

Crystal Kauffman

THE COMBAT

Loose Id



GUARDIAN'S REALM:
THE COMBAT

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
870 Market St, Suite 1201
San Francisco CA 94102-2907
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-912-6

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Jana J. Hanson
Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin



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Chapter One

Darkness fell over the city as thick and black as smoke, bringing a wet chill like an evil presence had descended with the night.

Gabrielle Langston drew her coat tighter at the collar. Her low-heeled boots tapped out dull clicks over Market Street's wide cement sidewalk. The bustling city had turned eerily silent, and she wished she hadn't come here alone. Who would have thought the frantic excitement of San Francisco's financial district would vanish with the sun?

Widely spaced streetlamps did little to penetrate the concentrated darkness. Vagrants huddled along the closed storefronts, dismal silhouettes crouched or lying in the corner where sidewalk met wall, seeking the solid protection of concrete on two sides against unseen dangers lurking in the shadows.

Flap.

Gabrielle looked around, but the sound seemed to emanate from all directions. It echoed crisply, like the snap of a great canvas sheet on an immense sailboat, the only interruption in otherwise heavy silence. A lone car turned onto Market several blocks up but veered off again before coming near.

"Hey, lady."

Gabrielle gasped, her step halted by the menacing voice.

"Give me some money."

A man sat against the low wall beneath the window of the Gap, creating a harsh banner of reality next to a poster of a too-pretty young man in designer jeans leaping through a meadow.

She hurried on.

"You don't got a dollar?" the vagrant called as she passed. "A dollar!" His tone increased, yet he didn't expend the energy to rise.

She nearly broke into a run. The next street, Grant, would lead her toward Chinatown and back to her small apartment. She should have sought out the mysterious Goth rave, where she also hoped to find her missing sister, during the day.

"A dollar, bitch. You can't spare a dollar? That ain't nothin' to a fancy glurg-ick—" *Flap-flap.*

She turned. Dark shadows reached for her like grasping hands, cutting off the last shreds of ambient light. The vagrant was gone. A scrap of paper fluttered to the ground where he'd been.

Gabrielle whirled, primed to run. She screamed and jerked to a stop before taking a single step.

"Linna!"

She'd searched the city for weeks without a sign of her sister, and suddenly here she was, having materialized out of thin air.

Only this didn't look like the Linna she remembered. The figure before her was a pale, gaunt shadow of the vivacious sister she once knew. Hollow, empty eyes stared back at her.

"You shouldn't be here, Gabrielle."

"I've been looking everywhere for you. God, Linna, you look..." She took a step toward her sister, wanting to embrace her, or at least touch her, but something made her hesitate. Her sister's expression was dull, emotionless. *Lifeless*.

The weight of her desperate search, coupled with the overwhelming rush at finally finding Linna, barreled over Gabrielle. Tears stung her eyes. "What's happened to you?"

It was drugs; it had to be.

Linna's few, half-lucid letters ranted about vampires, and while Gabrielle didn't believe in Dracula creatures or their Van Helsing counterparts, she had traveled to San Francisco expecting to find crazed cultists who engaged in blood rituals.

She knew there were dentists who would cosmetically alter canine teeth into fangs. She knew there were companies that sold costume contact lenses. Her sister had been a Goth since she was fifteen; Gabrielle knew more than she'd ever wanted to about the Goth community. She even believed there were fools who drank blood, risking countless diseases for their fad.

But she did not believe in bloodsucking demons that transformed into bats or burst into flames if sunlight touched their skin.

Before her was a much more logical, though no less horrifying explanation. Her sister was an addict.

"Come home with me. I can get you help. It'll be hard, but wouldn't it be better than this?"

"You can't help me," Linna said, devoid of emotion. "Go home, Gabrielle. It isn't safe for you here."

"This *is* home, Linna. I took an apartment here. I'm not going back to Seattle without you."

"You can't help me," she repeated. "I'm lost."

Two fat tears spilled down Gabrielle's cheeks. She swiped them away. "Linna, don't say that. I know it feels that way now, but nothing is that bad."

"You're wrong."

"I'll never turn my back on you. Linna, I *love* you."

Linna's gaze jerked over Gabrielle's shoulder. Her eyes widened with raw terror, the first emotion she'd shown, and her mouth opened in a silent gasp.

Gabrielle whirled around.

A young man had appeared soundlessly behind her. He made a startling sight with his long white hair and eerily light blue eyes.

"Elaine, don't be so inhospitable." He spoke to Linna without taking his eyes off Gabrielle. "Your sister has traveled a great distance to see you. Invite her in."

He was just as pale as Linna, only he didn't seem unhealthy like she did. His watery eyes were nearly as blank as Linna's, but the smile that slithered onto his face seemed oddly sincere. Almost...*beguiling*.

In the back of her mind, Gabrielle registered the muffled thump of music from a club. Why hadn't she heard it before?

"She can't stay," Linna said. "She was just leaving."

"Nonsense." He stepped forward and placed his arm around Gabrielle's shoulders. The instant he touched her, a strange electric current connected them. Above her uneasiness came an irrational desire to oblige him. She felt pulled into those weird eyes, almost like she was falling.

"Gabrielle, I'm Evan. It's such a pleasure to meet you." He took her hand and brought it to his lips. The light kiss he placed at her knuckles felt cold. "Your sister's tales didn't do you justice. You're much prettier than she said."

A black door she hadn't noticed before burst open. Gabrielle glimpsed a red symbol flare on the door so fast it was just a blink. Blue light from inside spilled over them, making Evan look demonic, and music flooded onto the street. A ferocious hulk

of a man in biker leathers exploded past. He glanced down at Gabrielle and gave a grunt of approval, trailing a cloud of smoke, liquor vapors, and a heady mixture of unearthly scents behind him.

Evan grabbed the door and held it. As though bespelled, Gabrielle's feet took her inside.

"Linna, don't be rude," Evan said behind her. "Come along."

Shrill, abrasive music speared into her brain. Wildly gyrating dancers jostled her as Evan took her under his arm and led the way to the bar. He held up three fingers to the bartender, who nodded in return. Linna crowded close on the other side.

"So, you're from Seattle. What's that like?"

"A lot like this, only flat." She turned to her sister. "Mom's really worried."

"As you can see, she's fine," Evan said.

The sickliness of her sister's gaunt and pale face made Gabrielle's anger flare. Even while the pull of an unexplainable magnetism clawed at her resistance, the energy at finally finding Linna was stronger.

"No, she isn't."

Linna's dull gaze, now with a hint of wariness, flicked from Gabrielle to Evan and back again.

The bartender placed three identical drinks on the bar, each in a clear shot glass that bore the bloodred symbol Gabrielle had seen on the door.

The liquid inside was blue at the top, bleeding to milky white. Linna picked hers up and gulped it down in one mouthful.

"You have an apartment here."

Gabrielle turned to Evan.

"I heard you tell Linna so." He picked up his drink and held it aloft. Feeling compelled, Gabrielle picked up hers. The glass seemed to vibrate beneath her fingers.

"Stay here awhile. You'll see for yourself she's just fine. Better than fine. I think you'll come to love San Francisco more than Seattle as well."

He smiled and tipped his glass. Excitement gleamed in his eyes as she took a sip from hers. It tasted sweet, and that small mouthful was oddly invigorating.

"San Francisco is an exciting city," Evan went on. "It has many hidden secrets I'd love to show you."

He wasn't exactly handsome or physically impressive. She didn't even like long hair on men, and his was downright *weird*. But he possessed some strange, mesmerizing power that made her feel quivery and uncertain. She took another sip, transfixed by the graceful movement of Evan's mouth as he spoke.

"How do you like the drink?"

"It's all right." She looked down, surprised to see the glass was nearly empty.

"Would you like another?" Evan motioned to the bartender. Within seconds, another shot glass slid in front of her.

Linna bumped her thigh. Gabrielle glanced into the mirror over the bar.

"Don't drink it."

Linna's voice echoed in her head, yet her sister's lips were tightly set in a grim line.

Gabrielle's body suddenly tightened with a surge of erotic excitement. Her insides swooped as if someone had pulled the ground out from beneath her feet. Her vision twisted, creating a blurred kaleidoscope of her hand when she set the glass down.

"I have to use the restroom."

"I'll show you where it is." Linna took her by the wrist and dragged her through the mash of dancers. The music intensified, pounding inside her head. Grotesque flashes that couldn't be real blinked into her vision. Flaring, animal-like nostrils. Glowing red eyes. Leering grins with elongated fangs.

Oh shit...he dosed me.

Linna shoved through the outer door. Gabrielle drew a deep breath, thankful for San Francisco's clean ocean breeze.

Her sister stopped only long enough to turn on her, vicious. "You have to leave. Please, just go home."

"Linna, what's going on?"

The world tilted sideways. Gabrielle blinked, fighting to right her vision.

With a furious grumble, Linna spun around and dragged her up the street, her strong grip cutting painfully into Gabrielle's wrist.

She tripped but somehow managed to stay on her feet. Linna dragged her into an alley, grabbed her by the shoulders, and shook her hard enough to loosen teeth.

Gabrielle's vision wheeled away.

"You can't help me. I'm not some heroin addict. It's much worse than that. There's no curing me, but you can be saved. Go home, Gabrielle. If you don't leave, I won't be responsible for what happens to you."

Gabrielle swallowed. She was going to throw up.

"Listen to me!" Linna shook her again, forcing Gabrielle to look at her. "I'm trying to help you!"

When Gabrielle's vision cleared, she found herself staring into the snarling face of a monster with glowing golden eyes and deadly fangs.

She yelped and stumbled backward.

What the hell was in that drink?

Linna's mouth widened. Two lethally sharp canines glinted from an ambient light source. She hissed like an angry cat. The inhuman sound sliced into Gabrielle, turning her blood to ice.

Sweet Jesus. This was a waking nightmare.

"Linna." Evan's voice came from behind Gabrielle.

"No!" Linna growled in an inhuman voice.

As though detached from her body, Gabrielle felt Evan grab her wrist and yank her away from her sister.

"Spike wants her. You know better than to interfere."

The pavement spun. Gabrielle looked down at Linna's upturned face, her sister's mouth wide open, those vicious teeth still extended. She hissed again, but the sound was far away now.

Above her, Evan laughed wickedly. "She doesn't have her wings yet."

The ground surged away. They were *flying*!

She twisted to look above her. The horrific sight that greeted her sent reality spinning away. Against a black sky, Evan's leathery wings flapped like a great, evil bat's. Tiny glints of ivory marked sharp barbs at the tips of the skeletal structure supporting the webbing.

For a frozen-in-time moment, she could only stare in absolute horror. She sucked in a breath that seemed to go on forever and finally let it out in a piercing scream.

Notrealnotrealnotreal!

Gabrielle thrashed and flailed, sickened by the nightmarish vision her brain refused to accept.

In the shadows of her mind, she fought to convince herself this was all a hideous dream, but the cold air rushing through her clothes and the painful grip on her wrist were two irrefutable signs this was utterly, horribly real.

A swooping feeling rolled through her stomach with the recognition of sheer and absolute horror.

She fought wildly, terrified by Evan's wicked transformation, while at the same time appallingly entranced by his monstrous appearance. Through it all, Gabrielle realized a shameful eagerness to succumb to whatever he wanted from her.

His eyes blazed red, and when he looked down at her, she saw his fangs were elongated just like Linna's. "Your sweet screams make my cock hard, little one. Yours will be a delicious initiation!"

Higher and higher, each flap of his colossal wings carried them deeper into the starless sky. Gabrielle looked down, saw the lights of the city and the black void of its surrounding water, two ribbons of light where the bridges crossed the bay. The astronomical height made her scream again and again, twisting and clawing to grasp an unreachable foundation of reality.

Her throat burned, and her vision spun. This couldn't possibly be real! Whatever strange drug was in that drink must be causing these horrifying hallucinations!

"I want you to scream like this when I plunge my fangs into your tender throat. Save your breath, because I won't be the first or the last, little sacrifice. Spike likes it when you scream too. We're going to fuck you and feed from you until we're satisfied, and then we're going to do it all over again!"

It *was* real! Horribly, dreadfully real!

"No!" Even as black fingers of oblivion clawed at the edges of her consciousness, she knew she had one escape.

Death.

She twisted and kicked, flailing with her free hand until she managed to jam it inside her coat pocket. Her fingers closed around the mace, still safely locked. The small steel cylinder felt solid beneath her fingers, a last sliver of reality. She brought it to her lips and pulled the safety pin free with her teeth, then spit it out.

"Please!"

"Ooh, I love it when you beg!" He glanced down, his eyes flashing red with malicious glee.

She sprayed him.

The vampire cried out and released her, bringing both hands to his eyes. "You fucking bitch!"

She careened toward earth, her descent smooth compared to the battering, jerking flight into the sky. Her final scream was one of relief and acceptance. A soft blanket of darkness wrapped around her.

Flap.

Something impacted Gabrielle hard enough to rattle her bones.

"Easy there. I've got you." The deep voice spoke just at her ear, a rumbling resonance that tingled across every nerve ending.

Flap.

Strong arms cradled her, pulling her against a rock-solid chest. The musky scent of virile male filled her senses. At once, she recognized the stark, refreshing difference from Evan's sour odor.

Flap.

It was the sound she'd heard on the street. Massive wings rose and fell, surging them upward and plunging them downward. Flying, again. This time prone, like Superman, she was cradled beneath her mysterious savior as though they were making love.

"Can you hold on to me?"

Who are you? she wanted to ask, but all that came out was an "ah." Her limbs had gone numb; her body too weak to try and hold on.

Whatever Evan had given her, she couldn't fight it. She no longer wanted to, she realized calmly. *Take me.*

"Almost home."

Sexy voice. Nice, she thought as his words echoed in her head. Her fingers splayed across a muscular chest. Nice.

He squeezed her more tightly against him, holding her now with one arm, and their bodies rotated upright. Two crisp *flaps*, and they bobbed in midair. She heard the familiar squeak of the single window in her studio apartment, nine floors up.

"Hold on." Her rescuer surged upward, then angled down. She opened her eyes to see flesh-colored wings tuck. They rocketed forward in a swooping dive. The wings then spread out and angled downward, like a bird slowing to land. She felt the solidity of the floor through him an instant before he set her on her own two feet.

Gabrielle swallowed over her burning throat. Her knees gave out.

"Gotcha." Those powerful arms caught her, brought her firmly back against his chest. She breathed deeply of that wonderful scent, content to be held...and whatever else this beautiful creature wanted.

Creature. Man with wings. It didn't matter. He wasn't that demonic thing from the alley. He was something else, something...wonderful.

"You smell good." She sagged against him, eager to draw from his warmth.

"I smell like sweat." He chuckled, and the sound wrapped comfortably around her like the sweet memories of Christmas.

"You smell like *man*." She reached up, pressed her palm against his muscular chest, dragging her fingertips across the smooth skin. He skittered under her touch as though ticklish.

He eased her away and slowly loosened his grip, testing her ability to stand. Hands came away, caught her when she began to sway, then gently eased away again.

Gabrielle looked up into the face of her savior for the first time.

Sweet mercy.

Soft brown eyes framed by impossibly long lashes gazed back at her. His dark hair wasn't long, but it was windblown, tossed in a gorgeous mess around his face. Deep lines trailed down his cheeks. One melded into a dimple as he smiled. God, he was

handsome. Her perusal continued unabashedly to his bare chest, blinking through drunk eyes to see all that there was to see. Not wanting to miss a single inch of him.

Impressive muscles bulged under glistening skin. An impressive muscle of another kind bulged under his leather pants. Gabrielle licked her lips, suddenly *hungry*.

"Are you an angel?"

He laughed, making the dimple more pronounced. "I am a Guardian."

"Was Evan a real vampire?"

His expression dimmed. "Did you have any doubt?"

"My sister —"

"Is one of them."

She shook her head, then blinked to steady her vision. "No."

"I'm sorry. She is beyond help. You must accept this and return home. It is not safe for you to remain in San Francisco."

Gabrielle brought a hand to her cheek. It felt blazing hot. "They drugged me."

"You were dosed with Tourin. A powerful drug made of vampire plasma, glucose, and opiates."

"Plasma...you mean blood?"

He nodded.

Disgusting. She swallowed back her rising gorge.

"What did you say you were?" She swayed on her feet. He reached out to steady her. The contact brought a rush of pure bliss. A low sound escaped her throat, halfway between a gasp and a sigh.

"I am Davin McCain. Humans refer to my kind as 'gargoyles.' We are called upon to protect the innocent."

Somehow, this came as no surprise. "Gargoyles, as in —"

"Made of stone." He held up a hand, closed it into a fist. Before her eyes, it transformed into a lion's paw and turned rock solid.

"My God."

"I am a sentinel in the Order of the Guardians. We are an ancient sect created to police vampire kind." The gray stone stopped its advance halfway up his forearm, then receded to flesh again. He flexed his fingers as though it had been unpleasant. "When a vampire attacks an innocent, my order is awakened."

"Awakened?" She stared at his glorious chest, finding it easier to concentrate on his delectable male perfection than try to make sense of the nightmare taking over her life.

"Transformed from stone to flesh."

She gaped, not sure how much more she could take. Her mind reeled with information overload. She stared at him so long she began to feel awkward.

"Does it hurt?" she finally asked.

He smiled, and she would swear his eyes twinkled. "No. My transformation is like a state of sleep. I need to rest, just as you do."

"Evan really is a vampire."

"Yes."

"And what he did to me was illegal? That's why you helped me?"

His brows drew together. "Drugging you without your consent is illegal, but Tourin itself is not. It is a popular drink in the vampire clubs for humans and vampires both."

"Wonderful."

"I was called to protect you when it was discovered the coven leader has an interest in you."

She frowned, trying to fight through the fog in her brain. Vampires. Coven leader. Blood cocktail. She shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it onto the floor, her body

surging between too hot and too...aroused. He was so gorgeous, she wanted to lick every inch of him.

What the hell is wrong with me?

He went to the window and shoved it closed, then dragged the curtains across. She stared at his gloriously broad back, watching the muscles bulge and flex. *Drool.*

Wait a minute.

"You had wings. Or did I imagine all that?"

He turned around and dipped his head in a curt nod.

"Show me?" she asked, almost afraid to see.

His expression hardened. For a long moment, he considered her. Then, dragging in a long breath, he closed his eyes.

With a papery rustling of flesh, two awe-inspiring wings unfolded from his back and stretched as wide as her small studio apartment would allow.

The sight helped sober Gabrielle. But where Evan's monstrous transformation had been terrifying, Davin's was magnificent.

"Incredible."

A flicker of surprise passed through his eyes.

She crossed the room to him on numb feet. Gabrielle reached out and touched his shoulder, marveling at the amazing transformation. He felt warm, his skin soft but his muscles firm, just like any other man. Any other gorgeous, muscled hunk of a man.

She slid her palm over his back and onto the firm wing.

It was beautiful, a glorious sculpture of otherworldly splendor. The flesh was as smooth and golden as the rest of his body. The webbing stretched between a powerful architecture of muscle and bone, quivering under her touch as though ultrasensitive. He drew them close and tight, allowing her to circle him. She stepped behind him, dragging her fingertips lightly over the incredible limbs.

Davin turned his head, watching her from his peripheral vision, seemingly as awed by her exploration as she was. She moved to the other side, staring in amazement when he folded them into himself again. They melded into his superbly muscled back and vanished.

"Magnificent," she whispered. She finished her circle and faced him again. "You are beautiful." *The most beautiful creature I've ever seen.*

He chuckled. "I think that's the first time in seven hundred years anyone ever said that to me."

Her mouth fell open. Only after he caught her did she realize she had begun to tip over again.

"You're seven hundred years old?" What she truly couldn't believe was no one had ever called him beautiful before. The man was smokin'.

"Seven hundred and forty-six."

A sudden dizzy spell sent the room spinning wildly. Agonizing muscle spasms gripped her so powerfully Gabrielle's entire body seized. Davin caught her before she hit the floor. He lifted her easily and cradled her against his powerful chest. She cried out as her vision filled with bright flashing lights.

"It's all right, I've got you."

As the pain faded away, she became aware of every minute point his skin touched hers. Waves of heat rolled through her, leaving her bereft with a powerful yearning she didn't understand. Fire blossomed between her legs, and her breasts ached to be squeezed and sucked.

She drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth. "What's happening to me?"

"It's the Tourin, Gabrielle. It'll pass."

"Why did he give it to me?" Gabrielle laid her cheek against his chest, knowing only that when she touched him, the pain eased. He felt so good she never wanted to let go. "He was strong enough to fly away with me without drugging me."

"It was intended to make you biddable." He set her on her own feet again but took her hand and pressed it against his heart. "You were to be taken by the covenant."

Horror seeped around the hot need coursing through her being. His arms encircled her and tightened, chasing the terror away and making her body quiver with exhilaration so intense it bordered on orgasmic.

"Taken?"

He smoothed a lock of hair from her temple while cradling her gently with the other arm.

She felt weightless in his powerful grasp, helpless, feminine, and she wanted him to...*indulge* in her. The overwhelming sexual desire racing through her body was like a thirst. If he didn't quench it, she would die.

"You were to be presented to the den as a slave for their pleasure. They intended to rape you and feed from your blood."

Her knees gave out. Davin caught her against his chest. He brought out his wings and wrapped them around her.

Her last thought was of how delicious he smelled; then the room went dark.

Chapter Two

It was at times like these Davin preferred being made of stone. Gabrielle's pitiful agony tore into his tender, immortal heart. He hated to hurt her with the truth, but if it helped convince her to go home, it was worth it. She knew nothing of this world she'd stumbled into, and it threatened to eat her alive.

She came awake in his arms with a tiny mewl.

He pressed his lips against her temple. Her hair was soft as silk, and she smelled like flowers.

"You are safe now."

But for how long? And why had Spike decided he wanted this sweet young girl?

The coven leader preferred lustful women who were more than willing to be turned, and there were plenty of those to choose from. They became the most immoral vampires and kept his den of iniquity alive with excitement. Today's society left no shortage of sinners eager to fill his wicked dynasty.

But Gabrielle was petite, delicate, the epitome of gentle innocence. Not at all like her sister. What need could they possibly have of her?

He'd been in a dive toward them when he heard the minion Evan's cruel promises.

"Scream like this when I plunge my fangs into your tender throat. Save your breath, because I won't be the first or the last, little sacrifice."

He wanted to destroy Spike's underling, guilty or not.

"You saved me."

"It is my job."

She pressed her face to his chest and breathed deeply, sliding closer to him, powerless against the sexual pull of the Tourin. She let the breath out on a moan.

"Is all of you" —her hand cupped the bulge in his pants and stroked his hard length — "flesh and bone?"

Davin drew a sharp breath but didn't pull away. It was the evil cocktail's wicked power that made her lust burn, and he didn't want to embarrass her. She wouldn't remember any of this in the morning, when the Tourin wore off.

