieces of bark from her shirt pocket. Willow. She'd found a tree down by the bayou. Remembering Starr tell one of her customers once that in the old days people boiled willow bark and drank the liquid to help reduce fever, Becky had pulled several pieces from the tree.

Staring at it for a second, she shrugged. What the heck. It can't hurt. She placed the dried bark in the can with some water. Checking to see if Ben was out of sight, she positioned it at the edge of the fire, so it would boil. "I guess about ten minutes should be enough."

After bringing it to a boil, she covered it with the shingle they had used as a plate, hoping that this type of tea worked like others and needed steeping. Checking every few minutes, she finally decided it was ready when it had turned a brownish color, like lightly brewed commercial tea. She sniffed.

"Hmm ... sandalwood. Bet this tastes pretty good."

With a stick, she scooted the can away from the fire, so it would cool enough for her to drink. By the time she could hold the can without burning her fingers, she was shaking so hard her teeth chattered. The can rattled against her teeth, but she managed to take a gulp of the warm liquid.

"Ugh!" She spit the concoction onto the ground at her feet. "That tastes like crap." Holding a hand over her mouth, in case she vomited, she sniffed the tea. It might smell like her favorite incense, but the bitter flavor definitely had a "kick." "Get a grip, Becca. Just drink the stuff and you'll feel better."

She remembered a trick that she and her sisters used to do whenever their parents forced them to eat something they didn't particularly like. Holding her nose, she drank the

liquid as quickly as possible. When the last dregs were gone, she held her nose for a few seconds more, hoping the bitter taste would dissipate.

She released her nose. "Ugh!" No such luck. A shudder of revulsion shook her body, but she managed to keep the tea down. Another round of shaking attacked her, and she hugged herself tightly, trying to keep warm in the oppressive heat. "This shit better work."

Turning the fish one more time, she curled up on the bare ground and closed her eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Glad that he and Rebecca weren't fighting any longer, Ben hurried back to the travois, or -- he held up the limbs -- what he hoped would be a travois. Now that he had some rope, the process would be much smoother.

Taking the two ten-foot poles, he carved a groove in the top one to fit over the bottom limb. There was an overhang from the junction of about three feet. He'd use that for the harness that would fit over his shoulders. Although, looking at the rough texture of the bark, the thought of the poles tearing into his bare skin didn't fill him with pleasure. He'd have to rig some kind of padding over his shoulders for the poles to rest on.

Behind him, he could hear Rebecca working with their meal. Every now and then he heard the can rattle, like she was boiling something.

Hell, he hoped not. There wasn't much fresh water left. He'd have to scout around before they took off and see if he could find some more for their trek. Judging from the amount of destruction along the beach and the pile of debris stretching behind them where the storm surge had bulldozed everything in its path, they would be having a rough go of it hacking their way through the mess.

He returned his focus back to his task and looped one end of the rope around the junction of the long poles, weaving it around in a figure eight before circling the center three times and securing it with a knot.

Once it was secure, he moved to the bed. Taking two limbs, one about four feet and the other about six feet, he again carved out a groove on either end of both sticks where they would sit flush to the larger poles. Satisfied with the fit, he lashed them down with the rope. He held up the remaining rope. "There's plenty."

Making a loop with one end around one of the larger poles inside the area that constituted the bed he worked the rope back and forth, over and under the limbs, forming the bed section. When he reached the end he looped and tied it off as he'd done in the beginning.

He propped the travois against the remains of the garage and put his weight against the rope mesh. It held. "Good."

Rebecca and the demon cat would be able to ride as comfortably as possible. He had no doubt that each jarring movement would be excruciating for her leg.

Studying the remaining rope, he moved to the top of the travois. With each arm he measured his biceps and shoulder width. For the portion across his shoulders he decided to add a piece of a two-by-four he found in the sand for balance. With his plan laid out, Ben braided and sculpted the harness he would use to pull the travois.

Early Native Americans had used horses and dogs to pull their supplies on the flexible frames. Unfortunately, he and Rebecca didn't have the option of a horse or dog.

"We only have a cat." He knew he was strong, but he also knew that this journey wasn't going to be easy. If it were just flat roads and fields there would be no problem, but he didn't have any idea what they were going to have to climb over, under, or through to get to Rebecca's family's old house.

Satisfied with his handiwork, Ben wiped his forehead, noticing for the first time the lack of mosquitoes and gnats that would usually swarm this time of the year in tropical climates. It struck him that the storm had not only destroyed countless homes, but birds, insects, plants, and other small creatures who couldn't have had a way to escape the

turbulent waters and winds. He wouldn't miss the pesky blood-thirsty bugs, but he did regret that so much wildlife surely must have died.

That left the question of how many human lives had been lost. He shook his head. He couldn't think about that. The only human he was concerned about was Rebecca.

Stepping into the clearing, he could smell the fish cooking. Hmm ... He sniffed. They were burning. He rushed forward and grabbed the sticks from the fire. Glancing down he saw that Rebecca was curled into a fetal position, asleep. Her face was flushed, but in a feverish way.

Reaching a hand to her forehead, he could feel the heat radiating from her skin before he'd even touched her. "Goddamit!" He'd known this would happen the second he'd seen her wound. If he didn't get her some antibiotics soon, she'd develop gangrene and lose that leg, or worse. If they didn't get any relief, she'd die.

His jaw tightened. He bent and picked her up, bringing her close to his chest. Carrying her into the attic, he situated her on the sleeping bag and covered her with the blanket. Turning, he hesitated, stroking the hair from her forehead. "You can't die on me, Rebecca. That's not an option of your pact."

They would leave in the morning at first light.

\* \* \* \* \*

Becky didn't know why they had to leave at the crack of dawn, but Ben had insisted after checking her forehead for fever and changing her bandage with a scrap of material he'd "boiled" with hot water the night before.

Sitting on the travois, she watched the remains of the house she and her sisters had lived in for so many years fade away. So sad ...

The light gradually increased and she was able to make out the extent of the hurricane's destruction through the residential area of the town away from the beach. If

downtown had been a shock, this was ten times worst. The entire area was a pile of toothpicks, but those toothpicks were remnants of people's lives and memories.

A trombone arm rose from the earth, like a spindly skeletal arm. They passed a fishing boat sitting on top of someone's prized sports car, as if picked up and gently placed in that position like a child's toys.

A photo album lay open. The pages fluttered from one to the other in the wind. The hot sea breeze turned each page, slowly, with ghostly fingers.

Each scene, horrific and gut-wrenching on their own, combined to crush the strongest of spirits. The Gulf Coast was forever changed, never to be the same as she was once before.

Becky wanted to cry and release the pain of all these others. Tears wouldn't come. Her mind was numb at the magnitude of destruction around her. "Numbness is good. If you can't feel, it won't hurt as bad," she said, mumbling to herself.

She turned and watched the muscles in Ben's back and legs stretch and strain to pull the travois. Every few yards he would have to stop, clear debris from their path, and continue on. The concentration etched on his face was amazing to watch.

His eyes would focus on what had to be done. His lips would thin; his teeth would bare, but not once did he complain. He did what he had to do. The motion of his body was fluid and graceful -- a symphony for her eyes. Or a well-oiled machine. The notes of discord wormed their way into her mind, reminding her of what he was.

Every now and then he would stop and look at the sun.

"Why do you do that?" Becky asked the third time she noticed him looking up.

"I'm checking to see if we're heading in the right direction." He pointed to the ground. "There's so much mud and debris, it's hard to tell if we're even following a road."

Becky sighed. "It's amazing how much you take for granted until something like this comes along."

Ben leveled his gaze on her. "Has anything like this ever happened before?" he asked.



“Not during my life, and not ever in recorded history, from what the news on the radio says.” She patted the portable radio she’d packed in the blanket along with several other items from the attic and their can and shingle.

“Kind of a coincidence that it happened right after you worked your mojo, don’t you think?”

“Um” was all she said. She’d already thought of that.

He frowned, shading his eyes and glancing at the sky, then the debris in front of them. Their conversation apparently forgotten, he climbed over a felled pine tree and ducked beneath another. In a matter of seconds, he had disappeared.

Becky sat there, realizing she actually felt better. The willow bark had eased her fever and aches. She checked her pocket and found three more pieces of the bark.

Good. Maybe it would be enough to keep the fever under control for a day or two. She sighed as she surveyed the jungle of tangled debris. Judging by this mess, it could take them a week to get out of here.

Limbs crashed and snapped to her right. Her heart racing, she turned to see Ben step into the clearing. A long, bloody scratch decorated his left cheek. His expression looked grim. “Can’t go that way. There’s a bayou ahead of us that loops around, trapping us on what looks like a peninsula.”

Becky frowned, trying to picture the area in her mind to figure out exactly where they were. “We came up Ramoneda, but after all that twisting and turning, I’m not sure where we are. It sounds like the old Jefferies place.”

“And that tells me what exactly?” he asked, leaning against a tree and wiping his cheek with the back of his hand.

Becky heard the irritation, but ignored it. “Exactly what you said. We’re stuck. We’ll have to go back the way we came for a while, then turn east. If we keep going west, we’ll just hit more marsh and bayou.”

Ben sighed, grabbing their drinking can. "Here. I did find this." He opened a smaller bottle of water, poured the liquid into the cup, and handed it to her.

Becky hesitated. "Is it drinkable?" The outside of the plastic container was covered with dried mud -- hurricane mud full of sewage, seawater, and other unmentionable things.

He grinned. "Now, she distrusts me." He held the cup out to her again. "I wiped the top off and you're not drinking directly from the bottle. Besides the seal hasn't been broken."

Becky licked her lips, cringing at the dried, parched skin she encountered. She grabbed the cup with both hands. "I don't care. Water is water!"

His chuckle was soft and warm, like the water cascading down her throat.

"Hey, easy now. Just take a few small sips. Kitty over there needs some along with me, too."

Between a laugh and a sip, Becky sputtered, "What is this? Concern for Hades? I thought the two of you were blood enemies."

Ben removed the can from her fingers. A slight flush lay across his cheeks. "He's along for the ride, and if he dies, I don't want you accusing me of purposely dehydrating the beast."

Still laughing, she fell onto her side across the travois, holding her stomach. "Wait. Wait." She held up her hand. "A demon with a soft spot for a cat. That's too funny."

Struggling to sit up, she found herself pinned beneath Ben's weight. The travois groaned and creaked under the additional pressure. Staring into angry eyes, her laughter died in her throat.

His throat worked convulsively, and his teeth were gritted. "I'm not a demon."

Becky blinked. "W-What are you then?"

A look of confusion clouded his eyes. Releasing her, he sat on the side of the carrier. "I don't remember."

Easing closer to him, she touched his face. "I'm sorry for calling you a demon ... and for bringing you here."

The anger dissipated from his gaze. He angled his head and closed his eyes, nuzzling her hand with his cheek. Amazed at the change in him, she was reminded of Hades, demanding to be petted. Becky froze. Was that what Ben needed?

He had been created to please, but she seemed to remember the book saying a “servitor” would gain strength by performing and completing the tasks that he was created for.

*Oh my God.* That meant he thrived -- No fed! -- from what he was programmed to do.

*Why does that turn me on?* Becky studied him. She closed her eyes and smelled him. Everything told her he was all man.

Her fingers curled against his skin. He felt human enough. “Oh, Ben.”

Sighing, she cupped his face, turning him toward her. Leaning forward, she kissed him, wanting to ease the hunger and frustration he must feel at not being allowed to do what he’d been created to do.

She knew she felt it!

## Chapter Five

Her hands on his skin had been heaven, but when her mouth touched his in a hungry kiss, Ben froze, not sure what to do. Everything below his waist screamed for him to take what she offered, but his mind was slamming on the brakes. *If you do this, you're going to die.*

Grabbing her wrists, he pulled her hands away before pushing her back onto the seat.

"What the fuck?" he asked. The throbbing vein in his temple pounded like an angry drum. "I told you we couldn't do this."

"But I just remembered what the book said about how your ... you gain energy and strength from carrying out your program."

"I'm not a damned computer."

She shook her head and tried to twist free of his grasp. "I know that! You don't understand."

He held tighter. "You're damned right. I don't understand." He'd already decided Rebecca Chappel was dangerous to his well-being. Not only physically, but mentally. The need to protect her and take care of her was almost as strong as the need to fuck her, but he couldn't! Stronger than either of those *needs* within him was the need to survive at whatever

cost. If he had sex with Rebecca, sooner or later, his time could run out and he would no longer exist. "Make me understand."

She quit struggling. "I remember the book saying how a 'servitor' could gain power and become stronger with each task they completed. Some of them get so strong that they begin to maintain themselves."

"What you're telling me is that since you 'programmed' me for sex, then each time we have sex, I will get stronger."

"Yes!" She looked up at him with such excitement, he almost gave in to what she was suggesting.

He shook his head, knowing he couldn't do it. What he remembered of where he'd come from terrified him enough that he would do anything it took not to go back. Besides that there was the idea that he was nothing but a whore to her. Anger overrode desire.

Running a hand beneath her hair, he pulled her to him, kissing her lightly. Her sigh and closing eyes told him she liked what he did. Nuzzling her ear, he asked, "Can you tell me for certain that you didn't put an expiration clause on how many times you thought it would take you to get off completely that you wouldn't need my services?"

She jerked back from his hold, and he released her. Falling onto the travois, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "That was a nasty thing to say."

"I'm in a rather nasty mood." Ben threw the harness over his shoulders. Not caring if she was holding on, or not, he grabbed the poles and yanked the travois around. "We've got a long way to go. I'll expect you to behave yourself from now on."

What the hell had happened? Becky grabbed either side of the travois to keep from falling to the ground. She'd said she was sorry for casting the spell that brought him here, but that was no excuse for him to say she was treating him like a whore.

Fine. If he didn't want her, she'd keep her affections to herself. She crossed her arms over her chest, but quickly grabbed the sides again when Ben jerked the travois, roughly, over a log. Beside her, Hades hissed.

"It's okay, boy. He's just in a foul mood. Ignore him. I am." Glancing at Ben's back, she saw him turn his head slightly at her last remark. Good. I hope he heard me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Another hour and they were back on the beach and heading east. Several houses that remained standing, but suffered severe damage, came into view. Becky sat straighter, recognizing one house in particular. "Stop, Ben, stop!"

The travois halted with a jolt. "What's wrong?"

Struggling off the carrier, Becky grabbed her crutch. "I know the owner of this house. Look! There she is. Mrs. Comeaux. Mrs. Comeaux."

Her progress was slow and halting, but Becky managed to scramble over the dune to what remained of the once glorious lawn. In front of the shambles stood Isabel Comeaux, Bay St. Louis's most prominent citizen. Far from proud and powerful, Isabel looked shell-shocked. With a dazed expression, the woman turned toward Becky.

Becky gasped and reached a hand out to Isabel. "Mrs. Comeaux, are you okay?"

Isabel Comeaux blinked, and her gaze sharpened with recognition. "Rebecca? Is that you?" She looked from Becky to Ben and pointed. "Who is that?"

Becky didn't know why, but she could feel a blush spread over her cheeks. "Ben. Ben Chaote. He's helping me get to the old shopping center at the corner of Highway 90 and Highway 603. I hurt my leg --"

Isabel pushed Becky aside and walked over to Ben. Looking him up and down, she circled him, then stopped in directly front of him. "I know who you are."

Becky frowned. Isabel was acting strangely. “He’s my friend, Mrs. Comeaux. Do you need any help? Are you hurt?” Walking to her, Becky placed a hand on Isabel’s arm.

Isabel jerked away, glaring at Becky. “Don’t touch me, you filthy little whore.” Again, she turned her gaze to Ben, then back to Becky. “I’ve created enough of these creatures over the years that I would recognize one if I were blind.”

Suddenly, her face was a centimeter from Becky’s, and the older woman’s fingernails bit into Becky’s arm. “I knew one of you had the gift, but I always thought it was Starr.”

She released Becky, causing Becky to stumble.

Strong arms caught her when she would have fallen. Glancing up, Becky saw Ben, but he was watching Isabel with narrowed eyes. His face was pale, as it had been yesterday when she’d told him the name of the book she’d used to bring him here. She gasped.

“Y-You’re the one who gave Starr the book,” Becky said, looking at Isabel.

*Snort.* “Not likely. I had two copies of *Hels Grimoire*, purchased from a private collection in Europe. I came home one weekend to find one copy missing.” Her lips pulled away from her teeth in a sneer. “Your father, the mighty Reverend Harold Chappel, had taken one of my books for his personal *studies*.”

Becky stood, stepping close to Isabel. “You’re lying. My father was a fine preacher. He would never study witchcraft.”

“Witchcraft?” Isabel laughed. “My dear child, what is in the pages of those books isn’t merely *witchcraft*, it’s pure black magick. Your father was fascinated with it. He wanted power, wealth, sex ... He wanted it all. He surely didn’t practice what he preached.”

Isabel laughed. The sound was brittle and stabbing.

“Liar!” Becky’s hands fisted. “He was a good man.”

Isabel’s laughter stopped, but was replaced by a smirk. “Indeed. He was good.” She turned away from Becky and Ben, walking back to her house. She was almost at the door

when she turned back toward them. "I loved your father. I gave him everything he needed and wanted, including that book."

Her face hardened. "All I wanted was his love in return, but he kept that for his wife, your mother. Hmpf ... We all know what kind of tramp she turned out to be, especially you, my dear." Isabel smiled, graciously. "Y'all have a nice day, now. I have a lot of cleaning to do before Mark David gets home."

The door squeaked on broken hinges, as Isabel disappeared into the house.

"She's insane," Ben said.

Becky hugged herself tightly, trembling with anger at Isabel's accusations about her father and from emotions she'd tried so hard to keep buried. "She's something, all right. I'm not sure insane quite covers it."

"Who is Mark David?" Ben asked, watching the door as if he expected Isabel to come charging out with a butcher knife.

Becky bit her lip at the mention of Isabel's son. "Her son."

Ben nodded. He shifted his gaze to Becky. "Where is he?"

"It's a long story," she said, turning to go back to the travois. "We need to get going."

Ben caught her arm as she passed. "I've got all day. You can tell me about her son, and her relationship to you and your family."

Becky pulled her arm free. "I don't want to talk about it." She sat on the travois, but he stood there with his arms crossed over his chest, not moving. Finally, she sighed. "All right, already. Let's just get out of here. She gives me the creeps."

He nodded, picking up the harnessed end. As they moved forward, the swish of the pole tips through the sand and dried mud created a calming effect. Becky found herself telling Ben the story of the preacher's daughters.

\* \* \* \* \*



*My parents weren't rich, but they were happy. When my father received the opportunity to move all of us to a small town and take over as pastor at the local church, we were all excited. It was a dream come true.*

*I was about six when we moved here. Starr was four and Gina was just a baby, barely one. We had a small house in town, close to the church. We could walk there for any of the services or Sunday school.*

*Everything was great for the first couple of years, I think. When you're that young, you don't pay much attention to the worries of adults. I remember all of our problems starting when we moved into the "old" house outside of town.*

*We were further away from everyone and that meant my father had to be gone more often and for longer periods. My mother began crying a lot and withdrawing from all of us and her duties in the house. According to my father, that left me to pick up the slack.*

*Starr refused to do "girl stuff," and Gina was too little.*

*I learned how to cook and clean, and made sure my sisters were dressed for school and church. The fighting started that year. Whenever my father did return home, my mother would lay into him. I only remember her accusing him of "running around." Nothing else.*

*Out of all of us, I was the closest to him. I resented my mother's weakness and the fact that I had to perform her tasks as homemaker and mother, when what I really wanted to do was play and be like other girls my age. It was hardest when I reached high school and became interested in boys.*

*I wasn't outgoing, like Starr, or perky and cute, like Gina. Added to that, I always had to rush home to "take care" of the evening meal, or type my father's sermons for either Wednesday night or Sunday morning. He would pat my head and kiss my cheek, telling me, "I don't know how we'd survive if you weren't here, baby. You are a responsible, good girl, Becky. Don't ever change."*

*And, I didn't. I stayed the same year after year. When I was twenty, I met Adrian Tullos and fell in love at first sight, if that exists. He was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. His family had moved here from New Iberia, Louisiana, and he had that sexy Cajun accent and dark Cajun looks. He gave me chills whenever he looked at me.*

*Even though he was Catholic, he started showing up at our church on Sunday mornings. He would always sit directly behind me. I didn't hear a word of what Father said, but that didn't bother me. If he asked me what he'd said in the sermon, I always knew, because I had typed them.*