But at the same time, the gentle press of her hand, dragging upward in a teasing stroke that made his whole body tingle, had him wishing he could indulge her needs.

That part of me feels like it's still made of rock, he thought.

He'd encountered other drugged humans and helped to alleviate the pain until it wore off, but he had never before felt such an intense desire to toss aside his honor and fall into a victim's sexual craving.

"I am mortal as any man, in this form."

And as weak as any. He folded his wings away while wishing he could fly out into the cold night and clear his thoughts. Gabrielle was so sweet and frail; she felt different against him than any human woman he'd ever met. It was more than her vulnerability that inspired him. There was something unique, something special about this beautiful woman he'd never experienced before. She was terrified but still had courage. She was horrified, but she still had wonder.

Part of him had wanted her since he was first assigned to protect her. Even the mere sight of her photograph had stirred something deep inside him.

"Can you...love me?"

She squeezed his aching cock, driving him to the breaking point. *Gods, spare me this torture.*

"You should sleep now."

"No," she breathed out. "Stay with me. Touch me."

"It is forbidden. I am your Guardian."

Though the rules of the Guardians were unwritten, they may as well have been carved in stone. To go against them was the greatest crime he could commit. To take advantage of an innocent in her vulnerable state would put him lower than pond scum in the eyes of his comrades. The Guardians were all he had left in this world. Eternity was too long to spend in banishment, cursed to some lonely corner ledge of a skyscraper.

But even more than his loyalty to the Guardians and what they stood for, Davin's honor meant everything to him.

Gabrielle twisted in his arms, pressed a kiss against his pectoral. Another against his breast. The last directly atop his nipple.

The breath rushed out of his lungs in a *whoosh*.

She is not like the others. This woman is special. Somehow, I was meant to find her.

Her soft hair tickled his skin, tempting him to drive his fingers through the thick tresses as he drove his cock into her sweet depths. It took every ounce of strength he had to resist her.

"What's between us is just between us." Her words caressed his skin with puffs of warm breath. She flicked his nipple with the tip of her tongue. Her lips then closed over it in a gentle kiss. "Nobody else has the right to know."

By the gods, it had been eight years since he last transformed, two hundred and fifty years since he'd last lain with a woman. The carriage master's spinster daughter

had taken him out of pity, but Gabrielle marveled at his wings and his ability to transform. Clearly she wasn't repulsed by it, didn't pity him for it.

"Don't you want me?"

Great Aries, was she crazy? "There is nothing I want more than to lose myself inside you —"

"Then do it."

"The Tourin has heightened your desire and clouded your judgment. To do so would be to take advantage."

She eased back but held his hand, urging him with her toward the bed in the corner of the room. "I'm no virgin."

As though someone else were controlling his limbs, he followed. She tore off her blouse and grabbed him, kissing him like a starved woman. The contact of her skin against his was like an explosion.

But while she was aggressive and bold, she was still impossibly soft, tiny, and fragile. Even for a mortal, she was so delicate. At the same time he wanted to plunge himself deep inside her and fuck her until they were both sated, he wanted to cherish and protect her as if she were made of crystal.

"Gabrielle..."

"Please. I need you."

A simple touch would calm her need. He could ease her pain merely by holding her hand.

"I want you."

He couldn't. It was wrong. *But great gods of Olympus, I want her so badly.*

"I know you're following some rule," she said between breathy kisses, as if she'd read his mind. "But it's not up to anyone else. Only I decide for me."

He pulled the straps of her bra over her shoulders. The back caught. He tore it off. The stretchy garment sprang away. Her pert breasts pressed into his chest, the tips rigid and hot.

Gabrielle reached for the button on her jeans. His hand beat her there, and he tore them open so fast her hips yanked against him.

A spike of pure need speared his cock. She rose onto tiptoes and took his mouth, kissing him hotly. Her kiss grew desperate as she kicked off her boots and jeans in a tangle and stumbled backward toward the bed.

"Wait." He broke from her mouth to hold her at arm's length. "Let me look at you."

The startled look on her face turned to enchantment. His face heated with shame as he explored her body with his eyes, but he was too transfixed by her carnal invitation to yield to his eternal pledge.

She was the loveliest creature he'd seen in centuries.

Her petite body was softly curved, her wrists and ankles slender and delicate. Long, loosely curled auburn hair danced around her shoulders. Her neck was long and slender like a ballet dancer's. She was thin but not bony. Supple, firm breasts were smallish, but nicely rounded and high.

"So beautiful," he said, surprised by the wonder in his own voice.

She took his hand and eased backward, slowly this time, never breaking his gaze. He shrugged out of his pants and kicked off his boots while stumbling along.

Through the niggling guilt, he convinced himself he was just a man, that he had served the Guardians loyally since its inception in 1263 and he deserved this reward. His cock pointed skyward, so hot he would swear it crackled with heat.

Her bed was nothing more than a box spring and mattress on the floor, but she'd bought good-quality sheets and a goose-down comforter to ward off the San Francisco chill. It was soft and possessed her light, flowery scent, igniting long-ago memories of

home and normalcy. Before giving over his soul to the Guardians, he'd been a man of flesh and blood, of wants and needs, just like any other.

She sat on the bed and lay back, watching him with lusty appreciation. Suddenly she squeezed her eyes shut and cried out. Another spasm racked her, turning every muscle tense. She drew a sharp breath, then let it out in a tortured scream.

He crawled over her and lowered himself onto her delicate body. Skin came against skin with a shocking flare of sensation. Her pitiful moan turned to a sigh, her pain instantly alleviated. Her body was blazing hot, reminding him it was the Tourin coursing through her veins making her desire him, nothing more.

But she needed this to avoid a night spent in wanton misery. His gentle touch would ease her pain safely. He would never hurt her, never steal her for his own greedy pleasure as the vampires intended to.

The drug was designed to make her insatiable, spawning a voracious sexual hunger no more satisfied by one than a hundred raping demons. They would have used her repeatedly, fucking and feeding, fucking and feeding, until she awoke at dawn battered and torn, her life force drained, *if* she awoke at all.

Gabrielle arched into him, branding him with her scorching skin. She must have felt his hesitance, because she wrapped her arms around his neck and urged him between parted thighs. "Come inside me."

"I want to, so much."

"Then don't wait another second."

Her soft palms slid over his shoulders, down his back, and cupped his ass. He reached between their bodies to the moist folds of her pussy, as eager to explore her as she was to be explored. She was juicy wet in her eagerness; another effect of the Tourin.

He pushed two fingers inside, discovering the velvety softness of her inner realm. Her pleased mewl had its own drugging effect on him. He stroked in and out, eager to replace his fingers with his cock.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you," he whispered, still plagued by guilt.

"I'm not. How else would I have met you?"

A good-sized chunk of his heart crumbled. "Gabrielle."

She grasped his shaft and froze. "God," she breathed out in wonder. "So big."

"I'll be gentle."

"No. Don't."

He almost stopped then, knowing the terrible tricks the Tourin played on its victim's mind, but she tugged, urging his anxious cock toward her needy center.

Hades, he was powerless to resist. The swollen head touched her wet heat, and Davin lost the battle with his principles. Her pitiful whimper drove him over the edge.

He thrust inside, riding through her slick nectar until the sheer tightness of her little cunt halted his advance.

Gabrielle threw her head back and cried out. Only halfway inside her, her body could accept no more. Mortified he'd hurt her, Davin eased out. She wrapped her legs around his hips and squeezed with the strong muscles of her sex, trapping his engorged head before he could escape her body.

By the gods, he'd forgotten just how thoroughly immortality had changed him.

"Please," she whimpered. "More."

It wasn't her talking; it was the Tourin. She would have begged the vampires to use her the same way, one after the other after the other, unaware of her own pain in her desperate need to please.

But Davin was beyond the ability to stop. He thrust again, traveling another inch deeper this time. Her pussy gripped him tight, a wet, sucking glove squeezing with silken heat.

"Ah yes, yes!"

His hips moved of their own accord, starting a slow rhythm that gradually increased, testing her body's ability to accept him deeper. Each withdrawal milked him;

each homeward thrust caressed him with its tantalizing, creamy clasp. He should resist ejaculation; none of this was about his pleasure, only easing her pain, protecting her from herself. But goddess Terra forgive him, he couldn't remember ever feeling such divine ecstasy.

Davin bent his head to suckle one tight nipple. She arched her back, rolling her hips to meet his driving thrusts. She grasped her breast and squeezed, guiding it toward his mouth.

"Yes, suck me. Fuck me!"

Her wanton pleas drove him crazy. He drew the ripe berry into his mouth. At her gasp of pleasure, he sucked again, hard, and raked with his teeth. She cried out, delighted. "Yes, take me. Take all you want!"

Her nails raked over his back. She gripped his ass, urging him deeper. His entire body rose and fell with the power of his thrusts.

Her cries turned pitiful. "Please. Please! Oh God!"

The raw desperation in her voice tore at his heart. He rose to his elbows and looked into her eyes. "What, sweetheart? What do you need?"

"I need to come. God, I need it so bad it hurts." Her expression crumbled with sheer anguish, and slivers of clarity slipped through the Tourin's powerful hold. She understood what was happening to her, and she knew what she needed. "Please, make me come."

"Tell me what to do."

"I'm close, but I can't," she sobbed. "Not until you do."

It was just another cruel side effect of the Tourin.

He stroked a lock of hair from her cheek, torn between the desire to cherish and protect and the need to fuck her into oblivion.

"Do I please you?" she whimpered.

"Gods, yes. So incredibly much."

"Please, I need to feel you come!"

How to explain to her that immortality had changed him, made him different from other men, without making her think she didn't satisfy him? He was stronger, bigger, a hundred times more virile, and thus lasted longer during sex than any mortal man was capable. What a cruel twist of fate that the very act meant to ease her suffering only prolonged her agony.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle. It takes me longer."

Her eyes grew dreamy with sexual intoxication as the Tourin took over again. "That's all right, baby. Take as long as you need," she purred. "Take whatever you need. I'll give you everything you want."

The drug worked its evil magic, making her crave more while her body agonized under his use.

Davin was conflicted, knowing that in her right mind she could never tolerate such ferocious fucking. To ease his force would only prolong his orgasm, but to thrust harder and deeper would bring it on faster. His body made the decision for him, driving him past the edge of reason.

His hips pounded, turning his cock into a mighty piston driving in and out of her silken chamber. His climax built in waves. His balls grew tight, and his shaft thickened and yearned for greater depths.

"Oh yes, that's it," she breathed out with the last of her strength. "Fuck me, baby."

Boiling heat erupted, his seed like liquid fire, jetting into her womb in great heavy spurts. He threw back his head, rearing over her like a mighty stallion.

She screamed out her pleasure in time with his own cries, clawing at his back while the muscles of her sex squeezed and convulsed.

Their orgasms stretched on forever, rising, climbing, peaking, *exploding*, and then slowly diminishing in rippling waves until they still humped at each other, tightening and releasing with the wonderful aftershocks of sheer rapture, hardly moving at all.

Seven hundred years, and he had never experienced anything so earthshaking.

He'd known, even before he met her, there was something extraordinary about this woman. Now he was certain. Davin felt it as sure as he felt the beating of his own heart.

Whatever it was, it was so important the vampire leader chose her over the thousands of willing sinners he could pick and choose from. For some unknown reason, Gabrielle was so special Spike was willing to break the Sacred Laws for the first time in over four hundred years and lure an unwilling, risking the wrath of the Guardians.

He lowered himself gently onto her soft body. His heart nearly broke when he discovered her trembling.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart."

He kissed her temple. Her skin was wet from the tears running from the corners of her eyes.

He was about to ask if he'd hurt her, when she whispered in his ear. "Don't be. That was incredible. *You're* incredible."

He rolled them onto their sides and tucked her into his chest. She went limply, exhausted and pliant in his arms. He shifted his hips to gently remove himself from her body.

"No." A small hand squeezed at his hip. "Don't leave me."

"The pain caused by the Tourin won't come back as long as I hold you."

"Just stay inside me. Please." Her eyelashes fluttered against his chest. She tilted her head back to look at him. "I want you to stay with me."

He touched her chin. "Gabrielle, the Tourin makes you think you want more than your body can take."

"No, it isn't the Tourin." She snuggled close. "It's you. You're a god, Davin."

He laughed and wrapped his arms around her. "I am no god."

"But you're immortal, right?" Her breath made a warm fan across his nipple.
"That's what you meant by 'it takes you longer'."

"Yes."

"So you'll probably stay hard now, right?"

He chuckled again. "Yes."

"Then we don't have a problem."

* * * * *

Gabrielle came awake to a silent, dark city. She sensed the man beside her, that he was awake already.

Their combined fluids dribbled over her thigh, heightening her awareness of the magical physical bond. She'd never experienced anything like this and knew that even in his seven hundred and forty-six years, he hadn't either. Something told her this was anything but typical.

Though she'd told him she was no virgin, neither was she experienced. Still, she knew he wasn't your everyday, garden-variety hunk. The man had a superhuman cock. He'd left her sore and feeling thoroughly fucked yet knowing the magic he was capable of, hungry for more.

"Are you awake?" she whispered against his chest. Her lips found one flat nipple and kissed.

"No." He chuckled over the obvious lie.

"Sleep."

"Okay." Another lie. She would make sure sleep was impossible.

She kissed her way across his chest, then circled the other nipple with her tongue. His fingers found their way to her nipple and plucked. Pinched, pressed, squeezed. If she hadn't already been hotly aroused and eager for more, she would be now.

"Mmm."

Gabrielle had never sucked a guy but was suddenly desperate to know what he tasted like. He drew a deep breath as her kisses altered course. His stomach was washboard hard, ridged with muscles. He let the breath out in a rasp when she stabbed her tongue into the shallow indent of his belly button.

She'd known he had a Herculean cock just by how it felt inside her, but to see it sent a thrill of awe racing over her nerve endings.

She grasped his shaft and tugged him toward the sky. She laved a circle around the engorged head, sliding her tongue across the slit to lick away a drop of precum.

You've got the biggest cock in the world.

She sensed his own awe as he went still, and somehow knew he'd heard her thoughts. Was such a thing possible? After tonight, she could believe anything.

We are bonded, she realized. Somehow, this was meant to be. The understanding was profound, earthshaking. *My life changes tonight. And he will be a part of it.* The only thing that surprised her was the calm with which she accepted this.

She opened her mouth and sucked him inside as well as she could. He was so big, she couldn't get him very deep before her mouth would open no farther. His body quivered as he fought the urge to thrust into her mouth.

Gorgeous, and sweet.

She concentrated on sucking the tip, working the shaft with her hands so not to be completely inept. Gabrielle made a silent promise to improve her skill, if he could endure the practice. His strained gasp told her he could.

Come here, big boy.

She rose and straddled his hips.

"Gabrielle, are you sure?"

She took his hands, placed them on her tits, and urged him to squeeze. "Impale me."

The bumps and valleys of his muscles gleamed sexy in the dim light. His eyelids fell shut as she lowered herself onto his erect pole. She was tight and sore, but her new cream helped swallow him into her body. Each inch he traveled deeper flooded her with intense warmth.

Her thighs trembled as she forced her tender muscles to spread around his bulk. He reached the ceiling of her cunt and nudged for more.

"Oh!" Gabrielle tightened quivering thighs to ease the sharp jab to the very center of her. She smiled wickedly. "Bad boy."

Still holding her hands over his against her tits, she urged him to squeeze. Ever so slowly, she lowered herself until the weight of her body rested on the head of his enormous cock.

"Do it again."

He did, shoving against the stretched flesh at the end of her channel.

"Oh! Oh my."

As he relaxed the thrust, she wriggled herself down, swallowing more of him inside herself.

"Gabrielle, be careful."

"Am I hurting you?"

"It's you I'm worried about. I'm too big for you."

"Then break me in." In this position, her muscles were tighter, and gravity made her woman's channel shorter, but that only heightened the intensity of what she felt.

"Sweet mercy, love. I don't want to hurt you."

"But it hurts so *good*."

Gabrielle rode him up and down, squeezing her tits and pinching her nipples as she writhed and wriggled on his cock.

"Please, Davin. I like it hard. I want you deep inside me." The deeper she drove him, the closer the pleasure surged, like waves crawling up a beach as the tide rolled in.

"I am deep, darling. It's just right." He was lying, trying to keep from thrusting too deep even as he warred with his needs.

Gorgeous, sweet, and heroic.

"You want more. I know you do."

"I want you safe most of all."

"With you inside me, I'm safer than I've ever been."

"You'll regret this tomorrow when you can't walk."

She rode down, forcing him all the way inside her body to the hilt. "Confident, aren't you?"

He pinched and pulled on her nipples to distract her, and it worked. Gabrielle couldn't hold back the squeals of delight.

But at the same time, she was inching toward another mind-blowing orgasm and wouldn't be dissuaded. She rose up, dragging all the way up his long shaft, letting the swollen cap pop out, before plunging him back into her pussy. At his gasp, she smiled. "You want more, just like I do. Admit it."

"Yeah," he breathed out. "Suck at my cockhead with your pussy lips. That's right."

She rose, gliding easily off his shining pole through the slipperiness of her eager moisture, knowing he made the request to keep her from hurting herself.

He made her work the tip, lessening the danger to her tender muscles while also urging him faster toward climax.

"Do you like it?"

"Keep doing that, and you're going to make me come," he assured her.

She worked him, frenzied by the promise of climax, desperate to drag his orgasm out of him. His face contorted as he started coming, thrusting up into her like a great erupting volcano. She felt the heat, the slickness of his cum, and gasped with pleasure, holding his hands firmly against her tits like an anchor.

Great waves of ticklish delight rolled from her pussy outward, consuming every muscle and nerve. She squeezed her eyes shut as the pleasure peaked, seeing white flashes like starbursts behind her lids.

Gabrielle collapsed on his chest, exhausted, and heard herself murmur his name once before darkness wrapped around her.

* * * * *

Davin gently extracted himself with a warm rush of their combined fluids and eased her limp body to the mattress.

He leaned over her on one elbow, combing damp tendrils of hair from her face.

"Sweet innocent," he whispered. The sight of her delicious little body, worn and battered from the Tourin, brought a sting of emotion to the back of his throat.

He lay on his side, watching her sleep, until streaks of color invaded the predawn sky. It was time for him to leave. Had the Tourin worn off enough?

He worried it had not, but suspected it was his own desire to stay that made him doubt her safety. He'd seen plenty of humans overcome the Tourin. She would still be lustful for hours, but there would be no more seizures, no more crippling dizziness, and when she awoke, her judgment would be returned.

There was nothing more he could do to protect her. If Gabrielle awoke and went looking for casual sex to satisfy the lingering effects, there was nothing he could do about that.

The thought burned in his gut, but Gabrielle did not belong to him. She was a single, healthy young woman living in an age of sexual uninhibitedness, and he was a Guardian. He had a job to get back to; she had a life to get back to. Neither included the other.

He rose gently from the bed and dressed. Davin removed the dead bolt key from her key ring so he could lock himself out, then slide it back under the crack of the door.

He knelt by her bed, watching her sleep, finally at peace. Davin placed a last kiss on the perfect bow of her pretty lips. "Good-bye, Gabrielle."

Chapter Three

Gabrielle peered through sleep-crusted eyes. Three thirty. The warm, golden light illuminating the curtains proved it wasn't three thirty in the morning. How on earth had she slept so long?

She was sick; that was how. She must have a fever. She didn't want to move. Her body ached *everywhere*.

Ugly nightmares tormented her sleep. She dreamed she'd finally found her sister, but Linna had turned into a vicious vampire right before her eyes. Snippets of the dream hit her in flashes until she remembered her mysterious savior.

That part had not been a nightmare, but it definitely had to be a dream, because men like him didn't exist.

Still pressed to the mattress on her stomach, Gabrielle smiled, imagining she could smell her dream lover on the sheets.

She rolled over and sat up. She was so parched she couldn't even work her throat into a swallow. *Water*. She leaned over to push out of bed and yelped in pain. Her right wrist was a mottled kaleidoscope of green, purple, and yellow bruises.

She gasped. The room disappeared as her mind's eye filled with images of the night before.

It had been real. *All* of it.

Even now, her nipples throbbed with the phantom memory of his mouth and fingers. The delicious burn between her legs from his magnificently thorough fuckings sent her sprawling back on the mattress.

Had she really begged the man to take her over and over again?

Gabrielle didn't *do* casual sex...though even now she understood there had been nothing casual about their encounter. He was a god among men, a virile wall of masculinity that had cherished and adored her even as he sought his pleasure eagerly inside her.

She covered her brow with a hand, strangely empty of the shame she should feel.

"I am your Guardian."

She'd been drugged. She still felt its odd power flowing through her veins, but the sudden, tragic need to find Davin had nothing to do with it.

We are bonded. Somehow, this was meant to be.

And Linna. God in heaven, what had happened to her sister? Was it possible she was really a vampire?

Despite all Gabrielle had seen and felt last night, her rational mind tried to reject it. It just wasn't possible! That was the stuff of Bela Lugosi movies, not real life.

She showered and dressed in a fog of confusion, as tormented about her wild encounter with her mysterious lover as her sister's monstrous transformation. She stuffed down a frozen burrito for breakfast/lunch, eager to return to the streets.

Gabrielle left her apartment at five, well before sunset, and wandered the city. She headed back to the financial district but crossed Market and went to the small park at Yerba Buena Gardens where she'd first suspected she was watched several days earlier.

The eerie feeling had been easy to dispel, but now she knew her instincts had been right. Someone had been following her.

But who? Evan's evil brood or Davin and the magical Guardians?

She'd heard that strange flapping sound and had seen a dark shape move through the trees, but at that time had been blissfully unaware of the evils that truly lurked in this city.

And the secret magnificence.

She climbed the steps to the Metreon and sat on the bench at the wide, vanishing fountain that overlooked the park. Towering structures of glass and cement spread to the left and right, reaching into the sky. Her stomach lurched as she remembered staring down at those, and Gabrielle rubbed at the pain that flared in her wrist.

Directly across the street from the park, sandwiched between the imposing modern structures, a brick church dating from the 1800s stood in testament to history's tenacious grip on this city.

Atop its majestic spears, beastly gargoyles perched at each corner. The creatures sat on their haunches, staring down at the sidewalk with mouths open in a snarl.

Gabrielle cut through the park and crossed the street. At this hour, the church was empty. She genuflected and sat in a pew near the center, enjoying the deep silence. Dapples of colored light bled through the stained-glass windows, bringing a sense of peace.

She'd been desperate to find Linna for so long that her mind still couldn't grasp the horror she'd seen. It just couldn't be real.

But Davin had definitely been real. Her body still ached wonderfully with reminders of his vigorous sexual prowess.

"The answers you seek are not within these walls."

Her attention jerked up. She hadn't seen the priest approach, but his sudden presence didn't alarm her.

"It's not often I say that to a visitor." His smile grew. "But it's nice to have you anyway."

"Your church is beautiful. I like the quiet."