*Adrian and I met secretly behind the "old house." There's a storage shed that my mother would use whenever she had a strange urge to garden. It was the perfect rendezvous point -- dark and quiet.*

*I gave myself to him there one afternoon before anyone got home. He was so gentle. Everything was perfect. I knew I loved him. He said he loved me. That's when I decided to introduce him to the family, formally.*

*That night I invited Adrian to supper. For a change, my father was home on time. Both he and my mother acted like a happily married couple. Of course, in public, they always did. It was only in the privacy of our home that the truth was ever revealed.*

*Mother seemed especially happy to meet Adrian. They hit it off immediately. Father was much more reserved, but not unfriendly. He took Adrian into his study for a "man to man" talk after dinner. After that night, Adrian was a regular at our house, dropping by almost every day and staying through supper-time. He would help me do the dishes, then we would take a walk, which inevitably led us to the gardener's shed.*

*It's amazing I didn't get pregnant, as often as we had sex, but I didn't. Thank goodness.*

*After a month, Adrian asked my father if he could marry me. He and I had discussed eloping, but I told him I couldn't do that to my father, who would expect us to marry in the church in front of the entire congregation with him officiating.*

*Father agreed, but I remember Mother being exceptionally quiet that night, while the rest of us celebrated. Starr and Gina loved Adrian. We all did. He had such vitality, always full of energy, always laughing, and always knowing the right things to say in any situation. I guess I was too young to know that if something is perfect, it is usually too good to be true.*

*A month later Starr came home to find Adrian and Mother nude and dead in my mother's bed. There was a suicide note written by Adrian along the lines of, "I love you more than life itself. If you can't leave your husband to be with me, then we will both die together."*

*It was a huge scandal in our little community. Around that time Starr had started practicing witchcraft, so many of the townspeople blamed her for casting a spell that had gone wrong. Many blamed me for being such a "frigid bitch" toward Adrian that he had turned to my mother for consolation.*

*We favored each other, Mother and I. In fact, we could have passed as twins from a distance. The twist came, when out of the blue, my father confessed to killing them both. The entire town went crazy. How could their "beloved pastor" have done such a thing. Starr didn't have any trouble believing it, at first. She told Father she'd "meet him in hell" when he was still trying to save her soul for denouncing her faith. He died a few months later after going to prison.*

*Poor Gina didn't have a clue what was going on. She was still in high school and couldn't understand why all her friends she'd had one day refused to hang out with her the next. Although, after a few years and the gossip dying down a bit, Isabel Comeaux agreed to her son marrying one of the "fallen" angels, as they called us around town.*

*That fell through. Gina came to her senses the day of the wedding, which Starr and I weren't invited to, by the way, dumped Mark David, and ran off to New Orleans where she met her husband, Quin.*

*I guess that's why Isabel is so nasty right now. Mark David hired some heavy-duty thugs to get rid of Quin. Quin's sister, who is a Voudon priestess, came to the rescue with some Santerian priest. Now, Mark David has gone missing, as well as the Santerian guy. That's been almost a year now.*

*The poor woman has had a rough time with all that and now the storm. Although, accusing my father of all that she did won't make her world right. She shouldn't have done that.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Becky stopped speaking. Glancing around them she realized they were headed back north, and had made great headway due to others having cleared part of the way through the debris. For the first time, she realized that Ben had been quiet the entire time she'd been telling him about her family. "I didn't mean to talk so much."

His steps slowed. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, "No. I like to hear your voice."

Becky laughed. "Thank you."

"You shouldn't excuse Isabel Comeaux so easily."

The hair on the back of her neck stood up at his words. "What exactly did she mean back there when she said 'she knows you'?"

His gait stopped, and he turned to face her. "She owned two of those books, Rebecca. What do you think it means?"

The tingling grew stronger, spreading over her entire body. "She used them to perform black magick."

Ben's eyebrow rose. "And?"

Frowning at what she was thinking, she finally said, "She called you to be her servitor."

“Amongst other things.” He sounded so nonchalant about his relationship with Isabel, but a short time ago he’d been furious at the thought Becky had wanted to have sex with him.

“You know, I don’t understand you.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said.

She pushed herself off the travois. Hobbling to him, she stuck her finger in his face. “Quit acting all mysterious, like you’ve got all these secrets hidden away in your mind that we poor humans can’t begin to fathom.” She poked him. “You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for us.”

“Don’t I know it,” he said, grabbing her finger when she apparently poked one too many times. His fingers moved to her wrist and quickly wrapped around it, pulling her to him.

Flush with his chest, Becky could feel the flex of his muscles and smell the musky scent of a man who had been working hard. Her panties clung to her inner thighs from the rush of her juices. God, he made her ache.

“I’ve seen the things that woman is capable of. Don’t mess with her, Rebecca. You have a lot of natural talent, but Isabel has that, plus years of practice.”

“You remember everything?” she asked.

The muscle along his jaw tightened. “Almost. The woman is a fucking sadist. I don’t remember all the details yet, but I guarantee that if she really loved your father that much and he jilted her for your mother, then Isabel probably had something to do with the two murders and your father going to prison.”

“Starr has been saying for months that someone besides Adrian or Father killed our mother.”

“What does your other sister think?”

"Gina? I don't know. I don't think she has ever suspected Isabel. Not if she was willing to marry the woman's son at one point."

"Could that be why she backed out of the marriage?"

Becky shook her head, finding it difficult to keep her mind on the conversation while she was this close to him. "No. She caught him fooling around with her maid of honor."

Ben grinned. "That sounds like a good reason to dump the guy. If he's stupid enough to cheat on a beautiful woman who was willing to be his wife."

She glanced at him, sharply. "How do you know Gina is beautiful?"

"For one, you just told me so in your story, and two, if she's your sister, she has to be at least as beautiful as you." He caressed her hair, watching his fingers move over what she knew was a ratty mess.

Pushing against his hold, she laughed -- a nervous sound that told of her embarrassment at his compliment. "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

He leaned closer with his lips close to her ear. "And, you were jealous."

Her mouth opened, but closed without any response. Turning her head away, she said, "I was not."

"Admit it." Ben's arms tightened around her. "The thought that I might know your sister bothered you."

Angry that he could read her so well, she twisted free of his hold, but stumbled when a sharp pain shot through her leg. Throwing out her arms to break her fall, she shut her eyes for the impact.

It didn't come. Strong arms caught her, pulling her back from further injury. Turning her easily within his hold, Ben scooped her up and placed her on the travois.

Becky lay there, staring up at him. He was so close. His head lowered and his lips brushed her mouth. She turned her head, abruptly ending what could have been a mistake. The attraction was there between them, there was no doubt, but if everything he told her

was true, he'd been Isabel Comeaux's lover -- several times. Becky didn't know if she could handle that, especially since he had rejected her own advances earlier. "I ... can't."

Ben released a pent-up breath, bumping his forehead, lightly, against hers several times. "Rebecca, Rebecca ... what am I going to do with you?"

She kept her head turned away, so he wouldn't see the tears of frustration welling in her eyes. "Nothing. You said it yourself, we can't do this. We don't know what kind of limit, or if there is one, on the program."

"Right." He moved away. "I can tell you for a fact that Isabel always put a time limit on her 'creations.' That way there wasn't any possibility of anything gaining too much power and usurping her control."

He moved to the front of the travois. "We need to get going. I want to get further along before we make camp for tonight."

Becky reached a hand toward his back, wanting to pull him back to her and feel his skin next to hers. A shiver of anticipation at the remembered feel of his cock deep inside her raced down her spine. God, she wanted him.

Becky pulled her hand back. She couldn't.

Rubbing her hands up and down her arms, she didn't know if it was the fever or the cold-bloodedness of Isabel Comeaux that caused her discomfort. The knowledge that her father could have loved someone like Isabel left Becky empty and aching inside. The added torture that the man she'd created to please her had pleased Isabel, too, was just too much at the moment.

She laid her head on the seat. One of the tears she'd hidden from Ben escaped. "Oh, Momma, I'm so sorry for thinking bad of you all those years." To have lived with the pain and loneliness that her father's infidelity must have caused. Becky could almost understand why her mother had sought comfort from a man like Adrian. A man who was warm and affectionate and not cold and distant, like she admitted her father had been when he wasn't

pleased. Now, Becky wondered how much of her father's moodiness and bad temper had been Isabel's influence over him.



## Chapter Six

Becky woke with a start. Settling back onto the ground, she lay still listening to the quiet of the night. Nothing much in the way of animal or insect life stirred. It had all been washed away.

Overhead the stars shone brightly. She could make out Orion and his belt. A satellite, bright and swift, streaked across the sky without blinking. Its orbit was set. She wondered, absently, how many man-made objects floated around the earth.

Shifting her weight, she bit back a groan of pain. Her leg throbbed and she could feel the fever without touching the tender area.

Ben's face had been grim when he'd changed the bandage with newer cloth he'd picked up along with an old cooking pot. Boiling the dressings was going to be easier, if they could keep their water supply at a decent level.

She smiled. Anyone seeing them would think they were a pair of vagabonds with their travois littered with the odds and ends they had collected for daily survival.

His eyes had lit with admiration when she'd produced her willow bark and told him about the tea she'd made the day before. When he'd added "clever girl," she'd tucked the exhilaration his praise brought about deep inside and had managed a quiet "thank you." They

didn't need additional temptation between them. Besides, she'd felt too tired to even think about sex.

Right! With a man like that sleeping across from her every night.

Squinting at the sky, she guessed it was close to one or two in the morning, but she was wide awake. She frowned. Something must have wakened her, but what?

Not Ben. He laid on his side with his back to her on the other side of the campfire. They hadn't slept next to each other since that first night. She knew that was a conscious move on his part, but she didn't blame him.

A sigh escaped onto the night breeze. She shivered and curled tighter beneath the blanket. Even without fever, the nights became amazingly cool in the early morning hours before dawn.

If everything he and Isabel said about the *Hels Grimoire* was true, she couldn't doubt the fear and pain she witnessed in his eyes whenever he spoke of having to go back to the place where he'd come from.

It had to be a horrible existence, bound to a person who didn't care about you, except what you provided sexually. What other deeds had Isabel called him to perform?

A niggling at the back of her mind formed. What if --

*Snap!* Becky froze. Without moving her head, she glanced around the darkness. The fire had long since died and the stars in the moonless night offered little light to see through the thickness of trees, limbs, and other debris that surround their tiny camp.

Fighting the urge to call out to Ben, she felt around her on the ground, as quietly as possible, for something to use as a weapon. Her fingers groped something cool, smooth, and rounded, but flat on one side. A paperweight?

Not caring what it was, she gripped it tightly, as she lay perfectly still. Her heart pounded and her breath came faster, but she forced herself to stay calm.

*Snap. Crunch.* Whatever or whomever it was had moved closer.

Something brushed her arm. She opened her mouth to scream, but a firm hand smothered the attempt. A person's cheek, warm and stubbly, pressed against hers. "Shh, it's me. Be really quiet. We've got company," Ben whispered in her ear.

No shit! She could kill him for scaring her. Tightening her pelvis muscles, she realized she'd almost urinated on herself with his little scenario. Men, thinking a woman had to be warned to be quiet in a dangerous situation!

He removed his hand from her mouth, pressing one finger across her lips before he released her completely and moved away. If she wasn't so worried about what direction he'd taken, she would have bitten him for covering her mouth with that additional finger warning.

The intruders were close enough that Becky could hear the shuffle of their shoes, and thought she heard breathing. *Hurry up, Ben. They're right on top of me!* Of course, she didn't have a clue what he'd planned, because he hadn't bothered telling her.

Nervous perspiration coated her forehead, arms, and legs. She bit her lip on a gasp when she saw a metal object glint in the pale starlight. Where the hell was Ben?

The man was upon her. A hand grabbed her by the ankle, pulling her from beneath the blanket. She screamed, as a searing pain raced through her leg and body. Kicking out with her other foot, she made contact with her attacker's chest.

He grunted, but didn't let go.

Becky sat up, hitting the guy with her fists. "Let go of me, you bastard."

Out of the darkness another pair of hands grabbed at her arms, pushing her backward and pinning her to the ground. Sticks and stones dug into her flesh, but she continued to fight even when they shoved a nasty tasting rag into her mouth.

"Shut that bitch up. The guy is around here somewhere."

Her ankles were roughly tied together. The man pinning her upper body lifted off her, pulling her up with him. "Well, well, look what we got." He smoothed a hand over her hair.

"No!" Becky screamed through the rag and twisted her head away, but her protest came out muffled.

Both men laughed.

"She don't like you much," said the man who had tied her feet.

"Not right now, she don't, but after a little lovin' she'll come around." The second man pulled her closer.

Becky managed to extricate one hand. She swung. The attempt went wide through empty space. She stumbled forward and one of the men caught her by the waist.

"Whoa, now, girly. You're gonna fall and hurt yourself." Both busted out laughing.

*Okay, Ben. Any second now would be great!* Becky twisted and clawed, but in the end she knew she was beat. The two thugs were bigger, faster, and stronger.

Taking her to the ground, one of them grabbed her hair, pulling her head back hard. "I've got something for you, you little wildcat." He raised his fist.

In the second he brought it down toward her face, Becky heard a growl followed by an animal scream. Both men jumped, turning toward whatever it was coming at them from the dark. Becky didn't care, as long as they were off of her. Scooting with her feet and pulling with her hands, she moved away from her captors, as fast as she could.

Human screams, hideous and pitiful, resounded around her. Becky got on her knees and crawled, caterpillar style, to the other side of the camp. When the thing got through with them, she didn't want it to find her if it was still hungry.

The screams turned to groans, which turned to a gurgling sound.

She didn't want to look, but couldn't help being drawn to the carnage behind her. Lifting her gaze, she saw a darkened form with glowing red eyes hovering over the bodies of both men. The sound of bones crunching and an animal feeding echoed in the small clearing. The space grew smaller with each bite the animal took. Her gaze met the red gaze; the beast growled.

Becky covered her ears and shut her eyes, frightened to move. Didn't wild cats go for you if you ran or threatened them? Nausea rose in her throat, but she fought it down. Pulling her legs up, she rocked back and forth. "Ben, Ben, where are you?" she whispered.

Had he been the beast's first victim?

The throbbing in her head was as bad as that of her leg. Sneaking her tongue over her roughened lips, she realized how thirsty she was, but there was no way she could reach the supplies without going around the animal.

Taking a piece of the willow bark from her pocket with slow, easy movements, she slipped it inside her mouth. Maybe if she sucked on it, she could produce some moisture and help ease the fever her headache told her had returned. After a few minutes, her head dropped forward onto her knees.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn's rays peeked through the dead forest. Becky jerked awake, disoriented and blinking in the early gray light. Had she fallen asleep?

The grotesque sounds had stopped. Nothing moved around her. A light breeze lifted several strands of hair from her forehead. The fever was still present, but her head throbbed less. "Ben?" she called, moving her limbs and body, slowly -- not only from pain, but from fear. Fear that whatever creature had killed those men was out there waiting for her to move so it could play chase.

She had no desire to be batted around like a toy mouse before she was eaten alive. Crawling under one felled tree, she stopped at the sight of a man sitting on the ground in front of what remained of her attackers.

"Ben!" Stepping forward, a metallic, sweetish odor assailed her nostrils, forcing her to quickly cover her mouth and nose. Holding onto limbs and trunks for support, she made her way to him. He sat still as stone, staring at the carnage. Blood covered his chest and hands.

"Ben, are you hurt?" Becky placed a hand on his shoulder.

He turned toward her; Becky gasped, stumbling backwards. Dried blood coated either side of his mouth where it had run down his chin.

"Oh ... my God." She shook her head. "No, no ..."

"This is what I kept trying to block out," he said.

Becky could see his pain in his eyes, but she couldn't ... she couldn't wrap her mind around how he could have ... "You ate them!"

Ben stood, taking a step toward her. "Rebecca, let me --"

"Stay back!" She waved her hands at him. "Just don't come any closer."

"I won't hurt you. You created me."

"I did *not*! I don't believe in magick. You're some kind of cannibalistic serial killer."

"What I am is a being from another dimension. Through the use of black magick you took me from that dimension and brought me over into yours."

"No!" Her body was shaking from fever and reaction to all she'd witnessed in the last few days. Her teeth chattered and she fluctuated between hot and cold. When he tried to come to her she turned to run, but her leg gave out. She fell.

The ground rose and fell, swimming and swirling in her vision. She lay on her back panting and staring up at the peaceful blue of the sky. Such a deceitful color!

Ben's face appeared above her with a concerned expression, but all she could focus on was the blood on his face and hands. Black worked through her peripheral vision and her last words she remembered before it took over was, "Are you going to eat me, too?"

Her words had cut through him like a razor-sharp knife. He couldn't get them out of his mind. The words, the fear on her face ... How could she think he'd hurt her?

There was only one place Ben knew to get help, fast. Isabel Comeaux. His jaw tightened. She was the last person he wanted to go to, but he didn't have a choice. His glance slid to Rebecca. After she'd collapsed, her fever had sky-rocketed.

She lay curled in a fetal position on the travois, shaking and delirious, going on and on about monsters and magick.

Monsters and magick. Those two words summed up his entire existence. If he hadn't been in this world for one of the "Masters of the Book" fucking, killing, or stealing, he was locked away in his watery prison cell, waiting in the depths of darkness for a new Master to call him. And, she had -- a beautiful, gentle creature whose loneliness had reached out to him at the bottom of the sea through the art of Chaos and a tiny sigil drawing. All she had wanted from him was love, affection and protection.

Ben yanked the travois over a rocky patch of ground and kept walking as fast as he could. He didn't think he was capable of the first two of her requests, but he could protect her just as he'd protected her last night. But that had cost him her trust and desire, and in exchange he'd gained his freedom. For how long, he didn't know.

Isabel Comeaux was a cold-hearted, mean-minded bitch. Whatever she demanded in payment for Rebecca's health and safety, he would have a high price to pay. That was one thing of his past that was crystal clear.

Reaching Isabel's house, he drug the travois up the sloped yard littered with furniture, sheetrock, carpet and other articles from the once fine home prided for its antiques and priceless articles. Today, the house looked old and battle-worn with its contents belched from its belly onto the lawn, like dirty laundry, for the world to see.

"Isabel!" Ben kicked the front door open and carried Rebecca through into the bare-to-the-bones structure. Somewhere in the house people were talking, a radio played, and the odor of food reached his nose. His stomach growled in response, but he ignored the weakness of his human form.

"Isabel, where are you? I know you're here."

"I'm here, but why are you? And with that little bitch?"

"You know why. You sent your thugs to kill us, or at least Rebecca, but you must have forgotten my capabilities."

She laughed. "No, I didn't forget, my pet. In fact, I was counting on them. I could see Rebecca was ill yesterday. I was hoping Lonnie and Jet would get to her before you got to them. If not kill her, at least delay you with more injuries so that she would have died sooner or later." She patted Ben's cheek.

He jerked his head away; Isabel shrugged.

"They were loose ends that needed to be tied up."

Ben's fury intensified with each word the woman spoke. "Goddamn you. I'm not yours this time, but you still found a way to get me to do what you wanted."

"Whatever are you saying, dear boy?" she asked with a smile that would make Lucifer cringe. "You have always been the cold-blooded, calculated killer."

Angling her head, Isabel studied Rebecca. "She's very ill, poor child." She reached, as if to stroke Rebecca's hair.

Ben pivoted, pulling Rebecca out of Isabel's tainted reach. "Don't touch her."

"But that's why you brought her isn't it? So, I can heal her with my magick?"

"Yes, but if you harm a hair on her head --"

Isabel stepped closer with bright eyes and flared nostrils. "Or you'll what? Beat me? Is that what you'd like to do to her?"

Ben closed his eyes and swallowed hard against the waves of temptation and lust that assailed him at the reminder of deep, dark passions that had been restrained for years.

"Does she know what you can do to a woman?" Isabel asked in the seductive voice she used to bewitch man and demon.



Ben opened his eyes, so he wouldn't be conned into a situation that would put Rebecca at further risk. She was depending on him to protect her. "She knows I'm not human, and she watched me kill your men last night."

"Ah, but does she know you killed her mother and her mother's lover -- her own fiancé?"