He sat in the row in front of her, angled backward to look at her.

"What do you know of the gargoyles on the roof?" she asked when he didn't say anything more.

"Ah. Very little." Yet his secretive smile told her he knew more than he admitted. "They were imported from France when the church was completed in 1847. The records of their purchase were lost, and there's no insignia on the stone to tell us who created them."

"They're beautiful."

"There are many like them in the city. Unknown, mysterious, secretive. There's even a group who documents them, convinced they move around."

She barked a chirp of laughter. It sobered instantly. "Do you know about the evil in this city?"

"The gargoyles are not evil."

"I know."

He sighed. "There are many dangers here."

Gabrielle laid her hand over the smoothly polished pew. "I'm scared."

He patted her hand. "A little fear is good. But the choice to resist is a power that you alone possess."

Strangely, his elusive words helped.

The priest stood. "Come here anytime you like. Our doors are always open to you." He moved through the columns lining the sides of the church and vanished.

She walked to Market Street and found the Gap. In daylight, the financial district bustled with life.

Professionals walked at a hurried pace, tourists shopped, and many people simply hung out. Here a guitar player, there young people with boom boxes, skateboarders everywhere. Many of the homeless still loitered but didn't seem to behave so

aggressively in the light of day. Maybe she just felt safer cushioned in the protection of the crowd.

She scanned the shadows and alleys for Davin as much as for Linna. She needed to see him again, to reassure herself he was as real and as solidly gorgeous as she remembered, as much as to have her questions answered. Last night she still didn't entirely believe in vampires. Today, she did even less. The nightmarish events seemed less and less real with each hour of reality that passed.

She walked west up Market toward Geary but stopped at the alley Linna had dragged her into. She'd passed the door to the club without seeing it.

She looked down the narrow passage and imagined soaring out of it in the clutches of that demonic vampire bat.

Gabrielle shuddered. She took a deep breath, rubbing her arms to ward off the sudden chill rolling over her skin.

It couldn't have been real. Someone had drugged her with a roofie, and she'd taken a bad trip, that was all. She hadn't really flown into the sky. She hadn't really seen wings. Telling herself this helped settle the queasiness that had taken up permanent residence in her stomach.

But part of her didn't want it to have been imagined. Part of her couldn't bear to think Davin wasn't a winged hero, just some guy who had walked her home and taken advantage. The sex had been incredible, there was no disputing that, but there was so much more to him than his amazing body and superhuman cock.

The man she'd imagined him to be – the *gargoyle* – had been incredible.

But to accept that Davin was a gargoyle was to accept that her dear sister was a vampire.

She pushed the thought away as she backtracked and found the door. The symbol was gone. Instead, a rusted sign was bolted to the metal. NO ADMITTANCE.

She grabbed the handle. The latch release was frozen with decay, but the door wobbled in the jamb. Gabrielle glanced right, then left. Nobody paid her any attention. She yanked, wrenching the door open. The metal bottom dragged hard across the uneven cement landing.

A foul smell crept out and encircled her. Death. She swallowed her rising gorge and slipped inside.

The large room had been gutted. Even the bar and the neon that lined the back were gone. Large, treaded footprints of workmen's boots tracked through the dusty floor. An old scaffolding stood against the left side.

How could this be? Not even twenty-four hours ago a complex network of spotlights had lined the ceiling, throwing multicolored beams over dancers gyrating to a thundering sound system. It seemed the club had not been removed but had never existed in the first place.

With the vanished club went her hope of finding Linna. It had been her only lead in over six weeks.

Gabrielle clenched her fists. I saw Linna last night, she reminded herself. At least I know she's in San Francisco.

The sickly sweet odor grew worse as Gabrielle stopped at a dark spot on the floor. She scraped at it with the edge of her sole. Beneath the dust-crust surface was a thick, glistening substance, still damp. Blood.

A scratching sound made Gabrielle whirl around.

"What you doin' in here, girly?" A man in a ratty overcoat clamored to his feet. His dark, tattered clothes and weathered brown skin blended in with the shadows, but a gleaming grin shined like the Cheshire cat's. "This ain't no place for you."

She backed away. He turned away as though unconcerned with her and proceeded to urinate against the wall.

"What happened to the club that was here last night?"

The derelict gave a groan of satisfaction and zipped up. "They move on. Never in the same place twice in the same month." He turned and narrowed his slightly drunk gaze. "They'll be back. But if you know what good for you, you won't be."

"You know of them?" Her voice rose with her excitement. Maybe she hadn't imagined the whole thing.

"Everybody who live on the street know about them." He rattled a gritty laugh. "Question is, how you know about this place and still got your head? They bring you in, you don't get out."

A chill rolled over her flesh. Pure luck, and a heroic rescue from an enchanted savior.

"I could ask you the same question."

"Who me?" He threw back his head and whooped with laughter. "They don't want me. My blood ninety proof. That's the secret." He tapped his head. "Don't want this fat ass as no slave, neither. They lookin' for pretty young things, like you."

"Do you know where they'll go next?" Her hope bristled. So far he was the only person she'd found who knew about the mysterious "coven."

He shook his head as he shuffled to the door. "Nope. Don't want to, neither. Hell no." He stopped. "You got a dollar? I ain't eaten since yesterday."

She fished in her pocket. She handed him a five.

"Oh bless you, darling. Five simoleans. That buys you some advice." His bloodshot eyes pierced hers with surprising clarity. "Whatever it is you want from them, forget it."

But she's my sister! Gabrielle thought desperately. I could never forget her. Even if she really is a vampire, she's all I have left.

* * * * *

Gabrielle hurried out of the area as dusk crept over the city and evening drew near.

"A little fear is good," the priest had told her. Only hers was more like raw terror. The darker it got, the more her stomach quivered with it.

She walked into the burgs and ate dinner at a window-seat table in an Irish restaurant, watching darkness creep through the city like a disease.

She'd intended to be back at her apartment by now, but all the warnings she'd heard could not convince her to abandon Linna. Her sister had been her best friend, an anchor in a sea of misery when their alcoholic father was still alive.

His angry tirades were nothing more than unjustified bouts of fury he worked himself into all on his own. Yet Linna always ran interference, catching the blame for whatever frivolous thing set him off and taking the beatings that would otherwise have been unleashed on Gabrielle or their poor mother. She believed his illness had been what turned Linna into such a disillusioned young adult, though doctors told Gabrielle that Linna's bipolar disorder was chemical, not a result of abuse.

"Go home, Gabrielle. It isn't safe for you here."

Davin had warned her away as well. *"She is beyond help. You must accept this and return home."*

And today, again from the gentle derelict. *"Whatever you want from them, forget it."*

But she couldn't. Her sister was all that she had left. She hadn't told Linna their mother had died. When she'd said *"Mom's really worried,"* it hadn't truly been a lie, because their mother *had* been worried. Gabrielle knew if she'd told Linna about their mother's accident, she wouldn't go back to Seattle. Her presence alone was not enough reason.

The waitress brought her receipt. "Is it okay if I stay here for a while?" Gabrielle asked her. The restaurant was half-empty. It wasn't like they needed the table.

"Sure, hon. Somebody stand you up?"

"Sort of, yeah," she responded noncommittally.

The woman smiled gently. "Take all the time you need."

By nine thirty, Gabrielle could delay the inevitable no longer. She took a deep breath, collected her courage, and headed out into the darkness.

Visions of Linna's monstrous transformation plagued her thoughts as much as the pleasant memories of Davin's handsome face.

Would she ever see him again? Would she ever have the opportunity to touch him again and indulge in that incredible body? The idea of sex with a plain old guy seemed boring, now that she knew what an immortal god felt like.

She was walking along, lost in thought, when a glow in the shadows caught her eye.

The symbol! It faded on the plain black door as though having illuminated to catch her attention. Goose bumps rose on her flesh. *That can't be good.*

She glanced around. Behind her, a couple strolled arm in arm, gazing at storefront windows. Across the street, a group of young people went into a restaurant-slash-bar. She hurried over and followed them inside. She took a stool at the far end of the bar, so she could see out the window, and ordered an iced tea.

For hours, people went in through the mysterious door, but nobody came out. Other than the symbol, no other markings identified the drab, windowless building.

Lone figures dressed in the telltale black of the Goth community strode purposely to it, their garish black makeup obvious even in the thin, bluish light reflecting off the cloudy sky. Excessive body jewelry and facial piercings glinted off the streetlights. Gabrielle had grown so sickly familiar with the look she wanted to puke.

A young man with a spiked Mohawk slunk to the door as though avoiding someone. Next, three sexily dressed women with deathly pale skin. Gabrielle heard their laughter even through the glass window of the pub. A heavyset man the size of a linebacker came next, leading a girl who appeared to hesitate before being convinced inside. A few minutes later came another young man who looked around nervously as though guilty of something. He probably was.

She took a quick trip to the restroom and returned just in time to see a tall, willowy girl with flyaway black hair crossing the street toward the secret door. She wore a black miniskirt with torn fishnet stockings, thickly soled Goth-punk boots, and a cotton shirt with black-and-white-striped sleeves.

The girl had her back to Gabrielle, but she was sure it was Linna. Gabrielle would recognize that ugly, thrift-mart shirt anywhere.

She hurried out of the bar and crossed the street just as Linna stopped and turned right, headed away from the door, with a cell phone to her ear.

"Linna. *Linna!*" Gabrielle hurried up the sidewalk and caught up to her at an antique store. She grabbed Linna's arm.

A stranger whirled around. She flashed a menacing smile. Elongated canines glistened with saliva, and her eyes glowed iridescent green.

"Got her," the girl said into the phone. She snapped it shut and laughed a grating trill worse than nails on a chalkboard.

Icy dread sank into the pit of her stomach as Gabrielle realized the enormity of her mistake.

She'd walked right into a trap.

Chapter Four

A pair of arms locked around Gabrielle's chest like a steel band. A sour odor straight out of her nightmares burned her nostrils.

Evan.

"I paid a price for losing you last night," he hissed into her ear. "You can bet it won't happen again, little lamb."

He leaned over her shoulder and licked her neck. His foul tongue slathered a slimy path across her skin. She winced and tried to shrink away.

He suddenly jerked, hissing like a snake. The girl vampire's glee turned to surprise, then anger. She gripped Gabrielle's blouse by the lapels and ripped it open to the navel. Gabrielle sucked in a breath to scream, but Evan clamped his hand over her mouth.

"This meaningless symbol can't help you," the girl hissed. She gripped the gold chain supporting Gabrielle's cross and yanked. It burned through her fingers like acid. The severed stumps fell to the pavement, eliciting an inhuman screech from the vampire, which shattered the window of the antique store. A security alarm started ringing.

Evan's wings sprang out with a wet, squishy sound like someone stepping on a slab of rotting meat. He launched them into the air with enough force to make Gabrielle bite down on her tongue. The girl flew with them, shrieking like the Wicked Witch of the West. She soared into the air in front of them, her face transformed hideously, her bleeding hand hugged against her chest.

Evan's hand came away from her mouth, and Gabrielle screamed, kicking and writhing to break her arms free.

"I'd gladly drop you, bitch, but Spike wants you for whatever fucking reason, so I'll drag you there by the hair if I have to."

This caused the demonic girl to erupt with crazed laughter again. "For whatever fucking reason precisely! What did you think? For afternoon tea?" The vampire bitch soared close, giving Gabrielle a blast of noxious breath. "If he didn't want you, I'd slit your throat and use your blood to feed my slaves."

She careened to the left with a flap of wings that nearly *did* slice Gabrielle's throat, leading the way through San Francisco's low-lying clouds to whatever wretched fate awaited.

Another vampire greeted them in the sky. He carried a medieval crossbow.

"Silence her screaming," he hissed, narrowing glowing red eyes at Evan. "She'll alert every Guardian in the—" He threw back his head and let loose a beastly roar.

His wings splayed wide, and he drifted backward toward earth like an acrobatic biplane in a stall. Gabrielle didn't see the quill jutting from the side of his calf until sparkling blue flames ate their way up his leg, leaving charred flesh behind. He wrenched the arrow out, and the ruined limb disintegrated into dust.

Evan whirled to and fro, searching for their attackers, tossing Gabrielle left and right like a rag doll.

A figure soared out of the clouds and smashed Evan in the head. He cartwheeled toward earth, losing his grip on Gabrielle. She tumbled out of the sky, screaming through a terrifying plummet.

Davin caught her. They soared upward in a graceful arc. She threw her arms around his neck, never so happy to see anyone in her life. To the left, she saw the quilled vampire bring up his crossbow.

"Davin! Look out!"

Davin spun them, turning his back on their attacker. In a flash, he turned to stone. The quill bounced harmlessly off his back, but they were falling straight down at a speed that tripled per second, a deadweight that would smash into a million pieces on the ground. Gabrielle couldn't scream; her stomach was in her throat.

The next instant he transformed again, back to the flesh and bone creature that had loved her so magically the night before. With a mighty flap of his beautiful wings, he soared them away with the grace of a sparrow.

There were a million things she wanted to say, a million things she wanted to ask, but no words would come. "The vampires!" was all she could scream as they raced through the sky with the hideous creatures in fast pursuit.

"Rolf!" he roared. He tossed Gabrielle free. For a terrifying moment she dropped toward earth; then yet another flying creature caught her again.

"Be still," he commanded, and Gabrielle knew instinctively he was a Guardian. The next instant the vampire woman crashed into him, and Gabrielle was falling again. Her arms flailed in a macabre backstroke as she dropped out of the sky, watching the vampire woman and the Guardian twist through the clouds above her like fighting cats.

Where was earth? Would she smack against pavement, bounce off jagged skyscrapers, or God forbid, be skewered by some enormous rooftop antenna?

"Ha!" Evan caught her around the middle, breathing out his triumph on a blast of foul breath. He sneered viciously. "You'd better be worth my trouble."

The next instant, his face contorted into a hideous twist of pain. Burning sulfur stung her nostrils. He let go, twisting his arms to try and reach behind him. As he swiveled away, Gabrielle saw the arrow in his back and blue fire spreading in a widening circle.

Falling again, she had a split second to draw in her next scream when she was caught again, this time by a female. The woman—a Guardian, she hoped—soared up from below and caught Gabrielle gently around the waist.

“We’d best get out of here,” she said, veering away to the left. A thunderous explosion rocked the night. Gabrielle turned her head to see a massive spray of blue sparks where Evan had been. She stared in amazement. What was left of the vampire burned away in shooting trails of smoke.

Her throat felt like it was on fire, and Gabrielle had long lost the ability to scream. The woman held her securely, long blonde hair flowing out behind them as they rocketed back toward the city.

“Are you...?”

“A Guardian, yes. Hold still, honey. I don’t fly as well with luggage.”

Behind the clouds, another blue firework burst with a dull *whump* that pressed on Gabrielle’s ears.

Dark spots swam in her vision. She closed her eyes and counted to five, forbidding herself to pass out.

“Why do they explode like that?” she managed to ask.

“Holy water. There’s a small glass reservoir in the arrow tips that breaks when they penetrate the body.”

The woman holding her swooped upward, slowing them.

“Can you stand?” she asked gently.

“I...I think so.”

“We’re coming in for a landing. Wendell, a little help here.”

Strong arms caught her from behind and accepted her weight. Gabrielle opened her eyes to see the woman settle on her feet and fold away her wings. She rolled her shoulders as though working out stiffness, then straightened her leather jacket.

“Welcome to Hawthorne. I’m Faewen.”

"And I am Wendell."

Gabrielle staggered on noodle legs.

"Are you all right, girlfriend?"

She looked around, searching for something pleasant to fix her eyes on while the world stopped swooping. Where was Davin? She would never forgive herself if anything happened to him.

They stood in a garden surrounded by tall, ivy-covered walls. At the far end, an enormous Victorian mansion blazed with light.

"Fine," Gabrielle bit out. She turned in a circle, desperately searching the sky for Davin. The flapping of wings preceded the figures, still cloaked by the thick clouds. She folded her hands together at her heart, praying he emerged from the battle unharmed.

One by one, Guardians arced their wings and landed on the grass around her. Davin landed third, followed by a hulking man with flowing red hair.

She closed her eyes, issuing private thanks. She wrung her hands tightly, fighting the urge to run into his arms as his words from the night before echoed in her mind.

"It is forbidden. I am your Guardian."

"Welcome, Gabrielle." An older man with salt-and-pepper hair landed gracefully and stepped forward. "I am Molin, leader of the Guardians of San Francisco."

"You mean there's more?"

"Of course, all over the world. Just as there are vampires all over the world."

Oh boy. She took a deep breath, fighting rising nausea. "Was anyone hurt?"

"I fear only you, dear." He smiled kindly. "You're bleeding."

She breathed a sigh of relief and swabbed at her nose. Gabrielle's stomach rolled at the sight of her own blood. The vampire woman had elbowed her when she attacked Rolf.

"No. I'm... I just need to..." She dropped to her knees at the edge of a babbling creek running through the beautiful garden. The vampire's touch had made her feel

dirty. She rinsed her hands in the water and dabbed at her nose, then splashed it on her neck where Evan had licked her.

Davin knelt beside her. He slid a hand around her waist but kept their bodies from touching. Still, his embrace brought powerful reassurance.

"You are safe here, Gabrielle," he promised in a low voice.

Tears pricked at her eyes. *I was so afraid I would never see you again.*

He smiled. Somehow, he heard her thoughts. Or maybe, instinctively, he just knew.

The Guardians waited patiently. Davin helped her to her feet, then resumed his place in the circle of powerful men.

She flicked the water from her hands, then blotted them on her jeans, glancing from one to the next of the amazing group.

They were an impressive lot. The scene before her could have easily been mistaken for a Chippendale's calendar shoot, if they weren't all holding crossbows or bloodied swords.

Two of the men were shirtless, and the rest, the woman Faewen included, wore black cotton T-shirts beneath leather jackets. All were fit, tall, and uniquely attractive. It was more than just the perfectly chiseled, aquiline features and muscled physiques. Each revealed obvious pride and palpable confidence that proved him a formidable force. Even Faewen exuded powerful strength like an Amazon queen.

Molin made quick introductions, starting with Faewen. Next was Brandon. Vance. Rolf, the Guardian with flaming red hair who'd caught her in the sky. He looked like a Viking warrior who had stepped through time. Manfred, who stood at least seven feet tall with gentle, intelligent eyes. Balin, who looked like Fabio on steroids. Wendell, who made such a ferocious sight, she would have mistaken him for a vampire if he'd not been introduced as a Guardian.

"And Davin, whom you know already," Molin finished.

Intimately so, she thought with a warm rush of something powerful and intense that felt frighteningly like love.

How crazy was that? She'd only known him twenty-four hours, yet she could not deny the mere sight of him made her pulse race, her stomach jump, and her entire body all shivery and warm. She didn't feel flighty for it either. What would any single woman do when she met an immortal, Herculean god but fall head over heels?

It was only slightly overwhelming to realize she stood before *nine* immortal, Herculean gods.

"Somebody want to tell me what's going on? I mean, I can't believe you do this every night for one poor, helpless victim after another."

"No," Molin said. "You are unique."

Her gaze slipped to Davin. He remained silent.

"Why?" she demanded a little too fiercely. She reminded herself these people, these...*gargoyles* had just saved her life. "Because of Linna? What does this Spike person want, a threesome with sisters?"

"We do not know, Gabrielle," Molin answered calmly. "But there is something important enough about you that makes him risk a four-hundred-year-old truce."

She took two deep breaths, trying to calm her anger as much as the fear quaking in her bones. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Nor do we," Davin said.

Rolf stepped forward into the circle, fists clenched. "Whatever Spike's reasons, it is bigger than this girl alone." His deep voice rumbled like a ferocious beast's growl. "No vampire leader would risk his coven over a single human. We must find the Palace!"

"I-I don't understand. What Palace?"

Faewen placed her hand on Rolf's arm, and the fierce Guardian immediately calmed. Gabrielle watched his eyes fill with adoration as he looked at the beautiful woman, and noted the loving smile she returned.

"The vampire coven leader hunting you is a fallen nobleman-turned-modern entrepreneur," Molin explained. "He's created a vampire club much like a twenty-four-hour rave."

"It's a sort of vacation spot for vampires to indulge in illegal activities," Faewen told her. "We were given scant information before losing contact with a vampire agent on the inside."

"We believe he is keeping slaves imprisoned within its walls," Balin finished.

"Which is against some vampire law?" Gabrielle prompted, hoping. Did this Spike person intend to make her a slave?

"Yes," Davin answered firmly. "The Sacred Laws."

"As well as some of the acts the vampires force them to do," Faewen said.

"Punishable by death," Rolf added in a menacing voice.

"And unfortunately the Sacred Laws are much like your human laws," Molin said. "We can't just go barging into his home without probable cause."

"A mistake, if you ask me," Davin grumbled.

"That female vampire said..." Gabrielle took a steadying breath before repeating the cruel things the unholy creature told her. "If she had her way, she'd cut my throat and use my blood to feed her slaves." She tried to sound courageous, but her voice hitched over the last couple of words.

Faewen put her arm around Gabrielle and hugged her. "You poor thing. This must be terrifying for you."

"We will not let that happen," Davin said in a deadly tone. "Figuratively or literally."

Molin glanced at him sharply. After considering him over a long heartbeat, he spoke. "No, we absolutely won't. You are safe here, Gabrielle. No vampire can enter these walls."

"She should be returned to Seattle," Manfred said in a voice as gentle as his eyes. "We can't keep her a prisoner any more than Spike can."

"I agree." Molin turned his imposing gaze on her. "You'll be safer in Seattle."

"Don't I have a say in the matter?"

Faewen grasped her hand. "Of course you do, honey. But do you really want to go up against a vampire leader?"

She glanced at Davin. His deep brown eyes searched hers.

She didn't want to consider never seeing him again. Returning to Seattle would be agony, wondering every minute if he was harmed or killed in a supernatural battle. And selfishly, she knew she would spend each day longing for his magical touch.

As horrible as existence without Davin would be, she couldn't let this bastard get away with turning Linna.

She fisted her hands on her hips. "If I have to."

"You do not know what you're saying," Molin barked. "Wendell, fly Gabrielle home."

"I'm not leaving without my sister."

Wendell grabbed her wrist. Sharp pain flared all the way up her arm, and Gabrielle cried out.

In a flash, Davin was by her side. He shoved Wendell back. "She's hurt, fool!"

He reached for her, and before she considered it, she slipped against him, cradling her injured arm against her chest as she pressed close. His embrace was warm and solid, and the nauseous fear churning in her stomach vanished.

She became aware of total silence. Without lifting her eyes to gauge the Guardians' reactions, she eased away.

"Evan hurt my wrist yesterday."

"Yeah, well, he's a pile of ash now," Brandon said, kindly trying to ease an awkward situation.

She straightened her shoulders. "I'm not leaving without Linna."

"Gabrielle, your sister is beyond help."

Surprisingly, those words came from Davin. Of all the Guardians, at least *he* wanted her to stay.

Didn't he?