Ben shook his head, staring down at Rebecca. She was so beautiful, just like her mother -- so innocent. He hadn't remembered the totality of his last incarnation until last night when he'd killed Isabel's men. He hadn't wanted to see the hate and accusation in Rebecca's eyes at the knowledge of what he'd done to her and the ones she'd loved.

Glancing at Isabel, he caught an expression of surprise and wonder on her face.

"Why?" She shook her head. "You never cared about me as a woman all those times you fucked me, then begged to go back to that hell you came from."

"The hell I knew was better than the hell you offered."

Isabel's wonder turned to rage. She pointed at Rebecca. "Do you love her?"

A muscle in his jaw tightened. "No."

"That's it! Oh, my god. This is rich. The spawn of hell in love with a preacher's daughter." Isabel threw her head back and laughed. "And the most prudish one of the brood."

"She's not a mare."

"Her mother was, spitting out kids left and right. Harold told me she had wanted more, but he had a vasectomy and didn't tell her. Those three and their mother nearly broke his spirit."

"I think you did that, Isabel."

She came to him, rubbing her hand over his chest still covered with the blood of her men. "No, darling, you did. Don't you remember?"

He couldn't answer, because unfortunately, he did remember. Every fucking detail in living color. The nightmares his last assignment had caused him. The guilt that had eaten at him every second he spent in this dimension at deceiving every member of that family, all because this woman had a personal vendetta against the Reverend Harold Chappel.

"I'll save your whore on one condition."

"What?" he asked, knowing what she wanted before she voiced the words.

"You come back to me," she said, walking around him, trailing her fingers over his arms and shoulders. "It's been a long time since I've been fucked well."

A nasty, bitter taste rose in his throat, but Ben forced it down. "What else do you need me to do for you?"

"Why, that hurts me that you would think me capable of such horrific crimes."

"I don't think, Isabel. I know. What *exactly* do I have to do in order to save and protect Rebecca?"

Isabel smiled. "Oh, nothing much. Just fuck me and die."

## Chapter Seven

*Flashes of Isabel standing over her with some kind of smoking silver bowl kept tormenting Becky's dreams. She didn't know where she was, but the monster had returned and if she didn't get away, he would consume her, too. "No, no ... Have to run."*

*She tried, but couldn't. Her leg throbbed as if it were on fire. Looking down she saw a long wiry, black hair protruding from the wound. Curious as to what it was, she pulled it.*

*Pulling the hair, it kept coming along with blood and flesh, but there was no pain. After about five inches had been removed she met resistance. Becky tugged harder. A lizard-like creature emerged, squealing loudly enough that she let go of the thread of hair and covered her ears.*

"Are you sure this will work?" Ben asked, watching Isabel trace Becky's body with the incense smoke. He covered his nose at the stench. Whatever she was using smelled like death and decay, not life and health.

Isabel shot him a glance that would have sliced through any normal man. "I think I know what I'm doing after all these years. Now, silence. I have to concentrate to pull the infection from her system. It's spread quite nicely since yesterday."

Her eyes lit with glee as she smiled. Then, the smile faltered and she gave a regretful sigh. "Pity. That would have been one less Chappel I would have had to deal with."

Isabel placed the incense to the side.

Ben stepped out of her way, but continued to watch the woman's every move. Even though she'd agreed to save Rebecca, he didn't trust her.

She opened a jar of yellowish salve.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Shh ...!" Isabel glared at him before closing her eyes. "Come forth out of this one's body. It is not her time."

A handful of salve was removed and smeared over Rebecca's wound. Rebecca moaned; Ben stepped forward ready to pull her out of Isabel's grasp.

Isabel held up her hand without looking at him. "Come forth. She is not ready to descend into the murky depths of your abode. Give back the life that you have taken."

Again, Rebecca groaned, twisting her head side to side. "No, no ... Have to run."

Run where? Ben frowned, trying to understand what was happening to the woman he loved.

The room shifted; Isabel stood still as a statue. The only sound Ben heard was his own breathing and the pounding of his heart. He glanced down at Rebecca's pale face covered with sweat from her fever.

"I love her." He stared at her for several more seconds. Finally, he stepped forward and touched Rebecca's face. "I love you." Bending down, he kissed her mouth. The cool temperature of her lips told him she was dying.

He closed his eyes and his hand fisted into her hair. With a rush of air, everything came back into motion around him. Ben blinked.

He was standing in the exact spot he'd been before everything stood still. Isabel turned, studying him with narrowed eyes. "Would you die for her?"

“Yes.” Ben stepped forward. “I’d die a million times if Rebecca could live.”

*Snort.* “How romantic. And how stupid. Be careful what you say, dear, it may come true.”

“Good. I wish you’d drop dead right this second.”

Isabel laughed. “Oh, it won’t be that easy to get rid of me.” Turning back to Rebecca, Isabel bandaged Rebecca’s leg. When that was done, she clapped her hands together twice.

Two men, identical twins to the men last night, came into the room. Ben wasn’t surprised. How many replications of him had there been over the years? Servitors could be produced over and over and over. It was their shell here in this dimension that could be destroyed, but not the original form that lay hidden beyond the boundaries that mere humans couldn’t imagine. That form existed forever.

“Take Miss Chappel to the ‘old house.’ Her sister will be there.”

The two moved forward, lifting Rebecca off the wooden table still stained with the mud from the storm.

“Wait --” Ben moved to stop them, but Isabel stepped in front of him.

“We had an agreement. I have done all I can for her. It’s up to her if she wants to live now. My boys won’t harm her. She’ll be perfectly safe.”

Ben hesitated, knowing he couldn’t go with Rebecca. He’d made his bed, so to speak, and now he was going to have to lay in it. With Isabel.

The men left, carrying Rebecca.

Ben gritted his teeth against the scream of protest forming deep within him. He belonged to Rebecca, but in order to save her he had to allow Isabel to dominate him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Becky! Becky, wake up. How’d you get here?”

Becky thought she heard Starr's voice, but knew that was impossible. Ben and she hadn't come far enough. They had only been about a mile from the beach when that monster --

"Ben!" She struggled up and awake, shielding her eyes from the glare of the afternoon sun. Glancing around, she saw that she wasn't in the clearing any longer. She was home.

"Starr? Is that you?" Becky asked, clutching at her sister's arms.

"Yes. We just got back from finding some gas so we could get to the beach house and you were lying here. How did you get here? What's wrong with your leg?"

Becky held up a hand. "Wait. First, where's Ben?"

A tall man with sandy-brown hair stepped forward with a worried expression on his face. He placed a comforting hand on Becky's shoulder. "Who is Ben?"

"Mason!" Becky quickly hugged the town's preacher, who was also her boss and friend.

"Who are you talking about, Becky?" he asked again.

"The ser ... person, who saved me. He's been taking care of me and trying to get me to the medical camp the last few days." She searched the grounds with a quick glance, taking note of the fallen trees in the yard and on the house. Part of the house looked burned, but there was no sign of Ben. She frowned.

"Where is he?" Becky stood, remembering her reaction to him when she'd realized he'd killed those men. She wanted to apologize. He'd been protecting her in a situation that was life or death -- hers or theirs. "I need to tell him I'm sorry for not understanding." She clutched Mason's forearms. "I have to tell him 'thank you' for saving me, and --"

Mason took hold of her shoulders, squeezing tight. "There's no one else with you. You were alone when we found you."

"No, that can't be right. Ben wouldn't leave me like that. He couldn't." Could he? Becky let her mind drift over their conversations regarding servitors. From what they'd discussed, he was her servant and had to do as she instructed.

The determination he'd asserted about gaining his independence and freedom from possible death came to her. Her shoulders sagged; her head dropped.

He'd made sure she was somewhere safe, then he'd left to pursue that freedom.

"Becky, are you okay?" Starr asked.

Becky nodded, clearing her throat of the red-hot sting of tears that gathered. "Yeah."

"What happened to your leg? The medics at the crossroads treated you?" Mason asked, pointing to the fresh bandage on her thigh.

"No, Ben --" She stopped and stared at the clean, white bandage that covered her wound. The bandage was fresh; her fever was gone; she felt great except for hunger.

An image of Isabel Comeaux appeared in her mind. The older woman was speaking some words that Becky couldn't understand and waving incense smoke over Becky. Then, the truth dawned on Becky. "Oh, my God! We've got to go."

"What?" Starr and Mason said in unison.

Starr grabbed Becky's arm. "You're not well, Beck. Calm down. It's okay."

Becky jerked free. Limping as fast as she could toward Mason's car, she yelled over her shoulder, "No, it's not okay. Isabel is going to kill Ben. We've got to hurry and stop her."

Mason and Starr looked at each other for a second before rushing to the car. Mason climbed behind the wheel and Starr sat in the passenger's seat.

Becky sighed, leaning against the back seat, as Mason cranked the car.

He glanced over the back seat, as he reversed the car in the drive. "Where exactly are we going?"

"Isabel Comeaux's house." Becky hugged herself, rocking back and forth and chewing on her thumbnail. Jesus they needed to hurry! "Come on, Mason, we have to get there quickly."

Mason accelerated, but it was Starr's voice that carried over the seat. "Tell us who this Ben person is and why Isabel, bitch that she is, would want to murder him."

"Long story short: I used your book, *Hels Grimoire*, and created a servitor -- Ben. He saved me from this thug the day I met him and couldn't tell me who he was or where he'd come from. He bandaged my leg and fed me." No way could Becky tell Starr with Mason present that she and Ben had also had sex. "I didn't know you dabbled in Black Magick, Sis." Becky looked at Starr pointedly.

"I don't use the *heavy* stuff. I've only ever used the potions and herbal mixtures that it offers. I didn't mean for you to go straight for the hardcore magickal rites, for Pete's sake. I never thought for a second you'd try anything like that." Starr gave an apologetic shrug. "Sorry."

"What's a servitor?" Mason asked, glancing at Starr with a deep frown.

"Shh, I'll explain it later." Starr patted Mason's shoulder. "Continue your story, please."

Becky smiled at the way Starr handled Mason and redirected the conversation. She could see that the two were in love with their secret smiles and special glances.

Looking out the window, Becky's glance took in the mass of cars turned upside down along and across the roads where power lines lay stretched and twisted. Debris littered the tops of trees, marking the waterline of the hurricane's storm surge even this far north. The afternoon sun was going down on the horizon, casting a gold and red haze on the western sky.