"I don't believe that." She passed her gaze over each warrior. "Besides, I've got nothing to go home to. My mother died four months ago. She was killed by a truck driver who fell asleep behind the wheel. Even if she is a vampire, Linna is all I have left."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Molin said. "But your sister is beyond curing."

"She is still my *sister*. She never gave up on me, and I won't give up on her."

"If she hasn't yet fed on human blood..." Faewen offered.

"Fae." Molin's quiet tone cut more impressively than a shout. He turned to Gabrielle. "How long has your sister been missing?"

Gabrielle hesitated. "A long time. But yesterday Evan said she didn't have her wings yet. What does that mean?"

"Nothing," Rolf snapped. "She's fully turned. You must expect the worst."

She bit her tongue. Arguing with them was pointless. She would find Linna with or without their help.

"Rolf is right about one thing; this is bigger than Gabrielle and her sister," Vance said. "First and foremost, we must discover the Palace's location."

"This may be a dumb question," Gabrielle risked, "but how is this Spike guy hiding an entire Palace?"

"It could be anywhere," Faewen explained gently. "A renovated warehouse, a docked freighter, a sealed-off garage. Even a high-rise in the heart of the city. Not only would it be nondescript, but it would be protected by a vampire hex."

That would make sense, Gabrielle thought. A sense of hopelessness tumbled in her stomach. "I walked right past the rave, and I never even heard the music."

"For the past five days, Spike has returned to his known lair," Wendell said, addressing the entire group. "He enters at dawn and doesn't emerge until dusk. If he's traveling to another location, he's probably doing it through tunnels under the city."

"We should capture a vampire and torture it." Rolf pounded his fist into his opened palm. "I say, if he breaks laws, we break laws."

Gabrielle's heart beat a painful strike. What if they captured Linna? She couldn't leave knowing her sister might be at risk from these people.

"No." Manfred stepped into the circle. "That would only unleash chaos. We must strive to keep the peace; that is our purpose. Otherwise, we have no reason to exist."

"We are warriors first," Davin argued. "Peacekeepers second."

Rolf gave a sharp nod. The man was clearly the most ferocious out of all of them. "If nobody knows a Palace exists in our city, no one will know we've destroyed it."

"He'll know," Molin said, silencing the lot. "The Sacred Laws mean nothing if we do not respect them. He'll take vengeance, and we'll be forced into a war. We must find this Palace and punish him legally."

"I can help you."

All eyes turned to Gabrielle.

Vance smothered a laugh. "Don't take this the wrong way, but how can you help us?"

"With modern technology." She hesitated, unable to believe what she was about to say. "Use an electronic tracking device that can transmit underground. Follow him to his Palace."

"Are you saying we should try to plant a tracking device on Spike?" Faewen asked her.

“Not on Spike.” She met Davin’s eyes. They were filled with clear alarm as he stared back. “On me.”

Chapter Five

They stood in the garden, blessedly alone for the first time since the group had landed. Davin towered over the petite girl, who stood before him so tiny and frail, yet so strong and courageous. He wished he could protect her forever.

"Gabrielle."

"Davin, I—" She started at the same time.

He smiled but eased away. "You have no reason to be embarrassed about what happened last night. The vampire's poison controlled your actions."

"I'm not embarrassed or ashamed." She stepped toward him, removing the space he'd created. "I don't regret a single thing we did."

He lifted his hands, and she reached for him at the same moment. Their fingertips touched, intertwined.

"And it wasn't the Tourin. It was you."

A metal band tightened around his chest. It wasn't possible she felt the same way he did after a single night. She hadn't suffered through the centuries of loneliness necessary to experience the need he did.

She slid close, and his arms instinctively encircled her. He could still dream.

"The drug only distracted me. I wish I could have been more aware, more myself." She slipped her hands under his jacket and squeezed him around the middle. He closed his eyes, hardly believing his own ears.

"I remember you telling me the drug controlled me. I remember you trying to resist, trying to protect me from myself. I remember this tiny scar you have on your chin." She kissed it. Davin's insides melted.

"But I don't remember the taste of your kiss or the color of your nipples. I don't remember if I said you have wonderful, soft hands that touched me just right. I don't remember if I told you that you are the most special man I've ever met."

Another tiny peck on his chin; then her lips were on his. The kiss she bestowed was timid and softer than a cloud. Her lips went still; Gabrielle swept past the seam of his lips and devoured his mouth. He tightened his arms and returned her kiss with all that he was made of.

"I woke up this morning terrified I would never get the chance to tell you that you were wrong. It was all you. Please, Davin, let me tell you now."

He nuzzled her cheek, inhaling the flowery scent he'd also been afraid he would never experience again.

"Gabrielle." He breathed her name on a sigh. "You don't have to tell me anything." He could feel it. Sense it. Hear it in the beating of her heart and the pounding of her breath.

"The vampires robbed us. We should have been able to enjoy each other the first time without their poison between us. But if it weren't for them, I would never have met you. So I'm thankful." She smiled through her next kiss.

He hardly realized he'd driven his hands into her jacket and pushed it off her shoulders. He shrugged out of his own and dropped it to the ground.

She yanked his shirt out of his waistband and pushed it up his chest. Gabrielle fell against him with a happy moan, licking his nipple. "Oh yes. Now I remember. Now I'll never forget."

He yanked the shirt over his head and threw it aside. Her fingers explored the bumps and valleys made by his muscles. "Mmm. So strong. So beautiful. I told you that last night, didn't I? I think you're beautiful."

Elation rippled through him. She *remembered*. "You did."

She stared up at him. The clouds had parted and the moon reflected in her eyes as twin pools of starlight.

Her hand found his straining erection. She cupped the aching shaft and stroked upward.

"Mmm. I remember this. I would have to be *dead* not to remember this."

He laughed, but the humor faded fast.

"Love me, Davin. Nothing but us this time."

She kissed him as she shrugged off her ruined blouse and pried open his pants. In a furious tumble, they struggled out of their own clothes and wrestled over the other's. She toed off her shoes, and Davin backed her against the broad trunk of a sheltering willow. He slid his hands down to cup her ass. She lifted one leg and bent it around his hip. Her palm found his turgid length. He nearly exploded on the spot.

"I've never done what we did last night," she said between frantic kisses. "Make love to a stranger, I mean." She flicked across his lips with her tongue. "And I never will again. You've ruined me for other men. Normal men. Mortal men."

It was the nicest compliment he'd ever received.

He shifted, lowering himself to angle his engorged cock into the apex of her thighs. The swollen crown sought her waiting heat as though of its own mind. He angled left and right to part her outer lips. Hot wetness kissed the tip, and Davin lost the battle with his last ounce of sense.

Consequences be damned. He wanted this woman like he'd never wanted anyone or anything before. Even if it was the last time forever, he had to have her just once

while knowing it was her heart and soul that wanted him, not the vampire's evil poison driving her lust.

She moaned into his mouth as he pushed inside. The engorged head of his sex stretched her to breaking. She gave a tiny whimper the instant her entrance spread wide and accepted the plum of his cock. Immediately her straining muscles snapped tight around his shaft.

He waited, letting her body react to his massive girth. Gabrielle breathed out the tension on a long sigh and smiled. "I'm sore. You rode me good last night."

He pecked soft kisses against her lips. "I'll be gentle."

"No." She nipped at him mischievously, proving she remembered *everything*. "Don't."

"Sweetheart." He nudged deeper, enjoying the way she mewled with pleasure and dug her fingers into his shoulders. "I've waited centuries for you."

Yet at the back of his mind was the shadowy reminder he could lose her in less than a day. She was crazy, volunteering to jump into that spider's web.

He locked his arms around her and lifted her off the ground. With a swivel of his hips, he drew out enough to stir her moisture, then slid back into her silken valley. Gabrielle locked her legs around his waist, letting gravity slide her down his cock. He held her easily, lifted her, then slid her back down the length. Lifted, slid, thrust.

With deft care, he repeated the motion until he'd seated his entire length deep in her pussy.

Davin turned away from the tree. He dropped to his knees, inadvertently shoving deeper into her velvet chasm. Gabrielle gasped with pleasure.

"Mmm. You're so big. So fierce. So wonderful."

"I'll be anything you want me to be."

"You already are."

A blast of heat swirled around his heart. Holding her legs at his hips, he laid her gently in a bed of clovers. The cool grass tickled his balls. With a surge of emotion, he realized he was embedded to the hilt.

"Gabrielle. You have all of me." She was his now, even if he could never have her again.

She sensed his thoughts as clearly as he sensed hers, because she spoke aloud in response.

"You've claimed me. I'm fit to you. Here..." Gabrielle ground her clit against his pelvis. Her body shuddered. "And here." She grasped his hand and pulled it against her heart.

She arched, pressing tight little nipples against his chest. She wriggled her hips, clearly enjoying the pull of his thick trunk left and right, forward and back. "Oh...oh yes."

Last night she couldn't come unless he did. It was one of the vile side effects of the Tourin. She'd been desperate to make him come just so she could achieve a sliver of relief. Today, he wanted to give her the pleasure she deserved.

And there was more to it, he realized. Last night they had sex. Today they made love.

He began a slow, languid rhythm, withdrawing to half-mast before sliding back in at the same pace. Not too fast, not too deep. Steady.

His first journey home brought a pleased sigh from her lips. The second, a gasp. He thrust again, making her coo with delight. Again, bringing a cry.

"Oh yes. Like that."

Moisture slicked the path. Tingles erupted at the tip of his tailbone and surged forward through the length of his cock like an electric current.

"More, baby. Please."

But he didn't. She moaned, almost pitifully, when he maintained, even slowed, his speed.

"This is for you, sweetheart. Tonight's all for you."

"No fair. Don't make me come alone." Her breath caught as he slid back inside, slowly, tantalizingly. "Please, I want us to come together." She clenched with the muscles of her sex as he withdrew, milking it from him.

He didn't possess the strength or will to argue. This little nymph had slain him.

"I'm yours to command." He drove deep, loving the way she gloved him. He reached the hilt at precisely the place his bulk met resistance, clinched perfectly. Tension built in his balls and burst. "Oh yeah, sweetheart."

"Yes!" She planted her feet and rotated her hips to meet him. She clawed at his bare ass, forbidding him to let her climax alone. His rhythm broke, and he plunged in and out with a glorious slurping of fluids, wanting nothing more than to share in her pleasure. He erupted again and again, gushing into her womb until there was nothing left of him.

He'd never experienced anything so powerful. He wouldn't risk losing her now.

He had to figure a way to make her change her mind about turning herself into vampire bait.

* * * * *

"Naughty girl."

Faewen whipped her head around. Rolf crouched behind her, peering over her shoulder.

"How long have you been there?" she whispered.

"Long enough." He smiled wickedly. "I like a good show just as much as the next guy. Though I can't see much, distracted by your sweet ass pointing toward the sky like that."

"Shh," she admonished and turned back to the beautiful scene before them.

Faewen knew right off that Davin cared about this mortal woman. She'd seen it in the way he surged through the sky faster than she'd ever seen him fly, in the way his eyes held unspoken dreams when he looked at her, and in the way he nearly broke Wendell in two when the Guardian seized her injured wrist.

Though she couldn't deny being somewhat surprised he'd violated his oath and taken Gabrielle, no matter how sumptuous her little body. Davin possessed fierce honor and unyielding integrity.

"Will he be punished?" she asked, sad that Davin might be banished from their close-knit team simply for loving. He'd been a Guardian since its inception, two centuries longer than she had, yet he'd never chosen a mate. Like all of them, tragedy had made him give himself to the order, but Davin had never overcome his. He'd been a trustworthy, loyal warrior, ruthless with his enemies and ferocious about his beliefs, but a silent loner at the same time.

"He knows it is forbidden to take advantage of a vampire's victim." Rolf bent over her and gave a playful bite to her shoulder. "But she's no longer possessed by the Tourin and seems to have decided for herself."

She giggled and shivered under the ticklish touch, but kept her eyes pinned on the two lovers. She watched Davin lay Gabrielle down in the clovers. Faewen breathed out a soft oath as he proceeded to love the woman tenderly. Somehow, she knew he would be a gentle lover.

"By the gods, woman. I come undone when you moan like that."

"Shh!"

Her husband reached around and cupped her dangling breasts through her thin cotton shirt. "Make me."

She arched her back and thrust the heavy orbs into his hands. Her bottom wriggled against the steel shaft threatening to burst through his leather pants.

Rolf groaned. "You better watch it."

Her heart melted as she watched Gabrielle return Davin's love. The petite girl was dwarfed under Davin's burly frame, yet she was a generous and enthusiastic lover. At that moment, Davin withdrew nearly all the way. Faewen got a delicious glimpse of the thick shaft between Gabrielle's legs, glistening with her nectar, before Davin plunged back inside.

Faewen called forth her animal eyes to see better in the darkness as Gabrielle threw back her head, a look of pure rapture on her face. Thank goodness her eyes were closed, or she would have seen Faewen's flash in the dark. The girl's moans carried to them on the gentle breeze, stirring the fire in Faewen's blood.

She tossed a glance over her shoulder at her husband and pushed her ass back against him. "Davin's got a big cock."

"You're in trouble now, lady."

He tore her pants over her hips and shoved them down her thighs. Faewen gasped and arched, turning her eager pussy outward. Rolf freed himself from the restricting leather and guided his cock to her wet slit with a hand. He dragged the ripe plum up and down her hot slit, anointing himself in the moisture weeping from her core. He grasped her hips, and she steeled herself for the massive intrusion she'd come to love.

Rolf rammed deep with a powerful thrust. She felt his claws dig into her hips and knew he'd partially transformed. In their centuries together, she'd taught him she liked it rough, but Rolf was a tender and attentive lover above all else. She loved that she could give herself over to him and trust him to treat her right every time. It seemed his own pleasure stemmed from satisfying her, and Faewen always tried to respond in kind.

Her husband's gargoyle form was a combination of dragon, horse, and tiger. She got the beast's cock for provoking him with the comment on Davin's manhood, but tonight she wouldn't settle for any less. The battle had excited her, and the lovers in the

garden stoked her desire. And Rolf needed to prove his supremacy, at least where her pussy was concerned.

He withdrew completely, pulled her nether lips apart with his thumbs, and rammed to the hilt. She would have liked nothing better than to open herself wide for him, but with her pants halfway down her thighs, her legs were bound tight together. He slid through her sensitive folds, fucking her pussy lips with a vengeance. She glanced over her shoulder, saw his eyes gleam in the darkness.

She was hotter than she'd ever been, and Faewen feared Davin and Gabrielle would hear the wet slurping sounds coming from her pussy. But then a breeze brought their muffled cries of pleasure to her ears, and she knew the new lovers were aware of nothing but themselves. She forgot them, concerned only with the beastly phallus thrusting in and out of her body.

Rolf reached around her thigh and gently pinched her clitoris with fingertips that were once again the soft pads of a man's. He pinched and tugged, rolling the sensitive bud between his fingertips. After six hundred years, her husband knew precisely what drove her to sweet madness.

"Deeper," she commanded.

"Like this?" He withdrew nearly all the way, tugging at the tight clench of muscle with his engorged tip before shoving his massive pole to the hilt.

"Harder!"

"Watch what you wish for, wife." He bucked his hips, doubling his force. Warm waves rolled through her pussy and spread outward like ripples on a pond. Faewen pushed herself backward to meet his divinely violent thrusts.

"Gods, woman, you slay me." With a satisfied groan, he gave a final thrust so deep, his thighs smacked hers. Heat unfurled in her womb with the long streams of cum spurting inside her. Faewen's climax surged and burst. Tremors racked her as all sights, sounds, and smells left her awareness for the pleasure seizing her entire body. She panted wildly, her animal side emerging too, half wolf, half eagle.

Her husband chuckled softly as her breathing returned to normal. “*Who’s got a big cock?*”

* * * * *

Davin brushed a strand of hair from Gabrielle’s forehead. She’d been given a guest room at Hawthorne Mansion, but after taking a shower, she’d entered his room, dropped the towel over a chair, and slipped into bed with him. Not a word was spoken.

She came against him with a timid smile, speaking volumes with her eyes. He understood that to put their bond into words might shatter it. He took her in his arms and loved her slowly and gently, not caring that Molin and everyone in the house knew. She’d cradled him inside her body with the same tenderness, ripping his heart in two.

Now she slept, a fragile, delicate creature he did not know how to save.

He wanted to forbid her to use herself as bait to lure the vampire, but not only wasn’t it his place to challenge the Guardians, Gabrielle was of single-minded determination.

He closed his eyes but could not shut out the image of Josephine’s torn and bloody body. His young wife had been taken by the vampires and drugged the same way Gabrielle had.

For two weeks she’d been missing, finally found in an abandoned castle with four other local maidens. The vampires had simply left them behind when they tired of their games.

Their meager search party was nothing more than simple villagers, woefully ignorant of what they were up against and tragically underarmed. The others were lost in some other part of the castle when he found Josephine in the great hall. She’d been mercilessly raped and fed upon, left to die among the carcasses of dogs and rats. Josephine issued her last breath in his arms.

Davin had surprised a lone remaining vampire as it came through the great hall entryway, a female who he later learned had drained Josephine to change her, intending to claim her as a lover mate. She'd come back to guide Josephine into her change.

Alone, he battled the vampire with nothing more than a lance blade as it shrieked out its evil plans for his poor wife. Davin hadn't believed in vampires, yet time after time the creature recovered from the stab of the blade until a lucky slash severed its head.

His horror had only just begun, for Josephine rose at that moment and went for his throat. Unable to act against her, he'd stumbled backward and struck his head on the stone dais. He awoke staring into the face of Molin, and his destiny as a Guardian was sealed.

He rose from the bed and tucked the blanket around Gabrielle when she stirred. He dressed quietly and ran his fingers through his hair. In the small mirror above his dresser, his own reflection stared back at him, desperate and frustrated.

Molin's office door stood open. Davin entered without knocking and flopped into the chair across from his desk.

"Go ahead. Let me have it."

Molin closed the ledger he'd been writing in and settled his intelligent gaze on Davin. "Why do you feel you deserve to be reprimanded?"

Davin looked away. "I didn't protect her."

"It seems to me you protected her quite well. She is safe, and three criminals have been dealt with."

"I should have helped her overcome the Tourin, but instead, I lay with her."

If Molin was surprised, he hid it well. He settled back in his chair and tossed his pencil onto the ledger. "Do you love this woman?"

Davin shifted his gaze but still didn't meet the eyes of the man he respected more than anyone. "I do."

Molin folded his fingers together. "You are only human. Well, part of you, anyway." He smiled, but Davin didn't return it.

"A bond is already fused between you. You sensed her thoughts in the garden tonight." His superior then asked the question Davin knew was coming. "Do you wish to take her as your mate?"

He drew a shaky breath, let it out slowly. "I can't risk that pain again."

Molin glanced down. He had been an understanding friend and a sympathetic leader through all these centuries, but Davin sensed Molin now found him pitiful.

"Life without risk is truly dull indeed." *"Dare to risk your heart, warrior. Eternity is too long to spend alone."*

Davin felt trapped in a prison of wretched indecision. He couldn't bear to send Gabrielle home any more than he could send her into that den of demons.

"Speak your mind, warrior."

"Don't do this. She is no match for the vampires. She is but a frail human."

Molin nodded. "You may try to talk her out of it."

Davin clenched his jaw and shook his head. "She won't be convinced. She refuses to believe her sister is lost."

"She is a spitfire," Molin said with reverence in his voice. "But it is more than that. You sense it as well."

He couldn't argue. "She wants to help us."

A long moment of silence passed. Molin shifted forward on his chair. "Gabrielle is stronger than you credit her. She resisted the Tourin. She simply could not resist you."

Molin raised his eyebrows, daring Davin to argue.

"She fought against the vampire when most mortals would have surrendered to the Tourin's powerful erotic potency," he went on. "She sprayed her attacker with mace."

A smile tugged at Davin's lips.

"Additionally, there is something about her we do not yet understand that makes her special. Spike has taken great risks to claim her."

A stab of white-hot fire pierced his gut. He would die before he let that monster have her. Molin sensed his pain, he saw it in his leader's knowing eyes, but the man didn't comment.

"What will you do if we lose her?" Davin could hardly bear to ask the question.

"It is a risk we have to take. Gabrielle understands this."

Davin closed his eyes and breathed out a rush of torment.

Molin studied him for a long moment. "If Gabrielle decides against the plan," he finally said, "we will respect her choice."

She wouldn't. Davin felt like she was already lost.

Chapter Six

Gabrielle awoke alone in Davin's bed. She took another shower and dressed in clothes that had been mysteriously laundered and repaired in the night, then wandered through the empty house until she found the kitchen.

Faewen sat at a small table while an elderly woman with a tight bun of steel gray hair worked at the stove.

"Good morning," the Guardian said cheerily, despite her yawn.

"Good morning. Where is Davin?"

"Sleeping, as I should be as well. I waited up to talk to you."

Obediently, Gabrielle sat across from her. The older woman served her a cup of tea and a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast.

"Oh, my. This looks wonderful."

"Gabrielle, this is Evetta. She's human."

The old woman gave her a kind smile. "It's nice to have another mortal in the house."

Gabrielle sipped the tea. Green with mint and honey. It flowed through her like magic. She set the cup down. "Is Davin in trouble?"

Faewen smiled and shook her head. "Some rules are meant to be broken."

Relieved, she dug into the food. The terrifying sky-high battle or the astronomical sex afterward – Gabrielle wasn't sure which – had left her ravenous. "He wasn't in his bed."

"Most of the men prefer to rest outside." Faewen yawned again. "It's too stifling indoors for them in their beastly forms."

She nodded, almost thankful she wouldn't see Davin as a stone animal. Somehow, she knew that would inspire more nightmares than any of the horrific things she'd seen over the last two days.

God in heaven, what if he couldn't change back to human form? What if he remained made of stone?

"He's outside under the tree where..." Faewen cleared her throat. "We've arranged for you to travel downtown with Daniel, another of our human contacts. He'll take you to our connection who will outfit you with an electronic tracking device."

Gabrielle wiped her lips with a napkin and nodded. "Sounds good."

Faewen reached across the table and grasped her hand. "Gabrielle, I know that part of you wants to help our cause. Understand that it is your *only* reason. Your sister cannot be saved. She has been turned. There is no cure."

"You said it isn't permanent if she hasn't fed."

Faewen only leaned back in her seat. *What are the chances of that?*

Gabrielle heard the question as clearly as if the woman had spoken aloud.

A test? Or simply an understanding, confirming to Gabrielle, if she still had any doubts, that she was now one of them.

"I need to know for sure," Gabrielle told her. "And I want this bastard to pay for what he's done. He has to be stopped."

Faewen smiled. "You sound like a true warrior."

Gabrielle finished her tea, and Evetta took her empty plate. "That was delicious, Evetta. Thank you." She took a deep breath. "This is a beautiful house," she said, deliberately changing the subject.

"Molin built it in 1845. Nob Hill was literally constructed around it. After the fire of 1906, he expanded the property to what you see today."

"Have you been a Guardian that long?"

"I was inducted in 1427, under the original troop in France, or rather what was part of England at the time. You could say I'm a corporate transfer."

"What made you decide?"

Faewen's pretty smile dimmed, and she glanced away.

"I'm sorry. Forget I asked."

"No, it's all right. I think it's important you understand what drives most of us." She took a deep breath and picked up a napkin, which she toyed with. "I fell in love with a man much beneath my position. Despite my father's anger, I married him. We had a beautiful daughter. When my mother died, my father's loneliness drove him mad. He decided he had to have me back at any cost. So he made a deal with a vampire leader near Burgois to kill my husband and child."

Gabrielle's heart came to a wrenching stop. "God, Faewen, I'm so sorry."

"It happened a very long time ago. My father learned the hard way the vampires could not be trusted. They attacked the house and killed him and my two brothers as well. The Guardians rescued me, and I joined them."

"Are you the only woman Guardian?" Gabrielle asked her.

"Heavens, no. The only one in this house, yes. There are five other sects in San Francisco and clans all over the country."

"Because there are vampires all over the country."

Gabrielle hoped the woman would say no, but she nodded. "All over the world."

"So all the stories..."

Faewen tilted her head sympathetically. "Most folklore is based on truth."

Gabrielle's stomach rolled. She suddenly wished she hadn't eaten the mountain of scrambled eggs. "Lovely."

"Gabrielle, you don't have to do this. No one will think any less of you if you don't."

She couldn't just ignore the problem. Even if it cost her life, she couldn't turn a blind eye. Rolf had been right when he said this was bigger than just one girl.

She settled her gaze determinedly on Faewen. "Yes, I do."

* * * * *

Gabrielle left the house with Daniel just after lunch. They hopped in a cab and told the driver to take them to the wharf near Pier 1.

"So, you're the one going up against Spike." Daniel looked at her incredulously, as though she were setting out on a suicide mission.

Maybe she was.

He turned his gaze out the window. "You have bigger balls than I do."

The cab dropped them at an industrial building with an unmarked front on a narrow street across Embarcadero near The Ferry Building. The inside was a dark, secretive spy store as nondescript as the outside. It reminded Gabrielle of the Lone Gunmen's workshop from *The X-Files*.

She and Daniel were immediately greeted by a young man who seemed to be expecting them. He introduced himself as Monty as he led them into a private office. He stood on the opposite side of a tall workbench where five identical devices were lain across a green felt display pad.

"These are handheld GPS locators. Molin indicated this was a very sensitive operation with extremely valuable cargo and I should pull out all the stops, so I took the liberty of creating you a set. Overkill maybe, but you can never be overprepared."

Gabrielle experienced a rush of gratitude for the Guardian leader.

"Each device has its own transmitter, but all five devices can be programmed to a single transmitter, so five different people can track one subject."

Monty's eyes rose and flicked between each of them. They flashed with a glimmer of excitement, as if his gadgetry sparked a sense of espionage in him.

"Cool," Daniel said.

"Likewise," Monty cut in proudly, "you can program all five transmitters into a single device. So each GPS tracker can monitor the activity of five different subjects, if he or she chooses."

He held up a transmitter. The round disk was about the size and thickness of a nickel and looked like an industrial fuse. He angled it toward them and used a magnifying glass to show them a tiny engraving. "This is the serial number and also serves as the access code. You program the number into the GPS device." He pressed the menu button and showed them the list of numbers already entered, and chose one. The screen displayed "SEARCHING"; then a map popped up with a small green light at their location on Spear Street.

"The GPS device displays a map similar to those you find on the Internet. Easy to read, easy to follow. The light is solid right now because you're right on top of the transmitter. Ordinarily, it blinks. The blink rate slows at a five hundred foot distance, again at three hundred, one hundred, and so on, so you can calculate the location of your subject even when you can't see them."

Monty handed her the transmitter. She looked closely the small device. Two wire prongs poked out of the small round gadget. "How is it powered?"

"Five-year battery, inside the transmitter. Same as in my car's remote, and it hasn't died yet. My bucket is ten years old."

"Can it get wet?" Daniel asked.

"Not a problem. The transmitter is encased in fired ceramic, so it's practically shatter proof too. You'd have to crush it with your heel to destroy it." He glanced from Daniel to Gabrielle. "I understand you'll need to track underground?"

She nodded, feeling queasy.

"It's the most powerful transmitter known." He grinned. "*This* week. You're on the cutting edge with this baby. You can follow someone through the BART tunnels from a 747 if necessary. Even into the transbay tube."

"BART goes deeper than the sewers," Daniel explained to Gabrielle.

"What about underground garages?" she asked.

"Not a problem," Monty assured her. He took the transmitter. "You transmit where cell phones can't. It's not a communication device, remember, but you've got a panic button right here." He pointed to the small red button flush on one side of the disk. "Press this, and the frequency changes."

He did. The indicator mark turned red and blinked at an accelerated rate.

Perfect. Gabrielle felt panicked already.

Chapter Seven

"You should wear your hair up all the time," Faewen told Gabrielle. She fastened the French braid with a pretty cloth ribbon that had a spray of pearls like baby's breath. She leaned over Gabrielle, staring at her reflection in the mirror. "It looks pretty."

Gabrielle's heart was beating too fast and her breath coming too thin to respond.

"This hair ribbon was owned by Marguerite de Valois. She was a sixteenth-century princess and my very best friend." The other woman smiled gently. "You're wearing a bauble worthy of the Louvre."

Gabrielle touched the tight braid at the back of her head. "I shouldn't wear it. It's much too special —"

Faewen hugged her. "Don't you worry about a thing. I have a feeling we're going to be just as close soon."

Gabrielle smiled back, thankful for Faewen's encouragement.

Faewen held out her hand and pulled Gabrielle from the chair. Together they made their way back to the main room where the men waited.

Davin slouched in a deep leather chair, his eyes dark and his mouth set in a grim line.

Molin stood and addressed the group. "Gabrielle has been fitted with a tracking device that will allow us to follow her underground anywhere in the city."

She rolled up her sleeve to show where the transmitter was taped to her arm, just above the elbow.

"With the exception of Balin, we'll stay in pairs of two, five groups, each with their own tracking device. If we become separated, stay with your partner with the locator."

A collective murmur sounded. Molin was paired with Brandon, Faewen with her husband, Rolf, and Vance with Manfred. She'd met two more Guardians, Stephen and Johan, when they awoke this afternoon. Davin was paired with Wendell.

Manfred pointed to an enlarged map of the city hanging on the wall. "Edward Cameron will position members of his clan here, here, and here, as well as both ends of the transbay tube. You'll communicate with them via cell phone if Gabrielle's signal goes underground near any of their watch points."

"The other clans have been told to expect he'll first take her to his house on Gough," Faewen explained. "He's gone directly there every night for the past week. If he's using an underground tunnel to get to the Palace, it probably originates there."

The Guardian leader turned to her. "Gabrielle, as soon as you see the Palace or the instant you feel you're in physical danger, you hit the panic button. We'll extract you in less than a minute."

She merely nodded, too afraid to put into words how long a minute would feel when a vampire was biting at her jugular. She had to place her trust in these people or this would never work.

"It's a very brave thing you're doing. You have the gratitude of the entire realm of Guardians. Understand that you are more important to us than finding the Palace. We won't risk your safety, and we don't want you to either."

"Believe me, that's first on my list too."

"It's time for you to return to your apartment. You'll have to go alone because Spike will sense our presence if we're near."

Davin shot to his feet. Gabrielle crossed the room and placed her hands on his chest. He hauled her close and kissed her deeply.

She closed her eyes and fell into his kiss, knowing it might be for the last time.

He cupped her cheek, holding her fast even as it ended.

"Gabrielle..." His whisper hung, unfinished.

She smiled. "I'm going to think up hundreds of delicious ways you can make it up to me."

His brow creased as she eased away. "I'll be watching your every move."

She blinked away the tears stinging her eyes. "You better."

* * * * *

Gabrielle paced her tiny apartment, then sat in the living room, afraid that her anxious movements would appear as quivers on the monitoring devices. She plopped onto the futon chair she'd bought at a garage sale and flipped on her small television. She immediately shut it off, not liking how the sound distracted her. She wanted to concentrate entirely on her surroundings. She no longer felt safe, even in her own apartment.

She picked up a book to read, but her eyes strayed from the words. She tried to calm her nerves by thinking about Davin.

He'd made love to her so tenderly last night she'd cried in his arms.

It wasn't fair that she'd only found him days ago but could lose him forever in mere hours. What worried her most was not dying, but being turned into some cold, unfeeling bloodsucker with a dead soul.

If faced with a choice—join her sister or never see her again—Gabrielle would definitely take the latter. She couldn't bear being turned against Davin, to become an enemy of the noble Guardians.

At ten thirty, she rose and headed to the small kitchen. She wasn't hungry but knew she should eat to keep up her strength. She could be awake the entire night. Soup would go down easy and come up easy, if need be.

Something caught her eye. Gabrielle turned and yelped in surprise.

A man stood in the corner of her apartment.

"Who are you?" *And how the hell did you get in?* Her leaping pulse thundered in her ears.

He was strikingly handsome, though with a sharpness to his features bordering on severe. His eyes were a strange shade of blue like Evan's, only not quite as light. His skin was a shade too pale, his lips a shade too pink, as though he'd just fed. Gabrielle swallowed. *Don't think those thoughts.*

He stared at her, but there was a faraway look in his eyes. "You look just like her..."

She stood frozen on numb feet. Was this him? Or another minion? Rational thought fled as fear closed in and strangled. He was over six feet tall, with broad, strong shoulders, but it was the ferociousness of his eyes that made him so dangerous looking.

He bowed. "I am Lord Michael Winslow, at your service." He shook off his bewilderment as though stepping out of a cold night into a warm house. "I go by the name Spike now. Much more modern and carries a threatening ring to it I quite like."

Gabrielle backed away and snatched up a wooden spoon she'd broken into a sharp point.

He laughed. "My dear, not everything you see on television is accurate."

Her eyes strayed to the garlic on the counter.

He shook his head, still chuckling. "No, not that either. Though I must confess I don't like garlic in my food. It dulls the flavor of blood for hours."

Oh yikes.

"What do you want from me?"

He took a step toward her. She darted back two.

"Don't come any closer!"

I've changed my mind! Davin, what a fool I am.

With the vampire standing in front of her making a menacing sight, she understood beyond a doubt she was in over her head.

"Merely the pleasure of your conversation." He smiled, but it was a pasted-on, false-looking grimace meant to tease. "What, no Guardian friends about?"

"Why would they be here?" Her voice quavered. She hoped he couldn't detect her deceit.

"They told you to leave the city, did they not?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't."

"They're not the boss of me," she snapped, hoping to convey disrespect.

He eyed her for a torturously long heartbeat. He then glanced away and strolled to the scrap bookcase, her only piece of furniture besides the bed and futon, and fingered the silver picture frame holding her mother's portrait.

"She's dead, isn't she?"

"How did you know?"

"I have my sources."

"Did you tell Linna?" Worry surged into her chest, kicking up her heart rate. It was already near bursting. Black spots swam before her eyes.

If Linna knew their mother was dead, there would be no convincing her away from the coven. Other than Gabrielle, she had nothing outside it.

"I think it best she hear it from you," he said idly. He turned to her. A sardonic smile pulled at one corner of his mouth. "Silver doesn't hurt me, either."

Enough of these games. She wished he would act, if for no other reason than to get it over with. "Where is my sister?"

He held out his hand. "I'll take you to her."

She snorted. "Yeah, right."

Spike cocked his head, grinning like a little boy. Gabrielle could see how his victims were easily seduced. When he wanted to, he could appear quite charming.

"Gabrielle, I apologize for the crudeness of my associates. Please, you won't be harmed. Come to my home to discuss my proposition of your own accord. You won't be prevented from leaving."

Proposition. The tiny hairs rose all over her body. *The first real proof he does want something from me.*

"I've already been harmed. Look what that creep did to me!" She pulled up her sleeve and showed her bruised wrist, hoping to convince him there was nothing hidden up her sleeves.

"A most unfortunate accident, for which I would have killed him myself if your Guardian friends had not spared me the effort."

"Why there? Why can't we talk here?"

"You want to see your sister, don't you?"

Damn! If he didn't force her, the plan was for nothing. If she entered the Palace willingly, would the Guardians still have the right to follow?

She had to risk it. Besides, Faewen had said it was the acts the vampires forced the slaves to engage in that were illegal. She had to gamble she'd find something that would warrant the raid.

"I don't expect you to trust me," he said, his hand still extended. "But I think you want to see your sister badly enough. You searched for the raves by yourself, after all. I dare say you'll be much safer in my home than in some rough-and-tumble mosh of illicit vampires. Not every nightwalker in this city is part of my coven, you know. Many of them are quite vulgar and think nothing of breaking the Sacred Laws. Only the most dignified are invited into my circle."

She lowered the spoon, wishing she could ask Molin what to do.

"You want to see your sister. I'm offering you the opportunity."

"And I can leave if I want to?"

"Absolutely."

"And we'll walk? None of this flying-above-the-city shit."

He chuckled. "If you prefer."

She set the stake down. Without taking her eyes from him, she slipped into her jacket and collected her keys.

"I don't think I trust you, Lord Winslow."

"I'd think you foolish if you did, Ms. Langston."

* * * * *

They walked up the darkened streets toward the Sunset district, passing several pedestrians who didn't give them a second look.

If they only knew what kind of monsters walked among them...

Spike breathed in the night air. "I do so love this city. Have you come to love it as well, Gabrielle?"

"Yeah," she answered. *But not for the reason you think. Because of a sizzling-hot superhero who saved my life twice and loved me until I couldn't see straight.*

"I knew you would."

"Though it seems to have a vampire problem."

Spike chuckled.

It felt odd, walking beside a monster and chatting pleasantly with him.

"How long have you been a vampire?" she asked him, even though Molin had already told her. She had a general idea but couldn't remember the date. "You did *become* one, right? I mean, no one is born a vampire?"

"Yes. I was turned." His expression lost all warmth, but he continued. "I have been a nightwalker for ten of your lifetimes."

A chill peppered her skin with gooseflesh. She suspected he was really saying, *I have that much more experience and intelligence than you. Don't think you'll fool me with this silly act.*

"Were you turned against your will?"

"My dear, no one is turned against their will. Not legally, anyway. The Sacred Laws have existed for a thousand years."

Her mouth fell open. "You mean you chose it?"

"I did."

"God, why?"

"Precisely."

"What?"

"God. He abandoned me, so I abandoned him."

She gaped at him, shocked. He laughed, but his humor faded quickly.

"Don't look so surprised. Since the dawn of Christianity, the devout have walked hand in hand with the abandoned. A thousand years ago, as many had forsaken God as do today, only they had a lot more passion about it. My biggest problem today is that so many care so little."

He walked on in silence for another two blocks, and Gabrielle believed he'd forgotten her question.

When he finally spoke, his voice held a hint of sadness. "Eight hundred and twenty years ago, my wife died of scarlet fever. The human body is dreadfully frail. I watched her waste away, our child still in her womb, and I decided I never wanted to shrivel and suffer in such a way. So I buried her and my past."

"Have you no regrets?"

"Not a single one."

"That's so sad." She turned forward, feeling oddly numb. His story was like Faewen's, yet he had chosen evil, and she had chosen good.

A choice everyone makes, Gabrielle thought, in one form or another.

"Here we are." He stopped and gestured with a hand.

They stood at an exquisitely maintained brownstone overlooking Lafayette Park. She glanced at him with a wave of new fear jumping in her belly.

Spike started up the steps in front of her. Motion sensor lights kicked on. Spike fished out a ring of keys and unlocked the door.

Gabrielle put her foot on the first step. She looked up. He held the door open, waiting. The house beyond was as dark as a tomb.

She took one step. And another.

Into the spider's lair.

* * * * *

"She's stopped moving." Faewen looked up from the device.

Davin abandoned his pacing and stalked to the table where the small unit lay.

"We should go out now."

"They're still aboveground, on Gough."

"Are you sure?" he demanded a little too gruffly.

"Davin, calm down. They're at his residence across from Lafayette Park. We expected this."

Davin turned and drove his fingers through his hair. "This is a mistake. I'm convinced of it now. We should extract her." *Dammit, she's too valuable to risk!*

He wished he'd told her that before she left. That, and so many other things. *Don't do this. Stay with me here, forever. We'll find the Palace another way.*

"Gabrielle will make the decision with the panic button."

If she has the time, Davin thought grimly. I only hope we do as well.

By the gods, what have I done?

* * * * *

The inside of Spike's house was magnificently decorated. She passed a modern kitchen of glass, chrome, and granite.

Do vampires eat? she wondered too calmly. Her terror had transformed into eerie tranquility. Gabrielle felt as if something had gone wrong in her brain. The fact his home was so normal made him seem less threatening.

Don't be fooled.

"Where is Linna?" she asked again. She followed him through a long hall toward darkness, wondering what possessed her to take this fool's trek.

"I want to show you something first. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

She stopped. "I don't like surprises."

He turned back and gestured, almost impatiently. "A painting, Gabrielle. You have nothing to fear from oils on canvas." He turned and started ahead of her, confident she'd follow. He turned into a room at the end. A lamp clicked on and warm, beautiful light spilled into the hall. Gabrielle forced her feet to continue.

The entire house was richly decorated with what Gabrielle suspected were priceless antiques, and she had no doubt Spike was the original owner. She took in the luxurious room, and for a moment didn't notice what he'd brought her to see. When she looked up, the earth moved under her feet.

"My God. That's...that's me!"

"No, Gabrielle. It is not." His voice had taken a low, lustful tone. He stood near the painting but watched her. His eyes had darkened to a deep sapphire blue, the lids heavy with sultry hunger.

"Her name was Gustine. You understand now why I was so caught by you earlier tonight when I first saw you. With your hair bound up like that, you look just like her."

Gabrielle finally tore her gaze away. Hissing rose in her ears, and the world tilted. Gustine Langston. *My great-great-great-grandmother.*

"Your ancestors thought she simply walked away from her husband and infant son."

"You took her." Her words were barely a whisper, but Spike heard.

"Yes."

The connection clicked into place with frightening clarity.

"She'd been depressed and filled with regret. Her father disowned her when she ran off with a simple farmer. Ben Langston." He spat the name. "I placed her hair ribbon on a thicket at the cliff overlooking Trinity River Falls. Everyone thought she jumped to her death."

Gabrielle's legs went rubbery. She wanted to turn and run but had lost the power over her own body.

"She became my vampire bride. Over the next four decades, we built a coven more powerful than any other in the young United States."

"Did you force her?"

He turned and paced, ignoring the question. "Gustine brought her depression with her into her second coming." He stopped and smiled at her, but it was as if he were looking through her. "That's what we call it when a person is turned."

She glanced back at the portrait. In it she saw the sadness in her descendant's thin smile and jaded eyes.

"When I discovered Linna, I went about seducing her. She came easily enough." He said it with a callous flip of his hand, as though her sister's life meant nothing. Gabrielle had wondered how her sister could make such a wretched choice. Now she understood; Linna had been conned by his lies.

"So many young people today have a darkness in them that is easily cultivated. But after I turned her, I realized my mistake. For one thing, she looks nothing like Gustine. *You* could be her reincarnation."

Her stomach clenched. *I'm going to throw up.* Gabrielle was glad she hadn't eaten anything.

"Your sister inherited from Gustine what doctors now call bipolar disorder. But Linna says you never had it, Gabrielle. You were always strong and smart, the independent one despite your drunken father's abuse. And when I saw your photo, I knew. It wasn't Linna I wanted, but you."

Dear God, what have I gotten myself into?

Suddenly it all made sense, and she accepted it with a calmness bordering on insanity.

"What happened to her?"

He stopped and forcibly squared his shoulders, as though shrugging away great misery.

Liar! Gabrielle thought. You have no soul, thus can feel no pain!

"She walked out into the sun." A muscle in his jaw ticked. His Adam's apple rose and fell. "Looking back, I realize my decline began that year. I have had to struggle to rebuild my coven and my fortune, scraping along, restricted by the Sacred Laws." Spike clenched his fists. "It isn't fair. I should be able to take those who are lost. I give them new life, a new future. Pleasures beyond anything their mortal bodies are capable. Your great-great-great-grandmother was a unique case."

He turned and resumed pacing. "This world is overpopulated by slime. Mortal governors should rejoice in my ability to clean the filth from the streets. If we were allowed our way, there would be no crime, no murder. We would gladly purge the garbage from your society, leaving only the most deserving to exist." He stopped, drew a deep breath, and composed himself.

Gabrielle shook so hard her teeth were chattering. She rubbed her arms, feeling for the transmitter. It was still fixed just above the crook of her elbow. She imagined she felt the tiny panic trigger through her leather jacket. Not yet.

Oh Jesus, I'm so scared.

No, not yet, she convinced herself. Just a little longer. If I press it before I see the Palace, all this will be for nothing.

"With you by my side, I'll resume my pursuit for power."

She shook her head and backed away, unable to form words.

"You will become my bride of the second millennium."

Dear God. "You said I c-c-could leave when I wanted."

"The choice is still yours."

He advanced. She retreated, bumping into a Queen Anne table. Gabrielle nearly went down. She dodged around it.

"I'll *never* choose you!"

"I think you will." His eyes flashed with fire. "Come, Gabrielle. There is nothing as delicious as immortality. Nothing as passionate as bloodlust!"

A single thought filled her mind. Davin. His beautiful smile, the adoration in his soft brown eyes. *My passion for him outweighs all else.*

I will see him again.

"Your sister is dying at this very moment."

Gabrielle froze. "You said you would take me to her." *You lying bastard.* Two fat tears welled and spilled. Spike's expression didn't reveal even a sliver of sympathy.

"I will take you to her. But first, you must remove your coat."

"What?"

His eyes glowed red with anger. Her terror spiked when she saw his fangs protrude and extend. "Remove your coat, or I will tear it from you with my teeth."

She drew a deep breath and let it out in a shudder. Calling courage from some unknown part of her, she peeled the coat off her shoulders and reached behind to tug down the sleeves. It took three tries before her trembling fingers grasped the cuff.

Spike advanced in a blur. One moment, across the room, the next, directly before her. He tore off her blouse like it was tissue paper. Gabrielle screamed, her first instinct to cover her nakedness.

He hissed like an angry cat as he snatched her wrist and jerked her arm up. He ripped the transmitter off, glaring at her with bloodred eyes glowing like twin lasers.

Chapter Eight

"Nice try!"

She barely registered the hissed words.

How in sweet heaven did he know?

Spike tossed the transmitter. Her gaze shot to the person who caught it. Seconds passed as her confused mind skipped over what she couldn't believe.

Daniel stood in the doorway, leaning casually against the jamb.

He grinned. "Hey, Gabby."