All Becky realized as they headed toward the beach was that she missed Ben. Sure he was cranky and defensive most of the time when they spoke, but that was because he had been so abused by Isabel in the past. If he hadn't had a spell on him to be tied to a Master, would he still be attracted to Becky?

"Becky!"

"Huh?" Becky asked, startled out of her thought.



Starr leaned over the front seat, shaking her. "Finish telling us about Ben and Isabel."

Becky took a deep breath and completed the story, as they pulled into town.

Vehicles were lined down the highway waiting to get into the gas stations. Armed National Guardsmen were checking identification cards and turning people away at blockades from entrance into the areas south of the highway and closest to the beach.

Mason's jaw tightened. "We'll have to figure out a different way to get down to the beach. These guys mean business. Those M16s they're carrying aren't just for show. They're loaded and ready to fire."

"Becky, I don't see how we're going to get to Isabel's."

Becky gripped her sister's hand. "We have to! Ben's going to die."

Starr stared her straight in the eye. "He's not human. Sooner or later, he was going to die anyway."

"No! He wanted to stay alive, to stay here and not go back to that hell he came from. Please, we have to get to him. He needs our help."

"You love him even after he murdered those men?"

Becky took a deep breath. It was time for the truth. "Yes, I love him."

"Good enough for me. Take the second right up here past that gas station, Mason."

Mason's frown deepened. "I'm not sure I like this, Starr. We're risking our lives for something from Hell, who your sister admits murdered two men."

"Who were trying to murder me," Becky said, sitting up and placing her arms along the back of the seat. "Please, Mason."

Mason sighed. "All right. Tell me where to go."

"Thank you, Mason," Becky said, hugging him.

He shook his head. "This week has already surpassed surreal. I don't think it can get any worse."

Becky and Starr looked at each other. Their smiles faded. They both knew that Mason didn't have a clue just how much wilder and surreal things were really about to get.

\* \* \* \* \*

They had to park a few blocks from the beach. Too much debris on that end prevented Mason driving further. He turned to Starr. "How did you know about that driveway behind the boat shop?"

"Uh ... well ... a lot of us used to go there and hang out after school on Friday nights."

Mason laughed and kissed her. "You mean parking?"

"I admit it. You caught me." Starr laughed, quietly.

"Yes, I did," Mason said.

"For Pete's sake, quit the smooching and let's get to Isabel's before she cuts Ben's heart out." Becky climbed out of the vehicle.

"Right." Grabbing the two flashlights from the glove box, Mason handed one to Becky. Taking Starr's hand he said, "If we hear anyone coming, lights off and take cover. I heard one of those guardsmen tell someone that they had orders to shoot any trespassers."

"Then how did Isabel get to come back here so quickly and start her cleanup?" Starr asked.

"She's Isabel Comeaux, that's how," Becky said. "And with that book of hers, it looks like she's done, and can still do, anything she wants."

"Yeah, well ... let's do this, shall we?" Starr asked.

Becky and Mason nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

What was normally a five minute walk took twenty minutes with all the obstacles and the need for stealth, but they finally made it. To Becky it had seemed like an eternity.

Dim lights shone from an upstairs window in the back. The rest of the house remained dark.

“Looks like they’re up there.” Starr pointed.

“In the bedroom.” Becky prayed she didn’t find them wrapped in some lovers’ embrace. Doubts surfaced. Maybe Ben had decided to go back to Isabel. With her, he could have any number of sexual encounters without the risk of dying.

Wrapping her arms around herself, Becky tried not to think about that possibility.

Mason motioned toward the front of the house. “We’re going to go around front. You come in from the back. That way, we’ll have the element of surprise if anyone is downstairs.”

“And what are any of us supposed to do if we encounter one of Isabel’s people?” Starr asked.

“Keep out of sight if possible, but if you get into an altercation, scream and the others will come help,” Mason said.

Everyone nodded.

Creeping through the back door, Becky shone the flashlight over the kitchen. Everything had been stripped down. Nothing remained but the bare studs and concrete floor.

Above them there came a hard *thud* and a groan, like someone was being beaten. Becky hurried up the stairs, stopping at the top to listen for anything that would tell her which way to go.

Another groan sounded from down the hall on the right. Becky glanced over the balcony. There was no sign of Starr and Mason, but no sign of anyone else either. She decided not to wait. If that was Ben groaning, he could be seriously injured. Becky crept forward until she stood outside the bedroom door.

There was a crack about two inches wide that she could peek through into the room. Squinting in the dim light cast by several rows of candles, Becky could make out Isabel in a long robe standing with some kind of knife in her hand.

Becky pushed the door further open to see Ben spread naked upon a table with his eyes staring fixedly at the ceiling. Isabel sat atop him, gyrating her hips and raking her fingernails down Ben's chest.

Becky clutched her shirt as a pain tore through her heart. He looked dead.

Ben blinked; Becky gave a sigh of relief, but fought not to run to him and pull Isabel off him. She forced herself to be as still as possible.

Not wanting to startle Isabel in case she hurt Ben, Becky moved slowly into a darkened corner of the room. Her gaze traveled over the planes of Ben's physique, knowing why Isabel wanted him. He was perfect.

Isabel's robe fell open, revealing a long, slender leg, as she fucked Ben. Her words were slurred, but discernible. "Go back from whence you came and come again to me new."

Becky watched Isabel ride Ben -- slowly at first, then faster as the older woman's climax rose to a peak. Ben never moved, but continued to stare at the ceiling. When Isabel lifted the athame above Ben's chest, Becky tensed.

"Your blood and the juice of my orgasm unite to form within you as my new servitor, more magical and stronger, but in the likeness of my son, Mark David." She held up a photograph. "Your power will be my power and we will be greater than before."

"Not so fast, Izzie." Becky stepped out of the shadows. She'd had about as much as she could stand of this bitch.

Isabel jerked her head in Becky's direction. "You! I should have had you killed instead of making that ridiculous agreement, like I did."

Ben still didn't move.

"What have you done to him?" Becky asked, wondering what Ben had agreed to in order to keep her safe. Oh, Ben, you crazy man.

Isabel smiled, swinging one leg over Ben's body, as she lowered herself off the table. She patted his cheek. "I gave him a little concoction to make him more susceptible to my suggestion."

"Get away from him," Becky said.

Isabel examined her athame. "What if I say 'no'? What will you do?" She lunged at Becky.

Becky jumped back with her heart hammering. Sweat plastered her shirt to her back and ran between her breasts. She didn't have any type of weapon, except her flashlight. "I'll just have to make you."

Brave words. Becky just hoped she could back them up. She didn't have a clue how to fight, but by the way Isabel was wielding that knife, the older woman had some experience.

"Stupid girl. He's not real. You can make another one just like him. Why risk your life for a slave?"

Becky stood straighter. "He's *my* slave. He'll die when I'm ready for him to." Which will be never, she thought. She wanted him to live forever, exploring and learning what life was really about and not tied to anyone, even herself, as some sex slave.

Isabel threw her head back and laughed. "It's so disgusting, it's funny."

Becky's gaze narrowed. "What is?"

"You. Him. In love. It makes me want to vomit."

Ben was in love with her? Becky glanced at him, wishing he would snap out of it.

Isabel stepped to her left; Becky moved to the right, keeping Isabel as far away as possible. The only problem was the woman was still too close to Ben.

"I don't have time for this, Rebecca. I have a son to resurrect."

"Mark David is dead?" Becky asked.

"You know he is, you little bitch. Thanks to that whore of a sister of yours, Gina. She and her Voudon lover."

"Husband. They're married, and the last time they saw Mark David, he was alive."

"Gina belonged to Mark David. Just as I belonged to your father."

"My father was married to my mother. You were the whore, Isabel."

Isabel screamed and swung the athame.

Becky jumped back on her toes. The knife missed her by centimeters. She quickly twirled away to her left, out of reach of Isabel.

Isabel's eyes were wide and wild. Her long, usually coifed hair, flew around her head in abandon, like a hag. "Did your lover tell you he was the one who murdered your precious mother and lover?"

It felt as if someone had punched her in the gut. Becky placed her hand over her stomach. "No." But the thought had crossed her mind the day before. "That's a lie."

"Oh, no. You see, servitors can take on any form they want, animal, human. It only takes a bit of blood for them to change."

The beast!

"Didn't you ever wonder why you never got to meet Adrian's family? Or why you never saw his home?"

"No!" There was no way Ben had been Adrian. She would have known. She stared at Ben. Wouldn't she? Becky shook her head, not wanting to believe that it had all been an elaborate hoax by Isabel to extract revenge.

"Why?" Becky asked. "What did I ever do to you?"

Isabel's lip lifted in a sneer. "You looked like her. You took over her household duties when she couldn't handle being a preacher's wife any longer. You performed them so well, your father didn't need me but for one thing."

“Sex.”

“Yes!” Isabel hissed the word. “He said he couldn’t leave her, that he still loved her. He didn’t love anyone but himself. Reverend Chappel had everything he wanted when he got his hands on *Hels Grimoire*. He dumped me and continued fucking everything in a skirt.”

Becky wanted to yell it was a lie, but with every word Isabel said, bits and pieces of the past revealed the truth. Ben wasn’t the only one who had lost his memory. It was just more convenient for Becky to replace bad memories with false ones.

“So you see, Rebecca. You need to be begging me to kill the thing you love. He killed your parents. He ruined your life all those years ago.” Isabel had slowly worked her way up to the table while she’d been talking. She raised the athame, again, and brought it down.

“No!” Becky rushed forward, grabbing at Isabel’s wrists and hands. The force of the collision drove both women backwards and into the hallway.

Becky cried out as her ribcage hit the balcony railing.

Down below, Starr screamed. “Becky!”

Isabel’s face was so close that Becky could see the lines of age and hatred etched into her skin. The woman’s blackness seeped through her skin and was almost tangible in the air around her. Becky gagged, but held on.

Isabel twisted and turned, trying to break the knife free. With one ferocious shove, she pushed Becky off of her.

Becky hit the wall with a hard *thud*.

Isabel gripped the athame tighter, shifting her weight as if ready to charge.

Without waiting for Isabel to attack, Becky lunged from the wall and hit Isabel full force with her body weight.

Isabel stumbled backwards with a cry, hitting the railing. The rail creaked and groaned, then fell away, toppling Isabel, screaming, to the foyer floor below.