The next instant, she grasped with perfect clarity. "Betrayer!"

Daniel shrugged. "What can I say? My father died a shriveled ruin of a man in a fog of Alzheimer's. No way I was gonna go through that. I want immortality, but the Guardians work too damned hard. Spike offered me a life of opulent indulgence. I'll be a prince with a brothel of slaves. That's too good to pass up."

"You can be royalty as well," Spike growled in an inhuman voice. "Be my bride, Gabrielle. Become my queen. Rule with me!"

She jerked out of his grip. "Never!"

His demonic smile grew. "So spirited. I knew you were the one." He turned to the traitor. Another man had joined Daniel in the doorway. "Take the transmitter to the warehouse," Spike commanded. "Do like we planned. By the time they realize they're following a dead end, she'll be mine."

* * * * *

"They're moving again," Faewen said. The group crowded around the table, staring at the device, all save Davin, who paced angrily back and forth.

He stopped at Faewen's words and faced the group. "Take to the sky," he growled. "Now!"

"Wait!" Faewen held up her hand. "Something's wrong." She shoved out of her chair and looked around, her eyes skipping over each person.

"Where's Daniel?"

Blank faces stared back. Finally Evetta spoke up. "I haven't seen him in about an hour."

Davin's heart dropped out of his chest. He locked gazes with Faewen. Her eyes reflected bone-deep horror.

"He's betrayed us."

* * * * *

Spike dragged Gabrielle down the stairs to his cellar with Daniel trailing behind like a dumb puppy. She pulled against him, stumbling down the shadowy steps while horrific visions of monstrous torture devices raced through her mind's last shred of sanity.

Silver spots of light popped in and out of her vision; all coherent thoughts of argument fled.

Instead of a wicked room of evil, the cellar was that of a typical house. The water heater stood in one corner. An old bicycle leaned against a wall beneath a painted-out

shutter window, and on the other side a pile of sagging cardboard boxes stood against the wall, various dates written on them with a wide-tipped marker. No torture devices, no shackles, no coffin.

Spike dragged her across the cement floor to a doorway with a heavy wooden bolt and thick black rivets. It looked like a relic from a medieval castle.

"Please, let me go. Please."

Davin, I'm so sorry. Would she ever see his handsome face again? Delight in his charming smile or join along with the deep rumble of his laughter? Or would she be his mortal enemy, a vile, bloodsucking thing preying on innocents and forevermore afraid of a simple drop of golden sunshine?

Daniel slid the bolt open and hauled the heavy door wide. Gabrielle planted her feet.

"I thought you wanted to see your sister," Spike snapped. "Well? What will it be, Gabrielle?"

She jerked against his iron-solid grip on her wrist. "You're going to bite me."

He laughed. "I promise you, I'm not going to bite you unless you ask me to."

"I've changed my mind. Let me go!"

"That I cannot do. I'm afraid you are my prisoner until you allow me to turn you, or your sister dies. I guarantee you will make the choice of your own accord."

The heavy door slammed shut, and for a terrifying moment, they were plunged into darkness. An overhead chain of bare bulbs flickered on with a buzz of electricity. They were in a crudely dug tunnel. Daniel's footsteps padded through the worn earth behind her.

A rat scurried along the edge, squeaking in fear, cut off from its own escape.

"Yeesh," Daniel said. "Get away, nasty thing."

"Buck up," Spike snapped. "Gabrielle's not even afraid of rats, are you, love?"

She didn't answer. She'd always believed rodents were cute, and this one signified a last graspable sliver of normalcy.

Spike set off at a fast pace, dragging her deeper and deeper under the city. They twisted through a maze of tunnels with arms that branched in all directions. The temperature dropped to chilling, and Gabrielle's sense of direction turned upside down.

* * * * *

Davin grabbed the device.

"There are two signals." He met Faewen's eyes. "You suspected."

"Yes." She turned to Molin. "I didn't think you would believe me. I knew you trusted him."

"You should have told us," Davin growled. "You've endangered Gabrielle's life!" He stepped forward. Rolf and Molin both jumped between him and Faewen.

"She very well may have *saved* Gabrielle's life, Davin," Molin said. "She's tricked Spike into thinking he has the upper hand."

"And Daniel's inadvertently become a double agent," Rolf added.

Faewen's frown was one of hurt. Davin knew his anger toward his centuries-old friend stung, but he didn't have time to worry about the female's feelings now. Gabrielle had been lost!

His worst fears had become reality.

"Which do we follow?" He clenched his fists, wanting to smash something.

"Since we suspect he's taken over a large building, I believe this transmitter, headed toward the bay," Balin said, pointing to the blinking dot on his monitoring device. "The Palace is probably in a renovated warehouse."

A moment's silence hung.

Wendell spoke up. "Before the German vampire we captured last month killed himself, he told us others were coming. The warehouse district provides the easiest access in and out."

Davin looked at the device as a war of uncertainty waged in his heart. "This transmitter is headed to the financial district."

"Down Grant. Probably to the empty club on Market," Manfred surmised.

Davin wasn't convinced. Something told him they were wrong. "He could just as easily be in a high-rise."

Everyone looked to Molin, as they always did in times of crisis. Though his gut instinct told him Montgomery Street, Davin would trust Molin's judgment.

"I believe Balin is right," Molin decreed. "Faewen, Rolf, you go with Vance and Manfred to the wharf. Brandon and I will follow the second beacon with Davin and Wendell. Faewen, call the others and tell them to spread out. We need all possible points watched carefully. Let them know the vampires are on to us. There's probably more than one trap out there."

Davin sprinted to the back door, unfolding his wings as he ran. He burst outside and leaped into the air, transforming despite his restrictive clothing. He gave a powerful beat with his wings and sliced into the night sky, letting loose a guttural roar from the very beast deep within him.

* * * * *

It seemed they walked for hours. Fatigue slipped over her senses, smothering the fear.

"Let go of me. I can walk by myself." She jerked her wrist free. "Do you actually think I'm going to try and run away from you down here?"

Spike stopped. He held up his hand in mock surrender. "As you wish."

He turned and resumed the lead. Gabrielle tossed a glare over her shoulder. "You'll get what you deserve for this," she hissed at Daniel.

"Keep moving." Daniel shoved her shoulder.

In a blur, Spike had him pinned to the wall, his feet dangling inches off the ground. "Touch her again," he hissed, nose to nose, "and I'll kill you myself."

He dropped the traitor. Daniel backed away with terrified eyes. "Yeah. Sorry, boss."

The crippling terror returned in a thunderclap. She knew at that moment Daniel was to be sorely disappointed with his reward. Was he such a fool he couldn't see it himself?

The tunnel merged with another and then ended at a steel door in a wall of concrete. Spike unlocked a dead bolt with a key and led them into the sewers. They walked on a narrow ledge along a trench running with foul-smelling, greenish liquid.

"Where are you taking me?" Gabrielle finally demanded. She couldn't take the waiting any longer. It felt like they were walking through limbo.

He stopped at a set of twin doors and smiled. "We're here." These were locked with an electronic keypad much like the face of a push-button phone. He punched in a code, and the locks released.

Four-three-five-five. The corresponding letters on the keypad spelled out *HELL*.

Gabrielle shuddered.

They entered an underground service hallway of what she suspected was a skyscraper. She rubbed her arms against the cold. Through another set of locked doors, they entered a hallway painted completely black and lit with eerie blue lights. Muffled beats of heavy bass music carried from all directions. Spike entered the same code on another keypad and let them into a large, luxurious office furnished entirely in black and chrome.

"Welcome to Shangri-la." Spike's eyes flashed with glee.

Gabrielle surveyed the opulent office as Daniel strode to the far side of the room and opened an elegant bar hutch. He poured himself a tumbler full of something amber and drank it down fast.

Oh yeah. He knows.

Spike sat behind a colossal desk and rifled through one of the drawers. "Would you like something to drink, Gabrielle? Perhaps something to eat? Anything your heart desires can be found within these walls."

Like she'd drink anything offered to her down here. Not bloody likely!

"My. Sister." Cottony weight pushed on her ears, as though entering Spike's private domain signified her last steps. Gabrielle stopped and rooted herself in the middle of the room as fear crushed in from all sides.

Daniel poured a second glass and collapsed into a plush leather chair near Spike's desk.

Two additional chairs and another couch faced the wall where chains with cuffs were mounted nearly ceiling high. The office was clearly used as a private entertaining area as well. Or punishing area. She shivered as she wondered what illicit interactions had been conducted here.

"Where are we?" She swallowed when her voice trembled.

Spike gave a half smile. He liked the sound of fear in her voice. "Precisely? Forty-two Montgomery, the old Century Trust building. Over the years I've gradually taken control of the leases, and last year, I purchased it outright. With no tenants to evict, I was hardly noticed."

He stood and moved around his desk. "This office and the party rooms outside are what used to be the lower garage levels. Above us, twenty-six floors host fifty-two luxury apartments. Vampires from all over the world travel here for" —he opened his tented fingers graciously—"a vacation of sorts. The party rages here twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When they tire, or choose to take their favorite slave to a

more private spot, each apartment provides sleeping quarters completely light- and soundproof. No vampire ever need fear the sunlight."

A shiver rolled from head to toe. A heartbeat later, the words registered. He'd said "slave."

He turned back to his desk and punched a button on the intercom. "How is Miss Langston?"

A male voice crackled an answer. "Bitchy as ever."

Spike chuckled.

"I want to see her."

"All in good time, Gabrielle." He crossed the room toward her. Her heart rate sped up with each step that brought this unfathomable monster nearer. "I have many wonderful things to show you."

He placed his arm over her shoulders. She cringed underneath his touch.

"Where are my manners? First, let me get you something to wear. You must be freezing." He went back to his desk, leaned over, and buzzed again. "Send Gladiolas with something for Ms. Langston to wear. Miss *Gabrielle* Langston."

A moment later, a beautiful woman wearing a sheer gossamer swath of cloth stepped through a door at the rear of the office.

Her gown looked like an erotic twist on the Roman toga. The shimmering silvery cloth was almost entirely see-through, revealing the pink spots of her nipples and the dark golden thatch of hair atop her thighs. Her long blonde hair hung straight down her back. She wore intricate gold scrolls around her upper arms and thick gold bands on her wrists and ankles. As she neared, Gabrielle realized there were rings attached to them. They were restraints.

She smiled at Gabrielle and unfolded a satiny garment of smooth white fabric.

Gabrielle swallowed, sick with indecision. Had she not been almost naked and freezing cold, she would have never agreed to wear this ludicrous costume. But for the last two hours she'd worn nothing on top but her bra. She was anxious to cover up.

It was also a Roman-type toga, sewn only atop the shoulders and from the armpits to her hips. The skirts reached her feet, two swaths of fabric slit all the way up the sides.

Gladiolas placed it over Gabrielle's head and secured the waist with a thin belt of woven gold strands. Fortunately the top billowed loosely, draping in large ripples between her breasts.

"Gladiolas has sandals for you. Please remove your jeans."

"Not," Gabrielle snapped.

"If you prefer, I could remove them for you."

"Fucking try it."

"You wouldn't be hiding another transmitter, would you?"

"Why don't you ask your rat?"

Spike seemed to check his anger. She could see it lingering behind a very thin barrier. What the hell are you doing? she asked herself. Don't provoke him!

But she was at the point of breaking, her adrenaline long expired. She'd experienced so much terror over the last few hours, she didn't have any energy left to resist.

Gladiolas waited. Gabrielle blasted a sigh. She kicked off her running shoes and pushed her jeans over her hips, then hitched her panties back into place.

Slung back in the deep leather chair, Daniel gave a low chuckle. He watched her with hungry, half-lidded eyes. He brought the nearly empty glass to his lips and drained it, ice cubes tinkling.

Just wait, traitor, Gabrielle thought. You'll get yours. Third-rate slimeballs like you always do.

Spike rounded the desk and examined her, arms wide. "Lovely. Simply lovely." He grinned wickedly. "You are a true gem, Gabrielle. Your panties are showing, though."

"Not a chance in hell. That's where we are, so the answer is definitely no."

Spike laughed, delighted. "Very well. They're pretty, so I'm glad to allow them."

Gabrielle wished she'd been wearing granny panties. She realized glumly the thin-strapped, flowery lace only complemented the white toga.

"Will there be anything more, master?" Gladiolas asked him.

He opened his mouth to dismiss her, then seemed to change his mind. "Gladiolas, bare your breasts."

The girl smiled and happily slipped the gossamer gown over her shoulders, then peeled it down her body, where it draped over the belt at her waist. She had pert, upturned breasts. Her nipples hardened in the cool air.

"You are a gift to my new queen, Gabrielle. She is your mistress now."

Anger rolled through Gabrielle. She wanted no part of his sickness!

"Gabrielle, make your desires known."

"Fuck you."

"Very well. Gladiolas, come here."

Gabrielle grabbed the girl's arm. "That's not what I meant!"

Daniel snickered.

She brought Gladiolas back to face her. "Gladiolas, I grant your freedom. You are free to leave this place."

"I do not wish to leave," the girl responded in a tiny voice. She couldn't have been more than twenty.

Gabrielle's gaze slid to Spike, too late to hide her confusion. He stared smugly back. "You see? No one is here against their will."

She frowned. "Like you didn't pour Tourin down her throat."

"Gladiolas, did we force you to drink the Tourin?"

"No, master. I chose to drink it. I like how it makes me feel, and I enjoy serving you."

He waved her away, smug. "See to our guest. He seems to have an uncomfortable erection."

The girl padded over to Daniel, knelt between his spread thighs, and unzipped his pants.

"No! I don't want her to do that," Gabrielle protested.

"Gladiolas, do you wish to suck Daniel's cock?"

"I would rather suck yours, master."

Spike laughed. "Perhaps later, dear."

"Then his will have to do."

Spike turned back to Gabrielle. "You see? While she is delightfully obedient, she does nothing she doesn't wish to do."

"Enough! Do you think torturing me like this will make me respect you? This is a freak show!"

Spike's glee turned wild. "You haven't seen anything yet, my queen."

He took her by the arms and turned her toward the back wall of the office. Gabrielle shrank from his touch. After a flicker of anger fused his brow, Spike walked by himself to the edge of an immense set of curtains and flipped a switch on the wall. They drew open on electric tracks.

"Behold. Club Exotica."

Gabrielle gasped. They stared through a giant window of tinted glass, a one-way mirror probably, at a vast nightclub. It spread so far she couldn't see its end. It looked like a private Hollywood club for A-list movie stars, as lavish and modern as anything she ever could have imagined.

A dance floor took up the center, crowded with dancers who gyrated to the music coming through the thick glass as muffled beats. Tables lined the sides, protected from the floor by an art deco-style chrome railing. A bar ran the length of the far wall, its ceiling-high mirror decorated with a scrollwork of cool blue and green neon lights. They cast bluish light on those nearby, making them look like zombies.

Intermixed into the vast room were raised and sunken seating areas where people, *vampires*, lounged on plush white leather furniture. Exotic drinks sat on cocktail tables that looked like sculptures of modern art.

The Palace? But if so, where were the slaves? Gabrielle could see nothing that resembled a crime.

"Linna is here?"

She turned to find Spike staring down at her with longing. The intensity of his gaze felt like a lead weight.

"She is in the Playground." He held out his hand. "Come. I'll take you to her."

She turned around at the sound of slurping from the back of the room. Gladiolas knelt between Daniel's legs, her head bobbing up and down. Daniel laid his head back against the chair and let out a low groan.

Gabrielle turned away. Spike still held out his hand.

"Daniel, join us when you're finished."

"Yeah. Oh yeah. Gimme a sec. Oh yeah."

The poor girl was being raped without even realizing it.

Gabrielle understood she was an addict under the influence of a drug more powerful than heroin and rescuing her wouldn't be as simple as granting her freedom. She vowed that when the Guardians seized this place, she would make sure Gladiolas was given the best care.

Against her better judgment, she took the vampire's hand. He smiled, gazing at her small hand in his almost wistfully, before leading her through a door into a small vestibule. A second door opened into the club.

At once, thundering music assaulted her. Flailing spotlights swung over them, giving the place an otherworldly feel.

She glanced back as they passed the window they'd just been looking through. It was indeed a one-way mirror. In the reflection, she understood just how massively Spike towered over her. The reflection. The vampire possessed a reflection.

She hated acknowledging that he was right. *"Not everything you see on television is accurate."*

They passed one of the seating areas where sexily dressed men and women lounged. All eyes followed them. A female vampire showed her fangs and hissed. In all absurdity, Gabrielle found herself tucking closer to Spike.

"Panache, don't be jealous," Spike admonished playfully.

"She stinks like gargoyles."

The humor left his face. "And soon she'll be your queen. Be nice, unless you want to find yourself dismembered and stored for eternity in little glass jars."

He pulled Gabrielle through the crowd. Like a demonic Moses, each step Spike took brought an instant part to the throng of vampires.

Gabrielle felt like a bug under a microscope. No, strike that. More like a plate of meat in a room full of hungry lions. From the corner of her eye, she noticed Daniel hurrying to catch up while tucking his shirt back into his pants.

Once past the bar, Spike pressed the call button for the elevator. The doors opened to a plush cab. Inside, a man and woman kissed passionately. The woman stopped, having just noticed them. She wore a light brown Chanel suit with fur trim at the wrists and lapels and Prada heels. A stylish choker and matching earrings Gabrielle would bet were real rubies glittered in the cab's gentle lights.

The man was shirtless, wearing shiny black pants made of some strange, glossy material that clung to every bump and ridge and black leather collars at his neck and wrists. Each cuff had a heavy silver ring.

Twin trickles of blood ran from the man's throat! Gabrielle bit back her distaste. Nothing she'd seen in the movies, no fake, candy-apple red Hollywood special effects, had prepared her for the sight of free-flowing, *real* blood. It was vivid and gruesome, with pus and flecks of torn flesh.

"Is this not the Playground?" the woman asked.

Gabrielle planted her feet, but Spike only chuckled and pulled her inside the cab. Daniel hurried in after them. He cleared his throat and straightened the jacket of his cheap suit.

"That's two. Allow me." Spike pressed the button. "Are you enjoying yourself, Lady Chantal?"

"Mmm, ever so much," the vampire woman purred. "Such scrumptious slaves!"

Gabrielle's attention perked. Slaves.

The ride was blissfully short. The doors opened to the next level of the renovated garage and a room just as wide and endless as the floor below. This one was decorated in bloodred and deep gold.

A hypnotizing beat of sensual music throbbed. The massive circular columns supporting the building had been decorated with flowing velvet and gleaming gold chains. At each one, three or more young men and women in sexually suggestive costumes were chained to solid rings embedded in the cement.

Gabrielle's heart beat so fast it pounded against her ribs.

She had found the Palace.

Chapter Nine

Daniel, standing in front, stepped out first. Spike pulled Gabrielle along. The vampire and her snack exited and turned left, disappearing from sight.

Stunned by the carnal sight stretching endlessly before her, Gabrielle couldn't find the strength to resist.

Spike drew her close to whisper in her ear. "This is the Playground." He gestured over his macabre domain with a sweep of his hand. "Vampires come from all over the world to indulge in delicacies they wouldn't dare to anywhere else."

Plush red carpeting stretched into oblivion. Bizarre sex machines were interspersed among raised and sunken areas much like the club downstairs, only these were stages, filled with pillows, chairs, lounges, and apparatuses designed to restrain the vampire's victims.

Spike pointed to a fat Asian man chained spread-eagled in a wrought iron rack. Four young slaves, two women and two men, flogged him with what looked like leather pom-poms on long handles.

"That man you see there is a vampire leader from China. He shipped himself here in a cargo container."

Gabrielle had heard something like thirty thousand containers fell off freighters into the ocean every year. Why couldn't his have been one?

"He's over two thousand years old," Spike went on. "He believes himself the most powerful vampire alive. Soon, he will answer to me. Already I hold him captive by his desires, providing indulgences he wouldn't dare seek outside my Palace."

The Asian vampire's long, thin cock strained upward, the pink tip touching the rotund curve of his belly. He leaned his head back and groaned with each strike.

"The trick is learning your enemy's weaknesses. They are easy to control if you hold the right bargaining chip."

He led her into the decadent Playground. The slaves flogging the Asian vampire stepped aside and released him from his bonds. Stark naked, he walked toward them and greeted Spike with a bow.

Spike stood over the room with regal pride. He stopped at the edge of a wide, sunken circle. The carpet stopped for red tiled steps that led down to the tiled floor, similar to a shallow Roman amphitheater.

All around, vampires stopped their indulgences and turned their attention to Spike.

"Guests, friends, you visit at a truly momentous time. I have found my bride of the new millennium. I introduce you to my queen, Gabrielle. Over the coming months, you are sure to see evidence of her truly remarkable powers!"

He threw his hands into the air. Applause thundered, echoing off the walls and ceiling. Gabrielle stared in awe, too frightened to defy him in this endless auditorium of bloodsucking parasites. There had to be hundreds of them.

"Already the Sacred Laws cannot touch me. Under my rule, they will drift into obscurity. The Guardians will become obsolete. My coven shall become the most powerful vampire kingdom in the world!"

The guests roared with monstrous glee. Gabrielle covered her ears with her hands. The Asian vampire and several others glanced around, seemingly hesitant to join in the revelry.

"In celebration of this momentous event, I offer you a truly decadent indulgence. Feast!"

Spike whirled around, grabbed Daniel, and hurled him into the pit. Daniel screamed as he soared through the air. His terrified cry cut off as he smacked the hard tile floor. He tumbled head over heels until he sprawled to a twisted stop. He struggled to get up, but his arm was broken.

Gabrielle stared, numb with horror. For a terrifying moment silence hung, broken only by the gentle pulse of erotic music piped through the vast Playground.

Then, with an inhuman shriek, a vampire female leaped into the pit, prompting several others. Gabrielle screamed and turned away. Spike grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to look.

Thankfully, she could see nothing beneath the writhing mass of naked vampires. Daniel's screams peaked, then abruptly cut off. Shiny liquid dribbled toward a center drain, mercifully disguised on the red tile. A scrap of fabric flew free. Gabrielle whimpered as she recognized the shredded khaki that had been his suit, now soaked red.

The stench of blood rose, making her gag.

"Why?" she cried. She covered her mouth with a hand. Her fingers itched to press into her hair to push the panic button on the transmitter hidden in her braid.

Not yet. Linna is somewhere in here. I have to find her first!

"He could not be trusted," Spike said simply. "A traitor is a traitor is a traitor."

He glanced down at her. His eyes held no emotion. "Fret not. I promised him he wouldn't die shriveled and confused."

From the shallow pit came horrendous sounds of tearing flesh and gobbling mouths. Gabrielle's stomach started to revolt.

"Come, you're anxious to see Linna."

He took her by the wrist, and Gabrielle stumbled blindly behind him, forcing herself to remember that Daniel was a rat and had only gotten what she'd hoped for an hour earlier. Still, he was a human being. He had made mistakes, but no one deserved to die such a horrible death.

They passed yet another sunken arena, this one filled with pillows and blankets made of sumptuous fabrics.

A naked male vampire sprawled back on a narrow chaise. A slave girl, naked except for gold shackles at her wrists and ankles identical to those Gladiolas had worn, straddled his hips, humping up and down.

Gabrielle couldn't avert her eyes, even as she continued on and received an unobstructed view of the girl's wide open sex and the long cock she drew in and out of herself. Her vampire captor seized her ass and forced her to move faster, squeezing deep fingerprints into her plump cheeks.

Gabrielle stumbled to a halt as another vampire joined the party. He crawled up the chaise and mounted the girl from behind. She twisted around, uttering a surprised cry, and Gabrielle saw bloody pinpricks on the side of her breast where the first vampire had fed. The girl's face revealed pure delight. She squeezed her eyes shut and shrieked again as the second vampire pushed roughly into her ass. Both vampires humped out a dual rhythm, selfishly taking their fill.

"Does the sight arouse you?" Spike asked, suddenly intimately close.

A third vampire strode into the sunken room and stood at the front of the chaise. The girl turned and reached for his cock. She guided it to her lips and sucked the full length greedily into her throat.

"Gabrielle, I offer you a world of limitless pleasures. Any desire you have will be fulfilled. As my queen, you'll be adored and revered. Vampires and slaves alike will

beg for the chance to serve your every whim. Whether you choose to enjoy such a show or take part yourself, nothing will be denied you."

* * * * *

"Davin!" Faewen beat powerful strokes to catch up to him. "Davin, wait."

She held her GPS device out for him to see, even though he held his own in his right hand.

"The panic button just went off."

Davin cut his wings and hovered. He looked at the device. Sure enough, the signal at the wharf had turned red and blinked twice as fast as the other beacon.

He shook his head. "I have a bad feeling about this." The wrong choice, and Gabrielle was a dead woman. Or worse, undead.

"We shouldn't just fly haphazardly through the sky without knowing where we're going," Molin pressed. "We told Gabrielle to hit the panic button as soon as she saw the Palace."

"The other beacon hit the vicinity of the abandoned club site on Market and stopped," Faewen cut in. "Someone took it there and dropped it. Probably Daniel."

"Or a bunch of bloodsuckers waiting at a trap," Wendell said in a growling voice.

"Yes, one of the locations is definitely a trap," Molin warned the group. "Be on your guard."

Davin gritted his teeth. "Faewen, dammit, I wish you had told me you were going to do this. It could have been planned better."

"It's a good thing she did," Molin said. "Otherwise we'd be flying blind."

"It was a last-minute idea." Faewen's voice was heavy with worry. "And I couldn't say anything in front of Daniel."

"What else could she have done?" Rolf asked, defending his wife. "There was no way to incorporate a secret signal."

"You should have told me."

"Davin, I'm sorry."

"Arguing among ourselves isn't going to help Gabrielle. We need to make a decision." Molin tossed an angry glare over them all. "I agree with Faewen; the wharf is the most likely place. Spike would have his pick of countless facilities just perfect for a vampire's lair."

"The same could be said for any part of this city." Davin was losing his patience, and precious time ticked away too fast. "Everything he's done so far has been in the heart of the city, near better feeding grounds."

Faewen looked at her device. "Davin, put your priorities with the panic button. If this is Gabrielle, she's in danger. If she's at the other location, she hasn't hit it yet."

"All right!" He clenched both hands into fists. "The wharf then." He flapped ahead with the others toward the bay. Faewen was right; the panic button should be his first priority.

But why did his gut, and his heart, tell him he was headed the wrong way?

* * * * *

Spike waited as she watched the enthralling display. Gabrielle reminded herself the girl was not willing, simply confused. But if such a thing were consensual between all parties, what an encounter it would be.

Gabrielle shook the insanity away. Fantasies were one thing, but her reality was one man.

Davin. She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. So easily she could dig her finger into the braid and press the panic button.

First, my sister. Then your demise, bloodsucker.

"They're hurting her. She just doesn't know it."

He smiled at her like she was a naive child. "Any injuries they cause will be instantly healed." His smile grew at her obvious confusion. "A vampire's saliva possesses healing powers. Additionally, the tongue can transform like a snake's and travel deep inside the body. You should experience it while you're still human. I'm told the sensation is really quite exquisite."

Gabrielle shuddered, horrified. "No, thank you."

"While you're still human." His belief she would choose him was as clear as her understanding Spike did not intend to let her go.

She tore her gaze away from the raucous sex.

Wearing a satisfied smile, Spike took her hand and led her past countless, unimaginable displays of sexual bondage to a private alcove far in the corner of the immense room of sin.

Speechless, the edges of her sanity fraying, Gabrielle sank into a deep leather couch. *He believes I'm caving. The surprise will be yours, demon.*

"Bring out Linna," he commanded another male wearing the standard uniform of shiny, clingy pants and collar restraints at his wrists and throat.

The man disappeared behind a heavy velvet drape, then returned moments later pulling a large metal rack on wheels. It looked like a medieval torture device. As it cleared the curtained-off area, Gabrielle gasped.

Linna hung naked, spread-eagled, her wrists chained to the upper corners, and her feet chained to the lower. She writhed in agony, eyes squeezed shut.

"Linna!"

Gabrielle shoved from the couch, but Spike pulled her back.

"She's dying, Gabrielle. She's starving to death."

Hope soared to her heart. Linna hadn't fed!

Just as quickly, Spike dashed it. "She has a taste for human blood. Nothing else will quench her."

She shot a look at him. "She's tasted it?"

He eased back into the couch, his face a mask of triumphant arrogance. He crossed his legs. "The Guardians told you that if she hadn't yet fed, she might be cured. They are wrong; she has been turned, and that is the cure. She is vastly superior to the mass of cattle that makes up this planet's population. No more illness, no more frailty, no old age. Linna is a vampire now, for all eternity. Unless she is destroyed."

A tremor rattled her from head to toe. "What do you mean 'destroyed'?"

"She can be killed, Gabrielle. Let starve to death slowly and painfully. Or she can be saved."

Gabrielle turned back to her sister. Linna still didn't seem aware of her. She twisted and struggled against the binds, seemingly driven by some inner pain more excruciating than anything external.

"She's so hungry," Spike said calmly. "Join me, and she becomes a duchess to your rule as queen. Refuse me, and she dies. Take your time, Gabrielle. I think a small part of Linna enjoys the pain."

"Help her. Please."

Spike waited a long moment, intentionally torturing her. Finally, he motioned to the shirtless man. The slave went to Linna and held a shot glass to her lips. Gabrielle recognized the weird white and blue liquid. Tourin.

Linna stirred as the glass touch her lips. She lifted her head, seeking. Once she recognized the concoction, she gulped it down greedily.

It seemed to awaken her. She jerked against the chains, gasping like a wounded animal. Her eyes opened and flashed amber. "Come here," she demanded of the slave.

He glanced at Spike.

"Come here and fuck me, you scum-sucking piece of shit. I'll tear out your throat when I get out of here. Come here, damn you. Obey me!"

Spike tipped his head in a single curt nod.

The slave turned and released his zipper. He shoved his latex pants to his knees and stepped forward between Linna's spread legs. He grabbed her hips and shoved into her.

"Ah, yes. Give it to me, minion. Do as I say, and I'll spare your worthless hide."

Spike's fierce grip on Gabrielle's wrist turned gentle. His fingers caressed the pulse at her radial artery.

She jerked away. "Don't touch me!" She covered her face with her hands but couldn't block out the sounds of Linna's chains snapping with the rhythm of the slave's thrusting.

"I wonder...how strong is your willpower? How long will you let your sister suffer?"

She shot a look at him.

"The Tourin satisfies her only as much as methadone to a heroin addict, yet with one nasty side effect I dare say methadone doesn't possess; it makes her blood boil with lust. The sex will satisfy her for a short time, but soon she'll be just as hungry as she was before."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I told you, I'm giving you a choice. Your sister's life for your own."

The slave grunted. He gave a final, jerking thrust, then withdrew. A glistening bead of cum trickled down Linna's thigh.

Linna screeched like an enraged animal. "Don't you stop until I tell you! I'm not finished with you, vermin. Come back here. Fuck me, you bastard!"

Her gaze drifted over to them on the couch.

"Spike, please. Make him do it right. I need it so bad. Haven't I been good to you? Make him fuck my ass, please. I'll do whatever you want."

"Linna," Gabrielle breathed out.

Her sister's drunken gaze slid over and found her. "Gabrielle."

She pushed from the couch, and this time Spike let her go. Her heart broke as she stood beside her sister and felt the pain radiating from her.

"Gabrielle, I told you to go home."

"I'm not leaving without you." Tears spilled down her cheeks. She turned to Spike. "Bring her down, please."

He stood, grinning triumphantly. "Bare your throat to me, Gabrielle."

"Don't do it," Linna whispered. "You don't want this life."

Gabrielle turned from them both and brought her hands to her cheeks. "I...I don't know. I can't decide under so much pressure. I don't feel well." She dragged a hand to her brow, then smoothed it over her hair. Gabrielle slipped a finger into the weave of her braid and pressed the panic button.

* * * * *

The beat of his wings echoed off the walls of the cavernous warehouse. The only light came from widely spaced sodium vapor lamps hung high at the ceiling. Their milky beams spread conelike into the murky darkness, yet didn't seem to penetrate all the way to the floor, as if the darkness were an evil, living thing that refused to surrender.

Davin and Wendell landed on the rough gravel and tucked their wings, but didn't absorb them. Davin held his crossbow at ready, expecting bloodsuckers to flow from the shadows at any minute.

Eerie stillness descended, thick and heavy. The signal had turned to a solid red, indicating they were right on top of the transmitter.

This couldn't be the Palace. While it had been renovated windowless and lightproof and the main freight doors sealed with a vampire hex, there was nothing here to indicate a twenty-four-hour rave had ever existed within these walls.

He scuffed a loose patch of gravel that looked recently disturbed with the toe of his boot. The tracking device emerged beneath two inches of dirt.

Tremors of rage started deep inside Davin. Why hadn't he followed his heart? "Dammit. I knew this was the wrong place."

"Or the right place, depending how you look at it, Guardian."

Davin heard the vampire's quill hiss through air. He dived right as Wendell dived left. The quill hit the rough earth and sank deep where he'd just been standing.

He flipped in midair and landed on his back, aimed at the steel rafters. He loosed an arrow. The two vampires in the rafters were already at flight, but his arrow hit caught one in the thigh. It let loose an unholy shriek as blue flames crawled over its body. The beast exploded into tendrils of smoke.

Wendell's arrow missed the other vampire. Two more came from the far end and two from over the doorway where they'd entered.

Davin quickly reloaded and shot a second demon out of the air. Its partner crashed into his shoulder and sent him five feet into the air. They both hit the rough gravel floor and tumbled. Davin dropped his crossbow, but the vampire had dropped his too. Transformed into its demon form, it sprang to a crouch and hissed with its batlike face.

Davin drew the blade from the sheath at his thigh. He cut twice, left over right, then right over left, severing both wings before the creature could get to its feet. It shrieked in pain. The limbs would grow back, if the creature survived. Davin made sure it wouldn't. He spun, bringing the blade around in an arc. The demon's head bounced to the ground and rolled away.

Faewen and Rolf and two Guardians he recognized from a neighboring sect rushed in from the rear doorway. Manfred, Balin, and Molin came in from the front.

Vampires emerged from the shadows like cockroaches. To his left, a blast of blue petered out into smoking embers. One of the sodium vapor lights exploded with a spray of sparks. Four Guardians burst through the sealed-up windows high near the roof, letting in streams of moonlight. This place was no longer safe for vampires during the day.

Manfred took a quill to the thigh. He roared in pain but managed to quill the attacking vampire as it soared toward him. The beast exploded in blue sparks that sprayed over him.

Davin ran to his side and severed the head of a vampire who dropped from the ceiling to attack the injured Guardian.

"Are you all right?"

"I will be when I get this damn —"

Davin ripped it out.

"Sonofabitch!"

"You're welcome."

Manfred collapsed. He twisted as he fell and loosed an arrow toward the ceiling at the same instant Davin sent one to the rear of the warehouse. Two vampires exploded.

The building teemed with attacking creatures. Blood sprayed, blue fire erupted, and unholy shrieks bounced off the walls. The undead creatures outnumbered them, but lost the odds in their weakness for holy water. It seemed when one fell, two more appeared.

"These are sacrifices," Davin growled. "Their only purpose is to distract us. Cover me." He flipped out his cell phone. An arrow shot the phone out of his hand, narrowly missing his flesh.

"Davin!" Faewen's scream rang through the vast warehouse. All the way at the front doors, she held up the GPS device. "The second panic button!"

* * * * *

A minute passed. Another. Five stretched into ten, and still no sign of the Guardians.

Gabrielle's fear was not for herself, but for them. Knowing about the transmitter, Spike had set a trap. She collapsed into a deep love seat, leaving Spike to return to the couch, alone.

Linna struggled against her bonds, making horrible sounds like the hyenas Gabrielle had once seen on a nature program. Her sister hung naked and spread for all the room to see like a wretched sacrifice. Should the Guardians' arrows begin to fly, Linna was dangerously exposed.

"Take all the time you need, my dear." The gleeful ring in Spike's voice proved he enjoyed Linna's suffering. "She will live for months like that, withering away in exquisite agony."

"Master, may I feed her?" The young man who'd thrust himself into Linna at Spike's command stood nearby. Shirtless and with those shackles at his throat and wrists, he looked like some sort of deviant Chippendale.

"Two drops," Spike allowed. "To whet her appetite."

The young man made a small slit in his wrist and brought it to Linna's lips. She tried to refuse at first, but once she tasted the blood, she went at him hungrily.

"Enough," Spike commanded almost immediately. Linna screamed as the sustenance was removed. The young man moved away and bowed toward Spike.

Gabrielle closed her eyes. *Davin, where are you?*

By now the Guardians knew about the two transmitters—Faewen would have explained their secret plan the minute the signals split. She only prayed they anticipated a trap and were on their guard.

"Gabrielle..."

Her name, whispered on her sister's lips, cut into Gabrielle like a knife. She rose and went to Linna's side. The slave stood nearby, watching her as though he didn't trust her. She looked into his eyes, surprised to find they weren't dead like everyone else's around here. In them she found concern, and she would swear, worry.

"Gabrielle, save yourself." Linna's brow furrowed, and tears welled in her eyes.

Vampires can cry, she thought. I never would have guessed.

"Get out while you can. Leave me. Let me die. I deserve it. I just want to die."

"I should," she snapped. Gabrielle was running out of ideas to stall, and pretending anger was a good way to shift gears toward resistance. "This is all your fault, just like everything was always your fault. When we were growing up, it was always 'poor Linna.' You've dragged me into your trouble more times than I could count, and this is no different."

"Gabrielle, I'm so sorry."

She bit her lip, regretful she had to speak to Linna this way. "It's a little late for that, don't you think?"

"Take it easy," the slave said.

Gabrielle shot a glare at him. "What the fuck?"

"Don't you dare talk back to her!" Linna shrieked. "Bow to my sister, you worm!"

"Oh, this is getting juicy," Spike said.

"My apologies, mistress." The slave bowed his head.

"Don't even talk to me," Gabrielle spat. "What right do you have to interfere between me and my sister?"

"I..." He stopped and glanced at Spike. "None, Mistress Gabrielle."

A crash sounded from the front near the elevator, followed by a scream.

Gabrielle dodged to the side as Spike leaped to his feet. His suit tore as his wings emerged, and he launched into the air.

Pandemonium erupted. Vampires ran frantically, searching for exits that didn't exist. Screams rang out over the oddly enchanting music.

"Get her down from here!" she demanded of the slave. The young man was already working the buckles at Linna's wrists. Gabrielle unhooked the ring at her sister's left ankle.

A vicious fist seized her braid at her nape and jerked her backward. "While it would be much more interesting to check those little panties," Spike hissed in her ear. "I suspect the tracking device is hidden in your lovely tresses." He tore the ribbon and Faewen's antique pearls away and ripped the device out with a handful of Gabrielle's hair.

She screamed and grabbed for his fist. He shoved her away, sending her sprawling face-first.

She looked over at Linna. Still chained to the rack at one ankle, she had dragged the slave to the ground and pinned him beneath her. Her sister reared back her head and screeched before she bent over the man. Gabrielle heard the crunch of fangs through flesh and cartilage. He gave a single kick, then lay still beneath her. As still as death.

Gabrielle couldn't bear the sight, but neither could she look away. *She really is a vampire. My sister really is gone.*

Spike crushed the tracking device in his hand. An explosion caught his attention, and he drew back his fists, face turned heavenward as if to curse God. He transformed into a hideous monster, his eyes as black as coals and thick blue veins running through green-tinged skin. His fangs were longer than she'd believed possible. Saber-toothed vampire.

She scrambled backward, her mouth frozen in a silent scream.

Spike grew two feet taller, tearing through his clothes, and his head twisted into a hideous shape no Hollywood theatrics could ever duplicate. He looked like a mutated cross between a cat and an alligator.

In a blur, Davin soared through her line of sight. He caught the vampire in the shoulder and spun him around. Spike lashed out but missed. Davin cut a tight arc and hit him again from behind.

The rest of the room was a blur of frantic vampires and attacking gargoyles. The Guardians spread throughout the Playground but only fought with the vampires that attacked.

The female from the elevator dropped to her knees and begged at Molin's feet, hands held wide in surrender. Molin gave a jerk with his chin, letting her go. She jumped up and ran in the direction of the elevator through a ribbon of black smoke slicing midhigh through the room.

Gabrielle scrambled backward in a clumsy crab walk, struggling over the damn skirts of her ridiculous costume. She slammed into a table and flipped over onto her hands and knees, still watching Spike more than where she was going. She hit another couch and awkwardly crawled around it.

Davin landed and raised his crossbow. Spike clenched his fists and roared like a jungle cat, making Gabrielle's blood run cold.

She could only watch helplessly as the man she loved squared off with the demon prince.

Chapter Ten

Davin aimed his last arrow at Spike. "You can't have her."

The vampire glared. "She is already mine."

Davin's heart dropped out of his chest. He was too late. His finger hesitated on the trigger.

She crouched on the floor behind the demon, cowering in fear. Or was it humiliation?

The sweet woman he had loved so tenderly was gone. Gabrielle was dressed in one of the sexually suggestive costumes of the slaves. Had she been brought here to punish the Guardians? Did Spike simply want her to keep Davin from having her?

With the knowledge he would never again feel her in his arms, a yawning hole opened inside him.

"Bring it on, Guardian." The vampire leader's hideous face twisted in maniacal glee. He strode forward, inviting Davin to battle.

He loosed the quill. The demon opened his arms as if inviting it to pierce his heart. At the last instant, he caught it and snapped it in half. Tossing aside the broken halves, he advanced again.

Burning fire pierced Davin's neck. The demon halted, his eyes wide with surprise; then he threw his head back and howled with laughter.

Davin staggered under the blinding pain. He brought his hands to his throat. An enemy's arrow had pierced him straight through.

Gabrielle's scream cut through his fading awareness. He blinked his eyes to find the vampire looming over him, rancid breath gusting over his face as Spike extended a snakelike tongue and licked his cheek.

"Know this as you die, Guardian. She is to be my queen. I'm going to fuck her until the end of time. Watch me turn her as you issue your last breath."

* * * * *

Tears blurred her vision as Gabrielle's mind tried to reject the terrible sight. The arrow had come at him so fast, it seemed to appear out of thin air. Davin reached for his throat, streams of blood spurting from a severed artery.

"No. No." She rocked back and forth, hugging her knees to her chest.

Her eyes fell on the broken arrow. She snatched the point end from the floor and squeezed it in her fist.

Spike shoved him away, and Davin fell to his knees. The vampire turned on her. His hideously beastly transformation dragged a scream from her burning throat. She toppled backward and scrambled away.

He advanced slowly, mocking her attempt to escape with a wicked laugh. Somewhere in the room, a vampire screeched its inhuman cry, and a blue explosion flared and petered out. A crash sounded, a ball of fire erupted where the bar used to be.

"Dearest Gabrielle," Spike hissed through those impossibly long fangs. "The time for choice has passed." Before her eyes, he transformed into a human again, but his eyes held the same monstrous excitement, his skin still a shade of green that revealed shadows of the inhuman veins running beneath. The horrific image was burned in her mind's eye. He would forever be that hideous beast.

She closed her eyes. Kill me, she thought. I can't bear to live a single minute knowing Davin is dead and it's my fault. If Spike turned her, she would spend eternity knowing it. This was hell.

Spike opened his mouth. His fangs extended like prehistoric tusks. His wings extended, and he launched himself into the air. He soared over her and pounced, head angled to seize her throat.

Gabrielle screamed and squeezed her eyes shut. She fisted the broken arrow shaft in both hands and drove it upward with all her might. His body crushed down heavily, his snakelike hiss hot against her ear. She braced herself for the pierce of canines into her jugular.

None came. Gabrielle opened her eyes.

Spike slowly pushed off, staring down at his chest. She scurried from beneath him. The broken arrow jutted from his rib cage where his heart would be if he had one. Blue flames sparked where the broken stem emerged from his flesh, and spread outward in a circle.

His eyes rose to hers, the black orbs filled with a mixture of shock and sorrow. He held her gaze as the flames intensified and engulfed his torso. He didn't scream, didn't thrash. Didn't even move.

His lips pressed together, formed a word. "Good-bye."

The fire consumed his entire body, leaving only his head an instant before he exploded in a blinding blue firework.

* * * * *

Davin struggled to get to his feet. Molin's ugly mug filled his vision. Faewen and Rolf crowded in beside him. Davin pulled against them, fighting to see around. Gabrielle could still be saved. The vampire hadn't yet taken her...had he? Why weren't they moving to save her?

"Davin, oh my God." Faewen covered her mouth with both hands.

Gabrielle... He pointed when no sound came from his lips.

"Transform, now!" Molin ordered. He grabbed the spear end of the arrow and pulled it through. Davin knew he must transform or die.

Part of him *wanted* to die. He could not go on another day having lost again. Not Gabrielle. Sweet, innocent Gabrielle.

But he was no coward, and his death would only be a triumph for Spike. He would not let the vampire leader win.

Gabrielle...

Her name died on his lips as he turned to stone.

* * * * *

Gabrielle screamed his name as she pushed through the crowd of Guardians. Rolf stood aside and Gabrielle froze, horrified.

Davin had transformed to stone in his human form. His face was a granite mask of pain, agony chiseled into his features.

"Oh my God!" She brought her hands to her face. "Is he...?"

"He rests," Molin said.

No! This couldn't be! "Please, don't let him die."

Faewen grasped her hand. "We won't know until he awakens if he was able to heal himself."

"You mean *if* he awakens."

No one responded. Davin's stone form blurred through an onslaught of tears.