"Becky, are you all right?" Starr asked, running up the stairs. When she reached Becky she pulled her into a tight embrace. "She's dead. She's dead, and it's finally over."

"We can't prove anything. No one will believe us!"

"But we know and that's all that matters." Starr hugged Becky close.

"Oh, no! Ben." Becky pulled free and ran into the bedroom.

Ben lay on the table where she'd left him, but there was blood pooling beneath him that streamed from his chest.

"No, no, no," she cried, going to him and throwing her arms and body over his. "Don't die." She pulled away and looked down into his face. The life slowly faded from his beautiful, brown eyes. Tears flowed from hers.

Starr stepped beside her, wrapping an arm around Becky's waist. "He isn't real, Becky. He was a beast. You can't want him to live."

"He did what he had to do, Starr." She didn't dare tell Starr that Ben had been the one who had killed their mother. "It wasn't his choice."

"We all have choices," Starr said in a hard voice before she turned and left the room.

Alone with Ben, Becky stroked his face. "I love you, Ben. I loved you as Adrian, and I love you in this form, too." She kissed his lips, then left.

Outside, Mason waited. "We need to call the police."

"And tell them what? That a sorceress was murdering her servitor and I tried to save him and accidentally killed her instead? I don't think so."

"Your fingerprints are all over that house."

"I think the officials are too busy with other more important matters at the present, Mason. I'll take my chances that this double murder will be left unsolved, or marked down as 'occult related' and thrown to the side."



Mason shook his head. “We better go. The less chance that anyone sees us here, the better for us.”

They headed for the car. At the top of the slope, Becky turned, like Lot’s wife, and looked back at what she was leaving behind. Becky didn’t turn to salt. A lump rose in her throat, but she refused to cry. A long, painful chapter was now closed in her life. She’d mourned enough.

Like the hurricane, it had taken all of Isabel’s and Katrina’s destruction to wipe the slate clean where they could all begin life anew. The losses incurred would never be forgotten or replaced, but new dreams and new memories could be realized. A quote by the Latin poet, Marcus Valerius Martial, rose in Becky’s mind, “Glory paid to our ashes, comes too late.”

“What was that?” Mason asked, stopping to glance back at her.

Becky shook her head. “We need to live life to the fullest, because we won’t get another chance.”

Mason looked at Starr. “Not in this lifetime, anyway.”

## Chapter Eight

"How many bedrooms do we need?" Becky asked, frowning down at the new house plans the contractor had dropped off that morning. "There are only five of us living here, and four of you are sharing two rooms."

"There are children to be considered," Gina, the youngest Chappel sister, said. She rubbed a hand over her swollen belly and glanced up at her husband, Quin.

Becky watched him smile down at his wife with loving eyes. Becky smiled, but turned away, unable to watch the love between the two.

This direction didn't prove to be any better. Mason and Starr were chasing each other around an apple tree in the backyard.

Becky sighed. It had been two months since the hurricane. Everyone had been busy with the clean-up and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast. She didn't have time to think about love and what she'd lost. When she went to bed at night she was so exhausted, she didn't spend much time lying awake, mooning over what might have been.

"Luckily the fire damage to this house was minimal," Quin said. "The house is old, but the foundation and underlying structure are sound. It won't be difficult to add the additional square footage."

“Lucky for us, since everything in New Orleans is still struggling with floodwaters. Quin’s bar is going to cost a fortune to renovate,” Gina said. “At least the kitchen and bathrooms still work here.”

“I’m so sorry about your business, Quin. How is your sister handling everything?” Becky asked.

“She headed to New York City. We have relatives there, and Vivian said she needed a change of scenery,” Quin answered.

“She never heard anything from Roman?” Gina asked.

Quin’s lips tightened. “No.”

Starr and Mason ran in through the back door, letting the screen slam with a bang and laughing like two kids.

Becky smiled and excused herself. “I think I’ll grab a quick nap.”

Mason’s smile turned to concern. “Is your leg still bothering you?”

Glad for the excuse, Becky nodded. “Every now and then, when I overdo it.”

Starr came over and hugged her. “You deserve a break, sis. Go ahead. Gina and I will take care of supper.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a great idea,” Gina said. “There’s this new recipe I’ve been dying to try for Quin.”

Quin’s face took on a funny expression. Behind his wife’s back he shook his head. When Gina turned to face him, he straightened with a loving smile and nodded to his wife. “I can’t wait, dawlin’. I know it will be as wonderful as all your special recipes.”

Becky bit back a smile at the easy way Quin Tertulliano told little white lies so as not to hurt his wife’s feelings.

Adrian’s face flashed into Becky’s mind.

*"You won't ever lie to me will you, Adrian?"*

*He'd taken her in his arms and kissed her gently. "No, baby, never. I love you too much to ever lie to you."*

Shaking her head free of painful memories, Becky walked upstairs to the bedroom she had occupied in high school. Lavender wallpaper with tiny white daisies lined three walls of the room. The fourth wall was painted a deeper, darker purple.

Sitting on the bed, covered with her old white down comforter, she hugged her stuffed teddy bear. "I'm tired, Teddy. I just want to lay back, close my eyes, and go to sleep forever." She lay back, but quickly sat up again with a frown. Something was beneath the comforter, poking her in the back.

Yanking the comforter down, she reached beneath the sheets. "What the heck?" She pulled a heavy, square object from under the covers. At the sight of the ancient book, she dropped it from her fingers onto the floor. *Thud!*

Two steps back, she bumped into her dresser, as she clutched Teddy to her chest and stared at the book that had brought so much destruction into her world.

The clock on the nightstand ticked loudly in the quiet room for what seemed hours, as she stood there afraid to move.

"You are the Keeper. If you don't pick it up, someone else will, and all hell will probably break loose."

Becky tried to scream, but a large hand quickly covered her mouth. Warm breath fanned the side of her face.

"Don't do that. The entire household would be up here with us, thinking I was killing you." He removed his hand from her mouth, but stayed close to her.

The warmth of his skin radiated outwards, and she had the sudden need for him to wrap his arms around her and hold her until she was warm again.

“Aren’t you?” Staring up at him, Becky didn’t know if he was a ghost, or what.

The pain she saw in his eyes told her how much her question hurt him, but he didn’t defend himself against her attack. She gestured toward the book. “Why me? You’re the servitor.”

“You’re the magician, Rebecca,” he said, gripping her upper arms and guiding her to sit on the bed. “You are the one who wielded your magick and created me.” He smoothed a hand over her hair. “My wild chaote. You have so much power that you are unaware of. That alone insures the safe-keeping of the book. You won’t abuse that power.”

“No,” Becky whispered, not wanting to believe him. Adrian had lied. How did she know Ben wasn’t doing the same?

He stood in front of her, studying her, as if he knew what she was thinking. “I only hope you can believe that I didn’t want to lie to you, or hurt you, or kill your mother.”

Becky nodded, remembering Starr’s remark about always having choices. “Then, why did you?”

She watched Ben’s throat muscles work as he swallowed. This was difficult for him.

“Isabel told me that if I didn’t have sex with your mother, she’d kill you.”

“That bothered you?” Becky asked. It hurt like hell, but she had to know the answers to all the questions that had haunted her over the years. Years of blaming herself for what had happened between her mother and Adrian.

“Yes!” Ben pulled her up in front of him. His fingers dug into her shoulders. “After Isabel’s abuse for so many years, you were heaven for me, Rebecca. So sweet, so innocent. You offered me everything of yourself. I loved you. I still do.”

Becky ignored that last statement. “And my mother? Did you love her, too?”

His jaw tightened. “No. I fucked her to keep you safe.”

Becky laughed, a short, bitter sound. “Thanks. Appreciate that.” She took a step around him, but he spun her around.

With a cry of surprise, she landed on the bed with him on top of her. Glancing up, she stared into angry brown eyes. "What are you doing?"

"What I should have been doing those few days we had together before I died." His mouth came down over hers, blocking any protests she might have had.

If she twisted her head either way, he followed, reclaiming her mouth with his. She finally quit fighting and lay perfectly still.

He lifted his head. "That's not going to work."

"I don't have to respond. This is rape."

"Rape? When have I ever had to rape you? You've wanted me from the first time you saw me walk into your father's church, as Adrian Tullos."

"Yeah? Who are you this time? What's your name?" she asked, trying not to be aware of his cock throbbing against her abdomen. God help her, she wanted him, whether he'd killed her mother or not. How warped was that? She closed her eyes on a wave of self-disgust.

"I'm Ben Chaote and I love you." Nothing fancy. No explanations.

Becky opened her eyes, searching his, looking for something that would tell her whether to believe him or not. Finally, she asked, "Why did you kill my mother?"

He closed his eyes, and his lips tightened. "I didn't. She shot herself when I told her I didn't love her."

"But ... the coroner said it was a murder suicide."

Ben nodded. "That's the way I made it look with the note. When she did what she did, I couldn't take it any more. I couldn't hurt you any more. I wrote the letter to try and make it look as if I killed her, then myself. Only Isabel could get the investigators to believe that your father had been the one to kill your mother and me. I'm sorry."

Everything made sense. Isabel's hatred had been so strong that even with the reverend's wife dead, Isabel wanted him to be blamed for the murder and go to prison.

“How did she get him to confess?” Becky asked.

Ben shook his head, as he slowly unbuttoned her blouse. “I don’t know. I wasn’t there, thank goodness.”

“How did you get back this time?” she asked, trailing her hands up and down his arms and liking the flex of his muscles beneath firm, hot flesh.

“Your sister, Starr and her husband, Mason.”

“They’re not married. Yet.”

Ben rolled his gaze to the ceiling. “Whatever. Does it matter?”

“Not as long as they’re happy. Now, how did they do it?”

“A sex sigil charged with wild, passionate love.”

“Really? Mason would do that for me?” She knew Mason accepted Starr’s beliefs, but she didn’t know he would actually participate in a ritual willingly. The last time they had done that had really blown his mind.

“Starr told me it was an ‘early wedding present’.” Ben kissed the top curve of her breast. “She wants you to be happy, Rebecca, and for some reason she thinks I can give that to you.” Ben’s gaze met hers. “Can I?”

Becky swallowed the emotions rising in her throat. Holding the tears of happiness back that her sister loved her so much, she managed, “Yes.”

Ben’s voice grew harder, but his eyes blazed with passion. “Tell me you love me.”

“I love you.” He was so close, but Becky wanted him closer. She pulled his head down to hers, kissing him, showing him how much she loved and needed him.

Becky closed her eyes, bumping the back of her head against the mattress. She had to keep a clear head, but the heat and sweet, male scent of him invaded all those secret spots she tried so hard to hide from herself. If she acknowledged them and explored all of their desires and fantasies, she’d be lost in a sea of tactile sensations. Swept away with the sheer ecstasy of her physical and sexual needs.

He pressed closer; the heat increased, attacking her skin with wave after wave of pure masculine lust.

Opening her eyes, she stared into the hooded recesses of his gaze. His lips had altered from full and sensual to drawn and cruel. The primal shift had also pulled the skin taut across his cheekbones. Shadows flickered in the hollows giving him the appearance of a satyr.

Becky gasped. Her heart pounded harder against her ribs. He frightened her more than any man she'd known, but that only forced her to realize she wanted him with a need just as strong.

"Do you know what you want?" he asked. "Anything, and it will be yours."

She nodded, slipping a nervous tongue over her dry lips. Glancing around, she found no place to escape. He was here in front of her, around her, trapping her with his mere presence.

He leaned into her body. His hair tickled the side of her face as he turned his lips to her ear.

"I can't just give you what you want, Rebecca. You have to tell me." The words whispered around the shell of her ear, warm and seductive, and trickled down her spine. The electrical *zing* of his voice circled her hips and crept questing fingers to settle in her clit. Moisture resulted, gushing between her legs.

A strangled cry rose from her throat. Wrapping her fingers into the silken-tressed hair, she jerked his face to hers, not caring if she hurt him. She only focused on the white-hot need that crawled within her body, devouring all logic and reason. "Fuck me. That's what I want."

His lips skimmed hers. Warm breath fanned her mouth and chest, but he grabbed her wrists, breaking her hold on him.

Becky struggled to reclaim her grasp, but Ben shoved her hands and arms above her head against the bed. His pelvis and chest captured her body, holding it captive. Her lust



roared its need and thrilled at his roughness. Adrian had never attempted to handle her like this. The way she'd always craved.

A low growl emitted from her chest. She glanced up, breathing hard through her nostrils, chest heaving, teeth bared.

His gaze flared into hers, but a taunting grin tugged at one side of his mouth. His voice still soft, he said, "Still trying to eat me."

Before she could respond, his mouth covered hers in a brief, searing kiss. When he pulled back, quickly, they were both panting.

Becky could feel each beat of his heart against her chest, but it wasn't close enough. She tried to push closer, but he held her away from him with a grim, determined expression on his face.

"I have to warn you before you proceed. You can take what you want from me, Rebecca. Use me for whatever purpose you choose, but there is a price for my staying here permanently."

His stare cut into her, refusing to relinquish her gaze. Becky couldn't utter a word through the sudden dryness and terror choking her. Her father had always preached the perils of playing with the devil's toys, saying there would be hell to pay for the one who continued to tempt the flames. The good reverend had said the fire would burn so hot and so bright it would eventually consume the one who lit it.

"You're the devil and you're going to take my soul?" she asked in a husky whisper.

Ben's lips quirked a second, centimeters from her mouth. "No, but I will take *everything* else." His tongue flicked out to trace the contours of her lips.

Becky groaned, digging her fingernails into the flesh of the hands that held her, as he licked a trail along her jaw to her ear where he circled the edges, sending those same electrical currents to her clit.

His warm breath against the wetness he created forced Becky to shiver. "I will give you everything you want, but you will give me everything I need."

Burying his tongue into the recess of her ear, as his hips ground against her pelvis, she could feel the outline of his cock, long, hot and hard. He let go of her wrists.

She had been exerting so much pressure against his restraint that the release took her by surprise. Her arms fell upon his shoulders. The sensations he created in her body with his tongue shuddered through her mind in total chaos. Time stood still, as images of the storm and their few days together blurred into nothingness. It was just the two of them. Kissing. Touching.

Her fingers raked through his hair, across his shoulders, down his arms and back up to his chest. His chest!

She dug her nails into his skin; he groaned and his body shuddered beneath her hands. Power radiated through her with the realization of the control he had told her was hers. She pulled her mouth from his and laughed.

Ben smiled. His dark gaze raked over her face and body and back. "You understand."

Curling her fingers into the hair at the back of his neck, she jerked his face to hers. "Yes." Taking his mouth with all the hunger she'd stored deep within herself for years, she kissed him. He was hers to do with what she wanted. All she had to do was give him her body.

Ha! That was the easy part. She'd been waiting to do that with a man for years, but not just any man. This one. She'd loved him before, but she needed him now.

Becky wrapped her bad leg around his waist. Circling his neck with both arms, she pulled him even closer against her body, crushing her breasts flat against his chest.

The taste of his mouth, the feeling of his tongue thrusting in and out of her mouth and around her tongue created a drowning sensation. Not only that, but even as she was pressed between his body and the bed, Becky could feel something inside of her falling ... falling ...

The air around them shimmered and shifted. Flashes of black surrounded. They were going down together, turning and twisting, through a void with no bottom in sight. Twisting her head, Becky broke the kiss with a panicked cry. She ducked beneath his arms, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, as she rolled away.

He reached for her; she shied away further, shaking her head. "No."

His fingers wrapped around her wrist, yanking her to him. His other hand wound into her hair when she was close enough. With a harsh tug, she was immobilized beneath him.

Her breath caught and her body trembled at the savage look on his face.

"You chose, Rebecca. You called me from the depths of nowhere and I answered." He lowered his head and bit the soft flesh of her neck beneath her ear. "'No' is not a word I recognize from you any longer," he said. The whispered softness of his words scorched along her skin, tightening her nipples and arrowing through her abdomen to her clit. "I came back for you, and I'm not leaving here without you."

Firm lips pressed against hers. His tongue snaked between her tightly pressed lips, forcing her mouth open. He truly "took," but she discovered that in his apparent greed, he gave her what she wanted. With a moan, half relief -- half despair, she surrendered to him with a shudder.

As soon as she did, Ben's demands softened into a more teasing, coaxing nature. Between kissing her mouth and neck he uttered encouraging words. "Taste so good ... I could eat you."

Becky's laugh was muffled by his kisses, but she managed to utter, "Please."

He stopped, abruptly. His eyes glazed with desire and a feral light that had Becky panting, he took her face between his hands. "Please what?"

She hesitated, not sure she could say out loud what she wanted. She closed her eyes again as he watched her closely, but patiently. The throbbing artery in his neck gave away

his excitement. "G-Go down on me," she whispered, biting her lip against the fear of expressing her desire.

His head angled back as his eyes fluttered. A short, deep groan erupted in his chest and throat. He didn't give her time to change her mind. In one moment, he grabbed the folds of her skirt, wadding the material within a brutal grasp. The hand that had pushed her down slid over her belly and thigh, spreading her legs wide.

"Ben --"

"I'm giving you what you want, Rebecca, but I have some of the same needs, too."

The thrill of anticipation raced through her. She laid back.

"Grab your ankles and don't let go unless I tell you to."

She did as he instructed and found herself at the edge of the bed, open and exposed to his gaze.

Ben took his time examining her with his eyes and his fingers. Pinching and prodding, he had her wetter than wet in a matter of seconds.

"Ben, please."

"Impatient, aren't we?" he asked, laughing.

"Yes," she said, hearing the note of irritation in her voice.

A wet, hot tongue swiped her clit. Becky gasped and dug her fingernails deeper into her own skin. "T-That feels so good."

"I know it does." He went back to it, picking up the pace with his tongue. Around and over her clit, then deep within her pussy his tongue explored.

Becky moved her pelvis in rhythm with his licks. When he inserted two fingers into her pussy, she arched her back, lifting her ass off the bed and pressing hard against his mouth and hand.

Pumping his fingers and licking her clit, Ben brought her to the verge of orgasm, but backed off.

Becky groaned. "No, no, no. I was almost there. You can't leave me --"

Ben thrust his cock deep inside her in one swift motion, taking her mouth with his. The taste of her own pussy shocked her, but she relaxed into what his body was doing to hers. After several hard thrusts that she felt deep within her womb, Ben smacked her thigh.

Becky cried out at the shock of the slap. "Ouch!"

"That's nothing compared to what I'm going to do," he said.

A rush of juices coated the comforter beneath her. "R-Really?" The thought of being spanked terrified her, but, at the same time, it fascinated her. Could she really let someone do that to her?

Ben smacked her again, harder. Her pussy clenched and her juices flooded down the inside of her thighs. Oh yeah, she could definitely let him.

He pulled out of her and she moaned. With both hands on her hips, Ben flipped her onto her stomach with her legs hanging off the side of the bed. Her skirt was shoved up over her back. "What --"

*Smack! Smack! Smack!* Hard across her bared ass.

"Owww ..." A large hand clamped over her mouth. His mouth came to her ear.

"No more crying out, Rebecca. You're a big girl and I know you want this."

Becky fought back the tears of pain and nodded. Putting her head into the mattress she was determined not to make a sound. She wiggled her hips, anticipating the next blows, but they didn't come.

Instead, warm lips teased her reddened skin, licking and kissing. Strong hands reached between her legs, spreading them apart. As before, he entered her with one hard thrust of his cock -- pumping in and out -- filling her.

She didn't think he could get any deeper, but he surprised her.

"Tilt your ass out to me. That's a girl. Feel me deeper in you?"

"Y-Yes. Oh, shit."

"What?" he asked with a groan.

"I'm ... coming!" Becky moved her hips as if she fucked the bed, as Ben worked her the same way. She felt him spasm and heard his groan as he came right behind her.

Slowly, they both slid from their sexual high. Ben slipped out of her and pulled her closer as he drew the comforter over them -- his body curled around hers.

He kissed her hair. "I love you."

Becky smiled in the darkness of the room. "I love you, too."

On the floor beside the bed silver letters glowed brightly from an old, worn book with the words *Hels Grimoire*.

 THE END 

## **Sheri Gilmore**

When Sheri Gilmore isn't creating romantic sexual fantasies for her readers, she's a registered nurse, wife, and a mother of three. Her most favorite cities are New Orleans, San Francisco, and New York City, but she's always wanted to visit San Antonio, Santa Fe, and Las Vegas. Visit Sheri on the Web at [www.sherisecrets.com](http://www.sherisecrets.com).