"This is my fault. This stupid plan was my idea."

"Because of you, the Palace was destroyed," Faewen said.

It was little consolation to Gabrielle. She would trade it all back for Davin to be all right.

“And the vampire leader was stopped,” Rolf added. “We paid a heavy price, but Davin knew the risks and was willing to take them.”

Gabrielle closed her eyes and moaned. *I wasn't!* she wanted to scream.

Molin placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. “Gabrielle, don’t lose faith in Davin. He is not lost to us yet.”

Chapter Eleven

Faewen stood at the living room window. Above the garden, glorious brushstrokes of pink and orange colored the dawn sky.

Rolf moved up behind her and slid his arms around her, called to the window by Gabrielle's weeping.

"She's been out there all night?"

Faewen nodded. Gabrielle had refused to leave Davin's side. She'd heard muffled snippets of the girl speaking to him through the glass. An hour ago, Gabrielle had collapsed to her knees, sobbing.

"It could take longer than her lifetime for him to awaken."

If he awakens at all, Faewen thought. She turned and embraced her husband. He squeezed her back, his silent acknowledgment communicated in his touch.

"I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

"I'm glad you're okay too."

She kissed him deeply. They'd been mated for over three hundred years, but every evening upon awaking she felt a brand new surge of joy at the sight of his face. Gabrielle had only known Davin a matter of days, but Faewen knew their love was just as fierce.

"Go to her. She needs you."

Faewen nodded and stepped into the garden. She knelt beside Gabrielle and took her in her arms. Gabrielle was exhausted, limp as a rag doll. Her sobs turned to whimpers, and finally sniffles, before she drifted off to restless sleep.

* * * * *

Gabrielle arrived at Molin's office to find two men in black suits on their way out. She stepped aside to let them pass, and Molin waved her inside.

She wondered if they had something to do with the Guardian Balin's mysterious disappearance from the raid. She'd overheard Wendell say he'd seen Balin, the slave girl Gladiolas, and a vampire disappear into thin air. Even stranger, it seemed the mysterious vampire had been trying to save the two others from a gargantuan demon. But so far, everyone had been very hush-hush about it.

Gabrielle sat stiffly in the guest chair across from his desk.

"How is my sister doing?"

He smiled. "As well as can be expected. She'll be tried, of course, but I have no doubt she'll be pardoned with the others who surrendered."

Gabrielle nodded, then glanced around, not sure how to begin. She took a deep breath. "I have no home."

After she'd said it, it sounded stupid.

"I told you my mother died. I sold her house."

"You are welcome here for as long as you'd like to stay."

The man watched her intently. Anyone else would have made her nervous with such an unwavering gaze, but the Guardian possessed gentle eyes and a calm voice.

She stared down at her hands as she thought carefully over her next words.

"Is it true the gargoyles are made? No one is born a Guardian?" She met his eyes.

He gave a single nod.

"What does a person have to do to...get made?"

His eyebrows crept up his forehead. "Are you saying you wish to join us?"

Gabrielle swallowed. "I-I think so. Yes. I would." She shifted on the chair, sitting up taller. "If you'll have me."

He smiled, but it was a polite, businesslike smile. "We would be quite pleased to have you. But you must be certain."

"I am. I've never felt as complete as I do here with Dav—with all of you. It isn't just that I don't have anything else. Even though I didn't exactly know it, I realize now I've never *wanted* anything else." She took a deep breath. "I'm not saying this very well. I went to school and got my degree, then did a bunch of different jobs I didn't really care about. My heart was never in it. This is"—she opened her arms—"incredible. It's the most important cause I could ever hope to be involved with, Mr...."

"Just Molin, please."

"I came very close to being turned into a vampire, and in what I thought were my last seconds as a human, I knew I would rather die. What you do is *amazing*, and I want to be part of it. There is nothing more meaningful I would rather devote my life to, especially if it means helping people like my sister."

His smile shifted, barely perceptibly, but Gabrielle saw it become real. "It sounds as though you have made your choice."

"I have." She sat back into the chair. "How is it done?"

"You will drink an elixir prepared by the elders, who will perform a ritual. You will then sleep for three days. When you awaken, you will be transformed. A vigorous training process will follow." He grinned. "It isn't easy to learn to fly."

She smiled back. "Ever since I was a little girl I wished I could fly."

Molin chuckled. "I sense in you that you will make an excellent Guardian."

"Will I still be able to see Linna?"

He sat with elbows on his desk, his fingers tented together. At her question, he opened them. "Of course. We are not enemies of the vampires, just like the police are not enemies of the general public. They take necessary action to stop the violent who plague society, just as we take action to stop the vampires who break the Sacred Laws."

Molin sat back and opened his drawer. "I will messenger the elders. If you wish to give up your apartment, you can stay in the guest room until an addition is built on the house for you."

"Am I required to live here?"

"No, of course not." He swept out his message in long, elegant script. "At your inception, you'll be granted a sum of one million dollars." He eyed her and quirked a half smile. "Keep in mind, it isn't a lot when you consider it has to last through eternity."

"I have my own money," Gabrielle said. "I received a settlement from the trucking company responsible for my mother's death, and the payout from her insurance policy. Half of the money is technically my sister's, and I'd like to use it for her care. But I'd love to live here," she finished.

He folded his note and sealed it with wax. "We can discuss the financial terms at a later time."

Gabrielle hesitated before risking her next question. "Will I still be able to have children?"

"When you are in your human form, you are as mortal as you sit here before me now. You will not, however, be able to transform into stone during a pregnancy."

Gabrielle nodded, her mind whirling. It made sense. Her heart beat a rapid staccato against her chest. She was really going to do this! For the first time in as long as she could remember, a decision felt right.

"Gabrielle, there is something you must know before I can accept your pledge."

She bristled. The tone of his voice had changed.

He laid his pen down on the sealed letter.

"Before he was injured, I asked Davin if he wished to take you as his mate."

Gabrielle's heart seized. She searched Molin's grim gaze.

"His answer was no."

She felt as if she'd been kicked in the stomach. Gabrielle glanced down at her folded hands, swallowing past the soreness in her throat. She would not let herself cry.

"I understand. That wasn't the reason for my decision, and that doesn't change it." She met his eyes. "I promise, if — *when* he awakens, I won't pester him."

She blinked away stinging tears. Molin wasn't a fool; he knew the news must come as a heartbreaking blow. "I just want him to be all right."

"As do we all, Gabrielle." He stood and plucked the letter off his desktop. When he passed behind her, she quickly swiped at her eyes.

"Manfred, take this to the citadel. Give it to Cirom with the other reports."

She rose and met him at the doorway. Molin smiled and took her hand.

"Welcome aboard, Gabrielle."

* * * * *

For three days, Gabrielle struggled through a fog of turbulent dreams. She felt only half-asleep, totally aware of the changes tearing through her body as she transformed. There was pain, fear, joy, and relief. And in her memories of Davin, sorrow.

She awoke to find Faewen and Evetta at her bedside.

"Davin?" she asked immediately.

Their expressions didn't change. Even before they spoke, Gabrielle knew the news was not good.

Faewen touched her elbow. "He hasn't awakened."

Gabrielle sat up, ravenous, and more exhausted than when she'd lain down three days ago. Her hands looked the same. She threw the blanket off her legs. They looked the same too. "God, I stink."

"It was rough," Faewen told her. "We were worried about you for a while."

"Always is," Evetta commented. Her expression softened. "But I never doubted you."

"I didn't either." Faewen patted her knee. "Get showered. Your sister's been asking after you."

After an enormous dinner, she and Faewen walked to the high-rise through the pink twilight of an unusually mild San Francisco evening. The exercise felt wonderful. Gabrielle flexed aching muscles that seemed to possess new strength she'd never imagined possible.

"I haven't felt this fit since gymnastics class when I was little," she remarked.

She peppered Faewen with a million questions as they continued walking. Her blood bubbled with excitement, but an underlying current of sadness lingered. Davin's absence would always be a tender wound in the innermost part of her.

They arrived at the building at street level. Gabrielle had never seen it from the outside before, but still her heart gave a fearful lurch. High above, one of the blackened windows on the gleaming face was a gaping hole where the Guardians had stormed through.

"We've been using it as a hospital for the injured vampires and their slaves. A rehab center of sorts."

"How many are still here?" Gabrielle asked. They passed inside and took the escalator to an upper lobby area.

"Sixteen vampires, including your sister, and twenty-three slaves. *Ex-slaves*."

"Still no word on Balin and Gladiolas?"

Faewen shook her head. She must have sensed Gabrielle's trepidation as they ascended to the second level, because she grasped her hand and stopped her as they stepped off the escalator.

"You're a Guardian now. You can't be turned. You can still be injured while in human form, but soon you'll learn to transform to stone to protect yourself."

"Is Linna...being difficult?"

"She's furious because we won't let her see you, but you don't have anything to fear. Come on, I'll walk with you to her apartment."

They crossed a wide marble floor through an immense indoor garden. The center of the building was a giant atrium, open all the way to the skylights twenty-five floors above. Through the glass, the moon had just begun its trek into the sky.

"We cleaned off the skylights. We wanted to have more control over the vampires, and this keeps them sealed up tight during the day. Some of them are pretty pissed, but we think they're trying to sway the subject off their crimes."

"What's going to happen to them?"

Faewen quirked a wry smile. "The vampires who surrendered peacefully are being released. Most of those who attacked were destroyed. The ones who weren't will be tried by the elders."

Gabrielle felt a flash of fury. "What about the one who hurt Davin?"

"Dead. Molin got him."

She was glad he was dead, and didn't feel a sliver of guilt, but a part of her would have liked to see him punished.

They rode the glass elevator to the twelfth floor. Faewen knocked once, then opened the door to Linna's apartment.

Her sister paced through the lavish suite. She looked up suddenly, as though she didn't hear the knock, and her face brightened. "Gabrielle!"

They rushed together and embraced.

"Gabrielle, I was so worried about you!"

Gabrielle eased back and looked into her sister's face. She'd regained some of her color, and thankfully the fangs were retracted. "You were worried about me? Girl, you're the bloodsucker."

Linna cupped her cheeks. "You'll always be my baby sister." Her sadness melded into a frown. "Is it true you've become one of them?" She glanced over Gabrielle's shoulder.

"I'll leave you two alone." Faewen left but didn't close the suite door.

Gabrielle nodded. The transformation brought her much joy, but it wasn't enough to overcome the heartache. "I'm a Guardian now, so you better be on your best behavior. You and I will go through eternity together." She managed a smile. "Someone has to watch out for you."

Linna didn't smile back. "No, Gabrielle." She paced away and flopped onto the couch. "I'm dying. I need to feed to survive, and without a willing...mate, I'll starve."

"You don't need to worry about that."

Gabrielle whirled around. The young man Gabrielle thought her sister had killed stood in the doorway.

"Jason." Linna's whisper held question, and an ounce of hope.

"How is he...?" Gabrielle hooked a thumb in his direction. "I thought you ate him."

"Jeez, Gabrielle. You don't kill your slave. Don't you know anything?"

"I'll have to read up in my vampire handbook," she said dryly.

It seemed Linna didn't hear her. Her sister stared longingly at the handsome young man, now dressed in jeans and a Motorhead T-shirt. The color had returned to his face, and he'd lost the glossy emptiness in his eyes.

"I'm off the Tourin," he said, his gaze pinned on her sister.

"You look good. I'm glad you're safe." Linna's voice quavered. "You're going home then."

He entered the suite and crossed the room. "Not if you don't want me to." He dropped to one knee before Linna. "I love you, Linna. I always have. I won't let you die."

Tears welled in Linna's eyes. "Are you sure?"

Jason smiled. "Absolutely." He slid up onto the couch and leaned over to kiss her. He held her cheek and leaned farther. With her new powers, Gabrielle heard his soft whisper. "Feed from me, my love."

She turned away as a sucking sound followed. She felt as though she were intruding on something as intimate as sex to the vampire and her lover.

That her sister was an undead who drank blood and couldn't let sunshine touch her skin was going to take some getting used to, but Gabrielle indulged in a secret smile. After everything that had happened, she felt confident she and her sister could withstand a little thing like that.

She turned back at the sound of Jason's sigh. He sagged into the deep leather cushion, weakened.

"Is he okay?" Gabrielle asked.

Linna caressed his cheek. "He'll recover in a few minutes, stronger than before. As long as he feeds on my blood several times a month, he'll never age or get sick."

"So he's immortal?"

"Sort of." Linna thrust out her arm, encouraging Gabrielle to join them.

She sat beside her sister and watched Jason snuggle up on the other side. Linna wiped a tear away. She took Gabrielle's hand and brought it to her heart.

Gabrielle dabbed at an escaping tear of her own. "I'm happy for you."

"Then why do you look so sad?"

She slid away and blinked the rest of her tears away, fighting the sobs squeezing at her chest. "I met someone."

"That dark-haired hottie with the big...wings? Gabrielle, that's..." Linna's voice softened. "He was injured."

Gabrielle nodded, unable to acknowledge it aloud.

"But he'll be okay, right?"

"We don't know, Linna. It's bad. He might die."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry." Linna reached over and took her hand. "Don't give up hope. Those gargoyle Guardians are strong. He'll come out of it; then we'll have a double wedding. Imagine that. Vampires and gargoyles. A new alliance, forged by us."

Gabrielle shook her head. Linna's exuberance faded.

"Don't gargoyles marry?"

"We do." She nodded, losing the battle with her tears. "But he doesn't want me."

Chapter Twelve

In the Guardians' swift triumph over the vampires, a powerful message had been delivered that was heard around the world.

The pardoned vampires headed back to their homelands with tales of the Guardians' untiring strength, leaving only their former slaves in the makeshift rehab center. Those who weren't pardoned – no one told her, and Gabrielle didn't ask.

She kept busy during the nights, her new days, by working with the poor addicts who fought to escape the effects of the Tourin.

Like Jason, many of the slaves chose to stay with their vampire masters. Seven days after the raid, Balin, Gladiolas, and an unknown vampire still had not been located, but this morning a mysterious-looking group, including the strange men in black Gabrielle had seen in Molin's office, shut themselves into a conference room and had yet to emerge.

As she did every day, Gabrielle went to the garden at dawn and stood beside Davin under the tree where he'd loved her, to tell him about her day.

"I flew for the first time last night. Molin says he's never seen anyone take to it so fast, but I think he was just flattering me."

In truth, she'd soared into the sky like a fledgling sparrow. It had been incredible, and if she'd had any doubts about her choice, which she absolutely hadn't, they would have vanished. The only thing that brought her back to the ground was soreness in places she never knew soreness could exist.

Transforming had come easily too. Gabrielle's animal form was a mixture of panther and hawk. She'd pretended disappointment. "Why couldn't I be something pretty, like unicorn and dove?" But in truth, she liked looking ferocious. Gabrielle was still nervous about battling evil vampires, and the fierce counterphysique bolstered her courage.

As she did at every dawn, Gabrielle stood on tiptoes and gently kissed Davin on the cheek. "Good night, love."

Though Faewen slept in her bedroom, she'd been right when she said many gargoyles found sleeping indoors too stifling. Gabrielle enjoyed the open air, the fading stars above, and the rising sun warming her stone hide. Soft beds were for making love, and without Davin, she had no need of a bed ever again.

A cool morning breeze billowed through her loose nightgown as she transformed into her beast and curled up on the ground, content to pass the day at his feet.

* * * * *

Some things haven't changed, Gabrielle thought sleepily as she awoke to a pink dusk sparkling with emerging stars.

She'd never been a morning person, and dragging herself awake from a stone transformation at dusk was just as hard as crawling out of bed at six in the morning to go to work.

Across the garden, Manfred transformed back into human form, stretched with a satisfied moan, then trudged through the grass to the house.

Gabrielle transformed while still curled into a ball. She wore nothing beneath her billowy, full-length nightgown, having learned not to wear restrictive clothing when

transforming. There usually wasn't much left of her clothes when she shifted back. Gabrielle vowed never to wake up naked in the garden for all to see.

The scent of the moist green grass filled her awareness, and she languished in it like a cat in catnip. She stayed on the ground, enjoying the cool blades against her cheek, even as she heard Evetta run the coffee grinder.

As a Guardian, all her senses had become magnificently bright. Her hearing was near-superhuman. Scents were lush and vibrant. Taste was more potent than she'd ever dreamed. Her sense of touch was damn near electric. She could only imagine how amazing it would feel to love Davin again. If only he would awaken.

If only he wanted me.

She'd known the minute she came awake that he still remained in stone, still frozen in his agonized transformation. She sighed, lacking the will to rise even for Evetta's delicious coffee.

Gabrielle sat up and straightened her nightgown into place. A cool September breeze rushed under the billowy cotton skirt and touched her bare pussy, igniting a million sensitive nerve endings.

With a sigh of longing, she rose and touched Davin's outstretched hand. "Good morning, sweet." She lingered, unable to bring herself to leave his side. Today she felt different, inexorably pulled to him. "I miss you so."

She leaned in to kiss his cheek as she did every morning, careful not to jostle him, even though he remained in solid stone form.

Since her transformation, she understood a gargoyle could hear, feel, and sense just as a sleeping human could. If Davin was indeed still in there, he was aware of her.

"You wouldn't be faking just to avoid me, would you?" Her pathetic attempt at teasing died as a painful spike in her heart. "Darling, everyone misses you terribly. Even Molin is worried, though he won't admit it out loud. I can see it in his eyes."

She sighed and looked down at the new shoots of grass by his feet. Her next attempt to speak faltered over choking tears. She took a deep breath and started again.

"I know you don't want me as your mate, and I would never force myself on you. I just want to see your smile again. Please. Come back to me."

Gabrielle eased away, dragging her hand lightly over his extended fingers. She turned and started for the house on leaden feet.

A soft crumpling sounded behind her.

"Who in Hades told you that nonsense?"

Gabrielle whirled around. Davin had collapsed to his hands and knees in the grass. She rushed over and dropped beside him.

She threw her arms around his neck and peppered him with kisses. He laughed as he struggled upright and leaned on her, then took her mouth in a deep kiss.

Gabrielle lost herself in it. She didn't dare open her eyes for fear it was all a dream and she would wake herself up. The next instant she wrenched away and pushed him to arm's length, scouring his neck for signs of the wounds. There were none. He'd healed completely!

"Oh, Davin!" She fell against him and locked her arms around his neck.

"I felt you and heard you," he whispered into her hair. "You've been by my side every day, even though you thought I didn't want you."

He leaned away only enough to look in her eyes. Davin traced her cheek with his fingertips. He did it again to wipe away a fallen tear. "Whose head should I sever for feeding you those lies?"

She placed a soft kiss on his lips. "As long as it isn't true, that's all that matters."

Davin drove his fingers into her hair and pulled her hard against his mouth. His kiss turned desperate.

"Gabrielle, I love you. I want you by my side forever. Be my mate."

"Forever I can do."

She stood and helped him up. He was still weak as he climbed to his feet, but she could feel his strength returning as though it were her own. His arms slid tight, pulling her against him at all possible points.

"Are you...*taller*?" His hand circled her breast, and his kiss fell away. "Your breasts are bigger."

"Disappointed?"

"Never."

She'd grown two inches, her feet were a half size larger, and she'd increased a cup size. Her waist had narrowed with the flare of her hips. Transforming had brought on a true *transformation*.

She stepped backward. Her wings emerged through the slits tailored in her nightgown, as they had been in all her new clothes.

Davin's eyes widened. A gleam of excitement passed over the pupils. "*Gabrielle!*"

She brought her new wings down in a powerful stroke and surged toward the emerging stars. Below she heard the *flap* of Davin's wings as he followed.

They soared high into the sky and veered west. He caught up to her over the ocean, grabbed her ankle, and yanked her back against him, prone. She gasped but put her trust in him.

She had barely learned to fly a straight line; aeronautics had definitely not been covered. She set her wings straight, giving small strokes that helped steer as Davin held them aloft.

"You are a dream come true."

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Davin's neck and closed her eyes, concentrating on the powerful stroke of his wings that proved his recovery was true and complete. "I hoped and prayed every day you would come back to me. I told everyone I wouldn't force myself on you if you truly didn't want me, but inside I refused to believe that was a possibility. I love you, Davin."

He dotted kisses across her face. "I'm so grateful you never gave up on me. It was you who gave me the strength to come back. I can't live without you, Gabrielle."

And then to be sure there were no doubts, she shouted it. "Yes. Yes!"

Without having to hold her as he did when she was mortal, Davin's hands were free to roam beneath her clothes. He inched up the hem of her nightgown and slid his palm along the inside of her thigh. Cool air rushed over her bare legs and touched the eager moisture pooling between her legs.

Gabrielle ripped open the button fly on his jeans and pushed them over his hips. "Take me now. Prove to me this is real!"

"Baby, I'll never stop proving it."

Davin grabbed her ass and hauled her against him. The rounded crown of his cock came against her slick cleft. He gave a shallow push, as though warning her of what was to come, then plunged deep in a slick glide.

She cried out as pulses of heat and light exploded through her pussy and raced into every minute point of her body. He seated himself to the hilt and growled out his satisfaction through his kiss.

"I couldn't do that before. Not until your body accepted me, and even then I was too big for you."

She wrapped her legs around his hips and pressed her face to his neck, content to hold him fast inside her. The wind rippled through her hair and caressed her bare skin like magic.

"My body transformed for the lover in my heart," she said, slightly awestruck. She'd just realized it herself, but it made perfect sense. She gave a tiny cry as he thrust, pressing his huge member hard against the limits of her womb. Liquid shimmers rolled through her. "God, Davin, you're still too big. So wonderfully too big."

His hips humped in time with each down surge of his wings. Pleasure built inside Gabrielle in a torrential storm of sensation. She rocked against him, delighted by his magnificent cock traveling deep with each surge.

They soared over a sleeping sailboat, but Gabrielle could not hold her cries as her pleasure built in powerful waves. She clenched the walls of her sex, determined she would never orgasm alone again. Davin's building moans proved it worked, and her channel grew slick with the rush of seed erupting inside her. They climaxed together in a powerful explosion of shattered light.

She knew it was the man, not the altitude, that made her breath grow thin and her heart race.

"You're mine now," Davin said against her lips.

"I was always yours," she told him back. "And I always will be."

Until the end of time.

 THE END 

Crystal Kauffman

Crystal Kauffman has been a closet erotica writer since high school. Her mother found one of her works and dealt a heavy dose of guilt as punishment, but that wasn't enough to stop Crystal from writing (and reading) the steamy stuff. She just did a better job of hiding her work. Then the greatest thing happened; publishing houses catering specifically to erotica were born, bringing Crystal out of the closet. The formation of Romance Writers of America's *Passionate Ink* chapter, where she could mingle with other like-minded erotica writers, was the proverbial icing on the cake.

Crystal Kauffman is a native San Franciscan who also writes action thrillers. She is a four-time nominee for the prestigious Golden Heart award given by the Romance Writers of America, and took home the win in 2008.